

That I Should Die and Others Live

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1. In Lecture Three, Samuel Scheffler argues for two main theses, alternately unsettling and reconciling:

- A. We have reason to fear death, independently of its “depriving” us of the goods of future life, because it “extinguishes” us: brings it about that we no longer exist. (My terms.)
- B. If we never died, we would not live (stronger conclusion) a life at all, or (weaker conclusion) a value-laden life.

From B, Scheffler draws, or seems to draw, two conclusions:

- C. Never dying but still living a life, or never dying but still living a value-laden life, is conceptually incoherent.
- D. Never dying would be a disaster for us, since it would deprive us of a life, or of a value-laden life.

I take it that C does *not* mean that it is incoherent that we should never die, period: that our organism continues in its vital functions, including support of consciousness, indefinitely. Never dying is at least conceptually possible.

I begin by drawing out the rather striking implications of A. Scheffler more or less explicitly accepts one of these:

- E. One can have reason to fear something to which there is no possible alternative—in some sense of “possible” stronger than conceptually possible, but still quite weak.

But there are others.

Observe that death might not be depriving for a person who is unfortunate enough: the evils of future life for that person might outweigh the goods. According to A, such an unfortunate still has an “egoistic” reason to fear death: extinction.¹ Perhaps this is so. Nevertheless, it seems to me that such an unfortunate has no “egoistic” reason to *avoid* death. I rest this conclusion not on any sophisticated metaphysics, but instead simply on imaginative entry into the unfortunate’s deliberative situation. If the evils in prospect outweigh the goods, then that, to my mind, settles the question (ignoring, of course, “non-egoistic” effects on others, or other things of value, including, perhaps, disrespect for the value of personhood itself). It is not as though the “bad of extinction” puts a finger on the scales in favor of continued life that some further net deficit in the goods of continued life must outweigh. Indeed, there seems something misplaced, a kind of category mistake, in the thought that extinction itself is the sort of thing that could be weighed against the goods and bads that a life might contain.

This suggests:

F. There is no “egoistic” reason to avoid extinction as such.²

A and D imply, not all that surprisingly:

G. One can have reason for “egoistic” fear of something that one has overwhelming “egoistic” reason *not* to avoid.

¹ However, Scheffler seems to suggest at points that fear of death depends on deprivation: “assuming that they are glad to be alive and would like to go on living” (96), “our fear testifies to the depth of our confidence in the value of all that death brings to an end” (106), and, possibly, “*unwanted* cessation of one’s existence” (97, my emphasis).

² More metaphysical routes to F and J below have been suggested. They turn on the claim that one does not exist at the time of the misfortune of death, or, at any rate, cannot experience it. For a contemporary example, see Stephen Rosenbaum, “How to be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23:2 (1986): 217–25. (Indeed, the claims are sometimes taken to support the stronger conclusions that, even supposing that future life promises more good than bad, one has no reason to avoid death, and it is not bad for one.) I don’t rely on such claims here.

Going to the dentist, as Scheffler says (95), is a familiar example of this. But A and F imply, more surprisingly:

H. One can have reason for “egoistic” fear of something that one has *no* “egoistic” reason to avoid.³

It is harder to think of other examples of H. There is *some* reason to avoid dental appointments. They are unpleasant.

If we assume:

I. If something would be in some way bad for one, then one has egoistic reason to avoid it.

then Scheffler may also be committed to:

J. One can have reason for “egoistic” fear of something that is in no way bad for one.⁴

Another route to J, owing to Lucretius, appeals to the apparent symmetry between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence.

1. One’s prenatal nonexistence as such—that is, apart from depriving one of the goods of a longer life⁵—was in no way bad for one.

³ One might reply that, *as things are*, no one can *avoid* extinction. We can only *postpone* it. And we often have reason to fear things that we have no reason to postpone (e.g., dental surgery, which will be as painful whenever it occurs). There is nothing surprising about that. But we are assuming that it is at least conceptually possible that things are different: that the unfortunates *could* avoid extinction. It seems, even in that case, that they would have no reason to avoid it.

⁴ In passing, Scheffler entertains this possibility, when he observes that denying the Second Epicurean Conclusion may not require denying the First Epicurean Conclusion (77).

