

## Doomsday Needn't Be So Bad

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### ABSTRACT

In his *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler provides a compelling argument that people *would* see less reason and be significantly less motivated to pursue most of their life's projects if they were to discover that there is no collective afterlife (i.e. future generations of humans continuing to exist after they die). Scheffler focuses on how people *would* react to learning there is no collective afterlife. In this paper, I focus on issues concerning how people *ought* to react to learning there is no collective afterlife. Answers to this question lead to surprising conclusions that challenge some of the normative claims Scheffler seems disposed to endorse. This paper has two central aims. First, I attempt to show that negative attitudes toward the lack of a collective afterlife are warranted for two reasons that have been heretofore overlooked. Interestingly, such reasons leave open the possibility that it can be appropriate to lament the lack of a collective afterlife even if it is not bad, all things considered, for anyone. Second, I argue that the lack of a collective afterlife need not be bad, all things considered, for most people. This is because there could be a sufficient number of meaningful projects available to people that would *compensate* for the loss of *pro tanto* value caused by the lack of a collective afterlife. These considerations lead to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that the lack of a collective afterlife need not negatively affect the total value of anyone's life, yet it may still be appropriate to lament the fact that there is no collective afterlife.

### 1. Introduction

Samuel Scheffler's *Death and the Afterlife* contains a fascinating exploration of the relationship between the value in our life and the existence of the *collective afterlife* (i.e. future generations of humans continuing to exist after we die). After imagining that the collective afterlife is prevented by a doomsday scenario or by sudden human infertility, Scheffler argues that people would react with horror and dread to such revelations. Each case is set up so that one gets to live out the remainder of her natural life, but the collective afterlife ceases to exist soon thereafter (Scheffler 2013, 19, 38). In such cases, people would supposedly see less reason and be significantly less motivated to pursue most of their life's projects (e.g. finding a cure for cancer, creating art, engaging in political activism) or even follow through on everyday plans (Scheffler 2013, 23). They would no longer believe such activities, and by extension their life, to be worthwhile. Or, at least, they would believe such activities to be significantly less worthwhile than if there were an extensive collective afterlife.

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These *Doomsday* and *Infertility* thought experiments raise a few distinct, but closely related, questions. First, how *would* people react to learning that there is no collective afterlife? Second, how *ought* people to react to learning that there is no collective afterlife? Scheffler focuses primarily on how people *would* generally react to such scenarios, though people's imagined responses are presumed to be, for the most part, apt. In this paper, I focus on issues concerning the second of these two questions and do so with respect to individuals' well-being. It may be true that they would react in the way Scheffler suggests, but should they? Surprisingly, I think the answer is often 'No.' My arguments may be seen to challenge some of the normative claims Scheffler seems disposed to endorse. However, my principal aim is not to tear down, but to build upon, this new area of philosophical inquiry. The conclusions I reach are quite different from, but largely consistent with, Scheffler's. My hope is that they will further our understanding of the relationship between the value<sup>1</sup> in our lives and the collective afterlife.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I review Scheffler's *Doomsday* and *Infertility* thought experiments and the conclusions he draws from them in a bit more detail. While doing so, I argue that one kind of reaction Scheffler claims people would have is irrational. In the third section, I argue that negative attitudes<sup>2</sup> toward the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios are warranted for two reasons that have been heretofore overlooked by Scheffler and his commentators. Interestingly, such reasons leave open the possibility that it can be appropriate to lament the lack of a collective afterlife even if it is not bad, all things considered, for anyone. In the fourth section, I suggest that most people are not primarily engaged in projects that would be significantly affected by the lack of a collective afterlife. I then argue that the degree to which the lack of a collective afterlife does negatively affect the meaningfulness of people's lives (and their total well-being) could be compensated for if people engaged in other, comparably meaningful, projects which could be pursued in the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios. These considerations lead us to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that the lack of a collective afterlife need not negatively affect anyone's total well-being nor make anyone's life less

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, when I discuss the *value* in one's life, I am referring to the total well-being and meaningfulness contained in one's life. The relationship between well-being and meaningfulness is a complicated one and I do not take a stand on the correct way to understand it in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> There is a variety of different negative attitudes one may have towards the lack of a collective afterlife: fear, sadness, dread, worry, depression, angst, despair, melancholy, dismay, and so on. Attempting to determine which negative attitudes are warranted by the lack of a collective afterlife, under what conditions, is beyond the scope of this paper. For simplicity's sake, I will simply speak of negative attitudes at a general level and use the term *lament* as a catchall for non-trivial negative attitudes. I employ the same strategy in my (2016) and (2018).

meaningful than they believed it to be. Yet it may still be appropriate to lament the fact that there is no collective afterlife.

## 2. *The Doomsday and Infertility scenarios*

### 2.1. *Two thought experiments*

I will now provide a brief exposition of the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* thought experiments, as well as the broad conclusions Scheffler draws from them. In order to disambiguate certain conclusions I will draw from these thought experiments, I also fill in some important details on Scheffler's behalf. Let's consider the *Doomsday* scenario first.

**The Doomsday Scenario:** A giant asteroid is going to strike the earth thirty days after you die your natural death. As a consequence, we may suppose, all life on earth will be permanently destroyed by the asteroid (2013, 18).

Scheffler's description of this thought experiment is not very detailed. Does everyone know that their lives will be ended prematurely by an asteroid? If so, how do they respond to such news? For those who get to live out their natural lives, will any of their loved ones die prematurely? Answers to these questions affect the way in which people would (and ought to) respond to such news and the way in which the *Doomsday* scenario affects your life. To consider an extreme example, suppose that after learning of their imminent premature death, almost everyone stops going to work and the economy collapses. Soon after it becomes exceedingly difficult to procure the basic necessities of life, which forces people to act violently to survive. This outcome would clearly be bad for you and everyone else, who would suffer as a consequence of the economic collapse. This much is obvious and, as such, philosophically uninteresting. To focus on the substantive philosophical issues, let's suppose that in the *Doomsday* scenario, the world does not descend into a post-apocalyptic nightmare. People would still tend to fulfill their moral obligations, do what is in their prudential interest, and react appropriately (whatever that amounts to) to learning there is no collective afterlife.

