

IV*—RATIONALITY AND TIME

by Derek Parfit

One theory about rationality is the *Self-interest Theory*, or *S*. *S* claims that what each of us has most reason to do is whatever would be best for himself. And it is irrational for anyone to do what he knows would be worse for himself.

When morality conflicts with self-interest, many people would reject the *Self-interest Theory*. But most of these people would accept one of the claims that *S* makes. This is the claim that we should not care less about our further future, simply because it is further in the future. We should not, for example, postpone pains at the foreseen cost of making them much worse. In our concern for our own self-interest, we should give equal weight to all the parts of our future. In this paper I shall discuss how a *Self-interest Theorist* should defend this claim.

I

THE BIAS TOWARDS THE NEAR

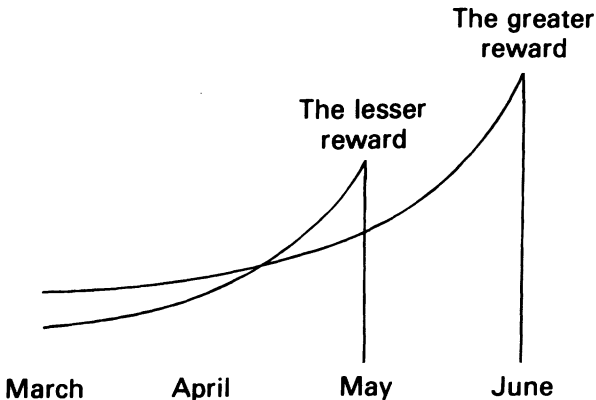
Bentham claimed that, in deciding the value of any future pleasure, we should consider how *soon* we shall enjoy it.¹ C. I. Lewis suggests that this may have been a loose reminder that the 'nearer pleasures are in general the more certain.'² But the claim would then be redundant, for Bentham tells us directly to consider the likelihood of future pleasures. If we take his claim strictly, it tells us to prefer nearer pleasures just because they are nearer. It commits Bentham to the view that, 'although we should be rationally concerned about the future, we should be less concerned about it according as it is more remote—and this quite independently of any doubt which attaches to the more remote'. Lewis calls this 'the principle of fractional prudence'. As he admits, 'it expresses an attitude which humans do tend to take'. But he regards it as so clearly irrational as to be not worth discussing.

I call this attitude the *bias towards the near*. Hume describes

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one of the ways in which this bias is revealed: 'In reflecting upon any action which I am to perform a twelvemonth hence, I always resolve to prefer the greater good, whether at that time it will be contiguous or remote. . . . But on a nearer approach. . . a new inclination to the present good springs up, and makes it difficult for me to adhere inflexibly to my first purpose and resolution.'³

Hume's words suggest that this bias applies only to the immediate future. But a more accurate description is this. We have a *discount rate* with respect to time, and we discount the *nearer* future at a *greater* rate. This is why we do not 'adhere' to our 'resolutions'. Here are two examples. I decide that when, in five minutes, I remove the plaster from my leg, I shall wrench it off at once, now preferring the prospect of a moment's agony to the long discomfort of easing the plaster off hair by hair. But when the moment comes I reverse my decision. Similarly, I decide that when in five years' time I start my career, I shall spend its first half in some post which is tedious but likely, in the second half, to take me to the top. But when the time comes I again reverse my decision. In both these cases, viewed from a distance, something bad seems worth undergoing for the sake of the good that follows. But, when both are closer, the scale tips the other way. Another case is shown below. The height of each curve shows how much I care, at any time, about one of two possible future rewards. I care less about the further future; and the amount by which I care less is greater in the nearer future. This is shown by the fact that these curves are steepest just before



I get these rewards. It may help to restate these claims. If some event will occur a month later, I now care about it less. My concern will be some proportion of my concern about a similar event one month earlier. When these two events are *further* in the future, there is *less* proportionate difference in my present concern about these events. And the proportionate difference is *greatest* when the first of these events is in the immediate future.

These claims explain why, in my diagram, the two curves cross. When these curves cross, my preference changes. Judging from March, I prefer the greater reward in June to the lesser reward in May. Judging from the end of April, I prefer the lesser reward in May.

The bias towards the near is often shown in simpler ways. When planning the future, we often bring pleasures into the nearer future, and postpone pains. But this bias is often concealed by another attitude to time. This is the *bias towards the future*. This attitude does not apply to events that give us either pride or shame: events that either gild or stain our picture of our lives. Like the bias towards the near, the bias towards the future applies most clearly to events that are in themselves pleasant or painful. The thought of such events affects us more when they are in the future rather than the past. Looking forward to a pleasure is, in general, more pleasant than looking back upon it. And in the case of pains the difference is even greater. Compare the states of mind of a schoolboy before and after a beating.

We often act in ways which may seem to show that we are *not* biased towards the near: we bring *pains* into the nearer future, and postpone pleasures. The bias towards the future provides the explanation. We want to get the pains behind us and to keep the pleasures before us. Since the second bias counteracts the first, our tendency to act in these two ways cannot show that we have no bias towards the near. This bias may be always outweighed by our bias towards the future. I remember deciding, after blowing out the candles on my tenth birthday cake, that in future I would always eat the best bit (the marzipan) last rather than first.

Here is another example. Suppose that I must choose when to have some painful course of treatment. If I wait for a year, until the hospital has new equipment, the treatment will be only half

as painful. And suppose my discount rate drops to a half within a year. If I postpone the treatment for a year, I shall now care about it only a quarter as much. It will be in itself half as painful, and I now discount it by a half. But if I postpone the treatment I shall have a whole year's painful anticipation. The prospect of this, even when discounted, may seem worse to me now than the prospect of immediate treatment. If this is so, despite my bias towards the near, I shall choose to have the treatment now, when it will be twice as painful.

There are some people who do not care more about what is near. Some even care more about what is remote. The propensity to save, or to postpone gratification, can be compulsive. But I need not here decide how many people have the bias towards the near. I shall discuss an imaginary person. This person cares more about his nearer future, simply because it is nearer; and he does this even when he knows the facts, and is thinking clearly. I shall call this person *Proximus*. It will not affect the argument whether, as I believe, there are many actual people who are like this.

It is often unclear what would be best for someone, or be most in his interests, both because the facts are doubtful, and because of the disagreement between the rival theories about self-interest. But on all plausible theories one point is agreed. When we are deciding what is in someone's interests, we should discount for uncertainty, but not for mere remoteness.

On the Self-interest Theory, someone acts irrationally when he does what he knows will be worse for him. My imagined man often acts in this way. Because he is biased towards the near, *Proximus* often deliberately postpones pains, at the foreseen cost of making them worse. In these cases he is doing what he knows will be worse for him.

I shall now compare his attitude with that of someone who is self-interested. On the Self-interest Theory, each of us should do what would be best for himself, *whatever* the costs to others. Each of us should always be governed by what I shall call the *bias in one's own favour*. Is this bias more rational than the bias towards the near? It is essential to the defence of S that we answer Yes.

Proximus knows the facts and is thinking clearly. We should add one more assumption. Those who have some bias may wish to be without it. This is quite common in the case of the bias

towards the near. After describing how this bias makes him act against his interests, Hume wrote, 'this natural infirmity I may very much regret'.⁴ We should assume that Proximus has no such regrets. Only this assumption makes our comparison fair, for those who are self-interested are typically assumed not to regret their bias in their own favour.

