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**Against Brueckner and Fisher's solution to the  
Lucretian Symmetry Argument**

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by

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## **Abstract**

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In this paper, I argue that, contrary to what is claimed by Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fisher, the account of the badness of death that they offered fails to establish that death can be bad for somebody, while prenatal non existence cannot be so without appealing to the controversial metaphysical assumption of the impossibility of prenatal existence, and therefore it fails to offer an adequate solution to the Lucretian symmetry argument. Furthermore, I argue that, assuming that we could have come to be before our birth, prenatal nonexistence can indeed be bad for us.

I then focus on the weaker thesis that death is necessarily worse than prenatal non existence. I argue that, assuming that it is possible for us to be born before our birth, this claim as well can be proven to be false through a counterexample, even in the circumstances in which both death and prenatal nonexistence are bad for us.

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## 0.1 Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that, contrary to what is claimed by Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fisher (henceforth: BF), the account of the badness of death that they offered in (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer 1986) and subsequent papers fails to establish that death *can* be bad for somebody, while prenatal non existence *cannot* be so without appealing to the controversial metaphysical assumption of the *impossibility of prenatal existence* [1](#), and therefore it fails to offer an adequate solution to the *Lucretian symmetry argument*. Furthermore, I will argue that, assuming that we could have come to be before our birth, prenatal nonexistence *can* indeed be bad for us [2](#).

I will then focus on the weaker thesis that death is *necessarily* worse than prenatal non existence. I will argue that, assuming that it is possible for us to be born before our birth, this claim as well can be proven to be *false* through a counterexample, even in the circumstances in which both death and prenatal nonexistence are bad for us. Finally, I will consider the claim, advanced by BF in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2014), that *in general*, prenatal nonexistence is a lesser evil than death. I will argue that, while this might be true, BF did not manage to establish this claim, and we have good reasons to be skeptical regarding its truthfulness.

More specifically, this is how the paper is going to be structured, section by section:

- In section [0.2](#), I will locate BF's account of the badness of death within the philosophical literature on the subject
- In section [0.3](#), I will present BF's argument

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<sup>1</sup>By '*impossibility of prenatal existence*', I mean the thesis that it is metaphysically *impossible* for anybody to come to be before their actual birth

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this paper, I am going to assume that it is *possible* for us to be born before our *actual birth*, that is to say, that for any time *t* before the time we came to be, we could have come to be at *t*. I am using the concept of *birth* in a technical sense: I am not referring to the delivery of the baby out of the womb of the mother, but to the moment the person comes to be (an event which, arguably, occurs before the aforementioned delivery)

- In section [0.4](#), I will criticise BF's argument. I will indicate which premises we should reject as *false*, and through a thought experiment, I will show that if the account specified by BF is correct, prenatal nonexistence *can* indeed be bad for us
- In section [0.5](#), I will analyse how BF have reacted to the kind of criticisms raised in the previous section, and I will argue that even under their *reformed* account of death's badness, it is still the case that prenatal nonexistence can be bad for us
- In section [0.6](#), I will investigate whether the *reformed* account advanced by BF manages to establish that death is *necessarily* worse than late birth. Through a thought experiment, I will argue that, under the *reformed* account, it is false that death is *necessarily* worse than late birth
- In section [0.7](#), I will analyse the argument put forward by Huiyuhl Yi in (Yi [2012](#)) in favour of the thesis that death is *necessarily* worse than late birth, and I will explain why I believe it to be unsound
- In section [0.8](#), I will investigate whether the *reformed* account advanced by BF manages to establish that, *in general*, death is worse than late birth, and I will argue that it fails to do so
- Finally, I will devote section [0.9](#) to the conclusions of this paper

## 0.2 The philosophical debate on the *badness* of death

Intuitively, most people think that death, while *not necessarily* bad for someone, *can* be bad for someone, and indeed it is so in certain cases [3](#).

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<sup>3</sup>As highlighted by (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer [1986](#)), there are cases in which death is not bad for someone. For instance, if instead of dying, all that would have happened to me would have been several hours of torture, then it seems that death was not bad for me

Against the widely shared belief that death can be bad, in the *Letter to Menoeceus* Epicurus advanced the following argument <sup>4</sup>:

‘Make yourself accustomed to the thought that death is nothing to us, since every good or bad resides in perception and death is the absence of perception.’

According to Epicurus, death *cannot be* bad for you: for things to be good or bad for you, they *must be* perceived, and death <sup>5</sup> *cannot* be perceived. Dying might indeed be bad for you, as it might prove to be a painful experience. But death is assured not to be bad for you <sup>6</sup>.

In (Nagel <sup>2012</sup>), Thomas Nagel challenged Epicurus’ argument. More specifically, he challenged the premise that for things to be good or bad for you, they *must be* perceived. Against this contention, he offered the counterexample of *a friend’s betrayal*. According to Nagel, the betrayal of a friend is *bad* even if we never come to learn about it <sup>7</sup>.

In (Nagel <sup>2012</sup>), however, Nagel does not limit himself to argue against one of the premises of the Epicurean argument against the badness of death. He also offers an influential account of death’s badness. According to Nagel, *when* it is bad, death is bad

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<sup>4</sup>Translation due to Warren in (Warren <sup>2004</sup>), p.18

<sup>5</sup>*Death* can mean two things:

1. The condition of being dead, *or*
2. The event which consists in passing from the condition of being alive to the condition of being *dead*

. In this paper, unless otherwise specified, when I write of ‘death’ I mean the *latter* of these two meanings

<sup>6</sup>This is not the only argument that Epicurus offers against the claim that death can ever be bad for someone. Another important and influential argument that Epicurus advances is the following one: ‘Therefore death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, since for the time when we are, death is not present; and for the time when death is present, we are not. Therefore it is nothing either to the living or the dead since it is not present for the former, and the latter are no longer.’

<sup>7</sup>As Nagel writes: ‘A man’s life includes much that does not take place within the boundaries of his body and his mind, and what happens to him can include much that does not take place within the boundaries of his life. These boundaries are commonly crossed by the misfortunes of being deceived, or despoised, or betrayed.’



because it *deprives* us of the ‘goods of life’ that we would have had had we not died [8](#).

While influential, the Epicurean argument relying on the absence of sensation is not the only argument that has been raised against the possibility that death can be bad for us. Another very important argument is the one raised by the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius in his *magnum opus*, the *De rerum natura*: the so-called *symmetry argument*. According to Lucretius, there is no significant difference between the time that we do not get to enjoy after our death and the time that we did not get to enjoy prior to our birth. Since it seems that we do not regret not having had the experiences we would have had had we been born before our actual birth, according to Lucretius it follows that we should not regret the fact that we will not have the experiences we will not enjoy due to our death [9](#).

If we were to represent it formally, Lucretius’ argument would have the following structure:

1. (OL1) It is not bad not to have existed before our birth
2. (OL2) If it is not bad not to have existed before our birth, then it is not bad not

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<sup>8</sup>See (Nagel [2012](#)), p. 1: ‘If death is an evil at all, it cannot be because of its positive features, but only because of what it deprives us of. I shall try to deal with the difficulties surrounding the natural view that death is an evil because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains.’

