

# **Motivating future-oriented actions**

**Self-regarding reasons to ensure the fate of future generations**

Westerink - 2112876 – Meijers - 08/02/2020

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## Abstract

With the challenges of global warming and the loss of biodiversity worsening, scientists are calling for unprecedented, multi-level societal change in the next several decades, especially in affluent societies. Such change is required in order to abate the worst possible consequences of societal collapse and human extinction in the coming centuries. If such change is ever to happen, a comprehensive understanding of why people would be willing to bear the costs of change in order to ensure the fate of future generations is required. Many philosophers have provided moral arguments to answer this question. In this thesis I examine the work of Samuel Scheffler who addresses this issue from a different angle, questioning whether and in what ways future generations *matter* to us. Scheffler argues that compelling reasons for wanting to ensure that humanity continues to thrive in the remote future are implicit in many of the things that matter to people today. I discuss various challenges to Scheffler's work and argue that, besides minor amendments, his core claims are viable. Indeed, the survival and flourishing of humanity into the remote future matter to us in its own right and because it is a condition for our ability to live a value-laden life. Moreover, it enables us to answer our conservative desire to preserve and sustain the things that we value beyond our own lifespan. Consequently, I stress the importance of incorporating these reasons into communication strategies aimed at enhancing public support for environmental policies, as these reasons have strong motivational power.

**Keywords:** future generations, Samuel Scheffler, sustainability, values, motivation, value-based communication strategy.

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 1 - The Afterlife Conjecture and four attachment-based reasons</b>	<b>11</b>
1.1 The afterlife conjecture and its origins	11
1.2 The conception of valuing	14
1.3 Interaction afterlife conjecture and valuing	17
1.4 Four attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations	19
1.4.1 The limits of our egoism	22
Conclusion to Chapter 1	23
<b>2. Four challenges to the afterlife conjecture</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 Survival of the community vs survival of humanity	24
2.1.1 Community vs humanity	
2.1.1.1 Different perspectives, different claims	24
2.1.1.2 An alternative defence of our concern for humanity	28
2.1.2 Self-identity and reasons of reciprocity	30
2.1.3 Conclusion	32
2.2 A meta-ethical challenge for our attachment-based reasons	32
2.2.1 Nothing really matters, really?	33
2.2.2 The only solution to nihilism	34
2.2.3 Implications to Scheffler's work	36
2.3 Value in the face of human extinction	37
2.3.1 Critical assessment of the good-making features	38
2.3.2 Conclusion	42
2.4 For how long should humanity go on?	43
2.4.2 An argument by analogy	44
2.4.3 Conclusion	46
Conclusion to Chapter 2	47
<b>Chapter 3 - Communication strategies based on attachment-based reasons for action</b>	<b>48</b>
3.1 Societal collapse, human extinction	48
3.2 Motivational power of our attachment-based reasons	49
3.3 Conclusion to Chapter 3	51
<b>General Conclusion</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>54</b>



## Introduction

Current generations face an imminent crisis. Global warming and loss of biodiversity, both mainly caused by human action, present grave threats to humanity and remain ever-growing.<sup>1</sup> Over the next century, people will face rising sea levels, mass species extinction, more extreme weather events, and less resilient ecosystems (IPCC 2018, 177-78; IPBES 2019, 6-19). Consequently, the world's water and food supply will become dramatically less secure, forcing millions of people to migrate to more habitable lands, causing associated societal disruption (IPCC 2018, 236-44; IPBES 2019, 6-19). Scientists argue that the scope of suffering and chaos could be significantly decreased, but it requires unprecedented, multilevel and cross-sectoral changes on a global scale (IPCC 2018, 98-101, 394). Moreover, these changes would need to occur promptly (i.e. in the next 10 years) in order to avoid tipping points when both global warming and degraded ecosystems will become irreversible (IPCC 2018, 262-65; Wood 2019).

Many of these unprecedented adjustments will need to be made by affluent societies. First, lifestyle patterns within these societies are a major contributor to rising greenhouse gas emissions and loss of biodiversity (IPCC 2018, 97, 362-69; UNFCCC 2016, 2-17). Second, affluent societies have the resources (knowledge, power and capital) to utilise technology and innovation that can develop and scale more sustainable practices. (IPCC 2018, 369-72; UNFCCC, 2-17). Thus, these adjustments regarding affluent societies involve changes in individuals' standards of living and the adoption of new practices on a cross-sectoral level. This implies financial costs, but also many cultural costs, such as abandoning certain habits, ideas, values and worldviews. Simultaneously, although all people living today will experience the consequences of global warming and loss of biodiversity, those in affluent societies will suffer the least (IPCC 2018, 245-53; IPBES 2019, 6-19).<sup>2</sup> The older generations, currently in power, may even complete their lives without too many consequences. This presents the following dilemma:

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<sup>1</sup> There is an overall consensus among scientists that the greenhouse gas emissions from human activity are a main contributor to the current warming of the earth; see IPCC (2014: ch. 1.2). The main contributors to the anthropogenic loss of biodiversity are deforestation, intensive agriculture, and overfishing; see IPBES (2019: ch 2.1).

<sup>2</sup> These societies are the least affected as they have sufficient resources to resist the consequences of global warming and loss of biodiversity, and the locations of many are geographically advantageous; see IPCC (2018, 186-98) and UNFCCC (2016, 2-7).

**The Affluence Dilemma:** In order to avoid the worst outcomes of global warming and loss of biodiversity, affluent societies, which objectively seem to have the lowest incentive to undertake resolute pro-environmental action must act at high financial and cultural costs to themselves.

The question arises *why* these societies should bear costs today in order to prevent catastrophes that will most dramatically affect other societies or the future generations of their own societies. At first glance, this appears to be a moral question, and it has been presented as such in most branches of philosophy dealing with these environmental issues, most notably environmental ethics.<sup>3</sup> Arguably the moralization of this dilemma has had some effect, clearly emphasizing how wrong it is to not undertake sufficient action in order to decrease the consequences of these environmental issues. However, it can be said that given the current lack of political and societal will to undertake the unprecedented changes the moralistic discourse - generally combined with the communication of highly complex scientific data on these issues - has proven unsuccessful in sufficiently convincing affluent societies to bear the costs of action.<sup>4</sup> The ineffectiveness of scientific and moralistic discourse on this topic has incited much research on how to effectively engage people on these topics. A large body of evidence reveals the significant role our worldviews, values and social norms have in dictating how we interpret information and how we then apply it to our own lives (Corner and Clarke 2016). People are not primarily motivated by daunting facts or moral demands but rather by the things they personally attach importance to (Hornsey et al. 2016). As a result, a *value-based communication strategy* has recently become popular amongst climate scientists and environmental campaigners (Corner et al. 2018; Corner et al. 2014, 415-17). This strategy tailors information on environmental issues to the worldviews, values and social norms of the audience, thus making the issues more relatable to one's own life. Rather than moralizing the affluence dilemma this strategy frames the dilemma as a *value conflict*: enumerating the gains

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<sup>3</sup> In short, the discipline of environmental ethics studies the moral relationship human beings have with the natural environment. The anthropocentric take on this question regards our moral duties towards the natural environment in respect to ensuring current and future generations are able to meet a certain standard of life. The non-anthropocentric perspective extends the moral standing to non-human life, discussing our moral duties towards the environment and animals, irrespective of human benefits. For an outline of this discipline, see Cochrane (2018).

<sup>4</sup> An example of the lack of political will is evidenced by the environmental policies of Donald Trump; see (Lipton, Eder and Branch 2018).

and losses for people personally in both the scenario of persisting inaction or of resolute action to combat the environmental challenges. This has proven to be more successful in engaging people on these topics (Corner et al. 2018; 8, 14-6). Given people mainly govern their conduct with what personally matters to them, this strategy is of utmost importance in order for people in affluent societies to make an informed decision on which course they prefer.

The current lack of will amongst affluent societies to undertake these unprecedented changes indicates that resolute action is yet perceived as too costly. A reason for this perception is that the aforementioned financial and cultural costs are perceived as *losses*, and human nature resists losing things. The psychological impact of losing something is much stronger than the psychological impact of gaining something. This is called *loss aversion* (Elster 2015, 263-64). This tendency has the following effect. If an individual obtains either item A or B, which are objectively judged as having the same amount of value, the individual will attach greater subjective value to the item one has obtained possession of. This valuation occurs because once we acquire something, the new state of ownership becomes our baseline by which we judge future gains and losses. As a result, the loss of item A will have more psychological impact than the gain of item B. This is called the *endowment effect* (Elster 2015, 30). The consequence of these cognitive biases is that when people within affluent societies evaluate the gains and losses of the required changes, the losses are likely to play a more salient and important role in their decision making than the gains. Regarding the affluence dilemma, these human tendencies place the benefits of resolute pro-environmental action as secondary to the perceived costs of such action.

A prominent method within the value-based communication strategy, which I term the *loss of values method*, aims to spread awareness about the costs of inaction for current generations (Corner et al. 2014, 413-16). This method circumvents the impediments of *loss aversion* and the *endowment effect* because it frames the value conflict as a choice between either the losses as a consequence of inaction or the losses implied with undertaking resolute pro-environmental action. For example, it communicates the loss of local landscapes or species, the loss of security due to mass migration, or the loss of certain activities in nature that will no longer be possible in the future (e.g. fishing and skiing) (2014, 415). One type of value has remained neglected within this method: the value that current generations attach to the survival and flourishing of humanity after their own lives. Scientists have recently warned that a lack of resolute action will increase the possibility of societal collapse within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, human extinction may become a reality as both global warming and loss of biodiversity reach



tipping points, setting the Earth on a course towards becoming uninhabitable in the next century.<sup>5</sup> Given these warnings, it is important to question the value that current generations attach to the flourishing continuity of humanity after their own lives, for it is crucial to understand whether the losses that will result from inaction may be worse than the losses that will result from undertaking resolute action.

Samuel Scheffler argues that the ‘collective afterlife’, which refers to human life on Earth that continues after one’s own death, matters more to us than we usually acknowledge. Indeed, he argues that the survival and flourishing of people after our death matters greatly to us, both in its own right and because it provides value for many of our current activities, enabling us to live a value-laden life. He terms this the *collective afterlife conjecture* (Scheffler 2013, 108). This conjecture is, as Scheffler points out, somewhat surprising: we normally *assume* that humanity will continue for a long period of time. Therefore, the value that we attach to the continuity of humanity is elusive (2013, 59-60). He also points out that traditional societies had clearly defined relations with their ancestors and successors, whereas modern societies lack a vivid array of values and norms that depict relationships with former and future generations. He argues that modern societies are more *temporally parochial*, which he defines as being more entrenched in their own time (Scheffler 2018, 4-11). Recent research has reached a similar conclusion: when asked, people do not intuitively perceive the extinction of humanity as necessarily bad (Schubert et al. 2019). However, assuming Scheffler’s afterlife conjecture, citizens of modern societies, perhaps unconsciously, attach significant value to the survival and flourishing of humanity after their own death. Regarding the value conflict posed within affluent societies, it is crucial to clearly understand why and in what sense the fate of future generations matters to us. Subsequently, this attachment to the collective afterlife should be communicated so that people have a comprehensive understanding of what they stand to lose if inaction persists.

In this thesis, I consider the place of future generations within our value systems, and question how—if at all—this could help to move people to action through incorporating our attachments to future generations in the *loss of value* method. To this end, I pose the following question: What reasons do people have within their *value structure* that can be included in the

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<sup>5</sup> Scientists disagree on the extent to which climate change and loss of biodiversity are existential threats to humanity. The IPCC has been criticised for being too moderate in their predictions by focusing on the risks of 2 °C of warming, while current inaction implies warming of 4–5 °C by the end of this century. A recent report criticises the IPCC on this point and explores the worst-case scenario of persistent inaction, arguing that human extinction would start as early as 2050, see Spratt and Dunlop (2019).

