

The Symmetry Argument Against the Deprivation Account

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Abstract Here I respond to Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer's "The Evil of Death: A Reply to Yi." They developed an influential strategy in defense of the deprivation account of death's badness against the Lucretian symmetry problem. The core of their argument consists in the claim that it is rational for us to welcome future intrinsic goods while being indifferent to past intrinsic goods. Previously, I argued that their approach is compatible with the evil of late birth insofar as an earlier birth would have generated more goods in the future. In reply, Brueckner and Fischer argue that my critique fails to appreciate an important aspect of their thought experiment, which aims only to show that the deprivation of past goods per se is not bad for us. Thus, purportedly, my critique poses no threat to their view. Here I argue that since the deprivation account explains the evil of death with recourse to how one's life *would* have fared had one lived longer, it ought to respond to the symmetry problem with reference to how one's life *would* have fared had one been born earlier. However, it is not generally true that the life one *would* have had with an earlier birth is not preferable to one's actual life, because in many cases such a life would contain more future goods.

Keywords Brueckner and Fischer · Death · Deprivation account · Evil of death · Symmetry argument

The Brueckner/Fischer Approach and My Critique

According to the most popular exposition on the evil of death, death is bad for one who dies because it deprives one of possible goods that one would have otherwise enjoyed

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in a longer life marked by a later death. Defenders of this “deprivation account,” as it is commonly called, face a complication stemming from Lucretius’s observation that posthumous non-existence is simply a mirror image of prenatal non-existence. Just as an earlier death deprives us of the goods we would have had were we to die later, a later birth deprives us of the goods we would have had if we had been born earlier. Nevertheless, it seems inappropriate to regret the fact that we were born at the time of our actual births and not earlier. Likewise, the argument goes, the fact that death deprives us of possible goods is insufficient grounds to think that it’s bad for us to die at the time of our actual deaths and not later.

In addressing the Lucretian symmetry argument, Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer take note of the fact that an earlier death deprives us of additional intrinsic goods in the future whereas a later birth deprives us of intrinsic goods in the past. They then claim that it is (arguably) rational for us to care about having future pleasant experiences while being indifferent to having had past pleasant experiences (Brueckner and Fischer 1986, 1993a, b, 2013). To support this point, they suggest the following thought-experiment:

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. (1986: 218–19)

This example is intended to demonstrate our asymmetric attitudes towards past and future pleasant experiences. According to Brueckner and Fischer, these asymmetrical attitudes are rationally grounded.¹ In their view, the badness of an early death lies in the fact that it deprives us of what is rational for us to care about, namely, future intrinsic goods. On the other hand, we have no reason to regret a late birth, because that merely deprives us of what is rational for us to remain indifferent to, namely, past intrinsic goods.

In regard to the Brueckner/Fischer approach, I have previously argued that, granting their claim about the rationality of our asymmetrical attitudes, late birth can still be deemed bad because it can potentially deprive us of what is rational for us to care about, namely, future intrinsic goods (Yi 2012: 297–300). Had I been born earlier, I would have been given more time in the past, during which time I probably would have engaged in at least some activities or projects that would in turn have generated more intrinsic goods in the future. To illustrate this point, I offered an example involving learning a new language, calling it *Learning Japanese* (Yi 2012: 298–299). Suppose I am about to learn Japanese for the purpose of deriving pleasure from using it fluently, though I do not enjoy the process of learning it at all. In this context, I may rationally wish that I had been born earlier, because then I could have used the additional, available past time to learn the language. More precisely, in a life trajectory plotted just like the actual one where I am about to learn Japanese, but which begins

¹ They refer to Fischer 2006 and Moller 2002 for justification of the claim that these asymmetrical attitudes are rational. One may not find these approaches convincing, but I will not question their soundness here.

sufficiently earlier, I would by now have already mastered the language. In this alternative life with an earlier origin, the painful process of learning Japanese would be behind me, and therefore the net amount of future pleasures ahead of me in this life would be greater than that in my actual life. In this sense, my pursuit of learning Japanese might be called a “future-goods-generating” activity. Then, owing to future-goods-generating activities of this sort, late birth not only deprives us of past pleasures, but also (indirectly) deprives us of future pleasures. Given Brueckner and Fischer’s claim that it is rational for us to care about future pleasures, we have reason to regret our being born at the time when we were actually born (rather than earlier), insofar as late birth deprives us of such future pleasures. Thus, I have concluded that their argument about the non-badness of our birth fails.² The lateness of our actual birth deprives us not only of what is rational for us to be indifferent to, but also of what is rational for us to care about.