II

A SUICIDAL ARGUMENT

How should a Self-interest Theorist criticize Proximus? Given the choice of a mild pain soon, or a much worse pain later, Proximus often deliberately chooses the worse pain. And he often prefers a small pleasure soon to a much greater pleasure later. He must therefore claim, with Hume, 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater'.⁵ This—the deliberate choice of what he admits will be worse for himself—may seem the clearest possible case of irrationality. An S-Theorist might say, 'The first rule of rationality is to reject what you know to be worse'.

Proximus could answer: 'If the only difference between two pains is that one would be worse, I accept your rule. But, in the cases we are discussing, there is another difference. When I choose between two pains, I consider both how painful they would be, and how soon I should have to undergo them. I am not simply choosing what I know to be worse. I choose the worse of two pains only when the amount by which it is worse is, for me now, outweighed by the amount by which it is further in the future.'

The S-Theorist must reply that it is irrational to take nearness into account. He might claim, quoting Rawls, 'mere temporal position, or distance from the present, is not a reason for favouring one moment over another'.⁶ How should the S-Theorist support this claim? Why should time not be taken into account? He might say:

A mere difference in *when* something happens is not a difference in its quality. The fact that a pain is further in the future will not make it, when it comes, any the less painful.

This is an excellent argument. It is by far the best objection to the

bias towards the near. But the S-Theorist cannot use this argument. It is a two-edged sword. The same argument can be used against the Self-interest Theory. Just as Proximus takes into account *when* a pain is felt, the S-Theorist takes into account *who* will feel it. And a mere difference in who feels a pain is not a difference in its quality. The fact that a pain is someone else's does not make it any the less painful.

The S-Theorist takes into account (1) how bad pains would be, and (2) who would feel them. He therefore sometimes chooses the worse of two pains. He sometimes chooses a worse pain for someone else rather than a lesser pain for himself. (It may seem that he would always make this choice. But this assumes that the S-Theorist must be purely selfish. This is a mistake. Someone who accepts S may love certain other people. It may therefore be worse for him if he escapes some lesser pain at the cost of imposing a worse pain on someone whom he loves.)

Proximus takes into account (1) how bad pains would be, (2) who will feel them, and (3) when they will be felt. He can say, to the S-Theorist, 'If you take into account who will feel some pain, why can't I take into account when some pain is felt?' There may be answers to this question. There may be arguments to show that differences in personal identity have a significance that differences in timing lack. The point that I have made so far is only this. In explaining why time cannot have rational significance, the S-Theorist cannot use the obvious and best argument. He cannot appeal to the fact that a pain is no less painful because it is less near. A pain is no less painful because it is someone else's.

The S-Theorist might say:

You misunderstand my argument. That a pain is further in your future cannot make it any the less painful *to you*. But that a pain is someone else's does make it less painful *to you*. If it is someone else's pain, it will not hurt you at all.

The second of these sentences makes a pair of claims. That a pain is further in my future does not make it either (a) any the less painful, or (b) any the less mine. (a) is true, but irrelevant, since the objection to which it appeals applies equally to the Self-interest Theory. That a pain is someone else's does not make it any the less painful. (b) is also true. The fact that a pain is

further in my future does not make it any the less *my* pain. But this truth is not an argument. What the S-Theorist needs to claim, in attacking Proximus, is that a difference in *who* feels a pain has great rational significance, while there cannot be rational significance in *when* a pain is felt. All that (*b*) points out is that these are *different* differences. Time is not the same as personal identity. By itself, this fact cannot show that time is less significant.

I shall now summarize these claims. The S-Theorist must criticize Proximus. According to S, we can take into account differences both in painfulness and in the identity of the sufferers. Proximus also takes into account differences in timing. The S-Theorist has not shown that differences in personal identity have a rational significance that differences in timing lack. There may be arguments for this claim. But I have not yet given such an argument. The S-Theorist cannot use the best argument. He cannot dismiss differences in timing with the claim that they are not differences in painfulness. Nor are differences in personal identity. Nor can the S-Theorist dismiss differences in timing on the ground that they are not differences in personal identity. That these are *different* differences cannot show that the first has a rational significance that the second lacks.

III PAST OR FUTURE SUFFERING

The S-Theorist might claim that there is no need for argument. We cannot argue everything; some things have to be assumed. And he might say this of his present claim. He might say that, when we compare the questions 'To whom does it happen?' and 'When does it happen?', we see clearly that only the first question has rational significance. We see clearly that it is not irrational to care less about some pain if it will be felt by someone else, but that it *is* irrational to care less merely because of a difference in *when* some pain is felt by oneself.

Is this so? The bias towards the near is not our only bias with respect to time. We are also biased towards the future. Is this attitude irrational?

Consider *My Past or Future Operations*.

Case One. I am in some hospital, to have some kind of surgery. This kind of surgery is completely safe, and always successful. Since I know this, I have no fears about the effects. The surgery may be brief, or it may instead take a long time. Because I have to co-operate with the surgeon, I cannot have anaesthetics. I have had this surgery once before, and I can remember how painful it is. Under a new policy, because the operation is so painful, patients are now afterwards made to forget it. Some drug removes their memories of the last few hours.

I have just woken up. I cannot remember going to sleep. I ask my nurse if it has been decided when my operation is to be, and how long it must take. She says that she knows the facts about both me and another patient, but that she cannot remember which facts apply to whom. She can tell me only that the following is true. I may be the patient who had his operation yesterday. In that case, my operation was the longest ever performed, lasting ten hours. I may instead be the patient who is to have a short operation later today. It is either true that I did suffer for ten hours, or true that I shall suffer for one hour.

I ask the nurse to find out which is true. While she is away, it is clear to me which I prefer to be true. If I learn that the first is true, I shall be greatly relieved.

My bias towards the future makes me relieved here that my pain is in the past. My bias towards the near might, in the same way, make me relieved that some pain has been postponed. In either case, I might prefer some different timing for my ordeal even if, with the different timing, the ordeal would be much worse. Compared with an hour of pain later today, I might, like Proximus, prefer ten hours of pain next year. Or, as in this example, I might prefer ten hours of pain yesterday.

Is this second preference irrational? Ought I instead to hope that I am the second patient, whose pain is still to come? Before I discuss this question, I should explain one feature of the case: the induced amnesia.

Some writers claim that, if some part of my future will not be linked by memory to the rest of my life, I can rationally ignore what will happen to me during this period. For these writers, a

double dose of amnesia is as good as an anaesthetic. If I shall have no memories while I am suffering, and I shall later have no memories of my suffering, I need not—they claim—be concerned about this future suffering. This is a controversial claim. But even if it is justified it does not apply to my example. This does not involve a *double* dose of amnesia. During my painful operation I shall have all my memories. It is true that I shall afterwards be made to forget the operation. But this does not remove my reason to be concerned about my future suffering. If we deny this, we should have to claim that someone should not be concerned when, already knowing that he is about to die, he learns the extra fact that his death will be painful. This person would not later remember *these* pains.

If we imagine ourselves in the place of the patient who will suffer for an hour today, most of us would be concerned. We would be concerned even though we know that we shall not later remember this hour of pain. And I can now explain why my case involves induced amnesia. This gives us the right comparison. If I have learnt that I am this second patient, I am in the following state of mind. I believe that I shall have an hour's pain later today, and I can imagine roughly how awful the pain is going to be. This is enough to make me concerned. If I have learnt instead that I am the first patient, I am in the strictly comparable state of mind. I believe that I did have ten hours' pain yesterday, and I can imagine roughly how awful the pain must have been. My state of mind differs only in the two respects that I am discussing. My belief has a different tense, being about the past rather than the future. And it is a belief about ten hours of pain rather than about a single hour. It would confuse the comparison if I did not just believe that I suffered yesterday, but could also remember the suffering. When I believe that I shall suffer later today, I have nothing comparable to memories of this future suffering. And memories of pain are quite various; some are in themselves painful, others are not. It therefore rids the example of an irrelevant and complicating feature if I would have about my past pain only what I would have about my future pain: a belief, with an ability to imagine the pain's awfulness.

