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Philosophy Comps

### Confidence and Insecurity in the Realm of Value

In *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler engages with a set of thought experiments about the apocalypse. First Scheffler asks us to imagine that we know that 30 days after our own deaths, humanity will end. He calls this undesirable scenario “the Doomsday scenario” (Scheffler 2012, p. 18) Second, he presents a scenario in which every person on earth loses their reproductive capacity, causing humanity to slowly die out, which he dubs the “infertility scenario” (Scheffler 2012, p. 38). Scheffler believes that, in both of these cases, the consequences to our values would be far reaching, and that this can tell us something important about the nature of our values, and by extension, about ourselves. Some of Scheffler’s commentators, however, are unconvinced. Susan Wolf responds that she feels activities aimed “at the care and comfort of others” would remain an important source of value even if there would be no future people (Wolf 2013, p. 121). Harry Frankfurt argues that “some of the things that are of the greatest importance to us—such as music, friendship, and intellectual and creative activity—may be important to us quite regardless of either the existence of the afterlife or our confidence in its existence” (Frankfurt 2013, p. 133). Both of these responses point to the concern that not *everything* that we value is called into question in the Afterlife scenario. Some things, it seems, would have to retain value for us, even in these apocalyptic scenarios. In his response to Susan Wolf’s commentary on his essays, Scheffler feels that she mis-interprets him as making the strong claim that mattering and value would be *lost entirely* as concepts. Scheffler replies that he “meant only what he said”, namely that in these scenarios:

1. Many things that previously mattered to us would cease to do so
2. Our confident and unreflective deployment of the concept of something's mattering would be rendered insecure
3. The realm of value would shrink dramatically
4. Our lives would be impoverished in consequence (Scheffler 2012, p. 183)

I agree that, in the afterlife scenario, it is much harder to imagine somebody living a good or choice-worthy life than it is in more traditional circumstances. One could even say, as Scheffler does, that our lives would be impoverished. I don't know, however, if Scheffler fills out the story of *why* this must be so quite enough. The relation between these four points, and what they even mean is not entirely obvious or made explicit despite the fact that Scheffler takes them to be constitutive of one of his major claims. Readers like Wolf can, I think, be excused for some confusion about what the consequences to the general enterprise of valuing are supposed to be in Scheffler's apocalyptic scenarios. If we are to understand what Scheffler thinks the Afterlife scenario can tell us about our values, we must understand what will actually happen to our values—on his view—and why. I believe that the second point, that “our confident and unreflective deployment of the concept of something's mattering would be rendered insecure” is the most indicative of what Scheffler thinks would happen to our values, and so will focus on its interpretation most heavily. I will argue that Scheffler's argument that our concept of something's mattering would be rendered insecure with the imminent end of humanity is best understood as stemming from an incompatibility between the norms about value which are accessible to us and facts about the social and material world.

The sentence: “our confident and unreflective deployment of the concept of something’s mattering would be rendered insecure” is a hard one to get a firm grip on. Its slippery because confidence, reflectiveness and insecure are each attitudes and psychological conditions which we take up in relation to our values. The importance of psychological attitudes to this picture further complicates Scheffler’s already heavily psychological account of what it is to value something. He writes that “valuing is an attitudinal phenomenon that has doxastic, deliberative, motivational, and emotional dimensions” (Scheffler 2012, p. 17). In other words, to value something is to, at the very least:

1. Believe it to be valuable
2. Have a “susceptibility to experience a range of context dependent emotions towards [it]”
3. Experience those emotions as being merited or deserved.
4. Treat certain kinds of consideration pertaining to the valued item as reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts.

Each item or practice at which we direct our valuing attitudes is, then, vulnerable in at least four ways. These are what I take to be the negations of the preceding requirements for value, namely: (1) doubt, (2) apathy, (3) self-doubt, and (4) akrasia. If any of these four attitudes creep into one’s association with a valued item or practice, that value can be destabilized. In addition to being vulnerable to the whims of individual psychology, values are vulnerable to external, sociological assault. Scheffler believes that our values are integrated and mutually supporting in such a way that a threat to some of our values is in an important sense a threat to all of them. The realm of value is socially constructed as a sort of facsimile of Indra’s net, where the value of any particular valued item or practice only fully makes sense by way of reference to every other

valued item or practice. If large chunks of what we value were suddenly rendered untenable values, this could potentially endanger the whole of our valuing enterprise; even valued items or practices that would not be directly affected would still be indirectly affected by way of the blow dealt to valuing in general. Our values, then, are vulnerable not only from bottom-up psychological destabilization, but also from top-down sociological destabilization. Scheffler adheres generally to Alisdair Macintyre's claim that valuing is never simply valuing as such but always valuing within a tradition (Macintyre 1988)(Scheffler 1999). The public and shared nature of our valuing as being dependent on community and tradition is key, I think, to understanding how Scheffler conceptualizes the apocalyptic scenarios he proposes. Given this, it is clear that valuing for Scheffler is already a quite complex phenomenon in its own right! Taking the attitudes that comprise our values together with our the insecurity of our confidence and un-reflectiveness, complicated psychological picture emerges that Scheffler would do well to address more specifically, as attitudinal psychology is an integral part of his argument.

