

Early Death and Later Suffering*

1 Death Very Early in Life

On the assumption that to die is to cease to exist, Epicurus argued that death cannot be bad for one who dies, for when it occurs, there is no one for whom it, can be bad.¹ One contemporary response to this argument has been to claim that, for death to be bad, there need not be anyone for whom ceasing to exist is bad; rather, one can simply compare the life a person would have if he were to die at time t with the life he would have if he were not to die at t . If, as I will assume throughout this chapter, the longer life would be better, death at t would be bad because it would condemn the person to have a worse life. This is a fact about the person's *life* that is comparatively bad for him.

It is a natural corollary of this response that the measure of the extent to which a death would be bad for the victim is the extent to which the longer possible life would be better than the shorter one. This "Life Comparative Account" of the badness of death has plausible implications for the deaths of adults: for example, that death is normally worse for a younger person than for a much older person. But it also implies that the worst death that an individual can suffer is death immediately after the individual has begun to exist. Suppose that we begin to exist, as I believe, when the fetal brain develops the capacity for consciousness, sometime between 22 and 28 weeks after conception. It is hard to believe that a 28-week-old fetus suffers a greater misfortune in dying than a teenager does, and even harder to believe that, if all other considerations (such as effects on others) are equal, there is a stronger reason to prevent the death of the fetus than there is to save the life of the teenager.²

I have sought to develop an account of the misfortune of death that explains and justifies the common intuition that the death of a fetus is a substantially lesser misfortune for that fetus than the death of a person normally is for that person. It is based, as Broome notes, on Derek Parfit's argument that the fact that an individual at an earlier time and an individual at a later time are the same individual is *not* what makes it rational for the former to care in an egoistic way about what may happen to the latter. The basis of rational egoistic concern about the future is instead a set of relations that are constitutive of personal identity in

*I am extremely grateful to Derek Parfit for extensive comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

¹ Carl Tollef Solberg, this volume.

² John Broome argues in his chapter for a version of the Life Comparative Account that does not have this implication. I suspect that this version has other implications that are no less implausible. While there is insufficient space to try to show that here, I intend to do so in a longer version of this paper in Jeff McMahan, *The Values of Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

the normal case. For the sake of argument, assume that these relations are, as I believe, psychological relations grounded in physical, functional, and organizational continuities in the brain, such as continuities of memory, character, desire, belief, intention, and so on. The stronger these relations are between an individual earlier and an individual later, the stronger is the basis of egoistic concern by the former for the latter.

According to the account I have defended, the extent to which death is a misfortune at t is a function primarily of two variables: (1) the amount of good life lost (which is the sole factor recognized by the Life Comparative Account), and (2) the strength of the relevant relations that would otherwise have held between the individual at t and himself at those later times at which the good things in his life would have occurred. Moreover, the extent to which the individual at times prior to t has reason to care in an egoistic way about the possibility of death at t also varies with the strength of the relevant relations between himself at those earlier times and himself both at t and as he might be after t . Because there would be virtually no psychological relations between a barely conscious 28-week-old fetus and itself as a child or adult, the misfortune it suffers in dying at 28 weeks may be negligible even though the amount of good life it loses is great. As Parfit might say, the good life it loses would be relevantly like someone else's life. The fetus would be related to that life by being identical to its subject, yet the relevant psychological relations, not identity, are the basis of egoistic concern. Even though the fetus would have a much better life if it were not to die, its interest at the time (or "time-relative interest") in avoiding death is very weak.

I have elsewhere argued that the claim that death is not a grave misfortune for a fetus, even when the fetus would otherwise be identical with a later person, supports a permissive view of abortion.³ Unless the fetus has properties that make it wrong to kill it even though it would not be seriously harmed by being killed (and I argued that it does not), abortion cannot be significantly objectionable because of its effect on the fetus. I also argued, however, that the infliction of a nonlethal injury on a fetus *could* be very seriously wrong. I sought to reconcile these claims by observing that, whereas killing the fetus would frustrate only its present weak interest in continuing to live (since killing it would prevent it from having other interests), the infliction of prenatal injury would frustrate interests that this same individual would later have independently of whether the injury is inflicted, and these interests would be the potentially strong interests of a *person* over much of a lifetime.