How *ought* you to respond to learning that you're in the *Doomsday* scenario? Clearly, the *Doomsday* scenario is bad for the people whose lives are ended prematurely by the asteroid. But, we might wonder whether the *Doomsday* scenario is bad *for you* and if so, whether it is intrinsically or extrinsically bad. We also might wonder whether it is *pro tanto* bad or all things considered bad or both. Relatedly, we might wonder whether the *Doomsday* scenario would make the projects you pursue, and by extension your life, less meaningful. Scheffler recognizes that

answering these questions may be made difficult by certain features of the *Doomsday* scenario. The fact that it would be bad for many people we deeply care about might make it difficult to disentangle our judgments about how our lives are affected from judgments about how others' lives are affected. It may then sometimes be difficult to tell which features of the thought experiment our reactive attitudes are tracking. To help deal with these complications, Scheffler also imagines the *Infertility* scenario, drawn from the novel and film *Children of Men*.

**The Infertility Scenario:** Everyone is inexplicably and instantaneously rendered infertile. Although they suffer no adverse health effects, they are unable to reproduce. Each person will live out their natural life, but no future generations will come into existence (2013, 38).

Since no one dies prematurely as a consequence of the *Infertility* scenario, we can imagine that everyone is aware that humankind is infertile and that there is no collective afterlife. To keep the *Infertility* scenario relevantly similar to the *Doomsday* scenario, let us also assume that earth will be permanently devoid of all sentient life once the last human dies. The *Infertility* scenario raises interesting questions in its own right. How should people who identify as prospective parents react? They will be deprived of an experiential 'good' that those in the *Doomsday* scenario are not. Is the *Infertility* scenario necessarily bad, all things considered, for anyone? Each existing person gets to live out their natural life, while only merely (metaphysically) possible persons are deprived of a good life. How should those in the *Infertility* scenario feel if it is not bad, all things considered, for anyone? Could it still be appropriate to have negative attitudes toward the lack of a collective afterlife? I will return to these questions in the next two sections. Before I do that, however, I am going to briefly review the conclusions Scheffler draws from his thought experiments.

## 2.2. Scheffler's conclusions

Scheffler first writes that the (relatively nearby) "imminent disappearance of human life would be sufficient for us to react with horror even if it would not involve the premature death of any of our loved ones" (2013, 23).<sup>3</sup> The central lesson

<sup>3</sup> Scheffler also suggests that this, in itself, supports a nonexperientialist interpretation of value (2013, 20). But that seems too quick a conclusion to draw for two reasons. First, both scenarios could affect our present experiences, which may ground our negative attitudes. Second, as I will argue, one may hold that the *only* goods are experiential, yet respond negatively to the *Infertility* scenario because the world contains less good than one (justifiably) believed. This attitude, which is perfectly consistent with a purely experiential account of value, could explain our presumed reactions of horror to the lack of the collective afterlife.

Scheffler draws from these cases is that if people were to discover that there is no collective afterlife, they would believe that their projects (and their lives) consequently matter less than they believed.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, they would also believe that the lack of a collective afterlife reduces the total well-being of people who find themselves in the *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario.

To help see why, consider one of Scheffler's oft-cited examples. Those engaged in cancer research would be significantly less motivated to continue their work if they were to discover that life on earth was ending in the (relatively) near future (2013, 24–27). One reason why is immediately clear. The primary expected beneficiaries of cancer research are future generations of people, not necessarily those who currently exist. In fact, countless projects are primarily aimed at benefiting people who do not yet exist. I will refer to all such projects as *future-oriented projects*. The primary, if not sole, reason people have to cure disease is to prevent unnecessary suffering and to extend lives that are worth living. So, the actual value of engaging in cancer research in the *Doomsday* scenario is significantly less than the expected value since the lack of a collective afterlife prevents there from being any beneficiaries of such research. Generalizing from this example, we can see that the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would significantly undermine the reasons people have to pursue future-oriented projects.<sup>5</sup> Scheffler's discussion of the example reveals that he takes people to accept the following principle.

*Meaningful Projects (MP)*: The degree to which a project is meaningful is at least partly determined by the extent to which it benefits morally considerable beings.<sup>6</sup>

*MP* should seem pretty uncontroversial. It includes the qualifier 'partly' to allow that other features of a project can contribute to their meaningfulness. Perhaps, *ceteris paribus*, helping someone you love makes a project more meaningful. It could be that the uniqueness of a project or the difficulty of completing it contributes to its meaningfulness. Scheffler's imagined reactions also suggest that people are disposed to believe the following, not implausible, principle.

<sup>4</sup> Various reasons why are discussed throughout Scheffler's first two lectures. See, especially, Scheffler (2013, Lecture 1, §§3–6).

<sup>5</sup> I write 'significantly undermine' rather than 'completely eradicate' to leave open the possibility that projects such as engaging in cancer research are intrinsically valuable. This could be because such work is inherently difficult and making any progress in the field requires a great deal of ingenuity gained from years of highly specialized research. See Frankfurt (2013, 134).

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps *MP* needs to be restricted to rule out the possibility that a project can be meaningful if it benefits people that deserve to be harmed or, more generally, requires performing immoral acts. I remain neutral on this question for the purposes of my argument.

*Well-Being and Meaning (WAM): Ceteris paribus*, one's total well-being is increased by engaging in meaningful projects.

WAM is certainly controversial and Scheffler does not explicitly take a stand on its truth in his (2013). I will likewise not take a stand on its truth in this paper, but I will include it as a viable option in my discussion.

The lack of a collective afterlife certainly undermines the value of future-oriented projects, but most people do not seem to be primarily engaged in many future-oriented projects. A few common future-oriented projects notwithstanding, people tend to select careers, hobbies, and goals with the explicit aim of affecting existing people more often than not. I will refer to projects with this as their primary aim as *present-oriented projects*.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Scheffler suggests that people would also think that present-oriented projects are rendered significantly less valuable by the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios.<sup>8</sup> To understand why, it will be helpful to first consider an example.

