Time Bias and Altruism

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We are typically near-future biased, prioritising our present and near-future interests over our own distant-future interests. This bias can be directed at others as well, prioritising their present and near-future interests over their distant-future interests. I here argue that, given these biases, and given a plausible limit on the extent to which we can permissibly prioritise our present interests over the present interests of strangers, we are morally required to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our distant-future interests. I also argue that a similar conclusion holds even if we are near biased only towards ourselves, and regardless of whether this bias is rational. And I show that my conclusions have interesting implications for the ethics of charitable giving, because they generate moral pressure to donate to charity those funds that would otherwise have gone into our long-term savings.

1. Introduction

We are typically time biased with respect to our own interests. We display both future bias, by prioritising our future interests over our past interests, and near-future bias, by prioritising our near-future interests over our distant-future interests. And these biases can be directed at others too, prioritising their future interests over their past interests, and prioritising their near-future interests over their distant-future interests.

I here argue that, given these biases, and given a plausible limit on the extent to which we can permissibly prioritise our present interests over the present interests of strangers, we are morally required to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our distant-future interests. I also argue that a similar conclusion holds even if we are near biased only towards ourselves, and regardless of whether this bias is rational. I present these arguments in Section
Three, after a more detailed discussion of self-directed and other-directed time bias in Section Two.

In Section Four, I show that my arguments have interesting implications for the ethics of charitable giving. This is because deciding to give to charity typically leads not to a reduction in our immediate well-being but rather to a reduction in our distant-future well-being. As a result, my arguments call into question the morality of saving up to secure our distant future when millions of people around the world are presently suffering, and they generate moral pressure to donate to charity those funds that would otherwise have gone into our long-term savings.

In Section Five, I consider two potential objections to my arguments. First, I address the objection that the priority that we are permitted to give to the interests of our loved ones makes charitable giving remain non-obligatory. Second, I address the objection that plausible assumptions about our economic behaviour undermine my arguments.

2. Self-Directed and Other-Directed Time Bias

There are two ways in which most of us fail to be temporally neutral with respect to our own interests. We typically prioritise our future interests over our past interests, and typically prioritise our near-future interests over our distant-future interests. In this section, I explain both these biases, and I tentatively argue that we should also display these biases when it comes to the interests of others.

2.1. Self-Directed Time Bias

People often display future bias, showing asymmetrical attitudes toward future and past pains and pleasures. We strongly prefer painful experiences to be in the past and pleasurable experiences to be in the future. We would even prefer that our lives contain more total hours of pain if it means less of the pain is still to come, and that our lives contain fewer total hours of pleasure if this means more of the pleasure is still to come.

Derek Parfit illustrates this aspect of our future bias with the following thought experiment:
My Past or Future Operation. You are in the hospital to have an extremely painful but safe operation for which you can be given no anaesthetic. In order to ease recovery, you know that the hospital will give you drugs that cause you to forget the operation as soon as it is completed. You wake up in hospital and the nurse informs you that either you have undergone a painful four-hour operation, or you will soon undergo a painful one-hour operation.¹

Most people would prefer to have already had the four-hour operation than to face the one-hour operation in the future. They would be immensely relieved if it turns out that their ordeal is over.

In addition to future bias, many people also have a bias toward the near future. We care less about things that are good or bad for us the further into the future they will happen, preferring pleasurable experiences to be in the near future and painful experiences to be in the distant future. Sometimes, we would prefer our lives to contain fewer total hours of pleasure if that means we experience the pleasure in the near future rather than the distant future. For example, imagine you are faced with the choice of going on a pleasant two-day skiing vacation this year, or a pleasant three-day skiing vacation in five years. I suspect many people would choose the former over the latter, all other things being equal. We might also prefer our lives to contain more total hours of pain if that means we experience the pain in the distant future rather than the immediate future. For example, we often put off dental treatments even though it means more suffering in the long run. So, it seems we are naturally inclined to discount the distant future, both with regards to pleasurable experiences and painful experiences.

While many people accept that future bias is rationally permissible, or even rationally required, a number of philosophers hold that near-future bias is a rational defect.² This is because, the reasoning goes, the rational person would make choices that result in their leading overall better lives. If this reasoning is right, it seems that we should not display near-future bias when it comes to our own interests.

I will later present a version of my main argument that goes through even if near-future bias is irrational. However, I want to begin by taking seriously the idea that near-future bias is

rationally permissible, or even rationally required. This is because I think there are at least two good reasons to accept that near-future bias is at least rationally permissible.

