

# Yet Another “Epicurean” Argument

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## 1 Introduction

The Epicureans are often credited with the view that death is not bad and is not to be feared. One of the most discussed arguments in this Epicurean tradition is the “symmetry argument”, principally drawn from Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. In the key passage of the poem, Lucretius urges, “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.”<sup>1</sup> We can formulate his appeal as an argument. Begin with the observation that most of us are unconcerned with the fact that we did not have conscious existence prior to our births. Yet we think death is to be feared. There is no important difference between the absence of pre-natal conscious experience and the absence of post-mortem conscious experience. So, the typical symmetry argument concludes, we should not be concerned with the fact that we will eventually be dead.

Note that this argument concerns our attitudes toward the state of being dead rather than, say, our fear of the process of dying. While the state of being dead is presumably just like the state of not yet having been born, for most of us the experience of being born is nothing like the experience of dying. For the rest of this paper we’ll understand the state of being dead to be the post-mortem absence of conscious existence.

There’s a longstanding scholarly dispute over how to characterize the thoughts presented in *De Rerum Natura* and how to relate Lucretius to the complete Epicurean tradition.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we will be completely silent on these difficult exegetical issues (hence the scare quotes around “Epicurean”). We will also be mostly silent on how to compare extant symmetry arguments *vis-à-vis* their soundness or dialectical efficacy. Instead, we want to present and defend a new symmetry argument. Our argument focuses on rational preferences

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<sup>1</sup>*De Rerum Natura* 3.972–3.975. The translation is from James Warren (2004).

<sup>2</sup>Some philosophers provide a value-based interpretation of Lucretius (Feldman (1991); Glannon (1994); Johansson (2013); Kaufman (1999)) Others provide an attitude-based interpretation (Belshaw (1993); Brueckner and Fischer (1986); Rosenbaum (1989)). See, also, Warren (2004) for an extended discussion of the relationship between Lucretius, his arguments, and the Epicurean tradition.

rather than the fittingness of emotions or the rationality of particular actions, choices, or agents. We think this argument is difficult to resist and raises interesting issues for those who wish to defend the rationality of time-biased preferences.

## 2 Extend-o-Life

Consider a thought experiment. Imagine that your doctor gives you the following advice while wrapping up your annual physical:

Well, it seems you are in perfect health, and we have every reason to suppose you'll continue to live a happy and healthy life for awhile to come. However—if you are interested—I might recommend you take a dose of a supplement called *Extend-o-Life*. Extend-o-Life is a free, one-time pill which, if taken while you are healthy, is proven to extend your life by one additional healthy week. Here is a prescription, if you'd like to try it out. There are no side effects, and studies show that the drug is highly effective for patients like you.<sup>3</sup>

Should you take the supplement? And should you prefer a life with an extra week in the future over the status quo? Your answers may, of course, be influenced by how much you trust your doctor's guarantees. They may also be influenced by the particular circumstances of your life that color your expectations about what that extra week would be like. But suppose your doctor is trustworthy, and suppose you have reason to believe the supplement would give you an extra week of healthy life without having any intrinsically bad or immoral side effects. Given these assurances, there seems to be good reason to take the supplement. It certainly doesn't seem irrational to prefer another week of good life. Indeed, we suspect few of us would need more information to see the good in life extension. (And if a week really doesn't mean that much to you, just extend the durations in what follows.)

As you are deliberating about whether to fill the prescription, your friend Lucretia tries to convince you to not take the supplement. It isn't that she is opposed to supplements or has any doubts about your physician's predictions. It's just that she thinks you would be irrational to prefer an extended life. She reasons as follows:

Suppose you were to discover that you were actually born a week earlier than you previously believed. And suppose this would mean you'd had an extra happy week sometime in your past, one which you perhaps don't remember now but was good all the same. Would you like to make such a discovery? Admit it—you don't prefer that your birthday were a week earlier. But there is no significant difference between having lived an extra week in the past and extending your life an extra week in the future. So you shouldn't prefer a longer life either.

Lucretia is employing an argument from symmetry. We can make her reasoning more precise. Consider three states of affairs:

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<sup>3</sup>If you find yourself thinking that it matters here that you make a *choice* to take the supplement, consider a variant of this case. Instead of offering you the Extend-o-Life supplement, your doctor informs you that your parents gave you Extend-o-Life injections as a child and they have only now taken effect. As a result of the treatment you will live an extra week into the future.

**Actual Life:** The state of affairs in which you are born when you actually are born and die when you actually die.

**Earlier Start:** The state of affairs in which you are born one week earlier than when you actually are born, as a result have experienced one good week more in your past that you otherwise would not have had, and die when you actually die.

**Later End:** The state of affairs in which you are born when you actually are born, die one week later than when you actually die, and as a result you will experience one good week in your future that you otherwise would not have had.

When considering the Extend-o-Life offer, you are considering your preference about Later End obtaining rather than Actual Life. One way we might formalize Lucretia’s argument is as follows:

1. Where A, B, and C are any states of affairs, rationality requires that if an agent is now indifferent between A and B, and there is no rationally significant difference between B and C, then the agent is now indifferent between A and C. (Symmetry)<sup>4</sup>
2. You are now indifferent between Earlier Start and Actual Life.
3. There is no rationally significant difference between Earlier Start and Later End, because there is no reason to distinguish a week of well-being realized in your future from a week of well-being realized in your past. (Reflection)

C. Rationality requires that you are now indifferent between Actual Life and Later End.

We call this argument the *Argument from Preference Symmetry*. Its similarity to other “Epicurean” symmetry arguments is, we hope, apparent. But is it a good argument?

Presumably, the most controversial premises are (1) and (3). In Section 4, we’ll defend premise (1), which we call the Symmetry principle.<sup>5</sup> As we’ll argue, Symmetry is a well-motivated generalization from different cases of criticizable bias. In Section 5, we’ll defend premise (3), the Reflection principle. We’ll survey candidates for a rationally significant difference between Earlier Start and Later End—including modal, causal, and counterfactual differences—and argue that each fails to meet the non-arbitrariness burden set by premise (1). We’ll also argue that the past/future distinction *simpliciter* is not rationally significant. The Argument from Preference Symmetry motivates us to either accept the surprising Epicurean conclusion or to rethink our attitudes with respect to premise (2). Ultimately we will contend that the real problem with the argument lies in this premise; rational agents might prefer more well-being rather than less in their lives, yet they should be indifferent as to when that well-being occurs.

But before turning to the individual premises, we would like to discuss two advantages the Argument from Preference Symmetry has over more common formulations of the Lucretian symmetry argument.

