

Why prenatal nonexistence is bad, but not as bad as death

1. Brueckner and Fischer on death's badness

The deprivation account of death's badness holds that death is bad for us because our posthumous nonexistence (PH, henceforth) deprives us of the goods which would have been available to us had we died later. One response to this account, usually attributed to Lucretius, is that our prenatal nonexistence (PN, henceforth) also deprives us of the goods we would have had had we been born earlier.¹ According to this response, since PN is not bad for us, the deprivation caused by PH cannot be a good reason to think that death is bad. This objection may be presented as an argument from analogy, recapitulated as follows (call it *the Symmetry Argument*):

PR1. PN and PH are symmetric in significant ways (especially, PN deprives us of the goods of life in the same way in which PH does).²

PR2. PN is not bad for us.

C. PH is not bad for us either.

In *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit argues that we, as normal human beings, naturally maintain asymmetric attitudes toward past and future sufferings. To illustrate this point, he considers a case where one may be either a patient who already underwent an extremely painful surgery for ten hours (without anaesthetics) or a patient who will

¹ Several writers have rejected this response, claiming that one could not have been born earlier than one actually was born. See, e.g., Nagel (1970), p. 79. Frederik Kaufman has developed a different approach for the same claim. See his (1996, 1999). Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer criticize Kaufman's approach in their (1998). In this paper, I shall grant that one could have been born earlier, and argue that this response is problematic for different reasons.

² As the statement in the parentheses indicates, here I intend that PR1 entails what Ishtiyaque Haji calls the symmetry thesis, according to which "our pre-vital times deprive us of life's goods in the same way in which our post-vital times do" (See Haji (1991), p. 171). I understand this thesis as entailing the conjunction of the following two propositions: (i) PH deprives us of the goods of life that we could have enjoyed had we died later; (ii) PN deprives us of the goods of life that we could have enjoyed had we been born earlier.

undergo the same surgery soon that will last for one hour.³ Parfit thinks, and most of us would agree, that the subject should prefer to be the former patient. According to Parfit, this case reveals that we are more concerned about future sufferings than past ones. Call this case *the Hospital Case*. According to Parfit, this case reveals that we are “biased toward the future,” in the sense that we are concerned about future sufferings more than past ones.

In discussing the Hospital Case, Brueckner and Fischer develop a strategy to block the Symmetry Argument. First, they argue that although the Hospital Case concerns our asymmetric attitudes toward past and future *sufferings*, the similar reasoning may be applied to establish a case that explains our asymmetric attitudes toward past and future *pleasures*. They say: “Imagine that you are in some hospital to test a drug. The drug induces intense pleasure for an hour followed by amnesia. You awaken and ask the nurse about your situation. She says that either you tried the drug yesterday (and had an hour of pleasure) or you will try the drug tomorrow (and will have an hour of pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow.”⁴ According to them, this case shows that there is an asymmetry in our attitudes toward experienced goods as well as toward experienced bads, in the sense that we care about future pleasures more than past pleasures. If this is correct, then PH is bad for us because it deprives us of our *future* pleasures. However, that does not mean that PN is also bad, since PN deprives us of our *past* pleasures, pleasures to which we are indifferent.

Employing this result, one can point out that the premises of the Symmetry Argument do not adequately support the proposed conclusion. Suppose we endorse both

³ Parfit (1984), pp. 165-166.

⁴ Brueckner and Fischer (1986), pp. 218-219.

PR1 and PR2. Since we endorse PR1, we have to grant that PN deprives us of life's goods in the same way that PH does. However, we can still argue that PH is bad for us while PN is not. No matter how similar PN and PH are to each other, they cannot be the same in one respect: PN is located in the past while PH is in the future. Since we do not care about past pleasures in the same way as we care about future pleasures, this difference is crucial: due to our asymmetric attitudes (or our "bias"), PH *is* bad for us even if PN is not.

