

*Parfit on Pains, Pleasures, and the Time of their Occurrence*¹

DAN MOLLER
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544
USA

Consider our attitude toward painful and pleasant experiences depending on when they occur. A striking but rarely discussed feature of our attitude which Derek Parfit has emphasized is that we strongly wish painful experiences to lie in our past and pleasant experiences to lie in our future. Our asymmetrical attitudes toward future and past pains and pleasures can be forcefully illustrated by means of a thought-experiment described by Derek Parfit which I will paraphrase as follows:

You are in the hospital to have an extremely painful but completely safe operation for which you can be given no anesthetic. In order to ease recovery, you know that the hospital will give you drugs that cause you to forget your operation as soon as it is completed. You wake up, not remembering having gone to sleep, and ask the nurse if your operation has been completed. She tells you that there were two patients for this operation and she cannot remember which you are: either you already had your operation and it was the longest such operation ever performed, lasting ten hours, or else you are the other patient in which case your operation is imminent, but will last only one hour.²

Almost everyone's reaction to this thought-experiment is that they would feel immense relief if it turned out that their operation was over, even though that would mean it involved ten times more pain than if it

1 I wish to thank Sarah Broadie for comments on a version of this paper and Derek Parfit for conversations on this subject.

2 See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984), 165.

were still to come. Though there are other reasons we might feel relieved than that the pain was past (e.g. any risk of death, however small, would no longer exist), most people feel the mere pastness of the pain would be a large part of the ground of their relief.

In reacting in this way, we are exhibiting a pattern of concern it may help to illustrate graphically — see *Actual* in the Appendix. Parfit refers to this pattern of concern as revealed in the hospital scenario as *bias toward the future*.³ Though we take our future-bias for granted, it is in fact highly puzzling in several respects. Why do we have it? Are we endowed with it by nature, or is it simply a natural response to facts about the nature of time? And either way, is our bias justified?

The plausible answers to these questions come bundled in sets. The *common sense* view is the one most of us actually have. It consists of the claims that in holding our bias we are responding to some kind of fact (it's not just arbitrary), that there aren't any reasons militating against our bias, and that the correct causal explanation of our bias does not consist in a 'debunking' evolutionary account which would show that it is merely the result of brute instinct imparted in us by nature for its survival value. The *revisionist*, by contrast, adopts just such a debunking account, and couples it with the claims that our bias is contrary to reasons we have (it is irrational, in a weak sense of the term), and is not supported by reasons. We can summarize these bundles of claims as follows:

Common-sense: (a) there are reasons to be biased, (b) there are no reasons not to be biased, and (c) no debunking evolutionary explanation applies.

Revisionist: (a) there are no reasons to be biased, (b) there are reasons not to be biased, and (c) a debunking evolutionary explanation applies.

A complete discussion of the problem of our bias would require an investigation of all three kinds of claims. My goal here, however, is to discuss and evaluate the claims made under (b), concerning whether or not there are reasons against our bias. The (a) and (c) claims will mostly fall to the side here, though toward the end it will turn out to be necessary to consider certain (a)-claims as well. I should stress that in discussing

3 'Bias' sometimes connotes an asymmetry in attitudes which is unwarranted. Since part of what we will be investigating is whether our asymmetrical attitudes *are* unwarranted, we should try to hear 'bias' without this connotation.

the relevant arguments my goal will be to understand and evaluate them, not to marshal them toward a conclusive defense of or attack on a particular position.

