

Future Bias and Presentism

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Abstract

Future-biased agents care not only about what experiences they have, but also when they have them. Many believe that A-theories of time justify future bias. Although presentism is an A-theory of time, some argue that it nevertheless negates the justification for future bias. Here, I claim that the alleged discrepancy between presentism and future bias is a special case of the cross-time relations problem. To resolve the discrepancy, I propose an account of future bias as a preference for certain tensed truths properly relativized to the present.

Keywords: time bias, future bias, A-theory, presentism.

1 Introduction

One reason to fear death might be that death is a form of nonexistence. Yet nonexistence is not always so fearsome. After all, people do not usually fear how the world was before they were born. Yet being prenatal is also a form of nonexistence. So what is there to fear in the one but not the other?¹ Here is an intuitive answer: To be deceased is to be a thing of the past, and things of the past no longer exist. But to be prenatal is to be a thing of the future, and things of the future will exist.² The value asymmetry between them is thus supposed to correspond to a like metaphysical asymmetry between pastness and futurity.

¹This question poses Lucretius' Puzzle. See Harman 2011, [13], p. 129.

²An answer like this one is implicit in Brueckner and Fischer (1986, [2])

That said, thinking through the difference in this manner takes a certain controversial conception of the world in time for granted: namely, the A-theory of time. A-theory comes from a distinction that J.M.E. McTaggart raised as a way to frame and support his argument that time is unreal.³ In this connection, McTaggart argued that *when* something happens can be understood in two importantly different ways. According to the “A-series,” events instantiate the intrinsic temporal properties of being past, present, or future. According to the “B-series,” by contrast, events instantiate the extrinsic temporal relations of being earlier than, later than, or simultaneous with other events.

There is no exact definition of A-theory.⁴ But it is safe to say that it stands for a group of doctrines whose common denominator is that the A-series irreducibly represents the temporal dimension and that it is typically associated with the following metaphysical doctrines.

Privilege: There is a metaphysically privileged time that is, in some sense, more real than other times.

Passage: Which time has metaphysical privilege changes. In this connection, privilege transitions from earlier times to later times.

Tense: There are irreducibly tensed properties intrinsic to their bearers.

What justifies the asymmetry in our attitudes towards being deceased and being prenatal, despite the fact that being deceased and being prenatal are both ways for people *not* to exist, is that being deceased and being prenatal are related to time differently, at least according to the A-theory of time. This metaphysical difference is supposed to correspond to a like difference in the value between being one rather than the other. Consider the fact that the metaphysically privileged time passes from earlier to later times. This may justify attaching greater value to being prenatal because prenatal things have a future into which the privileged time will pass, but deceased things do not. Many philoso-

³McTaggart (1908, [19]).

⁴See Cameron (2015 [3], p. 2) and (Skow 2015, [28], p. 18).

phers have arrived at a similar conclusion regarding matters that exemplify some sort of temporal value asymmetry, which are asymmetries in how we evaluate things according to their relationship with time.⁵ With respect to the value difference between being deceased and being prenatal, the temporal value asymmetry is that future nonexistence, in the form of being deceased, is worse than nonexistence in the past, in the form of being prenatal. This value asymmetry can be considered a generic version of what some call “future bias,” which is a preference for certain things that are present or future rather than past or for certain things that are past rather than present or future. People are most susceptible to engaging in future bias when they evaluate pleasurable and painful experiences. As aforementioned, some philosophers think that future bias is justified by some part of the metaphysics of time, such as the passage of time. Derek Parfit, for instances, writes that:

Pains matter only because of what they are like when they are in the present, or under the scope of “now.” This is why we must care more about our pains when we are *now* in pain. “Now” moves into the future. This is why past pains do not matter.⁶

Similarly, Caspar Hare writes that “if a painful experience is in my future, then it’s *going to happen to me* — I *still have to experience it* — it’s *yet-to-be-experienced*.”⁷ As Parfit and Hare gesture towards, there’s something about an experience’s being *future* which individuates it from being *past*, and it’s this difference-maker in virtue of which futurity matters more than pastness. That said, many philosophers, including Hare, think that appealing to the passage of time is insufficient to justify future bias. To say that futurity matters more than pastness with respect to certain goods because time passes into the future is just to say that futurity matters more because it is futurity.⁸ Indeed, A-theory might even be inconsistent with certain temporal value asymmetries. In this

⁵See (Prior 1959 [24], Schlesinger (1976 [26]), Craig (1999 [4]), and Deng (2015 [7])).