I now believe, however, that there are objections to this view. I will state them presently. First I will consider first the objections to my view that John Broome has advanced in his chapter.

2 Broome's Objections

³ Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Broome distinguishes two interpretations of the account of the misfortune of death just described (the “Time-Relative Interest Account”). According to the first, an individual’s interest at time $t1$ in some event that may occur at a later time $t3$ may differ in strength from the interest she will have at $t3$ – or at an intermediate time $t2$ – in that same event. His objection to this is that it “can lead to incoherence in how she ought to act in promoting her interest.”⁴ To illustrate this claim, he cites an example in which a person at age 30 would be well psychologically connected to herself in her nineties (for which I will substitute “at 95”) but at age 90 would not be well connected to herself at 95. At 95, for example, she would be able to remember many of her experiences at 30 but, because of recent short-term memory loss, unable to remember most of her experiences at 90. At 90, she will have a disease that will kill her painlessly unless she undergoes a painful treatment that will enable her to live to 95. According to Broome, the Time-Relative Interest Account implies that it is against her interest at 90 to have the treatment but that was in her interest at 30 to have it and, moreover, that she had reason at 30 to prevent herself from being able to refuse the treatment at 90. But, he says, it cannot be right that what a person “ought to do at one time is to frustrate what she herself ought to do at another time.”⁵

In this example, memory is the relevant form of psychological connection. This is understandable, as memory has seemed the most important form of psychological connection since it appeared as such in Locke’s discussion of personal identity. But the facts as they are stated in this example seem impossible. All the memory connections that would be present between the person at 95 and herself at 30 must also be present between herself at 95 and herself at 90; for the memories of experiences at 30 must be present when the person is 90 if they will exist when she is 95. So the memory connections between 95 and 30 cannot be stronger than those between 95 and 90.

One might cite the fact that very elderly people sometimes remember events from their earlier life that they have previously been unable to remember. But those memories have all along been present in the brain but inaccessible to consciousness through ordinary introspection. Such memories nevertheless constitute psychological connections with the experiences they represent. Thus, one’s psychological connections to one’s past are undiminished while one is asleep or under anesthesia.

Broome’s objection could, however, be coherently illustrated with an example involving a different form of psychological connection. Suppose a person who is an atheist at 30 can somehow predict that he will convert to Christianity when he is 90 but revert to atheism by the age of 95. At 90 it might be rational for him to refuse the painful treatment for his otherwise fatal disease because of the psychological discontinuity involved in his reversion to atheism. But at 30 it seems rational for him to try to prevent himself from refusing the treatment at 90.

⁴ Broome, this volume.

⁵ Broome, this volume.

Even this example might be challenged in two ways. First, one might claim that the belief that there is no god that he has at 30 ceases to exist when he converts at 90, so that the belief with the same content that he acquires between 90 and 95 is a different belief and thus does not form a psychological connection with the belief he had at 30. This point would seem especially forceful if, when he became an atheist again between 90 and 95, he had no memory of having been an atheist at 30.

Second, one might argue that neither conversion to Christianity nor reversion to atheism constitutes a significant psychological discontinuity. They involve changes in the person's sense of identity but only marginally weaken the basis of rational egoistic concern about the future. Thus, while the person at 90 might be averse to surviving to become an atheist, the justification for the aversion would not be the weakening of the basis of egoistic concern but would instead *presuppose* a strong basis for egoistic concern. For what is particularly disturbing to the person at 90 is not that there may be *someone* who in a few years will be an atheist but that there may be someone who will be an atheist who will be strongly related to himself now in the ways that matter.