*loss of values* method to ensure the fate of future generations? I argue that we have four reasons to ensure the fate of future generations based on our value systems and that communicating these reasons could enhance public support for environmental policies. It is important to clarify that although values are related to the realm of morality, this thesis strictly focuses on whether we have self-regarding—rather than moral—reasons to be concerned with future generations.

This thesis takes Scheffler's recent work on this topic as a starting point to examine the first aim. In chapter one, I describe the core of Scheffler's work. In the first section, I explore the thought-experiments that lead him to his afterlife conjecture. In the second section, I discuss Scheffler's conception of valuing. In the third section, I examine the interaction between Scheffler's afterlife conjecture and his conception of valuing. In the fourth section, I discuss four reasons we have to ensure the fate of future generations which Scheffler identifies within our attachments to the collective afterlife.

In chapter two, I discuss various arguments that challenge Scheffler's view, and I reformulate his four attachment-based reasons in light of these challenges. In the first section, I offer a challenge based on the work of Avner De-Shalit, who argues that it is the survival of our own community that matters to us rather than the whole of humanity. In the second section, I show how the work of David Heyd fills a gap left in Scheffler's work. Heyd examines the origins of value, providing us with a better understanding of why future generations are essential for our ability to live a value-laden life. In the third section, I raise various objections against Scheffler's conjecture about the range of human activities that will diminish in value when facing humanity's imminent end. I conclude that Scheffler's afterlife conjecture withstands the objections that I raise. In the fourth section, I discuss how much - how long after we are gone - collective afterlife we require to be able to live a value-laden life. I draw an analogy to claim that the degree of shared similarities with future generations determines this ability. The conclusions of chapter two are mainly amendments to Scheffler's claims, but the core conjecture that the assurance of posterity is a precondition for living a value-laden life survives scrutiny.

In chapter three, I examine how the insights gained from the former chapters can be implemented in the *loss of value* method. In the first section, I discuss the losses which would be felt when the prospect of societal collapse or human extinction becomes a reality. In the second section, I discuss how communicating the value we attach to the collective afterlife could in various ways enhance public support for environmental policies. I conclude with a summary of my findings.

# Chapter 1 - The Afterlife Conjecture and four attachment-based reasons

This chapter outlines Scheffler's work, which will form the theoretical starting point of this thesis. In the first section, I introduce the thought-experiments that led Scheffler to his *afterlife conjecture* that the survival of humanity matters to current generations in two significant ways. In the second section, I discuss Scheffler's conception of valuing in order to understand what it means for something to matter to us in the first place. In the third section, I discuss various implications the afterlife conjecture has on the conception of valuing. A core thread in Scheffler's work is the interaction between Scheffler's *afterlife conjecture* and his conception of valuing; both deepen the understanding of the other. The first three sections address this interaction. In the fourth section, I introduce Scheffler's four attachment-based reasons for action concerning the fate of future generations.

Before continuing, a few methodological remarks must be made. First, Scheffler's interpretation of future generations concerns only those people who will be born after the reader's own lifespan. He uses this *restricted interpretation* in order to eliminate reasons of acquaintance for ensuring the fate of future generations (Scheffler 2018, 16-7). Second, Scheffler (as will I in this thesis) speaks of 'we' when addressing those who have reasons to ensure the fate of future generations. He presumes that his afterlife conjecture is relevant to many people and when speaking of 'we', he is referring to that broad group (2018, 40). Scheffler's takes his conjecture to be less relevant to people who believe in a personal afterlife given that the end of humanity may have different implications for them. Therefore, his focus is primarily on people who do not believe in a personal afterlife (Scheffler 2013, 74).<sup>6</sup>

## 1.1 The afterlife conjecture and its origins

Scheffler examines his intuition that the collective afterlife is fundamental to our ability to live a value-laden life through two thought-experiments. These thought-experiments enable Scheffler

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<sup>6</sup> It would be interesting to explore to what extent Scheffler's afterlife conjecture is relevant to people who do believe in a personal afterlife and the implications this may have for his claims. Due to the limited scope of my thesis I cannot address this question.

to analyse how and in which ways the collective afterlife plays a role in the value structures of current generations. I briefly outline the thought-experiments hereunder:

**Infertility scenario:** From today onwards, all women on earth become infertile (Scheffler 2013, 38-9).

**Doomsday scenario:** Humanity will end thirty days after your death (2013, 19).

I will mainly refer to the infertility scenario in this thesis because it reflects the *restricted interpretation* of future generations. Namely, that everybody we know will outlive their lives but there will be no future generations to follow after current generations. The question of how human beings would react to such scenarios is an empirical question which (fortunately) cannot be tested. Therefore, Scheffler is rightly wary when he speculates about potential reactions and emphasizes that his predictions are mere conjectures (2013, 19). He predicts that both scenarios would bring about utter dismay and depression, and people would lose interest in many of their activities because part of what made these activities valuable would be diminished (2013, 21-7). As Scheffler supposes:

Such a world would be a world 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 other words, he surmises that life as it is now will disappear as the basic structure of society erodes due to our reactions towards the prospect of the imminent end of humanity. If correct, Scheffler argues that these responses reveal that the collective afterlife matters to us in two ways. First, the fact that we would have an *emotional reaction* of dismay and depression reveals a *genuine* concern for the survival of humanity itself (Scheffler 2018, 55).<sup>7</sup> Second, the fact that people would become disengaged with many familiar activities reveals that the value of these activities relies on the assumption that there will be a collective afterlife (2018, 52). Thus, he suggests the:

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<sup>7</sup> This point is also emphasized by Elizabeth Finneron-Burns, although she draws different conclusions from it; see Finneron-Burns (2017).

**Collective afterlife conjecture:** the collective afterlife (1) 'matters to us in its own right' and (2) 'it matters to us because our confidence in the existence of an afterlife is a condition for many other things that we care about continuing to matter to us' (Scheffler 2013, 15; numeration mine).

Regarding the second part of the conjecture, Scheffler contends that various properties of our activities are dependent on the collective afterlife. He defines such properties as follows:

**Good-making features:** properties of an activity which make the activity valuable and, at the same time, vulnerable to the imminent end of humanity (Scheffler 2018, 45).

He identifies four types of good-making features. First, there are activities with a long-term, goal-oriented feature, such as scientific research or social and political activism (2018, 46-7). It is fairly sensible why these are vulnerable to the imminent end of humanity; why conduct research on the cure for cancer or the development of driverless cars, or why fight for civil rights when this catastrophe looms?

Second, engaging in traditional, conservation-oriented or educational activities aimed at preserving valuable heritages would diminish in value; part of the value of these activities (the good-making feature) is the transmission of valuable wisdom and customs to future generations (2018, 48-9).

Third, activities that people undertake in order to be part of something that is 'larger than themselves' (2018, 48) will diminish in value. The good-making feature here is the value one derives from this activity by being part of a large, collective, transgenerational organisation. He argues that many activities have this feature, 'from science to politics to literature to journalism to the exploration of the natural world to technological innovation to religious devotion to organized athletic competition' (2018, 50). Scheffler doubts, for example, that philosophers would be able to find the motivation to write essays on global justice, freedom, or human values in the face of this looming catastrophe (2018, 50).

Fourth, people would become disengaged with activities which provide insights on what the future may bring. Typical examples of such activities are social sciences and humanities

studies, such as history, arts, sociology and literature (2018, 50).<sup>8</sup>

Scheffler argues that some of these activities would lose all of their value in the face of humanity's imminent end; others would merely be compromised in value. However, in both cases our wholehearted engagement with the activity would decrease as the reason why we undertake these activities becomes less clear. Consequently, Scheffler argues, our ability to live a value-laden life, one structured by earnest engagement in a whole range of valued pursuits, would be threatened (2018, 53). In chapter two, I critically assess this range of activities and question whether the range is as large, or possibly larger, as Scheffler presumes. However, in this chapter, the focus is to explore the key implications that Scheffler draws from his afterlife conjecture. Therefore, I will, for now, assume that Scheffler's range of activities with good-making features is correct. In this section, I have introduced Scheffler's thought-experiments and the predicted reactions that led him to his afterlife conjecture. In the next section, I explore Scheffler's conception of valuing in order to better understand the evaluative relations Scheffler contends that we have with future generations.

## 1.2 The conception of valuing

In order to fully grasp the two distinct ways in which the survival of humanity matters to us, it is important to first understand what it means, in general, to value something. Scheffler argues that being attached to something or someone (X), entails 'a complex syndrome of attitudes and dispositions' (Scheffler 2012, 14) which includes

1. 'A belief that X is good or valuable or worthy,
2. A susceptibility to experience a range of context-dependent emotions regarding X,
3. A disposition to experience these emotions as being merited or appropriate,
4. A disposition to treat certain kinds of X-related considerations as reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts' (2012, 14).

This conception implies that the fate of our attachments both influence our emotions and can

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<sup>8</sup> In the book *Children of Men*, which partly inspired Scheffler's thought-experiments, the world is set in the infertility scenario. The main character, Theo Faron, describes the all-encompassing ennui that citizens fall into. He mentions the following about the activity of studying history: 'History, which interprets the past to understand the present and confront the future is the least rewarding discipline for a dying species'; see James (1992, 11).

drive our prospective courses of action (Scheffler 2013, 61). For example, if I would know that my best friend is very sick and must undergo heavy therapy to get better, the prospect of her having a difficult time would deeply sadden me. Moreover, it would give me many reasons for action with the aim to improve her circumstances (e.g. weekly visits to the hospital). Hence, valuing is inherently future-oriented. This aspect makes valuing tricky because it makes us emotionally vulnerable to the fate of our attachments. Simultaneously, valuing is powerful. Human beings do not solely follow their instinctive body signals until one day their bodies deteriorate and we die. Rather, by attaching ourselves to certain things, we enable ourselves to have a stake in the development of time; we decide, guided by our values, how the future should unravel. Simultaneously, valuing is inherently related to the past; we can only become attached to X if we have had a former experience with X. Once attached, we gain special reasons for actions regarding X which project us into the future. Hence, valuing is a *diachronic phenomena*: our values are constructed by the past and have a stake in the development of the future (2013, 60-2).

Scheffler calls reasons which depend on what we value now, *attachment-based reasons for action*. It is important here to distinguish between positive and negative reasons in order to understand the implications of valuing. Negative reasons are limited to avoiding the cause of any serious harm, maltreatment or death to X (e.g. I have no reason to harm your friend). Whilst positive reasons go beyond mere prevention of harm, inciting a whole range of reasons to act in order to benefit X (e.g. my reasons of action regarding my friends). Our attachment-based reasons are of the latter type (Scheffler 2018, 101). This is because we have a conservative disposition toward our attachments. Scheffler defines this as follows:

**Conservative disposition:** People desire, in general, that what they value is preserved and flourishes into the indefinite future (2018, 68).<sup>9</sup>

For example, I do not want my best friend to merely exist, I also want her to be in good condition. Therefore, I undertake actions which contribute to her well-being (e.g. weekly visits to

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<sup>9</sup> Scheffler notes that our conservative disposition defined as such applies to most of our valuing attitudes. However, there are exceptions. For example, there are circumstances that we value X and explicitly want X to end after a while in order for X to remain of value to us (e.g. a nice dinner with friends). However, my attachment to the concept of cosy dinners with friends remains a concept I value and which I wish will always continue to exist. For a more detailed discussion on the complexity of our conservative dimension of valuing, see Shiffrin (2013, 144-54) and Scheffler (2012).

the hospital in order to improve her grim circumstances). This conservative disposition is an expression of the human tendency to prefer and care more about things we are already attached to (e.g. my friend), rather than things we have not yet encountered (e.g. your friend). Scheffler terms this the *conservative bias* within our conservative disposition (2018, 116).<sup>10</sup> The following is presented as an example:

**Conservative bias example:** Jill, a painter, cannot value a project she will work on in the future the same way she values the project that she is currently working on. This does not mean that the current project is objectively more valuable than the as yet non-existent project. It simply means that a future project cannot provide her with the attachment-based reasons for action that her current project does (2018, 110-11).