Scheffler's argument is about what attitudes that a collective "we" *would* adopt in the Afterlife scenario and, because of this, he winds up making some bold psychological and sociological claims. He is conspicuously conscious of his limitations here, and is careful to clarify that he is only making claims for those who, like him, have the intuition that the lack of future people would be devastating to our values. For this reason, he doesn't feel that he has to defend, or provide a detailed mechanism for, these psychological and sociological claims. Nevertheless, to offer a satisfactory account of the view he is trying to present, he may need to, as it seems that neither Wolf nor Frankfurt—and potentially many others—straightforwardly agree with his intuitions. It is clear that at least *some* of our values depend on the existence of future people, but their place within our wider conception of value may be more controversial.

Scheffler himself acknowledges this, qualifying his arguments with the fact that people are notoriously psychologically, doxastically, motivationally and emotionally diverse. Some might question whether this acknowledgement is not a bigger obstacle to his view than Scheffler himself takes it to be.

I will try to help fill out Scheffler's psychological story a little bit more on his behalf, drawing on my reading of his work and the work of others. Why would the lack of future people pose such a serious threat to our values, and how would this work? Philosopher James Lenman has argued that from an eternal, timeless perspective, it doesn't seem to matter whether a species' demise comes sooner or later (Lenman 2002). Why do we care so much about the number of people diachronically (through time), when we appear to care very little about the number of people synchronically (any given time)? If the apocalypse will have to happen to some generation, if there is some group of people who will inevitably have their lives impoverished in this way, why not us? Given the choice, why would we, as I assume is the consensus view, will it on a group thousands or millions of years in the future rather than our children's or great-grandchildren's generation? The answer that Lenman winds up at, which is in line—I think—with Scheffler's view, is that this has to do with our participation in and partiality to traditions and inter-generational narratives in which we are participants (Lenman 2002). Group membership and intergenerational values, narratives, and projects to which we contribute are the things, for Lenman (and I think for Scheffler) without which we would have little impulse to care when the end of our particular species would occur. Scheffler believes that valuing itself is a "diachronic phenomenon" and takes the temporal relationship of continuity we have with our surroundings to be an independent normative force that acts on us (Scheffler 2010 [normativity]).

Scheffler, Wolf and others have argued that any satisfactorily value laden life must include participation in these intermediate narratives—intermediate in the sense that they lie somewhere between the individual and humankind—such as traditions, families or hobbies.

Wolf writes that:

“We tend to implicitly conceive of our activities as entering or as being parts of one or another ongoing stream...Even if we do not think of ourselves as affecting the direction or shape of these streams, the mere fact that we are contributing to them gives us a place in or attachment to a larger and independently valuable whole” (Wolf 2013, p. 120)

The desire to feel that we are part of something larger than ourselves that transcends us is a commonplace of human experience. This idea is often offered as a comfort for the elderly or dying, or to families of the deceased. What kinds of properties do these “streams” or “patterns” have to have in order to function as important grounding agents of our values? If it is important, as both Scheffler and Wolf take it to be, for us to participate in intermediate level projects which transcend us but don’t transcend us *too* much, then we should say a little about this distinction.

While many of us take our personal projects to be of great importance to us, and take how these projects fare to be an essential constituent of our living a good life, I think that Scheffler’s account is a little misleading in its analysis of the prevalence of people’s undertaking projects which are primarily supposed to benefit future people of no relation to them. I think this is particularly the case in his recurrent usage of the example of a cancer researcher who is no longer motivated to perform cancer research after hearing of the imminent apocalypse. I think that this example is misleading in a few ways, and that

Scheffler may actually be obscuring his most interesting and powerful ideas by relying on it so heavily.