There are at least three reasons for criticizing our bias which the revisionist might press, each of which can make our asymmetrical attitudes seem like a mistake. Because all three are extracted from *Reasons and Persons*, and since the revisionist view is Parfit's by his own avowal, I take myself to be loosely discussing his views. However, I will often refer to the revisionist instead of Parfit, and also to the revisionist's arguments instead of Parfit's, even when the arguments are drawn from *Reasons and Persons*, for several reasons. For one thing, *Reasons and Persons* contains no explicit discussion of any argument that is labeled as an argument for the irrationality of our bias; in fact, Parfit doesn't anywhere refer to our bias as irrational, so far as I know, though in conversation he urges that it is. Moreover, it is unclear whether Parfit, at least in the context of *Reasons and Persons*, can coherently adopt the revisionist view. Parfit raises the issue of our bias in *Reasons and Persons* to make trouble for the so-called self-interest theory of rationality. Without going into detail, the point is supposed to be that the self-interest theory is committed to there being no rational significance in *when* an experience occurs, that being the key claim that allows it to explain what's wrong with what I will below describe as our bias toward the near (sacrificing distant future benefits for lesser but nearer ones). But if it is in general irrational to care more about some event merely because of *when* it occurs, then it must be irrational to care more about future pains than past ones, which Parfit sees as the bottom-end of a reductio against the self-interest theory (186). However, if our bias really *is* irrational, then obviously the reductio against the self-interest theory collapses; in fact, it will be one of the few theories of rationality that correctly condemns our actual attitude. Hence it is hard to make sense of Parfit's apparent opposition both to the common sense view of our bias and to the self-interest theory. Finally, some of the arguments I discuss are advanced in very different contexts by Parfit, scattered as they are across a lengthy discussion of the self-interest theory, which I am ignoring. But it seemed worthwhile to collect the three arguments that follow together and to discuss them as a coherent set, despite this awkwardness involving their provenance.

The first, rather straightforward, argument of the revisionist against our bias is just that it would be better for us not to have it. Clearly if this were so, we would also have a (*pro tanto*) reason not to have it. Parfit offers two reasons why we might be better off if we were neutral in our attitudes toward past and future pain and pleasure. The first is supposed to emerge from the following consideration: If we lacked our bias, then

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. (174-5)

Our bias consists in not caring about past pains and pleasures as much as we do about future ones. Parfit is imagining that the absence of bias would mean the presence of concern for the past that was similar to our actual concern for the future. His point in the section quoted, however, is that the concern for the past we would possess if freed from our bias could fortunately be different from our actual concern for the future, at least in so far as we could afford to forget many past painful events. This is because whereas we can't afford to ignore possible future pain, since doing so would make its occurrence more likely, ignoring past pain would not, usually, make either it or events of the same type in the future more likely to occur. On the other hand, we could treat past pleasures just as we actually treat future pleasures, viz. as objects of frequent and pleasurable contemplation. Hence, on Parfit's view, being rid of our bias would mean we would have the benefits of another category of pleasures to enjoy contemplating without the drawbacks of more painful experiences to have to confront, for we could systematically forget about those.

But this claim is peculiar. Consider the man in the hospital after his agonizing ten hour operation. The natural way to envision his possessing a neutral pattern of concern is to imagine his feeling about his past operation as he would about that same operation if it were imminent. This, surely, would be deeply traumatic, as would be any similar case involving great pain or distress, and hence neutrality would seem at first glance to make things much worse for us. The reason Parfit is unmoved by this consideration is that he thinks we could be selective in which past-experiences we chose to dwell on, thus reaping only benefits from neutrality without any drawbacks. But it's hard to see how what is being imagined here is compatible with neutrality. Simply forgetting about recent past pain (even supposing this were generally possible) is incompatible with caring as much about that pain as we do about future pain, which is what neutral concern is, by definition. We simply don't forget about non-trivial imminent future pain; that's part of what it is to have our actual pattern of concern.