<sup>9</sup>For the original passage in Lucretius, consider the following from *DRN 3.972–5* translated by Warren in (Warren [2004](#)): ‘Look back similarly at how the stretch of unending time before we are born has been nothing to us. Nature, therefore, offers this reflection to us of the time to come after our eventual death.’ This is not the only passage in which Lucretius exposes his *symmetry argument*, even though it is the one that has probably influenced most reconstructions of the argument in the contemporary philosophical debate. A *slightly* different argument, still very much in the spirit of the *symmetry* between post-mortem and prenatal nonexistence, can be found in *DRN 3.832–42*, which recites ‘And just as in the time that went before we felt no pain — when Carthaginians came from all sides to wage war, and the world struck by the disturbing upheaval of war shook and quivered under the high vault of heaven, and it was unclear to whose kingdom should fall all men on land and sea—so when we are [lit. ‘will be’] no more, when the body and soul from whose combination we are formed have come apart, then you can be sure that we (who will not exist then) will be able to have nothing whatsoever happen to us or move our senses in the slightest, not even if earth and sea and sea and sky are mixed together.’ (this translation as well due to Warren). That said, I will reiterate what I have written: the version of the argument that has been considered (sometimes with slight modifications) in the philosophical literature is the first one

to exist after our death

3. (OLC) THEREFORE, it is not bad not to exist after our death

The version of the Lucretian symmetry argument both Nagel and BF deal with is, however, a different one. Assuming that *what* makes bad not having existed before our birth and after our death is the lack of good experiences the condition of nonexistence would entail, they have interpreted the Lucretian symmetry argument in the following terms:

1. (L1) It is not bad not having enjoyed the times before we were born
2. (L2) If it is not bad not having enjoyed the times before we were born, then it is not bad not enjoying the times after our death
3. (LC) THEREFORE, it is not bad not enjoying the times after our death

If we assume, as Nagel does, that death is bad, when it is bad, because it deprives us of the good times we would have had had we not died, then (LC) seems to suggest that death *cannot* be bad for us: if it were, there would be some circumstances in which death would deprive us of good times we would have had had we not died, and therefore (at least in those circumstances) it would be bad for us not to enjoy the times after our death.

Those who want to resist (LC) have to show that at least one of the premises is arguably false.

In (Nagel [2012](#)), Nagel claimed that his account managed to refute this argument by proving that *L2* is *false*. He argued in the following way: there is *indeed* a significant difference between the time that we do not get to enjoy after our death and the time that we did not get to enjoy prior to our birth. According to Nagel, the first one is

time our death ‘deprives us’ of, whereas the second one is time our late birth <sup>[10]</sup> *did not* deprive us of. And the reason why our late birth did not deprive us of the time before our birth is that, according to Nagel, we quite simply *could not have existed* before our birth. Therefore, while it is not bad not having enjoyed the times before we were born, the same cannot be said of the times after our death: not enjoying them *can* be bad for us <sup>[11]</sup>

From the very beginning, Nagel’s argument has been received with a lot of skepticism. Several philosophers have pointed out that it is far from obvious that we could not have existed before our birth. The problem is that the grounds upon which Nagel argued that it is impossible for us to be born before our actual birth appear to be somewhat questionable.

As an argument in favour of such a premise, Nagel does not offer much more than a generic claim that *a life could not have begun at a different point from the one in which it actually began* <sup>[12]</sup>. Some philosophers have hypothesized that behind Nagel’s claim there is the idea that the genetic material of which we are composed of (that is to say, our DNA) is *essential* to our being the person that we are, and since it *essential* that we are born out of the union of a certain sperm and a certain egg <sup>[13]</sup>, they have claimed that we *could not* have come to be before our *actual birth*. The issue, however, is that even if we grant that it is essential for us to be born out of the union of a certain sperm and

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<sup>10</sup>By *late birth* I mean having been born later than could have been

<sup>11</sup>And similarly, in terms of the original Lucretian symmetry argument, while it is true that it is not bad not having existed before our birth, still it can be bad not to exist after our death

<sup>12</sup>Nagel claims that anybody ‘born *substantially* earlier than he was’ (p. 8) cannot be the same person he/she is now. As he writes: ‘The direction of time is crucial in assigning possibilities to people or other individuals. 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).’

<sup>13</sup>The idea that it is *essential* for us to be born out of the union of a certain sperm and a certain egg invokes an account of personal identity that is grounded in a *Kripke-style origin essentialism*. See (Kaufman <sup>[1996]</sup>), p. 308: ‘Saul Kripke and others have argued that personal identity requires an essentiality of origins, such as a particular genetic structure or some aspect of bodily continuity’

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a certain egg, it is *far from clear* why it would follow that it is *impossible* for us to be born earlier. After all, why should we believe that the eggs and the sperm the union of which we are formed of could not have come to be *before* the time they came to be in the actual world? [14](#)

Of course, the solution to the Lucretian symmetry argument does not have to be found in a rejection of the similarity between the time that we did not get to enjoy prior to our birth and the time that we will not enjoy after our death. More specifically, it is possible to argue that we do not need an account of death's badness that would explain why, while not enjoying the time we will not have after our death can be a bad thing, not enjoying the time that we did not have prior to our birth cannot be so.

It is true, however, that some philosophers have tried anyway to build upon Nagel's theoretical apparatus, trying to offer an account of the badness of death that would allow death to be bad for us, while ruling out that late birth, *even* if it were possible for us to be born before our birth, could ever be bad for us.

In this regard, probably the most important attempt is the one due to Brueckner and Fisher [15](#). As we shall see, BF argued that, for deprivation to be a bad thing for us,

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<sup>14</sup>Nagel himself seemed to have realised that his argumentation was a bit *weak*. In a footnote he added to the text after its original publication, he conceded that it is *dubious* whether we could not have come to be before our actual birth. See (Nagel [2012](#)) p.8, footnote number 3: 'We could imagine discovering that people developed from individual spores that had existed indefinitely far in advance of their birth. In this fantasy, birth never occurs naturally more than a hundred years before the permanent end of the spore's existence. But then we discover a way to trigger the premature hatching of these spores, and people are born who have thousands of years of active life before them. Given such a situation, it would be possible to imagine *oneself* having come into existence thousands of years previously. If we put aside the question whether this would really be the same person, even given the identity of the spore, then the consequence appears to be that a person's birth at a given time *could* deprive him of many earlier years of possible life'. Of course, we know that people could not have developed from spores. But the *insight* of Nagel's thought experiment can be appreciated if we consider the following *realistic* scenario. Imagine that an embryo is created *in vitro* and frozen. A few years after its creation, the embryo gets implemented and a baby is born out of it. Consider now the scenario in which *no time* would have passed between the creation of the embryo and its implantation. *Assuming* that the person who would have been born if *no time* would have passed is the same person that was born when the embryo was implanted a few years after its creation, then it is correct to say that *that* person could have been born before their actual birth

<sup>15</sup>The most important one, but by far *not the only one*. Other important arguments are the ones due

the deprivation must deprive us of goods we *care about/it is rational to care about* <sup>16</sup>, and while we may care about the experiences death deprives us of, we do not care/it is irrational to care about the experiences we would have had had we been born before <sup>17</sup>.

Having located Brueckner and Fisher's account within the philosophical literature on the badness of death, I will now proceed to explain their account of the badness of death and their argument in favour of the asymmetry between death and prenatal non-existence.

### 0.3 BF's account and argument

In the first paper that they authored on this topic (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer <sup>1986</sup>), Brueckner and Fisher claimed that death is bad, when it is bad, because it deprives us <sup>18</sup> of the good experiences that we would have had had we not died <sup>19</sup>.