Brueckner and Fischer’s Response to My Critique

In response to my argument, Brueckner and Fischer agree that we may rationally prefer a life with an earlier origin insofar as being born earlier would secure more goods in the future. However, they maintain that this agreement causes no trouble for their treatment of the Lucretian symmetry problem. This is because they deny that my observation about the deprivation of future goods by late birth bears any relevance to what their approach aims to achieve. They explicitly state that the goal of their project is limited to a defense of the deprivation account against the Lucretian objection. They write:

Over the years we have offered a strategy of response to the Lucretian Mirror Image Argument insofar as it is a critique of the deprivation account of death’s badness. We did not thereby intend to (nor is there any reason to suppose that we would thereby need to) offer a general theory of value or of meaningfulness in life. These are of course extremely important and large projects, but they were not in the scope of *our* project, which has had as its more limited goal a reply to Lucretius on behalf of the deprivation account. (Brueckner and Fischer 2014b: 746)

More specifically, they identify the goal of their project in terms of what they call the Lucretian Symmetry and the Commonsense Asymmetry. According to them, the Lucretian Symmetry is “the idea that we should have symmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence,” while the Commonsense Asymmetry in attitudes is the thesis that “in general (and apart from special circumstances) we regard

² It may seem that Brueckner and Fischer are not straightforwardly arguing for the *non*-badness of late birth, because they sometimes qualify their conclusion by saying that late birth is not bad *in the way that early death is bad* (Brueckner and Fischer 1986: 219; 1993b: 327). However, if I am right in suggesting that late birth can deprive us of future intrinsic goods, then late birth should be bad precisely in the way that early death is bad—that is, they both deprive us of what is rational for us to care about. Furthermore, Brueckner and Fischer, at least on one occasion, explicitly endorsed a thesis that ascribes the non-badness of late birth to the fact that it is not rational for us to care about our being deprived of pleasant experiences as a result of late birth (Brueckner and Fischer 2013: 787).

our prospective deaths as bad and to be regretted whereas we are relatively indifferent to the fact that we were born when we actually were born, rather than earlier” (Brueckner and Fischer 2014b: 745). They claim that the deprivation account requires them to deny the Lucretian Symmetry and accept the Commonsense Asymmetry in its place but that none of this entails that my observation about the badness of late birth be false.

In particular, they note that their rejection of the Lucretian Symmetry attends to our indifference to pleasant past experiences per se, as opposed to past experiences or activities that we value only because they contribute to generating further pleasures afterwards. They write:

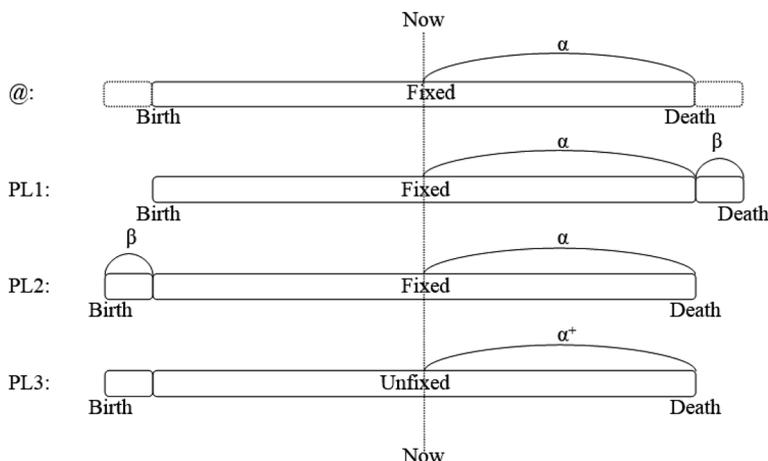
Note that our Parfit-style thought experiment involved considering episodes of pleasure in the past and future *to be followed by amnesia*. Thus, the past pleasures and the activities that generated them would be screened off from the future and would not be able to generate more pleasures in the future. The employment of such thought-experiments, with the analytical device of the amnesia-inducing drug, helps to isolate the past pleasures; we ask whether an individual would care about them, given that they do *not* lead to greater pleasures in the future. This is the sort of thought-experiment relevant to the deprivation theory of death's badness, because the exact moment of one's birth constitutes a similar sort of deprivation to the exact moment of one's death *only if one holds fixed the total amount of pleasure in the future and only adjusts the beginning of one's life*. That one would prefer to have been born earlier in circumstances in which an earlier birth would increase one's future pleasures is beside the point here; it is completely compatible with rejection of the Lucretian Symmetry, which requires that the total amount of pleasure in the future be held fixed. (Brueckner and Fischer 2014b: 745)

