Samuel Scheffler. **Nikko Kolodny, ed**. *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford University Press 2013. 224 pp. $29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199982509).

The first thing you need to know about this book is that Scheffler's 'afterlife' has nothing to do with religious conceptions of life-after-death; rather it refers (idiosyncratically) to the continued existence of human life in general after one's own personal death. The book consists of his Tanner Lectures on that theme (plus a third lecture delivered at the University of Chicago) followed by critical comments by Susan Wolf, Harry G. Frankfurt, Susan Valentine Shiffrin, and Niko Kolodny (who also served as editor), as well as Scheffler's responses.

Paradoxically, Scheffler claims that both the long-term *survival* of humanity and the *mortality* of the individual are needed in order to make possible a life of value, a life in which we can care about things in a robust way. The first claim takes up most of the book and Scheffler argues for it by asking us to engage in two rather disturbing thought experiments. In the first we are to imagine what life would be like for someone who knew that just a month after her future death at a good old age the entire human race would be annihilated in some kind of global catastrophe. Scheffler expects we would agree that such a person would lose interest in many things that had previously been objects of great concern for her. Such a reaction would purportedly demonstrate that even the preoccupations of seemingly self-centered individuals are radically dependent on the continuing existence of other people.

It might be suggested that what really rattles the unfortunate individual in the aforementioned thought experiment is not the destruction of the human race in general, but rather the tragic deaths of all those near and dear to her in the month following her own demise. In order to address this criticism, Scheffler presents a second thought experiment based upon P.D. James's novel *The Children of Men*, which describes a world in which all humans have become infertile and human history will end with their eventual deaths from old age. If everyone alive at the moment of my death were to become sterile and yet would continue to live for a normal span, my fear of their impending early deaths would evaporate. Whatever distress I would feel in this new situation could only reflect my concern for the continuing existence of humanity-in-general, and both P.D. James and Samuel Scheffler seem convinced that such a predicament would severely undermine my ability to care about anything, even the simple pleasures of life which, unlike multi-generational projects and practices, are not obviously linked with the strangers who were to populate the future. Contrariwise, the prospect of personal immortality would spell the end of value in the life of the individual. Why should I be particularly worried about anything if I have an infinite amount of time to see things through? While there is no *threat* of individual immortality on the horizon, human extinction seems to be a very real danger. Scheffler wants to show us that concern for the survival of humankind does not merely consist in our taking account of future generations in our utilitarian calculations; the very value of our *own* lives depends upon the future lives of the strangers who will constitute humanity well after our own individual deaths.

As Scheffler demurely admits, his argument is somewhat susceptible to a variety of critiques which are ably pressed by the commentators. One of these is the 'Alvy Singer' thesis, named for the protagonist of Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall*. Absurdly, the child Alvy is paralyzed by his knowledge that billions of years hence Earth will be destroyed by grand cosmic processes. But if it is absurd to worry about the *afterlife* enduring only for billions of years, should we really be concerned about its lasting only millions or thousands or even hundreds of years? Scheffler confesses

'I do not claim to have a solution to the Alvy Singer problem' (189). Another problem relates to Scheffler's urge to prove the universalist point that it is the continued existence of humans-in-general, whether friends or strangers, members of our own culture or not, which undergirds our ability to find things valuable. When pressed, however, he eventually admits that without some minimum degree of cultural similarity between present and future persons, humanity's sheer persistence might not be able to anchor our valuations: 'Matters might be different…if we thought that our human successors and their values would be thoroughly and irredeemably depraved' (196).

The Afterlife, then, is the kind of book which some philosophers love and other philosophers love to hate. Its champions will promote a new philosophical cottage-industry concerned with the interpretation and elaboration of Scheffler's fresh batch of enticing thought experiments. Its detractors will dismiss it as an especially extravagant exercise in armchair psychological speculation; Scheffler does without any references to actual psychological research.

How in the world can we foresee how people would react to the end of the world? Indeed, several of the commentators question Scheffler on this point. Might not people quickly rebound from their initial shock to make the best of the situation? Perhaps they will find great value in helping each other in those final days? As for Scheffler's claim that without the temporal constraint of our mortality we would be unable to develop concern for the things of this world, Niko Kolodny argues that even immortals have to worry about deadlines. For those who never die, missing a unique and fleeting opportunity can produce eternal regret.

I think my own reaction to being informed that everyone would die soon after my own natural death would be to take great care in matters of personal safety. As for the *Children of Men* situation, I am not at all sure that people would actually fall into despair. When reason leaves no room for hope religion steps in. As the Talmud states: 'Even when the sword rests upon their neck they should not deny themselves hope of mercy'. Thus Scheffler's second thought experiment becomes a kind of speculation wrapped up in a psychological counter-factual: 'Suppose I were informed that all human beings would became sterile *and despite human nature* I did not cling to some hope of miraculous salvation'.

Scheffler himself admits that we must keep track of the difference between how we *would* in fact react to his extreme hypothetical situations as opposed to how we s*hould* react to them. Perhaps he is really interested in the more easily answered question of how we, in the comfort of our living rooms and dinner parties, untouched by the psychic shock of living in an apocalyptic reality, *imagine* we would react to the various scenarios. After all, it is our own values that Scheffler hopes to clarify, not those of spectacularly traumatized people living through an apocalypse. Thus *The Afterlife* may spark both discussions of its hypothetical situations as well as discussions of what we are talking about when we talk about such situations.

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