*Some* of us may desire to be known and appreciated by, or save the lives of many future people. For the vast majority of us, however, saving the lives of even a few of our contemporaries, or being known and appreciated by them is enough. As Wolf argues, most scholars, at least in the humanities, are happy if only a small number of their contemporaries find their work illuminating or useful. I might add that most people are not even humanities professors! Many people work in a capacity where, unlike Scheffler's cancer researcher, they do not feel that what they are doing in an official capacity contributes to a valuable goal at all. It is safe to say that relatively few people have projects of categorical importance to them which are aimed at benefiting humanity *as a whole* unconditionally after their deaths. Rather, people's projects often aimed at a certain *kind* of person: a person with certain kinds of relationships or ties to institutions, practices, or people that one values. We are unabashedly impartial in this regard, and Scheffler, for his part, accepts that this is just a part of what human valuing consists in (Scheffler 1993, 2010 [partiality]). Frankfurt makes a similar point when he says that even a cancer researcher seems to do his research not for humanity in general, but for a certain *kind* of person (namely, people with a tendency to accept the recommendations of medical science).

More importantly, most people do not spend their lives driven by a desire to contribute to some material project (like a cure for cancer). In as much as people take their projects to be important to humanity as such, it is usually in the capacity of "being a drop in the bucket" towards a world that is more inclined towards good, justice etc. Many people simply want, in the

abstract, for the world to have been a better place for having them in it without the need for them to specify in exactly which precise ways. Indeed there is something almost slightly degrading about describing the good of a person's life solely in terms of their instrumental contributions to particular concrete projects. Martin Luther King Jr. is famously quoted as saying that the "moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." If there are no more people has justice bent as far as it will go, or do we still have room for hope? It seems to me that the thought of "being a drop in the bucket" towards a better world *often* offers comfort and reinforcement of our values even though it is relatively *rarely* accompanied by any systematic thought about in which concrete respects this should be so. We want to participate in inter-generational projects, traditions, and narratives, but the example of the cancer researcher importantly misrepresents the nature of these projects and their importance to us as instrumental and results oriented. I think that Scheffler does himself a dis-service in relying heavily on this example, as I think he has something more interesting to say. Scheffler himself has been an avid critic of consequentialism and defender of non-instrumental morality for nearly 40 years (Scheffler 1982, 1992) It seems unlikely that such a person would really see the purely instrumental example of the cancer researcher as a paradigmatic example of human valuing. Scheffler's work elsewhere has to do with partiality and the way that we treat the beliefs, practices and values that make up our traditions as having a unique normative force. Often citing Alisdair Macintyre, he sees value as being a necessarily embedded within a tradition, which is in turn by necessity temporally extended. I take his emphasis on tradition to be an important part of his sociological thinking.

Scheffler employs the language of "destabilization", "insecurity", and "shaking the foundation" of values, but what exactly does this mean? We are *already* in many individual cases



not confident in our values. Here, I sketch a rough outline of what Scheffler might mean when he uses this language.

1. Value is an interpretive concept, which is learned in the process of moral education by reference to examples.
2. What kinds of things can be valuable to us is determined by important facts about what the world *is really like*.
3. When the world changes in a significant way, what is valuable will necessarily shift with it.
4. In any scenario in which individuals find themselves in vastly different circumstances from those in which they learned about value, people will be “fish out of water”, living lives that their moral education and traditional understanding of value up to that point have not equipped them to understand.

Notice that I am not claiming to know what Scheffler really *is* trying to say with premise 2. I am merely trying to provide a plausible account for what he *could* mean, so that we can make sense of his claim. I personally find this formulation of Scheffler’s claim to a compelling one. One source of my interpretation of Scheffler as such is his usage of the word “anomie” to describe the sociological conditions that would attain in one of his apocalyptic scenarios. He writes, for example, that “[he] find[s] it plausible that such a world would be characterized by widespread apathy, *anomie* and despair.” The nuance of this term is easily lost without further investigation, so I will try to provide a brief analysis. The term comes originally from the work of pioneering sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim. First used in *The Division of Labor in Society*, the term was developed further in *Suicide*. The usage of the term is complicated: it is used across disciplines and even Durkheim seems to have at least two distinct conceptions of it—what Marvin Olsen refers to as procedural and a normative concepts. Since Scheffler’s

account is about values, I think the normative concept is the more appropriate, which is the one more heavily developed in *Suicide*. Basically, the idea is that when societal developments outpace our ability to react to them, we are left with “inadequate moral norms to guide and control the actions of people and groups in the interests of the total social system” (Olsen 1965). Our norms and values in these anomic cases are forced into opposition with facts about the social and material structure of the world. Durkheim provides his own examples of these kinds of cases, but I think that a case which puts this discordance into stark relief—and which compliments Scheffler’s apocalyptic thought experiments particularly well—is that of the Crow Native American tribe. Psychoanalyst and philosopher Jonathan Lear has provided what I take to be at least a plausible account of what the experience of anomie would be like for members of a culture in the face of that culture’s devastation. He uses the example of the Crow Native Americans, whose traditional way of life for various reasons became untenable between 1860 and 1890.