In doing this, they were not departing from the account offered by Nagel. However, they modified it by introducing the provision that, for deprivation to be bad for you, it must be the case that we *care* about the good things we are deprived of <sup>20</sup>. While BF to David Velleman (Velleman <sup>2008</sup>) and Frederik Kaufman in (Kaufman <sup>1999</sup>). However, while the accounts of Brueckner and Fisher and Kaufman can be configured as *variations* of Nagel's account, the same cannot be said regarding Velleman's

<sup>16</sup>In the first version of their account, BF stuck to the 'caring about'. In the refined version, they rephrased it as 'it is rational to care about'. Of course there is a difference between goods *we care about* and goods *it is reasonable to care about*. For instance, somebody might care about making sure they drink 400 cups of coffee per day, but arguably it is not *rational* to care about that

<sup>17</sup>*Modulo*, of course, the possibility that we could have come to be before our actual birth

<sup>18</sup>Death could then be an *experiential blank* and still be a bad thing for an individual. And one plausible explanation of why this is so is that death (though an experiential blank) is a *deprivation* of the good things of life. That is, when life is, on balance, good, then death is bad insofar as it robs one of this good: if one had died later than one actually did, then one would have had more of the good things in life. ' p. 214. In (A. Brueckner and Fischer <sup>1993</sup>), BF clarify that the goods they have in mind are *experiential goods*. In fact, they write (p.1): 'In a previous paper, we argued that death's badness consists in the deprivation of pleasurable experiences which one would have had, had one died later rather than at the time of one's actual death'

<sup>19</sup>BF only claim that death *can* be bad for us, not that it is *always* bad for us. If the experiences death deprived me of were, for instance, *just* several hours of torture, arguably death did not deprive me of any good

<sup>20</sup>In their paper (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer <sup>1986</sup>), BF generically refer to 'deprivation of good

never fully specified what it means to *care* for certain goods, I believe that a faithful interpretation of what they meant by *caring* is the following: you care for a certain good *if and only if* you have a *preference* to have that good versus *not* having it.

According to BF, the modification of the criterion poses no issue for the claim that death can be bad for us - it is not too far-fetched to claim that death can deprive us of good things we care about <sup>21</sup>.

What about prenatal nonexistence? BF claim that, even granting the possibility that we could have come to be before our actual birth, we do not care about the good experiences we could have had had we been born before <sup>22</sup>. And since they posit that caring about the experiences is a *necessary condition* for deprivation to be bad for you, it follows that being deprived of the good experiences you would have had had you been born before is not bad for you. In turn, if being deprived of the good experiences you would have had had you been born before is not bad for you, there is no reason why prenatal nonexistence should be bad for you at all.

A crucial point in this argument is the claim that we do not care about the good experiences we could have had had we been born before. BF argue in favour of this claim through the following reasoning. They argue in the following way: *we* prefer to have pleasurable experiences *in the future* rather than *in the past* (a principle that I will

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things in life'. On the other hand, they claim that when death happens, it constitutes a deprivation of *experienced goods*. See (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer [1986](#)), 'Death is a bad insofar as it is a deprivation of the good things in life (some of which, let us suppose, are "experienced as good" by the individual). If death occurs in the future, then it is a deprivation of something to which we look forward and about which we care - *future* experienced goods' p. 219

<sup>21</sup>Imagine somebody conducting a normal life, and equipped with a will to live. Unfortunately, she dies. Had she not died, she would have had plenty of good experiences (playing her favourite sports, spending time with her loved ones, *et cetera*). It is clear that *death* has been bad for her

<sup>22</sup>See (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer [1986](#)) 'If death occurs in the future, then it is a deprivation of something to which we look forward and about which we care - *future* experienced goods. But prenatal nonexistence is a deprivation of *past* experienced goods, goods to which we are indifferent. Death deprive us of something we care about, whereas prenatal nonexistence deprives us of something to which we are indifferent' p. 219

henceforth refer to as the *pro-future bias*, following the footsteps of Feldman [\[23\]](#)). And if we prefer to have pleasures in the future rather than in the past, then we care about future goods, but we are indifferent towards past ones.

In order to argue that we *always* prefer to have pleasures in the future rather than in the past, they recur to the following thought experiment. Consider someone who is about to be administered a pleasure-inducing drug. As they write in (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer [\[1986\]](#)) (p.218):

‘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. There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes to “experienced goods” which is parallel to the asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced bad: we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures.’

If we were to represent this argumentation as a formal argument, I would schematise it in the following way [\[24\]](#):

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<sup>23</sup>Technically, Feldman in (Feldman [\[2013\]](#)) refers to it as ‘*The Pro Bias Toward Future Pleasures*’. BF claim that the inspiration for this principle came from a similar principle held by Derek Parfit. As they write (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer [\[1986\]](#)), p.219: ‘Thus we can defend Nagel’s account of the badness of death by explaining the asymmetry in our attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence. This explanation makes use of a principle clearly related to (but different from) Parfit’s principle concerning the asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future experienced bads. If we have asymmetric attitudes toward past and future experienced goods, then death is a bad thing in a way in which prenatal nonexistence is not’. Parfit’s principle was about *bads*, not *goods*. Again, in the words of BF (p.215): ‘Recently, Derek Parfit has suggested another response. His position could be put as follows. We have a (not irrational) bias toward the future to the extent that there are cases where we are indifferent toward (or care substantially less about) our own past suffering but *not* indifferent toward our own future suffering’

<sup>24</sup>Throughout this argument, I refer to events that are either *future* or *past*. *Future* and *past*, of course,

1. We prefer having experiential goods in our future to having them in our past
2. If we prefer having experiential goods in our future to having them in our past, then we care about future experiential goods, while we are indifferent <sup>25</sup> towards past ones
3. THEREFORE, we care about future experiential goods, while we are indifferent towards past ones (from (1) and (2))
4. Death can deprive us of future experiential goods
5. THEREFORE, death can deprive us of goods we care about (from (3) and (4))
6. Either prenatal non existence does not deprive us of any experiential goods, or it deprives us only of past experiential goods
7. THEREFORE, either prenatal non existence does not deprive us of any experiential goods, or it deprives us only of experiential goods towards which we are indifferent (from (3) and (6))
8. Death and prenatal nonexistence are bad for us if and only if it is bad for us that they deprive us of experiential goods
9. A deprivation is bad for us if and only if we care about the goods we are deprived of
10. THEREFORE, death and prenatal nonexistence are bad if and only if they deprive us of goods we care about (from (8) and (9))

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are not *absolute*. When I was four years old, the event of my *bachelor graduation* was in the future, now that I am doing a PhD, that event is firmly *in the past*. So, which is the point of reference for *future* and *past* in the context of this argument? I would say that the point is *any time* at which you are alive. When I write that death can deprive us of future goods, they are *future* with respect to any moment in which we are *alive*. Similarly, when I write that prenatal nonexistence might deprive us of *past* goods, I mean, once more, *past* with respect to any moment in which we are alive

<sup>25</sup>Where *indifferent* means *not caring about*



11. THEREFORE, death can be bad for us (from (5) and (10))
12. THEREFORE, prenatal nonexistence cannot be bad for us (from (7) and (10))
13. THEREFORE, death can be bad for us, while prenatal nonexistence cannot be bad for us (from (11) and (12))<sup>26</sup>

## 0.4 The criticism

After having presented the argument BF offer in favour of their thesis, I will now proceed to articulate some criticisms that I would raise against it<sup>27</sup>. My criticisms are going to be of two kinds: I am going to argue that (i) some of the premises employed in the argument are false *tout court*, and that (ii) some of the premises employed in the

