



Lucretian Symmetry and the Content-Based Approach

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Abstract

In addressing the Lucretian symmetry problem, the content-based approach attends to the difference between the contents of the actual life and those of relevant possible lives of a person. According to this approach, the contents of a life with an earlier beginning would substantially differ from, and thus be discontinuous with, the contents of the actual life, whereas the contents of a life with the same beginning but a later death would be continuous with the contents of the actual life. In this paper, I examine two versions of the content-based approach: the identity account and the preference account. The identity account holds that, in the sense of identity which is relevant to the evil of nonexistence, the subject of the actual life, though identical to the person in the life with a later death, is distinct from the subject of the life with an earlier beginning. The preference account maintains that, given one's attachments to actual particulars, a life with an earlier beginning is not rationally preferable to one's actual life, whereas a life with a later death is. I argue that each version of the content-based approach is implausible, while discussing some of the complications that face each of them.

Keywords Content-based approach · Evil of death · Identity account · Preference account · Symmetry problem

1 Introduction

In a famous passage from *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius claimed that it is not rational to fear the prospect of death.¹ In his view, the time after death is just the mirror image of the time before birth. Since we treat the prenatal time of nonexistence with the utmost

¹ Lucretius, 2007: 101. The relevant passage reads as follows: “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?”.

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calm and equanimity, we should maintain the same attitude toward death and our subsequent nonexistence. This line of reasoning may pose a problem for the most influential account of the evil of death, commonly known as the deprivation account. According to the deprivation account, the evil of death lies not in any intrinsic quality, but in its prevention of intrinsic goods which the person would otherwise have enjoyed. In other words, death is bad for the person who dies in the sense that had she not died, she would have lived longer and enjoyed more intrinsic goods. Death deprives her of goods which would have been available to her had she died at a later time. However, if Lucretius is correct to note that prenatal nonexistence exactly mirrors posthumous nonexistence, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that prenatal nonexistence deprives us of some possible goods as well. Had we begun to exist earlier, we would have enjoyed more goods during the time prior to our actual birth. However, as Lucretius pointed out, the deprivation that stems from prenatal nonexistence does not seem bad to us at all. We do not regret that we had not begun to exist earlier than we actually had in the same way that we regret that we will not live longer than the time of our actual death. If it is rational to maintain this asymmetrical attitude, then it seems to follow that death is not necessarily bad for us merely because it deprives us of some possible intrinsic goods. This is referred to as the *Lucretian symmetry problem* (or the symmetry problem).

To address the symmetry problem, it is important to identify a relevant asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. This can be accomplished by noting some significant difference between them, due to which posthumous nonexistence is bad for the person who fails to die later although prenatal nonexistence is not bad for the person who fails to come into existence earlier. An influential approach to the symmetry problem has been to take recourse in the observation that the life that began earlier would have been completely different from the actual life, whereas the life prolonged by a later death would have been continuous. Proponents of this approach typically argue that differences in contents among the relevant possible lives play a crucial role in establishing an asymmetry. For example, Frederik Kaufman says that “it is not possible for a person in the psychological sense to exist earlier than in fact he or she did because a psychological continuum which...starts earlier, would be a sufficiently different set of memories and experiences, and hence be a different psychological self.”² Similarly, Christopher Belshaw (2000: 71) claims that if “I” (i.e., the person with the same biological composition as mine at the time when I came into being) had begun to exist earlier, “[t]he particular psychology which actually characterizes my life would not have obtained.” For this reason, he claims that if “someone [had] been born earlier, that person would not have been me.”³ Following a similar line of reasoning, Jeff

² Kaufman, 1996: 309. Similar remarks can be found in his other work as well. See, for example, his 1995: 62, 1999: 12–13, 2000: 95, and 2011: 122–123.

³ Belshaw 2000: 69. This locution suggests that we begin to exist at birth, which may not be true. Here I take his claim to mean that if someone had begun to exist earlier, then that person would not have been me. In this paper, I do not take a stand as to when exactly we begin to exist. However, I will be discussing the possibility that one might have begun to exist earlier than one in fact did and yet lived until the time of one’s actual death. That would have made one’s life longer than the actual life by adding to one’s past rather than to one’s future.

McMahan (2006: 222) notes that “I now may have little reason to care, in an egoistic way, about an alternative life in which the contents of my mental life would have been utterly different because the contents of my *life*—including those particulars that I care about—would have been different.” Likewise, Elizabeth Harman claims that “our lives would have been very different if we had been created earlier.” For this reason, she argues that “people often would reasonably prefer their actual lives to alternative lives that would have been longer but very different” (2011: 139).

These remarks commonly refer to the contents of relevant possible lives in explaining why prenatal nonexistence is not bad. In envisioning a scenario in which I had begun to exist earlier, the person who came into existence earlier, whoever that may be, would have had a biographical history entirely different from my own. In view of my current psychological feature and value system, I have little reason to regret that this prenatal extension of life was not actualized. By contrast, in envisioning a scenario in which I die later, my current biographical history would be preserved intact; thus, I have good reason to regret the denial of a posthumous extension of life. Since this approach attempts to establish an asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence while comparing the contents of the actual life and those of relevant possible lives, I call it the *content-based approach* to the symmetry problem.

