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Brueckner and Fischer on the Evil of Death

1. It's natural to think that death – especially premature death – can be a terrible thing for the one who dies. In many cases, when we are crying at a funeral, some component of our grief seems to arise from concern about the decedent. We think that his early death was a tragedy for him. Puzzles arise when we try to explain precisely why death is so terrible for the one who dies in those cases in which it is terrible.

Three familiar points of clarification: (a) Often a person's death is bad for others; but that's not what is in question here. We are focusing on the question why death is bad *for the one who dies*. (b) If a person suffers a lot as he is dying, that suffering could be bad for him. While it may be horrible, such suffering does not give rise to special conceptual problems. But when we speak of death's being bad for someone, we should not confuse *death* with *dying*. When I said it's natural to think that death is a terrible thing, I meant to be talking about even painless death. If a young person with a promising future dies while under anaesthesia it's natural to think that he has suffered a huge misfortune, even if he feels no pain. That is harder to explain. (c) Sometimes we think that early death is not a tragedy for the one who died. If further life would have brought only misery and suffering, we think death might be a blessing. So the question concerns the evil of death in those cases in which it is an evil for the one who dies.

2. One of the most popular explanations of the evil of death is the Deprivation Approach.¹ According to this view, what makes death bad for the person who dies is that it deprives him of all the goods he would have enjoyed if he had not died. The magnitude of the evil of a given death is said to be equal to the amount of net good that it steals from the person. So if a person is fairly young, and if he were otherwise destined to enjoy quite a lot of good things in the next 60 or 70 years, it would be reasonable to think that

¹ Defended by several philosophers, perhaps made prominent by Thomas Nagel in his "Death" in *Nous*, 1970.

premature death would be bad for him. Such a death would rob that person of a lot of good things.

3. The Deprivation Approach seems pretty attractive, but there is an old argument that it must confront. This is the Symmetry Argument, and it is often attributed to Lucretius. In Book III of *De Rerum Natura* he says:

Look back once more at how past centuries
of infinite time prior to our birth
have meant nothing to us. This, therefore,
nature offers to us as a mirror
of time to come, once we are dead and gone.
What appears so horrifying about it?
Does anything seem gloomy? Is it not
more free of misery than any sleep?²

Perhaps Lucretius was trying to show that it is irrational for us to fear death. Perhaps he was trying to show that death is not bad for us. Perhaps he was just trying to get us to take up a calmer attitude toward death. His precise aim (if indeed he had one precise aim) is not clear. But nowadays it is widely thought that there is an argument here.

Maybe this is the argument:

1. Prenatal nonexistence is not bad for us.
2. Postmortem nonexistence is the temporal mirror image of prenatal nonexistence.
3. If (1) & (2), then postmortem nonexistence is not bad for us.
4. If postmortem nonexistence is not bad for us, then the fear of death is irrational.
5. Therefore, the fear of death is irrational.

² Lucretius (2010).

4. In an important and widely cited and reprinted paper, Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer made use of some Parfitian ideas in order to rebut this Lucretian argument.³ Brueckner and Fischer mention Parfit's claim about the bias toward the future.⁴ We care more about future pains than we do about past pains, even if the pains are equal in magnitude. Parfit illustrated this with his now famous example of *My Past or Future Operation*.⁵ A person wakes up in the hospital. The nurse tells him that he either already did suffer a painful operation and has now forgotten it, or he will soon suffer a painful operation. The patient hopes it is over and done with. The moral of the story is that if a person has his choice between two equally painful experiences but one is in the future and the other is in the past, then the person will prefer to have already had the one in the past rather than to be such that he will have the one in the future (other things being equal). We may call this "the Con Bias Toward Future Pains". This bias seems to have no direct relevance to the puzzle about the evil of death, since there is no such thing as "the painful experience of not yet being born" or the "the painful experience of being dead". Maybe if there were such things, then we could say that it's only natural that we fear the latter more than the former, since the latter is in the future, and the former is in the past.

But Brueckner and Fischer go a little beyond Parfit. They focus on pleasant experiences. Following a generally Parfitian line, they say that we have asymmetrical attitudes toward these, too. More exactly, if given the choice between a pleasant experience in the future and an equally pleasant experience in the past, we would prefer to have the pleasure in the future (other things being equal). They give this 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

³ Brueckner and Fischer, (1986).

⁴ Brueckner and Fischer, (1986), pp. 215-6.

⁵ Parfit (1984), pp. 165-6.

tomorrow. There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes toward “experienced goods” which is parallel to the asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced bads: we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures.⁶

This attitudinal asymmetry is just a slight variant of the Con Bias Toward Future Pains. We can call it “The Pro Bias Toward Future Pleasures”.

Assume that a person was born at a certain time in the past and is to die at a certain time in the future. Assume (a) that he would have had some additional pleasant experiences in the past if he had been born earlier; and (b) he would have some additional pleasant experiences in the future if he were to die later. The Pro Bias Toward Future Pleasures might be thought to explain why the person is more concerned about being deprived of the pleasures in the future than he is about having been deprived of the pleasures in the past. He cares more about the future pleasures because they are in the future. So if death will rob him of these, then death will rob him of something about which he cares more.

