

# After the Meteor Strike

Amia Srinivasan

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

by Samuel H. Scheffler.

Oxford, 210 pp., £19.99, November 2013, 978 0 19 998250 9

WHAT'S really so bad about death? Unlike heartbreak, debt, public speaking or whatever else we may be afraid of, our own death isn't something we experience. 'Death,' Epicurus said, 'is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist.' Death is not an event in life. It isn't, properly speaking, something that happens to us. It is, rather, the nullification of the self as experiencing subject. How then can death be a bad thing for the person who dies? What is there to be afraid of?

We tend to speak of 'the fear of death' as if it were a single particular thing, but that is to obscure the diverse terrors death evokes. For some, no doubt, the fear of death rests, as Epicurus suspects, on the mistaken notion that there is an experience of being dead – a nightmarish paralysis, perhaps, or an utter aloneness. That way of fearing death doesn't make much sense. (Which isn't to say that it doesn't make sense as a way of fearing dying. Dying is very much an event in life, and often a painful one.) But not everyone fears death because they anticipate, however inchoately,

the experience of being dead. For some, Epicurus' neat proof of the triviality of death can feel like sophistry, an irritating evasion of the point. After all, many things we never experience are of great importance to us. We care that our lovers are genuinely faithful and not just excellent dissemblers (hence the cruelty in the defence 'what he doesn't know can't hurt him'). And we care about things that happen after we die: that our children are happy or that our friends remember us fondly. More things matter to us than we can or will ever experience.

In *Death and the Afterlife*, Samuel Scheffler asks what matters to us more: the experienced facts of our lives, or the never to be experienced facts of what happens after we die? Common sense suggests the former, but Scheffler insists that what really matters to us is what happens once we are gone. Our own lives matter to us less than the lives of those who will come after. Perhaps parents, thinking of their children, will be unsurprised by this. But Scheffler isn't pointing out merely that we tend to care a lot about other people. Rather, he is suggesting that what matters to us most is

that humanity should have a future beyond our own. More important to me than my own continued existence, or the continued existence of the people I love, is the continued existence of the human species. This is the ‘afterlife’ of Scheffler’s title: not the heavenly afterlife of religious imagining, but the earthly afterlife of a collective human future. That we seldom think about its importance shows only how much we take it for granted.

How could this be? Surely the continued existence of an undifferentiated human-kind can’t figure so largely in my concerns – can’t, that is, trump the forces of self-love and tribalism. It sounds a bit treachery. An earthly afterlife might be a fine thing, but in the end isn’t it a poor substitute for what really matters to us: that we survive, and that our loved ones do too? In an attempt to persuade us otherwise, Scheffler asks how we would feel if we knew there wasn’t going to be any earthly afterlife. (And no heavenly afterlife, either; Scheffler is assuming that we, like him, are good atheists.) Suppose you knew, ahead of time, that thirty days after you died of natural causes, all human life would be destroyed in a meteor strike. Or suppose, as in P.D. James’s novel *The Children of Men* (loosely adapted as a film by Alfonso Cuarón in 2006), you learned that the human species as a whole had become infertile. Scheffler predicts that we would react to either scenario with what he calls (‘with bland understatement’) ‘profound dismay’. We would suffer, he thinks, a general draining of meaning from our lives. The projects we previously valued would cease to matter. Joy and happiness would

evade us. We would be overtaken, as James puts it in her novel, by an *ennui universel*.

This descent into nihilism, Scheffler thinks, couldn’t be explained merely as a response to the premature and violent death of our loved ones (in the doomsday scenario) or to our inability to have children or grandchildren (in the infertility scenario). Instead, what properly explains the despair in each of these scenarios is that they entail humanity’s extinction. Why should this matter so much to us? It’s perhaps true that some human projects – finding a cure for cancer or protecting the environment for future generations – make sense only if there are people in the future who stand to benefit from them. But such projects account for only a fraction of human activity. What about lives that are structured around projects that aren’t on the face of it so bound up with future generations? Scheffler thinks the loss of an earthly afterlife would rob even these of much of their value. This is because the logic of value is future-oriented. Valuing, Scheffler thinks, is essentially conservative; when we value something, we want to see it preserved and sustained. Death, with its abrupt annihilation of personal agency, poses a metaphysical obstacle to valuing. Once dead, there’s nothing we can do to ensure anything will last. The common solutions to this problem are community and tradition: by placing our private pursuits in a larger narrative of human history and culture, we project our agency into the future, death notwithstanding. But this possibility too would evaporate in the absence of a collective future, and many of the

projects we currently value – Scheffler is thinking particularly of humanistic scholarship and artistic production – would be rendered pointless. He concedes that some simple pleasure-giving activities – eating, listening to music, sex, spending time with friends, playing games – might retain their charm in the face of apocalypse. But for Scheffler this is little comfort.

