

THE LUCRETIAN ARGUMENT

Jeff McMahan

The Lucretian Challenge

Lucretius wrote: “Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight – anything depressing – anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?”¹ The argument is repeated, a couple of millennia later, by Vladimir Nabokov, who opens his memoir with the observation that “our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour).”²

Particularly in the short statement by Lucretius, this argument, which I’ll refer to as “the Lucretian argument,” urges us to see that there is nothing intrinsically terrifying about nonexistence. Just as we look back with indifference on the indefinitely long period in the past in which we did not exist, so, Lucretius contends, we ought to contemplate with the same detachment and indifference the period after which we will have ceased to exist. If nonexistence was not so bad before, it will not be any worse later.

This is not as deep a reflection as many have supposed: for we know that nonexistence itself is not bad. What troubles us about death, on the reasonable assumption that it involves future nonexistence, is that, for at least some of that time

during which we will not exist, we *could* be experiencing the goods of life, but will not be.

Contemporary philosophers have therefore reformulated Lucretius's challenge in a way that makes it more powerful. Lucretius could have urged us to consider the time before we began to exist as a time in which we might have been enjoying the goods of existence but were not. If we are unconcerned about the loss of that good life, perhaps we should be equally unconcerned about the loss of good life in the future through death.

The Metaphysical Response

One prominent response to this more sophisticated version of the argument is to deny that we could in fact have begun to exist earlier. There are different versions of this response. According to one version, the conditions of our actual origin are essential to our identity. Thus, Thomas Nagel claims that "distinct possible lives of a single person can diverge from a common beginning, but they cannot converge to a common conclusion from diverse beginnings. (The latter would represent not a set of different possible lives of one individual, but a set of distinct possible individuals, whose lives have identical conclusions.)"³

Nagel may have had in mind an argument that was current at the time he wrote according to which a person could not have come into existence except through the joining of the gametes from which he in fact developed. Nagel's own argument may presuppose that the gametes from which a person in fact developed could not have come into existence and joined together earlier than they in fact did. For, among other things, a gamete with an earlier origin would itself have been a different gamete.

Let us assume that some version of the doctrine of the “necessity of origin” is true. Even so, it is probably too strong to claim that the same individual gametes through whose fusion a particular human organism was formed were essential to the existence of a particular person. You, for example, came into existence via the fusion of a particular sperm and a particular egg. Suppose, however, that that same egg had been fertilized instead by a different sperm, but one with copies of all the same chromosomes carried by the sperm that in fact fertilized that egg. It is not implausible to suppose that the resulting person would have been you. If that person would have been you, then the joining of the very same gametes from which you in fact developed was not essential to your existence. You could have existed even if the same egg had been fertilized by a different though qualitatively identical sperm – or even, perhaps, by a different sperm that would not have been qualitatively identical but would have carried copies of all the same active genes.

But let us forget about gametes for a moment. Assume, for the sake of argument, something that I believe to be true: that we are not identical with our organisms and that we do not begin to exist at conception but at some later point – for example, when the fetal organism develops the capacity to support consciousness. On this view, we were never embryos.

Next consider someone who is the product of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Her parents wanted a child but not until they were older. But they worried that conceiving a child when they were older would carry a higher risk that their child would have a congenital defect. So they had IVF and had the resulting embryos frozen. They then waited 15 years before implanting the embryo that in fact developed into this person. This seems to be a case in which, if the parents had implanted this same embryo earlier,

the same person would have had an earlier origin. (Remember: *she* was never the embryo; on our assumption, she began to exist only after the embryo was thawed, implanted, and developed a brain capable of consciousness.)

If this is right, there are some people who could have come into existence earlier than they did. It may be objected, however, that while someone who came into existence via a frozen embryo might have had an earlier origin, the rest of us, who came into existence via natural conception, could not. I think this is wrong too. We just have to imagine our parents' reproductive systems working a bit differently – for example, my mother's ovaries could have released the egg from which my organism was formed earlier than they did, and that egg could have been fertilized earlier by a sperm that carried copies of the same chromosomes that were carried by the sperm that actually fertilized it. Then, arguably, I would have begun to exist earlier.

