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# DEATH'S BADNESS

BY

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There's an old joke. Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of 'em says: "Boy, the food at this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know, and such small portions." Well, that's essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly.

Woody Allen, *Annie Hall*

## I

There is a puzzle about why death is bad for a person, if indeed it can be a bad thing for the person who dies. Let's say death is an experiential blank. It might still be bad for the person who dies insofar as it deprives him of goods he would have experienced, had he died later. But if so, then shouldn't it 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? Shouldn't the prenatal deprivation be considered just as bad as the posthumous deprivation? And shouldn't we have symmetric attitudes to the prenatal and posthumous deprivations?

In a previous piece, we sketched an approach to resolving the puzzle.<sup>1</sup> We presented some considerations which render it 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 non-existence is not such a deprivation.<sup>2</sup>

The "Parfit-type" example we presented to motivate the claim that it is rational to welcome future pleasures but be relatively indifferent to past pleasures is as follows:

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.<sup>3</sup>

The example seems to point to the fact 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.

Recently, Ishtiyaque Haji has raised some questions about our approach.<sup>4</sup> Although we feel that Haji raises some important questions, we also believe that some of his criticisms miss the mark. Careful scrutiny of these criticisms can help to illuminate the underlying issues pertaining to death's badness.

## II

According to Haji, the "symmetry thesis" is the claim that "our pre-vital times deprive us of life's goods in the same way in which our post-vital times do."<sup>5</sup> Haji portrays the proponent of the symmetry thesis as holding the following:

If your date of conception is fixed, you can live longer by dying later. If your date of death is fixed, you can live longer by being conceived earlier. Since more life is better than less, it does not matter *when* you enjoy the extra years.<sup>6</sup>

The proponent of the symmetry thesis thinks posthumous and prenatal nonexistence have equal value: if death is considered a bad thing for the individual, then so should his prenatal nonexistence.

In a nutshell, Haji criticizes our strategy by arguing that the denial of the symmetry thesis does *not* follow from our *actually* having asymmetric attitudes toward past and future pleasurable experiences or even from the *rationality* of such asymmetric attitudes. That is to say, Haji argues (among other things) that even if it were rational for individuals to have asymmetric attitudes (of the sort described above) toward past and future pleasurable experiences, it would *not* follow that death is a bad in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not.

Haji begins his critique by (correctly) pointing out that we did not specify any sort of account of the rationality of attitudes; that is, we did not state the conditions for rationally fearing, welcoming, or preferring a certain state of affairs. He goes on to suggest certain specific accounts and to argue that, relative to these accounts, the rationality of asym-

metric attitudes toward past and future pleasurable states does not imply the falsity of the symmetry thesis.

The first suggested account of the rationality of our attitudes is the prudential view, PR:

PR: For any person, *s*, an attitude of *s*'s is rational for *s* if and only if *s* would be better off having this attitude; alternatively, such an attitude is rational for *s* if and only if it would be 'prudent' for *s* to have this attitude.<sup>7</sup>

Now Haji says:

Since we cannot change the past, it may be pointless to worry about it. But if we care about the future, we may be moved to improve our situation. Thus caring about the future may have some point. If this is so, then it may well be prudent for us to have asymmetric rather than symmetric attitudes toward our post- and our pre-vital nonexistence. Our lives may go better for us if we had the relevant asymmetric attitudes. . . . So it may well be prudent for you to have the asymmetric attitudes, and hence, it may well be true that your asymmetric attitudes are PR-rational. But why should this particular psychological fact about you . . . indicate a fault in the symmetry thesis? After all, your pre-vital times could be as valuable for you as your post-vital ones are valuable for you even though you had PR-rational asymmetrical attitudes toward these times.<sup>8</sup>

Haji's point is that even if it is prudentially rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward our past and future, it does not follow that the deprivation of past pleasurable experiences is not just as bad for you as the deprivation of future pleasurable experiences. But we can grant this point. We did *not* argue that the rationality of just *any* sort of past/future asymmetry in attitudes renders plausible the denial of the symmetry thesis. Rather, we argued that the apparent rationality of asymmetric attitudes toward a *fixed* set of past and future pleasurable experiences renders plausible the denial of the symmetry thesis. And *this* claim is not impugned by Haji's reasoning.