**Playwright:** A genius playwright is working on her latest masterpiece when she learns that there is no collective afterlife. She realizes that shortly after she dies her natural death, there will be no one to read, write, act in or even appreciate a play ever again.

Now, if Scheffler's speculations are correct, this writer would believe that the act of finishing her play is made significantly less valuable by a *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario. She might even lose her motivation to complete the project after she learns that there is no collective afterlife.

Furthermore, this imagined artist's reaction is presumed to be fitting. The reason why, Scheffler contends, is because most people think there is value in continuing to engage in distinctively human projects that reflect human values (Scheffler 2013, Lecture 1, §5).<sup>9</sup> There is supposed value in carrying on a tradition and, likewise, in pursuing a project that is part of a tradition that *will be* carried on.<sup>10</sup> This idea is

<sup>7</sup> Present- and future-oriented projects are each a bit of a misnomer since people may engage in projects aimed at helping people in the future who currently exist. Such projects count as present-oriented projects, as I use the phrase. These are not mutually exclusive categories either. Some projects may be both present- and future-oriented.

<sup>8</sup> Numerous reasons why are discussed throughout Scheffler's first two lectures. See, especially, Scheffler (2013, Lecture 1, §§ 8–9).

<sup>9</sup> Scheffler makes an argument for this view in his (2012, ch. 11).

<sup>10</sup> Scheffler further distinguishes between group-based and tradition-based projects. See Scheffler (2013, Lecture 1, §§5 and 6). The former aims to preserve the existence of a certain group in the afterlife that one finds valuable, while the latter aims to preserve a tradition in the afterlife that one finds valuable. I don't further discuss this distinction in the paper since nothing, for the purposes of my argument, hangs on it.

eloquently captured when Scheffler writes that “participating in traditions that embody the values to which [the participants] are committed, individuals can leverage their own personal efforts to ensure the survival of those values” (Scheffler 2013, 33). Since the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios prevent the survival of such values, all such projects lose what Scheffler refers to as their *conservative* dimension and would consequently be regarded as less valuable.<sup>11</sup> This is important to note because the loss of the conservative dimension of value can even apply to present-oriented projects. Although such projects have the explicit aim of helping existing people, they are undertaken with the implicit assumption that there will be a collective afterlife in the evaluative background.<sup>12</sup> The lack of a collective afterlife can supposedly therefore reduce the value of such present-oriented projects. We can state Scheffler’s idea in terms of the following principle.

*Conservative Meaningful Projects (CMP):* The degree to which a project is meaningful is at least partly determined by the extent to which it is *conservative* in Scheffler’s sense.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Scheffler also entertains the possibility that the perceived value of immediately gratifying goods would also be negatively affected. Drawing from P.D. James’s (the author of *Children of Men*) predictions, Scheffler suggests that the *Infertility* scenario would cause people to fail to see the value in “such things as the enjoyment of nature; the appreciation of literature, music, and the visual arts,” as well as the “appetitive pleasures of food, drink, and sex” (2013, 42). More precisely, Scheffler is suggesting that *just* the lack of a collective afterlife would,

<sup>11</sup> Scheffler also suggests that there is a *non-consequentialist* dimension to our imagined reactions (p. 20). The fact that we would supposedly react negatively to learning there is no collective afterlife without first trying to calculate the net value of this consequence is supposed to indicate that what we value is not solely a matter of the best consequences. I do not discuss this further in the paper for two reasons. First, I am skeptical that this is any evidence of a non-consequentialist dimension of value. People may implicitly *assume* that the net value of life would be positive were it to continue despite the fact that this is far from obvious. See Parfit (2011, Volume II, ch. 36) for more on this issue. More importantly, consequentialists need not think that our reactions to various outcomes should *only* track the overall goodness of the consequences. The best outcome may still be intrinsically bad or comparatively bad to other metaphysically possible outcomes. This in itself can warrant negative attitudes. So, I suspect that even dyed-in-the-wool consequentialists would immediately have a negative reaction to learning that there is no collective afterlife. The only exceptions might be consequentialists who are also anti-natalists. See Benatar (2006, 2017, ch. 4). Anti-natalism is a viable position that merits serious discussion, but that discussion extends beyond the scope of this paper. Since Scheffler appears to assume that anti-natalism is false, I will proceed under that assumption for the purposes of this paper. Second, it is worth noting that the positions I defend in this paper are consistent with there being a non-consequentialist dimension of value.

<sup>12</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for helping me see this point and for articulating it so clearly.

<sup>13</sup> This principle is drawn from Scheffler (2013, 22).



by most people's lights, significantly reduce (though it needn't completely eradicate) the value of goods that tend to be immediately gratifying.

### 2.3. *An objection*

I grant that people might believe that the lack of a collective afterlife, in itself, can render a present-oriented project less meaningful, but I am skeptical that this is an appropriate reaction. The following case should help illustrate why.

**Ice Sculpture:** Alice the artist is hired to carve a grandiose ice sculpture for a one night only art exhibit. The ice sculpture will completely melt by dawn the next day. It will only be seen and appreciated by those who attend the night of the exhibit. The attendees will not be discussing the art with anyone else. No video or photos will be permitted. Alice knows this prior to starting her art project and does not expect her ice sculpture to make any impact on the art world beyond those who see her sculpture the night in question.

Now, suppose that Alice discovers she is in an *Infertility* scenario while sculpting. If Scheffler's speculations are accurate, Alice would be inclined to think her project is less valuable (though not completely valueless nor pointless) than she originally believed because, for instance, the tradition of sculpting will not be carried on after she dies. This is so in spite of the fact that the ice sculpture would be appreciated by the exact same people, in the exact same way, and to the exact same degree as Alice initially believed. I am not sure if people would react as Alice is imagined to, but such a reaction seems to me to be misguided. Nevertheless, since this is a matter of intuition over which reasonable people disagree, I will also include *CMP* as a viable option in my discussion.

