

The Mirror-Image Argument: An Additional Reply to Johansson

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Abstract We have argued that it is rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous non-existence insofar as this asymmetry is a special case of a more general (and arguably rational) asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future pleasures. Here we respond to an interesting critique of our view by Jens Johansson. We contend that his critique involves an inappropriate conflation of the time from which the relevant asymmetry emerges and the time of the badness of death.

Keywords Asymmetry in attitudes · Jens Johansson · Lucretius · Prenatal and posthumous non-existence

1 Introduction

In previous work we have defended a version of the deprivation theory of death's badness. (e.g., Brueckner and Fischer 1986) Part of our defense involves a reply to Lucretius' "Mirror-Image Argument". Lucretius pointed out that posthumous non-existence is the mirror image of prenatal non-existence (insofar as they are similar kinds of deprivation), and this suggests (and many commentators have attributed to Lucretius the view) that we should have symmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous non-existence. But since most people think that it is rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward posthumous and prenatal non-existence, there would appear to be a problem for the deprivation theory of death's badness. The

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deprivation theory needs an account of why it is rational to have one set of attitudes toward the one deprivation (involved in posthumous non-existence) and another set of attitudes toward the other deprivation (involved in prenatal non-existence).

We have argued that, whereas posthumous and prenatal non-existence are mirror-image deprivations, it does not follow that it would be rational to have similar attitudes toward these two periods. (e.g., Brueckner and Fischer 1986) The symmetry in deprivations does not entail or force on us a symmetry in rationality of attitudes. Indeed, we have argued that it would be rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward these periods. More specifically, we have argued that the asymmetry in the attitudes in question is a special case of a more general asymmetry in attitudes toward past and future pleasures—an asymmetry that is, arguably at least, rational. (Fischer 2006; Fischer and Brueckner 2012, 2014a).

Jens Johansson criticizes aspects of our approach to defending the deprivation theory against worries stemming from the Mirror-Image Argument in Johansson (2013, 2014). Although we replied to part of Johansson's critique in Fischer and Brueckner (2014b), we think that it might be helpful to provide a further response here, addressing an aspect of Johansson (2014) to which we did not previously respond.

2 Johansson's Critique

In Fischer and Brueckner (2014a), we contend that a certain objection raised by Johansson to our view involved an illicit shift in temporal perspectives. This contention prompted Johansson to distinguish two versions of our key principle $BF^*(dd)^*$ (Johansson 2014). He argues that there is no illicit shift in temporal perspectives with respect to the first version, and whereas there might be such a shift in the second, this version is independently implausible. Let us focus on this second version of the principle (and Johansson's analysis of it).

The principle we suggested (Fischer and Brueckner 2014a, 4) is:

$BF^*(dd)^*$: When death is bad for an individual X, it is bad for X because it is rational for X to care about having pleasant experiences after t (where t is the time of his death), and his death deprives him of having pleasant experiences after t (whereas prenatal non-existence is not bad for a person because, even though it deprives him of having had pleasant experiences before t* [where t* is the time at which he came into existence], it is not rational for him to care about having had pleasant experiences before t*).

Johansson writes that our (Fischer and Brueckner 2014a) reply to him suggests that what we had in mind can be captured as follows:

$BF^*(dd)^*(B)$: When death is bad *at certain times* for an individual X—times at which X is alive—it is bad for X at those times because it is rational for X, *from the perspective of those times*, to care about having pleasant experiences after t (where t is the time of his death), and his death deprives him of having pleasant experiences after t (whereas prenatal non-existence is not bad for a

person at those times because, even though it deprives him of having had pleasant experiences before t^* [where t^* is the time at which he came into existence], it is not rational for him, *from the perspective of those times*, to care about having had pleasant experiences before t^* . (Johansson 2014, 16)

Johansson, however, does not think well of $BF^*(dd)^*(B)$:

Actually, it was for reasons of charity that I did not interpret $BF^*(dd)^*$ as $BF^*(dd)^*(B)$. For the claim that my death is bad for me at a certain time seems to be tantamount to—or at the very least to entail—the claim that I am worse off at that time than I would have been if my death had not occurred. And earlier in my discussion of Brueckner and Fischer’s approach—before I turned to the principles that the authors bring up in their reply to me—I had already considered various other construals of it, one of which was precisely a view of this sort (Johansson 2013, 58–59). More exactly, I discussed a view which appeals to time-relative value for people and which implies the thesis that my well-being level at a certain time partly depends on what happens at *later* times ... Like many others before me..., I argued that that thesis is implausible (Johansson 2014, 16).

