Rationality and Time
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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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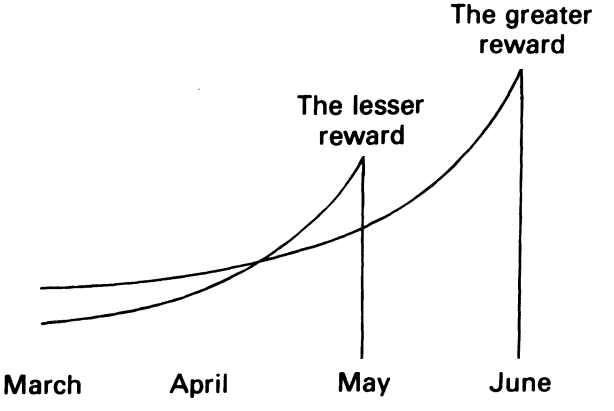
one of the ways in which this bias is revealed: 'In reflecting upon any action which I am to perform a twelvemonth hence, I always resolve to prefer the greater good, whether at that time it will be contiguous or remote. . . . But on a nearer approach. . . a new inclination to the present good springs 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

> *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 fore-knowledge 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

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 out 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

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 president 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