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<sup>26</sup>It might be considered curious the fact that in (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer 1986), BF frames the contrast as a contrast between *death* and *prenatal nonexistence*. It would have seemed more natural to frame it as a contrast between death and *late birth*, that is to say, *having been born later than could have been*. In fact, writing in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2013), BF characterise the Lucretian symmetry argument indeed as a contrast between death and late birth: ‘Lucretius pointed out that prenatal nonexistence is the “mirror image” of posthumous nonexistence; thus, just as the actual time of our death deprives us of experiences we would have had, if we were to have died later, so the actual time of our birth deprives us of experiences we would have had, if we had been born earlier. If those experiences we would have had, if we had been born earlier, would have been part of an on-balance good stretch of life, then arguably we should regret the fact that we were born when we were actually born, rather than earlier. That is, if it is “rational” to regret that we die when we actually die, rather than later, then it would appear to be equally rational to regret that we were born when we actually were born, rather than earlier. But to many people it just does not seem appropriate or rational to regret that we were not born earlier than we actually were born’. I do not believe that, for the purposes of criticizing BF’s argument, it is so relevant to focus on the distinction between *prenatal nonexistence* and *late birth*. After all, if late birth can be bad for us, it must be so because prenatal nonexistence can be bad for us. If BF were to succeed in arguing that prenatal nonexistence cannot be bad for us, by doing this they would also have shown that late birth cannot be bad for us. The issue is that, as it will be made clear in the following sections of the paper, I do not believe that they succeed in arguing that prenatal nonexistence cannot be bad for us

<sup>27</sup>A criticism that I will not explore in this paper is the one advanced by Jens Johansson in (Johansson 2014). According to Johansson, the account offered by Brueckner and Fisher can be criticised on the grounds that to assess whether a fact (such as death or prenatal non existence) is *bad* for me, we should not consider whether the goods the fact deprived me of are goods I care about (or it is *reasonable* to care about) in the actual world, but whether I would care about them (or it is *reasonable* to care about them) in the possible world in which I obtained these goods. Personally, I do not find this criticism founded. I do not agree with Johansson that we should consider the possible world in which I obtained these goods to establish whether deprivation is bad for me.

argument are false *if we assume* that it is possible for us to be born before our actual birth [28](#).

### 0.4.1 Against (2) and (3)

I believe that (2) and (3) are false. Even granting the veracity of (1), we have no reason to believe in the veracity of (2), and it seems that we can actually offer some counterexamples to (3).

Let's grant Brueckner and Fisher that (1) is true, let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that it is indeed the case that we always prefer to have good experiences ahead of us instead of behind us. Why would it follow that we are indifferent to past good experiences?

The most we can manage to prove from a *bias* in favour of goods in the future rather than in the past is just that it is better for us to have such goods in our future than to have them in our past. But this does not show that in general we do not prefer having had those experiences in the past to not having had them, and therefore that not having had the good experiences in the past is not bad for us. That you prefer  $x$  over  $y$  does not tell us that you are *indifferent* toward  $y$ . You might prefer a chocolate cake to an apple pie, and this means that, given the choice, you would prefer to have a chocolate cake. But this does not mean that you would be indifferent between consuming an apple pie and not having anything at all.

This point is perfectly captured by Christopher Belshaw in his criticism of the BF's account in (Belshaw [1993](#)). As Belshaw writes (p.105):

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<sup>28</sup>As the reader will recall, the aim of BF in their paper was offering an argument in favour of the asymmetry between death and prenatal nonexistence independently of the assumption of the metaphysical impossibility of prenatal nonexistence. By showing that the *truth* of some of the premises that they employ is *contingent on* whether it is possible to be born before our actual birth, I will manage to show that they failed to offer *such* an argument

‘The authors make two claims and, I fear, blur the distinction between them. The first, bluntly, is that we are indifferent to past pleasures. The second is that we have a bias towards the future’

Finally, a more substantial problem seems to affect BF’s account: it just seems that, contrary to (3), we are *not* indifferent to past pleasures. Consider the following example from Kaufman in (Kaufman 1999): the joys of childhood. The joys of childhood serve as a useful example of experiences located in the past that we *prefer* to have had, and therefore, that it would be bad for us not to have had.

Belshaw believes the same when he writes in (Belshaw 1993) p. 106:

‘We are not indifferent to past pleasures. We often enjoy remembering such pleasures, and we don’t want to lose our memories of them. We can regret that there were not more such pleasures, that our lives up to now have been only moderately satisfactory.’

#### 0.4.2 Against (9)

A powerful counterexample to (9) comes from Fred Feldman in (Feldman 2013). Feldman asks us to consider the case of a baby who dies with SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Such a baby would definitely not care about the goods death would deprive her of, for the very simple reason that her intellectual capabilities are not developed enough to have conscious interests. Given (9), the deprivation of good experiences due to death is *not* bad for this baby (and given (8), it would further follow that *death* itself is not bad for this baby)

Yet, it seems that a reasonable case can be made that the deprivation of good experiences is bad for the baby who dies of SIDS. While she did not care about the experiences

she would have had had she not died, it seems that it was bad the she was deprived of them.

### 0.4.3 Against (6)

As I have anticipated, some of the premises that BF use in their argument are *false* if we assume that, after all, it is possible for us to be born before our actual birth. More specifically, premise (6) can be shown to be false *once* we assume that that prenatal existence is possible.

In this regard, probably the best argument is the one offered by Huiyuhl Yi in (Yi 2012). Yi brings up an interesting counterexample to the claim that either prenatal non existence does not deprive us of any goods, or it deprives us only of past goods. He claims that, instead, it is possible that prenatal nonexistence might deprive us of *future goods*, and not only past ones.

The counterexample is the following. Imagine that I have a keen interest in learning Japanese in order to socialize with some Japanese friends of mine, and assume that it takes 1 year <sup>29</sup> for me to speak Japanese fluently enough to socialize with them. Once I will be able to socialize with them, I will enjoy experiences that are more pleasurable than the ones I would have had had I not learnt Japanese. In the actual world, I was born in year  $x$ , and at the age of 40 I decided to study Japanese for a year (and then I enjoyed pleasurable conversations with Japanese friends of mine until I died at the age of 80). This means that I enjoyed 39 years of beautiful conversations with my friends. But consider now a possible world in which I was born in year  $x-1$ , and at the age of 40 I have similarly decided to study Japanese. If I die in the same year I die in the actual world (but in this case, at the age of 81, and not 80) I would have had 40 years of beautiful

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<sup>29</sup>An unrealistic assumption, as everybody who has tried accurately learning a second language can confirm

conversations with my Japanese friends, one more year than what I got in the actual world.

If I had been born one year before my actual birth, I would have had an *extra* year of pleasurable experiences speaking Japanese with my friends. Therefore, prenatal nonexistence deprived me of *future goods* <sup>30</sup> - in this case, an *extra* year of pleasurable conversations.

The counterexample presented by Yi does not only prove that (6) is false. Even more importantly, the counterexample advanced by Yi proves that, even if BF were right in asserting that (3), (8), (9) are true, then prenatal nonexistence *can* indeed be bad for us. After all, as I have highlighted, the counterexample presented by Yi proves that prenatal nonexistence can deprive me of experiential goods that are future with respect to my birth in the actual world. Therefore, given (3), prenatal nonexistence can deprive me of goods I care about. Given (8) and (9), it follows that prenatal nonexistence *can* be bad for us.