⁵ There is also a puzzle of this kind surrounding the depriving effects of death. Why is one’s not being born earlier not as much of a misfortune as one’s not dying later, given that they both deprive one of goods of additional life? But we are setting deprivation aside. For attempts to solve this puzzle, see Thomas Nagel, “Death,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 1–10; Fred Feldman, “Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death,” *Philosophical Review* 100:2 (1991): 205–27; Frederick Kaufman, “Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence,” *American Philosophical*

2. There is no relevant difference, in this context, between prenatal nonexistence as such and postmortem nonexistence as such.
3. Therefore, one's postmortem nonexistence as such will be in no way bad for one.

If J is false, that it is, if:

4. One has egoistic reason to fear only what will be in some way bad for one,

then it would follow that A is false: that is, that:

5. One has no egoistic reason to fear one's postmortem nonexistence.

So Scheffler may be committed, in another way, to J. He may need J to block this argument against A.

Note further that:

6. If X is a past event or condition, such that, were an event or condition, Y, relevantly similar to X to lie in future, one would reasonably fear Y, it is reasonable for one to feel a sense of disquiet in contemplating X.

For example, someone who barely escaped an atrocity, or experienced the horror of war, cannot reasonably be expected to contemplate those past events with equanimity, even if he knows full well that they will never return. Indeed, one imagines that he would shudder at the thought of it. But I take it that:

7. It is not reasonable for one to feel disquiet in contemplating his prenatal nonexistence as such.

Whatever disquiet I might feel at thoughts of Nixon's first term, it would be bizarre for me to feel disquiet about the fact that, during it, I did not yet exist. But 2, 6, and 7 also imply that Scheffler's A is false. So perhaps Scheffler must deny 6 too:

Quarterly 36:1 (1999): 1–19; and Anthony Brueckner and John Fischer, "Why is Death Bad?" *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986): 213–23.

K. It may not be reasonable for one to feel disquiet about X, even if X is a past event or condition, such that, were an event or condition, Y, relevantly similar to X to lie in future, one would reasonably fear Y.

Scheffler might seek to avoid J and K in another way. I have been supposing that what we fear, in fearing extinction, is the “state” of postmortem nonexistence. This makes 2—the claim that prenatal and postmortem nonexistence are relevantly similar—relevant. But perhaps what we fear is, specifically, the “passage” *into* this state, of nonexistence.⁶ And perhaps the passage *into* the state of nonexistence—the passage that death involves—is unlike the passage *out* of it—the passage that birth (or gestation, or postnatal development) involves. But, if so, what is it about the *passage into* nonexistence that we fear, apart from the fact that, its having taken place, we will “be” in a *state* of nonexistence? And how is it different from the passage *out* of nonexistence, which can seem no less “uncanny” or “impossible” (78)?⁷

If A indeed implies H, J, and K, this fact need not refute A. It may only testify to something that Scheffler is at pains to emphasize: the singularity of our fear of death. Insofar as it is not fear of the deprivation of the goods of further life, our fear of death may be, unlike any other fear, a fear of something that we have no reason to avoid,

⁶ Indeed, Scheffler tends to characterize the object of fear in terms of the “transition” into nonexistence: “will stop being,” “is now going to end” (78), “will cease to exist” (96), “cessation” (97).

⁷ The “temporal asymmetry” described by Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), sect. 67—that we are not as upset by news of *past* egoistic bads as we are by news of *future* egoistic bads—might be invoked as a theory of error for claim 1, which would alleviate one source of pressure to accept J. It only seems that prenatal nonexistence is in no way bad for us, the error theory would say, because it lies in the past. But this would not make K less puzzling. Why do we not contemplate our prenatal nonexistence with horror, whereas we fear its future equivalent, postmortem nonexistence, even though we *do* generally contemplate with disquiet past events and conditions whose future equivalents we greatly fear?

something that is in no way bad for us, and something whose analogue in the past gives us not the slightest disquiet to contemplate.

2. I now turn to the implications of C and D. Scheffler notes that C implies:

- L. The wish that our lives, or value-laden lives, should go on forever is a wish for something conceptually incoherent (93).

What, if anything, follows from this? Does it follow that the wish is unreasonable? We can reasonably have wishes for distinct objects that we know are not compossible. Is it so obvious that we cannot also reasonably wish for their impossible combination? Perhaps the reply is that there is no such wish, reasonable or otherwise. As described, there is no propositional object for it to have.

