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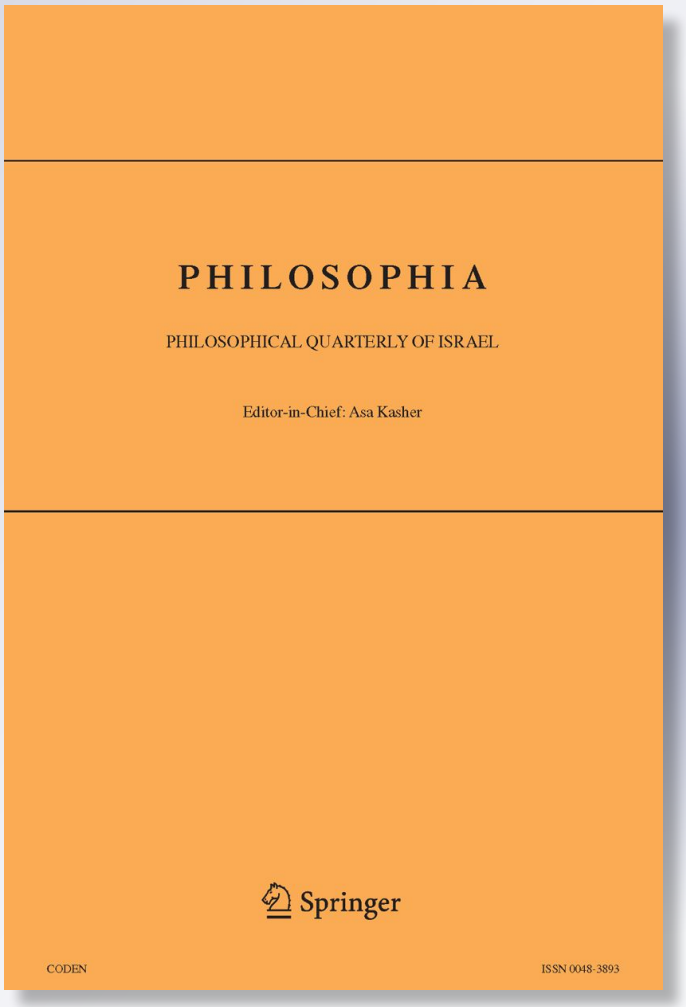

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Abstract A primary argument against the badness of death (known as the Symmetry Argument) appeals to an alleged symmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. The Symmetry Argument has posed a serious threat to those who hold that death is bad because it deprives us of life's goods that would have been available had we died later. Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer develop an influential strategy to cope with the Symmetry Argument. In their attempt to break the symmetry, they claim that due to our preference of future experiential goods over past ones, posthumous nonexistence is bad for us, whereas prenatal nonexistence is not. Granting their presumption about our preference, however, it is questionable that prenatal nonexistence is not bad. This consideration does not necessarily indicate their defeat against the Symmetry Argument. I present a better response to the Symmetry Argument: the symmetry is broken, not because posthumous nonexistence is bad while prenatal nonexistence is not, but because (regardless as to whether prenatal nonexistence is bad) posthumous nonexistence is even worse.

Keywords Brueckner and Fischer · Death · Prenatal nonexistence · Posthumous nonexistence · Symmetry argument

The Symmetry Argument

Many philosophers hold that death is bad for us because the subsequent posthumous nonexistence deprives us of the goods which would have been available to us had we continued to live. Death is a deprivation in the sense that it takes away from us something we would have enjoyed had we died later, something valuable that would have otherwise been ours.