## 0.5 BF's response

In this section, I will analyse BF's response to the arguments presented against their account. More specifically, I will focus on a *modification* of their argument that they have proposed in light of Feldman's criticism, and I will show why even this modified version *fails* to establish that death can be bad, whereas prenatal nonexistence cannot be so *independently* of the assumption of the metaphysical impossibility of prenatal existence. Then, I will focus on BF's response to the counterexamples of Yi. BF concede that

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<sup>30</sup> *Future* with respect to the moment of my birth in the actual world. What Yi seeks to prove is that there are possible scenarios such that, *at least* at one time  $t$  in our lives, it is the case that had I been born before, I would have had goods located after  $t$ , and therefore *goods* located in my *future* from my temporal location at  $t$ . Were prenatal nonexistence never to deprive me of *future goods*, there would be no time  $t$  such that at  $t$ , there would be goods I would have had located after  $t$  if only I had been born before my actual birth

prenatal nonexistence can be bad for us, but they argue that their account still manages to prove that we are *relatively indifferent* to the fact of our late birth. I will try to clarify what this means.

How did BF respond to the arguments that I have presented in the previous section? I will begin by discussing how BF have responded to the objection raised by Belshaw against (2), according to which it is not true that if we prefer having experiential goods in the future to having them in our past, then we care about future experiential goods, while we are indifferent towards past one.

Regarding Belshaw's criticism, BF accept that (2) is false, and in (A. Brueckner and Fischer 1993), BF answer Belshaw's criticism by arguing that what they wanted to prove with their thesis (that is, the thesis that, given the alternative between two goods, we want them to be in the future rather than in the past), is that we do not prefer to have had past goods *as such*, but only as means for future goods, such as pleasant memories 31.

Of course, such an account still posits that past pleasures have only an *instrumental* value, and this remains disputable. If I prefer to have had good experiences that I was not lucky enough to have had in the past, why should this preference necessarily be connected to future pleasures as a necessary condition for the arising deprivation to be bad for me? But I will set aside this concern for the time being.

Regarding the objection raised by Feldman in (Feldman 2013) against (9), according to which the death of a baby in case of SIDS is not bad for the baby, BF recognised Feldman's point, and in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2013) they proposed to modify premise (9) in the following way: a deprivation of goods is bad for us if and only if it is rational for us to care about the goods we are deprived of. Similarly, BF advocated rephrasing

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<sup>31</sup>See (A. Brueckner and Fischer 1993), p.330 : 'Clearly, the deprivation account of death's badness is quite compatible with our wishing to maximise our pleasures in the future and thus not being indifferent to past pleasures *insofar as they are connected favorably to future pleasures*.

the pro-future bias (the thesis that *we prefer having experiential goods in our future to having them in our past*) as *it is rational to prefer having experiential goods in our future to having them in our past*. It is not immediately clear what BF mean by ‘it is rational to have preference  $x$ ’. It seems to me that there are two ways of interpreting the concept of rationality when applied to preferences:

1. *Strong reading*. Any rational person would have that preference
2. *Weak reading*. Not any person that has that preference would be irrational (where *irrational* means ‘not rational’)

While BF are not clear about which interpretation of rationality they endorse, it seems to me that the *weak reading* is the one that they have in mind, or at the very least, it is the one that is *defensible*. In fact, for the sake of the argument, let’s assume that the *strong reading* were the correct one. Imagine that I have a keen interest in skydiving. Unfortunately, a day I injure my knee and I cannot practise skydiving anymore. The event of my injury deprives me of all the skydiving experiences I would have had had I not been injured, and it seems that *it is bad* for me not to have those goods. At the same time, it seems *false* that any rational person would prefer to have had those goods (i.e. *skydiving* experiences) to not having them<sup>32</sup>. Yet, if the *strong reading* were the correct one, and the deprivation of the skydiving experiences were bad for me, it would follow that any rational person would prefer to have had skydiving experiences.

Despite these reformulations to the premises of their original argument, this *new account* advanced by BF in response to the criticism of Belshaw and Feldman<sup>33</sup> is still

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<sup>32</sup>For instance, somebody can be a *perfectly rational* person and be afraid of skydiving

<sup>33</sup>That is to say: the original argument presented in (A. L. Brueckner and Fischer 1986), but with the following modifications:

- (2) as ‘If it is rational to prefer having experiential goods in our future to having them in our past, then it is rational to care about future experiential goods *as such*, while being indifferent

vulnerable to the counterexample that I have raised in the previous section, showing that prenatal nonexistence *can* be bad for us. In fact, if it is rational to care about future experiential goods as such, it is rational to care about the extra year of conversations in Japanese that being born before my actual birth would have afforded me. And since if it is rational to care about the goods we are deprived of, the corresponding deprivation is bad for us, the deprivation of the extra year of conversations we incur due to prenatal nonexistence is bad for us, and henceforth prenatal nonexistence *can* be bad for us.

BF acknowledge this. In fact, writing in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2014), they concede that prenatal nonexistence can be bad for you. More specifically, in the cases in which prenatal nonexistence deprives you of goods that are located after your birth in the actual world, then prenatal nonexistence in those cases is bad for you. As BF write in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2014), p. 746:

‘If an earlier birth would result in more pleasure in the future or a better life overall, then it could be perfectly rational to prefer an earlier birth.’

Nonetheless, they believe that their modified account still manages to prove some version of the asymmetry. In fact, in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2014) they write (p. 746):

‘[I]t would still be rational to have asymmetric attitudes toward early death and late birth; it would still be the case that our early deaths are *significantly*

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towards past ones *as such*’

- (3) as ‘It is rational to care about future experiential goods *as such*, while being indifferent towards past ones *as such*’
- (9) as ‘A deprivation is bad for us if only if it is rational to care about the goods we are deprived of’
- (6) is removed entirely



*worse* than our late births (and thus that our attitudes should reflect this fact).’

There are two ways to interpret this claim:

- In *modal terms*, as late birth cannot be worse or as bad as death
- In *general terms*, as *in general*, late birth is not worse or as bad as death, but *there can be exceptions*

Arguably, the interpretation intended by BF is the second one. In (Fischer and A. Brueckner [2014](#)), they label ‘*Lucretian Symmetry*’ the thesis that ‘we should have symmetric attitudes toward prenatal and posthumous nonexistence’, whereas they label ‘*Commonsense Asymmetry*’ the thesis that ‘in general (and apart from special circumstances) we regard our prospective deaths as bad and to be regretted whereas we are relatively indifferent to the fact that we were born when we actually were born, rather than earlier’.

They *explicitly* state their belief that it is possible to reconcile the Commonsense Asymmetry with their acceptance that *at least sometimes* prenatal nonexistence might be bad for us, as it is made clear in the following passage (from (Fischer and A. Brueckner [2014](#)), p. 745)):

‘But denying the Lucretian Symmetry thesis, and accepting in its place the Commonsense Asymmetry, does *not* entail that it could not be rational in certain specific circumstances to prefer an earlier birth’

Nonetheless, I believe that investigating whether BF’s account manages to establish the *modal interpretation* (that is to say, that late birth *cannot* be worse or as bad as death) is a worthwhile theoretical enterprise. In the next section, I will explain why I believe

that investigating whether BF's account manages to establish the *modal interpretation* is a worthwhile theoretical enterprise, and I will argue why I believe that it does not, and that actually, given their account, prenatal nonexistence (and late birth) can be worse or as bad as death.