But, still, does it follow that it is unreasonable to *regret* the very fact of C: that our lives, or our lives if they are to be value-laden, must come to an end? That attitude has a propositional object: a necessary truth. It might be replied that we can reasonably *regret* something only if there is conceptually possible alternative to it. But can Scheffler give this reply? As noted above, he accepts E: that we can reasonably *fear* our death, even though, in a still very weak sense of “possible,” there is no possible alternative.

At any rate, according to C, the desire for worthwhile eternal life is for something conceptually impossible (and so perhaps no desire at all), and, according to D, the desire never to die is for something that would be a disaster for us, depriving us of a meaningful life, or even any life at all. Yet, as Scheffler notes, the desire never to die and, moreover, to enjoy eternal life seems widespread (55–7) (even when distinguished from other desires that might fuel yearning for a personal afterlife, such as being connected with loved ones or seeing justice done (57–9)). Romans 6:23 did not, and still does not, fall on deaf ears. What are we to make of this?

One possibility, short of attributing to such people an even deeper confusion, is suggested by the fact that knowing that we would never die would, as Scheffler notes (59), relieve us of the fear of death. Indeed, if Scheffler's A is correct—if we have reason to fear our extinction as such, whenever it should occur—then it is the only *rational* way to relieve us of that fear. Unless our extinction will *never* occur, the reason for fear is still present. Assuming that, in general, we have reason to want to vacate reasons for fear, as such, we have at least that reason to wish never to die.

Another possibility, again short of attributing to such people an even deeper confusion, is that they really desire not infinite time, but instead more time. That is, for any time that they might die, they desire that they should die, but later than that. This seems a reasonable structure of desires. *Whenever* we die, our dying *then* would be *all things considered worse for us than dying later* (at least if our lives are worth living). First, it would be worse in one respect: it would deprive us of the goods that we would have enjoyed had we had a longer, but finite life. Second, it would be *no better* in another respect: our dying then is no better than dying later at bringing it about that we die at some point, and so at avoiding the catastrophe of immortality.

This may also ease an apparent tension between C and D, on the one hand, and the “conservative” impulse (8–9, 50), on the other hand. Suppose that the impulse is interpreted as: to value something is to wish, or think it good, or see oneself as having reasons to strive, that it last forever. Then to value our lives is, perversely, to think good, etc. something that is conceptually impossible, or a disaster for us: that our lives last forever. But suppose the impulse is interpreted as: to value something is, with respect to any particular time it might end, to wish for, think it good that, etc. it not end until later. That structure of desire is, as far as I can tell, coherent.

3. Next, the case for B. Why should we accept B, and so C and D: that if our lives were to go on forever, they would not be value laden, or lives at all? One possible reason is that *no* life that went on forever would be a life, or a value-laden life. But why accept that?

Scheffler offers three kinds of reasons. He suggests, first, that a life, or value-laden life, requires a *progression through stages, change, development, etc.* (89).

But an infinite life could involve a progression through stages, even a progression through (an infinite number of) finite stages. Compare the progress of humanity. It seems intelligible that humanity should go on forever, but that doesn't obviously mean that humanity would not progress, change, develop, and so on.

He suggests, second, that a life, or value-laden life, requires, or requires the possibility of, *loss, illness, injury, harm, risk, and danger*. And these, in turn, draw much of their content from the possibility of death (90).

But much of their content, it seems to me, would remain without the possibility of death. There could still be the possibility of: loss of honor, reputation, self-respect, good conscience; failing in one's projects; hurting, disappointing, being separated from, rejected by those one cares about; being tyrannized, enslaved, humiliated by others; losing skills, capacities, control over one's body or environment; pain and suffering.

Indeed, one might think that immortality would raise the stakes to terrifying heights. Having done what one can't live with oneself for doing is bad enough—but, despite that, having to live with oneself for eternity? Suffering a fate worse than death is bad enough—but suffering such a fate with no hope of the relief of death? Surely much of the power of the myths of the punishments of Prometheus and Sisyphus, and of depictions of hell, owes to their images of *unending* torment. Far from immortality removing risk, danger, etc., the thought would instead be that immortality would make

risk, danger, etc. paralyzing, crushing. (Admittedly, this might be a route to a *different* conclusion to the effect that mortality has some redeeming feature: not that mortality makes things matter, that it keeps them from mattering oppressively much.)

A third reason Scheffler gives is that *temporal scarcity is a necessary, or otherwise important, condition for valuing*. He argues, very suggestively, that we could scarcely so much as make sense of structured deliberation, of the need to make comparative evaluations and so, arguably, evaluations at all, in its absence (92–3).

