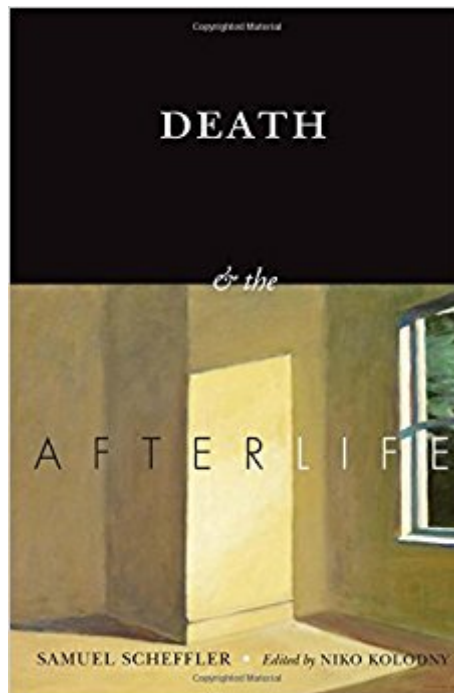




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Death And The Afterlife (The Berkeley Tanner Lectures)



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Based on the Berkeley Tanner Lectures given by N.Y.U. philosophy professor Scheffler, this volume offers an unusual conversation about our fear of death, and our hopes to live on in memories. Of Scheffler's three lectures, the first two explore humanity's possible reactions to two catastrophic scenarios. In the first, particular individuals would live normal life spans, but with the knowledge that all of humanity would be wiped out by an asteroid 30 days after their death. In the second, humanity is rendered infertile, so that the most recent generation would be the last. Scheffler (*Human Morality*) suggests that these scenarios cause distress because they mean the end of what he calls the afterlife—*the knowledge that others will continue to live after I have died and that the human race will continue*. As a result, he believes, many activities and projects that we find worthwhile (finding a cure for cancer, preserving cultural traditions) will feel worthless if life ended after our deaths. Thinking about the end of humanity provides insights into what we value, and why we value it. After the lectures, several philosophers weigh in on Scheffler's ideas, offering their own interpretations, to which he responds—*an insightful look at what death means to us*. (Oct.) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"...combined with Scheffler's eminently readable (and often humorous!) prose style, and the insightful and provocative exchanges that he has with his similarly-distinguished interlocutors, propels *Death and the Afterlife* into that rare class of philosophical books that are both valuable and enjoyable." --Analysis
"Clearly, this book brings together some impressive intellectual firepower." --Metapsychology Online Reviews
"With its careful arguments, counterarguments, and comparative evaluation of alternative hypotheses, this book is a superb example of the application of analytic philosophy to a subject that is of fundamental concern to everyone, not only to academic philosophers. Scheffler has opened up a new range of questions about life and death." --Thomas Nagel, *New York Review of Books*
"Thinking about the end of humanity provides insights into what we value, and why we value it...an insightful look at what death means to us." --Publishers Weekly
[Scheffler's] wonderful Tanner Lectures, recently published as *Death and the Afterlife*, attempt to extract several striking lessons from our supposed reaction to the doomsday scenario....One of the many gems embedded in Scheffler's lectures is a nicely observed contrast between our sense of catastrophic horror in the face of the doomsday and infertility scenarios, and