First, we can argue for the rationality of near-future bias by appealing to a psychological view about personal identity of the kind defended by Parfit. Parfit argues that one of the criteria that makes me the same person over time is ‘psychological connectedness’, by which he means the holding of direct psychological relations between myself at one point in time and myself at another point in time. These psychological relations include, among other things, memories, intentions, and desires. Parfit argues that how much I care about my future self should depend on the strength of the psychological relations between me now and myself in the future. He argues that ‘since connectedness is nearly always weaker over long periods, I can rationally care less about my further future’. In other words, it can be rational to care less about myself in the distant future than about myself in the nearer future, because time diminishes the degree of psychological connectedness between my present and future self. Similarly, Jeff McMahan argues that the ‘egoistic concern’ that it is reasonable for someone to have now for their own future good depends on the strength of the psychological connections holding between the person now and the person at the time at which the good will be experienced. Again, the strength of these psychological connections will be weaker over long periods of time, and so it seems reasonable for someone to care less about their far-distant future.

Second, it might be difficult to justify the existence of agent-centred prerogatives that allow us to weigh our own interests out of proportion to their impartial significance whilst rejecting near-future bias as irrational. Most of us believe that morality does not require strict impartiality. Instead, it permits us to give some amount of priority to ourselves over others. An influential way of defending this permissible partiality, advocated by Samuel Scheffler, is by appeal to the importance of the personal perspective. Scheffler writes: ‘people do not typically view the world from the impersonal perspective, nor do their actions typically flow from the kinds of concerns a being who actually did inhabit the impersonal standpoint might have. … [A] moral view gives sufficient weight to that fact only if it reflects it, by freeing people from the demand that their actions and motives always be optimal from the impersonal perspective.’ But if taking seriously the personal perspective means permitting partiality towards ourselves

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over others, it equally seems to mean permitting partiality towards the present over the future. For just as we do not view our own lives from an *impartial* point of view, we also do not view our own lives from an *atemporal* point of view. So, one could argue that our view about prudential rationality gives sufficient weight to the personal perspective only if it reflects its *temporal* character, by freeing people from the demand that their actions be optimal from the perspective of their welfare at all times.

2.2. Other-Directed Time Bias

I think it is clear that most of us display time bias with respect to our own interests. Do we also display time bias with respect to the interests of others? Parfit thinks not. He suggests that there is ‘a surprising asymmetry in our concern for our own, and other people’s pasts’. While we feel relieved knowing that some ordeal of ours is over, he thinks, we do not experience the same relief knowing that some ordeal has already occurred to a loved one.

To evaluate this claim, consider the following modification of Parfit’s earlier case:

*My Daughter’s Future or Past Operation.* Your daughter has just woken up in hospital. The nurse informs you that there has been a mix up with the patient charts. Your daughter either has already had a painful four-hour operation or is about to undergo a painful one-hour operation.

Should you prefer that your daughter has just had a four-hour operation, or that she will soon undergo a one-hour operation? If you are temporally neutral with respect to her interests, you should prefer that she will undergo a one-hour operation in the future, as this leads to her having a life with less overall hours of pain. If, instead, you display other-directed time bias, you should prefer that she has already had a four-hour operation.

There are conflicting empirical results regarding whether we display other-directed time bias. In a study conducted by Caruso, Gilbert, and Wilson, most of the participants display

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8 I thank Andreas Mogensen for this suggestion.

9 Parfit (1984), 182.
other-directed time neutrality, giving all parts of the other person’s life equal weight.\textsuperscript{10} However, in Greene et al.’s study, most of the participants wanted good experiences to be in the other person’s future, and bad experiences to be in the other person’s past.\textsuperscript{11} Greene et al. attribute this contradiction in findings to the following fact: while the participants in the Caruso et al. study were prompted to consider the fate of an unidentified third party, in the Greene et al. study, participants were given rich biographical information about the other, such that they identified with the third party.

This finding seems to support an interesting argument from Caspar Hare, according to which other-directed time-neutrality is a result of being detached from the other person and failing to engage with their condition.\textsuperscript{12} Hare thinks that, in My Daughter’s Past and Future Operation, most people’s preferences will switch depending on where their daughter is located. He suggests that if she is far away on the other side of the world, you will find it more difficult to identify with her, and thus be temporally neutral with respect to her interests, preferring that she is to undergo the one-hour operation in the future. If she is instead close by, lying in the hospital bed in front of your eyes, he suggests that you will display future bias, preferring that she has already gone through her ordeal. Hare argues that there are no good reasons to think that appropriate concern for one’s daughter should mandate this switch in preferences based on location, or mandate preferences which contradict her own preferences. Rather, he thinks, we should engage imaginatively with the other’s present condition, regardless of their proximity to us, and thus adopt their preferences so that their future-biased preferences become our own.