The induced amnesia purifies the case. But it may still arouse suspicion. I therefore add

Case Two. When I wake up, I do remember a long period of suffering yesterday. But I cannot remember how long the period was. I ask my nurse whether my operation is completed, or whether further surgery needs to be done. As before, she knows the facts about two patients, but she cannot remember which I am. If I am the first patient, I had five hours of pain yesterday, and my operation is over. If I am the second patient, I had two hours of pain yesterday, and I shall have another hour of pain later today.⁷

In Case Two, there is no amnesia; but this makes no difference. Either I suffered for five hours and have no more pain to come, or I suffered for two hours and have another hour of pain to come. I would again prefer the first to be true. I would prefer my life to contain more hours of pain, if it would be true that none of this pain is still to come.

If we imagine ourselves in my place in these two cases, most of us would have my preference. If we did not know whether we have suffered for several hours, or shall later suffer for one hour, most of us would strongly prefer the first to be true. If we could make it true, we would undoubtedly do so. If we are religious we might pray that it be true. On some accounts, this is the one conceivable way of affecting the past. God may have made some past event happen only because, at the time, He had foreknowledge of our later backward-looking prayer, and He chose to grant this prayer. Even if we do not believe that we could in this way, through God's grace, cause our pain to be in the past, we would strongly prefer it to be in the past, even at the cost of its lasting many times as long.

Is this preference irrational? Most of us would answer No. If he accepts this answer, the S-Theorist must abandon his claim that the question 'When?' has no rational significance. He cannot claim that a mere difference in the timing of a pain, or in its relation to the present moment, 'is not itself a rational ground for having more or less regard for it'.⁸ Whether a pain is in the past or future is a mere difference in its relation to the present moment. And, if it is not irrational to care more about pains that are in the future, why is it irrational to care more about pains that are in the nearer future? If the S-Theorist admits as

defensible one departure from temporal neutrality, how can he criticize the other?

IV THE DIRECTION OF CAUSATION

The S-Theorist might say: 'Since we cannot affect the past, this is a good ground for being less concerned about it. There is no such justification of the bias towards the near.'

This can be answered. We can first point out that we are still biased towards the future even when, like the past, it cannot be affected. Suppose that we are in prison, and will be tortured later today. In such cases, when we believe that our future suffering is inevitable, our attitude towards it does not fall into line with our attitude towards past suffering. We would not think, 'Since the torture is inevitable, that is equivalent to its being already in the past'. We are greatly relieved when such inevitable future pains are in the past. In such cases the bias towards the future cannot be justified by an appeal to the direction of causation. We are not concerned about such future pains because, unlike past pains, we can affect them. In these cases, we *cannot* affect them. We are concerned about these future pains simply because they are not yet in the past.

The S-Theorist might reply: 'Such a justification need not hold in every case. When we are discussing a general attitude, we must be content with a general truth. Such attitudes cannot be "fine-tuned". Whether events are in the future in *most* cases corresponds to whether or not we can affect them. This is enough to justify the bias towards the future. If we lacked this bias, we would be as much concerned about past pains and pleasures, which we cannot affect. This would distract our attention from future pains and pleasures, which we can affect. Because we would be distracted in this way, we would be less successful in our attempts to get future pleasures and avoid future pains. This would be worse for us.'

We could answer: 'If this is true, there is another similar truth. If we were as much concerned about pains and pleasures in our *further* future, this would distract our attention from pains and pleasures in the nearer future. If we want to reduce our future suffering, we ought to pay more attention to possible pains in the nearer future, since we have less time in which to avoid or reduce

these pains. A similar claim applies to future pleasures. Our need to affect the nearer future is more urgent. If your claims justify the bias towards the future, these claims justify the bias towards the near.'

We could add: 'We care more about the near future even in the special cases in which we cannot affect it. But these cases correspond to the special cases in which we cannot affect the future. Both these attitudes to time roughly correspond to these claims about causation. Your claim therefore cannot show that only one of these attitudes is defensible.'

The S-Theorist might say: 'You ignore one difference. We can act directly on the bias towards the near. If we are due to have one hour's pain later today, we may be able to postpone this pain, at the cost of making it worse. We may, like Proximus, exchange this pain for ten hours' pain next year. But we cannot exchange this pain for ten hours' pain yesterday. We cannot put pains into the past, at the cost of making them worse. The important difference is this. Since we can affect both the near and the distant future, our bias towards the near often makes us act against our own interests. This bias is bad for us. In contrast, since we cannot affect the past, the bias towards the future never makes us act against our interests. This second bias is not bad for us. This is why only the second bias is defensible.'

To this there are three replies: (1) This argument has a false premise. The fact that an attitude is bad for us does not show this attitude to be irrational. It can at most show that we should try to change this attitude. If the person whom I love most is killed, I should perhaps try, after a time, to reduce my grief. But this does not show that I have no reason to grieve. Grief is not irrational simply because it brings unhappiness. To the claim 'Your sorrow is fruitless', Hume replied, 'Very true, and for that very reason I am sorry'.⁹ Similarly, that it is bad for us to be biased towards the near cannot show that this attitude is irrational.

(2) Even if (1) is denied, this argument fails. It assumes that what matters is whether something is bad for us. This begs the question. The S-Theorist is condemning the bias towards the near. If we have this bias, we care more about our nearer future. What is bad for us, impartially considered, may be better for us in the nearer future. If our bias is defensible, we can therefore

deny the assumption that what matters is whether something is bad for us. Since this assumption can be denied if our bias is defensible, this assumption cannot help to show that our bias is *not* defensible.

(3) It has not been shown that the bias towards the near *is* bad for us. Because we have a more urgent need to affect the nearer future, the bias towards the near is in some ways good for us. But let us suppose that this bias is, on balance, bad for us. *So is the bias towards the future.* As I shall explain later, it would be better for us if we did not care more about the future. The argument above has another false premise. It is not true that the bias towards the future is not bad for us.

The S-Theorist must condemn the bias towards the near. If his criticism appeals to temporal neutrality, he must also criticize the bias towards the future. By appealing to facts about causation, the S-Theorist tried to avoid this conclusion. But this attempt failed.

In condemning the bias towards the near, the S-Theorist might say: 'Since our need to affect the near is more urgent, the bias towards the near is quite natural. It is not surprising that evolution gives this bias to all animals. But, since we are rational, we can rise above, and critically review, what we inherit from evolution. We can see that this bias cannot be rational. That some pain is in the nearer future cannot be a *reason* to care about it more. A mere difference in timing cannot have rational significance.'

If the S-Theorist makes this claim, he must make a similar claim about the bias towards the future. He might say: 'Since we cannot affect the past, it is natural to care about it less. But this bias cannot be rational. This is clearest when we cannot affect the future. That some inevitable pain is in the future, rather than the past, cannot be a *reason* to care about it more. It is irrational to be relieved when it is in the past.'

