

# Death and the "Afterlife" (Part 1)

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## Scheffler's Doomsday Scenario

*Doomsday Scenario:* Imagine that, thirty days after your death, the earth will be completely destroyed by collision with an asteroid.

**Question:** What are your reactions to this scenario? How would you feel if you learned this were true? How might this affect your everyday behavior?

*Note:* Questions about what we in fact value are distinct from questions about what we *should* value.

*Scheffler's Project:* To draw some conclusion about *what we value* from our reactions to the Doomsday Scenario.

## Three Observations about Valuing

1. *Nonexperientialism.* What matters to us is not merely our own experiences.

*Reaction 1:* we would not respond to the Doomsday Scenario with indifference.

We would not react by saying: "So what? Since it won't happen until thirty days after my death, and since it won't hasten my death, it isn't of any importance to me. I won't be around to experience it, and so it doesn't matter to me in the slightest."

2. *Nonconsequentialism.* What matters to us is not solely that the best consequences (whatever they happen to be) should come to pass.

*Reaction 2:* Our knee-jerk reaction is profound dismay, which we feel prior to any deliberating about the good and bad consequences of the destruction of the earth.

Might this, instead, be explained by the fact that it is *overwhelmingly obvious* that the destruction of earth would be a bad thing? Scheffler doesn't think so.

3. *Conservativism.* Valuing something (at least for us) typically involves wanting those things that we value to be sustained and preserved.

*Reaction 3:* We are likely to feel grief, sadness, and other forms of distress at the thought of the sudden death of the people we love and the sudden loss of the things we deeply care about.

Scheffler thinks there is (something "approaching") a *conceptual connection* between valuing something and wanting it to be sustained or preserved. Is he right?

## Worthwhile Projects without an Afterlife

Scheffler wonders how the Doomsday Scenario would affect our motivations and choices about how to live.

**Questions:** To what extent would we remain committed to our current projects and plans? To what extent would the activities in which we now engage continue to seem worth pursuing?

Scheffler thinks that many projects would become less important to us. In particular:

- Projects whose completion won't be achieved until sometime in the distant future.
- Projects that derive their value from their affects on large numbers of people over time.

*Examples:* Cancer research, political activism, scientific research, ...

### *Personalizing Our Relation to the Future*

Most people regard it as a bad thing for everyone they care about to die before they do. Why do we feel this way?

- *Personalizing the Future:* We want to "personalize" our relation to the future—if our deaths involve certain relational disruptions, then the future "can be conceptualized with reference to an ongoing social world in which one retains a social identity."

The Doomsday Scenario is particularly bad because there is no way for us to be a part of the future after our deaths.

### *The Infertility Scenario*

Consider the Infertility Scenario (from P.D. James' *The Children of Men*), in which people become disinterested in many things—even those meant to deliver immediate gratification.

**The Afterlife Conjecture:** With no afterlife (in Doomsday Scenarios), people would cease to value, engage in, and be emotionally attached to many activities and pursuits—even those meant to deliver immediate gratification.

Do you think this is right?

If so, what does this show?

Scheffler thinks it reveals that we are less egoistic than we might've thought.

They'll become less important in three ways:

- (1) Our reasons to engage in them will be less strong.
- (2) Our emotional investment will weaken.
- (3) Our belief that they are worthwhile will be undermined.

Can you think of other examples?

What about creative pursuits? Writing a novel or painting a portrait? What about having children?

We want our deaths to feel more like a party that we had to leave early rather than a gathering of strangers.

Is he right?