To explain. Haji's first point is that we may be able to have *more* pleasurable experiences in the future if we adopt a certain sort of asymmetric stance toward our past and future. Further, his crucial claim is that this insight is compatible with our pre-vital and post-vital times having equivalent value for us: the insight is compatible with the claim that prenatal nonexistence is bad in the same way as posthumous nonexistence. We do not quarrel with Haji's claims here, but we insist that they in no way diminish the force of our argument. This is because we focused on a context in which the sort of attitudes one adopts *cannot* influence the total pattern of the experiences: the quantity and intensity of the pleasurable experiences are by hypothesis *fixed* independently of one's attitudes toward the experiences. 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 “instrumentally” in terms of the desirability of maximizing one’s good experiences over one’s lifetime; 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*. And if this is so, then our case is immune to the considerations invoked by Haji. If it is true that it is rational for a person to prefer his pleasurable experiences in the future rather than the past, given that the total number of such experiences is held fixed, then it is plausible to suppose that posthumous nonexistence is a bad thing for a person in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not. Surely, cases in which one can allegedly affect the total quantity or quality of pleasurable experiences are irrelevant to this argument.<sup>9</sup>

The following is another way of putting our point. We were *not* arguing that it would follow from the existence of just *any* sort of rational asymmetry in our attitudes toward our past and future pleasurable experiences, including contexts in which the adoption of asymmetric attitudes could affect the total quantity and quality of our experiences, that the symmetry thesis is false. The rationality of *such* an asymmetry might depend on the *effects* of the attitudes, not on the value of the objects of the attitudes. Rather, we were arguing that it would follow from the existence of a rational asymmetry in our attitudes toward certain specific and *fixed* past and future pleasurable experiences that it is plausible to reject the symmetry thesis. Thus, Haji’s remarks about PR do not engage our argument.<sup>10</sup>

Haji goes on to consider a “slightly modified” view about the rationality of our attitudes, WE:

WE: For any person, *s*, *s*’s attitude toward some state of affairs, *y*, that *y* is bad (good) for *s* is rational if and only if *s* has a justified belief that *y* is bad (good) for *s*.<sup>11</sup>

Concerning this view about rationality, Haji says:

Understood in this weak sense, though, WE just like PR cannot sustain asymmetry. It is consistent with *S*’s having WE-rational asymmetric attitudes toward *S*’s pre- and post-vital times that these times resemble one another in the way in which [the proponent of the symmetry thesis] claims they do.<sup>12</sup>

It is not entirely obvious what the criticism is here. Perhaps Haji is availing himself of an epistemic interpretation of rationality in attitudes to point out that the rational asymmetry we noted does not *entail* the falsity of the symmetry thesis. Given the fact that justifying evidence need not be entailing evidence, it is of course logically possible for an individual to be (highly) rationally justified in believing that deprivation of future

pleasure, and not past pleasure, is bad for him even though the belief is false. But surely it is too stringent a requirement here that the relevant premises or evidence entail the conclusion; it is enough that they render the conclusion highly plausible. If someone asked us on what basis we hold that there is a table in a particular room, we would adduce certain observational (and other) evidence. Presumably (apart from special contexts) this evidence is sufficient to back up the claim that there is a table in the room, although the evidence certainly does not entail that there is a table in the room: it is logically possible for the evidence and ancillary considerations to be conjoined with the absence of a table.<sup>13</sup>

### III

Haji defines "subjectivism" as follows:

According to subjectivist theories, states of affairs have value only in relation to the affections of persons. The value of a state of affairs for a person, on these views, is identical to the value, if any, that that state of affairs has for that person. A state of affairs, S1, a subjectivist believes, has value for a person, P, if and only if P has the relevant 'affective attitude' toward S1.<sup>14</sup>