In My Past or Future Operations, I would prefer it to be true that I did suffer for several more hours yesterday rather than that I shall suffer for one more hour later today. This is not a preference that I could act upon. But the fact that I could not act upon this preference is irrelevant to the question of whether the preference is irrational. The S-Theorist cannot claim that this preference is *not* irrational *because* I cannot act upon it. He could

say, 'What an absurd preference! You should be grateful that you cannot act upon it.' And this is what he *must* say, if he keeps his claim that our concern for ourselves should be temporarily neutral. If he condemns the bias towards the near because it cannot have rational significance *when* some pain is felt, he must condemn the bias towards the future. He must claim that it is irrational to be relieved when some pain is in the past. Most of us would find this hard to believe. If the S-Theorist insists that we should be temporally neutral, most of us will disagree.

V

TEMPORAL NEUTRALITY

The S-Theorist might change his view. He might condemn the bias towards the near, not on the general ground that the question 'When?' cannot have rational significance, but on a more particular ground.

He might switch to the other extreme, and claim that temporal neutrality is inconceivable. He might claim that it is not conceivable that we lack the bias towards the future. If this was true, he could again criticize only one of these two attitudes. It cannot be irrational to have some attitude if it is not conceivable that we lack this attitude. But, unlike the bias towards the future, the bias towards the near is clearly something that we could lack. We could be equally concerned about all the parts of our future. Some people are. The S-Theorist could claim that this is the only rational pattern of concern.

Is it conceivable that we might lack the bias towards the future? Our attitudes to the past could not be just like our attitudes to the future. Some emotions or reactions presuppose beliefs about causation. Since we cannot affect the past, these emotions and reactions could not be backward-looking. Thus we could not form an intention to have done something yesterday, or be firmly resolved to make the best of what lies behind us.

Are there mental states which are essentially forward-looking, in a way which cannot be explained by the direction of causation? This is a large question, to which I need not give a complete answer. It will be enough to consider the most

important mental states that are involved in our bias towards the future.

One of these is desire. Some of our language suggests that desires are essentially forward-looking. Compare 'I want to go to Venice next winter' with 'I want to have gone to Venice last winter'. The second claim is obscure.

Our language is here misleading. Consider

My Temporally Neutral Desire. I learn that an old friend is now dying in some distant country. We parted in anger, for which I now blame myself. After learning that my friend is dying, I have a strong desire to ask her to forgive me. Since she cannot be reached by telephone, the best that I can do is to send an express letter, asking to be forgiven, and saying goodbye. A week later, I do not know whether my friend is still alive, or has got my letter. My strongest desire is that she gets my letter before she dies.

If desires are essentially forward-looking, I must be held to be in two states of mind: A conditional desire, and a conditional hope. I must be said to want my friend, if she is alive, to get the letter before she dies, and to hope, if she is dead, that she got the letter before she died. But this description, even if linguistically required, is misleading. To distinguish here two states of mind, the desire and the hope, is to subdivide what is in its nature a single state. My 'hope' is in its nature and its strength just like my 'desire'. What I want is that my friend's getting of this letter precedes her death. Provided that these events occur, in this order, I am quite indifferent whether they are in the past or the future.

Even if it changes the concept, it is therefore best to say that we can have desires about the past. I may want it to be true that, in my drunkenness last night, I did not disgrace myself. And I may want this to be true for its own sake, not because of its possible effects on my future. Reading the letters of Van Gogh, I may want it to be true that he knew how great his achievement was. And I may want it to be true that Keats knew the same.

It may be objected that desires are essentially tied to possible acts. This is like the claim that 'ought' implies 'can'. On this view, we cannot have desires on which it would be impossible to act. From this general claim we could deduce the special claim

that we cannot have desires about the past, since we cannot affect the past.

This general claim is false. There are, of course, close connections between desires and acts. If we strongly want something to be true, we shall try to find out whether we can make it true, And 'the primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*'.¹⁰ But the desire here comes first. We do not have to know whether we could make something true before we can want it to be true.

We can admit one way in which desires are tied to acts. If people could not act they could not have desires. We could not have the concept of desire, in our common language, unless we also had the concept of an act. But we can have a *particular* desire without being able to act upon it. We can want something to be true even when we know that neither we nor anyone else could possibly have made it true. The Pythagoreans wanted the square root of two to be a rational number. It is logically impossible that this desire be fulfilled. Since we can have desires that even an omnipotent God could not fulfil, particular desires are not tied to possible acts. This removes the ground for denying that we can have desires about the past.

We can next consider the mental states that are most important in this discussion: looking forward to some future event, and its negative counterpart, painful or distressing anticipation. These two mental states are essentially future-directed. But this may be another superficial truth. Could there be comparable states directed towards the past?

It may be thought that we actually have such backward-looking states. The bias towards the future does not apply to many kinds of event, such as those that give us pride or shame. But though the knowledge of a past achievement may give us pleasure, this is not analogous to looking forward. We are discussing our attitude, not to the *fact* that our lives contain certain kinds of event, but to our *experience* at other times of living through these events. For simplicity, I have been discussing attitudes to experiences that are merely in themselves pleasant or painful. Do we in fact look backward to past pleasures in the way that we look forward to future pleasures?

Once again, there is a complication raised by memories. These can be in themselves pleasant or painful. We may enjoy

remembering pleasures, and dislike remembering pains. But neither of these is strictly analogous to the pains and pleasures of anticipation. We therefore need to consider our attitude to past pains and pleasures about which we know, but of which we do not have painful or pleasant memories.

Consider *My Past Ordeals*.

Case One. I am unusually forgetful. I am asked, 'Can you remember what happened to you during May ten years ago?' I find that I can remember nothing about that month. I am then told that, at the start of that month, I was found to have some illness which required four weeks of immediate and very painful treatment. This treatment was wholly successful, so I have no grounds for fear about the future. When I am reminded of this fact, it arouses a faint memory, which is not in itself painful.

I have been reminded, to my surprise, that ten years ago I had a month of agony. All that I have now is a faint memory of this fact, and an ability to imagine how bad my agony must have been. When I am reminded of this past ordeal, would I be upset? Would I have what corresponds to painful anticipation? I would not. I would react to this reminder with *complete indifference*.

If I learnt that, ten years from now, I shall have a month of agony, I would *not* react with complete indifference. I would be distressed. But I would be in no way distressed if I was reminded that, ten years ago, I had such a month.

Since we are biased towards the near, some of us might be little moved by the news that, ten years later, they will have a month of agony. I therefore add

Case Two. I wake up, on what I believe to be the 1st of May. It is in fact the 1st of June. I have just had a similar month of very painful but wholly successful treatment. So that I should not have painful memories, I was caused to forget this whole month.

I learn that I have just had a month of agony. Here too, I would not regard this as bad news. More exactly, I would regret the fact that a month of my life had to be wasted in this way. I might be somewhat anxious about the claimed success of this treatment. And I might have some fear that, if the induced

amnesia does not last, I shall later have painful memories of this treatment. But I would not be at all distressed about the fact that, during this month, I was in agony. I would regard this recent agony with complete indifference. If I learnt that I was about to have such an ordeal, I would be extremely distressed.

It may be an objection to Case Two that it involves induced amnesia. I therefore add

Case Three. In my actual life, I have often suffered severe pain. I can remember these pains, but these memories are not themselves painful. The worst suffering that I can remember lasted for three days in 1979.

It is a fact that, when I now remind myself of these three extremely painful days, I am not distressed at all. In the imaginary Cases One and Two, I believe that I would regard my past ordeals with complete indifference. In my actual life, I do in fact regard my past suffering with complete indifference.

I believe that, in this respect, most other people are like me. Unless their memories are painful, they would regard their past suffering with complete indifference. I know a few people whose reaction is slightly different. These people claim that, even if they have no painful memories, they find knowledge of their past suffering mildly distressing. I know of no one who would have what fully corresponds to the pains of anticipation.