In this paper, I shall examine the plausibility of the account given by Brueckner and Fischer. First, I will attempt to show that, in contrast to their view, PN can be seen as bad for us. However, this doesn't imply that PN is equally bad as PH. I will then show that their view regarding the badness of PH is consistent with the claim that PH is worse than PN. All these considerations will lead us to the refutation of the Symmetry Argument.

2. Why is prenatal nonexistence bad?

Brueckner and Fischer's discussion of Parfit's Hospital Case may seem to suggest that they would endorse some version of hedonistic assumption, according to which all goods are grounded upon pleasant experiences. Some writers may reject this assumption. For instance, Phillip Mitsis thinks that there are *non*-hedonistic experienced goods such as possessing proficiency in a foreign language, which is temporally neutral.⁵ He then argues that their view cannot explain the temporal neutrality of some non-hedonistic

⁵ Language proficiency may not be a good example of temporally neutral non-hedonistic goods, for it often involves generating some pleasures in the future. However, there may be better examples. For instance, it is good for one to give care to a dying person although it may not involve any pleasure for the caregiver.

experienced goods.⁶

It is not clear whether Brueckner and Fischer would indeed endorse the hedonistic assumption in question. However, even if the hedonistic assumption is true, I think it possible to make a case that causes a problem for their view. Consider the following case involving three possible worlds (Call this case *My Learning Japanese*):

The actual world: I was born in 1970 and will die in 2030. I am currently located in 2000 (so I am 30 years old). At this point of my life, my primary concern is to learn Japanese in order to have some pleasant experiences with my Japanese friends. For this reason, I am about to learn Japanese now. Before now, the rate at which I receive pleasure in my life was constant. By stipulation, I gained exactly α units of pleasure each year during that time. It will take exactly one year for me to master Japanese. During this year, I will gain/lose 0 unit of pleasure.⁷ Once I have mastered Japanese, I can spend my time having some pleasant experiences (including hanging out with my Japanese friends) again. During that time (i.e. the time after I master Japanese), the rate at which I receive pleasure will be also constant. By stipulation, I will gain exactly $\alpha + \beta$ units of pleasure each year during that time.

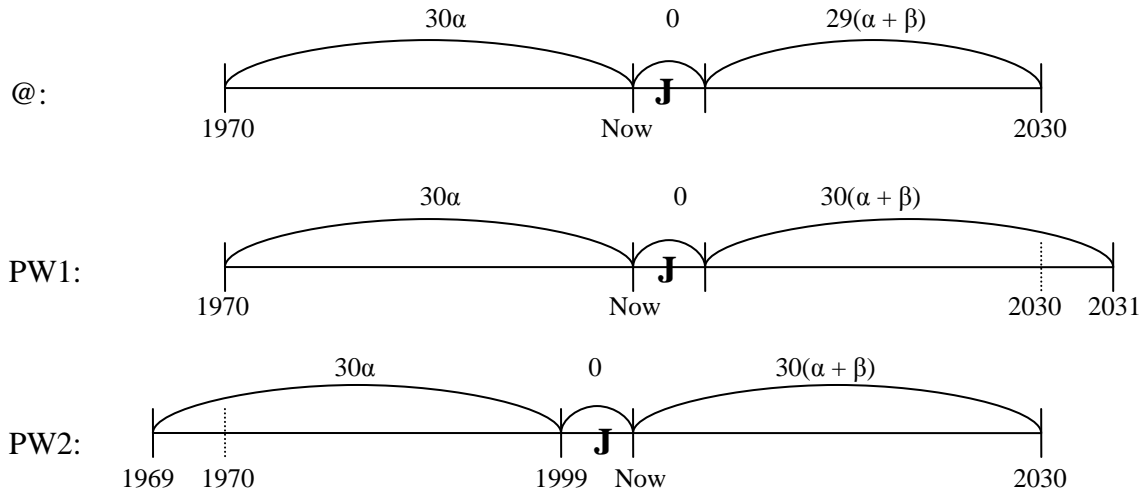
PW1: I was born in 1970 and will die in 2031. I am currently located in 2000 (so I am 30 years old). Everything else is held fixed relative to the actual world. Since the remaining time after mastering Japanese in this world is one year longer than that of the actual world, and since the rate at which I receive pleasure is constant during that time, the total units of pleasure in this world after mastering Japanese are greater than those of the actual world.