There are two grounds for thinking that neutrality would be especially traumatic. The first is that past suffering possesses a feature that would exacerbate our mental anguish in contemplating its having occurred: there is no chance of its not having occurred. By contrast, it is often the case that our anguish in contemplating future suffering is attenuated by the possibility of its non-occurrence, as in cases like our being *threatened*

with being fired, our enemies being *poised* to invade, and so on. This problem is made worse by Parfit's view of another bias we have, the bias toward the near. (See *Near* in the Appendix.) This bias consists in our caring more about the nearer future than the later future, leading, some say, to consistent *akrasia*: we knowingly choose the worse of two options, simply because it involves having pleasure sooner or pain later. (E.g., we sometimes avoid having dental work done now even though we know this choice commits us to more painful dental work in the distant future.)⁴ I will have more to say about this bias below. For now, what is important is that Parfit thinks that it too is irrational. This being the case, presumably he thinks we should not simply reduplicate our future bias toward the near in our pattern of concern for past pain, yielding a bias toward the nearer *past* (the *Symmetrical* graph), but that we should ultimately be neutral in three respects: between past and future pain, between the nearer and the further future pain, and between nearer and more remote past pain (as represented in *Neutral*). This means that in considering even remote past suffering which has no chance of not occurring, we must have the same concern for it that we actually have for imminent future suffering. This would seem to make the neutral pattern of concern unbearable and hence much worse for us than being biased.

Parfit might reply that though we might not naturally forget our past suffering if we truly had the same concern for it that we have for imminent future suffering, we could afford to train ourselves to ignore it. We could, he might claim, train ourselves not to worry about *future* suffering, but we do not since we would then be likely not to take various precautionary measures to avoid the relevant events. In contrast, we *could* afford to train ourselves to ignore past suffering since this would make no difference to its occurrence.

It is conceivable that the conditioning envisaged is possible: it may be that advanced conditioning techniques could be developed to get us to avoid thinking about past pains.⁵ Though it is difficult to see how such

4 I am passing over various controversies here. Since some philosophers deny true *akrasia* exists, clearly it's not obvious that the bias toward the near involves or can lead to *akrasia*. In this kind of 'diachronic' case it is particularly tempting to suppose that the choices involved may merely be the result of a failure of the imagination — that we aren't fully aware of what the later of the two outcomes of our choice involves.

5 But see Frederik Kaufman, 'Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1999) 1-19, for an argument that it is conceptually impossible for us to have an attitude toward pain and its timing significantly different from the one we have.

conditioning would work given the very different kinds of painful events that are at issue — physical pain, emotional distress, hunger, depression, etc. — perhaps it could be done. (A neural device which caused mild pain whenever we turned our thoughts to [the wide variety of] painful events in the past?) But this is just an empirical question; at most Parfit could claim that it's *conceivable* that neutral concern would bring more benefits than harms. And even then many of us would feel uncomfortable with the sort of invasive 'brain-washing' procedure that would be involved. (Many painful memories are pleasurable to recall, e.g. the memory of arguing with one's now dead spouse.) So far, then, we don't seem to have compelling grounds for supposing that we'd be better off without our future-bias.

Parfit's second reason for preferring neutrality revolves around the different attitude toward death we might acquire if we were rid of our bias. As it is, says Parfit, as we age we have less and less to look forward to which is why we fear death: there is no future at all to look forward to beyond death. Of course, as we age we also have more and more to look back to. But because of our bias, that fact does nothing to compensate for our having less of a future to look toward. If we didn't have our bias we could enjoy looking back at our past as much as we enjoy looking toward the future now, and hence we would not fear death. As Parfit puts it,

Now suppose that our lives have nearly passed. We shall die tomorrow. If we were not biased toward the future ... [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. (176)

To evaluate this claim, notice to begin with that what makes us most regret our future non-existence is probably not the absence of future pleasurable experiences (nor, certainly, the absence of future pains). Even a life devoid of both pleasures and pains seems to most of us worth living, and we would fear death even if it deprived us only of a meager, relatively joyless life (say, as workers in a penal colony). The mere fact of continued existence seems to be the or at least a central object of our wish to live on.⁶ What would be needed to avoid our sense of despair at

