

Fischer and Lamenting Nonexistence

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## Fischer and Lamenting Nonexistence

It is sometimes said that we exhibit an *asymmetry* in our attitudes to future nonexistence and past nonexistence: we lament that we will not exist after we die, but we do not lament that we did not exist before we were created. This asymmetry is seen as puzzling. One of those who made this claim was Lucretius:

Lucretius's Puzzle: Why is it that we lament our nonexistence after death, but we do not lament our nonexistence before our creations?<sup>1</sup>

Closely related to the puzzle is an argument that death is not bad for us.

Lucretius's Argument: Something is bad for us if and only if it is appropriate to lament it (it is reasonable to lament it and it would be unreasonable not to lament it). It is not appropriate to lament our nonexistence before our creations. So, our nonexistence before our creations is not bad for us. But either both our nonexistence after death and our nonexistence before our creations are bad for us, or neither is. Therefore, our nonexistence after our deaths is not bad for us. Furthermore, we should not lament our nonexistence after our deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Lucretius's Argument assumes that there is no satisfactory solution to Lucretius's Puzzle that both explains our differing attitudes and vindicates them as *reasonable*; this assumption is evident in the Argument's claim that either both types of nonexistence are bad for us, or neither is, in combination with its claim that something is bad for us if and only if it is appropriate to lament it.

A *solution* to Lucretius's Puzzle would both explain our differing attitudes to the two types of nonexistence and would vindicate these atti-

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<sup>1</sup>In calling this "Lucretius's Puzzle" I do not mean to suggest that the puzzle comes only from Lucretius, or that it is his only puzzle.

<sup>2</sup>In calling this "Lucretius's Argument" I don't mean to make any claim about Lucretius himself. This is simply an argument closely related to what I have called "Lucretius's Puzzle."

tudes as reasonable. A solution would thereby undermine Lucretius's Argument.

In this essay, I will offer a solution to Lucretius's Puzzle and then defend it. I will also discuss John Martin Fischer's solution to the Puzzle, outlined in several of the essays in *Our Stories*,<sup>3</sup> and his discussion of others' solutions to the Puzzle.

### Clarification of the Puzzle

Several points of clarification regarding the Puzzle are in order. First, I will not consider attempts to "solve" the Puzzle by denying its presuppositions, namely, that we do lament our nonexistence after death, but we do not lament our nonexistence before our creations. Second, I will assume that the Puzzle is constrained by these presuppositions in the following way: we must understand the Puzzle as being about the lament *we really do have* regarding our nonexistence after death, and as being about a lament *we really do lack* regarding our nonexistence before our creations. One thing that follows is that the truths in question are not universal generalizations, but rather generic claims or claims about what people's attitudes typically are. That is, the Puzzle might be more clearly stated as follows:

Why is it that we typically lament our nonexistence after death, yet typically we do not lament our nonexistence before our creations?

It is not true that all people lament death, or their nonexistence after death. (Fischer makes this point in discussing those who are suffering from a terrible illness.<sup>4</sup>) And it is not true that all people do not lament their nonexistence before their creations. (Fischer makes this point too.<sup>5</sup>)

I should note that I state the Puzzle in terms of "nonexistence before our creations," though Fischer prefers the expression "prenatal nonexistence." I think this phrase carries the unfortunate implicature that we do not exist before we are born. We do not come into existence at birth. My own view is that we come into existence at conception, but even if one denies that, one will acknowledge that we come into existence at some

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<sup>3</sup>John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>See Anthony L. Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?" *Our Stories*, pp. 27-35. See also John Martin Fischer and Daniel Speak, "Death and the Psychological Conception of Personal Identity," *Our Stories*, pp. 51-62.

<sup>5</sup>See the quote that begins "Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin" (Fischer, *Our Stories*, pp. 63-78).

point before we are born.<sup>6</sup> I do not think Fischer is making any mistake here; the phrase “prenatal nonexistence” picks out the nonexistence that is prenatal, without strictly committing its user to the claim that all prenatal times are times of nonexistence. Nevertheless, for reasons of clarity I prefer the wording in terms of “creation.”