To sum up Scheffler's grim speculations in his own words, the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would be "characterized by widespread apathy, anomie, and despair; by the erosion of social institutions and social solidarity; by the deterioration of the physical environment; and by a pervasive loss of conviction about the value or point of many activities" (2013, 40). In section 4, I hope to provide reason to think that our response to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios ought not be so bleak.

### 3. *Overlooked warranted negative attitudes*

Before I defend the comparatively optimistic component of my view, I want to add to Scheffler's grim speculations. There are a few significant kinds of reason to lament the lack of a collective afterlife, which are overlooked by Scheffler and his commentators. Interestingly, these reasons warrant non-trivial negative attitudes



toward the lack of a collective afterlife irrespective of whether any morally considerable being is made worse off by the *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario. The upshot of this section is twofold. First, if my arguments succeed, they will reveal two surprising features of the relationship between appropriate attitudes and the lack of a collective afterlife. Second, it should help to further clarify which features of the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios our responses are tracking, as well as which features they ought to be tracking.

### 3.1. *Impartial considerations*

One striking feature of the *Infertility* scenario is that it is not clear that it is all things considered bad for anyone (or that it will *necessarily* make anyone's life less valuable). I will argue that the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios warrant some non-trivial negative attitudes for both partial and impartial reasons. First, consider the impartial reasons. The *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would entail that

- (1) The world is significantly less good from the point of view of the universe than we reasonably expected.<sup>14</sup>

Henry Sidgwick coined the idiom *from the point of view of the universe*, which, generally put, picks out an impartial evaluative stance (Sidgwick 1907, 382). More precisely, it involves seeing “everything from the outside, including myself and whatever moral or other dispositions, affections or projects, I may have; and from that outside view,” assigning them a value. When I take up the point of view of the universe, I don't imagine myself as any particular person in any particular world, but instead consider how good the world is from the outside, so to speak.

The vast majority of people justifiably believe that life on earth will continue for hundreds of millions of years. Assuming most believe that the net value of the world is and will remain positive, most people believe that our world's future is going to contain a practically incomprehensible amount of additional good. Were they to discover that there is no collective afterlife, they would learn that the actual world is vastly less good, from the perspective of the universe, than they expected. This, in itself, warrants negative attitudes; not necessarily because the lack of a collective afterlife is *bad for any person*, but simply in virtue of the fact that the *world* is less good than one reasonably expected. This should already seem plausible as an axiom, but the following analogue scenario may further motivate this claim.

<sup>14</sup> Scheffler recognizes this may be partly responsible for people's negative reactions to the *Doomsday* scenario (Scheffler 2013, 20–21). Michael Cholbi suggests that this *may* help justify people's negative reactions to the *Doomsday* scenario (Cholbi, 2015, 209).

**Prospective Alien Life:** There is overwhelming evidence that another planet (Planet X) will start to be inhabited by sentient life in the year 2030, which will thrive for hundreds of millions of years. We have decisive reason to believe that although the humanoid beings that will supposedly inhabit Planet X will not share our history, non-moral values or general way of life, they will be comparably intelligent and will live lives that are as good as ours. However, in 2030 we find out that Planet X formed near a black hole that will destroy it right before sentient life would have emerged. Consequently, contrary to what we justifiably believed, there will never be sentient life on Planet X.

What is the appropriate way to respond to such news? Clearly no one should be happy. Nor do I think anyone should be callously indifferent to this revelation. Rather, some non-trivial negative attitude seems appropriate. This is so even if it is not bad for any existing person that there will be no such intelligent life. Generalizing from this case, we get the following principle.

*The Impartial Expectation Principle (IEP):* The degree to which it is appropriate for person  $P$  to have a negative attitude toward an actual outcome  $O_a$  at time  $t$  is partly determined by the extent to which  $O_a$  is worse, from the point of view of the universe, than the outcome  $P$  justifiably expected  $O_e$  prior to  $t$ .

*IEP* is a relatively modest principle. It includes the qualifier ‘partly,’ so that it may be supplemented with other principles about appropriate attitudes. It does not take a stand on the appropriate *strength* of the negative attitudes it warrants. It is neutral with respect to the correct axiology and so is *flexible*. Finally, it does not take a stand on whether the disparity between the actual and possible goodness of the world can warrant negative attitudes. It only posits a link between *actual goodness* and *one’s justified expectations of goodness*.<sup>15</sup>

Although *IEP* is a modest principle, it yields substantive, interesting conclusions. For one, negative reactions to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios should be, in part, the product of concerns that have nothing to do with how the lack of a collective afterlife affects the value of one’s life. Appropriate negative reactions should be, in one sense, purely selfless.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This should avoid the worries Kai Draper raises (Draper 1999, 2013) and accommodate Jeff McMahan’s insights (McMahan 2002, ch. 2, §§3–5). That is, *IEP* does not entail that we should lament the lack of goods we cannot reasonably expect (e.g. Aladdin’s Lamp). It is also consistent with the positive account Bradley defends (Bradley 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Scheffler does write that our perceived dependence on the collective afterlife reveals the limits of our egoism. But he is not suggesting that such concerns are selfless and his use of the term *egoism* seems non-standard (2013, 181). Kolodny (2013) and Frankfurt (2013) both suggest that Scheffler’s view, if accurate, reveals concerns that are particularly egoistic (in a standard sense) rather than altruistic.

Another notable consequence of *IEP* is that it entails that one's attitudes should not simply track possible goods that are distinctively human. Scheffler suggests that the fact that distinctively human values, traditions and communities would be eradicated in the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would be largely responsible for our reactions of horror. That may be, though there is more that should be informing our attitudes if *IEP* is true. The net loss of reasonably expected good of any kind warrants some kind of negative attitude. With respect to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios, the impartial negative attitudes you ought to have should be comparable to the impartial negative attitudes you ought to have in response to *Prospective Alien Life*.