Philosophical thought experiments are a delicate business. As with scientific experiments, the idea is to isolate and tweak a single variable in order to grasp its significance – in the case of Scheffler’s doomsday and infertility scenarios, the significance of the earthly afterlife. In this sense philosophical thought experiments are exercises in clean abstraction. But unlike scientific experiments, thought experiments are often designed to evoke and plumb our emotional reactions – in this case, how the loss of an earthly afterlife would make us feel. Because of this, their abstraction comes under strain. Take the doomsday scenario. Scheffler asks us to set aside thoughts of the premature and violent destruction of our loved ones, and attend to its other feature, the destruction of humanity in general. But it isn’t clear that such an abstraction is manageable. In a certain philosophical mood, I might recognise that the destruction of the human species is worse than the more modest loss of my friends and family. But in another mood – the mood I would surely be in if actually confronted with the doomsday scenario – the difference would mean nothing to me. There might even be some bitter consolation in the thought that if everyone I love has to

perish, at least the rest of humanity will go along with them.

The infertility scenario is a less fraught test of Scheffler’s thesis. Here no one is dealt a premature or painful death. Humanity simply withers away, incapable of reproducing itself. No doubt many would be sorely disappointed to learn of their personal infertility, but the aching despair Scheffler expects us to feel in the face of global infertility couldn’t be fully accounted for by this smaller, private loss, or even by our collective empathy for the private losses of others. Scheffler seems right in suggesting that we would also feel despair about the extinction of humanity as such, since it forces us to submit to the logic of personal death.

But Scheffler’s claim isn’t merely an empirical prediction about the way we would react to humanity’s demise. It is also a normative claim: we would be right to conclude that life on the edge of apocalypse wasn’t worth much. This too is part of the trickiness of thought experiments: it is always an interpretative question whether our reactions to them should be thought of as justified, or as lapses in judgment. For Scheffler, our psychic investment in the earthly afterlife is a structural feature of what it is to be a death-bound creature; shaking it off would be no easier, or more desirable, than giving up our humanity altogether. But in certain lights structural features can come to seem needless limitations. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks us to imagine how we would feel if we learned that our lives would be lived on an eternally recurring loop, each and every moment

infinitely repeated just as it unfolded the first time. Nietzsche's suspicion is that we would throw ourselves to the ground, gnashing our teeth with grief. But he also entertains the idea of a person – a higher and better sort of person – who could ecstatically embrace the prospect. That we recoil at the idea of the eternal recurrence isn't because it is intrinsically loathsome, but because we have a compromised – abnegating and regretful – relationship to our own lives. What Nietzsche's thought experiment reveals is our failure to construct lives that are worthy of repetition. What if we saw in Scheffler's thought experiment the same Nietzschean ambivalence? Could the despair prompted by the infertility scenario, rather than an appropriate response to catastrophe, be a symptom of our compromised lives? Might not a better sort of person be sanguine, even joyful, faced with humankind's extinction?

**I**F SCHEFFLER is right about our psychic dependence on the earthly afterlife, that's in part because it functions as a secular substitute for the lost afterlife of religion. Scheffler is at pains to deny a strong analogy between the two. He grants that both can give meaning to human life, but insists on the importance of the distinctions: only the religious afterlife promises genuine immortality, reunion with loved ones and direct retribution for earthly injustice. That may be. Yet it seems to me undeniable that both earthly and religious afterlives – and, for that matter, the afterlife afforded by children – are a vehicle for deferred fulfilment. The religious afterlife

promises that earthly suffering will be compensated for by heavenly reward, that present injustice will ultimately be put right by divine ordinance. The earthly afterlife promises that personal misery will be compensated for by the future happiness of one's children, or one's children's children, and that political injustice will be remedied in the fullness of time. The afterlife – earthly or heavenly – is both a consolation for and an erasure of the insufficiencies of the present. Our horror at the counterfactual of global infertility reveals how much we crave such erasure and consolation. But in the Nietzschean spirit, shouldn't we ask ourselves what kind of creatures we would or could be if we didn't?