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An important challenge to this "deprivation account" for death's badness is inspired by Lucretius's observation that posthumous nonexistence is the perfect mirror image of prenatal nonexistence.[1] If death is bad because it is a deprivation, the argument goes, there is a good reason to think that prenatal nonexistence is also bad. For prenatal nonexistence is a deprivation as well in the sense that we would have gained more good from life had we been born earlier than our actual time of birth.[2] Prenatal nonexistence deprives the past goods that would have otherwise been ours in much the same way that posthumous nonexistence deprives us of possible future goods. Nevertheless, we do not seem to treat prenatal nonexistence with the same dread and fear we typically display when considering posthumous nonexistence. Quite the contrary, we treat past nonexistence with complete indifference and equanimity. If our equanimous attitude toward prenatal nonexistence is rational (or, at least, not irrational), this is indicative of the non-badness of prenatal nonexistence. This line of reasoning seems to tell us an important fact: it supposes that prenatal nonexistence deprives us of possible goods, but nevertheless concludes that it is not bad for us. Hence, the argument shows that the mere fact that something deprives us of some possible goods is insufficient grounds to think that it is therefore bad. The same reasoning may apply to posthumous nonexistence: the mere fact that posthumous nonexistence deprives us of some possible goods is not sufficient for its badness.

The kernel of this reasoning has often been referred to as *the Symmetry Argument*: since prenatal and posthumous nonexistence are perfectly symmetrical, and since

[1] Lucretius 2007: 101, where he writes, "Look back again—how the endless ages of time come to pass before our birth are nothing to us. This is a looking glass Nature holds up for us in which we see the time to come after we finally die. What is it there that looks so fearsome? What's so tragic? Isn't it more peaceful than any sleep?" On the face of it, this remark hardly says anything about the evil (or badness) of death. Rather, it implicitly suggests that our attitude toward death is in fact *irrational*. For this reason, Lucretius's statement might seem irrelevant to a discussion as to why death is *bad*. However, the preceding remark can be charitably interpreted as making an important point about the evil of death. For instance, one may argue that if Lucretius is right in thinking that our attitude toward posthumous nonexistence is wholly irrational, that is probably because posthumous nonexistence is not bad for us after all. For if posthumous nonexistence is indeed bad, the fear we have toward it should not be irrational.

[2] Two strategies have been developed in objection to this claim. First, some writers have rejected it on the ground that one could *not* have existed substantially earlier than one's actual origin. See, e.g., Nagel 1970: 79. Nagel's view seems to be committed to two kinds of essentialist claims: (i) the particular gametes from which one is developed are essential to one's identity, and (ii) the actual time at which one is conceived is essential to one's identity. Many philosophers have rejected at least one of them. See, e.g., Parfit 1984:175, Brueckner and Fischer 1986: 214–15; 1993a: fn. 2, and Rosenbaum 1989: 360–63. Frederik Kaufman suggests a different approach for the same conclusion Nagel reached. See his 1996 and 1999. His view is that although one's "thin" metaphysical self—the one stripped of one's biographical history along with particular psychological states and characteristics—could have existed substantially earlier, one's "thick" self that contains such history and characteristics could not, and only the thick self is pertinent in discussing the deprivation of death. I doubt that Kaufman's approach is successful as I deny that the kind of biographical and psychological components Kaufman has in mind are the only elements that matter with respect to one's survival. But I will not press this point further because it would be beyond the scope of this article. For further discussions, see Brueckner and Fischer 1998; Belshaw 2000; Fischer 2006; Johansson 2008. For the purpose of this article, I shall grant that one could indeed have existed substantially earlier than one's actual origin. Another strategy for denying that one would have had more goods with an earlier origin is given by Fred Feldman, who has argued that there is no reason to suppose that an earlier birth will guarantee a longer life (1991: 221–24; 1992: 154–56). Some commentators, however, illustrated circumstances where an earlier origin does tend to ensure a longer life. For instance, suppose a gigantic asteroid is predicted to hit the surface of the Earth next week, which will cause the immediate extinction of humankind. In such a case, most of us would have lived longer had we been born significantly earlier (Kagan 2007). See also McMahan 2006: 216–17.

