

Prenatal and Posthumous Non-Existence: A Reply to Johansson

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Received: 19 November 2013 / Accepted: 20 November 2013 / Published online: 18 December 2013
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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 a crucial and illicit switch in temporal perspectives in the process of considering modal claims (sending us to other possible worlds).

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

Introduction

How exactly can death itself (that is, the condition of being dead, as opposed to dying) be a bad thing for the individual who has died, insofar as we assume that death results in the non-existence of the individual and involves no unpleasant or negative experiences had by the individual? That is, why—in this sense—is death bad? We have defended the “deprivation” account of death’s badness, according to which death is bad for the individual who has died insofar as it deprives the individual of what would on balance be worthwhile or good (Brueckner and Fischer 1986).

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In an interesting article, “Past and Future Non-Existence,” Jens Johansson asks whether the British singer Amy Winehouse’s death in July 2011 should be deemed a bad *for her* [and not just for her friends, family, business partners, and fans (Johansson 2013, p. 51)]. He points out that, although she does not have any desires or experiences after her death, a proponent of the deprivation approach to death’s badness will indeed deem it a bad thing for her that she died, assuming that she would have had an on balance better life if she had not died. He writes:

More generally, on this ‘deprivation approach,’ as it is often called, something is overall bad for a person if and only if, and to the extent that, she would have been on balance intrinsically better off if it had not obtained [references in original removed] (Johansson 2013, p. 52).

Whereas the deprivation approach is attractive, it does face various problems, one of which was developed by Lucretius. Johansson writes:

Just as death deprives the subject of goods, Lucretius observed, so does her prenatal non-existence: because she was not born 20 years earlier (say), she misses out on two valuable decades. So if the deprivation approach is correct, a person’s prenatal non-existence would apparently have to be bad for her as well. It does not seem to be, however. While there has been a funeral for Winehouse (which seems entirely appropriate), it would be ridiculous to propose a ceremony dedicated to lamenting her not having come into existence earlier (Johansson 2013, p. 52).

Johansson goes on to map out two “lines of response” to the Lucretian challenge:

One is to insist that, despite appearances, a person’s prenatal non-existence is in fact bad for her. The other is to argue that prenatal non-existence is relevantly different from death: despite appearances, the former does not deprive the person of a better scenario. I happen to favor the former alternative, but shall not try to defend it here, other than indirectly. What I shall do is criticize the two presently most influential versions of the second option (Johansson 2013, p. 52).

We shall here explain Johansson’s critique of our version of the second option, and we shall also seek to defend our approach. It will emerge that the issues are considerably more nuanced than Johansson presupposes, and that his critique depends on an inappropriate shift in temporal perspective.

The Brueckner/Fischer Reply to Lucretius and Johansson’s Critique

We concede that prenatal non-existence deprives an individual of good experiences in a way that is parallel to the way in which posthumous non-existence does. The key to responding to Lucretius, on our view, is to note that it is rational to have different attitudes toward previous good experiences, just in themselves (and not insofar as they lead to future good experiences) and future good experiences. The way we originally put the point, somewhat too simply and perhaps infelicitously, is as follows: “Death deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal

nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent” (Brueckner and Fischer 1986, p. 219).

Inspired by important work by Derek Parfit, we based our view on the following sort of case (and our analysis of it):

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).

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 10 hours of pleasure yesterday followed by amnesia or 1 hour of pleasure tomorrow followed by amnesia, you would presumably prefer the 1 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 10 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; we shall return to this point below.

Although we originally put our point in terms of what we took to be people’s actual preference patterns, we should have put it in terms of the *rationality* of such patterns of preference (Brueckner and Fischer 1993a). It is difficult to *prove* that a bias toward the future is rational, but various strategies might be fruitful [See Moller (2002) and Fischer (2006)]. Here we simply posit that it is rational to prefer a future pleasure followed by amnesia over a past pleasure followed by amnesia. Thus, we contend that death (posthumous non-existence) deprives an individual of something it is rational for him to care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence does not. Both posthumous and prenatal non-existence constitute deprivations of what can be on-balance good; but it is not rational to have symmetric attitudes toward the goods of which we are (or would be) deprived. The rational asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous non-existence is a special case of the general rational asymmetry in our attitudes toward future and past good or pleasant experiences; to the extent that the latter, more general asymmetry can be explained and justified, so can the former, more specific asymmetry [Again: see Moller (2002) and Fischer (2006)].