Perhaps the most interesting consequence of *IEP* is that it allows that it may be appropriate to have non-trivial negative attitudes to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios even if the lack of the collective afterlife is *good* for every being with moral status. It is possible that all beings with moral status could be made better off by the *Infertility* scenario and yet, everyone may be warranted in lamenting this outcome because the *Infertility* scenario could simultaneously make the world vastly worse off from the point of view of the universe. Interestingly, an analogue issue also arises with respect to the purely self-regarding reasons we have to respond negatively to the lack of a collective afterlife. It is to that topic that I now turn.

### 3.2. *Partial considerations*

At first glance, understanding which *self-regarding* reasons we have to be concerned with the collective afterlife might seem relatively straightforward. Most would be inclined to accept the following principle, which seems practically indubitable.

*The Meaning and Well-Being Principle (MAWP)*: The degree to which it is appropriate for person *P* to have a negative attitude, for self-regarding reasons, toward outcome *O* is partly determined by the extent to which *P* is made worse off (and/or *P*'s life is made less meaningful) by *O*.

Scheffler seems disposed to accept a principle like *MAWP* and its appeal is quite evident. It has a good deal of explanatory power. For instance, it could explain why it seems appropriate for a cancer researcher to react with horror were she to discover that she is in the *Doomsday* scenario. Her life thus far would have been much more meaningful if the asteroid were going to miss the earth. *MAWP* could also explain why someone who only wants to be a father should lament discovering that he is in the *Infertility* scenario (assuming he would be better off if he had a child). In short, (given *MP*, *CMP*, and *WAM*) *MAWP* seems to capture the reasons why Scheffler imagines that people would react with horror to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios. The lack of the collective afterlife is supposed to be regarded as bad for existing persons and, relatedly, makes their lives less meaningful.

Susan Wolf (2013) and Harry Frankfurt (2013) both argue that doomsday scenarios wouldn't be as bad as Scheffler imagines and they do so within the confines of *MAWP*. I am going to do something different, not by arguing against *MAWP*, but by arguing that it is not the entire picture. It is also true that one can have self-regarding reasons to lament the lack of a collective afterlife even if one is not made worse off (and one's life is not made less meaningful) by the *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario. This conclusion is important in its own right. But if my arguments in the next section are successful, it is also crucial to preserving our initial judgments about the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios. This is because the lack of a collective afterlife need not be bad, all things considered, for anyone. At the same time, some degree of lament may still be an appropriate response to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios for the following heretofore overlooked reason.

- (2) *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios undermine people's justified beliefs about the types of goods they reasonably expect in their life.

To be clear, it is not always bad to have one's beliefs about expected goods undermined. Imagine, for instance, that one is indifferent between the receipt of two different types of goods (*A* and *B*) and desires each of them equally for similar reasons, yet only expects to receive *A*. To this person's surprise, she receives *B* instead of *A*. I will stipulate that this person has made no arrangements for the receipt of either good, is indifferent to which one she receives, and the receipt of either good will not affect her in any significant way. Maybe *A* is attending a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* symphony and *B* is watching *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. In this case, it seems that expecting *A*, but receiving *B*, warrants no negative attitudes.

What is interesting, however, is that the details can also be filled in such that expecting *A*, but receiving *B* *does* warrant non-trivial negative attitudes, even if *A* and *B* are equally good for everyone affected by the good in question.<sup>17</sup> This will be true in cases in which one's life has been shaped in important ways by the expectation of said good or the receipt of the type(s) of good in question is important to the agent's *thick*, as opposed to *thin*, self. The distinction between thick and thin selves has usually been invoked to discuss the supposedly relevant asymmetry between the ways in which it is possible for us to have been born earlier than we were and to die later than we will.<sup>18</sup> But this distinction will also be useful in thinking about how (2) sometimes warrants negative attitudes. The *thin* notion

<sup>17</sup> Or, for that matter, even if *B* is to a certain extent better than *A*.

<sup>18</sup> This argument can be originally attributed to Thomas Nagel (1979), although John Martin Fischer and Frederik Kaufman have probably done the most to develop it. John Martin Fischer notably makes use of this distinction in his (2009). For criticisms of this move, see Johansson (2013) and for a response, see Fischer and Brueckner (2014).

of personhood is constituted by one's *metaphysical essence* (e.g. one's body, genetic makeup, mind, soul) or whatever is essential for cross-world identity (Kaufman 2000, 95). The *thick* person is determined by (a) the *thin* person and (b) the *thin* person's history determined by all of the contingent matters of fact of the world in question (e.g. memories, desires, beliefs, values, and personality traits).<sup>19</sup>

Now, the *Infertility* scenario would undermine a large set of justified beliefs most people have about certain types of goods they can expect in their life and, crucially, it would undermine beliefs about expected goods that are centrally important to such persons' current thick selves. The expectation of such goods will even inform a plethora of significant life-altering decisions made by such people. This subversion would result in outcomes that are intrinsically bad (e.g. pain) for these people even if it doesn't make any of them, on the whole, worse off.<sup>20</sup> Let's consider the clearest example of the phenomena I have in mind. Prior to the moment everyone becomes infertile, people justifiably believe that they may have children. Moreover, most people want to have children and plenty of people desire to have children so much that it is a central part of their identity. They plan their lives around this desire. They may forgo job opportunities, refrain from using their money to improve their quality of life, and likely let their desire for children inform their choices about where they live, what careers they pursue, who their romantic partners are, and so on. In the *Infertility* scenario, these sacrifices were unnecessary and the preparations for child rearing were made in vain.

Many people would, understandably, suffer immensely were they to learn that they were in the *Infertility* scenario because they expected to receive certain goods that were central to their current thick selves' identity. It would also force them to make quick radical changes to their thick selves (that they do not currently want to make) if they are going to prevent a net decrease in the value of their life. This will be true for most people, at some level, not just those who strongly desired to be (and identified as prospective) parents. Anyone who expected to receive goods that were dependent upon future generations would be so affected. School teachers, youth sports coaches, pediatricians, children's entertainers, day care workers, and child psychologists would all be negatively affected. The list goes on. Now, negative attitudes in response to the subversion of the expectations of such goods seems perfectly appropriate, *even if* people are not made worse off (and even if they are made better off), all things considered, in the *Infertility* scenario.<sup>21</sup> To further motivate this claim, consider Jeff McMahan's *The Cure*.

