



Selves, Persons, and the Neo-Lucretian Symmetry Problem

Patrick Stokes¹ 

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Abstract

The heavily discussed (neo-)Lucretian symmetry argument holds that as we are indifferent to nonexistence before birth, we should also be indifferent to nonexistence after death. An important response to this argument insists that prenatal nonexistence differs from posthumous nonexistence because we could not have been born earlier and been the same ‘thick’ psychological self. As a consequence, we can’t properly ask whether it would be better for us to have had radically different lives either. Against this, it’s been claimed we can form preferences as to which ‘thick’ (psychological) self our ‘thin’ (metaphysical) self would be better off ‘associated’ with. I argue that these discussions draw the right distinction, but do so in the wrong place: understanding the ‘thin’ self phenomenally instead of metaphysically allows us to understand how we can rationally form preferences to have been somebody else.

Keywords Death · Lucretian symmetry · Persons · Selves · Frederik Kaufman · John Martin Fischer

There are certain long-lived arguments in philosophy that have the longevity they do precisely because they seem at once both hard to refute and obviously wrong. The Lucretian symmetry argument – that as we do not fear or lament the time before our birth when we existed, so we shouldn’t fear or lament the period after our death when we won’t exist either – is one such. It’s one of those arguments that, on first encountering it, seems both utterly reasonable and outlandishly misguided.

✉ Patrick Stokes
patrick.stokes@deakin.edu.au

¹ Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood VIC 3125, Australia

The debate over this symmetry problem has seen something of a recent resurgence.¹ What's ultimately important about this discussion is not simply what it tells us about our attitudes to death and non-existence, but the way in which it connects this problem with more fundamental questions about the very nature of selfhood. At the core of this exchange is an important question as to whether the self whose survival we care about, and whose death is thus the target of our asymmetric attitudes towards birth and death, could be substantially other than it is without destroying its identity.

In this paper I offer a brief recapitulation of the (neo-)Lucretian symmetry argument. I then consider attempts to justify our asymmetrical attitudes to pre-vital and posthumous nonexistence by arguing that while we could have been born earlier, we would not have been *ourselves* in the thick psychological sense required for egocentric fear of death. Frederik Kaufman explicitly differentiates between a metaphysical *thin* self and a psychological *thick* self, a distinction which John Martin Fischer accepts even while rejecting Kaufman's conclusion that it is incoherent to wish that we might have had a substantially different thick self. I've argued previously that any conception of personhood that could account for the range of self-reflexive attitudes we adopt would need a bifurcation of roughly this sort. However, drawing on Nagel, Mark Johnston, and others, I argue that the thick/thin distinction used by Kaufman and Fischer draws the line in the wrong place. Instead I suggest we think of the thin self not as a metaphysical essence, but as an irreducibly present-tense, phenomenally-given locus of consciousness. Making this move allows us to explain how we can form evaluations across lives, and thus how later birth might in fact be worse for us than earlier birth. But it does this by shifting the topic in a more phenomenological, rather than straightforwardly metaphysical, direction. I conclude by considering whether that shift in focus is one that metaphysicians should accept or reject.

1 Lucretian Symmetry and Parfitian Temporal Bias

Lucretius' Symmetry Argument is encapsulated in two succinct passages of his *De Rerum Natura*, here translated by Warren (2004: 58):

And just as in the time that went before we felt no pain [...] so when we are [lit. 'will be'] no more, when the body and soul from whose combination we are formed have come apart, then you can be sure that we (who will not exist then) will be able to have nothing whatsoever happen to us or move our senses in the slightest, not even if earth and sea and sea and sky are mixed together. (DRN 3.832-42)

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. (DRN 3.972-5)

¹ In addition to the works discussed directly in this paper, see also Fischer & Brueckner, 2013, 2014a; Johansson, (2014), Cyr (2014), Meier (2019).

There are various ways this argument can be interpreted. For one thing, whether Lucretius himself thinks nonexistence *is not* a harm, or is simply a harm that it would be irrational to fear, is a further issue (cf. Draper, 2013); Lucretius perhaps inherits the ambiguity of his Epicurean prototype here. Moreover, modern readers, beginning with Nagel (1979), have seen Lucretius as arguing that just as we are not *now* distressed by past non-existence, so we should not *now* be distressed by future non-existence. But as Furley (1986) and Warren (2004) note, this is reading more into Lucretius than is in the text: he only tells us that prenatal nonexistence *was nothing* to us and likewise death *will be* nothing to us. Nagel's influential retelling of the Symmetry Argument is thus, as Sørensen (2012: 235–36) puts it, the philosophical equivalent of a misheard song lyric. And that's fine: sometimes misheard lyrics are an improvement on the original song. For the sake of historical fidelity, however, I'll here refer to the familiar Nagelian version of the Symmetry Argument as 'neo-Lucretian.'