our relative calm in the face of the fact that everyone now living will one day be dead." --Mark Johnston, Boston Review "Scheffler has produced a superb essay -- indeed it seems to me about as good as analytic philosophy gets. It is entirely free from obfuscating jargon and other tiresome tricks of the trade, yet it is meticulously argued and demanding in exactly the right way -- forcing us to think about hitherto unexamined implications of our existing beliefs. Though written with agreeable lightness and fluency, it is rich in psychological and ethical insight, and restores philosophy to its proper role of tackling the big structural concerns that are inseparable from the human condition." --John Cottingham, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews "[Scheffler's] discussion of the issues with which he has concerned himself is fresh and original. Moreover, so far as I am aware, those issues are themselves pretty much original with him. He seems really to have raised, within a rigorously philosophical context, some new questions. At least, so far as I know, no one before has attempted to deal with those questions so systematically. So it appears that he has effectively opened up a new and promising field of philosophical inquiry. Not bad going, in a discipline to which many of the very best minds have already devoted themselves for close to three thousand years." --Harry Frankfurt, Princeton University, from "How the Afterlife Matters" (in this volume) "This is some of the most interesting and best-written philosophy I have read in a long time. Scheffler's book is utterly original in its fundamental conception, brilliant in its analysis and argument, and concise and at times beautiful in its formulation." --Stephen Darwall, Yale University "A truly wonderful and very important book." --Derek Parfit, Emeritus Fellow, All Souls College, University of Oxford "Scheffler's book is a beautiful example of philosophical reflection on matters of great significance... 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." --Times Literary Supplement "Death and the Afterlife constitutes two remarkable achievements. The first is rare enough. Samuel Scheffler presents us with a set of reflections, the importance, and arguably the correctness, of which seem obvious in retrospect, but which most people will not have previously registered, let alone thought to be of considerable profundity. The second is even rarer. Scheffler appears to be the first person, in nearly 3,000 years of western philosophy, to get to grips, in a sustained and insightful way, with the particular questions his book raises." --Oxonian Review "Scheffler's thesis has striking implications for the way we should think about the demands of our egos. Our self-interest doesn't merely extend, as we're used to thinking, to the preservation of ourselves and those we love. It extends to the lives of indeterminate future people we neither know nor love." -- London Review of Books "A brilliant example of how a thought experiment can make us rethink our values." -- David Edmonds, The Big Issue

This well-written, short book purports to be a contribution to a theory of value. Scheffler asks us to imagine as a thought-experiment two grim scenarios and then asks us to think about how these possibilities would affect the way we think about what we value or, as he says more often, "what matters to us." The two scenarios involve a world without a human future, the "afterlife" of the title being the continued life of the human race (a communal afterlife) and not the "personal afterlife" that some religious traditions offer. Scheffler is not interested in the latter possibility. The two scenarios are "The doomsday scenario" -- "Suppose you knew that, although you yourself would live a normal life span, the earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid" (18) -- and "the infertility scenario" -- everyone alive now would live out his or her normal life span, but in a world where no children are being born to create a future generation and future generations beyond that. Dire, eh? We would feel bad, of course, and we would perhaps ask ourselves about whether what we have up to that point been doing with our lives is worth continuing with. And there can be no doubt that there would be changes in our ways of thinking about whether or not this or that project was worthwhile. We would have to acknowledge that our sense of what matters to us often does unthinkingly take for granted not just the lives of our own children and grandchildren but generations of people we will never know. As Scheffler says, "our confidence that there will be an afterlife is a condition of many other things mattering to us here and now" (32). One can agree with this, broadly . . . but is belief in an afterlife a NECESSARY condition of things mattering here and now? Scheffler's strongest claim is that such a belief is indeed a necessary condition of our valuing. Here's how he frames that strong claim: "We need humanity to have a future for the very idea that things matter to retain a secure place in our conceptual repertoire" (60). I read this as meaning that we could not possibly provide good reasons for our valuing ANYTHING without a belief in a communal afterlife. Notice that we might still prefer some things or courses of action to others; we might like some things better than others -- but we could not possibly give good reasons for our judgments of value, absent an afterlife in Scheffler's sense. ("I just like X or Y or Z" not being a good reason, or indeed a reason at all.) The rest of the book seems to be a clarification of what that claim entails -- about temporality in relation to value, for example -- rather than an argument in support of the claim. The claim in its strongest form (p. 60) remains, I think, just a claim, provocative to be sure, because the relations of our values to time are worth thinking about, even without the dire contexts of the doomsday and infertility scenarios. It seems to me that what Scheffler is also wanting to get at is the idea that his thought experiments show that our values are not at bottom egoistical or individualistic. The very act of valuing, he would like us to believe, is

finally a commitment to a communal rather than a purely selfish end. This amounts to an extension of the strong claim, and it is worth pondering, but it doesn't GROUND the claim, which, as I said, remains asserted and elaborated rather than argued. In the group with which I read and discussed the book, there was discussion of reasons why we might continue valuing (keeping the notion of value in our conceptual repertoire), one of which started from the Aristotelian distinction between process (kinesis) and activity (energeia), the former being goal-oriented and the latter being a matter of "valuing in the act of doing." (My thanks to my friend Jim Edwards for the distinction). Certain very long-term goal-oriented projects might come to seem less valuable. But would our sense of the value of artistic appreciation or musical performance be diminished? Might the value of such activities not be heightened? You get the idea . . .? Lots of food for thought here, and the book includes not just Scheffler's three essays but some responses from philosophers and Scheffler's response to them. Recommended.

