

12 Is Temporal Bias Key to Justifying Fischer's Asymmetry?

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12.1 Introduction

Deprivationists hold that death can be (extrinsically) bad for the person who dies and is (extrinsically) bad insofar as it prevents one from accruing additional net good life. One of the major objections to deprivationism is known as the *Asymmetry Problem*.¹ If death is bad when it deprives individuals of additional good life, then why couldn't "births"² be bad for the same reason? Epicureans have argued that the events flanking each period of non-existence are axiologically symmetrical. If it's not bad (and we shouldn't care about) being deprived of an earlier birth, then it's likewise not bad (and we shouldn't care about) being deprived of a later death.

One of John Martin Fischer's numerous seminal contributions to philosophy of death is his ingenious multi-layered solution to the asymmetry problem. Stated over simplistically, Fischer argues that, generally, death is bad for people because it prevents them from accruing goods of which it's rational to care about being deprived, while the same isn't true of the goods people miss out on as a result of their birth. The relevant difference, Fischer contends, is that the goods birth deprived us of are in our past, whereas the goods death will deprive us of are in our future. The second layer of his solution thus relies on future temporal bias (hereafter "temporal bias" unless otherwise noted) being rationally required. People tend to care about goods and bads in their future, while being indifferent to goods and bads in their past. Most would even prefer accruing some small amount of additional good in their future over having acquired some much larger amount of additional good in their past. If these attitudes are rationally required, they may form the crux of a solution the *Asymmetry Problem*.

How might such temporal bias be justified? In the third layer of his solution, Fischer argues that this bias was selected for by evolutionary forces and contributes not only to our survival but also our flourishing. This is meant to offer robust, albeit defeasible, justification for our temporal bias. This layer of Fischer's solution will be the primary focus on this chapter.

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After reviewing each layer of Fischer's solution in more detail in the next section, I will raise two objections to this layer of his argument. First, I question the idea that temporal bias contributes to individual's flourishing, all things considered. Second, I argue that, even if it does, this does not provide the justification necessary to solve the *Asymmetry Problem* in the way Fischer wants. Though, it does make way for a few different solutions in the same vicinity.

Before I proceed, a few points are in order. My critique of Fischer is narrowly focused on one layer of his argument. Even *if* I am right, that wouldn't warrant a wholesale rejection of Fischer's proposed solution. There may be other ways to fill out that layer of his argument, some I consider here and some I don't. For instance, even if our temporally biased attitudes are irrational, there may be a second-order rational requirement to maintain these irrational attitudes. Or, the asymmetry in our causal powers may justify us being temporally biased most of the time, a second kind of solution which Fischer also accepts. Moreover, even if one ultimately accepts a different solution to the asymmetry problem, there is a great deal of insight in Fischer's proposed solution that should not be ignored. This includes, but is not limited to, what it reveals about the psychological underpinnings of our attitudes toward prospective prenatal and posthumous goods/bads, focusing our attention on the relationship between rational attitudes and good/bad events, identifying attitudinal and axiological versions of the *Asymmetry Problem*, and examining the *Asymmetry Problem* from different temporal perspectives. I can write, without exaggeration, that no one has influenced my own view on this topic more than John Martin Fischer. More generally, almost all of my work in the philosophy of death is indebted to John's work in some way. This chapter, quite obviously, is no exception. If I manage to get something right in this chapter, it's worth noting that I couldn't have done so without having first learned so much from John's work. As Isaac Newton once remarked, if I have seen further, it's by standing on the shoulders of giants.

12.2 Fischer's Solution to the *Asymmetry Problem*

12.2.1 *Layer One*

It's helpful to think of Fischer's solution to the asymmetry problem in at least three layers. The "top" layer is the general solution, while the justification for this layer is provided by the layer "underneath" it, which is, in turn, justified by the layer "underneath" that. Recall that the "top" layer is that the Lucretian asymmetry is explained by an asymmetry in deprivations it's rational to care about. While we can rationally lament

being deprived of posthumous goods, we cannot rationally lament being deprived of prenatal goods or so Fischer argues.

Now, this top layer admits of multiple interpretations. Is the rational lament *de re* or *de dicto*?³ Relatedly, does one rationally lament missing out on the specific goods they would have received had they not died when they did or is it missing out on good in general that is the object of rational lament? Or perhaps it's both. Fischer opts for the *de dicto* reading.⁴ He also seemingly allows that we can rationally lament missing out on good, even if we don't know what goods we'd be getting, exactly. Moreover, we do this from a temporal perspective. As a matter of necessity, whenever we have a perspective, our prenatal deprivations will be in our past and our posthumous deprivations in our future.