My restatement of the Puzzle still leaves unexplained the nature of the lament in question. I have granted that it is true that people typically lament their nonexistence after death, but what is the reading of this claim on which it is true? Do people typically take nonexistence to be in itself a bad thing? If that were so, it would lend support to the claim that we face a puzzle, because if nonexistence itself is a bad thing, then nonexistence before creation is a bad thing, and it is puzzling that we do not lament it.<sup>7</sup> However, people do not take nonexistence itself to be a bad thing; not existing is not intrinsically bad in the way that being in pain is intrinsically bad. Rather, nonexistence is bad comparatively: it is bad because it is better to exist than not to exist (at least if one’s existence is sufficiently good). We lament nonexistence after death because, were it not for this nonexistence, we would have more life.

At this point, I want to distinguish two quite different versions of Lucretius’s Puzzle. I will begin by focusing attention on the first version of Lucretius’s Puzzle, because I take it to be the central puzzle (and a close variant of it is Fischer’s main focus, as we will see). I will turn to discussing the second version of the Puzzle at the end of the paper.

Lucretius’s Puzzle (Central Version): Why it is that we typically wish our deaths would be later rather than earlier (later than they actually will be), but typically we lack a wish that our creations be earlier rather than later (earlier than they actually were)?

This version of the puzzle focuses on our lamenting our nonexistence at particular times after we die; we would prefer to have existed, rather than not, at those times.

An alternative version of the puzzle focuses on our lamenting *that there is any time in the future at which we will not exist*: lamenting that we will die at all, lamenting that we are not immortal. It is less clear to me that people typically have this lament as opposed to merely lamenting that death is sooner rather than later, which is one reason I see this puzzle as a less central puzzle.

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<sup>6</sup>See Elizabeth Harman, “Creation Ethics: The Moral Status of Early Fetuses and the Ethics of Abortion,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 28 (1999): 310-24, p. 312 n. 3.

<sup>7</sup>This may be the puzzle Lucretius had in mind. But this puzzle has a false presupposition, so I do not discuss it in this paper.

Alternative Puzzle: Why is it that people typically wish to be immortal, with no death, but typically people do not wish to have existed forever in the past, with no creation?

I discuss the Alternative Puzzle at the end of the paper.

### My Solution to the Puzzle

The Puzzle is this:

Lucretius's Puzzle (Central Version): Why it is that we typically wish our deaths would be later rather than earlier (later than they actually will be), but typically we lack a wish that our creations be earlier rather than later (earlier than they actually were)?

I will argue that there is no puzzle here at all. While our wish that our deaths be later rather than earlier is straightforward, easily understandable, and reasonable, it would be very *odd* for us to wish that our creations were earlier rather than later; this explains why we have the first wish but lack the second.

A person typically wishes that her death was later rather than earlier because if her death was later, she would live a longer life. Typically, people prefer to have longer rather than shorter lives.

What would things have been like if one had been created earlier? If we imagine a significantly earlier creation (at least one year earlier, say), then this is a scenario in which one would have had a completely different life.<sup>8</sup> All of one's life circumstances would have been different, all of one's experiences would have been different, and all of one's relationships would have been different in character (and most with different people). Furthermore, for most of us, even if we specify a particular earlier time—for example, what would things have been like if I had been created exactly *three years* earlier?—there is simply no fact of the matter about how our lives would have gone, in most respects. Given this, it is not at all surprising that we typically lack a wish to have been created earlier than we were created. What would make us wish for this alternative scenario?

In particular, note that it is not the case that had one been created earlier, one would have lived a longer life. It is not the case that had one been created earlier, one would still have died at the same time. (Indeed,

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<sup>8</sup>It's plausible that a stronger claim is true: if I had been born five minutes earlier, my whole life would have been quite different. But I don't need to make this stronger claim for my purposes here.

it would be very weirdly coincidental if this counterfactual were true of a particular person.) So the motivation that appears to underlie the wish to die later—that one would thereby have a longer life—could not motivate a wish to be created earlier—because it is not typically true that if one had been created earlier, one would have had a longer life.