Some philosophers argue that the attachment-based reasons that follow from this bias are irrational. They argue that temporal neutralism is better since our conservative bias creates a skewed proportion in the judgement of the value of two things (existent and non-existent). These perspectives contend that there is a rational pressure to judge the value of things independently of our attachments.<sup>11</sup> Scheffler opposes such a rigid notion of rationality, arguing that it ignores the complexity of human attitudes and behaviour. Rather than condemning this conservative bias, it is important to consider this bias when examining all reasons for action. This does not mean that these reasons are superior to other attachment-independent reasons for action. Scheffler's point is simply that these reasons should not be condemned as deficient reasons for action (2018, 133). This point is crucial for this thesis, the aim of which is to find sources of motivation that people may have for their own sake to combat the environmental challenges that threaten future generations. Attachment-based reasons provide such motivational sources.

In this section I have outlined Scheffler's conception of what it means to value something. Valuing is a diachronic phenomenon: our attachments to objects or people, gained by past experience, create a desire to preserve and sustain them into the indefinite future. Consequently, prospects of what will happen to our attachments can affect our emotions and

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<sup>10</sup> The endowment effect, which we discussed in the introduction, is also a reflection of our conservative bias; we prefer not to swap an item we have possession over with a new item, despite both items being objectively of equal value.

<sup>11</sup> For arguments that the bias is irrational, see Brink (2011); Cowen and Parfit (1992); Dougherty (2015).



provide us with attachment-based reasons for action. In the next section I will explore the interaction between the afterlife conjecture and the conception of valuing.

### 1.3 Interaction afterlife conjecture and valuing

Scheffler argues that the collective afterlife matters to us in a direct way (1); it matters to us in its own right, and an indirect way (2); it is a precondition for our ability to live a value-laden life. In this section I discuss the insights Scheffler draws from our evaluative relations with the collective afterlife onto our concept of valuing.

First, our direct concern for the collective afterlife sheds light on a *non-experiential* element of valuing; it is not only our own experiences with our attachments that matter to us. Rather, what also matters to us is the actual fate of what happens to the things we value, whether we are present or not (Scheffler 2013, 20). The fact that the prospect of humanity's imminent end fills us with despair even though this particular event will happen long after our death reflects the non-experiential element; we are attached to humanity and therefore we want it to survive and flourish, regardless of our presence. This insight challenges the *hedonistic ethical perspective* which contends that what matters to people is simply having pleasurable experiences and avoiding painful experiences.<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, our attachment to humanity implies enjoying pleasurable experiences 'with humanity' whilst we are alive. What happens after our lives does not matter because we will not be there to experience it. However, as the infertility scenario shows being attached to something implies more than this. Another good example of this element is the fact that most people make a last will or testament. People do this because it matters to them what actually happens to the things or people they are attached to, also when they are not there to experience it.

Second, Scheffler argues that our indirect attachment to the collective afterlife casts light on how we understand ourselves within time (2013, 60-2). People's values are an expression of their understanding of their place in the world. This self-understanding provides the framework in which one can make sense of one's life, create a self-identity, and construct and form volition (i.e. desires, beliefs, and projects that all partly stem from one's values). Gaining this understanding happens in two ways, spatially and temporally. Our geographical surroundings,

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<sup>12</sup> A more detailed defence on the non-experiential element of valuing is provided by Robert Nozick's discussion on "the experience machine," see Nozick (1974, 42-5). For key contributors to the hedonistic ethical perspective, see Bentham, Epicurus and Mill.

our culture, our community, and so forth, contribute to our spatial self-understanding. Scheffler argues that the fact that our confidence in the value of many of our activities diminishes in the infertility scenario provides insight on how we temporally understand ourselves. Namely, the good-making features of our activities reveal that part of the value of our activities is dependent on its place within an ongoing chain of human generations. This indicates that we see ourselves as individuals with a temporally limited lifespan, who constantly succeed each other, resulting in an ongoing chain of human generations (2013, 61). One may oppose this by arguing that, regarding the infertility scenario, our reaction of loss of confidence in the value of many activities is mistaken; one is wrong to become disengaged with activities, such as, studying history or partaking in traditional activities because the value of these activities are independent from whether human life will go on after our own lifespan.<sup>13</sup> However, Scheffler argues that rather than assuming our reactions to be mistaken, we could also reflect on what these reactions tell us and discover a striking insight: much of the value of our activities is derived from the activities enabling us to play a part in the ongoing chain of human generations (2013, 54). In other words, we engage in many activities because it makes us feel part of the greater picture we associate ourselves with. If this conclusion is correct, this insight then challenges the *concept of individualism*: the belief that an individual's concerns, projects and personal attachments are independent from one's interaction with society. Scheffler argues that our values might be very idiosyncratic, many still have a strong social dimension as far as they rely on the assumption that human life is an ongoing process (2013, 59-60). Scheffler's point here is that although our personal values and commitments seem to be very personal and exactly the thing that distinguishes us from others, they are constructed within a context which assumes that humanity is a continuous and worthy process. However, because we take the continuity of humanity for granted this social dimension of our values remains elusive.

Our temporal understanding of ourselves and the good-making features within many of our activities that flow from this understanding underwrite the diachronic dimension of valuing; our values are not only inherently related to our own past and future but also to the history and future of humanity itself. As Scheffler describes eloquently:

When we engage in valuable activities, we follow in others' footsteps, fill their shoes, struggle with their legacies, learn from their mistakes and stand on their shoulders to see further. We also break new ground, blaze new trails, make new mistakes, and create

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<sup>13</sup> I will further explore this claim in section 2.3.

histories and legacies of our own. Eventually, we pass the torch, or the baton, to a new generation (Scheffler 2018, 53).

In conclusion, valuing has a non-experiential and conservative dimension; we desire that our attachments fare well, also beyond our lifespan. Moreover, our temporal understanding of ourselves as being part of an ongoing chain of human generations strongly influences the form and content of our values. Our evaluative relations with the collective afterlife therefore provide us with various attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations. I will discuss these reasons in the next section.

#### 1.4 Four attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations

Scheffler identifies the following four attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations. First, he argues our direct concern for humanity itself provides us with a reason to ensure the survival and flourishing of humanity into the indefinite future (Scheffler 2018, 55). Scheffler defines it as following:

**Reasons of concern:** We have a reason to ensure the fate of future generations because the collective afterlife matters to us in its own right.

He argues that although it is a straightforward reason, it is not a reason that easily pops up in one's mind when thinking about ensuring the fate of future generations. This, he argues, is because we tend to take the survival of humanity for granted and because of the prevailing *temporal parochialism* within modern societies. However, the reactions of despair in the infertility scenario reveal a genuine concern for humanity (2018, 62).

The second reason, *reasons of valuation* concerns our direct attachment to many other items of value. Much of what we value depends on the existence of human beings. For example, we value the creation of music, literature or cabaret, or the existence of intimate relationships. As discussed in section 1.2, our conservative disposition reveals how we are emotionally vulnerable to the prospect of how our values will fare. The prospect of so many things we are attached to coming to an end is therefore *an additional setback* to the already agonizing prospect of humanity's imminent end. However, more is at stake here. What saddens

us is not only the demise of the value, for example, of ‘musicians making great music’, but also the end of the value of ‘people enjoying music’. In other words, the end of humanity implies the end of the very concept of human valuing regardless of the valuer or the item of value itself (2018, 69-70). Hence, this reason has two elements:

**Reasons of valuation:** We have a reason to ensure the fate of future generations because of ‘our desire that the things that we value—and the very phenomenon of valuing things— should survive and flourish into the indefinite future’ (2018, 70).

Third, we have a reason which indirectly depends on our attachment to humanity. Namely, the fact that the collective afterlife is a precondition for many things to matter to us. Without the assurance of a collective afterlife, many of our activities will diminish in value. Consequently, we would have a very limited repertoire of valuable activities left and our ability to live a value-laden life would be confined (2018, 59). Hence, the third reason:

**Reasons of interest:** We have a reason of interest to ensure the fate of future generations, because the survival of humanity is a precondition for our ability to live a value-laden life (2018, 53).

Lastly, we have *reasons of reciprocity* to ensure the fate of future generations. Reciprocity typically occurs when two parties make a direct contribution to the well-being of one another. For example, a mother cares for her son as a child. Subsequently, the son feels the urge to reciprocate the care of his mother when he is older. This urge to reciprocate the love and beneficial contributions of others is ‘a deep human tendency’ (2018, 76). However, it only emerges under two conditions. First, a person must have the tendency to reciprocate which depends on whether a person has been raised in conditions that foster empathy. Such conditions create space for a person to develop this deep human tendency into a mature and stable moral motivation to act.<sup>14</sup> Second, one must recognize the reciprocal structure that governs the relation between the two parties in order to have the urge to reciprocate the contributions of the other (2018, 76-7). Scheffler argues that the relation between future and current generations is also governed by a reciprocal structure. This could provide a strong

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<sup>14</sup> Scheffler draws upon John Rawls his notion of reciprocity and his contention that this is a powerful source of motivation. See Rawls (1999, sect. 70-2, 75-6).

source of motivation to ensure the fate of future generations given the fact that many people are sensitive to reciprocity. However, these people must first recognize this particular reciprocal structure, which is the following: both groups enhance the *value* of the other group's life. Current generations make a *direct* contribution to the lives of future generations because today's actions determine how many resources will remain, what the political circumstances will be, whether future generations will even exist, etc. Future generations make an *indirect* contribution to us because they give us reasons to have confidence in the value of many types of activities (2018, 72-4).<sup>15</sup> Hence, our last reason is the following:

**Reasons of reciprocity:** We have a reason of reciprocity to ensure the fate of future generations, because of their contribution to our ability to live a value-laden life and our ability to reciprocate this by contributing to the well-being of their lives.

It is important to mention that this reason is not a moral claim. Scheffler's point here is simply that people's natural urge to reciprocate is a stable and strong *normative force* which often influences our behavior (2018, 79). Despite the potential motivational power of our reasons of reciprocity, Scheffler is sceptical whether people will recognize this reciprocal structure; our attachment to the collective afterlife may be too elusive. He argues:

Having taken the survival of humanity for granted, on a visceral if not on an intellectual level, we may never have had occasion to recognize how much it matters to us or how much we depend on it to support our confidence in the value of our own activities (2018, 77).

However, regarding the quest for effective communication strategies to enhance pro-environmental action this reason remains powerful. Informing people on the contribution of future generations to the quality of their lives could spark reciprocal behavior towards future generations by those sensitive to reciprocity.

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<sup>15</sup> In section 2.2 I will extend more on why future generations give us *reasons* to have confidence in the value of many types of activities.

### 1.4.1 The limits of our egoism

An extra word is required regarding the relation between our reasons of concern (we care about humanity in its own right) and our reasons of interest (the survival of humanity is a precondition for our ability to live a value-laden life). Scheffler argues that the former reasons help to explain the latter reasons. It is because we care about future generations in their own right that we have activities which help sustain them. These activities have a purpose to protect something we value and therefore become valuable themselves. Our reactions to the infertility scenario reveal the surprisingly large range of activities which, partly or completely, gain their value from contributing to the survival and flourishing of humanity. Hence, our genuine concern for future generations helps explain why our ability to live a value-laden life depends on the existence of a collective afterlife (2018, 55-7).

This relation between these two reasons is important to know because of the following discussion: Scheffler argues that our reactions to the infertility scenario reveal the *limits of our egoism*. Egoism meant here in the sense that people are mostly unaffected by how others fare. The fact that our motivations and attitudes are severely affected in the infertility scenario by the fate of complete strangers who inhabit the Earth after our own lives reveals the limits of this perspective. Various philosophers have refuted this claim of Scheffler, arguing that ensuring the fate of future generations in order for oneself to be able to live a value-laden life is an inherently egoistic reason (Owens 2014; Frankfurt 2013, 137-39; Wolf 2013, 115-18). However, Scheffler's point is that our egoism is *limited*; our self-interest in having the ability to live a value-laden life remains a consequence of our genuine concern for the survival of humanity itself making this very ability possible; our motivations and attitudes are partly driven by, and therefore dependent on, playing a part in the ongoing chain of human generations (Scheffler 2013, 44-5).