There are at least two different versions of the content-based approach, which I shall call the *identity account* and the *preference account*. Kaufman and Belshaw are notable defenders of the identity account.⁴ In defending this view, Kaufman makes a distinction between the *thick* self and the *thin* self. The thick self refers to a person as a biographical entity fully equipped with “psychological states, memories, beliefs, ongoing projects, values, aspirations, and commitments” (Kaufman, 2000: 94). The thin self, on the other hand, refers to a person “shorn of [the aforementioned] thick traits such that all that remains is one’s metaphysical essence.”⁵ The identity account does not object to the view that thin persons could have possibly begun to exist earlier than they in

⁴ See Kaufman, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2011; Belshaw, 1993, 1998, 2000. Sometimes Belshaw seems more interested in expounding on people’s asymmetrical attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence as opposed to the asymmetry itself. However, even in that case, his view can be faithfully employed to offer an account of the asymmetry between the two types of nonexistence, and that is how I construe his view in this paper.

⁵ Kaufman, 2000: 95. According to Kaufman, the metaphysical essence of a person is what makes her identical to its bearer across all possible worlds that contain it. It does not necessarily involve any of the psychological attributes she has in her actual life. For several candidates for metaphysical essence, Kaufman mentions “a certain human body, a particular genetic construction, a certain origin, the brain, [and] a Cartesian soul” (1999: 11, 2000: 95). We can sharpen the distinction between thick and thin selves by referring to a philosophical thought experiment involving a “brain-zap,” i.e., the complete and irreversible destruction of one’s psychological states and dispositions (Shoemaker & Swinburne, 1984: 86–88). If I undergo a brain-zap, my thick self would not survive, though my thin self would remain intact. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophia* for inspiring me to make this observation.

fact did.⁶ However, it emphasizes that the identity of thin persons is of little importance to the issue at hand. According to the identity account, the kind of identity pertinent to discussing the evil of prenatal and posthumous nonexistence has to do with one's conscious, psychological continuum, which is subject to biographical details. To use Kaufman's terms, it is the thick person rather than the thin person who should be the focal point when discussing the evil of death. In imagining a scenario in which I had begun to exist earlier, my memories, beliefs, desires, character traits, and other psychological features that are constitutive of my person would have been entirely different from how they currently are. Hence, the person with an earlier beginning, when thickly conceived, is not identical to me as I am currently, even if that person originates from the same thin self as I.⁷ By contrast, in dying later, the added part of my life would not disrupt my previous biography, and I could possibly retain most of the psychological traits that define me as the thick person that I am. So, it may be supposed that I, as the thick person, would not cease to exist and would still persist in the scenario of a later death. In Kaufman's terms, I would only get "thicker" (1999: 14).

The preference account, prominently argued by McMahan and Harman, does not deny the possibility of personal identity across possible worlds. Thus, unlike the identity account, the preference account holds that I as a psychological being could have begun to exist significantly earlier and, as a result, would have had a

⁶ See, e.g., Kaufman, 1999: 12, and 2000: 95. It is sometimes claimed that one could not have existed significantly earlier than one in fact did, on the grounds that any person who had existed significantly earlier would have been numerically distinct. See, e.g., Nagel, 1970: 79. This claim is often regarded as being associated with Kripkean genetic essentialism, according to which the identity of genetic material is essential to the identity of a person. This sort of essentialism has been rejected by many philosophers. For instance, Stephen Rosenbaum claims that "these theses about genetic origin are as questionable as the proposition that a person could not logically have been conceived earlier, and they are thus unconvincing reasons for the conclusion" (1989: 363). McMahan also observes that you "could have existed even if the same egg [from which you in fact developed] had been fertilized by a different though qualitatively identical sperm—even, perhaps, by a different sperm that would not have been qualitatively identical but would have carried copies of all the same active genes" (2006: 214). According to some critics, even if genetic essentialism is true, it does not follow that one could not have begun to exist earlier than one in fact did. Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer maintain that "[t]he essentiality of the actual time of one's birth is a highly contentious metaphysical claim, and even if one (controversially) held that generation from such and such gametes is an essential property of an individual, this would not commit one to the essentialist claim" (1993: Note 2). McMahan also argues that it is conceivable that "our parents' reproductive systems [were] working a bit differently—for example, my mother's ovaries could have released the egg from which my organism was formed earlier than they did, and that egg could have been fertilized earlier by a sperm that carried copies of the same chromosomes that were carried by the sperm that actually fertilized it" (2006: 215). Rosenbaum maintains that "for it to be logically impossible for the person to come into existence earlier, it would have to be logically impossible for the particular sperm and egg to exist at some earlier time and to fuse at some earlier time[; however,] this is not *logically* impossible" (1989: 363).

