Death and the Psychological Conception of Personal Identity

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I. THE PROBLEM: OUR ASYMMETRIC ATTITUDES

It is frequently claimed in the literature on the metaphysics of death that human beings have asymmetric attitudes toward death and prenatal nonexistence. The claim is that we tend to consider the prospects of our future deaths as bad or unfortunate for us, whereas we do not regret the fact that we were born when we actually were born, rather than earlier. This is not to say that we would think of any future death as bad; if we are asked to consider that we might be in the end stages of a very painful, debilitating, and terminal disease, we might well look at death in such circumstances as a welcome relief. However, when it is assumed that life is still good, we tend to consider death (but not failure to be born earlier) a bad thing for the individual in question.

This alleged datum—the assymetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence—poses a problem for an appealing account of death’s badness. On the assumption that death is a period of nonexistence that is an experiential blank, then it is tempting to say that death is bad for the individual who dies insofar as it deprives the individual of the goods (whatever they are thought to be) of life. We find this “deprivation account” of death’s badness highly plausible. But if the deprivation account of death’s badness is correct, then it would appear to imply that we should
also consider the fact that we were born when we actually were, rather than earlier, a bad thing. It seems that the time of our birth deprives us of time during which we could enjoy the goods of life in just the way in which the time of our death deprives us of such goods.

One could of course address this apparent problem in various ways. One approach would be to stick with the deprivation account and accept the conclusion that we should indeed have symmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous non-existence. There are various different versions of this approach. One possibility would be to contend that we should regret both the fact that we do not die later and the fact that we are not born earlier. Another possibility would be to regret neither fact.

An alternative way of responding to the problem is to continue to embrace the deprivation account of death’s badness but to argue that (despite the initial appearance) it does not entail that we should have symmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. A salient version of this strategy contends that whereas a person could live longer than he actually lives, he could not have been born earlier than he actually was born. Thus, since deprivation requires the relevant possibility, death can deprive the person of the goods of life, but the time of his birth—the fact that he was born when he actually was born—cannot deprive him of such goods.

Thomas Nagel presented this way of defending the deprivation account in “Death,” although he confessed to some doubts about its adequacy. Why exactly is it not possible for an individual person to have been born considerably earlier than he actually was born? It is not clear why this would be impossible (in some broad metaphysical sense). If it is suggested that it is a necessary condition of an individual’s being the individual he actually is that he come from a particular sperm and egg, then why is it impossible that that sperm and egg have existed considerably earlier than they actually existed? Of course, the particular sperm and egg came from the individual’s parents, but why exactly is it impossible (in some appropriately broad metaphysical sense) for the parents to have lived considerably earlier?

II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF THE PERSON

Recently Frederik Kaufman has proposed a different way of arguing that an individual could not have been born earlier. In brief, Kaufman argues that when an individual is concerned about his own death, he is concerned about the death of a “psychologically thick” person—an individual with a particular history and thus a particular set of memories, desires, beliefs, values, personality traits, and so forth. But, Kaufman argues, such an individual could not have existed earlier; an individual existing (considerably earlier) would necessarily have been some other particular individual (construed in the “thick” way). Thus the deprivation account can be defended.

It is not clear to us that it is impossible (in the relevant way—in some broadly metaphysical sense) for the same thick individual to have been born considerably earlier than he actually was born. But we grant that this sort of possibility is at best very far-fetched; it would appear to require wholesale changes in the past: various
persons existing and events taking place considerably earlier than they actually do. About this Kaufman says:

So even if it is not logically impossible for me, thickly conceived, to have existed slightly earlier, it is so extremely unlikely that an earlier existing person would turn out to be qualitatively identical (or even similar) to me as I currently am as to make it virtually impossible that I could have existed earlier.⁵

We will grant, then, for the sake of the argument, that human persons, thickly conceived, could not (in the relevant sense) have been born much earlier than they actually were.⁶