Fischer's proposed solution highlights two importantly distinct readings of Lucretius' symmetry argument. There is first the axiological question of whether it is *bad for* one to be deprived of prenatal and posthumous goods. Then there is the question about which sorts of *attitudes* it's rational to have in response to these deprivations. The answers could come apart. While it's often assumed that rational attitudes neatly track an events' goodness/badness, this is not obvious.⁵ Perhaps we can rationally lament events that are not overall bad for us or be indifferent to events that are indeed overall bad for us. For his part, Fischer presciently recognizes that these questions come apart and argues for an interesting connection between the badness of events and rational attitudes. Specifically, he suggests that posthumous deprivations are bad *because* it's rational to lament missing out on that good, while prenatal deprivations are not bad *because* it's not rational to lament missing out on those goods.⁶ For reasons to be discussed in the next section, I take the "because" claims to pick out epistemic (as opposed to metaphysical) grounding relations.⁷

Over the years, Fischer has somewhat modified his view in response to the large subliterature his solution generated. He's also offered increasingly precise formulations of his favored solution. With the above clarifications in mind, I quote his most recent (2014) formulation below in its entirety. This final formulation is referred to as $BF^*(dd)^*(D)$, though I'll here refer to it as *Fischer's Asymmetry* for ease of exposition.

Fischer's Asymmetry (FA): When death is bad for an individual X , it is bad for X because it is rational for X , from the perspective of certain times during his life, to care about having pleasant experiences after t (where t is the time of his death), and his death deprives him of having pleasant experiences after t (whereas prenatal non-existence is not bad for a person because, even though it deprives him of having had pleasant experiences before t^* [where t^* is the time at which

he came into existence], it is not rational for him, from the perspective of those times during his life, to care about having had pleasant experiences before t^* .

(Fischer and Brueckner 2014c: 329)

This is the first layer of Fischer's solution. Now let's turn to the second layer.

12.2.2 *Layer Two*

Now that *Fischer's Asymmetry* has been reviewed in maximally precise detail, one may wonder what justifies this asymmetry. More carefully, one may ask *why* it is that we should be indifferent to posthumous deprivations, but not prenatal ones? The answer Fischer gives appeals to temporal bias. In his (1984), Derek Parfit famously gave a case demonstrating that we're temporally biased about pain. People prefer that their pain be in the past and even, *ceteris paribus*, prefer a larger amount of pain in the past to a smaller amount pain in the future even though that seems overall worse for them! In his earliest (1986: 218–9) work on the *Asymmetry Problem*, Fischer and his co-author Anthony Brueckner offer a revised version of Parfit's⁸ case to show that people are conversely temporally biased about pleasure. That is, people prefer that pleasure be in the future and even, *ceteris paribus*, prefer a smaller amount of pleasure in the future to a larger amount of pleasure in the past even though that seems overall worse for them! Here's the amended version of the case Fischer gives in his (2020).

Imagine that you are in some hospital to test a drug. The drug induces intense pleasure for an hour followed by amnesia. You awaken and ask the nurse about your situation. She says that either you tried the drug yesterday (and had an hour of pleasure) or you will try the drug tomorrow (and will have an hour of pleasure). While she checks on your status, it is clear that you prefer to have the pleasure tomorrow. There is a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced goods that is parallel to the asymmetry in our attitudes to experienced bads: we are indifferent to past pleasures and look forward to future pleasures.

(2020: 78)

This is the second layer. Why are prenatal deprivations ones we cannot rationally care about, yet posthumous deprivations are ones we're rationally required to care about? The answer is that we have a rational future temporal bias about pleasures. Now, one may push further and ask for a justification about temporal bias. Why think that such a bias is rationally

obligatory or, for that matter, even permissible. The answer is the third layer of Fischer's solution.

12.2.3 *Layer Three*

12.2.3.1 *Fischer's Evolutionary Explanation*

There are actually a few subtly distinct solutions Fischer endorses that fit in this third layer. I am going to first focus on the one he defends most frequently and in the most detail before moving to his second solution, to which I'm quite amendable. In his (2006), (2009: 74), (2020: 78–80), (2022a: 347), and (2022b: 406), Fischer argues that evolutionary forces selected for future directed temporal bias because it's survival conducive. I'll refer to this as *Fischer's Evolutionary Explanation (FEE)*. Not only is this bias survival conducive, but it also helps us flourish, Fischer argues, and so is rational. In his earliest robust defense of *FEE*, Fischer writes the following.

There is a clear survival benefit to creatures who care especially about the future, so from a purely evolutionary perspective, there seems to be a 'point' to some sort of general asymmetry in our concern about the past and future. Given this, and the difficulty of 'fine-tuning' such an asymmetry in attitudes, it would not be surprising (or inappropriate) that we have the general asymmetry in our attitudes toward our own future pleasures and our own past pleasures.

(2009: 74)

He adds that "creatures with this specific sort of attitudinal asymmetry will have a greater chance of maximizing pleasure over time, and, arguably, being happier." And so "there is a clear survival advantage to having such an asymmetry" (Fischer 2009: 74). He elaborates in his (2020), writing that temporally biased people "will be more attentive to possibilities for opportunities and pleasure in the future, and also to obstacles and dangers. Having this sort of future bias 'lights up' these possibilities (along with the obstacles) for the individual, thus making it more likely that she will have more pleasurable experiences, and avoid unpleasant experiences, in the future" (Fischer 2020: 80). The details of this extremely plausible "just so" story could be further filled out in a number of ways, but the general details should be relatively clear. In line with Fischer's (2006) explanation, Suhler and Callender offer an evolutionary explanation in their (2012). Here is the crux of that explanation.

