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A DEFENSE OF TEMPORAL NEUTRALITY

BY

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Chapter One

Introduction

"Everything is what it is, and not another thing" observed Bishop Butler, and his famous remark's immunity from doubt can make one wonder that he bothered to make it. That things are what they are is certainly true, but the truth in question seems to buy certainty at the cost of uninformativeness. In pursuit of understanding or at the command of other strong desires, however, we sometimes stray—without meaning to or knowing we have done so—from the plainest truths. And it is such strayings that warrant philosophers' reminders of and insistings on the obvious. Butler wished to remind his auditors of a home truth about themselves (that people want all sorts of things) that a facile "depth" led them to deny (adapting models drawn from 17th century mechanics to the structure of the soul, Butler's foes spuriously deduced the perfect ubiquity of selfishness in human motivation).

Our concern in what follows is also at root with the bearing of a fairly unexceptionable claim about identity upon a question of value and also with the defense of a home truth. But the mistake we wish to diagnose and correct is not, perhaps, so unambiguously an error as was Butler's *bete noir*. Nor is the truth we wish to defend quite so unassailably true. We are not here intending to preserve a class of facts or entities against the claims of a mistaken reductionism. We wish, rather, to endorse and support some traditions of thought that strive to

correct a failing which is as much a matter of the human will and affect as it is a defect in our habits in the fixing of belief. The failing in question is the tendency we have to treat the axiological properties of particular things that happen to us or are done by us as if they possess a weirdly changeable ethical nature.

Imagine, please, an act of wanton cruelty. The simple thought we wish to nurse and guide through unsimple complications is that that act is what it is axiologically just as much as it is, say, *an act*. In particular, the time of its occurrence does not and cannot change it into something else and so cannot change its ethical nature. An irrevocability attends the cruel thing done, an irrevocability as to its ethical nature which is at bottom the same irrevocability that attends any fact. No metaphysical or moral alchemy is available which can alter the goodness or badness of the events that are the bearers of ethical or axiological properties. To think otherwise is to fall afoul of fundamental and indispensable understandings of the nature of identity, is to deny that things are what they are. But (apparently) think otherwise we regularly do, in effect, when we find that our attitudes toward the cruel thing done vary depending on its location in time. Surely, though, a vicious slaughter of the innocent becomes no less evil when we discover that it took place in 1400 than it would have been had 1914 or 2004 turned out to be its date.

From this self-identity in point of good or evil of acts, events, or states of affairs a practical consequence may, it appears, be deduced. This consequence is the home truth that it is the aim of the present work qualifiedly to defend. The

counsel of wisdom, whether from our elders in their efforts to lead us towards a just regard for our overall good or from Plato, Spinoza, or Sidgwick pronouncing more or less magisterially on the shape that a life guided by reason will take or from such contemporary lights as Rawls and Nagel, has been that we rationally ought not prefer the lesser good to the greater because of *when* that good is found.[1] We will call this claim the temporal neutrality thesis, or TNT. It is, we think, true.

It is not usually presented as deriving from considerations of identity, though Spinoza's formulations are suggestive of such an idea.[2] One might, after all, accept it that a given act, event, or state of affairs has the axiological nature it has, yet still question the TNT's truth. For one chooses between *different* courses of action or *different* states of affairs: one does not choose between the very same thing! If two things are equal in value, if there is no axiologically relevant difference between them, then of course one ought to be indifferent between them. But one might hold that ice cream delight tomorrow is not, after all, the very same state as is ice cream delight five years from now. Even if one could secure with absolute certainty that they would be in every other relevant respect the same, the two instances of ice cream delight would still differ in this: that the one has a "five year futurity" that the other lacks. Why can't that difference provide a rational warrant for licking tomorrow's cone instead of the temporally distant one? We neutralists insist that it cannot, that "five-year futurity" and its ilk are axiologically irrelevant properties, if they be properties at all. And we

suggest that, where the preference for tomorrow's cone is anything but a defection from governance by reason, it is other differences that license that choice. The uncertainties of the future are well able to account for our rational tendencies to favor the present. But tendencies to give special weight to the present are regularly irrational, go well beyond anything the uncertainties of our knowledge of what will be would warrant. This is so commonplace as to make the TNT appear banal.

Whether or not it is banal, it has recently been subjected to a variety of attacks. Michael Slote, Derek Parfit, Bernard Williams, J.N. Findlay and C.I. Lewis have either denied it or subjected it to potentially undermining scrutiny.[3] We will seek in what follows to defend it against these attacks. But each line of attack opens up for examination an area of substantial ethical interest quite independently of its bearing on our central concern. In defending the TNT, we will find ourselves exploring many aspects of temporality's relation to value. Our talk of time will often and unavoidably become talk of other things than simply one of the dimensions in which all natural things are located.

We will begin, in Chapter Two, with the weakest of the attacks on temporal neutrality. Slote recommends that we look at the goods of life's stages, suggests that doing so will show us that some times of life are inherently better than others, and concludes that we had best reject the TNT.[4] Slote's recommendation is not a bad one: the stages of life are a rich, important, and somewhat neglected topic. We will pursue that topic with an attention to its

intricacies that Slote's account, perhaps justifiably given his limited aims, lacks. But a due regard for life's stages and their comparative worth does nothing to cast doubt on the idea that we ought not prefer the lesser to the greater good. Slote simply holds that the greater good has a typical location in the life cycle. How we are to assess that claim is no simple matter, but the claim–even were it true–does not touch the TNT.

In Chapter Three we will treat a more substantial and menacing criticism of the TNT. It can be found in some influential writings of Bernard Williams and in the work, as unlike Williams's as imaginable in other respects, of Richard Brandt.[5] We'll call it the *now and then problem*, since it hinges on the ways changes over time in our evaluative attitudes disclose an ambiguity or indeterminacy in the TNT. The lesser good is not choiceworthy; its location in time can't alter that. This is all well and good. But ponder young Ralph, who considers homosexuality abhorrent. His choice in youth for later life is that he not be gay. Same sex liaisons are not in his youthful estimation even a lesser good: they are not goods at all. The awful thing he'd hated in his youth turns out, however, to be the thing he wants at a later time. How can the TNT guide Ralph, when his measure of good changes with the passage of time? Williams holds that it cannot, that "now" is the time that possesses exclusive rational authority. Brandt, by contrast, opts for hedonism as a solution to the now and then problem; in effect he rejects the changing measure and supplants it with one that is constant.

The now and then problem is of interest quite apart from whatever damage it will or, as we think, will not do to the TNT. No wholly adequate account of prudence or even of practical reason can fail to address it. The problem of competing conceptions of the good, which lies at the heart of contemporary disputes about political morality, is equally, if more subtly, a problem for the individual rational agent planning her own life. (We leave aside for the moment the collective aspect of the TNT, though the problem clearly raises its head there as well[6])

Williams's exposition of the now and then problem is an assault on any notion of a view "from without" as possessing special rational authority, a phase or moment in his influential campaign against the very idea of moral theory. The TNT assuredly is aligned with those ways of thinking about questions concerning the ends of human life that grant authority to vantage points that are "objective," "impartial," or otherwise removed from the urgencies and immediacies of the particular self in its particular present. Those vantage points, in turn, are closely associated with, or perhaps inseparable from, the attempt to construct or verify a moral theory.

Views from without vary greatly in their degrees and kinds of removal from the particular and immediate: the viewing from without required by "putting oneself in the other fellow's shoes" lies at one end of a spectrum at the other end of which we find a cold and godlike remoteness from the human. It is an open question where on this spectrum the TNT falls. It is portrayed by Nagel

and Sidgwick as essentially commonsensical, an aspect of our native picture of the world which reflection endorses and clarifies. Spinoza, by contrast, derives his version of the principle from that somewhat inhuman (if oddly humane), radically liberated perspective that rests upon the possession of a rectified and perfected understanding of self and world, an understanding unsubjugated by passion, unconfused by the distortions of appetite and indeed freed even from the illusion (?!) that time, anyhow as ordinarily understood, is real at all.

To Williams' endorsement of "now" as providing the correct perspective for deciding what to do, we neutralists must respond that he has blended, cunningly, an undeniable claim about human motivation (that the beliefs, intentions, or desires which move us to act must be present in the soul at the time they move us) with a manifest untruth (that *being one's present state of mind* bestows rational authority upon a wish or thought) to provide an almost wholly unwarranted persuasiveness to the idea that one owes a special allegiance to the dictates of one's present will *qua* present.

The sources of Williams' view are several. He is, in part, a child of Hume defending the centrality of the claims of desire in the geography of value against the contrary, rationalist claims of the children of Kant. The TNT does have a natural affinity with Kantian views, but it is not clear that a modified Humean view of practical reason altogether rules the TNT out. (How much one may modify a Humean view while retaining enough of the father's character to continue bearing his name is of course a question. But almost no one thinks the

undiluted Humean view correct, almost all will allow that the need for harmony among one's desires provides an opening for reason to assume a position loftier than passion's slave. And if harmonizing one's desires *at a time* is consistent with a broadly Humean understanding of rational human motivation, why should not the harmonizing of desires *over time* be likewise consistent?) Williams appears to embrace immediacy as a kind of authenticity, abuses the view from without as inauthentic. Defenders of neutrality will not, of course, agree with such a characterization. Leaving aside the murky difficulties of understanding authenticity and its value, we will not grant that the understanding of self that neutrality inculcates and expresses is inauthentic. We do, of course, endorse a wholesome alienation from the present. What is needed is a demonstration of the wholesomeness of the stance in question.

Here we touch upon one of the underlying themes or motivating preoccupations of this dissertation, a matter much broader than the question of the TNT's validity, in which matter that question is bound up. The progress of human reflection regularly takes us far from our starting points. This is obviously so in science, where the descriptions of the world with which we end up are progressively more deviant from the pictures of things that come naturally to us. Equally, and perennially, we find images of human possibility cast before us—by religions, by philosophers, by works of literature—which involve the utter transformation of our nature, the escape from our ugliest and least tolerable limitations.[7] Ideals of human conduct, thought, and feeling that

leave the common world far behind are the object of exhortation, praise, aspiration. When they are not quite that, they are latent presences the sense of which, dim or vivid, serves as a continual criticism of our shabby, inadequate, unadmirable ways of treating one another and ourselves.

Such ideals, however, become in turn an object of ethical criticism. They are, it is said, harmful. They are mirages in a desert, which distract us from those real springs that might succeed in quenching our thirst. We deform ourselves in the effort to become something we are not and cannot be. We ought to conform ourselves to the limits nature imposes upon us, rather than feeling dwarfed by images of perfection and straining to escape this illusory dwarfdom by attempting to reshape ourselves in accordance with a model not suitable to the stuff we're made of. Fidelity to the actual: therein lies our duty. So, with many variations in emphasis, origin, and intention, goes the criticism of ideals. One wishes to find a way through this controversy, in which both sides seem at times to be saying something true and important.[8]

Obviously, "the" controversy to which I refer embraces an unmanageably heterogeneous superabundance of conflicts of temperament, belief, and attitude: romantic, conservative, Christian, pagan, progressive, Confucian, utopian—the list is very long and not very tidy. We do not wish to show any lack of respect for the particularities of historical instances. Nor do we wish to deny the complexities particular cases present: on which side of the divide here limned does Confucius's thought fall, for example, is a question that one might

reasonably ask, and the answer, equally reasonably, might be "both". Nonetheless, we assert that there exists across diverse contexts a thematic opposition, in human imaginings and understandings of what we are and what we might become, between the lure of transformation and the lure of acceptance. Our sympathies lie, on the whole, with transformation. But we are fully aware of the recalcitrance of human nature and of the variedly disastrous consequences that a heedless pursuit of transformation has worked upon human beings. So our sympathies are tempered. In particular, we wish to distinguish as sharply as their inevitable mingling in the lives of essentially social creatures permits between the political realm and its complement. The hideous failures of certain attempts to alter persons—to create a new and better "man"—through the mechanisms of the state have given a bad name to the idea that we stand in need of radical change. That we do so stand is the fundamental claim of the transforming stance. But corresponding complaints might be made about acceptance: the "wise" acceptor of things as they are regularly justifies acceptance on the basis of the necessity of this or that feature of the social world. That the necessities in question are false necessities, that a given present order is not inevitable, are liberating discoveries. The belief that features of human life are writ into the nature of things has been a perpetual obstacle to our improvement and a very effective means by which great evils have been sustained.

All this leaves volumes of large questions unanswered. In which of the numberless possible directions should we aim as we go about becoming what we aren't? How are we to choose ideals? There is no evident neutral standpoint from which these questions can be answered. The attempt to find the right standpoint from which to answer them is almost certain to involve many of the very problems that the choice of aims presents in the first place. One hopeful thought might be that *attainability* should be a qualifying condition. If the desiderated state can't be got to by the likes of us, then it isn't a fit object of our exertions. The thought here is that it must be irrational to set a goal that is necessarily beyond one, rather as it would be irrational for a man to have his heart set on marrying Anna Karenina. But even that condition, quite independently of more or less empirical disputes about what we are and aren't able to do or be, won't do. For it might well be the case that aiming at an unattainable goal will bring us to a better state than aiming at lesser, attainable, goals would do.

In any case, the demands of temporal neutrality don't belong, at first glance, to the class of drastic or radical recipes for human transformation. They do not ask us to emulate the Buddha, or some such thing. Williams' complaint seems to be that a commitment to an impartial view of our whole life estranges us from our projects in the here and now. But how narrow shall the here in question be? How short the now? If we were to shrink the locus of our concern enough, we'd not even amount to persons. Instead we'd be no more than pulsing medleys of conations and affections. What the TNT involves, at root, is a

relatively primitive liberation from the immediate and the actual. What it requires of us is the practical acknowledgement that we possess a past and a future. The aspects of ourselves of which it is the articulated or rationalized expression are conditions of being persons, quite as much as they are the basis of a call upon us to change ourselves.

The capacities to regard the present as one time in a chain of times and to regard the actual as set amidst possibilities are the first rungs of a ladder that progresses toward ever more adequate understandings of ourselves and (so) of what we ought to be. The oppositions generated between more and less extensive views of how far we can properly or wisely hope to ascend that ladder are not only on view in our discussion of the now and then problem, they will show themselves at several other points, notably in the treatments of the kinship of temporal neutrality and impartiality between persons and of the bearing, if any, of the metaphysics of time upon the TNT.[9]

The third set of objections to the TNT, which are the topic of the fourth chapter, concerns the peculiarity of the idea, which the strictest neutrality would suggest, that we be neutral as between past and future goods. Intentions that no longer live in any breast, wishes that no living soul harbors, just don't have the look of valid claimants to our caring. We'll call this the *dead past objection*. It will require us to examine the ethical character of our relation to past persons and to our own pasts. There is ample material in the conflicting deliverances of moral common sense—the ensemble of convictions and responses that our inheritance

and constitution provide us with, which ensemble is an inevitable starting place for our ethical reflection—to support the belief that we owe more than nothing to the past, that our predecessors, for all that they are no more, have claims upon us. Deathbed promises are the obvious example of a widely acknowledged duty to the dead and it is with them that we begin.

We go on to examine more broadly our relation to our ancestors. The extent of our indebtedness to the past can scarcely be exaggerated. To contemplate that indebtedness is in some ways rather like gazing at the starry heavens and being filled with that complex and ineffable cluster of sentiments and thoughts which occurs when, through the apprehension of the vastness about us, we perceive how tiny we are. And perceive in turn the insignificance of this insignificance, if only we after a fashion abandon ourselves. A mixture of exhilaration and poignancy attends the reflection that every human word, every rite with which we negotiate our way through the changing world, every tool and toy, is the product of an imponderably long chain of human efforts. From the enormity of our debt a substantial ethical burden issues. Our effort will be to characterize it usefully.

Since the works of our predecessors are contradictory in their aims, insofar as those aims even involve us, it cannot be that we are in any straightforward sense obliged to fulfill their intentions. If we could divine some suitable overarching purposes to the labors of the race, then we could say that the furtherance of *those* is our duty. And perhaps the project of such a divination

is not the altogether hopeless thing it is often taken to be by those who are justly sceptical of the dominant forms the project has taken. Something more palatable than assisting the Absolute in its realization or insisting that this or that favorite messiah be accepted, we may hope, can serve as the ground for a sense that we are meaningfully linked to the labors of the past, serving a common end.

We can, apart from any such effort, undertake to act out of respect for those labors. We can oppose amnesia and be allies of memory. We can protect and, where called for, revere our predecessors' works. And we can suggest some grounds for believing why we ought to do so.

It is a common though by no means universal fact about human beings that they take an interest in their history. Such an interest might, all by itself, provide a ground for protecting the things required for its satisfaction. Here, however, we wish to argue at a somewhat deeper level. We wish to justify that interest itself, to suggest that it is in some sense indispensable. We don't want to say just that it is, qua interest or even qua deep and abiding interest which human beings contingently happen to have, one of the features of human life that belongs under a protective moral penumbra, a penumbra which might guard against its treatment as one more thing to be traded in the marketplace, for example. We wish rather to expose and defend the reasons such a judgment might be made in the first place. We want to offer a brief for historical piety. To do so, we must look at the reasons the amnesiasts offer for their view of the

attitude we ought to take to our history. And we must show that they are bad reasons.

