

Bootstrapping the Afterlife

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Abstract: Samuel Scheffler defends "The Afterlife Conjecture": the view that the continued existence of humanity after our deaths— "the afterlife"—lies in the background of our valuing; were we to lose confidence in it, many of the projects we engage in would lose their meaning. The Afterlife Conjecture, in his view, also brings out the limits of our egoism, showing that we care more about yet unborn strangers than about personal survival. But why does the afterlife itself matter to us? Examination of Scheffler's second argument helps answer this question, thereby undermining his argument. Our concern for the afterlife involves bootstrapping: we care more about the afterlife than about personal survival precisely because the latter has such salient limits that our lives are structured by adaptation to mortality, and it is only because the afterlife does provide a measure of personal survival that it can give meaning to our projects.

1. Introduction

A great number of things matter to us—friendships, painting, wildlife preservation, ice cream—and many seem to matter intrinsically: engaging in the latter pursuits seems to be good in itself, quite apart from any other benefits it brings. But this value appears in our lives against a background

confidence, typically hidden from our awareness of the valuing, that our lives are embedded within a human history that will continue past the expiration date of those lives themselves. Were this confidence shattered, much of that valuing may evaporate. Samuel Scheffler has recently defended this claim (“the Afterlife Conjecture”), arguing that much of our everyday valuing depends on a confidence in the “collective afterlife,” or simply “the afterlife”.

I pursue a further question: Why does the afterlife itself matter to us?¹ Scheffler argues that the Afterlife Conjecture shows not merely how much the afterlife matters to us as a background of other valuing, but also reveals “the limits of our egoism” (Scheffler 2013, 44).² It shows that we care far more about the existence of yet unborn strangers than we do about our own survival. Examination of the lacunae in the argument for this ethical conclusion will reveal why the afterlife matters to us; seeing why the afterlife matters to us, in turn, further undermines the argument.

Scheffler is right to hold both that the afterlife typically matters to us, and that our confidence in it is a condition of other valuing. In Section 2, I accordingly

¹ Following Scheffler, I will use “afterlife” to refer to the collective afterlife, that is, the continued existence of humanity after our own demise. I will use “personal afterlife” whenever I mean to refer explicitly to our own postmortem survival. This distinction, however, will of necessity be somewhat difficult to maintain consistently, as it is part of my contention that the two senses of “afterlife” are harder to pry apart than Scheffler would have it.

² See also Scheffler (2013, 45, 46, 47, 59, 77, 80, 81, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181). This is clearly a central contention of the book.

defend the Afterlife Conjecture against an important criticism, though a complete defense will have to wait until Section 4. In Section 3, I argue that Scheffler's ethical conclusion relies on bootstrapping: we care more about the afterlife than about our own survival *because* the latter's limits require our lives to be structured by adaptation to mortality. Our concern with personal survival grounds our concern with the afterlife. In Section 4, I argue for a stronger claim: our concern with the afterlife *is* a concern with personal survival. Section 5 draws an ethical conclusion sanctioned by my revision of the Afterlife Conjecture: that we should care about more than simply the *human* afterlife.

2. The Afterlife Conjecture

Scheffler's initial argument rests on a thought experiment dubbed "the doomsday scenario." Imagine that you will live out your natural life span, but the Earth and everyone on it will be destroyed exactly thirty days after your death. How would such knowledge affect the way things that currently matter to you continue to do so? Some of our projects will lose their value in a fairly straightforward manner: any project that we believe has a natural conclusion that cannot be attained within our lifetime (and the thirty day grace period) will suddenly become pointless. There is, in Scheffler's example, little to be gained from pursuing a cancer cure if such a cure is unlikely to be found before its potential recipients go up in smoke (or, perhaps, dust). Inspired by P. D. James's *Children of Men*, Scheffler complements the doomsday scenario with the infertility scenario, asking us to imagine that the human race has ceased reproducing. It is worth noting that certain projects—the preservation of the African Rhino from destruction by humans, for example—that would be

rendered inert by the doomsday scenario may become more urgent in the infertility scenario. Saving a species that will soon be destroyed along with its planet seems like a lot of bother for nothing; but in the infertility scenario, preserving a species from destruction by humans becomes a project with a clear end in sight, a point I will return to.