We do not in fact have this attitude to our past pains. And we do not look backward to past pleasures in the way that we look forward to future pleasures. Could there be such mental states? Could 'looking backward' to some past event be, except for its temporal direction, just like looking forward?

We might say: 'We look forward to some future event when thinking about this event gives us pleasure. Thinking about a past event could give us similar pleasure. And to the pains of anticipation there could be corresponding pains of retrospection.'

It might be objected: 'You understate what is involved in looking forward. It is not merely true that the thought of future pleasures gives us pleasure. We *anticipate* these pleasures. Similarly, we anticipate pains. *Anticipation* cannot have a backward-looking counterpart.'¹¹

We might answer: 'We may be unable to imagine what it would be like to have this counterpart. But this does not show

that it could not be had. Those who are congenitally blind cannot imagine what it is like to see. This does not show that we cannot see.'

This reply may not meet this objection. If this is so, our claims can be revised. Even if looking backward could not be *just like* looking forward, it could be equally pleasant, or in the case of pains equally distressing. This would involve a change in our attitudes. And *this* change is conceivable. We can clearly describe someone who, in this respect, is unlike us. When such a person is reminded that he once had a month of agony, he is as much distressed as when he learns that he will later have such a month. He is similarly neutral with respect to enjoyable events. When he is told that he will later have some period of great enjoyment, he is pleased to learn this. He greatly looks forward to this period. When he is reminded that he once had just such a period, he is equally pleased. I shall call this imagined man *Timeless*.

This man is very different from us. But his description is coherent. We can therefore reject the suggestion made above. It is conceivable that we might lack the bias towards the future. Even if we could not be wholly temporally neutral, we could have been like *Timeless*.

VI

WHY WE SHOULD NOT BE BIASED TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Our bias towards the future is bad for us. It would be better for us if we were like *Timeless*. We would lose in certain ways. Thus we should not be relieved when bad things were in the past. But we should also gain. We should not be sad when good things were in the past.

The gains would outweigh the losses. One reason would be this. When we look backward, we could afford to be selective. We ought to remember some of the bad events in our lives, when this would help us to avoid repetitions. But we could allow ourselves to forget most of the bad things that have happened, while preserving by rehearsing all of our memories of the good things. It would be bad for us if we were so selective when we are looking forward. Unless we think of all the bad things that are at all likely to happen, we lose our chance of preventing them. Since

we ought not to be selective when looking forward, but could afford to be when looking backward, the latter would be, on the whole, more enjoyable.

There would be other, greater gains. One would be in our attitude to ageing and to death. Let us first consider the argument with which Epicurus claimed that our future non-existence cannot be something to regret. We do not regret our past non-existence. Since this is so, why should we regret our future non-existence? If we regard one with equanimity, should we not extend this attitude to the other?

Some claim that this argument fails because, while we might live longer, it is logically impossible that we might have been born much earlier. This is not a good objection. When they learnt that the square root of two was not a rational number, the Pythagoreans regretted this. It is logically impossible that the square root of two be a rational number. We can therefore regret truths even when it is logically impossible that these truths be false.

Epicurus's argument fails for a different reason: we are biased towards the future. Because we have this bias, the bare knowledge that we once suffered may not now disturb us. But our equanimity does not show that our past suffering was not bad. The same could be true of our past non-existence. Epicurus's argument therefore has force only for those people who lack the bias towards the future, and do not regret their past non-existence. There are no such people. So the argument has force for no one.

Though the argument fails, it may provide some consolation. If we are afraid of death, the argument shows that the object of our dread is not *our non-existence*. It is only our *future* non-existence. That we can think serenely of our past non-existence does not show that it is not something to regret. But since we do not in fact view with dread our past non-existence, we may be able to use this fact to reduce our dread, or depression, when we think about our inevitable deaths. If we often think about, and view serenely, the blackness behind us, some of this serenity may be transferred to our view of the blackness before us.

Let us suppose that we lack the bias towards the future. We are like Timeless. We should then greatly gain in our attitude to ageing and to death. As our life passes, we should

have less and less to look forward to, but more and more to look backward to. This effect will be clearer if we imagine another difference. Suppose that our lives began, not with birth and childhood, but as Adam's did. Suppose that, though we are adults, and have adult knowledge and abilities, we have only just started to exist. We lack the bias towards the future. Should we be greatly troubled by the thought that yesterday we did not exist?

This depends on how non-existence is bad. Some think that non-existence is in itself bad. But the more plausible view is that its only fault is what it causes us to lose. Suppose that we accept this view. We may then think it a ground for regret that our life is finite, bounded at both ends by non-existence. But, if we had just started to exist, we would not think that something bad is just behind us. Our ground for regret would merely be that we have missed much that would have been good. Suppose that I could now be much as I actually am, even though I had been born as one of the privileged few around 1700. I would then greatly regret that I was in fact born in 1942. I would far prefer to have lived through the previous two and a half centuries, having had among my friends Hume, Byron, Chekhov, Nietzsche, and Sidgwick.

In my imagined case, we are not biased towards the future, and we have just started to exist. Though we would regret the fact that we had not existed earlier, we would not be greatly troubled by the thought that only yesterday we did not exist. We would not regard this fact with the kind of dread or grief with which most actual people would regard the sudden prospect of death tomorrow. We would not have such dread or grief because, though we would have nothing good to look backward to, we would have our whole lives to look forward to.

Now suppose that our lives have nearly passed. We shall die tomorrow. If we were not biased towards the future, our reaction should mirror the one that I have just described. We should not be greatly troubled by the thought that we shall soon cease to exist, for though we now have nothing to look forward to, we have our whole lives to look backward to.

It may be objected; 'You can look backward now. But once you are dead you won't be able to look backward. And you will be dead tomorrow. So you ought to be greatly troubled.' We

could answer: 'Why? It is true that after we cease to exist we shall never be able to enjoy looking backward to our lives. We now have nothing at all to look forward to, not even the pleasures of looking backward. But it was equally true that, before we began to exist, we had nothing at all to look backward to, not even the pleasure of looking forward. But that was then no reason to be greatly troubled, since we could then look forward to our whole lives. Since we can now look backward to our whole lives, why should the parallel fact—that we have nothing to look forward to—give us reason to be greatly troubled?'

This reasoning ignores those emotions which are essentially future-directed. It would not apply to those for whom the joy in looking forward comes from making plans, or savouring alternatives. But the reasoning seems to be correct when applied to more passive types, those who take life's pleasures as they come. And, to the extent that we are like this, this reasoning shows that we would be happier if we lacked the bias towards the future. We would be much less depressed by ageing and the approach of death. If we were like Timeless, being at the end of our lives would be more like being at the beginning. At any point within our lives we could enjoy looking either backward or forward to our whole lives.

I have claimed that, if we lacked the bias towards the future, this would be better for us. This matches the plausible claim that it would be better for us if we lacked the bias towards the near. There is no ground here for criticizing the latter bias but not the former. Both these attitudes to time are, on the whole, bad for us.

Since I believe that it is bad for us to be biased towards the future, I believe that we ought not to have this bias. This belief does not beg the question about the rationality of this bias. On any plausible moral view, it would be better if we were all happier. This is the sense in which, if we could, we ought not to be biased towards the future. In giving us this bias, Evolution denies us the best attitude to death.