One could still refute Scheffler's claim by arguing that our genuine concern for the survival of humanity is egoistic as well. For, as discussed in section 1.3, human beings come to understand themselves as being part of human history. Therefore, the end of humanity means an assault on a fundamental element of one's self-understanding. Scheffler agrees that, in this sense, it is difficult to neatly divide self-interest and our concern for future generations from each other. However, the essence of his point regarding the *limits of our egoism* remains the same. Albeit, many of our motivations and attitudes have egoistic elements, many are *also* strongly driven by the assumption that humanity matters and will go on into the indefinite future (Scheffler 2018, 65-7).

## Conclusion to Chapter 1

This chapter explored the theoretical framework of Scheffler's afterlife conjecture. First, I discussed how the predicted reactions of the Doomsday scenario 2 led Scheffler to conclude that the afterlife matters to us in its own right and because it is a precondition for many things mattering to us. Subsequently, I discussed his conception of valuing. Valuing is related both to the past and the future. It has a conservative disposition which incites attachment-based reasons for action. Moreover, I discussed the non-experiential element of valuing and how our temporal self-understanding as being part of the ongoing chain of human generations influences our values. Our direct and indirect attachments to future generations provide us with four attachment-based reasons for action. Lastly, our implicit investment in the fate of future generations reveals both the limits of our individualism and egoism.

## 2. Four challenges to the afterlife conjecture

This chapter critically assesses core elements of Scheffler's work in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of our attachment-based reasons to care about the fate of future generations. In section 2.1, I will discuss the work of De-Shalit who challenges our *reasons of concern*, arguing that we only have a genuine concern for the survival of our community. I defend Scheffler's claim that our concern regards the survival of humanity as a whole. In section 2.2, I question whether Scheffler's claims about our four attachment-based reasons are undermined if one adopts a *person-affecting perspective*, which argues that humanity has no intrinsic value. I contend it does not, rather it provides a better understanding of these reasons, especially our *reasons of interest*. In section 2.3, I discuss various objections against the range of activities that Scheffler expects to diminish in value when facing humanity's imminent end. I conclude that we could still live a meaningful life but it would not be a value-laden life. In section 2.4, I raise the question of how many future generations are required in order for our ability to live a value-laden life to be assured. I argue that the strength of our attachments-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations is discounted as time passes. In conclusion, the critical assessment will lead to certain amendments to Scheffler's work. However, his core conjecture and his four attachment-based reasons are sustained.

## 2.1 Survival of the community vs survival of humanity

Avner De-Shalit states that our concern for the survival of humanity concerns the survival of the particular groups an individual identifies with. In this section, I argue that while Scheffler's own argumentation is deficient on this point, his claim that our concern about future generations extending beyond any particularistic concern is correct. First, I examine the arguments of both philosophers and show how Scheffler fails to accommodate De-Shalit's claim. Second, I defend Scheffler's claim by appealing to a new thought-experiment, which reveals that we identify not only with particular groups but also with the whole of humanity. Hence, Scheffler's *reasons of concern* survives the challenge.

### 2.1.1 Community vs humanity

#### 2.1.1.1 Different perspectives, different claims

De-Shalit and Scheffler have different philosophical perspectives towards the social nature of an individual which explains their different views on the value of the community. De-Shalit has a *communitarian perspective*, which holds that a person cannot be thought of as independent of their community because a person is inherently shaped by their cultural surroundings. Ethical conduct is construed within a community, and therefore frameworks of social justice are context-dependent. Consequently, communitarians hold that moral obligations towards non-community members are much less demanding than moral obligations towards one's community members (Bell 2014). Scheffler has a *liberal perspective*, which holds that a person can be seen independently from their context; a person has the autonomy to choose their own projects and ends. Regarding ethical conduct, human behaviour has both universal and context-dependent elements (Gaus 2018).

According to De-Shalit, we cannot be seen independently from our community because it constitutes a fundamental part of our identity (De-Shalit 1995, 15). Our community carries the ideas, values and customs that we identify with. This deep identification with others is because of our human capability to *self-transcend*; we can naturally place our awareness in moments and places that are separate from our current place, time of awareness, and our physical being (1995, 34).<sup>16</sup> This causes us to incorporate events, other people and ideas into our identity. We

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<sup>16</sup> De-Shalit bases this idea of self-transcendence on the work of Ernest Partridge. See Partridge (1981).



are more than what we just physically and biologically are (1995, 33). The non-experiential element of valuing reflects our self-transcendent capabilities; it is because we can place ourselves in someone else's shoes that we can identify with them and care about what happens to them, regardless of us being there. So too, we care about the future generations of our community as long as they share certain values, customs and ideas with us. De-Shalit contends that our concern for the survival of our community can be seen as an expression of our concern for the survival of our spiritual existence. He makes the following claim:

**(X)** what makes a person today the same person in 2030 is that the future self is related to the person now by having similar intentions, desires, etc. (1995, 35-6).<sup>17</sup>

If our intentions, desires, ideas and concerns remain represented by our future community members after our death, then situations after one's death can be seen as a continuity of the self as well. Physically we may be dead, but in spirit we still exist. Subsequently, De-Shalit argues that ensuring that our community (i.e. our values, customs etc.) survives, mitigates our fear for death, because

**(Y)** death troubles us mainly because it entails the end of our spiritual existence (i.e. ideas, intentions, norms, values) (1995, 37).

Hence, assuming X and Y, De-Shalit argues that we care about the fate of our transgenerational community members because we want our spiritual existence to remain in the world.<sup>18</sup> Hence, De-Shalit argues the following:

**Community immortalization claim (1):** The future of our community entails the extension of our spiritual existence, and this is why we are motivated to ensure that our transgenerational community members fare well (1995, 39-40).

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<sup>17</sup> De-Shalit appeals here to the work on personal identity of MacIntyre. See MacIntyre (1981, ch. 5).

<sup>18</sup> This implicitly supports Scheffler's argument about the limits of our egoism. Our capability to self-transcend enables us to extend our notion of self beyond our physical and biological boundaries. Simultaneously, this broader self-conception makes our attitudes and motivations dependent on many external factors (those things and people we identify with), such as the collective afterlife.

De-Shalit argues that our motivation to ensure future generations of the community fare well gradually fades away as the shared similarities between current and future generations lessen (1995, 48-9). Scheffler agrees with De-Shalit that the survival of particular people and groups we are attached beyond our lifespan tempers our fear of death. This fact, he argues, partly explains our attachment to the collective afterlife. He develops his claim as follows:

**(1) Particular individuals:** The idea that people we have personal relationships with will continue to live after our demise is of great solace to the dying because it enables us to 'personalize our relations with the future' (Scheffler 2013, 31).

**(2) Particular groups:** We want our values, projects, and ideas to survive into the indefinite future. This is best satisfied if the groups we share these values, projects and ideas with survive (2013, 32-5).

Scheffler argues that both entities temper our fear of death because the thought that individuals we know and the values we care about will continue, ensures us that we retain a social identity in the world (2013, 29). This is similar to De-Shalit's claim that we remain existent in a spiritual sense. However, Scheffler contends that this specific concern for the survival of particular individuals and groups is only part of our genuine concern for the survival of humanity. He supports this claim in two ways. First, he proposes the

**Meliorative activities claim:** The fact that many people undertake meliorative activities that have a long-term, goal-oriented structure (e.g. cancer research, political activism) suggests that our concern for humanity extends beyond any specific affection or loyalty to a certain group (2013, 38).

It is important to note here that this claim only refers to one of the four good-making features that Scheffler has defined. Second, he points out that in the *infertility scenario* our loved-ones will not die prematurely. Nevertheless, our predicted reactions are identical to our reactions towards the *doomsday scenario*. This reveals that our concern goes beyond our desire that particular individuals survive. Scheffler admits that the *infertility scenario* does entail the prospect that the particular groups we are attached to will end shortly after our death. However,

the severity of our reaction implies 'there is also another powerful element that is at work, namely, the impact that the imminent end of humanity as such would have on us' (2013, 40). Hence, he proposes the

**Infertility claim:** The fact that people react with despair to the infertility scenario, despite the knowledge that our loved-ones will not die prematurely, indicates that our concern for the survival of humanity goes beyond any particularistic concern.

I argue that these two claims are inconclusive to support the argument that our concern for future generations is about the survival of humanity as a whole. First, the *meliorative activities claim* is a fallacy. The argument is analogous to the following:

(A) 100 people live on Earth. All of them read.

(B) 20 people also play tennis.

(C) Conclusion: all human beings have a concern for reading and tennis.

The fact that *some people* undertake meliorative activities, which expresses a concern for the survival of humanity as a whole, need not imply that all people have this concern. Therefore, I suggest the

**Objection to meliorative activities claim:** The fact that a certain group of people undertake long-term, goal-oriented meliorative activities is insufficient to represent the claim that most people have a genuine concern for humanity which extends beyond the particularistic.

Second, it is not as evident to me as it is to Scheffler that the severity of the reaction in the infertility scenario implies that our reaction has more to it than despair about the looming end of our *particular groups*. The infertility scenario implies that our communal or national groups will end a few decades after one's death; all the values, customs and traditions, and projects of our communities will no longer survive. Moreover, it implies that all family lineages that one is acquainted with will no longer further develop. All of this seems sufficient reason to me for grave

despair, especially for people who have strong ties to their communal or national groups.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is not significantly evident to me that our reactions to the infertility scenario reveal our genuine concern for the survival and flourishing of humanity as a whole. Therefore, I propose the

**Objection to infertility claim:** The reaction to the infertility scenario is sufficiently represented by the daunting prospect of the demise of our particular group-based attachments.

Conclusively, Scheffler's arguments are too weak to decisively counter De-Shalit's claim that we are only concerned about the survival of our community. In the next section, I will propose a better argument that can accommodate De-Shalit's objection.

#### 2.1.1.2 An alternative defence of our concern for humanity

In order to support the claim that our concern for future generations extends beyond any particularistic concern, I would like to propose the following thought experiment:

**Rivalry and Human Survival:** There are only two communities in the world. They have shared periods of rivalry and periods of peace together. Community A will soon come to an imminent end because a meteorite will hit the land that they inhabit. Community B may survive if community A warns them to flee. Does community A have a reason to prefer a world where community B continues to live over a world in which both communities disappear?

I find it plausible that most people would answer this question affirmatively. Despite occasional rivalry and strife, I surmise people find the prospect of no human beings on earth even worse than the prospect of the extinction of 'only' their own community. If this is true, it supports that our concern for future generations is not only a community focused concern. The reason for this broader conception of our concern for future generations can be related to De-Shalit's notion of

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<sup>19</sup> Will Kymlicka discusses the large costs of changing cultures. The complete extinction of one's culture or other things one is closely attached to seems evenly distressing, if not more; see Kymlicka (1995: ch. 5)

*spiritual existence*. On a basic level, all human beings share similar intentions, desires, norms and values with each other. We have an apparent universal consensus on a set of norms (e.g. aversions to killing, treachery and lying). Moreover, we share a set of emotions that drive our actions. We organize in groups in order to run our society on both large and small scales. We have a sense of rationality, the possibility of imagination, and the capacity to communicate with each other through a complex language. Additionally, we share the desire to attach ourselves to objects, ideas and persons in order to make sense of our lives. One could add, as David Heyd does, that the existence of value stems from humans themselves. Thus, we also share the fundamental characteristic of being the very conditions of value creation (Heyd 1994, 212).<sup>20</sup> I will not take a position on this meta-ethical debate here. However, the above-mentioned shared characteristics are enough to make the claim that all human beings share a basic spiritual similarity with each other.<sup>21</sup> Thus, I present the

**Identification with humanity claim:** The fact that all human beings share a *basic spiritual similarity* implies that humanity as a whole constitutes a fundamental part of the identity of all individuals.