⁶ Though controversial, this claim seems plausible, especially if we're careful to distinguish between what makes death bad and what makes us fear death. It is defended at length by Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993), pt. I, who identifies several grounds for fearing death but argues that the 'extinction' aspect of death is the most central. For more detailed

impending death, then, seems to be feeling as concerned about the current stage of our existence being the successor to a previous stage as we are about there being a successor to our current stage. In that case, as we faced death we could say to ourselves that though nothing was to *follow* our current stage of existence, the fact that something *preceded* it was just as significant. But what neutrality would involve, recall, is not a general heightened appreciation of the fact that our current life-segment has predecessors, but rather the completely different and much more narrow heightened appreciation of past pleasures and pains. Therefore it seems unlikely that neutrality would have the effect Parfit supposes. For the point was supposed to be that our bias-free concern for the past experiences would balance the lack of future experiences to look forward to. But since it isn't the lack of those future experiences that causes our fear of death to begin with, compensating for them by neutrality would not help matters: we would still fear death just as much, or at least nearly so.

And this seems fairly easy to confirm: if I imagine myself in the position of the person who knows he will die the next day, and, pursuing Parfit's suggestion, further imagine myself naturally disposed to care as much about my past pleasant experiences as I do now about my future pleasures, then, even supposing that I have been trained not to care at all about my past painful experiences, I am certain that I would nonetheless deeply regret the imminent end of my existence. (I will suppose most people would share my feelings.) Of course, Parfit might complain that this is merely to do with my weak powers of imagination — perhaps I am simply unable to imagine with sufficient vividness looking back to past pleasures the way I look forward to future ones. But the basic problem isn't that when I imagine myself in the situation described the past pleasures seem insufficient or weak or otherwise inadequate; the problem is that it is the bare fact that there will be no later stage of my existence that strikes me as what is so bad about my death, and my past pleasures aren't in principle capable of weighing against that sense, no matter how strongly I care about them or how attentive I am to them.

The revisionist's first argument, which I have just rejected, is different in kind from the second and third. The former, if successful, shows only that it would be better for us not to have our bias, not that it is inconsistent or that it rests on some false belief or mistaken assumption. By contrast, the last two arguments attempt to show just that.

criticism of Parfit's view of death and its relation to bias, see Christopher Belshaw, 'Death, Pain and Time,' *Philosophical Studies* 97 (2000) 317-41.

I mentioned earlier the bias toward the near, our tendency to care more about experiences which occur sooner. The revisionist's second argument involves pitting our attitude toward our bias toward the near against our bias toward the future.⁷ The argument looks something like this:

1. The bias toward the near is irrational.
2. There is some fact F that *makes* our bias toward the near irrational.
3. But F is equally involved in our bias toward the future.
4. Therefore, our bias toward the future is irrational as well.

This way of putting the argument can make it seem as if it relies on our actually having the bias toward the near, which, for reasons I mentioned above, may be disputed. But as Parfit points out, it doesn't matter if we in fact lack this bias. It is enough for the revisionist to secure our agreement that *if* we did it would be a mistake, or, alternatively, that an imaginary being which had such a pattern of concern would be subject to rational criticism. For as long as either of these is true, then the argument can just be recast with the appropriate subjunctive verb-forms substituted for the indicative forms in (1), (2) and (4), and the argument seems to stand much as before.

A better point at which to resist is the first premise. Why should we think that our bias toward the near is irrational? This can seem obvious from cases like the one mentioned above in which we bring upon ourselves more (tooth-)pain by opting for the sooner but lesser benefit. Since few of us think that it is rational to act so as to create more pain for oneself than is necessary, other things being equal, this example may seem to show that there is something wrong with caring more about the nearer than the more distant future. But two things are being confused here: the rationality of *caring* more about the nearer future, on the one hand, and, on the other, *acting* so as to bring about more pain overall

⁷ This argument is loosely modeled on considerations Parfit brings to the fore in sections 62-4 of *Reasons and Persons*. I will again emphasize, however, that it's unclear Parfit could endorse the revisionist's arguments at this point. The point of sec. 62, for instance, is that though it would be helpful for the self-interest theorist, in order to explain what's wrong with the bias toward the near, to be able to claim that it is irrational to take into account the mere timing of an experience, our bias toward the future shows that this is false, since we *don't* think the bias toward the future is irrational. ('Is this preference [to have pains behind us] irrational? Most of us would answer No' [167].)

merely because of the timing of the two pains involved.⁸ Though the latter seems clearly irrational, the former is much less clear.

