



The Temporal Bias Approach to the Symmetry Problem and Historical Closeness

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Abstract

In addressing the Lucretian symmetry problem, the temporal bias approach claims that death is bad because it deprives us of something about which it is rational to care (e.g., future pleasures), whereas prenatal nonexistence is not bad because it only deprives us of something about which it is rational to remain indifferent (e.g., past pleasures). In a recent contribution to the debate on this approach, Miguel and Santos argue that a late beginning can deprive us of a future pleasure. Their argument is based on the claim that for birth or death to deprive a person of any value in life, the historically closest counterfactual situation that contains the value is such that the person begins to exist earlier or dies later. This is what they call the Historical Condition. However, the Historical Condition is untenable for several reasons. First, this condition substantially weakens the explanatory capacity of the deprivation account because it implies that most ordinary sorts of pleasures are not deprived by death. In addition, the Historical Condition is vulnerable to counterexamples. In particular, what they offer as a standard case of the deprivation of future pleasure due to a late beginning (what they call *Seeing The Beatles*), or some of its variants, can be used to falsify this condition. Finally, the Historical Condition is theoretically indefensible because it is based on a faulty analysis of deprivation.

Keywords Brueckner and Fischer · Evil of death · Historical closeness · Historical condition · Lucretius · Miguel and Santos · Symmetry problem · Temporal bias approach

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1 The Temporal Bias Approach

Lucretius offers consolation to those who fear the prospect of death. He says death is no different from the nothingness during the eternity of time before we came into existence. Given that prenatal nonexistence is nothing dreadful and death mirrors prenatal nonexistence, we ought not to fear our postmortem nonexistence.¹ This sort of reasoning provides a challenge for any view that accepts that death can be rationally feared or regarded as a bad thing, including the mainstream exposition of the evil of death known as the *deprivation account*. According to the deprivation account, death is bad for the person who dies because it deprives her of possible intrinsic goods she would have had if she had died later than the time of her actual death. However, if prenatal nonexistence is an exact mirror image of death, as Lucretius suggests, then the deprivation account also provides grounds to argue that prenatal nonexistence deprives the person who has begun to exist in the same way in which death deprives its victim: the person would have had more intrinsic goods in her life had she begun to exist earlier.² Nonetheless, it seems perfectly reasonable for us to treat our past nonexistence with utter indifference and equanimity. Hence, it is reasonable to display symmetrical attitudes toward death. The mere fact that death deprives one of possible future intrinsic goods one would have otherwise enjoyed doesn't seem to be a sufficient reason to think that it is therefore bad to die. This line of thinking is commonly known as the symmetry argument (or, if posed as a dilemma for those who hold that death is bad but the time before one's existence is not similarly bad, as the symmetry problem).

Proponents of the deprivation account get around the symmetry problem by drawing a significant disanalogy between prenatal and postmortem nonexistence to show that the latter is bad for the person who dies while the former is not for the person who has begun to exist. Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer have developed an influential strategy to accomplish this task. In their view, death (or postmortem nonexistence) is bad for us because it deprives us of something about which it is rational for us to care (namely, future intrinsic goods), whereas prenatal nonexistence is not bad for us because it only deprives us of something about which it is rational for us to remain indifferent (namely, past intrinsic goods) (1986: 218–220). This strategy is based on the asymmetrical attitudes deeply ingrained in

¹ The relevant passage from Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* goes 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?" (2007: 101)

² Philosophers who address the symmetry problem often use terms like 'late birth' or 'later (rather than earlier) birth' to indicate the state of affairs in which one fails to come into existence until after the actual time at which one came into existence. However, it is most natural to think that we come into being somewhat earlier than the time of our births, at some time during our fetal stages. Hence, it will be more accurate to use terms such as 'late beginning' or 'coming into existence later (rather than earlier)' to express this notion. For this reason, I will mostly use the terms that refer to our beginning of existence as opposed to our birth, unless it is more appropriate to do otherwise for contextual reasons.

us toward past and future intrinsic goods. To illustrate the existence of our attitudinal asymmetry, they give the following example:

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)

Given that our asymmetric attitudes toward past and future pleasure are well-founded,³ attitudinal asymmetry toward past and future nonexistence can also be explained: death, but not prenatal nonexistence, takes away the kind of goods that matter to us. Since this strategy essentially relies on our tendency to prefer goods differently that occur at different times, I call it *the temporal bias approach* to the symmetry problem.

I have previously argued that insofar as we assess the evil of past or future nonexistence with recourse to our temporal bias, prenatal nonexistence can also be regarded as bad even if we grant that only future intrinsic goods and not past intrinsic goods are rationally of value to us (Yi 2012: 297–300). If one had begun to exist earlier, then it is highly likely that one would have been engaged in at least some activities during the additional past portions of one's life that would ensure intrinsic goods located in the future. To illustrate this point, suppose that I am planning to learn Japanese soon with the expectation of having the pleasure of communicating with my Japanese friends in the future. Suppose also that if I had begun to exist earlier, I would have started to learn Japanese earlier and thus I would have mastered the language by now. Given that I would not now have to go through the frustrating steps necessary to learn a new language in the counterfactual life in which I had begun to exist earlier, the net amount of future pleasure derivable from speaking Japanese in that life would be greater than the amount of future pleasure derivable from using the language in my actual life. This example, which I called *Learning Japanese*, is supposed to show how prenatal nonexistence can deprive one of future intrinsic goods. If I had begun to exist earlier, I would have had some additional time in the past. During that time, I would have most likely been engaged in activities such as learning a foreign language that would prove fruitful in generating goods in the future. Hence, granting the rationality of the temporal bias, we have reason to think that prenatal nonexistence deprives us of what, rationally, we ought to care about as well as that to which we ought to remain indifferent.⁴

³ Initially, Brueckner and Fischer did not offer a substantial argument for the claim that our differing attitudes toward past and future goods are in fact justified, while referring to Moller 2002 in support of the rationality of the asymmetric attitudes. Fischer later argues that the asymmetry is rational on evolutionary grounds in his 2006 and 2020: 80–81. Though the arguments in these works may be contentious, I will not press the point here.

