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REASONS OF MEANING TO ABHOR THE END OF THE HUMAN RACE*

Thaddeus Metz

In this review essay on Samuel Scheffler's *Death and the Afterlife*, I focus on his intriguing suggestion that we reasonably care more about the fate of an unidentifiable, future humanity than of ourselves and our loved ones. Scheffler's main rationale for this claim is that meaning in our lives crucially depends on contributing to the well-being of the human race down the road, with many commentators instead arguing that advancing the good of ourselves or existing loved ones would be sufficient. In contrast, I argue for a different kind of rationale for Scheffler's conclusion, contending that it is our attachment to, not contribution towards, humanity's flourishing that plausibly constitutes a large part of the meaning in our lives.

1. Introduction

In a book based on his Tanner Lectures,¹ Samuel Scheffler has purportedly become the first Western philosopher to systematically address the issue of how the ending of the human species in the future would affect the value of our lives in the present.² In the first two major sections of his lengthy essay "Death and the Afterlife,"³ on which I focus, Scheffler argues for the claim that "the fact that we and everyone we love will cease to exist matters less to us than would the nonexistence of future people who we do not know and who, indeed, have no determinate identities."⁴ Beyond making this interesting phenomenological point, Scheffler also seeks to explain why we tend to care more about the fate of humanity

*A review of *Death and the Afterlife* by Samuel Scheffler, ed. Niko Kolodny (Oxford University Press, 2013). Pp. 224. \$29.95 (paperback).

¹For audiofiles of the lectures, see Scheffler, "The Afterlife."

²Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters," 132.

³Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife." For a summary of these sections from the horse's mouth, see Scheffler, "The Importance of the Afterlife." Note that I set aside any discussion of the third major section of the essay, in which Scheffler takes up the issue of how a person ought to react to the prospect of her own death, not the death of the species.

⁴Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 45.



than of ourselves and our loved ones, an explanation that makes *good sense* of those differential attitudes.⁵

In this review essay, I focus on Scheffler's justificatory project, or at least I read him as providing one.⁶ Supposing that we sensibly care more about the fate of humanity than that of ourselves and our loved ones, should we for the reason that Scheffler posits? Which considerations would best justify a greater concern for the survival of the species—which is what Scheffler principally means by "afterlife"—than of oneself and one's beloveds?

I argue that if we sensibly care more about what happens after our lives, it is not mainly for the reason Scheffler appears to offer, which is, roughly, that our activities would lose substantial meaning if they were unable to *affect* future generations. If this tendency is justified, it is more likely so in virtue of other considerations, specifically about our *attachment* to humanity, or so I contend.

Such a critical approach to Scheffler's position differs from other discussions of it, which have instead focused on showing that much of what we value in life could obtain in the absence of an orientation towards a future humanity.⁷ I am more inclined to agree with Scheffler that such an orientation matters crucially to us and rightly so, but not so much for the central reason suggested in his essay.

I begin by clarifying the nature of Scheffler's thesis that we sensibly care more about the fate of humanity than that of ourselves, after which I expound his central argument for it (§2). Next, I present objections to his rationale (§3), and then advance a new account of why it would be reasonable to deem humanity's future to matter more than one's own, an account that avoids and explains the objections I make to Scheffler's account (§4). I conclude by briefly addressing a related issue about how to value the future that stumps Scheffler, with him being "open to suggestions" from the field,⁸ namely, how to account for the intuition that it is reasonable to exhibit strong negative reactions towards humanity's demise when it is imminent, but not when it is very far off (§5). I conclude by noting that reflection on this issue provides extra reason both to doubt Scheffler's central rationale for prizing the continuation of the human race and to favour my alternative.

2. The Contribution View of Meaning in Life

With regard to Scheffler's claim about how we (properly) value the continuation of the species, he can be read as defending both a weaker claim and

⁵Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 26, 31, 53–54. See also Scheffler, "Death, Value, and the Afterlife," 189.