One may oppose this by arguing that there are many situations in human history in which different groups of people did not identify with other human beings, resulting in abhorrent circumstances. However, this does not refute my claim. The fact that we do not always recognize the spiritual similarity we share with other human beings does not undermine the fact that we share a basic spiritual similarity with all of humanity. Evil corners of human history are subject to inconsistency. As a result, the claim may be reformulated:

**Identification with humanity (2) claim:** Human beings often do but should always at the pain of inconsistency, identify with the whole of humanity.

Thus, humanity on a fundamental level is a community per se and constitutes a part of every individual's identity. Hence, I argue against the communitarian perspective that it is only our community which constitutes a part of our identity, and refute De-Shalit's *community*

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<sup>20</sup> I will elaborate on Heyd's argument in section 2.2.

<sup>21</sup> A compelling defense of the universal set of human qualities can be found within Martha Nussbaum's work on 'The Capability Approach', see Nussbaum (2000, 412-26).

*immortalization claim*.<sup>22</sup> The Rivalry and Human Survival thought-experiment reveals that most of us are not indifferent to what happens to human beings outside of our community. I have argued that this is because on a basic level we identify with humanity as a whole; our spiritual existence is not only preserved and sustained by the survival of our community, but also by the essential human characteristics that can be found within all human beings. Our genuine concern for humanity is a concern that humanity as a whole survives and flourishes into the indefinite future. This supports Scheffler's *reasons of concern* claim. The first part of our *reasons of valuation* (we desire that our particular values and attachments survive into the remote future) represents our concern for the survival of our more particularistic values and attachments.

A relevant observation is that our concern for the survival of humanity has rarely been tested. Human beings have always 'had the luxury' to assume the survival of humanity. Given our conservative disposition to preserve and sustain our attachments, it seems plausible that once one of our most fundamental attachments (the survival of humanity) is guaranteed to survive, our focus shifts to ensuring the fate of particular attachments. We can then devote ourselves to ensuring that the world after our lives remains as familiar as possible to us, thus ensuring that our spiritual existence remains at its best. Therefore, I add the following:

**Luxury problem conjecture:** Once the survival of humanity seems assured, one becomes preoccupied with what shape the very continuance of humanity will take rather than the survival of humanity itself.

Again, this point reveals how taking the survival of humanity for granted can obscure the genuine concern we have for future generations.

### 2.1.2 Self-identity and reasons of reciprocity

As previously stated, I do not wish to address moral arguments in this thesis. However, De-Shalit makes a moral claim about our concern for future community members, which is

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<sup>22</sup> Again the work of Nussbaum is relevant here who stresses the importance of respecting and recognizing cultural differences and the way they influence our motivations and way of life. However, simultaneously, she argues, we must not deny the core set of human qualities we all share and have the right to develop. See Nussbaum (2000).

similar to Scheffler's *reasons of reciprocity*. Scheffler is wary whether people will act upon their reasons of reciprocity as many are unaware of the reciprocal structure that governs our relations with future generations. De-Shalit's work provides insight into when our *reasons of reciprocity* come into force. He argues the following:

**De-Shalit's normative reason for action:** When future generations constitute a part of person Y's identity, Y has a perceived sense of moral duty to ensure these future generations fare well.

According to De-Shalit this implies we have a perceived sense of moral duty to ensure that our transgenerational community members fare well. These are *positive moral obligations* (see distinction positive and negative reasons for action in section 1.2) (De-Shalit 1995, 13). As discussed in section 1.4, Scheffler also refers to a positive reason for action with normative force regarding future generations. He argues the following:

**Scheffler's normative reason for action:** Future generations give person Y's life value, and therefore Y, seeing oneself as a moral reciprocator, feels a sense of duty to ensure that future generations survive and flourish.

I argue that both philosophers are referring to the same normative reason for action. Whether we feel a moral duty to ensure that future generations fare well, because they constitute part of our identity, or whether we feel a tendency to reciprocate the value we gain from future generations appears to be two versions of the same argument. The insight that De-Shalit provides is that it is only when we clearly understand how X constitutes a part of our identity that we gain a sense of moral obligation to ensure X fares well. In practice, this point is very recognisable: I am willing to do much more for the sake of my mother than for the sake of a stranger. Following De-Shalit's argumentative structure this is because my mother plays a strong role in my identity. As such, she adds a lot of explicit value to my life and I gain the urge to reciprocate this. Empirical research confirms this point.

**Empirical claim on identity as mediator between values and behaviour:** Whilst our values can motivate our actions, it is when our values play a clear role in our self-identity that they more strongly influence our behaviour (Van der Werff, 2013b). This

is partly because they incite a sense of moral obligation to act in accordance with these values (Van der Werff, 2013a).

Self-identity is defined here as ‘the [explicit] label that one uses to describe oneself’ (2013b, 56). Our self-identity reflects our actual behavior. This is different from *our fundamental self-understanding*, which constitutes all of our values and is the implicit version of how we see ourselves. Scheffler’s work appeals to our *fundamental self-understanding* and finds within this our ‘hidden’ evaluative relation with future generations. The insight that De-Shalit and the empirical research provide is that in order for our reasons of reciprocity to be ‘activated’ the value we attach to future generations must play a vivid role in *our self-identity*. In chapter three I will extend on this point, discussing how a communication strategy could help to ‘activate’ our reasons of reciprocity.

### 2.1.3 Conclusion

In this section, I have argued that both Scheffler’s *meliorative activities claim* and his *infertility claim* fail to conclusively counter De-Shalit’s *community immortalization claim*. In response, I have proposed The Rivalry and Human Survival thought-experiment. If correct, this thought-experiment reveals we indeed have a genuine concern for the continuity of humanity as a whole. The reason for this concern is that all humans share a basic spiritual similarity with each other. Thus, on a fundamental level, the spiritual extension of ourselves is accomplished by the survival of humanity as a whole. The fact that our concern for humanity may be more elusive than our concern for our community is because we take the survival of humanity for granted. Lastly, I have discussed how our *reasons of reciprocity* is likely to strongly influence our behavior once future generations play a clear role in our self-identity.

## 2.2 A meta-ethical challenge for our attachment-based reasons

Scheffler argues that for our attachment-based reasons to be justified, the item we are attached to must, in fact, be valuable itself. Regarding the discussed four attachment-based reasons, which all depend, directly or indirectly, on our attachment to humanity, the following question arises: is humanity valuable in itself? To answer this we must make a meta-ethical ascent in order to question the origins of value. One interpretation to this question, and underlying in



Scheffler's work, is the *person-affecting* view. This perspective holds that value is a man-made concept, which implies that the existence of humanity has no inherent value. Thus, our attachment-based reasons to ensure the survival and flourishing of humanity are unjustified. In this section, I discuss whether the *person-affecting view* would indeed lay bare an inconsistency in Scheffler's argument. First, I discuss why I think Scheffler has a person-affecting view and how the implications of this view exactly challenge his argument. Second, I suggest a solution to the discussed inconsistency. Third, I explore the implications this solution has for our attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations.

### 2.2.1 Nothing really matters, really?

A *person-affecting view* holds that the concept of value is brought into life by the existence of human beings. Thus, humans are the preconditions of value (Heyd 1994, 212). This implies that from a non-human perspective, the world is valueless. The world is not better or worse with or without humanity. This perspective is contrary to the *impersonal view* which holds that what is good or bad is derived from a human-independent value system.<sup>23</sup>

Scheffler's work seems to have an underlying *person-affecting view*. First, Scheffler contends that in the face of humanity's extinction, 'the world of value would be slipping away like a fistful of sand' (Scheffler 2013, 188). This implies that without humanity there is no value in the world. Second, when examining the value of an item, Scheffler refers to the effect the item of value has on human beings (Scheffler 2012, 20; 2018, 90). This is a person-affecting approach because, from this perspective, things cannot exist without considering how they relate to human needs, concerns or moral beliefs. Despite these 'hints' of a person-affecting approach, Scheffler explicitly avoids making any meta-ethical commitment about the origins of value, stating the following:

Whether value can survive without [human] valuing is a nice question for philosophers, but for the purpose of understanding our reactions to the prospect of humanity's imminent extinction the answer doesn't matter very much (2018, 70).

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<sup>23</sup> A core contribution to the "person-affecting vs impersonalism" debate has been the work of Derek Parfit. See Parfit (1984).

I disagree that the answer does not matter if the aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of our reactions to the infertility scenario. If value only exists through the existence of human beings, we cannot claim that humanity is valuable in itself. Nor can we claim that any 'carrier' of value is valuable in itself. Consequently, the following inconsistency appears in Scheffler's work: He argues that in order for attachment-based reasons to be justified, three conditions must be met:

- (1) We must actually value something.
- (2) The things that we value must be valuable in itself.
- (3) We must be in the correct position to value that something (2018, 91).

However, Condition 2 can never be met. From a *person-affecting view*, values are always instrumental. In other words, this view seems to undeniably force us into nihilism; the human concept of 'things mattering' turns out to be an empty and illusory idea; nothing *really* matters. From this perspective, our reactions to the infertility scenario - falling into despair and obtaining the attitude that not much is worth undertaking - is the attitude we should always have towards life (Heyd 1994, 211-12). Hence, this view undermines Scheffler's argument by not only arguing that humanity has no inherent value but also implying that any attachment-based reason for action is senseless in the first place.

To solve this inconsistency, Scheffler must either defend an impersonal perspective that supports the intrinsic value of humanity. Or, if he indeed holds a person-affecting view on value, he must solve the problem that condition 2 cannot be met and therefore our attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations are unjustified. Given his apparent commitment to the person-affecting view, I explore whether the latter option is possible in the next section. I will continue the rest of this chapter under the assumption that Scheffler has a person-affecting view.

## 2.2.2 The only solution to nihilism

Human beings, being rational creatures, want their actions to make sense; condition (2) is an expression of this desire to justify our efforts and attachments in life. Rather than animals, we are not satisfied with things only being valuable *for us* (life-serving). We also want our lives and our life projects to be worthwhile themselves (life-justifying) (Heyd 1994, 211). We want to be able to say: 'I'm building up a life, undertaking projects, with all the pain and pleasure that

comes with it, because this project is worthwhile (and therefore my existence is worthwhile).’ If our ordinary, worldly lives do not have a greater cosmic significance or purpose which explains the worth of our activities, our desire for justification becomes a burden.

David Heyd calls this the *logical paradox of wanting to justify the value of human value creation* (1994, 217). He explains the issue by a metaphor to games; when we play games, we can assess the worth of a game because it is ‘nested in life’ (1994, 213). Life is a broader framework and therefore enables us to assess the worth of this game. Human life, which he terms the ‘valuing game’, has no greater framework of conscious activity against which it can be assessed. Heyd argues that the only (imperfect) solution to this logical paradox is the collective afterlife; the prospect of new conditions of value creation allow for this broader framework. However, it is an imperfect solution because future generations cannot eliminate the fact that our existence has no greater cosmic meaning. Once the assurance of the collective afterlife disappears, our ability to assess the worth of our value creation decays (1994, 212-22).