The neo-Lucretian argument seeks to diagnose a deeply ingrained asymmetry in our attitudes towards past and future non-existence. As Jens Johansson puts it, it seems entirely appropriate that a funeral was held for Amy Winehouse, but 'it would be ridiculous to propose a ceremony dedicated to lamenting her not having come into existence earlier' (Johansson, 2013: 52). That Winehouse died as young as she did is a tragedy; that she was born as late as she was is neither here nor there. Yet both facts seem to deprive her of life-years she might otherwise have had. The neo-Lucretian claim is that this asymmetry exposes our intuitions as fundamentally confused. As there's no relevant difference between prenatal and postmortem non-existence, to hold different attitudes towards the time before birth and the time after death is irrational. Our concern for rational consistency² thus gives us reasons to rid ourselves of such asymmetrical attitudes, if we can: we should either regret both periods of non-existence, or regret neither. No-one seems keen to argue we should start weeping for our prenatal non-existence,³ and so we should be just as indifferent to the time after we die as we are to the time before we were born.

The major form of reply to this argument is to assert that prenatal and posthumous nonexistence *are* relevantly different, if not in their experiential properties (of which they have none) then at least in their relation to the value of a life. Buben (2016: 140 n. 3) notes we can find replies of this sort as far back as Augustine, but the classic response is, again, from Nagel:

It is true that both the time before a man's birth and the time after his death are times when he does not exist. But the time after his death is time of which his

² Burley (2007: 329) argues that 'Our desire to be consistent in our affective and conative attitudes – that is, consistent in the ways we respond toward things of the same type – is crucial to the argument's normative force.' However, the Lucretian argument might also furnish a different kind of normative force, of a prudential rather than rational form: given that our lives will go better if we don't fear death, we have a prudential reason to extend our indifference to the time after our death, rather than extending our concern to the time before birth.

³ We might still conclude that late conception does in fact deprive us of goods and does thereby harm us, but that it is nonetheless not rationally required to care about this harm; see, for example, Timmerman (2017).

death deprives him. [...] But we cannot say that the time prior to a man's birth is time in which he could have lived had he been born not then but earlier. For aside from the brief margin permitted by premature labor, he *could* not have been born earlier: anyone born substantially earlier than he was would have been someone else. (Nagel, 1979: 7–8)

The idea here is that an existant's origin is one of its essential identity conditions, such that it could not have a different origin and have the same identity. So the time after we die is time we can be deprived of (and so potentially a legitimate object of regret) but we cannot, by definition, be deprived of the time before our birth.⁴ Yet citing a counter-example offered by Nozick, Nagel retreats from this position almost immediately, and also admits to finding the argument 'too sophisticated to explain the simple difference between our attitudes to prenatal and posthumous nonexistence' (1979: 8). Instead, he finds himself drawn to a (then-unpublished) claim made by Parfit (1984): our asymmetrical attitudes to prenatal and posthumous non-existence are simply part of our larger, seemingly incorrigible bias towards the future. We care more about future goods and pains than we do about past goods and pains, even at the cost of preferring a life that contains a higher aggregate of pain: we would prefer, all things being equal, to learn we had ten hours of pain yesterday than that we will have two hours of pain tomorrow.⁵ Brueckner and Fischer agree with Parfit that Lucretian asymmetry is just a special case of our bias towards the future, and that 'to the extent that the latter, more general asymmetry can be explained and justified, so can the former, more specific asymmetry' (Fischer & Brueckner, 2014b: 3). But whether it *can* be justified then becomes the issue; as Fred Feldman reminds us, it's not enough simply to assert in reply to Lucretius that we have globally asymmetric attitudes to the past and future: 'Lucretius knew that. He described it in detail. His point was to say that we shouldn't have it' (Feldman, 2013: 316).

2 The Thick and Thin Selves Response

As noted, Nagel's original reply to the neo-Lucretian symmetry argument was that it is impossible for something to come into existence earlier than it does. Consequently, it is not possible to be born earlier, and so prenatal non-existence cannot deprive us of anything. But even at the time, Nagel was already somewhat skeptical of just how much explanatory force this argument has with respect to our temporal biases, and by *The View From Nowhere* he has come to regard, with Parfit, our asymmetric attitudes as something simply hardwired into subjectivity, 'a fact perhaps too deep for explanation' (Nagel, 1986: 229).

Kaufman (1999) thinks Nagel defects to the Parfitian camp a little too hastily, and seeks to defend our asymmetrical attitudes to pre-birth and post-death nonexistence

⁴ As Hetherington (2005: 212) notes, Nagel might have been wiser to focus on preconceptive rather than prenatal nonexistence, though according to Hetherington the argument still fails.

⁵ For an outstanding recent discussion of these problems, and a robust defence of temporal neutrality, see Sullivan (2018).

on Nagel’s original basis that we simply could not have come into existence earlier than we in fact did. This position can’t be straightforwardly defended on Kripkean grounds, as we can imagine a particular sperm and a particular egg being combined earlier than they in fact were, or a frozen embryo being implanted earlier than it in fact was. But Kaufman argues that while a person’s ‘metaphysical essence’ could have come into existence earlier than it actually did, this would not be the entity whose non-existence *we worry about*.

