

Flourishing and Finitude

Antti Kauppinen (a.kauppinen@gmail.com)

Trinity College Dublin

Final draft for *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*

No one would save for retirement or slave away at clearing a field for herself, if she knew for certain that she would not live to enjoy the fruits of the labor. The point of many of our projects hangs on the assumption of our continued existence.

Extending this commonsensical thought, Samuel Scheffler (2013) argues for the provocative thesis that the value of many of our activities depends on humanity in general surviving into the future beyond our own lives – in short, on our having what he calls a secular afterlife. We would be rightly demoralized if we knew that history would end after us.

But how long, and what kind, must our afterlife be for us to flourish? In his critical response, Mark Johnston (2014) argues that an afterlife that matters must itself be flourishing, which results in a kind of Ponzi scheme: the value of every life in history hangs on the infinite continuation of humanity. Otherwise the whole structure will collapse when we reach the last generation, which cannot flourish without an afterlife of its own.

In this note, I will develop an independently plausible version of afterlifism that avoids this objection. While the full significance of many of our activities tacitly presupposes a realistic prospect of *making a difference* to future lives, future *flourishing* is neither necessary nor sufficient for our own flourishing.

For and Against Afterlifism

Scheffler (2013) asks what it would mean psychologically and normatively if we were to discover that all of humanity will be extinguished soon after our own eventual death, whether by a cosmic accident or global infertility. He argues that such knowledge would and should deeply affect our decisions and actions. We would have less reason to do many kinds of research, engage in political or environmental activism, educate others, or sacrifice for art, for example – perhaps so little reason that the activities would become pointless. This is particularly clear in the case of projects whose ultimate success depends on what happens in the future, perhaps because it takes generations to achieve the goal, or projects whose point it is to benefit people for a long time. But part of our reason for undertaking many other activities derives from participating in and extending a continuing social tradition, and other activities, like reading fiction or appreciating art, are arguably as rewarding as they are only in the context of ongoing human history. So we would be justifiably demoralized by the prospect of human extinction – even more so than by the prospect of our own death. Scheffler concludes (in part) that we need future generations to exist in order to flourish ourselves, in order for our lives to have significant purpose and value.

The way I've characterized Scheffler's argument suggests a view that can be captured as follows:

Brute Afterlifism

Many activities that give value to our lives are pointless (or at least less worthy of emotional investment), unless there *exist* future generations of human beings, so we need future generations to exist in order to flourish.

The little that Scheffler explicitly says is in this vein. In introducing the notion, he says that “in this rather nonstandard sense, I take it for granted that there is an afterlife: that others will continue to live after I have died” (2013, 15).

Johnston’s critique begins with the observation that while it is plausible that many of our commitments and plans do presuppose a continuing human future, simple survival of humanity in any condition whatsoever is not sufficient for us to avoid being justifiably demoralized by knowledge of what is to come. As he puts it,

If the future of humanity just came down to Mafia-like families battling it out on a galactic scale, or to our being fully pacified fodder for the hungry aliens, or to our universal participation in “reality” shows to the exclusion of anything else—in other words, if the human future did not contain some value-laden lives—then it would not provide the larger horizon of sustaining value that makes many of our present small efforts matter. (Johnston 2014)

Johnston maintains that insofar as the value of our activities hangs on future generations, the non-demoralizing scenarios of human survival are those in which future lives are value-laden in just the same way as ours. So the most defensible version of afterlifism is something like the following:

Recursive Afterlifism

Many activities that give value to our lives are pointless, unless there are *flourishing* future generations of human beings, so we need flourishing future generations to exist in order to flourish.

However, Recursive Afterlifism (RA) leads to a very pessimistic conclusion, unless there is an infinite chain of flourishing human generations. After all, if the afterlife is finite, we will eventually reach a generation that has no afterlife, and by RA, such a generation cannot flourish. Since the flourishing of the immediately preceding

generation hangs on a flourishing afterlife, it cannot flourish either. The same is true of the preceding generation, and the one before, and so on to the beginning of time.

