

Death's Badness and Time-Relativity: A Reply to Purves

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Forthcoming in *Journal of Ethics*; please cite published version.

Abstract According to John Martin Fischer and Anthony Brueckner's unique version of the deprivation approach to accounting for death's badness, it is rational for us to have asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. In previous work, I have defended this approach against a criticism raised by Jens Johansson by attempting to show that Johansson's criticism relies on an example that is incoherent. Recently, Duncan Purves has argued that my defense reveals an incoherence not only in Johansson's example but also in Fischer and Brueckner's approach itself. Here I argue that by paying special attention to a certain feature of Fischer and Brueckner's approach, we can dispense of not only Johansson's criticism but also of Purves's objection to Fischer and Brueckner's approach.

Keywords Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, Death, Deprivation approach, Jens Johansson, Duncan Purves, Time-relativity

1. Introduction

On the assumption that one's death (the condition of being dead) results in nonexistence, it is surprisingly difficult to account for the common-sense belief that death can be bad for the one who has died. Epicureans resort to the denial of the common-sense belief, but others try to rescue the belief by adopting the "deprivation approach" to accounting for death's badness. On this approach, death can be bad for the one who has died by depriving her of various goods (e.g., pleasures) that she would have had had she not died. An objection to this approach is the Lucretian symmetry argument, which says that since death (i.e., posthumous nonexistence) and prenatal nonexistence are mirror images of each other, and since we do not take one's prenatal nonexistence to be bad for her even though it deprives her of goods, death is not bad for the one who has died either. The deprivation approach appears to be on the ropes, and with it the common-sense belief about death's badness.

In a series of articles, however, John Martin Fischer and Anthony Brueckner defend a novel version of the deprivation approach that is well-suited for a response to the Lucretian symmetry argument. Essential to their account is that death is bad for the one who dies only

insofar as it deprives her of goods that it was actually rational for her to care about. Given our actual preference patterns, which privilege future goods over past goods, it is rational for us to care about the goods of which death can deprive us and not about the goods of which a later birth might have deprived us. I have offered a defense of this novel approach against a recent criticism raised by Jens Johansson, and Duncan Purves has replied that my attempt to defend the approach relies on a principle that would, if true, show that the approach is actually incoherent. The aim of this paper is to defend Fischer and Brueckner's approach against this most recent criticism offered by Purves; the principle on which Purves thinks my reply to Johansson relies states that what it is rational for an agent to care about is not time-relative, but, as I argue, this principle is false and not something on which Fischer and Brueckner need to rely in order to respond to Johansson's objection. To this end, I will briefly summarize the debate, then explain Purves's objection to Fischer and Brueckner's approach, and then provide a reply to Purves.

2. A Brief Summary of the Debate

Originally, Brueckner and Fischer claimed that “[d]eath deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent” (Brueckner and Fischer 1986: 219).¹ More recently, though, in response to criticisms by Fred Feldman (2011) and Jens Johansson (2013, 2014), Fischer and Brueckner have added what I will call a “rationality component” to their view: “Although we originally put our point in terms of

¹ Fischer and Brueckner use the following Parfit-inspired (see Parfit 1984) thought experiment to show that we do in fact have asymmetric attitudes toward past and future goods (in this case, pleasures):

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. (Brueckner and Fischer 1986: 218-219)

what we took to be people's actual preference patterns, we should have put it in terms of the rationality of such patterns of preference" (Fischer and Brueckner 2014; see also Fischer and Brueckner 2012). They have come to articulate their view as follows:

BF*(dd)*²: When death is bad for an individual X, it is bad for X because it is rational for X to care about having pleasant experiences after t (where t is the time of his death), and his death deprives him of having pleasant experiences after t (whereas prenatal non-existence is not bad for a person because, even though it deprives him of having had pleasant experiences before t* [where t* is the time at which he came into existence], it is not rational for him to care about having had pleasant experiences before t*). (Fischer and Brueckner 2014: 4)

Not only do our actual preference patterns favor future goods (such as pleasant experiences) over past goods, but, on Fischer and Brueckner's view, these preference patterns are rational ones.