On Scheffler's view, however, a wide variety of other types of projects would be jeopardized as well, including those we would normally think of as having an intrinsic value. Scheffler suggests that such activities as painting—and perhaps even the composition of complex arguments about the importance of the afterlife—would lose much of their luster. This is because, as Scheffler suggests, such projects, despite their intrinsic value, presuppose an audience. Both Susan Wolf and Harry Frankfurt, in comments appended to Scheffler's lectures, express a distinct skepticism on this point. Our attitudes on a wide range of projects might be indifferent to the attitudinal shifts brought on by the doomsday scenario, and this includes, as Frankfurt puts it, “not just comfort and pleasure, of course, but whatever we value for its own sake and thus whose value to us does not depend entirely on the importance to us of something other than itself” (Frankfurt 2013, 135). Frankfurt takes this to be fairly obvious, since “surely, producing a marvelous painting—or string quartet or novel—may be enormously satisfying to the artist, even if there is no one, beyond the thirty days before doomsday, who will be around to appreciate and admire his or her creative work” (Frankfurt 2013, 134).

This objection overlooks the distinction between our valuing of an object and the activity involved in sustaining or creating it. I may, in the doomsday scenario, still believe that doing philosophy is intrinsically valuable, but this is no guarantee that I will still value my production of further philosophy; the production itself may come to seem pointless, even if it is, independently of other factors, immensely satisfying. I suspect it is overly Romantic to believe that most artists, philosophers, and so forth produce work *only* because it is

intrinsically satisfying to do so.³ We can imagine Harry Frankfurt stranded on an island, equipped with quill and scroll, but also with the certain knowledge that shortly after his death the island will be swallowed by the sea before it can be discovered even by the most adventurous of Viking explorers. Would penning (quilling?) a response to Scheffler remain among his pastimes? I suspect for most of us the answer would be no (though we may not want to admit it); I may well believe that thinking through Scheffler's thesis is interesting in itself, and that I cannot properly think it through without writing, yet also have no motivation to carry out that writing. This would be a strange kind of motivational paralysis, but not an uncommon one.

Moreover, what is typically intrinsically satisfying is not merely the production of the work, but its production *for an audience*. Absent the latter, the activity itself changes, and a source of deep motivation to engage in it vanishes. Any seasoned philosopher knows, for example, that peer review isn't *just* a means to an end; despite our certainties about the quality of our work, it is only in being appreciated by others that this quality is made manifest. Aristotle may have said that in seeking to be honored, we seek to be honored for the right reasons and by competent judges; true enough, but we seek to be honored nevertheless, and that is because being so honored is partially constitutive of being worthy of being honored. Achievement is, in an important

³ I say "*most* artists, philosophers, and so forth" because we are not here in the domain of certainties. There may be some people whose burning need for self-expression glows so hot that it *must* be given expression, no matter what. But I suspect this to be quite rare: some intrinsically valuable self-expression may look effortless, as in the case of a Pollock painting, but its production almost always requires work. Hard work. And the motivation to do hard work is precisely what may be undermined in the doomsday scenario. Artists may find themselves in the unpleasant (but not entirely uncommon) quandary of having a burning desire to express themselves but a complete lack of motivation to perform the work necessary to do so.

sense, incomplete without an audience (which is not to deny, as Scheffler suggests, that the audience may be imagined).

Frankfurt can still object that this shows only the importance of other people—in this case, contemporaries, as that is what the island most saliently excludes—to the ongoing value of our projects; it shows nothing about the importance of *future* other people. Why should that audience be in the future? Part of the answer, I suspect, is that we need the approval to be ongoing: how else can my work appear as work of quality rather than as fulfilling a fad?⁴ Another part of it may be, as Scheffler argues, that the value of creative work depends partly on its being a move in an ongoing conversation. I will return to the last part after examining why the afterlife matters at all.

In any case, let's stipulate, for now, that Scheffler is right about the Afterlife Conjecture. Scheffler himself notes a number of other project types that the doomsday scenario would threaten: those that derive their value from sustaining a tradition, for example, may lose that value if the tradition cannot be sustained. Moreover, Scheffler conjectures that many everyday pleasures and relationships may be undermined, or at least altered, because their value is constituted partly by their place in our conception of a good life, a conception that may not survive unscathed if the horizon within which good lives are lived is removed. I will focus primarily on the second kind of project, the kind that relies on a future (even if imagined) audience, as our