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<sup>4</sup>The states of affairs can be metaphysically possible or impossible, an issue we’ll return to in Section 4. We also assume an agent is aware of all of the relevant features of A, B, and C.

<sup>5</sup>We could have just as well called it the Transitivity principle, but we opt for Symmetry as an homage to Lucretius.

### 3 Two Advantages of the Argument from Preference Symmetry

As we see it, there are two main advantages of our formulation over other common symmetry arguments. The first is that our formulation is relatively agnostic about the extent to which emotions are subject to rational evaluation. The second is that it is relatively agnostic with respect to which preferences an agent should have. Symmetry imposes a restriction on the *coherence* of preferences, but agents are free to operate within that constraint. Consider each advantage in turn.

#### Agnosticism about Emotions

The most common versions of the symmetry argument focus on the emotions that individuals associate with the different options. We are asked to justify fearing an early death when we do not have any corresponding fear of a late birth or are asked to compare the relief we feel in facing a later death to the indifference we feel toward an earlier birth. Christopher Belshaw, for example, says that the symmetry argument attempts to show that “we should neither *fear* death nor *regret* its inevitability.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, James Warren says, “just as when looking back we *feel no distress* at the thought of pre-natal non-existence, so we should in the present *feel* similarly about post mortem time.”<sup>7</sup> These emotion-based formulations of the argument are controversial to the extent that they assume emotions like fear and relief are subject to rational evaluation or are under an agent’s control. Defenders of emotion-based formulations of the symmetry argument are thus forced to make substantive assumptions about the nature of emotions, assumptions that weaken the overall argument.

In contrast, it is less controversial to assume that *preferences* are subject to rational evaluation. And to the extent that preferences represent a considered endorsement of an attitude, they are to some degree under an agent’s control. For example, suppose Kathy has an instinctive fear of flying. Before a normal takeoff, she may develop an elevated heart rate, have sweaty palms, and experience a strong fight-or-flight response.<sup>8</sup> Kathy cannot be criticized for merely having these reactions, and in an important sense they are outside of her voluntary control. These “low-level” emotions may lead her to experience fear. This manifestation of her fear might lead her to form irrational beliefs about the likelihood of crashing and to prefer, in the moment, to not be flying to her destination. She might also, however, reflect on her situation and decide that she prefers to take her trip even though she has to endure this temporary episode of fear. This considered preference is, to a large degree, under her control and is subject to rational evaluation. Suppose that a natural disaster is expected to hit Kathy’s hometown, Kathy knows this, and she knows that the only way for her to evacuate in time is to travel by air. Kathy is not suicidal. If she fails to address her fear and still prefers not to fly, her preference could be criticized as irrational. In this case, her preferences and her beliefs fail to cohere. Of course, we might understand Kathy’s

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<sup>6</sup>Belshaw (1993) p. 103, emphasis ours

<sup>7</sup>Warren (2001), p. 469, emphasis ours. We should note that Warren argues against this “prospective” interpretation of Lucretius’ argument. Nonetheless it is still, for Warren, an argument about feelings.

<sup>8</sup>No pun intended.

deliberation as involving “higher-level” emotions, ones that build in higher-level beliefs and deliberation. Yet in this case it is difficult to determine the extent to which her emotions are subject to her control.

By formulating our symmetry argument in terms of what an agent prefers, as opposed to what she feels, we sidestep the thorny question of how emotions relate to practical reason. We think such agnosticism is a strength of the Argument from Preference Symmetry. But even on the assumption that there is a clear-cut relationship between emotions and practical reason, our focus on preferences eliminates a needless complication. Preferences are most likely under an agent’s control and are therefore directly subject to philosophical scrutiny. Consequently, preferences are the most immediately relevant attitudes in discussions of practical rationality.

## Symmetry as a Wide-Scope Constraint

Another advantage of the Argument from Preference Symmetry is that, unlike many other versions of the symmetry argument, it remains relatively agnostic on which particular attitudes rational agents ought to have *vis-à-vis* Earlier Start and Later End. Some versions of the symmetry argument, especially when combined with other Epicurean principles, argue categorically that death is not bad, that everyone should not fear death, and that everyone should not regret not living longer. For example, both versions of the symmetry argument discussed in Warren (2004) are concerned with emotions like pain and distress and argue that such attitudes should be abandoned.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the Argument from Preference Symmetry only contends that *if* you have certain preferences about Earlier Start and Actual Life and lack certain reasons to differentiate between Earlier Start and Later End *then* you should have a symmetrical preference about Later End. Recall the first premise of Argument from Preference Symmetry:

**Symmetry:** Where A, B, and C are any states of affairs, rationality requires that if an agent is now indifferent between A and B, and there is no rationally significant difference between B and C, then the agent is now indifferent between A and C.

Symmetry is to be understood as a *wide-scope* rational requirement. From the perspective of rationality, the agent is free to change her attitude toward Earlier Start or to find a rationally significant difference between Earlier Start and Later End, in which case she would not be obliged to be indifferent about Later End. We think the fact that there is a wider range of responses available is another strength of our version of the argument.

While we, in our own lives, reject the conclusion of the Lucretian argument, we do not take ourselves to be arguing for that particular response in this paper. Rather, we want to demonstrate what each response must look like if it is to succeed. We’ll return to this point at the end of the paper.

## 4 Defending the Symmetry Principle

Having discussed how our symmetry argument differs from others in the literature, we now turn to motivating its premises. We think our Symmetry principle and its natural extensions

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<sup>9</sup>See Chapter 3, especially pp. 58–69.

offer the best explanation of why we judge a family of cases as paradigmatically irrational. In this section we give three different examples and then draw some lessons about the relevant senses of rationality, indifference, bias, and arbitrariness.

First, consider Derek Parfit's case of the man who discounts future Tuesdays. Here is how Parfit describes the case.

**Future Tuesdays:** A certain hedonist cares greatly about the quality of his future experiences. With one exception, he cares equally about all the parts of his future. The exception is that he has *Future-Tuesday-Indifference*. Throughout every Tuesday he cares in the normal way about what is happening to him. But he never cares about possible pains or pleasures on a future Tuesday. Thus he would choose a painful operation on the following Tuesday rather than a much less painful operation on the following Wednesday. This choice would not be the result of any false beliefs. This man knows that the operation will be much more painful if it is on Tuesday. Nor does he have false beliefs about personal identity. He agrees that it will be just as much him who will be suffering on Tuesday. Nor does he have false beliefs about time. He knows that Tuesday is merely part of a conventional calendar, with an arbitrary name taken from a false religion. Nor has he any other beliefs that might help to justify his indifference to pain on future Tuesdays. This indifference is a bare fact. When he is planning his future, it is simply true that he always prefers the prospect of great suffering on a Tuesday to the mildest pain on any other day.<sup>10</sup>

Parfit judges this man to have irrational preferences. What explains their irrationality? The fact that his preferences vary *in arbitrary ways*. There simply is no reason to prefer some future pains over others only because they fall on a particular day.