⁶Parfit (1984, [23], p. 180). In this connection, Elizabeth Harman is sympathetic, but she disagrees with Parfit that past pains do not matter (2011, [13], p. 138).

⁷Hare (2013, [12], p. 510).

⁸Moller (2002, [22], p. 81). For additional criticism, see Suhler and Callender (2012, [30]).

regard, for instance, Caspar Hare has argued that a popular version of the A-theory of time—namely, presentism, according to which only the present moment exists—seems inconsistent with the grounds that some A-theorists give for justifying future bias, that is, the ground that there is some intrinsic difference between pastness and futurity.⁹ More recently, Preston Greene and Meghan Sullivan have also argued that presentism doesn't "give us a metaphysical reason to favor future experiences over past ones"¹⁰ For presentism entails that being past and being future are both ways for things not to exist. In that case, what is there more valuable or disvaluable in being one rather than the other?

It would be a remarkable conclusion that presentism entails that an experience or event is no more valuable or disvaluable when it is past than when it is future. A-theory is commonly regarded as a way to justify the intuition that it is rational to value goods when they are present or future more than when they are past. However, as a predominant version of A-theory, presentism seems to defeat that supposed justification. The argument for this position, whose conclusion both Hare as well as Greene and Sullivan seem to endorse, might be ultimately based on something like the following argument. First, future bias is based on an ontological asymmetry between futurity and pastness. Second, any justification for future bias must then properly reflect the ontological asymmetry it presupposes in the grounds for why it is rational to be future biased. Otherwise, it would be arbitrary to prefer goods when they are future rather than past and to prefer bads when they are past rather than future. However, presentism implies that there is no ontological asymmetry between pastness and futurity because they are both forms of nonexistence. Therefore, if presentism is true, there would be no non-arbitrary reason to be future biased. Briefly, I think the argument underwriting the supposed conflict between future bias and presentism traffics in a contentious conception of being biased towards the future. In order for the argument to work, one needs to define future bias as an attitude toward experiences *located* in the past, present, or future. But framing future bias in this way guarantees that presentism and the rationality of future bias are incompatible. In order for presentism to be free to accept that future bias is rational, there must be something asymmetrical between pastness and futurity that corresponds to a like and proper

⁹Hare (2007 [11], p. 363).

¹⁰Greene and Sullivan (2015 [10], p. 953).

difference in value between an experience that is either past or future. But the sort of requisite asymmetry needed in order to justify the rationality of future bias need not be between things located in the past or future. That is, with respect to future bias, what grounds the asymmetry between pastness and futurity need not be non-present sorts of things.

2 Future Bias and Presentism

We say there's no time like the present. For presentists, there's also no time but the present. Consider, for example, Ned Markosian's definition:

According to Presentism, if we were to make an accurate list of all the things that exist –i.e. a list of all the things that our most unrestricted quantifiers range over – there would be not a single non-present object on the list.¹¹

Or Kris McDaniel's:

Presentism [...] the view that there is exactly one metaphysically fundamental sense of “ \exists ” such that “ $\sim \exists x (x \text{ is a past or future object})$ ” is true.¹²

It would be an understatement to say that some people believe that presentism is true; at the very least it is an initially intuitive ontology of time. Many people are probably not going to take seriously the idea that the times at which they were born exist or the times at which they will be dead also exist, but that these other times exist in different regions of spacetime. To be sure, the point is not about what many or most people believe. Rather, the point is that for the many who do believe in presentism, it would be highly counterintuitive for them if presentism entails that they should value an experience when it is in their past to the same extent that they should value the experience when it is in their future.

¹¹Markosian (2004, [17], p. 47).

¹²McDaniel (2017, [18], p. 83).

For the same reason one might question our disproportionate fear of death given that being dead and being prenatal are equivalent forms of nonexistence, one might similarly put into question our disproportionate dread for pains when they are future rather than past because being future and being past are equivalent forms of nonexistence according to presentism. This analogy between, on the one hand, questioning the rationality of the value asymmetry between being deceased and being prenatal, and questioning the rationality of the temporal value asymmetry between being future and being past, on the other, helps frame and clarify what Hare as well as Greene and Sullivan mean when they claim that presentism provides no reason to favor futurity over pastness if it is true. Let's call their claim the "Symmetry Objection" against future bias, since the argument for this claim might be framed as a consideration that counts against justifying future bias by appealing to the A-theory of time.

