

Philosophical discussion of the afterlife has typically focused on the prospect of personal immortality: on whether we will survive our physical death, and on whether it would be a good thing for us if we did. Samuel Scheffler draws our attention to a quite different afterlife, one which consists in the fact that the human race is likely to persist long after you and I are dead. That collective afterlife is, Scheffler thinks, at least as significant as the individual afterlife that has received so much attention. In this book, he sets out to demonstrate just how significant it is.

One might imagine that the collective afterlife will matter mainly to the public-spirited among us – those who worry about global warming, for instance. In Scheffler's eyes this greatly underestimates the afterlife's significance. It is not just the conscientious recyclers who have a personal stake in the future of humanity. We all operate on the tacit assumption that the human race will long outlast us and, however self-absorbed we are, the meaningfulness of our lives depends on this presupposition.

Scheffler proceeds by asking how we would react to a situation in which this assumption no longer held. Suppose you knew that you would live the normal span but that the planet was going to be destroyed thirty days after your death. Or suppose the human race became suddenly infertile and faced extinction within two or three decades of your own demise. Wouldn't these discoveries have a deadening effect on altruists and non-altruists alike? Wouldn't people's sense of the worth of their own lives be undermined by the approach of doomsday or the blight of universal infertility, regardless of how public-spirited they are? The infertility scenario played out in P. D. James' novel *Children of Men* dramatizes this predicament.

Some philosophers disagree. For them, the quality of one's own life depends entirely on the quality of one's own experiences. Since death is (we may assume) a permanent state of unconsciousness, nothing that happens after death can affect one's experiences, and therefore how well life has gone. What I am not around to see, cannot hurt me. Of course nice guys will take an interest in the fate of others and so in the fate of the world after their death. But, so the story goes, even a nice guy shouldn't get upset about doomsday on his own account, for one's own interests are concerned only in what one will personally experience.

As Scheffler and many others have observed, you don't have to be especially public-spirited to reject this "experientialist" view of what bears on your own interests. I very much want it to be the case that my friends think well of me. Suppose they all mock me behind my back. If I ever discovered this I'd be upset, because I had learnt how sad and pathetic my life already was, before the discovery. Similarly, the insults thrown at me after my death do bear on whether I have had a good life, since they bear on whether other people should feel pleased or sorry for me.

Once experientialism is set aside, we can open our minds to the idea that the value of the things we have and of the things we do depends in various ways on our connection to the rest of the world. Scheffler emphasizes the dependence of value on what happens in the future; but consider for a moment the social dimension of value. The worth of enjoyable activities like sex or foreign travel often depends on whether the experiences they involve are

shared with someone else. Our sexual partners and travelling companions enhance our enjoyment of these activities just by being there and sharing in our delight. But a value may also have a social dimension without involving either shared experience or much in the way of relationships. All of us do many things only because we imagine that complete strangers are doing them also. Think of supporting a football team, wearing clothes on a hot day or sporting a tattoo. Those who do these things would be likely to lose interest in them, or even come to regard them as ludicrous, when they found they were doing them alone. Indeed, the knowledge that these practices were confined to a small group would drain them of much of their significance.

These examples might seem rather selective. Does the value of a scientific inquiry, a work of art and so on really depend on their being set in a social context? Scheffler argues that it does. Take a scientific project. Perhaps it will not be brought to completion without the participation of others, but even if it can be done alone, the project will lose much of its attraction if the scientist feels that hardly anyone

will understand or appreciate what has been achieved. The same is true of those artists who produce something with a view to its reception by a wider public.

Though Scheffler acknowledges and builds on this social dimension of value, his real interest is in its temporal dimension. In particular, he is interested in how our sense of the value of our current activities depends on our assuming that the future will contain people who participate in and appreciate them. In both the doomsday and the infertility scenarios there are plenty of contemporaries to play with. Society will run into trouble only once we are gone. Yet, Scheffler says, this is not enough to

All gone together

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keep our spirits up. We need the world to be populated by future fans, future fellow enthusiasts and future co-workers. Why?