⁴ Lucretius's symmetry argument has two major components: our indifference to late beginning and the symmetry of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence. Now, granting the symmetry of the two nonexistences and the observation that prenatal nonexistence can sometimes deprive us of future intrinsic goods, one might suggest that my argument can be useful for establishing the evil of death, which is precisely

In response, Brueckner and Fischer highlight that in their thought experiment, the occurrences of past or future pleasures are followed by amnesia. This conceptual device is meant to isolate the past pleasures: past pleasures or any activities that bring about pleasures will be blocked off from future memory so they won't produce any further pleasures in the future. In their account, isolating past pleasures from possible future goods is pertinent to addressing the symmetry problem as far as the deprivation account is concerned. They say, "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*" (2014: 745). If this is correct, my argument as to how past additional time can generate future intrinsic goods causes no damage to their view. A preference for a life which begins earlier and therefore has more future intrinsic goods is entirely compatible with indifference to a life with an earlier beginning that holds fixed the net amount of intrinsic goods and overall value in the future.

It is clear from their previous remark that they had in mind particular kinds of possible lives in evaluating the evil of an early death or late beginning. More specifically, to make their evaluations, they compare an actual life with a possible life that has been extended into the past or the future while holding constant the amount of intrinsic value during the period of time that corresponds to the actual life. This qualification raises an interesting question as to the deprivative nature of an early death or a late beginning: what kinds of alternative lives should we compare with the actual life when evaluating the deprivation of an early death or a late beginning?

With regard to this question, I previously argued that Brueckner and Fischer are at fault in restricting the kind of counterfactual lives to ones that contain the same amount of value during the stretch of time corresponding to the actual life (Yi 2016: 950–57). If we begin to exist earlier, it is far more likely that the amount of intrinsic value contained in that counterfactual life after the added period of time would differ from the amount of intrinsic value during the same period of time in our actual life. My argument is based on the contention that the badness of an event should be evaluated in terms of what would have been the case in the closest possible world, as opposed to what is merely possible, had it not occurred. I believe this contention is quite plausible. Tiger Woods's recent car crash was of course bad for him. A simple and standard explanation of its badness is that his life would have fared better without it—he would have been saved from the many ordeals he had to endure in his actual life. However, while this is true, he could possibly be in a much worse state had the accident not occurred in the sense that in some possible worlds in which the

Footnote 4 (continued)

the point Lucretius wished to deny and Brueckner and Fischer wish to defend. In response, I would like to note that arguing for the badness of prenatal nonexistence is completely compatible with arguing that death is even worse. In providing the preceding argument, I am not committed to the claim that prenatal nonexistence is as bad as death. My own view is that we can make a stronger case against Lucretius by arguing that death is even worse than prenatal nonexistence, as opposed to arguing that death is bad while prenatal nonexistence is not. See Yi 2012: 301–3 for my arguments that death is worse than prenatal nonexistence. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophia* for urging me to clarify this point.

accident did not occur he could have been worse off. For example, after avoiding the accident, a series of unlikely events could have cost him some abilities necessary to play golf and, as a result, caused the end of his golf career. However, such faint possibilities hardly have any practical impact. Woods in his hospital bed would not be impressed by the existence of such counterfactuals insofar as they are mere possibilities and not what *would* have happened had he not had the accident.

By contrast, we can find consolation in knowing that what is seemingly an unfortunate event turns out to ward off an even greater misfortune. Suppose I survived a terrible car accident. While enduring overwhelming pain, I may have wished I had never had the accident. Later, doctors performed a diagnostic imaging scan to make sure that I was well and discovered a small cancerous tumor in my pancreas, which they successfully removed via surgery. The tumor would never have been found without the accident since it was the accident that led to the scan. At this point, I can rationally be glad that I had the accident because I most likely would have been in a much worse state without it. This is still true although there are possible worlds in which I was never involved in the accident but nonetheless did not suffer much from the tumor. For example, in some counterfactual worlds in which I did not have the accident, the tumor was found for a different reason or it was never found but was, inexplicably, benign. Such remote possibilities shouldn't affect me. Even if I am aware of the existence of such possibilities, I would not regret being absent from those counterfactuals insofar as the tumor most likely would never have been discovered without the accident and I most likely would have suffered a great deal due to the cancer. That it is a possibility that I wasn't involved the accident but the tumor was somehow found or miraculously became benign is not relevant here.

The preceding discussion should make it clear that in evaluating the badness of an event, the proper object of evaluation is what *would* have been the case, as opposed to what is merely possible, had it not occurred. The same goes for evaluations of an early death or a late beginning. The evil of one's death or one's beginning should be evaluated in terms of what would have happened had one not died at the time of one's actual death or had one begun to exist earlier than the time of one's actual beginning.⁵ In considering the deprivation of a late beginning, Brueckner and

