RECONSTRUCTING SCHEFFLER'S AFTERLIFE: LEVINAS AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH DEATH AS ALTERITY

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Abstract: In *Death and the Afterlife*, Scheffler argues that, while our fear of death is justified, death is necessary for our ability to live meaningful lives. While our personal death is inevitable, we nonetheless find meaning in the knowledge that, despite our individual deaths, humanity will continue our projects and goals. In applying Levinas's understanding of death to Scheffler's position, I argue that while Levinas would agree with Scheffler that death is essential for sense of meaning, he presents important challenges both to Scheffler's understanding of death as well as to the exact quality of our commitment to future humanity.

"Blow wind! come, wrack!" –Macbeth (V.v.)

In this paper, I contrast the work of two philosophers, Samuel Scheffler and Emmanuel Levinas, with respect to their views concerning death. For both, as we will see, death takes on an explicitly ethical dimension—not only is death essential to our ability to lead meaningful lives in a series of successive stages, but our relationship with death, as well as the future that follows, carries specific ethical imperatives. This essay therefore aims to address three questions. First, what is our relationship with death? Second, how should we navigate our relationship with death? And finally, what should our relationship be with the future that follows? In answering these questions, I argue that while Levinas would agree with Scheffler that death is essential for sense of meaning, he presents important challenges both to Scheffler's understanding of death as well as to the exact quality of our commitment to future humanity. I will argue that our relationship with the future requires that we preserve the alterity of death while remaining absolutely responsible for the future that follows.

In Lecture 3 of *Death and the Afterlife,* Samuel Scheffler begins his discussion with an examination of Epicurus's statement that "death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist."[1] The basis of this claim rests on a trivial truth—as long as we are alive, we are not dead, and as long as we are dead, we are no longer alive for death to harm us—but does not necessarily provide us with an answer as to how we should feel about death while alive. One possible interpretation of the argument, according to Scheffler, would be that since we cannot be dead while alive, death can therefore cause us no harm. Another possible interpretation would be that because we cannot be dead while alive, we have no reason to *fear* death. In answering the question of how we should feel about death, Scheffler claims both (a) that our eventual death is essential to our way of living a meaningful life in progressive stages, and (b) that, even though death is essential for a meaningful human life, it can still be reasonable to fear death. "It is not unreasonable to fear death," he writes,

[1] Samuel Scheffler et al., *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 84.

"even if one recognizes that immortality would be undesirable and that there is a sense in which death gives meaning to life."[2] Just as we might have dread while waiting for an inevitable appointment with the dentist, he claims, we might also be justified in our fear about death despite its inevitability. And despite the fact that we might have terrible fear of our impending deaths, we can also recognize that death is necessarily implicated in our "formation and development of our ideas of value from the outset," a development which is explicitly temporal in nature.[3] While it may be reasonable to fear death, death is also crucial in providing the temporal arrangements around which we can provide our sense of value and development.

Even though Scheffler believes our individual deaths do not disallow our ability for meaningful lives, he does think that there is another necessary condition, which, if taken away, would unseat many of the things we value most—the survival of collective humanity. For Scheffler, the meaningfulness of our temporal lives depends not just on our own personal experience and development, but on the continuation of our values and projects by the humanity that will continue after our individual lives are over. In this sense, our ability to live meaningful lives is perfectly compatible with our own individual death, but is not compatible with the non-continuation of humanity after my death, such as the possibility that, in a doomsday scenario, I knew all human life would end soon after my death. While our fear of individual death may be reasonable, "our confidence in our values depends far more on our confidence in the survival of other people after our deaths than it does on our confidence in our own survival," and, ultimately, that "what is necessary to sustain our confidence in our values is that we should die and that others should live."[4] Even though we fear our individual death, it is our individual death, in conjunction with the continued survival of the rest of humanity, that allows us to live a meaningful life, committed to ongoing projects such as cancer research, Bulgarian military history, and artistic creation, confident that the benefits of these projects will continue in some form long after our individual deaths.

In evaluating Scheffler's claims about death, both collective and individual, I will draw from the work of Emmanuel Levinas in *Time and the Other* (originally published in 1948). A student of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Levinas has been a key figure for twentieth century existential phenomenology. Famously claiming that "ethics precedes ontology," Levinas sought to propose a new form of phenomenological ontology, based not in metaphysical principles or a development of ethical rules, but instead developed from a dramatic account of the subject's encounter with another person (often described simply as "the Other"), a person whose face demands our infinite responsibility and care, and yet who can never be fully grasped, who is ultimately unknowable and outside of our intellectual reach. In using Levinas's account of the relationship between death, time, and collective humanity, I want to highlight crucial ways in which his account, by providing a much more substantial account of our relationship with death, both extensively informs and complicates Scheffler's position. And while my hope is to focus on the parts of Levinas's account that are pertinent to Scheffler's concerns, it will also be necessary to reconstruct some few parts that are necessary to understand Levinas's broader claims.

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[2] Ibid., 106-7.

[3] Ibid., 109.

[4] Ibid., 108.

