

DEATH

& the

A F T E R L I F E

SAMUEL SCHEFFLER • *Edited by* NIKO KOLODNY

Death and the Afterlife

The Berkeley Tanner Lectures

The Tanner Lectures on Human Values were established by the American scholar, industrialist, and philanthropist Obert Clark Tanner; they are presented annually at nine universities in the United States and England. The University of California, Berkeley became a permanent host of annual Tanner Lectures in the academic year 2000–2001. This work is the eighth in a series of books based on the Berkeley Tanner Lectures. The volume includes a revised version of the two lectures that Samuel Scheffler gave at Berkeley in March of 2012, along with a third essay on a closely related theme. These are followed by comments by Susan Wolf, Harry G. Frankfurt, Seana Shiffrin, and Niko Kolodny, and a final rejoinder by Professor Scheffler. The volume is edited by Professor Kolodny, who also contributes an introduction. The Berkeley Tanner Lecture Series was established in the belief that these distinguished lectures, together with the lively debates stimulated by their presentation in Berkeley, deserve to be made available to a wider audience. Additional volumes are in preparation.

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SAMUEL SCHEFFLER

With Commentaries by

SUSAN WOLF

HARRY G. FRANKFURT

SEANA VALENTINE SHIFFRIN

NIKO KOLODNY

Edited and Introduced by

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Samuel Scheffler
December 2012

Contributors

SAMUEL SCHEFFLER is University Professor in the Department of Philosophy at New York University. He works primarily in the areas of moral and political philosophy and the theory of value. His books and articles have addressed central questions in ethical theory, and he has also written on topics as diverse as equality, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, toleration, terrorism, immigration, tradition, and the moral significance of personal relationships. He is author of *Equality and Tradition* (2010), *Boundaries and Allegiances* (2001), *Human Morality* (1992), and *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (1982).

HARRY G. FRANKFURT is Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. His books include the bestseller *On Bullshit* (2005) and *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (2006), which is based on his Tanner Lectures at Stanford University in 2004. He is also author of *On Truth* (2006), *The Reasons of Love* (2004), *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (1999), *The Importance of What We Care About* (1988), and *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen* (1970).

NIKO KOLODNY is Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. He works in moral and political philosophy, and has written papers on love, rationality, and promises, among other subjects.

SEANA VALENTINE SHIFFRIN is Professor of Philosophy and Pete Kameron Professor of Law and Social Justice at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has published many articles on a wide range of topics, including the demands of morality, the ethics of procreation, freedom of speech, promising, contracts, torts, and intellectual property. She will deliver the Tanner Lectures at Berkeley in 2017.

SUSAN WOLF is Edna J. Koury Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her books include *Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction* (2013), an anthology of essays co-edited with Christopher Grau; *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (2010), which is based on her Tanner Lectures at Princeton University in 2007; and *Freedom Within Reason* (1990).

Death and the Afterlife

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Introduction

NIKO KOLODNY

A line attributed to Woody Allen goes: “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don’t want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen, I want to live on in my apartment.”¹ Part of the joke’s effect comes from the abrupt drop from lofty metaphor (living on in hearts) to pedestrian literalness (living on in apartments). Part just comes from Allen’s nebbishy, self-deprecating persona. (Leave world-historical fame and noble self-sacrifice to others; a prewar walk-up is enough for me.) What strikes a more sustained chord, though, is the joke’s bleak knowingness, a kind typical of gallows humor. Try as you might to console or distract yourselves with substitutes, what matters—and deep down we all know this—is simply not dying.

In the papers that form the core of this book, Samuel Scheffler suggests that, while our situation may not be more reassuring, it is at least more complicated. What happens *after* we die may be more important *to us*, and our *not* dying may be less important *for us*, than Allen’s joke, or the sentiment it resonates with, would have it. This is not because Scheffler aims to show that we will somehow survive our deaths or should be unusually selfless. He makes his case simply by asking us to reflect carefully on what we do value and what our valuing it requires.

1. The first sentence appears in Linda Sunshine, ed., *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 250. Although I have not been able to find an authoritative source for the second sentence, I’m not alone in remembering it and attributing it to Allen. See <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Immortality>.