⁶As Susan Wolf remarks ("The Significance of Doomsday"), Scheffler "shies away from this more prescriptive question" (115) and "seems to want to resist any questions of this sort" (124), although he does clearly address it on the pages I have cited above.

⁷See Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters," 132–136, 139–140; Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday," 119–124; Belshaw, "Review: *Death and the Afterlife*"; Nagel, "After You've Gone."

⁸Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 63.

a stronger one. In this article, I focus on the stronger claim, here spelling it out and why Scheffler believes it.

The weaker claim regarding how we (are reasonable to) prize the future of the human race is that "the survival of people after our deaths matters greatly to us," much more than we usually recognize.⁹ Much of the first section of Scheffler's essay aims to establish this point,¹⁰ and to note the limits of not only psychological and ethical egoism, but also individualism more broadly, that is, the view that the good life makes no essential reference to relationships with others, or at least others in the future.

To argue for this weaker claim, Scheffler contends that most modern readers will share with him the sense that, in the face of our own mortality, we face "the problem of preserving our values and the problem of establishing a personalized relation to the future."¹¹ The former problem is that normally when we value something, we implicitly are committed to the thought that it should continue to exist. If we expect no longer to be around to sustain it, then we naturally form a desire that others will do so in the future. The latter problem is that we often do not just want our values to continue to survive, but also something of ourselves to do so. And, on this score, we typically identify with people who will live beyond us, children in the first instance, but also clubs, organizations, institutions and traditions. Hence, finding it important to "defend and extend the coherence and integrity of our selves and our values over time,"¹² we are strongly drawn to "leave traces" on the lives of future human beings, to use Robert Nozick's elegant phrase.¹³ And, according to Scheffler, we often fail to realize the extent to which our lives are geared around this interest.

Scheffler's analysis and defence of the weaker claim is powerful and revealing, and, as noted above, many interlocutors have focused on this claim, considering the objection that human beings could still find substantial meaning, happiness and other key values despite a keen awareness of the impending end of the human race. I, however, set the weaker claim aside, in order to explore Scheffler's stronger one, advanced mainly in the second section of his essay. The stronger claim is that we reasonably "care less" about our own survival than about the survival of humanity, or that the latter sensibly "matters more" to us than the former.¹⁴

This strong claim pertains more to our attitudes than our actions. Scheffler's view is not so much that we generally and reasonably *do more* for humanity than for ourselves. Instead, by people "caring" more about future human beings than themselves, or deeming the former to "matter" more than the latter, Scheffler in the first instance means something

⁹Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 54, 59–60, 80–81.

¹⁰Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 15–43.

¹¹Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 35.

¹²Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 35.

¹³Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 582–585.

¹⁴Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 47, 72, 73, 77–81.

about our mental states. He remarks that we are “more dependent for our equanimity”¹⁵ on our confidence in the survival of humanity than on our confidence in our own survival; we aptly exhibit stronger negative attitudes towards the prospect of the extinction of humanity than towards that of our own death. Concrete examples include emotions such as distress, profound dismay, grief, sadness, horror, despair and depression,¹⁶ with Scheffler claiming that we are rightly more distressed, dismayed, etc. upon anticipating humanity’s extinction than our own death.

My aim in this article is not so much to evaluate directly Scheffler’s strong claim that our negative attitudes towards the demise of the human race are sensibly stronger than those towards our own death. Instead, I appraise the rationale he advances for this claim. Has he advanced the most compelling argument for it?