He had argued (for instance) as follows:

Imagine that your life and mine have so far been exactly similar in their intrinsic features, but that you, unlike me are going to have pleasant experiences in the future. Perhaps it would be reasonable for me to be envious; but surely it would be completely unreasonable for me to be envious about the life you have had *until now*. (That would be like being envious about your kitchen even though I possess an exactly similar kitchen myself). The best explanation of this seems to be that we have been equally well off until now, despite our different futures (Johansson 2013, 59).

In Johansson (2014, 17) he writes:

Since $(BF^*(dd)^*(B))$, too, seems to imply the thesis in question—by implying that I would have been better off now than I would have been if it were not for my future death—it strikes me as an unpromising view. In any case, if Brueckner and Fischer want to defend $BF^*(dd)^*(B)$, it seems that they would have to address such arguments against the thesis—or, alternatively, show that I am wrong in supposing that the thesis follows from $BF^*(dd)^*(B)$. (Of course, I am not saying that this cannot possibly be done, but that it should be done).

3 Reply to Johansson

We wish to take Johansson up on his challenge. But he crucially omits a possibility. That is, he supposes that we would either have to address the arguments against the thesis in question (to the effect that an individual’s well-being level at a certain time partly depends on what happens at *later* times) or show that this thesis does not follow from $BF^*(dd)^*(B)$. Johansson fails to consider the possibility that our view

does not imply $BF^*(dd)*B$. Here we shall argue that Johansson's attribution to us of $BF^*(dd)*B$ rests on a mistake. Further, we shall suggest a different interpretation of $BF^*(dd)*$ that avoids the problems involved with the thesis under consideration. (We take no stand on the thesis).

To understand the mistake we shall attribute to Johansson, it is helpful to return to the sorts of Parfit-style examples that help to motivate our approach to replying to the Mirror-Image Argument:

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 (Brueckner and Fischer 1986, p. 227).

In Brueckner and Fischer (1986) we emphasized that the sort of preference elicited in such an example (and similar examples) emerges *only* from a *specific temporal perspective*. In Fischer and Brueckner (2014a) we developed the point as follows:

The use of temporal indexicals, such as “yesterday” and “tomorrow” indicates that we are here operating within a temporally situated perspective, and the preference for pleasure tomorrow only emerges from such a perspective. Given that you are situated within time (now), you prefer the pleasure tomorrow. Even given a choice of ten hours of pleasure yesterday followed by amnesia or one hour of pleasure tomorrow followed by amnesia, you would presumably prefer the one hour of pleasure tomorrow. But it is obvious that this sort of preference would disappear, if one were not situated in time at a particular time. That is, if one steps back from any given location in time and asks about which life one would prefer, (say) one with an hour of pleasure on a certain date or ten hours of similar pleasure on a later date (holding everything else fixed), one would presumably choose the life with more pleasure. Similarly, from a non-localized temporal perspective, one would presumably be *indifferent* between an hour of pleasure on a given Monday and a similar hour of pleasure on a given Wednesday (the pleasures to be followed by amnesia, and holding everything else fixed). So one's preferences will depend crucially on whether one has a localized perspective within time or not... (Fischer and Brueckner 2014a, p. 3).

