



Living With Loss: On Samuel Scheffler's "Aging and the Threat of Normative Poverty"

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Received: 5 November 2025 / Accepted: 13 April 2026
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Abstract

In Chap. 5 of *One Life to Lead*, Samuel Scheffler introduces the concept of “normative poverty”—the predicament of older people whose important relationships are mostly “archived” (ended by death). Scheffler argues that such people face a scarcity of relationship-based reasons for action and a tension between honoring past relationships and engaging with the present world. I raise several difficulties for his analysis of loss and argue there is a further aspect of loss, a way in which loss can make us come undone, which Scheffler's treatment does not account for.

Keywords Relationships · Aging · Reasons · Loss · Normative poverty · Attachment · Grief

A book about attachment and time is, inevitably, a book about loss. But while Samuel Scheffler's *One Life to Lead* confronts the perplexities and heartaches of loss, he also emphasizes the significance and value of our finite lives and attachments. Indeed, the bright side of loss is highlighted in the book's subtitle: “The Mysteries of Time and the Goods of Attachment.” I appreciate the deeply humanistic picture Scheffler draws, what he calls “the attachment-sensitive conception of leading a life”. But there is an aspect of loss, a way in which it can make us come undone, which seems to me to go unnoticed or at least underappreciated in the book. I will focus here on the book's fifth chapter, “Aging and the Threat of Normative Poverty.” [4]

In this chapter, Scheffler observes that most of the philosophical attention given to personal relationships has focused on ongoing relationships, which he calls “active relationships.” Yet at a certain point in the course of one's life, most of one's important relationships lie in the past because most of the important people in one's life are

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dead. The problem this condition presses on us is how to live with the absence of our important relationships.

Scheffler calls relationships that end through the death of one of the participants *archived relationships*; he wants “to consider what becomes of the reasons generated by such relationships” (127). He stipulates that *old-age* (normative rather than chronological) is the stage of one’s life in which the majority of one’s important relationships have been archived. The idea is that in the course of a whole life, there is some finite number of important relationships. At each stage of one’s life, some of these important relationships haven’t begun, some are active, and some are no longer active. Relationships can become inactive due to a change in the participants’ attitudes and dispositions, as when one participant ceases to love or care for the other (in which case the relationship “expires”) or due to the death of one of the participants (in which case the relationship is “archived”). The question of how to relate to archived relationships becomes more urgent as their proportion among the total of one’s important relationships grows. This is the *normative* process of getting older.

When most of the important relationships in one’s life are archived, Scheffler says, one faces the problem of *normative poverty*. Here’s Scheffler’s description of the problem:

Older people no longer have reasons to spend time with their deceased friends, to make plans with them, to seek advice from them, and so on. One cannot have reasons to do things with people who no longer exist. Yet the reasons generated by our important personal relationships are among the most significant reasons that we have. They are responsible for a great deal of our voluntary activity, supplying the basis on which we allocate a large proportion of our resources of time and energy. So one question that arises for older people is how this looming normative vacuum can be filled or avoided. (132)

Scheffler considers two solutions to this problem of normative poverty. One is forward-looking: it says that old people should create new, active relationships, which would give them new reasons. The other solution is backward-looking: it says that old people should respond to the reasons past, archived relationships *continue* to give them. But there is an objection to letting go of our archived relationships and there is an objection to holding on to them.

First, consider why there should be an issue with letting go of our archived relationships and forming new ones. Scheffler suggests that important human relationships are collaborative undertakings that have no determinate goal and are constituted by the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the participants. We make up our relationships together as we go along. When the attitudes and dispositions of one of the participants change, this can end the relationship, which would then be *expired*, in Scheffler’s terminology. When one of the participants dies, however, the relationship ends without a change in the content of the participants’ attitudes. “Because there is no change in the content of those dispositions and attitudes,” Scheffler writes, “such relationships normally continue to engage the emotions of the surviving participants and to be experienced by them as having ongoing normative reality.” “After all,” he says, “the survivor’s attitudes and dispositions had previously been nourished by the

reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the other participant, and those attitudes and dispositions never changed." (141).

