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PROSPECTS FOR TEMPORAL NEUTRALITY¹

We often assess actions and policies at least in part by how they distribute goods and harms across different people's lives. For example, utilitarians favor distributions that maximize welfare, egalitarians endorse equal distributions, and friends of maximin favor distributions that are to the greatest advantage of the worst off. In parallel fashion, we might assess actions and policies in part by how they distribute goods and harms across time. Intertemporal distribution has not been as extensively studied as interpersonal distribution. Whereas there are many competing conceptions of interpersonal distributive justice, there are not so many competing conceptions of intertemporal distribution. This may be in part because one view about intertemporal distribution has seemed uniquely plausible to many people. This traditional conception of intertemporal distribution is the demand of *temporal neutrality*, which requires that agents attach no normative significance per se to the temporal location of benefits and harms within someone's life and demands equal concern for all parts of that person's life. For example, this kind of temporal neutrality is reflected in the demands of prudence to undergo short-term sacrifice for the sake of a later, greater good, as when it requires us to undertake routine but inconvenient and unpleasant preventive dental care. Indeed, as we shall see, some have claimed that temporal neutrality is an essential part of rationality.

Despite its hegemony, temporal neutrality deserves philosophical scrutiny. We need to know what exactly temporal neutrality requires and why we should care about its dictates. Even if we can locate a rationale for temporal neutrality, it has several apparently controversial or counter-intuitive normative implications about our attitudes toward the temporal location of goods and harms that must be addressed as part of any systematic assessment.

1. PRUDENCE AND TEMPORAL NEUTRALITY

Prudence demands that an agent act so as to promote her own overall good. It is usually understood to require an equal concern for all parts of her life. But one can also have an equal concern for all parts of the lives of others. So, while prudence requires temporal neutrality, temporal neutrality is not limited to prudence. Nonetheless in discussing temporal neutrality, I think it will often help to focus on the special case of temporal neutrality within the agent's own life, which prudence demands.

Consider Adam Smith's claims in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790), linking prudence and temporal neutrality with the approval of the impartial spectator.

[I]n his steadily sacrificing the ease and enjoyment of the present moment for the probable expectation of the still greater ease and enjoyment of a more distant but more lasting period of time, the prudent man is always both supported and rewarded by the entire approbation of the impartial spectator, and of the representative of the impartial spectator, the man within the breast. The impartial spectator does not feel himself worn out by the present labour of those whose conduct he surveys; nor does he feel himself

¹This essay draws on but significantly extends the discussion in Brink (1997a) and (2003). Thanks to Craig Callender for encouraging me to write this essay and to Theron Pummer for thoughtful comments on the penultimate version of this essay.

solicited by the importunate calls of their present appetites. To him their present, and what is likely to be their future situation, are very nearly the same: he sees them nearly at the same distance, and is affected by them very nearly in the same manner. He knows, however, that to the persons principally concerned, they are very different from being the same, and that they naturally affect *them* in a very different manner. He cannot therefore but approve, and even applaud, that proper exertion of self-command, which enables them to act as if their present and their future situation affected them nearly in the same manner in which they affect him [VI.i.11].

As Smith's appeal to an impartial spectator suggests, the demand for temporal neutrality need not be confined to a prudential concern with one's own well-being but can extend to concern for the well-being of *others*. This is why temporal neutrality is often an aspect, explicit or implicit, in conceptions of impartiality and benevolence, as well as prudence. Also, as Smith makes clear, he conceives of temporal neutrality as a *normative* requirement, not as a description of how people actually reason and behave. As Smith notes, it is an all too familiar fact that people are often temporally *biased*, investing short-term benefits and sacrifices with normative significance out of proportion to their actual magnitude and discounting distant benefits and harms out of proportion to their actual magnitude. This sort of temporal bias is sometimes thought to play a major role in various familiar human failings, such as weakness of will, self-deception, and moral weakness.² But it is almost always regarded as a mistake, typically a failure of rationality.

In *The Methods of Ethics* (1907) Henry Sidgwick recognizes the normative aspect of temporal neutrality in criticizing Jeremy Bentham for assigning normative significance to the temporal proximity of pleasures and pains.

[P]roximity is a property [of pleasures and pains] which it is reasonable to disregard except in so far as it diminishes uncertainty. For my feelings a year hence should be just as important to me as my feelings next minute, if only I could make an equally sure forecast of them. Indeed this equal and impartial concern for all parts of one's conscious life is perhaps the most prominent element in the common notion of the *rational* – as opposed to the merely *impulsive* – pursuit of pleasure [124n; cf. 111].

Later, he elaborates on the demands of temporal neutrality and notes that it has broader application than its role in his own version of hedonistic egoism.

Hereafter *as such* is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now. It is not, of course, meant, that the good of the present may not reasonably be preferred to that of the future on account of its greater certainty: or again, that a week ten years hence may not be more important to us than a week now, through an increase in our means or capacities of happiness. All that the principle affirms is that the mere difference of priority and posteriority in time is not a reasonable ground for having more regard to the consciousness of one moment than to that of another. The form in which it practically

²Temporal bias plays an important role in Socratic and Aristotelian discussions of weakness of will. Compare Plato's *Protagoras* (356a-357e) and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* vii 2-10. The significance of temporal bias or discounting is explored in Ainslie (1992) and (2001).

presents itself to most men is 'that a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good' (allowing for differences of certainty) The commonest view of the principle would no doubt be that the present *pleasure* or *happiness* is reasonably to be foregone with the view of obtaining greater pleasure or happiness hereafter; but the principle need not be restricted to a hedonistic application, it is equally applicable to any other interpretation of 'one's own good', in which good is conceived as a mathematical whole, of which the integrant parts are realised in different parts or moments of a lifetime [381].

There are several aspects of Sidgwick's account of prudence and temporal neutrality that deserve discussion.

First, Sidgwick recognizes here that prudence's temporal neutrality is a structural constraint about the distribution of goods and harms over time within a single life. As such, it is neutral or agnostic about the content of the good. Though all conceptions of prudence are temporally neutral, different conceptions result from different conceptions of the good. Sidgwick's own conception of the good is hedonistic. Alternatively, one might understand the good in preference-satisfaction terms, as consisting in the satisfaction of actual or suitably informed or idealized desire. Hedonism and preference-satisfaction views construe the good as consisting in or depending upon an individual's contingent and variable psychological states. By contrast, one might understand the good in more objective terms, either as consisting in the perfection of one's essential capacities (e.g. one's rational or deliberative capacities) or as consisting in some list of disparate objective goods (e.g. knowledge, beauty, achievement, friendship).

Second, just as Sidgwick makes clear that temporal neutrality is not limited to hedonistic conceptions of prudence, so too we can notice that it is not limited to prudence. As Smith recognizes, temporal neutrality can be applied to concern for another, as well as oneself. So, for example, the two methods of ethics that form Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason – egoism and utilitarianism – are equally temporally neutral.

Third, Sidgwick is careful to claim that temporal neutrality insists only that the temporal location of goods and harms within a life has no *intrinsic* or *independent* significance. Prudence is intrinsically concerned with the magnitude of goods and harms, but not their temporal location. Temporal location can inherit significance when it is correlated with factors that do affect the magnitude of goods and harms. So if at some future point in time I will, for whatever reason, become a more efficient converter of resources into happiness or well-being, however that is conceived, then a neutral concern with all parts of my life will in one sense require giving greater weight to that part of my life. Perhaps, in the "prime of life" I have greater opportunities or capacities for happiness. If so, temporal neutrality will justify devoting greater resources to the prime of life. However, this is not a pure time preference for that future period over, say, the present, precisely because the same resources yield goods of different magnitudes in the present and the future. The rationality of this sort of discounting is an application of, not a departure from, temporal neutrality.