Say that a person’s ‘metaphysical essence’ consists in the existence of a particular body, or brain, or genome, or soul, or origin-event (Kaufman’s account is deliberately agnostic), and that a specific person therefore exists in all possible worlds which contain that essence. This would entail that ‘it is possible for one to be shorn of all the attributes of one’s actual life and remain the same person throughout the changes’ (Kaufman, 1999: 11). But ‘persons’ in this sense are almost entirely abstract, and are not (according to Kaufman) the object of our egocentric concern regarding death. Fear of death, according to Kaufman, is not fear of the destruction of one’s metaphysical essence, but rather ‘is driven by concerns that one’s conscious personal existence will be extinguished forever’ (Kaufman, 1999: 11). What we care about in survival, according to Kaufman, is ‘my conscious awareness of myself, my personal life ‘from the inside’ which is not ‘a transparent ego that retains its point of view independent of its content’ but is instead ‘constituted by the formative details of my life’ (Kaufman, 1999: 12). As a result:

Were the ‘thin’ metaphysical me to be raised by an [Inuit] tribe, the conscious personal entity that I currently am would regard him as a complete stranger. I wish him well, but I am no more concerned about his death than I am about the death of any other stranger. When I reflect on my death and whether it would deprive me (and hence be an evil), I reflect on the fortunes of the conscious personal self that I currently am, not on some possible self with whom I have no affinity. (Kaufman, 1999: 12)⁶

Our concern over our deaths does not track the fortunes of this ‘thin’ metaphysical essence, but of a ‘thick’ person: ‘biographical persons, persons in the sense of having a full complement of psychological states, memories, beliefs, ongoing projects, values, aspirations, and commitments [...] an entity with a particular history, particular loved ones, and particular projects under way (Kaufman, 2000: 94–95).⁷ And while a thin metaphysical essence could have come into existence earlier, a thick person could not. We could not be born substantially earlier and still have our distinctive psychological, relational and practical concerns:

⁶ Kaufman uses what is now a non-preferred term for Arctic peoples; I have replaced it with the more neutral Inuit, and singular noun Inuk. That’s still not entirely neutral however, as the original term is also applied to Yupik people.

⁷ Such a claim may be, as Pettigrove (2002: 411) observes, somewhat “historically and culturally myopic,” given that billions of adherents of the Dharmic faiths have seen and do see reincarnation without a ‘full complement’ of continuant psychological factors as still counting as personal survival.

If my first personal perspective is constituted by the particularities of my life, the possibility of my existing earlier would, from my perspective, be like death. This is because for me to exist earlier, I would have to be stripped down to my metaphysical essence, moved back in time, and then have a different set of memories, beliefs, commitments, and so forth, build a first-personal perspective back up. Thus the conceptual possibility of my essence existing earlier does not tell us what we want to know about death, since it would actually be a form of death; that is, the extinction of a particular first-personal perspective. We want to know whether the thickly constituted beings that we conceive ourselves to be could have existed earlier, and it seems plain that they cannot. (Kaufman, 1999: 13)

Christopher Belshaw makes a very similar argument, albeit without reference to the language of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ selves. Kaufman thinks global amnesia-type events are identity-destroying in the same way death is; Belshaw does not. But Belshaw does think that *replacement* of psychology *is* identity-destroying. Replace my psychology with that of someone else, and I cease to exist. (Belshaw, 2009: 169–70). And shifting my origin back in time would, in pretty much all imaginable cases, result in a psychology so radically different that I simply wouldn’t be the person I am now. Being born earlier would therefore be replacing my psychology with that of someone else, such that *I* would not exist. Conversely, there’s no obvious impediment to our ‘thick selves’ lasting longer than they in fact do,⁸ such that transworld identity can hold between a world S_1 in which my thick self dies at 50 and a world S_2 in which it dies at 90. A welfare comparison between those two worlds becomes possible: dying at 50 in S_1 deprives me of 40 good years I would have had in S_2 . So our asymmetrical attitudes can be defended on the basis that it makes no sense to regret non-existence at a time when necessarily I could not have existed anyway.

In reply, Fischer and Daniel Speak have argued that we can, indeed sometimes do, consider how things would be if we’d been born at a different time and place. It doesn’t seem obviously incoherent to decide that I’d have been better off if I’d been born into an Inuit family after all, while Belshaw claims that such desires to have had a radically different life are, if sometimes irrational, nonetheless ‘perfectly natural’ (Belshaw, 2009: 173). To come to a conclusion that I would have been better off had my earlier life been radically different is, in effect, to ‘form judgments and preferences about which thick persons our metaphysical essences – or thin selves – are associated with’ (Fischer, 2009: 56).⁹ Fischer goes on to suggest that:

⁸ Against this, Johansson argues that if a person can get ‘thicker’ in a variety of different ways into the future, then they could have gotten thicker at an earlier point in a range of different ways too, and thus a thick self *could* have been substantially different (Johansson, 2013: 56). To anticipate the discussion below, I think this points to the extent to which the central question here is properly regarded as one of temporally-emplaced (thin) selves relating to diachronic persons (thick selves): *from here and now* the thick self that the thin self identifies with already is what it is and so could not have been otherwise, whereas its future directions remain at least partly indeterminate.

⁹ This portion of Fischer (2009) reproduces Fischer and Speak (2000).

when we speak of deprivation and harm, the subject is not the thin self (*qua* thin self), but some more complex entity, such as the thin self conjoined with a capacity to step back from any particular thick self and evaluate such selves. (Fischer, 2009: 70)¹⁰

Kaufman maintains that even if we can form preferences about which thick self our thin self is attached to, this doesn't show that our preferences track possible states of affairs. But what's interesting here is that both Kaufman *and* Fischer and Speak, in exploring the distinction between thick and thin selves, accept the premise that thick selves, not thin selves, form preferences and evaluate different (putatively) possible thick selves, for thin selves 'have no perspective' (Kaufman, 2000: 96; cf. Fischer, 2009: 69).