Even if we suppose that these challenges can be overcome, so that Broome's objection can be illustrated with this kind of example, I think the implication of the Time-Relative Interest Account that he says is implausible is in fact plausible. Philosophers have presented various cases in which it is intuitively plausible to suppose that it can be rational for a person to frustrate an interest he will have later .

Parfit's nineteenth century Russian socialist, for example, anticipates that his youthful idealism may fade and therefore signs a legal document that will give away estates that he is due to inherit in some years and makes the document revocable only with the consent of his wife, whom he asks to promise him never to revoke his commitment. His assumption is that if his values do change, it will then be in his interest to retain the estates. But because he judges that the change of values would be a corruption, he seeks now to prevent himself from later serving his interests and thwarting his former ideals.⁶ This has not seemed irrational to many of Parfit's readers.

Similarly, Dworkin discusses an example in which an intellectual signs an advance directive refusing treatment if she develops a life-threatening disease after becoming demented, even if she will be entirely contented in her demented condition. He argues that although this individual will have an "experiential interest" in surviving after becoming demented, her earlier judgment that it would be better for her to die established a "critical interest" in not surviving that she retains even when demented. The critical interest, he argues, outweighs the experiential one.⁷ An equally plausible interpretation of the case is that, although it will be in her interest to survive in a contented condition once she

⁶ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 326-328.

⁷ Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. ...

becomes demented, her interest as an intellectual is not to continue to exist in a demented state. It does not seem irrational for her, when competent, to act to frustrate her later interest when it will conflict with her present interest.

Having presented his first objection, Broome suggests that it may apply only to a mistaken interpretation of my view. He says this, I suspect, because we agreed during a discussion in Oxford in 2013 that the objection to my view he advanced in *Weighing Lives* was based on a misinterpretation. Yet while the earlier objection did presuppose a mistaken interpretation, the objection I have just considered does not. It is unsurprising, therefore, that I do not accept his second interpretation, according to which the strength of an individual's interest in avoiding death at t does not vary in strength at times other than t . My earlier statements of the view do, however, invite this interpretation and I am grateful to Broome for prompting me to state the view more clearly, as I hope I have done in Section 1.

It may nevertheless be worth explaining why I think Broome's objection to this incorrect interpretation involves an equivocation between the strengths of interests at times and the comparative goodness of lives. He contends that my view, interpreted in the second way, implies that "(1, -1, 4) is better for you than (1, 1, 1), which is better for you than (1), which is better for you than (1, -1, 4)."⁸ But this intransitivity arises only because the first two evaluations concern the goodness of lives, whereas the third, though it is expressed as a claim about the goodness of lives, is true according to the Time-Relative Interest Account only if it articulates a claim about an individual's interest at a time. Because claims about interests at times are not even implicitly claims about the goodness of lives, the third claim is not contradicted by the combination of the first two and thus there is no intransitivity.

Broome goes on to say that an account of the badness of death should be a corollary of an account of the goodness of lives. And indeed the Life Comparative Account is just that. But the Time-Relative Interest Account is instead an account of what it is rational for individuals to care about for their own sake at particular times. This may partly depend on an account of the goodness of lives but it neither entails nor is entailed by any such account.

Although Broome rejects the Time-Relative Interest Account however it is interpreted, he rightly prefers the first interpretation. But he says that if he were to accept the view, so interpreted, he would take account of retrospective interests in events that occurred or might have occurred in the past. Thus, while he is willing to concede that the interest he had in continuing to live when he was an infant was weak, he says that from his "present perspective, dying as an infant would have been a great loss" to him, as it would have prevented him from having all the good life he has had between infancy and the present – to most or much of which he is now strongly psychologically related.⁹

⁸ Broome, this volume.

⁹ Broome, this volume.

There are, however, several problems raised by retrospective interests. One derives from the fact that one can affect whether an individual will die in infancy only while, or before, the individual is an infant. During this period, retrospective interests of the adult self are merely *possible*. The infant itself has at most an extremely weak interest in whether its adult self will have retrospective interests that will have been satisfied. If the infant dies, there will be no retrospective interest in the avoidance of death in infancy that will have been frustrated. A retrospective interest in not having died earlier necessarily cannot be frustrated.