Haji is correct to be skeptical about subjectivism. Indeed, despite the appearance engendered by some uncaredful formulations, we wish to reject subjectivism. Our view is that value does not come from an individual's actually caring about something, but (roughly) from its being *rational* for him to care about it. Haji, however, incorrectly supposes that the denial of subjectivism requires the acceptance of the symmetry thesis:

If the relevant past and future goods of experience, though, are contentwise indiscernible but are simply experienced at different times, then, given that values are objective, these goods, it appears, should have the *same* objective value in relation to some person.<sup>15</sup>

But clearly the denial of subjectivism does *not* by itself yield the symmetry thesis. We deny subjectivism by claiming that value comes not simply from having certain attitudes but from the rationality of those attitudes. The symmetry thesis obviously does not follow from this sort of denial of subjectivism. This would indeed follow if the denial of subjectivism somehow entailed that all values must emerge from an *atemporal* perspective; but it is a mistake to assimilate objectivism to this sort of atemporal view about value.

After rejecting subjectivism, Haji distinguishes two perspectives: the perspective of a person within time and the atemporal perspective. He

points out that, from the atemporal perspective, prenatal and posthumous nonexistence are equivalent in value. He says:

From an atemporal perspective, the symmetry in S's pre- and post-vital times is starkly evident. . . . So perhaps [the proponent of the symmetry thesis] should insist that it is *unreasonable* for S to have the asymmetrical attitudes toward his content indiscernible pre-vital and post-vital times, the bias toward the future notwithstanding.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that the asymmetry in our attitudes in the Parfit-type of example we presented above disappears if it is reformulated so that one attempts to generate the preference from an atemporal perspective. If one is asked to evaluate (from an atemporal or at least a temporally nonsituated perspective) two lives of the sort described in the example, one would presumably be indifferent. That is, if one life has a segment in which there is an hour of intense pleasure followed by amnesia on a certain Monday, and the other life has a segment in which there is an hour of intense pleasure followed by amnesia on the following Wednesday, it seems that in the absence of any assumption about one's temporal location, one should be indifferent to the two lives.

But what follows from the facts just described? What follows from the symmetries that emerge from the atemporal standpoint? Haji clearly suggests that the atemporal standpoint should have hegemony with respect to questions of value, but we do not agree. Granted, there are the two perspectives. But why should it simply be assumed that values emerge from the atemporal perspective? Value is extremely complex, and arguably the sources of value are multifarious. Some philosophers would argue that there is no single perspective from which all values are generated.<sup>17</sup> At best, it is contentious whether the atemporal perspective should trump the perspective within time with regard to values. Further, we believe that the fact that we live our lives within time and actually view ourselves and others from within time provides some reason to think that the temporally situated perspective is at least as important as the atemporal perspective with respect to the generation or recognition of values.

Above, we pointed out that Haji seemed to be mistakenly assimilating the denial of subjectivism to the claim that value emerges from the atemporal perspective. Here our point is that this claim about the hegemony of atemporality has been given no independent warrant, and is, to say the least, controversial. We do not wish to claim that the atemporal perspective is in any way defective or not to be credited. Our point is merely that, since the temporally situated perspective is after all *our* perspective—the perspective from which we view and indeed live our lives—the preferences it generates are not rendered irrelevant by the mere existence of an atemporal perspective (or even the possibility of our adopting it).

## IV

We have attempted to clarify and defend a strategy for resolving the puzzle about how death can be a bad thing in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not. Our strategy is really very simple. We point out that it seems that there is a general and rational asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future pleasurable experiences: we rationally care about our future pleasures but are relatively indifferent to our past pleasures. Since death deprives us of something about which we rationally care but prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something about which we are rationally indifferent, it is plausible to think that death is a bad thing for us in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not.

Of course, we have not attempted to give an *analysis* of the rationality of our attitudes. Thus, we have not *explained* the asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future pleasurable experiences; we have merely pointed to this asymmetry and its apparent rationality. Neither have we sought to explain why it is rational for an individual to prefer his own current pleasure to current pain: this preference does seem manifestly rational but we do not claim to be able to explain its rationality. It just seems to be a fact that it is rational for an individual to prefer (other things being equal) his own current pleasure to his own current pain. And it seems similarly rational for an individual to prefer (other things equal) his pleasures in the future rather than the past. If it is rational for a person to prefer his current pleasure to his current pain, then there is a perfectly good sense in which that pleasure is good for him although the pain is not. Finally, if it is rational for a person to have the temporally asymmetric attitudes we have noted, then there is a perfectly good sense in which death can be a bad thing for a person in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?" *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986), pp. 213–227.