First, I will argue that the Symmetry Objection is just a special case of the cross-time relations problem for presentism that depends on, just as other special cases of the problem seem to depend on, an assumption about the nature of the relevant cross-time relation that is objectionable by the standards of presentism.¹³ Roughly, the cross-time relations problem for presentism is the problem of accounting for the fact that entities enter into diachronic relations with each other, e.g., causal relations, which entails the fact that the entities in such relations exist at different times. The standard response to any special case of the cross-time relations problem is to reduce and paraphrase these sorts of relations into synchronic relations between abstract or concrete entities that currently exist. For instance, A. N. Prior responded to a variant of this problem by arguing that we can reduce and paraphrase facts about diachronic comparative relations, such as the fact that Prior is taller than his grandfather, to a complex relation between facts about presently existing entities.¹⁴ First, there is the present-tensed fact that Prior has a certain height H . Second, there is the past-tensed fact that his grandfather has a certain height H^* . Finally, there is the present-tensed or perhaps atemporal fact that H is a greater height than H^* . Accordingly, the fact that Prior is taller than his grandfather just is the conjunction of the foregoing facts.

¹³Sider (2003, [27], p. 27-8). For further review, see Ciuni and Torrengo (2012, [33]).

¹⁴Prior (1967 [25], p. 170-1).

Following Prior's lead, one can respond to the Symmetry Objection by arguing that we can reduce and paraphrase the metaphysical difference between past and future experiences that provide a reason to favor certain experiences when they are future rather than past. To demonstrate how this might be possible, I propose that we compare the Symmetry Objection to another special case of the cross-time relations problem according to which presentism and *time travel* are incompatible: namely, the "Nowhere Argument."¹⁵ What the comparison between the Nowhere Argument and the Symmetry Objection is supposed to demonstrate is that, like the Nowhere Argument, the Symmetry Objection relies on an assumption about the nature of certain diachronic relations that presentists should reject. To that end, I formulate the Nowhere Argument as follows. Time travel is like spatial travel: there must be some time to go to and some time to come from. But if presentism is true, then there exists neither a past nor a future to go to or to come from. Therefore, time travel is impossible if presentism is true.¹⁶

What is objectionable about the Nowhere Argument for the incompatibility between time travel and presentism is its implicit assumption that time travel involves a causal relation between events that occur at different times. But there is a conception of time travel that is compatible with presentism if we take Prior's response to the cross-time relations problem seriously. In this connection, Simon Keller and Michael Nelson have argued that presentists are free to accept a conception of time travel according to which it consists in a sequence of tensed truths properly relativized to the present that merely describe causal facts between events that occur at different times. To illustrate their argument, consider the following thought experiment, which is inspired by the thought experiment that Keller and Nelson provide:¹⁷

Jennifer's Journey. Jennifer is a glum fourteen year old millennial listening to sad music in her room one night and reading articles about the replication crisis in science. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a stranger appears and surprises Jennifer, who tells her how to become a successful physicist whose

¹⁵Keller and Nelson (2001, [15], p. 334-5).

¹⁶Cf. Dowe (2000, [8], p. 442), who calls it the "no destinations paradox."

¹⁷Keller and Nelson (2001, [15], p. 335-338).

experiments will be applauded for their replicability. The stranger then twiddles with a weird looking device in their hand and vanishes. Jennifer follows the stranger's advice and becomes a Nobel laureate in physics. By the time Jennifer retires, she has forgotten about the prescient stranger from her past and has come to believe that all of her success was due to good luck, effort, innate talent, and friendly assistance. For her retirement project, Jennifer invents a time machine, presumably the first of its kind. Whimsically, Jennifer operates the machine. Because of this, *it was the case* that Jennifer randomly appears as if from nowhere in the room of her younger millennial self, who was listening to sad music and reading articles on the internet. Feeling sorry for herself, *it was the case* that Jennifer surprises her past self, who does not recognize her, and tells her past self how she to become a successful physicist like her. Afterwards, it was the case that Jennifer twiddles with a weird looking device in her hand and vanishes. Because it was the case that the device she twiddles with is a time machine, Jennifer will reappear a second after the moment in which she disappears after operating the time machine in the future. Now, in the present, the second after Jennifer operates the time machine, Jennifer reappears, feeling like more than a second has passed, but with memories of having spoken to her younger self for quite some time, having finally made the connection between herself and the once forgotten prescient stranger from her past.

