

CHAPTER FIVE

The Lucretian Symmetry Argument

In this chapter, I will reject the Lucretian symmetry argument by criticising some proposals from recent philosophers. To achieve this, let me explicate the Lucretian symmetry argument first.

5.1 EXPLICATION OF THE LUCRETIAN SYMMETRY ARGUMENT

Joining his master, Epicurus, in the campaign against the fear of death, Lucretius¹ poses a famous and now much-discussed symmetry argument—the Lucretian symmetry argument. This argument, if correct, would lead to the conclusion—*death is not a harm, so we should not fear our death*. This conclusion directly challenges my conclusion reached in Chapter Four—*death can be a harm to the person who dies*. In order to defend my position, it is necessary to reject the Lucretian symmetry argument. To reject the Lucretian symmetry argument, it is important to examine it in detail, as follows.

In his *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius says:

Think too how the bygone antiquity of everlasting time before our birth was nothing to us. Nature holds this up to us as a mirror of the time yet to come after our death. Is there anything in this that looks appalling, anything that wears an aspect of gloom? Is it not more untroubled than any sleep?²

Call this the ‘Lucretian symmetry argument’.

Put simply, the main point of this argument is:

Our future nonexistence and our past nonexistence are *equally* devoid of value for us now. And the fact that our past nonexistence is devoid of value explains why it is irrational to be presently concerned about our past nonexistence. Therefore, it is irrational to be presently concerned about the future state of being dead.³

This argument has been appropriately reconstructed by Rosenbaum as follows:

- (1) No one fears the time before which one existed.
 - (2) The time before which one existed is relevantly like one's future nonexistence (in that one cannot be affected negatively in either period). (This is the 'symmetry thesis'.)
 - (3) It is reasonable for one to fear something relevantly like what one does not fear only if one justifiably believes that the two things are relevantly different.
 - (4) No one justifiably believes that one's future nonexistence is relevantly different from one's past nonexistence.
- THEREFORE, it is not reasonable now for one to fear one's future nonexistence, one's being dead, one's death.⁴

Call this argument the 'standard interpretation of the Lucretian symmetry argument'.

For a more effective discussion of the Lucretian symmetry argument (and its standard interpretation), let me explicate it in more detail.

Firstly, the starting point of the Lucretian symmetry argument (and its standard interpretation) is that we, as normal and reasonably rational persons, are indifferent (or nearly indifferent) to our prenatal nonexistence. Indeed, no one really fears one's past nonexistence. Since this is a fact, both Lucretians and anti-Lucretians should accept it. But note that the attitude toward to the time before our birth (or after our death) is one thing, and the value-evaluation of this period (i.e. deciding whether this period is bad or not) is another. As Williams quite correctly points out, considering whether death (or prenatal nonexistence) can reasonably be regarded as an evil is not the same as considering whether death (or prenatal nonexistence) should be feared.⁵

Secondly, it is assumed that in the Lucretian symmetry argument, Lucretius directs his attention to the fear of nonbeing or ceasing to be, but not to the fears of (painful) dying, or the unknown.⁶

Thirdly, the Lucretian symmetry argument (and its standard interpretation) apparently endeavours to prove the following conclusions:

- (i) Neither prenatal nonexistence nor death is a harm.
- (ii) It is not reasonable now for us to fear either our prenatal nonexistence or our death.

Here, (i) has theoretical priority over (ii). For *only if* we make sure whether prenatal nonexistence is a harm and whether death is a harm, can we properly consider the appropriate attitudes toward these two periods. That is, the ‘symmetry thesis’ is the crucial premise in the Lucretian symmetry argument (and its standard interpretation). To refute the Lucretian *symmetry* argument, it is better and easier for us to focus on (i)—the symmetry thesis—rather than (ii). In so doing, logically speaking, there are three possible approaches to rejecting the Luretian symmetry argument:

- (1) Showing that prenatal nonexistence is a harm, but death is not a harm.
- (2) Showing that both prenatal nonexistence and death are harms.
- (3) Showing that prenatal nonexistence is not a harm, but death is a harm.⁷

These three approaches can be called: (i) Prenatal harm approach, (ii) Prenatal-and-Posthumous harm approach, (iii) Posthumous harm approach. In the next section, I will discuss them in order.