The advantages enjoyed by an organism with a tendency to experience (contextually appropriate) affective states upon imagining future

events, relative to an otherwise similar conspecific not disposed to experience such states, should be clear. These future-triggered affective states—and their associated physiological changes and motivational effects—would help an organism behave in ways that would make the occurrence of desirable or evolutionarily advantageous states of affairs (e.g., acquiring food or a mate) more likely to occur and undesirable or evolutionary disadvantageous states of affairs (e.g., starvation, failing to find a mate, being injured/killed by a predator or aggressive conspecific) less likely to occur... Given the existence of the causal asymmetry, changes in an organism's behavior or motivation resulting from emotions activated by imagining or retrospectively past events would not have any effect on the past states of affairs in question. They would not help the organism to act so as to make desirable past states of affairs more likely to have occurred or undesirable past states of affairs less likely to have occurred.

(Suhler and Callender 2012: 12)⁹

The “just so” story is meant to explain the causal origins of our bias and the reason we're rationally obligated to have this bias, according to Fischer, is that it's prudent to have it. Presumably, it's supposed to be prudent at multiple levels, benefitting *Homo sapiens* as a whole all the way down to individual members of our species.

One, too quick, retort is that these considerations do not offer a wholesale justification of temporal bias. Rather, they would only justify a severely restricted temporal bias, perhaps along the following lines.

Restricted Temporal Bias (RTB): We are justified in having future biased attitudes *only* in the situations in which it's prudent to do so.

Fischer, however, argues against this, writing that it would be far too difficult to “fine-tune such an asymmetry” and that we could not simply turn “it off and on as the context requires” (2006: 199). Thus, “it would not be surprising or inappropriate that we would have asymmetrical attitudes toward our own future pleasures and our own past pleasures, even in particular instances in which it is clear that such an asymmetry will not affect one's long-term pleasure or happiness (or chances for survival)” (2006: 199). Fischer concludes that “insofar as it is rational to care about pleasure, happiness, and even survival, the general asymmetry is, arguably, rational” (2020: 80).

I wish to pause here to appreciate a few intriguing, never discussed, implications of Fischer's solution. First, it's highly dependent on contingent psychological features of humans and, more controversially, our world. Very different cognitive beings in very different environments might not

be justified in sharing our asymmetrical attitudes. Perhaps alien creatures whose intentions are causally inefficacious would have to be temporally neutral. Should time traveling or atemporally existing beings be possible, they too may have to be temporally neutral. Perhaps more cognitively sophisticated beings would be rationally required to act in accordance with RTB. This seems, to me, as plausible as it is interesting.

Second, it's also a bit depressing that the rationality of our asymmetric attitudes depends on our coarse-grained subpar rational capacities. Counterintuitively, our rational requirement to (in a way) treat prenatal and postmortem deprivations asymmetrically depends on our being incapable of doing better. It's rather like a young child who, on the basis of seeing a single Savannah and Yorkshire Terrier forms the belief that domestic cats are bigger than dogs. They may be justified in doing so, but only because they're ignorant of other domestic breeds and lack the requisite cognitive capacity to apply more fine-grained principles of comparison and generalization. Still, if they were a bit more cognitively sophisticated, this belief would be unjustified and, on Fischer's view, if humans were a bit more cognitively sophisticated, our sweeping asymmetric attitudes would be unjustified as well.¹⁰ This is not an objection to Fischer's view, but rather a note about the interesting relationship between rationality and our cognitive limitations Fischer's solution reveals.

12.2.3.2 *Asymmetry of Causal Power*

In addition to FEE, Fischer very briefly mentions a closely related explanation that could be worked out in such a way as to fill in the third layer of his solution to the *Asymmetry Problem*. He refers to this solution as the *Asymmetry of Causal Power Approach (ACPA)*. Details about our evolutionary history notwithstanding, "causation goes forward, and not backward, in time," which suggests that "insofar as we care about bringing about effects in the world, we care especially and distinctively about the present and future (rather than the fixed past)" (Fischer 2009: 74). Fischer alludes to this in his (2020) and mentions it again in his (2022a), writing that since "we can causally affect the future but not the past, it makes sense to focus our practical reasoning on future possibilities, rather than the past," adding that this "asymmetric psychological orientation complements the Brueckner/Fischer point that this confers significant survival advantages" (2020: 347). As with FEE, this focus is supposed to be rational because it's prudent.