Furthermore, we may be differentially epistemically situated with respect to different points in time, and this will affect what temporal neutrality requires. Relative to events in the near future, events in the further future depend on more intervening events and are typically harder to predict and less certain. The most obvious case of this sort is the certainty or predictability of my continued existence. It is less certain or predictable that I will exist the

further into the future I project. The probability that I will exist in 2030 is lower than the probability that I will exist in 2020. Presumably, rational planning can and should take this kind of uncertainty into account by discounting the significance of a future good or harm by its improbability. But, again, this seems to be an application of, rather than a departure from, temporal neutrality. Insofar as near and distant goods and harms are equally certain, I should have equal concern for them.

Another way to make this point is in terms of the important distinction, which Sidgwick draws, between *objective* and *subjective* reasons (1907: 207-08, 394-95). Claims of objective rationality are claims about what an agent has reason to do given the facts of the situation, whether he is aware of these facts or in a position to recognize the reasons that they support. Claims of subjective rationality are claims about what the agent has reason to do given his beliefs about his situation or what it would be reasonable for him to believe about his situation. Actions that are objectively rational can be subjectively irrational, and vice versa. Prudence can admit that the existence of my near future is more certain than the existence of my distant future and that this epistemic fact should affect what it is subjectively rational for me to do; it claims only that insofar as I have both present and future interests, they provide me with equally strong objective reasons for action.

This point reflects the fact that prudence is, at least in the first instance, a theory about an agent's objective reasons. This focus on objective reasons is worth elaborating. Subjective reasons are normatively important. In particular, it is common for those who make the distinction to think that we should tie praise and blame to subjective, rather than objective, reasons insofar as an agent's subjective reasons are accessible to her in a way that her objective reasons may not be. Insofar as praise and blame are constrained by what is within the agent's power to recognize and do, we have reason to tie praise and blame to an agent's conformity with her subjective reasons. But we can and should still recognize objective reasons. Objective reasons are independent of subjective reasons, as is reflected in the perspective of second-person and third-person evaluators, who distinguish between what was reasonable to do *tout court* and what was reasonable to do from the agent's perspective. But objective reasons are also essential to first-person evaluation in two ways. Objective reasons are central to the retrospective evaluation of one's own conduct and to learning from past successes and failures, even when these successes and failures are not appropriate objects of praise or blame. Moreover, objective reasons appear to be the object of prospective evaluation and deliberation. In practical deliberation, one aims at forming one's best judgment about what it is objectively rational to do, even if praise and blame are best apportioned in accordance with one's subjective reasons. Indeed, objective reasons have a kind of explanatory primacy insofar as we identify an agent's subjective reasons with the actions that would be objectively rational if only her beliefs about her situation, or the beliefs about her situation that it would be reasonable for her to hold, were true. These considerations give objective reasons an independence and theoretical primacy in discussions of practical reason. Prudence, is in the first instance, a theory about objective reasons, and that will be our primary, but not exclusive, focus in assessing its commitment to temporal neutrality.

We have now seen two ways in which Sidgwick thinks that temporally neutral concern can justify differential treatment of different periods in one's life. There is another way in which prudence might justify temporal discriminations that might initially seem incompatible with temporal neutrality, but which Sidgwick does not anticipate. On some views, a life is an organic whole whose value cannot be reduced to the sum of the values of its parts, or, at least, cannot be

reduced to the sum of the values of its non-relational parts. It is possible to hold a version of this view that treats lives with certain narrative structure as being more valuable, all else being equal, than other lives (see, e.g., Velleman 1991). One could hold, for example, that it is intrinsically better for the value of one's life to display an upward trajectory, such that a life in which evils (e.g. misfortunes, pain, and failure) preceded goods (e.g. good luck, pleasure, and success) was, all else being equal, better than a life in which the goods came first. I do not want to defend this view, but it is, I think, coherent. Such a view says, in effect, that the distribution of goods and harms within a life is itself a good, improving the quality of the person's life. Such a view would require assigning normative significance to the temporal location of goods and harms within a life. But this unequal *treatment* of different periods in one's life would be justified by an equal *concern* for all parts of one's life.³ Though such an agent is equally concerned about all parts of her life, she sees that by locating the goods later in life she actually makes a greater contribution to the value of her life overall. This sort of temporal bias does not assign normative significance to temporal location as such. It is compatible with and, indeed, required by temporal neutrality if and only if the temporal distribution of goods and harms within a life actually contributes to the value of that life.

This means that temporal neutrality should be understood to claim that the temporal location of goods and harms within a life has no normative significance except insofar as it contributes to the value of that life. We might say that on this view temporal location has no independent significance or no significance *per se*. The prudent person, concerned to advance his overall good, will be temporally neutral, assigning no independent significance to the temporal location of goods and harms within his life. There will often be diachronic intrapersonal conflicts of value in which what one does affects both the magnitude of goods and harms in one's life and also their temporal distribution. Temporal neutrality requires sacrificing a nearer good for a later, greater good. Call this *now-for-later sacrifice*. This aspect of temporal neutrality, Sidgwick thinks, is a central aspect of our concept of rationality. This claim is echoed by others – for instance by Frank Ramsey, who describes temporal bias as “ethically indefensible” (1928: 261), and by John Rawls who endorses Sidgwick's claim and describes the commitment to temporal neutrality as “a feature of being rational” (1971: 293-94).

However, this conception of temporal neutrality contrasts with a narrower conception that is suggested by some of Sidgwick's remarks. As he sometimes conceives the demand of temporal neutrality, all that the principle affirms is that the mere difference of priority and posteriority in time should not affect the normative significance of goods and harms (1907: 381). This may suggest that the principle is limited in its application to intrapersonal conflicts in which the only variable is temporal location. But that would be far too restrictive. In particular, that conception of temporal neutrality would limit its application to intrapersonal conflicts between goods of the same kind -- for instance, smaller pleasure now versus greater pleasure later. The principle would not apply to conflicts in which different kinds of goods are at stake. Sidgwick's focus on conflicts among homogeneous goods is, of course, reinforced by his sympathy for

³In interpersonal contexts, we sometimes distinguish between equal *concern* and equal *treatment*. Cf. Dworkin (1977: 227). For instance, treating my two children, one of whom has a significant physical disability, with equal concern may require treating them unequally in terms of medical and other resources. We need to make the same distinction in the intrapersonal context. Prudence and temporal neutrality require equal concern, rather than equal treatment *per se*, for all parts of an agent's life.

hedonism, which is a monistic theory of the good. Though he contemplates other conceptions of prudence, informed by non-hedonistic theories of the good, Sidgwick does not explore them in much detail, and he may assume that all significant rivals to hedonism would also be monistic. But there is no reason for us to make this assumption or to restrict the application of temporal neutrality to conflic

later, greater goods seems a paradigmatic form of irrationality, even if it is common and familiar kind of weakness. So temporal neutrality enjoys intuitive support. But can we say more about why we should conform to the demands of temporal neutrality? Can we provide a rationale for temporal neutrality? This is important, because temporal neutrality requires sacrifice, and we should be able to justify sacrifices we demand. In this case, we should be able to justify sacrifices made at one point in an agent's life for the sake of some other period.

A traditional rationale appeals to *compensation*. Now-for-later sacrifice is rational, because the agent is compensated later for her earlier sacrifice. To see how this rationale works, it will help to consider a familiar interpersonal/intrapersonal analogy. Whereas prudence is temporally neutral, utilitarianism is person neutral. Prudence is temporally neutral and assigns no intrinsic significance to *when* a benefit or burden occurs in a person's life. It says that we should balance benefits and harms, where necessary, among different stages in a person's life and pursue the action or policy that promotes the agent's overall good best. Utilitarianism is interpersonally neutral; it assigns no intrinsic significance to *whom* a benefit or burden befalls. Just as temporal neutrality requires intrapersonal balancing, so too person neutrality requires interpersonal balancing. It requires that benefits to some be balanced against harms to others, if necessary, to produce the best interpersonal outcome overall. Utilitarianism's person neutrality thus effects a kind of interpersonal balancing akin to the intrapersonal balancing that prudence's temporal neutrality requires.