However, while I agree that other-directed time-neutrality is a result of being detached from the other, I don’t think that other-directed time bias is a result of adopting the preferences of the object of your concern. If you learn that your daughter is unusual in having time-neutral preferences, I suspect that you would still prefer that she has already had the four-hour operation in the past. So, rather than time neutrality arising from a failure to adopt the other’s preferences, it seems to me that the more you identify with the other, the more you respond


empathetically to their situation, feeling their pain as your own, and thus adverting to your own time biases to set your preferences about what happens to them.\textsuperscript{13}

Just as our future bias can be directed at other people with whom we identify, so too our near-future bias can be directed at others. For if we care more about our present- and immediate-future interests than our distant-future interests, and if we respond empathetically to the other’s situation, we will come to care more about their present- and near-future interests than about their distant-future interests, feeling a greater immediacy or urgency when confronted with their present suffering than we would were we to learn of some misfortune that will come upon them many years in the future. This other-directed near-future bias means that we would feel a stronger motivation to alleviate their present- and near-future suffering over the suffering they will experience in the far-distant future.

Whether we morally should display other-directed near-future bias will depend in part on the rationality of self-directed near-future bias. If self-directed near-future bias is irrational, it is much less plausible that responding empathetically towards others means becoming near-future biased with respect to their interests. But, as I have argued, there are good reasons to think that self-directed near-future bias is at least rationally permissible. And if this is right, I think that we should bring our other-regarding preferences in line with our self-regarding preferences, by displaying other-directed near-future bias too. This is because we should respond empathetically to the others’ situation. It would be strange if prudential rationality permitted us to display near-future bias regarding our own interests, but then morality condemned near-future bias when it comes to the interests of others. For this would be in tension with the idea that we should treat other people the way we would want to be treated ourselves.

However, while it seems plausible to me that other-directed near-future bias is morally permissible, or even morally required, this idea is likely to remain controversial. It is likely to remain controversial in part because, as I noted earlier, it is controversial whether self-directed near-future bias is rationally permissible, and if it is not rationally permissible, then it seems that other-directed near-future bias involves an inappropriate attitude towards the interests of others. Also, even if it is rationally permissible for us to display near-future biased with respect to our own interests, we might think that there are specifically moral reasons to be time-neutral when it comes to the well-being of others. And if we think that there are no moral duties towards oneself, then these moral reasons would not affect the moral permissibility of self-directed

\textsuperscript{13} I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
near-future bias, even though they will affect the moral permissibility of other-directed near-future bias.\textsuperscript{14}

For these reasons, in the next section, I will develop two separate arguments. The first argument will assume that we do display both self-directed and other-directed near-future bias, and that both biases are rationally and morally permissible. I will show that, given these biases, and given a plausible limit on the extent to which we can permissibly prioritise our present interests over the present interests of strangers, we are morally required to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our distant-future interests. The second argument will assume only that we do display self-directed near-future bias—it will not assume that this bias is rationally permissible, or that we do or should display the same bias towards the interests of others. I will show that even these weaker assumptions have interesting implications for how we should weigh other people’s present interests relative to our distant-future interests.

\textbf{3. Near-Future Bias and Concern for the Other}

If you are impartial, or agent neutral, you will give the same weight to the interests of other people as to your own interests. If you are also near-future biased, it follows that you will always be more concerned with other people’s present interests than with your own future interests. Sometimes, out of love, you might go beyond agent neutrality and give more weight to the interests of other people than to your own interests. In such cases, you would care more about the other’s present interests than even your own present interests. We often see this with parents who sacrifice their present well-being for the sake of their children’s well-being.

When it comes to distant strangers, however, we would not expect the agent to show such sacrificial love or even agent-neutrality. Most people would accept that it is permissible for you to give greater weight to your own interests than to the interests of distant strangers. Most people would also accept that we are morally required to have some level of concern for distant strangers—it would be morally wrong to remain indifferent about their suffering.

In this section, I will argue that, given that we display near-future bias, and given a plausible limit on the extent to which we can permissibly prioritise our interests over the interests of strangers, we are morally required to sacrifice our distant-future interests for the

\textsuperscript{14} I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.
sake of a stranger’s present interests to a greater extent than would be required of us if it was our present well-being at stake. I will first assume that we display both self-directed and other-directed near-future bias, and that both biases are rationally and morally permissible. This will allow me to draw the stronger conclusion that we morally ought to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our distant-future interests. I will then show that a similar but weaker conclusion holds even if we reject the idea that near-future bias is rational, and even if we remain temporally neutral regarding the interests of others.

3.1. The Implications of Self- and Other-Directed Near-Future Bias

Let’s first assume that near-future bias is rationally and morally permissible, both with respect to your own interests and with the interests of others. Given your near-future bias, you will care more about your present and near future than about your distant future. You will also show the same near-future bias when it comes to the interests of others, caring more about their present and near-future interests than about their distant-future interests. It follows that, if your level of concern for the present interests of others exceeds a particular threshold, then there will be a point in time such that you care more about other people’s present well-being than about your own future well-being beyond this point. The following graph illustrates all this:

![Graph showing level of concern over time]

This graph shows that, even if you grant greater weight to your own interests than to the interests of strangers, so long as your concern for the stranger is above a certain threshold, there will be a future point in time, \( T_n \), such that your concern for your own well-being after this point will be equal to or less than your concern for the stranger’s present well-being. You will thus be indifferent between giving an extra unit of well-being to yourself at \( T_n \) and giving the same unit to the distant stranger now. And your concern for your well-being beyond \( T_n \) will, in
fact, be less than your concern for the current well-being of the stranger. In other words, you will prefer to provide an extra unit of well-being to the stranger now than to your distant-future self at any time beyond $Tn$. If you are morally required to have a level of concern for distant strangers that meets this threshold, it follows that, given your near-future bias, you morally ought to sacrifice your well-being beyond $Tn$ for the sake of the present well-being of distant strangers.