At this point Scheffler offers more than one answer, the most intriguing of which appeals to our need to "personalize the future". Many people are desperate to be remembered after they are gone, at least by friends, neighbours and family members. Scheffler reckons that our need to personalize the future goes beyond any desire to be recalled by posterity. A future with religious practices, scientific institutions, football teams that I would find familiar is a world that contains a place for someone like me, even if no one in it remembers who I am: "rather than looming as a blank eternity of non-existence, the future can be conceptualized with reference to an ongoing social world in which one retains a social identity".

So expressed, this need to "personalize the future" sounds like a concern of the sort that should also lead people to wish to live on after their own death. Scheffler disagrees. He says that "it is essential to our idea of a life that it is temporally bounded, with a beginning, a middle and an end and with stages of development defining its normal trajectory". By contrast it makes perfect sense to wish that many of the people we know and the social practices we share should persist after we are gone. The intensity of the latter desire renders the doomsday and infertility scenarios profoundly depressing.

Suppose that Scheffler is right in what he says about the temporal dimension of value.

implies that our desire for a collective afterlife may in fact have little impact on what we are inclined to do. For example, he declines to say whether many of us would sacrifice ourselves in order to extend the life of humanity. Scheffler's caution on this point is understandable, but he needs to explain why the non-altruists among us should remain unmoved by his reasoning. If the meaningfulness of our own lives largely depends on the continuance of the human race after we are gone, shouldn't we be inclined to do all we can to bring this about?

The key to the puzzle is to understand the particular way in which a selfish person values the continuance of humanity. Suppose that by taking a fatal dose of radiation, I can stop a leak in a nuclear power station that will otherwise cause mass infertility. The (self-interested) case in favour of such self-sacrifice is that without it my life will be drained of meaning by the prospect of human extinction. Still, I hardly put myself in any better position by taking the fatal dose and ending my life. If living in the shadow of extinction really would deprive my future existence of all meaning, I'll be indifferent between playing the hero or the coward. If on the other hand (as Scheffler concedes) there remains something to live for, then I'll get what I can out of life and leave humanity to its fate.

This thought experiment highlights the fact that Scheffler has given the selfish person no reason to value the continuance of humanity for its own sake. The selfish person needs human beings to serve as partners in their projects and as an appreciative audience for their achievements. The future existence of other human beings is a means to such selfish ends. The survival of humanity need have no significance of its own, no worth which might be weighed in the balance against our personal interests. It is simply a precondition for anything to matter to us, a precondition whose absence saps all motivation, whether selfish or altruistic.

Nevertheless, though heroic self-sacrifice is not to be expected, Scheffler's reflections ought to have an impact on even the most hardened individualist. Suppose that by recycling your rubbish and limiting your air miles you help to postpone the extinction of the human race. For most of us, these things involve no great loss and, if Scheffler is right, they yield a very significant benefit, sustaining our confidence in the worth of our other activities and achievements. That alone would give the environmentalist some welcome leverage.

Death and the Afterlife comprises three chapters written by Scheffler, followed by incisive comments from four eminent philosophers, rounded off with a short reply from the author. In focusing on the book's main theme I have overlooked much that is of interest. Scheffler's book is a beautiful example of philosophical reflection on matters of great significance. Unfortunately the wider culture is, on the whole, unreceptive to such reflection, no doubt owing in part to the forbidding professionalism of much moral and political philosophy, which can verge on scholasticism. There is nothing scholastic about Samuel Scheffler's book. He has no need to grapple with an intricate academic literature, since very little has been written on the topics that concern him. He writes in a rigorous but engaging manner about things of obvious importance to us all. *Death and the Afterlife* is a model of how to make difficult philosophy intelligible to thinking people. Perhaps it will even improve them.