⁷ I find Kaufman's usages of the thin and the thick selves to be rather vague. Perhaps what he really means here is that the person with an earlier existence would not have been qualitatively identical to me as I currently am, though he might have been numerically identical to me. If this is indeed what he means, then his view is significantly similar to the preference view. I will further discuss this point later.

wholly different biography without losing my identity. However, this view maintains that my life with an earlier beginning is not rationally *preferable* to me because such an alternative life would radically differ from my actual life. As McMahan observes, the alternative life would not contain most of the people and things I especially care about in my actual life. For instance, if I had begun to exist significantly earlier, I would have been too old to marry my wife and would have failed to have my children (McMahan, 2006: 221). Also, such an alternative life would not contain the life's achievements that matter to me. Likewise, Harman notes that a loving mother, strongly attached to her child, would not prefer to live a longer life with an earlier beginning because the child would not have existed in that life. She says that we often feel the same about other actual relationships because we typically have “reasonable attachment to the actual” (2011: 135–136). In sum, the preference account holds that given my current values and interests, it is perfectly rational for me to prefer my actual life to a life with an earlier beginning, because such an alternative life would not contain most of the personal attachments in my actual life such as my personal relationships and achievements. On the other hand, in the scenario in which I die later, the alternative life would be continuous with my actual life, and thus would preserve most of the relationships I hold dear and other particulars I care about. Such a life would be rationally preferable to my actual life.

In what follows, I discern problems with each version of the content-based approach. I first suggest several problems facing the identity account, which arise from its assertion that identity cannot be preserved with a wholly different biography. The preference account, on the other hand, attempts to show that a life with an earlier beginning is not rationally preferable to the actual life without recourse to the non-identity of the subject in different lives. I argue that this account does not provide a wholly satisfactory solution to the symmetry problem, while offering several circumstances in which an actual life does not seem rationally preferable to the life with an earlier beginning.

2 Complications with the Identity Account

...a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we don't. Is this dying mine alone? (Morrison, 2008: 135–136)

—Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

In its treatment of the symmetry problem, the core of the identity account is to deny that anyone who had begun to exist significantly earlier than I actually did would have been me. This denial is based on the idea that the current psychological feature constitutive of my current thick self is causally dependent on my past. If my

past had been different, I would not have gone through the phases of my life which are responsible for the person that I currently am.⁸ For this reason, proponents of the identity account maintain that the solution to the symmetry problem is provided by the “commitment to leaving the past as it is,” which is what Belshaw calls the *conservation claim* (1993: 111). He says: “I want to be me,⁹ and it is not at all easy to see how this desire can...be satisfiable if I am to think of the past’s being very different, or my having been born, or acquired sentience, much earlier” (Belshaw, 1993: 110). In light of this remark, we can formulate a presupposition for the conservation claim as follows: I would not exist if my past were different than it actually was.

I believe that a problem for the identity account stems from the falsity of this presupposition. It may be true that if my past were different, then the resulting person would be psychologically very different from how I currently am. However, it does not follow from this that the resulting person would not be identical to me in the sense of identity relevant to the evil of nonexistence. If I could not possibly exist with a set of psychological features different from those that I currently have, as suggested by the aforementioned presupposition, then given that I desire to exist, I cannot rationally wish that my past were different. However, there may be many occasions in which we rationally regret our past. In such occasions, it would be unconvincing to argue that it is irrational for us to have regrets because doing so would jeopardize our existence. To illustrate this point, consider Florens in Tony Morrison’s novel *A Mercy*. In late sixteenth century Maryland, Florens and her younger brother are born to a female slave, who suffers repetitive rapes at the hands of her despicable owner. Realizing that a noble trader from New England is considering taking her as compensation for her owner’s unpaid debt, she begs him to take her little girl Florens instead, with the intention of protecting her from future sexual assaults. Ignorant of her mother’s hidden motive, Florens comes to believe that her own mother (or *a minha mãe*) abandoned her for her younger brother. This thought wounds and haunts her deeply, and leaves a perilous impact on her, which later leads her to lethally attack her lover, who cherishes a young boy over her. Completely shocked, she is now empty inside and turns feral. In this tragic story, Florens’ life circles around the thought of how her mother abandoned her, as hinted by the quoted passage above. In fact, she is described as being so deeply affected by the idea of abandonment that one might say it becomes a part of her identity. However, this is not to say that the feeling of deprivation and wanting caused by the (idea of) abandonment is essential to her existence. People can surely persist while overcoming psychological trauma; otherwise, the practice of psychotherapy would be regarded as the potential termination of the patient’s life. In this context, it can be said of Florens that she may rationally regret (based on her misunderstanding) that her mother

⁸ In this line of thinking, Belshaw (2000: 70–71) observes that if I had begun to exist earlier, I would not have received the education, met the people, and had the experiences that shaped my life in its current form.

⁹ This statement suggests that there is some coherent alternative context in which I might not be me but someone else, which is impossible. It is not clear what exactly Belshaw means by this statement. My best guess is that he means that I want to retain various psychological features I currently have and I (or the past person psychologically continuous with me) had in the past.

abandoned her in the past. She may reasonably believe that had her mother not sent her away, she would not have suffered from the aching dark void in her heart.