But many think that this sort of interpersonal balancing is unacceptable because it ignores the *separateness of persons*. For instance, Rawls famously makes this claim in *A Theory of Justice*.

This view of social cooperation [utilitarianism's] is the consequence of extending to society the principle of choice for one man [i.e. prudence], and then, to make this extension work, conflating all persons into one Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons [1971: 27].

Bernard Williams (1976: 3), Thomas Nagel (1970: 134, 138-42) and Robert Nozick (1974: 31-34) agree. They all accept prudence's intrapersonal balancing, at least for the sake of argument, but reject utilitarianism's interpersonal balancing. But perhaps the right reaction is not to deny the parity of intrapersonal and interpersonal cases but to extend intrinsic distributional considerations into intrapersonal contexts. Perhaps we should be concerned with the way in which we distribute goods and harms among the stages in a single life, as well as among lives, and not just with maximizing value over the course of one's life.

We can see how to deny the parity of intrapersonal and interpersonal cases and provide a rationale for the temporal neutrality of prudence by highlighting the role of compensation in the separateness of persons objection. Nozick's discussion is especially instructive here.

Individually, we each sometimes choose to undergo some pain or sacrifice for a greater benefit or to avoid a greater harm. ... Why not, *similarly*, hold that some persons have to bear some costs that benefit other persons more? But there is no *social entity* with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. ... To use a person in this way does not sufficiently respect and take account of the fact that he is a separate person, that his is the only life he has. *He* does not get some overbalancing good from his sacrifice, and no one is entitled to force this upon him ... [1974: 32-33].

Like the others, Nozick is invoking claims about compensation to explain the asymmetric treatment of intrapersonal and interpersonal balancing. Whereas balancing benefits and harms is acceptable *within* a life, balancing benefits and harms *across* lives appears unacceptable. In the intrapersonal case, benefactor and beneficiary are the same person, so compensation is automatic. In the interpersonal case, benefactor and beneficiary are different people; unless the beneficiary reciprocates in some way, the benefactor's sacrifice will not be compensated. Whereas intrapersonal compensation is automatic, interpersonal compensation is not. This leads the critics of utilitarianism to defend the need for independent principles of interpersonal distribution that would be acceptable, in a way that needs to be specified, to *each* affected party.

3. RATIONALIZING THE HYBRID STRUCTURE OF PRUDENCE

This appeal to compensation also allows us to address a concern about the *hybrid structure* of prudence. Prudence or egoism is a hybrid theory, because it is temporally neutral, assigning equal importance to all parts of an agent's life, but agent-relative, because it assigns significance only to benefits and harms that accrue to the agent. As such, prudence can be contrasted with two purebred rivals. *Neutralism* is fully neutral; it holds that an agent has reason to do something just insofar as it is valuable, regardless of whom the value accrues to or when it occurs. *Presentism* is fully relative; it claims that an agent has reason to do something just insofar as that would promote his own present interest.⁵

Time and person are parallel distributional dimensions; we need to decide where to locate goods and evils in time and among persons. Once we adopt this perspective, prudence may seem like an unstable hybrid. It says that it makes all the difference *on whom* a benefit or burden falls and none whatsoever *when* it falls. On reflection this may seem arbitrary. In *The Methods of Ethics* Sidgwick considers this issue in the context of his discussion of the proof of utilitarianism.

I do not see why the axiom of Prudence [rational egoism] should not be questioned, when it conflicts with present inclination, on a ground similar to that on which Egoists refuse to admit the axiom of Rational Benevolence. If the Utilitarian [neutralist] has to answer the question, 'Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater happiness of another?' it must surely be admissible to ask the Egoist, 'Why should I sacrifice a present pleasure for a greater one in the future? Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?' [418]

The egoist asks the neutralist: Why should I sacrifice my own good for the good of another? The egoist doubts that concern for others is non-derivatively rational. But the presentist can ask the egoist: Why should I sacrifice a present good for myself for the sake of a future good for myself? The presentist doubts that concern for one's future is non-derivatively rational. These doubts may seem parallel. We must decide where among lives and when within lives to locate goods and harms. Because both are matters of position or location, we may think that they should be

⁵What I am calling presentism here is a normative theory about how an agent's reasons for action are grounded in her present interests. It is different from presentism as a metaphysical view about the nature of time, according to which only the present, and neither the past nor the future, is real. For a discussion of this metaphysical version of presentism, see Mozerky's contribution to this volume.

treated the same. Derek Parfit pushes this same worry about the hybrid structure of prudence, or the self-interest theory (S), as he calls it, in Part II of *Reasons and Persons* (1984).

As a hybrid S can be attacked from both directions. And what S claims against one rival may be turned against it by the other. In rejecting Neutralism, a Self-interest Theorist must claim that a reason may have force only for the agent. But the grounds for this claim support a further claim. If a reason can have force only for the agent, it can have force for the agent only at the time of acting. The Self-interest theorist must reject this claim. He must attack the notion of a time-relative reason. But arguments to show that reasons must be temporally neutral, thus refuting the Present-aim Theory, may also show that reasons must be neutral between different people, thus refuting the Self-interest Theory [140].

If present sacrifice for future benefit is rational, why isn't sacrifice of one person's good for the sake of another's? In this way, the appeal to parity may support neutralism. This is roughly the view Thomas Nagel adopts in *The Possibility of Altruism* (1970). His primary aim is to argue against egoism's agent-bias and in favor of impartiality or altruism, and he relies on the parity of intertemporal and interpersonal distribution to do so. Just as the interests of an agent's future self provide him with reasons for action now, so too, Nagel argues, the interests of others can provide him with reason for action. Failure to recognize temporal neutrality involves temporal dissociation -- failure to see the present as just one time among others -- and failure to recognize impartiality or altruism involves personal dissociation -- failure to recognize oneself as just one person among others (1970: 16, 19, 99-100).⁶

Alternatively, we might treat time and person as parallel and argue from the agent-bias that egoism concedes to temporal bias, in particular, present-bias. If my sacrifice for another is not rationally required, it may seem that we cannot demand a sacrifice of my current interests for the sake of distant future ones. If so, we will think that it is only the present interests of the agent that provide her with non-derivative reason for action. Though Parfit mentions Nagel's fully neutral response to parity, it is the fully biased response that he develops and thinks Sidgwick anticipated (1984: 137-44).

Whereas Parfit thinks that one cannot defend the hybrid character of prudence, Sidgwick thinks that this challenge to prudence is unanswerable only if we accept Humean skepticism about personal identity over time (1907: 418-19). Sidgwick thinks that prudence is defensible provided we recognize the separateness of persons.

It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently "I" am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in

⁶Nagel's remarks about the "combinatorial problem" (1970: 134-42) show that he is skeptical of an impersonal interpretation of impartiality. Nonetheless his appeal to parity seems to require neutralism and not just impartiality. He appeals to parity to argue from egoism's temporal neutrality to non-derivative concern for others. But if intertemporal and interpersonal distribution must be isomorphic, and we accept a temporally neutral interpretation of intertemporal impartiality, then we seem forced to accept a person-neutral interpretation of interpersonal impartiality.

which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual [498].

This appeal to the separateness of persons suggests a rationale for the hybrid structure of prudence. We saw that when the separateness of persons is invoked to discredit utilitarianism critics of utilitarianism appeal to the compensation principle. But the compensation principle and the metaphysical separateness of persons explain the asymmetry between intrapersonal and interpersonal distribution. We saw that there is automatic intrapersonal compensation but no automatic interpersonal compensation. Compensation requires that benefactors also be beneficiaries, and for compensation to be automatic benefactor and beneficiary must be one and the same. In the diachronic, intrapersonal case one's sacrifice of a present good for a (greater) future good is rational, because there is compensation later for the earlier sacrifice; benefactor and beneficiary are the same. This explains temporal neutrality. But in the interpersonal case, benefactor and beneficiary are different people; unless the beneficiary reciprocates in some way, the agent's sacrifice will be uncompensated. This explains agent relativity or bias. So we have a rationale for the hybrid treatment prudence accords intertemporal and interpersonal distribution.