## 0.6 The modal claim

In this section I am going to argue that, even when (i) *both* death and prenatal nonexistence are bad (because they deprive me of goods it is rational to care about), *and* (ii) they deprive me of *equal* amounts of time, still late birth *can* be worse or as bad as death.

Somebody might question why we should be interested in whether it is *necessarily* the case that death is worse than late birth. After all, whether death is worse or not does not have any bearing on the standard Lucretian symmetry argument. Furthermore, as I have already highlighted, the textual evidence in (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2014) seems to suggest that the *general reading* is the one BF endorse, not the *modal* one <sup>34</sup>.

I would answer that it is still relevant whether the account offered by BF could manage to establish that death is necessarily worse than late birth without appeal to the assumption of the metaphysical impossibility of prenatal nonexistence. In fact, somebody might be open to accept that it could be the case that late birth (and prenatal nonexistence) is bad for us, but she might be far more skeptical of the *weaker* claim that prenatal nonexistence (and late birth) *can* be worse or as bad as death.

I believe, however, that even this weaker claim *cannot* be established through the theoretical framework offered by Brueckner and Fisher, and that actually the account

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<sup>34</sup>It is more ambiguous which reading is endorsed by Yi in (Yi 2012). It seems to me that, at least in those cases in which both death and late birth deprive me of good experiences it is rational to care about, Yi wants to claim that death is (necessarily) worse than late birth. So Yi endorses some formulations of the *modal* reading

offered by BF manage to prove that late birth *can* be worse than death. I will now explain why I believe so.

There are several ways in which we could interpret the claim that death is necessarily worse than late birth. The first one is reading it at its face value: for every person, death is a *worse thing* to suffer than late birth. But given the considerations I have laid previously in the paper, it is not particularly difficult to see why, assuming we could have come to be before our actual birth, such a claim is bound to be false. In fact, as conceded by Brueckner and Fisher at the beginning of their paper, there *can* be cases in which death is not bad. In those cases, it goes without saying that since it is not bad, death *also* cannot be worse than late birth.

Maybe a more productive strategy could be to focus on those cases in which both death and late birth deprive us of good things it is rational to care about, and *therefore* are both bad for us. The question we can ask ourselves is: is it *necessary* that in those cases in which both late birth and death are bad for us, death is worse than late birth? I believe that the answer to this question is negative, and I will try to establish it as follows.

What is bad about death is the fact that it deprives people of the experiences that they would have had had they not died. Similarly, what is bad about late birth is that it deprives them of the experiences they would have had had they been born before their actual birth <sup>35</sup>.

But if this is the only criterion that we should adopt, then, in order to adjudicate whether death is worse than late birth or not, we have to focus on the deprivation. Which deprivation is worse? I believe that, at least *in some cases*, *late birth* constitutes a worse deprivation than *death*, and I would offer the following thought experiment in favour of

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<sup>35</sup>Again, *modulo* the possibility of being born before our actual birth

this claim <sup>36</sup>.

Imagine a medieval prince, Charles, who was born in 1300. He is the second male son of the royal family, and therefore, when his father, the king, dies in 1320, he *does not* inherit the throne. He has always craved to be king, but unfortunately, due to his *second born* status, the most he can achieve is working as a knight for some other king. Imagine that the brother was born in 1298. Assume that, had Charles been born before his brother, he would have been born in 1297. Charles would have inherited the throne once the king died, and he would have spent the majority of his life as a king. On the other hand, imagine that in the actual world Charles died out of an injury at the age of 50, and had the injury not befallen him, he would have died three years later. We can imagine that, given how much Charles craves to be king, the three years of life Charles did not get to enjoy due to his *actual* death resulting out of injury are dwarfed by *all the pleasures* arising out of the status of being king he missed out due to his prenatal nonexistence. It seems that in such a scenario, while *both* death and late birth deprive Charles of goods, late birth constitutes a *worse* deprivation, and henceforth late birth is *worse* than death <sup>37</sup>.

It does not seem to make a difference whether we restrict our focus on *intrinsic goods*. More specifically, we can categorize deprivations into two kinds: deprivations of *intrinsic goods* and deprivations of *non-intrinsic goods*. *Intrinsic goods* are goods that we enjoy for the sake of themselves. *Non-intrinsic* goods, instead, are goods that we do not value for

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<sup>36</sup>The thought experiment that I offer also shows that prenatal nonexistence as well can be worse than death. In fact, by showing that it is possible to conceive of a coherent scenario in which, had somebody been born before, they would have incurred a more significant deprivation than the one due to their death, I would also have managed to show that it is possible to conceive of a coherent scenario in which, for somebody, there is at least a time  $z$  preceding the time of their actual birth  $t$ , such that, not having been born at  $z$  made them incur a more significant deprivation than the one due to their death, and henceforth, that prenatal nonexistence *can* be worse than death

<sup>37</sup>If we modify this thought experiment, by assuming that the amount of pleasure he would gain from being king *equals* the amount of pleasure he would have gained from being alive three more years had he not incurred the injury that claimed his life, we would show that late birth can be *as bad as* dying even when they deprive me of the *same* amounts of time and the *same* amount of pleasure

the sake of themselves, but as means for acquiring *intrinsic goods*. What I am claiming is that, even if we restrict the focus to cases in which only deprivations of *intrinsic goods* are involved, it can still be argued that prenatal nonexistence *can* be worse than death. Case in point: the thought experiment that I have just presented, in which prenatal nonexistence deprives you of *more* intrinsic goods than death, and therefore it is *worse* than death even when we restrict our focus to deprivation of *intrinsic goods* only.

After having shown that late birth *can* be worse than death, even when they both deprive me of goods it is rational to care about, we could ask ourselves: is there any way in which we could characterise the deprivation so that late birth *cannot* be worse or as bad as death?

I believe that such a way exists. When anything late birth deprives me of is located *before* my birth in the actual world, then in those cases late birth cannot be worse than death. The reason why this is so is that in those cases, late birth does not deprive me of any good that it is rational to care about, or, at the very least, it is rational to prefer any amount of pleasure in the future, no matter how small, to any amount of good experiences in the past that, by stipulation, have no effect whatsoever on future enjoyment. It seems to me that BF agree with me on this point [38](#).

Besides the characterisation that I have just offered, I think that potentially another one can be defended: whenever *all* the goods that death and late birth deprive me of are goods they *directly deprive* me of, late birth cannot be worse than death.

I borrow the concept of *direct* (and *indirect*) deprivation from Yi in (Yi [2012](#)). Yi

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<sup>38</sup>In fact, in (Fischer and A. Brueckner [2014](#)), p. 746, they write: ‘All we are committed to, and all any proponent of the deprivation account is committed to, is that holding fixed the total amount of pleasure in the future and the overall value of the life (measured in some way other than simply by aggregating pleasure), we are (relatively) indifferent to the fact of our late births’. I disagree with BF, however, when in (Fischer and A. Brueckner [2014](#)), p. 745, they claim that ‘That one would prefer to have been born earlier in circumstances in which an earlier birth would increase one’s future pleasure is beside the point here; it is completely compatible with rejection of the Lucretian Symmetry, which requires that the total amount of pleasure in the future be held fixed’. The Lucretian symmetry does *not* require that the total amount of pleasure in the future be held fixed

introduces these concept in the following passage (p. 301):

‘Prenatal or posthumous nonexistence directly deprives us of intrinsic goods in the sense that they deprive us of some time during which we could have been engaged in some immediately pleasant experience. [...] Prenatal or posthumous nonexistence can be thought to indirectly deprive us of intrinsic goods in the sense that they deprive us of some time, during which we could have been engaged in a project that would ensure us intrinsic goods at some later time.’