As Johansson notes, there is a tension between Kaufman's insistence that metaphysical essences cannot form preferences, and at least some of the potential candidates for 'metaphysical essence' he cites, such as bodies and Cartesian souls. Those who believe in Cartesian souls certainly see such souls as the bearer of mental properties, while physicalists about mind likewise see bodies as capable of thinking, feeling, and forming preferences. That being the case, says Johansson, either of these 'metaphysical essences' would appear to be a 'thick self' in Kaufman's terms, and thus 'The thick/thin distinction seems to collapse' (2013: 55). Moreover, the assumption that thick selves but not thin selves (metaphysical essences) form preferences leads to other difficulties. Fischer ends up endorsing an apparently tripartite ontology of persons, consisting of thin selves, thick selves, and an associated reflective 'capacity to step back from any particular thick self and evaluate such selves' (Fischer, 2009: 70). It's not clear, however, what the status of this third item is. Fischer and Speak seem to ascribe this reflective capacity to the thick self (Fischer, 2009: 58) – in which case Kaufman's objection that thick selves *cannot* be other than they are is still in play. Alternatively, if this third element is understood as something genuinely separate from the thick and thin selves, we might well wonder where it comes from.

Kaufman, meanwhile, takes it that 'Questions about the evil of death engage persons thick with particular traits; the details of their lives, the projects under way, the beliefs and commitments, the loved ones' (Kaufman, 1999: 12). But he simultaneously insists that 'concern about my death focuses on the extinction of *my awareness of myself as myself*, irrespective of whether my metaphysical essence is also extinguished,' a concern 'over the extinction of personal conscious existence' (Kaufman, 1999: 12, *my emphasis*). So the thick self on Kaufman's account is both a locus of experience *and* a bearer of psychological *and* practical (relational) predicates. Yet if thick selves are loci of experience, and total amnesia is self-destroying as Kaufman says it is, then we're left with the complication that total amnesia still leaves a locus of consciousness in place, and it doesn't seem right to say that the old locus has vanished and a new one has taken its place.¹¹

¹⁰ For some objections to the aggregate suggestion, see Johansson (2008: 477).

¹¹ Kaufman might, however, here respond by agreeing with Anthony Rudd that 'A Self is not a bare I plus some extra ingredient; a bare I is a drastically diminished Self' (Rudd, 2005: 421).

There is, however, another option, one that preserves what's right in the thick/thin self bifurcation while avoiding these problems. Kaufman (1999: 13) endorses Nagel's claim that 'the desire to go on living [...] is essentially first-personal: it is not the desire that a particular, publically identifiable human being survive' (Nagel, 1986: 223). But this irreducibly first-personal dimension is, as Nagel notes in the same breath, in tension with an objective indifference over the death of anyone in particular, which cuts across the thick/thin self distinction – as evidenced by Kaufman's indifference to the thick self of the Inuk he imagines. First-personal concern and the concern that specific thick selves survive can, it seems, come apart (otherwise we could make no sense of a preference for total amnesia over instant death). That fact might, and I think should, lead us to look at drawing the line between thick and thin selfhood in a somewhat different way.

3 Self and Person

A distinction has been gradually emerging across various philosophical literatures connected to selfhood between the *person* and the *self*, one which is related to, but importantly different from, the thick/thin self distinction. There are several ways into an account of this distinction, but here I'll take a path beginning, appropriately enough, with Nagel, who has been cited (Baker, 2013: 162) as a philosopher who might be sympathetic to this emerging distinction: not Kaufman and Fischer's distinction between the thin self as a metaphysical essence and the thick self as a psychological and practical subject, but between the *self* as locus of experience and the *person* as a publically identifiable psycho-physical being.

Nagel speaks of a person TN, who corresponds to Kaufman's thick self: 'an individual born at a certain time to certain parents, with a specific physical and mental history, who is at present thinking about metaphysics' (Nagel, 1986: 56). But the fact TN is a subject raises at least two difficult questions: first, the problem that the proposition 'I am TN' seems to say something more than the tautological proposition 'TN is TN' does; and second, the problem that it seems incomprehensible that I could be *any* person. With respect to this second, less familiar problem, Nagel speaks of the sense that 'as far as what I really am is concerned, any relation I may have to TN or any other objectively specified person must be accidental or arbitrary. I may occupy TN or see the world through the eyes of TN, but I can't *be* TN. I can't be a mere *person*' (Nagel, 1986: 55). What Nagel reports here is a sense that while he *is* the person TN, he is not *essentially* that person:

my being TN (or whoever I in fact am) seems accidental, and my identity can't be accidental. So far as what I am essentially is concerned, it seems as if I just *happen* to be the publicly identifiable person TN: as if what I really am, this conscious subject, might just as well view the world from the perspective of a different person. The real me occupies TN, so to speak; or the publicly identifiable person TN contains the real me. (Nagel, 1986: 60–61)

What's interesting about this for our purposes is the claim that the identification between a person (TN) and a 'conscious subject' comes apart at least to the extent that the relationship between them comes to appear contingent. My sense of myself as a 'conscious subject' can detach from my sense of myself as a *person*, with the latter being understood as the (diachronic) bearer of the range of physical, psychological, and relational properties. TN cannot help but be TN, but, thinks Nagel first-personally, *I* might not have been TN. And this capacity to detach from any particular person is not, as Nagel notes, mysterious or unfamiliar: it is simply what we do anytime we view the person we are 'from the outside.' (It's also what we do when we wonder if it would have been better to be born in an Inuit community). How, then, are we to describe this subject that is somehow 'contained in' TN, or that sees the world from a perspective defined by TN's spatio-temporal location and bodily constitution?