VII TIME'S PASSAGE

Return to my main question. Are these attitudes to time irrational? Most of us believe that the bias towards the future is not irrational. We are inclined to believe that it would be

irrational to *lack* this bias. Thus we may be wholly unconvinced by the reasoning I gave in the case just imagined, where we are temporally neutral and shall die tomorrow. We can describe someone who does not much mind the prospect of death tomorrow, because he can now look backward to his whole life. But this attitude, though describable, may seem crazy, or to involve an absurd mistake.

It will help to take a simpler case, not involving non-existence and our attitudes to a whole life. This can be a variant of an earlier example, involving our imagined temporally neutral man. Consider

How Timeless Greets Good News. Timeless is in hospital for a painful operation, that will be followed by induced amnesia. He wakes up, with no particular memories of the previous day. He asks his nurse when and for how long he will have to endure this painful operation. As before, the nurse knows the facts about two patients, but is unsure which he is. In either case, however, his operation needed to be unusually long, lasting a full ten hours. The nurse knows that one of the following is true. Either he did suffer yesterday for ten hours, or he will suffer later today for ten hours.

Timeless is plunged in gloom. He had hoped for a shorter operation.

When the nurse returns, she exclaims, 'Good News! You are the one who suffered yesterday.'

Timeless is just as glum. 'Why is that good news?', he asks. 'My ordeal is just as painful, and just as long. And it is just as much a part of my life. Why should it make a difference to me now that my ordeal is in the past?'

The induced amnesia may be an objection to this case. I therefore add

Case Two. Timeless has this operation, and has no amnesia. We visit him on the day before his ordeal, and on the day after. On the day after, Timeless is just as glum. 'Why should I be relieved?', he asks. 'Why is it better that my ordeal is in the past?'

Is Timeless making a mistake? Ought he to be relieved? Most

of us would answer Yes. But it is hard to explain why, without begging the question. We might say, 'If the ordeal was in his future, he would still have to undergo it. Since it is in his past, it is over and done with.' This is not a further explanation of why Timeless is irrational. That he 'still' has to undergo the pain merely repeats that it is in his future.

We might appeal here to what is called *time's passage*, or the *objectivity of temporal becoming*. We might say: 'If his pain is in the future, it will get closer and closer until he is actually suffering the pain. But, if it is in the past, it will only get further and further away.' Such remarks seem to express a deep truth. But this truth is curiously elusive. What is meant by the phrase 'it will get closer and closer'? Does this not merely mean that, at future moments, the future pain will be closer to what will then be the present moment? But at past moments a past pain was closer to what was then the present moment. Where is the asymmetry?

It is natural, in reply, to use a certain metaphor: that of motion through time. We might say that we are moving through time into the future, or that future events are moving through time into the present, or that presentness, or the scope of 'now', is moving into the future. 'Now' moves down the sequence of historical events, 'like a spot-light moving down a line of chorus-girls.'

It may help to compare 'now' with 'here'. For those who deny time's passage, or the objectivity of temporal becoming, 'here' and 'now' are strictly analogous. They are both relative to the thoughts, or utterances, of a particular thinker. 'Here' refers to the place where this thinker is at some time, and 'now' refers to the time at which some particular thought, one involving the concept 'now', is thought. Both words could be replaced by 'this', as in the announcer's jargon 'at this place and time'.¹²

Those who believe in time's passage would reject this analogy. They would admit that, in a Universe containing no thinkers, the concept 'here' would lack application. But they claim that, even in such a Universe, it would still be true that certain things are happening *now*, and then be true that other things are happening *now*, and then be true that other things are happening *now*, and so on. Even in a lifeless Universe, the scope of 'now' would still move through time from the past into the future.

The metaphor of motion through time may be indefensible. How fast do we move through time? We may not be satisfied with the only possible reply, 'At a rate of one second per second'. We may claim that, *if* either we or 'now' can move through time, it must make sense for this motion to be faster or slower, but that this makes no sense.

The critics of the metaphor may be justified. But this may not show that there is no such thing as time's passage, or the objectivity of temporal becoming. Perhaps this is a categorical truth, at so deep a level that we should not expect that it could be explained, either by metaphors or in other terms.¹³

I shall not try to decide where, in this debate, the truth lies. I shall therefore consider both alternatives. Suppose first, as many philosophers have done, that time's passage is an illusion. If this is so, temporal neutrality cannot be irrational. In defending the Self-interest Theory, the S-Theorist must condemn the bias towards the near. If temporal neutrality cannot be irrational, the S-Theorist might return to his earlier view that such neutrality is rationally required. He must then claim that, just as it is irrational to be relieved when pain has been postponed, it is irrational to be relieved when it is in the past. We shall find this hard to believe.

Suppose, next, that we would be right to believe in time's passage, or the objectivity of temporal becoming. The S-Theorist might then retain his later view, and appeal to time's passage. He must still condemn the bias towards the near. He might claim: 'While you have excellent reasons to care less about the pains of others, you cannot rationally care less about pains of yours which lie further in the future. Mere distance from the present moment cannot have rational significance.' The S-Theorist might now support this claim in a different way. He might abandon the appeal to temporal neutrality—the claim that mere timing cannot have rational significance. He might instead discriminate between different kinds of temporal relation.

We should remember here that most of us have a third attitude to time: the bias towards the present. If mere timing cannot have rational significance, it cannot be rational to care more about present pains. That I am *now* in agony cannot be a

ground for being more concerned now about this agony. This may seem absurd. The requirement of temporal neutrality may seem least plausible when applied to the bias towards the present. How can it be irrational to mind my agony more while I am suffering the agony? Such a claim seems to undermine the whole structure of concern. Pain matters only because of what it feels like when we are *now* in pain. We care about future pains only because, in the future, they will be *present* pains. If future pains behaved like Alice's *Jam Tomorrow*, and remained perpetually future, they would not matter at all.

The S-Theorist might now claim: 'Of our three attitudes to time, one is irrational, but the other two are rationally required. We *must* care more about present pains, and we *cannot* rationally care about past pains, but we must *not* care less about pains that are in the further rather than the nearer future.' This new view lacks the appeal of generality. There was an appealing simplicity in the claim that mere differences in timing—mere answers to the question 'When?'—cannot have rational significance. But this new view, though less simple, may still be justified. The S-Theorist might claim that, on reflection, it is intuitively plausible. He might claim: 'When we compare presentness, pastness, and distance in the future, it is clear that the first two are quite unlike the third. The first two have obvious rational significance, justifying a difference in our concern. But the third is obviously trivial.'

This appeal to intuition is, as always, regrettable. And these intuitions are not universal. Of those who are relieved when some bad event has been postponed, many do not believe that this relief is irrational. Consider another effect of the bias towards the near: the mounting excitement that we feel as some good event approaches the present—as in the moment in the theatre when the house-lights dim. This excitement would be claimed by many not to be irrational.

The S-Theorist might say: 'Those who have these intuitions have not sufficiently considered the question. Those who *have* considered the question, such as philosophers, generally agree that it is irrational to care more about the nearer future.'

The agreement of philosophers may not justify their view. The Self-interest Theory has long been dominant. It has been assumed, for more than two millennia, that it is irrational for

anyone to do what he knows will be worse for himself. This assumption was not questioned by Christian writers since, if Christianity is true, morality and self-interest coincide. If wrongdoers know that they will go to Hell, each will know that, in acting wrongly, he is doing what will be worse for himself. Christian writers were glad to appeal to the Self-interest Theory, since on their assumptions S implies that knaves are fools. Since S has been taught for more than two millennia, we must expect to find some echo in our intuitions. S cannot be justified simply by an appeal to intuitions that its teaching may have produced.