Although our claim, “Death deprives us of something it is rational to care about, whereas prenatal non-existence deprives us of something to which it is rational to be

indifferent” can be given a de re or a de dicto reading (Feldman 2013), we are inclined to accept a de dicto reading:

BF*(dd): When death is bad for an individual X, it is bad for X because it is rational for X to care about the fact that if X dies, X will be deprived of some pleasant experiences (though X may not know what experiences these will be) that X otherwise would have enjoyed (whereas prenatal non-existence is not bad for an individual because, even though it deprives him or her of pleasant experiences, it is not rational for an individual to care about the fact that if he or she is born late, he or she will be deprived of some pleasant experiences (Brueckner and Fischer 1993a, p. 787).

Johansson offers three criticisms of our BF*(dd). The first is as follows:

... BF*(dd) is an odd interpretation of [our basic contention that death deprives us of something it is rational to care about, whereas prenatal non-existence does not]. [This is because] the relevant object of X’s care is the fact *that if X dies, X will be deprived of some pleasant experiences*; but that fact is not something of which death deprives X (Johansson 2013, p. 63).

That is, the basic contention is that there is some *single* fact such that death deprives us of it (that is, death makes it the case that it does not obtain) and it is something which it is rational to care about (that is, the obtaining of which it is rational to care about). But, as Johansson points out, death does not deprive us of the obtaining of the fact adverted to in BF*(dd): the fact *that if X dies, X will be deprived of some pleasant experiences*. *This* fact will obtain, whether or not X dies (at some particular time).

Johansson however does make a suggestion for a de dicto reading of our basic contention that avoids this problem. (Johansson 2013, p. 61) We can employ this suggestion by adapting it to BF*(dd) to yield:

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*).

Note that it is true of the fact that X has pleasant experiences after t (where t is the time of his death) *both* that his death would make it the case that it this fact would fail to obtain and it some something the obtaining of which it is rational for X to care about.

Johansson’s second and third criticisms are related, and he presents them as follows:

Second, just as how well off I am in a certain possible world *w* does not seem to depend on what I care about in some world other than *w* [reference to previous section deleted], so it does not seem to depend on what it is rational

for me to care about in some world other than w . It might well depend on what it is rational for me to care about in w ; but there is no reason to deny that if I had been born earlier, it would have been rational for me to care about the pleasures that I would thereby receive. Third, just as the deprivation approach, in order to be plausible, should not be construed as saying that an event is bad for me by depriving me of something I *in fact* care about [reference to previous section deleted], so it should not be construed as stating that an event is bad for me by depriving me of something it is *in fact* rational for me to care about. Again, compare with pain and goodness; even if, for some reason, it is not actually rational for a person to care about a painful torture, it is still good for her to avoid the torture, at least provided that, if she had been tortured, it *would have been rational for her to care about it and she would* have been on balance worse off. Surely the analogous thing holds for pleasure and badness (Johansson 2013, p. 63).

Johansson explains his claim that how well off an individual is in a certain possible world w does not seem to depend on what that individual cares about in some world other than w thus:

It may be true that I do not *actually* care about past the past pleasures I would have received if I had come into existence earlier. But this does not show that I *would* not have been overall better off then. How well off I am in a certain possible world w can hardly depend in this way on what I care about in some world *other* than w . Perhaps it depends on what I care about in w itself. But there seems to be no reason to deny that I *would* have cared about the pleasant experiences that I would have had if I had come into existence earlier... (Johansson 2013, p. 62)

He takes it that this point is telling against a principle such as BF*(dd). His claim (in the previous quotation) is that if this point is telling against a principle such as BF*(dd) (which simply refers to what the individual *does* care about [as opposed to what he *would* care about]), it also applies to a principle such as BF*(dd)* (which refers to what it is *actually rational* to care about [as opposed to what *would be* rational to care about]). He thus rejects BF*(dd)*. The problem with BF*(dd)*, according to Johansson, is that it does not refer to what it *would be* rational to care about.

It will be helpful to have before us Johansson's elaboration of the third critique:

Suppose you are able to torture me, but do not. Suppose also that I do not, in fact, care about the prospect of being in pain. (For instance, I might have managed to take up an attitude of indifference towards anything that might happen to my body.) Surely it is still good for me that you refrain from torturing me—at least if I *would* have cared very much about the pain if it *were* inflicted upon me, and if that scenario would be overall worse for me than the actual scenario. And pleasure can hardly be different in this regard. If you prevent me from receiving pleasant experiences which I do not actually care about, but which I would have cared about if I had gotten them and which

would have made me overall much better off, then you are acting against my interests (Johansson 2013, p. 62).