But why couldn't other kinds of scarcity serve much the same function? It doesn't follow from the fact that *time* is not scarce that *nothing* is.

In any event, there could still be temporal scarcity even if time alive was not scarce. Scheffler notes that there might be limited time to engage with perishing objects, or non-repeating events (93 n. 15). But there would many other sources of temporal scarcity. (1) If an immortal life would be made of finite developmental stages, then the finitude of those stages would make for temporal scarcity. Regrets for missed opportunities in one stage might be carried into the next stage of life. (George Bernard Shaw's quip comes to mind, about how youth is wasted on the young.) (2) Imagine an immortal life where our time with others was limited: that you would eventually be separated from those you had come to love, albeit not by death. (3) Some goods are intrinsically temporally "positional," or depend on "timing." To discover or invent something, you have to be the *first*. To have a monogamous marriage to someone, you need get your marriage proposal accepted by her *before* someone else does. (4) In general, in competition for scarce goods, "getting there before the other guy" is of paramount importance (especially so, one might think, if the alternative is *eternal* deprivation).

Finally, I'm struck by the fact that small children seem to care about many things—such as the attention of their parents, control over their environment, the acquisition of new skills—often quite intensely, even though they don't have much grasp of mortality, especially not of their own. Of course, one might attribute to them greater implicit sophistication in their beliefs about mortality, or less sophistication in their alleged valuing. But if we take my description at face value, then it suggests that, even if awareness of scarcity, or even of temporal scarcity, is necessary for valuing, such awareness induced by awareness of one's own mortality is not.

I have been raising questions about the thesis:

If we never died, we would not live a life, or a value-laden life, *because no life* that went on forever would be a life, or a value-laden life.

A weaker thesis, easier to defend, is:

M. If we never died, we would not live a *human* life, or a life laden with *human* values, because no life that went on forever would be a *human* life, or a *human*-value-laden life.⁸

Yet M may read like “merely a trivial truth resting on a stipulative definition” (94). It doesn't rule out the possibility of a *different kind* of eternal life, or an eternal life with *different kinds* of values. Why should one care that that eternal life, or its values, wouldn't be classified as “human”? Is it so foreign to yearning for immortality, after all, to chafe at being confined to the merely human?

Perhaps the reply is that what matters is not that those values wouldn't meet certain criteria of “humanness” per se, but instead something that this implies: namely, that (on the assumption that our actual values *do* meet these criteria for humanness) those values would simply not be *our* values. “At best,” the thought would run, “a life

⁸ Indeed, the qualification “human” appears throughout Scheffler's discussion.

that went on forever would be laden with values very different from our values: the values to which we have become attached and by which we have come to be defined—under the lengthening shadow of our mortality. Perhaps we could wish eternal life for homo sapiens who have not yet become attached to values such as ours. But could we reasonably wish it for ourselves? Imagine that we were given, here and now, the option of eternal life. This would be, we are assuming, the option of a life estranged from *our* values. Setting aside the question of whether we could see this life as one that *we*, rather than some stranger, would go on to lead, how could we, who value *our* values, value *it*? To be puzzled about why we shouldn't value this different, everlasting life would be like being puzzled about why I shouldn't trade in the man or woman I love for a substitute with better actuarial prospects.

Note that, on this line of thought, we need not deny that whatever values might be available to us were we never to die would be classifiably “human.” We might observe merely that, even so, they would not be the *particular* human values to which we are *actually* attached. This line of thought would rest on an even weaker thesis:

N. The lives that we are now in the midst of leading could not continue to be laden with the *values that they actually are* were we never to die, because *those* values presuppose our death.

Whether N is defensible is another question. But it seems much easier to defend than B. And this retrenchment would seem to meet Scheffler's objective just as well. Or, more guardedly, and assuming nothing about anyone's “objectives,” the emotional and practical import for us of N might differ little from that of B. For, while we would not be forced to the stronger conclusion that mortality is necessary for a value-laden life, or even for a human value-laden life, we would be forced to the weaker conclusion that *our* mortality is necessary for *our* life being laden with *our* values. And given that *our*

life is the one up to us to lead, and that we *actually do* value our values, the upshot seems all the same *for us*.