Significant parallels exist between the reasons we ought to be mindful of the history of the race and the considerations that count in favor of rejecting pastlessness in the individual case. If, indeed, the entry into the past of any intention, attitude, or purpose consigned it to nonbeing, from the point of view of practical reason, then the whole business of planning would be undermined. The past's dismissal is the suicide of practical reason. Here we are finding unacceptable not the dead past objection, but the idea that the past is dead.

Derek Parfit has brought to our attention most pointedly the extent to which our temporal attitudes are asymmetric.[10] Through an ingenious thought experiment he has shown the power of a tendency we have to prefer the goods before us to those that are past, even where those past goods are far greater than the goods the future has in store. But that tendency is, we hope to show, either irrational or not indeed in conflict with the neutralist stance. To show this we look first at cases that find our commonsensical intuitions failing to display the asymmetry. This is of some interest, inasmuch as it divides goods into types along lines that are not themselves immediately or obviously connected to questions of time. The traditional candidates for "higher" goods turn out, we argue, not to be subject to the asymmetry.

We go on to consider the explanation of the asymmetry, where it does hold, in terms of the reach of our powers and its limits, specifically our inability

to do anything about what has already happened. We consider, in particular, the bizarre counterfactual situation in which we actually could alter the temporal location of goods and ills. It is with some anxiety and logical curiosity that we draw conclusions from a counterfactual the antecedent of which may express an impossibility. It is clear, though, that a world which finds agents capable of engaging in backward deferral of miseries would also find them regularly punished by their former selves (earlier stages, or what have you—no metaphysic of the self is here playing a role). And temporal neutrality would be the rational stance of beings possessed of such peculiar causal powers, whether or not they be in some sense impossible. In addition, we consider the Parfitian observation that a species of past-future symmetrically concerned individuals would be at a reproductive disadvantage. So the biological processes which have shaped us offer an explanation of how our future biassed attitudes have gotten so deeply planted in us. We finally take head on the sheer perspectivality of the position that future goods matter more than past goods. With confident circularity we argue that the very instability of this attitude, or rather of the judgments which issue from it, place it under a cloud of suspicion.

The fourth group of objections with which we must deal, which are the topic of Chapter Five, are found in writings of C.I. Lewis, Findlay, Broad and Slote.[11] We will call them *holism objections*. As the name suggests, they derive from understandings of how the value of temporal parts is related to the value of the wholes of which they are parts. The objections in question have it that

axiological properties located at given times are radically dependent upon, or internally related to, axiological properties located at other times. *Contra* the claim that irrevocable and absolute value properties attach to events, the holist finds the value of happenings at a given moment or year residing *somewhen else*: we cannot simply locate goods in time and compare them, on this view.

One thing the holists might have in mind is this. Timing and temporal order are oftimes constitutive elements of goods. The medicine needs to be taken at a certain time. A piece of music is meant to be heard in the evening. A first course in logic ought not begin with Godel's proof and end with truth tables. But the neutralist has no need to deny all this. The neutralist compares goods, for purposes of choice and evaluation, and holds of those goods that mere temporal location as such is irrelevant to those purposes. But the evening music played in the morning is simply not the same object as the evening music played in the evening, any more than the sentence 'You love spiders' is the same sentence as 'Spiders love you.' Not being the same object, it is not the same good, if good it be at all. Comparison of goods presupposes that the goods in question have been identified, so temporally constitutive elements of goods will have been taken account of before any legitimate comparison takes place.

But the holist denies that the neutralist can safely segregate constitutive temporal aspects of goods from temporal locations of good. Phenomenologically, she attends to the ubiquitous interpenetration of past, present, and future in experience. The strong preference we feel for axiologically "upward" movement

over its opposite, for blossomings rather than declines, seems to imply that greater value belongs to later elements in a series than to earlier ones. And this is hard to square with the neutralist view. "The" value of, say, a deed can, on a holistic view, only be rightly assessed from the perspective of the narrative of which it is part. Or, perhaps, from a vantage point that takes full account of its consequences.

Now to some extent the holist forces upon us some emendation or qualification of the adamant simplicity with which we began. To speak of "the" value of things we do, behold, and suffer cannot be to tell the whole story, or to say all that needs be said. The significance of a journey or a kiss may be subject to transformation over time. Aspects may be grasped in recollection which were unavailable to the understanding at the time. Consequences may bestow new roles upon the long ago voyage or gesture.

Nonetheless, the neutralist has a decent reply to the holist. Negatively, we resist as absurd any *boundless* axiological mutability of events. Positively, we find no necessary inconsistency between the partial dependency of the value of what goes on *now* upon what goes on at past and future *thens* and the TNT.

On the first point, our appeal is, perhaps and in part, somewhat circular. We reiterate our denial that a fact can be somehow unmade by another fact—facts are not like that—and we conjoin to this denial the claim, no doubt controversial but well at home in the common beliefs of humankind, that among the facts are the possession by certain events of certain moral and axiological

properties. It is a reasonable complaint against certain radically unsubtle forms of consequentialism that they would allow events known to be evil or wrong to have such evil or wrongness expunged or transformed by the grace of history. Was the torture of the babe a bad thing? "We must wait and see," saith the foolish adherent of such doctrines. If the felicific calculator (truly) tells them that through quirks in the course of things, abnormalities in a causal chain, a great enough good has issued from the babe's cruel fate, then that fate is transferred from the "liabilities" to the "assets" column of the moral account. But such a transference is, it is widely and sensibly thought, illicit. Our presumption is that cleaving to this necessary component of moral sanity, this refusal of limitless consequentialist transvaluation, does not prohibit us from the just recognition of paradoxical or surprising geneses of good. The whole simply does not *erase* the part. My beloved city was lately wounded— horribly and evilly. From that wounding some goods have flowed. It might improbably be that fortune shall determine more good than ill to come from the hideous thing that's happened. But the event remains indelibly evil.

On the second point, the dependency of (say) the value of some present deed upon its links to past and future is more likely to confirm than to disconfirm the TNT. No doubt the relevant estimations of value will be rendered by such dependencies more baroque and uncertain than they otherwise would be. The thrust of the holist's claim, though, is a demand that, for example, the axiological aspects of a given now be understood in light of its predecessor and

successor times. This hardly seems a denial of the axiological potency of past or future!

Two topics that we'll not be able to treat within the framework of this dissertation deserve discussion here. The first is a possible defense of that doctrine. The defense in question was broached by Parfit and was, perhaps, anticipated by Spinoza. We'll call it the metaphysical defense. It takes us into very deep waters and provides an occasion for reprising the theme of the opposition between transforming and quietistic views of what we are and ought to be. Parfit suggests that the unreality of temporal becoming would, if established, immunize the TNT against the charge of irrationality. In this weak sense, at least, the illusoriness of time's flow would vindicate the rationality of temporal neutrality. We must wonder whether this is true. And we must explore the reasons for believing that temporal becoming is unreal.

Even a superficial attempt to plumb the question of flowing time's reality induces a kind of vertigo. Time shares a feature with many of the concepts and categories which provoke us to metaphysical perplexity (intentionality, for example): nothing else is remotely like it. The deniers of time's flow may, perhaps tendentiously, be taken as denying this *sui generis* mysteriousness of time. For it is time *as flowing*—it is past, present, and future—which give to time its incomprehensibility or, if you like, paradoxicality. So an account of temporality which dispenses with flow, with past and present and future, and relies instead exclusively upon time's B series aspects, upon—to be brutish but

accurate about the matter—*eternal* characterizations of the temporal aspects of the world, has dispensed with time's most philosophically troubling side and, to a significant degree at least, assimilated it to a more familiar realm.

Such an account has a lot going for it. Physics appears—in the eyes of many—to endorse it. McTaggart's celebrated argument against the reality of time (itself a culmination of a line of thought with ancient roots) speaks powerfully in its favor.[12] What speaks against the account of time as devoid of flow is human experience, in particular the experience of agency. And this puts quite a damper on Parfit's suggestion that we might put the static view of time into the service of the TNT.

If we accept it that quite powerful metaphysical arguments succeed in casting doubt on the reality of flowing time, we may nonetheless be stuck with the indispensability of belief in flowing time to our intelligibility to ourselves. Time's passage may be vindicated by our practical reason (very broadly construed) even as it is banished by our theoretical understanding. So the metaphysical arguments that would banish it have to presuppose the subordination to the theoretical, the vacuity as evidence, of a concept's indispensability to our understanding of ourselves. It is not obvious that this is a permissible strategy, that it is not a way of begging the question.

In any case, if we suppose that flowing time is an illusion, that the most adequate view of the world is one which does not countenance temporal becoming and we further suppose that such a view is relevant to questions of

evaluative or practical judgement, we will be arriving at that version of the TNT which embraces the most extreme sort of distance from the *lebenswelt*. The attainment of such a view is itself a good. That said good provides a proper habitation for human agency is hard to believe. It seems essentially contemplative and thus passive. Aside from that fundamental limitation on the usability or relevance of the perspective in question, there is another closely allied problem. It is not that the likes of Spinoza or Plato were wrong to regard the attainment of an eternal, changeless perspective as extremely valuable, both in itself as a fulfillment of our vocation as knowers and as a corrective to our immersion, regularly irrational, in a domain characterized by turmoil and illusion. What is exceedingly hard to make out is how it is that we might, while regarding things from such a "place", justly apprehend the worth of such time infested and quotidian goods as telling a joke or walking the dog. I mean with all seriousness to suggest that it is an axiological shortcoming of God that that putative or sublimely fictional being cannot have a sense of humor. At least not while still remaining resident in the citadel of eternity.

The second topic that deserves at least to be mentioned in an examination of temporal neutrality is the link that has been said to exist between temporal neutrality and impartiality between persons. In Nagel's *Possibility of Altruism* we find a line of argument that can be understood as, after a fashion, deriving morality from prudence. In the tradition, arguments so described generally appeal to the imprudence of immoral conduct. Nagel has something else in

mind. The same sorts of considerations, Nagel maintains, that warrant prudence as rational also warrant interpersonal impartiality.

Rhetorically, Nagel's line of argument has a sort of force similar to that of more traditional derivations of morality from prudence. Acceptance of the rationality of prudence is part of the common lore of humankind. Those inclined to reject prudence have not tended to attack it as irrational. Rather, they have been hostile to too fussy a concern with rationality. (Such souls have not, for obvious reasons, tended to come from the ranks of philosophers. But they are a recurrent voice in the human conversation.) Relying on our commitment to prudence as something given, the advocate of impartial morality tries to show that that commitment already includes or entails a commitment to the favored moral view. If we were naturally strongly inclined to love our neighbors as ourselves but to be neglectful of the future, then the argument would need to run in reverse direction.

Nagel's thought is that a correct understanding of what a person is the—selfsame being extended through a stretch of time, equally real at all times of its existence—underwrites prudence. It is as if the imprudent person fails to acknowledge, in her possession, say, by the wants of the present and its immediate temporal neighbors, the reality of herself in future time (when she suffers the consequences) or herself in past time (when her settled sane resolve opposed the foolish thing want for which *now* has her in its (alien?) grip.) A generality and an objectivity attach to genuine reasons, Nagel holds. To treat the

present differently from other times violates this objectivity and generality. But just as treating *now* as special offends against its objective equi-actuality with other times, so treating *me* as subject to different rules and reasons from everybody else is to offend against the equal reality of other persons. A parallelism exists between the distortions that egoism introduces into practical thinking and that which what we can call 'practical presentism' introduces.

The neutralist about time will naturally wish to defend this line of thought. Our understanding of it, which we would not foist on Nagel, links it to moral philosophical traditions that go back to *The Republic*: morality is demanded, *inter alia*, by the unity of the self. Immorality threatens that unity. We'd like to try to offer a brief for the plausibility of this rather attractive line of thought. Aside from qualms about the linkage, in the Nagelian argument, of considerations about different times to attitudes towards different persons (how analogous is *me* to *now*: times and persons, one might think, are too different to bear the weight of the analogy) we must contend with the suspicion that the mental health-unity of self-argument for living in a principled fashion has the somewhat grave defect of being unsound, however much it may be the case that it would be very nice were that argument widely accepted. Degree of personal integration can't be used to calibrate degree of moral rectitude. 'Integrated immoralist' is not an oxymoron. Such creatures do inhabit the human menagerie, as do persons of rectitude whose selves are rent. Or so it seems.

Given the complications and hazards the world and the self present, it would be silly to suppose that the aim of being moral should serve as a talisman against unhappiness. We might hope to make believable, though, the old idea that neglectfulness of morality's demands is indeed in its general tendency deforming, that it involves either a brutishness which cannot be reflectively accepted or a commitment to self deceit which is essentially unstable.

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[1] For Plato, see *Protagoras* 355-357, for Spinoza, *Ethics* IVP66, for Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* 7th Edition (London:Macmillan, 1907) p. 381, for Rawls, *The Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) p. 293, for Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) Part Two.

[2] At *Ethics* IV P66D Spinoza writes ". . .insofar as we attend to reason itself. . .the thing will be the same, whether the greater good or evil is supposed to be future or present."

[3] For Slote, see *Goods and Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), Chapter One, for Parfit *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) Part Two, for Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality" in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), for Findlay, *Values and Intentions* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961) Chapter Six, for Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (LaSalle Illinois: Open Court, 1946) Chapter XVI.

[4] Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, Chapter One.

[5] Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality'; Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

[6] The collective aspect of the TNT receives some discussion in Chapter Four. The most substantial problem to which it is germane, the problem of future generations, receives only brief attention in this dissertation. It seems quite plausible that, if I ought be impartially concerned with all the parts of my life, then we ought be impartially concerned with all the times of our life. And our life, I take it, will go on after we who are now living have died. But the question of who 'we' refers to is a hotbed of moral controversy.

[7] Here I am echoing Nagel's discussions of objectivity in *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). The sternest criticism of that work is that Nagel equates the objectivity of science with that of ethical thinking. I here make no such claim. (Nor am I certain that Nagel has done so.)

[8] The thoughts here rather densely expressed were brought to mind by many sources. A long ago conversation with Pak Tjermodiwara, a central Javanese dalang (narrator puppeteer) concerning the heroes of the *Mahabharata* and their efforts through ascetic practice to become godlike, Emerson's essay *The Conservative* and John McDowell's criticism of Parfit as succumbing to the "deeply suspect temptation" of fantasizing that one can "transcend the finiteness of individual life" ("Reductionism and the First Person" in Dancy, ed., *Reading Parfit* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1997), p.248) are among them. The theme of becoming a god is a perennial one. Atheists can play, too. Nietzsche, whose writing verifies this last thought, was also a brilliant critic of ideals. Aurel Kolnai's attacks on utopianism are another excellent criticism of certain sorts of aspirations to transcendence.

[9] These matters are treated briefly at this introduction's end.

[10] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Part Two.

[11] For Broad, see *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1930) p225;for Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, Chapter XVI; for Findlay, *Values and Intentions*, Chapter Six; for Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, Chapter One.

[12] McTaggart's argument appears in 'The Unreality of Time' *Mind* 1908. The literature on tensed and tenseless views of time is enormous. An excellent discussion from an opponent of tense is D.H. Mellor, *Real Time II* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1998). Dummett, in 'A Defense of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time' *Philosophical Review* 64 (1960) pp.497-504, and Horwich, in *Asymmetries in Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) Chapter Two, take up McTaggart's line. Yourgrau, in *Godel Meets Einstein* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Press, 1999) expresses grave doubts about the eliminability of tense, even as he defends Godel's arguments for the ideality of time.

Chapter Two

The Stages of Life

Michael Slote offers an argument against the TNT that we shall call the *stages of life* argument. [1] He claims that certain periods of human lives typically count for more than do others in our global evaluations of how well a life has gone. Childhood and youth, as well as old age, are typically, and on Slote's view rightly, thought to be axiologically inferior to what Slote calls the prime of life. In making these claims, Slote presents himself as merely following the judgments of value which reflective human beings would and do make. He takes himself to be confronting the utterances of moral theorists with some common opinions of humankind, of which opinions the theorists have failed to take proper notice. For Slote thinks that it *follows* from the putative fact that our lives present us with a sort of natural aristocracy of better times that temporal neutrality is not required of us

Now it may be that, *if* Slote can establish the intrinsic superiority of certain stages of life, then the TNT is in some ways a weaker thesis than it appears at first glance to be. His claim would not, however, show the TNT to be false. The times which Slote favors are not the sorts of times the favoring of which the neutralist is fundamentally committed to opposing. In 14 years my dog will be old, my son will be young and I will be well into middle age. The temporal predicates 'old', 'young', 'middle aged' and the like are defined relative to the

typical life processes of the kind of being to which they are applied. They are not to be understood in A series terms, i.e. relatively to the present moment, nor are they to be understood in B series terms, i.e. in terms of mere calendrical location. And it is these latter sorts of favorings for practical purposes of one time over another which the TNT commits us to regarding as irrational and bad. The neutralist holds that we ought not prefer a lesser over a greater good just because the lesser good is nearer to the present, or farther in the future, or comes to us in January 1999.

Slote is looking at time, not as the metaphysician or physicist looks at it, but rather as the physician, the biologist or the historian looks at it. By contrast, the neutralist is focussed upon the former sort of view. It is probable that this difference is a large part of Slote's quarrel with the neutralist—a theory of what we ought to do ought, he thinks, to take account of the organic contour of human life. That is in some respects a laudable aim, I think, but not an aim with which the neutralist need quarrel.