Jennifer's Journey is supposed to represent a time-travel narrative that is compatible with presentism because putatively no single proposition that the narrative expresses necessarily depends for its truth on the existence of things that do not exist in the present. In other words, the facts in virtue of which Jennifer is a time traveler are all facts made true by presently existing entities. There are the facts that a stranger suddenly appears in front of Jennifer as a young millennial, who has a discussion with her and disappears into the future because it *will* be the case that Jennifer operates the time machine with the intention of having a discussion with her younger self until she reappears. And when that time comes, it *was* the case that Jennifer suddenly appears in front

of her younger self and has a discussion with her until she leaves. Assuming that presentism is compatible with the possibility of *Jennifer's Journey*, then, it seems that time travel is not incompatible with presentism if time travel is reduced and paraphrased in a manner that is not objectionable by the standards of presentism.

I believe that there is a constructive elaboration on the way Keller and Nelson reconcile presentism and time travel that can similarly reconcile presentism and future bias. That is, perhaps presentism is compatible with future bias conceived as a preference for certain sorts of tensed truths that are properly relativized to the present. Rather than ascribing an intentional relation between a preference of mine and an experience of mine located in the past or future, we can ascribe an intentional relation between myself, the preference, and the truth value of a tensed proposition representing an experience that occurs to me. Understood as such, the asymmetry that future bias presupposes is supposed to be grounded in or a function of metaphysical differences between past, present, and future tensed propositions about certain experiences, which corresponds to a like difference in the value between these propositions.

Having sufficiently characterized my proposal, I offer the following definition of future bias with respect to pleasure.¹⁸

An agent S is biased towards the future with respect to pleasure iff for two inconsistent propositions about a pleasure that S experiences, P_1 and P_2 , where P_1 describes an experience that is at least as pleasurable as the experience that P_2 describes, S prefers the truth of P_2 because it is a present-tensed or future-tensed proposition rather than past-tensed. An agent S is biased towards the future with respect to pain iff for two inconsistent propositions about a pain that S experiences, P_1 and P_2 , where P_1 describes an experience that is at most as painful as the experience that P_2 describes, S prefers the truth of P_2 is because it is a past-tensed rather than a present-tensed or future-tensed proposition.

According to my proposal, future-biased agents prefer the truth value of certain sorts of tensed propositions about pleasures or pains that

¹⁸This definition structurally parallels Greene and Sullivan's definition of future bias with respect to pleasures and pains. (2015, [10], p. 949).

they might experience. Of course, it might be immediately objected that it's not clear how past-tensed and future-tensed propositions could be true if the things that they are describing do not currently exist. This is also a worry for Keller and Nelson's argument for the compatibility between presentism and time travel. But there are seemingly viable solutions to variants of this problem, which people call the "grounding objection" or the "truthmaker problem."¹⁹ In general, such solutions issue from what Rognvaldur Ingthorsson calls the "relocation strategy," according to which truths about the past or future are made true by presently existing entities.²⁰ In this connection, for example, there's John Bigelow's proposal that there are past- and future-directed properties such as "the property of being burdened with a certain sort of past."²¹ I presume that presentists can account for their tensed truths by locating whatever makes them true in the way the world currently is. If so, presentists have a way to justify being biased towards the future because they are able to maintain a metaphysical difference between past-tensed and future-tensed propositions, and which putatively corresponds to a like difference in the value between these sorts of tensed propositions.

3 BIAS TOWARDS THE ERSATZ FUTURE

In the previous section, I presented a definition of future bias that appears to be compatible with presentism. In order to frame and motivate my argument, I showed how Keller and Nelson argue for the compatibility between presentism and time travel. Given the structural parallel between my argument and their own, it would stand to reason that my argument is susceptible to structural objections that Keller and Nelson's argument faces. In this connection, Ted Sider has raised such an objection, claiming that Keller and Nelson's argument misrepresents time travel:

That I will view a dinosaur in my personal future amounts merely to the fact that I once viewed a dinosaur, and moreover that this is caused by my entry into a time machine.