Hence, the notion of intrinsic value can be upheld as long as the ‘valuing game’ is extended beyond one’s life. Moreover, the notion of intrinsic value does gain a different meaning. Heyd argues that, from the person-affecting view, we can distinguish between instrumental values and human ‘ideals’. The latter is a person-affecting interpretation of intrinsic value (1994, 86-7).<sup>24</sup> Instrumental values are items that are of benefit to someone in particular. Whilst ideals are items that are good in an ‘agent-neutral way’ (1994, 87). For example, beauty, art, or science are valuable to human beings in general. Identifying ideals requires reasoning and deliberation on whether an item is truly valuable to people in an agent-neutral way; a discussion many philosophers have pondered over.<sup>25</sup> Regarding condition 2, we can argue that attachment-based reasons are justified if the attachment is valuable in an agent-neutral way. This is why many of our activities are a contribution to a certain human ideal. We collectively engage in projects that explicitly or implicitly have as an end the further development of a human ideal, whether it is in science, art, nature conservation, politics, cultural practices or business. We enjoy undertaking such activities partly because they are life-justifying. Without a collective afterlife, the notion of a human ‘ideals’ decays. Science becomes only valuable to me and my contemporaries. As such, they become life-serving rather than life-justifying, causing disengagement with such activities. Hence, our attachment-based reasons can only be confidently endorsed as long as condition 2 can be met; this condition is dependent on a larger

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<sup>24</sup> Heyd makes this distinction drawing upon the work from Christine Korsgaard. See Korsgaard (1983).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Korsgaard (1983) and Parfit (1984).

framework of human activity in order to sustain the notion of agent-neutral value. The claim of both Heyd and Scheffler is that life-serving practices are not sufficient to motivate us to undertake large, collective projects. Scheffler's work helps identify the large range of activities which gain their value from being a contribution to a human ideal which is dependent on the continuity of humanity. Heyd's work, by ascending to the meta-ethical realm, points out *why* our ability to have confidence in so many of our activities depends on the existence of future generations; if value is a man-made concept we can only uphold the reality of the concept value by continuing the existence of the very preconditions of value creation.

### 2.2.3 Implications to Scheffler's work

In this section I discuss the insights we can draw from this meta-ethical ascent onto the work of Scheffler. First, committing to the person-affecting view does not undermine Scheffler's argument. Rather, it creates a more comprehensive understanding of why future generations are a precondition for our ability to live a value-laden life; many attachment-based reasons for action can only be confidently endorsed as long as there is a collective afterlife.

Second, the person-affecting view casts a different light on the origins of our *conservative disposition*. In section 2.1 I argued that our desire to preserve and sustain the things, ideas or people we value is an expression of our desire to continue our spiritual existence. This was based on the following claim of De-Shalit:

**Psychological claim (Y):** Death troubles us mainly because our spiritual existence will end.

Assuming the person-affecting view, this claim can be explained as follows: Death troubles us because the prospect of our values, projects, and ideas coming to an end confronts us with the insignificance of it all. Therefore, we try to preserve and sustain the things we are attached to beyond our lives as it affirms the worth of our value creation. In other words, from a meta-ethical point of view, our conservative disposition is a strategy to temper our fear that our life efforts, in the end, are insignificant.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is likely that when many particular values of a person remain existent beyond one's own lifespan, the person, on their deathbed, will have a greater sense that their efforts in life mattered. Thus, I argue that when we fear death, we fear the

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<sup>26</sup> A similar argument can be found in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer regarding his concept of the 'Will-to-Life'; See Wicks (2019).

revelation of our true cosmic insignificance. This fear is tempered by the knowledge that our world of meaning continues to exist.

Third, from a person-affecting view, our *reasons of concern* (the collective afterlife matters to us in its own right) and the second part of our *reasons of valuation* (the very phenomenon of valuing matter to us in its own right) mean the same; a concern about the survival of humanity is the same as having the desire that the very phenomenon of valuing things survives into the indefinite future. What makes humanity humanity is our capability to create and appreciate value. If this ability would be taken away from us, and humanity would continue to survive on earth merely as living bodies which eat, defecate and sleep until they demise, we would not perceive it is humanity that is surviving. Hence, we can eliminate the second part of our *reason of valuation* as this is implicated by our *reasons of concern*.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2.4 Conclusion

In this section, I discussed Scheffler's underlying person-affecting view and explored whether it lay bare an inconsistency in his work. I argued it did not. A person-affecting view only requires a different understanding of the notion of intrinsic value. This notion of 'agent-neutral value' can only be confidently endorsed if there is a collective afterlife. Therefore, future generations enable us to confidently attach ourselves to things and act upon these attachments, rather than ponder over our cosmic insignificance, stimulating a huge repertoire of valuable activities. Moreover, I have argued that our *conservative disposition* is a strategy to temper the fear of the insignificance of our value creation. Lastly, I have argued that from a person-affecting view the second part of our *reasons of valuation* is included in our *reasons of concern*.

## 2.3 Value in the face of human extinction

In the last section I have defended Scheffler's claim that the collective afterlife is a condition for many things to matter to us. In this section, I explore more detailed which things will and which

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<sup>27</sup> This point is also emphasized by Seanna Shiffrin. She argues that our concern for humanity is a concern for our capability to reason and engage in valuing activity. For example, if human life would be superseded by a different creature with the same capacity for reasoning and valuing, our sense of loss and despair would only be for the loss of particular attachments that would not survive the succession of these creatures. Scheffler disagrees on this point arguing that our concern for humanity entails more than a concern for our rational and valuing capacities. See Shiffrin (2013, 144-54 ) and Scheffler (2013, 193-96).

things will not continue to matter to us when facing human extinction.<sup>28</sup> This is important in order to fully understand the quality of life that remains in the infertility scenario. Clearly, the poorer the quality of life, the greater our *reasons of interest* to ensure the fate of future generations. I discuss the criticism of three philosophers on Scheffler's contention about the range of activities which will or will not diminish in value. I conclude that we could still live a life of meaning. However, as Scheffler rightly claims, it would not be a value-laden life. Lastly, I will briefly discuss two different meta-ethical assumptions people could embrace in the infertility scenario which could provide them with a sense of greater purpose.

### 2.3.1 Critical assessment of the good-making features

First, in order to critically assess Scheffler's range of activities, let us briefly reiterate the four types of good-making features he identifies within many of our activities:

- Activities with a long-term, goal-oriented structure aimed at improving human conditions (e.g. many medical and non-medical research in science, engineering, technology, and the social sciences as well as many forms of political and social activism)
- Activities in which one participates in an ongoing collaborative process which is transgenerational (e.g. science, politics, literature, journalism, exploration of the natural world, technological innovation, religious devotion, organised athletic competition)
- Activities which are based on transmitting valuable forms of human wisdom, practice and achievement to new generations (e.g. traditional, curatorial, educational and conservation-oriented activities)
- Activities which involve imagining what the future may bring (e.g. history, arts, social sciences, political theory)

R. Jay Wallace and Harry Frankfurt have both argued that Scheffler is wrong about the extent to which the value of many activities depend on the existence of the collective afterlife. Frankfurt agrees that our lives would be impoverished due to the loss of value of these good-making features but that, for example, intellectual and creative activities would retain enough valuable features to keep us engaged; amongst other things, they would still have their *intrinsically valuable characteristics*. For example, he argues that the work of a historian would remain

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<sup>28</sup> Things should be interpreted here in the broadest sense of the word (ie. people, physical artifacts, activities, objects, ideas etc.)

worthy simply because it is interesting to learn about the past (Frankfurt 2013, 133-4). Similarly, Wallace argues that activities such as examining or producing great works of art, literature, or music, trekking through beautiful landscapes in good company or conducting scientific research, 'are paradigms of human activity that we would consider to be intrinsically valuable' (Wallace, 16). Becoming disengaged with such activities in the face of humanity's imminent end would be an evaluative mistake. Nevertheless, Wallace thinks we would become disengaged with these activities but for a different reason: a traumatized state of mind. He argues that the prospect of our *particular attachments* and the *very phenomenon of valuing itself* ending shortly after our own lives would distress us to such an extent that it would cause disengagement with many activities; even though these activities would still be intrinsically valuable. (Wallace, 28).

I argue that Wallace and Frankfurt overlook the fact that, as discussed in section 2.2, our notion of intrinsic value decays in the infertility scenario. From a person-affecting view, this notion is formally wrong but can be interpreted as indicating items which are valuable in an agent-neutral way. However, the contention that something is valuable independently from how we personally value it is exactly what is rendered insecure in the face of humanity's imminent end. As a result, the claim that an activity is worthy to undertake because of its agent-neutral value is weakened. Regarding Wallace's claim that our disengagement is a consequence of a traumatized state of mind, I argue Wallace misses the point of *why* we in the first place desire that our attachments and the activity of valuing survive beyond our death. This desire is an expression of a deeper meta-ethical issue; namely, that to confidently claim our attachments are valuable independently of how they are of value to us, our attachments should extend beyond our own lives.<sup>29</sup> Thus, both Wallace's and Frankfurt's claim is fallacious.

**Loss of confidence in agent-neutral value claim:** It is exactly *because* the intrinsic (read: agent-neutral) value of an activity seems lost that we lose our motivation to engage in many activities.

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<sup>29</sup> It is good to emphasize that the extension of our attachments does not require our attachments to stay exactly the same. What we want is that our values make progress and further develop. The element of change that is desired within the survival of our attachment differs on the type of attachment. For example, an attachment to the creation of beautiful music can throughout time manifest itself in many ways. For argument on the element of change within our conservative disposition. See Scheffler (2007) and Heyd (1994, 217).

Hence, Scheffler's conjecture survives these objections; the good-making features of the above-mentioned activities are features that situate the activity in an ongoing chain of human generations. As such, we can confidently confer meaning and value to our own projects and goals. Simultaneously, Scheffler does emphasize that it would be particularly laudable if one could accept the loss of being part of a greater realm of value and still be motivated to, for example, write books or compose music (Scheffler 2013, 187).

Second, Frankfurt and Wallace argue that activities which gain part of their value from having an *audience* that enjoys the product of the activity would remain worth undertaking. As long as doctors, artists or scholars, could still heal, entertain or provoke an audience, there seems no reason to disengage from such activities. Again, Scheffler refutes this by arguing that most of the value from these activities stems from feeling part of a collective, ongoing project (e.g. a cabaretier feels parts of the collective project of human creativity). Without this element, the point of such activities would become lost. If true, this is partly encouraging for it shows that human beings, in normal circumstances, already gain most value from simply being a participant of a collective, ongoing project. Their individual influence on the whole of the project (e.g. being a successful and remembered cabaretier) is of secondary importance (2013, 185). I am less sure than Scheffler about whether people would become completely discouraged to undertake activities despite the meaning they can still have for their remaining audience. I will further this thought later in this section.

Third, Scheffler himself is wary about the extent to which more momentary, experiential satisfactions would remain satisfying. Activities such as enjoying a good meal, appreciation of nature, listening to music, having sexual intercourse or reading book reviews. He argues that such activities are evaluated as good in the context of our understanding of the good life. Without their usual context it is unclear whether such 'constituents of the good life' would survive (2013, 43). Frankfurt refutes this arguing that, for example, good music always remains pleasurable to hear (Frankfurt 2013, 134-35). However, Scheffler points out that our ability to enjoy pleasurable sensations is dependent on complex 'background attitudes and beliefs about the world' (Scheffler 2013, 183). I agree with Scheffler on this point. An illustrative example is that many vegetarians do not enjoy the taste of meat, not because of them having a particular type of taste-buds. Rather, their strong belief in the immorality of killing animals for food influences their sensory perception. So too, I argue, would our attitudes towards the collective afterlife cause more momentary satisfaction to *diminish* in value in the face of humanity's imminent end. Scheffler ignores the fact that this implies that these activities also have a good-making feature.