Though the other participant's attitudes and dispositions no longer exist, their content never changed. Therefore, the absence of the other participant does not weaken the normative force of the relationship. Thus our commitment to the now-archived relationship remains. This phenomenon, Scheffler says, explains the problem with the forward-looking response, which urges us to let go and move on to new relationships.

But now a different worry looms: continuing to respond to the reasons generated by an archived relationship seems to amount to "living in the past" and "disengaging from the world". The two problems are connected, according to Scheffler. The backward-looking approach faces a catch: the distinctive value of the relationship is *undermined by our continued loyalty* to it after it is no longer active. The people with whom we share important relationships are the people with whom we experience and interpret the world around us: "our relationships with the people to whom we are most deeply bound serve to structure and to shape our engagement with the world" (146). But archived relationships can no longer play the role they played in our lives when they were active.

Much of the value of the relationship derived from its role in structuring and extending and giving character to the participants' engagement with the world. But in order to honor and acknowledge the continuing value of that relationship, one is moved to act in ways that represent a kind of disengagement from the world, and so seem antithetical to the very value one is trying to honor. (148)

Our devotion to an archived relationship leads us away from the world the relationship enabled us to engage. This problem is one we can, and often do, live with, but it is not one that can be solved. According to Scheffler, we are bound to fall short of adequately responding to our archived relationships. We simply cannot do what these relationships seem to give us reason to do, which is to continue to experience and interpret the world in the company of the other person.

I share Scheffler's impression that there's something essentially impossible and perplexing about the loss of the people we love. I agree with him that trying to articulate and understand this impossibility is an important philosophical and human task. Yet I have reservations about Scheffler's analysis.

To begin, I think the problem of normative poverty is different from the problem of the normativity of archived relationships. It is enough to have one important archived relationship to face the question of loss — specifically, of how to regard an important relationship that is no longer available to us. By contrast, the problem of normative poverty arises when we don't have enough active relationships to give us reasons for voluntary, meaningful activities. So these are different problems.

But what exactly is the problem of normative poverty? Scheffler says that reasons generated by our important relationships are the basis of much of our voluntary activity so it is a problem when these reasons are gone. This suggests that when our relationship-based reasons are gone we lack reasons for voluntary activity. But that is an odd way to conceive of reasons. We do not *use* reasons in order to perform volun-

tary activity the way we use money to acquire food and shelter. If performing some specific voluntary activity would be good or would contribute to our well-being, then it *follows* we have reason to perform that voluntary activity. And if we genuinely lack reason to perform the voluntary activity, then the fact we don't perform such activity doesn't pose a problem.

To be sure, I agree that when most of our important relationships are archived we face a kind of normative poverty, but I doubt it is best described as a *poverty of reasons*. The problem is not primarily that one lacks reasons to engage with the world but that the world strikes one as not worthy of engagement; the world itself seems poor. (Compare: having reasons to love someone but finding no one to love). The people who once made the world meaningful and worth engaging for us are elsewhere, or nowhere, and in any case they are not here. As Scheffler suggests, finding meaning in the world and engaging with it is something we do *together*.

But why should one not find new people with whom to engage with the world? The world continues to provide sources of meaning, there are still plenty of people who are worth having important relationships with, we have many good reasons to act and create, there really isn't any scarcity of reasons. What exactly is the problem? Is the Schefflerian old-person *unable* to engage with the world or does she *refuse* to engage with it out of her commitment to her archived relationships? Whatever the answer, the problem of normative poverty arises from the way we understand our commitments to our past relationships. Therefore, I believe that to understand the problem of normative poverty we must first understand the problem of the normativity of archived relationships.