Slote does cite writings of prominent ethical thinkers which, assuming temporal neutrality, address questions of the axiological weight of life's stages in ways with which we can find fault. Sen and Fried seem to regard life's stages as though, each having satisfactions peculiar to itself, they ought be treated with an impartiality analogous to that with which a liberal will treat different persons possessing different conceptions of the good.[2] This is by no means altogether absurd. But neither does it seem adequate. Recall the gorgeous and terrifying

Shakespeare soliloquy on the seven ages of man. It does not seem at all apt, somehow, to think, in response to that poetic exhibition of life's successive parts, that a good life will be one in which we will find that the mewling and puking infant, the gallant soldier, the swain, the schoolboy, the magistrate and the man in his second childhood each have gotten what a decent representative could secure for him from the original position

Of course we are not here concerned with the special problems of the infant and the senile person, whose goods are of a radically different sort than those of the others. And of course we bracket the fatalistic element in the little tale Shakespeare tells—it is no part of our present concern. Nor do we here intend to consider that persons in the same stage of life have particular interests in common, criss crossed in complicated ways with those they have as members of other social categories, so that a polity may face ethical questions as to the relative power of the different age groups and what the demands of justice are in this connection. What seems objectionable is a way of thinking of the stages of life that fails to take account of them as stages of *one* life. It is not that Sen and Fried are wrong to think that one ought to wish for and aim at all one's stages of life being good. It is the failure to reckon with the internal connectedness of the stages that strikes one as a mistake. This failure, though, is not at all what Slote directly addresses. He thinks that the neutralist view fails to get at the different value or importance of life's various stages. That the writings of neutralists by and large ignore life's stages is true, but this ignoring is a byproduct of the level

of abstraction at which the neutralist view operates. And it is not yet at all clear that such abstraction vitiates the neutralist's claims. Slote's account seems to have it that the goodness of the "best" part of a life, its prime, is lexically prior to the goodnesses of other life stages. If a picture of each stage getting an equal share of good is in some way unlifelike or artificial, a picture of one stage outweighing all the rest absolutely seems much more drastically misguided. Perhaps this is a mere reflection of my neutralist convictions, and so not an argument against Slote. I leave it to the reader to ask herself, after having acknowledged that a certain sort of impartial regard for all the parts of one's life can seem slightly unreal because it abstracts so much both from the differences which obtain between life's stages and from their internal relations, whether a view which stakes *everything* on one of those stages does not do yet greater violence to any sense we may soberly have of the unity of our lives or the goodness thereof.

The neutralist, in any case, for all that his claim abstracts from the typical powers and possibilities that the different periods of our lives find us possessing, is perfectly well able, so far as I can see, to accommodate any such differences between times as those of which Slote would make much, Sen's and Fried's oversimplications notwithstanding. Suppose there is a period in a life that matters more than other periods, perhaps because it is the time during which a person will succeed or fail in making something of that life. That person might be not merely permitted, but indeed required by the neutralist to place more weight

upon that time, to sacrifice some good of other times to the greater good of the favored prime of life. This seems as obvious, and as consistent with temporal neutrality, as does the necessity that the farmer plant in the spring. The neutralist does not suggest that one should harvest corn in May, she is no lunatic foe, on *a priori* grounds, of the evident truth that there are times to purposes. Nor, *qua* neutralist, is she obliged to deny that some purposes are more valuable than are others.

Whether, as Slote claims, some from among the seasons of a life are to be valued more than others is an interesting question quite independently of its role in an invalid argument against the TNT. Slote particularly attacks childhood as being axiologically inferior.It will be worth our while to begin our examination of Slote's claims for the differential axiological weight of different life stages by looking at the value, and the values, of childhood.

Slote's disparagement of childhood deliberately brackets the influence of childhood experiences on how well things go in the subsequent course of persons' lives. He is concerned with the global judgment of a life and it is quite clear that what goes on in a person's early years can be crucial in determining how a person fares over the course of a life. Instrumentally, if we may put it that way, childhood might well be the most axiologically important stage of life. But Slote is not concerned with the instrumental value of the circumstances of childhood. It is rather, the intrinsic value of childhood—or, more precisely, of childhood's valuings—which he assails. One might well question Slote's

separation of these two sorts of value. Here, we might say, is Connie at age 12 devoting herself to playing basketball. Slote would emphasize the insignificance or anyway the relative lightweightedness of this pursuit. Slote would characterize it as a typically unobjectionable but fundamentally unimportant sort of activity to which youth are wont to dedicate themselves. But suppose that Connie is the sort of girl whom the advocates of sport as pedagogical tool have in mind. Through the practice, silly enough, of dribbling an inflated sphere and hurling it at a lofty hoop she learns perseverance, strategy, cooperation and cunning. Her health and well being are enhanced by the physical rigors of the practice, her sense of beauty awakened by the grace the game involves. She wins a sports scholarship to a prestigious university and later pursues a career in politics with great success. The qualities of mind and character that serve her well in her career she gained, or began to gain, on the basketball court. Slote wants us to sever the beneficial results of her early enthusiasm from our evaluation of it. If we call her happening to fall in love with the game the crucial event of her life, he'll say that it is because of what it led to that we accord it a high value, so its value is derivative from the intrinsic value of the adult life that it made possible. I wish here to register a dissatisfaction or reservation with such a severance of seed from fruit. My complaint is not that it is flat wrong, but that it is wrongheaded.

Children and youth do typically care overmuch about silly or unimportant things. (The pursuit of scouting badges is the example that Slote

deploys.) The objects of their concern are either just not worth much concern or are cared about in a manner all out of proportion to such worth as those objects possess. Now Slote is surely right in thinking that the evaluation of an intentional state depends quite as much upon the fit between object and attitude as it does upon anything else—this is as true of what we value as it is of what we believe. As we ought to take care that the things we believe are true, so we ought to take care that the things that matter to us matter. It is more valuable to value the valuable than it is to value that which lacks value. The latter state can readily become—some would say it necessarily is—a disvalue. In cases that find a tremendous hedonic or other payoff to intentional states that are valuings disproportional in strength to their objects, one may be reluctant to pronounce such valuings a bad thing altogether. Hamsters just do not seem to rank especially high in the axiological hierarchy, but the joy the hamster lover takes in his relationship to these dim rodents might be great enough to make us hesitate to call the hamster lover's enthusiasm an all-things-considered bad thing.

There is quite a lot of room to move, a considerable descriptive elasticity is available to us, when we begin to describe the objects of youthful elation and revulsion. A certain youth loves Jackie Chan's kung fu movies. Stupid fantasy tales of vengeance and romance, says the Slotean denigrator of youthful frivolity. And this is, in a way, a plausible thing to say. But the properties which excite the youth may turn out to be not at all silly things to value. Physical grace, loyalty, humor, intelligence and imagination are among the properties Chan's films

depict or exemplify. It is these properties which delight the youth. These properties are worthy objects of esteem. It is not obvious that the adult the youth becomes should trade in his love for these properties for other allegiances.

The capacity of children and youth to suffer or to experience pleasure is certainly not less than that of adults, if anything quite the contrary. It cannot be with respect to these capacities that Slote wishes to discount the value of the earlier portions of a life. He cannot be saying that the suffering of children does not matter (though his admiration for Gaugin's abandonment of his offspring for the sake of the pursuit of an artistic vocation suggests an indirect endorsement of this view[3]) or that it matters less than the suffering of adults. The axiological inferiority that he attributes to childhood is presumably not a ground for, say, slighting the young if there is only so much pain medication to go around.

Childhood is essentially preparatory. It is this fact upon which Slote, it seems to me, is relying. What does this fact come to? Biologically, childhood is the period of the organism's maturation process. Socioculturally, it is the period of a person's induction into a community of shared understandings. Howsoever felicifically blest a person's time as a child may be, his upbringing is not a success if it leaves him ill equipped to function in an adult milieu. Children and youth vary in the extent to which they regard their activities as preparatory. Much of their preparation does not need to be seen by them as such to function as such. Some of it needs *not* be seen as such if it is to function as such. But understanding childhood to be essentially preparatory can appear to mean taking the

instrumental value of the things of childhood to trump their intrinsic value. This is not a surprising stance to take if one is concerned with the good of a whole life. Even if one took the crude view that the good of a whole life is the simple sum of satisfactions that all the days of that life yield (a view which Slote would certainly not take), one would lay great stress on not botching the acquisition of skills which satisfaction seeking throughout a life requires. If one takes a view that the point of a life lies in the exercise of certain of one's powers, powers that can be fully exercised only in maturity, then childhood and youth will be even more radically subordinate to the aims of later life.

Now in general we wish to place limits on the extent to which we regard people as instruments or means. There is something disturbingly redolent of taking a person as a mere means in the idea that we should regard a stage of a person's life as instrumental. Does this redolence turn out to be illusory if we note that the end in view is the person's own good? Not usually. What if the aspect of the person's own good with which we are concerned is the very achievement of coherent moral personality? Perhaps. We are not in a general way obliged to worry that we are being paternalistic in our dealings with and treatment of children. Paternalism is a moral evil when it describes our stance towards beings capable of rational self-direction. The capacity of children to govern themselves is limited in ways that make paternalism appropriate. Kids are defective judges of their own good. So if the unpleasant scent which we detect in the notion that childhood's doings and undergoings are means is the

scent of paternalism, our noses are mistaken. The instrumental view of life's first stages is not morally dubious if anxiety over paternalism is our diagnosis of that view's disturbingness.[4]

But it is not clear that the instrumental view can escape censure so easily. The instrumental or preparatory value of the activities and experiences of childhood may trump their intrinsic value in the previously mentioned sense that the happiest of childhoods would nonetheless be correctly judged a failure if it led (for reasons other than the hazards of fortune) to a bad adulthood. The nascent person that a child is must be treated and regarded nonetheless as a person. Small people are bearers of value, capable of delight and sadness, possessed of purposes and powers. That they are on the way to becoming something, that what becomes of them is a very important matter, should not eclipse their present value. They are not to be seen now simply as incubators of future value—to see them that way is not to see *them.*

Slote does not deny the value of childhood's values, rather he gently and tolerantly denigrates it. The correct description of childhood's values is, on his view, that they are goods relative to a time of life. They do not count for much, on a mature judgment they are found wanting, but they are not because of that to be thought any the less to be genuine goods. They are the best we can do, when we are children. They lack the unqualified goodness that attaches to a career in politics or the exercise of mature creativity, but they are, for the lowly things we are when we are children, authentically good.

In assessing childhood's values, Slote takes himself to be getting at complexities with which such neutralists as Rawls and Nagel cannot adequately deal. His qualified denigration of childhood, his account of its goods as time-of-life-relative, allows him to distinguish the deficiencies of its typical desires from the irrationality of, say, the addict's. Kids ought not to lament or resist the deficiencies of their normal desires, whereas addicts are in a position to regret and resist the compulsions their addiction imposes upon them. The views of Rawls and Nagel, according to Slote, lack the resources with which to account for our discounting of desires except insofar as those desires are irrational and bad. So on those views the discounting of childhood's aims only makes sense if we assimilate it to the case of the addict or some other sort of desirer of unworthy ends. This seems to me unfair. Rawls and Nagel offer characterizations of rational agency and its requirements which operate at a rather abstract level. The rational agent whom they envision is, indeed, a grownup. How could it be otherwise? A principal aim in the rearing of children is to cultivate in collaboration with them their deliberative capacities, to enable them to arrive at rational agency. Guiding them towards this end, their elders act in part as surrogates. Those who rear them make rational choices for them, with an eye to their whole good. And this choosing, when done well, neither sacrifices their present to their future nor their future to their present. Rawls and Nagel are concerned to characterize certain sorts of deviation from rationality; such a characterization is a natural component of an account of rationality. Why should

they, given their projects, attend to the peculiar features of the case of creatures who are being led to rationality? They need to offer an account of deviation from rationality *by a creature in possession of full blown powers of rational self governance.* Paideia is not their topic. Anyhow, children *are* like addicts, in some respects. They don't do what rational authority tells them is best, sometimes.

Our image of childhood is wildly contradictory: it is, we think, a paradaisacal time (a time of immediacy and innocence) and a morally monstrous time (a time of absence of control, subjection to impulse, unbridled egoism.) There is no strict contradiction between the possession of these several traits, of course. But they point in axiologically different directions. The ethical inadequacies of childhood and youth are obvious to Slote (calling them inadequacies is of course somewhat distorting in a manner Slote recognizes.) But Slote appears almost entirely to miss the value of certain values only accessible to the child or youth.

Perhaps he would hold that such values do not exist, that they are the illusory fruit of romanticism or, worse, sentimentality. An alternative open to him would be to claim that they achieve their status as (full fledged non-relative) values only as apprehended by adults, that they are but raw material to which adults transformingly add value through acts of recollection and imagination. This latter interpretive path seems a perverse one to me. (I cannot attribute this perversity to Slote, he is quite silent on the matter, I only claim that this is a line that a someone determined to dismiss childhood's goods might take.) It is

perverse to acknowledge a value and then claim that it is in the acknowledging that the value is bestowed or created. It is in general perverse to find oneself recollecting something as valuable, and then to claim that it is only as recollected, not as present, that the valuable thing possesses value. This is quite a different matter from the claim that one only later realizes what value some happening or circumstance or state possessed—that in the midst of the situation which one later values one had no sense of that situation's value. "I did not know what I had until I lost it" is a commonplace expression. And it is often true—it expresses reasonably well and concisely a commonplace tragedy in the epistemology of human value. But the perverse view turns things on their head: "It wasn't valuable until I lost it" is the expression to which that view corresponds.

So it is more charitable, and more consistent with what he says, to attribute to Slote nihilism about the singular and unrepeatable value of certain states only available in childhood. The values in question I've only vaguely indicated. They are an immediacy and an unalloyedness, a receptivity and spontaneity that are peculiar to those who have not yet been in the world for very long, the only ones—in the nature of the case—for whom things can be new. The claim that I am making is that these states possess a goodness all their own, a goodness it is foolish and misleading to think inferior to the goods of life's prime. My evidence, like Slote's, is the testimony of humankind. Like Slote, I recognize that these values are time limited. They are not directly available to adults. What is being denied is that these values are time relative, in Slote's denigratory sense.

These valuable states have instrumental value: their occasions play a causal role in the arrival at adult goods of various sorts; but one cannot even arrive at (some of) these goods if one has not taken these states in as intrinsically good. These goods are under the axe, they cannot last, they are not self preserving. Their retrieval is hazardous. But they are not inferior.

An excellent characterization and evocation of such goods is found in Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. He is recounting his education in the piloting of steamboats and the transformation of his understanding of the river that that education involved.

> Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river! I still kept in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me. A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced; the shore on our

left was densely wooded, and the somber shadow that fell from this forest was broken in one place by a long, ruffled trail that shone like silver; and high above the forest wall a clean-stemmed dead tree waved a single leafy bough that glowed like a flame in the unobstructed splendor that was flowing from the sun. There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances; and over the whole scene, far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it every passing moment with new marvels of coloring.

I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture. The world was new to me, and I had never seen anything like this at home. But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them. Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly, after this fashion: "This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody's steamboat one of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that; those tumbling 'boils' show a dissolving bar and a changing channel there; the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that that troublesome place is shoaling up dangerously; that silver streak in the shadow of the forest is the 'break' from a new snag, and he has located himself in the very best place he could have found to fish for steamboats; that tall dead tree, with a single

> living branch, is not going to last long, and then how is a body ever going to get through this blind place at night without the friendly old landmark?"
>
> No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat.[5]

To be a steamboat captain is, or was, a worthy occupation at the prime of life: Twain, along with Dickens, is one of the great 19th century propagandists of the glories of youth, but those glories are encountered *en route* to the tasks of adult life. (Granting that the route, like the Mississippi, may meander a bit.) The recognition of such values, that is to say, is no denigration or refusal of adulthood.[6]

To assert baldly that Slote is wrong about the values of childhood would, I fear, push this discussion to an impasse. Impasses are philosophically unsatisfying. Since Slote has his evidence, and I have mine, it is desirable that matters not be left in a state of bald irreconcilability. The things which matter most to children and youth are not, on Slote's view, the things which matter most. For this claim, Slote marshalls the considerable support of the viewpoint of adult humankind. His claim, as we have seen, is correct. It needs severe qualification in so far as the objects of youths' praise and disdain are exemplifiers, often enough, of properties which are properly praised and

disdained. What Slote misses in his characterization of the values of human life's early stages, are (I claim) modes of apprehension of the world which are themselves valuable and singular, unique to those stages, but valuable *simpliciter*.

Now it seems to me that Slote posits two kinds of axiological superiority for beings in the prime of life. One is epistemic, the other not. Adults (of the right sort) know better what is valuable and adults (of the right sort) do, and so are, what is most valuable. With the former sort of superiority we need not quarrel. A defense of childhood's values which relied on the equal validity of the judgment of children and that of adults is a most unpromising prospect. It is the latter, nonepistemic, claim that warrants a bit more critical scrutiny.