Scheffler contends that we sensibly care more about the lives of future strangers than our own lives because the worth of much of what we find most valuable doing now would not obtain if humanity’s demise were imminent.¹⁷ For Scheffler, much of what we most value doing depends on its having some *positive effect on the human race in the future*. When we talk of “meaning in life” or “what matters,” we are centrally referring to “things we can do to promote the survival and flourishing of humanity after our deaths.”¹⁸ I call this the “Contribution View,” since it deems contributing to humanity’s good in the future to be crucial for one’s life to be meaningful. This view underlies Scheffler’s specific examples of the kinds of activities that would become meaningless were humanity to die out: working on cancer research;¹⁹ developing seismic safety techniques;²⁰ engaging in creative projects;²¹ tackling climate change;²² and preventing nuclear proliferation.²³

In his reply to critics, Scheffler at one point appears to disavow the Contribution View, when he says that “even very modest academic or creative efforts can have a point or value that is independent of their individual merits or causal influence.”²⁴ Instead, Scheffler suggests that their point “depends on seeing oneself as a participant in a collective, temporally extended project.”²⁵

¹⁵Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 77.

¹⁶Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 20, 21, 22, 23, 38, 40, 43.

¹⁷Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 24–26, 53, 72, 76, 78.

¹⁸Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 78.

¹⁹Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 42.

²⁰Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 42.

²¹Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 42.

²²Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 78.

²³Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 78.

²⁴Scheffler, “Death, Value, and the Afterlife,” 185.

²⁵Scheffler, “Death, Value, and the Afterlife,” 185.

Here are three reasons why, despite this once-off distancing from the Contribution View, it is apt to focus on it here. First, Scheffler's defence of the strong claim that we sensibly care more about humanity's future than our own becomes weaker in the absence of the claim that the meaningfulness of a project depends crucially on the prospect of it affecting humanity's future. After all, one already has a good 10,000 years or so of human civilization into which one's academic and creative efforts can fit so as to see oneself "as a participant in a collective, temporally extended project." In order to defend the strong claim about the relevance of the future, Scheffler needs to show that we must understand ourselves as more than, say, the final, crowning achievement to human enquiry or creativity.

There is a second consideration of coherence among Scheffler's claims that prescribes holding the Contribution View. Recall that he believes that we modern folk typically want to "act in ways that will help preserve and sustain the things that we value" and to "personalize our relation to the future."²⁶ And in the face of our own mortality, Scheffler contends that we often seek "to create a future in which the value we have historically shared with other members of the group will continue to endure" and "to create a future whose inhabitants will share with us some of the commitments that matter most to us."²⁷ In short, these claims indicate that in order to satisfy desires to extend our selves and our values, we must *create a future*, i.e., act in ways that are going to contribute to what comes after we are gone.

Finally, even if, upon reflection, Scheffler would change the phrasing of the many passages that I quote and cite in this article, the Contribution View is at least a fair way to read the first two sections of his essay, and, moreover, is a view that is philosophically important and merits critical investigation.

In sum, according to Scheffler, we sensibly prize the continuation of the species more than our own continuation since the meaningfulness of our lives substantially depends on helping to create a desirable future for it. We are reasonably inclined to lose our equanimity more upon losing faith that the species will continue than upon losing faith in our surviving the death of our body, since "we need humanity to have a future for the very idea that things matter to retain a secure place in our conceptual repertoire."²⁸ This is an original, fascinating suggestion, one that is under-explored in the literature on life's meaning.²⁹

3. Criticisms of the Contribution View

I have two major objections to what I have identified as Scheffler's rationale for valuing the lives of future, currently non-existent human beings

²⁶Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 32.

²⁷Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 35.

²⁸Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 60.

²⁹For an overview of the field, see Metz, "The Meaning of Life."

over one's own life and the lives of one's beloveds. The first objection to the Contribution View starts from the point that very few people are able to make much, if any, progress towards ends that would benefit human beings unrelated to themselves in the future. Some large percentage of current human beings is made up of "non-contributors," those who, by virtue of lack of talent, bad upbringing or unfortunate circumstance, are not able to engage in projects that are likely to leave traces. Neither cleaners, insurance salespeople, advertisers, television actors, comedians, farmers, firefighters nor general medical practitioners, let alone the unemployed, can be "contributors" through their careers, on which they spend the bulk of their time.³⁰ They can do a lot of good for people currently alive, but they are unlikely to do much for "future people who we do not know and who, indeed, have no determinate identities."³¹ Not many people engage in the kinds of contributory activities Scheffler discusses as key examples, which, recall, include fighting cancer, climate change and nukes.

