



## Death and the Afterlife

*Samuel Scheffler , Niko Kolodny (Editor)*

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Suppose you knew that, though you yourself would live your life to its natural end, the earth and all its inhabitants would be destroyed thirty days after your death. To what extent would you remain committed to your current projects and plans? Would scientists still search for a cure for cancer? Would couples still want children?

In *Death and the Afterlife*, philosopher Samuel Scheffler poses this thought experiment in order to show that the continued life of the human race after our deaths--the "afterlife" of the title--matters to us to an astonishing and previously neglected degree. Indeed, Scheffler shows that, in certain important respects, the future existence of people who are as yet unborn matters more to us than our own continued existence and the continued existence of those we love. Without the expectation that humanity has a future, many of the things that now matter to us would cease to do so. By contrast, the prospect of our own deaths does little to undermine our confidence in the value of our activities. Despite the terror we may feel when contemplating our deaths, the prospect of humanity's imminent extinction would pose a far greater threat to our ability to lead lives of wholehearted engagement. Scheffler further demonstrates that, although we are not unreasonable to fear death, personal immortality, like the imminent extinction of humanity, would also undermine our confidence in the values we hold dear. His arresting conclusion is that, in order for us to lead value-laden lives, what is necessary is that we ourselves should die and that others should live.

*Death and the Afterlife* concludes with commentary by four distinguished philosophers--Harry Frankfurt, Niko Kolodny, Seana Shiffrin, and Susan Wolf--who discuss Scheffler's ideas with insight and imagination. Scheffler adds a final reply.

## **Death and the Afterlife Details**

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## Richard says

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I've completed this book...and with what results?

(1) I have a much richer grounding in the distinction "value."

(2) I have access to "possibility" regarding the "conservative view."

(3) I am more at peace with my personal temporality...my own death.

(4) I am present to the profound privilege of being alive.

(5) I've added over 100 books to my "want to read" list.

This is a well-written and fascinating book—Read it!

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## Bryn says

Although I feel like the entire point could have been crystallized down to about forty pages, it was interesting and, from what I remember of the few philosophy classes I took, very accessibly written.

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## Jennings Peeler says

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## **Duncan McLaren says**

Scheffler argues elegantly that for our lives, projects and commitments to matter, we rely on the continuation of humanity, and indeed on the flourishing of society. He does this without appeals to relatedness or strictly communitarian emotions, and in ways that are entirely immune to Parfit's 'non-identity problem'. Scheffler concludes that perhaps we should care about humanity's survival rather more than we appear to.

Scheffler reaches his conclusions by way of thought-experiments about how we might react to inevitable extinction level events (a doomsday scenario in which the world ends shortly after our death, and an infertility scenario in which the human race dies out as the current generation dies). Both, he argues, would lead to us valuing many things less, and many things losing value. It's hard to subject his views to empirical testing, but the case of climate change offers interesting insights into how humans react to a less than certain doomsday. Here we can see also reactions of denial and activism: both of which support - in different ways - Scheffler's case that the survival of a flourishing human society is important to us. We also see apparent disinterest, and a focus on short-term interests which might seem to undermine the case (if they are seen as reactions to the problem, rather than to its uncertainties). Clearly real-world reactions are complex in the ways they reveal our interdependencies with other humans, past, present and future.

Scheffler is not (as far as I could tell) a 'care ethicist', but I found many encouraging synergies between his approach to the future, and the ideas of interdependency elaborated in the Ethics of Care. The result is a deeply thought-provoking book. The book may be academic philosophy, but - based on a series of public lectures - it is entirely readable, rather than complex and abstruse (although one or two of the short responses by other philosophers included in the volume stray in that direction). Highly recommended.

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## **David says**

Scheffler provides some very thought-provoking reflections in his lectures on the relationship between our values, death and the extinction of the human race. It's excellent to see these sorts of questions being discussed in contemporary anglophone philosophy.

Scheffler's reflections, as I said, are thought provoking, but they are also often quite limited in depth and rigor, instead being wide-ranging and speculative. On the upside, the responses to Scheffler are all excellent and bring the claims and themes of Scheffler's lectures under a more rigorous light, challenging him on all the right points (though Frankfurt's is unfortunately brief). Scheffler's reply, too, is more critically engaged and interesting. The quality of the second half of the book easily makes up for the shortcomings in the first.

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## **Jafar says**

I found Scheffler's ideas quite brilliant and original. Even for those who don't believe in a traditional afterlife – our self continuing to live in the form of a surviving soul – the belief in “afterlife” is necessary to lead a meaningful life. Afterlife in this sense means that the rest of humanity will continue to live after our own death. Scheffler demonstrates his point by proposing two thought experiments (one: imagine the entire humanity perishing shortly after your own death; two: imagine humanity struck by a case of complete infertility) followed by a detailed analysis of how we might react to these two scenarios and what our reactions mean in terms of how we value life and see death.

The afterlife conjecture as proposed in this book can lead to other far-reaching conclusions. It posits that the fear of our own personal death pales in comparison to the prospect of a collective demise; that we value the survival of unknown people in the future more than our own personal survival; that there's a fundamental limit to our egoism and individuality; and, the more surprising conclusion, that death is necessary and without it there can't be a life.