If the conservation claim is true, however, this sort of regret is irrational. If Florens' mother had not sent her away, there would not have been a girl preoccupied by feelings of desertion and despair in a farmhouse in New England. Given that this sense of abandonment was crucial in forming her particular biography and is still predominant in defining who she currently is, defenders of the identity account should argue that Florens as the thick person would not exist if she had not been sent away in the past. Provided that it is irrational to wish for nonexistence, Florens would not be rational in wishing that her past were different. Proponents of the identity account similarly argue that had I been (counterfactually) given to an Inuit family upon my birth and raised by them, or had my family (again, counterfactually) not moved to Australia when I was two, then the psychological feature of the resulting individual would have been radically different from my current feature.¹⁰ Raised in a different environment, this individual as he is thickly conceived would have been distinct from me as I currently am. In such cases, they maintain that my wish to be raised as an Inuit or not to have spent my childhood in Australia is inconsistent with *my* living a different life.

I find their argument unconvincing since it does not readily accommodate why we usually withdraw our regrets. We all have moments of regret about the past. Some of the regrets may be cancelled out by the consideration that the regrettable events are causally accountable for compensable consequences. For example, someone who is determined to have only one child may regret that she had a miscarriage a few years ago. But afterward she may find consolation that due to this unfortunate event, she was able to give birth to her current child. As a result, she may feel that she would not wish for the scenario in which she did not have the miscarriage and ended up not having her current child. Of course, if she had not had the miscarriage and gave birth to a different child, things would have been quite different. There would have been a mother with that different child whose biography partly overlaps but eventually diverges from her actual life. From the perspective of the identity account, the two individuals, taken as thick persons, would not be identical. However, when she prefers her current life to the scenario with no miscarriage, her preference would not be triggered by the desire to preserve her identity; rather, it would be brought about by her attachment to her current child (or so I can stipulate). Likewise, it may be rational for Florens to withdraw her regret if she discovers her mother's true motive or if she realizes that she would have been brutally victimized by sexual violence had she not been sent away. However, even in that case, the rationality of her withdrawal would not have stemmed from the recognition that with a different past, she would not be the same person as she currently is. In a typical case in which we retract our initial regret, the retraction is based on a comparison between what is in fact the

¹⁰ The Inuit example is from Kaufman, 1999: 12, and the moving example is from Belshaw, 1998: 334. In light of this consideration, Kaufman says, "[i]n some broad sense, my biography is necessary for me to be me" (1996: 309).

case and what would have been the case in the relevant counterfactual scenario, as opposed to a deliberation on the identity of the individual in the counterfactual life.¹¹ This observation indicates that the identity account is not correct in suggesting that rational regrets for the past are impossible.

Proponents of the identity account might attempt to mitigate this problem by arguing that at least their view is compatible with the rationality of regretting many non-momentous past events. For example, Belshaw claims that it is perfectly rational for me to regret that I sprained my ankle last year (1998: 336). He says, “There is no objection to our regretting many of the bad things that have happened to us. Only when we think of radical shifts in experience, many of them occurring long ago, is it likely to seem that we would be too much affected for our ordinary identities to be preserved.”¹² I doubt that this mitigated position is consistent. The core of this position seems to be that regrets for momentous past events cannot be rational whereas those for non-momentous past events can be rational. However, from the perspective of the identity account, consistency requires that even regrets for non-momentous past events are not rational. Suppose that spraining my ankle many years ago led me to start dating an orthopedist, who later became my wife. Being aware of the causal connection between the injury and my subsequent marriage and life with my family, I might withdraw my initial regret for spraining my ankle. I might say that I am glad that I was injured after all. However, once again, my withdrawal would not be caused by my recognition of my identity crisis; rather, it would result from my attachment to my family in actual life.

Another problem with the identity account is that it is not well-suited for a robust metaphysics of modality. Let us first note that many ordinary events can drastically change our lives. For instance, imagine that I met my wife at the Mexican food truck on George Street many years ago. If I had arrived at the truck a little later than I actually did, or if I had happened to try the Indian food truck on Apple Road instead, I would not have met her and my life would have gone quite differently. Or, consider the morning of the day that my child was conceived. If I skipped my morning coffee or took the subway to work rather than driving, then perhaps later that night a different sperm would have been combined with my wife’s egg. As a result, I would not have had my actual child. Given that my relationship with my child has a great

¹¹ I acknowledge that there may be circumstances in which one would not regret one’s unfortunate past, because one believes that a change in one’s past would have resulted in an undesired change in one’s identity. Suppose someone’s difficult past helped her grow to be an admirably strong person with a sturdy mind. Looking back at her past, she might say, “I do not regret the hardships in my past. Without them, I wouldn’t be quite myself now.” Nevertheless, such a sentiment is entirely compatible with my observation that our retractions of initial regrets are often unrelated to considerations about a loss of identity. In making this claim, I am not committed to the view that no withdrawal of regret stems from reflections upon identity, only that some withdrawal of regret does not stem from reflections on identity. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophia* for urging me to clarify this point.