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas begins with a Heideggerian distinction between things that exist from the work of existence. "Heidegger distinguishes subjects and objects—the beings that are, existents—from their very work of being," he writes. "The first are expressed by substantives or substantivated participles, the other by a verb."[5] The purpose of this distinction is to attempt to explore what it means for things to exist, "to approach the very work of being," the work of being that cannot be simply affirmed or captured completely, but which nonetheless "imposes itself because one cannot deny it."[6] The general "work of being" is important to understanding Levinas's views on our relationship to death. As individual subjects, the general "work" of human being is that of mastery. Our existence is contracted in the act of continually attaching ourselves to existents, that is, objects in the world. As subjects, we act out a "mastery over existing" in the world, able to grasp things as objects and manipulate them according to our projects and desires.[7] And while he claims that our existence as humans is necessitated on the fact that we exist in solitude, saying that "the subject is alone because it is one," this solitude is "not only a despair and an abandonment," as the existentialists would argue, but is also "a virility, a pride and a sovereignty."[8] This solitude allows for an existence in which I am responsible, "encumbered by myself," but in which I am also free to grasp the world as "master, master of the possible, master of grasping the possible."[9] Because of our solitude, our general "work of being" is that of being as masters of the world, responsible for our material bodies to which we are confined and yet free to constantly grasp the world's objects, to know and manipulate them according to our needs.

But despite the status of our general relationship with objects in the world, our relationship with death is not one of mastery. Because the point of our death is the end to our ability to exist as subjects, to master the world around us, our relationship with death is not one of mastery but rather one of "mystery."[10] Even further, the "unknown of death" is not due to the fact that death is "a region from which no one has returned and consequently remains unknown as a matter of fact," but is rather due to the way in which our relationship with death is by definition the end of our ability as subjects to continue our relationship with the world in terms of mastery. As mystery, death can never be "experienced" as such because it is precisely the end of experience. At the same time, death is not something that we can usefully conceptualize as an endless void or abstract emptiness. For Levinas,

> It is not with the nothingness of death, of which we precisely know nothing, that the analysis must begin, but with the situation where something absolutely unknowable appears. Absolutely unknowable means foreign to all light, rendering every assumption of possibility impossible, but where we ourselves are seized.[11]

[5] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other,* trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 44.

[6] Ibid., 48.

[7] Ibid., 52.

[8] Ibid., 55.

[9] Ibid., 72.

[10] Ibid., 70.

[11] Ibid., 71.

In approaching the question of our relationship with death, the starting point is neither death as a type of fearful but necessary future even, such as, using Scheffler's example, going to the dentist, nor is it one in which we attempt to conceptualize death as an essentially abstract "nothingness." Rather, the starting point for our relationship with death is a point of seizure—an event in which we recognize that something ultimately unknowable is in front of us, something which we cannot grasp ourselves but which nonetheless seizes us.

Our relationship with death is therefore not the final terminus to a sequence of events, but is rather a relationship with something that is necessarily in the future. While Levinas agrees with Scheffler that Epicurus's statement that, "If you are, it is not; if it is, you are not," is misguided, stating that it "misunderstands the entire paradox" of our relationship with death, he nonetheless thinks that Epicurus's statement is correct in the way in which it "insists on the eternal futurity of death."[12] Levinas claims that the fact that our death is inevitably in the future, however, is not due to "our evasion of death" but is rather due to the fact that death "marks the end of the subject's virility and heroism."[13] Our heroism is the ability, as subjects, always to seek chances in the face of death. When confronted with our death, we cannot simply "accept" our death but rather alternate between a state of passive submission and active heroism, responding both with the passive understanding that death is inevitable and the hero's impulse to overcome the impossible.

In characterizing the two aspects of this relationship with death, Levinas uses the example of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. When Macbeth is confronted by the fact that Macduff is "not of woman born" and realizes his death is at hand, he first says, "Accursed by the tongue that tells, for it hath cow'd my better part of man! . . . I'll not fight with thee."[14] For Levinas, this first response to death is "the passivity when there is no longer hope." In the first response, Macbeth recognizes the futility of his situation, and responds with passivity, saying that he will no longer fight with those that are attempting to overthrow him. Immediately after this response, however, Macbeth regains a sort of hope. These are his last words: "Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane, and thou oppos'd, being of no woman born, yet I will try the last."[15] Macbeth's desire to "try the last," to keep on fighting in the face of certain doom, demonstrates the heroism that happens even in the face of the inevitable, our ability as subjects to endlessly seek chances. Facing up to his death, the state of Macbeth is paradoxically one in which he both knows he will, despite his best efforts, die at the hands of MacDuff, and yet in which he still fights on to the end. "Prior to death," Levinas says, "there is always a last chance; this is what heroes seize, not death. The hero is the one who always glimpses a last chance, the one who obstinately finds chances. Because death marks the end of our ability as subjects to grasp the world around us, our relationship with death is strained by our ability to recognize the inevitability and inescapability of death while at the same time being ultimately unable to grasp or accept our death as such, inevitably fated to hope for last chances. In attempting to illustrate this state, Levinas cites the Latin phrase "*Spiro/spero*"—[if] I breathe, I hope.[16]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 72.