prenatal nonexistence is not bad for us, posthumous nonexistence is not bad, either.[3] Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer attempt to argue against the Symmetry Argument by breaking the symmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. Like most advocates of the deprivation account, they attempt to show that posthumous nonexistence is bad for us while prenatal nonexistence is not. Crucial in their argument is the presumption that only future experiential goods, but not the past ones, is of value to us. In this article, I shall point out that granting this presumption, it is questionable that prenatal nonexistence is not bad for us, contra Brueckner and Fischer. This consideration, though, is not necessarily in favor of the Symmetry Argument. Rather, I shall show that with their presumption that only future intrinsic goods matter, the symmetry can be broken a bit differently: whether or not prenatal nonexistence is bad, posthumous nonexistence is even worse than prenatal nonexistence—hence, the asymmetry. At the end of this article, then, I shall proffer several grounds to hold that posthumous nonexistence is worse, thereby breaking the symmetry.

Why is it Questionable that Prenatal Nonexistence is not Bad?

In response to the Symmetry Argument, Brueckner and Fischer develop an influential strategy to account for the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence, appealing to our asymmetrical attitude toward past and future experiences. To this end, they adduce a well-known thought experiment given by Derek Parfit (1984: 165–66). Parfit considers a case where someone wakes up from the bed in a hospital, unable to remember what has happened to him in the last several hours. Then, he learns that he may be either (i) a patient who already underwent an extremely painful surgery (performed without using anaesthetics) or (ii) a patient who will undergo equally painful surgery quite soon. Parfit thinks, and most of us would agree, that the patient should strongly prefer that the former is the case. This illustrates that we naturally maintain asymmetric attitude toward past and future sufferings, in the sense that we are (or ought to be) concerned about future sufferings in the way we are not concerned about past ones.

Brueckner and Fischer argue that similar reasoning may be applied to a case that illustrates our asymmetric attitudes toward past and future *pleasures*, as opposed to past and future *sufferings*. They write:

> 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

[3] One might wonder how this argument might be relevant to a discussion on the evil of *death*, unless death is to be equated with posthumous nonexistence. However, within the framework of the deprivation account, it is safe to say that the badness of death, for the most part, consists in the badness of posthumous nonexistence. Though death is not identical to posthumous nonexistence, it *gives rise to* the subsequent nonexistence, thereby depriving us of possible goods. For this reason, I shall assume that explaining the badness of posthumous nonexistence amounts to explaining the badness of death.

pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow. (1986: 218–19)

According to this argument, our attitudes toward experienced *goods* are asymmetrical just like our attitudes toward experienced *bads*: we care about future pleasures in the way we do not care about past pleasures. If this is correct, they argue, posthumous nonexistence is bad for us because it deprives us of our *future* goods, goods that we care about. However, the same reasoning does not apply to prenatal nonexistence: i.e., prenatal nonexistence is not bad since it deprives us of our *past* goods, goods to which we are indifferent. This observation supposedly reveals the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence: only the latter deprives us of the kinds of goods about which we are concerned.[4]

Note that Brueckner and Fischer fairly clearly limit their discussion to the kinds of goods that are experienced as good or bad by their subject (1986: 216). So, their contention is that as far as *experiential* goods are concerned, only posthumous nonexistence, but not prenatal nonexistence, deprives us of the kinds of goods about which we are concerned.[5] I think this is mistaken. Even if we grant that past goods are of no concern to us at all, prenatal nonexistence can still be bad for us. This is because prenatal nonexistence can potentially deprive us of *future* goods. Given that future goods are the kind of goods we care about, prenatal nonexistence can be bad for us. To illustrate this point, consider the following story that involves a comparison between two possible worlds[6]:

[4] It is important to note that in Brueckner and Fischer's discussion of our asymmetrical attitudes toward past and future experience, it is presumed that evaluating the value of an experience is indexed to *the time in which one is objectively placed*. An experience can only be regarded as being in the future or in the past relative to a particular point of time. Hence, on this presumption, it is no wonder that the value of one single experience can be measured differently depending on the time of its evaluation. For instance, the prospect of undergoing a painful surgery may be dreadful, but once it is over, the *same* event in retrospect may not be too awful. This does not mean that the surgery has both a negative and a neutral value *at the same time*. A surgery taking place during a certain period of time p is regarded as being in the future relative to a time before p, but as being in the past relative to a time after p. Therefore, one may be indifferent to a painful surgery that he had yesterday because the surgery is objectively in the past, though it can of course be regarded as being in the future relative to a time before yesterday. Many thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to clarify this point.