It seems to me that the concept of *indirect deprivation* can be defined in the following way:

**Definition 1 (Indirect deprivation)** *X indirectly deprives a person P of goods f if and only if (i) X deprives P of f, and (ii) there are some non-intrinsic goods g such that X deprives P of g, and, had X not deprived P of g, X would not have deprived P of f*

In turn, *direct deprivation* can be defined in terms of *indirect deprivation*:

**Definition 2 (Direct deprivation)** *X directly deprives a person P of goods f if and only if: (i) X deprives P of f, and (ii) it is false that X indirectly deprives P of f.*

The arguments runs in the following way. I will establish that, if all the goods late birth deprives me of are goods it deprives me of *directly*, then those goods are bound to be all located *before* my birth in the actual world. But if all the goods late birth deprives me of are located in the past before my birth, then these are good it is not rational to care about, or at the very least, the deprivation of these goods is necessarily going to be a *lesser* deprivation than the one due to death. This is the way the argument would play out:

1. For *reductio*, let's assume that, while, *all* the goods that late birth deprives me of are goods it *directly deprives* me of, *some* of the goods late birth deprives me of are located *after* my birth in the actual world
2. For any good  $x$  located in the future, if late birth deprives me of  $x$ , then there is at least a non-intrinsic good  $y$  located in the time before my birth, such that, by depriving me of  $y$ , late birth deprived me of  $x$
3. THEREFORE, from (1) and (2) it follows that there are some non-intrinsic goods located in the past before my birth, such that, by depriving me of them, late birth deprived me of some of the goods located after my birth
4. **But**, given the definition of *indirect deprivation*, there are some goods late birth indirectly deprives me of, contrary to the assumption of the *reductio*

The key premise in this argument is the second one, but it does not seem particularly far fetched to me to claim that, if late birth deprives me of goods located *after* my birth, it is doing so by depriving me of non-intrinsic goods located *before* my birth.

## 0.7 A rebuttal of Yi's argument

According to Yi in (Yi [2012](#)), it is possible to argue on the grounds of BF's approach in favour of the claim that postmortem non existence is *worse* than prenatal nonexistence.

As I have explained in the previous sections, Yi distinguishes between two different kinds of *deprivation of intrinsic goods*: *direct* and *indirect* deprivations. According to Yi, it is not particularly controversial to claim that 'posthumous nonexistence is worse than prenatal nonexistence in terms of their resulting direct deprivations'. I agree with him. It is clear that if we are considering only direct deprivations of intrinsic goods

(therefore, if we are considering exclusively those cases in which *all* that death and prenatal nonexistence are depriving us of are *intrinsic goods* located respectively in the future <sup>39</sup> and in the past) then, given the discussion of the previous section, it is indeed the case that death is *necessarily* worse than prenatal nonexistence.

But Yi wants to establish something more than that. He seeks to establish that posthumous non existence is worse in terms of indirect deprivations as well. He argues along the following lines. He distinguishes between two different kinds of activities: *projects with fixed benefits* (which he also refers to as *PFB*), and *project with on-going benefits* (which he refers to as *POB*). The PFB are activities that yield, as the name suggests, *fixed benefits* which last *only* for a certain limited period of time. According to Yi, an example of this kind of activity is *cooking*: the benefits of cooking tend to consist in the satisfaction that arises out of consuming a certain meal, but once the meal has been consumed, it cannot be said that the activity of cooking yields any other benefit. In contrast, POBs are activities that yields benefits, so to speak, without an expiration date - or, more formally, that do not last *only for a limited period of time*: an example of POB, according to Yi, is learning how to bike: once the skill of biking is acquired, we can always use it for improving our time enjoying a good ride whenever we can.

Now, having established this, Yi claims that ‘as concerns indirect deprivation, posthumous nonexistence is generally worse than prenatal nonexistence in terms of both PFBs and POBs’. It is important to realise why, if he were indeed to establish this, he would manage to show the thesis he so ardently wants to prove, that is to say, that death is *worse* than prenatal nonexistence.

In fact, he correctly points out that BF, through their arguments, have at least managed to show that death is worse than prenatal nonexistence when they both involve

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<sup>39</sup> *Ça va sans dire*, the only goods death can deprive us of are located in the *future*, not in the present, nor in the past



*direct deprivations*. Now, since deprivations are either direct or indirect, and since the badness of death and prenatal nonexistence, by assumption, hinges upon the badness of the deprivations they give rise to, Yi believes that, if he were to show that even in the context of indirect deprivations death is worse than prenatal nonexistence, then he would have managed to establish that death is worse than prenatal nonexistence *tout court* <sup>40</sup>.

Alas, I do not believe that Yi manages to prove it. I will go over his argument. Yi argues in the following way. First of all, he focuses on PFBs. He correctly points out that it is possible that, at least in some cases, the benefits of PFBs that arise out of prenatal nonexistence might reside completely in the past <sup>41</sup>. On the other hand, Yi points out that the PFBs death deprives me of are bound to be PFBs located in the future <sup>42</sup>, therefore the PFBs death deprives me of are bound to be *intrinsic* pleasurable goods. Since it is possible that at least in some cases prenatal nonexistence deprives me of PFBs whose benefits are exclusively located in the past, whereas death always deprives me of future, and even more importantly, intrinsic pleasurable goods, it follows that death is worse than prenatal nonexistence in terms of PFBs deprivation.

Now, it is true that there can be cases in which all the PFBs prenatal nonexistence deprives me of are squarely located in the past, and it is true that it is always the case that whenever death deprives us of PFBs, they are located in the future and they are intrinsic goods. But from this it does not follow that death is worse than prenatal nonexistence

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<sup>40</sup>I believe that there is a flaw in the argument that Yi puts forward. The structure of his argument is the following. Whenever we restrict our focus on indirect deprivations of PFBs, it is the case that death is worse than prenatal nonexistence, and whenever we restrict our focus on indirect deprivation of POBs, death is worse than prenatal nonexistence. Therefore, when we consider indirect deprivations, death is worse than prenatal nonexistence. The reason why this argument does not go through is that it fails to cover all the relevant scenarios: what about a situation where death deprives me of POBs, and prenatal nonexistence of PFBs, and *viceversa*?

<sup>41</sup>For instance, had you been born before your actual birth, you might have enjoyed more true Neapolitan pizzas in your life. If we imagine that eating pizza is a PFB (and therefore that it has no influence on future enjoyment), then yes, this would be a good completely located in the past

<sup>42</sup>For the very obvious reason that whatever time death will deprive me of is time *located* in the future of somebody who is alive

in terms of PFB deprivation, both if we read it as a *categorical statement*,<sup>43</sup> as well as if we read it as a ‘*most of time*’ statement. For assessing whether, in a case in which both death and prenatal nonexistence deprive us of PFBs, one is a worse deprivation than the other, what we should ask ourselves is which one ends up depriving me of *more* intrinsic goods located after my birth. If it were the case that in the vast majority of cases in which death and prenatal nonexistence both deprive us of PFBs, prenatal nonexistence would deprive us of *more* intrinsic goods located after my birth, then in general prenatal nonexistence would be worse than death. It does not matter at all that, at least in some contexts, prenatal nonexistence can deprive me of PFBs all located in the past (and therefore, no reasonable to care about from the my point of view in the actual world).