A Defense of the Brueckner/Fischer Approach

In our view, the problem with Johansson's critique stems from the fact that his analysis does not simply involve counterfactual reasoning (and thus consideration of different *possible worlds*); it also involves switching of temporal perspectives. That is, as he moves to different possible worlds in order to evaluate the relevant counterfactuals, he is *also* illicitly changing temporal perspectives: he is moving from a temporally situated perspective posited to be *after* some of the relevant pleasures and *before* others to either a nonlocalized temporal perspective or a temporally situated perspective *before or during* all of the pleasures in question. This shift of temporal perspective is inappropriate and results in distorted and inaccurate judgments.

We can agree with Johansson that "how well off" I am in a given possible world w does not depend on my preferences in a different possible world; rather, it depends on my attitudes and preferences in w . And this point applies not just to what preferences there would be, but also to the *rationality* of these preferences. Further, we can agree with Johansson that "...there seems to be no reason to deny that I *would* have cared about the pleasant experiences that I would have had if I had come into existence earlier..." In shifting to another possible world w^* , one is here imagining that in w^* one's "carings" are different from those in w . That's fine. And, again, the same point applies to the rationality of the relevant preferences. That is, we can agree with Johansson "...that there seems to be no reason to deny that it *would have been* rational to care about the pleasant experiences that I would have had if I had come into existence earlier..." (Johansson 2013, p. 63)

But from what temporal perspective do these differences emerge? That is, exactly when is it to be supposed that I would have cared about these pleasant experiences? And exactly when would it have been rational to have cared about these pleasant experiences? Surely, it is plausible that from a temporal perspective prior to or during the envisaged pleasures, I would care about them and indeed be grateful for their prospective or contemporaneous occurrence. Similarly, it is plausible that from a temporal perspective prior to or during the envisaged pleasures, it would be rational to care about them and indeed be grateful for their prospective or contemporaneous occurrence. But it is completely unclear, and dialectically unfair to suppose, that in w^* I would not be indifferent to the pleasures in question, on the relevant assumptions—that they are envisaged to have occurred in the past [in w^*] to be followed immediately by amnesia.¹ If these assumptions are made, then there is presumably no reason to think that my preferences would be any different in w^*

¹ Note that the assumption that the relevant pleasures are immediately followed by amnesia is part of the Parfit-style thought-experiments on which our view is based. The reason for this assumption is that, in its absence, the subsequent effects of the memories of the prior pleasures might have an additional impact on the total welfare of the life. This must be avoided if the thought-experiments are to be relevant to the Lucretian argument.

than they are alleged by us [Brueckner and Fischer] to be in w . Similarly, if these assumptions are made, then there is presumably no reason to think that the rationality of my preferences would be different in w^* than they are alleged by us [Brueckner and Fischer] to be in w . The force of Johansson's point, insofar as it can seem to have force, comes from an illicit shift in temporal perspectives, and not simply from a shift in possible worlds. Or so we claim.

The asymmetry in our attitudes (or the rationality of our asymmetric attitudes) toward past and future pleasures emerges *only* from a temporally situated perspective, and *not* from a non-localized temporal perspective. (Brueckner and Fischer 1986) Further, the only way one could get the asymmetry in question is to presuppose a temporal perspective *after* some of the envisaged pleasures and *before* others. The fact that one would not be indifferent to certain pleasures from a *different sort of temporal perspective*—nonlocalized or perhaps not subsequent to some of the envisaged pleasures—is just not relevant to our reply to the Lucretian argument. But Johansson appears to rely on exactly this kind of fact.

Consider again Johansson's third critique, in which "you are able to torture me, but do not". We are asked to imagine that I have in fact managed to take up an attitude of indifference to my body, so that in fact I am indifferent to pain; but we are further asked to imagine that, had you inflicted the torture, I *would have minded*. As Johansson points out, what matters here is how I *would have felt* about the torture. That is, shifting to another possible world is here perfectly appropriate in making the pertinent evaluation. But the problem comes (again) from *also* illicitly shifting to an inappropriate temporal perspective. Recall that Johansson writes:

And pleasure can hardly be different in this regard. If you prevent me from receiving pleasant experiences which I do not actually care about, but which I would have cared about if I had gotten them and which would have made me overall much better off, then you are acting against my interests (Johansson 2013, p. 62).