<sup>19</sup> This is drawn from Fischer and Speak (2000, 85).

<sup>20</sup> The intrinsic badness may take the form of thwarted desires or states of emotional pain or something else, depending on one's favored axiology.

<sup>21</sup> This may be because we have what Elizabeth Harman (2011) refers to as, "reasonable attachment to the actual".

**The Cure:** Imagine that you are twenty years old and are diagnosed with a disease that, if untreated, invariably causes death ... within five years. There is a treatment that reliably cures the disease but also, as a side effect, causes total retrograde amnesia and radical personality change. Long-term studies of others who have had the treatment show that they almost always go on to have long and happy lives, though these lives are informed by desires and values that differ profoundly from those that the person had prior to treatment. You can therefore reasonably expect that, if you take the treatment, you will live for roughly sixty more years, though the life you will have will be utterly discontinuous with your life as it has been. You will remember nothing of your past and your character and values will be radically altered. Suppose, however, that this can be reliably predicted: that the future you would have between the ages of twenty and eighty if you were to take the treatment would, by itself, be better, as a whole, than your entire life will be if you do not take the treatment (2002, 77).<sup>22</sup>

Setting aside the question of whether it is in your prudential interest to take the cure,<sup>23</sup> it seems quite plausible that you are warranted in having negative attitudes about the prospect of taking the cure even though the extra sixty years of life you gain would be better than the life you have lived thus far. Such negative attitudes are warranted, at least in part, because you will be unable to obtain goods you reasonably expected to obtain which matter to your current thick self. These goods would not be replaced by goods that are even comparably important to your current thick self, though they may be centrally important to your future thick self. What is more, any preparations or sacrifices you made for such expected goods were made in vain. These considerations suggest that we can pick out the instances of (2) that warrant negative attitudes with the following principle.

*The Partial Expectation Principle (PEP):* The degree to which it is appropriate for person *P* to have a negative attitude, for self-regarding reasons, toward some outcome *O* is partly determined by the extent to which *P* is deprived of goods that (i) *P* was justified in expecting and (ii) that *P*'s current thick self desires.<sup>24</sup> The more central the good is to the identity of the agent's thick self, the greater the degree to which it is appropriate to have a negative attitude toward *O*.

*PEP* should be no more contentious than *IEP*. It too includes the qualifier 'partly' for the same reasons and it too is flexible. It also is neutral with respect to the question of whether it is in your prudential interest to take the cure. That

<sup>22</sup> McMahan stipulates that *you* survive taking the cure and so is ruling out certain psychological accounts of personal identity. To avoid begging any questions, just imagine that your psychology is altered to the maximum extent possible with you continuing to exist after taking the cure.

<sup>23</sup> For a compelling argument that it is in your prudential interest to take the cure, see Bradley (2008, 2009, §4.2).

<sup>24</sup> To be sure, *PEP* allows that you may look forward to a future where your thick self is radically different. Your future well-being should be of central importance to your thick self. Assuming your future thick self does not have values that your current thick self finds objectionable, you should look forward to a future where your thick self is well off.

is, one could accept *PEP*, but deny that it is in your prudential interest to take the cure because of the radical change your thick self undergoes. Alternatively, one could also accept that it is in your prudential interest to take the cure, yet hold that you should have some non-trivial negative attitudes toward doing what is in your prudential interest.<sup>25</sup>

Although *PEP* is a modest principle, it too yields substantive interesting conclusions. For one, your reasons for concern about the existence of the collective afterlife are self-interested in a rather peculiar way. *PEP* entails that we should be concerned with how the lack of a collective afterlife affects your thick self *independent* of how it affects the net value of your life. It may still be appropriate to lament the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios for self-regarding reasons even if the lack of a collective afterlife does not negatively affect the net value of your life.

My aims in this section have been relatively modest. I argued for *IEP* and *PEP* and highlighted the surprising implications of each. I then argued that these principles reveal some heretofore overlooked features of the relationship between appropriate attitudes and the collective afterlife, as well as help elucidate the kinds of negative attitudes that the lack of a collective afterlife warrants.

#### 4. *Doomsday and Infertility scenarios need not be bad, all things considered*

##### 4.1. *Vacation Adversity: an analogue scenario*

The conclusions I reached in the last section might seem grim. But hopefully not too grim since, for all I have argued, the lack of the collective afterlife need not be bad, all things considered, for any morally considerable being. It could even be good, all things considered, for many of them, which would warrant a non-trivial positive attitude (at least at some point). At first glance these conclusions might seem to work as a *reductio* against my view. But they don't. In fact, I think we are disposed to make these kinds of judgments in more realistic cases and such judgments are recognized to be perfectly reasonable. To illustrate, consider the following case.

**Vacation Adversity:** The Griswold family has been planning a trip to the Louvre for years. In preparation, they took numerous art history classes to better appreciate the

<sup>25</sup> This is consistent with the argument given in Bradley (2008, 2009). This should also be a natural move for those persuaded by Harman (2009, 2011). Our reasonable attachment to the actual can, in certain circumstances, justify having positive attitudes toward outcomes that are not in our prudential interest. Conversely, our reasonable attachment to the actual should also, in certain circumstances, justify having negative attitudes toward outcomes that are in our prudential interest.



art they planned to see. As a result, creating and appreciating art became a central part of their lives. After years of planning, they finally make it to France. Unfortunately, the Louvre burns down the night before they are able to first visit it.

The Griswolds rightly lament this outcome. They also begin to research other things to do in France. They end up filling their days with bike tours, visits to the Eiffel Tower, the Palace of Versailles, the Luxembourg Gardens, and various other outings. Although they previously had no interest in any of these activities, each activity brings them joy and is fulfilling in its own way. In the end, the Griswolds had a better vacation than they expected. As a matter of fact, they had a better vacation than they would have had if the Louvre had not burned down.