[5] This claim, in turn, is based on the following presumption: as far as experiential goods are concerned, only future goods, and not past goods, matter to us. Some might raise a question on this presumption. Christopher Belshaw, for instance, argues that past pleasures are of value to us insofar as it provides us with positive aftereffects such as good memories (1993: 106–7). Brueckner and Fischer reply that Belshaw's objection causes no trouble for their contention that past goods are of no value to us *as such* (1993b: 329–30). Another possible line of reasoning in response to Belshaw would be to argue that though it may not be true that past experiential goods are of *no* value to us at all, it would still be true that in general future experiential goods are of *more* value to us than past experiential goods; and this latter claim is sufficient to account for the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. For instance, one might argue as follows: past goods are of less value to us than future goods; posthumous nonexistence deprives us of future goods while prenatal nonexistence deprives us of past goods; hence, the two kinds of nonexistence are asymmetrical. Though I believe that it would be more promising to base Brueckner and Fischer's argument on the weaker presumption that the past goods are of less value to us, I will not question their own presumption (that past goods are of no value to us) in what follows. The main arguments that I will put forward in the remainder of this article will work, *mutatis mutandis*, on either presumption.

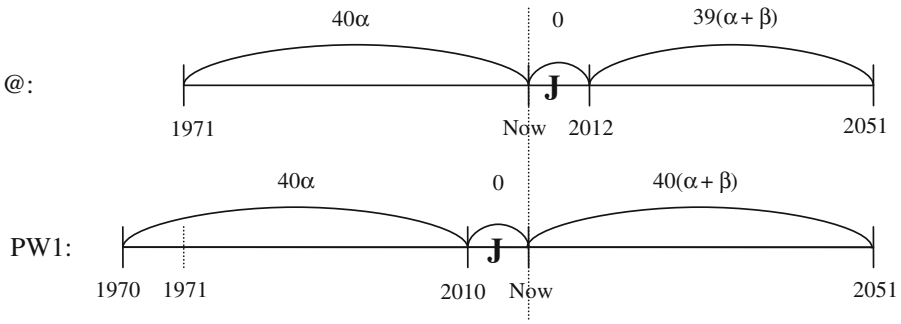
[6] Here I will assume that some version of hedonism is true purely for simplicity's sake. An analogous conclusion would follow even without this assumption.

Learning Japanese

The actual world: I am a historian specializing in East Asian history and cultures. I was born in 1971 and will die in 2051. It is currently 2011, so I am 40 years old. At this point in my life, my primary concern is to learn Japanese in order to hang out with my Japanese colleagues. For this reason, I am now about to learn Japanese. Before now, the rate at which I received pleasure in my life was constant. By stipulation, I have until now gained exactly α units of pleasure each year. It will take exactly 1 year for me to master Japanese. During this year, I will gain/lose 0 units of pleasure.[7] Once I have mastered Japanese, I can once again enjoy pleasant experiences (including hanging out with my Japanese friends) with my time. By stipulation, I will gain exactly $\alpha+\beta$ units of pleasure each year after mastering Japanese, the addition thanks to my proficiency in the language.

PW1: I was born in 1970 and will die in 2051. It is currently 2011, so I am 41 years old. I started learning Japanese exactly 1 year ago and have just mastered it. I gained exactly α units of pleasure each year before I started learning Japanese. I have gained/lost 0 units of pleasure during the time I was learning Japanese. After mastering Japanese, I will gain exactly $\alpha+\beta$ units of pleasure each year. Since the time I am alive after mastering Japanese in this world is 1 year longer than that of the actual world, the total units of pleasure I take in this world after mastering Japanese are greater than those of the actual world.