The Crow are a Native American tribe based in what is now the Montana and Wyoming area. Before the arrival of European settlers, the Crow were essentially a nomadic tribe, because their lives were structured around following and hunting the buffalo herds. In the mid to late 1800s, with the arrival of European settlers and the negotiation of various treaties—varying from the slightly inequitable to the grossly inequitable—the traditional Crow way of life was threatened. In particular, the Crow were confined to a reservation, and the buffalo herds which were so important to their livelihoods either moved away or were killed. This obviously had huge effects on the things that the Crow had traditionally valued. In particular, Jonathan Lear examines the effects of this material change on the Crow’s relationship to a practice that was central to their valuing enterprise: that of counting coup.

In act of counting coup, a Crow would tap a member of another tribe with what was called a coup stick—often in the context of a raid or battle—forcing them to acknowledge the superior might of the Crow, and re-establishing the boundary of Crow territory in a context where territory was much more fluid than the later imposed European concept of territory. By counting coup, a Crow was able to participate in the re-affirmation and re-establishment of the Crow identity. This act was extremely significant in Crow ethics and their views about what it was to live a good life.

After their confinement to a reservation, young Crow men in particular still had an impulse to count coups, because that was a central part of their moral education. There was a kind of tragic feeling, however, that in their new existence, confined to a reservation, with an identity imposed from without, the act of counting coup no longer made sense, and was in large part an impossible act. The Crow's traditional way of making sense of the structure of their world, and even of their own subjectivity, was no longer a possible way of existing in the new world created by the white settlers. The Crow understood their world in terms of a form of tribal warfare and nomadic life that had been rendered impossible .

The ability of the Crow to carry out activities central to their valuing practices had been interrupted in a surprising and radical way: the Crow literally could not even do that which was valuable to them anymore. They could do something that hollowly resembled it (tapping another with the coup stick), but this would not really be “counting coups” in any meaningful sense. Lear offers the following illustration of this point. Suppose you go into a restaurant and order a buffalo burger. In the first case, the restaurant no longer serves buffalo for whatever reason. Ordering a buffalo burger is not a possible act for you. In the second case, the idea of a restaurant simply ends. Lear asks us to imagine that “for a while there was the historical institution of

restaurants... but for a variety of reasons people stopped organizing themselves in this way.” In this case, as in the first, ordering a buffalo burger is not a possible act for you. But it seems that it is true in a more radical way. In the second case, “ordering” is not even an act that makes sense: the sentence is little better than gibberish (Lear 2006, p. 38).

Much in the same way that the idea of ordering relies on the social institution of restaurants, and counting coup relied on certain territorial and cultural facts, some of the acts that we take to be constitutive of our valuing may rely heavily on the existence of future people. This is, at least, what Scheffler thinks. Scheffler holds that even many activities that we (and Harry Frankfurt) might see as being good just for their own sake like listening to music are dependent for their value on our living in a social world structured around the existence of future people. Future people are among the circumstances of value.

It is certainly un-controversially true that our current traditions and values have been arrived with the belief that we are not the last generation. I take it for granted that the different conditions in the cataclysmic world would present a different set of possibilities for value. If it were to become clear that there would be no future generations, there is a *kind* of valuable project that would become incoherent: it will no longer be a *possible act* to sacrifice one’s pleasure and time for the wellbeing of future generations, for instance. It will conversely *become possible* to value relationships in ways that are only made possible by impending extinction, as Wolf and Frankfurt emphasize in different ways. As Scheffler suggests, most people will be inclined to see this tradeoff as net negative as far as our ability to value is concerned, and I am inclined to agree with them. Others, like Frankfurt, are not even so sure about this much.

What is nevertheless true in this case, regardless of its particular desirability, is that according to Scheffler the inhabitants of the world imagined by the Afterlife scenario would be