Of course, whether there is such a point $Tn$ will depend on where this threshold lies. One could argue that there is never a point at which you morally ought to care more about a distant stranger’s present well-being than about your own distant-future well-being, because we are just not required to give that much weight to the interests of distant strangers relative to our own interests. If we are permitted to give less weight to the interests of strangers than I have suggested, the graph comparing the level of concern for your own interests and that of a stranger over time would instead look something like this:

Here, we can see that even if you are near-future biased, both with regards to your own interests and the interests of the stranger, there is never a point in time at which your concern for your own well-being at that point is equal to or less than your concern for the stranger’s well-being. You are permitted to prefer your own well-being, at any point in your life, to the well-being of strangers, at any point in their lives. It follows that you are not morally required to sacrifice your distant-future well-being for the sake of a stranger’s present well-being.

It seems to me very plausible that, given the extent of our self-directed near-future bias, having any reasonable level of concern for the present interests of strangers relative to our concern for our own present interests will result in there being a threshold of the kind just described. However, even if it is permissible to give relatively less weight to the present interests of strangers, so that no such threshold obtains, we still get an interesting result. This
is because there will still be an upper limit to how much we can prioritise our own interests above the interests of others—a *maximally permissible gap* between the level of concern you can have for your present well-being and the present well-being of a stranger. What my observation about our near-future bias shows, then, is that the maximally permissible gap between the level of concern you ought to have for your distant-future well-being and the present well-being of strangers is significantly less than the gap for your present well-being and the present well-being of strangers. Whatever you think is the maximum permissible priority you can give to your present interests relative to the present interests of strangers, the maximum priority you can permissibly give to your distant-future interests relative to the present interests of strangers will be less, given that you discount your future well-being. So, even if there is never a point in time at which you should be *more* concerned about the present well-being of strangers than about your distant-future well-being, you still ought to be significantly less concerned about your distant-future well-being relative to the present well-being of strangers. The following graph illustrates this:

Distance *a* is the gap between the maximum level of concern you are permitted to have for your present interests over the present interests of a stranger. Distance *b* is the gap between the level of concern you have for your distant-future interests and the level of concern you have for the present interests of a stranger. As we can see, distance *b* is smaller than distance *a*. This implies that, even if there is no point in time for which you are morally required to be indifferent between an increase in your own well-being and an increase in the distant stranger’s well-being, you should at least be willing to sacrifice some unit of your distant-future well-being in order to *greatly* increase the stranger’s present well-being. And the size of the unit that you should be willing to sacrifice is greater than what it would be if was your present well-being that was being sacrificed.
3.2. The Implications of Self-Directed Near-Future Bias and Other-Directed Temporal Neutrality

So far, I have assumed that we typically display both self-directed and other-directed near-future bias, that both biases are rationally and morally permissible. However, as I mentioned above, the moral permissibility of other-directed near-future bias is controversial. Even if it is rationally permissible for you to display near-future bias with respect to your own interests, it may be morally impermissible to do so with respect to the interests of others, because there could be moral reasons to remain temporally neutral with respect to their well-being. And if near-future bias is, in fact, irrational, then it is likely to be morally inappropriate to display this bias when it comes to other people’s interests.

The arguments I presented in the previous subsection go through even without the assumption that we display other-directed near-future bias. However, without this assumption, it is less plausible that the level of concern we have for our distant-future interests ever drops below the level of concern that we should have for the present interests of strangers. For if it did drop below this level, and if we did not display other-directed near-future bias, then we would end up being more concerned about the distant-future interests of strangers than about the distant-future interests of ourselves. And this pattern of concern would seem very odd. The following graph illustrates this:

Here we can see that beyond $T_n$, your level of concern for the stranger’s future interests is greater than the level of concern you have for your own future interests. Not only would it be implausible that morality demands this, but it would also seem particularly strange for a moral agent to show such a pattern of concern, caring more about the stranger’s distant-future interests than about their own distant-future interests, all the while caring more about their own present interests than about the present interests of a stranger.
So, if we drop the assumption that we display other-directed near-future bias, we must also drop the assumption that there is a point in time at which we ought to be more concerned about a stranger’s present well-being than about our own distant-future well-being. If we drop both these assumptions, and we remain temporally neutral with respect to other people’s interests, the graph will instead look something like this:

This graph reveals something interesting. Like the previous graph in subsection 3.1., we can see here that, given your near-future bias regarding your own interests, the distance between the level of concern you have for your distant-future interests and the present interests of a stranger (distance $b$) is smaller than the distance between the level of concern you have for your present interests and the present interests of a stranger (distance $a$). Again, this implies that, even if there is no point in time for which you are morally required to be indifferent between an increase in your own well-being and an increase in the distant stranger’s well-being, you should at least be willing to sacrifice some unit of your distant-future well-being in order to greatly increase the stranger’s present well-being. And the size of the unit that you should be willing to sacrifice is greater than what it would be if were your present well-being being sacrificed.