So if everyone's flourishing hangs on a flourishing future, no one can flourish. But fortunately, Johnston believes, we *can* flourish in a finite world, so Recursive Afterlifism is false. Regardless of what happens in the future, "there is simple human joy, the joy that comes from eating, drinking, sensing, moving one's body, engaging one's intellect, conversing" (2014). We can also be good to each other right now, and grateful for what we have already received. Although we are deprived of genuine goods without a flourishing future for humanity, self-standing goods that can be realized in the present are enough to make our lives worthwhile.

But will this really do? Parts of Johnston's alternative sound like what Tolstoy called the Epicurean response to grasping the finitude of humanity. It consists in "enjoying for the present the blessings that we do have ... it lies in licking the honey as best we can" (Tolstoy 1884/1983, 49–50). While there is a lot to be said for living in the present, there seems to be something shallow and even desperate in foregoing those ordinary sources of significance that do seem to hang on a continuing human history. But can we find a form of afterlifism that doesn't lead to pessimism when combined with finitude?

How to Cope with a Finite Afterlife

The issue that Johnston rightly raises for Scheffler concerns the nature of a meaning-endowing afterlife. Not just any kind of future existence will do. But, I will argue, neither is infinite chain of flourishing generations necessary, nor even sufficient. To make the case, I will first introduce the notion of a meaning horizon.

Suppose, with Scheffler, that a large part of the point of participating in cancer research, for example, is that one thus contributes to improving the lives of many people over time. But how many people and for how long? It is natural to think that while there is *some* point in the activity if there is just *one* generation of people who get to benefit from it, it makes *more* sense to make the effort if there are more generations to come, as long as those generations stand in the right relation to present activity (see below). We want our contributions to have *enduring* value, so that we don't vanish without a trace. But at some point, I maintain, it will not matter whether there's n or $n+1$ generations left. (What n amounts to will depend on the activity in question.)

Let us call the span of future generations up to the point at which the existence of further generations no longer affects the significance of present activity the *meaning horizon* of an activity. By definition, what happens beyond the meaning horizon doesn't affect the value of the activity. Suppose that there's just as much point in cancer research if there's a 100 or a 101 future generations to be benefited by it. If so, were the world to end a 101 generations after the cure, it makes no difference to the value of that activity. If the world ends beyond the meaning horizon of *everything* we do (our total meaning horizon), it's all the same from the perspective of our self-interest. Plausibly, our meaning horizons are finite: it would not affect my motivation and emotional commitment to the things I do if I were to discover that humanity will end in, say, 3000 years. So what?

The notion of a meaning horizon by itself doesn't solve the recursion problem. As long as the point of my activities depends on the *flourishing* of future generations within my meaning horizon, the regress still looms. As long as the last generation has a meaning horizon beyond itself (as any form of afterlifism holds), it

cannot flourish. Consequently, the preceding generation cannot flourish either, and so on.

Fortunately, it is not the *flourishing* of future generations that is required for the significance of our future-directed activities. What is needed is that they *make a difference* beyond our personal existence. The best form of afterlifism is something like the following:

Difference-Making Afterlifism

Many activities that give value to our lives have less point if there is no realistic prospect of their making a positive difference for future generations within their meaning horizon, so we need a realistic prospect of the life of future generations within our meaning horizon to be influenced by ours in order to flourish.