More carefully: the man is indifferent between an experience of pain scheduled on a future Wednesday and a similar experience of pain scheduled on a future Thursday.<sup>11</sup> The only differences between pains on future Wednesdays or Thursdays and pains on future Tuesdays are arbitrary. Thus the man ought to be similarly indifferent between pains scheduled on a Tuesday and pains scheduled on a Wednesday or Thursday. Because his preferences are sensitive to arbitrary differences, they are criticizable. To answer the charge of irrationality, the man owes us a reason for why he should care which day of the week a pain is scheduled.

Future Tuesdays is, admittedly, a far-fetched case.<sup>12</sup> But note that Symmetry also explains our reactions to much more common cases of criticizable bias. For example:

**Grocery Store:** Tim's local grocery store stocks three kinds of detergent: Tide, Surf, and Clorox. Each is composed of exactly the same cleaning agents, and Tim is aware of this. Tide and Surf are stocked on the same shelf, at about waist height. Clorox is one shelf above them at eye level. Clorox is priced \$5 above the other two brands.

Tim finds he is indifferent between Tide and Surf, but he prefers Clorox to either of the other detergents. In fact, he is willing to pay the \$5 difference to get Clorox and regularly chooses that brand.

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<sup>10</sup>Parfit (1984), pp. 123–124

<sup>11</sup>Here we assume, in line with the case, that he isn't near-biased.

<sup>12</sup>Street (2009) considers whether Future Tuesdays gives us any evidence that we have attitude independent reasons, and she argues that the esoteric nature of the case gives us reason to doubt its value.

Tim’s preferences are rationally criticizable. This is because they violate the Symmetry principle. He is indifferent between Tide and Surf. The only difference between any of the detergents is their location. Relative location is no reason, by itself, to discriminate between cleaning products. Given that there are no rationally significant differences, Tim ought to be indifferent between the detergents. Indeed, to the extent that he has reason to care about money, he should prefer the other detergents to Clorox.

Finally, analogues of the Symmetry principle seem to be in the background of many discussions about cognitive biases. For example, consider how judgments about attractiveness vary in seemingly arbitrary ways:

**Cheerleader Effect:** Ted is at a singles bar with his friends. At one end of the bar he sees a woman, Amy, who is enjoying an amaretto sour by herself. At the other end of the bar he sees Trudy, who has just been given her amaretto sour. Being perhaps too shallow, he finds Amy more attractive than Trudy and so prefers to go talk to her. He decides to introduce himself to Amy after buying himself another drink.

In the interim, Trudy has rejoined her friends. Ted glances in her direction on the way to Amy. Ted’s judgment changes when he sees her with a group. He now finds her more attractive and prefers to go talk to her. With no shame Ted pivots and heads toward Trudy’s table.

Ted’s change of mind is a relatively well-documented phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> People’s judgments regarding physical attraction regularly depend on whether or not that person is alone. Yet there is something criticizable about agents whose judgments and preferences vary in this way – especially once we control for things like the implied social value of the individual.

Why are such agents criticizable? Presumably it is because a version of Symmetry also holds for strict preferences.

**Symmetry\*:** Where A, B, and C are any states of affairs, rationality requires that if an agent now strictly prefers A to B, and there is no rationally significant difference between B and C, then the agent now strictly prefers A to C.

In the Cheerleader Effect case, Ted’s preferences shift in virtue of the fact that Trudy was at one time by herself and at another with a group. Nothing intrinsic to Trudy changed. We might find it reasonable for Ted to acknowledge a change in impression. And we might have a vigorous debate over whether it is rational to prefer dating individuals who have demonstrated that they have friends over individuals for whom that remains a question. But we should all agree that agents who find their preferences concerning physical attraction are sensitive to the Cheerleader Effect are rationally obligated to either make their preferences symmetrical or offer some reason for why a change in company is rationally significant. As Tversky and Kahneman say, “rational choices should satisfy some elementary requirement

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<sup>13</sup>See Geiselman et al. (1984); Walker and Vul (2013) for the more restricted Cheerleader Effect. We should note that the empirical evidence is not indisputable. At least one study has had some difficulty replicating results – see Ojima et al. (2015). Nevertheless, that perceptions of attractiveness are sensitive to seemingly irrelevant details (e.g. whether or not the individual is alone) is well-documented. See Furl (2016); Pegors et al. (2015); Taubert et al. (2016); van Osch et al. (2015).

of consistency and coherence.”<sup>14</sup> We submit that our symmetry principles are among these elementary requirements.

Symmetry and its analogues offer a plausible and general explanation of why the agents’ preferences are irrational in the Future Tuesdays, Grocery Store and Cheerleader Effect cases. In each of these cases, the agent’s preferences are sensitive to features of the state of affairs which are irrelevant: day of the week, shelving height, or present company.

You might object that Symmetry is too strong: it leads us to declare certain preferences irrational which are intuitively rationally permissible. Consider a case that seems to challenge the symmetry principles:

**Buridan’s Laces:** Buridan is composing a pair of shoelaces for her new Chuck Taylor IIs. She is offered a pair of shoelaces A and B, which are duplicates. Buridan is indifferent between A and B. Buridan is then offered a third shoelace, C, a duplicate of the first two. She finds she prefers C to A and so she trades A for C.

Symmetry entails that Buridan is irrational, since her pattern of preferences violates Symmetry. But doesn’t it seem wrong to criticize Buridan for her pattern of preferences? After all, many of our preferences, on reflection, might seem quite arbitrary but nevertheless unproblematic.

In considering this case we should draw a distinction between rationally criticizable *preferences* and rationally criticizable *actions*. It may well be the case that an agent might act correctly even though her preferences and intentions are irrational. This is the most common lesson from Buridan’s ass cases. The agent needs to form an intention that favors one of the options over others in order to act. The agent ought to act (at the risk of missing out on a good), but whatever intention the agent forms is criticizable because it is not based on a reason. Likewise, the Symmetry principle is silent on the issue of whether Buridan is irrational to choose whatever laces she in fact chooses. It only insists that if her preferences discriminate among the laces, then she must have some reason for the discrimination. Compare this to a case where Buridan finds she prefers C to A, is offered A, but is also offered the chance to pay some sum (however small) to switch. We could criticize her for paying to realize this preference, since there is simply no reason to pay more for a duplicate lace. Likewise, if offered Later End for free, it might be perfectly correct for you to choose it, even if you are indifferent between Later End and Actual Life. Still, your preferences over Actual Life, Earlier Start and Later End might be rationally criticizable to the extent that they violate Symmetry. And your actions may be criticizable if you are willing to sacrifice something to realize your irrational preferences—for instance by paying some amount of money for the Extend-o-Life supplement.