One might argue that if near-future bias is irrational, then any conclusions about what we morally should do on the assumption that we display this bias must be unsound. But this seems to me a mistake. Consider an analogy: if you irrationally believe that the sweets you are carrying are poisonous, then you morally should not give them to me, even though, were you fully rational, giving them to me would be morally fine. So, likewise, given that we do discount the value of our distant-future interests, we should be willing to sacrifice a greater unit of our distant-future well-being for the sake of a stranger’s present well-being than we should be required to sacrifice if it were our present well-being at stake. If we choose not to sacrifice this
unit of our distant-future well-being for the sake of the stranger’s present well-being despite our near-future bias, we must be giving much too little weight to the interests of the stranger.

We can put this conclusion more carefully as follows. If near-future bias turns out to be irrational, but we typically display this bias, then we morally must either give up this bias, or be prepared to sacrifice a greater unit of our distant-future well-being for the sake of a stranger’s present well-being than we would be willing to sacrifice if it were our present well-being at stake. If it turns out, as I suspect, that near-future bias is psychologically very difficult to give up, then, in practice, most people will have to take the latter of these options.

3.3. Summary

Before turning to the implications of my argument for the ethics of charitable giving, let me sum up what I have argued so far.

I began by presenting a strong version of my main argument, which holds that, given that we display self-directed and other-directed near-future bias, given that these biases are permissible, and given a reasonable limit on the extent to which we can permissibly prioritise our own present interests over the present interests of strangers, we are morally required to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our distant-future interests. This strong version of the argument seems to me very plausible, because, as I argued earlier, there are good reasons to accept that near-future bias is rationally permissible, and that other-directed near-future bias is morally permissible or even morally required.

I then argued that, even if we drop the more controversial assumptions of this strong argument, we can still reach a similar, though weaker, conclusion. If we display self-directed near-future bias, then, regardless of whether this bias is rationally permissible, and regardless of whether we also display other-directed near-future bias, it still remains that the gap between our concern for our distant-future interests and our concern for the present interests of others should be significantly less than the gap between our concern for our present interests and our concern for the present interests of others. This would imply that we ought to sacrifice a greater unit of our distant-future well-being for the sake of a stranger’s well-being than we would be required to sacrifice if it were our present well-being at stake.

4. Near-Future Bias and Altruism
The conclusions of my arguments have particular importance for the ethics of charitable giving. This is because, when it comes to beneficence, it is usually not the agent’s present interests that are placed in competition with other people’s present interests. Giving to charity does not usually require the agent to sacrifice their present well-being to alleviate the suffering of others. To see this, consider the following example:

*Cinema.* You are considering watching a movie at the cinema. You realise, however, that you could do a lot of good by spending your cinema money on famine relief, and so you give the money to a charity instead. The next day, you are considering watching the movie again, but you are faced with the same choice—once again, you could do a lot of good by spending your cinema money on famine relief.

Philosophers who argue that we have strong moral obligations to give to charity would say that each time you face this choice, you are morally obligated to give to charity rather than go to the cinema.¹⁵ Most people, however, do not believe our duties to alleviate poverty are so strong. So, in most real-life versions of this example, in most developed countries, the charitable agent is likely to *both* donate to charity and *also* go to watch the movie. That is, rather than sacrificing the trip to the cinema, the agent is likely to sacrifice a part of their savings.

There are, of course, people who cut back on cups of coffee, going to the movies, and other luxuries in order to give to charity. But assuming that we are talking about people of a certain level of financial security, the decision to give to charity does not usually create immediate loss for the agent. The agent is most likely to enjoy these luxuries in life while also donating to charity. For many people, charitable giving does not entail that we sacrifice our present well-being for the sake of a distant stranger’s present well-being.

The decision to donate, however, while not creating immediate loss to the agent’s well-being, will most likely affect her distant-future well-being in some way. This is because a lifestyle of giving added up over the years will mean the agent’s distant-future interests are compromised to a certain extent. For instance, instead of giving to charity, perhaps you could have invested the extra money, potentially greatly increasing your wealth many years in the future. The monthly donations added up over your lifetime may mean you put less into your savings account, preventing you from enjoying a cushy retirement in your old age. So, unless

¹⁵ See Peter Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’ (1977) and Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die.*
you believe that we have strong duties of beneficence, and assuming you are above a certain level of financial security, while the decision to give to charity will not affect your present and immediate future well-being, it will most likely affect your distant future well-being in a significant way. So, for any moral agent over a certain level of financial security, the decision to give to charity is better framed as a trade-off between increasing a stranger’s present well-being at some cost to their own distant-future well-being.