⁵ Insofar as I can see, most influential philosophers refer to what would have been the case in characterizing the deprivation account or the symmetry problem. Thomas Nagel, in his groundbreaking paper, claims that death deprives a person of possible goods in the sense that "if he had not died, he *would* have continued to live...and to possess whatever good there is in living" (1970: 78, emphasis mine). John Martin Fischer identifies the deprivation account as the view that "death is a bad thing for an individual insofar as it deprives her of what *would* have been on balance a desirable continuation of her life" (2020: 40, emphasis mine). Frederik Kaufman, in his recent contribution, characterizes this account by saying that "death can be bad...if it deprives someone of life that she *would* have enjoyed by not dying when she did" (2021: 112, emphasis mine). A similar result can be found regarding the discussion of the symmetry problem. For example, Lukas Meier describes the symmetry problem as follows: "Had one come into existence earlier than in fact one did, one *would*...have lived longer and *would* have experienced all of the goods that this additional time span would have provided, just as *would* be the case if one died later" (2019: 652, emphasis mine). In coping with the symmetry problem, many prominent scholars refer to what would have happened in a possible life with an earlier beginning to show that such a counterfactual life is not rationally preferable to the actual life. See, e.g., McMahan 2006: 221 and Feldman 1991: 221–23; 1992: 154–55.

Fischer are mistaken in holding fixed the value of a life during the time that corresponds to the actual life because such a possible life most likely does not conform to what would have been the case with an earlier beginning.

2 Deprivation and Historical Closeness

Ricardo Miguel and Diogo Santos have recently made a valuable contribution to the debate about what kinds of counterfactuals are pertinent to evaluating the deprivation caused by an early death or a late beginning. While focusing on Brueckner and Fischer's example of a pleasure-inducing drug, they propose a novel interpretation of the temporal bias approach. In particular, they note that amnesia in the example works to restrict the induced pleasure from generating any further value beyond the point of its being experienced. In their argument, the amnesia restriction can be interpreted in two different ways.

In the "modal" interpretation, "only the counterfactual situations where the value of one's life is held fixed are relevant" (Miguel and Santos 2020: 1531). As a result, any counterfactual situation in which an earlier beginning generates more (or less) value than the value contained in one's actual life (during the same interval of time corresponding to the actual life) is precluded. They claim, as does with my argument, that the modal restriction is not tenable because it prevents us from considering the closest counterfactual situation in which one came into existence earlier.⁶ It is highly unlikely that one would have had exactly the same amount of goods in this counterfactual life as in one's actual life (during the time corresponding to the actual life), especially given that the contents of one's life would have been completely different in the counterfactual life.

To avoid this problem, we can apply the "primarily axiological" interpretation of the amnesia restriction. In this interpretation, we set aside and disregard any additional value that would have obtained during the stretch of time between one's actual beginning and actual death. If we accept this interpretation, we are allowed to consider what would have happened in the given counterfactual situation with an earlier beginning. We simply pass over whatever additional value might have obtained during the aforementioned period of time. As I understand Miguel and Santos, the reason why we can disregard the additional value in taking the primarily axiological interpretation is that this value is *not* deprived by one's late beginning (i.e., it is not deprived by one's coming into existence at the time of one's actual coming-into-being). Rather, it is deprived by some event or episode during one's actual life. To illustrate this point, in *Learning Japanese*, take

⁶ I suspect that here Miguel and Santos have a rather peculiar notion of the closest counterfactuals in mind. In illustrating this point, they say that if Tom Simpson had been born one year earlier, he would have become a professional cyclist in 1958, as opposed to in 1959 (2020: 1531). I do not see why this should be so. In my view, nothing indicates that one's life would go as it did in the actual life if it began earlier. If Tom Simpson had come into being one year earlier, his life would have been completely different—hence, we have no reason to suppose that he would have started his professional career as a cyclist exactly one year earlier (if he had become a cyclist at all).

an additional pleasure that stems from conversing with my Japanese friends in a counterfactual situation in which I began to exist earlier. Let us call it *e*. Given that *e* is an *additional* pleasure, it never occurred in my actual life but would have occurred in the counterfactual situation with an earlier beginning. However, Miguel and Santos argue that it is not my actual beginning that deprives me of this additional pleasure. Rather, I am deprived of *e* because I failed to decide to learn Japanese earlier: had I decided to learn the language earlier, I would have had *e* in the relevant counterfactual situation. In their view, it is a mistake to think that just *any* additional value that would have occurred (during the stretch of time corresponding to the actual life) in the counterfactual life with an earlier beginning or later death is a proper object of deprivation. They say:

To evaluate birth and death we should not take into account all the additional value persons' lives would have had, had they been born earlier or died later. Since other things besides coming into existence or ceasing to exist can deprive, one needs to focus on the part of that value that persons were deprived of due to the beginning or the end of their existence, and not due to particular contents of their existence (besides the time of their birth and death). (2020: 1535)

For this reason, they claim that my argument against the temporal bias approach is guilty of conflating (i) the deprivation of value in virtue of actual beginning or death and (ii) the deprivation of value in virtue of some event during one's life (other than actual beginning or death). It is important to make this distinction because only the former kind of deprivation is pertinent to the discussion of the symmetry problem. According to Miguel and Santos, *Learning Japanese* is simply irrelevant to the evil of a late beginning because the additional pleasure of communicating in Japanese, which would have been realized in a relevant counterfactual situation, is not deprived by the late beginning of my existence but by an episode of my actual life (that includes my too-late decision to learn the language).

To make the distinction stand out, they claim that the deprivation due to actual beginning or death must comply with a particular requirement, which they call the Historical Condition:

Historical Condition: Birth/death deprives a person of value E only if the historically closest counterfactual situation where her life has the additional value E is such that the person is born earlier/dies later (2020: 1536).

Crucial to understanding this condition is the notion of historical closeness. According to them, "the historically closest counterfactual situations ... are such that the actual causal history is held fixed as much as possible, except for the events that imply the person's existence" (2020: 1536). Hence, in considering how my life would have looked had I begun to exist earlier, events not premised on my existence – such as Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021 or Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – must be held fixed as much as possible.