Johansson offers two criticisms of BF*(dd)*, and both will turn out to be relevant to my reply to Purves.³ The first of Johansson's criticisms is that

...just as how well off I am in a certain possible world *w* does not seem to depend on what I care about in some world other than *w* [reference to earlier section omitted], so it does

² This name 'BF*(dd)*' requires a key: 'BF' refers to Brueckner and Fischer, 'dd' to the fact that it is a *de dicto* construal of Fischer and Brueckner's position, and the asterisks to independent modifications of the *de dicto* construal of Fischer and Brueckner's position.

³ As Fischer and Brueckner (Fischer and Brueckner 2014: 4) see it, Johansson raises three criticisms of their view, the first of which is avoided in the most recent formulation of the view, BF*(dd)*, which leaves two remaining criticisms. Johansson (Johansson 2013: 62) sees the first of these two remaining criticisms as an objection to Fischer and Brueckner's claim that they are rescuing the standard deprivation approach, and he sees the second criticism as an objection to taking an alternative approach. As I noted in my reply to Johansson (Cyr 2014: 335), Fischer and Brueckner take both criticisms as criticisms of their actual view, and so, I take it, we should understand BF*(dd)* to be an alternative to the standard deprivation approach (one that Fischer and Brueckner take to be particularly well-suited for a response to the Lucretian symmetry argument).

not seem to depend on what it is rational for me to care about in some world other than w [reference to earlier section omitted]. It might well depend on what it is rational for me to care about in w ; but there is no reason to deny that if I had been born earlier, it *would* have been rational for me to care about the pleasures that I would thereby receive.

(Johansson 2013: 63)

In response to this criticism, Fischer and Brueckner have said of Johansson that

...as he moves to different possible worlds in order to evaluate the relevant counterfactuals, he is *also* illicitly changing temporal perspectives: he is moving from a temporally situated perspective posited to be *after* some of the relevant pleasures and *before* others to either a nonlocalized temporal perspective or a temporally situated perspective *before or during* all of the pleasures in question. This shift of temporal perspective is inappropriate and results in distorted and inaccurate judgments. (Fischer and Brueckner 2014: 6)

When we are considering whether it is in fact rational for someone to care about some experience (which is potentially good or bad for the person), we must hold fixed that person's actual temporal perspective. I return to this point below.

Johansson's second criticism relies on the following thought experiment:

Suppose you are able to torture me, but do not. Suppose also that I do not, in fact, care about the prospect of being in pain. (For instance, I might have managed to take up an attitude of indifference towards anything that might happen to my body.) Surely it is still good for me that you refrain from torturing me—at least if I *would* have cared very much about the pain if it *were* inflicted upon me, and if that scenario would be overall worse for me than the actual scenario. And pleasure can hardly be different in this regard. If you

prevent me from receiving pleasant experiences which I do not actually care about, but which I would have cared about if I had gotten them and which would have made me overall much better off, then you are acting against my interests. (Johansson 2013: 62)

What this example aims to show is that there are cases in which someone, call her “Susan,” does not actually care about some pain (or pleasure) and yet it would be bad (or good, in the case of pleasure) for Susan if she were actually to receive it. And since prenatal nonexistence deprives us of pleasures that we would have cared about had we come into existence earlier, Johansson thinks that there is no asymmetry in what is bad for us between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence.

In reply to this criticism, I have argued that the addition of a rationality component to Fischer and Brueckner’s view (which is captured by $BF^*(dd)^*$) enables them to avoid the criticism altogether. In order for the example supporting the criticism to be relevant to $BF^*(dd)^*$, we need to imagine both that it is not actually rational for Susan to care about torture (even though torture would make her on balance worse off) and that, if Susan were to be tortured, it would be rational for her to care about being tortured. In order for this to be coherent, both of the following claims must be true:

(A) It is not actually rational for Susan to care about whether or not she is painfully tortured.

(B) If Susan were to be tortured, it would be rational for her to care about painful torture.

(Cyr 2014: 337)

But these claims are mutually exclusive, so the case on which Johansson’s criticism relies is incoherent.