living in a world with which their moral education, traditions and culture had not equipped them to deal, or even to understand. In this respect these theoretical people bear a certain resemblance to the Crow Native Americans. They were living one way, comfortable in their values, when the world suddenly became such that these values were rendered unintelligible. One might wonder what would stop the residents of these unfortunate scenarios from radically reimagining their values to accommodate the lack of future people. Since, as I have argued, valuing for Scheffler is always valuing within a tradition, I take tradition to be the prohibitory force against radical change. What is it about our valuing within a tradition that would limit us in this way? In his paper *The Normativity of Tradition*, Scheffler argues that any good or choice-worthy life includes participation in traditions, intergenerational projects and the like, and offers several reasons why traditions are valuable to us in this way. He offers at least the following seven benefits which adherence to a tradition can provide us with: convention, habit, wisdom, guidance, value, loyalty and integrity (Scheffler 2010 [normativity]). Offering an in depth analysis and account of each of these benefits is beyond the scope of this paper, but for my purposes it will be useful to divide these benefits up into two categories. External benefits (convention, habit, wisdom, guidance) help us to determine the best and most efficient courses of action, while internal benefits (value, loyalty, integrity), help us define who we are or want to be. In one of Scheffler's apocalyptic scenarios, he argues, the external benefits are largely lost. The world would be a completely different kind of place, and the kinds of actions that would have made sense before would no longer do so. The internal benefits, on the other hand, would remain. Since our valuing within a tradition is importantly constitutive of our identity—who we feel we *are*—we would not be able to get away from our system of values, and thus would be stuck in a widespread state of anomie.

This experience of anomie and discordance between the self and the world seems to be shared between cases of cultural devastation (like that of the Crow) and apocalypse. If there are important respects in which these two cases are alike—the loss of a possibility of future Crow subjectivity and the loss of future human subjectivity—it may be important to distinguish how they are different. A potentially significant point of difference seems to be the kinds of recourse or sources of hope that are available to the victims of each of these types of scenario.

In his account of the Crow Native Americans, Lear documents one response to the question of how one is to respond to cultural devastation that he takes to be a desirable one, given by the chief Plenty Coups. To give a rough outline of this view, Plenty Coups recognizes that his tribe's conception of goods is intimately tied with their way of life, and that life is about to disappear. He recognizes that things are changing in ways beyond what his tribe is equipped to understand. If there is an unavoidable "abyss" across which the Crow people must cross, they should cross it with integrity and faith that "something good will emerge, even if it outstrips my ability for understanding what that good is." Lear goes on to write, summarizing Plenty Coups' view that:

"I am thus committed to the idea that while we Crow must abandon the goods associated with our way of life—and this we must abandon the conception of the good life that our tribe has worked out over centuries—*We shall get the good back*, though at the moment we can have no more than a glimmer of what that might mean" (Lear 2006, p. 94)

This is a perplexing view to hold. How is one to hope for a good that they do not have the capacity to understand? Lear aims to explain this response by reference to a concept from Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*—an analysis of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, in

which God commands Abraham to kill his own son. Kierkegaard introduces the concept the *teleological suspension of the ethical* to describe a situation where faith in something not understood is taken to be more authoritative than everything that one believes (Lear 2006, p. 92)(Kierkegaard 1843). Abraham had to believe in a normative authority beyond any normal ethical understanding in order to convince himself to kill his own son, and the Crow, on Plenty Coups' view, had to let go of their concepts of the good, having faith that they or their descendants would get something that resembled, at least in important respects, back. *Teleology* has to do with ends, or *telos*. In the case of the Crow, the kinds of ends that had traditionally been aimed at were rendered nonsensical; their *telos* was completely uprooted and destabilized (Lear 2006, p. 55). Scheffler finds it to probable that the inhabitants of the Afterlife scenario would find their *telos* to be uprooted in a much similar way. It seems evident to Scheffler that our *telos* includes ways of being in and relating to the world that would be rendered incoherent in the Afterlife scenario. In both situations, then, there is a destabilization of a traditional set of values. Taking for granted that the devastating effects on the values in question are comparable, what is the difference between these two cases?

Lear, following the Crow chief Plenty Coups, advocates a teleological suspension of the ethical as a good response to cases of widespread anomie and devastation like that visited on the Crow. Would this response be open to the residents of Scheffler's apocalyptic earth? The answer seems like it has to be no, barring any sort of very serious philosophical gymnastics (the sort which are not likely to really change people's minds anyway). Can we hold to a conception of the Good that is thin enough so as to be plausibly used in reference to a social environment containing no humans, or even no life, which still connects in some meaningful way to the thick and robust concepts with which we live value-laden lives? It seem fair to say that it would be at

least *hard* for someone to have faith that *they* would get the good back with the knowledge that that, after their own deaths, the social world would no longer contain any beings that were recognizably like themselves. Who would be getting the good back? What could this good possibly look like? Though Plenty Coups had “no more than a glimmer of what [the good] might mean,” he at least—I take it—assumed that it would include people, and their relating to the world in certain ways. Even in the cultural devastation of the Crow, it might be said that they took some comfort in biological continuity of both their species and—more specifically—their community. This comfort would not be available to the unfortunate residents of doomsday earth.



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