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PRESERVING THE VALUED OR PRESERVING VALUING?

by

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Death and the Afterlife

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Preserving the Valued or Preserving Valuing?

Seana Valentine Shiffrin

Throughout my career, Samuel Scheffler has served as an aspirational, if unattainable, model of how to approach deep and central issues in a clear, penetrating, original, and slyly humorous way. His sharply focused work consistently offers new vantage points on themes and arguments that have been close but elusive companions, allowing them to seem fresh, new, and suddenly more tractable. These lectures provide yet another source of exactly this sort of inspiration about how to think about individualism, value, and the meaning of our lives and deaths. By doing so, they supply a vivid, sobering account of what is so horrifying about the environmental risks we have been taking and the precipice toward which we literally have been driving.

Commenting on these lectures is, although an honor, more than challenging. My dominant reaction to this work is appreciative agreement. Not only has Scheffler identified and framed a new set of philosophical questions, a welcome and precious gift in its own right, but he has argued persuasively for major, significant conclusions. In particular, I think he is right about the afterlife conjecture as well as the profound implications he draws from it, namely: First, we are far from indifferent about what happens after our deaths; this reaction is reasonable and goes deep, and this reaction confirms nonexperientialist accounts of value (15, 20). Second, in significant respects, the longevity of what else we care about reasonably matters substantially more to us than our personal longevity (26).

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Reflection on this fact highlights our deeply social orientation and underscores the limits of our egoism (44).

Thus, there is little in Scheffler's account that I want directly to dispute. What I think worth exploring and fleshing out in greater detail is how exactly to characterize the way in which the present depends upon the future and what precisely constitutes the object of our shared dismay occasioned by the prospect of collective non-existence. In particular, I want to examine more closely two themes in Scheffler's lectures: First, the idea that our emotional investment in future generations derives from (or, perhaps, more weakly, exemplifies) our valuing things, projects, and activities because, as Scheffler posits, "there is something approaching a conceptual connection between valuing something and wanting it to be sustained or preserved" (22). Second, the connected idea that we are invested in a collective afterlife because of our interest in being a part of *human history* (54).

1. *Conservatism about Value*

I start with Scheffler's claim that conservatism about value underlies our emotional investment in the existence of future generations, where conservatism about value is the thesis that valuing something (nearly conceptually) involves wanting it to be sustained or preserved. For brevity, I will label this the "conservatism thesis." My interest in this thesis may point to a possible divide between Scheffler and myself, although I remain unsure whether there is, in fact, a fissure between our views. Many of Scheffler's examples involve individual, particular projects, their dependence on the continued participation or appreciation of future people, and the explanations these dependencies provide of the individual dismay each of us would feel at the end of collective life. I think Scheffler is right that the achievement of many (or even most) of our important particular values depends upon others yet to be. Still, I wonder

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whether the aggregate of those individual frustrations is what would underlie the deep and devastating *shared* dismay we would experience if the end of collective afterlife loomed. As I will argue while unpacking the conservatism thesis, I am inclined to think that the real source of the devastating, shared dismay Scheffler envisions would be triggered less by the shared condition that our disparate, particular valued projects would be frustrated and more by the prospect of the termination of the general practice of acting on reasons and of valuing.

The most plausible interpretation of the conservatism thesis probably does not involve its simplest construal, contending that for everything we value, we value its being sustained or preserved. For, it seems that there are some valuable (and valued) things that should *not* be sustained but, rather, should come to an end. Consider a beautiful musical note or a wonderful conversation. Their prolonged longevity becomes tedious or turns parodic. One may value an exquisite, artistically prepared meal, but this entails consuming it and relishing the dishes (thereby destroying them), rather than lacquering the food for posterity. To turn to a more significant example, as Bernard Williams argued in his essay "The Makropulos Case,"[1] and as Scheffler in this volume concurs on other grounds, it is good that individual human lives come to an end.[2] They may generally be too short; but not only is valuing them consistent with wanting them to come to an end, but, further, their having an end contributes to their value. That life does not persist indefinitely not only prevents it from turning sour, dull, and routine, but its having an end contributes to its significance, gives it

1. Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100.