It will be helpful to lay out Kaufman’s reasoning in some detail. Kaufman is concerned to distinguish between thick and thin conceptions of personhood. The thin conception involves nothing more than “metaphysical essences.” Kaufman says:

A person, on this view, is simply a particular essence, and that person exists in all possible worlds which contain that essence. The details of one’s actual life are wholly contingent features of an individual. On this understanding of ‘person,’ since the features of one’s actual life are not in any way constitutive of the person one is, it is possible for one to be shorn of all the attributes of one’s actual life and remain the same person throughout the changes.⁷

Kaufman concedes that one’s metaphysical essence could have been born earlier—could have been associated with a different thick self. But he considers this irrelevant to the issues about death and earlier birth. He says:

[Insofar as concern about death is driven by concerns that one’s conscious personal existence will be extinguished forever, the fact that one’s metaphysical essence might occur in different times and places seems beside the point. This is why certain possible occurrences that leave my metaphysical essence intact but which nevertheless extinguish my subjective sense of myself as myself are things which, like death, I could not survive; such as brain zaps, philosophical amnesia, permanent coma, some versions of reincarnation, or ‘merging with the infinite.’⁸

In defending his view, Kaufman presents the following intriguing example:

My metaphysical essence—whatever it is—might have led a very different life. I could have lived as an Eskimo, for example, had my parents given ‘me’ to an Eskimo tribe upon my birth. I would speak Aleut, live in igloos and hunt seals. That person—metaphysically me—would be otherwise unrecognizable to the person I currently am, the one who grew up in middle-class America. The conscious personal life of the Eskimo ‘me’ would consist of completely different memories, projects, beliefs and commitments. Whatever point of view the Eskimo ‘me’ would have on his life and circumstance, it will be vastly different from my current subjective awareness. . . . Were the ‘thin’
metaphysical me to be raised by an Eskimo tribe, the conscious personal entity
that I currently am would regard him as a complete stranger. I wish him well,
but I am no more concerned about his death than I am about the death of any
other stranger.9

Thus, on Kaufman’s view, it is important to distinguish between the thin
person (the metaphysical essence) and the thick person (the person with a particular
set of memories, histories, projects under way, beliefs, and values). Kaufman holds
that what we worry about, when we consider our own deaths, is the elimination of
the thick person. But this sort of person cannot have been born earlier than he or she
actually was born, and thus the time of one’s birth cannot deprive the thick person
of goods he or she otherwise would have had. Thus, the deprivation account of death’s
badness is perfectly compatible with our asymmetric attitudes toward prenatal and
posthumous nonexistence.

III. CRITIQUE OF KAUFMAN

We are willing to concede the actual time of one’s birth cannot deprive the thick
person of goods he or she otherwise would have had. But why exactly should this be
the only relevant issue? That is, why should we agree with Kaufman’s contention
that it is irrelevant that the thin person—the metaphysical essence—could indeed
have been born earlier (and thus could have been associated with a different thick
person)? We will contend that persons often make judgments that presuppose that it
is coherent to care—and perhaps care deeply—about which thick person one’s meta-
physical essence is, as it were, attached to. (For the purposes of this discussion, we
will adopt Kaufman’s terminology.)

Imagine that you read in the newspaper that a certain hospital has had various
problems with “baby-switching” cases: babies have been mixed up in the maternity
ward, and couples have been given babies who are not biologically theirs to take
home. Assuming that you had a generally pleasant and favorable set of childhood
experiences, you might say to yourself, “I’m relieved that sort of thing did not happen
to me! I’m glad that my biological parents brought me home from the hospital and
raised me.” This seems to be a perfectly natural and not uncommon kind of thought,
and it seems to presuppose that one can coherently make judgments about which
thick person one’s thin self is attached to. If one’s family life was particularly pleas-
ant, one might explicitly contrast, in one’s mind, one’s early childhood experiences
with (as one would naturally assume) the experiences one would have had, had one
gone home from the hospital with another couple.