Second, suppose that one can have a retrospective interest in not having died in infancy and that that interest can have moral significance – for example, in grounding an objection to infanticide. If the first assumption is correct, one can also have a retrospective interest in not having died immediately after beginning to exist, and indeed in not having been prevented from coming into existence. If the second assumption is correct, these other possible retrospective interests should ground moral reasons not to have or to permit abortions, and not to use or to permit contraception.

Finally, a significant limitation to the prudential and moral significance of retrospective interests is that one can have a retrospective interest in past action that was against one's interest when it was done. Suppose that if a person who is now 60 had attended a different high school, her subsequent life would have been better, in objective terms, than it has been. She would, for example, have achieved more and enjoyed more satisfying personal relations. Yet much of what she actually cares about – for example, the people to whom she is closely related – would have been absent from that alternative life. It therefore seems that she has a retrospective interest in having attended the high school she actually attended, even though prior to going to high school it was in her interest to attend a different one. Because it is not irrational to become attached to the particulars of our lives that are good, we tend to have retrospective interests in whatever happened in the past that was necessary for us to have them. Admittedly, however, this does not apply to retrospective interests in the avoidance of death at earlier times, for the frustration of those interests would not have given one a different future that would have been less good relative to what one actually, and not irrationally, cares about. This third problem is, nevertheless, relevant to certain other issues, as we will see.

These three problems suggest that the implications of accepting that retrospective interests have normative significance may be intuitively problematic. The problems are especially acute for Broome's example of a retrospective interest in not having died at an earlier time t . It is only at or before t that it is possible to act to determine whether an individual will either not die at t or die at t , and thus whether a retrospective interest in not having died at t will exist and be satisfied or never exist at all. The retrospective interest is therefore a merely possible interest relative to any act that can affect whether it will be satisfied. That is, the existence of the interest will depend on any act that causes it to be satisfied. More generally, an interest that will exist only if a particular act is done, or if a particular act is not done, is what I will call a *dependent interest*

relative to the choice of whether to do that act. By contrast, an interest that does not exist but may exist in the future, but does not depend for its existence on whether a particular act is done, is an *independent interest* relative to the choice of whether to do that act.

3 Dependent Interests

Most of us believe that independent interests are relatively unproblematic. If the existence of some interest in the future is independent of whether I do some act, and if my choice of whether to do the act would affect whether the interest will be satisfied or frustrated if it exists, it seems that the permissibility of my choice is constrained by the effect that it will have on that interest, taking into account the probability that the interest will exist.

Dependent interests also seem to pose no special problem if the individual whose interests they would be has an interest in their later existence and satisfaction. I, for example, have an interest now in developing and satisfying certain new interests. This grounds a reason to ensure that I will have such interests and that they will be satisfied. But problems arise when interests that would be satisfied, particularly interests in having benefits, could be caused to exist but no one has an interest, or more than a negligible interest, in their existence and satisfaction. Similar but intuitively contrasting problems arise when interests that would be frustrated, particularly interests in avoiding harm, could be prevented from existing but no one has an interest, or more than a negligible interest, in their being prevented from existing and being frustrated.

There are two ways in which such interests might arise. One is through an individual's coming into existence. The interests that this individual might have are dependent interests relative, for example, to a choice of whether to use contraception, or a choice of whether to have an early abortion, before one of us has begun to exist.¹⁰ The other way is through an individual's continuing to exist when he would be psychologically unconnected, or only negligibly connected, to himself when the interests would arise. The interests that this individual might have are dependent interests relative, for example, to a choice of whether to have an abortion shortly after this individual has begun to exist.