¹² Belshaw, 1998: Note 27. One might argue that these remarks only make sense if they are interpreted as a claim about qualitative identity, given that the notion of numerical identity does not admit of degrees. If what Belshaw is offering is indeed an account of qualitative identity, as opposed to that of numerical identity, then his view may be regarded as a version of the preference view. Again, I will address this point later.

impact on the formation of my thick self, the kind of thick person I currently am would not have existed if I had had a different child. These observations illustrate that any trivial event that is causally accountable for some momentous event, which in turn is directly responsible for my current psychological feature, can be causally accountable for how I currently am, thickly conceived. Thus, many trivial or non-momentous events and the experiences that stem from those events are causally responsible for the mental states, value system, character traits, and other psychological features constitutive of my current thick self.

If, as the identity account holds, it is metaphysically impossible for me to have a set of psychological features radically different from the ones I in fact have, then I would not exist in the possible worlds in which such non-momentous events do not obtain and, as a result, there is no one who has the set of psychological features I in fact have. Consider the scenario in which I did not go to the Mexican food truck on the day I met my wife. Then, someone exactly like me (who may or may not be me) would have gone to the Indian food truck on Apple Road instead. This person would have been married to someone other than my wife, had children different than mine, and lived in a different neighborhood than the one in which I actually have lived. As a result, by now the psychological features of this person would have been radically different from mine. Then, the identity account holds that this individual would have been a thick person distinct from who I am. Since this individual would have been the same person as the one who went to the Indian food truck a long time ago, it follows that I am not identical to the person who went to the Indian food truck as well. A similar reasoning applies to the non-identity of me and the person who skipped the morning coffee. So, given the truth of the identity account, it is impossible for *me* (as the thick person that I currently am) to not have gone to the Mexican food truck on the day I met my wife or to not have drunk my morning coffee the day of my child's conception (and as a result, to not be equipped with the psychological profile I in fact have). This result calls for a major revision to the well-established literature of modality. It seems to me that defenders of the identity account fail to provide an argument strong enough to justify such a revision.

Finally, I would like to note that the identity account does not successfully handle objections that involve actual and merely possible psychological states. A striking objection to the identity account is that one's actual psychological life is not only discontinuous with a possibly extended life before the beginning of one's existence but also with a possibly extended life after one's death, because one's actual psychological states are not appropriately connected to the merely possible states of either extension (Brueckner & Fischer, 1998: 111–112). Suppose Joe DiMaggio died later than his actual death. In this possible scenario, the entirety of his psychological profile is composed of merely possible psychological states. Hence, none of his psychological states in this possible life are memories of his *actual* experience of winning the World Series in 1936. Likewise, when we imagine that he had begun to exist earlier than he in fact did, none of his merely possible psychological states in this possible life are connected to any of his *actual* psychological states. As a result, none of DiMaggio's actual states are psychologically continuous with any of his states in the possible life in which he had begun to exist earlier or with those in the possible life in which he dies later. In this sense, the objection goes, the asymmetry does not

hold. In response, defenders of the identity account resort to the qualitative identity between the actual and the relevant merely possible states of the subject. In envisioning a later death for DiMaggio, they would argue, the extended later states *might have been* continuous with the pertinent actual states containing his memory of winning the championship. By contrast, in envisioning his life with an earlier beginning, the extended earlier states would not have been continuous with any of the actual states including this glorious memory, since the pertinent later states in that possible life would not have been qualitatively identical to his corresponding actual states. In light of this reasoning, Belshaw says, “a qualitatively identical counterpart of the original life will be replicated (and then of course extended) under the supposition of a later death, whereas no part of this life will be qualitatively the same under the alternative supposition of an earlier birth” (2000: 72).

The identity account’s core response, then, is that only a life with a later death, but not a life with an earlier beginning, would contain a host of merely possible states qualitatively identical to the corresponding actual states of the subject, hence the asymmetry. I believe this response is in error because qualitative identity is not pertinent here. To illustrate this point, imagine a possible world in which I die later. Suppose also that in that possible world there is such a thing as a twin earth in which my double exists, whose psychological history is perfectly synchronous with my actual history (and then extended). A considerable part of the psychological states for his entire life would be qualitatively identical to my corresponding states in the actual world. Yet, when I think of the twin earth scenario, it is *my life* that I want to extend after my death. I am not particularly concerned about the extension of my double’s life in the same way that I am concerned about the extension of my own life. If it is the qualitative identity between actual and merely possible states that accounts for my asymmetrical attitudes towards a life with an earlier beginning and a life with a later death, as the response from the identity account holds, then I should be indifferent between my dying later and my double’s dying later. This observation reveals that the identity account’s treatment of the issue of psychological continuity is inadequate.

This completes my discussion of the implausibility of the identity account. It may be argued that prominent defenders of the identity account such as Kaufman and Belshaw simply equivocate between numerical identity and qualitative identity. For instance, when Kaufman maintains that I could not have possibly existed earlier, he might just mean that the person in the life with an earlier beginning could not have been qualitatively identical to me in my actual life. On this understanding, the person in the alternative life could or would have been numerically identical to me, but would have been too different psychologically from me that I cannot rationally care in an egoistic way about the alternative life I would have had if I had begun to exist earlier. If this is what defenders of the identity account in fact have in mind, then their view would be substantially similar to the preference account.¹³ However,

¹³ I would like to note that, even in this new construal, the identity account is not quite the same as the preference account. A notable difference is that, unlike the preference account, this construal does not appeal to our attachments to the particulars in our actual lives, but instead appeals to the difference of psychology in explaining why a life with an earlier beginning is not rationally preferable. However, what I will discuss as the problems of the preference account can mostly be applied to this newly interpreted version of the identity account.

this maneuver of offering a new interpretation would not save the identity account, since the preference account is not flawless. I now turn to the complications facing the preference account.

