

THE ASYMMETRY OF EARLY DEATH
AND LATE BIRTH

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“Inspector. Isn’t death terrible?”

“Murder is. Death isn’t; at least, no more than birth is. You couldn’t have one without the other or there’d be no room for us all. I reckon I won’t worry over-much when my time comes.”

— P. D. James, *Death of an Expert Witness*, p. 50.

I. In a previous paper, we argued that death’s badness consists in the deprivation of pleasurable experiences which one would have had, had one died later rather than at the time of one’s actual death.¹ Thus, we argued that death can be a bad thing for the individual who dies, even if it is an experiential blank. But there is a pressing objection to this view, for if the view is correct, then it seems that it should also be the case that it is a bad thing for a person that he is born when he actually is born, rather than earlier. That is, if the deprivation account is the correct account of death’s badness, then it appears that one should have symmetric attitudes to prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. But clearly we do not in general have symmetric attitudes toward the period before our birth and the period after our death; in general, we do not think of our late births as a bad thing, but we can indeed consider our early deaths as bad for us. Thus, it appears that there is a problem for the deprivation account of death’s badness.²

In our paper, we sketched a way of responding to this objection. We argued that it is plausible to think that it is rational for an individual to have asymmetric attitudes toward his own past and future pleasurable experiences: it is rational to care about and welcome the prospect of future pleasures while being relatively indifferent to past pleasures. Further, we argued that if this is so, then death can be a bad thing for an individual in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not: death can

deprive a person of something it is rational to care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence is not such a deprivation.

We presented the following “Parfit-type” example to motivate the claim that it is rational to welcome future pleasures while remaining relatively indifferent to past pleasures:

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.

The example suggests (although of course it does not establish or prove) that it is in general rational to have asymmetric attitudes to past and future good experiences. If this is indeed a fact, then it is reasonable to think that death is a bad in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not.

II. In his interesting paper, “Asymmetry and Non-Existence,” Christopher Belshaw³ argues that we did not adequately support our putative explanation of the rationality of the relevant asymmetry in attitudes. Let us follow Belshaw in construing the asymmetry claim as the contention that “although we have a considerable interest in a later death, we have none in an earlier birth, that our attitude to the two states involves a difference in kind, and not merely degree.” That is, the asymmetry claim is being understood as the claim that we (not unreasonably) tend to welcome future pleasures while we are indifferent to past pleasures (all other things equal).

Belshaw denies the asymmetry claim. He says:

We are not indifferent to past pleasures. We often enjoy remembering such pleasures, and don’t want to lose our memories of them. We can regret that there were not more such pleasures, that our lives up to now have been only moderately satisfactory. Though it might be objected that such enjoyment depends only on our present state, and is as well served by illusory memories as by the real thing, this is, I think, unconvincing . . . Further, we sometimes wish to have been born earlier, to have experienced events from which the timing of our birth excludes us . . . We can, then, regret the paucity of our pasts . . . (p. 106)

Belshaw diagnoses our mistake as follows:

Where do things go wrong? The hospital case is compelling, but it is eccentric. It shows quite convincingly, I believe, that we have no interest in past pleasures when those pleasures are a) forgotten and b) of no significant influence upon the present. If

pleasures are in such a manner wholly insulated from our present concerns, then we will, and quite properly, be indifferent to them. . . . But clearly there can be no inference from this special case to a general indifference to past pleasures. Curiously, though, the authors overlook this, construing the example as supporting their contention that 'we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures'. (p. 108)

Later, Belshaw puts the point as follows:

Inaccessible past pleasures (those which cannot be remembered and which are causally inconsequential) are of no concern, but we cannot conclude from that that accessible past pleasures, or accessible past content, will similarly be of no concern. The indifference claim . . . does not go through. (p. 109)

III. We wish now to respond to Belshaw's critique. Belshaw grants the asymmetry claim as regards inaccessible pleasures, but points out that one cannot enter the asymmetry claim as regards accessible pleasures. We agree, but we contend that the asymmetry claim as regards inaccessible pleasures is the claim pertinent to the issue of death's badness.