These cases are problematic if we assume that dependent interests can be sources of moral reasons. On that assumption, that an individual that has just begun to exist as a fetus would acquire and satisfy interests in having certain benefits grounds a reason not to prevent this individual from acquiring those interests. The interests would be dependent relative to the choice of whether to have an abortion and would provide a moral reason not to have it. Similarly, that an individual would develop and satisfy interests in having benefits would provide a reason not to use contraception. Yet it is counterintuitive to suppose that in these cases there is a significant moral reason to ensure that the interests will exist and be satisfied. Most people do not believe that it is a reason to cause

¹⁰ This presupposes, as I believe, that we do not begin to exist at conception. See *The Ethics of Killing*, chapter 1.

an individual to exist that he would later develop and satisfy interests in having benefits.

It seems, however, that some dependent interests are sources of moral reasons. Relevant cases again include ones in which an individual might continue to exist when he would be psychologically unconnected to himself in the future as well as ones in which an individual might be caused to exist. Suppose that in the following two cases, which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere, someone has just begun to exist as a fetus with a condition that will kill it painlessly unless it is treated immediately.¹¹ If treated, the fetus will be identical with the person into whom it will develop.

Suffering Now One can save the fetus but only in a way that will cause it moderate suffering beginning immediately and continuing for a few weeks. It will then live for some years in a neutral state of well-being, followed by many years of happiness.

Suffering Later One can save the fetus only in a way that will enable it to experience mild pleasure beginning immediately and continuing for a few weeks, after which it will live some years in a neutral state of well-being, followed by months of intense suffering before dying. If one saves it now, there will be no opportunity to prevent it from suffering later.

According to the Time-Relative Interest Account, the fetus in *Suffering Now* has no present interest, or only a negligible interest, in experiencing great happiness some years hence; for there would be no connections or continuities of the contents of consciousness between itself now and itself when it would experience the happiness. For the same reason, the fetus in *Suffering Later* has no present interest, or only a negligible interest, in avoiding great suffering in the distant future. Yet one ought to treat the fetus in *Suffering Now* and arguably ought not to treat it in *Suffering Later* – certainly it would be wrong to administer the treatment in *Suffering Later* if the individual with the condition were an animal rather than a fetus. This suggests that the interest the individual would later have in experiencing happiness provides a reason to save the fetus in *Suffering Now*, and that the interest the individual would have in avoiding suffering provides a reason not to save the fetus in *Suffering Later*. Yet these interests are dependent interests relative to the choice between saving the fetus and not saving it. In these cases, therefore, the dependent interests the individual might have much later in life seem to be sources of present moral reasons.

The same may be true, contrary to my earlier claim, in cases of prenatal injury. In earlier discussions, I have considered cases in which the bad effects of prenatal injury would be of late onset and would thus affect the interests that the fetus would have as an adult. And I have assumed that in the choice between injuring

¹¹ Jeff McMahan, “The Comparative Badness of Suffering and Death for Animals,” in Tatjana Višak and Robert Garner, eds., *The Ethics of Killing Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

the fetus and not injuring it, the fetus would continue to exist in either outcome. According to these assumptions, the interests at stake, relative to this choice, are the strong, *independent* interests of a *person* in the future. But many cases involving the possibility of prenatal injury can be understood differently.

Three-Option Choice If she takes no action, a pregnant woman will suffer from mild, intermittent pain for the remainder of her life. She can prevent this in either of two ways. She can have an abortion or she can take a pill that will, as a side effect, injure her fetus in a way that will cause it to suffer mild, intermittent pain throughout the whole of its adult life.

This case may challenge the distinction between dependent and independent interests. Relative to the choice between doing nothing and taking the pill, the later interests the individual that is now a fetus might have are *independent*; but relative to the choice between taking the pill and having an abortion, they are *dependent*. Given that all three options are available simultaneously and that in the outcome of one option the fetus would have no interests in the future, it is perhaps best to regard the interests the fetus might have as an adult as dependent interests relative to the choice among all three options. If so, they too are dependent interests that seem to be the source of a significant moral reason. Indeed, given that the pain caused by the injury would not begin until adulthood, the infliction of prenatal injury seems relevantly similar to treating the fetus in Suffering Later.