If there were no afterlife of any kind, then whatever happiness and joy and justice there was to be had would have to be had now. This is a dreadful thought, in Kierkegaard's sense of dread: it calls on us to act, or sink into nihilism. The loss of the earthly afterlife would, like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, demand that we become creatures capable of affirming our own lives. It would call on us to be wholly answerable to the present, to take the matter of our current happiness and the current state of the world more seriously.

By this I don't mean that the loss of the afterlife would call for earnestness. Play is prominent on Scheffler's list of activities that would retain their value in the face of the coming apocalypse. This is because play creates its own value and makes its own meaning. It needs nothing outside itself. Play can't properly be considered a

project: it has no purpose apart from its disruption of purposiveness. The value of play doesn't depend on its futurity, on its preservation in tradition or custom. Death is no threat to the value of play, for play gives itself happily to the logic of death. To be sanguine, even joyful, in the face of a life without an afterlife would be to treat our lives as a kind of play. We would abandon the hope that our books be read and our pictures admired by some future audience; indeed, we would give up having 'projects' altogether.

A life lived as play is a utopian construct. How easy would it be for people to give themselves over to it? Could we learn to value things in a way that doesn't require their preservation? P.D. James, in *The Children of Men*, is pessimistic. Her protagonist, Theo Faron, an Oxford don, has become incapable of taking pleasure in his books or in nature – he finds it all pointless. Scheffler thinks this makes narrative sense, in that it gives 'imaginative expression to the not implausible idea that the imminent disappearance of human life would . . . reduce [the] capacity for enthusiasm and for wholehearted and joyful activity across a very wide front.' It's telling that James has made her protagonist an academic: that is, the kind of person who is supposed to care only about the contemplation of the highest things, but is all too liable to care more about whether future generations will rate his work. An inability to take pleasure in doing things for their own sake may be a particular rather than a general affliction. Perhaps if Theo Faron had had a different job he would have had an easier time of it.

And maybe the same is true of the sorts of people Scheffler has in mind. Most people, after all, don't spend their time making art or researching medieval manuscripts. They work long and enervating hours in order to keep themselves and their families alive, and then spend what time they have left pursuing simple pleasures: food, drink, music, friendship, sex. It's possible to imagine that their lives wouldn't be changed in the way that Scheffler imagines by the prospect of humanity's demise. Or if they were changed, perhaps they would be changed for the better. Once all reassurances of progress had been exposed as bankrupt, the death of the afterlife might mean the birth of social revolution. Perhaps (as Marx suggested of the heavenly afterlife) the dissolution of the earthly afterlife would truly be a loss only for those who presently enjoy the status quo.

There is also reason to wonder whether, even if it were possible, a life fully committed to the present would count as a properly human life. Scheffler thinks not, since it would lack the narrative quality typical of – and, Scheffler thinks, essential to – human life. It is for this reason that he objects to the fantasy of immortality (Bernard Williams objected to it on the grounds of its tedium):

It is essential to our idea of life that it is temporally bounded, with a beginning, a middle and an end, and with stages of development defining its normal trajectory. A life without temporal boundaries would no more be a life than a circle without a circumference would be a circle . . . The aspects of life that we cherish most dearly – love and labour, intimacy and achievement, creativity and humour and

solidarity and all the rest – all have the status of *values* for us because of their role in our finite and bounded lives.

The idea that immortal life would somehow fall short of a fully human life is an old one. In Book 21 of the *Iliad*, the gods stage a shadow battle on Mount Olympus. Unlike the savage destruction taking place on the human battlefield below, Homer's theomachy is an inconsequential farce, complete with name-calling and tearful outbursts. The gods are incapable of mortal wounding, and so their warring carries no import. This is a satire, not a human drama. If the Olympian gods show us what lives lived as play look like, then we shouldn't seek to emulate them or envy their immortality. In their pettiness and narcissism, it's as if the gods had taken their cue from what is ugliest in the play of children. But perhaps there is an ethical possibility enclosed within the fantasy of immortality that Homer, and Scheffler, overlook. For children's play is also remarkable for its creativity, absorption and enchantment.