Since the particular purpose of the Brueckner/Fisher approach is to reject the Lucretian Symmetry and to vindicate the Commonsense Asymmetry, they maintain that “[a]ll [they] are committed to, and all any proponent of the deprivation account is committed to, is that *holding fixed the total amount of pleasure in the future and the overall value of the life* (measured in some way other than simply by aggregating pleasure), we are (relatively) indifferent to the fact of our late births” (Brueckner and Fischer 2014b: 746). So they claim that their approach remains unscathed by my observation that late birth can be bad insofar as it deprives one of future goods. We may of course rationally prefer a life with an earlier birth *and* a better future, while being indifferent to a life with an earlier birth that holds fixed the total amount of future pleasures and the overall value of life.

Reply to Brueckner and Fischer

It is clear from their earlier remarks that Brueckner and Fischer purport to apply their strategy only to comparisons involving *a certain restricted set of* counterfactual lives—namely, a structurally symmetrical pair of counterfactual lives that contain extensions of past and future experiences at the end or at the beginning of one's actual lifespan, while *holding the net amount of future intrinsic goods fixed during the stretch of time that coincides with the actual*

lifespan. This qualification may help them deal with what they take to be the exact target of their strategy, but I believe it holds them back from making a full-fledged defense of the deprivation account against the Lucretian objection. The following timelines will be useful in elucidating the dialectical structure of the current debate:



Let @ be my actual life that contains a certain amount of intrinsic goods in the future—as represented by α . Two bars with dotted outlines are attached at both ends of my actual lifespan to represent possible extensions of my life marked either by an earlier birth or by a later death. Let PL1 be the counterfactual life that I would have lived had I not died at the time of my actual death, with some additional goods and values—represented by β —to be had during the extension of my life at the end. Let PL2 be another possible life where (i) an extension is added to my actual lifespan at the beginning that has the same length as the extension in PL1,³ and (ii) this extension is followed by a course of life the overall worth and net hedonic value of which are held fixed relative to the overall worth and net hedonic value of @. Finally, let PL3 be a possible life where (i) an extension is added to my lifespan at the beginning, an extension of the same length as the extension in PL1, and (ii) this extension is followed by a course of life the overall worth and net hedonic value of which are *not* held fixed relative to those of @ due to past episodes in my life that generate future intrinsic goods. In particular, let the amount of future goods in PL3—represented by α^+ —be greater than α due to some additional goods obtained by future-goods-generating episodes in the past. Brueckner and Fischer seem to think that the sort of possible lives relevant to addressing the Lucretian symmetry problem are @, PL1, and PL2, because they claim that “the exact moment of one’s birth constitutes a similar sort of deprivation to the exact moment of one’s death *only if one holds fixed the total amount of pleasure in the future and only adjusts the beginning of one’s life.*” Thus, according to

³ I suppose that the net amount of goods obtained during the extended period of time in PL2 need not be β . I only stipulate that it is β to highlight the structural symmetry of PL1 and PL2.

them, my critique is simply irrelevant to their approach because it seeks to establish the badness of late birth by comparing @ and PL3, rather than @ and PL2.