There is, however, a reason for skepticism about whether these dependent interests generally ground reasons not to cause prenatal injury. As I noted earlier in discussing retrospective interests, if some significant event in one's distant past had not occurred, much of what one now rationally cares about would almost certainly be absent. Thus, if the woman in the Three-Option Choice takes the pill rather than having an abortion or doing nothing, the dependent interests that her adult child will have in not experiencing mild suffering will be frustrated. But this is likely to be outweighed by the satisfaction of that same adult's dependent interests, relative to the same earlier choice, in having the friends, children, career, and so on that she actually has rather than the different friends, children, and so on that she would have had if she had not been injured as a fetus. If so, then on balance prenatal injury will not on balance frustrate the dependent interests that the fetus will later have as a result of the infliction of the injury.

This is a problem for the Time-Relative Interest Account that the Life Comparative Account does not face. According to the Time-Relative Interest Account, a fetus's present interest in the character of its later life when the delayed bad effects of prenatal injury would occur is at most very weak. If the dependent interests it would later have if the injury is inflicted would not on balance be frustrated by the injury, it seems that this account has no basis for objecting to the infliction of the injury. That is highly implausible. By contrast, the Life Comparative Account, which does not discount an individual's interests in future events for diminished psychological connectedness or continuity,

claims that the fetus's interest in having the objectively better life without the injury is very strong and thus grounds a strong moral reason not to inflict the injury. But, as I noted earlier, its present interest in having the better life also grounds an *even stronger* reason not to have an abortion – a reason that is stronger the *earlier* the abortion would be performed after someone has begun to exist in association with the fetal organism. These implications are also hard to accept.

Dependent interests also seem to ground moral reasons in cases in which an individual might be caused to exist. Suppose that if an individual were caused to exist, all its strongest interests, particularly its continuing interest in avoiding suffering, would be frustrated – for example, its life might be filled with suffering to the exclusion of all else. The interest it would have in not suffering (as well as its retrospective interest, which Broome thinks may be relevant, in not having come into existence) is dependent relative to the choice of whether to cause or allow it to exist. Yet this interest clearly grounds a strong moral reason not to cause this individual to exist.

4 The Combined Account

Views about the moral significance of interests that do not but may exist tend to mirror views about the moral significance of individuals who do not but may exist. Some have argued, for example, that the only individuals whose interests ground moral reasons are those who are at some time actual. One might make a parallel claim about interests – indeed, it has been suggested that my own view about interests is “actualist” in this sense.¹² Yet actualism about both persons and interests is untenable. It cannot, for example, guide action that will determine whether some individual will be among those who are at some time actual, and it also tends to justify whatever act one happens to choose to do among acts that would affect who will exist.¹³

Others have argued for what might be called “independentism” about persons, which is the view that only the interests of people whose existence is independent of whether an act is done can provide reasons for doing or not doing the act. Again, one might have a parallel view about interests themselves. But independentism is also unacceptable, as it implies that it is irrelevant to the permissibility of causing an individual to exist that he would have interests in the avoidance of suffering that would all be frustrated.

Distinctions among persons and interests as actual, possible, future, dependent, or independent are unlikely to be important in resolving the problems I have raised. A more important distinction seems to be that between dependent interests in avoiding suffering or other intrinsically bad states that

¹² Nils Holtug, “Killing and the Time-relative Interest Account,” *Journal of Ethics* 15 (2011): 169-189.