Suppose, however, that one’s early childhood experiences were particularly
horrid, involving significant poverty and physical and psychological abuse. Under
such circumstances, it would not at all be unreasonable, upon reading the newspaper
article, to wish that one had in fact gone home from the hospital with another family.
One might wistfully think about having gone home with a happy, loving, and finan-
cially secure family; it would be natural to say to oneself, “My life would have been
very different. . . .” Again, these sorts of judgments appear to presuppose precisely
the coherence of stepping outside one’s thick self in a certain way, contrary to Kaufman’s supposition.

Return to Kaufman’s Eskimo example. Recall that Kaufman concludes, “Were the ‘thin’ metaphysical me to be raised by an Eskimo tribe, the conscious personal entity that I currently am would regard him as a complete stranger. I wish him well, but I am no more concerned about his death than I am about the death of any other stranger.” But let us now fill in the details of the story a bit differently. Imagine that you were adopted when you were very young, so that you have never known who your biological parents are. It happens that you have been raised in a middle-class community in Anchorage, Alaska. One day—when you are (say) forty years old—you get a telephone call from an elderly couple who explain that they are your biological parents. They would like to see you, and you arrange to meet them at a restaurant in Anchorage. When they arrive at the restaurant, you are surprised to learn that they are from an Eskimo tribe who live some distance from the city. They apologize profusely for having had to give you up for adoption at birth, but they already had eight children, and they just could not manage another. They are a lovely, warm, generous couple who have learned to speak English in their later years, in anticipation of this meeting with you.

The meeting is very emotional, and your feelings and thoughts are chaotic for some time afterward. But as you think about your biological parents and the story they told, you develop a strong feeling of sadness that you were not in fact raised by them in the Eskimo tribal community. You do love your adoptive parents, and you are grateful for all the love they have given you. But you can’t help wondering what your life would have been like had you been raised by your biological parents among your biological brothers and sisters in the Eskimo community. You wonder about it constantly, and although you know there is nothing now that can be done to change the fact that you were raised in a middle-class community in Anchorage, you nevertheless wish that it had been different.

Of course, the story need not be told in this manner; upon meeting your biological parents, you might have little or no regrets about not having been raised by them. But the point is that the story can be told in this way. It seems perfectly natural for human beings to prefer to have been raised by their biological parents, even when they have had relatively favorable circumstances. It would seem even more reasonable to have such a preference, if the adoptive circumstances are unpleasant and difficult.

When Kaufman concludes that the “conscious personal entity that I currently am” would regard the individual raised by the Eskimos as a “complete stranger” and that he would be no more concerned about this individual’s death than about that of any other stranger, this is a complex and puzzling claim. But it is interesting to ask why Kaufman focuses on whether the individual as raised in the middle-class community would be concerned about the death of the already-mature individual raised in the Eskimo community. This does not seem to be the relevant question. Rather, the question would appear to be whether the individual raised in the middle-class community could coherently form preferences about having been raised in the Eskimo community. If it is possible for the middle-class individual to prefer having been raised in the Eskimo community, then his not having been so raised could deprive him of significant goods. That is all that is required; the middle-class individual’s
alleged attitudes toward the death of the already-mature Eskimo individual seem beside the point.

If the judgments and preferences in the cases discussed above are coherent, then it is plausible that we can in general form judgments and preferences about which thick persons our metaphysical essences—or thin selves—are associated with. Put in simpler language, it seems plausible that we can make judgments and form preferences about which lives to lead, where the possibilities include lives with very different beginnings from those of our actual lives. It is not an uncommon thought experiment to wonder what it would be like actually to be someone else; one might wonder whether one would like to switch places with another person. Of course, some versions of the thought experiments are perfectly compatible with Kaufman’s view. For example, it is compatible with Kaufman’s view that a thick individual can imagine himself in some other person’s job or life circumstances now. But what does appear to be incompatible with Kaufman’s view is the possibility of imagining that one has led another individual’s life from the beginning. And yet it does not seem incoherent to form the preference for having led another individual’s life from the beginning or to be relieved that one has not.