This insight provides Brueckner and Fischer with the means to reply to Lucretius. As they put it:

Perhaps it is this temporal asymmetry in our attitudes toward certain goods, and not the asymmetry in our attitudes toward bads, which explains our asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. Death is a bad insofar as it is a deprivation of the good things in life (some of which, let us suppose, are “experienced as good” by the individual). If death occurs in the future, then it is a deprivation of something to which we look forward and about which we care – *future* experienced goods. But prenatal nonexistence is a deprivation of *past* experienced goods, goods to which we are indifferent. Death deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent.⁷

⁶ Brueckner and Fischer, (1986), pp. 218-9.

⁷ Brueckner and Fischer, (1986), p. 219.

Brueckner and Fischer thus appeal to the semi-Parfitian principle of the Pro Bias Toward Future Pleasures. This principle implies that we care more about future pleasures than past ones. Since death deprives us of future pleasures, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of past pleasures, death deprives us of things we care about, while prenatal nonexistence deprives us of things we don't care about. Therefore, Lucretius was wrong; it is rational to fear death – at least in typical cases where it deprives the one who dies of the goods he would have gotten in a longer life. And this explains why death is bad for us. Death is bad for us (and worse for us than prenatal nonexistence) because it deprives us of things we care about (while prenatal nonexistence deprives us of things we don't care about).

5. There is something attractive and plausible about this idea. It seems to reveal an asymmetry between prenatal nonexistence and postmortem nonexistence. Those (like me) who are inclined to accept the Deprivation Approach might be pleased now to see how our explanation of the evil of death can be defended against an ancient objection. But further reflection reveals that things are not so simple.

Note that Brueckner and Fischer state their principle in these words:

BF: Death deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent.

When I first read the paper by Brueckner and Fischer, I assumed that the “somethings” mentioned in BF should be taken *de re*. And I assumed that the “somethings” are to be understood to be certain pleasant experiences. These include the pleasant experiences that we will lose through death, and about which we care. With these assumptions made more explicit, we can expand BF in this way:

BF(dr): When death is bad for a person, D, it is bad for D because there are certain pleasant experiences, such that his death deprives D of those experiences, and D cares about those experiences (but prenatal nonexistence is not so bad for D because even

though there are some pleasant experiences, such that his prenatal nonexistence deprives D of those experiences, D does not care about them).

It should be clear, however, that BF(dr) does not constitute an acceptable explanation of the badness of death for the one who dies, since in some cases there are no pleasant experiences such that the decedent cares *de re* about them and death will deprive him of them. Consider the case of a small child who is healthy and smart and has a loving family. Suppose that if all goes well, he will have a wonderful life filled with pleasant experiences – a cheerful birthday party on his first birthday; a joyous Bar Mitzvah on his thirteenth birthday; a wonderful wedding on his twenty-first birthday; etc. There are many good things spread out before him, but since he is only six months old, he has no idea of any of them and is certainly not looking forward to them with anticipation. The idea that these pleasant experiences are things about which he cares *de re* is simply false. He is completely ignorant of them. Suppose this infant dies of SIDS when he is only six months old. That would be an incontrovertible example of a death that is a tragedy for the one who dies. The advocate of the Deprivation Approach wants to say that this death is bad for the baby because it deprives him of his pleasant birthday experiences. But we cannot appeal to BF(dr) to explain why this death is bad for this child, since this death did not deprive this child of any future pleasures *that he cared about*.

What's true of this small child may be true as well of a normal adult. Consider a young woman who is about to complete her college education. Suppose that as things stand she is headed for an enjoyable career, a happy marriage, and a serene retirement – provided that she is not hit by a bus and killed when she is only twenty years old. This young woman might not yet know what career she will have, and might not yet have met the person she will marry, and might have given no thought at all to her prospects for retirement. So it could be simply wrong to say that there are specific pleasant events in her future such that (a) early death would deprive her of them, and (b) she cares about them. Yet again if she were to die when twenty years old, her death would be a huge misfortune for this promising young woman, but BF(dr) cannot explain it.

6. Perhaps the problem here is that I have been taking Brueckner and Fischer's words too literally. Perhaps they did not mean to endorse a *de re* principle like BF(dr). Perhaps they meant to say that even if there are no specific pleasant experiences in our futures about which we care *de re*, still we might care *de dicto* about the idea that if we remain alive, there will be pleasant experiences that we will get to enjoy. Perhaps death is bad for us because it makes it the case that we do not get to enjoy any such events.

Consider this principle:

BF(dd): When death is bad for a person, D, it is bad for him because D cares about the fact that if he dies, he will be deprived of some pleasant experiences (though he may not know what experiences these will be) that he otherwise would have enjoyed (whereas prenatal nonexistence is not bad for a person because, even though it deprives him of pleasant experiences, he does not care about the fact that if he is born late he will be deprived of some pleasant experiences).