Whether we should give to charity, then, seems related to how much weight we should give to our future selves over the present suffering of others. I argued above that, given we are biased toward our near future, if we care enough about the well-being of others, there will be a point at which we will care more about the present well-being of others than about our distant-future well-being. Or, at the very least, the difference between our level of concern for our own distant-future interests and the present interests of others should be small, so that we are morally required to sacrifice some unit of our distant future well-being in order to greatly increase a stranger’s present well-being. And it seems that this is precisely the situation that faces us when it comes to alleviating poverty, for two reasons.

First, the diminishing marginal utility of wealth means that each incremental increase in wealth provides a smaller incremental increase in utility. In other words, as a person’s income increases, each unit of increase gives them a correspondingly smaller increase in satisfaction and happiness. This means that the extent to which we can increase someone’s well-being for the same amount of money will be different depending on their financial situation. If you are reasonably well off, you can do a lot more good by donating a given amount of money to those in absolute poverty than you can by spending the money on yourself. That is, you can greatly increase a poorer person’s well-being at a comparatively small sacrifice to yourself. For instance, if you spend an extra $100 on yourself this month, perhaps you can increase your well-being slightly by eating out a few more times or getting a few Ubers instead of the bus, while the same $100 is what it costs to provide Ready-to-use Therapeutic Food (RUTF) over a six to eight-week period to save a child suffering from severe acute malnutrition.16

Second, as I observed, for those above a certain level of financial security, giving to charity will likely involve sacrificing their distant-future interests rather than their present interests. And given that we discount our future interests because of our near-future bias, when we give to charity, we are in fact giving up a much smaller weighted unit of our well-being in

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order to greatly increase a stranger’s well-being. For instance, say that you decide to donate $1,200 over a period of a year in order to provide life-saving medicine, food, and treatment for a malnourished child for a year. If you are pretty well off anyway, you will probably not change your current lifestyle in order to donate this sum of money, but rather, you will put less money into your savings account. So, you are sacrificing something you regard to be of less value than $1,200, considering that it will not affect your immediate well-being.

So, even if we do not have strong obligations to alleviate poverty, and even if we are permitted to grant much more weight to our own interests than to the interests of others, the diminishing marginal utility of wealth coupled with the fact that we are forfeiting our far-distant future well-being rather than our immediate well-being makes it hard to deny that we have at least some obligations to sacrifice our distant-future well-being in order to relieve the suffering of distant strangers. The extent of these obligations will, of course, depend on whether we display other-directed near-future bias, and the extent to which we are morally required to care about the interests of others. I have argued that we should display both self-directed and other-directed near-future bias and have suggested that the level of concern we ought to have for others is such that we ought to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our own distant-future interests beyond a certain point in time. At the very least, given that we do display near-future bias with respect to our own interests, we should not be prioritising our distant-future interests over the present interests of strangers so much as to save up for a cushy retirement while others are currently suffering.

In these ways, my argument calls into question the morality of saving up to secure our distant future when there are currently millions of people suffering around the world. Of course, this isn’t to say that we should save nothing for our future. It is rather to say that our savings policy should reflect our near-future bias. Given that we discount our future well-being the way we do, if we have the level of concern for the well-being of strangers that we should, then we morally ought to be more concerned about greatly alleviating the present suffering of strangers than about securing some tiny extra unit of well-being for our distant-future self. If this is right, it follows that we morally ought to be directing our extra financial resources towards alleviating the present suffering of people in poverty, rather than saving up for a cushy retirement or investing heavily in our distant future.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} If we display other-directed near-future bias, this gives us reason to prioritise charities which focus on alleviating the beneficiary’s \textit{present} suffering, rather than charities where the payoff is in the beneficiary’s distant future, such as charities which focus on education. However, if, for example, the returns of investing
5. Objections

In this section, I will address two potential objections to my arguments. First, it might be objected that, while it is not permissible for us to prioritise our own interests way above the interests of strangers, we are permitted to do this with the interests of our loved ones, in a way that makes charitable giving remain non-obligatory. Second, it might be objected that plausible assumptions about our economic behaviour undermine my argument.

5.1. More Concern for Our Loved Ones

It might be argued that, while we are not permitted to grant our own interests too much weight relative to the interests of strangers, we are permitted to put the interests of our loved ones way above the interests of strangers. We may regard giving too much weight to our own well-being as egotistical and narcissistic, but giving a great deal of weight to the well-being of a loved one is usually seen as a virtue, rather than as a vice. Indeed, we consider parents who sacrifice their well-being for the sake of their children to be displaying characteristics that are admirable. So, it seems that the maximum permissible gap between the level of concern you have for someone you love and the level of concern you have for a stranger is much greater than the maximum permissible gap between the level of concern you have for your own well-being and the level of concern you have for a stranger.