A second version of the metaphysical response appeals to claims about the necessity of psychological continuity to personal identity. On this view, anyone who came into existence earlier than I did would have had a mental life too different from and unconnected with mine to have been *me*.⁴

While I accept that this view captures an important truth (to which I will return), I think it is a mistake to try to articulate this truth as a claim about identity. That someone in an alternative history of the world would have been psychologically very different from me does not entail that that person could not have been me. This can best be shown by means of an example that does not involve a hypothetical earlier origin. I am now one and the same individual as a late-term fetus that was in fact born in Georgia fifty years ago. I am, moreover, psychologically continuous with that fetus, albeit only weakly.⁵

Suppose that, shortly before I was born, my parents had converted to Islam and emigrated to Pakistan to live the lives of pious Muslims. If that had happened, there would now be a 50-year-old Caucasian Muslim living in Pakistan who would bear my name. That person's mental life would have been utterly different from mine. The mental states he might be experiencing now would be in no way continuous with those I am experiencing now. On the view that something close to my actual psychological nature is essential to my existence, that Pakistani could not have been me. Yet he would have been psychologically continuous, albeit weakly, with that fetus that was conceived and later born in Georgia. He would, indeed, have been one and the same individual as that fetus. But if he would have been identical to that fetus and I am in fact identical to it, it follows that he would have been identical to me – that is, would have *been me*. This shows that I could have existed with a very different mental life. Even if psychological continuity is the criterion of personal identity *over time*, it is *not* the criterion of the identity of persons across different possible lives.

(This conflation of the significance of certain relations within a life over time with the significance of those relations across possible lives also underlies – and undermines – another response to the Lucretian argument, which I will mention only parenthetically. Let us assume, following Parfit, that identity is not the basis of rational egoistic concern. Suppose instead that the bases of egoistic concern are the relations that are constitutive of identity in the normal case and that among these relations is psychological continuity, which is a matter of degree. Suppose next that a certain person is in the early stages of progressive dementia. His prudential reason for caring now about whatever goods may be accessible to him when he reaches the more advanced stages of the disease is

attenuated by the weakness of psychological continuity between himself now and himself in the future. But the significance of this relation runs in both temporal directions. Thus, when he reaches the intermediate stages of dementia, he will have less reason to take pride in what he achieved during his prime, for he will then be only weakly psychologically continuous with himself at the time of those achievements. It might be argued, therefore, that a person's reason now for caring about the additional goods he might have enjoyed in the distant past if his life had had an earlier beginning is similarly weak, and for the same reason: namely, that the relevant relations, such as psychological continuity, between himself now and himself in the early parts of his life in which those goods would have occurred are very weak. But this is a mistake. The fact that *if* he had had that alternative life, he *would* now have less reason to care about the early stages of his life does not imply that, *from the point of view of his actual life*, has less reason to care about the early stages of the alternative life. When he compares his actual life with the alternative, he should evaluate each as a whole, and from an atemporal point of view. One consideration that will be very important to this comparative evaluation is the extent to which the different moments *within* each life are unified by the relevant relations; but those relations do not run across the different possible lives and thus cannot be a basis for discounting the value of any segment of the alternative life from some vantage point within the actual one.)

An Earlier Origin Would Not Guarantee a Longer Life

A second response to Lucretius's challenge is to note that, while a later death would guarantee us a longer life, an earlier origin would not. Return to the case of the woman who came into existence through the implantation of a frozen embryo that had been

created 15 years earlier. If that embryo had been immediately implanted rather than frozen, this woman would have begun to exist earlier. But there is no reason to suppose that she would have lived longer. Indeed, given that the state of medical science advances slowly with time, it is slightly more likely, other things being equal, that an earlier origin would have given her a *shorter* life.

This is a point that Feldman himself has made in two of his most important and influential contributions to the philosophical debate about death.⁶ But it may seem that the point is somewhat unfair to Lucretius, or at least to his contemporary followers. For in order for an earlier origin to be relevantly analogous to a later death, it must be assumed to offer us a longer life. Just as when we consider the possibility of a later death we naturally hold the date of origin constant, so when we consider the possibility of an earlier origin we should hold the date of death constant, or at least roughly so.

This too is possible. Suppose that shortly after the woman who developed from the frozen embryo was born, her parents moved to an area where soon after their arrival a natural eruption of toxic gas caused all individuals under the age of three to have reduced longevity by an average of 15 years. She is now 80 and on the verge of death. It is reasonable to believe that, if she had not be exposed to the gas as an infant, she would have lived to be 95. It is also reasonable to believe that, if her parents had immediately implanted the embryo rather than freezing it, she would have come into existence earlier but would not have been exposed to the gas – or, even if she had been, she would have been old enough to be immune to its toxic effects. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that if her parents had implanted the embryo immediately, she would have come into existence 15 years earlier and would now be about to die at the age of 95.