We think Symmetry and its analogues offer the best general explanation for why the biases surveyed above are criticizable. Applied to the life extension case, the principle pressures anyone who would accept the offer to either also prefer Earlier Start or to find some relevant difference between Earlier Start and Later End.

This brings us to premise (3) of the Argument from Preference Symmetry.

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<sup>14</sup>Tversky and Kahneman (1981), p. 1



## 5 Temporal Arbitrariness

Recall premise (3):

**Reflection:** There is no rationally significant difference between Earlier Start and Later End, because there is no reason to distinguish a week of well-being realized in your future from a week of well-being realized in your past.

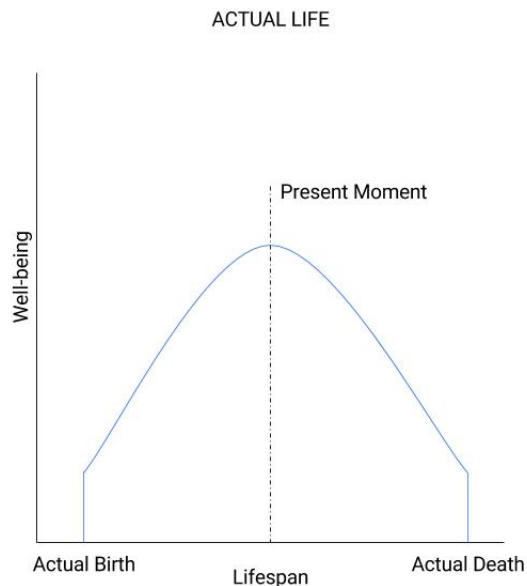
Why think Reflection is true? On the face of it, the differences between these states of affairs are many and significant. For one, there are details about individuals' lives and the broader context in which they are situated that might make a particular life with a week added in the future very different from a life with a week added in the past. For example, there are men such that, if they had been born a week earlier, their draft number would have been called and they would have served in Vietnam. Likewise, if John Adams had lived but one day longer, he would have known that he had fulfilled his wish to outlive Thomas Jefferson. Maybe you find yourself having such highly contingent reasons for preferring Earlier Start or Later End. That is fine. If some very particular facts determine your preferences in the Extend-o-Life case then you have a straightforward way to resist the Argument from Preference Symmetry at premise (3). Still, disputes about the Lucretian symmetry argument do not typically turn on highly contingent features of an agent's life or historical circumstances.<sup>15</sup> And many of us think that it is rational to prefer (future) life extension over earlier birth even if we only have a very general guarantee that the extra weeks in question will be good and even if we ignore details about particular life projects and wishes. A philosophically interesting defense of premise (3) thus abstracts from particular details about an agent's life.

To evaluate the Extend-o-Life offer in such general terms, we can graphically represent the quality of life an individual might have over time. Let's suppose that this first graph accurately represents the well-being had in Actual Life.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Brueckner and Fischer (2013), for example, claim that peculiarities like not being able to live in the 19th century are "not, strictly speaking, relevant to the Lucretian argument," (p. 784, footnote 2).

<sup>16</sup>This requires temporarily ignoring narrative accounts of well-being that claim the overall quality of a life cannot be graphically represented.



We can roughly determine the overall quality of life represented in a lifeline by calculating the area under the curve. A graph resulting in a higher area indicates a higher overall quality of life. Extend-o-Life extends your lifeline into the future. Now, as mentioned above, it's uncertain how an added week will affect an agent's overall well-being. Nevertheless, we find it plausible to assume that those who would be tempted to take the supplement think that it would overall increase the value of their lives because the extra week itself would be valuable to have.

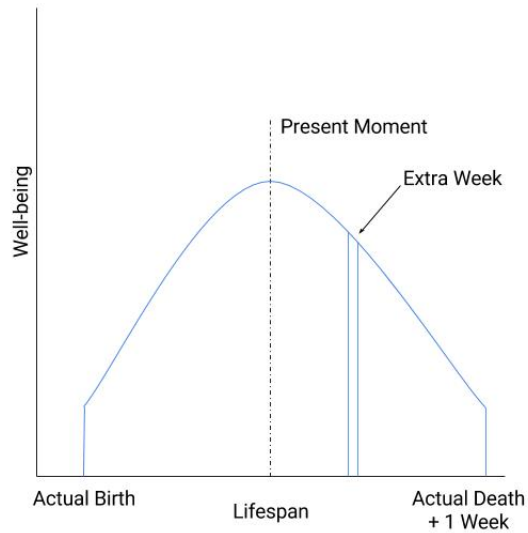
Why you would find it valuable to have is an interesting question. Some agents might find the week intrinsically valuable, perhaps because life is intrinsically valuable. Others might find the week valuable for the opportunity it affords to have more good experiences. And yet others might find it valuable because it allows them to finish projects they might otherwise not finish. Settling this question is beyond the scope of this paper. The only assumption we make about well-being in the arguments to follow is that it can be represented by a single metric, and even this assumption is not crucial to our points (though it makes the arguments easier to present).

One way to graphically represent of the effects of Extend-o-Life looks like this:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>We acknowledge that the shape of the life is underdetermined by what is said in the Extend-o-Life case. In the graph we insert the whole week at some point into the future. But we might have instead dispersed the week throughout by the hour. These variations should not make an important difference to the arguments to come.

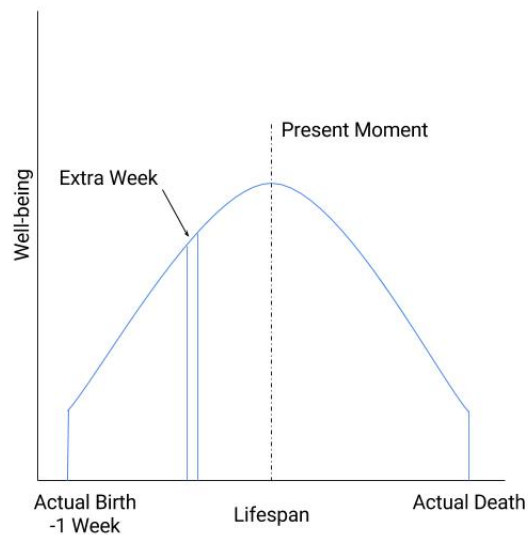
### LATER END/EXTEND-O-LIFE



The curved line, as before, represents the well-being enjoyed over the course of your life. The shaded region is the extra week of good life that distinguishes this timeline from Actual Life. Because the total area under this curve is greater, your life would be overall better if you took the supplement.