In response, I note that according to most advocates of the deprivation account, PL2 is not paired with PL1 in addressing the Lucretian symmetry problem. Philosophers describe the deprivation account in slightly different terms, but virtually all eminent proponents of the view, Brueckner and Fischer included, characterize the evil of death with reference to what *would* have been the case in the counterfactual life where one dies later.⁴ Thomas Nagel, whom Brueckner and Fischer claim to follow, characterizes the privative nature of death as follows: “[A man] has lost his life, and if he had not died, he *would* have continued to live it, and to possess whatever good there is in living” (Nagel 1970: 78, emphasis mine). Brueckner and Fischer recently defined the deprivation account in similar terms: “death is bad for the individual who has died insofar as it deprives the individual of what *would* on balance be worthwhile or good” (Brueckner and Fischer 2014a: 1, emphasis mine).

Crucially, in the aforementioned quotations, the evil of death is explained in terms of what *would* have been the case, as opposed to what merely *could* have occurred, had one not died. What merely could have happened seems to have no real practical force in one’s actual life. For example, when Beethoven suffered a severe form of tinnitus, his loss of hearing was bad for him only insofar as he *would* have been better off without it. Of course, he could have been in a much worse state in which he had not lost hearing ability; any series of strange or unlikely events may have led him to a difficult and miserable life, possibly much worse than his actual life as a deaf person. Nonetheless, the existence of such remote possible worlds would have offered him little consolation in real life. His loss of hearing was still bad for him because he *would* have been better off without such a disability; the fact that he *could* have been worse off still is simply irrelevant.

If we apply this same line of reasoning to one’s birth, the badness of late birth must be explained in terms of what *would* have been the case, as opposed to what merely could have been the case, had one been born earlier.⁵ Indeed, most influential strategies in response to the Lucretian symmetry problem attempt to establish that what *would* have been the case with an earlier birth is not rationally preferable to one’s actual life. Jeff McMahan, for example, argues that one may not prefer to live a longer life with an earlier origin because such a life *would* not contain the particulars about which one cares in one’s actual life.⁶ Also, Fred Feldman claims that one need not regret being born at the time of one’s actual birth because there is no reason to suppose that

⁴ Strictly speaking, they characterize it in terms of what would have been the case had one died later *holding fixed the time of one’s birth*. In what follows, I will drop this constraint to avoid unnecessary complexity.

⁵ Here, too, I should say that the evil of late birth should be explained with reference to what would have been the case had one been born earlier *holding fixed the time of one’s death*. To simplify the exposition, I will drop this constraint in what follows.

⁶ McMahan writes, “I still may not regret having my actual life instead [even if, with an earlier origin, my life would have been better even by reference to the general values that inform my actual life]. ... In that life, for example, my actual wife would have been too young for me to marry, and we would never have met in any case. So I would never have had my actual children.” (2006: 221) Here, in addressing the non-badness of a later birth, McMahan clearly alludes to what *would* have been the case in a life with an earlier birth.

one *would* have had a longer life in the *nearest* possible world where one was born earlier (1991: 221–23; 1992: 154–55).⁷ Even Brueckner and Fischer have said something along these lines on one recent occasion, while discussing the symmetry problem. They characterize a typical procedure for judging whether something is good or bad for someone as follows: we first “evaluate the nearest possible world in which the thing in question does not take place[;] [a]nd we evaluate the overall intrinsic goodness for the agent in that world, comparing it with the overall intrinsic goodness for the agent in the actual world” (Brueckner and Fischer 2014a: 8). From these observations, it seems clear that the proper corresponding part of the possible life with a later death in dealing with the Lucretian symmetry problem is the possible life one *would* have lived, as opposed to a life one *could* have lived, with an earlier birth.