If time's passage is not an illusion, the S-Theorist need not appeal only to our intuitions. He can claim that time's passage justifies the bias towards the future. If he is asked to explain why, he may find this difficult. There is, for instance, no suggestion that the past is unreal. It would be easy to see why, if the past was not real, past pains cannot matter. It is not so obvious why, because time passes, past pains cannot matter.

The S-Theorist might claim: 'Suppose we allow the metaphor that the scope of "now" moves into the future. This explains why, of the three attitudes to time, one is irrational, and the other two are rationally required. Pains matter only because of what they are like when they are in the present, or under the scope of "now". This is why we must care more about our pains when we are *now* in pain. "Now" moves into the future. This is why past pains do not matter. Once pains are past, they will only move away from the scope of "now". Things are different with nearness in the future. Time's passage does not justify caring more about the near future since, however distant future pains are, they *will* come within the scope of "now".'

It is not clear that these are good arguments. The last, in particular, may beg the question. But the S-Theorist might instead claim that, in appealing to time's passage, we do not need arguments. He might claim that there is again no need for further explanation. It may be another fundamental truth that, since time passes, past suffering simply cannot matter—cannot be the subject of rational concern. Timeless was not relieved to learn that his ordeal was in the past. This may not involve the kind of mistake that can be explained. The mistake may be so gross that it is beyond the reach of argument.

VIII AN ASYMMETRY

Perhaps, by abandoning the appeal to temporal neutrality, and instead appealing to time's passage, the Self-interest Theorist has strengthened his position. But we should consider one last kind of case. I call these the *Past or Future Suffering of Those We Love*.

Case One. I am an exile from some country, where I have left my widowed mother. Though I am deeply concerned about her, I very seldom get news. I have known for some time that she is fatally ill, and cannot live long. I am now told something new. My mother's illness has become very painful, in a way that drugs cannot relieve. For the next few months, before she dies, she faces a terrible ordeal. That she will soon die I already knew. But I am deeply distressed to learn of the suffering that she must endure.

A day later I am told that I had been partly misinformed. The facts were right, but not the timing. My mother did have many months of suffering, but she is now dead.

Ought I now to be greatly relieved? I had thought that my mother's ordeal was in the future. But it was in the past. According to the S-Theorist's new view, past pains simply do not matter. Learning about my mother's suffering gives me now *no* reason to be distressed. It is now as if my mother had died painlessly. If what I have learnt makes me distressed, I am like Timeless. I am making the mistake so gross that it is beyond the reach of argument.

This last example may shake the S-Theorist. He may find it hard to believe that my reaction is irrational. He might say: 'How can it possibly matter to you whether your mother had those months of suffering? Even if she did, the suffering is *in the past*. This is not bad news at all.' When applied to my concern for someone else, these remarks seem less convincing.

The S-Theorist might modify his new view. He might say: 'I should not have claimed that past pains simply do not matter. What is implied by time's passage is that they matter *less*.' This revision is indefensible. Once a pain is past, it is completely past. Being in the past is not a matter of degree. It is not plausible to claim that, since time passes, what is rational is to have *some*

concern about past pain, but *less* than about future pain. And what should be claimed about My Past Ordeals? In these cases I regard my past suffering with complete indifference. Is this irrational? Ought I to be somewhat distressed, but less distressed than I am about my future suffering? An appeal to time's passage cannot plausibly support this claim. And it is hard to believe that, in these cases, my indifference is irrational.

My examples reveal a surprising asymmetry in our concern about our own and other people's pasts. I would not be distressed at all if I was reminded that I myself once had to endure several months of suffering. But I would be greatly distressed if I learnt that, before she died, my mother had to endure such an ordeal.

This asymmetry is reduced in

Case Two. Like Case One except that, though my mother suffered for several months, she is still alive, and is now in no pain.

I would be less distressed here to learn about my mother's past suffering. This difference can be explained. If my mother is like me, she now views with indifference her past ordeal. (We can suppose that, like my memories, my mother's memories of her ordeal are not in themselves painful.) If there is an asymmetry in our concern about our own and other people's past suffering, it would not be surprising if this asymmetry was clearest in cases where the others are now dead. If my mother is still alive, my present attitude would naturally be affected by what I can assume to be her present attitude. Since I can assume that *she* now views with indifference her past suffering, this may reduce my concern about this suffering. But, if my mother is now dead, she does not now view with indifference her past suffering. Since my concern about her past suffering cannot be affected by her present attitude, this is the case in which my concern shows itself in its purest form.

Does it make a difference whether my mother's suffering ended in her death? Consider

Case Three. I learn that my mother suffered for several months, but that, before she died, she had a month free

from pain. There was, within her life, a period in which her suffering was in the past, and thus no longer mattered to her.

If this is what I learn, would this make much difference to my concern? I believe that it would, at most, make a little difference. I would be deeply distressed to learn that my mother suffered for those months, even if I also knew that she had a month in which that suffering was in the past. What distresses me is not just to learn of my mother's *painful death*. If it was only this that distressed me, and I was not distressed to learn that she had to endure much suffering some months before she died, my concern would be so special that it could perhaps be ignored. But my concern about the pasts of those whom I love, and who are now dead, is not merely a concern that they did not have painful deaths. I would be distressed to learn that, at any time within their lives, they had months of suffering of which I had not previously known. I believe that most people are, in this respect, like me.

We should finally consider

Case Four. The same as Case Three, except that I do not learn about my mother's suffering, since I knew about it at the time.

Even though I had this knowledge, I would continue to be saddened by the thought that, in my mother's life, there were several months of suffering. Once again, I believe that a similar claim applies to most other people. There is still a striking asymmetry with our attitude to our own past suffering, which most of us view with complete indifference.

It may be objected: 'If we draw distinctions, this asymmetry disappears. You ask whether, when it is in the past, suffering *matters*. This runs together different questions. It is one question whether you ought to *feel sympathy*, and another question whether you ought to *be concerned*. Whether suffering is in the past makes a difference, not to sympathy, but only to concern. We feel sympathy only for others. *This* is why you view your past suffering with indifference. You cannot sympathize with yourself. When you learn about your mother's past suffering, you do and ought to feel sympathy. But it would be irrational to

be *concerned* about this past suffering, just as it would be irrational to be concerned about your own past suffering. There is therefore no asymmetry.¹⁴

These claims do not, I believe, remove the asymmetry. At the start of Case One, I am told that my mother will suffer for several months before she dies. A day later I am told that I was partly misinformed. She did suffer for several months before she died. On the claims just stated, I should be greatly concerned on the earlier day, when I believe that my mother's suffering will be in the future. When I learn that it was in the past, I should cease to be concerned, though I should still feel sympathy. When I cease to have any concern, this should presumably make a great difference to my attitude, and also change its quality. But I am sure that, if this imagined case occurred, my attitude would not be changed in these two ways. I might be somewhat less distressed, but this difference would not be great. Nor would my distress change its quality.

Whether some event is in the past would and should affect those of my emotions that are tied to possible acts. But in these imagined cases, when my mother's suffering is in the future, there is nothing useful that I could do. I cannot even send her a message. I cannot therefore have the kind of concern that is *active*, searching for ways in which I can help the person for whom I am concerned. In these cases, my concern can only be passive. It can only be sadness and distress, with no impulse to search for possible remedies. Because my distress would take this form, its quality would not change when I learn that my mother's suffering is in the past.