Nagel goes on to call this entity¹² that can detach from the person the 'objective self.' The objective self gathers information about the world via the epistemic resources of the person TN, though there is no conceptual reason why it could not just as well be connected to the world through some different person, or through no person at all. It 'uses' the perspective of TN, but in an important sense the 'objective self' is not perspectival at all: 'It is the perspectiveless subject that constructs a centerless conception of the world by casting all perspectives into the content of that world' (Nagel, 1986: 62). However, we need to be careful about what 'perspectiveless' means here. If Nagel means, as he appears to, that the objective self has no *particular* perspective essentially, such that it could be associated with any *other* perspective (by which he apparently means sensory orientation to the world) then the claim is fairly unproblematic. This is in keeping with Nagel's example of a brain in a vat fed information about the world via words rather than quasi-sensory input (Nagel, 1986: 62–63). Yet not having any *specific* perspective *essentially* is not the same thing as being *essentially perspectiveless*. Nagel speaks of the 'objective self' as a 'conscious subject,' and as has been noted in the phenomenological tradition (e.g. Sartre, 1969: 306–07; 16–17), a completely non-perspectival consciousness seems to be inconceivable. Even a brain in a vat receiving non-sensory information must have a perspective: even if such a brain is radically cut off from its spatial location and is thus 'centerless' in Nagel's terms, its experience must nonetheless be irreducibly *temporally* perspectival. Its experience must have the character of being 'now', even if its sense of 'here' has been vitiated by a loss of contact with its environment. And in our everyday embodied experience, of course, consciousness is both *here* and *now* even when its intentional object is elsewhere and elsewhen.

So Nagel's 'objective self' is an essentially first-personal, here-and-now perspective that is only contingently associated with a given human being. This maps fairly neatly onto a range of distinctions that have subsequently been made in the literature, such as the 'self' and the 'human being' (Strawson, 2009), the 'minimal self' and the 'narrative self' (Zahavi, 2007), and the 'self' and the 'person' (Johnston, 2010). To

¹² If 'entity' is not already too ontologically strong a word. One worry about the SELF as defined in this paper, or Nagel's 'objective self,' is that it's really just a Cartesian *res cogitans*, a spooky thing interacting with other, non-spooky things. The temptation to ontologise what is essentially something phenomenological is almost impossible to resist.

avoid confusion across these different nomenclatures as well as ordinary language, I'll hereafter use small caps to pick out two technical uses of 'self' and 'person':

A SELF is a present tense, irreducibly first personal locus of consciousness.

A PERSON is a diachronic bearer of various forms of psychological and/or physical continuity and social identity.

I have deliberately left 'PERSON' rather capaciously under-described here (much as Kaufman does with 'thin self'). I mean by PERSON something fairly similar to the entity found at the center of Schechtman's (2014) 'Person Life View': a unified locus of our various person-tracking practices. The sense of PERSON and its difference (and separability) from SELF is also captured nicely in Johnston's (2010: 175) Nagel-echoing discussion of the fear of death: sometimes we fear that when we die there will no longer be a PERSON answering to our description to carry out our projects and tend to our concerns, while at other times, and more fundamentally, we fear that the SELF, the 'arena of presence and action' each of us experientially finds ourselves to be, will cease to exist. Despite the imprecision of the term, it should be fairly clear that the sort of thick selves discussed by Kaufman, Fischer, and Speak sit comfortably within this definition of PERSON: PERSONS will at least be thick selves in their sense – 'an entity with a particular history, particular loved ones, and particular projects under way' (Kaufman, 2000: 94–95) – even if Kaufman's psychologicistic description of thick selves leaves out at least some of what else might be included in PERSON. Distinguishing between SELF and PERSON in this way thus makes it easier to see which entity is forming a preference and which is, so to speak, the object of that preference than it has been in the debate up to this point.

So my claim here is that the SELF/PERSON schema maps productively onto Kaufman's 'thin' and 'thick' selves, albeit in ways that entail one major difference: instead of being a 'metaphysical essence,' the thin self is now understood as a present tense locus of consciousness. The 'thin self,' like Nagel's 'objective self,' takes the 'thick self' (the person TN) as its object. If we adopt the SELF/PERSON schema for differentiating thin and thick selves, Kaufman's Inuk example now starts to look very different. Instead of a thick self considering whether it would have been better to be a *different* thick self, with the attendant ontological issues that worry Kaufman, we are now talking about a SELF comparing and evaluating two PERSONS. Yet in some respects this new position is the same as Fischer's position, except that the ability to 'step back' reflectively is now ascribed to the thin self (SELF) rather than the thick self (PERSON). So, what flows from this change?