This can be brought out by considering examples that do not involve acting at all. So as a parallel to the previous dentist example, suppose that we have two appointments, one for relatively minor work that involves drilling, but will be brief, and a second appointment, prudently made for twenty years in the future, which we know will involve great agony. It is the eve before the minor but still painful dental work. The other, much greater pain is twenty years in the future. Most people would, I suspect, be much more concerned about their impending but relatively minor pain. In any case, let us stipulate that someone S does have such a pattern of concern. So S paces to-and-fro on the eve of his first appointment, fretting the next day, going over the dental procedures, feeling strong physical symptoms of anxiety and so forth. By contrast, he feels nothing of the sort concerning his later, greater agony. The question is, are we inclined to say S is involved in some kind of irrationality or mistake?⁹ The answer seems to be No: few people would judge that something is going wrong here. This seems to indicate that *mere* greater concern for the nearer future, which does not result in acting so as to bring about the worse of two outcomes, does not strike us as problematic, and by definition that means that we don't find the bias toward the near troublesome either. (Recall, the bias toward the near was defined as *caring* more about the nearer than the more distant future.) If that is so, the above argument fails, for it is based on our bias toward the near being irrational. We could describe the mistake being made as confusing the *attitudinal* bias toward the near (which, again, is what the bias toward the near, sans phrase, was defined to be) with the *practical* bias toward the near. For the argument to work, it would have to be the case that the attitudinal bias is irrational; but it appears that it is in fact only the practical bias that is irrational.

8 This distinction is rarely made, and consequently discussions of the bias toward the near are usually unclear in this respect. Parfit, for instance switches back and forth between language of concern and caring and language involving choices and action (see e.g. sec. 62).

9 It is important to recognize that to resist the first premise of the revisionist's argument, as I am attempting, it is necessary only to cast doubt on the revisionist's assertion that the bias toward the near is irrational. I *don't* need to show that our bias is rational. (It's not obvious whether, for any X, if X isn't irrational X must be rational. If so, the comment just made is superfluous. If not, my comment shows that in this context I nonetheless can safely ignore the question of whether our bias is rational.)

The distinction between practical and merely attitudinal bias toward the near, which I've stressed, is rarely discussed. This may be because the distinction is thought to be obscure or untenable. It might, for instance, be argued by neo-Wittgensteinians or behaviorist-sympathizers that one cannot truly be said to *care* about something unless one is disposed to *act* in a certain way toward it. The man who claims to care about his wife but treats her badly is lying or is self-deceived; he's not the victim of some sort of practical-attitudinal conflict, for his practice is the basis for judgment about his attitudes. (Or so it's sometimes said. Matters become more difficult if we allow the man's speech-acts themselves to count as actions.) This putative connection between attitudes and actions might be thought to render incoherent talk of judging attitudes to be rational or irrational independently of the corresponding actions.