2. Scheffler also discusses Williams's article in original and illuminating ways in Lecture 3 (88–95), coming to the same conclusion as Williams, albeit for different reasons.

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poignancy, and supplies a bracing reason to organize a life around a particular set of values, making one a distinctive individual and prodding one to get on with it.

So, at least in some of these cases, it seems that I can genuinely value something, yet not want or seek to sustain or preserve it. Indeed, sometimes valuing something involves actively wanting or seeking, at the appropriate point, its end. I value the beautiful song, and the wonderful conversation, but I deliberately bring them to a close. Further, I am careful not to repeat the song too often for fear of cheapening its value, rendering it staid or clichéd. I value my life but I am with Williams and Scheffler that I would not elect to sustain it forever. (Although, assuming good health and good companions, I would not refuse an extra one hundred years or so.)

If these points hold true, they raise two related questions: First, if we put aside the simple construal of the conservatism thesis, how should we correctly understand it? Are there *some* sorts or some aspects of valuable things that are essential to preserve and sustain, such that to value them properly *is* to wish for their sustenance or preservation? Second, more specifically, does a more nuanced version of the conservatism thesis underlie our shared reaction to the prospect of the discontinuation of collective life and, if so, in virtue of what valued thing or things?

Two observations might be made on behalf of the conservatism thesis that may help us make progress in understanding its scope and assessing whether it may hold true in some cases or at some level of generality. First, in at least some of the examples I have mentioned, it may be observed that it is not so much that we resist the sustenance or preservation of the valuable thing where it is possible. Rather, in these examples, the sustenance or preservation of the valuable thing *as such* is not possible. With songs, conversations, meals, and even human lives, the valuable thing qua valuable thing cannot be indefinitely sustained *through temporal extension* because, at some point, longevity spoils or, at least, diminishes its

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value. In many cases, valuable events cannot be repeated, and even where they can be, frequent repetition may spoil their value (as with repeated songs and some meaningful conversations). Thus, in these cases, indefinite or extended temporal continuation (or repetition) of these valuable things is not a method of sustaining or preserving them qua valuable things.[3] Hence, they may not pose threats to the conservatism thesis if that were more narrowly drawn to claim that valuing something (nearly conceptually) involves wanting it, where possible, to be sustained or preserved qua valuable thing.

Second, there may be a better way to understand the connection between valuing and sustaining or preserving than the simple ways I have been considering. Perhaps instead of thinking only in terms of the sustaining (or preserving) of a valuable thing through temporal elongation or repetition, for some sorts of valuable things, we might regard sustaining (or preserving) as involving their occasional or regular concrete realization as well as their preservation in memory. To reformulate the conservatism thesis in a more long-winded way, we might say that valuing something involves recognizing reasons to ensure that it is somehow realized or instantiated, if it is not already, and pursued or protected to the point that it achieves and maintains something approaching its full (or perhaps

3. The right way to put this point in the case of a human life is surely more complicated. Unlike a song, the fact that it is good that a human life ends at some point does not necessarily mean that when the end comes, the end at that time is a good thing or that the life's continuation would lack value. For many human lives, their further prolongation would continue their value, even though their indefinite prolongation would not. Of course, when a life has deteriorated and become wretched, the particular end can be a good thing at the time. Even so, in such cases when the life may no longer be of value to its holder, some other indices of value may persist if the life is continued nonetheless. For example, others have obligations to treat the person and her life with respect. They might end it at her request, but they cannot take haphazard risks with it or treat its end as sport.

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its distinctive) value.[4] In some cases, such as that of a piece of music, its instantiation may be relatively short. In other cases, such as the enactment of complex valuable projects, such as discovering a cure for cancer or understanding an ancient civilization, this commitment may involve multiple generations' worth of effort. Perhaps, in the case of pursuing or preserving knowledge or justice, this commitment may involve an indefinite number of generations.