However, once we focus on what *would* have been the case with an earlier birth, the general non-badness of prenatal non-existence may seem dubious. The defense of the Commonsense Asymmetry in part serves to establish that prenatal non-existence (or late birth) is in general (and apart from special circumstances) not bad for us. We can demonstrate that late birth is in general not bad for us by showing that it's generally true that the life one would have had with an earlier birth is not preferable to one's actual life. In the context of discussing the Brueckner/Fischer approach, which claims that it is not bad for us to be deprived of past intrinsic goods per se whereas it is bad for us to be deprived of future intrinsic goods, this amounts to showing that the net amount of future goods one would have had with an earlier birth would not, in general, be greater than the amount of future goods in one's actual life. My contention is that given the truth of Brueckner and Fischer's crucial assumption regarding the rationality of our asymmetrical attitudes toward future and past intrinsic goods, it is questionable that a life with an earlier birth would be in general not preferable to the actual life. This is because it is not generally true that one's life would not contain more future goods with an earlier birth (i.e., it is not generally true that one's life would contain the same or fewer future goods with an earlier birth). Here, I do not mean to argue that prenatal non-existence is in general *bad* for us (given the truth of the asymmetry of past and future intrinsic goods in value). What is established by the Commonsense Asymmetry, in part, is a general statement about the *non-badness* of late birth. In questioning this statement, I need not establish a general claim about the *badness* of late birth (given the truth of the asymmetry between past and future goods). (This is comparable to the fact that in order to refute that dogs are in general loyal, we need not show that dogs are in general *disloyal*. It is enough to show that there are sufficiently many instances of dogs that are not loyal.) What I need to show here is that it is not *generally* true that late birth is not bad for us (given the truth of the asymmetry). To explain by means of the timelines diagrammed above, the life one *would* have with an earlier birth is not likely to be in the form of PL2; rather, in many cases, it would be in the form of PL3. The example of *Learning Japanese* has been offered to illustrate that a person's life may

⁷ It may be argued that the nearest possible world in which an actual event occurring at time t does not occur need not be a world that is exactly like the actual world up to t . For example, the nearest possible world where I do not die at t , where in the actual world I never quit smoking and die from lung cancer at t , may be a possible world where I quit smoking sometime *before* t . Feldman, and perhaps some other proponents of the deprivation account as well, do not seem to distinguish between these two kinds of possible worlds. However, I disregard this point and ignore the difference between these two kinds of worlds for the sake of simplicity.

contain more future goods with an earlier birth.⁸ Brueckner and Fischer seem to think that this example only shows that *in some special circumstances* a person's life with an earlier birth would contain more future goods and that thus *in such a context*, the fact that she was born at the actual time of birth may be rationally regretted, a point to which Brueckner and Fischer have no reason to object.

In response to this, I want to first note that it is extremely common that a daily activity contributes to the generation of future intrinsic goods. For instance, it takes time for a child to learn to use simple eating utensils, such as spoons and chopsticks. Once she masters how to use them, this skill can come in handy in the future. The same goes with the use of more complex tools, such as computer software. We spend much time learning various skills, such as riding a bike, driving a car, playing the piano, appreciating the arts, cooking dishes, tasting wine, doing calculations, using sign languages, communicating with other people, and so on, all of which would find use in opportune future occasions. In fact, I think that for most daily activities, learning them would typically involve increasing utility in the future.

Now, when we imagine that an arbitrary person were instead born earlier, we do not know how her life *would* have unfolded with an earlier birth. However, one thing is clear: she would be guaranteed an extension of her life in the past. Some of the additional past time in that counterfactual life might have been spent on immediate pleasant experiences, such as bathing in hot springs and enjoying strolls on wonderful beaches. However, had she led a life typical to most ordinary people, some of that additional time might have been spent on activities that help produce future intrinsic goods. Given that the future-goods-generating feature is so prevalent in daily activities, therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that she would have been engaged in at least some such activities, which help increase future goods, during the additional past time secured by her earlier birth. Furthermore, Belshaw (1993: 106–7) argued that even when one spent time on immediate pleasant experiences, such past experiences *could* contribute to the generation of future pleasures insofar as they provide some positive aftereffects, such as happy memories. If this is correct, even the immediate pleasant experiences one would have had in the additional past time are conducive to increasing some future goods. In sum, if one were to be born earlier, given that one would lead a life typical to most people, it is reasonable to suppose that one would have been exposed to at least some future-goods-producing activities and at least some happy-memory-producing experiences (because our lives typically contain both).⁹

⁸ Again, I don't mean to argue that the example of *Learning Japanese* represents a typical case of how life's goods would be allocated if one were to be born earlier. I aim merely to argue that there are sufficiently many cases like this, and, therefore, that it is not *generally* true that the life one would have had with an earlier birth is not preferable.