⁴ We may be perfectly happy to produce faddish work, of course; faddish work is, for example, quite useful in promoting a career. And in this sense, the production of faddish work—and work in general—would have just as much value in the doomsday scenario as it does now, provided our hiring and tenure-granting institutions survived intact. But this is precisely the point: engagement with intrinsic value is hit much harder by the doomsday scenario than engagement with instrumental value; comfort in life remains a necessity, even if the activity one engages in to attain that comfort seems otherwise pointless.

participation in such projects is tightly intertwined with the human need to leave traces.⁵

3. Mortality and the Afterlife

Scheffler builds on the Afterlife Conjecture to ground a further claim: “if by the afterlife we mean the continuation of human life on earth after our own deaths, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in some significant respects, the existence of the afterlife matters more to us than our own continued existence” (Scheffler 2013, 26). Scheffler takes this conclusion—let’s call it “the Unegoism Conclusion”, as he holds that it shows the limits of our egoism—to be the central result of his project. This is clear both from the fact that the upshot of the lectures as a whole—that we should be far more concerned than we are about existential threats to humanity—rests on it, and that Scheffler derives this conclusion in each of the three lectures making up the book. The first derivation goes something like this:

- (1) Knowledge of our own inevitable deaths does not undermine the value of our projects.
- (2) Knowledge of the doomsday scenario *would* undermine the value of (many of) our projects.
- (3) Therefore, the existence of the afterlife matters more to us (in some significant respects) than our own continued existence.

I will examine the second derivation in Section 4, but for the time being we can start with the first. Despite the appeal of the conclusion, the argument seems straightforwardly flawed: Premise (1) cannot play the role it is meant to play

⁵ One might object that an imaginary future audience is not the same as a future audience. This is true. But knowledge that an event *will not* happen, while it may not nullify our ability to imagine it happening, certainly weakens the seriousness with which we can entertain such imaginings. If I am aware that my imagined audience is merely imaginary, my motivation to perform for that audience is correspondingly weakened absent an extra stiff dose of self-deception.

here. First of all, the doomsday scenario requires us to acknowledge the imminent destruction of humanity, rather than its eventual destruction, which many already take for granted.⁶ In the individual case, the analogous scenario would be one where we are certain not merely of our inevitable deaths, but of *impending* ones. But learning of one's impending death *does* tend to undermine many of our projects in drastic ways, since in selecting and engaging with projects we are typically guided by a background sense of the time available for their completion, including the time granted by our life-expectancy.⁷ The amount of time available to us affects the sorts of projects we commit to. This leads to a second problem for the argument.

Premise (1) must show that knowledge of our mortality does not *undermine* any of our projects. But we have no conceivable grounds for such a conclusion without a comparison analogous to the doomsday scenario. In the doomsday scenario, we are suddenly presented with the certainty that humanity will be destroyed, shattering a previously held confidence in its continuing survival. The correct analogy must, therefore, be one where we begin our lives as immortals, and suddenly discover that we have been stripped of this immortality.

Scheffler notes that "it would surely have a dramatic effect on our attitudes if we grew up thinking that we were immortal and discovered our own mortality only in middle age" (Scheffler 2013, 46), but he argues that this would involve only a dramatic change in expectations, whereas the doomsday scenario would involve far more than that. But this scenario is not analogous, and there

⁶ I doubt, however, that the common belief in the eventual destruction of humanity plays much of a role in our motivational structure. The event is often imagined to be so far off as to make our species practically eternal, at least in imagination. While many pessimists do believe human extinction is nigh, I venture that *confidence* in the continuation of humanity outweighs that belief in most cases.

⁷ I thank Ralf Bader, an Associate Editor for this journal, for bringing this point to my attention.

is more than a change of expectations involved. The scenario is not analogous because, for it to be so, we wouldn't just have to *think* we are immortal; there would need to be significant other changes involved. Our mortality is not something we "discover"; it is something (the behavior of many teenagers notwithstanding) that human beings simply know. While experience with the death of others clarifies and solidifies that knowledge, it is highly doubtful that knowledge of our mortality is empirical. A good deal of literature, much of it about or inspired by Heidegger (Blattner 1994; Malpas 1998), advances the idea that knowledge of our mortality is, primarily, a function of our having projects in the first place; projects can fall apart, and to engage in projects is to know this.⁸ Knowledge of our mortality is the generalized form of this awareness of the omnipresent possibility of failure. Aside from this, the experience of pain, of fear—the exhilaration that comes from going too high on a swing—is itself an expression of the knowledge of our mortality. We must thus be imagining a life from which such experiences are absent, only to suddenly appear in middle age.