Consider Scheffler's explanation of our continued commitment to archived relationships. As I said, Scheffler thinks that when a participant in a relationship dies, the relationship ends without any change in the content of the participant's attitudes and dispositions. Since the content of the other participant's attitudes and dispositions remains unchanged, Scheffler claims, it is a mistake to change our attitudes and dispositions toward the participant.

I am not persuaded by this explanation of our continued commitment to archived relationships. First, even if the unchanging content of the attitudes and dispositions of the other participant continues to give us reason for the same attitudes and dispositions, it doesn't follow that any change in our attitudes and dispositions would be mistaken or disloyal or unjustified. After all, we are not rationally locked into our attitude-dependent relationships and, when we can no longer engage the other person or elicit their reactions, and the relationship has ended, we may have sufficient reason to change various attitudes that were constitutive of the relationship while the participant was alive.

Second, consider Scheffler's explanation of the "normative shadow" of archived relationships: "the survivor's attitudes and dispositions had previously been nourished by the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the other participant, and those attitudes and dispositions never changed" (141). However, one significant change in the participant's attitudes and dispositions is that they no longer exist, and this might plausibly explain why they can no longer nourish the survivor's attitudes and dispositions as they did before. To be sure, the history of the relationship is itself normatively significant for one's present attitudes and dispositions. My point is that

the normative structure of relationships is not fully determined by the past but partly depends on participants' present and future attitudes and dispositions. I agree that archived relationships cast a normative shadow but worry that Scheffler does not properly identify its source.

Third, I do not understand the claim that the content of the participant's attitudes and dispositions *is not altered* although the attitudes and dispositions themselves cease to exist. To be sure, it continues to be true that *when* the person was alive their attitudes and dispositions had the content they had, but once the person died it no longer makes sense to ask "what is the content of their attitudes now?". The content is gone with the person and this is a change in the content. Compare: The sign says "don't feed the lion", but after the lion eats the sign the sign says nothing at all.

Fourth, though I agree with Scheffler that relationships are profoundly important to us, it seems to me that the problem of loss is primarily a problem about the absence and inaccessibility to us of the person we love. The person, not the relationship, is the primary object of our longing; we need *the person* in order to engage with the world; we mourn *the person* and are determined to remain loyal *to the person*. Our relationship with a person is the *way we are together*, and we can certainly miss that too, but missing the relationship is itself a way of missing the person. To see this, note that we can miss the person without missing the relationship we shared with them, if for example we had a very fraught and complicated relationship that was more burdensome than rewarding. We can even miss the person as they were during the worst moments in the relationship: we can recall the moments they made us most miserable and feel longing for those moments because we miss them so.

Fifth, even if the other participant in the relationship changed their attitudes and dispositions a moment before they were killed by a passing truck, there might still be the same problem of how to relate to them now. To be sure, if I learn that the other participant had radically changed their attitude toward me shortly before their death, this would be significant — probably deeply disturbing and shocking — but I doubt the "normative shadow" would thereby dissipate. This might be because expired relationships can also cast a normative shadow or it might be because a change in attitude that would otherwise end the relationship does not do so when it is immediately followed by the participant's death. So the problem of relating to archived relationships doesn't seem to depend on the participant's attitudes and dispositions at the last moments of their life.

Finally, we seem to have a commitment to inactive relationships even in cases in which the other participant hasn't died but the relationship has ended due to changes in the other participant's attitudes and dispositions. If a relationship was deep, meaningful, and had an important impact on my life, it is reasonable to ask: what role should I assign it in my life presently? At issue is the problem of how to live with the loss of people who were and continue to be important to us, not just how to live with *the death* of people who were and continue to be important to us. This is not to deny that it makes a difference whether the person died or decided to end the relationship, just to insist that the problem of inactive relationships — a category that includes but is not limited to Scheffler's archived relationships — is broader than his account of normative poverty suggests.