The main way that most people affect future generations is by creating them. However, procreation is of course not a relevant way to have a positive influence on people "who have no determinate identities," something that Scheffler claims should matter to us more than ourselves and "everyone we love."³² After all, one point of Scheffler's essay is that we would no longer continue to have children if we knew the species would die out, implying that procreation cannot count for him as a way to positively influence the future of the species in a way that would confer much meaning on life.³³

Now, suppose I am right that relatively few people are currently in a position to count as "contributors." Then, it probably is not the inability to have some beneficial effect on future human beings that explains most people's negative attitudes towards the prospect of the extinction of the species. Humanity's extinction would take no opportunity away from the large majority of us "non-contributors," and yet we would *still reasonably be very upset were we to learn that humanity were soon to die out*. Hence, there must be some important reason for mourning humanity's doom more than one's own besides the fact that the death of the species would occlude one's ability to help human beings down the road; again, few of us could have helped anyway.³⁴

³⁰My point, that these folks are unlikely to be able to help future generations *but would still sensibly be upset were they to discover there would soon be no more of them*, differs from Nagel's point that it would not be natural "for an electrician, a waitress, or a bus driver to think of what they are doing as essentially part of the collective history of humanity, stretching far into the future" and hence that most people are focused on obtaining meaning in life from the present. See his "After You've Gone."

³¹Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 45.

³²Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 45.

³³Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 25; cf. 39.

³⁴Notice that this objection also applies to the alternate construal of Scheffler's view mentioned above, that meaning in life depends not essentially on contributing towards the future, but rather "on seeing oneself as a participant in a collective, temporally extended

Here is a second objection to Scheffler's central explanation of why we are reasonable to be more distraught by the prospect of humanity's end than that of our own. Consider, now, the small group of those who *are* in a position, by virtue of talent, upbringing and circumstance, to make a long-term contribution to humanity's good. Of those who can contribute to the flourishing of future generations (however many or few they may be), most will be able to make a difference for, say, at most three generations. Imagine, now, that humanity would die out upon the fourth generation. By the logic of the argument occasioned by Scheffler's text, those who have in fact contributed to the next three generations would have *much less* reason to be upset than non-contributors. However, I suspect the negative reactions of contributors and non-contributors towards the prospect of humanity's extinction would be *comparable*, and reasonably so. Those who can and will make progress towards ends that will benefit strangers in the future would be sensible to be about as upset at the impending death of the species as would those who could not or did not, but the logic of Scheffler's argument entails that these two groups ought to have substantially different degrees of negative reactions, since one group has succeeded in its "determination to act in . . . behalf"³⁵ of future generations and the other has not.

In sum, it appears that it would be reasonable to be more upset upon anticipating humanity's demise than one's own death, even if one had no ability to contribute towards humanity's good, and furthermore that it would be reasonable to be more upset about the prospect of humanity's demise than that of one's own death, even if one in fact did so contribute. If so, then it cannot be that such attitudes are best justified by the idea that humanity's demise would undercut our opportunity to contribute to its flourishing in the long term.

4. An Alternate Explanation: The Attachment View

In this section, I advance a novel account of why it would be reasonable to care more about humanity's survival than one's own, an account that rivals what I find in Scheffler's essay. After spelling it out, I note how it avoids, and also plausibly explains, the objections I have made to the Contribution View.

I suggest that our negative attitudes towards humanity's extinction would reasonably be stronger than those towards our death and the deaths of our loved ones if and because: (a) humanity over time is capable of much greater things than an individual, where (b) a given human being is sensibly "attached to" humanity's achievements.³⁶ Call this the "Attachment View," the two clauses of which I now spell out.

project" (Scheffler, "Death, Value, and the Afterlife," 185). It is far from clear that, say, bus drivers are able to see their job in this way.

³⁵Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 79.