The Diagram of Learning Japanese can be depicted as follows:



I grant that the Learning Japanese example is highly stipulative. However, there is an analogous way of thinking that we might have in everyday life. For instance, one might say, "If only I had been born earlier, I could have made a better future for myself." This sentiment seems reasonable, and it is the kind of intuition that Learning Japanese is meant to capture. Having said that, in this example I have every reason to prefer PW1 to the actual world. In the actual world, I might wish I could have 1 more year to live in the future beyond the actual moment of my death so that I could enjoy for 1 more year the pleasant experiences resulting from my skill with

[7] This assumption may seem unrealistic, for people may take pleasure in learning a new language. However, the point that I am making through this example is hardly affected by this observation.

Japanese. However, I may equally wish that I could *have had* 1 more year in the past to master Japanese. In that way, I would be able to enjoy the pleasant experiences resulting from my skill with Japanese in the future without spending a year now learning the language. In sum, I may rationally wish both that I could die 1 year later, and that I had been born 1 year earlier.

This consideration poses a problem for Brueckner and Fischer. Their argument for the non-badness of prenatal nonexistence is based on our deep-seated preference toward future intrinsic goods. However, as the diagram clearly indicates, more future goods obtain in PW1, a possible world where I had an earlier origin. Hence, Learning Japanese illustrates that prenatal nonexistence can be bad even from their point of view.

Prenatal nonexistence deprives us of our past times. During those times, we could have been engaged in certain activities that would have created some pleasure in the future. Since we do care about future pleasures, and, in some contexts, those future pleasures can only be generated by the projects in which we were engaged in the past, we have reason to value our past projects. This is not because our past projects were necessarily pleasant at the time when we were engaged in them, but because they generated some pleasures in the future. Still, as long as we should value our past projects at all, and assuming that being engaged in those projects takes some time, we should be concerned about what is deprived by prenatal nonexistence. Prenatal nonexistence robs us of our past times during which we could have been engaged in projects that would generate some goods in the future. Learning Japanese was designed to demonstrate the point that prenatal nonexistence, like posthumous nonexistence, *can* deprive us of the kinds of goods about which we care (e.g., future pleasure). The additional time in the past that would have been available to us, had we had an earlier origin, could have been used for whatever project we might have had, and such a project may generate some pleasures *in the future*. Hence, if Brueckner and Fischer are right in positing that only future goods matter to us, then the preceding observation may be the basis for the badness of prenatal nonexistence. Prenatal nonexistence marks our later origin, thereby depriving us of past times that might have been spent for generating future goods.[8]

[8] Though Brueckner and Fischer limit their discussion on the evil of death in terms of experiential goods, another line of thinking may be used to support the badness of prenatal nonexistence in terms of *non-experiential* goods. To illustrate this point, consider a variant of Parfit's hospital case given by Jeff McMahan (2006: 219): one wakes up in a hospital in a state of temporary but not total amnesia; he then learns that he may be either (i) a terminal patient at the age of 40 or (ii) a terminal patient at the age of 60; it turns out that in either case, he has only about one month to live. Given that the quality of the remaining future is relatively similar in each life, we can plausibly suppose that he would prefer to be the 60-year-old patient. After all, the 60-year-old would likely have accomplished more, since he would have lived longer. This suggests that past achievements should matter to us, not because they contribute to the quality of our lives in the future, but because they make our lives *as a whole* more fertile and fulfilling. (To reinforce this observation, McMahan introduces the words of Harold Brodkey before he died from AIDS: "I like what I've written, the stories and two novels. If I had to give up what I've written in order to be clear of this disease, I wouldn't do it" (2006: 219).) If this is correct, then we can see how prenatal nonexistence deprives us of non-experiential goods. Personal achievement in the past is a primary example of a non-experiential good. Suppose the aforementioned patient turned out to be the 40-year-old. He might as well say, "I wish I were the 60-year-old. Then I would have lived 20 more years in the past, during which I might have had more achievements. That means I would have led a more fulfilling life." These words of lament seem reasonable. Prenatal nonexistence takes away past times that would have been ours had we had an earlier origin. During those past times, we might have produced some past achievement that would have made our lives better as a whole. In this sense, prenatal nonexistence deprives us of possible past non-experiential goods. Since we care about *having had* those goods, prenatal nonexistence is bad.