The Historical Condition makes it clear that *Learning Japanese* is not a case of depriving a pleasure due to the time of my actual coming into existence. In

comparing the counterfactual situation in which I had begun to exist earlier and the counterfactual situation in which I had decided to learn Japanese earlier, let us stipulate that both of them contain an additional pleasure of using Japanese that never occurred in my actual life. However, Miguel and Santos argue that far more historical events, irrespective of my existence, are held fixed in the latter counterfactual, given that far fewer events would have been different. In this sense, the latter is historically closer to the actual world than the former. This implies that the former is not the historically closest counterfactual situation in which I enjoyed the additional pleasure. Hence, according to the Historical Condition, it is not my actual beginning but my failure to learn the language earlier that deprives me of the additional pleasure.

Instead of *Learning Japanese*, Miguel and Santos offer what they take to be a standard case in which one's actual beginning deprives one of future pleasure:

Seeing The Beatles

Alice was born in 1967. She is a huge fan of The Beatles. Her greatest regret is not having been able to see the band live in concert since she was only two years old at the time of their last show. Had she been born 15 years earlier, she would have gone to the concert and would have experienced additional pleasure (2020: 1534).

According to them, unlike *Learning Japanese*, *Seeing The Beatles* satisfies the Historical Condition. Given that it is a historical fact that The Beatles stopped playing live in 1969 and this fact is independent of Alice's existence, claim Miguel and Santos, "[f]or any historically close world where The Beatles stopped playing live in 1969 and Alice is born when she actually is, she does not see them live" (2020: 1537). In their view, any counterfactual situation in which Alice did not begin to exist earlier and had the pleasure of watching The Beatles play live is not historically closer than the counterfactual situation in which she did begin to exist earlier and had such a pleasure. For this reason, they think that it is a late beginning, as opposed to some event (or the absence of some event) during Alice's actual life, that deprives her of such a pleasure. Furthermore, they argue that *Seeing The Beatles* amounts to a case in which one's beginning deprives one of a value in the future in the sense that, in the relevant counterfactual situation with an earlier beginning, Alice's pleasure of watching the band live would have occurred after the time of Alice's actual birth. Hence, while *Learning Japanese* fails to show how an earlier birth can deprive one of a future pleasure, *Seeing The Beatles* does exactly that, causing difficulty for the temporal bias approach.⁷

⁷ If it is true that an earlier beginning deprives one of future intrinsic goods, it can also be used to impugn a certain strategy for defending the symmetry argument, since the symmetry would now imply that it could indeed be rational to fear death or regard it as a bad thing, given that it is similarly rational to regret a late beginning. This observation is of course compatible with the claim that it is not rational to remain indifferent to prenatal nonexistence contra the temporal bias approach, given that a past extended period of time would have ensured more future goods. Since the main focus of this paper is to provide a critique of Miguel and Santos's view, I will not pursue to discuss how the deprivation of future pleasures caused by a late beginning disputes the symmetry argument any further. I am grateful to John Martin Fischer for urging me to clarify this point.

3 Complications of the Historical Condition

The Historical Condition appears to be the primary building block for Miguel and Santos's treatment of the temporal bias approach. It is this condition that enables us to disregard the additional values that would have occurred in relevant counterfactuals with an earlier beginning or a later death (during the time of the actual life) in taking the primarily axiological interpretation of the amnesia restriction. It also places importance on drawing a distinction between deprivation of a value due to one's actual beginning or early death, and deprivation due to an event (or the absence of an event) during one's life, which is crucial in establishing what they take to be the proper sense of deprivation pertinent to the symmetry problem.

However, there are several complications facing the Historical Condition. First, this condition drastically diminishes the attractiveness of the deprivation account because it unduly restricts the kinds of goods deprived by death. The plausibility of the deprivation account derives from its capability to explain how death can deprive us of most ordinary sorts of pleasures not subject to particular historical facts about the world such as those stemming from visiting a new place or spending time with one's loved ones. But most of those ordinary pleasures could have been achieved by engaging in activities that would have generated them at an earlier time. Suppose I always wanted to visit Lisbon, but this wish was never fulfilled as a result of my untimely death. Had I not died, I would have had the pleasure of enjoying the great natural and architectural attractions of this beautiful city. Most defenders of the deprivation account would take this case as a standard example of deprivation due to an early death. Yet, if the Historical Condition is enforced, it is not my death that deprives me of these scenic and aesthetic pleasures. Rather, in my actual life I could have easily decided to visit Lisbon earlier and put the decision into action. Had I visited before my demise, I would have had the pleasure of exploring the city. Here, the counterfactual situation in which I went to Lisbon and had the pleasure due to my earlier decision is historically closer to the actual world than the counterfactual situation in which I had the same pleasure thanks to my later death.⁸ Hence, given the truth of the Historical Condition, it is not my death but my failure to decide to

⁸ One may question the identity of the additional pleasures in the two counterfactuals on the grounds that the quantity of each pleasure is determined by experiences in visiting Lisbon but a value in visiting a particular place can be individuated differently depending on the time of the visit. It is one thing to be deprived of the pleasure which would have been generated had I died later, it is another to be deprived of the pleasure that would have been generated by a visit to Lisbon at an earlier age. According to this argument, given that these pleasures are of different quantity, only the former counts as deprivation due to an early death. In response, I want to note that one may wish to visit a place regardless of the time of visiting and, in such a case, the deprived pleasure does not seem to be individuated in terms of its quantity. Suppose that I wished to visit Lisbon for the celebration of my 60th birthday, but this wish was never realized because I died at 55. This wish would not have been realized even if I had decided earlier and visited the city before 55. This is *not* the kind of wish I had in mind in giving the preceding example. There, I stipulate that I always wanted to visit the city regardless of the time of my visit, but this wish was never realized because of my premature death. Unlike the wish to visit Lisbon for the celebration of my 60th birthday, this wish would have been successfully fulfilled if I had made an earlier decision to visit the city and acted on it (regardless of the quantity of the deprived pleasure). I thank an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophia* for inducing me to address this point.

go to the city earlier that deprives me of the pleasure. A similar line of reasoning is applicable to many other pleasures that I would have had with a later death. What this means is that only a very limited range of pleasures can be a legitimate target of deprivation due to death, such as those resulting from celebrating one's 100th birthday or playing with one's great-grandchildren. Since these kinds of pleasures are relatively rare, the explanatory power of the deprivation account regarding the evil of death is significantly diminished with the onset of the Historical Condition.