Part of what makes these activities valuable is that they are a ‘celebration’ of being a worthy participant in an ongoing, collective human endeavor; I propose the following, additional good-making feature:

**Good-making feature (5):** Activities that are perceived as ‘life-indulgences’ partly gain their value from ‘deserving’ such an indulgence due to other undertaken, worthwhile pursuits.<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, Scheffler argues that the value of friendships and other personal relations is likely to come to matter even more to us, given the comfort and unity it can provide during such grim times. However, he does point out a challenge for personal relations. Normally, friendships are fostered by the developments of each friend outside of their friendship. In the infertility scenario the effects of the mutual disengagement with activities could leave little distinct projects, failures, achievements, worries and dreams to share with one another (2013, 54-5). Despite the challenge, Scheffler does implicitly argue that the value of having intimate relationships is independent from its place in the ongoing chain of human generations. So too, does Scheffler argue that we would remain motivated to avoid circumstances in which we experience extreme pain (2013, 53). Susan Wolf makes an interesting argument regarding these two points. She combines the value of personal relationships and the relief of extreme pain, arguing that we would remain engaged in activities which provide direct comfort and care to people close to us. Moreover, she argues that, given humanity will not disappear for 150 years, we would have time to discover different ways to care and comfort each other: ‘We could create and perform music and plays, we could plant gardens, hold discussion groups, write books and commentaries’ (Wolf 2013, 122). The aim of comforting others could bring back value to certain activities from which we initially were disengaged (2013,122). Scheffler refutes Wolff’s suggestion, arguing that such communal activities require the logistics of a functional economy which will no longer exist due to unmotivated people. Moreover, as discussed, he doubts people’s motivation for artistic or intellectual pursuits when facing humanity’s imminent end (Scheffler 2013, 187). I agree with Scheffler’s first point; a large functional economy would no longer exist. However, a more local, community economy could reasonably be developed; the direct relief of pain one could provide to one’s friends by comforting them could remain a meaningful activity. This may not motivate

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<sup>30</sup> This idea of first having to work, and then be granted relaxation is a deeply embedded idea that can be found in many cultures (e.g. Jewist and Christian Sabbath).

people to write large books but simpler forms of entertainment and inspiration could still be appealing. For example, in the movie *Melancholia*, the main character gains a sense of purpose in the face of the end of the world (a giant meteorite will soon hit the Earth). She devotes herself to caring for her young nephew and ensuring his last days on Earth are full of fantasy and fun. The extent to which this source of meaning would keep people engaged in various activities, I believe, is very idiosyncratic and on a communal level dependent on the right kind of leadership. Nonetheless, Scheffler's main point remains; such scenarios would not be the flourishing life we once knew with a wide range of valuable activities to engage in.

Lastly, I believe human beings could still find beacons of hope and meaning in two ways. First, the belief that one day new conditions of value creation (whether human-like or alien) might emerge on our planet and encounter the remnants of human history could motivate people to preserve human wisdom and relics.<sup>31</sup> This may not amount to a vast range of valuable activities. However, it could stabilize the concept of things mattering somewhat because of the prospect that our value creation would remain of relevance to valuing creatures in the remote future. Second, people who did not believe in a supreme being, or who had a passive belief might become more devout in the infertility scenario. The desire to situate our activities in a greater realm of meaning is so strong that this could supersede any former observed irrationality of such a belief. One may embrace the idea of God in a Kierkegaardian way, acknowledging the irrationality of it but indulging in the satisfaction of such a belief. As Kierkegaard states: 'To have faith is to lose your mind and to win God' (Goodreads, n.d.).

### 2.3.2 Conclusion

In this section, I defended Scheffler's assertion that being part of an ongoing chain of human generations is an element of many of our activities from which we gain much value. I have refuted the argument that we would remain engaged in activities because they would remain intrinsically valuable; without the prospect of a collective afterlife, it is the very notion of intrinsic value that is rendered insecure. Moreover, I argue that activities which partly gain their value from celebrating one's place in the ongoing chain of human generations would lose this valuable

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<sup>31</sup> Already such an attempt has been made by NASA when in 1976 it sent a space probe into space with a blueprint of the story of humanity on Planet Earth. The hope being to one day reach any possible other existent creature in another galaxy to inform them on our existence, see Van Heemstra and Prantl (2019).

feature when facing humanity's imminent end. One source of value would remain of importance: the comfort we could provide to people close to us. This would keep us engaged in undertaking creative activities on a local scale. Such activities would provide meaning but they would not enable us to live a flourishing, value-laden life.

## 2.4 For how long should humanity go on?

In this section I question how long humanity must go on after our death in order for us to keep our equanimity. For one day humanity will inevitably end. However, this fact does not seem to fill us with the same existential dread as the prospect of humanity ending in the next 150 years. The discrepancy between these reactions seems to imply that we only care about humanity continuing for a certain amount of time.<sup>32</sup> Hence, how far do our evaluative relations with future generations reach? First, I discuss Scheffler's remarks on this question. Second, I suggest a different argument to the problem by making an analogical argument based on the work of Jeff McMahan. I conclude that the less relatable future generations will be to us, the less their existence will have an influence on our motivations and attitudes.

### 2.4.1 A fixed date vs indefinite future

Scheffler makes two remarks in his work regarding the extent to which humanity must survive in order for us to retain our equanimity. He argues that the prospect of humanity ending in a billion years does not severely affect our attitudes and motivations because the event is temporally so remote; we simply do not know how to think about such a temporal perspective (Scheffler 2013, 63-4). Moreover, he argues that in order to retain our equanimity, humanity 'should survive for a healthy and indefinitely long period after our own deaths' (Scheffler 2013, 63). This is a vague answer to the question of how long humanity should survive in order for current generations to keep their equanimity. However, I think our equanimity stems partly from the vagueness of the word 'indefinite'. If humanity were to end on a specific date, whether in 500, 1000 or 1500 years, it would confront us with the clear boundaries of humanity's existence. As long as the temporal

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<sup>32</sup> Scheffler questions whether the discrepancy between our reactions is justified. I do not address this question here as I have already implicitly answered this question in section 2.2: we need a larger framework in which we can assess our value creation in order to justify the value of our lives. Ideally this is an endless, 'impersonal' framework which justifies the value of human existence. However, if the larger framework is the existence of future generations which is not endless, 'nor impersonal,' it is still justified that this framework enables us to confer value onto our lives. See Scheffler's discussion on the "Alvy Singer Problem" (2013, 62-4).

span of humanity is undefined, we can focus on the developments of our societies and all possibilities that lay in the future. Hence, I believe that preferably there remains a vagueness about the end of humanity as this does not vividly confront us with the limits of our realm of value creation. In the next section I discuss to what extent a fixed date of humanity's imminent end in 500, 1000 or 1500 years would affect us.

#### 2.4.2 An argument by analogy

We are invested in the fate of future generations because we have a genuine concern for them and because they carry on and further develop our attachments which enables us to confidently confer value to our existence. A way to interpret this evaluative relation between current generations and future generations is through an analogy with the more comprehensible relation a person has with one's future self. I will shortly introduce a thesis by Jeff McMahan on this and use it as an analogy to support the following claim:

**Spiritual unity claim:** Our evaluative concern with the fate of future generations depends on the degree to which we remain related to these generations in a spiritual sense.

I argue that the *spiritual unity claim* is analogical to McMahan's *prudential unity relations* conception. McMahan contends that this conception refers to the extent that a person at time X (Tx) is the same person at a later moment, for example, at time Y (Ty). If the prudential unity relations between a person at Tx and Ty are strong, this implies that the person at Tx has a high degree of 'egoistic concern' for oneself at Ty; egoistic concern refers to a unique kind of concern an individual has for one's own future (McMahan 2002, 42). The strengths of one's prudential unity relations between different moments is determined by three elements. First, 'the proportion of the mental life that is sustained over that period' (2002, 75); mental life refers to the beliefs, desires, thoughts, ideas and values of a person. Second, 'the richness of that mental life' (2002, 75) which refers to the amount and variety of one's beliefs, desires etc. Third, 'the degree of internal reference among the various earlier and later mental states' (2002, 75). For example, a present experience at Tx and the memory of that experience at Ty. McMahan uses this concept to evaluate the 'badness' of a death. He contends that the death of someone in the midst of one's life is worse than the death of a newborn baby. This is because the personal identity of a baby is so different to the personal identity of the baby at later stadiums of one's life that it is

hard to claim that the baby has much egoistic concern for one's future self. Given the little interest in one's future, the death of a newborn baby can be evaluated as less bad (2002, 79).

A similar argument structure can be applied to the relationship we have with future generations. The strength of our spiritual unity relation with future generations determines the degree of our *evaluative concern* for future generations. Evaluative concern refers to being concerned with the fate of future generations because they matter to us in their own right and because they carry on our particular attachments enabling us to live a value-laden life. Our *spiritual unity relation* contains the following elements: (1) the proportion of the spiritual life that is sustained over that period (i.e. values, attitudes, ideas), (2) the richness of that spiritual life and (3) the degree of reference between the earlier and later states of humanity. The latter element entails the number of projects and endeavours of current generations that remain relevant to future generations. It is difficult to precisely know the degree of our spiritual unity relation over time, but the analogy helps us scrutinize this approximately. For the first 100 to 200 years, the following elements will remain of close connection to us: our projects, particular values, family and community lineage, a recognisable public space, and common customs. In other words, our spiritual unity relations are very strong. As such, we care deeply about what happens to these future generations and the prospect of humanity ending in 100 to 200 years will severely affect our attitudes and motivations.<sup>33</sup>

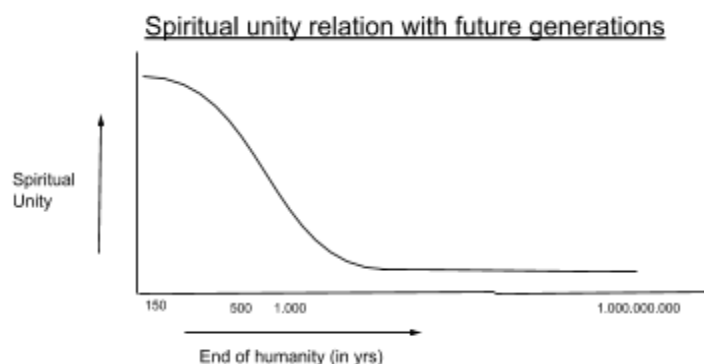
Regarding humanity ending in 500, 1000 or 1500 years, I believe that the strength of our spiritual unity is discounted with time but in all cases it would affect our emotions and motivations to a certain extent confronting us with the limits of human value creation; people would be emotionally affected by the prospect of humanity's end and more often question the sense of our concept of 'things mattering'. Nevertheless, we could still live a value-laden life because of the value our current activities would provide to the many future generations to come.

Regarding humanity ending in a billion years, Scheffler argues that we are unaffected by this prospect because the human brain simply cannot comprehend such a temporally remote perspective. My speculation instead is that the issue is not that we cannot comprehend such a temporal remote conception; rather, that it is difficult to know the amount of spiritual unity we will have with human beings in a billion years. Therefore, we can hardly be greatly concerned about

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<sup>33</sup> De-Shalit discusses how far into the future our transgenerational community extends. As argued, we oppose his communitarian notion of the community. However, his arguments on the extent to which similarities of values, customs and habits remain between different generations has inspired my thought on this specific argument. See De-Shalit (1995, ch.1).

their existence for they might be so different from us that our spiritual similarities will only be our shared existence of consciousness. Moreover, their framework of activity and consciousness might be so different to our current framework that it makes no sense to depend on the worth of our actions today based on the prospect of their existence. Thus, our level of concern for the survival of humanity is discounted as time passes. I present this in the form of a horizontal asymptote (see graph) in which our unity blurs after long periods of time, and the only clear unification will be our shared existence of consciousness.



### 2.4.3 Conclusion

I have argued that the prospect of humanity becoming extinct in the remote future only minimally damages our capacity to lead value-laden lives. The reason is because we have weak *spiritual unity relations* with temporally distant human beings. However, I have argued that the closer humanity's end, the more it affects our lives as our actions and existence would feel increasingly smaller and less significant. Regarding the idea of an indefinite future, a fixed date undeniably confronts us with the insignificance of human value creation whilst an indefinite date places the focus on the possibilities of human value creation.

## Conclusion to Chapter 2

The aim of this chapter was to discuss various objections to Scheffler's afterlife conjecture and his contention that we have four attachment-based reasons to ensure the survival and

flourishing of future generations. First, I refuted the claim that our concern for future generations entails only a concern for particular future beings. We have reasons to be concerned about the survival of humanity as a whole because it entails the survival of our spiritual existence at the most basic level. Second, I examined the origin of value itself. I argued that a commitment to the *person-affecting view* strengthens Scheffler's argument that future generations are indeed the only possible source for our ability to live a value-laden life. Furthermore, I argued that our conservatism towards our attachments is an expression of our desire to affirm the general significance of our values and attachments. Third, I scrutinized how many of our activities will be affected by the imminent end of humanity. I defended Scheffler's notion of good-making features and added an extra good-making feature, arguing that our more momentary satisfactions would also diminish in value. Section 2.2 and 2.3 only further supports our *reasons for interest*: the collective afterlife has great potential to provide current generations with a wide array of valued activities. Without the collective afterlife, we could still live a meaningful life but it would not be a flourishing life. Fourth, I argued that humanity preferably continues for as long as possible, because the continuity of human generations affirms our sense of being part of something significant and we genuinely care about the continuity of humanity. However, the extent to which our motivations and attitudes are affected depends on the extent to which we share similarities with future generations.