But reconsider the case I described, of the man who is more concerned about his imminent but lesser dental work. We are, I think, inclined to judge that the man cares more about his nearer pain, and disinclined to judge that his pattern of concern is irrational. It may be that in forming this judgment we are assuming that the man is disposed to make certain practical choices which, were they made, we would judge to be irrational. (He would then have exhibited practical bias toward the near, and I'm not contesting that *that* bias is irrational.) But the fact (as I take it to be) that the case as described *doesn't* strike us as involving irrationality just shows that even if it is true that attitudes involve connections to practical dispositions, then we judge dispositions to act in certain ways and actually acting in those ways differently. After all, if this weren't so presumably we would be inclined to criticize the man who is far more worried about his nearer but lesser dental work. Since we aren't, it really does seem to be the case that practical bias strikes us as irrational but attitudinal bias — even if dispositionally connected to practice — does not. Alternatively, and to my mind more plausibly, the case functions as a counter-example to the thesis that there exists a strong connection between caring and acting. The reason, on this alternative, that we aren't inclined to criticize the man concerned about his nearer dental appointment is that such concern is compatible with a strict habit of *never* making the worse of two choices at different times. After all, virtually everyone is more concerned about their nearer but less painful dental work, and at least some of us systematically avoid exhibiting any disposition for making akratic decisions about future dental work. But on either alternative, the behaviorism-inspired resistance to my suggestion that we can sharply distinguish between irrational attitudes and irrational actions seems misguided.

Finally, revisionists might say, 'Perhaps you are right and it's only the practical bias toward the near that's irrational. So what? Can't we just reword the second argument, substituting "practical bias toward the

near'' for ''bias toward the near'' and won't it then have just the same force?' But at this point we need to discuss the use of F in the second argument as described above. I left the fact F that was supposed to provide the link between the bias toward the near and the bias toward the future schematic. Since my point has been that, whatever that fact is, it can't show that the bias toward the future is irrational *because* it explains why the bias toward the near is irrational (since we don't think the bias toward the near is irrational), there has been no need to discuss what fact F might refer to. But now it becomes relevant that F, as discussed by Parfit, is that the mere timing of an event makes no difference to its intrinsic qualities: the mere fact that a pain occurs at t cannot make it any more or less painful. This is the fact that is to explain why the bias toward the near is irrational, and my revisionist is claiming that it also shows that the bias toward the future is irrational. But now notice that this fact cannot be retained in the new version of the argument we are considering, with 'practical bias toward near' substituted for (attitudinal) 'bias toward the near.' For if it's true that what's wrong with making practical choices that result in the worse of two outcomes over time is that the later pain is no less painful for being later, that ought also to show that the attitudinal bias toward the near is irrational, but few of us seem to feel that it is. What's needed, then, is some other fact which (a) refers specifically to actions, not to caring (otherwise it will wrongly say that our attitudinal bias toward the near is subject to criticism), and (b) such that it applies to our bias toward the future. And now the trouble is that any F that meets condition (a) won't meet condition (b), since the bias toward the future is essentially a matter of our attitudes and not our actions. This is because our bias involves a contrast between events in the past and the future, and there is no way to *act* so as to choose the worse of two options just because the one is in the past and the other in the future. (We can only make practical choices about events that are present or future.) This seems to be a strong ground for doubting that the second argument can be made to work at all. It is hard to see what fact could be such as to meet conditions (a) and (b).

At this point the revisionist might claim that if it comes to that, we're just *wrong* about the bias toward the near being rational; if I'm right that our attitudes toward near-bias and future-bias are the same — casual acceptance — then that just shows that our irrational tendencies are more numerous than even the revisionist suspected. But then a new argument is needed to show what is wrong with both our biases, since the second argument relied on the irrationality of our bias toward the near. That new, third argument will be more general and far-reaching than the previous two, since the domain of its application will be broader. The third argument I wish to consider is based on the fact referred to above, that the mere timing of an instance of suffering or pleasure could make

no difference to its importance, that a pain's occurring at t and not t' can't make it more or less painful. In the second argument, the revisionist said that this fact explains why we hold the bias toward the near to be irrational. Now he says that though that fact may not, after all, explain why we think the bias toward the near is irrational — if I am right relevant cases suggest we don't think this — it nonetheless *condemns* both our biases as irrational.