The Value of a Life as a Whole

Feldman claims that if we compare our actual life with an alternative life with an earlier origin but the same date of death, we could rationally regret not having had the alternative life with the earlier beginning. He writes that “there are ... two ways in which we can rectify the apparently irrational emotional asymmetry. ... We can follow Lucretius and cease viewing early death as a bad thing.... [Or] we can at least try to start viewing late birth [that is, a later origin] as a bad thing. My suggestion is that ... the latter course would be preferable. ... Our emotional reactions toward pleasures lost by early death are quite different from our emotional reactions toward similar pleasures lost by late birth. If my proposal is right, this emotional asymmetry is irrational.”⁷

This view grants Lucretius the desired symmetry between pre-vital and posthumous nonexistence but drives the inference in the other direction. It holds that, just as we should regard the loss of good life in the future as a misfortune, so we should regard the loss of good life in the past as bad. The proposal to which Feldman refers that has this implication is, in effect, that all differences in the length of a life should be evaluated by their effect on the overall value of the life as a whole. If the effect on the value of a life as a whole of the life’s beginning later rather than earlier is the same as the effect of the life’s ending earlier rather than later, we should evaluate the two ways in which the overall value is reduced in the same way – that is, as equally bad.

One problem with this proposal – and the only one I will mention – is that it cannot account for certain very robust intuitions about the comparative badness of different deaths. If the badness of death were just a function of the effect that death has on the value of a life as a whole, the worst of all possible deaths would, in general, be those that

occur immediately after we begin to exist. If, as most people believe, we begin to exist at conception, the worst deaths would be those that occur immediately after conception. (And there are a great many of these. Roughly 25 percent of conceptions fail to progress even to implantation – though some of these deaths are what might be called natural or spontaneous instances of euthanasia: the failure of defective embryos to survive.) For if death occurs immediately after the life begins, the life as a whole will contain nothing, or virtually nothing, of value. But if the death does not occur, it is likely that the life will be, as most lives are, both long and well worth living. In most cases of this sort, therefore, the disparity in overall value between the actual life and the life the victim would have had if the death had not occurred is maximally great. But the disparity between the value of the actual life and that of the longer possible life tends increasingly to diminish the later in life the death occurs.

Most people, however, believe that the deaths of embryos and fetuses are substantially *less bad for the victims* than the deaths of older children and adults. And this is not a belief that it would be easy to abandon at the behest of a theory. If we were to accept that the earliest deaths are the worst, we would, at a minimum, have to reconsider our comparative complacency about spontaneous abortion and might further have to reject common beliefs about the morality of abortion.

Feldman has argued, with considerable plausibility, that what is good for a person is a function both of the good itself and of the person's *desert*.⁸ For example, a good that is added to a life when it is not deserved may contribute nothing to the value of the life. It might be argued, therefore, that because desert is based on prior action, goods added at the beginning of a life through an earlier origin cannot have been deserved and thus could

not add to the overall value of the life as a whole. I, for example, cannot *now* deserve to *have had* those goods in the past. But this would be a mistaken application of Feldman's view. The goods a person might have had through an earlier origin have to be evaluated relative to the person's desert at the time they would have occurred. And just as a person may have deserved the goods of his actual infancy by virtue of what he did as an infant (though obviously this presupposes quite a wide criterion of the bases of desert), so he might have deserved the goods that an earlier origin would have made possible by virtue of what he would have done as an infant and as a child in that alternative life.

Asymmetrical Attitudes to the Future and the Past

Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer argue that even though it is metaphysically possible that we could have begun to exist earlier than we did, our lack of concern about this possibility reflects our general lack of concern about experiences in the past, except insofar as they affect our experiences in the present or future. They note that "we have asymmetric attitudes towards past and future experienced goods" and contend that this fact explains why "death is a bad thing in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not. ... Death deprives us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent."⁹ For we care about missing experiential goods in the future but not about having missed experiential goods in the past.