Moreover, valuing something the value of which resides foundationally in its type (where the value of its token mainly derives from the value of the type) may involve wishing to sustain its *type* or *kind* in some relevant form, but not necessarily through sustaining any particular token. For example, to value a good piece of music need not necessarily involve wishing that any instance of it be sustained indefinitely, say through a feedback loop continually broadcast in a public park, but rather, to seek for it to be—at some point—fully performed (perhaps for all willing subjects of appreciation), that the music and the performance be remembered, and that on sufficiently regular occasions, there be further instantiated tokens of the type, in a form that retains its value.

This unpacking of the conservatism thesis suggests something along the following lines. There is a tight connection between valuing something and: first, registering it in (collective) consciousness or memory; and, second, where possible, seeking to instantiate it occasionally or regularly, or to sustain it over time, or both, so long as those ways achieve and retain appropriate measures of the thing's value, recognizing that the apt methods of instantiating and

4. Again, the point is difficult to capture precisely in the case of some complex valuable things, such as human lives, that are surely worth continuing even once they begin to decline or diminish in value to their bearers. Whereas, with other valuable things (like songs or novels), respect for their value may demand curtailing their length so that they do not persist past the apex of their value even if further appendices and additions would share some of the charm of the rest.

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sustaining may differ depending on the thing in question. An interpretation of this sort has more plausibility than the simpler construal I first considered, but I remain unsure about it and unsure of the implications of my hesitation.

What continues to worry me is this: I accept and find illuminating what Scheffler says here (32–35) and in his superb essay on tradition about the ways in which sharing practices with people in the past and in the future allows us to personalize both the past and the future.[5] It may also show compassion for the investments of people in the past and represent an effort to allow their strivings to come to fruition, making their lives more meaningful in retrospect. Still, I am mindful that we cannot realize all valuable pursuits at once, temporally, or in the same social and material circumstances. The preservation and regular enactment or pursuit of the things we value, so understood, stand in some abstract tension with the invention and adoption of new valuable practices and with future generations' autonomous engagement with their lives. Some traditions, even valuable traditions, must give way if there is to be sufficient social space for new valuable practices. Indeed, some valuable new practices substantively involve not merely displacing former practices in a competition for time, space, and attention, but actively rejecting them.

Acceptance of the necessity of the displacement of the pursuit of (many) valuable practices from the past is, of course, consistent with the conservatism thesis. One may treasure the sustaining of valuable practices, while conceding that while valuable, that continuity must sometimes give way to the need and inevitability of change. Given our capacity for such wistful acceptance, however, I worry that the conservatism thesis, broadly understood, is not the source of the power behind the emotional reaction Scheffler

5. Samuel Scheffler, "The Normativity of Tradition," in *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch. 11, 287–311.

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persuasively imagines would be provoked by the infertility scenario. I am inclined to think it is not just the termination of our particular valuable practices that would be so unsettling, but, specifically, also the conditions under which they are terminated.

Another example will help to develop the point. I rather hope there will continue to be a thriving culture of physical books with their smells, feels, and the particular sort of intellectual engagement with ideas and texts they facilitate. I am devastated by the thought of physical books disappearing for a bad reason, for example, *because* intellectualism recedes, or if the form of their loss also risked the loss of the knowledge those books have faithfully preserved. Indeed, I spend a good part of my income on keeping physical book manufacture and sales thriving. Yet, if the reason physical books become rare is that the next generations find other methods of preserving and absorbing knowledge more attractive, I find that prospect vaguely alien and wrongheaded, but it does not plunge me into despair. Larger scale examples are at hand too. If the sorts of communal values and close-knit networks of care manifested in village and small-town ways of life disintegrate because the economic pressures of globalization force massive but reluctant migration to cities, that seems terrible and tragic. Suppose instead, despite their appreciation of small-town life and for continuing a way of life in solidarity with their forebears, people nonetheless prefer the complexity, excitement, and anonymity of cities and prefer less parochial and more regular, albeit bureaucratic, methods of providing mutual social support. If it occurs for these better reasons, then the loss of small-town life seems horribly sad, but something we might reconcile ourselves to, consistent with our valuing it.[6]

6. A related, but quite differently valenced, discussion appears in G. A. Cohen, "Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value," in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman, eds., *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203–30.