How might the revisionist argue for this claim? His position is difficult; many of us would, at least prior to encountering the revisionist's arguments, be inclined to cite our biases as *paradigms* of rational attitudes; most of us would regard the person who felt no relief at all when told that his painful operation was over as crazy, and someone who did as normal. Similarly we find perfectly rational the tendency to worry less about a painful operation twenty years hence and worrying a great deal about a less painful operation that is imminent. Someone who fretted a great deal about an operation twenty years hence would in fact strike many of us as *irrational*. How could we be as deeply mistaken as the revisionist claims, and how can the fact F , as explained just now, show that this is so?

The strongest way of fleshing out this argument is to say that the biases under attack are, in some objectionable sense, arbitrary. They involve, on this view, distinctions in our pattern of concern without relevant differences. The point being made can be illustrated forcefully with an example Parfit gives (123ff.), in a different context, of an irrational pattern of concern, viz. caring about pain only when it occurs on a future Tuesday. Or, equally compelling, take a spatial variation — caring about pain only when it occurs when you are located within the state of Texas. This pattern of concern would seem crazy to most of us. What on earth, we think to ourselves when confronted with this example, could make it rational to stop caring about a piercing head-ache as soon the state-line is crossed? The claim then is that our biases are similar. They too involve caring about pain more or less depending on non-intrinsic facts that don't seem to have any real significance. And this is just another way of describing the point of F , that the mere timing of pain can't make any difference to its painfulness.

In responding to the third argument, the challenge the anti-revisionist faces is explaining what exactly the facts are that we are responding to in exhibiting the pattern of concern we have, and then to show that those facts really are relevant and significant.¹⁰ Parfit discusses two candidates

10 Here the first two kinds of claims described earlier, (a)-claims concerning whether there are reasons for our bias and (b)-claims as to whether our bias is unreasonable,

for the relevant facts we are responding to, the direction of causation and the passage-theory of time. Take first the direction of causation. The anti-revisionist's proposal would be that what grounds our vastly greater concern for future versus past pain and pleasure is that causation is forward directed, i.e. that we can cause things to occur in the future but not in the past, and hence that we can influence the course of events that are before us, but not those that are behind us. This being the case, the anti-revisionist reasons, it makes good sense to care about future pain, which we might be able to avert, and not to care much about past pain, which we cannot.

Parfit objects (168) that our pattern of concern is exhibited even in cases where the future pain is unavoidable. There is, however, a reply, to which his response seems to me unsatisfactory. The reply is roughly that cases in which we are unable to affect future pain in any way are quite rare; in the general case we can, and it is sufficient to justify our general bias that it make sense in the general case. Parfit's response involves, once again, bringing in the bias toward the near, and attempting to show that the reply would wrongly render the bias to the near rational. For reasons given above, I think that this is not a good basis for a *reductio*; the bias toward the near *is* rational. However, Parfit appears to overlook a stronger objection to the use of the direction of causation in this context. Though it is easy to see how the difference between being able to affect events and not being able so to do *tracks* the asymmetry involved in our future-bias, it is much less clear how it *justifies* or grounds our bias. Why should it matter that future pain generally lies inside our causal cone, and past pain outside? This may provide the basis for a (c)-type claim about the causal explanation of our bias — perhaps it could help to explain why we evolved our bias at all — but that is still not to say anything about why our bias makes sense or is rational. The revisionist will want to know why the fact that we cannot affect past pain is a good reason for not caring about it, and our being able to avoid future pain is a good reason for caring about it.

The other candidate for answering this question was time's passage, or, as it is sometimes referred to as, the reality of temporal becoming. According to this controversial view of time, it is a fundamental truth that the present is somehow moving *into* the future and *away from* the past: e.g. I am getting closer and closer to my death and receding further and further from my birth. Space, on this view, may be isotropic since there is nothing special about any spatial direction from a given point,

come together: in order to deal with a (b)-level objection to our concern, we must find an (a)-level reason *for* our attitudes toward pain and pleasure.

but time is not; the forward-direction of time is distinguished by being the direction in which we are moving. And here Parfit seems, at long last, slightly to yield to the anti-revisionist, apparently granting that time's passage might justify the bias toward the future,¹¹ as follows:

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." (180)

The idea is that the asymmetry embedded in our bias is a function of the asymmetry involved the forward-movement of the present, away from the past and into the future. Since only pain that is present to us matters, we need only care about pain that we are moving toward and will be forced to confront.