I do not deny that some people wish to have been born earlier. Fischer gives the example of someone who wishes to have lived at a different historical time, at which a certain kind of exploration was still available to be done.<sup>9</sup> Someone might prefer to have been born earlier because his own immediate generation suffered various hardships not suffered by the prior generation. Someone might prefer to have been born earlier merely because his own life was so bad that he prefers *any* alternative that would clearly have been *different*, and he has noted that being born earlier is such an alternative. (Fischer makes a similar point.<sup>10</sup>)

Nor do I deny that each of us could have been born earlier. I grant that we can wish to have had very different lives, and that it is possible that we have had very different lives.

But it is not the case that people typically long to have lived at an earlier time, nor is it the case that people typically have such bad lives that they would prefer any alternative life. So it is no surprise that people typically *lack* the wish to have been born earlier.

This completes the initial stage of my solution to the Puzzle.

At this point, Fischer would object that I have misstated the Puzzle. I have not stated it in the way that he does, but that is because I think he grants far too much to the Puzzle. Here (in my own words) is how Fischer states the Puzzle:

Lucretius's Puzzle (Central Version, Narrowed): Why is it that we typically wish to have died later rather than when we will actually die (holding fixed the times of our creations), but typically we lack a wish to have been created earlier rather than when we actually were created (holding fixed the times of our deaths)?

I think the suggestion that this is an interesting puzzle is odd (though many besides Fischer have taken it seriously). Consideration of the counterfactual possibility in which a person dies later *just is* consideration of a counterfactual possibility in which she is nevertheless created at the same time—holding fixed the time of her creation requires no further stipulation: it follows straightforwardly from imagining the closest possibility

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<sup>9</sup>See the quote that begins “Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin.”

<sup>10</sup>Fischer and Speak, “Death and the Psychological Conception of Personal Identity,” p. 60.

in which she dies later. But consideration of the counterfactual possibility in which a person is created earlier *is not* consideration of a counterfactual possibility in which she nevertheless dies at the time of her actual death. As I have commented, it would be very coincidental if a person was such that, had she been created earlier, she would nevertheless have died at the same time. (Such a case is possible but unusual.) So there is nothing *parallel* in the two wishes being considered by the “puzzle.” The first wish is a wish that death be later, with no further stipulations; that creation be held fixed is not stipulated but simply falls out of consideration of that possibility. The second wish is a wish that creation be earlier, with a big—and odd—stipulation, that death nevertheless be at its actual time.

The second stage of my solution to the Puzzle is to offer a solution to this Narrowed version of the Puzzle. The first thing to say is this: it is no mystery why people in fact have not typically formed the wish to have been created earlier, but to have died at their actual time of death, because it is such an odd scenario to contemplate. Why would people *consider* the possibility in which they are created earlier but nevertheless die at the times of their actual deaths? This is not a possibility that people would naturally consider, so it is not at all surprising that they have not formed a wish for this scenario.

It might be responded that what I have said so far leaves open that once people contemplate this scenario, they *ought* to wish for it. And what I have said so far leaves open that people should have *implicit* wishes for this scenario, even if they do not explicitly wish for it because they have not explicitly considered it. Here is an argument that might be offered for these views. Grant what I have proposed, that people wish to die later because they wish to have longer lives. The scenario in question—in which one is created earlier but dies at one’s actual time of death—is one in which one has a longer life. Therefore, one should wish for it.

This argument fails because it assumes this claim:

If one wishes that *p*, then for any *q* such that if *q* is true then *p* is true, one ought to wish for *q* if contemplating *q* (or one ought to implicitly wish for *q*).

This claim is false. There are at least two ways of seeing that one might wish to have a longer life but reasonably not wish to have been created earlier yet to have one’s actual time of death.

First, if one wishes for something good, such as winning the lottery, one need not wish for scenarios in which one gets the good thing and in addition some irrelevant fact holds. Suppose Sue wants to win the lot-



tery, and Sue is indifferent to the color of her car. We ask Sue: What about the scenario in which you win the lottery and also your car, which is actually red, is blue? Do you wish for that scenario? Let's grant that Sue should *prefer* that scenario to the actual world: it has something good that she wants, and it is no worse in any way than the actual world. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to say that Sue should *wish* for that scenario. (It would similarly be a mistake to say that Sue should *lament* that this scenario is not the case.) That scenario adds an extra detail that Sue does not care about. She need not wish for that scenario in particular. Her wish to win the lottery exhausts her rational obligations regarding wishing on this matter. Indeed, Sue might rightly complain that in our suggestion that she should wish for that scenario, we are inviting her to have an *extra, unnecessary wish*. Sue wishes to win the lottery; she does not wish that her car be a different color. Sure, if her car's being a different color were a *route* to winning the lottery, she would wish for that; but that is not what we were considering.