I think there are several reasons (primarily phenomenological ones) to adopt the SELF/PERSON schema in general, but for the present discussion the primary benefit of assigning the subjective perspective from which thick selves are evaluated to the SELF is that it explains how coherent transworld evaluation across different thick selves, with different points of origin, is possible. The SELF is not asking whether it would have been better had *it* have come into existence earlier or later, but whether it would have been better to be associated with this particular PERSON or a different one. So even if Kaufman is correct that a thick self cannot come into existence earlier and be the *same* thick self due to the inevitable qualitative differences that would follow, a

SELF could still form preferences as to which PERSON it would be better to be ‘associated’ with. Hence any lingering difficulties occasioned by Fischer and Speak assigning the capacity to ‘step back’ to the thick self are sidestepped, and we have a better explanation for how it can be the case that we do, in fact, entertain questions like ‘would I have been better off if I’d been born an Inuk?’ without apparent incoherence. That being the case, one important attempt to counter the neo-Lucretian symmetry argument fails.

As an aside, this approach also allows us to account for a counter-example offered by Pettigrove: if we learned in middle age that we’d nearly been kidnapped as a baby and sold on the black market, we would think “I almost ended up having a very different life,” not “I almost died” or “I almost didn’t exist” (Pettigrove, 2002: 412). Such a response suggests, contra Kaufman, that we identify with our ‘thin’ (metaphysical, biological etc.) self rather than our thick selves. Notoriously, personal identity theory is a game of dueling intuitions, and for any candidate for ‘thin self’ we can offer here, a competing set of intuitions can be offered. Does the kidnapped baby example show I identify with my body? Then we run up against the irresistible pull of the Lockean ‘transplant intuition’ (Olson, 1998). Does it show I identify with some sort of Cartesian soul? Again we can adduce Lockean and Parfitian counter-intuitions here. But this problem goes away if we recast Pettigrove’s example thus: I qua SELF simply reflect that I would be associated with a radically different PERSON had the kidnapper gotten away with his crime.

However, there do seem to be at least two important objections to introducing the SELF/PERSON schema which I will now need to consider.

4 Objection One: Too Thick or Too Thin

As noted above, Johansson expresses the worry that if ‘metaphysical essences’ have mental properties – as some of Kaufman’s candidates for that role do – then the thick/thin self distinction simply collapses. If the thin self is, say, a Cartesian soul or a brain, then it seems to have the ‘full complement of psychological states, memories, beliefs, ongoing projects, values, aspirations, and commitments’ (Kaufman, 2000: 94–95) of the thick self. So while I don’t claim that SELVES are ‘metaphysical essences,’ by making the thin self into a locus of consciousness, and thereby assigning it mental properties, I seem to be collapsing the thick/thin self distinction by making the thin self too thick.

We could reply to that suggestion by reiterating that the SELF is very minimal: in effect, a mere point of awareness (perhaps something like the *puruṣa* of Sāṃkhya thought: pure awareness rather than mentality). But insisting on the thinness of the SELF creates another problem, which Strawson (2009: 331) calls the problem of ‘ontic depth.’ How can a SELF (or ‘minimal subject’ in the context of Strawson’s discussion) be said to speak three languages, be bad at mathematics, and so forth? Or to situate this in the context of Fischer’s insistence that we can coherently form preferences between different thick selves: how can something as thin as a SELF have interests and concerns from which to form such preferences *at all*? How can a present tense subject of experience express a preference for having one thick self (PERSON) over another if

the psychology by which it forms preferences is partly constitutive of its thick self? To put that in more graspable terms, suppose that I am outgoing and gregarious, and I am considering whether it would be better to have been shy and retiring. If such a life looks unattractive to me, surely that reaction is a function of the gregarious psychology I *actually* have? It looks like the dice are loaded: I'm being asked to choose between two thick selves where the criteria by which I would chose are already determined by the thick self I am already 'associated with' in Fischer's terms.

To this we could reply that Fischer is right that we clearly do have at least some capacity to step back from and critique our formed psychologies and wish them to be otherwise (after all, not many extroverts would wish to be more shy than they are, but a great many shy people *do* wish they could be more outgoing). But even if this capacity is not absolute, nothing rules out the possibility that our psychology can be *transparently* operative in the way our SELVES form preferences etc. That is, someone living in 21st century Japan reading the sagas of Snorri Sturluson might reasonably judge whether or not they would have been better off had they been born in medieval Iceland, with all the radical changes in psychology this would have entailed, and come to a choice that *expresses* the psychology of a 21st century Japanese person even as it makes that psychology the *object* of their preference. Or more simply, think of an easily embarrassed person (thick self) who, reflecting on how prone to embarrassment they are, is embarrassed this fact: there is no threat of regress here because the SELF's embarrassment is non-thetic, being *about* the PERSON's propensity to embarrassment (Stokes, 2015: 190). To use another Sartrean point, SELVES as here understood never coincide with themselves: as soon as I think about my own embarrassment, or poor mathematical ability, or language fluency, I qua SELF am already beyond what I contemplate. I'm considering myself as a PERSON in that case. Subjects cannot become objects for themselves without that object ceasing to be the subject. The self is, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, the eye that never sees itself. (Wittgenstein, presumably, never suffered from eye floaters).

Ok, we might respond, but can't we as third parties say of a specific SELF that it knows French and was never any good at long division, even if the SELF itself can't say that about itself without changing the subject and speaking about itself qua PERSON? (The language here is unavoidably torturous I'm afraid). *You* might not be able to say 'I speak three languages' without thereby talking about your PERSON rather than your SELF, but can't *I* say your SELF speaks three languages? But recall that I have defined a SELVES as being irreducibly *present tense* and *first personal*. That means that speaking of their objective properties in this way is, strictly speaking, illegitimate. In trying to do so, we end up turning a wholly subjective entity into an objective one. And a similar issue arises with respect to the temporal character of the SELF too, as we'll now see.