Do we measure our life and value it only by what we experience and expect to experience? Do we feel the loss of life only because we miss being around, either with our friends or by ourselves? Thus Scheffler poses apt questions that make us ponder what really matters to us on the assumption that we have no afterlife to distract us. These are questions that compels us to assess the difference between a thing of value and a valuable thing. We are led to ponder what the incentives are for people to want to give up their lives for others. Several other contributors including Harry Frankfurt and Susan Wolf comment on Scheffler's work and Scheffler, in turn, presents his rejoinder to those comments.

Death and the Afterlife introduces an original way of thinking about life after we are gone, (original to me, at least as a non-academic philosopher.) I recommend it- thought provoking and free of the sentimentalizing thinking usually associated with the subject of the afterlife.....I applaud the decision to include several essays by fellow philosophers, reviewing and criticizing the author's conclusions.

This book has an interesting thesis: it contains a conversation between several philosophers responding to the idea that each of us (or at least most of us) require the existence of the rest of humanity for a kind of existential meaning in our lives. This goes beyond the obvious. It is obvious, unless we are hopeless misanthropes or content hermits, that we need others for things like survival and much of our happiness. But Scheffler argues that we also need a future for humanity outside of

our friends and family for our current lives to make it worth living. Much of our lives, values, energy to do things he argues, are dependent on the onward rush of humanity beyond our deaths. I think most are at least intuitively aware of this but this book demonstrates just how much it is. He illustrates this point with several imaginary examples such as the Children of Men sci-fi scenario where humanity loses its ability to procreate (thus will be doomed within a generation's time) and the plausible view that society would also then lose its purpose and people would experience ennui. There would be subsequent social breakdown. Scheffler gives many plausible ways in which this might happen. The book also contains a really interesting discussion on the Macropolis Case and how this (fictional) scenario shows that in some sense, life requires death for our projects to have any kind of importance. It's an interesting topic and Scheffler is an exceptionally clear writer with entertaining examples. My objections mirror some of the respondents especially Wolf and Frankfurt. As with Wolf, I believe that eventually there are ways people will learn to live very meaningful lives in such scenarios where extinction is certain within a short time and everyone knows it. I also think Frankfurt is correct in that this need for the continuation of the human species says probably more about our evolutionary instincts than about our existential makeup as meaning-seeking and meaning-needing beings. I don't think Scheffler's objections to these philosopher's criticisms were very strong. Also I wish Scheffler had a better response to the question of why his argument doesn't collapse into an Alvy Singer pessimism. Alvy Singer is the character in Annie Hall who having refused to do his homework told his psychiatrist that doing it is pointless because the human race will eventually die out in another 4-5 billion years when the sun explodes. If we require the onward rush of humanity for deep meaning in our lives into the foreseeable future, why doesn't the prospects of certain extinction in the distant future equally undermine our need for meaningful lives? It seems that this question wasn't answered adequately. I also don't think he explained or went into it deeply why he thinks we need others to exist after our deaths for meaning to exist in ours. Perhaps Frankfurt was correct to say that it's just a desire from biology and not much else.

The fact that the book is half lecture notes and half commentary makes it less continuous than it might be. Some of the three lecture ideas were repeated and if the author had taken the time to write a coherent presentation of this basic idea; that the threat of humanity's imminent demise would significantly affect the behavior of the last generation of people, it would have been much more effective and would have gained clarity. Still a very worthwhile read and has generated discussion with others who have read it.

After life lucid-provocative fallos short however in not speaking about fear of pain, fear of losing control, death of personhood. but well worth reading

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