3 Why the Preference Account is not Satisfactory

*If I could just go back. If I could rub everything out. Starting with myself... Don't you put the past in a room, in the cellar, and lock the door and just never go in there?...I keep wanting to do that—fling open the door—let the light in, clean everything out. If I could get a huge eraser and rub everything out... starting with myself...*¹⁴
—*The Talented Mr. Ripley*

According to the preference account, the reason why a life with an earlier beginning is not rationally preferable is that the alternative life would hardly contain any *particulars* that we care about in the actual life such as our loved ones, and the works and achievements to which we have devoted ourselves. On the other hand, a life with a later death would be continuous with the actual life, and thus would contain most of the particulars to which we are attached. Such a counterfactual life is rationally preferable.

Before discussing difficulties for the preference account, I would like to note that this account is not subject to one of the objections raised against the identity account. According to the identity account, we noted, it is impossible for us to rationally regret the past events that are causally responsible for who we are. Though it is untenable to suppose that the impossibility of rational regrets stems from the failure of preserving identity, I think there is some plausibility in thinking that we would be reluctant to have a radically different life history. Thus, it would be desirable if the content-based approach could explain this reluctance without denying that one can still be the same person with a wholly different biography. The preference account successfully carries out this task. According to this account, the reason why I can rationally prefer my actual life to an alternative life with an earlier beginning is not that the person in that possible life would not have been me; rather, it is that the affections and regards I have developed for particular persons and objects make me favor my actual life over a possible life with different particulars. Hence, the preference account can explain the asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence without claiming that one would not exist in the alternative life. I take this to be an advantage of the preference account over the identity account.

Nevertheless, the preference account has its own difficulties. My main reservation is that whether we would prefer one possible life to another depends on various types of *contingencies*. Proponents of the preference account commonly refer to the valuable particulars in the actual life, such as personal relationships and significant achievements, in order to explain why a life with an earlier beginning is not

¹⁴ The lines here are from the 1999 film directed by Anthony Minghella, as opposed to the novel of the same title by Patricia Highsmith.

rationally preferable. The more the alternative life diverges from the actual life (i.e., the more the alternative life would contain different particulars, and the more different one would be psychologically in the alternative life), the more rational it is for one to prefer one's actual life, even if it is objectively a less good life. However, if the divergence between the two lives is not great, then it can be rational for one to prefer the alternative life.

Having this point in mind, let us note that some people may not find many meaningful relationships or achievements in their current circumstances. Suppose I am a two-year-old toddler. Most of my life is composed of loving care from my parents, play time with my nanny, simple meals, and lots of sleep. In short, I have not lived long enough to form any special personal attachments to particular people (except perhaps my parents) or objects around me. In these circumstances, it could be rational for me to prefer a life with an earlier beginning. Even if I had begun to exist earlier, I would still be loved and cared for by those same parents,¹⁵ and I would have had equally good food and sleep. Of course, I would have most likely had different toys and nannies. Yet I am not, perhaps, the kind of baby who tends to be strongly attached to particular playthings or caregivers. Even if I am, we can stipulate that the toys and the nanny to which I am attached are replaceable, so it would be rational for me to prefer a longer life with other toys and different nannies. Hence, we may conclude that it might be rational for me to not prefer my actual life to a life with an earlier beginning with different particulars (but with the same parents).¹⁶ The same conclusion would follow if we consider a case of a severely mentally disabled person, whose life is fairly simple yet sufficiently pleasing.¹⁷

Above, I considered cases in which a person has a limited chance or ability to form meaningful relationships. In response, the proponent of the preference account may argue that what I showed is merely that the preference account is compatible with its being rational to prefer an earlier beginning in some cases, but the preference account offers an explanation of why we—i.e., rational adults—can rationally not regret that we did not begin to exist earlier. However, it still can be rational for us as sensible adults to prefer a life with an earlier beginning even when we have

¹⁵ This is based on the notion that I could have begun to exist earlier than I in fact did, while sustaining the same genetic material from my parents. One might raise a question about this supposition from the perspective of Kripkean genetic essentialism. However, I believe this view can be readily defended even if we grant the truth of genetic essentialism. To illustrate this point, imagine that a particular sperm and a particular egg had been frozen separately for a certain period of time before they fused with each other to generate an organism from which I developed. Assuming that I came into existence at the time of the fusion (or the generation of the organism subsequent to the fusion), it is true that I could have begun to exist significantly earlier with the same genetic structure. In a similar line of reasoning, Lukas J. Meier claims that, "as it is now possible to cryopreserve gametes, the time of origin of the same biological individual has become variable" (2019: 653). See also the related comments by other critics in Footnote 6.