One might object that my observation fails to estimate a series of changes that would have been made as the result of an alteration in the relevant counterfactual situation. For instance, if I had decided to visit Lisbon earlier, there must have been many other changes in the world that account for my earlier decision. In contrast, in the counterfactual world in which I die later, nothing would have been different until the time of my death. To demonstrate that the former is historically closer to the actual world than the latter, it is not sufficient to say how "easily" I could have made an earlier decision. What must be shown is that more historical events would be held fixed in the former rather than in the latter.⁹

In response to this objection, I would like to first note that only the historical events *irrespective of the subject's existence* are pertinent for estimating historical closeness among counterfactuals. In the preceding example, many of the events not held fixed in the counterfactual situation in which I visited Lisbon due to my earlier decision are *not* in fact irrespective of my existence. For example, we can grant that in that counterfactual situation I would have been in a series of different mental states before I reached that decision. Hence, whatever states of mind I was in in the actual world during the corresponding period of time, these mental states (or the events representing them) cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual life. However, these events are *not* irrespective of my existence given that they represent *my* mental states, and thus do not count in estimating how close this counterfactual life is to my actual life. Unlike these events, most events truly irrespective of my existence that occurred during my actual lifetime and afterward such as the war between Ukraine and Russia, can still be held fixed in the counterfactual life. On the other hand, in considering how close the counterfactual life with my later death is to my actual life, some events irrespective of my existence indeed cannot be held fixed. For example, there are many events irrespective of my existence that occurred shortly after my demise in the actual world, such as my friend wearing a black dress on the day of my funeral. This event, though irrespective of my existence, cannot be held fixed in this counterfactual life because she would not have participated in my funeral (wearing the black dress) on that day. In sum, some actual events (irrespective of my existence) cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual life with my later death but the same is not necessarily true of the counterfactual life with my earlier decision. This may be a reason for thinking that the counterfactual lives in which one secured an additional value due to a change in the contents of life are historically closer to the actual life than the counterfactual lives in which one obtained the same additional value due to a later death.

⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophia* for guiding me to see this point.

However, suppose that this is a mistake. Suppose, in general, that a change in an actual event such as a decision to visit a new place or spend more time with loved ones in a relevant counterfactual life involves fewer historical events (irrespective of the subject's existence) being held fixed. If that is the case, then the same conclusion should follow regarding Miguel and Santos's argument against *Learning Japanese*: fewer historical events (irrespective of my existence) can be held fixed in the counterfactual situation in which I learned Japanese earlier (when compared to the counterfactual life in which I did not begin to learn Japanese earlier but died later). Then, they must have been mistaken in arguing that an additional value stemming from using Japanese is not deprived by my late birth but by my late decision to learn the language. Since their critique of this example is based on the distinction between deprivation due to one's actual birth or death, and deprivation due to an event during one's life other than birth or death – which is crucial to providing motivation for the establishment of the Historical Condition – this result may cast doubt on the plausibility of their view.

I grant that even if I am correct to think that Miguel and Santos's analysis significantly weakens the force of the deprivation account, this observation does not demonstrate the falsity of the Historical Condition. In fact, Miguel and Santos agree that death does not deprive us of the ordinary kinds of pleasure I discussed above (2020: 1538). They might argue that many of the things that are regarded as being deprived by death in the common understanding of the deprivation account are not actually deprived by death but rather by the occurrence or non-occurrence of particular events during one's life. Perhaps it is correct to say that only specific kinds of pleasures are deprived by death: namely those which satisfy the Historical Condition. If so, our discussion may appear to have reached a stalemate. Is there any way to break it?

I believe so. Miguel and Santos's view is misguided because the Historical Condition is subject to counterexamples. In fact, the story of *Seeing The Beatles* can be used to falsify the Historical Condition. Let us grant that Alice is deprived of the pleasure of watching The Beatles in virtue of her late beginning. Is the counterfactual situation, in which she began to exist 15 years earlier and had the pleasure of watching the band live, closest historically to the actual world among the counterfactuals in which she had the pleasure? Can we think of a counterfactual situation in which she did not come into existence earlier and had this pleasure, yet is closer to the actual world? I think we can. Imagine a magic pill that expedites people's intelligence (comparable to the way in which the viral-based drug affects the brains of the apes in the 2011 film *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*) and rapidly develops interests in arts and music. There is a possible world in which Alice accidentally took the magic pill not long after she was born in 1967, which promptly advanced her interests in rock music. As a result, she became a huge fan of The Beatles and was able to attend their final live performance, the 1969 Rooftop Concert in London, as a two-year-old baby (riding on her father's shoulders). Alternatively, imagine a scenario in which Alice was abducted by aliens as a newborn shortly after she was born in 1967. In the spaceship, the aliens gave Alice a special treatment, causing her to have a level of intelligence typical of the average adolescent. Upon her safe return to her family, Alice developed a keen interest in The Beatles, just like other teenagers at that time.