It is not at all silly to claim that the best exemplars of the human good are adults. It would be silly as well to deny that a fundamental moral project, perhaps the fundamental moral project, is the production of adults. "Grow up" is a moral imperative. "Childish" and "big baby" (properly disambiguated) are terms of moral opprobrium. The very idea of adulthood belongs among the "thick" moral concepts, which find descriptive and prescriptive elements so thoroughly mingled as to mock the notion that our lexicon comprises a chaste dichotomy of two lists of words, one evaluative, the other descriptive.[7]

One of the merits of Slote's discussion is that it calls attention to this ethical dimension of life stages. To be sure, moral theorists have not neglected some special problems attending childhood. The contractarian, basing her theory on the calculations of rational bargainers, must write long clauses and

riders about the status of beings in no position to bargain. The liberal, neutral with respect to the good, must fret over the standing or role in his theory of a kind of being towards whom the stance of value neutrality is a death sentence. But these ways of regarding childhood make it seem as if children are theoretical anomalies; whereas Slote's placement of the developmental course of human life at the center of his account avoids such seeming perversity. His aims are different from those of the sorts of moral theorist just mentioned. He is not constructing a moral theory at all, indeed the tendency of his thought seems opposed to the very idea of moral theory. He is concerned with the human good and the superiority which he claims attaches to the goods of adult life is not moral superiority. It is nonetheless consistent with the sort of account he offers to include the (fully developed) capacity for moral conduct among the superior goods typical of well formed adults and not typical of children and youth.

His view appears to be that a human life has its proper culmination in certain activities and that engagement in these culminative activities is the surpassing and supreme value. The examples of culminative activity that he gives are quite parochial and unrepresentative of what most folks are able to do with their lives. Careers in politics and the arts seem to be representative, for Slote, of the best goods a man or woman can aim at. This is consistent with his more or less implicit Aristotelianism. It is not a silly view. Only the few, it is reasonable to claim, have the opportunity to exercise the powers or undertake the projects that reveal human life at its best. The best does not define the good,

however, and an argument which contrasts good childhoods with the best adulthoods is not at all compelling or persuasive if it is intended to drive home conclusions which are to apply to typical human lives.

For most human beings, adulthood's principal project is raising a family. That is a task which, if it is to be done well, requires considerable wisdom and virtue. Subservient to this task is engagement in forms of labor which vary greatly in the extent to which they call upon our highest and best powers. A Slotean argument can still be run if we focus upon the lives of typical human beings, but its rhetorical power is altered. The typical adult, no less than the privileged, would be ashamed of childishness. The typical adult, no less than the privileged, would likely hold that the activities of her life's prime are in some sense what her life is *really* about, that an ethical reckoning of what she is should take her measure from her adult achievement.

But a reckoning of the *goodness* of a person's life, which is Slote's concern, does not so obviously restrict itself to a period of life which is, viewed in one perfectly valid way, decisive. This is, I think, more obvious when we regard the typical human being than when we train our eyes upon the person whose adulthood is an occasion for the exercise of uncommon excellences. A successful adult, by which I mean one who has succeeded in adequately realizing an ideal of adulthood rather than one who has, as an adult, met with worldly success, will not have reason to discount or neglect or ignore the peculiar goodnesses that childhood and youth made available to her in an accounting of what her life has

been. How she turned out will matter, but not in the overshadowing way Slote's claims demand.

Suppose a person has a destination. His journey stands or falls, in one evaluative dimension, on whether he gets there or not. If we wish to know, however, what sort of a journey it has been we would be unwise to ignore everything about it but its success or failure in arriving at the appointed place. The problem with focussing on privileged lives is that they are rather like journeys to extraordinary places—the unwise ignoring of how the journey went is made easy by the sublimity of the thing to be arrived at. Taking the A train is one thing if you are going to hear Duke Ellington and quite another if you are on your way to a humdrum job. Most of us, most of the time, are not on our way to something so grand that the whole value of our going depends upon the thing aimed at. Most of us, most of the time, had best take in the goods the journey affords us along the way and had best pay as much, or nearly as much, attention to how we get there as to where we're going.[8]

The goods of childhood for which I have claimed special status are not chosen in anything like the manner one chooses how to get from here to there, indeed they are scarcely chosen at all. A rationalist (unlike Slote) would exempt childhood goods from his list of first rate goods precisely because they are not objects of choice, precisely because they are after a fashion serendipitous. One cannot legitimately *choose* to be innocent, receptive, immediate or spontaneous. By the time rational choice has arrived on the scene, these goods are unavailable.

So it is unsurprising that judgment upon the value of these goods must be made by those incapable fully of possessing them. They are goods predicated upon epistemic limits, goods incapable of coexistence with self knowledge. This necessarily puts these goods under an epistemic cloud: when we know them, we cannot understand them; when we understand them, we cannot know them. Our recollection of them, our recognitions of them in the small people about us, are suspect: perhaps—it might be claimed— crediting these states with goodness is the mere projection of a corrupt longing. It can be argued with equal force that the attempt to deny these goods their standing as goods is corrupt: what cowardice hides behind an epistemologically puritanical or perhaps utopian wish that all goods be transparent, be such as may be recognized and possessed at the same time.

Slote himself does not charge the goods of childhood whose standing I'm defending with this defect of opacity, of being incompatible with the recognition that one possesses them. His own tendencies of thought seem in many ways contrary to the sort of rationalism that would find such a property to be a defect. But one needs some sort of argument if one is to dismiss these values. We considered the claim that they are a romantic illusion. Such a claim is difficult to refute, but it is inconsistent with Slote's method (attention to the nuances of our ordinary thought and talk) to ignore claims of value that have substantial testimony to support them. Calling the values of childhood which concern us

here illusory amounts to dismissal of testimony as founded on error. But what could the error be?

I believe that another explanation of Slote's neglect of these values is more plausible. His placement of goods of achievement at the top of the hierarchy of values probably accounts for his neglect of the transient blessings, not unmixed, indeed tragically doomed, of innocence and immediacy.

The goods of childhood with which we are here concerned are not achievements. It is not quite apt to say that they are things that happen to us, since they involve ways in which we are—quite actively—connected to the world. Whether they are without remainder goods of experience it is not easy to say with certainty. Certainly a large part of the value of these goods derives from their felt qualities. Yet it does not seem at all correct to regard these goods as only hedonically valuable. Spontaneity, for example, is a property of agency common to youth that seems valuable for reasons other than, or additional to, the pleasure it brings. Immediacy and receptivity in our apprehension of the world seem quite as much cognitively as hedonically valuable.

For what reason would Slote privilege goods of achievement over other sorts of goods? It looks as if these goods, more than others, can play the role of *telos* of a life. From the (not unreasonable) assumption that one should, as an ethical inquirer, look at the good of a whole life, Slote seems to have proceeded to the assumption that the highest goods are those that do the most to make of a life a whole. The latter assumption, though not one a person opposed to

romanticism ought to make, is not silly. Neither is it anywhere near as easily defended as the former. It just isn't obvious that a life organized around a dominant end, for all that it will possess a sort of unity which a life not so organized cannot possess, is categorically superior to a life more vagrant in the aims which give it shape.

If we take it that a life's value may be enhanced by the variety of goods which it contains, while not denying that the connections existing between the parts of a life are also sources of its value, then we'll not very readily accept the Slotean view of childhood's goods as being categorically inferior to those of many of life's later stages.

We should turn to Slote's other example of a time of life less good than its prime, old age. Unlike youth, its champions are hard to find. Like youth, it is thought by Slote to have goods of its own which are inferior to those of life's prime. His example of an inferior good of old age is participation in shuffleboard contests. He contends, with apparent plausibility, that one does not have reason to be greatly concerned in the earlier portions of one's life with the making of provision for one's ability to compete in such contests. And this, he appears to believe, undermines the neutralist's contention that one has, at any time in one's life, reason to provide for the satisfaction of the rational desires of any other time of one's life.

There is something very questionable going on here. Slote's cards aren't on the table, or perhaps he mistakes just which cards he is playing. It is, in the

first place, quite obscure how one goes about jeopardizing one's ability to win at shuffleboard in later life by pursuing to the fullest the completion of the projects of one's prime. If one tries to spell this out, Slote's contentions will quickly lose plausibility. For the loss of the ability to succeed at shuffleboard can follow most readily from one's general ruin at an early age. And if one proposes to pursue a course of action which will forseeably lead to one's ruin, or greatly increase the chances of such an outcome, one needs a very good reason for such a choice. Disdain for the playing of shuffleboard simply won't do. One must assume that Slote has no particular dislike of shuffleboard and that it is but a stand in for innocuous amusements that persons of diminished powers can engage in. If one varied his example, taking the case of a person who sees himself in the later stages of his life pursuing some more complex activity, an activity answering to deeper, better, richer aspects of himself than shuffleboard seems to be, then we'd not be so ready, I daresay, to endorse the Slotean conclusion. One who labored hard all his life and planned, upon retirement, to devote himself to the study of some aspect of the natural world, for example, would not be a fitting object of our disdain were he to devote some portion of his prime of life energies to preparation for that later life pursuit. On the contrary, the neutralist idea would seem to apply to such a person: he has good reason in his prime to secure his future ability to engage in his amateur naturalist avocation. Of course, one may think that in my altered example we are appealing to what the person *really*

wants to do in his prime, so that we do not have here an example of a reason's "transmitting its force" across time. But this need not be the case.

Many admirable lives, or lives admirable in some respects, are exhausted early. Is Slote offering a brief for the hard drinking bluesmen, novelists, abstract painters whose hearts and livers couldn't carry them past 55? Heroic figures many of them are, to be sure. But the brief would have to establish that the grand and passionate triumphs of their mode of life would have been impossible without the destructive behaviors. And that is for the most part improbable. Or if the very things for which we admire them are too bound up with the self destructive elements to have existed without those evils (a seductive and corrupting thought that might on occasion also be true) might there not be other, different accomplishments of substantial value that would have issued from them? Simone Weil, Jimi Hendrix and countless others leave behind immensely useful witnesses and testimonies to aspects of the world. Their revelatory testimonies are the product of excess. We are grateful to have had them among us. But we ought not confuse the value of the products of their excesses with a vindication of excess. In any case, they may not be the sorts of figure whom Slote has in mind. I speak of them only in order to make sense of his position. Of other sorts of case, say of persons who engage in risky behavior to help overcome a tyrannical regime or a dread disease, may appear more persuasive. Certainly we'd not know quite what to make of someone who said "I can't participate in this experiment which will lead to a cure of yellow fever, for if I did that, I'd miss

out on the shuffleboard games of my dotage." But Slote is not attacking prudence in the name of courage. That attack may have merit, but only against the dubious view that prudence is the supreme virtue. And that rather silly position is not entailed by the TNT.

What Slote is concerned with is the importance of the goods of old age. And that is surely a topic worthy of some examination. Slote's treatment of the topic is quite shallow, it seems to me. He dislikes old age. In this many oldsters agree. Diminished powers and increasingly frequent experience of illness are not things we can sanely like, and they are the common lot of the aged. But many distinctions, I think, need to be made before we can evaluate the goods of old age adequately. One ought not deny, in a Pollyannaish fashion, the bad aspects of life's latter phases. But the sound neutralist thought quickly follows from this that one has good reason earlier on to take measures that might prevent or ameliorate the malefactions of time's passage. One ought, anyhow, to be quite clear what one is meaning by "old age", one ought to disentangle several aspects of that category. Slote sees it, apparently, as essentially a time of severely diminished powers. And this seems to be a matter primarily of biology.

We do not, in our collective life, approve of disregarding the needs of the vulnerable. (I am concerned here with our professions, not our practices.) The individual stands to her own life in a different relation, no doubt, than do we to our fellows. One ought not, many think, apply to a society principles of choice appropriate to an individual life. But here we seem to see principles unacceptable

for a society applied to an individual life. And that should, I think, give us pause. Those who've arrived at the vulnerable state certainly will rue their earlier heedlessness. One would think their point of view carries some authority.

If his argument is that the needs of our second childhood ought not be the objects of our practical reasoning's impartial regard, his conclusion seems to me as feeble as the persons who provide him with his premise. The diminutions of capacity to think and build which the extremest ills of old age visit upon us are so drastic that we are regularly, when confronted with those who are subject to such things, inclined to say of them that they are not the persons we knew. I wish here to avoid taking a stand on the metaphysical issues involved in taking this sort of remark literally. They are deep and dicey. *Fragments* of a person ought, we may think, no more be taken for the person of whom they are fragments than fragments of some artifact–the shards of a cup we've dropped, say–ought be taken for that artifact. But we do, as well, find ourselves saying of the 40th President of the United States, that *he* was reduced, in the last years of his life, to a pitiable state. No sense there that it is some one or some thing other than the very same Ronald Reagan who'd once acted the part of an amputee and subverted his nation's Constitution who is at his life's close a drooling, unknowing, pathetic thing. The facts which make us speak of the senile as other persons than the ones they were when in their primes are enough, even if understood entirely metaphorically, to license the thought that an impartial regard for all the times of one's life wouldn't allow an equal claim upon one's

rational consideration to the desires of one's second childhood as one would allow to the desires belonging to the times which find one whole. Slote might say that this grants his point, but that is not so: imagine the case of a person suffering from bipolar disorder, a person who has a life as split as that of Jekyll and Hyde. Are we to be taken to be antineutralists if we think, of such a person's aims and wishes in the grip of mania that these ought not be granted equal weight when we consider what she ought to plan? Surely not! To think about what we ought to make of the worst reductions imposed upon a person by a bad old age from the point of view of his life as a whole is to think about the place of grave illness in a life. It does not address the question of what it is to have been alive a very long time.

Physical decline is, though an inevitability, in many respects (degree and timing, for example) a contingent matter. The things which can be done to postpone or prevent it shall be increasing (albeit not without limit) as our knowledge of the body's workings grows. What seems to me more interesting, if we are to assess the axiological character of old age, are those aspects of that time of life that really do arise just from having been on Earth a good many years. For the bad things of old age upon which Slote is focussed have no intrinsic connection to the question of how long one has been in the world: defeat the mechanisms of apoptosis and related phenomena and those problems go away.

"World, world, O world: but that thy strange mutations make us hate thee, life would not yield to age." The family of sentiments to which this quote

from *King Lear* belongs, and of which it is an atypically extreme, harsh, and eloquent example, tell us something about old age which is, I want to say, less contingent and more deep than the fact that our bodies give out.[9] We can imagine diminishing and postponing our bodily decline. A world that found such imaginings realized, if not to Methusalen extent, would be recognizably human[10]. But other things happen, things other than bodily decline, as our years increase. These other things are, first, a passage through disillusion and disappointment, a repeated encountering of the gap between bright possibilities and corrupt actualities. Second, we commence as creatures with an open future, with what-we-are a matter yet to be decided. We accumulate a history, choice upon choice, circumstance upon circumstance. And at some point we have arrived at what-we-are. ("Everyone has the face they deserve by the time they are fifty" Orwell is reported to have said.) A world in which these things were not true of us would *not* be recognizably the human world in which we live.

Two objections to this characterization of old age, or better oldness, leap to mind, aside from the complaint that it is rather vague. First, it seems to refer to an event that may happen well before old age. (Recall that complex events or processes may be made up of many smaller events: no claim is here being made that there is an *instant* at which one arrives at what one is.) To this I am inclined to give the following response. What is being offered is a perhaps mildly revisionist, non-biological description of what it is to be old. To have one's past weigh more than one's future: when that has happened, one is old. But one

might think that this implies that being old is a mere matter of one's attitude, a subjective affair that is subject in some wise to the workings of the will. On such a view, if one fails to recognize the strange mutations, they haven't happened. Which sounds absurd. But I would go so far as to say that in the sense I intend, a person afflicted with Down's syndrome might not become old, even in the biologically improbable event that he lives for 80 years. And that does not strike me as absurd. The person of normal or better capacities who has lived a good while and failed to notice that she's undergone disillusion, who has failed to understand herself as having a history, who has failed so to say to look in the mirror and find that there is something she's irrevocably become: what can one say of her? Well, it still will be the case that these things have happened, and her not noticing is no revocation of the process. If indeed these things have not happened, if she is somehow historyless, without disillusion, has not become anything but instead remained a bundle of potentialities, then I'd wish to say she hadn't really lived a life.

Still, arriving at what-one-is may seem better a characterization of *middle* than of old age. This, I think, valid observation makes a small bit of trouble for Slote's picture of life's stages: it seems to me clear that life's prime might well straddle, often does straddle, the events and discoveries to which I'm pointing. But showing that there is not a single canonical division of life into stages does not show the particular division which Slote favors is altogether mistaken: the different divisions do not exclude each other. I take it nonetheless to be a matter

of significance that at a certain "point" one's past weighs more than one's future, and I take it that I am not deviating from ordinary human self understanding to call the part of life that falls on the far side of that point the part that finds one *old*. If you like, though, further qualifications may be made. One is, in the non-physiological sense at which I am aiming, in full blown old age when one thinks of one's life, and sensibly so, in the past tense. Not the arrival at what-one-is, but a deep irrevocability in what-one's-life-is, is, on this qualification, the mark of old age.

But this leads to the second objection: the event in question may *never* happen. The picture of the old that I present is a picture of someone who essentially thinks of herself, and properly so, in the past tense. The suggestion of a closed future, closed just because it comes on the heels of too abundant a past, is—one may reasonably hope and think—something a person should and can resist, something to which we need not succumb, a bad and avoidable thing, a kind of premature death.