⁹ There is another way in which to make this point. Suppose it is possible that the life of an arbitrary person with an earlier birth contains no more future goods, in the sense that there exists a possible world where she had never engaged in any future-goods-generating projects during the additional time secured by an earlier birth, and all the past pleasant experiences she had enjoyed during that additional time are screened off from present recollection by amnesia. Her life in such a possible world might look like PL2. However, there is no reason to think that *this* possible life is what she *would* have had if she had been born earlier. It is far more natural to think that if she had been born earlier, she would probably have engaged in at least some activities during the additional past time that would be causally accountable for obtaining at least some future pleasures, and that at least some of the pleasant experiences she would have had during the additional time would not have been followed by amnesia. Given that her life with an earlier birth would be similar to the life typical to most of us, such a possible life may look like PL3. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that in many cases, were one to be born earlier, one would have more future goods than one's actual life does, as illustrated by PL3.

On the other hand, there is no straightforward reason to suppose that one would be in general worse off with an earlier birth. I do not deny that there are cases where one would have been worse off with an earlier birth. For instance, it is possible that, with an earlier birth, one would have been engaged in certain illicit activities (such as joining a gang) that one did not carry out in actual life and that would make one's life completely wretched in the future. Nor do I deny that during the additional time obtained by an earlier birth, one could have had some experiences so traumatic that one would go through enormous suffering in the future, suffering which one need not have in actual life. However, I do not see how it is *generally* true that people would engage in such future-goods-decreasing activities or experiences if they were to be born earlier; moreover, even if they would, why would the decreased amount of future goods be in general greater than the amount of future goods increased by previous future-goods-generating activities or experiences? Therefore, it is not straightforward to conclude that it's *generally* true that the life one would have had if one had been born earlier contains the same or fewer future goods than the amount of future goods in one's actual life.¹⁰

One may object to my argument by observing that the past extension of life would not necessarily increase the goods of one's life; in fact, there are many cases in which an earlier birth would decrease the goods of one's life, or at least increase the bads. For instance, it may be argued that if one were to be born into dire circumstances, such as extreme poverty, the total net amount of pain would be greater in the life with an earlier birth; thus, one would have been worse off by having been born earlier.¹¹ In regards to this objection, I would first like to clarify that whether one would have had more pains *in the past* (i.e., past pains per se) with an earlier birth is not pertinent to the current debate on the Brueckner/Fischer approach, unless the increased pains in the past somehow affect one's wellbeing *in the future*. The Brueckner/Fischer approach

¹⁰ Brueckner and Fischer, for the sake of the argument, seek to accommodate the possibility that "our late births typically deprive us of future pleasures, and thus a total indifference to late birth would not be rationally justified." According to them, "[even if it is true that late birth typically deprive us of future goods.] it would still be rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth; it would still be the case that our early deaths are *significantly worse* than our late births (and thus that our attitudes should reflect this fact). ... [A] proponent of the Brueckner/Fischer approach can accept that it would be rational to regret late birth *somewhat*, if it really were true that *Learning Japanese* represents the typical case" (2014b: 746). I am sympathetic to the view that early deaths are significantly worse than late births, because I believe that late birth tends to deprive us of fewer future goods than does early death (Yi 2012: 301–3). Nevertheless, I want to note that appealing to the worse-ness of early death in defending the Commonsense Asymmetry might be at odds with the basic tenet of the Brueckner/Fischer approach. Brueckner and Fischer have attempted to explain the asymmetry in our attitudes toward late birth and early death in terms of the *contrasting* nature of the goods deprived by the former and the goods deprived by the latter. They have emphasized that these two are different *in kind* from each other: the goods deprived by early death are things one can rationally prefer, whereas the goods deprived by late birth are things to which one can rationally be indifferent (Brueckner and Fischer 1986: 219; 1993a: 43; and 2013: 784–85). Such a disparity constitutes the core of the Brueckner/Fischer approach in its justification of the Commonsense Asymmetry. However, if we try to defend the Commonsense Asymmetry on the grounds that the amount of future goods deprived by late birth tends to be less than the amount of future goods deprived by early death, we now appear to justify the asymmetry in terms of the difference *in magnitude* of the deprived goods: both early death and late birth deprive us of those elements about which it's rational for us to care (namely, future intrinsic goods), but the former tends to deprive us of more of such elements and that's why it's worse. Here, the justificatory basis of the Commonsense Asymmetry is sought in the difference in magnitude, rather than kind, of the deprived goods. One might argue that this is a fundamental departure from their original view.