Why is Posthumous Nonexistence Worse?

So far I have shown how prenatal nonexistence may be considered to be bad for us under Brueckner and Fischer's presumption that future intrinsic goods, but not past ones, are of value to us. This observation poses a problem for their project of breaking the symmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence by showing that the latter is bad for us while the former is not. Note, however, that the problem is not that they fail to explain why posthumous nonexistence is bad, but that they fail to explain why prenatal nonexistence is *not* bad. To claim that prenatal nonexistence is bad is entirely compatible with holding that posthumous nonexistence is even worse. Hence, regardless as to whether prenatal nonexistence is bad, one can successfully break the symmetry by showing that posthumous nonexistence is worse. For the remainder of this article, then, I shall proffer several grounds on which to hold that posthumous nonexistence is worse than prenatal nonexistence.

To this end, let me first make a distinction between *direct* and *indirect* deprivation. Prenatal or posthumous nonexistence *directly* deprives us of intrinsic goods in the sense that they deprive us of some time during which we could have been engaged in some *immediately* pleasant experience. For instance, during the time we were deprived, we could have gone to an amusement park or could have taken a nice stroll along the beach. In such cases, prenatal or posthumous nonexistence deprives us of life's goods without recourse to any project. However, the way that they deprive us of goods is not entirely direct. Prenatal or posthumous nonexistence can be thought to *indirectly* deprive us of intrinsic goods in the sense that they deprive us of some time, during which we could have been engaged in a project that would ensure us intrinsic goods at some later time. Learning Japanese illustrates a possible circumstance where prenatal nonexistence indirectly deprives us of some future experienced goods; in depriving us of time during which we could have learned Japanese, it deprives us of some pleasant experiences in the future that would have been generated by the acquisition of that skill. Posthumous nonexistence can also be thought to indirectly deprive us of future intrinsic goods by depriving us of some future time during which we could have been engaged in a project that would have generated some intrinsic goods even later than that future time. My contention is that both direct and indirect deprivation caused by posthumous nonexistence is generally greater than the deprivation of either type caused by prenatal nonexistence.

It is plain enough that posthumous nonexistence is worse than prenatal nonexistence in terms of their resulting direct deprivations. Prenatal and posthumous nonexistence deprive us of past and future times, respectively, during which we could have *immediately* had experiential goods. Therefore, prenatal nonexistence is bound to cause the direct deprivation of *past* intrinsic goods, whereas posthumous nonexistence causes the direct deprivation of *future* intrinsic goods. Given that only future intrinsic goods are of value to us, as described in the previous section, we ought to regret only the deprivation of future goods. Of course, this is precisely what Brueckner and Fischer argued. I am mentioning this point merely for the sake of completeness, with no intention of claiming originality. My contribution to this issue is to expound how the loss caused by posthumous nonexistence is in general greater than the loss caused by prenatal nonexistence in regard to *indirect deprivation*. I shall now begin to argue towards this point.