But as above, from what temporal perspective is it being supposed that I would have cared about the pleasures in question? It would be totally inappropriate dialectically—indeed, it would appear to be question-begging—simply to assume here that, without changing anything else in moving to another possible world, the asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future pleasures (to be followed by amnesia) would disappear. But Johansson's point would seem compelling only on such a dialectically illicit assumption.

Conclusion

We take it that death is bad for an individual, when it is indeed bad for the individual, insofar as it deprives him of what would be on-balance good. This is completely compatible, or so we contend, with the fact that human beings tend to be indifferent to the time of their births but look to their deaths with trepidation. This is because it is (arguably, at least) rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward past

and future pleasures; thus, whereas death deprives us of something it is rational to care about, our late births do not.

The (apparent) rational asymmetry in our attitudes *only* emerges from a certain sort of temporally localized perspective. As in the Parfit-inspired thought experiments which motivate our view, one is asked (among other things) to imagine that one might have had pleasures in the past followed by amnesia. Further, one is asked to suppose that these pleasures are simply “added to” the beginning of one’s life, but do not thereby affect in *any* way one’s future life or experiences. It is *only* on these assumptions that the thought-experiments are relevant to our reply to Lucretius. It is thus neither here nor there that the asymmetry in attitudes would not be manifested from a nonlocalized temporal perspective or from a temporal perspective *prior to* or *simultaneous with* the envisaged pleasures. After all, Lucretius was pointing out that, as we live our lives (and thus from a temporally localized perspective), we have different attitudes toward our death and the time of our birth. What we need to do then is to explain how *this* phenomenon is entirely compatible with the contention that death’s badness consists in a certain sort of deprivation. (It is similarly neither here nor there that we would prefer to have been born earlier, if that would result in not just additional pleasurable experiences at the beginning, but a different and better life as a whole: Brueckner and Fischer (1993a, b; 1998).

Recall Johansson’s description of various ways of responding to the Lucretian argument:

One is to insist that, despite appearances, a person’s prenatal non-existence is in fact bad for her. The other is to argue that prenatal non-existence is relevantly different from death: despite appearances, the former does not deprive the person of a better scenario. I happen to favor the former alternative, but shall not try to defend it here, other than indirectly. What I shall do is criticize the two presently most influential versions of the second option (Johansson 2013, p. 52).

Johansson attributes to us a version of the second kind of strategy (rather than his preferred first strategy). But we could also offer our form of argument as a version of the first sort of strategy. Typically, whether something is good or bad for someone is a judgment that comes from an atemporal or temporally non-localized perspective. And recall Johansson’s claim about badness:

More generally, on this ‘deprivation approach,’ as it is often called, something is overall bad for a person if and only if, and to the extent that, she would have been on balance intrinsically better off if it had not obtained [references in original removed] (Johansson 2013, p. 52).

The indicated judgment about whether the individual would be on balance intrinsically better off obviously emerges from an atemporal or temporally non-localized perspective, rather than a particular temporal perspective. We step back, as it were, and evaluate the nearest possible world in which the thing in question does not take place. And we evaluate the overall intrinsic goodness for the agent in that world, comparing it with the overall intrinsic goodness for the agent in the actual world. This process is carried out from an abstract, temporally non-localized

perspective; we simply ask about the total amounts of intrinsic goodness for the agent in the two worlds.

Thus, the Brueckner/Fischer approach to replying to Lucretius is completely compatible with the contention that one's "late" birth can be a bad thing for an individual. Our point would then be that it is a bad thing to which it is rational to have a *different sort of attitude, when situated at a specific point in time*, than toward the prospect of our early death. Our fundamental point is that the typical human asymmetry in attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence is a special case of a more general asymmetry that is arguably rational. If this is correct, then death could indeed be a bad thing in virtue of being a certain sort of deprivation, compatibly with the typical asymmetry in attitudes. As we pointed out above, Johansson himself favors an approach according to which late birth can be a bad thing for an individual, although he further states that it would be "ridiculous to propose a ceremony dedicated to lamenting her not having come into existence earlier". This just shows that it can be ridiculous publicly to lament (in certain ways) something that is in fact a bad thing.

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