Of course, adding a week to the future is not the *only* way to make a life better. Lucretia's argument asks you to consider a lifeline where you are born earlier and compare it to the one Extend-o-Life offers.

### EARLIER START



Later End and Earlier Start contain the same overall quality of life. The challenge posed by the argument is to find a reason to prefer the well-being “bump” to be realized in one portion

of the curve rather than the other. We need a rationally significant difference between Earlier Start and Later End that can provide such a reason—otherwise Lucretia’s argument goes through. In the remainder of this section, we will consider five candidate differences. As we’ll see, some of the defenses these differences generate require controversial commitments on issues in the metaphysics of time and modality, commitments often ignored by those who wish to resist Lucretian symmetry arguments. Others require unjustifiable restrictions on rational preferences. All come with serious costs.

## 5.1 The Obvious Defense

Here is one difference between Earlier Start and Later End: the extra week in Earlier Start has the property of *being in the past* while the extra week in Later End has the property of *being in the future*. We often prefer some experiences to others based on their temporal properties. For example, you may prefer a painful surgery to have the property *occurring in your past* rather than the property *occurring in your future*. At the end of an amazing trip to Vermont, you might prefer the trip to have the property *occurring in your future* rather than the property *occurring in your past*. If you think it is rational—even irresistible—to discount experiences that have the property of being past, then it is rational to discount Earlier Start when compared to Later End. We can call this the *obvious defense* of temporally asymmetric preferences since it focuses on the most obvious way that Earlier Start and Later End differ.

There are two problems with the obvious defense.

First, the obvious defense pressures supporters to take a stand in a fraught debate in the metaphysics of time.<sup>18</sup> According to the A-theories of time, the properties of *being in the past* and *being in the future* are intrinsic and irreducible properties of times and experiences. According to the B-theories of time, these tensed properties are reducible to locations in a space-time manifold. A B-theorist who wants to maintain the obvious defense seems to be saddled with an inconsistent triad of views. First, that it is irrational to discriminate merely on the basis of locational properties (as the Grocery Store case shows). Second, that it is rational to discriminate merely on the basis of tensed properties. Third, that tensed properties are reducible to locational properties in a space-time manifold. It is hard to see how the B-theorist could maintain that tensed properties are rationally significant in a way that locational properties are not while simultaneously claiming that tensed properties are nothing over and above locational properties.<sup>19</sup> And even if B-theorist is able to do this, it is clear that the metaphysical questions at play cannot be sidestepped. The obvious defense’s “obviousness” is misleading.

Note that the tension here is largely orthogonal to the more general issue of how metaphysical facts support facts about preferences. If you deny that Tim’s preferences are rational in the Grocery Store case, you are thereby committed to the claim that locational properties are not rationally significant. As a result, the only potentially rationally significant difference in the neighborhood is one supplied by the irreducible properties posited by A-theories of

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. Sider (2012)

<sup>19</sup>A suggestion: the B-theorist might argue that the analogy between space and space-time should not be taken as strongly as it is here. Location in the space-time manifold is fundamentally different than ordinary spatial location. Therefore, the fact that ordinary location bias is irrational has no bearing on the rationality of space-time bias. We would be interested in seeing a developed version of this view.

time.<sup>20</sup>

A bigger issue with the obvious defense is that it fails to meet the burden set out by the Symmetry principle. The person with asymmetric preferences between Earlier Start and Later End is asked to find a reason for preferring more good life added to their future but not preferring the same amount of good life added to their past. Simply pointing out that you (and many other agents) prefer experiences in your future to experiences in your past doesn't confer any justification on your preferences. You (and many other agents) may find some people more physically attractive than others because they are in a group rather than alone. This doesn't *justify* being sensitive to the Cheerleader Effect. You (and many other agents) are likely biased toward products because of their shelf placement. This doesn't justify always paying more for detergent merely because it is at eye level.

In replying to various defenses of the symmetry argument, Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer issue following challenge:

Of course, if Lucretius (or anyone else) has an argument that could convince us that *all* asymmetries in the philosophical neighborhood ought to be rejected as being irrational, then we would not have made any intellectual progress by invoking the putative rational asymmetry between people's attitudes toward past and future pleasures. But we can at least point to a plausible argument to the effect that having asymmetric attitudes toward past and future good experiences is in our interest—is rational, in the relevant sense. That is, there would appear to be a clear survival advantage to any creature who cares especially about future good experiences, as opposed to past good experiences. Of course, this suggestion would need considerable refinement before it could provide a full defense of the rationality of the asymmetry pertaining to experiences, but it at least appears promising. Given the availability of this sort of suggestion, it would not be dialectically fair for Lucretius (or his followers) to assimilate all asymmetries of the relevant sort; that is, a Lucretian could not argue that the initial intuition elicited by the mirror-image Argument applies straightforwardly even to the asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future good experiences.<sup>21</sup>

We think Brueckner and Fischer mischaracterize the dialectic. It is not enough that asymmetric attitudes are linked to a heuristic that confers a survival advantage. Many of the heuristics connected to cognitive biases confer just such an advantage. But in these cases we judge that agents' preferences are, absent some further justification, irrational. What we want is some theory of rationality that explains *why* agents should be sensitive to properties like *being in the past* or *being in the future*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>See Deng (2015) for an attempt to make this strategy work.

<sup>21</sup>Brueckner and Fischer (2013), pp. 788–789.

<sup>22</sup>Perhaps the notion of rationality employed by Brueckner and Fischer is different from ours, and, by their lights, the Obvious Defense does not need to satisfy the constraints set by our Symmetry principle. They might respond to our criticism as follows: Symmetry and other coherence constraints don't come into play when the attitudes under consideration promote flourishing. The relevant kind of future bias here does promote flourishing. So whether our asymmetric attitudes about Earlier Start and Later End satisfy Symmetry is irrelevant. It is only because we have independent evidence that cognitive biases (and other paradigmatically irrational attitudes) are harmful that we deem them irrational. In reply, we're not sure

Moreover, note that the properties *being in the past* and *being in the future* do not make a significant difference when applied to other kinds of events that contribute to well-being. For instance, as Thomas Hurka notes, these properties do not make a difference when applied to achievements:

Imagine that, awaking in hospital with temporary amnesia, you are told that you are either a scientist who made a major discovery last year or a different scientist who will make a minor discovery next year. You will surely hope that you are the first scientist. You want your life to contain the greatest scientific achievement possible, regardless of its temporal location.<sup>23</sup>

The obvious defense is simply wrong to presume that the properties of *being in the past* or *being in the future*—on their own—are rationally significant.