[14] Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* Act 5, Scene 8.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other,* trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 44.

If we accept Levinas's description of the *ontological status* of our relationship with death, necessarily wedged between futile passivity and heroic striving, this still does not answer the normative question of how we *should* relate to our inevitable death: the exact quality of passivity we should allow ourselves, the definite color and shape of hope to which we should aspire. The question of how we *should* position ourselves in relationship to death is what he terms "the attempt to vanquish death."[17] For Levinas, the attempt to "vanquish death" is not the problem of "rescuing an eternity from the jaws of death," but is rather in "allowing it to be welcomed, keeping for the ego—in the midst of an existence where an event happens to it—the freedom acquired by hypostasis."[18] The attempt to vanquish death is the attempt to navigate the relationship with our future death as absolute alterity while at the same time preserving, somehow, our present solitude and freedom. This attempt necessitates that we allow death "to be welcomed," while at the same time "without welcoming it, as one welcomes a thing or object."[19] The answer to the question of how we *should* approach death demands both that we "face up to the event" while at the same time recognizing that death is not an event that can be anticipated in the way we would anticipate another kind of thing or object. Moreover, in facing up to death as an event that we cannot anticipate or grasp but that is nonetheless somehow "in front" of us, the ultimate task of "vanquishing death" is "to maintain, with the alterity of the event, a relationship that must still be personal."[20] But how is it exactly that we can maintain a "personal" relationship with death, when death, as absolute alterity, is necessarily ungraspable?

Levinas's account of "paternity,"[21] as an example of a relationship with alterity, provides some helpful clues in understanding our relationship with death. Paternity, he argues, is a specific kind of relationship with the Other, "a relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me."[22] The son is somehow "me," a product of my creation—and yet it is, at the same time "not simply my work, like a poem or an artifact, neither is he my property." The child cannot be grasped in terms of ownership or power, and yet there is an important sense in which "I am in some way my child." The relationship of paternity, however, is also not a harmonious circle of life that results in parity. There is an important sense in which the child usurps the parent in an uneven relationship, demanding my infinite responsibility and yet also remaining "a stranger to me." Additionally, the relationship with the child is not one that happens on the grounds

[17] Ibid., 78.

[18] Hypostasis, as introduced earlier by Levinas, is the event by which existents contract their existence. Our conscious relationship with the work of being allows us to be both free to manipulate the world while at the same time being responsible and, in a certain sense, chained to our material bodies.

[19] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other,* trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

[20] Ibid., 81.

[21] Throughout this text, Levinas frequently uses gendered terms such as father, son, and feminine in describing the relationship with the Other. The more general feminist critique of Levinas, led by de Beauvoir and others, has by no means been resolved. For consistency, I retain Levinas's use of the word paternity, though for my purposes *maternity* or a more gender-neutral term can easily be substituted.

[22] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other,* trans. by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 91.

of sympathy—my ability to put "myself in the son's place." Instead, it is "through my being, not through sympathy, that I am my son."[23] The relationship of paternity is not one of ownership or even of similarity, but is rather a relationship in which the child is both absolutely Other and yet still essentially connected in some way to the parent.

The relationship of paternity provides a kind of template for how we should approach our relationship with death—the child, after all, is the one who will live on after my individual death. Because of the points already noted, our relationship with those who continue on after our death is not one in which, as Scheffler's view might imply, a person (whether understood individually or in terms of a collective humanity) with compatible goals and ideals continues our life's projects in equanimical solidarity. Following the logic of paternity, the life that continues after my death cannot be grasped in terms of my ownership or power—it is not *my* projects that continue after my death but rather the projects of another. At the same time, my relationship with the future after my death is not one of sympathy, an extended compassion for a future humanity that somehow resembles my own.

If the fear of death is, for Levinas, the fear of alterity, then the question of navigating our relationship with death is how to "face up" to the inevitable futurity of death, to maintain a personal relationship without either reducing death to a present or abdicating our parental responsibility for the future that follows. In facing up the fear of death, the task of "vanquishing death" is not to eliminate death through immortality, but neither is it to preserve ourselves through commitments to projects that will go on afterwards. Following Levinas, the task of vanquishing death is to *preserve* the alterity of death while at the same time maintaining a responsibility for the ungraspable future that follows. The task is not to commit myself to a future humanity that will share my individual values and projects, but is rather to recognize my responsibility for a future that is absolutely alien to my understanding, a future of mystery, with values and projects that will in many ways be completely different from my own, and yet a future that is still in some sense myself. By following the logic of paternity, which preserves the alterity of the child while maintaining our absolute responsibility for its future, Levinas allows us a way to be intimately attached to the future that continues on after our death, to maintain a personal relationship with the future without simply reducing the future to projection of our own present humanity.

REFERENCES

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*. Translated by Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

Scheffler, Samuel et al. *Death and the Afterlife*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014.

[23] Ibid.