Or do we? Couldn't doubts about interpersonal balancing be extended to intrapersonal balancing? If the separateness of persons defeats interpersonal balancing, why doesn't the separateness of different periods within a person's life defeat intrapersonal balancing? After all, me-now and me-later are distinct parts of me.⁷ But then it is hard to see how me-now is any more compensated for its sacrifices on behalf of me-later than I am compensated by my sacrifices for you. Just as doubts about interpersonal balancing lead to a distributed concern with each person, perhaps doubts about intrapersonal balancing should support a distributed concern with each part of a person's life. There are different interpretations of what this distributed concern requires in the interpersonal context, such as equal distribution and maximin. Perhaps we need to explore comparable interpretations of distributed concern in the intrapersonal context. (McKerlie 1989 explores some of these possibilities in interesting ways.) However, this concern about temporal neutrality is not compelling, as it stands, for several reasons.

First, we might distinguish between temporal impartiality and temporal neutrality. Consider again the interpersonal case. Here, one norm might be called the norm of impartiality; it insists that everyone be given equal concern. This norm of impartiality admits of different interpretations, including a norm of substantive equality and maximin, among others. Indeed, utilitarianism's person neutrality is one interpretation of interpersonal impartiality. Similarly, we might identify a more generic notion of intertemporal impartiality that would admit of different interpretations, including that of temporal neutrality. One way to read the separateness

⁷I intend talk about temporal parts of a person or person's life to be metaphysically ecumenical in two ways. First, it is convenient to talk about persons and their temporal parts whether persons are four-dimensional entities that literally have temporal parts (as three-dimensional entities have spatial parts) or whether they are three-dimensional entities that have no temporal parts but do have lives, histories, or careers that have temporal parts or stages. Talk about a person's temporal parts can refer to temporal parts of persons or to parts of lives or careers of persons. Second, my talk of temporal parts is neutral in the debate among those who treat persons as four-dimensional entities having temporal parts about whether persons or their temporal parts are prior in order of explanation.

argument, then, is to see it mandating a temporal impartiality. That would not vindicate temporal neutrality, as such, but it would require a form of impartiality that was inconsistent with the sort of temporal bias displayed in ordinary life by familiar forms of temporal discounting and displayed theoretically in the purebred presentism.

Second, this challenge to temporal neutrality requires thinking that we can and should adopt a sub-personal perspective when reckoning compensation. But there are problems with this idea. Once we go sub-personal and appeal to full relativity, there seems no reason to stop until we reach the sub-personal limit – a momentary time slice of the person. But notions of compensation have no application to momentary time slices, which do not persist long enough to act or receive the benefits of earlier actions. Moreover, many of the goods in life, especially the pursuit and achievement of worthwhile projects, seem to be realized only by temporally extended beings. But if we stop short of momentary time slices and appeal to larger sub-personal entities, call these person segments, other problems arise. One question is just where to stop. If we don't fully relativize, why relativize partially? Moreover, if we do relativize partially, we introduce indeterminacy. This is because the careers of person segments overlap, with the result that any one point in time is part of the career of indefinitely many different segments. To decide whether compensation has occurred, we need a determinate subject. But if we appeal to person segments, we seem to lack a determinate subject (for more details, see Brink 1997a).

Of course, persons are just maximal segments. They also seem to be the most salient segments. Many of the things we value and that structure our pursuits are certain sorts of lives. We aim to be certain sorts of people. Insofar as these ideals structure our beliefs, desires, and intentions, the correct perspective from which to assess success would seem to be the perspective of a whole life. Even when persons have more parochial aims and ambitions, the successful pursuit of these aims and ambitions requires interaction and cooperation among segments, much as persons must often cooperate with others to achieve individual, as well as collective, aims. They do interact and cooperate, much as distinct individuals interact and cooperate in groups, in order to plan and execute long-term projects and goals. They must interact and cooperate if only because they have to share a body and its capacities in order to execute their individual and collective goals, much in the way that individuals must sometimes interact and cooperate if they are to use scarce resources to mutual advantage (cf. Korsgaard 1989). Indeed, both the ease and necessity of interaction among person segments will be greater than that among persons, because the physical constraints and the reliability of fellow cooperators are greater in the intrapersonal case. But this means that person segments will overlap with each other; they will stand to each other and the person much as strands of a rope stand to each other and the rope.⁸ Though we can recognize the overlapping strands as entities, the most salient entity is the rope itself. So too, the most salient entity is the person, even if we can recognize the overlapping person segments that make up the person.

In this way, person segments represent a rather ar1958:008), T

These appear to be reasons to preserve the normal assumption that it is persons that are agents. But is this assumption really coherent? I have identified the person with a temporally extended entity, some of whose parts lie in the future. But then the person is in one sense "not all there" at the time of deliberation and action. How then could the person be the agent who deliberates and acts and possesses reasons for action?

This raises difficult issues, but I doubt that they threaten the assumption that it is persons that are agents.⁹ Notice, first, that person slices seem to be the only candidates for agency that avoid some form of this objection. For person segments extend from the instant of deliberation or action into either the future or the past (or both); so person segments are also entities with parts that are "not all there" at the time of deliberation or action. Only one person slice is "all there" at this time. But we've already seen that that conception of agency is indefensible. We might, therefore, wonder whether the agent or entity whose interests determine what rationally ought to be done need be "all there" at the time of action.

Consider an analogy with nations. We speak of nations as actors that enact legislation, start wars, and so on. We also think of nations as having interests and acting in their interests. But a nation is composed, at least in part, by its entire current population. And there is certainly some sense in which the entire population does not enact legislation or start wars. Instead, certain individuals or groups act as representatives of a larger spatially dispersed group of which they are members. We don't conclude that nations cannot be actors or the bearers of interests. Instead, we conclude that a nation can act when its deputies act on behalf of the national interest, that is, the interest of the spatially dispersed group. Similarly, the present self can act as representative of the temporally dispersed entity, the person, by acting in the interest of this being. If so, then the fact that the temporally extended person is "not all there" at the time of action is not a reason to deny that it is the actor or the entity whose interests determine what agents have reason to do. On this assumption, there is automatic diachronic, intrapersonal compensation and so compensation does justify temporal neutrality.

4. PERSONAL IDENTITY AND TEMPORAL NEUTRALITY

So far, we have explored a rationale for temporal neutrality that appeals to the separateness of persons and the unity within a life. But then the rationale for temporal neutrality may seem to rest on potentially controversial assumptions about personal identity. There is an important tradition of thinking about personal identity, dating back at least to John Locke (1690: II.xxvii), which analyzes personal identity into relations of psychological continuity and connectedness. Following Parfit, we might call this tradition *psychological reductionism*. Bishop Butler claimed that special concern for one's future and moral responsibility would be undermined by Lockean reductionism (1736: 267). In a similar way, Parfit argues that psychological reductionism, of the sort he defends, would undermine prudence's demand of temporal neutrality.