In developing their argument, Brueckner and Fischer appeal to one of Parfit's celebrated thought experiments in which a patient wakes up unable to remember anything about the preceding 24 hours. The nurses are unsure which of two patients he is. He has either just had an extremely painful treatment or he is about to undergo a less painful but

still unpleasant treatment. Naturally the patient hopes that he has already had the more painful treatment than being about to have the less painful treatment. This illustrates the asymmetry in our attitudes to past and future experiences.

But let us imagine a more germane variant. I wake up from an operation with temporary but total amnesia. I can remember nothing of my previous life. I am also bandaged like a mummy. The nurse cannot see me and I cannot see myself. Again she does not know who I am, though she knows that I am one or the other of two terminally ill patients, each of whom has about a month to live. She tells me that one of these patients is 40 and the other is 60. While she goes off to determine which of the two I am, I muse about what she will discover. I am not indifferent. I want to have had the earlier origin. If other things are equal, I would rather have had the longer life.

Of course, to learn that I am the patient with the earlier origin would be to learn that I am *older* now. And that may seem unappealing. But to test our intuitions about an earlier origin, we should equalize the amount of future good I could expect in either alternative. So if being older would be worse, there must by hypothesis be other compensating features that would make the future equally good. Once those are factored in, my preference for the earlier origin remains.

It is true that I may not care much about whether my past contained more pleasure. But a longer life makes more of other goods possible as well. For example, if I have had the longer life, it is likely that I have accomplished more. And I want to have had a life of achievement – not, in this case, because that would make my future better, but because achievement contributes to the value of my life as a whole, and I care about that.

This is significant. While it is true that I care about future pleasure in a way that I do not care about past pleasure, the asymmetry between my attitudes to past and future achievement is much less pronounced, if indeed there is such an asymmetry at all. I believe that, for many people, one of the main reasons that an earlier death would be bad, or worse than a later death is that it would deprive them of further opportunities for achievement. But people also care very much about *having achieved* important things in the past. Shortly before his death from AIDS, Harold Brodkey wrote that “I like what I’ve written, the stories and two novels. If I had to give up what I’ve written in order to be clear of this disease, I wouldn’t do it.”¹⁰

Suppose that, while the nurse is away trying to determine my identity, I learn two facts. First, the 60-year-old patient has had a life with significantly greater achievement than that of the 40-year-old. But, second, the 40-year-old’s prognosis has just been revised. He can live for two or perhaps even three more months rather than just one. I may still want to learn that I am the older patient, since that would mean that I had achieved more – that I had had a more productive and thus, other things being equal, a better life.

Many people may find this implausible. They may be tempted to think that even if the 40-year-old could expect to live only a *day* longer than the 60-year-old, it would be rational to want to learn that I am the 40-year-old. The *only* thing that matters is what I have to look forward to in the future.

Is there anything that can be said in opposition to this view? I believe there is. Even looking forward, many people are willing to sacrifice a longer life for the sake of greater achievement. In the nineteenth century, for example, some scientists, unable and

perhaps unwilling to experiment on other human beings, injected themselves with pathogens, thereby predictably shortening their own lives in the effort to further the goals of their research. While some may have been motivated entirely altruistically, some almost certainly believed that they were also doing what was on balance better for themselves. Moreover, while the narrative structure of many lives may make it better if achievements are concentrated in the later parts of the life rather than in the earlier parts, in general what matters most to people is simply that their life should contain significant achievement.¹¹ As I noted, whether the achievement is in the past or in the future is less important, if it matters at all. Thus the fact that many people are willing to accept a shorter future for the sake of greater future achievement suggests that they should also be willing, in my thought experiment, to sacrifice future life for the sake of greater achievement in the past.

There are, of course, limits to this – limits that are reached fairly quickly. If I were to learn, for example, that the 40-year-old patient actually has three *years* to live while the 60-year-old has only a month, I will want very badly to learn that I am the 40-year-old, even if the 60-year-old's life as a whole will have been not only much longer but far more distinguished in terms of achievement. So there remains an asymmetry in my attitudes to the past and the future; it is just less strong than Brueckner and Fischer suppose.