APCA and FEE are closely related but come apart in some subtle, and important, ways. First, APCA is neutral with respect to our evolutionary history. The observation about causation is true regardless of whether evolution selected for temporal bias or whether such bias is

survival conducive. In fact, APCA could be accepted at face value while holding that we should be temporally neutral. These positions are consistent, though Fischer seems to plausibly think that it can (at least in part) justify our temporal bias. Second, along these lines, APCA primarily concerns the *focus of our practical reason*. That could be used in the third layer of Fischer's solution to justify temporal bias. But it can also be used to develop a completely different line of thought, as I've done in my (2018). The focus of our practical reason may come apart from how good or bad various events are for us, and (more controversially) what is rational to care about. On my view, prenatal deprivations can be just as *bad for us* as postmortem deprivations, yet we nevertheless ought to *focus our practical reason* on postmortem deprivations for the reasons Fischer outlines. I even will go so far as to hold that it's *fitting* to have a negative attitude toward prenatal deprivations, even if it's often all-things-considered irrational to do so due to the prudential considerations Fischer identifies.

In the next section, I am going to critique FEE and argue that it may not provide the needed justification for the second layer of *Fischer's Asymmetry*. It's important to note, however, that this won't result in the collapse of Fischer's overall solution. It leaves ample room for another argument to fulfill that justificatory role. *If* I am right, it suggests that the third layer should be replaced with another explanation, perhaps APCA (to which I'm amenable), something akin to it, or something else entirely.

12.3 Temporal Bias, Justification, and Truth

Fischer, of course recognizes that his detractors may question the rationality of temporal bias¹¹ and often tempers his conclusion in his typical, epistemically humble, fashion. In this section, I want to raise doubts that future directed temporal bias is justified by FEE. I have two major worries. First, I am somewhat skeptical that being temporally biased is ultimately survival conducive, even if it is in many situations. Second, while I grant that being survival conducive provides justification for some kind of asymmetry to be discussed, I don't think it justifies truth apt beliefs about the badness of events or rational attitudes. It might nevertheless provide a kind of meta-level prudential justification, rationally believing something not supported by the evidence for prudential reasons. It'd *roughly* be akin to hypnotizing oneself to believe John Adams was the first President to win money in a bizarre contest. Here it'd be prudentially rational to give oneself an irrational belief. One might even have most reason, all-things-considered, to maintain their irrational belief. I'll now consider each worry in turn. Though, as we'll see, these issues turn on some more complicated issues.

12.3.1 *Evolution and the Downside of Temporal Bias*

Evolutionary biologists hold that valenced experiences are adaptive because they motivate survival conducive or fitness-enhancing actions and discourage fitness-reducing actions (Phillips 2008: 291, Dawkins 2009: 393). A, perhaps overly liberal, reading of this allows “valenced experiences” to be understood broadly enough to cover attitudes directed at pleasurable and painful events. So, future bias about pain and pleasure is almost certainly fitness-enhancing. Nevertheless, not all fitness-enhancing dispositions (attitudes, natural instincts, actions, etc.) generate survival conducive or prudent action. Here are three ways fitness-enhancement and prudence can come to be at odds for the individual. First, think of the semelparous animals, who die after mating, such as the male praying mantis or antechinus. Their mating compulsions help those animals pass along their DNA to the next generation, but it’s worse *for them* to engage in this behavior. While it may help *their genes* or *their species* flourish, it doesn’t help *the individual* flourish. On the contrary, it harms the individual.

Second, evolution can also select for some coarse-grained behavior that resulted in less imprudent choices than the realistic alternatives evolution could produce but is nevertheless suboptimal. As we’ll see, being temporally near biased in one such example. Being future biased may be as well.

Finally, vestiges of once fitness-enhancing and prudent behavior can persist in different environments, even when they’re no longer fitness-enhancing or prudent. Humans’ natural fondness of sugars and fats is but one example. Evolution selected for humans to be future biased, just as it did for them to be near biased. This certainly served some general fitness-enhancing role for our *species* and our *genes*. Nevertheless, I’ll argue that it’s at least an open question whether being future biased is overall prudent for the *individual*.

Before considering future bias, let’s consider the downsides of near bias. Since evolution selected near and future temporal bias together, there is some reason to think that they stand or fall together. Unless a relevant difference can be identified between them, they should be treated symmetrically.¹² As luck would have it, the vast majority of research on the rationality of temporal bias is done by economists, focusing exclusively on near bias. Near bias, while surely selected for its fitness-enhancement, is generally imprudent to act on regularly. Near biased agents have trouble doing things, such as saving for retirement, motivating themselves to maintain a healthy diet, abstain from smoking, and generally refraining from indulging in some immediate pleasures when the greater negative consequences of such pleasures are in the distant future.¹³

None of this changes the fact that our near biased ancestors were more likely to make choices that resulted in them successfully reproducing. But

it does show that near bias is both fitness-enhancing and, yet, motivates individuals to act imprudently. While humans cannot fully eliminate their near bias by any simple act of volition, they can recognize it and work to eradicate its influence in their deliberation when it's most harmful. It has been partially curbed with success too, and there's no reason to think future bias would be any more difficult to partially curb. Acting in accordance with RTB may not be possible, but approximating it more closely than we do now seems feasible. At any rate, the connection between fitness-enhancement and prudence is complex, and the existence of the former is no guarantee of the latter. This suggests additional argumentation is needed to establish that it's prudent to act in accordance with a trait selected for fitness-enhancement.¹⁴