To get the intended notion of being old right, consider a (literal) picture, the portrait of a man, being painted on a canvas. That this portrait should at a certain phase in its progress towards completion reach substantial definition, that the main outlines and character of it are established at a given stage, leaves a great deal still open. The face may be fixed, but whether it be wearing a smile or a frown yet undetermined. The person who one is much may have much yet to

do, nor should we ignore the sometimes transforming effect of the finishing touch.

One common feature of the thoughts and actions of the old is that they are directed outward, to the lives to come, or lives just beginning. Another is the prevalence of retrospection, the increased weight of memory. What one makes of things is surely an important part of what one does and is. What is to be made of things must often wait upon their completion: the risky labors of a life await their sense's being made out. Such a making out of sense is, perhaps, their completion, or anyhow a part of such. That interpretative task can't be performed before the labors are done. And the turning towards the lives to come, the outward yielding of oneself to other lives is at once a declaration of the completing of one's life and a defiance of its finality.

It is a question, is a life a completable thing? Somewhere in Max Weber's writings that wise historian takes one important difference between modern life and the lives of earlier epochs to be that the possibility of a complete life is unavailable to us. That his pessimistic wisdom likely applies to the collective side of our life I am inclined to concede. To the individual life, however, the open-endedness of our collective endeavors need not, I think, be understood as precluding completion. I wish not to be misunderstood: there is at large a temptation to say, to the old, "Drop dead, please, you have lived past your time." I don't want to join that chorus, am disturbed by Slote in part because he seems to lend it his voice. But I do think it desirable that our lives should be

completable. Jonathan Bennett not long ago gave a lecture in which he speaks of his father, on his deathbed, saying "I think I have acquitted myself well."[11] To be able to say what Bennett's father said seems to me to require the possibility of a sense of life's completion. Further, the turn towards the lives beyond one's own has a peculiar significance in old age. Mortality provides a compelling argument against egoism. The absurdity of self-centeredness is made quite clear by the nearness of the self's annihilation. (Selves vary, to be sure, and one can imagine, or look around and see, those who cling the more desperately and crampedly to their own lives, interests or needs the more those lives draw close to conclusion. But such attitudes, though very common, are often desperate, and do not serve as evidence against the claim I'm making, that a generosity to the future world is an apt response to the position the old find themselves in.[12]) The acceptance of the completability of one's own life is quite of a piece with the sentiment that there are tasks, projects, lives of which one is a part and that these have other completions than one's own.

If the idea of completing a life makes sense, then the devaluing of old age has little to commend it. A period of life in which retrospection plays an especially significant role places a demand on the times to be retrospected, a familiar demand. The demand in question is that the acts and purposes of a given time of life be fit for future retrospection, that rue or shame not be their ultimate fruit. A good conclusion ought be aimed at, if one's life as a whole

matters. And to say that a life might be complete is to say that it is a (potential) whole.

What is puzzling about this notion of completing one's life is this. Imagine a person, still possessed of his faculties, whose life is, in the sense indicated, complete. The work is done, the grandchildren grown, the world he felt most truly his superceded. Still, it is Spring. The cherry blossoms are at their peak. This "completed" person might find that the delight of seeing the blossoms is for him not appreciably less than it had been when his life was "incomplete", there is still much he loves, there is still work to do. Adding to his days is a good thing, if all this is so. Where is the superfluity that the notion of a continuing after life is complete insinuates?

It would seem that, if one is happy to ascend to nonbeing, one's life has reached a bad state. But the notion of a complete life that is here offered does not insinuate that we ought to be happy to die, once we've arrived at the "finish line" of completeness. At most it provides grounds for a measure of contentment.

From these quite incomplete explorations of childhood and senescence and their goods, we need to turn to an examination of the putatively superior goods of the prime of life. Whereas childhood, youth, and old age can be biologically demarcated, life's prime cannot. This is not surprising. If the goods Slote would rank higher than all others are goods of achievement, then, allowing for the inability of persons at life's earliest and most advanced stages to achieve very much at all, and so providing some outer boundaries for the prime of life,

the period most to be valued will be relative to one's view of the sort of achievement which is most to be valued[13].

Arguments over the form or aim that the best human lives should possess are revealing and interesting. They are also interminable. They will revolve around claims about which activities are best, which human powers (if any) are highest. They will not, as a rule, revolve around *when* in a life those powers are most capable of being exercised. One might claim superiority for kinds of endeavor that can be sustained for longer portions of a person's life, in which case one is saying something especially consonant with the temporal neutralist's view. People are varied in their capacities, however, and it would be rank madness to dissuade a person gifted in some activity (dance, let's say) which cannot be engaged in throughout a life from pursuing that activity in favor of some other for which he has no special aptitude but which lacks so severe a time limit.

It is in good measure definitive of a culture which sorts of lives and activities the members of that culture take to be best, and for what reasons. Quarrels, more or less explicit, over ideals are the very stuff of a large part of ethical life. Quarrels over ideals occur as well within cultures and are, again, definitive. A dominant conflict, just as much as a dominant ideal, tells us what the people of a given time and place value. Scientist and priest, warrior, farmer and administrator, politician and poet, each in turn makes his claim within a polity, within a soul, in opposition to some other way of life or in opposition to

others whose society he shares. The upshot of this is that the notion of life's prime is relative to various values, projects or concerns.

It is by and large incidental to these quarrels that the warring ideals will each present a different period of life as the best. It is quite true that persons at different stages of life will be more likely to feel affinity with one ideal than with another. But this is not, it seems to me, the interesting sort of difference between ideals or values. The interesting differences are between different values and the reasons that support them. If we can explain an evaluative quarrel in terms of the ages of the typical advocates of the values at issue, then the quarrel will seem in a crucial respect less substantial. It will seem that conflicting evaluative preferences are but a function of age. This finding will tend to support temporal neutrality. If the *only* difference between two ideals or values is that they accord with or reflect the predelictions of persons at different stages of life, then we'll surely not on that ground alone grant favor to the one over the other.

If we rely upon a narrowly biological reading of the notion of the prime of life, which might rid it of relativity to values or projects, then it will not stand a chance of doing the work that Slote seems to want it to do. The period of maximal physiological vigor does not reliably coincide with the peak period of achievement, of the realization of ideals. If, however, Slote is using a broad reading of the notion, is calling 'the prime of life' all that falls between adolescence and senescence, then his claim seems terribly weak.

Of course, we must allow for individual variation. Perhaps Slote is leaving it open that lives will vary relative to central projects, cultural and historical frameworks and the like in the times which are most important to them. Perhaps he is only setting outer limits to such variation and holding that this is still sufficient to refute the TNT, that a rich and detailed examination of the different stages of life is not necessary for his purposes. But our own exploration of this territory, while still fairly superficial, seems not to confirm his claims.

Insofar as Slote's stages of life story relies upon the importance of carrying out some dominant or central projects within a life, he seems to be in a bad position to criticize the TNT. Essential to the carrying out of a project is the subordination of the goods of the moment to the project's demands, the integration of one's life's times *via* the unifying purpose. And that seems quite consonant with the TNT.

But he is right in this: merely to speak of 'impartial concern for all the times of one's life' is to leave a good deal that is of interest unsaid. It just isn't clear that the saying of these unsaid things will in any serious way call the TNT into question.

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[1] In Slote, *Goods and Virtues* , New York, Oxford University Press, 1983, Chapter One. Slote also offers another argument against temporal neutrality. The latter argument has also been offered by Findlay, C.I. Lewis and Broad. It will be taken up in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

[2] Sen's account appears in 'Utilitarianism and Welfarism', *Journal of Philosophy* 76, 1979, p. 470; Fried's in *An Anatomy of Values*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970, pp. 170-176. Neither employs the Rawlsian language I've used above, but both treat the goods of life's stages in the manner indicated. Equality in the distribution of goods across the lifespan is seen as desirable, quite independently of the amount of good a life contains, on their accounts.

[3] Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, Chapter 4. Williams was the first to bring the Franco-Peruvian artist's life to bear upon problems of moral philosophy. Gaugin's paintings are quite valuable things, I mean valuable to would be understanders of the human circumstance, not to those fortunate enough to possess the objects left behind by the man who emigrated to Tahiti, leaving behind (and in penury)his wife and children . The notion that Gaugin's pattern of life was admirable is, however, beyond my comprehension. To portray him as representing a challenge to ordinary moral conceptions reveals that the one tempted by such portraiture no longer accepts such conceptions, quite clearly. That Gaugin represents a challenge to such conceptions is a frivolous view, unworthy of a grownup. For confirmation of this consult Gaugin's biography. Slote seems to hold that we ought admire Gaugin's willingness to sacrifice all to his vocation: the painter's greatness plays no explicit role in Slote's account of why we ought admire this irresponsible adventurer. But it seems to me it must play an implicit role: the example would not be persuasive to anyone were it not for the extraordinary power of the paintings.

[4] A reader has complained that this is too obvious to bear mentioning. The point is that the sort of view Slote presents treats children as instruments, but does so to serve their own future good. Something seems amiss here: but the usual diagnosis of what is amiss in such a case, paternalism, does not apply. That it does not apply is obvious. That the instrumental attitude to children, or that some attitudes properly so characterized, are nonetheless seriously flawed seems to me of interest *exactly because* the standard explanation of what is wrong with them is unavailable.

[5] Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*,New York, Harper, 1896, Chapter 9.

[6] In this Twain differs from certain strong tendencies in contemporary United States culture, which seems at times in the grip of a disturbing infatuation with youth that entails a dislike of, a resistance to, adulthood. Puerility and infantilism, unfortunately, have powerful attractions.

[7] The 'thick and thin' language, introduced into ethical discussion by Williams, derives from Ryle. In employing it I don't mean to be endorsing the notion that

the dualism of *is* and *ought* can be handily erased by fidelity to the workings of ordinary language.

[8] One might note, in this connection, the commoness of "insider transactions" between means and ends, another useful dichotomy that refuses to be chaste.

[9] I fear to be misconstrued: I do take our mortality to be an essential thing about us. And I am not insinuating any dualism of mind and body. The *Lear* quote is from Act 4, scene 1.

[10] Bernard Williams, in "The Makropolos Case, or Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" [in J.M. Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death* ,(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992)] discusses rather brilliantly the absurdities involved in life's indefinite prolongation. Thinking about old age takes one quite quickly to thinking about mortality, as mortality's nearness is an ineluctable feature of old age (this is so even in those times and places where the chance of death is more generously present than it is in 21st century North America.) I take for granted, though, that a substantial prolongation of life beyond its normal term need not render it ridiculous and that the banishment of the gravest ills would be a blessing. Such takings for granted do not imply any wish to defy human finitude.

[11] Lewis Burke Frumkes Lecture 2001, "Time in Human Experience", Webcast at

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[12] To this claim the objection might be made that we are all of us at all times limited in our powers and dependent on others, that at all times our lives are best seen as linked to the larger life about us (of course, *from* our own points of view and of course not in a fashion which would demand sainthood of us.) This is true enough. It still remains the case that proximity to the end of life makes peculiarly poignant, acute and ineluctable the fact of and the need for our lives to be lived in the light of such connectedness. That one's environs may not be hospitable towards or permissive of such generosity is a sad fact. Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric* , offers a harsh portrait of cramped spirit in the old. It is a portrait of what we ought not become: the neutralist need not deny this, need not deny that old age is a time of lamentable susceptibility to unfortunate attitudes, bitterness, odd vanity, rigidity. To this we'll say that such things, like ills in general, ought be warded against.

[13] This point is made in Simone de Beauvoir's opulent treatment of old age, *The Coming of Age* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp 13-14.

Chapter Three

The Now and Then Problem

The stages of life argument traded upon putative differences in the value of persons' activities at different times of life. The class of arguments against the TNT with which this chapter will deal trade upon differences in the values that persons embrace at different times of their lives. We'll call these arguments '*now and then*' arguments.

The problem they pose for the TNT can be conveyed as follows. Temporal neutrality requires that we not choose the lesser good of one time over the greater good of another. This requirement presupposes a single scale upon which the goods of different times may be weighed. But people change, notably in what they hold dear. The TNT's presupposition appears not universally to obtain. The axiological scales often change over time. Is temporal neutrality, then, asking us to choose the greater good as we *now* see things, in which case we'll ignore the valuations we'd *then* place upon the objects of our choice, or is it asking us *now* to defer to the values we'll hold *then* ? The latter course promises to estrange us from our values in a senseless manner. (The suggestion that we should value what we take to be without value has something of the flavor of the Moore sentence 'It's raining, but I don't believe it'—compare, in point of pragmatic oddity, 'It's worthless, but I should value it'.) The former course threatens to rob the TNT of content (by privileging the present at the meta-evaluative level.)

The force of this objection varies with the kind of example envisaged. If one is merely indifferent to some probable future interest, as a passionate and active youth might be indifferent to the more sedentary and contemplative pursuits of his self of late middle age, then it may be quite reasonable at least to make the neutralist claim, vague and weak, that the youth ought not, anyway, to do anything which would close the door to such pursuits. If one is considering cases in which the different times at issue involve values that are not merely rivals but enemies, the matter is quite different. To ask Abdul the atheist to take account, in his present activities, of the values, interests and needs of his future self who shall profess Islam is to ask altogether too much. Conversion, as the most radical sort of change of evaluative commitment, does not readily accommodate the neutralist's admonitions. This may not be so troubling to the neutralist. Conversion is not the sort of thing that one can foresee, much less plan for. It is, for epistemic reasons, largely beyond practical reason's reach. But between a change in taste or temperament and conversion there is a vast range of possible kinds of change in a person's values. Some of these, for example those that are at once foreseeable (at least as real possibilities) and drastic, do seem liable to raise hard questions for the neutralist.

The now and then problem, unlike the stages of life problem, applies both to the individual and the collective applications of the TNT. Collective decisions, of course, can affect what is subsequently possible for the members and successors of a given community or society quite as much as an individual's

choices can affect her future possibilities. Changes in values are, if anything, more drastic in the course of collective history than in the course of an individual's life. So it would seem that our obligation to act in accordance with temporally neutral concern for our successors should be quite vexing when we confront the prospect that their values may be extremely different from ours. The collective version of the problem does not, however, seem at all as acute as does the individual, or prudential, version.

Some plausible conjectures may be offered to explain why this asymmetry obtains. Many people not otherwise morally nihilistic apparently think that we have no obligations to our successors. I take such a view to be obviously wrong, the fruit of moral blindness or lack of imagination, of ignorance or of confusion. If I plant a bomb that will not go off for 100 years, I will have wronged those who are harmed when it explodes quite as much as I would wrong passersby unfortunate enough to be outside my window if I hurl a bomb out of it now. Ignoring the views of those sadly numerous souls who fail to see this rather obvious truth, it does seem that what we uncontroversially owe the future are the requisites of a decent life. (How much we occupants of the present are obliged to sacrifice for future people to ensure that this debt is met is a question about which one might argue. I take for granted here only that moderate demands of intertemporal altruism are beyond reasonable dispute. In practice, of course, even these demands are not met.) The requisites of a decent life, we may assume, are something which is by and large common ground between detailed

specifications of a good way of life. As such, the requirement that we provide them will not give rise to now and then type dilemmas, since these arise out of conflicts between conceptions of the good.[1] Another, doubtless not unrelated, reason the now and then problem appears to be less of a problem for the collective than for the individual application of the TNT is that we do not regard our collective successors in anything like the first personal way we regard our future selves—they are, so to say, not a *we* to us nearly so much as they are a *they*. The motivational force attaching to the demand that we concern ourselves with our own future is far more powerful than that which attaches to the demand that we be concerned with distant others. This may be lamentable, but we'll not engage in lamentation here. Instead, we'll turn our attention for the time being to some of the prudential versions of the now and then objection which have appeared in the literature.

In a paper that has had considerable influence, Bernard Williams assails moral theory in its Kantian and its consequentialist forms alike for demanding of us that we take an external view of our lives. Along the way he attacks the TNT on the same grounds. His attack is vigorously disdainful and rather cryptic. He declares, against the TNT, that 'the correct perspective on one's life is *from now* '.[2]

Taken literally, this declaration is patently false. There are ever so many *nows* that fail to issue correct practical judgements. If I am, for example, drunk or depressed or enraged or under a misapprehension, then my practical judgement is especially liable to error. If Williams really means to say that any old present

moment is authoritative for practical reasoning, then we need not take him seriously. If he will allow that certain states of mind are more authoritative than others for practical reasoning, then he has to produce a specific argument against including states of mind which incorporate the stance of temporal neutrality among the authoritative states.

If Williams is merely saying that one's motive for action must be present in one's soul at the time of acting, so that one cannot act from an absent motive, then neutralists will happily agree with him. They will also, of course, add a loud "So what?" to their agreement with this trivial truth. The TNT claims to be a valid regulating principle, possessing rational authority over the various motives for action that may be present in an agent at a time. There occurs no motivational action at a distance, to be sure. Svengali type putative counterexamples to this claim are readily dealt with. Ignoring the fantastic character of the Svengali story, the singing of the soprano under Svengali's spell is not properly an action of *hers*. The neutralist would have his principle embraced by agents, he would have them have it guide their actions, but he is neither a would-be Svengali nor is he intending, in advocating the principle, to make Svengalies of the agent's future selves. The TNT, in its prudential guise, does not hold that the alien being which is my self of some years hence should usurp my agency and act ventriloquistically through present me. It asks instead that I now recognize that, utterly literally, his good is my own.