Regrettably, we do not have a decisive argument that the judgments and preferences discussed above are possible. It is in fact hard to see how to argue for their possibility. We do, however, wish to point to a possible source of confusion in the considerations Kaufman adduces on behalf of the contention that such judgments and preferences are without any basis and thus irrelevant. Recall Kaufman’s claim:

This is why certain possible occurrences that leave my metaphysical essence intact but which nevertheless extinguish my subjective sense of myself as myself are things which, like death, I could not survive; such as brain zaps, philosophical amnesia, permanent coma, some versions of reincarnation, or ‘merging with the infinite.’ And, like death, I regard these possibilities as bad insofar as they deprive me of the goods of life. Knowing that my essence might continue on without me, as it were, is no comfort.11

Suppose a person is subject to a “brain zap” that significantly changes one’s “quasi-memories,” preferences, values, and beliefs. As a result of this direct electronic stimulation of the brain, the individual has a very different personality from the one he had prior to the stimulation. We agree with Kaufman that this would be tantamount to death for the original individual. Once we have begun our lives and formed our personalities—our “thick selves,” as it were—we have a strong interest in not having these personalities (the total configuration of memories, beliefs, preferences, values, and so forth) radically altered in certain ways. When such alterations take place, we consider this tantamount to death.

But there is a difference between an alteration of this sort and a hypothetical case in which one’s life circumstances would have been different from the beginning (thus allowing for the development of a different personality or thick self). An alteration of the sort in question involves a radical discontinuity (to which one does not consent voluntarily). That is, one’s metaphysical essence is associated with one thick self, and then this association is severed and another thick self becomes attached to
the same metaphysical essence; we have strong negative reactions to these sorts of cases. We do not want our lives to be discontinuous in this sort of way, and thus we have a strong negative reaction when we contemplate such possibilities.

But Kaufman appears to infer from this sort of negative reaction to the “alteration” cases a conclusion about hypothetical cases in which one’s circumstances are different from the beginning (thus allowing for the gradual and continuous development of a very different kind of personality or thick self). This kind of inference is problematic, because one’s aversion to alteration and thus discontinuity (of certain sorts) is irrelevant to contexts that are different from the actual circumstances from the beginning. That an individual of course would object to being subject to an involuntary brain zap that would significantly alter his personality does not show that he could not reasonably prefer that he had been raised in very different circumstances from the actual ones.

Apart from the invocation of intuitions about cases of alternation and thus discontinuity, we do not see that there is any sort of argument in Kaufman’s article that would establish that the judgments and preferences discussed above about leading entirely different lives are necessarily incoherent, mysterious, or without any basis. Although this kind of argument is not explicit in Kaufman’s work, we suppose someone might argue as follows. The thick individual has a point of view or perspective—a set of experiences, memories, desires, and values—by reference to which he can coherently form preferences about leading various kinds of lives. But a thin person by definition does not have such a point of view and thus cannot coherently be thought to form preferences about different lives. After all, where would such preferences come from? What would they be based on?

But this argument rests on a mistake. It supposes that the preference for leading one total life (a life from the beginning) as opposed to another must be generated from the perspective of the thin self or metaphysical essence. This is admittedly impossible, but it is also unnecessary. On the picture we are suggesting, it is possible for us, construed as thick persons (with the appropriately rich perspective of a thick person) to make judgments and form preferences about various scenarios in which our metaphysical essences are associated with different thick selves. So the preferences about such scenarios are generated from the perspective of our thick selves, even though they are about the possibility of our thin selves being associated with other thick selves. There is nothing incoherent in this picture, as far as we can see.