Like near bias, future bias may very well be a fitness-enhancing trait on which it's often imprudent to act. Since economists have focused almost exclusively on near bias, they've ignored how future bias might underlie actual irrational behavior. As such, claims about the practical downside of future bias will be more speculative. Thankfully, philosophers have turned their attention to what economists have (largely) ignored. Being philosophers, however, they have tended to focus on how future bias will lead to paradigmatically irrational behavior in different possible worlds. Such example may still show that future bias is irrational, but they wouldn't show that it results in imprudent behavior in the actual world. Here are three considerations that tell against the rationality of future bias, only the last of which focuses on imprudent behavior in the actual world.

12.3.2 *Dutch Booking*

- (i) Assuming backward time travel is (metaphysically) possible, future biased agents can be Dutch Booked.

Imagine an agent who, in a Parfit-like case, faces the choice of having a four-hour painful surgery on Tuesday or a one-hour painful surgery on Thursday. Suppose it's currently Monday and they are scheduled for the four hour surgery on Tuesday. Since, on Monday, they prefer to have the surgery on Thursday, they should be willing to pay some money to have the date of their surgery pushed back to Thursday. Suppose they do this. On Wednesday, however, the agent should prefer that she had the four-hour surgery on Tuesday rather than the one-hour surgery on Thursday. Given these preferences, she should be willing to pay some money to switch the date of her surgery again from Thursday to Tuesday.

Even if this isn't metaphysically possible, it's epistemically possible and that may suffice to highlight the irrationality of these temporally biased preferences. Even if it's not epistemically possible to imagine such a case,

it's still true that *if* it were possible for the agent to act on her preferences, she would be Dutch Booked.¹⁵ Why is this irrational? Well, someone fully informed of all the normatively relevant facts would pay money twice to get the thing she had in the first place! Were she able to act on her temporal bias, she'd be acting in a way that she knows would make her worse off (with no compensating good) and that seems paradigmatically irrational.¹⁶

12.3.3 *Third Parties Should Be Temporally Neutral*

Here is another consideration that should make us doubt whether future bias is irrational.

- (ii) In Parfit's and Fischer's hospital cases, third parties should hope that the person in question gets the less painful surgery in the near future for their own sake and be indifferent between when they receive the pleasurable drug.

If I found out that my partner Amanda were in these situations, I would hope that she has the one-hour painful surgery in the future, and I'd be indifferent to when she received the hour of pleasure from the drug. It wouldn't matter to me that she prefers she had the surgery in the past, as that is irrelevant to what's good for her overall. I want her to suffer less over her life because that is what's overall best for her.¹⁷ For the same reason, I'm indifferent to when she gets the pleasure.

To be sure, this case just concerns preferences, and one cannot act on their future bias to make themselves worse off. After all, Amanda couldn't, at present, make it the case that she got the painful surgery in the past (or didn't get the pleasurable drug) if she in fact didn't get the surgery (or did get the drug). This is true, although agents can still take their future bias into account when deliberating about what to do now and that can lead to imprudent acts in the actual world. Consider irrational instances of "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning.

12.3.4 *I'll Be Glad I Did It*

The first example concerned irrational choices that persons in the actual world cannot make, while the second highlighted some reasons to think actual preferences people have are irrational. But does future temporal bias underlie irrational choices actual people make? I think it's plausible that it does when people engage in "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning.

- (iii) A person who is making a significantly life-altering decisions may feel comfortable choosing a seemingly prudentially impermissible option

because they know, once the event happens, they'll be glad they made the choice they did.

Or, they might falsely believe a complex question about prudence is actually quite simple because, whichever choice they make, they'll be happy with it. They then don't dedicate the time necessary to actually figure out what's in their best interest.

Harman (2009) discusses a number of fictionalized cases that, given my (and others') anecdotal experience, have real world counterparts. This includes, but is not limited to, a teenager carrying an early unplanned pregnancy to term, joining the armed forces, and either getting or not getting cochlear implant surgery.

Now, part of what is going on in these cases is that these life-altering choices affect one's self-conception in a significant way. The choices would change their identity in some important respect and, what Harman calls, their "reasonable attachment to the actual" will make them glad that they made the choice they did, even if they're worse off than they otherwise would have been. That's not *all* that is going on in these cases, I contend. The deliberating agent will come to be indifferent to the pains that result from the decisions (e.g., that of having a child as a teenager) once they're in the past, allowing themselves to take joys in the current and future pleasures that come with their newfound identity. Temporally neutral agents would, it seems, have a much harder time appreciating the pleasures of their new life if they were as focused on the past transitional pains (and loss of pleasure) that resulted from their decisions. Importantly, when agents think about the effects of these decisions on their future selves, they can (if only subconsciously) factor in the effects of their temporal bias when they imagine how their future selves will react to their choice. Knowing that their future self won't regret the choice in question, in part because of their temporal bias, they infer that making that choice is prudentially rational. This inference is unwarranted, even if they luckily make the right choice. It will lead to imprudent choices at least as often as it does prudent ones.