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### **Vegantrav says**

The afterlife referenced in the title is not the afterlife as popularly construed. Rather, by the term "afterlife," the author, philosopher Samuel Scheffler, refers to the idea that after an individual dies, human life for the rest of the species continues.

Scheffler invites his audience to consider two doomsday scenarios. (1) Let an individual suppose that 30 days after she or he dies, the entire human population is destroyed in a great cataclysm. (2) Let us suppose that the premise of the novel (and subsequent film) *Children of Men* were to become a reality: all humans are suddenly struck with infertility, thus guaranteeing that the current living generation of humans would be the last.

Scheffler probes these questions for insights regarding what we truly value as individuals and as a society, how we really feel about the prospect of our individual death, and whether we are as egoistic (or individualistic) as many of us suppose. Scheffler believes both scenarios would radically alter how we live our day-to-day lives; our priorities would be significantly changed; many of the projects and pursuits we currently value would lose their significance; and our entire axiological foundations would be threatened.

In addition to Scheffler's speculations, four other philosophers respond to and critique his ideas, and Scheffler in turn answers these responses.

The book presents a novel set of thought experiments and pushes the reader to think more deeply about what we value and why we value *simpliciter*. In many ways, it's more a reflection on human valuing than it is on death; it simply draws on the prospect of human death and mass human extinction to flesh out our understanding of what and why we value.

Scheffler and his interlocutors wrestle with profound existential and axiological questions, and their philosophical journey in this book is enlightening as well as fascinating.

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### **Elizabeth Chang says**

Certainly an interesting take on meaning in life and the afterlife. Made me think of the afterlife in a completely different light!

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### **Albert says**

This is not what you think it is about. Scheffler could care less what happens to us after we die. This book is

about the lives of those around us and how our death will affect them. Just as a thought experiment, think how you would go out of your way not to commit suicide in front of someone you love. You might kill yourself three blocks away but you wouldn't dream of doing it in front of them. Why should it matter? You are dead either way. Interesting read.

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### **Mary says**

The proposition raised in this book did not seem that significant. The book raises several thought experiments: would (how would) life be worth living if all humanity were going to end soon after our own death; to what extent is fear of death related to our worry about what happens after; is the fear of the extinction of humanity greater than the fear of our own death? But, upon reflection, these questions do not appear to have any answers (not just that Scheffler and his respondents do not answer the questions) but that the questions themselves are inherently unanswerable, and further, to what extent are they useful unanswerable questions (I don't mind that they don't have answers in and of itself, but what can/do they lead to)? I kept reading thinking this would lead to something thought provoking and useful, but I kept finding myself thinking "why does this matter?".

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### **Russell Warfield says**

Thrillingly original. Easy to read, hard to swallow, both eerily terrifying and truly inspiring. Without hyperbole, this made me think very differently about myself and humans in general. Brilliant stuff, and convincing. Really excellent philosophy.

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### **Ross Mckinney says**

If I could have rated this 3.5 stars, I would have. The question was fascinating - how would we as individuals react if there there was no future for the human species - no afterlife of the species, not us. Our death is normal, but beyond us the future of the species is limited either by a known catastrophe, or sterility (a la "Children of Man"). The format is a lecture by Samuel Scheffler, then several responses, then Scheffler's response to the respondents. The lecture itself is brilliant - cohesive, thought provoking, and resonant. The responses are each sound, although they seem a bit dimmed by their necessary deference to Scheffler. They don't present ideas as much as they interpret his. And his final response is much too categorical for a Kindle to handle - he constantly references the points made by the respondents almost in a shorthand, and it was tough finding the references back and forth in the Kindle. The reason to read this book is the original lecture - a real perspective changer. Then create your own response. Glad I read it, and it's recommended mostly for those who want to think deep thoughts about why we act like we do, particularly when we consider our mortality and that of our species as a whole.

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### **Spencer says**

Brilliant, thought provoking, and original. What I assumed would be a depressing venture into death turned into a mind opening look into new ideas and our own human reaction towards death and the afterlife.

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### **Pablo Stafforini says**

A very disappointing read. Most of what the author says is either trivial or unoriginal, and the rest is often demonstrably false. As just one example of the latter, consider Scheffler's claim that, from the fact that we would feel distressed at the prospect of humanity's becoming extinct, it is possible to conclude that we in fact value things other than experiences. This is a *non sequitur*, as authors discussing Epicurus' related arguments have long noted (see e.g. John Broome's 'Goodness is reducible to betterness: the evil of death is the value of life', in Peter Koslowski and Yuichi Shionoya (eds.), *The good and the economical: ethical choices in economics and management*, Springer-Verlag, 1993, pp. 70–84). Death can be bad because of what it deprives us of, and this is perfectly consistent with an axiology on which only deprivations of experiences are disvaluable. Not recommended.

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### **Will Corvin says**

An interesting theory on the importance that human beings place on future generations. Not bulletproof, but an interesting ideas that will get the reader to think about what is truly valuable

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