PW2: I was born in 1969 and will die in 2030. I am currently located in 2000 (so I am 31 years old). I started learning Japanese exactly one year ago and just have mastered it. I gained exactly α units of pleasure each year before I started learning Japanese. I have gained/lost 0 unit of pleasure during the time of my learning Japanese. After mastering Japanese (i.e. from now on), I will gain exactly $\alpha + \beta$ units of pleasure each year. Since the time after mastering Japanese in this world is one year longer than that of the actual world, the total units of pleasure in this world after mastering Japanese are greater than those of the actual world.

⁶ Mitsis (1988), pp. 317-318. n. 33.

⁷ Here, for simplicity's sake, I am imagining a situation where I enter some isolated language school for one year, and all the pleasures and sufferings that I experience during that time will be even out.

The Diagram of My Learning Japanese can be given as follows:



‘J’ indicates the time of my learning Japanese.

Here, I have every reason to prefer PW1 or PW2 to the actual world. However, it seems that I should be indifferent between PW1 and PW2—they seem equally good to me. For instance, in the actual world, I may wish I could have one more year to live in the future than the actual moment of my death so that I could enjoy pleasant experience my Japanese skill could bring for one more year. But I may *equally* wish I could have had one more year to master Japanese in the past. In that way, I could enjoy pleasant experience brought by my Japanese for 30 years in the future without spending a year now (from 2000 to 2001) for learning the language. In sum, I may reasonably wish I could die one year later, and I may *equally* reasonably wish I had been born one year earlier.

This is a problem for Brueckner and Fischer since they explain the asymmetry of PN and PH in terms of our preference for future goods (and indifference to past goods). As they would agree, PN deprives us of our past times, and during those times

we could have been engaged in certain activities that will create some pleasure in the future. Then, since we do care about future pleasures, and, in some contexts, those future pleasures can only be generated by the projects we were engaged in in the past, we have reason to value our past projects. This is not because the past projects were pleasant at that time by themselves, but because they generate some pleasures in the future. However, that does not change the fact that we should value the past projects. And as long as we should value our past projects, and being engaged in those projects takes some time, we should be concerned about PN (as well as PH), since PN robs us of our past times during which we could have been engaged in some projects that would generate some pleasures in the future. My Learning Japanese was designed to illustrate the point that PN, as well as PH, *can* deprive us of the kind of good that we care about (e.g. some future pleasure). That is, the past extra year in PW2 and the future extra year in PW1 can equally be used for exactly the same project: learning Japanese; and that project will generate some pleasures *in the future* equally in PW1 and PW2. This is the reason why I, in the actual world, should regret the deprivation of the past extra year (which is deprived of by PN) in exactly the same way as I should regret the deprivation of the future extra year (which is deprived of by PH).

I grant that My Learning Japanese is highly stipulative. But there is some analogous way of thinking that we might have in everyday life. For instance, one might say, “If only I had been born earlier, then I could have made a better future for myself.” This sentiment seems reasonable, and it is the kind of intuition that My Learning Japanese is grounded upon.

3. Why is death worse than prenatal nonexistence?

My Learning Japanese illustrates that PN, as well as PH, *can* deprive us of our future goods. If, as Brueckner and Fischer claim, it is future experienced goods that we are concerned about, and PN, as well as PH, can deprive us of future goods, then we need to explain why only PH, but not PN, is bad for us.

It is important to note that despite this problem, Brueckner and Fischer can still plausibly explain the badness of death. They are committed to the following two claims:

(i) PH is bad for us since it is a deprivation of future goods, goods that we care about, and (ii) PN is not bad for us since it is a deprivation of past goods, goods to which we are indifferent.⁸ My Learning Japanese illustrates that (ii) is not true; however, it does not refute (i) at all (in fact, it does not even aim at (i)). Even if my argument against Brueckner and Fischer is sound, (i) may still be true. And (i), which seems to be plausible, alone is sufficient to explain the badness of death. Hence, the problem of Brueckner and Fischer is not that it fails to explain why death is bad, but that it fails to explain why PN is *not* bad.

