

The Ethics of Non-Permanence:

How mortality makes morality

7 July 2026

One day, everyone reading this will cease to exist, even down to their very memory.

It is an uncomfortable and humbling thought, and one we try and avoid at all costs to not spiral into idealisms or the horrific thought of a finality. We distract ourselves with careers, relationships, entertainment and the beautifully idealistic concept of a tomorrow. Yet underneath what we believe and strive for, lurks the uncomfortable truth that time is finite.

At first glance it is understandable that finite lives can seem unsettling or disturbing. For if nothing lasts forever, why should we love, create, connect or be kind?

But what if the opposite were true? Perhaps finite lives are exactly what makes everything we do matter, always.

Imagine a flower that blooms forever. Would we still stop to admire it? How beautiful would a garden be if the colours never changed? The beauty of a flower may die within familiarity. For the fading of a flower is what makes spring beautiful. It is because the sun sets over our horizon that we stop to watch. Scarcity seemingly creates value.

So why do we not treat human life the same?

Our mortality has the capacity and capability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. A conversation with a friend or perhaps the crunch of the autumn leaves under our feet, even a shared laugh over coffee. These are all moments made precious not because they are eternal but because they cannot be just repeated.

Ethics share the same plain. If lives and memories were eternal, our mistakes can simply be corrected tomorrow. We could be forgiven in the century after, during a centennial of our errors. Every opportunity would have the capacity to return. Urgency would essentially disappear.

So, if our lives are limited, how much weight would and should our decisions carry?

Every act of kindness and selflessness becomes irreplaceable, just as every act of cruelty would leave a permanent mark. Thus, every choice shapes a future we may never live to see.

This can only mean that morality is not despite mortality, it is *because* of mortality.

So, what does science say on this? According to thermodynamics, every atom has existed for billions of years. Long before humanity was ever a concept or possibility through circumstance, the carbon in our cells drifted through ancient stars. And yet, even after our passing, those same atoms will continue their journey onwards whether that is to become the soil we step on, the air we breathe, the oceans we swim in and gaze into wondering what lies below, or even the future generations that we birth.

We are never killed off, we pass onto the next, we are recycled. Yet, consciousness, as far as we know, is not. This makes each life astonishingly rare.

The atoms that make us are not unique, yet their arrangements that make us us, are and we have never existed prior and will never exist again after.

Our uniqueness will always carry responsibility. Our temporary existence makes us custodians rather than owners; whether that is over our relationships, our environment, our knowledge, and the generations that will follow us.

Ethics is simply the art of leaving this reality better than how it was when we arrived. But this idea extends beyond our comprehension.

Every species occupies a small chapter of the Earth's autobiography. Forests grow and fall just as rivers change course. Stars will ignite and fade just as much as civilisations separate and rejoin. Impermanence is not an exception to nature; it is nature's definition of rhythm.

Within this cycle, beauty emerges. Music exists because notes end. Stories matter because of their ending. Lives matter because they cannot be

repeated; replicated, yes, but never repeated. Perhaps immortality would not be life's greatest gift but instead its greatest theft. Urgency would be robbed from us, as would gratitude, forgiveness and courage, too. It would make every moment we have now indefinitely replaceable.

Instead, we have something far more fragile, only a limited number of mornings and a finite number of conversations. A brief opportunity to leave kindness where suffering once existed.

Maybe, ethics is not a set of rules imposed on us by temporary entities. Maybe it is the natural subconscious consequence of recognising that every moment we have, and every person we meet, and every choice we have is unrepeatable.

We do not become moral in spite of mortality, but because our time with each other is precious.

And who knows? Maybe that is enough.

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