¹⁶ I do not mean to suggest that a two-year-old baby can have the abilities to form the sorts of preferences we are considering here. What I am assuming is only that even two-year-olds can have interests as we rational human adults do, just as we can plausibly assume that severely mentally challenged individuals have interests even if they lack the ability to form preferences.

¹⁷ There are several presuppositions for the truth of this claim. For instance, it should be presumed that the person under discussion would have been similarly mentally disabled if he or she had begun to exist earlier. I think it is possible to adjust the story to accommodate the presuppositions.

plenty of pre-established relationships. This becomes clearer if we consider someone who suffers utterly from the burdens of life.¹⁸ Some people may find many of the moments in their lives unbearable because of the hardships they undergo. For this reason, they might want to wipe out their past and start over, as we can see from Tom Ripley's monologue in the previously quoted passage. For instance, if we ask struggling rape survivors whether they would rather have led a different life in which they were not a victim of rape, some may answer in the affirmative, even if they are aware that most of the particulars of the alternative life would differ completely from their actual lives, including the majority of their personal relationships.

Here is a different example. Some people have an unhappy marriage and end up hating or keeping aloof from their spouse. Some forced (and some unforced) marriages may lead to tragic consequences, which often involve extreme poverty and mistreatment. It is even possible that some people are seriously abused by a vicious and obsessive spouse. Given that their married lives are unsatisfactory and even horrifying, it is not too unlikely that they would prefer to have had a different life in which they were in a relatively happy marriage with a different spouse, knowing that the alternative life would mostly contain completely different particulars. In other disastrous cases, people may lose young children. Some people may be betrayed by and cut off from their children as a result of their broken relationships. In a state of utter despair and anguish, they may wish to have lived a life in which they never had their children. In explaining why a life with an earlier beginning is not preferable to the actual life, the preference account highlights that people often form personal attachments to their loved ones. However, human relationships are not always valuable and constructive. As observed above, personal relationships may in fact constitute the main sources of pain and agony. If they cause me to lead a life which is not worth living or is unbearably painful, and if I would have had a life which is worth living or is significantly less painful had I begun to exist earlier, then it can be rational for me to prefer the alternative life with an earlier beginning.¹⁹

However, I do not mean to suggest that *anyone* who lives a life which is not worth living or is utterly painful should rationally prefer a life with an earlier beginning that would have been worth living or less painful. Suppose I have lived a life that on balance has not been worth living or has been immensely painful and will continue to be so; but I have children whose lives are well worth living and I love them deeply. I am aware that they would never have existed if I had begun to exist earlier. Under these circumstances, it may be rational for me to not prefer to have begun to exist earlier.²⁰ However, this sort of consideration is compatible with my previous observation in favor of the desirability of the life with an earlier beginning. My claim is that the

¹⁸ John Martin Fischer and Daniel Speck make a similar observation (2000: 92). However, they bring up this point to argue against Belshaw's conservation claim, whereas my main purpose here is to illustrate that the evaluation of the actual life and a relevant possible life with a different biography depends on various kinds of contingencies.

¹⁹ Here again, my preference would be based on the assumption that it is indeed possible for me to have begun to exist earlier. To see the plausibility of this assumption, see my remarks in Footnote 15.

²⁰ I am indebted to Jeff McMahan for this example.

pain and anguish stemming from the particulars of one's actual life, which could make one's life not worth living or nearly unbearable, may cause one to rationally prefer an alternative life with different particulars which would have been worth living or significantly less painful. In making this claim, I am not committed to arguing that *everyone* who suffers severely from the burdens of life, and thus is living a life which is not worth living or is immensely painful, should prefer an alternative life in which he or she would have lived a significantly better life with different particulars.

So far, I have focused on people's personal relationships to show how one's actual life is not always rationally preferable to an alternative life with an earlier beginning and different particulars. A similar line of reasoning may apply to people's achievements. Defenders of the preference account underscore the importance of our attachments to the actual achievements. McMahan, for instance, claims that he would not give up his actual work in philosophy for the different work that he would have achieved in a longer, counterfactual life, which might have surpassed his work in philosophy in both quantity and quality. He says, "I want to have written the things that I actually have written. I may rationally prefer my actual life to one in which I would have written other works, even if there would have been more of them and even, perhaps, if they would have been better than what I have actually written" (2006: 222). I suspect that this remark results from his positive assessment of his own writings, which is well-deserved given the superb quality of his work. Nevertheless, a sense of fulfillment toward one's own work is not universal. Suppose I am an untalented philosopher; I dislike what I have done in academia and find no joy in philosophical inquiry. Given that my work is mediocre, I may not like most of my philosophical writings, an unfortunate case in which I failed to develop attachments to most of the works to which I have dedicated my life. Disappointed with my own achievements, I may regret that I became a philosopher. Perhaps I dream of having lived a different life in which I became a successful businessman.