We have pointed to a number of contexts in which human beings naturally make judgments and form preferences about leading very different lives (from the beginning). We have not sought to dispute Kaufman’s claim that thick persons could not have been born much earlier than they were actually born. We have instead raised questions about Kaufman’s claim that thick personhood is the only notion of personhood relevant to concerns about the dates of our death and birth. If it is coherent to prefer that one had been raised in very different circumstances from the beginning, then there is no bar to saying that it would be coherent to prefer that one had been born considerably earlier. In Kaufman’s terms, one would be exhibiting a preference that one’s metaphysical essence be associated with a different thick person.

It is of course possible to insist that the sorts of judgments and preferences we have claimed are coherent are at a deeper level simply incoherent or without any
basis. But it is important to see that one would thereby be calling into question some fairly common kinds of practices (of making certain judgments and forming certain preferences).\textsuperscript{12} Further, we do not see a strong argument in Kaufman’s article (or elsewhere) to convince us that we should abandon these practices. When he seeks to argue for his conclusion, Kaufman appears to go from considerations pertaining to radical discontinuity and disruption to those pertaining to alternative circumstances that are different from the beginning (but involve no such alteration or disruption).

\textbf{IV. BELSHAW’S “CONSERVATION CLAIM”}

In his recent paper, “Death, Pain, and Time,” Christopher Belshaw presents an approach that is very similar to that of Kaufman. As we understand Belshaw’s argument, he wishes to start with the assumption that almost everyone does indeed have an asymmetric attitude toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. That is, the vast majority of people, if not everyone, will consider that the time of their death can deprive them of goods but will not think of the time of their birth as similarly depriving them of goods. He then wishes to offer an explanation for this asymmetry. Belshaw says:

We want, most of us, for the past to be as it is, and so are neither indifferent to its shape, nor interested in amending it. Older people can, on occasion, express a wish to be younger. Historians sometimes, and unthinkingly, say they’d like to be older than they are. The rest of us generally do not. We recognise that our being born at a certain time is, in large part, responsible for who we are today. Someone born at a different time just wouldn’t, in an everyday sense, be me. And so we want neither to reduce prenatal nonexistence, making ourselves older, nor, as a means of regaining youth, to increase it. Nor are we simply indifferent to past nonexistence, caring neither one way nor the other when we were born. Rather, our concern is with conservation, with keeping the facts of prenatal nonexistence just as they are. For many of us recognise, and many more can easily be brought to recognise, that a concern for the present to be as it is, and for us to be who we are, implies a concern that the past be as it was, and thus that we be born when in fact we were. . . . Indeed, the point can be put more dramatically: to want to be born at a different time is, in effect, to want not to exist, and for someone else to exist in your place. It’s not surprising that this is something only a very few of us want.\textsuperscript{13}

Belshaw’s view is presumably similar to Kaufman’s in that he is suggesting that to want to be born at a different time is to want to be a different thick person (in Kaufman’s terminology) and that very few persons would want this. According to Belshaw, we do not want to have been born earlier because we recognize (or could easily be brought to recognize) that if we had been born earlier, our personalities would have been significantly different. The key assumption is that we would not want our personalities to be significantly different (from the beginning, as it were).

But this assumption has problems that are similar to those that plagued Kaufman. Belshaw is seeking to explain what he takes to be a very prevalent and
almost universal attitude toward birth. His crucial supposition is that almost everyone would not prefer to have had a different personality from the beginning. But this does seem to be a very conservative principle, and it is not at all clear that it is true. Surely many individuals would not want to have had a different personality from the beginning. These individuals—perhaps they are a majority (even a large majority)—have led basically good lives under generally favorable circumstances. Even many people who have struggled considerably will no doubt prefer not to have had a different personality from the beginning (where they do not have control over the nature or features of this other personality).