3. Purves on (Non-)Time-Relativity

Purves concedes that the conjunction of (A) and (B) is incoherent, and thus that Johansson's example itself is incoherent, but he thinks that my case for the mutual exclusivity of (A) and (B) relies on a principle which actually shows Fischer and Brueckner's approach to be incoherent as well (Purves 2015: 217). In my case for the mutual exclusivity of (A) and (B), I argued:

If (A) were true, it would have to be for the reason that Susan is so constituted that she would not "feel" or "be bothered by" pain if she were subjected to it, or for some very similar reason. According to (B), though, it would also have to be the case that it would be rational for Susan to care about being tortured if it were to happen to her. But it would not be rational for her to care about it if she could not "feel" pain (or "be bothered by" pain, or something of this sort), as we have stipulated in order to explain how (A) might be true...Whatever it is that makes it the case that it is rational for Susan to care about torture when she is actually tortured *also* makes it the case that it is rational for her to care about it when she is not being tortured...it cannot be rational for her not to care about torture at any time if it is rational for her to care about it when she is being tortured. (Cyr 2014: 337–338)

Purves emphasizes the last sentence of the preceding passage and says that it constitutes an endorsement of the following principle:

Non-time-relativity (NTR): If it is rational for a subject S to care about an event e in a possible world w at a time t , then it is rational for S to care about e in a possible world w^* at a time t^* [where t^* is a time before or after t]. (Purves 2015: 216)

If (B) were true, then a world w in which Susan is tortured is one in which it is rational for her to care about being tortured at time t . But, according to NTR, it follows that it is rational for Susan

to care about being tortured in some other world w^* (presumably in which she is not tortured) at some other time t^* , and this contradicts (A). Thus, given NTR, the example is incoherent.

As Purves goes on to argue, however, NTR not only shows Johansson's example to be incoherent, but it also is a principle that would, if true, show Fischer and Brueckner's approach (BF*(dd)*) to be incoherent. Purves argues:

Suppose that w is the actual world and that t^* is the actual time of my coming into existence. Suppose that w^* is a possible world at which I come into existence at some time *prior* to t^* , and at which I enjoy pleasures at times prior to t^* . At w^* , we can assume, it is rational for me to care about the pleasures I enjoy at times prior to t^* . [BF*(dd)*] explains why prenatal non-existence is not bad in the following way: prenatal non-existence is not bad *because*, at w , it is not rational for me to care, at times after t^* ...about pleasures that obtain at w^* at times before t^* , *even though* at w^* it is rational to care about the pleasures that obtain at times prior to t^* . [BF*(dd)*]'s explanation of the non-badness of prenatal non-existence violates NTR. If it is rational at w^* to care about pleasures that obtain at times before t^* , then NTR *entails* that, at w , it is rational, at times after t^* , to care about these pleasures. (Purves 2015: 217)

If Purves is right and my case for the mutual exclusivity of (A) and (B) relies on a principle which would actually show Fischer and Brueckner's approach to be incoherent as well, this would be problematic; my aim in showing Johansson's example to be incoherent was to *defend* Fischer and Brueckner's position, not to undermine it.

4. Time(-Relativity) Is on My Side

Fortunately, as I will argue in this section, NTR is both false and also not necessary to show the incoherence of Johansson's example, i.e., I can show the incoherence of Johansson's

example without appealing to NTR.⁴ In showing this, I will appeal to a different principle, “time-relativity” (TR), which is not at odds with Fischer and Brueckner’s approach.

To see that NTR is false, we need only imagine a case in which an agent comes to care about something that she did not care about previously. For example, imagine that Fernando does not, at some time t^* , like the taste of hoppy beer, but that, as a result of trying other styles of beer (perhaps he really likes sour beers) over the course of a few years, Fernando comes to enjoy, at some later time t , even hoppier beers which he previously did not like, such that he now cares about having a hoppy beer. In this example, Fernando cares about the event of having a hoppy beer at t (and, we can assume, it is rational for him to care about this event at t , given the preferences he has developed) even though he did not care about this event at an earlier time t^* (and it would not have been rational for him to care about this event at t^* , given his preferences then). But consider NTR:

Non-time-relativity (NTR): If it is rational for a subject S to care about an event e in a possible world w at a time t , then it is rational for S to care about e in a possible world w^* at a time t^* [where t^* is a time before or after t]. (Purves 2015: 216)

According to this principle, if it is rational for Fernando to care about having a hoppy beer at t , then it is also rational for him to care about having a hoppy beer at time t^* .⁵ But, given Fernando’s preferences at those times, the antecedent of that conditional is true and the consequent false; it is rational for Fernando to care about having a hoppy beer at t but not

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Purves is committed to the truth of NTR; I only discuss problems with the principle because doing so will be helpful in creating an alternative principle to show the incoherence of Johansson’s example.