These six points of disagreement notwithstanding, I agree with Scheffler that much of the value of our important relationships has to do with the way they allow us to engage, experience, and interpret the world in the company of others. My relationship to a person I love is also a relationship to the world. What calls for explanation—and what Scheffler's account does not offer a satisfying answer to—is why, once such a shared engagement becomes impossible, we continue to have reason to seek or insist on it? Usually, when an activity becomes impossible we cease to have reason to do or attempt it, especially if there are accessible, feasible, and equally worthy alternative activities. What explains the normative pull of important inactive relationships? Why do they “cast a normative shadow”?

I think the answer emerges once we better understand the nature of our *reliance* on those with whom we share important relationships. In his recent book, *Grief Worlds*, Matthew Ratcliffe argues that our experienced-world is shaped by those we love. The world as we encounter it consists in “a cohesive, unfolding arrangement of significant possibilities, which are experienced and acted upon in ways that reflect projects, cares, and concerns” ([2], 30). This life structure depends in turn on relationships with particular individuals. Particular individuals infuse our perception and understanding of reality as well as the sense we make of it and the meaning we find in it. Even impersonal facts and appearances, seemingly unrelated to us or to our loved ones, may be imbued with the perspective of the particular people we love. So the people we love are both *people inside our world* and *conditions for the possibility of our world*.

For the same reason, our important relationships are not merely *undertakings* within our world or *ways of engaging with* the world; they *partly constitute* our experience of the world. This creates a perplexing duality. The death of the people we love and the end of important relationships are possibilities within our world the realization of which rules out the very world within which they are possible. Ratcliffe writes:

The bereaved person may thus continue to experience *our* home, the sofa where *we* sit together, the room *we* are decorating, *our* holiday documents, the park where *we* walk. The full realization that someone has died involves not only updating a system of propositional beliefs but also coming to experience and relate to the world as a whole in a different way ([2], 30)

This is what Ratcliffe calls ‘the two-sidedness of grief’. The loss grief is about also impacts the orientation to the world that is the background against which grief arises.

This point is worth emphasizing because philosophers tend to construe grief as an intentional attitude with a distinct object and to overlook the fact that grief implicates our experience of the world as a whole. For instance, Dan Moller asks us to consider a species of alien persons, *the super-resilient*, who are like us in every respect except that members of this species have no grief reactions at all to what would strike us as great tragedies. “When their spouses drop dead in front of them,” Moller writes, “they shrug their shoulders and check what is on television” ([1], 313). They remarry as soon as they can. But they deny that they did not care for their loved ones, Moller says, because they are willing to sacrifice a great deal and show tremendous concern

for their loved ones *before* they die. They are just so adaptive that they feel no distress after loss. Moller's point is that the response of the super-resilient seems unfitting though they do not manifest lack of love or care for their spouses. We can love and have valuable personal attachments even without experiencing grief at the loss of our loved ones, Moller suggests.

But the psychology of the super-resilient must be so different from ours that the claim they love and care for their spouses loses its meaning. For us, loving someone in the way characteristic of long-term relationships involves more than a willingness to sacrifice for them and a concern for their well-being. Love also involves *needing* the other person in a distinctive way such that their permanent absence would be a disaster for us [5]. Whatever attitude the super-resilient have toward their spouses while they are alive, it is very different from love. And even if such an attitude were possible, it would lack the distinctive value we find in love, which requires reliance on and vulnerability to the existence of another person.

Since we rely on the people we love and on our relationships with them in order to experience the world, make sense of it, and engage with it, in their absence we are, at least initially, *unable to* experience the world, make sense of it, and engage with it. Confronted with their loss, we may feel profound alienation and isolation, a sense of all-encompassing passivity and an unbridgeable abyss separating us from our social surroundings. Moreover, it is not just that we in fact need our loved ones, we are *committed to needing them*. Having loved them, we refuse to experience the world without them, to make sense of the world without them, and to engage with the world without them. This refusal to adapt to loss follows from what it is to love another. To be sure, as long as the people we love are around, we may not appreciate the depth of our commitment to them since we may fail to recognize that their permanent absence would completely upend our world. But when they die, a possibility that seemed intelligible before the fact materializes and reveals itself as world-shattering and in violation of our deepest commitments. So the answer to the question 'why do we continue to have reasons to respond to a person who is dead as if the person were still alive?' is that these reasons arise from a commitment that is partly constitutive of the relationship we shared with the person.