Parfit's version of psychological reductionism is similar to other views in the Lockean tradition of thinking about personal identity, including those of Shoemaker (1963, 1984), Wiggins (1967), and Nozick (1980: ch. 1). As a first approximation, psychological reductionism

⁹Perhaps the difficulty only arises if we are realists about temporal parts, and perhaps the proper moral of the difficulty is that we should reject realism about temporal parts. The defense of presentism that I am considering in this section presupposes a realism about temporal parts. If we reject realism about temporal parts, this hurts presentism, not prudence.

holds that two persons are psychologically connected insofar as the intentional states and actions of one influence the intentional states and actions of the other. Examples of intrapersonal psychological connections include A's earlier decision to vote Democratic and her subsequent casting of her ballot for the Democratic candidate, A's later memories of a disturbing childhood incident and her earlier childhood experiences, and A's later career change and her earlier re-evaluation of her priorities concerning work and family. Two persons are psychologically continuous insofar as they are links in a chain or series of people in which contiguous links in the chain are psychologically well connected. Both connectedness and continuity can be matters of degree. According to the psychological reductionist, it is the holding of many such relations of connectedness and continuity that unify the different stages in a single life. More specifically, personal identity consists in maximal (non-branching) psychological continuity.¹⁰

One of Parfit's arguments against temporal neutrality defends a discount rate as an apparent consequence of diminished connectedness.

My concern for my future may correspond to the degree of connectedness between me now and myself in the future. Connectedness is one of the two relations that give me reasons to be specially concerned about my own future. It can be rational to care less, when one of the grounds for caring will hold to a lesser degree. Since connectedness is nearly always weaker over long periods, I can rationally care less about my further future [1984: 313].

As Parfit notes, this is a discount rate with respect to connectedness and not with respect to time itself. His discount rate should, therefore, be distinguished from the discount rate with respect to time that C.I. Lewis calls "fractional prudence" (1946: 493). Prudence is neutral with respect to time itself and so must deny fractional prudence. But prudence's temporal neutrality is also inconsistent with Parfit's discount rate, because temporal neutrality requires a kind of equal concern among parts of one's life. The magnitude of a good or harm should affect its rational significance. But temporal neutrality implies that the temporal location of a good or harm within a life should be of no rational significance per se. If so, then, all else being equal, an agent should be equally concerned about goods and harms at any point in his life. In particular, if near and more distant future selves are both stages in his life, then, other things being equal, an agent should have equal concern for each, even if the nearer future self is more closely connected with his present self.

¹⁰Two qualifications are in order. (1) If we are to define identity in terms of relations of psychological continuity, these relations cannot themselves presuppose identity. Relations such as remembering one's earlier experiences and fulfilling one's prior intentions, which do presuppose identity, will have to be replaced by more general quasi-relations that are otherwise similar but presuppose causal dependence, rather than identity. See Shoemaker (1970) and Parfit (1984: 220-21). (2) If we are to define identity, which is a one-one relation, in terms of psychological continuity, which can take a one-many form, we must define it in terms of *nonbranching* psychological continuity. But the reasoning that leads us to this conclusion may also lead us to the conclusion that it is continuity (a potentially one-many relation), rather than identity per se, that is what has primary normative significance. See Parfit 1984: ch. 12 and Brink 1997b.

Indeed, Parfit's claim about the discount rate seems too modest. He insists only that this discount rate of concern for one's future is not irrational; he does not claim that it is rationally required. Though the friend of temporal neutrality must deny the more modest claim as well, the reductionist argument, if successful, surely supports the stronger claim that a discount rate of concern is rationally appropriate where the relations that matter hold to a reduced degree. This is because concern should track and be proportional to the relations that matter.

However, reductionism justifies neither the permissibility nor the duty to discount. A symptom that something is amiss in this reductionist justification of a discount rate is that the same reasoning would imply that we lack prudential reason to improve ourselves in ways that involve significant psychological transformation (e.g. an addict giving up his addiction and the associated psychology and lifestyle or a neo-Nazi replacing hate with tolerance and sympathy). For if the improvement involves psychological change that diminishes connectedness, then we must have less prudential reason to undertake it. Improvements that diminish connectedness would be like benefiting another. But self-improvement is a paradigmatic demand of prudence. Something must be wrong with the reductionist case for discounting.

First, notice that diminished connectedness does not follow from psychological change or dissimilarity. Connectedness is defined in terms of psychological interaction and dependence. Sometimes psychological connectedness takes the form of maintaining beliefs and desires, which will ensure some degree of psychological similarity. But connectedness is also preserved in change, as when one changes one's career goals in light of a reassessment of one's opportunities, abilities, and responsibilities. This applies to character change as well. Provided one plays a suitable role in generating and shaping the change in his beliefs, desires, and ideals, his change in character is no obstacle to preserving connectedness over time.

Second, this reductionist argument for a discount rate appeals to diminished connectedness over time, but psychological reductionism needs to be formulated in terms of continuity, rather than connectedness. As Thomas Reid suggested in his criticism of Locke's account of personal identity in terms of memory connectedness, identity is, but psychological connectedness is not, a transitive relation (1785: III 357-58). Transitivity requires that if $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = C$. But even if A is connected to B and B is connected to C , A need not be connected to C . Not so with continuity, which is defined as a chain the links of which are connected. Provided A is connected to B , and B is connected to C , A and C will be continuous, even if they are not well connected. But then diminished connectedness between A and C does not diminish the continuity between A and C . If reductionism is formulated in terms of continuity, rather than connectedness, then diminished connectedness over time does not justify a discount rate.

Third, even if connectedness did matter, the reductionist case for discounting confounds parts and wholes. The question is how a person should view different stages or periods in her life. This is a question about how a whole should view its parts. But the temporally dispersed parts of a person's life are equally parts of that person's life regardless of how the parts are related to each other. Consider, again, the person P and three different temporally successive periods in her life A , B , and C . The fact that A is more connected to B than A is to C does not show that C is any less part of P 's life than B is. As long as it is the person who is the agent and whose interests are at stake, differences in connectedness among the parts of a person's life should not, as such, affect her reasons to have equal regard for all parts of her life.

At one point, Parfit considers a version of this appeal to the idea that parts of a person's life are equally parts of that life (1984: 315-16). He rejects this appeal with an analogy involving

relatives. He claims that although all members of an extended family are equally relatives, this does not justify equal concern among them. For instance, it would not give my cousin as strong a claim to my estate as my children. But to focus on the division of my estate would be the intrafamily analog of asking about the interests of a person slice or segment in the intrapersonal case, which we have claimed is problematic. The intrafamily analog of the person would require focusing on the distribution of some asset that belonged to the entire extended family. But here equality or neutrality seems the right norm in light of the fact that all are equally parts of the family, even if some are more closely related to some relatives than they are to others.

These considerations undermine the reductionist case for a discount rate and show that the rationale for temporal neutrality is metaphysically robust.

5. INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICTS OF VALUE

Temporal neutrality can seem defensible when we restrict our attention to cases in which there is diachronic fixity of interests, because we can see how the agent is compensated later for the sacrifices she makes now. But what about cases in which there is significant change in an agent's character or ideals?

In *The Possibility of Altruism* Nagel claims that temporal neutrality is unproblematic when "preference changes" are regarded with indifference. However, he sees a potential problem when neutrality is applied to intrapersonal conflicts of ideals.

It might happen that a person believes at one time that he will at some future time accept general evaluative principles -- principles about what things *constitute* reasons for action -- which he now finds pernicious. Moreover, he may believe that in the future he will find his present values pernicious. What does prudence require of him in that case? Prudence requires that he take measures which promote the realization of that for which there *will* be reason. Do his beliefs at the earlier time give him any grounds for judging what he will have reason to do at the later [time]? It is not clear to me that they do, and if not, then the requirement of prudence or timeless reasons may not be applicable [74].

Parfit shares Nagel's worries about the application of temporal neutrality to intrapersonal conflicts of ideals (1984: 155). Later, he describes the case of the nineteenth-century Russian nobleman.

