

*"You know, you've come from nothing—you're going back to nothing. What have you lost? Nothing!  
So always look on the bright side of life..."*

*—Monty Python's Life of Brian*

## The Symmetry Argument Revisited

Recall our second Epicurean argument against the harmfulness of death.

- (S1) My pre-natal non-existence is not bad for me in any way  
(S2) My pre-natal non-existence is like my posthumous non-existence  
in all respects relevant to my well being  
-----  
(SC) My posthumous non-existence is not bad for me in any way

Most people respond to this by trying to break the symmetry and denying (S2). Some say: "when you die you lose something you already have, but this doesn't happen in birth." That's true, but leaves open a key question:

*Why is it significantly worse to lose something you had before than to lack something you're going to have?*

Nagel (judiciously) tries a different tack, arguing against (S2) roughly as follows.

- (P1) My posthumous non-existence constitutes a deprivation of life  
that could have been mine.  
(P2) My pre-natal non-existence does not constitute a deprivation of  
life that could have been mine.  
-----  
(C) My pre-natal non-existence is *not* like my posthumous non-existence  
in all respects relevant to my well-being

But why believe (P2)? Nagel:

"But we cannot say that the time prior to a man's birth is time in which he would have lived had he been born not then but earlier. For aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he could not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else. Therefore the time prior to his birth is not time in which his subsequent birth prevents him from living. His birth, when it occurs, does not entail the loss to him of any life whatever."

The idea here is essentially that the claim

If you were to die later than you actually do, you would have had more goods of life.

is true, but

If you had been born earlier than you actually were, you would have had more goods of life.

is not even false, but nonsensical—you *couldn't* have been born substantially earlier and *been yourself*. But is this true? Isn't it possible at least to imagine special cases where the *same* individual could have been born earlier? Is Nagel committed to saying in these cases that pre-natal non-existence is as bad as death?

## Parfit on Time Biases

What Nagel wants is an asymmetry between the past and future of some kind, and he sought it out in the idea that “we could have multiple futures, but only one past.” Is there any other way to break the symmetry? Consider a thought experiment by Parfit.

On Tuesday you are admitted into a hospital and told you will have one of two operations,  $W$  and  $F$ .  $W$  involves a very painful 4 hour operation on Wednesday.  $F$  involves a very painful 2 hour operation on Friday. The nature of both operations is such that you will have temporary amnesia for a few days after surgery.

On Thursday you wake up, unable to remember whether you've had surgery yet or not. What do you most prefer at this point: that you already had the  $W$  operation, or that you will have the  $F$  operation?

It seems like we are concerned about what happens in the future in a different way than we are about the past. In particular, it seems, customary human preferences follow this pattern:

Pains:            Past > Future > Present  
Pleasures:       Present > Future > Past

Suppose for the moment these attitudes are rational ones. Would it help? Maybe. It might tell us that the future is *more important* to us, as a source of goods, than the past. But it's not clear that it shows the past is totally irrelevant. Shouldn't we still mourn our previous losses to some extent, even if not as much as with death?

But there is a tough question as to whether or not these preferences are rational to begin with. After all, time-biases lead to apparent inconsistencies: you prefer one thing on Tuesday but another on Thursday. Time biases are also arguably connected with behavior we are inclined to label irrational (like procrastination).