Set aside for a moment the prospect of living on in the hearts of your countrymen, or achieving immortality through your work, and simply focus on the more basic expectation that this prospect presupposes: that people will live after you die. Without this “collective afterlife,” Scheffler argues, it is not clear that your life could be filled with the values that it is. This includes some of the pedestrian values (e.g., take-out Chinese, the Yankees on WPIX) that you might enjoy in your apartment right now, values that have little, if anything, to do with grander hopes of you “living on” in the memory of others. Granted, we may be disappointed if we look to the collective afterlife for stand-ins or consolation prizes for personal immortality. But we shouldn’t overlook how the collective afterlife supports the meaning of our finite, mortal lives here and now. On the other hand, Scheffler suggests, as natural as it is to want to live on in your apartment, this want makes little sense. Perhaps you might stay in your apartment and never die. That seems conceptually, if not biologically, possible. But this would not be a continuation of the life that you want, or even of anything you could recognize as a life at all. For your life depends not only for its value, but also for its very shape and definition, on the fact that it will come to an end.

Scheffler presented the two parts of “The Afterlife” as the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at the University of California, Berkeley, in March of 2012. The campus was fortunate on that occasion to have comments by three distinguished philosophers: Susan Wolf, Harry Frankfurt, and Seana Shiffrin. This book contains the full text of Scheffler’s Tanner Lectures, only slightly revised, along with a third lecture, which was shared with the commentators after the event, “Fear, Death, and Confidence.” These are followed by commentaries by Wolf, Frankfurt, and Shiffrin, which are based on the remarks they gave at Berkeley, and so engage primarily with “The Afterlife.” There is also a fourth commentary, by the editor and author of this introduction, which mostly addresses “Fear, Death, and Confidence.” The volume concludes with Scheffler’s response to the commentaries, which, in addition to replying to specific

objections, expands on the broader ideas of the lectures in an exploratory spirit.²

The “afterlife” of Scheffler’s title is not the personal “life after death” posited by so many religious and mystical traditions, but instead the “collective afterlife” described above: the existence of other human beings after our death. What role in our lives, he asks, is played by our assumption that there will be such a collective afterlife? It would be natural to expect an introduction to these lectures to explain their relation to earlier treatments of the same question. But part of what makes his question so stimulating is that it is not clear that any philosopher has asked it before. As Frankfurt observes in his commentary, it is “pretty much original with [Scheffler]... [H]e 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.”

Partly because he is raising new questions, Scheffler does not proceed by building on, or criticizing, established principles. Instead, as the most evocative philosophy often does, his lectures invite us to conduct a series of thought experiments and then to try to come to terms with our reactions to them. In the “doomsday scenario,” everyone dies thirty days after your death. In the “infertility scenario,” suggested to Scheffler by P. D. James’s novel, *The Children of Men* (made into a movie of the same name in 2006 by Alfonso Cuarón), no babies are born.³ It is hard not to find these scenarios, as Scheffler finds them, unsettling. But why? In the doomsday scenario, you don’t die prematurely. And in the infertility scenario, no one at all dies prematurely. Everyone now alive lives on as long, if not as fully, as she otherwise would. What is unsettling,

2. The preparation of the manuscript for publication benefitted greatly from the work of Eugene Chislenko.

3. P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

then, is just the end of humanity itself, the not-coming-to-be of mere strangers.

Scheffler's "afterlife conjecture" speaks to how deeply and pervasively unsettling this might be. If we were to learn that there was no afterlife, if we were to find ourselves in the doomsday or infertility scenario, the conjecture says, a wide range of things that now matter to us would no longer do so. We would no longer value them, where "valuing" involves cognitive, motivational, and affective elements. We would lose confidence in the belief in their value, we would see ourselves as having weaker reasons to engage with them, and we would become emotionally deadened to them, as if by depression or ennui.

What pursuits might come to matter to us less? The examples that seem least controversial and easiest to explain involve objectives that won't be achieved, or won't benefit anyone, if there is no afterlife. Would we feel driven to spend our days in the lab developing biofuels or commercial fusion, when no one will be around to finish what we started, let alone enjoy its fruits? It also doesn't take much imagination to worry that our investment in pursuits that belong to larger collaborative enterprises, extended over time, might be similarly undermined, even though they do not aim at any specific, datable payoff. This would seem to include contributions to art, literature, and knowledge, as well as participation in cultural, religious, and institutional traditions. And in James's imagining, which has a ring of truth, the disappearance of the afterlife somehow hollows out a wide range of forms of appreciation and enjoyment, including even simple pleasures, like a good meal. Perhaps, in the face of the doomsday or infertility scenarios we would still want to avoid pain, bodily deprivation, and psychic distress. But how much more would matter to us, Scheffler observes, is not at all clear.