¹⁹See Davidson (2013, [6]) and Crisp (2007, [5]).

²⁰Ingthorsson (2017, [14], p. 88).

²¹Bigelow (1996, [1], p. 46-47).

Since this fact bears little resemblance to the facts that constitute a normal person's genuine future, I could not enter the time machine with anticipation and excitement at the thought of seeing a dinosaur, for it is not true that I am about to see a dinosaur, nor is the truth much like being about to see a dinosaur. If anything, I should feel fear at the thought of being annihilated by a device misleadingly called a "time machine". The device causes it to be the case that I once viewed a dinosaur, but does not make it the case in any real sense that I will view dinosaurs.²²

Sider's argument is basically this. Backwards time travel can be future-looking: When someone time travels into the past, they experience that travel as part of their future. But backwards time travel that is recast in presentist-friendly terminology represents a form of time travel that cannot be future-looking. Take *Jennifer's Journey* for example. When Jennifer operates the time machine, it is not that she will experience what was the case. To be sure, her operation of the time machine in the present is that in virtue of which it is true that *it was* the case that she appears as if out of nowhere in front of her past self, among other things. But that is not a future-looking event for Jennifer. Instead, what happens is that Jennifer disappears for a second. And because of this she makes certain past-tensed propositions true. Suddenly, she reappears and acquires certain episodic memories in virtue of which she believes that she had a first-hand experience of time travel. But her experience of time travel was not first-hand, but rather second-handed—or so Sider contends. In sum, we are supposed to believe that Jennifer is a time traveler because three things involving her are the case. First, it is the case that Jennifer operates the time machine and disappears. Second, because of this, many past-tensed truths about events involving Jennifer are arranged and related to each other in the sort of way that one would expect from a time-travel story. Finally, it is the case that Jennifer reappears and acquires certain episodic memories about the past. However, is this really time travel?

A similar sort of critical question can be raised against my argument for the compatibility between presentism and future bias. That is, is it really a form of future bias to prefer the truth of a proposition about

²²Sider (2005, [28], p. 333).

pleasures when they are in the present or future tense rather than the past tense? What we care about when we care about *when* an experience occurs seems not to be about whether a true proposition about an experience we are having is in the past, present, or future tense. Rather, it is about the very experience that the proposition describes. The objection, then, is that my presentist-friendly account of future bias does not properly reflect the fact that to be future biased is to be biased towards the experiences themselves and not the truth value of the tensed propositions about them.

Basically, the objection states future-tensed propositions about experiences are not made true by experiences located in the future, but only something abstract and in the present. Why would future-biased agents care about such things? One reason to doubt this sort of objection is that, when we think closely about what future-biased agents want of experiences is not their futurity or pastness. Rather, they want a certain relation to the present to obtain. Otherwise, future-biased agents would always get what they want if, for example, there is a pleasure in their future that would never come. Indeed, consider the following thought experiment from Meghan Sullivan (2018, [32], p. 28):

Suppose Eternal Eddie will live an infinitely long life. And suppose God offers Eddie the promise of a single experience of bliss at one time in his life. Further, God promises that for every day Eddie waits to schedule the bliss, God will make the bliss even better. Poor Eddie; if all he cares about is blissing out as much as possible, he'll never schedule his bliss.

If Eternal Eddie is future-biased, and what future-biased agents care about is merely the timing of their experiences, then Eternal Eddie's future bias does not give him a reason to be frustrated because he will never schedule his bliss. For his bliss will always be future. But of course, what Eternal Eddie should do is schedule his bliss. Reflecting on what Eternal Eddie should do tells us something interesting about what future-biased agents really care about. That is, future-biased agents do not care whether their experiences are past or future *per se*, but whether their experiences are present, will be present, or were present. This is why it would be rational for Eternal Eddie, were he a future-biased agent, to schedule his future bliss for some arbitrary time, because then his future bliss will eventually be present, which is what matters to

future-biased agents. Having made it sufficiently clear that future-biased agents do not care about the pastness or futurity of certain experiences, but whether certain experiences are present, will be present, or were present, we can also clarify why my presentist-friendly account of future bias accords the truth value of a tensed proposition about an agent's experiences its proper role as the object of future-biased preferences. For a true future-tensed proposition about a pleasure represents part of the way the present will be, and a past-tensed proposition about a pain represents part of the way the present neither is nor will be for an agent, and what future-biased agents care about is how the present was, is, or will be. Therefore, such propositions are appropriate objects of concern for future-biased agents.