5 Objection Two: The Temporality of First-Person Perspectives

My proposal is that we understand Kaufman's thin self (SELF) as corresponding to the first person perspective. But here we might object that for a SELF to be associated with a PERSON it would have to be temporally co-extensive with that PERSON – meaning

that in asking this question, a SELF *is* implicitly asking whether it would have been better for *it* to have come into existence earlier. Kaufman allows that thin selves in the sense of ‘metaphysical essences’ can come into existence earlier without compromising their identity. The same sperm and the same ovum could (theoretically) have been combined much earlier, for instance, or a Cartesian soul might turn out to have existed for centuries before its embodiment. But what about SELVES in the sense of loci of experience? Can a SELF come into existence at a different time and still be the same SELF?

Suppose I ponder whether it would have been better if I had been born in Renaissance Florence. On the story I am sketching here, I-qua-SELF (subject of experience) am asking which of two PERSONS it would have been better to be associated with. But to be associated with a PERSON living in fifteenth century Florence, it might seem natural to assume that I-qua-SELF would have had to have come into existence five centuries earlier than I-qua-SELF actually did. Johansson considers the idea that the *thick* self could be a bare first-person perspective, but notes that this won’t help Kaufman’s argument as he sees no reason why a first-person perspective, not being dependent upon any specific psychological content, could not have existed earlier than it did. (Johansson, 2008: 482). But in fact there is a serious problem of reidentification here. Whereas we can imagine a sperm and egg combining earlier, what would it mean to say that a first-person perspective could have come into existence earlier? In what would its identity and persistence conditions consist? In fact Johnston takes this thought as fatal to ‘selves’ in his sense: if we reject the idea of mental substances or immaterial souls, then SELVES can have no reidentification conditions, and are therefore *merely intentional* objects, ‘creatures of the unreal’ (2010: 225) like hallucinations.

But as noted, SELVES in this sense are irreducibly present tense. To ask about a SELF’s temporal extension is thus to make a sort of category mistake: it would be to move from an irreducibly tensed phenomenological datum to a tenseless metaphysical question of endurance. There might of course be third-personal ways of discussing the duration of SELVES, as when psychologists study the duration of the specious present, but just insofar as this departs from the first personal character of SELVES it thereby also departs from the irreducible *nowness* of SELFHOOD. I’ve made the point elsewhere (e.g. Stokes, 2015) that Johnston’s rejection of selves misses its target for precisely this reason. Likewise, the question of whether a SELF could have come into existence earlier than it did without compromising its identity is a non-starter if we can’t properly speak of the duration of SELVES without changing the subject.

So *from the perspective of the SELF*, the objection that a given SELF *p* associated with (and temporally co-located with) a PERSON *q* would also have to be temporally co-located with a PERSON *r* in order for *p* to coherently form a preference to be associated with *r* instead of *q* simply gains no purchase. From-the-inside, so to speak, the temporal location of *p* is simply *now*, and to ask about whether *p* existed at specific moments in the past is to subtly abandon the constitutive ‘nowness’ that is essential to what *p* is. Rather, for *p*, the question is simply something like this: Do I *now* think it would be better to be associated with *q* or with *r*? And so we’re now talking about a question of how SELVES interact with – react to, appropriate, identify/disidentify with, modify – PERSONS.

This irreducible indexicality helps to address at least two possible objections. The first is that we need some limits on which PERSONS my SELF could be associated with. Recall that for Nagel, it is wholly contingent that the ‘objective self’ is associated with any specific person. This raises a range of possible objections: if that’s the case, couldn’t my SELF be associated with *your* body (which is part of your PERSON), in a sort of Lockean body-swap scenario? Couldn’t it be associated with the body of, say, a dog? Indexicality, I think, closes off these options. I can’t be in your body because whichever body I am in right *now* is by definition *my* body. Nor could I be associated with a dog’s body *now* assuming mental capacities are somehow related to brains – regardless of what sort of relation that turns out to be – and assuming dogs don’t have the sort of neural architecture to support the asking of such high-level self-reflexive questions.¹³

The second possible objection is specifically related to temporality.¹⁴ To form a preference is, unavoidably, a diachronic process. We consider our options, weigh up pros and cons, and finally reach a decision. (Even apparently spontaneous preference-formations, as when we see something and take an instant dislike to it, presumably take at least *some* small amount of time). That raises a potential question of how it could be possible for a SELF, given its present-tense character, to form preferences between possible PERSONS. However, that objection too involves a certain objectivizing of the SELF, treating it as if being present-tense is the same as having a definite, if very small, duration. On that way of thinking, SELVES just don’t last long enough to do the work of deliberation. But think of, for instance, Husserl’s (in)famous model of consciousness as exemplified by hearing a simple melody. We can speak of a given moment of consciousness as containing the note we are hearing at a given instant *plus* a retention of the previous note *and* an anticipation of the note to come. Were this not the case, we would not hear a melody at all, just one note after another. But this does not mean that the moment of consciousness being referred to must have some minimum duration, of, say, at least three notes. Likewise, for someone as indecisive as myself, forming a preference may take an agonizingly long time, yet every moment of that deliberation is, for me, as I deliberate, *now*. As a PERSON I could end up deliberating for hours; as a SELF I am either deliberating right now, or not.