To reject Reflection, we need an account of the conditions under which temporal properties are rationally significant. We ought to consider other ways in which the past and future are significantly different, ways that might be more directly relevant to forming rational preferences. We now turn to more sophisticated approaches.

## 5.2 The Emotion Defense

Another way you might try to justify having asymmetrical preferences towards Earlier Start and Later End is by appealing to asymmetries in our emotions about our past and future. As a matter of psychology, we are emotionally hardwired to care more about experiences in our future than experiences in our past. We experience pleasure now anticipating future pleasures but not past ones. We experience pain now dreading future pains but not past ones. This asymmetry makes good evolutionary sense—it focuses our attention on securing pleasures and avoiding pains that might be under our control.<sup>24</sup> According to the *Emotion Defense*, we are justified in preferring Later End to Earlier Start because we have temporally asymmetric emotions.

We grant that agents have temporally asymmetric emotions, and that rational preferences often take into account our anticipated emotions and the ways in which these emotions affect our well-being. For instance, if Kathy knows she is bound to experience dread before her flight and knows she can dull this emotion by taking a Valium now, she might rationally prefer to take the drug now.

Nevertheless the Emotion Defense fails because it is not certain what emotional effect, if any, Later End will have on agents, and it is certainly not the case that there is a general emotional effect it will have on all agents. Some agents may derive a great deal of pleasurable anticipation contemplating that extra week. Other agents may expect to suffer another week of dreading their inevitable (but now delayed) death. Still others (these authors included), would not feel any significant emotional reaction now to the prospect of an extra week realized far in the future. And even if the times at which the dread is experienced shift,

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the suggested notion of rationality is all that significant. Further, it is not clear that any of the paradigm cognitive biases are, overall, harmful. They are plausibly essential to leading a life, let alone a good life.

<sup>23</sup>Hurka (1996), p.61.

<sup>24</sup>For more on the role of emotions in guiding action, see Greene and Sullivan (2015); Suhler and Callender (2012).

there need not be an overall decrease in the agent's overall well-being. There is no systematic objection to Reflection based on time-biased emotions.

### 5.3 The Control Defense

Here is another difference between Earlier Start and Later End: the extra week contained in Earlier Start is in the past, and therefore settled and outside of your control, but the extra week in Later End is in the future, which is unsettled and potentially within your control. You might think that rationality only constrains preferences which are action-guiding—a preference is only rational or irrational relative to a particular choice. When no choice is involved, the attitudes are better understood as desires or wishes, and any desire or wish is permissible insofar as it has no practical effects on an agent's choices. Since the past is settled, the agent will never face a choice with respect to bringing about Earlier Start. So *any* attitude about Earlier Start is rationally permissible. We can call this the *control defense* since the crucial assumption is that it is permissible to have any attitude whatsoever when comparing states of affairs that are beyond your control. The control defense suggests that Symmetry (along with other rational constraints) simply doesn't apply to states of affairs that are beyond your control.

The control defense rests on an overly restrictive theory of preferences and an overly permissive view of rationality.<sup>25</sup> Regarding preferences, why think that an agent can only form a rational preference with respect to a particular choice? We think it makes more sense to think of preferences as reflected not in the choices we make, but rather in the value to us of learning that certain states of affairs do or do not obtain. While Sam may have no say whatsoever over whether it will rain in New York tomorrow, he can prefer the state of affairs where it does not rain to the one where it does rain. Our everyday notion of preference seems indifferent to whether agents have control over relata. In adopting this broader concept of a preference we take inspiration from Richard Jeffrey, who understands preferences on the “news value” model: “To say that A is ranked higher than B means that the agent would welcome the news that A is true more than he would welcome the news that B is true.”<sup>26</sup> Along these lines, we framed Lucretia's argument in terms of the news value you would receive from learning that you'd had an extra week in your past versus the news value of learning you will have an extra week from the supplement.<sup>27</sup>

Further, evaluating preferences only with respect to particular choices will lead to counterintuitive results in diachronic Dutch Book cases. In a diachronic Dutch Book case, an agent faces a series of choices, has a clear preference in each individual choice based on her interests at the time of choice, but jointly her pattern of choices leads to a certain loss. For example, Tom Dougherty (2011) offers an argument that agents with certain forms of risk-aversion and a tendency to discount the past will be susceptible to a diachronic Dutch Book—they will accept a series of choices which will result in a sure, avoidable loss. We typically do not want to say that an agent who is susceptible to Dutch Books is rational. But

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<sup>25</sup>Much of what we say here is in agreement with Parfit (1984), especially pp. 168–169.

<sup>26</sup>Jeffrey (1983) p. 82. Thanks to Tom Dougherty for discussion.

<sup>27</sup>Unlike some treatments of preferences in decision theory, we take it that agents can deliberate about their preferences; we don't take them as “basic”. More on this in the next subsection.

if we only evaluate rational preferences relative to particular choices, then we'll be forced to conclude that it is rationally permissible to accept such a series of choices.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, while attitudes about the past may never be action-guiding considered individually, they can be action-guiding in conjunction with an agent's other beliefs and preferences. For instance, an agent might face a choice between having a good experience now or a similarly good experience a week from now. The agent knows that she discounts past experiences—she always wishes to have a pleasurable experience in her future rather than in her past. And the agent also now prefers that all of her future preferences be satisfied. These preferences combined will lead her to choose to delay the experience. And crucial to this choice is her wish that future pleasurable experiences obtain rather than past ones. While this wish may seem inert on its own, it is action-guiding when coupled with the rest of the agent's preferences.<sup>29</sup>

## 5.4 The Modal Defense

The control defense relies on a difficult to defend assumption about how preferences relate to choice. You might still think the “settledness” of the past provides a non-arbitrary reason to discount Earlier Start. You might argue as follows. Earlier Start is a metaphysically impossible state of affairs. But Later End is metaphysically possible. It is never rational to prefer a metaphysically impossible state of affairs to a good metaphysically possible state of affairs. So it is rational to prefer Later End to Earlier Start. We can call this the *modal defense*, as it turns on the modal features of states of affairs.