Those who do not find this convincing need not dwell on it, because the problem is more significant. For (1) to present a relevant contrast to (2), we must imagine humans who begin life being (or genuinely believing themselves to be, if we don't find the foregoing convincing) immortal. If such beings suddenly become (or discover themselves to be) mortal, this must involve more than simply the acquisition of a bit of knowledge: it must involve a radical reorientation of one's conception of one's power in the world. And we must keep in mind that, for this case to work, we are not imagining that

⁸ As will become clear, I do not think this is right. Knowledge of our mortality is built into *our*, mortal, projects; it is less obvious that it must be built into the nature of projects as such. Sigrist (2015), however, argues that a background awareness of mortality is a necessary condition for undertaking projects we find meaningful, as otherwise projects would not satisfy a risk condition he holds is necessary for meaning in life.

children, who may lack the concept of their mortality, gradually acquire it on their way to adulthood. We must be speaking of adults—at least, individuals who are already engaged in projects not dedicated solely to their own comfort—who suddenly discover their mortality. And for (1) to present a relevant contrast to (2), it must be the case that *their* projects would not be undermined by “the mortality scenario.” This appears at least as unlikely as the idea that discovering our impending deaths would leave our projects untouched.

Someone *might* think that immortals of this sort simply wouldn’t have projects to begin with. Scheffler follows a tradition that, in recent times, begins with Bernard Williams (1973), and has been endorsed by many others (Nussbaum 1989; Smuts 2011), of holding that immortality would rob our lives of meaning, or perhaps of motivation; that, in any case, if we were to become immortal, we would lose any reason to engage in projects and therefore to go on living. There has been a great deal of disagreement on this point—most visibly by John Fischer (Fischer 2009a; Fischer 2009b)—but we can put that aside and imagine that Scheffler and Williams are right. Still, they would not have grounds for the claim that immortal lives could not have projects, but only for the more limited one that *our* projects would lose their point were we to become immortal. But that is irrelevant here. For to make (1) relevant to Scheffler’s argument, we would need a scenario in which immortals, upon suddenly becoming mortal, would not find their projects undermined. And to speculate that this would be the case, we must think we have a pretty good grasp of what the projects of immortals would be like.

We might, following the Williams/Scheffler line, think that immortals *have* no projects. But that thought is unwarranted. That our projects would vanish if we were to become immortal does not show that immortals cannot have projects; it shows only that *our* projects—that is, the kinds of projects we now have—are incompatible with being immortal, and that we have no idea what

the projects of immortals might look like.⁹ Their projects might be incomprehensible to us, involving action over millennia and perhaps over vast spaces, but if immortals *could* have such projects (and I see no reason to deny it from our temporally curtailed perspective), it is likely that discovering themselves suddenly to be mortal would shatter them. Perhaps immortals could continue to enjoy immediate pleasures; but the vast majority of their projects would, in the mortality scenario, become untenable. Just try, in a mortal life, to discover whether the universe is truly infinite by sailing around it, or to document the extinction of every star as it occurs!

So Premise (1) is illegitimate in this argument. We cannot know or assume with any warrant that, counterfactually, *discovering* our mortality would not undermine the value of our projects. We can only know that, in the actual case, knowledge of our mortality does not, typically, undermine the value of our projects. This should surprise no one, since *all* our projects are chosen by mortals in the full knowledge of their mortality. If we accept the Afterlife Conjecture, then many (perhaps most; perhaps even all) of our projects have a value only against the horizon of our confidence in the afterlife. Many of our projects involve participation in goal-oriented activities that will not reach fruition (if they ever do) until long past the conclusion of our lifetimes. Many require us to imagine a future audience. Still others involve participation in a tradition that we anticipate continuing past us. In other words, many of our projects involve passing the baton off to future generations, or at least presuppose the passing of such a baton. This is, in fact, exactly what we should expect if our projects are the projects of mortals. Given how little we can accomplish within a single lifespan, it makes sense for us to integrate our activity into ongoing human history.

⁹ Ferrero (2015) argues that the necessary condition for (at least some of) our value-involving projects isn't scarcity of time but scarcity of opportunities for action. Thus, nothing about the nature of value or projects limits their pursuit to mortal lives.