Williams makes his brief, sketchy case against the TNT with a metaphor. The neutralists, he says, represent practical reasoning as if it involves viewing one's life 'as a given rectangle that has to be optimally filled in.'[3]This he takes to be a self evidently cockamamie way to view a life, a self evidently wrongheaded vantage point from which to engage in practical reasoning. The correct view 'from *now* ' is contrasted with the supposedly flawed, external, bird's eye view.

The metaphor is quite puzzling. It may sound odd to view one's life externally as a "given rectangle to be optimally filled in." But quite a bit more needs to be said about just what this metaphor might mean, before we agree that it unequivocally refers to something silly or absurd. We must also determine whether, among the absurd things it might denote, there is anything to which the neutralist is committed.

One absurdity the metaphor suggests is that we neutralists take ourselves to be omniscient. As if, somewhat in the manner of Leibniz's God, we are in thinking about how we ought to live choosing the best from among the possible lives that might be ours. Obviously our lives do not await us as completed objects. Just as obviously, the neutralists' admonition that we should allow all the parts of our lives their due does not preclude taking account of the large uncertainties that attend our plans.

It is, presumably, in the *givenness* rather than the rectangularity of the figure that the larger part of the weight and meaning of Williams's metaphor is to be found. The view *from now* presents one's life as open, not as given. So the

argument for which the metaphor is surrogate might be this. In acting one is deciding what will be. But a view of one's life as given fails to capture this seemingly fundamental aspect of practical reasoning, its radical openness to possibility. Such a view, therefore, is not a fit ground for practical reasoning.

This argument strikes me as defective. It has a false premise. Gazing out upon one's future life as upon an open sea is quite romantic. The correct view of practical reasoning, however, surely is not such a view of *radical* openness. At most points in a life much is given and much is not. Things are not radically open to most of us most of the time, whatever Monsieur Sartre may have thought. A view of how we ought to think about how we ought to live is not subject to legitimate criticism because it fails to conform to a fantasy.

It will be well to glance at a relevant passage in Rawls, a passage that presumably expresses the view that Williams is assailing. In the course of a discussion of life plans, which notion he makes central to his linked characterizations of goodness and rationality, Rawls says this.

> A plan will, to be sure, make some provision for even the most distant future and for our death, but it becomes relatively less specific for later periods. Certain broad contingencies are insured against and general means provided for, but the details are filled in gradually as more information becomes available and our wants and needs are known with greater accuracy. Indeed, one principle of rational choice is that of postponement: if in the future we may

> want to do one of several things but are unsure which, then, other things equal, we are to plan now so that these alternatives are both kept open. We must not imagine that a rational plan is a detailed blueprint for action stretching over the whole course of life. It consists of a hierarchy of plans, the more specific subplans being filled in at the appropriate time.[4]

Does this passage warrant Williams' criticism? It does not seem at all obvious to me that it does. It allows plenty of room for changes in one's aims as time proceeds, plenty of room for the rational agent to approach the future as open, if not boundlessly so.

Williams is quite explicit that one objectionable element of the view he disdains is that it does not allow for suicide as an intelligible option. The size of the rectangle, Williams asserts, is up to us. It is not true, however, that an external view of a life cannot allow for the desirability of the voluntary ending of that life. From without, there are numerous circumstances that would show the smaller rectangle to be the better one. The prospect of unrelievable agony and profound diminution of one's powers is one such circumstance. Of very many lives (take those of Cole Porter, Haile Selassie and numerous nursing home patients whose "right to die" court cases have appeared in the newspapers as representative examples from recent history) it has seemed to those looking on from without that an earlier end would have yielded a better life. How bad things have to get, and in which ways, to warrant suicide is a controverted

matter, but the potential intelligibility and rationality of that course of action are just not hard to see. The consistency of this with the Rawlsian picture of life plans can readily be made out.

Perhaps what Williams has in mind is something like this. Upon the failure of the project which is at present the anchor of a given person's life, he may wish to die. He may know that resisting this wish and going on will bring him to happy days again; new projects would almost certainly be found which would sustain him. From the external view, from the neutralist stance that concern for one's future is a demand of reason, this consideration looks to be decisively telling against self murder. But *from now* the prospect of future brightness seems insufficiently to matter. "What is it to me that the future will be bright," the TNT disdaining prospective suicide may ask of the one, be it a part of himself or another person, who would deter him from pulling the trigger by noting how things look from on high, "the present darkness is what matters, the collapse of all that's made my life worth living is the sole fact which has rational authority for me."

There are very many cases where the consensus of reflective humankind would stand against the prospective suicide who reasons in such a manner. With the TNT, most of us would almost always say that although in such cases the despondent present indeed does not directly provide reason to go on, future reasons do. But not *all* cases are obviously of this sort. This may make trouble for the TNT. One can imagine a person unwilling to endure something even though

she knows full well that subsequent to enduring that thing there would be a great deal of good life in her future. The neutralist may be tempted simply to assign the unendurable thing a negative value that exceeds the positive value of that which would succeed it, thereby squaring unendurability with his theory straightaway. This is not a crazy interpretation of what unendurability is, but it is certainly not undeniably correct either. The philosophically interesting conception of unendurability is precisely that of considerations or circumstances that elude maximizational practical reasoning.

We should like to allow the TNT not to be tied absolutely to any maximizing view of practical reason, but clearly the maximizing view is deeply bound up with it. The principle advises us, after all, to choose the *greater* good. The prospective suicides whose existence would threaten the TNT present a threat precisely because of the TNT's apparently maximizational character. Their futures, in all likelihood, will contain goods of sufficient magnitude to justify these persons' going on—if magnitude of good is the rational measure of the choiceworthiness of going on. They, however, see the thing they'd have to go through in order to achieve those goods as not being worth it, *without* denying the neutralists' claims about the comparative magnitudes which are in question. "Give me any eventual future you please," they seem to say, "it is not enough." This way of putting things seems to return us to the language of maximization—it is a hard idiom to avoid when thinking about such matters—but I think the claim here must be that the glorious future is not enough, not because its

goodness isn't big enough, but because the unendurable prospect plays the role of cancelling or overriding all considerations of comparative magnitude. To call anything which can play this overriding or cancelling role 'bigger' than that which it overrides or cancels seems to misrepresent it. The reason which motivates repudiation of the scale is not yet another item on the scale. Such, anyway, are the claims that Williams' self killers must make.

Two rather different sorts of unendurability case come to mind. In the first sort of case the passage to future good may be through pain or humiliation which the person regards herself as unable to endure. Another round of chemotherapy, another five years in prison, another child sacrificed to the gods may be prospects which arouse a "No" which no future prospect might turn into a "Yes." In the second sort of case, closer to what Williams has in mind perhaps, the very idea of going on seems to betray a lack of fidelity to the commitments one has made. One has vested oneself in something, one has staked one's life upon a project. If the ship is to go down, then the captain shall accompany it.

One thing that is curious about this Ahab ethos which Williams appears to favor is that it is anything but hostile to givenness. What is, on his account, given—one's project—is so thoroughly given, and has had the soul so thoroughly given to it, that with its demise the soul may be obliged to descend with it to the realm of nonbeing. Williams would point out, I suppose, that this givenness is the existential substance of the self, not the objectionable givenness-from-without of a pre-existing scheme of values.

Williams's hostility, throughout his paper, is directed at "external" views of what we ought to do, more particularly at the idea that an external vantage point possesses some rational authority that the internal view, the view from me-here-now, lacks. It demands to be noted that the Ahab ethos is, in ever so many cases, silly and adolescent. Such an ethos is not, however, always inappropriate or silly or immature. If the external view of a life is to be declared defective in this connection, one would think that it should be because it cannot make sense of any situation to which this ethos validly applies.

This does not appear to be the case. There is a great deal of variety in the sorts of "external" view which philosophers have considered authoritative for practical reasoning (e.g. ideal observers, ideal negotiators, ideal insurers), but there is nothing intrinsic to externality as such which rules out the vindication of Ahab like commitments, commitments which demand our all, commitments for which we'd die. Prudence, *qua* temporally neutral concern for the goodness of one's whole life, need not entail timidity.

So Williams is not, on a charitable interpretation, asserting that an external view of one's life cannot provide a vindication of the attachments and commitments that provide that life with a good part of its ethical substance. He is instead expressing resentment of the very idea that such commitments and attachments *stand in need* of such vindication. To view one's life from without and to take that viewing as authoritative is already to have failed in one's commitments, on Williams's view as I understand it. The thought seems to be

that one's deepest commitments are shown to be such exactly in their not being available for questioning, in their independence of justification. They *are* the justification for what one does.

How warranted is Williams's resentment? His attitude seems in some ways rather like that of those philosophers who reject as absurd epistemological inquiries which seek the ground and justification of our knowledge of the things our senses plainly tell us. Pee Wee knows that there is a monkey in a tree—he sees the creature and hears its call. No philosophical account of what such knowing is can compare, in point of certainty or basicness, with that knowledge which it would explain. Ergo, we are sometimes told, the attempt to justify such knowledge, particularly if it involves rebuttal of exotic sceptical challenges, is a misguided endeavor. Nothing is more epistemically basic than Pee Wee's recognition that there is a monkey in the tree. To attempt to ground such knowledge on something else, on a philosophical account, is rather like proposing that a skyscraper requires an intricate spider's web to hold it up.

Certain of our commitments appear, in Williams's eyes, to be as basic to valuation as such acts as Pee Wee's recognition of the monkey is to cognition. Now in the epistemic case, I take the criticism to be misguided. If the epistemologist is taking the cognition to be accounted for as unassailable, then what he is seeking is an explanation of that unassailablity. Such seeking is not itself an assault on the cognition's epistemic credentials. And if in the course of constructing such an explanation what had been thought unassailable turns out

not to be so, this need not be a bad thing. The parallel in the case of value will not be perfect, but we need to examine the relevant similarities and differences. A person is committed to certain projects. These commitments embody that person's values. They are, in some sense, basic to that person as valuer and agent. An advocate of some "external" way of viewing values, the neutralist for example, calls this person's values into question in some manner—perhaps by asking how they fit into a good life overall. As has been observed, there is no reason in the world to think that such a questioning may not, in ever so many cases, be met with a thoroughly convincing answer which confirms the standing the questioned value was thought pre-theoretically to possess. If the questioning indeed in some instances reduces the strength of a person's attachment to a value, why should we think this by its nature a bad thing?! Only if we value commitment to values over value of values do we have an easy time answering this question. But why should we rank commitment as the supreme value, outranking the value of that to which we are committed? Only if we take the view that commitment bestows value does this ranking stand a good chance of making sense.

To some extent, Williams's anti-realist leanings do inform and motivate his extremism about the value of commitment. There exists on his view, it seems, no scheme of values antecedent to our commitments which we might discover. But the anti-realist sources of his attitude are not the only ones that are worthy of our attention. From an external view we must acknowledge that the very taking

of an external view, regardless of that view's being structurally of a higher order than other of our commitments, is itself nonetheless one commitment among others. It seems a prideful obstinacy on Williams's part to reject categorically the standing back from engagement in which the TNT and other moral theoretic stances would have us engage. But it is, in theory's own terms, legitimate to ask what the value of such standing back is. If, as Williams seems to think, the adoption of an external stance is indeed destructive of deep commitments, then *that would count—from the external stance itself—against the adoption of that* stance. So it might turn out that the TNT is self defeating. But recall the epistemological parallel: a reading of the *Meditations* is unlikely to dissuade Pee Wee from his warranted conviction that there is a monkey in the tree, which is a good thing inasmuch as monkeys bite and are good to eat.

One problem with the parallel is that we want the TNT sometimes to alter what it is that an agent takes as axiologically basic. In the epistemological case, it is vindication or explanation, rather than displacement, of our commonplace perceptually induced beliefs which we aim at. Of course, the TNT by itself does not make substantive axiological claims. It has a natural kinship, however, as requiring a distance from the urgencies of the moment, with the endeavor to assess one's values critically. And it may have substantive consequences for those of one's commitments which jeopardize one's future, one's present or one's past in a temporally biassed way. Or, in its impartialist interpersonal guises, it may serve to alter the station of the near and dear in our moral economy. Still

and all, if we look at the axiological counterparts of Pee Wee's monkey sighting, we do not see the TNT undermining them. Spouses and children, for example, are not abandoned nearly so often by those taking the long term view as by those under the sway of impulse. The very notion of commitment is suggestive of something abiding. The TNT asks that we consider critically what our commitments ought to be, it emphatically does not urge us not to commit ourselves to anything. Williams's complaint seems in one way paradoxical—he attacks a standpoint in the name of commitment when that very standpoint is supportive of commitment. Williams, the aficionado of integrity, attacks the view that takes the wholeness of a life seriously. He makes himself the philosophical bedfellow of impulsivity, the great disintegrator.

It is true enough that a willingness *at the drop of a hat* to stand apart from one's projects and concerns and reassess them is an ethically disturbing, intellectually and morally frivolous disposition. By portraying the adoption of the TNT as tantamount to the adoption of such a disposition Williams is able to portray himself as the champion of integrity and character. He seems to take the demands of the TNT as psychologically impracticable, as if viewing oneself from without were something only an impossibly divided, split level personality could do.

But it is Williams who is at odds with psychological reality. The recognition that one's present is a part of a whole life, the possession of concern for that whole life, an openness to the thought that things are not as one has

taken them to be, are not attitudes unintegrable with being present to one's life as it is now. It is only a bogus integration to exclude the view from without and the possibility of change. What can 'integrity' signify if it is decided beforehand that present projects are unassailable, come what may? Integrity is rather the capacity to retain a substantial character while still being able to view oneself and one's projects from without. It is a matter of *integration*, not impregnability. At the rudest biological level, our sustenance involves regular ingestion of pieces of the outside world and excretion of same. A living soul must equally be able to take in thoughts, views, experiences, questions and answers which are external to his mind, must be capable of assimilating them, if it is truly to live. Williams seems to approach becoming an inadvertent advocate of a variant of solipsism in his wish to maintain the chastity of the will's commitments. The healthy will, we wish by contrast to maintain, will not lose itself upon having intercourse with alien thoughts and wants.

There is a charming, amusing thing that little children sometimes do. They cover their ears or eyes in the apparent belief that doing so will make the thing thereby unheard or unseen nonexistent. Williams' attitude to the taking of the larger view seems the philosophical counterpart to this strategy of childhood.

For all that I find some of the tendencies of Williams' thought quite questionable, I fear doing injustice to a very rich and serious piece of work. The assumption that the adoption, serious entertainment, or ability to be persuaded by an external view is destabilizing of character or evidence of weak character is

indeed flat wrong. But to say that is not to say that the authority of the external view—of temporal neutrality in particular—is guaranteed. I do assume that the burden of proof lies with Williams, but one might take exception to that assumption. Again, if one is concerned with the now and then problem, the demand for temporal neutrality can reasonably be taken for the demand that one be an *auto-liberal*, one who adopts a wholly value neutral stance towards the possible allegiances, preferences or devotions of his past and future selves. Which would be a quite zany approach to the living of a life, for reasons in some ways very like those Williams puts forward against moral theory and the TNT. Indifference to what one's future commitments might be does seem to imply a certain anemia in one's present commitments, a morbidly passive alienation from oneself. But *temporal* neutrality is not *value* neutrality, and a life without substantial bonds to persons and projects is quite deplorable from the temporally neutral vantage point.

Williams chastises Rawls in particular for being too averse to risk. And there may be something to this: it is an open question, I think, how the neutralist ought deal with the problems of risk. Williams, however, sees this flaw in Rawls' claim that the rational planner should seek freedom from blame.[5] Here though, Williams goes too far. That we ought be willing to risk our lives for suitable purposes seems a fair claim. Too cautious an attitude toward such risk seems a fit object of censure. Risking one's soul, so to speak, is another matter. That there are boundaries around what may be put at risk is indeed the very thing Williams

seems to assert in his demand that character be defended against the, as he sees it, character dissolving claims of morality or prudence. The aim to live a life "beyond reproach", as Rawls puts it, could, one imagines, be construed as a cowardly desire or the fruit thereof. Someone might have a cowardly or morbid desire never to act reproachably. (This seems a peculiar instance of a self defeating aim. Self defeating, not because of the character of the aim, but because of the manner in which one is attached to it.{The self-defeat derives, of course, from the inherent reproachability of someone who elevates possible susceptibility to reproach to the decisive position in his hierarchy of reasons.}) The sane person governed by this aim will regard his other projects in its light. He wishes to find his ends and actions approveable as, e.g. not violating respect for persons, including himself. He determines what reproachability is on the basis of what he takes genuine grounds of reproach to be. *They* do the work. The morbid or ersatz version of this, so far as I can make out, detaches reproachability from its grounds, botches the order of explanation: the desire to act in a fashion beyond reproach ought to be the desire not to do any of the several things which warrant reproach, *because of what such actions are*, not because reproachability is the supreme evil.