In several tears, a young Russian will inherit vast estates. Because he has socialist ideals, he intends, now, to give the land to the peasants. But he knows that in time his ideals may fade. To guard against this possibility, he does two things. He first signs a legal document, which will automatically give away the land, and which can be revoked only with his wife's consent. He then says to his wife, 'Promise me that, if I ever change my mind, and ask you to revoke this document, you will not consent.' He adds, 'I regard my ideals as essential to me. If I lose these ideals, I want you to think that I cease to exist. I want you to regard your husband then, not as me, the man who asks for this promise, but only as his corrupted later self. Promise me that you would not do what he asks' [327].

Parfit uses the Russian nobleman example to argue that adoption of a reductionist view of personal identity should lead us to revise our views about promissory fidelity, especially in cases

involving intertemporal conflicts of ideals. But we can also use it to raise questions about the plausibility of the demands of temporal neutrality in such cases.

The Russian nobleman example is supposed to derive some of its force against the norm of temporal neutrality from Parfit's reductionist conception of personal identity. He seems to think that reductionism justifies the Russian nobleman's claim that that loss of his socialist ideals represents a substantial change, which he does not survive. This is what is supposed to justify the nobleman's wife in regarding his bourgeois successor as "another" who cannot revoke the nobleman's commitment.

But as our earlier discussion (§4) implies, there are several problems with this reductionist use of the Russian nobleman example. First, if this really were a substantial change, then prudence would not require neutrality between the socialist and bourgeois selves. Prudence requires intrapersonal neutrality but not interpersonal neutrality. If the example involves a substantial change, then it creates an interpersonal context. But then prudence does not demand concern and sacrifice for others. Absent some kind of reciprocation, these would be uncompensated sacrifices. So if the change of ideals produced a substantial change, prudence would not counsel the nobleman to moderate his socialist ideals out of concern for his bourgeois successor. Second, psychological reductionism does not justify regarding the change of ideals in this case as a substantial change. Even if such changes of ideals disrupted psychological connectedness, they would presumably not disrupt psychological continuity. But reductionism needs to be formulated in terms of continuity, rather than connectedness, to avoid Reid's transitivity concern. Moreover, psychological connections include ways an agent modifies his beliefs, desires, ideals, and intentions. So long as the nobleman plays a suitable role in generating and shaping his change of ideals (e.g. he is not the unwitting victim of psychological manipulation by another), character change of this sort is no obstacle to psychological connectedness. So in assessing the significance of the Russian nobleman example for the norm of temporal neutrality, we should resist any suggestion that socialist and bourgeois selves are literally different people. Both are equally parts of the nobleman's life, and, as such, prudence demands temporal neutrality.

But avoiding Parfit's reductionist gloss on intrapersonal conflicts of value does not itself remove the challenge that such cases pose to temporal neutrality. For we can still wonder if the demand of temporal neutrality makes sense in such cases. Should I be expected to moderate my pursuit of ideals I now hold dear for the sake of ideals I now reject but will or may later accept?

We should first notice something a little odd about the way intrapersonal conflicts of value are typically represented. Imagine that Before is at a crucial fork in the road of life and her prudential ideals speak in favor of route A, but she knows that she will later become After, whose prudential ideals will only be served if she now chooses route B. Should Before be true to her own ideals and choose route A, should she empathize with After and choose route B, or should she try to forge some third route C that compromises between A and B? This way of posing the problem assumes that there is a fact of the matter about the content of one's future character and ideals independently of the crucial choices one makes now. But often, perhaps typically, this is false. One's future character and ideals are very much influenced by crucial practical decisions one makes on the road of life. It is quite unlikely that a radical young socialist will turn into a complacent bourgeois regardless of the decisions he now makes. Who

one becomes depends in part upon what one does now.¹¹ But then it may be possible to avoid many intertemporal conflicts of value by making choices now that preserve, rather than compromise, one's present ideals. Provided one's present ideals are worthwhile (about which more below), one can honor temporal neutrality by acting in accord with one's present ideals and thereby avoiding intertemporal conflict.

But perhaps some intertemporal conflicts are unavoidable. What then? Remember

of After's ideals do not transcend reasonable idealizations of the agent's epistemic situation, whatever those are, the comparative merits of earlier and later ideals will be ascertainable in the relevant way. If the comparative value of her current and future ideals is available to her in this way, we can ascribe to her a subjective reason to favor her future ideals. However, in cases of Improvement in which the comparative values of current and future ideals is a transcendent fact (transcending the relevant idealization), then the demands of objective and subjective rationality appear to diverge. The friend of prudence can and should defend temporal neutrality as a claim about the agent's objective reasons. Whether she is in a position to recognize it or not, she has no reason to act on her current ideals and will have reason to act on her future ideals. This can be a case where it may not be subjectively rational to do what is in fact objectively rational.

What about unavoidable conflicts whose merits are symmetrical? The *Minus-Minus* situation occurs when the conflicting ideals are similarly worthless. Here it seems right to agree with neutrality's claim that there is objective reason not to act on either ideal but to find, adopt, and act on some third ideal that has merit. Provided that the comparative merits of the meretricious and genuinely valuable ideals are reasonably ascertainable and are not (in the relevant sense) transcendent facts, this also yields a plausible claim about the agent's subjective reasons. The agent should act on neither meretricious ideal but adopt and act on the new valuable ideal.

Perhaps the most interesting case of unavoidable conflict is the symmetrical case in which the conflicting ideals are both valuable and comparably so. One example might be a conflict between excelling as a professional athlete early in life, which may require forgoing extended educational and professional training and may impose significant health costs later in life, and various forms of professional and personal success later in life. Another example might be familiar conflicts between success in professional and family life. We might call any such case a *Plus-Plus* case. By hypothesis, the conflict is unavoidable, so that After's ideals conflict with Before's no matter what the agent now does, and each ideal is valuable. Here, temporal neutrality recognizes a conflict of objective reasons and counsels a kind of neutrality among the competing ideals. On reflection, this seems right. If the agent can pursue Before's ideals unreservedly only by completely frustrating After's ideals (and vice versa), then there seems something objectively wrong with the unreserved pursuit of present ideals. Ideally, one would try to find a way to achieve substantial success in one's ideals both now and later, even if it required some moderation in or restrictions on the pursuit of one's ideals now or later. Neutrality's counsel of moderate or restricted pursuit of current ideals is an instance of the familiar adage "Not to burn one's bridges". Where such compromise and accommodation are possible, neutrality makes good normative sense. Call these cases of *Accommodation*. But accommodation may not always be possible. In cases of *Genuine Dilemma* there is no prospect of substantially accommodating both ideals. Here, neutrality seems compatible with two possibilities. On the one hand, one might achieve some less-than-substantial success along both ideals – neither a stellar success nor an abject failure at any time. Alternatively, one might engage in the unreserved and successful pursuit of ideals either now or later (but, by hypothesis, not both), provided that the process of selecting the favored ideal gave equal chances of success to both ideals (as in a coin flip). Neither alternative is attractive, but that seems to be a consequence of the situation being dilemmatic.¹² One consolation is that unavoidable conflicts

¹²These claims about intrapersonal dilemmas parallel claims we might make about moral dilemmas. See Brink (1994).

are somewhat rare, and Genuine Dilemmas are even more exotic. Neutrality's claims about our objective reasons in such cases seem plausible enough. And, as before, provided the merits of the conflicting ideals are not transcendent facts, these claims about the agent's objective reasons apply to her subjective reasons as well.

We can reconcile the demands of prudence and fidelity to one's ideals if we remember that the agent is a person who is temporally extended. Her past, present, and future are equally parts of her and her life. To be true to herself, since she is a temporally extended person, she must be true to all of her reasonable ideals and cannot be selectively attentive to her current ideals. She must weigh her future reasonable ideals, where these are fixed, against her current reasonable ideals, where this is necessary, in order to conform her behavior to all of her reasonable commitments. This sort of concern for one's whole life does not require forsaking one's current prudential ideals. But it does require conditioning their pursuit on recognition of the legitimate claims that one's reasonable future prudential ideals make on one.