³⁶And perhaps (c), with Seanna Shiffrin, that these great things would come to an end for no good reason, i.e., either for no reason or for a bad one. See her "Preserving the Valued or Preserving Valuing?," 152–153.

The (a) clause should not be controversial. It says merely that what the species can do over time with regard to many of the highest final values is much more than what a single person can do in her lifetime. Picasso was amazing, no doubt, but still more striking is the entire rise of the modern art movement. Einstein was one of the greatest scientists ever to live, but, again, what the scientific community as a whole has accomplished with regard to insights into the workings of nature is even more impressive. The existence of a future humanity promises not merely more collective accomplishment down the road, but also the continuation of various narratives that the species has begun.

Such a perspective about what is good for its own sake should not worry champions of human rights, individual dignity and related moral perspectives that deny that persons may be treated merely as a means to a greater, collective good. It is coherent to contend that an individual has a superlative non-instrumental value that means that she may not be used as a mere tool for the promotion of culture, and also to acknowledge that the degree to which an individual can contribute to culture, which can be great, is small relative to what many people can over time.

The (a) condition, or something like it, is essential to explain the difference in negative reactions to the demise of our species if it were, on the one hand, capable of lives worth living, and, on the other, incapable of such lives. If future human beings were destined merely to live in a state of permanent coma, it is not clear that we would reasonably have extremely negative attitudes towards their extinction, let alone attitudes that are more negative than those towards our own death. For these attitudes to be reasonable, humanity must be at least capable of living well in the medium term.

The (b) condition is not as intuitive as (a). According to this second clause, part of the explanation of why we would be so inclined to lose our equanimity upon learning that humanity is soon to die out is that we are attached or close to its accomplishments. Roughly, one is more attached or closer to something, the more one's propositional attitudes are positively oriented towards it. One is attached to a thing to the extent that one's cognitive, emotive, affective and related mental states are contoured towards it.³⁷

With regard to humanity's accomplishments, one kind of attachment to them would be that on which Scheffler often focuses, namely, the intentional action of helping to bring them about. However, that is not the only kind, with most people instead exhibiting a variety of others. For example, many people are pleased by cultural achievements or appreciate them. For another, many people identify with the cultural output of the species, so that, even though they themselves did not produce it, they tend to think

³⁷For a related conception of attachment, interestingly cast in terms of personal identity, see Joseph Mintoff, "Transcending Absurdity." See also Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 222–225.

of it as “ours.” For yet another, many people take pride in what humanity has done in aesthetic and intellectual spheres.

The (b) condition, or something like it, is essential to explain the difference in negative reactions to the demise of our *own* species as opposed to reactions to the demise of some *other*, distant intelligent species. Imagine that we received a communiqué from a species in another part of the galaxy, which provided a description of their civilization and an indication that they are doomed because their sun will soon explode. Many of us would reasonably feel some dismay, but not nearly as much as what we would feel upon learning that our own sun would explode in a few generations. The difference is plausibly explained by the fact that our selves are closer to humanity’s civilization, even if we did not help to create it or will not further it in the future.

Return, now, to the objections facing Scheffler’s main account of why we reasonably care more about future strangers than ourselves. As I read Scheffler’s essay, the best explanation of why we are reasonable to care in this way is that the meaningfulness of our lives crucially depends on the ability to make progress towards ends that would benefit human beings in the future. I argued that this cannot be much of the explanation, since we would reasonably care more (or at least no less) about future strangers than ourselves even if we could not in the first place make such progress, and since we would reasonably care more about future strangers whom we could not affect than about ourselves, even upon having actually made such progress with regard to others whom we could affect.