In responding to Johansson, it is important to distinguish two claims: first, that the asymmetric attitudes in question emerge (only) from a specific temporal perspective, and second, that goodness and badness are time-relative in a sense that implies that (for example) the badness of death takes place at a time when the individual in question is still alive. We contend that we are *only* committed to the first, and not also the second claim. Johansson appears to think that the first claim entails the second, but we do not see why this would be so. It is one thing to claim that a certain pattern of attitudes would emerge from a specific temporal perspective; more specifically, it is one thing to suppose that relative to a particular time, one would care about having pleasant experiences after that time (and not care

about having pleasant experiences prior to that time, given that all the experiences in question would be followed immediately by amnesia, as in the Parfit-style thought experiments). But it is quite another thing to claim that the goodness or badness associated with various states of affairs take place at certain specific times (in particular, the time relative to which the pattern of cares emerges). Johansson appears to make the mistake of either failing to distinguish the first sort of claim from the second or presupposing (inappropriately, in our view) that the first entails the second.

Clearly, one could hold that the asymmetric pattern of cares emerges only from a certain specific temporal perspective while also holding a wide variety of different positions about *when* the badness of death occurs. Indeed, Fischer has explicitly argued (contrary to the position Johansson ascribes to Fischer and Brueckner) that the badness of death takes place *after* the individual has died (Fischer 1997). It seems obvious that it is an error to run together (in the various ways indicated above) the time at which the relevant attitudes emerge and the time of the badness of death.

We can drive our point home by considering a case involving pain. Suppose that an individual now fears the pain that he will experience tomorrow during his anticipated operation. A straightforward interpretation of this scenario is that he is now experiencing attitudes regarding a bad that will take place tomorrow; that is, he is experiencing attitudes regarding a bad at a different time than the time at which the badness will take place. It would seem absurd to claim either that the badness of the pain of the operation occurs *now* (because this is the time at which the relevant attitudes emerge) or that the attitudes will emerge *tomorrow* (because this is the time of the badness of the pain). Thus, it is in general mistaken to run together the time at which relevant attitudes emerge and the time of the badness those attitudes are about. The case of death does not appear to be any different in this respect.

With the distinction between the time of the attitudes and the time of the badness firmly in mind, we can revise our principle so that it more accurately reflects our view:

BF*(dd)*D): When death is bad for an individual X, it is bad for X because it is rational for X, *from the perspective of certain times during his life*, to care about having pleasant experiences after t (where t is the time of his death), and his death deprives him of having pleasant experiences after t (whereas prenatal non-existence is not bad for a person because, even though it deprives him of having had pleasant experiences before t* [where t* is the time at which he came into existence], it is not rational for him, *from the perspective of those times during his life*, to care about having had pleasant experiences before t*).¹

¹ We here use “BF*(dd)*D” because we employed “BF*(dd)*C” to present a fully counterfactualized version of the principle in Fischer and Brueckner (2014b, 20).

4 Conclusion

In Brueckner and Fischer (1986) and subsequent work, we have sketched out a way of defending the deprivation theory of death's badness against worries stemming from Lucretius' famous Mirror-Image Argument. On our view, although prenatal and posthumous non-existence are indeed mirror images, it is nevertheless (arguably) rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward these periods. We invoke Parfit-style thought experiments on behalf of our strategy.

In Johansson (2013), Johansson offers an interesting critique of our approach. In Fischer and Brueckner (2014a) we reply, suggesting that Johansson's critique involves an illicit temporal shift. In Johansson (2014), Johansson responds, contending that $BF^*(dd^*)$ admits of two interpretations: $BF^*(dd^*)A$ and $BF^*(dd^*)B$. He claims that on $BF^*(dd^*)A$, his critique involves no illicit temporal shift. He further claims that although on $BF^*(dd^*)B$, his critique would involve such a shift, $BF^*(dd^*)B$ is independently implausible (and not the version of the principle that he had thought we had in mind).

Here we have pointed out that our fundamental approach to replying to the Mirror-Image Argument does not commit us to *either* of these interpretations of $BF^*(dd^*)$. Indeed, we have claimed that to suppose that our approach commits us to $BF^*(dd^*)B$ is inappropriately to mix together the time of the relevant attitude and the time of the badness of death. Once these two issues are disentangled, $BF^*(dd^*)D$ can be seen to be the appropriate interpretation of our strategy.²

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