I admit that, when I learn this fact, I might be somewhat less distressed. Just as my concern might be affected by my mother's attitude, if she were alive, so my concern might be affected by my attitude to my own past suffering. This effect may partly remove the asymmetry. In my concern about my own suffering, it makes *all* the difference whether this suffering is in the future or the past. It would not be surprising if this fact about my attitudes affected my concern about the suffering of those I love. Since my concern about the past suffering of these people is always affected by my concern about my own past suffering, my concern about the suffering of others can never take a wholly pure or undistorted form. And, as I have claimed, when I learn

that my mother's suffering was in the past, my concern would not be much reduced.

On the objection given above, I have no concern about my past suffering because I cannot sympathise with myself. This claim does nothing to remove the asymmetry. It is merely a redescription. It concedes that there *is* this difference between our attitudes to past suffering in our own lives, and in the lives of those we loved.

This asymmetry makes it harder to defend the Self-interest Theory. An S-Theorist cannot plausibly claim that this asymmetry is rationally required. In particular, he cannot plausibly appeal here to time's passage. If time's passage justifies my complete indifference to my own past suffering, or even makes this indifference a rational requirement, the S-Theorist must claim the same about my concern for those I love. It is as much true, in the imagined case of my dead mother, that her suffering is in the past.

What should the S-Theorist claim about our attitudes to past suffering? He might claim: 'There is not, here, one attitude that is uniquely rational. If you view your own past suffering with complete indifference, this is not irrational. But it would also not be irrational if knowledge of your own past suffering caused you great distress. Similarly, it would not be irrational if you were greatly distressed by the knowledge of your mother's past suffering. But it would also not be irrational if you viewed her suffering with complete indifference.'

If the S-Theorist admits as not irrational this range of different attitudes towards the past, how can he defend his claim that, in our concern about the future, we ought to be temporally neutral? He must make this claim. But if, in the case of past suffering, it would not be irrational either to care just as much, or to care less, or not to care at all, why in the case of future suffering is there only one attitude which is rational? Though there is no outright inconsistency, it is hard to believe a view which is so permissive in its claims about one range of different attitudes to time, but is so strict in its claim about another range.

IX CONCLUSIONS

I conclude that there are only two views that a Self-interest Theorist can hope to defend:

(1) If time's passage is an illusion, temporal neutrality cannot be irrational. The S-Theorist might revive his claim that we must be temporally neutral. He must then claim that it is irrational to be relieved both when suffering has been postponed, and when it is in the past. If he criticizes the bias towards the near, he *must* also criticize the bias towards the future. If time's passage is an illusion, he must agree (a) that it would not be irrational to *lack* the bias towards the future. He cannot also claim (b) that it is *not* irrational to *have* this bias, and (c) that it *is* irrational to have the bias towards the near. There is no argument with which he could support these three claims. If he does not condemn the bias towards the future, he cannot condemn the bias towards the near with the claim that it is bad for us. The bias towards the future is also bad for us. And the rationality of an attitude does not depend on whether it is bad for us. There is one difference between these two attitudes to time: we can act directly on the bias towards the near, but we cannot act directly on the bias towards the future. But this cannot support the claim that only the first bias is irrational. The S-Theorist cannot claim that the bias towards the future is not irrational *because* we cannot act upon it. If he appeals to temporal neutrality, he must claim that it is irrational to be relieved when our suffering is in the past. We shall find this hard to believe.

(2) If time's passage is not an illusion, the S-Theorist might defend a different view. He might claim that, because time passes, past suffering cannot matter. He can then claim that it is irrational for Timeless not to be relieved when he learns that his suffering is over. This view we shall find plausible when we think about our own pasts, or consider the imagined cases where Timeless is not relieved. But, if the S-Theorist supports this view by appealing to time's passage, he must also claim that, when I am distressed to learn about my mother's past suffering, this is irrational. We shall find this hard to believe.

The S-Theorist may himself find this last claim hard to believe. If

he abandons this claim, he must abandon his appeal to time's passage. While this appeal might support the sweeping claim that past suffering simply does not matter, it cannot support the claim that we are rationally required to have *some* but *less* concern about past suffering. Nor can it show to be rational the difference in our attitudes towards suffering in our own and other people's pasts.

Even if time's passage is not an illusion, the S-Theorist might return to his first view: the requirement of temporal neutrality. He can then condemn the bias towards the near with the claim that a mere difference in timing cannot have rational significance. He can claim that, though it is rationally significant *who* feels some pain, it cannot be significant *when* some pain is felt.

If he returns to this view, the S-Theorist must condemn the bias towards the present. It was here that temporal neutrality seemed least plausible. How can it be irrational to mind my agony more when I am now in agony? The S-Theorist might say: 'In one sense, this is not irrational. Agony is bad only because of how much you mind it while you are in agony. But, in another sense, you should not be biased towards the present. It would be irrational to let such a bias influence your decisions. Though you mind the agony more while you are in agony, you should not, because of this, end your present agony, at the foreseen cost of greater agony later. At the first order level, you mind the agony more while you are feeling it. But you should not be more concerned about its being present rather than in the future. At the second-order level, where you make decisions that affect the length and the timing of your suffering, you can and should be temporally neutral.'

If he is requiring temporal neutrality, the S-Theorist must also condemn the bias towards the future. He might say: 'This bias is produced by evolution. This explains why this bias applies only, or more strongly, to our own lives. When we consider the lives of others, we can rise above our evolutionary inheritance, and can see the plausibility of temporal neutrality.'

This claim supports the S-Theorist's view. When some belief or attitude has an evolutionary explanation, this, in itself, has neutral implications. It cannot by itself show that the belief or attitude either is or is not justified. But suppose that we have

other grounds for challenging some attitude. Its defenders may then claim: 'The fact that this attitude is so widely held is a ground for thinking it justified. Why has it been so widely held, if it is not justified?' In answering *this* claim an evolutionary explanation may cast doubt on what it explains. It undermines the rival explanation, that we have the belief or attitude *because* it is justified. The S-Theorist can therefore claim that our bias towards the future, in our own lives, is a *mere product* of evolution, and is not rationally justified. And this claim is supported by the asymmetry in our concern about the lives of others.

The S-Theorist would have to apply this claim to My Past or Future Operations. In these cases I want it to be true that I did suffer for several hours yesterday, rather than that I shall suffer for one hour later today. The S-Theorist must again claim that this preference is irrational, and that, in general, it is irrational to be relieved when our suffering is in the past. Even given his new claim about evolution, we shall find this hard to believe.

I have described the two views which the Self-interest Theorist can most plausibly defend. Each of these views includes a claim that is hard to believe. This is a weakness in the Self-interest Theory. And it is a further weakness that there is a choice between these two views. It may be irrational to be less concerned about the further future. But we cannot be sure of this while we are undecided on the reason why.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapter IV, second paragraph.

² C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, Open Court, 1946, p. 493.

³ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part II, Section VII.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Op. Cit.*, Book II, Part III, Section III.

⁶ *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 420.

⁷ This variant of the case was suggested to me by G. Harman.

⁸ Rawls, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁹ 'The Sceptic', in *Hume's Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 177.

¹⁰ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 68.

¹¹ This objection was suggested to me by J. J. Thomson.

¹² See, for example, D. Williams, 'The Myth of Passage', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1951, pp. 457-472.

¹³ See D. F. Pears, 'Time, Truth, and Inference', in *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, edited by Antony Flew, Macmillan, 1966, p. 249.

¹⁴Versions of this objection were suggested to me by J. J. Thomson and R. G. Swinburne.

¹⁵This is a shortened version of part of a book, *Reasons and Persons*, to be published by the Oxford University Press in 1984. It is printed here by kind permission of Oxford University Press.

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