It might be said that when, in the original example, I want to learn that I am the older patient, my thought is really about death rather than about an earlier origin. For if I am the younger patient, I will be dying prematurely, and no one wants that. But this in

fact captures rather than refutes my point. For an earlier origin would prevent my death from being premature, just as a later death would.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that our attitudes toward time, while not so strongly asymmetrical as Brueckner and Fischer believe, are a major part of the *explanation* of why we do not regret having had a later rather than an earlier origin with anything like the same intensity that we fear having an earlier rather than a later death. But does the asymmetry in our attitudes to time help to *justify* our sense that an earlier origin would not have been good in the same way that a later death would be? Brueckner and Fischer find our attitudes to time rational, while Parfit doubts that they are. I find it difficult to share Parfit's skepticism but I will not pursue this matter here. I will instead argue that there are other dimensions to the justification of our lesser concern for any goods that we may have lost through not having had an earlier origin.

What We Care About

Let us combine the elements of a couple of our earlier stories. Suppose that I developed from an IVF embryo that was frozen for 15 years before being implanted in 1954. And suppose that during my infancy I was exposed to a natural eruption of toxic gas that reduced my expected longevity by approximately 15 years. Suppose, finally, that just after the embryo was created in vitro, my parents received an invitation to live and work in Pakistan – an invitation that, had they accepted it, would have made it easier for them to have a child, so that they would have implanted the embryo immediately. If that had happened, I would have begun to exist 15 years earlier and would not have been exposed to the toxic gas. If, therefore, my parents had moved to Pakistan, I would now

be a 65-year-old Caucasian Pakistani with roughly the same future life expectancy that I now have as a 50-year-old American.

Ought I to regret that my parents refused the invitation? If they had emigrated, my life would probably have been 15 years longer. That is one reason for thinking that that alternative life would have been better. And it might have been better, relative to the values that would have informed it, than my actual life has been relative to my actual values. I might, for example, have been a famously pious and greatly revered imam rather than a mere college professor. I would, admittedly, now be 15 years older than I am, but perhaps the added veneration I would now be receiving for my more advanced age would have compensated for any infirmities I might have developed.

One problem with this is that the alternative life as I have imagined it would not have contained the things that, in my actual life, I care about. Even knowing that, within that life, I would have been more satisfied than I am in my actual life, I nevertheless prefer my actual life. Because I believe that all religions are false, I cannot wish for a life in which I would have been an imam. I think that being any sort of religious figure would have made me a devotee of false doctrines as well as a threat to the credulous.

Of course, if it is true that all religions are false, it may well be that the longer and more satisfying life I might have had in Pakistan would have been objectively worse than my actual life. In that case I may have *no* reason to regret not having had the earlier origin. So let us imagine a different scenario. Suppose that if my parents had moved to Pakistan, I would have grown up within a western enclave and been a vastly better philosopher than I am. In this and other respects, we may suppose, my life would have

been better even by reference to the *general values* that inform my actual life. And it would have been 15 years longer.

But I still may not regret having my actual life instead. For the alternative life would not have contained the *particulars* I care about. In that life, for example, my actual wife would have been too young for me to marry, and we would never have met in any case. So I would never have had my actual children. Because my actual personal attachments would have been absent from that alternative life, I may rationally prefer my actual life even though there is a sense in which the alternative life would have been a better life (assuming that I would have had different but equally rewarding personal attachments).

This, I think, is the important point implicit in the arguments of those who have claimed that our psychology is essential to our identity. Their view that anyone lacking my particular psychology could not have been me is, I think, an overstated variant of the plausible view that I now may have little reason to care, in an egoistic way, about an alternative life in which the contents of my mental life would have been utterly different because the contents of my *life* – including those particulars that I care about – would have been different.¹²

We can, of course, speculate about the possibility of an alternative life that would have contained much of what I care about. Suppose – counterfactually – that my actual life has been single-mindedly devoted to one goal: writing philosophy. That is all I care about. And suppose scientists tell me that I have the philosophy-writing gene, so that virtually any life I might have had would have been one in which I would have compulsively written philosophy. If I had been born 15 years earlier and would not have

been exposed to toxic gas, I would almost certainly have had a significantly longer life and would therefore have written more philosophical material than I have. If there is little that I care about other than writing philosophy, I might regret not having come into existence earlier.

Yet even in this life the particulars that I care about would have been missing. If I had begun to exist 15 years earlier, the philosophical work that would have shaped my thinking would have been different. I would have had different teachers. As much as I would like to believe that my philosophical work is indebted to nothing but my own native talents, it is obvious that, in this alternative life, I would probably have written on different topics and certainly would have written different works. Yet, like Brodkey, I want to have written the things that I actually have written. I may rationally prefer my actual life to one in which I would have written other works, even if there would have been more of them and even, perhaps, if they would have been better than what I have actually written.