In their challenging and probing commentaries, Wolf and Frankfurt make cases for the resilience of value without the afterlife. Why should, say, the appreciation of music, or the satisfaction of

completing a painting, or the solace that we might find in comforting others here and now depend on our expecting humanity to have a future? Note that while these questions may be asked by those who are less convinced than Scheffler *that* the afterlife conjecture is true, they might also be asked, less rhetorically, by those who simply want to understand better *why* the conjecture is true. Scheffler offers several speculative, but highly suggestive, answers. Perhaps the absence of the afterlife would put even simple pleasures out of reach, for example, because these goods have a place only within a “human life as a whole,” and “our conception of ‘a human life as a whole’ relies on an implicit understanding of such a life as itself occupying a place in an ongoing human history.” In her constructive and imaginative commentary, Shiffrin sheds further light on this question, approaching it from a somewhat different angle. The mere loss of what we value, she observes, is not so distressing in itself; old forms pass away all the time to be replaced by new ones. Perhaps what is particularly distressing about the doomsday and infertility scenarios, then, has to do with the *arbitrariness* of the loss of what we value: that art, literature, scholarship, and so on, would end *for no good reason*.

In any event, Scheffler doesn’t aim to have the final word, especially in an inquiry that, if Frankfurt is right, has only just gotten under way. What he does stress, and this seems surely right, is the need to proceed with care. The values that we know of have been experienced only against a more or less settled, unreflective expectation of the afterlife. We cannot assume that they would survive in its absence, particularly given the intuitive power of the doomsday and infertility scenarios.

The afterlife conjecture might be paired with what could be called the “immortality conjecture”: that if we were to learn that we and everyone we knew were not immortal, then our lives would be similarly blighted. Here, of course, no thought experiment is needed. We have actually conducted the experiment, and its result is resoundingly negative. Despite knowing that we and everyone

we know will die, we carry on more or less confident and invested in our pursuits. This throws into relief a surprising, indeed astonishing, contrast. In some sense, the collective afterlife—the existence of people unknown to us and, indeed, as yet unborn—actually matters more to us than the continued existence of ourselves or anyone else now alive. As Scheffler puts it, “the coming into existence of people we do not know and love matters more to us than our own survival and the survival of the people we do know and love.”

Yet, someone might reply, just as the immortality conjecture has already been put to the test, hasn't the afterlife conjecture already been put to the test? And isn't the result just as resoundingly negative? After all, we know that humanity will *eventually* come to an end, if only millennia from now, and yet it strikes us as absurd to respond to this knowledge by packing it in today. In this, Wolf sees a possible rational basis for confidence even in the face of the doomsday or infertility scenario. If equanimity is the correct response to the certain, eventual disappearance of the afterlife, she suggests, then why not revise our initial dismay about its imagined, imminent disappearance? Scheffler observes, however, that this is just one way of resolving the tension between our responses to the eventual and imminent end of mankind. Other, less comforting, resolutions seem no less reasonable.

If the afterlife conjecture is correct, Scheffler observes, then it complicates, in subtle but far-reaching ways, prevalent assumptions about human individualism and egoism. It suggests limits to our individualism, in that it reveals that much of what we value, even if not overtly social, depends on implicit collective preconditions. And it suggests limits to our egoism, in that it reveals that we are more emotionally vulnerable to what happens to other people, even people as distant from us as other human beings can be. All the comments (save Shiffirin's) express one or another reservation about the suggestion that the afterlife conjecture shows us to be any less egoistic. As with many philosophical debates, however, the

controversy seems dispelled as soon as its terms are clearly defined. Scheffler's point, again, is that the afterlife conjecture reveals that we are more *emotionally* dependent on what happens to others than we might have thought. This does not necessarily mean that we are less "egoistic" in the sense of being more *motivated* to care for others. Nor need it mean that the emotional dependence on others that the afterlife conjecture reveals is not, in a way, "self-interested"; too crudely put, we need others to live so that our *own* lives can have value. Perhaps the lesson to draw is that the afterlife conjecture reveals not only the limits of our egoism, in Scheffler's stipulated sense, but also the limits of our *vocabulary* of "egoism." Our engagement with the fates of others is more complex and varied than "egoism," with its traditional opposition to altruism, is likely to capture.