**S**CHEFFLER'S thesis has striking implications for the way we should think about the demands of our egos. Our self-interest doesn't merely extend, as we're used to thinking, to the preservation of ourselves and those we love. It extends to the lives of indeterminate future people we neither know nor love. But Scheffler goes further. He is impressed by what he sees as a sharp contrast between our reaction to the infertility scenario on the one hand, and the fact of our own inevitable death on the other:

Every single person now alive will be dead in the not too distant future. This fact is universally accepted and is not seen as remarkable, still less as an impending catastrophe. There are no crisis meetings of world leaders to consider what to do about it, no outbreaks of mass hysteria, no outpourings of grief, no demands for action . . . Not only is that fact not regarded as a catastrophe, it is not even on anybody's list of the major problems facing the world.

The contrast is meant to suggest that there is a sense in which our own self-interest is better served by the preservation of the human species than by our personal survival or the survival of our loved ones. After all, the fact that we will all die is not a crisis, but impending species-extinction would be. This is a challenge to the logic of egoism: it looks, awkwardly, as if our self-interest ranks the human species above ourselves in importance. Or we could simply (and better, I think) deny that the terms of egoism are here any longer of use.

I like this result, but I wonder about the path to it. If I were asked to write a list of the world's major problems, death probably wouldn't be on it. But if I had to write down a list of the problems of being human – or, for that matter, the problems that are most worthy of philosophical attention – death would be near the top. Scheffler is right that death isn't a crisis on a par with climate change or global inequality (though notice how few outpourings of grief or demands for action those crises prompt). Surely death is far more troubling: lonelier and uncannier and altogether more likely to be met with denial.

Believers in a religious afterlife some-

times claim to be fearless in the face of death. But I wonder if they aren't getting it wrong. I was religious once, and for me fearing or not fearing death was beside the point, because I never truly believed in death. I believed in bodily decay, in exile from earthly life, but never in the extinction of the self. Now I do believe in death, and the terror I have of it – when I can bring myself to think about it – is debilitating. This no doubt accounts for my reluctance to accept Scheffler's claim about the relative importance of the afterlife over my personal survival. I find it difficult to imagine that anything could be worse for me than my own death and the deaths of the people I love, and I am suspicious of anything that might seek to console me about this as religion once did. Scheffler would counter that, however much I may fear my death, its inevitability doesn't stop me valuing things, while humanity's imminent extinction would. To this I can only say that when I consider the inevitability of my own death or the deaths of people I love, I feel the value drain from my life just as it might in the face of global apocalypse. That this doesn't result in a permanent apraxia perhaps speaks more (and more shamefully) to my capacity for denial than it does to the structure of my values.

If, as Scheffler argues, 'death gives the meaning to life' and immortality is thus undesirable, then shouldn't we be entirely unafraid of death? Such a conclusion would place Scheffler in the philosophical tradition that begins with Epicurus. But Scheffler resists this alignment. While he insists that humanity's survival matters to us more

than our personal survival, he wants nonetheless to do justice to the 'distinctive kind of terror that is produced by the strange and sui generis character of the thought that I myself . . . will simply stop being'. He goes on:

This is a thought that can in certain moods induce a kind of vertigo; it can seem uncanny, even impossible . . . Although I have had the experience before of losing things that mattered to me . . . it is I who have had those experiences . . . But I take death to mean that the very I that has had those experiences is what is now going to end. The egocentric subject . . . is itself to end. My only resources for reacting to this prospect seem to involve turning back on myself a set of attitudes – such as sadness, grief, rage, anxiety – that are tailored to circumstances in which the self endures and undergoes a loss. But those attitudes become unmoored when directed toward their very subject. And this induces, or can induce, *panic*.

Death brings oblivion. But what is that? I try to think about it, and find myself picturing something, so I know that whatever that something is, it can't be oblivion. I try to erase myself in my mind, and imagine myself hiding in a dark corner, looking on at a scene from which I am absent, and therefore not really absent at all. I can't think my own death; I'm not even sure what it is. In confronting this unthinkability, I reach a horizon beyond which I can make no sense – where I make no sense. The fear sets in. Perhaps Scheffler is right, even so, that we have more to fear in the deaths of others than in our own. In that case we have much to fear, and so little time. □