If we try to imagine an alternative life in which the influences on my philosophical thinking would have been the same and in which I would have written more or less what I have actually written – that is, in which the circumstances of my life would have been approximately the same as they actually have been (assuming that all I have cared about is my philosophical work) – we are in effect trying to imagine a world in which more or less *everything* occurs 15 years earlier. But that would not be a world in which I would have had an earlier origin. What we are really imagining is a world with a different calendar in which I would have had the same origin but a later death because I would not have been exposed to toxic gas. It is, in short, metaphysically impossible that my life

could have contained the same particulars if it had begun 15 years earlier than it did. If I value my life in part because I value many of the particulars that compose it, it may be quite rational for me not to regret that I did not have an earlier origin, even if that would have given me a life that would have been both longer and better relative to the values that would have informed it than my actual life has been relative to my actual values.

Note that I do not claim that the fact that a life with an earlier origin would have lacked the particulars that each of us cares about *explains* why most people are largely indifferent to the possibility of an earlier origin (or would be if they thought about it). Just as Nagel concedes that the idea that an earlier origin is a metaphysical impossibility is too sophisticated to explain common attitudes, so I think that most people, if asked to imagine an earlier origin, would fail to appreciate how different their life would have been. (Most people, I suspect, would even find it coherent to speculate about what it would have been like to have had different parents.¹³ But even if it does not explain common attitudes to the idea of an earlier origin, the fact that a life with an earlier origin would lack much of what we care about does tend to justify those attitudes, or to explain why they are rationally defensible.

Counterfactual Speculation

We cannot, however, assume that everyone would take the same view of a different but longer life. Many people might say: “If I could have come into existence earlier and would have had a longer and better life if I had, I would strongly prefer to have had that life. It would, after all, have been *my* life. And if I had had that life, I would have greatly preferred it to my actual life, just as many people prefer their actual life to an alternative that would have been objectively better. Within that alternative life, I would have had

different attachments to different particulars that would have been just as strong as, and perhaps more rewarding than, those in my actual life. If my parents could have foreseen what my life would be like both with its actual origin and with an earlier origin, surely they ought to have opted for the earlier origin if that would have given me a better life and other things would have been equal. Why should I not prefer what they ought to have preferred for my sake?" This does not seem to me to be irrational, given the assumptions that such people would be making.

I think, however, that the assumptions are unwarranted. Notice what we have been assuming: that one might have had an earlier origin but the same date of death, that one might have had a life with an earlier origin that would have been not only longer but better, and that one might have had a longer, better life that began earlier and would have contained much of what one cares about in one's actual life. It is certainly possible to evaluate one's actual life by comparison with these hypothetical alternatives. But these evaluations are largely irrelevant to whether it would have been better to have had an earlier origin. If we want to know whether it would have been better to have had an earlier origin, we should simply imagine the minimal conditions necessary for one's having come into existence earlier and then try to determine what would in fact have happened given those conditions. In the slightly more technical terminology of counterfactual analysis, we should consider the possible world in which one has an earlier origin but that deviates least from the actual world; and we should then run that world forward in accordance with the laws of nature in order to determine what happens in it. If instead we consider a possible world in which one has a longer, better life as well as an

earlier origin, we are not evaluating an earlier origin. We are instead evaluating an earlier origin *and* a longer, better life. That is different from just having an earlier origin.

There is a parallel confusion to which evaluations of death are prey. If we want to know how bad a certain death is, we have to compare the termination of the life at that point with what would have happened if the death had not occurred. We should accept that, if other things are equal, the death is bad to roughly the extent to which the continued life would have been good. Yet it is sometimes thought that we may evaluate the death by comparison with an alternative in which not only the death but other sources of misfortune – including subsequent causes of death – would not have occurred. At the extreme, it is sometimes held that death is always infinitely bad because it deprives each of us of an immortal life, all of which would have been worth living. While we can, of course, evaluate death by comparison with a life worth living that would continue forever, that is not what we do when we want to know how great a misfortune a particular death was or would be.