Irrational behavior that results from near bias is easier to spot because, as an agent's temporal position shifts (the distant future becomes the near), they live to regret having made the choice they did. Irrational behavior that results from future bias generally results in the opposite outcome. As an agent's temporal perspective shifts, they come to be indifferent to, or even outright endorse, having the worse option. Crucially, however, this doesn't prevent those suboptimal outcomes from being bad for them. Acting on this reasoning can result in them getting less good overall and it's bad for them when this happens regardless of whether they'll regret the outcome in the future.¹⁸

To recap, I began the section by illustrating how *survival conduciveness* or *fitness-enhancement* and *prudence* can come apart. I fully grant that future bias is survival conducive but offered four general reasons to be skeptical that it's prudent. First, the same evolutionary mechanism plausibly selected for both types of temporal bias and the imprudent choices generated from near bias are well documented. This raises the possibility that future bias results in similarly irrational behavior and shifts the burden of proof on to those who wish to defend acting on this bias as prudent. Second, those who are future biased can be Dutch Booked, which is indicative of a rationally inconsistent set of attitudes or preferences. Third, when we imagine what is best for others as a third party, we tend to adopt the temporally neutral perspective, ceasing to be future biased. If taking a temporally neutral stance is best for others, it seems that it's best for us too. Fourth, some people who engage in "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning appear to be real-world cases of people acting imprudently, partly as a result of their future bias. They are, in part, using their knowledge of how their future bias will affect their retrospective outlook on their choices and inferring that because their future self won't care about getting some (sub-optimal) outcome, it's not bad for them to now bring about that outcome.

What I've written is speculative and more rigorous empirical and philosophical investigation into future bias may reveal that it, unlike near bias, motivates prudent choices more often than not. I leave open this possibility as I turn to the next section, which focuses on the question of what this all has to do with the truth of whether death and "birth" are bad for us. Even assuming it's prudent to believe that "birth" isn't bad for us (and not rational to care about), it may nevertheless be true that it is indeed bad for us.

12.4 What Does Survival Conduciveness Have to Do with Truth and Justification?

My next worry concerns what kind of connections exist between beliefs and attitudes that are survival conducive on the one hand and justification and truth on the other. Recall that Fischer argues that "birth" is not bad for us *because* it's not rational to care about the goods that our "births" deprive us of, while it is rational to care about the goods of which our deaths deprive us. Whether some event is bad for us is a truth-apt claim. The reason Fischer believes these asymmetrical attitudes are justified is *because* they're survival conducive. Attitudes may not be truth-apt, depending on whether they're cognitive or not. Here I assume they are, though even if they're not, non-cognitive attitudes can still be (un)fitting.

Notice that Fischer invokes two "because" relations in his solution. I take the former to pick out an epistemic, as opposed to metaphysical, grounding relation. Seeing that we ought not rationally care about

something may be good evidence that the thing in question isn't bad for us. Connections between the value of events and rational attitudes can justify inferences that go in both directions, so to speak. The metaphysical grounding relation, however, seems to go in just one direction. *If* there is a metaphysical grounding relation between goodness/badness and rational attitudes, presumably the goodness/badness of something is explanatorily prior to what sorts of rational attitudes one can take toward it. The goodness/badness of an event is what would make it the case that you rationally ought to care about it, rather than the other way around.

So, FA concerns truth-apt *beliefs* about the badness of "birth" and death, as well as truth-apt (or at least fitting) *attitudes* about "birth" and death. The beliefs about goodness/badness are justified by the rational attitudes, which are justified by their survival conduciveness. This seems *prima facie* plausible, but I want to examine this in more detail. In the metaethics literature, some have argued that the survival conduciveness of beliefs (and, *mutatis mutandis*, attitudes) can actually serve to undermine justification in them.

Richard Joyce and Sharon Street are the pioneers of this type of argument. The fact that a belief or attitude is conducive to our survival provides a causal explanation for why we have it and, if our survival doesn't depend on the belief in question being true, then it looks like the cause of our belief isn't connected to its truth in any way.¹⁹ Structurally analogous arguments may be used to call into question the rationality of temporal bias. Here's what I have in mind. Suppose it's survival conducive to be temporally biased. This temporal bias is what underlies common beliefs about "birth" not being bad for us at all, while allowing that death could be bad. This temporal bias would be survival conducive regardless of whether it generated rational (or fitting) attitudes and regardless of whether such those attitudes generated true beliefs. As such, this seems to be a potential defeater for such beliefs.

To illustrate this point by way of analogy, I'll tweak an example given by Richard Joyce (2007: 180). Suppose I believe that Frances McDormand won an Academy Award for her performance in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* only to later find out that I was given a pill that would induce this belief in me regardless of whether she actually won. Upon learning this information, I should suspend my judgment about whether McDormand actually won since I have a causal explanation for that belief that is not truth-tracking. Ditto for temporally biased attitudes, as well as the beliefs they generate. After all, the justification for the asymmetrical claims about badness depended on the justification about the asymmetrical attitudes. *If* there is no reason to think the temporally biased attitudes selected for are tracking truth (or fittingness), then there is no reason to think the beliefs they generate are truth-tracking either.