The question to ask then is: “why is PN not bad for us?” (as opposed to “why is PH bad for us?”) We can answer this question by saying: “To some extent, PN *is* bad for us.” This may seem to be a surprising claim because many of us usually believe that PN is not bad. However, if we believe that we are concerned about future experienced goods, and that in some cases PN deprives us of such goods, then we should grant that PN is bad for us to some extent.

⁸ For instance, they say: “If death occurs in the future, then it is a deprivation of something to which we look forward and about which we care – *future* experienced goods. But prenatal nonexistence is a deprivation of *past* experienced goods, goods to which we are indifferent. Death deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent.” See Brueckner and Fischer (1986), p. 219.

This is by no means to say that PN is as bad as PH. As a matter of fact, we can plausibly argue that PH is worse than PN. To see this point, consider My Learning Japanese again. There we have seen that PN can *instrumentally* deprive us of future experienced goods in the sense that it deprives us of some (past) time, and during that time we could have been engaged in some project that would generate some future goods. Can we say the same thing about PH? That is, does PH instrumentally deprive us of future goods as well? I think it could. PH deprives us of some future time during which we could be engaged in some project that will generate some goods later than that time. In this sense, PH can be instrumentally bad for us just like PN. However, there is a difference. PN deprives us of the time during which we could have been engaged in *past* projects; and although sometimes past projects yield future goods (which we care about), sometimes they yield past goods (which we do not care about as much as future goods). On the other hand, future projects *always* yield future goods (which we care about). Then, since PH deprives us of the times during which we can be engaged in *future* projects, which in turn will yield only future goods, it *always* leads us to the loss of future goods. However, PN does not always lead us to the loss of future goods since it deprives us of the times during which we can be engaged in *past* projects. Hence, given that we favor future goods over past goods, PH is worse than PN.

Here is a slightly different way of thinking that PH is worse than PN. PN deprives us of our past time while PH deprives us of our future time; and although past projects yield some past goods, they may yield some future goods as well. On the other hand, future projects only yield future goods. In this respect, the time deprived by PH is the time during which we could receive benefits from past projects as well as future projects. On the other hand, the time deprived by PN is the time we could have received

benefits only from past projects. In this sense, the loss of the time deprived by PH is more unfortunate for us than that deprived by PN. Hence, PH is worse than PN.⁹

Admittedly, the way that PH or PN deprives us of life's goods is not always instrumental. Sometimes they deprive us of goods without recourse to any project. For instance, during the time deprived by PN or PH, one could have been sitting on a beach having some pleasant experience. Talking of this non-instrumental deprivation, PH is also worse than PN. In this case, PN deprives us of the *past* time during which we could have immediately had experienced goods; and we are not much concerned about such deprivation. On the other hand, PH deprives us of the *future* time during which we could immediately have experienced goods; and we do care about that kind of deprivation much.

These considerations clearly show that PH is worse than PN. If we grant that PH is worse than PN, perhaps it is not that surprising to claim that PN is bad to some extent. Having this point in mind, consider the Symmetry Argument again. Now, we can argue that the Symmetry Argument is defective at least in two respects. First, as Brueckner and Fischer have argued, PR1 and PR2 do not adequately support the proposed conclusion.¹⁰ In addition, PR2 is not true because PN is bad for us to some extent. On these two grounds, the Symmetry Argument can plausibly be refuted.

⁹ I am indebted to Luke Manning for the argument in this paragraph.

¹⁰ Note that I have never attempted to reject this claim. My objection to Brueckner and Fischer is only about their claim that PN is *not* bad since it deprives us of something about which we do not care. I have no objection to their other claim that PH is bad since it deprives us of something about which we care. *This* claim alone is sufficient to show that PR1 and PR2 do not support the conclusion of the Symmetry Argument in the adequate manner.

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