6 Asymmetry beyond Metaphysics

To recap: For Kaufman, what we care about in survival is the ‘thick self,’ and a thick self, on his view, could not have come into existence earlier than it did. If it had, the specific set of psychological properties we take to be constitutive of *just this* thick self would not exist. Hence it makes no sense to consider whether I would have been better off had I been born earlier; and so, contra Lucretius, the period of non-existence before I was born cannot deprive me of anything I could rationally care about. Fischer and Speak, against this, insist that we can and do

¹³ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this objection and these examples.

¹⁴ My thanks to Rik Kaufman for putting this objection, as well pressing as the metaphysics vs. phenomenology objection described in the final section.

ask this type of question – would I have been better off if I'd been born earlier/ richer/Inuit/in medieval Iceland? – without apparent incoherence. In so doing, we are, according to Fischer and Speak, considering which thick self our thin self would be better off 'associated with.' Their account, however, leaves it somewhat opaque how a 'metaphysical essence' could form such a preference. Adopting the SELF/PERSON schema clarifies this: by recasting the thin self as a first-personal locus of consciousness rather than 'metaphysical essence' the relationship of the thin self to the thick self is understood in a way that explains how transworld evaluation is possible. That being the case, the neo-Lucretian symmetry argument survives at least Kaufman's attempt to defeat it. That does not mean Lucretius is right (and I still doubt that he is). But it does mean that this particular avenue for defeating him hasn't worked out.

This transposition of the SELF for the 'metaphysical essence' also has the advantage of connecting with something that is importantly right about Fischer's approach. A key insight, beginning with Brueckner and Fischer (1986), is that temporal emplacement is essential to the sort of asymmetrical attitudes involved in both our differing attitudes to birth and death, and our bias towards future goods. They accept that late birth does indeed deprive us of something, and so the lack of a ceremony to mourn Winehouse's not being born earlier 'just shows that it can be ridiculous publicly to lament (in certain ways) something that is in fact a bad thing.' (Fischer & Brueckner, 2014b: 9). And Fischer and his co-authors are also aware, in ways that seem to escape some of their interlocutors, of the irreducible importance of temporal emplacement in asymmetry. Asymmetric attitudes disappear if we take 'a nonlocalized temporal perspective' (Fischer & Brueckner, 2014b), an implicitly atemporal viewpoint on our welfare. It is only from that irreducibly temporally indexical perspective of the SELF that the sort of asymmetries that Lucretius diagnosed can arise.

So to a very great extent, the proposal of this paper is sympathetic to Fischer and his co-authors. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that interpolating the SELF/PERSON schema leaves everything else otherwise untouched. Involving the SELF in this discussion takes us outside of the usual 'medium sized dry goods' territory of metaphysics, as Johnston's rejection of selves as 'creatures of the unreal' shows. Yet metaphysicians might very well balk at all this. The question, for them, is whether earlier birth is *in fact* possible, not whether SELVES can form preferences about doing so. The neo-Lucretian symmetry problem is a metaphysical problem, is it not? If we have to dissolve it through a flight to phenomenology, aren't we just changing the subject?

To some extent, this points to a tension that bedevils all philosophy of personal identity. Theorizing about selfhood is not only a game of competing intuitions, it's also a continual contest between what we care about and what we can justify metaphysically. Concerns that are found to track objects that can be completely exploded by metaphysics can rightly be regarded as needing correction, but equally, a metaphysics too far removed from how we experience the world and what we care about simply won't gain any purchase when we deal with questions that are fundamentally existential in character. And the symmetry argument, at least in its original formulation, is very much directed at an existential problem.

Lucretius is not trying to solve a merely intellectual issue; he's trying to assuage our anxiety about death so that our lives go better. Equally, he is not trying to calm us down using mere comforting rhetoric, but drawing attention to a disconnect between the metaphysical nature of non-existence and the preferences we form about it (fearing one type of it while not caring about another). That interplay between our subjectivity and our metaphysical judgments about what does and does not exist is nowhere more unavoidable than in questions of death and identity. Accordingly, we should not be surprised if the question of whether an earlier birth is theoretically possible turns out to be inseparable from the question of how I, here and now, would relate subjectively to alternative lives, how other such lives present themselves to me, and what the 'I' that does all this preference-formation understands itself to be. That does not entail that metaphysics has no role to play in demarcating what sort of identity claims or preferences are impossible, nor that our subjective judgments are somehow impervious to metaphysical considerations. Understanding how metaphysical reasoning and phenomenological reportage condition and constrain each other should be an important task for those interested in questions of self, death, and time.

The SELF/PERSON schema is, as I hope to have demonstrated in a small way, a productive one for addressing questions such as the symmetry problem, in this case, by showing how transworld comparisons are possible. But it also involves allowing the tensed, first-person perspective to stand on its own terms, rather than incorporating it as one element into a fundamentally impersonal, tenseless ontology. In that sense, it takes us beyond what a wholly objective metaphysics of selfhood can do, and goes at least some way to giving the irreducibility of the first-person perspective its due.¹⁵

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