A few clarifications. First, I say we need a *realistic prospect* of making a difference: cancer research has a point even if it turns out to make no difference in the end, as long as it might very well do so – it makes a difference in most nearby possible worlds, say. Second, *making a positive difference* means different things for different activities. Some things are supposed to benefit future generations, some to be there to be potentially appreciated, some to keep the tradition going in some form into the future. Third, I don't mean the thesis to be individualistic. It's not necessarily my doing something that needs to have a realistic prospect of making a difference, but ours collectively. It may be enough that I participate in a practice, such as making music, that has a future as well as a present. Even if my individual contribution will be forgotten, I will have helped pass the torch. Finally, while I acknowledge that the claim needs to be supported by argument, I must leave it open

here just *why* making an enduring positive difference matters for the value of our lives – perhaps it has to do with the significance of transcending the temporal limits of an individual life, as Robert Nozick (1981, 594 ff.) suggests, or with making the story of our lives a more successful one, as I argue elsewhere (Kauppinen forthcoming).

Difference-Making Afterlifism agrees with Johnston that a future of nothing but endless power struggle between gangster clans or alien enslavement is justifiably demoralizing. But that's not because those generations fail to flourish, but because, say, they are guaranteed to fail to be benefited by our sacrifices or continue the traditions we have maintained. Our future-directed efforts are altogether futile (and robustly such). *That sucks for us*. Simple survival of humanity won't do: the kind of future that humanity has must somehow non-accidentally hang on what we do, or for there to at least be a realistic chance of that.

This line of thought is further buttressed by considering what I'll call a Reset Event: a global catastrophe that ends history as we know it, while nevertheless preserving the continuity of the species. Suppose that through a natural catastrophe, all traces of human activity are permanently destroyed, and all human beings apart from a small number of babies perish. Those babies are by chance reared by friendly animals (or aliens), and survive to form new human communities with no link to the past. They may eventually develop something akin to science and art, but these analogues have no connection to our history and endeavors. These strangers may even flourish, while we will have been totally erased – nothing anyone has ever done (apart from some baby-making) makes a difference to the lives or the existence of the post-Reset generations. I maintain that we would be just about as justifiably demoralized by the prospect of a Reset Event as by a doomsday scenario. (Some

random genes will have to survive, which may provide some consolation.) This supports the claim that it's making a difference that matters, while mere survival or mere flourishing is not sufficient.

Importantly, Difference-Making Afterlifism isn't a Ponzi scheme. Consider the last generation. They had better have a *carpe diem* attitude: it makes little sense for them to do many of the things that orient our lives. Maybe their lives are bound to be quite meaningless, focused as they are on short-term pleasures and immediate relationships. Their lives are not necessarily entirely devoid of value – after all, they can make a difference to the lives of their contemporaries, and enjoy the gifts of the present – but they cannot flourish as we can at our best.

What about the second-to-last generation? They do have an afterlife, although a brief one. Can they flourish? According to Difference-Making Afterlifism, the answer is a qualified yes. Even if their descendants won't exactly flourish, they can be benefited by their actions, or continue their traditions. The second-to-last generation does have a realistic prospect of making a difference of the right sort in the short long run, so research or activism or contributing to a tradition, or anything else undertaken in the service or in the context of these ends, still makes sense to some extent. They can lead somewhat flourishing lives, and their predecessors with a longer afterlife even more so. The meaning horizon of many earlier generations will have been exhausted, so the eventual end of humanity does not in any way diminish the value of their efforts. There is thus no regress that would doom anyone who ever lived. Hence, even if the value of our lives is to a significant degree hostage to the future, our collective finitude doesn't make it all insignificant – unless,

perhaps, we happen to be the very last generation, in which case we're probably best off just licking the honey.¹

References

Johnston, Mark. 2014. Is Life a Ponzi Scheme? *Boston Review* January/February

2014. Online at <http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/mark-johnston-samuel-scheffler-death-afterlife-humanity-ponzi-scheme>

Kauppinen, Antti. Forthcoming. The Narrative Calculus. *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 5.

Nozick, Robert. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Scheffler, Samuel. 2013. *Death and the Afterlife*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tolstoy, Leo. 1884/1983. *Confession*. Tr. David Patterson. New York: W.W. Norton.

¹ I'd like to thank Lilian O'Brien and an anonymous referee for JESP for important written comments on an earlier draft.