Yet our need for and reliance on the person can adapt to the fact of their absence. Scheffler suggests that once the other participant has died, the relationship can only provide the survivor with reasons that turn the survivor's attention away from the world and its relentless novelty. Scheffler offers examples of the reasons archived relationships continue to provide—reasons to remember the person who has died, to share these memories with others, and to commemorate the person's life. But he says these activities *do not* "exemplify one's engagement with the world or one's dynamic efforts in the company of others to make sense of the never-ending succession of novel events and experiences" (147). Rather, Scheffler thinks these are examples of reasons for disengagement from the world.

However, it seems to me that remembering, sharing memories, and commemorating, all involve engagement with the world and with others. By remembering we relate the present moment to the past, by sharing memories we engage others currently present, and we commemorate our loved ones by presently engaging in activities, rituals, and projects. Moreover, these activities essentially depend on the actual

(though past) existence of the participant in the relationship. Indeed, seeking ways to continue to remember and to love the dead is a good example of an effort to make sense of the never-ending succession of novel events and experiences. More generally, our losses inform our new experiences, engagements, and relationships; loss is what we bring to the world as we act and create new things. Our commitment to the past is a condition for our engagement with the future. So while we can no longer rely on the dead to engage with the world in the same way as we once did, we can continue to rely on them nonetheless. Their perspective can continue to imbue our experience of the world.

Finally, let us return to the problem of normative poverty, which confronts normatively old people, whose important relationships are mostly in the past. I have just suggested that it is possible to remain faithful to our inactive relationships while also engaging with the world: it is possible to carry the past, as it were, into the future. Yet this may become impossible when there is *too much loss*. The despair and disengagement from the world characteristic of normative poverty result from one's sense of being unable to fulfill one's commitment to the dead, a sense of being unable to act and engage the world in a way that would begin to do justice to the most important people in one's life. There is too much to remember, too few people to share it with, and the projects and rituals through which the dead are commemorated no longer seem meaningful. The magnitude of loss separates the old person from her social surroundings; she still wants to engage others but there are very few people she can speak to. This need not be due to people's lack of interest in what she has to say; there's simply too much that younger people do not know and cannot appreciate. The old person's past relationships presupposed ways of being and thinking about the world that are completely foreign to people born later. If young people asked her to tell them everything, the old person wouldn't know where to begin. When she tries to tell them, she can see in their eyes that she is speaking to herself. She might as well be speaking a foreign language. The problem of normative poverty in old age is the problem of how to continue to carry the past when there is too much of it to carry and too few to carry it with.

To Scheffler's ingenious notion of 'normative old-age' we might add a *normative* notion of *death*: not bodily death, but the stage, at the end of one's normative life, in which a disappearance of sorts—consisting in alienation, inaction, withdrawal, and passivity—becomes the only available form of loyalty to the people one has lost and to the person one has been. Unlike bodily death, normative death need not come to us all; but if normative death arrives, just like bodily death, there might be nothing we can do about it.

Acknowledgements I thank participants and audience members at the symposium on Samuel Scheffler's book, which took place in 2024 at LMU, Munich. Special thanks for Jessica Fischer and Monika Betzler for organizing the symposium. I also thank Samuel Scheffler for his helpful response during the symposium and an anonymous reviewer, who has significantly improved the paper.

Author Contributions I authored the whole manuscript.

Funding Open access funding provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The writing of this essay was supported by the Israel Science Foundation Grant # 3136/24.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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