In his discussion of suicide, what Williams is emphasizing, *contra* the Kantians, is the Humean point of the necessity that there be some ground project, some nexus of desires or purposes, which propels a person forward through her life. Nagel and Rawls take the rationality and goodness of going on for granted

in their portrayals of the rational life. Should we see this taking for granted as a serious lacuna in their thought?

As we have already seen, there is no necessity that the depictor of practical reason in the "objective" mode deny that there are possible circumstances under which the life planner ought to cancel her plans and end her life. The implicit presumption of the objectivists is that such circumstances are rare enough to be ignored in a general characterization of the business of rational living. Is this so outlandish a presumption? We think not.

The reference to suicide in Williams' piece is to be sure not intended as a defense of that radical pessimism which would have it that, if they but saw things clearly, most people ought to seek a lethal injection. But this much ought be granted Williams. The radical pessimist view fails, practically, because of instinct, because of attachments people feel in their bones to their continued existence, visceral resistance which the organism throws up at the prospect of death. It is largely non-cognitive states of the mind which propel us forward. But acknowledging that is not at all tantamount to declaring such going forward irrational! The belief that radical despair is our enemy is one that we embrace with more than our reason. But it is not, save for circumstances which only rarely arise, a belief that reason fails to endorse. The neutralist appeal to the value of future life is the very appeal we are wont to make, in the face of such despair. When the despondent one is not ourself, we may be taken to be guilty of a sympathetic failure if we too glibly speak of goods whose attractions the

despondent one cannot feel. But it is the destructive tyranny of a despondent now which we oppose. Hence the thought that the terminally ill who face bad prospects are quite rational if they wish to "quit while they are still ahead." The neutralist counterweight to present gloom is unavailable in such cases.

Unlike Williams, Richard Brandt is a champion of moral theory. In *A Theory of the Good and the Right*[6] he proposes accounts of rationality and morality in terms of what an agent would want were that agent competent in deductive and inductive reasoning, fully aware of the psychological etiology of the desires he or she possesses and subjected to the vivid imagining of the consequences of those desires' realizations. A desire is rational (this is all, according to Brandt, that 'rational' may reasonably be taken to mean) if it survives this process of "cognitive psychotherapy". Having so defined rationality, Brandt proceeds to characterize morality in like fashion. One should choose that system of rules and principles for the governance of our relations with others over a whole life which survives a course of cognitive psychotherapy. It is Brandt's view that the envisioned process would yield a rule utilitarian moral code. He is, clearly, very far away from Williams in his view of how we ought to proceed in philosophizing about ethics.

His rule utilitarianism is not our concern here. It is the role of the now and then argument in his theory of the good (a prior matter, given his utilitarianism) which will concern us. He deploys the now and then argument against one theory of the human good and in favor of another.

Theories of the human good may be divided into three broad sorts: hedonistic theories, desire satisfaction theories and perfectionist theories.[7] Hedonistic theories have it that nothing is ultimately good except experiential states of certain favored sorts. It would be unfair or misleading to say that such theorists take pleasure to be the only thing good for its own sake. Older versions of the theory, which were committed to such a claim, famously came to grief because competent introspection reveals no unique felt quality common to all experiences which are wanted for their own sake. Watching a film by Hitchcock, having an orgasm, securing a tactical victory in a political struggle, giving and receiving expressions of affectionate attachment and solving a mathematical problem may all count as contributions to our happiness, as experiential goods. But their agreeable felt qualities, or, more exactly, the agreeabilities of their felt qualities, are rather radically disparate. 'Enjoyment' or 'satisfaction' may be more apt terms than 'pleasure' for the thing that plausible hedonisms claim we ought to be after.

The second sort of theory is less restrictive. Among the things we want, and on reflection think we should want, are many items which are not experiences at all and many items which are not wanted in virtue of their experiential features. To have done this or become that is what a man or woman may most want, and these wantings may be quite independent of the experiential plusses or minusses that accompany the processes of their satisfaction. It is the satisfaction of our desires at which we aim. So, according to

theories of this sort, it is the satisfaction of desires in which the human good consists. Most such theories filter human desires–merely being desired does not by itself guarantee the desired thing's standing as a good. Some desires are in one way or another mistaken, according to such theories. Desire satisfaction theories have no need to deny the importance of happiness or pleasurable experience to human well being. There may be extensive coincidence between the states of affairs that theories of the two sorts commend us to value. But desire satisfaction theories leave it open that the good at least of some people some of the time may diverge from their happiness.

The third sort of theory holds that certain states of affairs are good independently of their being either desired or experienced as enjoyable. Such theories are often called 'objective' because of this claimed lack of dependence of the good upon the wishes or enjoyments of subjects. Knowledge, virtue and beauty are traditional candidates for such goods. Although such theories are in a fairly clear sense indifferent to the mental states which attend such goods, the goods commended by such theories are for the most part things which would not exist in the absence of complex mentality. Were we to live in accordance with the recommendations of at least many versions of perfectionism, the results might well be such as would not greatly displease theorists of the first or second sorts. This class of theories is committed to denying that all good things are good because desired or good because productive of happiness. A community that recognizes such goods, however, is for obvious and trivial reasons likely to find

its hedonic and conative impulses tending towards harmony with the end of realizing the goods in question. This will fail to be the case only if one takes the rather pessimistic view that the true good stands inexorably opposed to our natural tendencies, so that the welfare of the many will needs be sacrificed to the achievement by the elect of the favored sorts of good.

Brandt, in any case, dismisses theories of the third sort as "obsolescent"[8]. This is unsurprising inasmuch as his revisionist definition of rationality indicates a metaphysically abstemious stance. A perfectionist ethic can seem quite hard to square with a stern and "scientific" metaphysic. The revival of such theories, from quarters not known for their wooliness, in the years following his book's publication, suggests that his characterization is not literally correct.[9] However that may be, he sees the competition among axiological theories as essentially a duel between desire satisfaction and hedonistic theories. And he regards the now and then argument as decisively telling in favor of the latter. His target, unlike Williams, is not temporal neutrality. He is happy to be a maximizer but he sees satisfaction of desires as being something we can't intelligibly hope to maximize.

Unintelligibility is an extravagantly strong charge, but Brandt is not without reason to say that it is hard to make out just what counts as maximal satisfaction of desires. Before proceeding to the now and then problem, we should note that strength of desire, duration of desire and integrability of desire with other desires are different aspects of conative states the relationships between which are not readily rendered algorithmically precise. How we should

weigh these different aspects of our wantings and needings against each other is a matter upon which it would be foolhardy too confidently to pronounce.

In Brandt's view, these problems are minor compared with the difficulties presented to the would-be desire satisfaction maximizer by the now and then problem. Consider two incompatible desires, one now for then and the other then for then, which are alike in all the potentially mensuration confounding respects mentioned above: same intensity, same duration, same degree of integrability with other desires. Brandt's argument holds that the desire satisfaction theorist can have nothing to say about which should be chosen. On Brandt's reckoning, changes in desire over time leave us unable to render a global judgment as to what would count as maximizing desires over a life. One appealing way out of the problem is to adopt a now for now strategy–conform at each time to that time's ranking of desires. (We should bear in mind that the desires in question are constrained or filtered in some fashion: the now for now strategy under consideration does not allow submission to destructive impulsivity.) Brandt takes this solution to be, in effect, a defection to hedonism. And he takes it that such a defection is the correct move for the theorist of the human good to make.

Choosing the happiest life, on Brandt's account, is an intelligible goal. It is, as constrained by morality, the proper goal of a rational being, according to Brandt. His hedonism employs a motivational concept of hedonic good, a concept derived from contemporary psychology. Very roughly, he takes the

extent to which an experience tends to make its subject want more of the same to be the measure of its hedonic weight. Of course he must complicate his account in order to include satiation effects and so on. He does not elude, by embracing hedonism, the problems of comparing intensity, extent and integrability with other hedonically positive states. The results of cognitive psychotherapies conducted at different times in a life will vary unless temporal neutrality is built in to the cognitive therapeutic process. But it is. Cognitive psychotherapy does require us to take the consequences of our action for our future well being into account, it has at least an aspect of prudence built into its notion of rational choice. Brandt does, after a fashion, avoid the now and then problem.

Why, then, should the neutralist not welcome Brandt's conclusion? Why should he not find in hedonism the salvation of the TNT?

Very simply, because hedonism very likely is not the correct theory of value. If living the happiest life were the supreme rational directive, then the now and then problem would dissolve: that course of action ought to be chosen which made the chooser happiest, modulo morality's demands. But here I want to endorse a Williams-like line of criticism. To make happiness the supreme value—and that is what Brandt would have us do—is to distort and subvert our self-understanding. Desire satisfaction theorists and perfectionists are more in accord with the phenomenology of value. We go for things because they seem worth going for. Some of what we go for is gone for because we think it shall please us or make us happy. But much of what we go for is gone for for other

sorts of reasons. I should like it that Javanese music continue to exist. So I support the preservation of such music. I shall be less happy if it fades away than if it persists. But I do not support it because of the unhappiness its extinction would cause me. I might send my check to the society for preservation of Javanese music even if I expect to be too busy to listen to new performances of that music. I might be convinced that my fellow human beings will be just as happy, on balance, when that form of musical expression is supplanted by some other: the sum of happiness might be the same upon its extinction. But that extinction I would take to be a bad thing nonetheless. Surely the hedonist must see me as confused or mistaken. On Brandt's account—for all the sophistication he brings to hedonism—all that is valuable is valuable as means to happiness. But this leaves all of us who desire things for reasons other than their felicific productivity branded as erroneous desirers.

The ameliorative move of finding felicific productivity in desires which do not have felicific productivity as their object is scant comfort to many of us. In addition to our first order wants, we have the further meta-desire of correct conative understanding and a"vindication" of our desires as subserving the true end in spite of our confusion does not satisfy this meta-desire. We want to want the right things for the right reasons, but the only right reason the hedonist admits lends no support to our unmediated sense of what the right things are. He returns our desires to us as phantoms begotten by an incomplete rationality.

He allows the goodness of our wanting much of what we want, but he denies the independent goodness of what is wanted.

It is essential to the acceptability of this objection to hedonism that it be understood as not entailing the impossibility of desire's bestowing value upon things.

If hedonism does not solve the now and then problem, because hedonism is not true, then how if at all shall it be solved? The hedonist solution did point the way towards one form a solution might take. It banished the conflicting scales. But how might an adequate theory of value do such a thing? How could we believe in an axiology that vanquished forms of conflict and change that seem ineliminable aspects of any human life worth living?

The "solution" may lie in some such direction as this. A substantial part of the worth of our lives lies in the very process of seeking the worthy. An adequate axiology must respect this. An adequate axiology must take account of the goodness in the very fact that a single static scale of value is not to be had, or is not desirable. The solution, that is to say, shall not rid us of the conflict between now and then, but shall find in that conflict itself a fecund source of good. To lead a valuable life ought be our aim. And a significant part of that aim's fulfillment shall consist in figuring out what that very aim amounts to. And such figuring out, for us in the successive partialities of our understanding, will needs involve contradiction and reconciliation among and between varying and incomplete apprehensions of our good. Should we regret this? The costs of error

can be very great and very bitter. But any alternative that promises to overcome such hazards has a yet higher cost.

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[1] I have some reservations here. Intertemporal conflict of conceptions of the good is scarcely unheard of. The destruction of libraries or monuments to false Gods is sometimes done with an eye to the banishment forever of certain conceptions of the real and the good from the hearts and minds of men. Such acts tend to be quite repugnant. (Think of the Buddhas of Bamiyan destroyed by the Taliban.) It is not at all hard, though, to think of beliefs about the good which the world would be *sans doubt* better off without. A survey of the present landscape of religious fanaticism provides a wealth of examples. Destruction of texts sacred to the murderous champions of inferno who are at present regnant in many portions of the world is absolutely precluded for a variety of good reasons. But is the provision of the opportunity to our descendants to embrace monstrous creeds and pernicious metaphysics one of those reasons?

[2] Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character and Morality' in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981) p. 13.

[3]Williams, p.12. It is no fault in Williams' fine paper that the TNT receives less than thorough attention. It is not his primary target, is dealt with only *en route* to other and more central concerns.

[4] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, 1971) p.410

[5] Williams, p.13.

[6] Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

[7]Theories which combine elements from these three, call them 'eclectic', are also possible. It is most probable that the correct theory of the good is an eclectic one.

[8] Brandt, p.246.

[9]Thomas Hurka is a recent advocate of such a view, see *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.).

Chapter Four

The Dead Past Problem

The sorts of consideration that seem to compel our acceptance of the TNT involve relations between present and future goods. The compulsive postponer who drastically diminishes the overall goodness of his life through chronic neglect of the present or the rather more commonplace instance of the impulsive, whose subjection to present want ruins or blights her life, appear to supply cogent grounds for taking the principle to be correct.

Temporal neutrality may cease to seem self evidently correct, however, when we turn our attention to the past: it is over with, dead. What weight do the wishes it contains have? To be temporally neutral would seem to require that we be neutral as between past, present and future wish, that we give equal weight to all. And that can seem, when we attend to the present weight of past purposes, really too silly an idea to warrant entertaining. This objection we shall call the "dead past" objection. It is, perhaps, not an objection with which the hedonist need be concerned, since the sum of past pleasures is a fixed quantity. Though the hedonist might ignore the objection on the ground that only the present and future provide opportunities for the augmentation of agreeable experience, other sorts of theorists of value—desire satisfaction theorists, for example—must take it seriously.

Before we condemn or amend the TNT on account of it, we should examine, unavoidably in a selective and incomplete manner, the interesting and

vast topic it lays before us, the problematic of our ethical-axiological stance towards the past. How and why should we value the past, if at all? What do we owe it, if anything?

The commonest case, in moral philosophical discussion, of a strict *obligation* to the past is that of the deathbed promise. Such a case, I take it, establishes that a blanket dismissal of the claims of the past upon us is untenable. Except to that minority which holds such promises to be non-binding, which minority I take to stand with the burden of proof firmly on its shoulders. It is, though, worthwhile to examine the reasons the minority puts forward in support of their view. For the harming or wronging of the dead is not without its puzzles.

The dead do not exist anymore. If we could render intelligible the thought that there is some posthumous continuation of existence, it still remains that the immortal souls of the departed would be quite other entities than the persons whose hands we shook or lips we kissed. The likelihood of such entities' existence is vanishingly small, but the point here is that even were they, improbably, to exist, they'd not be the very same beings as those for whom we care or to whom we owe things. The problem of posthumous wrongings or harmings thus is a problem even for those lucky or unfortunate enough to believe that death is in some irremediably obscure way not final for those who have died. And the problem of posthumous wrongings or harmings is this: the supposition that there are such things involves, or appears to involve, changing the fortunes of non-existents. And this, we may quite reasonably incline to think,

is logically or metaphysically beyond the pale, impossible. "No subject, no harm" is a plausible metaphysical cum moral maxim. Indeed we often take one of death's few consolations to be its removal of the one who's died from subjection to fortune's cruelties. The departed are, we like to say, at last beyond harm. So it is not necessarily a happy thought that one may suffer benefit or harm after one has ceased to be.

The philosophical defender of the reality of posthumous harm or wrong or benefit is, in any case, not to be understood on the model of the giver of offerings to ghosts. It is not some spirit or other sort of occult being extant at the time the posthumous good or ill befalls the dead who is the subject of that good or ill, on her view. It is the dead themselves, now nonexistent, whom she thinks are the subjects of posthumous changes in their ethical fortunes. And this is not quite so strange as it sounds. Consider the living. They, in the usual and healthy case, have interests in portions of the world which lie well outside the bounds of their own locations in space and time. We do not fault them, we do not criticize ourselves, when we consider such interests or the fact that we have them. Such interests we take to be legitimate, indeed we take those who lack such interests to be cramped and narrow. A person's fortune, her good, depends in large part upon the fate of her interests, of that in which she has in one way or another invested herself. If it is not crazy to have interests in the world beyond one's life's boundaries and if one's good depends upon the fate of that in which one's interest is bound up, then it cannot be crazy to think that setbacks to those of

one's interests which lie outside the narrow portion of space and time which is occupied by one's life are harms, that the protection and the flourishing of the temporally faraway objects of one's caring are among the constituents of one's good.