Our lives may contain particulars we detest as well as ones we treasure. Tom Ripley feels that his life has gone seriously wrong after he committed two murders and passes himself off as Dickie Greenleaf. He would certainly prefer to lose the memories of the murders, and would like to make it the case that he was not involved in the murders if such a thing were possible. Likewise, nearly all rape victims would like to lose the memory of their ordeal and, if possible, the experience itself. In their attempt to establish an asymmetry between a life with an earlier beginning and a life with a later death, proponents of the preference account mostly have in mind the kind of particulars we treasure. However, the more we concentrate on the particulars that are objectionable or disagreeable, the less likely we would be to prefer our actual life to an alternative life in which we had begun to exist earlier and thus had different particulars. Given that our lives are bound to contain unpleasant particulars and experiences, it does not seem too far-fetched to suppose that under certain circumstances we may rationally prefer a life with different particulars. In general, those who are

dissatisfied with their own lives would tend to find it less difficult to prefer counterfactual lives that contain different particulars.

McMahan considers the possibility of a special situation in which we are unswervingly dedicated to a particular goal in any possible life.²¹ He maintains that even in this context, the actual life is rationally preferable to a counterfactual life with an earlier beginning because the achievements in the counterfactual life would be different from our actual work, to which we are closely attached. However, I would like to note that there are other elements to consider in weighing the prudential pros and cons of the actual life and of a relevant counterfactual life with an earlier beginning. In particular, our current ages may matter because some of our achievements are significantly affected by it. For example, it may be supposed that it takes considerable time and experience for us to obtain wisdom in life. If so, being older is generally advantageous for learning lessons from life in order to be wise and perceptive. Then, this may constitute a reason to prefer a life with an earlier beginning to the actual life. Suppose that I am now an ordinary, 30-year-old writer. Given that I feel short on insights and perceptions for unraveling the mysteries of life, I may wish to be older and wiser. Alternatively, imagine that I am a young Buddhist monk whose sermons are not taken seriously by fellow Buddhists because they won't listen to a lecture from a young religious leader. To acquire the authority and respect I deserve, I may wish to be older than I am. In these circumstances, I may rationally prefer to have begun to exist earlier so that I would now be older.²²

Proponents of the preference account may of course employ the preceding consideration in the opposite direction to show the undesirability of a life with an earlier beginning. For instance, if I am a contented fashion model or a football player in my mid-twenties, I would not welcome having begun to exist significantly earlier and as a result now being older. Since physical features and abilities tend to deteriorate as the body ages, they might argue that being older probably would be disadvantageous for accomplishing achievements that require bodily strength or physical attractiveness. Given that I am very content with my current career, it may be rational for me to not prefer a life with an earlier beginning.

This particular observation may seem favorable to the preference account. However, the more pertinent point is that this account fails to provide a *general* explanation as to why a life with an earlier beginning is not rationally preferable to the actual life. The preference account maintains that we have a reason to prefer the actual life to a life with an earlier beginning based on how we rationally evaluate the particular contents of each life. However, as I noted above, there are several contingent factors

²¹ McMahan (2006: 222) provides the following example: "Suppose scientists tell me that I have the philosophy-writing gene, so that virtually any life I might have had would have been one in which I would have compulsively written philosophy."

²² Admittedly, if I had begun to exist earlier, I might not have ended up being a writer or a monk. So, here I intend to delimit my observation to a particular context in which a person unswervingly sticks to her current profession, just as McMahan considers a case in which he is single-mindedly devoted to writing philosophy. However, if this postulation is too far-fetched, we can surely imagine a case in which someone yearns for wisdom in life and, for that reason, prefers to be older, regardless of what she does for a living.

that affect this evaluation, such as whether we have already formed attachments to other individuals and objects that make our lives sufficiently meaningful, whether our lives contain severely distressing experiences, how we take pride in our long-standing achievements, and how our continuing commitments are affected by our current ages. When we evaluate the two lives to determine which one is preferable, if the verdict differs depending on those contingent factors, it is difficult to conclude that we *generally* favor our actual lives over lives in which we had begun to exist earlier (and ended up as a consequence having different particulars).

4 Conclusion

The content-based approach attempts to establish an asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence with recourse to the biographical contents of the given subject in relevant possible lives. In particular, it argues that prenatal nonexistence is not bad for one because the contents of one's life with an earlier beginning would be radically different from those of one's actual life. In this paper, I examined two versions of the content-based approach to reveal some of the complications that face them. The identity account holds that the subject in the actual life, conceived as a thick person, is distinct from the person in the life with an earlier beginning. This account yields the supposition that it is impossible to have rational regrets for past events which account for the formation of the current thick self. I observed that this result is implausible because our withdrawals of regrets are typically based on reflections about the actual and counterfactual circumstances as opposed to concerns about identity. I also argued that the identity account does not accord with the well-established metaphysics of modality and does not successfully handle the objection regarding psychological continuity.

The preference account, on the other hand, maintains that given one's attachments to the particulars of one's actual life, such as one's personal relationships or achievements, one's actual life is rationally preferable to a life with an earlier beginning. With regard to this account, I pointed out that whether one would prefer one's actual life to a life with an earlier beginning may depend on other contingencies pertinent to the evaluation of the two lives. As such, the preference account cannot answer why, in general, the latter is not preferable to the former. In conclusion, I argue that there are considerable difficulties in dealing with the symmetry problem by attending to the contents of the relevant possible lives, and that the complications discussed in this paper warrant answers from proponents of the content-based approach.

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