If this is true, then, while you may be morally required to sacrifice some unit of your distant-future well-being to alleviate a stranger’s present suffering, you will not be morally required to sacrifice the distant-future well-being of your child or someone you love in order to alleviate a stranger’s present suffering. This means that, while you may not be permitted to secure your own distant-future well-being at the expense of a stranger’s present well-being, you will be permitted to secure the distant-future well-being of your child or someone you love. For instance, suppose I am right that you are not permitted to save up for a cushy retirement rather than donate a certain proportion of that money to charity. If you are permitted to grant much greater weight to the interests of your loved ones than you are permitted to grant to your

in education are sufficiently great, then we could justify donating to charities which focus on such long-term goals. I thank Nikhil Venkatesh for pressing me on this point.
own interests, it seems you could still be permitted to put that money into your child’s savings account or keep it aside to leave them a hefty inheritance.

My response to this objection is that, although I do think we are permitted to grant even more weight to the interests of our loved ones than we are permitted to grant to ourselves, the additional weight is not unbounded, and it is not great enough to do the work the objection requires it to do. While it is admirable for a parent to sacrifice their present well-being for their child’s near future, it seems too much if they do so for the child’s far-distant future. If a parent is so concerned for the welfare of their child that they sacrifice their present well-being in order to secure their child’s pension, we would likely think this is a case of overparenting and that there is something unhealthy about the relationship. So, while it does seem permissible to grant more weight to the interests of our loved ones than to ourselves, there seems to be a limit to the level of concern we morally ought to have for them over the interests of strangers.

So, there is a maximum permissible gap between the level of concern you can have for your child’s present well-being and the present well-being of a stranger. Again, my observation about our near-future bias shows us that the maximum permissible gap between the level of concern you can have for your child’s distant-future well-being and the present well-being of strangers should be less than that. Even if you are permitted to grant greater weight to the interests of your child than to your own interests, you should probably not be so concerned with the interests of your child as to save up for their pension or leave them with a hefty inheritance at the expense of the immediate suffering of others. This point becomes even stronger when we consider that the diminishing marginal utility of wealth will also apply when it comes to what we can provide for our children in comparison to what we can provide for distant strangers in absolute poverty.

5.2. Economic Realities

There are certain economic behaviours that the moral agent might exhibit that might seem to challenge my argument. In this final subsection, I address the complications that compounding interest and returns on investments may bring, and the possibility that the moral agent is already following an optimal saving policy in light of their biased discount rate.

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18 There are, of course, exceptions to this. For instance, I may have a child who will, through some disability, never become an independent adult. We would not consider it to be overparenting to ensure that the distant future of such a child is provided for. I thank Teru Thomas for pressing me on this.
5.2.1. Compounding Interest and Returns on Investments

So far, I have argued that given our near-future bias, we morally ought to prioritise the present interests of strangers above our own distant-future interest, or, at the very least, we morally ought to sacrifice some unit of our distant-future well-being in order to greatly increase a stranger’s present well-being. However, compounding interest and investments make things more complicated. If we choose to save with a bank that offers an interest rate, the interest we gain from the sum of our savings will compound over time. If we choose to invest our money, we will gain returns on the investment over time.

For example, if you choose to save $100 rather than donate that sum of money to charity, the interest you earn from saving will compound over the years, so that the sum of money is much larger in the far-distant future. Furthermore, if you choose to invest this money rather than simply save, this could potentially vastly increase your future wealth. Given these economic facts, even if you discount your distant-future well-being, it may be that you ought to save or invest now rather than donate your money to help alleviate the current suffering of strangers.19

To respond, I think that any additional gains from compounding interest or investment returns will be offset by the diminishing marginal utility of wealth, both with regards to your own wealth, and with regards to your wealth when compared to the wealth of those in absolute poverty.

First, let’s consider diminishing marginal utility with respect to your own wealth. The diminishing marginal utility of wealth will mean that every dollar or pound will matter to you less than the last because each incremental increase in wealth will provide you with a smaller incremental increase in utility. So, if you are already wealthy, the interest added up over the years or the additional wealth gained by investing will not increase your well-being very much. At most, it will just allow you to have an even cushier retirement. So, even if any money we save today will be worth a lot more in the future, given that the extra money in our distant future will provide us with only a small amount of utility and given that we care less about our distant future well-being, it remains the case that we should direct our money towards poverty alleviation.