¹³ I rejected actualism in “La Moralita del Causare l'esistenza di Persone,” *Bioetica* 2 (1995): 182-200, though those who have thought that my view is actualist could not be expected to know this.

would be frustrated and dependent interests in having benefits that would be satisfied. Again, there are two ways in which there could be a dependent interest in which no one has a present interest. There could be the possible interest of an existing individual at a later time at which the individual now would not be psychologically related to himself, and there could be an interest that an individual would have if he were caused to exist. In both cases, if the interest would be in avoiding suffering and would be frustrated, there is a moral reason to prevent it from arising, perhaps even by preventing the potential sufferer from existing. This is true, for example, in *Suffering Later*, in instances of prenatal injury (putting aside the complication that we tend to have interests in how our lives have actually gone), and in causing people to exist whose lives would be intrinsically bad. If, by contrast, the dependent interest would be in having a benefit, there seems to be less reason, or no reason, to cause or allow it to exist, even if it would be satisfied, if no one has an actual interest in its existence. This is the common view about causing people to exist whose lives would be intrinsically good, and helps to explain why abortion seems less objectionable than the infliction of significant prenatal injury. It is, however, intuitively challenged by *Suffering Now* – though this is probably because one assumes, contrary to the Time-Relative Interest Account, that the fetus has a strong interest in experiencing happiness many years later.

Many people believe that while there is a moral reason to prevent or not to cause the existence of an individual whose life would be intrinsically bad, there is no reason to cause or allow the existence of an individual just because his life would be intrinsically good. This is sometimes called “the Asymmetry.” According to what I believe to be the most plausible version of the Asymmetry, the reason to prevent a dependent person from suffering is as strong as the reason to prevent an existing person from experiencing equivalent suffering. A more general version of the Asymmetry could cover all dependent interests in the existence or nonexistence of which no one has an interest. According to this view, there is a reason to prevent the existence of interests in the avoidance of suffering that would be frustrated but no reason to create interests (including retrospective interests) in having benefits that would be satisfied, if no one has an interest in the existence or nonexistence of these interests.

This view can be combined with the Time-Relative Interest Account to form what might be called the “Combined Account.” Because someone who has just begun to exist (as a fetus) is almost wholly psychologically unrelated to himself in the future, he has virtually no interest in forming and satisfying interests in having benefits in the future or in not developing interests in the avoidance of suffering that would be frustrated. According to the Combined Account, his later dependent interests in avoiding suffering ground reasons to prevent him from suffering in the future, though his later dependent interests in having benefits do not ground reasons to ensure that he will continue to exist to enjoy those benefits. So, for example, this fetus’s dependent interests ground a reason not to injure it in a way that would cause it to suffer as an adult but do not ground a reason not to kill it via abortion. This reflects the implication of the Time-Relative Interest Account that whether an individual that has just begun to exist continues to exist is not relevantly different from whether that same

individual comes into existence in the first place – which is the corollary of the view that there is no relevant difference between an individual's ceasing to exist immediately after beginning to exist and its never existing at all.

According to the general Asymmetry about dependent interests, the strength of the moral reason to prevent the future suffering of existing individuals does not vary with the degree to which they would be psychologically related to themselves at the time the suffering would occur. The strength of the reason derives instead from the strength of the dependent interest they would have at this later time in not suffering. But the strength of the reason to provide them with later benefits is correlative with the strength of their present time-relative interest in having the benefit, not with the strength of the dependent interest they would have at the time the benefit would occur.

This Combined Account may seem obviously implausible. Because it implies that there is a reason to prevent a newly existing fetus from suffering in the future but no reason to enable or allow it to enjoy benefits in the future, it appears to imply that there is a reason to prevent such a fetus from continuing to live.

But this is not so. There are two ways in which a benefit can matter morally. The prospect of a benefit can provide a reason for bestowing it – that is, the benefit can have “reason-giving weight.” But a benefit can lack reason-giving weight and yet have “offsetting weight,” in that it can offset or compensate for a harm, such as an experience of suffering. In the case of a normal fetus, there is reason to prevent its future suffering and there may be no reason to ensure that it continues to live to enjoy future benefits. But if it does continue to live, its future life will comprise frequently alternating experiences of happiness and suffering, with a predominance of happiness. Each experience of suffering will normally be immediately preceded and followed by experiences of greater happiness that will compensate the individual for the suffering. In these cases, there is no reason to prevent a fetus from continuing to exist, even if there is reason to prevent it from later suffering and no reason to enable it to have later benefits. A parallel claim is true about causing individuals to exist. Hence the Asymmetry does not imply, as some have thought, that there is a presumption against causing people to exist.