As a result, she attended the Rooftop Concert with her father in 1969. No doubt stories of this kind sound very far-fetched. Nonetheless, what would have happened in either of these counterfactual scenarios may be the historically closest situation in which Alice had the pleasure of watching The Beatles live, given that most of the actual causal history, except for those events implying Alice's existence, is held fixed in each case.

In particular, either of these counterfactual situations is very likely to be historically closer to the actual world than the counterfactual situation in which Alice was born 15 years earlier and attended the 1969 concert as a teenager. This is because many events (in the actual world) that do not imply Alice's existence are held fixed in the former but not in the latter. To illustrate this point, let us add a further detail to the story of *Seeing The Beatles*. Suppose, in the counterfactual situation in which Alice began to exist 15 years earlier, she went to the Rooftop Concert with one of her classmates, Brenda, as Alice was able to turn her into a great Beatles fan. In the actual world, Brenda is much older than Alice and has never become acquainted with her; also, she has no particular interest in The Beatles. Thus, on the date of the Rooftop Concert in 1969, Brenda read *To Kill a Mockingbird* near the fireplace in her house. This actual event (Brenda's reading the book at home on the date of the concert) does not imply the existence of Alice. Yet it cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual situation in which Alice began to exist earlier and attended the concert because she accompanied Brenda to the show. By contrast, we have no reason to suppose that this event cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual situations involving the magic pill or alien abduction in each of which Brenda would have been a complete stranger to Alice. This applies equally to many of the actual events that imply Brenda's existence but do not imply Alice's existence (e.g., some other actual events involving what Brenda did at home on the day of the Rooftop Concert): such events cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual world in which Alice began to exist earlier, but can be held fixed in the counterfactual situations involving the magic pill or the alien abduction. The same is true of many of the events in Brenda's life that occurred at times other than the day of the Rooftop Concert. Suppose, in the counterfactual situation in which Alice began to exist earlier, she spent the summer of 1969 at her aunt's house in Guildford with Brenda. This of course never happened in the actual world: Brenda did not go to Guildford during that summer. Then, many if not all of the events from the summer of 1969 implying the existence of Brenda but not implying the existence of Alice (e.g., events involving what Brenda did in the actual world during that summer) cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual situation with Alice's earlier beginning but can be held fixed in the counterfactual situations involving the magic pill or alien abduction stories.

We can tell a similar story for many persons other than Brenda who are strangers to Alice in the actual world but would have been acquainted with Alice in the counterfactual situation in which she began to exist earlier (e.g., other classmates of Alice). Plenty of the actual events implying their existence but not implying the existence of Alice (e.g., many of the actual events involving what they did during their lives without the presence of Alice) can be held fixed in the magic pill or alien abduction stories, but not in the counterfactual situation with Alice's earlier existence. From this observation, it is highly likely that the former kind of scenarios are

historically closer to the actual world than the scenario with Alice's earlier beginning. Hence, Miguel and Santos are mistaken to argue that "[f]or any historically close world where The Beatles stopped playing live in 1969 and Alice is born when she actually is, she does not see them live" (2020: 1537). Now, according to *Seeing The Beatles*, it is Alice's actual beginning that deprives her of the pleasure of watching The Beatles in their last concert, though the counterfactual situation in which she came into being earlier and had this additional pleasure is *not* the historically closest one. This illustrates the falsity of the Historical Condition.

Of course, Miguel and Santos need only slightly revise the story of *Seeing The Beatles* to ward off this sort of counterexample. Suppose that Alice was born after 1969, and her greatest regret is that she has never been able to enjoy the live show of The Beatles as she has not yet existed when the band played their last concert. In this revised version of the story, it is simply impossible for her to attend the show even if she could take the magic pill or was abducted by aliens. Hence, with respect to *this* version of the story, there is no counterfactual situation in which, thanks to the magic pill or alien abduction (or any other unusual circumstances), she could have enjoyed the last show of the band live insofar as she began to exist at the time of her actual beginning (i.e., some time after 1969). However, my aim here is to show that the Historical Condition is not viable because it is not true of *all* cases. It has not been shown that the Historical Condition is immune to the original version of *Seeing The Beatles* example, as initially suggested by Miguel and Santos. If, in the original story, it is Alice's late beginning as opposed to, say, the absence of the magic pill or the non-occurrence of alien abduction that deprives her of the pleasure of enjoying the show, then the Historical Condition is undermined. Whether or not the Historical Condition successfully accommodates some variants of *Seeing The Beatles* is not relevant here.

One might argue that in *Seeing The Beatles*, what deprives Alice of the pleasure of being at the concert is not her late beginning, but her not taking (or being unable to take) the magic pill or not being abducted by the aliens. If this is correct, the previous stories involving the magic pill or the alien abduction do not constitute counterexamples to the Historical Condition because the antecedent of the conditional is not instantiated as being true. However, I do not find this strategy promising as there is a robust sense in which Alice's late beginning does deprive her of the additional pleasure of enjoying the band live, given that she would have attended the concert had she begun to exist earlier. When we hear the story of *Seeing The Beatles*, I believe hardly anybody (myself included) would think that what deprived her of the pleasure of enjoying the show has to do with the conceivability of an outlandish apparatus, such as the magic pill or alien abduction, as opposed to her late beginning. Such possibilities seem just too unrealistic to have any significance in judging how she is worse off for not going to the show.