"Fear, Death, and Confidence" turns our attention away from our attitudes about the future of humanity toward more familiar (or more familiarly discussed) attitudes about our own personal mortality. What attitude, Scheffler asks, is it reasonable to have toward one's own death? Here too Scheffler finds our outlook on our mortality arrestingly paradoxical. In a sense, we need to die in order to live; our life must have an end for it to be a meaningful life, or indeed a life at all. For all that, however, our fear of death is not unreasonable.

The suggestion that immortality might deprive our lives of meaning is not entirely new. Bernard Williams, to take perhaps the best-known example, argues for something like this in his essay, "The Makropulos Case."⁴ For Williams, however, the idea often seems to be that a life that went on *too long* would eventually *lose* its meaning. Death, provided it comes soon enough, is what rescues us from that fate. Scheffler's point is more fundamental. A life lived

4. Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100.

beyond the shadow of death would not be, even “early on,” a meaningful life, or even a life at all.

Why? In part, because our conception of a life is a conception of a progression through a finite number of stages—childhood, adolescence, old age—of more or less fixed duration. In part, because many values are, or involve, forms of protection or relief from disvalues such as disease, harm, and danger, which themselves depend on the prospect of death. And in part, perhaps most importantly, because valuing things, with its comparative and prioritizing judgments, makes sense only against a background of scarcity, and, in particular, temporal scarcity.

It might be suggested that some of these features could be present, to some extent, even if the prospect of death were absent. Perhaps, for instance, there would still be the danger of pain or humiliation, if not loss of life. But it is hard even to know how to evaluate this suggestion, given how pervasively the fact of our mortality structures our thinking about life and the goods it might contain. As in his reply to Wolf’s and Frankfurt’s comparative optimism about value without the afterlife, Scheffler cautions against our assuming too easily that we can continue to make sense of value once it has been torn from the only contexts in which we have had any experience of it.

If Scheffler is right, then to want eternal life, or never to die, is confused. A life that goes on forever is not possible, and never dying would be a disaster for us, precisely because it would deny us a life. All the same, recognition of this fact may do little to palliate our fear of death. And Scheffler sees no clear reason why it should. Indeed, he suggests, even though we need to die in order to live, our fear of death may have deeper and more tenacious roots than many philosophical traditions recognize. I may fear my death not only because it deprives me of certain identifiable future goods, such as seeing my children grow up. I may fear my death, and not unreasonably, also simply because of what my death is: the ceasing to exist of the very subject of this fear.

The most striking of Scheffler's conclusions may be the contrast that finally emerges when the findings of "The Afterlife"—about our attitudes toward others' survival—are placed against the findings of "Fear, Death, and Confidence"—about our attitudes toward our own survival. Whereas the expectation that others will survive me, that humanity will go on, is necessary for my valuing much of what I do, the recognition that I will *not* survive, that my life will *not* go on, is likewise necessary for my valuing much of what I do. What I need, as he puts it, is that I "should die and that others should live." In the most abstract terms, one might say, our conception of a valuable life makes seemingly incompatible demands. It needs both an end and continuation. It needs to be bounded by temporal limits but also to partake, somehow, of ongoing enterprise. What makes this paradoxical combination, and so value itself, possible for us, is that we are at once mortal and social. My own death bends my life into a significant arc, but that arc is traced against a collective history that carries on.

This conclusion may not be consoling, exactly, and it is not, I take it, Scheffler's expectation that it will be. Indeed, as he notes, it may just as soon disconcert us, by bringing to light vulnerabilities and conflicting impulses that we did not know we had. Instead, the hope is that pursuing such questions will bring us to a better understanding of our complex and elusive attitudes toward our own and others' survival. It is a hope that is amply fulfilled by Scheffler's reflections and the discussion that they have only just begun to provoke.

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