Our projects, in other words, are adaptations to our mortality. This does not mean that we select projects on the basis of a conscious awareness of our mortality (though we can, and some projects—writing a will, for example, or setting up a trust—involve just that); rather, our mortality is already built into the sorts of projects we undertake and how we undertake them. Scheffler is right that many of our values would fall apart if we were to become immortal, but this is only because our values are grounded in the sorts of projects appropriate to mortals. What this line of thought suggests, then, is that we cannot say that the afterlife matters more to us than our own survival, since we have no relevant basis for comparison. Our survival is already ruled out for us, and the significance of this is not, as Scheffler suggests, that discovering our mortality would involve shattered expectations, but rather that all our expectations are already premised on our eventual non-survival. We can say that the afterlife matters to us, but not that it matters more than our survival. Our survival might matter to us a great deal, but to be human is to renounce such mattering as idle fantasy.¹⁰ The afterlife does not matter to us *more* than personal survival. Rather, the afterlife matters to us only *because* we have adapted to our non-survival. And it is because of this, I suggest, that the afterlife matters in the first place, so that there is an interesting bootstrapping effect in play: the afterlife matters to us because such mattering is an adaptation to our mortality. And in turn many of the projects we undertake within our mortal lives matter because the afterlife matters. The afterlife's

¹⁰ Of course some people do not: many today continue to believe themselves to be immortal and hold that after their death they will proceed to heaven. This does not change my point, however. Even those people, of whom there are indeed many, structure their lives for the most part around the idea that those lives will end, and the sort of sadness one witnesses at funerals would be incomprehensible against a background of a belief in personal immortality. That belief, in other words, simply does not have the same power over our lives as the awareness of our mortality has in shaping our projects.

matter is itself an adaptation, one by which we allow our lives to contain (certain kinds of) value in the first place.

4. Survival and the Afterlife

Let us now turn to Scheffler's second derivation of the Unegoism Conclusion. Here, Scheffler notes that,

although one of the primary reasons why the personal afterlife matters to people is that it offers the prospect of personal survival, and although many people desperately wish to survive for as long as possible, a failure to believe in the existence of the personal afterlife is actually much less likely to erode people's confidence in the value or importance of their worldly pursuits than is a failure to believe in the existence of the collective afterlife, which offers no prospect of personal survival (Scheffler 2013, 72).

The conclusion drawn here is the same as in the first case: the collective afterlife matters more to us than our personal survival. In response, we might again note the absence of a relevant comparison. It is true that lack of faith in a personal afterlife does not, typically, erode confidence in the value of one's projects. But this is, again, likely because those projects—and their value—are already structured as human projects on the basis of a lack of such faith. The relevant comparison case would have to be one in which we adopt our projects in the absolute certainty of our personal immortality, only to discover, with just as much certainty, that this immortality is a sham. But I doubt even the most devout adherents of afterlife religions have such an absolute certainty. If I am right and our background sense of our mortality is already built into human projects (just think about how it structures minute details of our lives—how long we take to eat a meal, for example), then no matter how confident one may be in the reality of one's personal afterlife, this confidence

simply *cannot* be as foundational in the shape of a human life as the confidence in our eventual demise. Perhaps more significantly, even those most convinced of their personal afterlife typically do not assume they have unlimited time to finish projects begun pre-mortem; the most fervent belief in heaven does not free one from a need to adapt to mortality. Mortality, in other words, isn't simply a belief we hold; it is—we might say in a Kantian transcendental vein—the form of human projects as such.¹¹

Again, then, we lack the grounds for saying that the afterlife matters *more* to us than our personal survival. But there is a further question here about *why* the afterlife matters. We can best approach this question by resisting the sharp distinction Scheffler draws between the personal and the collective afterlife when he claims that the latter “offers no prospect of personal survival.” The collective afterlife matters to us precisely *because* it offers a prospect of personal survival. If so, there would once again be a kind of bootstrapping in place: the afterlife matters to us because it allows for personal survival, and it is thus our concern with personal survival that allows our projects to matter.

It seems to be a fact about our lives that, for the most part, we want to leave traces behind after we die. These range, as Robert Nozick noted, from tombstones to the memories of others to children to artistic masterpieces.¹² The goal, he suggests, is to avoid simply vanishing from the world, so the kind of trace one leaves matters: it is not enough to leave hair samples and nail clippings. Rather, “the kind of trace one wishes to leave is one that people know of in particular and that they know is due to you, one due (people know) to some action, choice, plan of yours, that expresses something you take to be

¹¹ This is why, as I suggested earlier, it is a mistake to derive mortality from the nature of projects in general.