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With respect to some valuable pursuits, their displacement by other equally valuable pursuits feels sad, sometimes wrong, but inevitable and not intolerable in the way the infertility scenario feels deeply threatening. This seems true even of projects that have not fully achieved their value; for example, the discontinuation and abandonment of a multigenerational architectural project (like Gaudí's cathedral) to make room, if necessary, instead for a public park or forest. What seems intolerable is if our valuable activity is put aside for no reason, or for a terrible reason, or if it is utterly forgotten, but not if it comes to an end so that there is room for other valuable activities to be pursued and become socially salient, or, on the other hand, to satisfy an orthogonal moral constraint.

When valuable things or activities end for no reason or for bad reasons, they inspire a special kind of dismay or despair. I posit that this despair responds to the fact that forces other than reason-based responses dictate what happens and that this fact can make our reason-oriented activity seem futile or pointless. When they end for good reasons, the change may be sad but does not seem to render our efforts to pursue appropriate reasons and values pointless.

Notably, the primary examples in the last few paragraphs involve the replacement of some valuable endeavors by others in a deliberate way that involves the ongoing practice of valuing—that is, the ongoing practice of attempting for the recognition and implementation of reasons to determine what happens to us and what we do. This suggests that one might question the degree of power that the conservatism thesis exerts with respect to specific valued things, while yet thinking it may offer grounds for profound resistance to the interruption and discontinuation of *all* valuable pursuits. Scheffler is entirely right that a more global elimination of all our specific valuable pursuits would preclude the personalization of the future that renders our individual deaths less terrifying. But that is not the point I have in mind. I have been gesturing toward the idea that it seems to matter greatly that the general practices of acknowledging value and acting on reasons continue,

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even if many of the particular, instantiated objects of that abstract activity alter and evolve.

Although many such projects may alter, some of our valuable projects closely tied to the general practice of valuing seem less discretionary and more mandatory. Even if the particular realizations of valuable activity acceptably alter for reasons, it also seems to matter that the general practice of *remembering* what we used to (more actively) value and how continues. Further, as Scheffler discusses, among the things we want from the collective afterlife is the sense that justice is done (67). It does not seem as though it matters that justice be done only on the condition that there happen to be future people, but also that it matters for there to be people who eventually make sufficient moral progress to get it right: to achieve justice amongst themselves and not merely conceive of it.

So, when I consider the infertility scenario, what seems devastatingly sad about it is not simply the idea that the agglomeration of particular valuable practices and pursuits we love will come to an end as such, including those projects that require multiple generations to realize them properly. What seems deeply tragic about the thought, for me, is mainly *why* they come to an end. It is not that those projects come to be disvalued for an understandable reason, because other equally valuable pursuits understandably take their place, or because we chose to stop procreating out of concern for other species or out of concern about the conditions our future children would face.[7] The tragedy is that the enactment, reenactment,

7. I discuss some moral issues concerning procreation in "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory* 5 (1999): 117–48. It is an interesting, further issue whether the present generation's need for future generations to give the former's lives continued meaning provides a sufficient moral reason to create them, assuming the latter's lives would be worthwhile and assuming, as I do, that one needs a sufficient moral reason to create future people.

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and recollection of valuable activities comprehensively terminate *for no adequate justificatory reason*.[8] There is an explanation, to be sure, but the termination is not caused by the implementation of a coherent reason. Moreover, unlike the end of an individual life, the fact of which contributes to the life's (full) value (assuming Williams and Scheffler are right), the fact of the termination of our collective life does not contribute to its value (108–9).[9] Finally, I am distressed by the thought that its termination in the near future entails that we will never realize a compulsory end, namely, the achievement of relations of justice and stable, ongoing, rather than sporadic, relations of moral decency.