⁵ For simplicity’s sake, I have dropped references to the possible worlds at issue. Presumably the two worlds can be the same world, or at least identical in all respects relevant to this case. One complication with NTR (and, as I see it, an additional reason to set aside references to the possible worlds to which it refers) is that it is not clear what connections there must be between the possible worlds to which it refers, other than that S must be in both worlds.

rational for him to care about that at t^* . And since Fernando's case is a perfectly typical one, it is clear that NTR is false.⁶

To vindicate Fischer and Brueckner's approach while maintaining that Johansson's example is incoherent, we need a principle that does not show Fischer and Brueckner's approach to be incoherent but that does show Johansson's example to be incoherent. And this is where Fischer and Brueckner's response to Johansson's *first* criticism comes into play. Johansson has argued that what it is rational for a person to care about does not depend on what it is rational for her to care about in some *other* possible world, and so, he thinks, "there is no reason to deny that if I had been born earlier, it *would* have been rational for me to care about the pleasures that I would thereby receive" (Johansson 2013: 63). In their response to this objection, Fischer and Brueckner indicate what I take to be helpful constraints on a principle that will show Johansson's example (but not their own approach) to be incoherent. They say of Johansson that

...as he moves to different possible worlds in order to evaluate the relevant counterfactuals, he is *also* illicitly changing temporal perspectives: he is moving from a temporally situated perspective posited to be *after* some of the relevant pleasures and *before* others to either a nonlocalized temporal perspective or a temporally situated

⁶ One way to bolster NTR in order to avoid this problem would be to build into the principle the requirement that we hold fixed certain features of the agent, including her preferences, when we consider the other possible world:

Non-time-relativity* (NTR*): If it is rational for a subject S to care about an event e in a possible world w at a time t , then it is rational for S to care about e in a possible world w^* at a time t^* [where t^* is a time before or after t] provided that S's preferences in w^* at t^* are the same as her preferences in w at t .

In addition to being better suited to show the incoherence of Johansson's example and also to avoid the problem raised by the case of Fernando, NTR* would be just as problematic for Fischer and Brueckner's approach as is NTR. But, since there is a different principle to which Fischer and Brueckner can appeal to show the incoherence of Johansson's example (one that does not show their own approach to be incoherent too), we can set aside NTR*. Thanks to Duncan Purves and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin for discussion on this point.

perspective *before or during* all of the pleasures in question. This shift of temporal perspective is inappropriate and results in distorted and inaccurate judgments. (Fischer and Brueckner 2014: 6)

Since we must hold fixed the temporal perspective in question when making judgments about what it is rational for a person to care about in other possible worlds, *failing* to hold fixed that temporal perspective can result in a judgment that it is rational for an agent to care about some event even though it is not rational for her to care about it in the actual world. In Fernando's case, for example, if we ask, at the earlier time t^* , whether it would be rational for Fernando to care about having a hoppy beer, it would be an illicit temporal shift to imagine a later time t (in some other world) in which Fernando has already developed a preference for hoppy beers and to claim, on that basis, that it is rational for Fernando to care about having a hoppy beer at t^* .

Fischer and Brueckner are careful to make clear that we cannot infer from its being rational for someone to care about something now that it is rational for them to care about that thing at some other time (and in some other world).

In place of NTR, then, we need a principle that can accomplish two things: first, it must reflect Fischer and Brueckner's requirement that we hold fixed one's temporal perspective when asking about what it is rational to care about in some other world; second, it must show Johansson's example to be coherent. Recall that, in order for Johansson's example to be coherent, both of the following claims must be true:

(A) It is not actually rational for Susan to care about whether or not she is painfully tortured.

(B) If Susan were to be tortured, it would be rational for her to care about painful torture.