Note that I am not making the related but quite different claim that it is much less realistic to imagine a person's having had an earlier origin than to imagine her having a later death. It may well be true that, while it is not improbable in many cases that a person could have avoided dying when and how she did, it is nevertheless extremely unlikely that she could have come into existence earlier than she did. But that seems irrelevant. We do not tend to think that one death is less tragic than another just because what would have been necessary in order for the victim to have avoided it would have involved a greater deviation from actuality.¹⁴ A death is, for example, no less tragic for being multiply causally overdetermined. If the life the person would have had in the

absence of those causes would have been good, we treat her loss in the same way we would have if only one cause had been operative.

The point is rather that just as we must evaluate a death by comparison with what would actually have happened had the victim not died, so we must evaluate an earlier origin by reference to what would in fact have happened if the person had begun to exist at that earlier time. The problem is that, while we can make reasonable conjectures about what would have happened if a person had not died, we normally can have no idea at all what a person's life would have been like if she had had an earlier origin. It is, as I noted earlier, possible that a life with an earlier origin would have been longer and better and we can imagine cases in which this would be highly probable. But in virtually all actual cases we have no reason to suppose that an earlier origin would have led to a longer or better life. About the only thing one can be confident about is that a life with an earlier origin would have been radically different and would not have contained the particulars about which one cares. So in most cases there is no reason for a person to prefer to have had an earlier origin and good reason to prefer not to have had it. In general, therefore, it is rational for people not to regret that they did not have an earlier origin. But normally it is rational to want a later death. Hence there is an important asymmetry between an earlier origin and a later death. Even in its more powerful contemporary reformulation, Lucretius's argument offers no comfort for those of us who dread death for ourselves and those we care about.¹⁵

¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, translated by R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p. 125.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 19. Nabokov goes on, however, to note that he knows "of a young chronophobiatic who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged – the same house, the same people – and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence."

³ Thomas Nagel, "Death," in John Martin Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 68.

⁴ Versions of this argument have been advanced in Frederik Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 1-19; and Christopher Belshaw, "Later Death/Earlier Birth," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XXIV, Life and Death: Metaphysics and Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 69-83.

⁵ I follow Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 522-3. Parfit, however, conceives of psychological continuity as all or nothing rather than as a matter of degree and therefore implicitly rejects the assumption that I could now be psychologically continuous with a being with a mental life as rudimentary as that of a late-term fetus.

⁶ Fred Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death," in Fischer, p. 322; and Fred Feldman, *Confrontations With the Reaper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 155. With the possible exception of Thomas Nagel, whose short paper, originally published in 1970, has proved remarkably fecund, Feldman has done more than anyone else to stimulate the debate about death and to illuminate its central issues, including the issue that is the topic of this paper. I am grateful, and flattered, to have been invited to contribute to this volume in his honor.

⁷ Feldman, "Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death," p. 323.

⁸ See, for example, *Confrontations With the Reaper*, pp. 182-90.

-
- ⁹ Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, “Why Is Death Bad?,” in Fischer, p. 228.
- ¹⁰ Harold Brodkey, *This Wild Darkness* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), p. 176. This quotation and the issues it raises are discussed in Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 137-40.
- ¹¹ On the idea that the *placement* of achievement within a life may affect the contribution that the achievement makes to the overall value of the life, see David Velleman, “Well-Being and Time,” in Fischer, especially p. 331.
- ¹² The seminal modern work on the rationality of self-interested concern about alternative possible lives is Robert M. Adams, “Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil,” *Nous* 13 (1979): 53-65.
- ¹³ Parfit, p. 351, cites an instance of a writer who finds nothing unusual in this thought.
- ¹⁴ As Fischer observes, we often regret the nonoccurrence of events that were very unlikely to occur. See “Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin,” in this volume. There is, of course, an infinite variety of good things that might have occurred but did not. It would be irrational to regret them all. We need to identify the criteria for rational regret. On this matter, see Kai Draper, “Disappointment, Sadness, and Death,” *Philosophical Review* 108 (1999): 387-414.
- ¹⁵ I was fortunate to be able to present a draft of this paper at a conference on medicine and metaphysics at the University of Buffalo at which a significant proportion of the main contributors to this debate were present. I am very grateful to John Martin Fischer and Rick Kaufman for their comments on that occasion. Lucretius was prevented from attending by a severe case of posthumous nonexistence but doubtless our discussions were no better than others he had to miss owing to an earlier bout of nonexistence which he never regretted.