The following seems to be true of *Vacation Adversity*. It is appropriate for the Griswolds to have a non-trivial negative attitude toward the time they wasted preparing for their visit to the Louvre, toward being deprived of the good of seeing the art in the Louvre, and toward the fact that many people were made worse off as a result of the Louvre being destroyed. Still, the fact that the Louvre burned down was, all things considered, good for the Griswolds since it resulted in them having a better vacation than they would have otherwise had. This is so even though the Griswolds *could* have always taken the better vacation (i.e. the one they ended up taking). The fact that they *wouldn't* have taken the better vacation unless the Louvre burned down suffices for it to be good for them that the Louvre burned down.<sup>26</sup> Since the trip was better than they reasonably expected, the Griswolds ought to also have a non-trivial positive attitude toward their vacation. In this section, I will argue that similar judgments could be warranted in a *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario.

#### 4.2. Why *Doomsday* is not necessarily bad for you

If the lack of a collective afterlife is *necessarily* bad, all things considered, for a person, it must not simply render the person's life less valuable. It must also preclude the possibility of adopting new projects that are valuable enough to *compensate* for the loss of *pro tanto* value caused by the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios. Compensation occurs if the new projects one adopts in light of learning that there is no collective afterlife end up making a person's life at least as valuable as she reasonably believed it would be prior to learning there is no collective afterlife. For example, a young cancer researcher may reasonably believe, at  $t_1$ , that the total value of her life will end up being  $n$ . Suppose that at  $t_2$  she learns that she is in an *Infertility*

<sup>26</sup> To illustrate, imagine that I am trying to decide between having chocolate or vanilla vegan ice cream for dessert. Suppose that I decide to have the chocolate ice cream, though (unbeknownst to me) I would enjoy the vanilla ice cream more. As it turns out, however, I am unable to have the chocolate ice cream because I accidentally knock it on the ground when I reach for it. I end up having the vanilla ice cream, which was best all along. Knocking the chocolate ice cream to the ground was good for me because it resulted in me having the better dessert. This is true even though I *could* have chosen vanilla all along.

scenario. This information reveals that her cancer research is less valuable than she justifiably believed it to be at  $t_1$ . Consequently, her cancer research will not contribute to the value of her life to the extent that, at  $t_1$ , she thought it would. Now, compensation occurs if this person adopts new projects that cause the total value of her life to still be  $\geq n$ . We can state this idea more formally as follows.

**The Compensation Principle (CP):** The lack of a collective afterlife is *necessarily* bad, all things considered, for a person  $P$  iff it prevents  $P$  from having the ability to engage in projects that are sufficiently valuable to compensate for the loss of *pro tanto* value in  $P$ 's life caused by the lack of a collective afterlife.

I am going to argue that it is a viable possibility that there would be no shortage of compensating projects available to most people in a *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario. Call this claim the *Compensation Thesis (CT)*. *CP* and *CT* jointly entail that the lack of a collective afterlife need not be bad, all things considered, for most people. To be clear, this leaves open the possibility that many people would not take up compensating projects were they to learn there is no collective afterlife. The *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would then be bad, all things considered, for these people. The crucial point is that they needn't be.

One more clarificatory point is in order. Whether *CT* is true in a particular *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario depends on certain other details in the case. Compensation would not be possible if the very conditions for living valuable lives were undermined. If, for instance, the world descends into a post-apocalyptic nightmare, then I grant that compensation would eventually become impossible to obtain. The number of compensating projects available would also significantly decrease as the number of sentient creatures on earth decreases. People's epistemic state matters as well. For instance, people could not engage in compensating projects if they only find out that they are in a *Doomsday* scenario immediately before they die. In light of these considerations, I'll restrict the remainder of my discussion to *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios where the majority of people have many years of life left to live at the time they discover there is no collective afterlife and where there are as many people on earth at the time of discovery as there are presently. I am now going to provide four defeasible considerations in favor of *CT* under these conditions.

#### 4.3. In favor of the Compensation Thesis

First, the lack of a collective afterlife would have a smaller impact on the value of most people's lives than Scheffler's imagined reactions seem to suggest. The *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios pose the largest threat for those primarily engaged in future-oriented projects, but most people do not seem to be primarily engaged in such projects. Careers in fields such as environmental conservation and

medical research aimed at curing disease are much rarer than careers aimed, first and foremost, at benefiting existing people. In fact, the most common jobs in every income bracket appear to be exclusively present-oriented projects.<sup>27</sup> So, if most people are not primarily engaged in future-oriented projects, then the value of most people's lives should not be severely threatened by *MP*.

These considerations are far from decisive. It could very well be the case that most people are engaged in a future-oriented project of one kind or another outside of their careers. Such projects may give people's life a great deal of value, even if they only occupy a small portion of people's time. I'm skeptical that most people do engage in such valuable future-oriented projects, but I can allow for this possibility and still argue that *CT* is a viable option in light of the considerations I raise in this section.

Second, the lack of a collective afterlife could make available meaningful projects that would not otherwise exist. If Scheffler's speculations are accurate, the need for therapists would dramatically increase were people to learn that there is no collective afterlife. Relatedly, there would be a need for a new kind of career advisor: one that could place people in a new career that will be most valued by their future thick self, but perhaps is related in certain important respects to one's present thick self. Adoption rates would probably increase in an *Infertility* scenario, requiring a greater workforce to put children in the best possible homes. People could very well become more preoccupied with extending their own life, giving rise to an increased demand for life-extending products. Less egoistically, as Susan Wolf argues, people could recognize that "they are all in this together" and may find a sense of solidarity with people they would not otherwise have known.<sup>28</sup> These, and other new, meaningful projects made possible by the lack of a collective afterlife, could all help serve compensation.

