

Episode: *Author Interview: “Four Key Concepts in Existential Health Care Ethics”*

Guest: Émile P. Torres, PhD

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:03] TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Émile P. Torres, a postdoctoral scholar at the Inamori International Center for Ethics and Excellence at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. They're here to discuss their article, “*Four Key Concepts in Existential Health Care Ethics*,” in the August 2025 issue of the Journal, [Existential Health Care Ethics](#). Dr Torres, thank you so much for being here. [music fades]

DR ÉMILE TORRES: Thanks so much for having me.

[00:00:45] HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point of your article?

TORRES: Many scholars would argue that the probability of human extinction this century is unprecedented. So there've been a few periods in the past when we came to the brink of human extinction, but really, due to emerging technologies—from nuclear weapons to synthetic biology, maybe advanced AI—many people think that the probability is unprecedentedly high. So, one might argue that there is a kind of imperative for scholars, for philosophers, and also medical experts, medical professionals to investigate why exactly our extinction, if it were to happen, would be bad or wrong. Like, what exactly are the reasons for seeing the disappearance of our species to be, to constitute a great moral tragedy?

[00:01:40] HOFF: And so, what should health professions students and trainees be taking from your article?

TORRES: I would say that the idea of human extinction is actually much more interesting and complicated than one might initially think, right? So there are many different ways that we could go extinct. There are lots of people in Silicon Valley right now who advocate for the creation of advanced AI systems, artificial general intelligence, that they see as taking our place, right? So this is a kind of human extinction, if we are replaced by these digital post-human beings, which, again, people have actually advocated for. But on their understanding of human extinction, if we disappeared by being replaced, this would not constitute human extinction. And so, understanding the ambiguities of the term “human extinction,” the different ways that people who are participants in this ongoing conversation about the ethical and

evaluative aspects of our extinction, understanding the different ways they use the term, I think, is really important for being able to understand and navigate this conversation.

[00:02:48] HOFF: And finally, if you could add something to this article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

TORRES: I think I probably would have gone into more detail about the various reasons one could adduce for holding this or that position within the field, this sort of fledgling field of the ethics of human extinction. So I do allude at one point to this, a class of views which might be called "further loss views" that claim that there is a fundamental discontinuity between 99 percent of humanity dying out and 100 percent of humanity dying out. So these people see extinction-causing catastrophes as being different in kind rather than degree from non-extinction-causing catastrophes. And the reason they would give is that if you, if there is a disaster that results in 100 percent of humanity disappearing, then by definition, you foreclose all of the potential value and goods that could otherwise have existed in the future. And so, on their view, there is a very, very strong justification for allocating resources away from near-term interventions—so this might even include something like alleviating global poverty—and towards projects that specifically aim to prevent human extinction.

And then there are other theorists out there—and I would consider myself to be one of them—who don't see any kind of discontinuity between 99 percent of people dying out and 100 percent. And so, on my view, we should focus, we should not strongly prioritize the prevention of human extinction over the prevention of other kind of catastrophes that are happening in the world, from global poverty to climate change to even something like factory farming. And so, this is sort of a fundamental disagreement within the ethics of human extinction, that if I had had more space, I would have gone into and explicated further. [theme music returns]

[00:04:55] HOFF: Dr Torres, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks for your contribution to the Journal this month.

TORRES: Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, journalofethics.org. We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.