Furthermore, the deprivations in the two kinds of scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Even if we grant that Alice is indeed deprived of the additional pleasure of watching the band live because she would have had the pleasure in the counterfactual situations, this does *not* imply that she is not deprived of the pleasure in her actual life when compared with the counterfactual situation in which she began to exist earlier. In general, the fact that one is deprived of some pleasure because one

would have had it in some counterfactual situation has no bearing on whether one is deprived of the same pleasure in comparison with a *different* counterfactual situation. In considering the two scenarios, we have no reason to suppose that the deprivation involving the magic pill or alien abduction story is incompatible with the deprivation involving Alice's earlier beginning. Quite the contrary, it is plausible to think that her late beginning is accountable for the deprivation regardless of whether the non-occurrence of pill taking or alien abduction deprives her of the pleasure: as Miguel and Santos argue, Alice was born too late to enjoy the concert. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that a far-fetched scenario such as the magic pill or alien abduction story may be the historically closest counterfactual situation (or, at least they are historically closer to the actual world than the counterfactual situation in which Alice had the pleasure of attending the concert thanks to an earlier beginning). This consideration indicates that the problem lies in the Historical Condition, rather than in the story of *Seeing The Beatles*.

It is possible to think that stories like the magic pill or alien abduction scenarios depart too forcefully from the actual world because in considering these scenarios, there must be other differences that are not taken into account. For instance, in a counterfactual world in which something like the magic pill is successfully invented, the history of chemistry must have unfolded quite differently from the actual history featuring *Seeing The Beatles*. This means that many events regarding the advancement of chemistry in the actual world cannot be held fixed in the counterfactual world in which Alice accidentally took the magic pill. Given that these kinds of scenarios are historically more different than they might first appear, they may be too distant from the actual world to be the historically closest counterfactuals.

This problem can be sidestepped by revising the descriptions of the actual world in the story of *Seeing The Beatles*. Suppose that, in the actual world, unbeknownst to anyone on earth, aliens from an extraterrestrial civilization secretly placed the magic pill near Alice when she was a newborn. She could have taken it, but she didn't. If she had, she would have developed keen musical interests and attended the Rooftop Concert in 1969.¹⁰ In this setting, any historical event in the actual world (irrespective of Alice's existence) can be held fixed in the counterfactual situation in which she took the magic pill, up to the time of her taking the pill. Of course, such a description of the actual world may differ from what Miguel and Santos originally had in mind when they provided *Seeing The Beatles*. However, it should not concern us, since my goal here is simply to show that the Historical Condition is subject to counterexamples. Given that the counterfactual situation in which Alice took the pill is historically closer to the actual world, as described above, than the counterfactual situation in which Alice began to exist earlier, this revised version of the story suffices to illustrate the falsity of the condition.¹¹

¹⁰ Here we don't need to imagine that in the actual world there was a series of events regarding the invention of the magic pill in *human* history. We can stipulate that in the actual world history is roughly the same as the one we know, but it includes an episode of an alien civilization secretly placing the magic pill in Alice's residence (which, of course, is unknown to any earthling).

¹¹ A similar line of thinking applies to the alien abduction scenario. In describing the story of *Seeing The Beatles*, we can stipulate that in the *actual* world, a UFO, occupied by aliens equipped with the special treatment skills, was lurking around Alice's residence unbeknownst to anyone on earth, but did

Alternatively, we can revise the description of the counterfactual situation to address this problem. What happens in the actual world remains similar to how Miguel and Santos initially envisaged it in *Seeing The Beatles*. Still, there is a possible world in which Alice suddenly undergoes rapid cerebral development shortly after she was born, a phenomenon completely inexplicable by modern medical science. As a result, she became a huge Beatles fan and attended the Rooftop Concert. In this counterfactual situation, every actual event is held fixed up to the moment of her sudden neural development.¹² No doubt this sort of counterfactual scenario is unrealistic yet it is historically closer to the actual world than the counterfactual situation in which Alice began to exist earlier.

Since the previous counterfactuals are rather too outlandish, one might argue that some sort of likelihood constraint is wanted. The idea is that we should impose the Historical Condition on top of the likelihood constraint and enforce that the Historical Condition would operate only after relevant counterfactual situations are ordered in accordance with the constraint.¹³ In response, I must say I am not overly confident that we can successfully spell out the likelihood constraint. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to suggest a counterexample to the Historical Condition that incorporates a probable story to meet a likelihood constraint. Suppose that, in the actual world, Alice was born somewhat earlier than 1967, say in 1960, and thus was a nine-year-old girl who was just a little too young to be interested in The Beatles when they performed their last concert in 1969. Now, being a great teenaged fan of The Beatles, she regrets that she missed their last show and rightly believes that if she had been born earlier, say in 1952, she would have enjoyed attending it. Here I want to note that, although nine-year-old Alice was not mature enough to grasp the beauty of their music and thus be attracted to it, some kids around her age can and in fact do develop intense interests in rock bands like The Beatles. In this sense, it is reasonable to suppose that a counterfactual world in which Alice became a passionate Beatles fan before the age of nine and went to their last concert in 1969 should meet the likelihood constraint. And this counterfactual situation seems historically closer to the actual world than the counterfactual situation in which Alice was born earlier and had the pleasure of being at the concert.¹⁴

Footnote 11 (continued)

not kidnap her. So, the abduction never actually occurred, but it could have. In this version of the story, most, if not all, actual historical events can be held fixed in the counterfactual situation (up to the time of Alice's abduction).

¹² I am not assuming here that, in the counterfactual situation, Alice's brain states prior to the sudden development must differ from those in the actual world. I am thinking of a possible world in which her brain states were exactly the same as those in the actual world before the sudden developmental change kicked in. Arguably this scenario is physically impossible, but it is certainly logically possible.

¹³ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophia* for this observation.