<sup>2</sup> One way to argue for an asymmetry between death and prenatal nonexistence is to say that, whereas one could (logically) have lived longer, it is logically impossible that one should have been born much earlier. We argued in Brueckner and Fischer (1986) that this approach is unsatisfying. First, it is not clear that it is logically impossible that an individual should have been born substantially earlier than he actually was. The essentiality of the

actual time of one's birth is a highly contentious metaphysical claim, and even if one (controversially) held that generation from such and such gametes is an essential property of an individual, this would not commit one to the essentialist claim. Given the controversial status of the essentialist claim, it is unsatisfying to rely upon it in one's explanation of the intuitive asymmetry between prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. In his article, "Death" (Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, Nagel expresses this sort of dissatisfaction with this response (which employs the essentialist assumption). He points out that "it is too sophisticated to explain the simple difference between our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence" (Nagel, n. 3, pp. 8-9). To explain his doubts, he presents an example (attributed to Robert Nozick) in which it is granted that it *is* logically possible that an individual be born years before he is actually born (by prematurely "hatching" the spore from which one develops), and yet it seems that even here the intuitive asymmetry is justified. Thus, it seems that the logical impossibility of being born earlier cannot *explain* the intuitive asymmetry in our attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219. We formulated our conclusion thus: "There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes to '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." This is imprecise; we meant to suggest that there is reason to think that the asymmetry in question is *rational*.

<sup>4</sup> Ishtiyaque Haji, "Pre-Vital and Post-Vital Times", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991), pp. 171-180.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> At one point Haji asks for "a suitable non-question begging principle that bridges the gap between 'S's asymmetric attitudes toward S's pre-vital and post-vital nonexistence are rational' to 'whereas, S's post-vital nonexistence is bad for S, S's pre-vital nonexistence is not . . .'" (*Ibid.*, p. 175). It should now be apparent what we would suggest as bridging the alleged gap: when the rational asymmetry in attitudes is based on cases in which the pattern of experiences is held *fixed*, then it is plausible to conclude that whereas S's post-vital nonexistence is bad for S, S's pre-vital nonexistence is not.

<sup>10</sup> Against our view, someone might argue that it is obvious from a conversation with one's grandparents that older people generally hold past pleasures very dear, and few of them would be willing to trade any of these for any promised future pleasures, no matter how great or certain. This interesting point, raised by an anonymous referee for *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, is also developed in Christopher Belshaw, "Asymmetry and Non-existence" (manuscript). This objection raises some delicate matters which we cannot discuss in detail here. We believe that the response to this objection should be in an important respect parallel to the response to Haji's argument: it implicitly involves an inappropriate failure to "hold fixed" the relevant elements. That is, the pleasures held particularly dear by an older person presumably are associated with certain salient and important events in life, such as marriage, the birth of one's children, great accomplishments, and so forth. What is implicitly assumed in the objection is that such important life events be *removed* from one's past; but this would clearly have a major impact on the content or "narrative structure" of one's life. (For a fascinating discussion of such issues, see J. David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991), pp. 48-77.) Given this sort of change in the narrative structure of one's life, it would not be surprising that one would not be willing to "trade" past experiences for future pleasures. But (as with Haji) this does *not* show that there is no general preference for future pleasures over past pleasures *simply in virtue of their being future rather than past*. A more complete discussion of this point must await another occasion.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> We do not wish to endorse WE as providing the resources for a plausible general account of the rationality of attitudes. Having a rational *preference*, or *desire*, for example, cannot simply be identified with holding a justified belief about what is good for oneself, and it is not obvious that having such a preference or desire necessarily involves holding such a belief.

<sup>14</sup> Haji, p. 176.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value", in T. Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 128-141; and *The View From Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).