As the first step of weighing the evils of prenatal and posthumous nonexistence in terms of indirect deprivation, I will make a further distinction between two different kinds of projects (or activities) with respect to the fixed and unfixed resultant benefits. A certain kind of project provides fixed benefits. Most paid jobs offer a regular income: the money is gone once you spend it. Similarly, in cooking a dish, the satisfaction you get from the food will not last forever. This kind of project generates no further or recurring goods as the benefits are fixed. By contrast, the benefits of some projects are not fixed. In this kind of project, once the project is completed, the benefits from its completion normally last for quite some time—often as long, in fact, as the person lives. Some typical examples include learning how to communicate with sign language, how to play the piano, how to ride a bike, and how to taste wine. Once we master these activities, there is no limit to the amount of joy we may derive from them. I shall call these two kinds of projects, respectively, *projects with fixed benefits* (PFBs), and *projects with on-going benefits* (POBs). My contention is that, as concerns indirect deprivation, posthumous nonexistence is generally worse than prenatal nonexistence in terms of both PFBs and POBs.

Let us first examine the deprivations of the benefits obtained from PFBs. Prenatal nonexistence deprives us of time during which we could have been engaged in *past* PFBs. Although the benefits from those past PFBs might have entirely occurred in the future, in which case they would have yielded entirely future intrinsic goods (which we do care about), it may be that at least some of the benefits might have occurred in the past, in which case they would have yielded past intrinsic goods (to which we are indifferent or at least about which we do not care as much as future intrinsic goods). For instance, if I would have earned some extra money in my counterfactual life with an earlier origin (by engaging in some project during the additional past time that would have been available to me in that counterfactual life), some of the money might have already been spent in exchange for past pleasant experiences. In short, past PFBs do not always yield future pleasures (or the kind of intrinsic goods about which we care). On the other hand, future PFBs *always* yield future intrinsic goods. All of the extra money that I would earn in my counterfactual life with a later death (by engaging in some project during the additional, counterfactual future time) could only be used in the future. Since posthumous nonexistence deprives us of time during which we could only be engaged in *future* PFBs that yield in turn only future intrinsic goods, it *always* leads to the loss of future intrinsic goods. By contrast, prenatal nonexistence does *not* always lead to the loss of future intrinsic goods, since it deprives us of time during which we could only have been engaged in *past* PFBs, which might sometimes have yielded past intrinsic goods. Hence, given that we favor future intrinsic goods over past ones, posthumous nonexistence is worse than prenatal nonexistence.

Concerning the deprivations of the benefits obtained from POBs, the same conclusion follows. Prenatal nonexistence deprives us of some past time, while posthumous nonexistence deprives us of some future time. Since the benefits from POBs last for quite a long time, one could benefit at a given future time from both past and future POBs. In this sense, posthumous nonexistence deprives us in the future of the potential benefits of *both* past and future POBs. By contrast, prenatal nonexistence deprives us of a time during which we could have benefitted *only* from past POBs. For instance, suppose in actuality I learned how to ride a bike in the

remote past, and will learn Japanese in the near future. Here it can be said that prenatal nonexistence deprives me of the time in the past I might have used to ride a bike, whereas posthumous nonexistence deprives me of a future time during which I might have enjoyed *greater* benefits from having a pleasant conversation with my Japanese friend while riding a bike at the same time. In short, the benefits that I might gain given a later death tend to be greater than the benefits that I might have gotten with an earlier origin. In this respect, the loss of the time caused by posthumous nonexistence is more unfortunate for us than that caused by prenatal nonexistence. Hence, in considering the deprivations of the intrinsic goods involving POBs, on this account as well, posthumous nonexistence is worse than prenatal nonexistence.

According to Brueckner and Fischer's influential approach to refuting the Symmetry Argument, posthumous nonexistence is bad, but prenatal nonexistence is not. They argue that this is due to our deep-seated preference of future intrinsic goods. As I have discussed here, the very existence of such a preference provides a reason to doubt that prenatal nonexistence is indeed bad. The better strategy for them is to argue that assuming the truth of their presumption of our preference, posthumous nonexistence is even worse regardless as to whether prenatal nonexistence is bad. The symmetry is broken not because the prenatal nonexistence is not bad, but because posthumous nonexistence is worse.

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