To explain. In presenting the hospital case, we focused on a context in which whether one had a given particular pleasure *P* in the past, or instead will have it in the future, cannot influence the pattern of current and future pleasures — apart from the possible future placement of *P*. (We shall from now on lump current together with future pleasures; nothing important to the argument depends on this.) In such a context, the quality and intensity of the pleasurable experiences in the future (setting aside *P* itself) are by hypothesis fixed independently of whether one had *P* in the past or will have it in the future. We argued that *in this sort of context* an asymmetry in attitudes seems to be rational. Note that if in this sort of context an asymmetry in attitudes is indeed rational, the asymmetry cannot be explained in terms of the desirability of maximizing one's good experiences in the future. Rather, the asymmetry must be grounded in a preference for future pleasures over past pleasures *simply in virtue of their being future rather than past*. More specifically, in the sort of context under consideration here, it appears that we are indifferent to past pleasures *simply in virtue of their being in the past*. Of course, if having these past pleasures were to result in more pleasures in the future, we would not be indifferent to the past pleasures; but then this lack of indifference would issue from instrumental considerations and not from the past pleasures *as such*.

Belshaw's claim that the asymmetry thesis is false as regards accessible pleasures can then be explained in terms of the *instrumental* value of the past pleasures; it can thus be seen that the truth of his claim would not in any way vitiate our contention that individuals are indifferent to past pleasures *as such*. And it is *this* claim that needs to be true, if the deprivation account of death's badness is to be defended. Clearly, the deprivation account of death's badness is quite compatible with our wishing to maximize our pleasures in the future and thus not being indifferent to past pleasures *insofar as they are connected favorably to future pleasures*.

We might put our point as follows. We attempted to defend the deprivation thesis by arguing for a specific and limited asymmetry claim: the asymmetry claim as regards past pleasures *as such*. That a different asymmetry claim — an unrestricted one — is false is simply not pertinent to the argument we offered. It is not relevant to the issue of whether the deprivation thesis is the proper account of death's badness, since the deprivation thesis does *not* entail the unrestricted asymmetry claim.

Consider, finally, Belshaw's claim that "we sometimes wish to have been born earlier, to have experienced events from which the timing of our birth excludes us." But surely such a wish must be grounded on the idea that being born earlier would be connected with better experiences in the future. But then Belshaw's claim does not undermine the *relevant* claim: that we are indifferent to past pleasures *as such*, i.e., *simply insofar as they are past*. As above, the deprivation thesis does *not* entail that it cannot be the case that being born earlier would be desirable insofar it would be connected with better experiences in the future. Someone might resist our claim that a wish to have been born earlier *must* be grounded on the idea that being born earlier would be connected with better experiences in the future. As far as we can see, this denial then would have to be based upon the view that being born earlier would issue in more total pleasurable experiences (or at least a preferable total profile of experiences over the course of one's life). But if *this* is the basis for the wish, then it does not controvert our thesis: the deprivation thesis does *not* entail that it cannot be the case that being born earlier would be desirable insofar as it would issue in a more attractive total pattern of life experiences.⁴

In a passage which refines the view expressed in the epigraph to this paper (but which still doesn't seem to get it quite right), P. D. James's inspector says, "You'll be getting exhibits from your first murder case this morning. Don't let them worry you, Brenda. There's only one death we need to be frightened of, and that's our own" (p. 52).

NOTES

¹ Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?" *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986), 213–221.

² In *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Thomas Nagel calls the asymmetry in our attitudes to past and future nonexistence "the most perplexing feature of our attitude toward death" (228). He says:

We do not regard the period before we were born in the same way that we regard the prospect of death. Yet most of the things that can be said about the latter are equally true of the former. . . . It is a fact perhaps too deep for explanation that the cutting off of future possibilities, both their nonactualization and their obliteration even as possibilities, evokes in us a very different reaction from any parallel nonrealization or nonexistence of possibilities in the past (228, 229).

³ Christopher Belshaw, "Asymmetry and Non-Existence," *Philosophical Studies* 70 (1993), 103–116.

⁴ Our remarks apply equally to Belshaw's analysis of what he calls the "birthday case," a variant on a case we discussed in our paper, "Why Is Death Bad?":

You suffer from amnesia. The doctors know you are either Bill, who was born in 1925 and can be expected to live to 2005, or you are Ben, who was born in 1915 and can be expected to live until 1995.

Belshaw thinks that you will have a clear preference to be Bill only if you believe your amnesia to be incurable, which would insure the inaccessibility of the past pleasures in the case. He again points out that this asymmetry in attitudes is compatible with the falsity of the *unrestricted* asymmetry thesis. As in the discussion of the hospital case in the text, we reply that the deprivation thesis that we wish to defend does not entail the *unrestricted* asymmetry thesis.

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