In attempt to show that these claims are mutually exclusive, I have argued:

Whatever it is that makes it the case that it is rational for Susan to care about torture when she is actually tortured *also* makes it the case that it is rational for her to care about it when she is not being tortured. This is not to say that she must care about torture to the same extent when she is not being tortured as when she is; rather it is just to say that it cannot be rational for her not to care about torture at any time if it is rational for her to care about it when she is being tortured. She might be indifferent toward the prospect of pain, as we supposed when considering Johansson's original thought experiment, but if it is rational for her to care about pain when she is in pain then it cannot be rational for her not to care at all about pain at any other time. (Cyr 2014: 337–338)

The references to *times* in the preceding passage led Purves to suppose that I endorsed NTR, but notice that the references to those times constitute an endorsement of a much weaker principle, one which *does* maintain the time-relativity of what it is rational to care about (and which privileges present and future pleasures/pains over past ones):

Time-relativity (TR): If it is rational for a subject S to care at time t in a possible world w about an event e that may occur at time t^* , where t^* is later than or identical to t , then it is rational for S to care at t in a (relevantly similar) possible world w^* about e that may occur at t^* (where t^* is later than or identical to t).⁷

According to TR, if it is rational for Susan to care about painful torture when she is being tortured, as (B) maintains, then it is rational for her to care about painful torture in some (relevantly similar) other world in which she is not tortured *provided that* we are holding fixed a certain temporal perspective, one that is simultaneous with or prior to the painful torture.⁸ Now,

⁷ Thanks to Philip Swenson for discussion on the formulation of this principle.

⁸ In other words, when we shift to another possible world, we hold fixed two sets of things: first, all of the facts about Susan that ground whether or not it is rational for her to care about torture,

whatever makes it the case that (A) is true, such as that Susan is so constituted that she would not “feel” or “be bothered by” pain if she were subjected to it (or some very similar reason), will also make it the case that it would not be rational for Susan to care about being tortured if it were to happen to her, which contradicts (B) since, according to TR, (B) implies that it *is* rational for Susan to care about painful torture when it happens to her. Without appealing to NTR, then, it can be shown that (A) and (B) are mutually exclusive and thus that Johansson’s example is incoherent.

Furthermore, TR is consistent with the example of Fernando, discussed above, and also with Fischer and Brueckner’s approach to accounting for death’s badness. Holding fixed the temporal perspective of Fernando at time t^* , when he does not have a taste for hoppy beer, it is not rational for him to care about having a hoppy beer in another possible world with slightly different circumstances. Imagine that Fernando is offered a hoppy beer in world w but not in world w^* ; given the facts about Fernando at t^* , it is not rational for him to care about having a hoppy beer in either world. Unlike NTR, though, TR is not committed to the impossibility of a case in which what it is rational for an agent to care about changes over time (such as a case, like Fernando’s, in which an agent comes to care about something that she did not care about previously). Moreover, as should be clear, TR is built out of Fischer and Brueckner’s response to Johansson’s first criticism, and so TR is not only compatible with Fischer and Brueckner’s approach but also something which they already accept; in order to avoid illicit temporal shifts when making judgments about counterfactual scenarios, according to Fischer and Brueckner, we need to hold fixed the temporal perspective of the agent in question, and this, I take it, constitutes an endorsement of TR.

and second, the temporal relation between Susan and the painful torture (in this case, Susan is temporally located *prior to* the potential painful torture).

5. Conclusion

Given that both an earlier death and a later birth can deprive one of goods she might otherwise have had, it is difficult to make sense of the ordinary asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. Fischer and Brueckner have developed a novel version of the deprivation approach to accounting for death's badness, a version that is particularly well-suited for a response to the Lucretian symmetry argument. What is novel about their version is its "rationality component," which justifies asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence by appealing to what it is in fact rational for us to care about, given our current temporal perspective. As I have tried to make clear in responding to an objection to the approach raised by Purves, the time-relative (or, in other words, temporally-situated) feature of Fischer and Brueckner's rationality component is crucial to their approach; by paying special attention to this feature, which Fischer and Brueckner make clear in their reply to Johansson's first criticism of their view, we can dispense not only of Johansson's second criticism but also of Purves's objection to Fischer and Brueckner's approach.

Acknowledgments Thanks to the participants in the Immortality Project's Younger Scholars Workshop, especially to Ben Mitchell-Yellin, Duncan Purves, and Philip Swenson, for helpful discussion of an earlier draft of this paper. Special thanks to John Fischer, too, for insightful comments on the paper.

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