In conclusion, the attachment-based reasons to ensure the fate of future generations are retained. In the next chapter, I discuss how these three reasons could be deployed in a value-based communication strategy aimed at motivating people to engage in activities which sustain and enhance the fate of future generations.

## Chapter 3 - Communication strategies based on attachment-based reasons for action

In the introduction I have discussed two challenges regarding global warming and loss of biodiversity. First, there is a challenge of communication. Humans filter information on whether it fits their worldview and values, rather than objectively receiving and evaluating scientific data or responding adequately to morally sound arguments. Correspondingly, climate scientists and environmental campaigners have increasingly adopted a value-based communication strategy

in order to more effectively engage people on these topics. Second, there is a challenge of motivation. Humans have a natural resistance to losing things. Regarding affluent societies, pro-environmental resolute actions implies various financial and cultural losses. This can impede the willingness to undertake such action. The *loss of values* method of the value-based communication strategy aims to tackle this impediment of loss aversion by informing people on the personal losses these growing global issues imply. In the last two chapters, I have discussed various personal losses that current generations would experience when facing humanity's imminent end. In this chapter, I discuss how an emphasis on our evaluative relations with future generations could be an important factor in addressing the above-discussed challenges of communication and motivation. First, I discuss the personal costs implicated for current generations if the prospect of societal collapse and human extinction becomes a reality. Secondly, I explore the potential motivational force of our attachment-based reasons regarding pro-environmental resolute action.

### 3.1 Societal collapse, human extinction

Scheffler's thought-experiment questions the impact the prospect of humanity's imminent end would have on current generations. However, his insights are also relatable to the prospect of societal collapse in the near future; our attachment-based reasons are reasons we have to ensure the survival of future generations '*under conditions conducive to human flourishing*' (Scheffler 2018, 60). More specifically, societal collapse would imply the end of many of our particular attachments. For the reason that the further development of human ideals we are deeply attached to and which provide us with a large range of valued activities require a functional economy and stable institutions; these elements would go missing when society collapses. Hence, the prospect of the deterioration of humanity and the demise of many of our particular attachments would deeply affect current generations. Regarding our confidence in the concept of 'things mattering', this may not be destabilized to the same extent as it would when facing humanity's imminent end; there would still be a collective afterlife. However, the prospect of many of our particular values and attachments ending would cause activities related to these attachments to diminish in value. Thus, our ability to live a value-laden life would be deeply affected. Conclusively, our four attachment-based reasons are reasons we have to both avoid societal collapse as well as human extinction. Regarding the loss of value method, these potential losses are important to communicate as they inform people on how consequences of the environmental issues could personally affect them.



### 3.2 Motivational power of our attachment-based reasons

In this section I explore how different aspects show that our attachment-based reasons for action provide a strong motivational source to undertake pro-environmental actions. First, I have already discussed how the *loss of value* method tackles the impediment of loss aversion. However, there is another common human tendency which impedes people to undertake pro-environmental action; humans tend to discount the importance of long-term costs and benefits. Consequently, seeking short-term pleasures and avoiding short-term costs can predominate the human mind due to their perceived greater importance (Elster 2015, 103). In many cases, pro-environmental action in affluent societies implies undergoing short-term financial and cultural costs for long-term financial and cultural benefits (e.g. avoiding the end of particular attachments and the deprivation of humanity). Our *reasons of interest* could counter this impediment of *pure time discounting* as the loss of our ability to live a value-laden life is a looming, short-term loss. *If* environmental tipping points are reached in the near future, the prospect of both societal collapse as human extinction will become ever more real, promptly robbing current generations of their ability to live a value-laden life. Hence, stressing this short-term loss could circumvent the problem of *pure time discounting*. Simultaneously, communicating long-term losses (e.g. eventual deprivation of humanity and the end of particular attachments) remains important. For humans are also able to overcome the tendency of pure time discounting when they are explicitly committed to any long-term cause.<sup>34</sup> For such an explicit commitment to happen people must have a clear understanding of *why* the long-term benefits and costs are of such importance to them (2015, 102).

Second, I have argued that the moralistic discourse regarding the affluence dilemma has been unsuccessful in sufficiently motivating people to bear the costs of resolute pro-environmental action. However, in this thesis I have explored a different reason for action with normative force, namely Scheffler's *reasons of reciprocity*. I argue that rather than informing people on their moral obligation towards future generations and their current failure to act upon this, a strategy focused on creating more awareness on our evaluative relations with future generations could be more effective in motivating people to undertake pro-environmental actions. As discussed in section 2.1.2, empirical research reveals that values which play a clear role in our self-identity more strongly influence our behavior. This is partly because they incite a

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<sup>34</sup> Illustrative examples of this are when people are able to quit smoking or lose weight.

sense of moral obligation to act in accordance with these values. Hence, it is likely that once we more clearly understand the importance we attach to future generations, a natural sense of moral obligation towards future generations would arise within many people (reasons of reciprocity). This is, once activated, a powerful and stable form of motivation (Van der Werff 2013a, 1259-263)

The current moralistic discourse of the affluence dilemma often leads in the public debate to an emphasis on people's current failure to act upon their moral duties towards the future generations. This, I believe, can be counterproductive in motivating people to act for the following reason: In general, values which are not strongly incorporated in one's self-identity (more 'hidden' values) can be neglected by oneself, causing inconsistent behavior. For example, Tom values being healthy, but as a student he saw himself as a smoker, and, in this sense, he neglected the value he attached to health. When people are addressed for their failure to care about future generations, this creates the opportunity for people to reflect on their past behavior and conclude that they are a person who indeed does not care about future generations. However, such a conclusion is wrong and creates a further distance between one's self-identity and one's true values. As argued, we are deeply invested in the fate of future generations. In order to enhance a sense of moral obligation regarding future generations it is more effective to highlight our elusive attachment to the collective afterlife. Hence, a better strategy would be to underwrite behavior that harms the fate of future generations as inconsistent behavior with one's values. This denies the possibility for one to make the wrong conclusion and creates the opportunity for one to reflect on this inconsistent behavior. Moreover, pointing out that we already contribute in many ways to the survival and flourishing of human generations, by highlighting the good-making features within our activities, could make people realize that part of their actual behavior already carries the value of future generations. This realization brings the 'hidden' value we attach to future generations to play a more explicit role in one's self-identity.<sup>35</sup>

Another advantage of focusing on the normative force of our reasons for reciprocity is the following: when future generations come to play a more vivid role in one's self-identity this can shift one's perception of how costly pro-environmental resolute action is. Research shows that once a person is intrinsically motivated to undertake actions, whether for pleasure or

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<sup>35</sup> Research confirms that more implicitly held values can be 'turned on' within an individual enhancing behavior aligned with these values. Either, when individuals are asked to reflect on these values, see Chilton (2012). Or when former behavior of an individual is linked to a certain value, showing that one already implicitly cares about that certain value, see Van der Werff (2013b).

because one feels a moral obligation to undertake the actions, the actions are experienced as mainly fulfilling. Whilst neglecting one's perceived sense of moral duty and not undertaking the action is often experienced as costly, due to one's personal feelings of guilt (Van der Werff 2013a, 1259).

### Conclusion to Chapter 3

In this chapter, I argued how our attachment-based reasons fit into the *loss of values* method regarding the growing risks of global warming and loss of biodiversity. Moreover, I explored the potential positive effects communicating these reasons could have on people's motivation to undertake pro-environmental action. In the best case scenario, not only would it make the issues of global warming and loss of biodiversity more relatable to people, but it may enhance public support on environmental policies. This can be achieved by (1) mitigating the impediment of loss aversion, endowment effect and pure time discounting, (2) implicitly enhancing a natural sense of moral obligation to act, (3) changing the perception of how costly the unprecedented changes are.

## General Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been twofold. First, I have questioned whether and in what sense the fate of future generations matters to current generations. I have drawn upon the work of Scheffler who argues that we care more about the the fate of our successors than we might normally acknowledge. Indeed, the collective afterlife matters to us in its own right and because it is a condition for many things mattering to us. Having taken the survival of humanity for granted, our evaluative dependence on future generations is rather elusive. However, we are emotionally dependent on the collective afterlife as it enables us to answer our desire that particular values and attachments are preserved and sustained into the remote future. Moreover, it drives many of our motivations and attitudes because much of the value we derive from our activities stems from these activities having a place within the ongoing chain of human generations. Consequently, the collective afterlife is a precondition for our ability to live a value-laden life. Hence, implicit in the things we value today we find various compelling reasons to care about the fate of future generations.

In chapter two, I have discussed various challenges towards Scheffler's claim. First, I have refuted De-Shalit's objection that we are only concerned about the survival and flourishing

of our own community, given they constitute a part of our identity. Again, having taken the survival of humanity for granted, our particular attachments may seem more important and clear to us but this does not deny our genuine concern for humanity as a whole. I argued that we identify with humanity as a whole; and therefore we also have reasons to care about the survival and flourishing of humanity as a whole. Second, I have discussed Scheffler's afterlife conjecture from a meta-ethical perspective. Committing to the person-affecting view lays bare why future generations give us reasons to have confidence in the value of many types of activities. By extending human existence we create a larger framework of valuing activity in which our current appliance of value can be assessed. As such, the concept of value can be confidently upheld. Moreover, from a meta-ethical perspective, our conservatism towards our values can be interpreted as a strategy to temper our fear that our actions are, in the end, insignificant. This fear can no longer be tempered in the face of humanity's imminent end. Third, I have defended Scheffler's contention on how many of our activities have good-making features and identified a fifth good-making feature; even our more mundane pleasures gain parts of their value from having a place within the ongoing chain of humanity. In the face of humanity's imminent end, only the relief of extreme pain and our personal relationships to people would remain a source of meaning. Fourth, I have questioned how far our evaluative relations with future generations reach. I have argued that preferably we desire that human life goes on into the indefinite future. Any finite date of humanity inevitably touches upon the existential dread which resides in all human beings. The smaller the framework is in which we can assess our current value creation, the harder it becomes to see the value in many of our activities for the more insignificant we feel.

The second aim of this thesis was to discuss how the insights into the value we attach to future generations can be utilised within the loss of value method to increase public support for environmental policies. I have argued that our attachment-based reasons are reasons both to avoid societal collapse as human extinction. Moreover, I argued that these reasons could have a strong motivational force to undertake pro-environmental actions. Creating a greater awareness of how we are invested in the fate of our successors could counter the impediments of loss aversion and pure time discounting. Moreover, it could enhance a natural sense of moral obligation towards ensuring the fate of future generations.

The reach of this thesis has left certain discussion points of Scheffler's work unaddressed. Related to the environmental issues of today, it would be interesting to examine whether and how the survival and flourishing of animals and the natural world into the indefinite

future matters to us. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine whether people who believe in a personal afterlife would have similar reactions to the imminent end of humanity.

At the COP 2019 in Madrid the Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres started his speech contending the following: "There has never been a more important time to listen to the Science." Ofcourse, this is correct. It is of utter importance to take into account the scientific data regarding the impending environmental issues. However, when appealing to people's will to undertake the required changes, science nor moral arguments have proven rather powerful in enhancing such willingness. Human beings, being valuing creatures, are driven by what matters to them. Rather than perceiving this as an impediment to enhancing pro-environmental action, the communication around global warming and loss of biodiversity should treasure our valuing attitudes. For it is within these attitudes that our most powerful reasons to ensure the fate of future generations reside.

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