¹² “Artists often strive to leave behind permanent masterpieces, thereby achieving what is called immortality” (Nozick 1981, 583).

important about the kind of person you are” (Nozick 1981, 584). I suspect Nozick is mistaken here about what is central; while we care that our traces express who we are, and we care that others recognize them as such, it is the former that strikes me as most important (after all, people seem to be more concerned about leaving behind descendants than about ensuring that everyone know whose descendants they are). We mortals do try to leave something of ourselves behind, something expressive of who we are.

But why should we care? One suggestion, due to Owen Flanagan (1996), is that self-expression is a primary value in our lives, and traces allow us to continue expressing ourselves, after a manner, long after we are gone. Traces thus overcome what Flanagan takes to be the key feature of the badness of death: that it deprives us of the ability to continue expressing ourselves. This analysis is, interestingly, in line with Sartre’s (2012) suggestion that the badness of death lies in our standpoint on ourselves being overtaken by those of others; leaving traces, particularly self-expressive traces, provides at least an attempt at controlling how others will see us. Such traces, in other words, seem to allow us a kind of post-mortem agency. To some, however, such suggestions are simply metaphorical. Michael Slote, for example, discusses people who claim,

that they will *be or become immortal through their works*, or that they will *live on through their works*. Why do people ever say such things... It seems to me that such claims of immortality or living on are not (if there is no afterlife along traditional religious lines) literally true. It is not even literally true to say that part of one lives on in one’s works, for books, e.g., are not literally parts of those who write them (Slote 1975, 18).

Pace Slote, however, an important part of *living on* is being able to act in self-expressive ways, and this is something traces allow us. But are traces merely a proxy for literal survival?

Derek Parfit famously disagreed, arguing that survival is a matter of degree. After arguing that there is no “further fact” about personal identity aside from the overlapping chains formed by our psychological states, Parfit turns to his own death in a widely reproduced passage:

When I believed the Non-Reductionist view, I also cared more about my inevitable death. After my death, there will be no one living who will be me. I can now redescribe this fact. Though there will later be many experiences, none of these experiences will be connected to my present experiences by chains of such direct connections as those involved in experience-memory, or in the carrying out of an earlier intention. Some of these future experiences may be related to my present experiences in less direct ways. There will later be some memories about my life. And there may later be thoughts that are influenced by mine, or things done as the result of my advice. My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad (Parfit 1984, 281).

There is then a literal sense in which we do survive our deaths. The direct connections between our current experiences and some future experiences are broken, but many indirect connections continue to go on. Over time, of course, these have less and less to do with our current experiences, but if we were to continue living forever, the same would be true. Many disagree with Parfit, thinking that in reducing our identity to chains of connections among psychological states of various kinds, he has left out something central to being a self: our unique first-person perspective. While I am skeptical that there is

such a thing,¹³ we can accept the criticism while recognizing that Parfit gives us at least a model of *partial* survival.¹⁴

With this Parfitian model of survival, we have a straightforward way of explaining why the afterlife matters without insisting that it matters *more* than the personal afterlife. Leaving traces is a way of continuing our existence, but traces by themselves cannot accomplish this: they must be *recognized* by others. As Parfit's account would have it, these traces, themselves the causal results of our experiences, must give rise to further experiences in order to constitute our survival. The afterlife may then matter to us not *more* than the personal afterlife, not even as a proxy for the personal afterlife, but instead as a version of it (if an admittedly humble one). Of course not everyone will accept the Parfitian view that such causal continuity of experiences, across different individuals and different media (with various traces such as art works or works of philosophy thrown in as the media of survival transmission), constitutes genuine survival. But such metaphysical doubts have little bearing on the issue of why the afterlife matters to us. Even if we reject the idea that we can literally survive through our traces, the mere concern with leaving them suggests that something of the Parfitian view is interwoven with our attitudes. If we reject the metaphysics, the attitudes become irrational; nevertheless, it would be true that, irrationally or not, it is concern with personal survival that drives our concern with the afterlife.

¹³ Or, rather, I am skeptical that it is something apart from the purely formal "I think" that Kant took to accompany all our representations. To have a thought or experience is to have it from the perspective of an "I", but this does not imply that it is the same, unique "I" that underlies *all* our experiences. (See Kant's third Paralogism.)