This does not, however, wholly vindicate the Combined Account, for it may seem to have the implausible implication just indicated in certain rare instances. Let us use the label “unconnected individual” for any individual that is wholly unconnected with itself over any substantial period in its life and at most very weakly connected to itself from day to day or even moment to moment. A normal human fetus is not an unconnected individual because, although it is now almost completely unconnected to itself at any later time, it will later become closely connected with itself at other times, including quite distant ones. But some animals, and arguably some radically cognitively impaired human beings, are unconnected individuals.

Suppose there were a fetus congenitally formed to be incapable at any time in its future of being more than very weakly psychologically connected to itself at any other time. And suppose further that this fetus's future life would consist of substantial periods of mild suffering alternating with even longer periods of pleasure and contentment. In this case, the pleasure during one period would not have offsetting weight against the suffering in another. This is because the psychological connections between the individual during the pleasurable period and itself during the period of suffering are too weak for the suffering self to be compensated by the pleasure of the contented self. For the suffering self, the pleasure is relevantly like *someone else's* pleasure.

Indeed, according to the Time-Relative Interest Account, there is little or no relevant difference between the life of a single unconnected individual and an equally lengthy sequence of shorter lives of different unconnected individuals. Just as the pleasure of one unconnected individual cannot compensate a different unconnected individual for its suffering, so the pleasure during most of one period in the life of a single unconnected individual cannot compensate that same individual for most of the suffering it experiences during a different period.

If this is right, it seems to be an implication of the Combined Account that it is difficult to justify enabling or even allowing an unconnected individual to continue to exist when its future suffering and its future pleasure would be concentrated in different periods. For the prospect of the suffering provides a reason to prevent it from continuing to exist, yet longer periods of greater pleasure provide no reason to enable it to continue to exist and also do not compensate the individual during the periods of suffering. Moreover, because the Time-Relative Interest Account implies that an unconnected individual's continuing to exist is not relevantly different from an unconnected individual's coming into existence, the Combined Account seems also to imply that it is difficult to justify causing or allowing an unconnected individual to exist.¹⁴

I think, however, that the Combined Account need not have these implications. In the case of unconnected individuals, benefits can offset suffering without being either reason-giving or *compensating*. It has been a common criticism of utilitarianism that it treats persons as mere containers for utility. But one can deny that this is true of *persons* while accepting that unconnected individuals really are just containers for pleasure and suffering. One may also insist that the suffering of one person can be offset only by a *substantially* greater benefit to a different individual. But deontological considerations, and considerations of distributive justice, do not seem to apply to unconnected individuals. Thus, the existence and suffering of one unconnected individual can be offset by the existence of a different unconnected individual whose pleasure is good by more than the other's suffering is bad. This can be true even if the prospect of the latter's pleasure provides no reason to cause it to exist.

¹⁴ I am greatly indebted here to Daniel Wawrzyniak for helping me to see and appreciate the significance of some of the implications of the view I am defending.

There is more to be said about the Combined Account. I have here been concerned primarily to elucidate its structure. I actually think that there is a better version that replaces the Asymmetry with a "Weak Asymmetry," which accepts that dependent interests in having benefits ground reasons to provide those benefits even in the absence of any present interest, though these reasons are weaker than corresponding reasons to prevent the existence or the frustration of comparably strong dependent interests in avoiding suffering. There is also an issue about how to understand cases involving individuals who are intermediate between unconnected individuals and persons. In these cases, it may be that suffering at one time can be partially but not fully compensated for by happiness at another, and that deontological considerations apply to the distribution of benefits and harms among such individuals, though less fully than in the case of persons. I hope to discuss these matters elsewhere.¹⁵

¹⁵ In the longer version of this paper mentioned in note 3.