6. THE SYMMETRY ARGUMENT

A very different concern about temporal neutrality can be seen in common responses to Epicurean arguments about why we should not fear death. The Epicureans saw the main aim of philosophy as confronting and, if possible, removing the fear of death, which, as hedonists, they regarded as bad insofar as it causes anxiety. They thought that fear of death was predicated largely on fear of retribution from anthropomorphic gods. They offered many different sorts of arguments for why we should not fear death. They argued that if the gods do exist we have reason to think that they do not interfere in human affairs and that even if they do exist and intervene in human affairs we are invulnerable to harm after death. Some of these arguments assume death brings nonexistence. Others do not. The argument that bears on temporal neutrality purports to show that we have no reason to fear death even if – indeed, because – it implies our nonexistence. In *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius gives expression to temporal neutrality in appealing to a parallel between our prenatal and postmortem nonexistence to counteract our fear of death.

From all this it follows that death is nothing to us and no concern of ours, since our tenure of mind is mortal. In days of old, we felt no disquiet when the hosts of Carthage poured into battle on every side – when the whole earth, dizzied by the convulsive shock of war, reeled sickeningly under the high ethereal vault, and between realm and realm the empire of mankind by land and sea trembled in the balance. So, when we shall be no more – when the union of body and spirit that engenders us has been disrupted – to us, who shall then be nothing, nothing by any hazard will happen any more at all. Nothing will have the power to stir our sense, not though earth be fused with sea and sea with sky [III 830-51].

Later, he invokes the same symmetry between postmortem and prenatal nonexistence.

Look back to see how the immense expanse of past time, before we were born, has been nothing to us. Nature shows us that it is the mirror-image of the time that is to come after we are dead. Is there anything there terrifying, does anything there seem gloomy? Is it not more peaceful than any sleep [III 972-77]?

The Symmetry Argument is wonderful. Here is its structure.

1. Death brings nonexistence.
2. Postmortem nonexistence is no different than prenatal nonexistence.
3. We do not regret our prenatal nonexistence.
4. Hence, we should not regret our death.

The Epicureans notice an asymmetry in our attitudes toward past and future nonexistence. They reject this asymmetry as irrational and propose to make our attitudes toward death consistent with our attitudes toward prenatal nonexistence. In so doing, they embrace temporal neutrality.

But symmetry is a two-edged sword. The parity of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence could be exploited to expand, as well contract, regret. Consider this second appeal to symmetry.

1. Death brings nonexistence.
2. Postmortem nonexistence is no different than prenatal nonexistence.
3. We do regret our death.
4. Hence, we should regret our prenatal nonexistence.

This second appeal to symmetry may seem more compelling if we have no independent explanation of why death is not bad. Of course, the Epicureans also appeal to an *Existence Requirement* – one cannot be harmed if one does not exist – to explain why nonexistence is not to be feared (III 860-70). But the Existence Requirement does not explain why death is not bad. Even if one cannot be harmed *after* death, one can be harmed *by* death, because death deprives the person whom it befalls of the goods she would have enjoyed had she continued to exist and led a life worth living (Nagel 1979: 3; McMahan 1988; Feldman 1992). If this is what is bad about death, then symmetry suggests that we do have reason to regret our prenatal nonexistence. Had we existed earlier (and lived to the same date as we actually do), we would have enjoyed more goods than we will in fact. Either form of nonexistence deprives us of possible goods and so is a legitimate source of regret. Of course, to say that death or prenatal nonexistence is an appropriate object of regret is not to endorse preoccupation with it.

Some may regard either symmetry argument as a *reductio* of temporal neutrality. One common response to the second symmetry argument is to appeal to a metaphysical thesis about *the essentiality of origin* to defend asymmetry. The possible goods account of being harmed has an important counterfactual element – for something to harm me, it must make me worse off than I would otherwise have been. This allows us to explain how death can harm us, because it deprives of goods we would have enjoyed if we had lived longer. But some think that the essentiality of origin implies that, though I could live longer than I actually will, I could not have been born earlier than I actually was. If this were true, then we couldn't make sense of the counterfactual that I would have enjoyed more goods if only I had been born earlier (Nagel 1979: 8; Parfit 1984: 175).

But the second symmetry argument is metaphysically robust. First of all, the essentiality of origin, as usually understood, does not establish the essentiality of time of birth. In his classic discussion of the essentiality of origin, Saul Kripke (1980: 110-15) suggests that individual humans essentially had their origins as the particular zygotes out of which they grew. Presumably, what's essential to a particular zygote, by the same criterion, is being the union of

a particular sperm and a particular egg. But then the time of birth is not essential to a particular person or human. The gestation period for a fetus – the time from conception to birth --could be longer or shorter, and so one could well wish that it had been shorter and one had been born earlier. Neither is the time of conception essential to a particular individual. A particular zygote can be formed at different times, depending on when that sperm and that egg are joined. If so, then not only could one have been born earlier than one was but also one could have been conceived earlier.

Even if we assumed, contrary to fact, that one's time of birth was essential to one, it still wouldn't follow that one couldn't sensibly regret one's prenatal nonexistence. For while it would be true, on this assumption, that we couldn't have been born earlier than we in fact were, it doesn't follow that we know when this was. We need to distinguish between metaphysical and epistemic possibility here. Even if it was not metaphysically possible to have been born earlier than we were, it is still possible to discover that what we thought was our date of birth is incorrect and that we were in fact born earlier than previously thought.¹³ For instance, I could know that I was adopted but imagine discovering that the adoption agency confused my records with those of Baby Doe who was born later than I was – a discovery that would imply that I was actually born earlier than I thought I was. Such a discovery could be a legitimate basis for being pleased that one's life contains more goods than one had previously realized. Correlatively, closing such epistemic possibilities could be a legitimate basis for regret that one was not in fact born earlier than one had thought. Of course, being a coherent and legitimate object of regret does not make it appropriate for me to be preoccupied with the possibility (metaphysical or epistemic) of my prenatal nonexistence any more than it follows from the fact that my death is a legitimate object of regret that I should be preoccupied with it.

These considerations show that the second symmetry argument is surprisingly robust. Of course, this conclusion (expanding regret from death to prenatal nonexistence) is not one the Epicureans would welcome. But it takes seriously and defends their appeal to temporal neutrality.

7. MINIMIZING FUTURE SUFFERING

A final challenge to temporal neutrality worth considering here is the claim that most of us would prefer learning that our suffering is past, even if this suffering is greater than would be an alternative future suffering. Parfit illustrates this claim with his ingenious case of *My Past and Future Operations* (1984: §64). Imagine that there is a painful operation that requires the patient's cooperation and, hence, can only be performed without the use of anesthetic. But doctors can and do induce (selective) amnesia after the operation to block memories of these painful experiences, which are themselves painful. I knew I was scheduled for this procedure. I wake up in my hospital bed and ask my nurse whether I have had the operation yet. He knows that I am one of two patients, but doesn't know which. Either I am patient A, who had the longest operation on record yesterday (10 hours), or I am patient B, who is due for a short operation (one hour) later today. While I wait for him to check the records, I find that I have the strong preference and hope that I am patient A, even though A's suffering was greater than B's will be. Temporal neutrality would seem to imply that this preference is irrational. But that

¹³In a wonderful paper, Philip Mitsis (1989) invokes this distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibilities to defend the robustness of Epicurean assumptions about symmetry.

might not seem right. More generally, it might seem that we prefer to minimize future suffering, even if that is not a way to minimize total suffering.

I assume that when contemplating this example the preference for minimizing future suffering is common. But we can still ask if it is, on reflection, rational. We should put Parfit's example in proper context before deciding on the rationality of the preference in question.