Thus, I suggest what is *horrifying* about the infertility scenario is less the comprehensive discontinuation of the *specific* things we value, terrible as that is, and more the discontinuation of something more particular and more abstract, namely the brutal interruption and discontinuation of *valuing*—of the recognition of what matters and the undertaking of practices of enacting and realizing valuable things because we appreciate their value. If one thought that most valuable things depend for their full value upon their flourishing within a just and morally decent context, the ideas that it is crucial

8. Were there an adequate reason to end our collective lives and we took it, I think this path would render the experience less distressing but still profoundly dispiriting. I am less sure that this is only because our particular projects would be stymied (although many would be) and would not be sustained, rather than also because the universe would then consist solely of events occurring for no justificatory reason (although, at least, those events would not happen *to anyone*). Of course, it seems that in the past, the universe consisted solely of events occurring for no justificatory reason. A reason-less future seems to matter more than a reason-less past, as I go on to discuss.

9. As Scheffler observes, there are important differences between the individual and the collective case. Individuals have unified consciousnesses with attitudes (and distinctive characters). These features play a role in the argument for the good of there being an end to individual lives that would not extend to the case of collective life.

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that valuing should continue and that moral relations should be achieved would then be connected.

These suggestions, in turn, connect to a particular conception of the conservatism thesis and the conditions under which it exerts strong force. I have suggested two elaborations upon the more brief articulation of the conservatism thesis with which we started. First, the tight connection is between valuing something and registering it in (collective) memory and seeking, where possible, to instantiate it occasionally or regularly or sustain it over time, or both, so long as those ways achieve and retain appropriate measures of the thing's value, *or* deliberately foregoing these forms of recognition for an appropriate justificatory reason.[10] In short, it matters that the treatment of valuable things operates according to reasons. Second, there seems to be a tight connection between the more general, abstract activity of valuing and a fervent wish that *that very* abstract activity continue, however its objects alter (for reasons) over time.

2. *Human History*

This proposed understanding of the conservatism thesis fuels some hesitance about what emphasis to place on the *human* aspect of Scheffler's remark that "the actual value of our activities depends on their place in an ongoing human history" (54). Just as what may ultimately matter deeply is not that *my* or *our* current valued practices continue, but that valuing for good reasons continues, so it may not ultimately matter deeply that *human-led* valuing practices continue, rather than valuing practices by rational agents. Suppose humans were to die out, like the Neanderthals, because we succumbed to evolutionary pressures but that another rational

10. I am skeptical, though, that there could be an adequate justificatory reason for not registering in collective memory in some way the people who lived and the things they valued.

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species emerged and thrived in our stead. Suppose further that subsequent rational species remembered us fairly accurately, recognized our value, appreciated what we valued and why, strived to behave morally, and carried on engaging in valuable practices for reasons, though largely different practices. For me, it is a bizarre and humbling future to contemplate, but not a profoundly depressing one. It matters that valuing for reasons does not end abruptly—for no reason—and that the practice of history—that is, of remembering who existed and understanding what they valued—continues. I am less sure that it centrally matters that remembering and valuing is done by creatures like us.

I will conclude with a somewhat related question about the significance of being part of a *history* with a collective past and a collective future as opposed to the significance of being part of a collective with a future. Lucretius observed that we are untroubled about our prenatal nonexistence relative to our anguish over our personal postmortem nonexistence.[11] He thought that our indifference toward our prenatal nonexistence should render us less concerned about our own mortality. Most have been unmoved by that suggestion, but acknowledge the asymmetry and take it to provide an interesting puzzle.

In that light, it is tempting to ask whether there is a similar asymmetry with respect to collective prehistory and collective extinction. Of course, unlike our prenatal nonexistence, our collective life did preexist each of us for a long stretch. But, at one point, humans did not exist and, with fortune (and environmental reforms), our collective nonexistence will be longer off than our individual mortality.

I think that something like the Lucretian attitudinal asymmetry does exist with respect to our collective lives. First, in contrast to the

11. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, III., 830–4z, trans. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vol. 1, 151–52.