Similarly, suppose we ask someone who wishes to live a longer life than she will actually live: "Do you wish to have lived earlier, holding fixed your actual time of death?" This is equivalent to asking: "Do you wish for the scenario in which you have a longer life, but also that you live at an earlier time, such that your time of death coincides with your actual time of death?" She might well reply that she does not wish for *that scenario*, as it involves an *extra, unnecessary wish*. She wishes to live a longer life. She does not *also* wish to have lived earlier, so it would be odd for her to form a wish for that scenario rather than her simple wish for a longer life. Furthermore, note that it follows directly from her simple wish to live a longer life that she wishes to die later than she actually will—this is the most natural and straightforward way in which she would live a longer life. So we can explain why a wish to live a longer life leads to a wish to die later but does not lead to a wish to have been created earlier.

Can we say of her, as we said of Sue, that even if she need not *wish* for that scenario, she should *prefer* that scenario? We cannot. Because, unlike in Sue's case, the scenario is not one in which she gains something good—a longer life—at the sacrifice only of things to which she is indifferent. Let's grant for the sake of argument that the scenario with the longer, earlier life would involve a *better* life because it is longer. Nevertheless, people are typically attached to many features of their lives, such that they prefer and value them and are not indifferent to alternatives with equally good things, and do not even prefer alternatives with better things. A mother who loves her child might well wish not to have lived earlier—even if it would have involved a longer life—because then her actual child would not have existed. Even if she would have had a differ-



ent child, and even if that relationship with her child would have been equally good, and that child's life would have been equally good, still she might well prefer to have her actual child, to whom she is attached. People often feel similarly about their spouses and their friends; they prefer to have the actual relationships they have, and they do not wish for alternatives in which they would have different relationships, even if those alternatives would be in some way significantly better. I have written about this *attachment to the actual*, and argued that it is reasonable, elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Some paradigm examples of reasonable attachments to the actual arise in cases of unfortunate or unwise conceptions of children. If a girl conceives a child at age fourteen, then becomes a teenage mother and raises her child, she may well end up loving her child in such a way that she does not wish that she had not conceived at fourteen. Indeed, the thought of not having her actual child may be positively horrific to her. She might well grant that her life would have been better if she had waited and had a child later; but she doesn't care, she doesn't wish to have had that very different life. Such an attitude is perfectly reasonable. Cases like this show that it is not irrational to prefer what has actually happened to an alternative that would have involved a better, but very different life.

Because people often exhibit reasonable attachments to the actual, they often would not prefer to have existed earlier, with their actual dates of death, even if they see that those alternative lives would have been *better* lives. There is nothing unreasonable, irrational, or misguided about a preference for the actual, a preference for the life one has actually had and relationships with the people one actually loves.

(I have said all of this while *granting* the assumption that if one had been created earlier, yet had one's same date of death, one's life would have been *better* than one's actual life. But this is far from clear. One's life would have been longer, that is clear. But the life would have been so different that it is an open question whether it would have been as good, or better. In particular, for anyone whose life seems better than an average life, there is reason to deny that the alternative life in question would be as good a life, even given that it would be longer.)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth Harman, "'I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 177-99.

<sup>12</sup>One might object that I should consider a Yet More Narrow version of the Puzzle, which asks why we do not wish for the scenario in which we were born earlier, had our actual time of deaths, and yet had all the actual significant features of our lives. This scenario is somewhat hard to imagine, but of course it is *possible*. For an example of imagining the kind of scenario in question, a forty-year-old American woman who is married with children might imagine an alternative life which is just like her own but in which she takes two years after college to live in Spain, then does the things she actually did right after college, somehow with the years in Spain not altering what follows in any way. Part