5.2 THE FAILURE OF THE LUCRETIAN SYMMETRY ARGUMENT

The Prenatal harm approach, Prenatal-and-Posthumous harm approach, and Posthumous harm approach are adopted by various recent philosophers. Let us now examine these three approaches.

I. Prenatal Harm Approach

Walter Glannon suggests a temporal asymmetry to the effect that *prenatal nonexistence is a harm but death is not a harm*.⁸ In proposing this view, Glannon adopts the Existence Requirement. He states, 'I have been appealing to the Existence Requirement...to ground my own argument.'⁹

The Existence Requirement is understood by Glannon as: 'A person can be the subject of some misfortune [or harm] *only if* he exists at the time the misfortune [or harm] occurs.'¹⁰ (My emphasis.)

Furthermore, Glannon explicates the Existence Requirement as follows:

On the intuitively plausible assumption that the *value* of our lives is a function of what we *can* experience, something is... good or bad for us *only if* it is possible for us actually to experience it as such.¹¹ (My emphasis.)

On the basis of the Existence Requirement, Glannon argues that death is not a harm because it cannot affect the experienced quality of our lives. Therefore death should not be an object of our rational concern.¹²

Conversely, Glannon argues that prenatal nonexistence is a harm since it may function as causes bringing about temporally remote effects that can make a significant difference to the experienced quality of our lives. Therefore, prenatal nonexistence may be an object of our rational concern.¹³ Glannon offers the following examples to support his view:

A human organism begins to exist when the father's sperm fertilizes the mother's egg to form the zygote from which the organism develops into a person. Prior to conception, exposure to an occupational or environmental carcinogen can damage the father's sperm, which may manifest itself in some disease or handicap in his child and in turn have the effect of limiting that person's prospects for enjoying goods over the course of her lifespan. Furthermore, during the prenatal period when one exists *in utero*, a pregnant woman may contract a viral infection like rubella, which can cause blindness, deafness, or a congenital heart disorder in the child. In addition, daughters of women who received the drug DES (diethylstilbesterol) to prevent premature labor during pregnancy may suffer, after reaching sexual maturity, from such effects as malformed reproductive tracts, infertility, and vaginal cancer. Also,

people born immediately after an influenza epidemic may be at significantly higher risk for developing schizophrenia as adults than babies born in years without high flu rates. Or consider such genetically heritable diseases as cystic fibrosis and Huntington's chorea, whose causes in the parents' genes exist long before the birth of those who must suffer from their effects both in childhood and adulthood.¹⁴

Glannon concludes his above discussion with the following argument:

- (1) It is rational for one to be concerned now about something relevantly like what one is not concerned about only if one justifiably believes that the two are relevantly different.
- (2) Past nonexistence is relevantly different from future nonexistence insofar as states of affairs that obtain during the former period can affect persons adversely in respects in which states of affairs obtaining during the latter period cannot (asymmetry thesis).
- (3) One is justified in believing that past nonexistence is relevantly different from future nonexistence.
- (4) It is rational to be concerned now about what can actually affect a person adversely.
- (5) Therefore, although it is not rational for one to be concerned now about one's future nonexistence, it may be rational for one to be concerned now about one's past nonexistence.¹⁵

I think that Glannon's proposal is simply incorrect. Firstly, Glannon argues: Prenatal nonexistence is a harm since some prenatal events may function as causes bringing about a harm to us. However, it is also the case that some prenatal events may function as causes bringing about a benefit to us. Consider the following case:

John is a very successful lawyer in New York City. He is rich, knowledgeable, and respectable. Most importantly, he is very satisfied with his life. Before he was born, for some reason his parents were allowed to move to New York City from a very poor village in Africa. People in that village do not even have enough food to eat. Of course, most of them (including his cousins) cannot afford to go to school.



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