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eventual prospect of the end of the collective afterlife, our prior collective nonexistence is less a source of distress and despair than a source of interest and wonder. When we did not exist, many valuable things were not recognized or deliberately enacted. There may have been compassion, play, lower mathematics, and song among the animals once they came along, but there was no literature, architecture, painting, philosophy, higher mathematics, and so forth; some of those animals may have valued each other and the environment, but the sort of complex, self-conscious valuing we are capable of was probably absent. Those absences seem unproblematic. Yet, a future without valuing feels desolate in a way that, if we focus on it, may directly affect our lives and upset our equanimity.

Perhaps that is because our prior collective nonexistence was so long ago. Perhaps a collective nonexistence comparably far out in the future should not trouble us, though it would understandably upset those closer to it. But suppose our beginnings were more abrupt and closer in temporal proximity. Suppose we discovered that some ludicrous science-fiction conspiracy story was true—something like the Scientology myth[12]—but occurring much more recently. Very different aliens created us and deposited us here, around 150 years ago, left misleading evidence and implanted effective but false myths about our personal, social, and biological histories. Let's imagine that the personalities and fake histories they manufactured didn't represent their values or a conscious enactment of a normative alternative; perhaps our profile was just the output of a fancy randomized simulation game. In any case, don't

12. See, e.g., Bent Corydon and L. Ron Hubbard Jr., *L. Ron Hubbard, Messiah or Madman?* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1987) (describing the Scientology account of the alien creation of clusters of "Thetans," the implanted brainwashing to which Thetans were subject, and the ongoing but hidden embeddedness of Thetan clusters in our minds), 360–66; Joel Sappell and Robert Welkos, "Scientologists Block Access to Secret Documents, 1,500 Crowd Into Courthouse to Protect Materials on Fundamental Beliefs," *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1985, 1.

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imagine the case as one in which we share an unknown normative continuity with the aliens. Aside from our distress at the deception, our serious misapprehensions about our past, and our concern about the existence of manipulative aliens, would the fact that human history more recently did not exist be *as upsetting* as the prospect of collective nonexistence within 150 years?

Despite my own introduction of the case, I find it hard to wrap my mind around that sort of science fiction. It's hard to invent the right case. I concede it is especially hard to shake off the issues about deception, self-ignorance, reorientation, fear, and betrayal. The scenario would surely be distressing but, I think, mainly for those reasons. For those whose identities and projects revolve around continuing and preserving historical traditions, their practices of valuing would surely become unhinged. But, for others, I suspect the distressing feature of the situation would not center on the fact that we would be without much of a collective past. If one somehow put those other issues aside, the fact that we lacked a true collective history, I think, would not be *as* distressing as the lack of a collective future. If so, the Lucretian asymmetry holds true of both individuals and the collective, and its appearance is not attributable merely to the far distance of our collective nonexistence and the difficulty of imagining it.[13]

Because there was a human past, it seems important (as Scheffler discusses in his work on tradition) to share some things and practices with the people from before—to know about them, recognize them, and enact some of the same practices to share activity, if not time and space, with them.[14] But were we pioneers, starting virtually from the beginning, I am less confident that the absence of a rich history would matter as much as the absence of a rich collective

13. I suspect that this asymmetry is related to another: the fact that our prior injustice rankles less than the prospect of our future injustice. Whether related or not, the latter asymmetry is surely easier to think about.

14. Scheffler, "The Normativity of Tradition," in *Equality and Tradition*.

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afterlife that involves a continuation of the practices of valuing, if not the continuation of our actual values. History matters most if there is a history, whereas, as Scheffler remarks, the afterlife matters whether there will be one or not (55).

This also suggests that part of what matters most is not simply being a part of human (or rational) history and sustaining value through time, but doing so in a particular future-directed way—being a part of a project that, now that it is under way, makes progress and develops according to reasons.[15] Although I am unsure whether Scheffler would agree, I have been suggesting that *that* project, at bottom, should be abstractly identified as the project of responding to reasons and values appropriately, although each of us does our individual part by endorsing and pursuing specific values and thereby becoming distinctive individuals with fully valuable lives.

15. In saying there is a sense in which our valuing is future directed, I do not mean to deny or diminish the importance of nonetheless evincing a backward-looking concern for our predecessors and helping, where feasible, to achieve some of the projects that make their lives more meaningful in retrospect.

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