**Brueckner and Fischer's Solution to the Narrowed Puzzle**

Anthony Brueckner and Fischer<sup>13</sup> grant that there is something puzzling in the Narrowed Puzzle: they grant that there is an *asymmetry* in our attitudes, and they seek to explain that asymmetry. They begin by considering Derek Parfit's solution to the Narrowed Puzzle.<sup>14</sup> Parfit points out that we take a very different attitude toward bad experiences that we will have in the future and bad experiences that we had in the past. We much prefer that a particular bad experience be in the past rather than in the future; if we are unsure which is the case, we would prefer a worse experience in the past to a less bad experience in the future. Parfit says, starkly, that we are indifferent to bad experiences in the past but not to bad experiences in the future. He thinks that this *bias for the future* can explain our attitudes to nonexistence after we die and nonexistence before we were created: while we lament misfortunes in the future, we do not lament misfortunes in the past.

Brueckner and Fischer object that Parfit himself draws a distinction between two ways that events can be bad for a person; they can be bad in virtue of involving bad experiences, or they can be bad although they involve no bad experiences. Suffering pain falls in the first category; being betrayed falls in the second category. Parfit himself holds that our bias for the future applies only to the first category of bads. But death, Brueckner and Fischer rightly point out, is a bad in the second category: death is not bad in virtue of involving bad experiences. Rather, death is bad in virtue of involving the *deprivation* of good experiences. (They endorse a deprivation account of why death is bad, with which I am in agreement.)

But Brueckner and Fischer argue that our *bias for the future*, understood more generally, *can* solve the Narrowed Puzzle. They point out that we much prefer that pleasurable experiences be in the future, rather than in the past. Indeed, we would even prefer an inferior pleasurable experience in the future to a better pleasurable experience in the past, if we are not sure which is the case. They make the stark claim that we are indifferent to pleasures in the past, but that we care greatly about plea-

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of what is odd about contemplating such an alternative life is that whatever we imagine adding cannot be too significant, it cannot be life-altering in any way, or the imagined scenario will prove incoherent. My response to this version of the Puzzle is again that it would be odd to contemplate such a scenario—adding experiences to one's life which then have little or no causal consequences for the significant features of one's life—but if one does contemplate such a scenario, it would not be very attractive precisely because only relatively inconsequential or boring experiences can easily be added in order to yield a coherent life that largely matches one's actual life.

<sup>13</sup>Brueckner and Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?"

<sup>14</sup>Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 165-85.

asures in the future.<sup>15</sup> In caring about pleasures in the future, we both are glad to have actual future pleasures and wish to have future pleasures we won't have. In being indifferent to pleasures in the past, they claim, we both lack an attitude of being glad to have had actual past pleasures and lack a wish to have had past pleasures we didn't have. This would explain why we wish death would be later, but we do not wish to have been created earlier (with our same time of death): while we wish to have the future pleasures of which death deprives us, we do not wish to have the past pleasures we would have in the alternative scenario in which we were created earlier (but died at our actual time of death).

Brueckner and Fischer's criticism of Parfit's solution is well-taken, and their solution is an improvement on his. Nevertheless, their solution is misguided. First, as I have argued, there is no real puzzle in the Narrowed Puzzle, and no asymmetry of attitudes that needs to be explained: it is perfectly natural that people typically wish to die later (because that would involve a longer life at no cost to anything they value), and it would be incredibly odd if people typically wished to have been created earlier with their actual time of death (it would be odd for them to contemplate that scenario and also it is not the case that they should prefer it were they to contemplate it). Second, Brueckner and Fischer's solution involves a strong claim that is false. They claim that we are indifferent to past pleasures. In particular, they claim that we do not typically wish for past pleasures we did not have. I think people often wish for better lives, and indeed often wish to have had better pasts. I certainly agree that people exhibit a bias for the future regarding pleasure, but only in that people care *much more* about future pleasures than about past ones. It does not follow that people are indifferent to past pleasures. Brueckner and Fischer's solution at most could explain why people wish *more strongly* to die later than they wish to have been created earlier (with their actual date of death). But they seek to explain why people lack any wish at all to have been created earlier (with their actual date of death); their proposed explanation involves a degree of indifference to our pasts that we do not feel.