First, notice that Parfit must appeal to a *double* sort of temporal relativity. The preference is not simply for earlier than later suffering. If we keep the time of the two possible procedures fixed, but ask whether we prefer the greater earlier suffering from a point in time that is either prospective or retrospective with respect to *both* possible procedures, then most people would prefer the later operation with shorter suffering. I prefer B to A if you ask me before I enter the hospital, as I do if you ask me as I leave. So it's not about preferring earlier pain to later pain; instead, it's about preferring past pain to future pain. This makes the bias in question more narrow or isolated.

But it also makes the preference unstable. When I view both procedures prospectively or retrospectively, I have the temporally neutral preference to minimize suffering. It is only when the greater suffering is past and the smaller suffering lies in the future that I display the temporally biased preference for greater past pain. To see why this kind of diachronic instability of preferences might be reason to think the bias is irrational, consider briefly a structurally similar sort of instability that Socrates addresses in his discussion of akrasia or weakness of will in the *Protagoras*.

In the *Protagoras* Socrates famously denies the possibility of akrasia, claiming that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, it is really not possible to act contrary to what one judges on balance best. He focuses on cases in which our judgment about what is best is overcome by pleasure, in particular, proximate pleasure (356a-357e). He suggests that our judgments about what is best are inappropriately influenced by the proximity of pleasures and pains. The proximity of pleasures and pains leads to inflated estimates of their magnitude. This kind of temporal bias, Socrates thinks, produces instability in the agent's beliefs about what is best. For instance, in a cool prospective moment an agent might judge that a short-term indulgence should be forsaken for the sake of a later greater good. But as the indulgence becomes imminent -- in the heat of the moment -- its proximity changes the agent's estimate of the magnitude of the pleasure associated with the indulgence, leading him to conclude that the indulgence is actually on balance better. But in a cool retrospective moment, when his passions no longer inflame his judgment, he sees that he purchased the indulgence at too high a cost and experiences regret. There is no genuine weakness of will, on this interpretation of events, because the agent's beliefs about what is best actually change and he acts in accord, rather than against, the beliefs about what is best that he holds at the time of action. Though Socrates denies that the agent acts akratically, he does think that he acts irrationally, allowing temporal proximity to affect his beliefs about the magnitude of the benefits and harms associated with his options. One sign of the irrationality of the bias is the instability temporal proximity induces in the agent's beliefs and preferences. The fact that the hot judgment is preceded and followed by contrary cool judgments is evidence that the hot judgment is not to be trusted.

One needn't accept Socratic skepticism about weakness of will in order to accept his attack on temporal bias. Socrates believes that we are optimizers and that our desires and passions reflect our beliefs about what is best. He interprets temporal proximity as inducing a change of belief about what is best, which means that the putative akrates does not act contrary

to his practical beliefs at the time of action. But we might believe, instead, that agents are not always optimizers and can and do act on autonomous desires and passions that do not reliably track beliefs about what is best. On this alternative interpretation, we might think that temporal bias influences the agent's actions, not by changing her beliefs about what is best, but by triggering or inflaming good-independent desires or passions. Even so, we might still agree with Socrates that temporal proximity does not affect the magnitude of goods and harms and therefore should not affect their significance. Moreover, we might treat the diachronic instability of the bias as evidence of its irrationality: the brief hot judgment appears anomalous against the background of prospective and retrospective cool judgments. Similarly, we might think, the bias in favor of minimizing future suffering appears anomalous against the background of prospective and retrospective cool judgments that are temporally neutral. We might regard the diachronic instability of this bias as evidence of its irrationality.

Second, this preference does not generalize well. While I may have this preference for past over future pain, I don't have this preference, for example, about my own past and future *disgraces*. I might well prefer a smaller future disgrace to a larger past disgrace. Suppose that I drank too much at the firm party last night and can't remember what I did. I overhear that someone made lewd remarks to the boss before vomiting on her dress in front of the whole gathering. I desperately hope that somebody wasn't me and would gladly commit a minor faux pas this evening in exchange for not being implicated in last night's huge disgrace. If the preference is limited to pains or perhaps a few bad things, then it may not challenge temporal neutrality per se. Again, the bias proves, on inspection, to be rather isolated in scope.

Third, notice that the preference only seems to hold for *one's own* pains. As Parfit concedes (§69), my preferences about the pain of others, including loved ones, seems to be temporally neutral. My daughter undertakes volunteer work in a remote and largely inaccessible part of the world. I receive a message from someone that traveled through her village that she has a terminal disease that has become quite painful and will soon kill her. I am depressed. When I am told later that this was substantially correct but mistaken about the timing so that my daughter has already died, I feel no relief that her pain is behind her. Yet again, this narrows the scope of the bias.

Fourth, all else being equal, prospective pain is worse than past pain that one cannot remember, because one can anticipate prospective pain and this anticipation is itself painful. But then there is a danger that our preference for past pain may not be a preference for the larger amount of suffering, as it needs to be to challenge temporal neutrality. For the comparison to be fair, we must do one of two things: (a) we must change the example so that the past suffering is something that one can recollect, just as prospective pain can be anticipated, or (b) we must change the example so that it involves administration of a drug that blocks anticipation of future pain, much as the doctors induce amnesia to block recollection of the pain of the operation. But if we modify the example in either of these ways, it is somewhat less clear that the preference for the past pain persists.

Finally, it seems quite possible that evolution might have favored a forward-looking bias that prioritizes the minimization of future pain, inasmuch as a concern with future pain could contribute to a creature's fitness in a way that a concern with past pain could not. By itself, an evolutionary bias for minimizing future pain would not undermine that bias. But if there are other reasons to question the robustness or the rationality of the bias, of the sort we have just canvassed, then the existence of an evolutionary explanation of that bias could help explain

why we might be subject to this bias even if it is not rational. Together, these considerations would make it easier to reject this rather isolated form of a bias for the future as irrational.

I am not sure if these considerations completely undermine Parfit's defense of the bias for the future. The intuitions his example evokes are common and strong. But the example's handling of memory and anticipation is not fair, and it's not clear that our intuitions survive unchanged when the comparison is made fair. And, in various ways, any bias that can be uncovered turns out not to generalize well and to be unstable.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay has focused on issues about the intertemporal distribution of benefits and harms, especially within a single life. We have focused on prudence's demand of temporal neutrality, which is a traditional norm of intrapersonal distribution. It assigns no normative significance per se to the temporal location of benefits and harms within a person's life and demands equal concern for all parts of that life. After clarifying the commitments of temporal neutrality, we located its primary rationale in the principle of compensation. We saw that compensation provides a rationale for the hybrid structure of prudence -- the fact that it is agent-biased but temporally neutral. This rationale appeals, in part, to assumptions about the separateness of persons. We saw that those assumptions are metaphysically robust and not upset by reductionist assumptions about personal identity. Even with this kind of support, temporal neutrality remains a controversial norm, in part because some of its implications seem counter-intuitive. Though it may seem to give controversial advice in cases involving intrapersonal conflicts of values or ideals, neutrality does seem defensible in light of the fact that ideals of equal value hold sway in periods of a person's life that are equally real and equally parts of her life. Though it might seem to be a philosophical liability to be committed to Epicurean ideas about the symmetry of death and prenatal nonexistence, that symmetry turns out to be surprisingly robust and defensible. Perhaps the most counter-intuitive implication of temporal neutrality is its rejection of our apparent preference for past over future pain, even when this means preferring more total pain. But this bias does not generalize well and remains limited in scope and unstable. Moreover, it may not survive once the example used to elicit the bias is corrected in certain ways.

Our discussion of legitimate worries about temporal neutrality has been selective, and my assessment of some of worries has been sketchy and provisional. But we have seen a strong rationale for central features of temporal neutrality, and many of these worries have surprisingly good responses. A more systematic assessment of temporal neutrality would be comparative in nature -- comparing it with alternatives, whose rationale and adequacy are explored in comparable detail. At this stage in the inquiry, the prospects for temporal neutrality still seem good.

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