But surely there are many deeply unhappy persons—persons who grew up under conditions of horrible poverty or terrible physical or emotional abuse. Many of these individuals suffer from the emotional scars of their troubled early childhoods, and quite a few of them lead very unhappy lives. Why wouldn’t these people be willing to take the risks involved in having a different personality? And of course it is not only individuals from disadvantaged or troubled backgrounds who suffer from deep, persistent, and unpleasant emotional and mental problems; chronic depression and schizophrenia are not reserved for those who have grown up in poverty or suffered abuse. Why is it so obvious that almost everyone would want to keep the past as it is because they want desperately to keep the basic features of their personality as they are? This would seem to be conservative in the extreme and to be based on an unwarranted assumption that almost everyone is sufficiently satisfied with their personalities that they would be unwilling to take the risks associated with having a very different personality.

Now we want to emphasize that it does seem reasonable that most people would not prefer to have been “someone else” (in the sense of having a very different personality, and—importantly—not being able to select the nature and features of this personality). But this is not enough for Belshaw’s stated purpose, because he believes that the desire to hold fixed the time of one’s birth is almost universal. At the beginning of “Death, Pain, and Time,” Belshaw states the point starkly: “We wish to die later. But we don’t wish to have been born earlier. Our future nonexistence matters to us in a way that past nonexistence does not.”14 Later he criticizes approaches that seek to explain our asymmetrical attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence in terms of our attitudes toward pain and pleasure, saying “our asymmetrical attitude regarding pleasures and pains is, I shall maintain, complex and untidy, while that concerning nonexistence is more straightforward, and relatively easy to understand.”15

But the considerations discussed above indicate that it is not plausible to assume that there is an almost universal desire to maintain one’s personality as it is (and not risk assuming another personality, over the features of which one has no control). The situation here is more “complex and untidy” than Belshaw supposes. If this is so, and if there is indeed an almost universal lack of a wish to have been born earlier, then this wish (and the attendant asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence) cannot be explained in terms of Belshaw’s “conservation claim.”16
NOTES


3. For a discussion of these issues, see Brueckner and Fischer, 1993.


6. It is not clear that Kaufman needs so strong a conclusion as that it is impossible for an individual to have been born significantly earlier than he actually was born. It would seem to be sufficient, for Kaufman’s purposes, that certain counterfactuals would be true (whether or not the impossibility claim is true). So it would seem to be sufficient that it is true that anyone born considerably earlier would not be identical to the individual in question. And this could be true compatibly with the (perhaps remote) possibility that the individual in question could have been born considerably earlier. The counterfactuals and the possibility claims correspond to different modalities, and strictly speaking, what appears to be relevant to Kaufman’s argument are merely the counterfactuals. For a discussion of the logic of arguments involving these two importantly different kinds of modalities, see John Martin Fischer, The Metaphysics of Free Will (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), esp. pp. 87–110.


12. Consider the following parable, which we owe to Glenn Pettigrove. Odysseus, on his long journey home from Troy, is paid a visit by Zeus one Mediterranean afternoon. Zeus informs Odysseus that the gods have been contemplating human attitudes toward life and death. Not surprisingly, a heated dispute has arisen on Mount Olympus. In order to resolve the dispute, Zeus has proposed that they perform a little experiment. Because of his reputation for craft and cunning, Odysseus has been selected as the subject of the experiment. The experiment is simple, requiring nothing more from Odysseus than a single choice between two options: (1) complete, eternal annihilation, effective tomorrow, or (2) to be born fifty years earlier than he had been and live to the ripe age of one hundred (twice as long as his lifetime under option 1), at which time he would be completely and eternally annihilated.

After securing from Zeus the assurance that the life under option (2) would contain at least as much honor as his current life, it seems likely that the cunning Odysseus would choose an earlier birth over an immediate death. And it seems that many, if not most, of us would choose similarly. Of course, in Kaufman’s terminology the choice would be for our metaphysical essence to have been associated with a different thick person. Perhaps Kaufman would contend that upon careful reflection most persons would not make the choice for earlier birth, but it is not at all clear that this is so. Our attitudes toward the time of our birth—and thus the possibility of having a different thick self—are more complex and ambivalent than Kaufman supposes.


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