I submit that the deep problem with the Contribution View is that while having a productive, *causal* connection between oneself and future others is probably sufficient to make sense of having much greater negative reactions towards the death of the species than of oneself, it is not also necessary. Basically, other, *intensional* relations with future others are also sufficient to make sense of these reactions. Since the Attachment View does not make contributing to future humanity’s quality of life a necessary condition for sensibly having negative reactions towards its extinction, it avoids, and well explains, the counterexamples to the rationale that because the meaningfulness of our lives depends on “things we can do to promote the survival and flourishing of humanity after our deaths,”³⁸ we sensibly deem humanity’s survival to matter more than ours.

5. Future Reflection on the Future: A Remaining Puzzle

I close this review essay by considering another problem that faces the Contribution View. Scheffler himself raises the concern at one point when he poses this question: “If the end of human life in the near term would make many things matter less to us now, then why aren’t we similarly affected by the knowledge that human life will end in the longer term?”³⁹

³⁸Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 78.

³⁹Scheffler, “Death and the Afterlife,” 62–63.

Upon learning that humanity will die out in four generations, we would be sensibly upset and deem it to be a catastrophe in a way we would not upon discovering that it will die out in 10 billion years. The field has yet to work through a number of explanations of the difference.⁴⁰ I maintain that Scheffler's available explanations are implausible, and that the Attachment View grounds a more promising line.

Consider, first, the actual explanation that Scheffler gives, namely, that "we simply don't know how, in these contexts, to work with or even fully to grasp concepts like 'the end of the universe' or 'billions of years.'"⁴¹ The point might be true, but I suspect it is not relevant. Even if we cannot grasp what these things mean, they are not essential to the matter at hand; for we would continue to sensibly have different degrees of negative reactions to the prospect of humanity dying out in 100 years and to that of it dying out in 1500, where we presumably have some reasonably firm grasp of what the latter might mean.

There is another explanation that Scheffler does not offer but that would dovetail neatly with the Contribution View. What Scheffler probably ought to say is that although our actions could make no difference to humanity after a long time (even 1500 years), they could to humanity in the near term. This explanation is powerful, and, on the face of it, the ability to provide it enhances the credence of Scheffler's general position.

However, upon reflection, the present explanation does not go the distance. Return to the thought experiment above, where I had the reader imagine that we can influence only the next three generations of human beings, and that the fourth would coincidentally be the last one. Although the Contribution View account can make sense of why we would be much less upset about the demise of humanity 75 generations from now than about its demise three generations from now, it cannot make sense of our negative feelings about the demise of the fourth generation. Any generation beyond our influence should also be beyond our care, by the logic of the Contribution View. However, I presume that we would sensibly be much more upset about the death of the fourth generation than we, by hypothesis, could not influence than about the 75th generation. And so there is more reason to doubt the Contribution View.

What does the Attachment View entail about the puzzle? It does better. According to this perspective, while we can expect that humanity would be capable of great things in 1500 years, we are not acquainted with what its achievements would be, are not as disposed to take pride in them, are not as inclined to identify with them, and, yes, also cannot contribute to

⁴⁰For the view that we ought not to have differential reactions to humanity's imminent and far-off extinction, see Frankfurt, "How the Afterlife Matters," 138; and Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday," 127–129.

⁴¹Scheffler, "Death and the Afterlife," 63–64; see also Scheffler, "Death, Value, and the Afterlife," 189.

them.⁴² However, we are so acquainted, disposed, etc. when it comes to what humanity is likely or at least able to do in about 100 years.

In this review essay I have focused on evaluating Samuel Scheffler's particularly bold claim that, upon reflection, we can see that we reasonably tend to care more about the survival of the species than we do about that of ourselves and our loved ones. More specifically, I have considered Scheffler's apparent major reason for believing this claim, and have argued that it has serious weaknesses, which have led me to articulate a different account that avoids and explains them. As the reader will appreciate, a strong work of philosophy is not essentially one that is true or even convinces; it can rather be one that makes a contribution to improving humanity's future reflection on the source of meaning in our lives.

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⁴²Note that making this point does not undercut the one above that we can "grasp" what it would mean for humanity to die out after 1500 years. We can "grasp" that in the sense of having plausible descriptions of what humanity would be like then.

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