4. If I have more reservations than Scheffler about his claims in Lecture Three, I suspect that I have *fewer* than he has about his claims in “The Afterlife.” That is, I suspect that I am willing to take his conclusions farther than he is prepared to.

Scheffler qualifies, or guards against a misunderstanding of, his claim about what the afterlife conjecture reveals about the limits of our egoism. He seems to say (69–70) that:

- O. Although our *equanimity* is more dependent on beliefs about the survival of humanity than our own individual survival, we aren’t necessarily more *motivated* to ensure the survival of humanity than our own survival.

O might be taken to suggest a distinction between motivation and affect, as two “ways in which we might be said to care.” The point, then, would be to warn the reader that the afterlife conjecture may not show that we are *more motivated* to ensure the survival of humanity than we are to ensure our own personal survival.

For two reasons, I wondered about this. First, it seems to follow more or less directly from Scheffler’s earlier claims, first, that the afterlife matters to us very much, and, second, that mattering to us is, in part, a matter of being motivated (3), that we are in fact very motivated to ensure the survival of humanity. Or, at least, if this is not the case, then it would seem to call for some special explanation. Why, when it comes to the afterlife, is mattering only an affective, rather than motivational, affair, whereas in the other cases Scheffler describes, they go together?

Second, it just seems to me very plausible that we *are* highly motivated, in a suitably conditional sense, to ensure the survival of humanity. Granted, we don’t do a lot to ensure the survival of humanity, whereas we do do a lot to ensure our own

survival (visit the doctor, fasten seatbelts, etc.). But I suspect that this is because we don't see the survival of humanity as being seriously threatened (perhaps precisely because, for the reasons Scheffler gives, mass extinction is too horrible to contemplate, despite mounting evidence of the threats), because there is less that we can do as individuals about it, because we expect that others will step in to do it for us, because even if we slack off today there will still be time to set things right tomorrow, and so on. When confronted with a clear-cut case, in which we knew that it was up to us, it strikes me as very plausible that we would want to die prematurely, if this would mean that humanity survived.

Scheffler asks us to consider the following choice:

Option A: I die prematurely, but humanity survives long after I am gone.

Option B: I live to a ripe old age, but humanity perishes when, in Option A, I would have died.

He observes that you don't need to be particularly altruistic to choose Option A. However, he also observes that this case tells us less about limits to our egoism than about limits to our individualism, or simply to our capacity for enduring loneliness. For many of us, being deprived of all human contact would be a fate worse than death. And this deprivation might be equally bad for us even if it occurred not by the extinction of everyone else, but instead by our being separated from them forever, by being shot into space.

But consider a different choice:

Option A: I die prematurely, but humanity survives long after I am gone.

Option C: I live to a ripe old age, but humanity perishes when, in this Option, I die.

I don't think you need to be a particularly altruistic person either to be motivated to

choose Option A over Option C. You just need to share the sense, brought to articulation by Scheffler's discussion, that your life in Option C would lack much of the value and meaning that it would have under Option A, because of the dependence of that value and meaning on the collective afterlife.

By "motivated to choose X," I don't mean: "necessarily able to bring oneself to choose X if given the opportunity." It wouldn't be easy voluntarily to give up one's life, even when the meaning of one's life depended on it, just as it isn't easy voluntarily to saw off a gangrenous limb, even when one's life depends on it. But I don't think that's the relevant sense of "motivated to choose." I mean instead—as seems consonant with Scheffler's use of "motivated" (3)—that we would (sincerely and without needing special argument) see ourselves as having stronger reasons to choose it if given the opportunity. And I suspect that many of us, even those of us who are quite selfish by ordinary measures, would see ourselves as having such reasons, even if we might, incontinently, fail to follow them where they lead.

So I wonder whether the real distinction is not O, which contrasts affect with motivation, but instead something more like:

- P. Although we may in fact care (in both ways, not just affectively, but also motivationally) more about the survival of humanity than our own survival, our *grounds* for caring are, in a recognizable sense, more *egoistic* than *altruistic*.

That is, while we are concerned with the survival of humanity, this is not because, at root, we have disinterested concern for future people in themselves, but instead because their existence is a necessary condition of many objects of broadly egoistic concern: the value of *our* pursuits, *our* enjoying simple pleasures, and so on. Although it isn't quite right, one might try to bring out the egoism by saying that we value future people as "means." It's just that the afterlife conjecture shows that future people are much more

essential means than we might have thought. As Scheffler says, we are more dependent on them than we may realize.