A similar reasoning applies to the deprivation of POBs. According to Yi:

‘Posthumous nonexistence deprives us in the future of the potential benefits of *both* past and future POBs. By contrast, prenatal nonexistence deprives us of a time during which we could have benefited *only* from past POBs’

And on such grounds Yi concludes that in terms of POBs as well, the ensuing deprivation is worse. But in this case, the same reasoning applies that we have developed when discussing PFBs: we should consider the cases in which death and prenatal nonexistence deprive us of POBs. If in the vast majority of cases, the benefits in the future of the POBs we would have benefited by coming to be before our actual birth would exceed the ones we would have gained by not dying when we did, then it is correct to say that in the vast majority of cases the deprivation of POBs we incur due to prenatal nonexistence is *worse* than the one we incur due to death.

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<sup>43</sup>That is to say, applying to all circumstances

## 0.8 The non-modal claim

BF believe that it is possible to reconcile the Commonsense Asymmetry with their acceptance that *at least sometimes* prenatal nonexistence might be bad for us, as it is made clear in the following passage from (Fischer and A. Brueckner 2014), p. 745:

‘But denying the Lucretian Symmetry thesis, and accepting in its place the Commonsense Asymmetry, does *not* entail that it could not be rational in certain specific circumstances to prefer an earlier birth’

It is true that, strictly speaking, the two things are reconcilable, on the condition that the Commonsense Asymmetry is not interpreted as applying to *all circumstances*, but allowing the possibility of some exceptions. But a question that we could and should ask ourselves is the following one: do the argument(s) put forward by BF manage to establish the Commonsense Asymmetry even if we were to assume that prenatal existence is *possible* for us, as they seem committed to establish [44](#)?

My answer to this question is *no*. If we were to assume that it is possible for us to come to be before our actual birth, then, whether it is going to be in general rational to be relatively indifferent to the fact of one’s late birth compared to the fact of one’s early death is going to depend on whether, *in general*, the deprivation we incur due to prenatal nonexistence is a *lesser one* compared to the deprivation we incur due to our death. Yet, nothing in the arguments provided by BF manages to establish that in the vast majority of cases death deprives me of *more goods* that it is rational to care about than prenatal nonexistence or late birth.

I do not know whether it is in fact *false* that, in general, the deprivation we incur due to late birth is a *lesser one* compared to the deprivation we incur due to our death, and

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<sup>44</sup>Consider the following passage: ‘[W]e accept that it is in general rational to be (at least relatively) indifferent to the fact of one’s late birth. We thus deny the Lucretian Symmetry and accept the Commonsense Asymmetry.’

I believe that it is particularly difficult to assess the truthfulness of this claim. A crucial role is played by the the difficulties we run in when we try to assess what would have happened to us had we been born before our actual birth. A question naturally arises: *when* we would come to be, had we been born before our birth? I think that in general it is exceedingly difficult to say when somebody would have been born, had they come to be before the time of their birth in the actual world.

What I do believe, however, is the following. There are at *at least* some cases in history in which we can reasonably claim that, for a large number of people, had these people been born *a certain number* of years before their actual birth, they would have had goods (again, measured with reference to the time of their birth in the actual world) such that the deprivation they would incur due to late birth would be more significant than the deprivation they would incur due to death <sup>45</sup>: a case in point could be the cohorts of the young men who served in World War 2.

Consider an American man born in 1895. On September 16, 1940, all American men that were of age between 21 and 45 were required to register for the draft. Since this American was 45 at the time of the draft, he ended up being drafted and later sent to war, where he perished. Had he been born even slightly *earlier* (even a few months), he would have been old enough to avoid the draft. It is reasonable to assume that by not being sent to war, he would not have died as young as he did. On the other hand, had he not died when he died in the *actual world*, it is far from clear whether he would have managed not to die during the war, or whether he would have died at a later time during the conflict. Once more, it is reasonable to assume that at least for a sizable number of

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<sup>45</sup>If we assume that, when we claim that prenatal nonexistence can be worse than death for me, what we are claiming is that there is *at least* a time  $z$  preceding the time of my actual birth  $t$  such that not being born at  $z$  deprived me of more goods it is rational to care about at  $t$  than the ones my death will deprive me of, then the example that I am about to present would serve as an argument that prenatal nonexistence being worse or as bad as death is a much more common occurrence than BF would like to admit

people belonging to the cohort, what would have happened is that they would have died later in the war, had they not died when they died.

Therefore, if the thought experiment that I have just presented is plausible, we can make a case that during history there have been circumstances in which large cohorts of people would *likely* have benefited from being born before they were actually born. The medieval prince scenario that I have presented in section 0.6 might be criticised on the grounds of being too unconventional<sup>46</sup>, but arguably prenatal nonexistence has robbed many more people of goods it is rational to care about than we would think at first sight.

## 0.9 Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that *both* the original account offered by Brueckner and Fisher in (A. L. Brueckner and Fisher 1986), and the subsequent modifications of it that they have offered in light of the criticisms they received *fail* to establish that death can be bad for someone, while prenatal nonexistence *cannot* be so, and that actually, if the accounts that they provide (both the original and the modified one) are correct, and *if* it is indeed possible for us to be born before our birth in the actual world, then prenatal nonexistence *can* be bad for us.

I have also argued that the accounts offered by Brueckner and Fisher fail to establish even the *weaker* claim that death is necessarily *worse* than late birth and prenatal nonexistence (or, equivalently, that prenatal nonexistence and late birth *cannot* be worse or as bad as death), despite the arguments offered by Yi in (Yi 2012).

Having said this, it is important to understand also what I have *not* argued in favour of. In general, I have *not* argued in favour of the *negation* of the claim that Brueckner and Fisher sought to establish with their arguments. In other words, I have not argued

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<sup>46</sup>There are not so many princes in this world, after all

in favour of the claim that *'it is false* that death can be bad for someone, while prenatal nonexistence cannot be so'. Similarly, I have not argued in favour of the claim that late birth *can* be worse or as bad as death. I remain open to the possibility that *both* of these claims might turn out to be false, in the end. For instance, if it were really the case that we *could not* have come to be before our birth, as Nagel posited in (Nagel 2012), it would indeed be the case that death can be bad for someone, while prenatal nonexistence *cannot* be so (and, *ça va sans dire*, that late birth *cannot* be worse or as bad as death). But as I have argued in the paper, whether we could have come to be before our actual birth or not is a matter far from being settled, and the arguments provided by Nagel in this regard are unpersuasive.

What I have argued in favour of, instead, is that the premises Brueckner and Fisher employ *fail* to establish *both* the aforementioned claims independently of the assumption of the *impossibility of prenatal existence* . This means that, if you were to accept that death is bad insofar as it deprives us of goods it is rational to care about, you should also remain open to the possibility that prenatal nonexistence might be bad for you as well. You should remain *equally* open to the possibility that *at least in some cases* prenatal nonexistence might be for you worse or as bad as death.

It is perfectly possible to hold on to the analysis of the badness of death provided by Brueckner and Fisher in their papers, as long as somebody is willing to accept that, if *we* could have been born before our actual birth, prenatal nonexistence *might* be bad for us, and in some cases it might even be as bad as death, if not even *worse*.

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