I will argue below that Brueckner and Fischer's solution does a better job of responding to the Alternative Puzzle (though it is not the puzzle they state and intend to address).

### Fischer's Discussions of Other Solutions

Fischer discusses and objects to several alternative solutions to the Narrowed Puzzle. Some of these solutions have features in common with the

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<sup>15</sup>Brueckner and Fischer, "Why Is Death Bad?" p. 33.

solution I have offered.

One way of responding to the Narrowed Puzzle is to claim that a person could not have been created earlier. This solution holds that while we could have died later than we will actually die, we could not have been created earlier, and this is why we wish for the first scenario but not for the second. Fischer quite rightly points out that it is false that a person could not have existed earlier than she actually exists.

One argument offered in support of the claim that one could not have existed earlier is Frederick Kaufman's, which appeals to the idea that for each of us, there is a thin person and a thick person.<sup>16</sup> The thin person could have existed earlier, but would have had a very different life. The thick person essentially has the life experiences, relationships, and attitudes she actually has; she could not have existed earlier. The claim is that we care about the thick persons we are, and not the thin persons we are; we have wishes regarding the lives of the thick persons we are, but we do not have wishes regarding the lives of the thin persons we are. (I will adopt this terminology for my discussion of the view; I don't mean to endorse the view or even the claim that it is ultimately coherent.)

Fischer rightly points out that people do sometimes wish to have had radically different lives. Someone who was switched with another baby in the hospital when he was born, and then had a hard life, might wish that he had not been switched at birth, though the thin person he is would have been associated with a different thick person, and the thick person he actually is would not have existed. Someone who had a good life and was not switched at birth may be glad not to have been switched at birth: he is glad that the thin person he is is associated with the thick person he is, and not with a different thick person.<sup>17</sup> Both of these examples involve someone caring about the life of the thin person he is.

While my solution also appeals to the fact that our lives would have been very different if we had been created earlier, I do not claim that we *could not* have been created earlier. Nor do I claim that no one ever wishes to have had such a different life. My claim is more modest: that people often are reasonably attached to their actual lives, that people often would reasonably prefer their actual lives over alternative lives that would have been longer but very different. This is enough to explain why people need not prefer the scenario in which they are created earlier but die at their actual time of death.

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<sup>16</sup>Fischer discusses Kaufman's view in "Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin," and in Fischer and Speak, "Death and the Psychological Conception of Personal Identity." Kaufman's view is presented in "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999): 1-19.

<sup>17</sup>Fischer and Speak, "Death and the Psychological Conception of Personal Identity," pp. 54-55.

Fischer quotes Christopher Belshaw asserting the mere counterfactual claim (as opposed to an impossibility claim) on which I have rested part of my solution: for each of us, had she been created earlier, her life would have been very different. Furthermore, Belshaw points out that we prefer things as they actually are—we do not wish the present were different, nor the past. These claims of Belshaw's are close to my own claims about attachments to the actual. But then Belshaw goes on to say that "to want to be born at a different time is, in effect, to want not to exist";<sup>18</sup> I make no such similar link between the differences that would occur if we were created earlier and the claim that we could not really be created earlier.

Fischer objects to Belshaw that some people who have had bad lives do wish to have had radically different lives. Fischer claims that Belshaw seeks to explain why *everyone* lacks a desire for the scenario in which they were created earlier (but have their actual times of death). Fischer is right that Belshaw's explanation, that in that scenario one's life would be very different, cannot explain this phenomenon for *everyone*. But it is a mistake for Belshaw to think that we need to explain why everyone lacks this desire.<sup>19</sup> It is enough to explain why the desire is *typically* absent in people: that is the relevant datum. (Note, however, that Fischer would be mistaken if he thought that people who wish to have had radically different lives *should wish* to have been created earlier but with their actual times of death. Even people who have had bad lives and would prefer to have had radically different lives need not have any *wish* for the life in which they are created earlier but die at their actual time of death; they need not *lament* that that scenario does not hold. They wish to have had different lives. They may well also wish to have a longer life rather than a shorter life. But they need not desire *to have lived earlier*; as I said in discussing the case of Sue, they need not have *an extra, unnecessary wish*.)