19 I thank Harry Lloyd for pressing me on this.
Second, let’s consider the diminishing marginal utility of your wealth in comparison to the wealth of those in absolute poverty. As I explained above, it costs very little to do a lot of good for distant strangers in absolute poverty. In addition, there are significant returns on current benefits experienced by those in poverty. For example, health interventions not only spare people from disease, but have beneficial effects on human capital formation and economic development. So, even if investing or saving could greatly increase your fortunes in the distant future and do you some good, the impact of giving what you have now to those in poverty will be far greater. My argument shows that we should at least be willing to sacrifice some unit of our distant-future well-being in order to greatly increase a stranger’s present well-being. So, again, even if any money we save today will be a larger sum of money in the future, there will be many cases where we ought to direct this money to famine relief instead, in order to greatly increase the present well-being of strangers.

5.2.2. Optimal Saving Policy

Suppose you are considering giving $100 to charity this month. I have argued that if you discount your future welfare, you can donate the $100 and reduce your savings (rather than your present consumption) by $100, so that the donation comes at the expense of your future self, whose welfare matters less to you than the present welfare of strangers. However, if you are already following an optimal saving policy in light of your near-future biased discount rate, the discounted future utility you get from $100 in additional savings will be roughly the same as the present utility you get from $100 in additional present consumption. In other words, taking the $100 out of your savings shifts the welfare cost to the future, which you care less about, but it also makes the welfare cost larger in undiscounted terms, to a roughly offsetting

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20 For example, productivity losses due to malaria are estimated as 2.6% of annual household income for Malawi (Ettling et al. 1994), 2-6% of GDP for Kenya, and 1-5% for Nigeria (Leighton & Foster 1993). Also, “one study on malaria eradication in the U.S. South (which had malaria until 1951) and several countries in Latin America suggests that a child who grew up malaria-free earns 50 percent more per year, for his entire adult life, compared to a child who got the disease. Qualitatively similar results were found in India, Paraguay, and Sri Lanka.” (Bhanerjee and Duflo 2021, 45). I thank Andreas Mogensen for this point.

21 This may imply that we should reject Patient Philanthropy, the view that individuals should invest and later donate financial resources, instead of donating now. However, if the returns of investing are sufficiently great, and we could do a lot more good by choosing to invest now and donate later, then we could justify doing so.
degree. So, the cost of taking the $100 out of your savings will be just as great as taking the $100 out of your present consumption, even after accounting for the fact that you discount your future welfare.\footnote{I thank Christian Tarsney for pressing me on this point.}

To respond, even though we do discount our future welfare, I don’t think the saving policy that many people adopt reflects this near-future bias. People are not, in fact, rational economic agents, so as a matter of fact, virtually no one can be expected to be following an optimal saving policy. And many people save or invest despite their near-future bias for the sole purpose of wealth accumulation. So, it seems to me, their saving behaviour isn’t a reflection of their true preferences or of the amount of concern they have for their distant-future interests, but rather a reaction to social expectations and pressures that one ought to invest and accumulate wealth.

Failing to follow an optimal saving policy in light of our near-future bias would not be morally problematic if it were only our own welfare that we needed to consider. Saving up more than we rationally ought to would not be immoral—we would merely be preventing our present selves from enjoying additional welfare and giving more to our future selves instead. However, we must consider not only our own well-being, but also the well-being of other people, including distant strangers. When we save more than we rationally ought to in light of our discount rate, we do so not only to the detriment of our present selves, but also to the detriment of distant strangers. And this is morally problematic, for it implies that we care way too little about the present condition of distant strangers.

6. Conclusion

We typically prioritise our near-future interests over our distant-future interests. I have argued, tentatively, that not only is it rationally permissible to display this near-future bias with respect to our own interests, but also it can be morally obligatory to display this bias with respect to other people’s interests. If this is right, and given a plausible limit on the extent to which we can prioritise our own interests above the interests of strangers, there will be a point in time such that, beyond this point, we morally ought to prioritise the present interests of strangers over our own future interests.
A similar but weaker conclusion holds even if the level of partiality we are permitted to have for our own interests above the interests of strangers is much higher than I have suggested. This is because, given our near-future bias, we are morally required to sacrifice our distant-future interests for the sake of a stranger’s present interests to a greater extent than would be required of us if it were our present well-being at stake. And we can reach this weaker conclusion even if we drop the assumption that near-future bias is rational and even if we remain temporally neutral with respect to the interests of other people.

I have shown that my arguments are particularly relevant when it comes to our moral obligations to give to charity, as for most people of a certain standard of living, the decision to give to charity will not usually affect their present well-being, but rather affect their distant-future well-being. If this is right, my arguments call into question the morality of saving up to secure our distant future at the expense of the present suffering of those in poverty.

In closing, it is worth noting that my arguments might have important implications for the moral view known as “longtermism”, which has become increasing popular in the effective altruism movement. This view holds that positively influencing the long-term future should be a key priority, a claim that might be in tension with my conclusion that we should prioritise present suffering over our distant future.23 I do not have space to explore this issue here, but I plan to do so in future work.24

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