Let's unpack the modal defense. First, why think Earlier Start is metaphysically impossible? You might think that while it is possible that there be a state of affairs where someone very much like you is born in a very similar world a week earlier than you, there is nothing at all contingent about events in your past. Once events are in the past they are settled. As Thomas Nagel puts it, “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>30</sup> It is controversial whether there is in fact this stark modal asymmetry between the past and future, but grant the assumption for argument's sake. Is this enough to block premise (3) of the Argument from Preference Symmetry?

Everything turns on whether we think the modal constraint is a correct constraint on rational preferences. There are different ways you might defend the claim that it is always rational to prefer a good metaphysical possibility to any metaphysical impossibility. You might, for instance, think that rationality requires all agents to assign zero probability to any metaphysically impossible state of affairs—no other subjective probability is rationally

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<sup>28</sup>But see Hedden (2015) for an argument that it is rationally permissible to be susceptible to diachronic Dutch books.

<sup>29</sup>See Greene and Sullivan (2015) for discussion of this and similar cases.

<sup>30</sup>Nagel (1970), p. 79. Nagel does not argue for this claim. He seems to think it is a conceptual truth of personal identity. On the basis of this intuition, he concludes that there is no sense in which a later birth deprives an individual. It's worth noting that Nagel was never entirely satisfied with this position, despite its apparent plausibility.



permissible. This may be because you think probabilities must be defined over a space of metaphysically possible worlds. Or it may be because you think probabilities must accord with evidence and all evidence tells against a metaphysical impossibility ever coming to be. If you think rationality requires assigning zero probability to any impossible state of affairs, and you think a state of affairs must have some positive probability to be thought of as a news item over which rational preferences range, then you might think it is impossible for an agent to rationally prefer an impossibility to a good possibility.<sup>31</sup>

This certainly won't be a direct or uncontroversial route to resisting the Argument from Preference Symmetry. Many decision theorists, for instance, find it natural to construct subjective utilities and subjective probabilities by taking preferences as basic.<sup>32</sup> This argument for the modal constraint puts matters the other way around. Moreover, a modal constraint on preferences seems to rule out some perfectly coherent and psychologically realistic preferences.<sup>33</sup> Consider the following case:

**Party Game:** We are playing a party game. Ryan asks Ruth who she'd rather be: Michelle Obama or Ivana Trump. Ruth says would prefer to be Obama.

Assuming necessity of identity, it is metaphysically impossible for Ruth to be Obama or Trump. So the modal constraint entails that the only rational preference Ruth can have in the Party Game is indifference. But this is far too restrictive. It is perfectly reasonable to prefer to be Obama.

You might respond by saying we've misrepresented the Party Game case. When Ruth claims that she prefer to be Michelle Obama, all she means is that she would prefer to have Michelle Obama's most salient properties: being First Lady, being an intelligent and accomplished leader, having wit and grace, etc. It is possible for her to instantiate *these* properties. On this approach, when an agent claims to have a preference about a metaphysical impossibility, charity dictates that we interpret that preference as being over the most similar metaphysically possible state of affairs. If we take such a position on attitudes toward impossible worlds, then the modal constraint starts to look more viable.

Still, you might think that this charity is misguided in the Party Game case. Perhaps Ruth really doesn't want to be like Obama—she wants to be Obama. She wants the essence of Obama. The defender of the modal constraint must claim such a preference is irrational. And there are other cases where this strategy more obviously won't help. Consider:

**Resurrection:** Suppose persons just are their bodies, and if death and decomposition occur, then it is impossible that a person be resurrected. Suppose Ryan knows this, and Ryan is afraid of death. Ruth asks if Ryan would prefer to be resurrected from the dead in a hundred years or prefer that a person similar to Ryan now, with his quasi-memories and dispositions, be brought into existence. Ryan says he would prefer that he be resurrected.

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<sup>31</sup>Jeffrey (1983) contends that preferences over states of affairs with zero probability are undefined. For these reasons he would likely reject the coherence of the Argument from Preference Symmetry. But he wouldn't endorse the modal constraint. We aren't the only philosophers who assume Jeffrey's probability constraint is too restrictive; see Nolan (2006).

<sup>32</sup>See Buchak (2016).

<sup>33</sup>In fact, we regularly express preferences involving impossible states of affairs. See, e.g., Paul Simon's lyrics for "El Condor Pasa (If I Could)," and Johnny Burke's lyrics for "Swinging On a Star."

The modal constraint dictates that Ryan cannot rationally prefer his resurrection (since that is impossible).

But again, this result seems unjustifiably restrictive. Not only is Ryan's preference coherent, it is also rationally permissible. This is because Ryan can cite reasons for his preference that are not overruled by the fact that his preference is (according to him) unable to be satisfied. Ryan prefers to be resurrected because he wants to experience the 22nd century for himself. But he has no such preference for others. He doesn't care all that much if some other person very much like him has the same opportunity.

You might try to bolster a more restrictive notion of rationality by appealing to a more robust notion of an agent. Sandy puts her money into a 401(k) because she believes *she* will enjoy the retirement savings. Consider two different conceptions of personhood. On the metaphysical conception, egocentric values like rationality, well-being, and concern travel with the metaphysical relation of personal identity. So understood, Sandy cares about who at her time of retirement is metaphysically identical to who she is now. Frederik Kaufman (1999) calls this the thin conception of personhood. He contrasts it with a rich conception of the psychological self. The true object of egocentric values, Kaufman argues, is not merely the individual as defined by identity. Rather, our concerns are about ourselves understood biographically. On this thick conception of personhood, "insofar as my conscious awareness of myself—my personal life "from the inside"—is constituted by the formative details of my life, my conscious awareness of myself is not just a transparent ego that retains its point of view independent of its content," (12). Understood this way, Sandy puts money into her 401(k) because she believes the person who benefits is the person who was affected by all the significant life events she did and will experience.

We have argued that impossible states of affairs are within the domain of coherent preferences. You might object to this on the grounds that egocentric values are necessarily tied to the critical biographical elements of our lives. This is true in both directions; the thick self is what has preferences and it is toward thick selves that these preferences are directed. Each thick self is relatively modally inflexible and so states of affairs like Earlier Start are impossible. Furthermore, thick identity must hold in order for agents' self-interested preferences to be coherently evaluated. But since thick identity fails to hold in Earlier Start, preferences aren't even applicable to that scenario. Thus, you might argue, our response to the modal objection doesn't work and at best addresses a normatively irrelevant issue.