Third, along the same lines, the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would remove the moral reasons we have to make certain sacrifices that many of us are, at least to some extent, making. This would allow existing persons to partake in certain welfare-enhancing activities they otherwise would not. In a *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario, there would be no moral reason to be environmentally conscious, to consider population changes (e.g. increasing urbanization, changing income levels, common social aspirations) in infrastructure planning, to reduce reliance on non-renewable resources or to set up financial trusts for future family

<sup>27</sup> For some information about the most common jobs by income bracket in the United States, see <http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2014/10/16/356176018/the-most-popular-jobs-for-the-rich-middle-class-and-poor>

<sup>28</sup> See Wolf (2013, §2). Wolf also argues that people would be motivated to help those that are near and dear to them (p. 121). This is a different issue from the ones I raise in this section since Wolf's claim is neutral with respect to whether the majority of people are primarily engaged in future-oriented projects. Nor does Wolf (or anyone) argue that compensation may occur in *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios.

members. People could, for instance, drive whenever and wherever they desired in inefficient gas-guzzling vehicles, eat food imported from around the world, use non-biodegradable environmentally disastrous products whenever it is convenient and build golf courses and parks that use an inordinate amount of water.<sup>29</sup> Those with the financial resources could vacation frequently in exotic faraway places in private jets. Succinctly put, people would be free to use the remainder of earth's resources to maximize their comfort. Such activities would not necessarily make anyone's life more meaningful, but it would increase their well-being.

Fourth, and most importantly, there is an overabundance of valuable projects currently available to people which would seemingly remain available in a *Doomsday* or *Infertility* scenario. These projects help ensure that compensation would be attainable for most everyone. The project of fighting global poverty is a prime example. Over a billion people live in extreme poverty and more than 80% of people live on less than \$10 a day.<sup>30</sup> They suffer immensely and unnecessarily. Those who live in extreme poverty die prematurely from lack of food, water, and proper medical care. They are denied a proper education and lack access to substantial cultural goods (e.g. the internet). They are deprived of the opportunity to experience great works of art, literature, film, poetry and miss out on intellectual pursuits, like engaging in philosophical inquiry. A significantly greater amount of good could be done if just a fraction of the financial resources currently used on future-oriented projects were instead used to combat extreme poverty.<sup>31</sup>

Consider Scheffler's cancer example again. Finding a cure for any type of cancer is a long, arduous, and uncertain process. Almost everyone engaged in a cancer-curing project will, at most, only make a minor contribution to its success. Even those who do manage to contribute to its success are likely not making a necessary contribution to finding the cure. This is because there is not a shortage of qualified scientists willing to partake in cancer research. If one cancer researcher quit her job to work at The Humane League, her position would likely be filled by someone else that would make a comparable contribution to cancer research.

Jobs at non-profits may be quickly filled as well, but a (perhaps even better) alternative would be to take a high paying job and earning to give to the most effective charities. The most effective charities still lack the financial resources necessary to do the most good possible. Anyone with even a moderate expendable income can literally save hundreds of lives by adopting certain charitable practices that combat global poverty. Since there is a shortage of people willing to invest

<sup>29</sup> Wolf briefly alludes to this possibility (Wolf 2013, 122, fn 8).

<sup>30</sup> This means that they live on less than \$1.25 a day. More than 3 billion people live on less than \$3 a day and more than 80% of humans live on less than \$10 a day. For more on this, see The World Bank's data on global poverty at [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org).

<sup>31</sup> See Singer (2009, chs 6 and 7; 2015) for arguments that support this claim.

their time and resources in combating global poverty, people who adopt this project can ensure that hundreds of children live to adulthood who would have otherwise died. This is one sense in which the project of combating global poverty is more valuable than engaging in cancer research. What matters is not just being a part of a process that leads to some good. Being a *difference-maker* with respect to the time and degree to which some good is achieved also matters.

People can also do more good by joining Doctors Without Borders, The Humane League, volunteering at homeless shelters, animal shelters, providing educational resources to the underprivileged or undertaking any, even roughly, comparably good project. There are very few, if any, future-oriented projects currently available where one can reasonably expect to be personally responsible for saving hundreds of lives. But there is a plethora of present-oriented projects combatting global poverty that would allow those involved to do just that. There is also compelling empirical evidence that undertaking such charitable projects would noticeably increase people's total well-being.<sup>32</sup> The amount of expected good of future-oriented projects is far less than the amount of expected good of (certain) present-oriented projects.<sup>33</sup> Scheffler has expressed skepticism that people *would* engage in alternatively comparably meaningful projects, which is essential to maintaining his claim that *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios would be bad for people. Again, I am not taking a stand on how people *would* react, but instead on how they *ought* to react in such situations. The prudent (and moral) courses of action involve actively seeking out compensating projects that benefit existing people.<sup>34</sup> Even if global poverty were completely eradicated, so long as some people are not as well-off as possible, there would be meaningful present-oriented projects available. These considerations provide good reason to think that *CT* is a viable option in many *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios.

## 5. Conclusion

Scheffler has accomplished a rare feat with *Death and the Afterlife*. He uncovered a fruitful new area of philosophical inquiry and, in just a few hundred pages, made significant advancements toward answering the questions raised by his *Doomsday* and *Infertility* thought experiments. In this paper, I have been concerned with

<sup>32</sup> See Singer (2015, ch. 9).

<sup>33</sup> This is especially true if the value of benefiting morally considerable beings is proportional to the rarity of morally considerable beings. For some discussion on rarity and cosmic significance, see Kahane (2014).

<sup>34</sup> It may also involve ensuring that there is a 'Good Ending' to human civilization. For discussion, see Johansson (2015).

questions about how we ought to react to the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios. I first argued it would be appropriate to lament each of these outcomes to some degree for two reasons heretofore overlooked. First, the lack of a collective afterlife entails that the world is worse from the point of view of the universe than we reasonably expected. Second, most people believe that there will be a long collective afterlife and structure their life around this belief. This means that one will have to make radical changes to her thick self if she is going to live a life just as valuable as she reasonably expected prior to learning there is no collective afterlife.

I then argued that in spite of these reasons to lament the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios, they need not be, all things considered, bad for any existing person. At least, I gave four reasons to think this is a viable option. If my arguments are successful, they preserve the initial judgment that the *Doomsday* and *Infertility* scenarios warrant lament, yet seriously challenge the assumption that the possibility of leading lives as valuable as we expect depends upon the existence of a long collective afterlife.\*

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