4 CONCLUSION

I sought to draw more attention to the connection between the metaphysics of time and temporal value asymmetry, especially the metaphysics of presentism and the rationality of future bias. In this connection, I have put into better focus a potentially problematic objection against an approach to justifying future bias that appeals to the A-theory of time. The potential objection is that presentism, a popular form of A-theory, entails that future bias is unjustified because presentism entails that past and future experiences are not importantly different because neither of them exist. In turn, I have framed this objection as a special case of the cross-time relations problem for presentism.

In accordance with the usual sort of response philosophers make to special cases of the cross-time relations problem, I proposed an account of future bias that demonstrates its compatibility with presentism. In turn, I have responded to a potential objection against my account, which is based on a misunderstanding about future bias, or so I argued. Although the argument is beyond the scope of this paper, I also believe that my conception of future bias is compatible with other A-theories of time. Indeed, there are other versions according to whose ontologies, for instance, the past and present exist, but the future doesn't.²³ Or the past, present, and future are ontologically on a par, but meta-

²³Referred to as the 'Growing Block View,' see Miller (2017, [21]) and Forbes (2015, [9]).

physically dissimilar in that the properties of past or future things are non-qualitative.²⁴ Finally, it is worth making explicit a question implicit in the rich interplay between our temporal value asymmetries and the metaphysics of time. That is, is it not to the A-theorist's dialectical advantage that it accommodates an attitude we regularly summon from our inegalitarian perspective on time?²⁵ We regularly respect the authority of our shared evaluative or normative dispositions. If displaying a bias towards the future is one of them, we might thereby be tempted into a kind of wishful thinking against metaphysical views that enjoin us to disrespect or abandon such practices. Some metaphysical views have already been accused of paving a road to indifference.²⁶ In contrast, others have found a metaphysics of time more attractive *because* it respects our practical concerns.²⁷ In any case, these sorts of questions warrant further discussion and debate.

For example, whereas this paper considers the question, "Does A-theory justify time bias?", Alison Fernandes has considered the converse: "Do time biases justify A-theory?" She aims to show one affirmative argument, the "Normative Argument," is an unsound answer to her question.²⁸ The argument is this:

P1. The temporal value asymmetry is best explained by its being justified.

P2. If the temporal value asymmetry is best explained by its being justified, it is justified.

P3. The temporal value asymmetry is justified (P1, P2).

P4. The temporal value asymmetry can only be justified by objective (non-relative) facts about which events are past and future.

C. Therefore there are objective facts about which events are past and future.

²⁴Sullivan's "Minimal A-theory" (2012 [31]), for instance, or Cameron's "enriched presentism" (2015, [3], p. 209).

²⁵See Yehezkel's "Theories of Time and the Asymmetry in Human Attitudes" (2014, [32]), which argues that our time biases do not help settle the debate between A- and B-theorists.

²⁶I am referring to "A Road to Indifference," in David Lewis (1986, [16], p. 123-128).

²⁷For instance, see Zimmerman (2008, [33], p. 214).

²⁸See Fernandes (2019, [10], forthcoming).

Fernandes provides reasons against P1 and P4. Elsewhere, I have argued for a thesis entailing P4 is false: some time biases, or temporal value asymmetries, are consistent with the B-theory of time.²⁹ In that same paper, however, I also took into consideration some issues bearing on P1. One such issue is whether the temporal value asymmetry is best explained by a scientific rather than metaphysical explanation, and Fernandes thinks various features of the symmetry suggest the value asymmetry arises from evolutionarily-advantaged emotional biases “generalised through temporal framing and associative mechanisms to produce general temporal asymmetries of emotion and value.”³⁰ Although I have some concerns about Fernandes’ arguments, nevertheless it raises several compelling challenges for anyone who thinks temporal value asymmetries are justified for normative rather than merely motivational or descriptive reasons, as the emotional bias account suggests.

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²⁹See Bnefsi (2019, [2]).

³⁰See Fernandes 2019, [10], forthcoming.

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