¹⁴ Alternatively, we can distinguish "between the *self*, understood as the subjective, first-personal locus of experience, and the *person*, understood as an intersubjectively constituted unity of physical, psychological, social, historical and narrative forms of continuity" (Stokes 2015, 240), holding that the person can survive death even if the self cannot. Stokes, in fact, argues that posthumous deletion of online profiles constitutes a "second death" of one's person, in this sense.

In his appropriation of Williams, Scheffler suggests that what Williams's arguments against immortality point to is the idea that "the real problem is that one's reasons to live are, in a sense, reasons not to live as oneself. It is I who wants to live, but I want to live by losing myself—by not being me" (Scheffler 2013, 95). The reasoning here may be a little strained; following Williams's suggestion that in an immortal life our categorical desires would eventually become extinguished and we would be reduced to boredom, Scheffler suggests that without categorical desires we are left *only* with ourselves, and this is the fundamental problem. But the Parfitian account I have just sketched provides the ideal solution: if the afterlife, in its continuation of the influence of our traces, allows for partial survival, then the kind of survival it grants us is, in a sense, exactly what we want: we survive, but not quite as ourselves. This idea also helps make sense of the thought, raised above, that it is not merely the existence of contemporaries, but the existence of a *future* audience that seems essential to valuing the production of intrinsically valuable creative work. Such work is, in part, an embodiment of one's self. Only a future audience allows it to constitute the sort of personal survival we seek.

5. Conclusion

In arguing that the afterlife gets its primary value for us on the basis of a desire for personal survival, I am not claiming that the afterlife matters to us *only* or *necessarily* under that guise. In fact, it *may* matter less under that guise, since the bootstrapping effect is then more likely to fail. If we recognized that the afterlife provides the background horizon of much of our valuing, but only because the afterlife is itself a means of personal survival, its ability to provide such a horizon may be accordingly diminished to the extent that we reject Parfitian metaphysics of survival, or even the extent to which we worry that

the means of transmission of our survival may water it down.¹⁵ We may indeed want to survive as something other than ourselves, but this is rarely what we *explicitly* want. And we may well have other reasons—ones not connected to personal survival—for valuing the afterlife. Nevertheless, I suspect that the desire for personal survival does play a significant role.

If the afterlife matters to us to a large extent as a personal afterlife, we might ask whether traces of other kinds—ones that do not require the afterlife—can serve this role. I doubt it; but I suspect such traces can piggy back on the sorts of traces we normally want to leave, so that even traces that do not constitute personal survival on a Parfitian view might matter to us as proxies for personal survival. Consider the view proposed by Robin Le Poidevin (1996) that if we accept a certain version of the B-Theory of time, it will mean that our lives are, in a sense, eternal, since the past is just as real on such a view as the present; our lives themselves thus constitute traces on the face of eternity. This metaphysical proxy for survival does not serve well to satisfy our desire for personal survival, since the traces it leaves are unreadable by any temporal being.¹⁶ Any view that can piggy back on Parfitian survival must have *some* form of afterlife, though perhaps not necessarily a human one. I suggested above that in the infertility scenario, unlike the doomsday scenario, we may have reason to work to preserve other species. These species will not remember us; their continued experiences, though they would be the (indirect) causal upshots of our experiences, would not respond to the

¹⁵ There is a further complication that I cannot develop here. On a line of thought familiar from Williams (1973; 1981), our projects give us reasons to live. But as I have been arguing, our interest in surviving grounds our concern for the afterlife, which in turn (following Scheffler) provides the background for our having value-laden projects in the first place. Is our practical rationality, then, thoroughly bootstrapped? I suspect the answer is yes, but this is less troubling that it might seem. See Rousse (2016) for an account of how we can accommodate this circular value structure in our projects.

¹⁶ Since Le Poidevin explicitly denies God's existence, it is hard to even think of our lives *as* traces; perhaps they exist eternally, but they are accessible to no one.

individuality of our experiences. Their survival would not, in other words, allow for our Parfitian survival. Yet they would offer something of a replacement, however weak, as the next best thing to an afterlife. With Scheffler, we should perhaps worry more about the existential survival of humanity than we do. But perhaps for the same reasons—reasons I suggest are not entirely unegoistic—we should care more about the survival of those our species' afterlife threatens to destroy.

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