

Death, and the Human Preference for the Future

Britton Watson

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

December 2019

Death is a requirement for a life. If birth is the beginning of life, death is end of life. We may exist before we die and we may exist after we die. Or, we may only exist between birth and death. Either way, birth and death are demarcations of our known existence. Ideally, we live a full life of experiences, pleasures, and happiness for the longest possible time without suffering.

Hedonism attempts to measure this with a simple measurement: did *X* life have more pleasure than pain? If this is the simple hedonic definition of the good, what happens if the time factor of life changes? In theory, a longer life means greater pleasure can be attained. Conversely, it also means a greater amount of pain is equally possible. If a life is made of a beginning and end point, what happens to the quality of life if only one of those time factors shifts? This is the final puzzle Fred Feldman analyzes in *Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death*.

Late Birth vs. Early Death

If hedonism truly is as simple a proposition as the [good life = pleasure > pain], adding two time points changes the quality of life. For the purpose of this essay, death is labeled as $T2$ and birth is labeled as $T1$. The simplest time-factored pleasure is $T2$ being greater than $T1$ by the greatest factor possible. Our new hedonic equation is this: quality of life = $[(T2 - T1) * (\text{pleasure} - \text{pain})]$. Feldman asks if $T1$ or $T2$ changes, which T has a greater impact on the quality of life. Feldman describes the human tendency to “feel that early death is a greater misfortune for the prematurely deceased than is ‘late birth’ for the late born, even though each may deprive us of as much happiness as the other” (Feldman 221). Suppose that a person named Claudette was born in 1950 ($T1$) and dies in 2000 ($T2$). This early death may be considered a misfortune. Now, if we modify this and $T2$ becomes 2035, Claudette’s quality of life would increase as she now dies happily at the age of 85. But what if Claudette’s timeline moves in a different direction and $T1$ changes to 1915 and $T2$ remains 2000. Assuming that Claudette has the same amount of pleasure and pain, Feldman’s logic says that 85 years of life should hold the same quality regardless of the value of $T1$.

Yet, it seems uncomfortable to say that her late birth is an equal misfortune as her premature death.

In the possible world Feldman constructs for Claudette, any fluctuation in pleasure or pain is ignored in favor of total lifespan as the general measure of quality of life. Feldman addresses this saying “the results are that the deprivation of 35 happy years of life is a bad thing, whether these years would have occurred before the date at which Claudette was in fact born, or after the date on which she in fact died” (223). Feldman suggests that we address our “apparently irrational emotional asymmetry” by trying to “start viewing late birth as a bad thing” and proposes that “Claudette’s late birth was just as bad for as was her early death” (223). The asymmetry lies in the human assumption that early death is a tragedy while no one aments a late birth.

Is emotional asymmetry irrational?

By insinuating that humans are irrational when it comes to which end is fixed—Feldman suggests that the perfectly rational human believes a late birth that removed 35 years from Claudette’s life is perfectly equal to an early death that removed 35 years of death. Either way, Claudette lived for 50 years. If that is the case, an earlier birth or later death that resulted in an 85-year lifespan for Claudette is the best of all possible worlds.

Feldman seems fixed on the idea that this “irrational emotional asymmetry” on preferring the late birth to the early death is

explained by the fact that we tend to think that the past is fixed, whereas the future is still open. Thus, we may feel that there’s no point in lamenting the fact that Claudette missed the Early Pleasure [of late birth]. On the other hand, we may feel that there was a ‘real chance’ that she might have enjoyed the Late Pleasure [of early death]. Her loss of that seems a greater misfortune (224).

By employing this line of reasoning, Feldman appears to be caught in the basic assumption that a longer lifespan is always superior to a shorter lifespan.

Feldman himself seems to note this when he says living from 1950 to 2000 may be preferable to living from 1915 to 2000 because of the greater suffering in the world from 1915 to 1950. If Claudette has “has just fifty years to live, she’s better off living them in the second half of the twentieth century, rather than thirty-five years earlier” (222). Is it truly better to live from 1950 to 2000 ($W1$) than it is to live from 1915 to 2000 ($W2$)? The years 1915 to 1950 were marked with two world wars, the Great Depression, lacked penicillin and other medical advances, diseases such as whooping cough and measles were common—considering these factors it appears that the likelihood of pain is significantly greater than the possible pain if Claudette lived only between 1950 and 2000. Therefore, “it follows that early death is worse for Claudette than late birth. Her late birth deprived her of very little value; her early death would deprive her of a lot” (222). $W1$ can be presented in the quality of life equation as $[(2000 \{T2\} - 1950 \{T1\}) * (100 \{pleasure\} - 85 \{pain\})]$ —this equates to a quality of life index of 750. Compare this with the increased lifespan and pain in $W2$: $[(2000 \{T2\} - 1915 \{T1\}) * (100 \{pleasure\} - 95 \{pain\})]$ —a quality of life index of 425. Feldman uncovers an asymmetry here: if Claudette were to die later, we assume that her birthdate is fixed and that she lives longer. If we change her birthdate, we assume her lifespan is fixed and adjust the deathdate to accommodate the earlier birthdate.

It appears that Feldman’s conception of hedonism falls short. In the possible world he proposes for Claudette, pleasure is attained and pain is experienced over a lifespan of 85 years, and the pleasure and pain factors remain constant regardless of a late birth or an early death that decrease the lifespan by 35 years, then perhaps there is a perfect symmetry between late birth and early death. However, Feldman is assuming that pain and pleasure will be constants despite his own example of the additional pain of being born into the world of 1915-1950.

Conclusion

We have no control over our birth—we come into the world whenever we come into this world. No human being suffers from being born too late. One may wish they were born early enough so they could be there when we first walked on the moon. One may lament that they weren't there to see John F. Kennedy be sworn into office. One may wish they born in time to participate in the fall of Berlin wall. Yet, genuine pain never occurred because someone was not there to experience those historical events. After all, we have no control over our birth—we are at the whims and winds of the universe when it comes to our existence. Therefore, late birth is no tragedy.

The difference between late birth and early death is that we consciously experience death—we know death is coming from the moment we are born. Throughout our lives, we have some measure of influence in the pleasure and pain that we experience. In that sense, perhaps hedonism is true. But, “once they are past, we become indifferent toward our pleasures and pains; while they are still in the future, we care deeply about them. If hedonism is true, this sort of asymmetry is wholly irrational” (224). Perhaps this is why Stoicism came after hedonism—we have some measure of control, even if for a moment, in how long we live and how we die. We are indifferent to our birth since we have no control over how we came to be but we very much have a stake in our death. We have the ability to make choices and even Feldman is forced to admit that our preference for the future “might be a deep-seated feature of human psychology” (224).

The human preference for the future is based in the idea that life is always improving at a macro-level. New knowledge is being learned, new things are developing, humans are developing as a species, we are always improving in some capacity even it is difficult to measure on a day-to-day basis. Philosophy itself is in constant development—we always look to the past, mindful of great minds but we are always in pursuit of the future.

Works Cited

Feldman, Fred. "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death" *The Philosophical Review*. Vol. C, No. 2. April 1991.