We think that the thick conception of personhood is interesting and worth developing in tandem with Kaufman's thin conception of personhood.<sup>34</sup> However, we deny that the thin conception is irrelevant for egocentric values. We clearly are concerned with our later selves even when they are sufficiently divorced from our current selves so as to be non-identical in the thick sense. We talk to our loved ones about how we would like to be treated if in an irreversible coma. And we take seriously our obligations toward those who suffer from dementia. It is clear that much of our concern is in fact based on a thin conception of personhood. Perhaps more importantly, the preferences of others are based on the thin conception. A spouse, to take just one example, is specially concerned with the well-being

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<sup>34</sup>Our response to Kaufman is, we think, importantly different from that of Johansson (2008). We are happy to grant the distinction between thin persons and thick persons and even grant that egocentric values may differ between them. Our main objection is that the relevant sense of rationality is clearly something that involves the thin conception of personhood.

of her comatose partner and does not regard him as a complete stranger.

We submit that the important sense of rationality relevant to our argument is consistent with preferences concerning impossible states of affairs. The symmetry problem therefore cannot be blocked by the modal defense.

## 5.5 The Counterfactual Defense

The modal constraint is too restrictive. But you might think the modal constraint was right to focus on the different ways Earlier Start and Later End might be realized. You might think, for instance, that the nearest possible world which realizes Earlier Start is much farther from actuality than the nearest possible world which realizes Later End. You might also think that when comparing scenarios with similar overall well-being, it is rationally permissible to prefer possibilities which are more similar to actuality over states of affairs which are less similar. Call this the *counterfactual defense*.<sup>35</sup>

The counterfactual principle appealed to here might be thought of as a version of conservatism about value. There are a few ways you might try to justify conservatism. One interesting strategy turns on the permissibility of valuing one's actual commitments over merely potential commitments. Elizabeth Harman, in discussing the ethics of cochlear implants, makes the following point:

[A] deaf child's parents could grant that things would have been better if their child had not been deaf. But things would then have been very different. They feel that they would have then had a different child—not numerically a different child, but a child with a completely different personality, character, and sense of self from the child they actually have. In loving their child, they love who he has become. They are glad he has become who he is, they value him as he is, and they cannot prefer that he had come to be so different—indeed, they prefer things as they are. Surely these preferences are utterly reasonable.<sup>36</sup>

According to Harman, overall well-being is not the only relevant consideration when it comes to forming preferences. She argues that our preferences should also be sensitive to actual values (as opposed to hypothetical values). The reasonableness of conservatism carries over to the decision between Earlier Start and Later End. As Harman puts it, “a mother who loves her child might well wish not to have lived earlier—even if it would have involved a longer life—because then her actual child would not have existed.”<sup>37</sup>

Conservatism about value is also controversial. But grant for the sake of argument that it is correct. Still, it isn't the case that we are conservative about every aspect of our actual past, since we do not value many aspects of our actual past. So for the counterfactual defense to work, it must be the case that realizing Earlier Start requires losing something you currently value about the past while realizing Later End does not risk such a loss. Why might you believe this? Perhaps you subscribe to a strong essentiality of origins thesis and think that Earlier Start only obtains if you or someone else you value does not exist. Or

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<sup>35</sup>Something like this can be found in Belshaw (1993).

<sup>36</sup>Harman (2009), p. 185

<sup>37</sup>Harman (2011), p. 135

perhaps you think that Earlier Start entails the relationships you value take on a substantially different form, or even vanish altogether, as the mother case illustrates. As long as Earlier Start substantially affects the things you currently value, the counterfactual defense permits preferring Later End over Earlier Start, even if the two are comparable in their overall well-being.

We think this reasoning relies on a peculiar and unnecessary interpretation of the case. It is not altogether clear how to evaluate the counterfactuals involved in the symmetry problem.<sup>38</sup> It does seem, though, that an earlier birth need not entail a massively different life. Given the context sensitivity of counterfactuals, there is no systematic reply available to the counterfactual defense. We can simply assume that in Earlier Start you were born a week earlier as a happy, healthy, slightly premature infant. Or we can assume that Earlier Start is realized by a scenario where the actual sperm and egg are combined a week earlier in a doctor’s office and then implanted. If need be, we can further complicate the story to accommodate other values. For example, if you and your partner met because of your shared birthdate, then we can assume that in Earlier Start both of you were born a week prematurely, thereby preserving that valued relationship—and the birth of your child, and whatever else you value.

An earlier start might in fact be better given your actual values. Suppose, as a result of a medical emergency in your thirties, you became significantly closer to your grandmother during her final years. You might highly value the relationship you had with your grandmother and prefer that it have lasted longer. If so, you have a reason to prefer Earlier Start over Later End. Being born a week earlier would give you an additional week with your grandmother but dying a week later would not.

The counterfactual defense depends on modal differences that need not be part of the setup of the symmetry argument, especially when the time scales for life extension are relatively short. The counterfactual defense is no systematic objection to the Reflection thesis; it is only a problem for specific ways we might extend that premise to require dramatic changes to what you care about in the actual past.<sup>39</sup>

## 6 Living a Symmetrical Life

We’ve exhausted our candidates for rationally defensible differences between Earlier Start and Later End. So where does this leave us? The conclusion of the Argument from Preference Symmetry is that rationality requires that you now be indifferent between Actual Life and Later End. Presumably in such a scenario you should flip a coin to decide whether to take the supplement. Whether or not this conclusion is properly “Epicurean”, it seems extreme enough to be a *reductio* of any theory of rationality.

This might be one upshot of the argument, but it is not the only lesson we can draw. The original presentation turned on a premise about *your* preferences. Premise (2) claimed

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<sup>38</sup>See the discussion of counterpossibles and the Strangeness of Impossibility Condition in Nolan (1997) for relevant considerations.

<sup>39</sup>Harman (2011) gestures to a similar point in footnote 12. But her response seems to assume that the scenarios under consideration must be possible. As we’ve argued, we can coherently have preferences regarding impossible scenarios.

that you were indifferent between Earlier Start and Actual Life. As an empirical matter, this might reflect your unconsidered attitude (presumably that is the kind of thing a psychologist might survey). But it need not reflect your considered or sustained attitude, especially after being shown the rational implications of such an attitude. This is where the wide-scope nature of the Symmetry principle comes into play. An agent is free, so to speak, to satisfy the constraint in one of two ways. She may either become indifferent between Actual Life and Later End *or* no longer remain indifferent between Actual Life and Earlier Start.

Personally, we both reject the conclusion of the Argument from Preference Symmetry. We think that rational agents should prefer more well-being to less *whenever* it is scheduled. We think there is much to recommend this attitude. Though a full discussion of it is well beyond the scope of our paper, we think preferring to increase your overall well-being (wherever it is located) is more reasonable than remaining indifferent toward your total well-being. Indeed, we think this view is more defensible than any of the controversial claims required to resist premise (3) of the Argument from Preference Symmetry.

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