### The Alternative Puzzle

Let's turn now to discussing this version of the puzzle:

Alternative Puzzle: Why is it that people typically wish to be immortal, with no death, but typically people do not wish to have existed forever in the past, with no creation?

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<sup>18</sup>Christopher Belshaw, "Death, Pain, and Time," *Philosophical Studies* 97 (2000): 317-41.

<sup>19</sup>If Belshaw is really committed to that. Fischer's evidence for Belshaw's commitment is weak. Fischer quotes Belshaw, saying: "We wish to die later. But we don't wish to have been born earlier" (Fischer and Speak, "Death and the Psychological Conception of Personal Identity," p. 60). Fischer reads these as universal generalizations, but they could be generic claims.



In discussing this puzzle, it doesn't matter much whether we stipulate that the latter scenario being considered is one in which the subject dies at her actual time of death; it simply matters that the imagined scenario in which one did exist forever in the past is one in which one is still mortal, and will die at some point. From this it follows that both wishes would be for infinitely long lives bounded on one side.

One might advocate a solution to the Alternative Puzzle that follows closely my solution to the Central Version of the Puzzle. We wish to live longer lives, and this is why we typically wish to be immortal (if people do typically have this wish, which is not clear to me). However, we are attached to our lives as they actually are, and so we do not have a tendency to wish for radically different lives. So we do not wish to have always existed, because that life would not have included any of the experiences or relationships in our actual lives. Furthermore, a life in which one has always existed is not the only way in which one's life could have infinite duration, so a desire for a life of infinite duration need not lead to a desire to have always existed. The scenario in which one has always existed has (arguably) one good thing—it has infinite duration—but it also has a serious strike against it—it lacks all the things in one's actual life to which one is attached; for this reason, it is not the case that people typically *should* prefer it.

However, one might object that once we start discussing desires to be immortal, we have left the realm of ordinary pedestrian desires and started down a path of discussing *weirder* desires. Certainly the desire to be immortal is more fanciful than the straightforward lament that one's death is sooner rather than later. If we were immortal, our lives would be *very different* from our actual lives. It's true that our actual lives so far would form a small piece of these other lives, but those lives would go on to have spans that would far eclipse the stage corresponding to our actual lives. Once we are in the business of wishing for immortality, we are far off from the attachments and preoccupations of the particular actual lives we have. In wanting immortality, we are not placing a great priority on the actual lives we have had, because these actual lives would be small inconsequential parts of the lives we are desiring. Given this, it seems odd to insist that, while we wish for immortality, we do not wish to have existed forever simply because we are so attached to our actual lives. This is a serious objection to the solution above.

Brueckner and Fischer's solution may do better. Since a desire for immortality is fanciful in itself, and the possibility that one existed forever is rarely discussed in science fiction, I think all that needs to be explained (the data for this puzzle) is simply our greater tendency to wish for immortality than to wish to have existed forever. Brueckner and Fischer point out that we exhibit a bias for the future regarding good

experiences: we care a great deal more to have them in the future than we do to have had them in the past. This does seem adequate to explain why we would wish for immortality but would have less of a tendency to wish to have existed forever.

Furthermore, Brueckner and Fischer's solution may help to capture something Thomas Nagel points out: that what we mind about death is not just that our life is thereby shorter but also that, as death approaches, we have little or nothing left *to anticipate*.<sup>20</sup> Immortality is attractive partly because it promises that we will never face a time at which death is imminent, a time without meaningful anticipation. Having an ever-extending past does nothing to alleviate this concern: it involves an infinitely long life but still one in which, at some point, there is little left to anticipate. Nagel leaves it as unexplained why we care to have something to anticipate. But Brueckner and Fischer's solution has something to say to that: we care much more about our future experiences, including that there be some.<sup>21, 22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Fischer quotes a footnote from Nagel's paper "Death" (*Noûs* 4 (1970): 73-80) in "Earlier Birth and Later Death: Symmetry Through Thick and Thin," p. 65.

<sup>21</sup>It might be objected that an appeal to our bias for the future is merely a redescription of the phenomenon to be explained, rather than an explanation of it.

<sup>22</sup>For comments on this paper, thanks to Ben Bradley, Peter Graham, Alex Guerrero, Sarah McGrath, and Michael Rescorla.