¹¹ I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

suggests that whether a possible life is preferable to some other possible life depends on whether the former contains more goods *in the future*; whether it contains more pains in the past (or whether it contains less goods in the past) is not relevant insofar as it is not good for us to be deprived of past pains (and it is not bad for us to be deprived of past goods). Therefore, if what we are imagining here is a situation where the total net amount of bads in the entire life increases with an earlier birth because of increased *past* pains stemming from dire circumstances, yet the past pains are screened off from future life, the Brueckner/Fischer approach would hold that the life with an earlier birth in this context would not be less preferable to the actual life.

The question to ask with regard to this objection, then, is whether it is *generally* true that if a person born into dire circumstances were to be born earlier, this life would not be preferable to her actual life. Given that it is future intrinsic goods (as opposed to past intrinsic goods *per se*) that matter in judging which possible life is preferable, I do not see why such a life would be in general not preferable. It doesn't seem straightforward to me that the life with an earlier birth, in the context where one would suffer from dire circumstances during the additional past time, would in general contain the same amount or fewer future goods. On the contrary, it may be argued that in some cases, a life in an extremely harsh environment can be a cornerstone for establishing valuable future achievements. Frederick Douglass, for instance, was able to stand as a renowned social reformer after being born into the difficult life of a plantation slave (Douglass 1999). George Orwell experienced life in poverty as a vagrant and a dishwasher and, based on these experiences, later published a vivid portrait of the lowlife in a literary work (Orwell 2003). These illustrate that one may build a valuable future out of painful past experiences. Apart from those who are so talented and strong-willed as Orwell and Douglass, ordinary people, even when they suffer hardship, often have the chance to be exposed to valuable human relationships based on love and friendship, which may last long into the future. In addition, given the prevalence of future-goods-generating daily activities and experiences, it's likely that even people suffering from hardship would be involved in at least some future-goods-generating activities or experiences during the additional time obtained by an earlier birth. By contrast, I see no particular reason to think that people born into dire circumstances would *in general* have the same or fewer future goods had they been born earlier. It doesn't seem right to me that past pains *in general* contribute to a worse future.

Another possible objection stems from the fact that we do not appear to be in a position to know what would be the case if an actual event had not occurred. According to this objection, owing to our epistemic limitations, it would be difficult for us to judge whether one's life would have more goods in the future with an earlier birth and thus whether one would have been better off with an earlier birth.¹² In response, I would like to first note that this consideration also applies to those who want to argue that prenatal non-existence is in general not bad for us, since we equally suffer from the epistemic limitation as to whether one's life would have the same or fewer future goods with an earlier birth and thus as to whether one would have been worse off (or not particularly better off) with an earlier birth. In this respect, I think that any defender of the deprivation account against the Lucretian symmetry objection is in the same boat with me on this issue. Indeed, in some contexts, we may plausibly conclude what would be

¹² I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this objection.

the case in the relevant counterfactual scenario. For instance, when Feldman argues that one would not be guaranteed to have a longer life with an earlier birth, he holds one's lifespan constant (1991: 222–23; 1992: 155), even though we are not in an epistemic position to judge how long one would have lived if one were to be born earlier. Presumably Feldman thinks that it is fair to suppose that when one were to be born earlier, one would live approximately the same length of life as one's actual lifespan. In a similar fashion, given that we typically engage in future-goods-generating activities or experiences in our daily lives, as I observed above, it is reasonable to suppose that in many cases one would have been involved in at least some future-goods-generating activities or experiences during the additional time obtained by an earlier birth. Hence, despite our epistemic limitations, we may plausibly judge that it is not generally true that one would have the same or fewer future goods with an earlier birth.