Fischer might respond by arguing that we have good reason to believe that evolution selected for truth-tracking beliefs about these matters. How

might he argue for that claim? Perhaps Parfit's (2017) doubling-down reply to Street could be extended to attitudes about temporal bias. Or perhaps Chappell's (2017) question-begging reply to Street could be extended with the additional claim that there is good internal reason to trust one's (standard) normative judgments about temporal bias. I personally lean against these responses because I find existing arguments against temporal bias compelling.²⁰ Perhaps temporal bias can be justified non-inferentially. That may be, but I cannot reject the arguments against it without also having to reject other non-inferential beliefs I find more compelling. But that's just me. When we hit argumentative bedrock, it can be perfectly rational for people to give up other non-inferential beliefs to preserve the judgment that temporal bias is justified.

Fischer might instead respond by holding either that, contrary to my assumption, the temporally biased attitudes are non-cognitive and, furthermore, that such attitudes can be justified by purely prudential reasons. Or, instead, he could argue that they're cognitive, yet nevertheless justified by the reasons of prudence. I am sympathetic with something akin to this line of thought. In a sense, I accept that we should have asymmetric (cognitive or non-cognitive) attitudes toward "birth" and death insofar as it's prudent to do so. We should similarly act in accordance with such attitudes when it's prudent (and not immoral) to do so. Crucially, however, the sense in which we "should" do this prudential, and these prudential considerations are not epistemic ones. The only considerations that bear on the truth about the badness of death and "birth" are epistemic considerations. Thus, the prudential considerations I have in mind cannot justify FA.

To motivate my position, it will be helpful to consider the distinction between the rationality of *letting one's beliefs (and attitudes) guide their actions* and the *rationality of the beliefs (and attitudes) themselves*. Imagine that I will be murdered by an eccentric group of philosophers unless I believe that I deserve to have my finger pricked with a needle daily, and act accordingly. Suppose also that I have been hypnotized to believe that I deserve to have my finger pricked daily, and act accordingly. Finally, to make this case even more bizarre, imagine that I know the causal origin of my belief but simply could not rid myself of it without weekly sessions with an epistemologist. Now, consider the following questions.

Is it rational for me to believe that I deserve to have my finger pricked?

Or, relatedly,

Do I have sufficient epistemic reason to believe that I deserve to have my finger pricked?

The answer to both questions is "No." There are, we may suppose, simply no *epistemic* considerations that count in favor of my deserving to have

my finger pricked and many against.²¹ Were I a perfectly rational agent responding to the evidence, I would not believe that I deserve to have my finger pricked. The same might be said about temporal bias. Now consider the following question about maintaining this belief.

Should I continue to believe that I deserve to have my finger pricked?

Here the “should” is ambiguous. If it’s understood epistemically, the answer is still “No” and for the same reason. If it’s understood prudentially, the answer is “Yes,” not because the belief is rational, but because maintaining this irrational belief helps you avoid being murdered. Analogously, it *may* be imprudent for people to try and rid themselves of their future bias. If so, perhaps it’s prudentially best (and rationally required) for them to not fight it, simply maintaining their irrationality.

What about acting on this irrational belief? Consider this question.

Should I prick my finger each day?

Again, the prudential answer is “Yes.” Your motivation to do this is based on a false belief, viz., that you deserve to have your finger pricked, but that doesn’t change the fact that acting on this false belief is what’s best for you. Likewise, being temporal bias may be irrational. But *if* it’s survival conducive, it may be best to accept it and act accordingly. Since the bias is so engrained in our collective conscious, it would be hard to rid ourselves of it, at any rate. Given our cognitive limitations, finite time on earth, and possible prudential value of being future temporally biased, perhaps we should surrender to it and act *as if* our beliefs (and attitudes) are truth-tracking. In short, perhaps it’s rationally required to maintain irrational beliefs about temporal bias. That wouldn’t quite provide the justification for FA Fischer had in mind. But it, combined with ABCA, could justify a solution in close proximity.

12.5 Conclusion

I have tried to do a few different things in this chapter. I first reviewed Fischer’s collective works on the asymmetry problem, explaining each of the three layers of his solution and how they build on one another. I then argued against the third layer of his solution, which offers a justifying evolutionary explanation of our temporal bias. I grant that evolution selected for temporal bias because it was survival conducive for our species and genes but offered some highly defeasible reason to doubt that it’s in the prudential interest of individuals to be temporally biased. I then argued that, even if it is prudent to be temporally biased, that wouldn’t make such attitudes (or the actions that flow from them) rationally justified.

As a conciliatory point, though, prudential considerations may rationally justify maintaining, and acting on, irrational beliefs about temporal bias.