¹⁴ One might point out here that it is because of Alice's immaturity that she is deprived of the pleasure. However, as discussed before, to say that Alice is deprived of a value due to her immaturity is perfectly compatible with saying that she is deprived of the same value due to her late birth. Hence, in this version of the story, the antecedent of the Historical Condition is instantiated as being true.

Apart from my previous observation that the Historical Condition is subject to counterexamples, I doubt that this principle is theoretically defensible.¹⁵ The Historical Condition, in part, specifies a necessary condition for a late birth's depriving a person *S* of an additional value *E*. According to a fairly standard understanding of deprivation, to say that a late birth deprives *S* of *E* should imply:

(A) If *S* had been born earlier, then *E* would have occurred.

So, in referring to Alice's deprivation in *Seeing The Beatles*, it is correct to say that if Alice had been born earlier, she would have enjoyed the pleasure of attending the Rooftop Concert. However, instead of implying (A), the consequent of the Historical Condition ("the historically closest counterfactual situation where [*S*'s] life has the additional value *E* is such that [*S*] is born earlier/dies later") includes exactly its converse, which is:

(A_c) If *E* had occurred, then *S* would have been born earlier.

This signals that the Historical Condition is wrong-headed, failing to accommodate a highly plausible notion of deprivation. The implausibility of (A_c) can be demonstrated by a couple of observations. First, given that the time at which *S* was born (i.e., the time of *S*'s earlier birth) precedes the time at which *E* occurred in the supposed counterfactual situation, (A_c) is guilty of being a backtracking counterfactual, which is usually taken to be a type of claim to avoid. Furthermore, (A_c) is based on an incorrect analysis of deprivation. In general, to say that *p* deprives a person of *q* implies that *q* does not obtain because of *p*. A proper analysis of *q* not obtaining because of *p* should go as follows:

(a) If *p* had not occurred, then *q* would have obtained.

Hence, to say that Alice never enjoyed the pleasure of being at the concert because of her late birth is to say that if she had been born earlier, she would have enjoyed it. By contrast, according to the analysis from which (A_c) is modeled, to say that *p* deprives a person of *q* is analyzed as:

(b) If *q* had obtained, then *p* would not have occurred.

However, (b) is clearly an incorrect analysis. Suppose that the driver of an overloaded truck turned the wheel too abruptly and, as a result, the truck was overturned. By stipulation, if either of the two conditions (the overloading and the abrupt turning of the wheel) was not met, the accident would not have occurred. Hence, it is true to say that the accident took place because the driver turned the wheel too abruptly, and it is also true that the accident occurred because the truck was overloaded. Here, in analyzing the notion that the accident took place because of the overloading, it is patently false to say, in accordance with (b), that if there had been no accident then

¹⁵ I am indebted to Hwan Sunwoo for the criticisms of the Historical Condition that follow in the remainder of this section.

the truck would not have been overloaded. If the driver had not turned the wheel so abruptly, then the truck would not have been overturned even if it had been overloaded. The Historical Condition is untenable because it is based on this faulty analysis. Taking into account the preceding observations, I contend that we should reject the Historical Condition.

4 Conclusion

Miguel and Santos's discussion of the temporal bias approach is significant in that it offers an adequate explanation of the amnesia restriction while accommodating the idea of "what would have been the case." Though we share the view that a late beginning can deprive a person of future intrinsic goods, there are discrepancies between our views. They claim that my argument for the evil of late beginning is guilty of confusing deprivation due to death or beginning with deprivation due to an event (or the non-occurrence of an event) during one's actual life. As a result, they argue, what I take to be a case in which one is deprived of a future pleasure by a late beginning, such as *Learning Japanese*, does not do the job given that such a deprivation is caused by what one does or doesn't do in one's actual life. The core of their argument hinges on a principle regarding the deprivation of pleasant experiences and historical closeness, namely the Historical Condition. I have argued that the Historical Condition is ill-advised for several reasons. First, this condition substantially weakens the explanatory capacity of the deprivation account since, given the truth of the Historical Condition, death is not able to deprive most ordinary pleasures. In addition, the Historical Condition is vulnerable to counterexamples. Perhaps ironically, *Seeing The Beatles*, which Miguel and Santos offered as an exemplar of deprivation due to a late beginning, or at least some of its variants, can be used to falsify this condition. I have also argued that *pace* Miguel and Santos, the Historical Condition is theoretically unjustifiable since it is based on a faulty analysis of deprivation.

In their critique of my argument, Miguel and Santos claim that the kind of examples I had in mind to illustrate the deprivation of future pleasure by a late beginning (of which *Learning Japanese* is an instance) "conflates being deprived due to the contents of our existence with being deprived due to its length" (2020: 1535). The Historical Condition operates as a means to eliminate this confusion. However, the time of one's beginning does not only affect the length of one's life but also its contents. When we consider the (non-) badness of a late beginning, we are led to be concerned about how our life would have been different from, and whether it would have been better than, our actual life, if we had begun to exist earlier.¹⁶ Hence, it should not come as a surprise that the contents of one's life would have

¹⁶ I am not alone in making this claim. Some philosophers attempted to deal with the symmetry problem by observing that a life with an earlier beginning would be completely different from the actual life. For example, Jeff McMahan (2006: 221–22) argues that we have little reason to care about a life with an earlier beginning given that such a life would not have contained the particulars that we care about in our actual life. See also Harman 2011: 139.

been different with a different beginning. The idea that one is deprived by the (non-) occurrence of an event in one's life does not imply that one is *not* deprived by one's early death or late beginning. On the contrary, it is precisely because of an early death or a late beginning that we are deprived by the (non-) occurrence of an event of which the death or beginning is causally accountable if some additional goods have been generated due to the (non-) occurrence of the event in the relevant counterfactual situations.

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