In response to my claim that PL2 does not make a pertinent pair with PL1 in dealing with the Lucretian symmetry argument, Brueckner and Fischer might want to point out that in the Symmetry Argument, Lucretius referred only to the symmetry of our posthumous and prenatal non-existence without mentioning anything about the nature of the time during our existence.¹³ This may be the reason why they think that the sort of counterfactual lives relevant to exhibiting the asymmetry between early death and late birth are those (such as PL1 and PL2) that hold fixed the total amount of intrinsic goods during the span that coincides with the time of one's actual life. Since they have explicitly said that the aim of their project is to defend the deprivation account from the *Lucretian* symmetry argument, they might propose that my argument is simply irrelevant to their view. However, even if we grant that what is relevant to Lucretian Symmetry is a pair of structurally symmetrical, counterfactual lives, such as PL1 and PL2, opponents of the deprivation account, who do not necessarily follow Lucretius, could easily counter the deprivation account by pointing to a possible life like PL3. Then, Brueckner and Fischer's proposed solution, insofar as they aim to defend the deprivation account against criticism stemming from the Lucretian objection (as well as from the particular objection Lucretius himself had in mind), is inadequate as a general defense of the account.

In their reply to my critique, Brueckner and Fischer say that they need not deny that a possible life like PL3 is rationally preferable. They write:

It is important to note however that the deprivation account of death's badness (even together with the notion that we do not in general regret our late births) does *not* require acceptance of other claims about our attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence (and the specific time of our births). That is, there may indeed be special circumstances in which we know that by being born earlier, we would have better futures in terms of experiential goods. In this sort of case (of which *Learning Japanese* is an instance), it might indeed be rational to prefer to have been born earlier. It is crucial to see that we have never denied this point; nor are we required to deny it in virtue of accepting the deprivation account of death's

¹³ The relevant passage from *De Rerum Natura* goes as follows: "Look back now and consider how bygone ages of eternity that elapsed before our birth were nothing to us. Here, then, is a mirror in which nature shows us the time to come after our death. Do you see anything fearful in it? Do you perceive anything grim? Does it not appear more peaceful than the deepest sleep?" (Lucretius 2001: 94)

badness (together with the ancillary assumption about our indifference to our late births). What the deprivation account requires us to deny, given that we do not believe that our late births in general are bad for us, is the Lucretian Symmetry thesis. But denying the Lucretian Symmetry thesis, and accepting in its place the Commonsense Asymmetry, does *not* entail that it could not be rational in certain specific circumstances to prefer an earlier birth. We thus need not deny Yi's conclusions about his example, *Learning Japanese*. (Brueckner and Fischer 2014b: 745)

These remarks create the impression that I had challenged Brueckner and Fischer to reject my claim that a counterfactual life with an earlier birth (holding fixed one's actual time of death) may contain more future intrinsic goods, and therefore may be rationally preferable to the actual life. However, I do not mean to argue that the Brueckner/Fischer approach is incompatible with my claim that a life like PL3 is rationally preferable to @. Nor do I want to deny that we can rationally be indifferent to being born earlier in a life like PL2. We all agree that it is rational for us to prefer a life like PL3 and to be indifferent to a life like PL2. Instead, however, I want to point out that Brueckner and Fischer were on the wrong track in pointing to a life like PL2 in defending the Commonsense Asymmetry against the Lucretian objection. This is because a possible life like PL2 is not the right corresponding counterfactual to a life such as PL1 where one dies later, holding fixed the time of one's actual birth. The right kind of corresponding counterfactual life should be the life one *would* have had if one had been born earlier than the time of one's actual birth. Such a life would not be like PL2; rather, in many cases, it would be like PL3.

Conclusion

Brueckner and Fischer claim that they mean to apply their approach only to a peculiar pair of symmetrical, possible lives, such as PL1 and PL2. For this reason, they argue that my previous critique of their view misses the mark to the extent that it refers to a counterfactual life that does not hold fixed future goods. However, the deprivation account explains the badness of death by comparing one's actual life with the counterfactual life one *would* have had if one had died later. In order to judge the evil of one's birth in a way that corresponds to how the deprivation account addresses the evil of death, then, we ought to compare one's actual life with the counterfactual life one *would* have had if one had been born earlier. I argue that it is extremely unlikely that such a counterfactual life could be symmetrically paired with the counterfactual life marked by a later death in the way that Brueckner and Fischer envision. Once we focus our attention on what *would* be the case with an earlier birth, there is reason to suppose that in many cases, were one to be born earlier, one would have more future goods than in one's actual life. Given the rationality of our asymmetrical attitudes toward past and future goods, this may raise a question as to whether prenatal non-existence is *in general* not bad for us.

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