Parfit evaluates this and several related arguments so:

It is not clear that these are good arguments.... 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 be the object of rational concern. (180-1)

This evaluation is much too weak. The passage-view of time, even if correct, cannot in itself make any sense of our bias. Like the direction of causation, the reality of temporal becoming seems just irrelevant to the kind of justification we are searching for. Such a reality would do nothing to *justify* any asymmetries in our attitude toward certain tensed facts; at most it could constitute an asymmetry our attitudes *track*. The revisionist will demand to know why it should matter that our past pains are receding behind us whereas our future pains are approaching before us.

The basic answer it is tempting to give in explaining why our bias makes sense is that future pain will still occur, whereas past pain already has. Or, as we might put it, present pain is what we're ultimately concerned about, and future pains becomes present ones, whereas past pains do not. But on closer inspection this answer to the revisionist's question about our bias turns out to be no answer at all, since to say that a future event E will eventually be present is to say nothing more than

11 Though it is acknowledged that our sense of time's passage may only be an illusion, for reasons discussed by Donald Williams in 'The Myth of Passage,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1951) 457-71.

that E is in the future, and we already knew that. ('Your future pain is yet to be experienced' = 'Your future pain is future pain,' or perhaps, 'Your future pain is *future* pain' — but the italics only indicate how difficult we find it to understand that there is a question to be answered here.) It is true that future pains *will be* present whereas past pains merely *were* present, but that truth just raises the exact same question we have been asking only in different words: why do we care about pains that *will be* present (i.e. future pains) but not care much about pains which *were* present (i.e. past pains)? No progress has been achieved.

The passage theorist simply transposes the non-answer just described into his preferred metaphorical spatial language of movement, telling us past pain is behind us and future pain is before us. On his view of time, that is true by definition, but it cannot explain why that difference should have any force for us. As a matter of fact, if we think intuitively about why it seems to us better to have a danger (say an approaching knife-blade) receding behind us rather than approaching before us, the reason seems to be that the approaching danger *will* harm us (*will be* present), whereas receding dangers *will not*. But this, yet again, is just to say to no effect that the crucial fact involved in our bias is that future pain is in the future and past pain is not.¹²

It seems fair to conclude that the passage theory doesn't provide an explanation of the relevant differences between past and future pain. Of course, as Parfit mentions in the above quotation, the passage theorist may just say that it's basic that future pain matters and past pain does not ('some errors are so deep that they are beyond the reach of argument'). All we can say to this is that, even if it were true, the passage theorist does nothing to explain that basic fact, and that he has in any case failed to say anything we might use to explain how our bias relevantly differs from the case of caring about pain only in the state of Texas.

Though there may be other candidates for explaining the relevant difference between past and future pain, the two just reviewed seemed the most promising. Since they appear to fail, it is unclear that the revisionist's third argument can be successfully resisted by the defender of what I have been referring to as the common sense position. Notice that this conclusion is weaker, however, than that which would be obtained if either of the first two arguments had been successful. In that case, we would have had positive reason to reject our bias. As it is, final

12 The points I've been making are not purely hypothetical in their application. For an instance of the kind of mistake I've been discussing, see Kamm, *Morality, Mortality* vol.I, 28.

evaluation of the revisionist's arguments must await a more complete discussion of the various candidates for explaining the basis for our bias and hence further work on this under-discussed and perplexing phenomenon.

Received: February, 2001

Revised: July, 2001

Appendix: Different Patterns of Concern about Pleasure and Pain