The example of the SIDS baby shows that BF(dd) is false. That baby has no conception of death and no expectation that there will be pleasant experiences in his future. He does not care about the fact cited in BF(dd) in large part because he cannot even conceive of that fact.

Suppose a person is unduly pessimistic. He believes that continued life would bring only misery; so he kills himself when forty years old. But in fact great things were in store for him; if only he had waited a few more days he would have seen a wonderful unexpected turn of events. His death is a disaster for him (though he didn't realize it). Again, BF(dd) generates the wrong result. This suicide victim did not care about the fact that he would be deprived of pleasant experiences since he assumed that there were no such experiences in his future in any case. That's why he killed himself.

7. Recall that Brueckner and Fischer stated their principle in these words:

“Death is bad for us (and worse for us than prenatal nonexistence) because it deprives us of things we care about (while prenatal nonexistence deprives us of things we don’t care about).”

I have been assuming that the point here is that death is bad for *a certain person* because it deprives *that person* of things that *that person* cares about. But this is not exactly what Brueckner and Fischer said. They said that death is bad for “us” because it deprives “us” of things that “we” care about. We could break the link between “we” who are deprived and “we” who care. We could understand the principle to be saying that death is bad for *certain people* because it deprives *those people* of things that *we – the rest of us, other people --* care about. Then we could say in the SIDS case that the baby’s death is bad for the baby because it deprives him of future pleasant experiences that other people – perhaps other members of his family – care about.

This would yield:

BF(dd2): When death is bad for a person, D, it is bad for D because other people care about the fact that if D dies, D will be deprived of some pleasant experiences (though they may not know what experiences these will be) that D otherwise would have enjoyed (whereas prenatal nonexistence is not bad for a person because, even though it deprives him of pleasant experiences, other people do not care about the fact that if he is born late he will be deprived of some pleasant experiences).

This principle seems to me to have a kind of prima facie implausibility. How could the fact that other people are worried about my deprivations serve to explain why my death would be bad for me? Furthermore, there seem to be clear counterexamples: suppose in fact others think (mistakenly) that D is fated to a life of misery. Though in fact D’s life is about to take a surprising turn for the better, others don’t think that death will deprive him of anything of value. In this case, BF(dd2) seems to imply that early death would not be bad for D; yet in fact it is. Another class of problems arises in cases in which D lives in isolation. Suppose no one knows about D, and so no one fears that death will

deprive him of future goods. Still, early death might be very bad for him. Maybe if he had managed to stay alive for one more week, a rescue boat would have arrived to save him from his lonely isolation on his desert island.⁸

8. I want to close with a couple of observations.

i. Suppose some version of the asymmetry principle succeeds in explaining why we have asymmetrical attitudes toward deprivations due to prenatal nonexistence and postmortem nonexistence. Still it seems consistent to say that all deprivations of goods are bad, but that we don't worry about ones that are in the past, and we do worry about ones that are in the future. Maybe this is just a brute psychological fact about which bads we care about. Parfit himself said in this context "Our equanimity does not show that our past suffering was not bad. The same could be true of our past non-existence."⁹ As I understand him, Parfit was pointing out that from the fact that we don't care about a certain evil, it does not follow that it wasn't an evil. Consider your past suffering. It was terrible. It made your life worse. But you don't care about it any more. It's over and done with. And your current attitude of indifference concerning it may be rational. This does nothing to reduce its badness.

If this Parfitian conjecture is right, Brueckner and Fischer's line of thinking does not explain why early death can be worse for us than late birth. For it is possible that we do care about the deprivations resulting from early death, and we don't care about the deprivations resulting from late birth, but deprivations of either sort are bad for us and help to make our lives worse.¹⁰

ii. Lucretius is understood to have been challenging the idea that it's rational to fear death. He went on at great length acknowledging that we in fact do fear death far more

⁸ There are yet other permutations of the BF principle. One would suggest that death is bad for a person because it deprives him of goods *of a type that many people care about*, whereas prenatal nonexistence is not bad for a person because it deprives him of goods *of a type that others don't care about*. I leave it to the interested reader to determine why this is an implausible principle.

⁹ Parfit, (1984), p. 175.

¹⁰ Note that the title of the relevant section of Brueckner and Fischer's paper is "Why Death Is Bad". My point here is that they have not explained why early death is worse for us than late birth.

than we fear prenatal nonexistence; his aim seems to have been to make us see that our attitude in this case cannot survive scrutiny. He tried to make us see this by pointing out that postmortem nonexistence is just the mirror image of prenatal nonexistence; we universally acknowledge that it would be crazy to get upset about the latter; what could justify getting upset about the former? Brueckner and Fischer's answer to this seems to be to assert a principle to the effect that in fact we do have this temporally asymmetric pattern of concern; we do have a bias toward the future. But Lucretius knew that. He described it in detail. His point was to say that we shouldn't have it.¹¹

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