I'd like to end the chapter by considering where this leaves Fischer's argument, and FA specifically. Even assuming my argument against the third layer succeeds, alternative views in the vicinity can offer up a sturdy enough replacement to support something quite close to FA. I favor the view that temporal bias with respect to "birth" and death is a useful fiction, and it would be irrational to try and eliminate our (irrational) bias. At the same time, it is true that time's arrow flows in one direction and our choices now will affect our future selves. This gives us practical reason to focus on our potentially bad deaths far more than our "births." Here I just echo the insights of Fischer's ABCA, which is strong enough to serve as the third layer of Fischer's argument on its own. The only caveat is that it wouldn't support FA in its current form. Instead, it at least allows that "birth" and death can be bad for us, though we ought to have different attitudes toward them. The most definitive thing I can write is that the truth lies somewhere in this vicinity and this truth would not be recognized without Fischer's seminal work on this issue over the last 37 years.

Notes

- 1 This is really a problem for any view that posits an asymmetry between the badness of "birth" and death. It is, however, a particularly notable problem for deprivationists, such as Fischer and myself.
- 2 Even though one exists before they are born, I'm using the term "birth" in a stipulative sense to refer to the event that brings one into existence.
- 3 Feldman (2013) raises this interpretive question and argues that both readings are subject to problems. Fischer and Brueckner reply to Feldman in their (2013), opting for the *de dicto* reading and showing how it can avoid the problems Feldman worried about.
- 4 In addition to their (2013), see Fischer and Brueckner (2014b) and (2014c), replying to Johansson (2014).
- 5 For an argument for this claim, see Timmerman (2016).
- 6 For objections, consider Belshaw (1993), where he argues that accessing past pleasures can be pleasant, bringing about future goods. See also Yi (2012), where he identifies certain cases where past events deprive us of future goods. In their (2014a), Fischer and Brueckner respond, allowing that sometimes past pleasures generate future pleasures and prevent future goods. Their argument concerns past pleasures, as such, not their impact on future pleasures or deprivations of pleasures.
- 7 It's also important to understand how "rationality" is being understood in Fischer's explanation. On a weak reading, it's *rationaly permissible* to have these asymmetric attitudes, while on a strong reading, it's *rationaly required* to have them. In his most recent discussions of the problem, Fischer suggests that caring about prenatal deprivations is rationally impermissible, which suggests the strong reading. Moreover, his most precise formulations of his solution entail the stronger reading. See Fischer and Brueckner (2013), (2014a), (2014c) and Fischer (2022b: 406).

- 8 For the original description of the case, see Parfit (1984: 165–66).
- 9 For the discussion of the causal asymmetry in relation to this type of explanation, see Horwich (1987). See also Van Boven and Ashworth (2007).
- 10 Perhaps some philosophers who argue against the rationality of temporal bias have even managed to transcend this bias and should, by Fischer’s own lights, be temporally neutral. The best the rest of us could do, perhaps, is to curb our bias some.
- 11 See Fischer (2006) and (2009: 74).
- 12 Scheffler makes a case for a difference in his (2021).
- 13 See Sullivan (2018) for a discussion of near bias causing irrational behavior, even taking into account appropriate levels of risk aversion.
- 14 Though, again, this is certainly possible. The sociobiological story given in Suhler and Callendar’s (2012) could possibly be expanded to do just that.
- 15 One response available to Fischer is to suggest that Dutch Booking is only indicative of irrational preferences in (metaphysically) possible worlds.
- 16 For more on Dutch Booking arguments against temporal bias, as well as a variety of other independent arguments against temporal bias, see Dougherty (2011), Greene and Sullivan (2015), and Sullivan (2018).
- 17 Though, see Greene et al. (2021) for a work in experimental philosophy that shows this judgment is not widely shared among non-philosophers. As anecdotal evidence, at least one anonymous referee did not share this judgment nor did Amanda. She would both prefer that she had the more painful surgery in the past and that I had the more painful surgery in the past. She also prefers that we both have the pleasurable experience in the future. One speculative explanation is that these judgments correlate with the degree to which third parties are imagining the case empathetically. When I think about these cases as a third party, I automatically think of the events from a temporally neutral perspective and how they impact this other person’s total well-being, represented as a ledger with numerical values denoting their well-being. A particularly empathetic person will think about these cases from within the frame of reference of the person being affected by these events. Amanda, for instance, may imagine what *I want* or what *she would want if she were in my place* in these cases and, thus, reintroduce temporal bias.
- 18 Parfit imagines a temporally neutral person *Timeless* who is able to selectively look back on past goods with the same excitement as future goods, while also ignoring past bad events. He thinks this would confer an advantage to the temporally neutral. It really seems to confer an advantage to merely possible agents who are both temporally neutral and have volitional control over their memories.
- 19 See Joyce (1998: ch. 6), Joyce (2007), Street (2006; 2016).
- 20 See notes 18 and 19.
- 21 If this strains credulity, just replace “me” with a fictional agent who’s free of vice and whose virtue knows no bounds.

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