The strangeness of posthumous harm and benefit may not yet be adequately overcome by these considerations. If one understands the subject of posthumous harm and good to be the living person, rather than his corpse or ghost, then it still may seem that one is, in accepting that there are such harms and goods, embracing belief in some bizarre form of causation. For the posthumous event is said, on this account, to alter the condition of the person whose existence precedes it. And that sounds like a violation of the fixity of the past. But of course the believer in posthumous changes in fortune is not thinking of a voodoo doll which one can prick with a pin on a Tuesday in order to cause the victim pain the preceding Friday. The sort of effect upon the past, change in condition of the past person, which is envisioned by the believer in posthumous wrongs is not causal. If the drunken guest at the wedding makes a mockery of the earlier labors of preparation for that wedding, he has not by doing so violated any law of nature. If a series that begins '2, 4, 6, 8, 10' turns out to have as its next five members '3, 6, 9, 12, 15', one's understanding of what series it was will be altered. But the second group of five members do not in any particularly mysterious way change what the first group is. The changes upon us that posthumous harms and goods work are of these sorts. They are acausal,

alterations of the sense of the earlier members of a series or earlier elements of a pattern by later elements or members.[1]

To apply this to the example at hand, the breaking of a promise after the promisee has died makes it the case that he has been deceived. No ghosts or temporally reversed causes are involved. One must allow that breaking a promise which had been made to one now dead is sometimes excusable, but this is so for more or less the same sorts of reasons that other promises are excusably broken. The tempting thought that the promissee, being dead, no longer has interests or is no longer susceptible to harm and therefore has no claim to the promise's fulfillment, is, as we have seen, a confusion. The very point of a deathbed promise, for the promissee, is the extension of her will into a future that will not contain her. Such promises presuppose the notion that people may have interests which last longer than do their lives. If one does not believe that, then one ought not make such a promise. If one is concerned to justify the making of an insincere promise, then the casuistical issue is not the excusability of breaking a promise but the justification of deception. The deathbed promise insincerely made for, say, the benevolent purpose of sparing the dying person a final anguish, is excusable, if at all, for the same sorts of reasons and under circumstances which relevantly resemble other cases in which we take beneficence to override truthfulness. The peculiarly troubling feature of deathbed promises is that one cannot be released from them, nor can one be forgiven for failing to fulfill them.

Another, and quite interesting, sort of case of moral subjection to a dead intention is that of the promise made to a person at an earlier stage of that person's life to carry out some plan even in disregard of the promissee's later repudiation of the plan in question. The possibility of a change of heart is foreseen by the one who exacts the promise at the time the promise is exacted. Evaluating such cases will turn upon an array of psychological and casuistical considerations. One might readily feel a bit "used" by the one who exacts such a promise, for the following reason. While most promises involve enabling a person to bring about what she *cannot* do by herself, the sort of promise here considered—call it a future intention defeating promise—enlists one not as an augmenter of the promissee's abilities but rather as a surrogate for or guarantor of her present will.[2] It seems quite a different matter to ensure that a person's wants or needs are met, when that person cannot meet them unaided, than to ensure that her wants of time t_1 will be met at time t_{1+n} even against her wishes of the latter moment. The least questionable such cases—which still impose severe burdens upon the one who promises—are those in which the promissee's will is in some fashion, e.g. through addiction, compromised at the time the promise is to be fulfilled. Such cases indeed may be classed as special variants of the normal case, because a compromised will can plausibly be regarded as amounting to an (especially troubling and complex) kind of inability. Agreeing to subvert the heroin addict's quest for the drug or the manic's refusal to take lithium, one may plausibly regard oneself as allied with an authoritative part of

the promissee's self, aiding her on the future occasion of her enfeeblement by powers in some sense external to herself. No such assimilation of the future intention defeating promise to the more usual case of the ability extending promise is available when we look at promises whose purpose is the overriding of a future change of heart. The promiser may have a legitimate grievance. He is asked to ensure the victory of the promissee's earlier intentions over those she later holds, he is asked to embody a steadfastness that the promissee herself fails to maintain. He is asked, in effect, to disrespect the person she becomes. If he shares the intentions the promise expresses, the case is, in some respects, easier. It may be troublingly obscure whether he is acting on his own values or respecting the promise made, but if he is secure in his sense of the rectitude of the values the promise furthers, then that fact will, presumably, be an additional reason for pursuing the promised course of action. The more interesting case is that in which the promiser has no commitment of his own one way or the other to the purposes the promise furthers. All, in such a case, will depend upon his sense of the legitimacy of the promise.

Imagine, for example, that our promiser stands to inherit some money upon the death of a distant relative, an event which is not at all imminent when he promises his friend, who has quite selflessly helped him through a difficult period, to donate a substantial sum to a particular cause which she then favors. She explicitly asks that he not be swayed by any change in her attitude towards that cause which might come about between the time of the promise and the time

of his inheritance. When the time comes, she has changed her mind. She has no sympathy at all for her former purpose and begs her old friend to redirect the handsome moneys that have come his way. He finds nothing morally objectionable in the promised donation. She views it as quite inferior to another—equally unselfish—purpose that she has come to embrace. She has not undergone a great change of character, though she is emphatic in her repudiation of her former cause and resentful at the prospect of her friend's disregarding her present will. What is he to do? Those who think he ought to keep the promise are surely offering an intelligible and plausible response to such a situation.

Variations on the above scenario can easily be imagined, some of which will sway us one way and others of which will sway us the other on the question of whether the promise ought to be kept. What is crucial to our present purpose is that such situations establish that dead intentions have weight. It might be objected that it is the moral force of promise making which really bears the weight in the case in question, but this objection seems misguided. Rationally to feel the weight of the promise one must regard it as legitimate. To regard it as legitimate requires that one countenance the possibility that one may be bound by intentions that do not survive a person's change of heart. To grant moral force to a promise absent belief in its legitimacy, absent assent to the propositions which are that promises' presuppositions or implications, is to turn from morality to magic, is to regard promise making as a speech act on a par with casting a spell.

One can also imagine cases in which the change of heart to come had not been foreseen and yet the promiser still feels bound by the commitment made, despite the promisee's sincere attempt to release her from it.

A particularly acute dilemma concerning the weight which ought be granted a past intention arises in medical ethics, where we are confronted from time to time with profoundly demented patients who had directed, or expressed the hope, while still competent, that their lives not be prolonged were dementia to afflict them. "Don't let me live like that," such a person might say. The patient's intention prior to dementia has of course vanished. The demented patient has desires of various sorts, but nothing so complex as an intention. The dominant legal understanding has been that the person's will should be respected, and that will is taken to be expressed by the directions they offered while still competent. But the prior will seems to contradict the best interests of the demented patient as he is. We imagine the case, not at all unheard of, in which the dementia is not principally characterized by terrors and rages, but has instead a decent share of pleasant experiences.

Ronald Dworkin supports the autonomy right of the patient to dictate his treatment when demented. He does so on the basis of a distinction between two sorts of interests, the critical and the experiential.[3] The latter are more or less the hedonic, things the value of which lies in their felt qualities. The former embody our judgements as to what we ought to be. The distinction seems to derive from, or anyway has a kinship with Charles Taylor's 'strong evaluations'.[4] Dworkin has

it that our experiential interests just depend on our liking how they feel, so that we don't think we'd have been making a mistake if we'd happened not to enjoy the particular things that give us pleasure. Our critical interests, by contrast, are such that we'd take ourselves to be making a mistake if they were otherwise. They are the bases of our deepest commitments, our defining values.

It should come as no surprise that critical interests trump experiential interests. The prior will of the person not to live on in the demented state expresses a critical interest, a commitment as to how he ought to live or what he ought to be. The demented person's diffuse pleasures in exchanging greetings with persons whose identities she cannot properly grasp, his satisfaction in eating and so on, are merely experiential interests. So on this account the critical interests which the person possessed prior to dementia prevail over the lexically inferior interests he possesses once he's been divested by dementia of any higher, critical interests at all.

For our present purposes, the crucial matter here is that it makes sense to grant weight to those prior intentions, that the extinct will still commands at least our recognition, possibly our deference. I am, actually, not in the end wholly convinced by Dworkin's argument. That giving a liver transplant to a demented individual would be an appalling thing to do seems obvious. That we should withhold routine care or impose *faux* euthanasia upon such individuals, where they are not suffering, seems to me quite unacceptable. It is, however, because the prior will is asking of us that we do things which are *wrong* that I take it to be

properly overridden. It is not their pastness, but their moral quality, which gets in the way of our fulfilling such intentions. The manner in which we treat the vulnerable seems to me of very great importance. In this I am holding no idiosyncratic view, though it is a considerable problem for moral theory to articulate the importance in question, or provide it with a systematic rationale. One prominent form of moral theory, social contract theory, indeed dismisses such concerns[5]. But I take that to be one of the very good reasons for doubting social contract theory's adequacy or correctness. Killing the demented, or "letting them die" when preserving their lives involves so small an effort as providing antibiotics, look to be serious violations of morality's demands. The case we are considering is, after all, one in which the demented person is not in misery, but happy. He possesses, within the sadly circumscribed region of his experiential possibilities, reasons for living, even as he is bereft of the capacity to articulate them critically.

That the person facing such degeneration might kill himself, on the other hand, does not violate any substantial moral demand. And we would not be wrong to aid him then. The two actions, aiding the person in his preventive suicide, and annihilating the demented on the authority of their will prior to dementia, are significantly different.

It is tempting to deploy the claim (canvassed in the previous chapter, in a different context) that the demented one is not the same person as the pre-demented inhabitant of his frame. That he should, prior to sinking into dementia,

end his life, is rather like his aborting the person he'll otherwise become. And so is permissible. From this permissibility follows the permissibility of aiding him in ending his life[6]. But the killing or letting die of the contented demented person towards whom he stands in a begetter relation is another matter. He is now gone, and what remains before us and quite real, is a being possessing interests, wishes, a being to whose welfare we are obliged to attend. We mayn't, after all, take the lives of children whose mothers had intended, but failed, to abort.

Still, can we not say that it is a bad thing *for the man himself* that *he* has fallen into so pitiable a state, a state that was the very thing he dreaded to become? Are we to square this with the "different person" line by looking upon his demented successor as being the sort of misfortune for him that a child who has turned out badly would be? This seems like a contorted, unconvincing bit of reasoning. So the different person line breaks down.

The principle that we ought, when deciding for a person who has become incapable of deciding for himself, to make the choices he'd want made, is quite compelling. Sometimes the making out of what those choices are is very difficult. This will be so when there is a paucity of evidence as to what the one now unable to decide would have wanted. This is so most especially when there is reason to doubt that the person really knew, or possessed suitably authoritative beliefs about, what he would have wanted. The change in circumstance is so great that it is foolishness to suppose that the person, in his normal state, could adequately grasp what he would want. The knowledge required for such a counterfactual to

be true is knowledge he does not have. But this line, too, is of little help in the dementia case. Some dreaded afflictions turn out to be less unendurable, more welcoming to rich and worthwhile life, than anticipated or imagined. Paraplegia is said to be of this sort. Dementia is not of this sort, for reasons which conform well to Dworkin's account. Leaving aside that the condition of the demented is often terribly unhappy, one dreads dementia because of what one's wants will be in that state, not because they will be difficult to satisfy.

I take the dementia case to support the giving of non-zero weight to extinct past intentions, despite my view that such intentions mayn't be acted upon. We should consider a case in which the past intention may be taken to override that of the present. Jolene is pregnant. She is diagnosed with cancer. Chemotherapy offers her a 60% chance of survival, but will terminate her pregnancy. She declines it, preferring to have the child. Late in her pregnancy the cancer worsens. Jolene has a very short time left. The fetus is quite healthy. Her doctors can save it; they want to perform a Caesarean section. Without the operation, both mother and fetus will die, the final collapse of the body upon which it depends being predictably lethal to the fetus. Jolene refuses the surgery. It seems on balance a bad thing to accede to her refusal. I believe the case for the incorrectness of such deference can be made on the basis of Jolene's own interests and will. The deep commitment her own choices show surely ground well the conviction that it is her own deepest interests and project one serves if one does not defer to her present declaration.

Any case of this sort can arouse strong opposition to the view here advocated from some of those concerned about the domination of women and the problems of abortion and its atavistic politics. The understanding they may offer of the course of action I am advocating is that it leaves Jolene in her dying violated, her dignity as well as her abdomen the object of a violent assault. Such an understanding of the case seems to me to require a deafness to Jolene's different voice, when she deliberated, declared her intention and embraced her project in the most categorical fashion possible.

We can, I believe, distinguish this case from the many superficially similar and morally outrageous cases in which women, and patients generally, have been subjected to treatment against their will. Contemplation of such cases and acquaintance with the excesses of medical paternalism may lead one away from the choice to perform the Caesarean.

Through the presentation of examples, I hope to have established the reasonableness of believing that dead past intentions are not, for purposes of deliberation, weightless. That they are past does not mean that they do not count. Our attention, thus far, has been upon the intentions of particular individuals. The claim I have made is that past intentions have bearing upon those individuals' own good. Inquiry into the bearing of the individual's past upon his good opens the door to the wider, embarrassingly nebulous and enormous ethical problematic of the collective past, *our* past. In what ways and to what

degree, if any, should the things and thoughts of our predecessors matter to us? It is to that problematic that I now wish to turn.

What I intend by 'the ethical problematic of the collective past' is expressed with terse beauty in these lines from the New Testament. "Others have labored and ye are entered into their labors."[7] I take these words to apply to all of us; they say something about our situation that we should heed. Their relevance is not at all restricted to those who take themselves to be members of an elect group that is privy to the true purport of our history.

In case the brevity and poetry of John's words, or their association with the forces of darkness, irritate or confuse, let me spell out the obvious, and as I think obviously important, facts to which I take them to allude. The languages we speak, such knowledge as we possess, the manners in which we order our relations with one another, the ways in which we adorn ourselves, the arrangements of tones or hues we employ to give shape and intelligibility to our inner lives, the means we employ to get sustenance from the earth, the terms in which we understand the largest and deepest of our tasks, are all, in greatest part, a hand me down. The world we live in was made by the dead. And so are the thoughts, or anyhow the materials of thought, with which we understand that world. All this being the case, we are surely "entered into" the labors of others who have preceded us. We are reapers of what others have sown.

If there were a "true" purpose to "the labors we are entered into", then we might take ourselves to have a straightforward duty. The duty in question would

be the completion of the labors, the realization of their intended fruit, their end or ends. Questions, deep questions, would then arise as to how we come to be bound to realize projects not of our choosing. The past is not something we consent to, so why should we accept its putative dictates? Why should we allow ourselves to be "entered into" the labors of our predecessors? Should we not rather resist them as a kind of forced labor?

The question of how we might be obliged to carry forward purposes not our own, purposes we have been 'entered into' without our consultation, much less our consent, may be held at bay, however. That there are such purposes is something we might well be able to convince ourselves of. But on the face of it the aims of our predecessors, taken all together, are not a possible object of action. The project of realizing those aims appears to be an incoherent one. Our predecessors' purposes form no more of a unity than do those of our contemporaries. The fulfillment of their conflicting ends would be a multiply contradictory state of affairs. We might try to discern bases upon which to select from among the conflicting purposes of our predecessors some coherent set of aims that we ought to try to further. Such a project faces grave skeptical challenges. How, for example, could a selection from among the aims of the numberless dead avoid being arbitrary, or avoid being merely a reflection of present taste and so not truly a taking up of past persons' causes but instead a trite adorning of present purposes in historical finery. The project is, nonetheless, one possible response to the debt we have to the past.

This debt, of course, is to generations that did not, by and large, perform their burdensome labors with the end in view of making our lives go well. It is true that remembrance, fame and the wish to benefit those to come have been among the motives behind some of our predecessors' grandest, as well as some of their most dubious, undertakings. But these explicitly future regarding efforts amount to only a small part of what we have been given. Because of this we are to some extent unlike ungrateful children if we ignore the degree to which the goods we currently enjoy are the bequeathal of those who have come before us. And of course the ways and means of living and enjoying which are our inheritance are anything but an unmixed blessing: error, inanity, and injustice are an ample portion of our legacy. We are, nonetheless, inheritors who shall in turn pass on an altered world to our successors. All who inherit face the burden of answering the question "What have you made of that which was given you?"

If there is a debt, then our minimal duty is to acknowledge it. There is a debt. I leave it to the reader to draw the conclusion. Doubt may arise about the premise's truth, or uncertainty as to its meaning. Where does the duty come from and what does 'acknowledgment' come to? As to the first question, consider what *failure* to acknowledge means. It is an insult. It is ingratitude, a vice. Failure to acknowledge the inherited character of the human world is implicitly pretending to an absolute self-creation. The reality of our predecessors' vast strivings is in effect denied, and this amounts to a denial of *their* reality. In general, denying the reality of other persons is a grave offense. And it is an

offense that often boomerangs upon the offender. In the present case, to see ourselves as absolutely self created, to see the present as created *ex nihilo* , or worse, as not created at all, is a radical misapprehension of ourselves. "You are nothing", we say to the ancestors, in effect, when we fail to acknowledge them. The other side of this coin seems to be the delusional assertion "We are everything." As to the second question–what does acknowledgement come to– I will try to make a case for the view that acknowledgment comes to a fair bit.

One might think that it comes to very little. A sound upbringing will of course apprise a person that her world hasn't sprung full blown from out of nowhere, nor has it eternally been as it now is. A general sense that the present world has a history, fleshed out here and there with particular stories of the struggles, sufferings, and accomplishments of past persons, can be implanted in the young easily. The minimal duty makes minimal demands, has few costs. Furthermore, this sceptical line of thought continues, the alternatives to this view are absurd. Imagine that Peter buys Petra, his girlfriend, a lovely silk dress. Should this occasion grateful reflection by the couple upon the Persian monks who long ago smuggled in their walking sticks the eggs of the silkworm out of China and so introduced sericulture to the West?

Well, the duty is undoubtedly an imperfect one. The objection just broached insinuates that a strong reading of acknowledgment would yield a demand for total and perpetual recollection. The task of total recollection is, apart from its incompletability, a crazy and destructive undertaking. No

individual would wish–save for some extraordinary circumstance of the sort philosophers and writers of strange fictions are wont to concoct–to remember *every* moment of his life. The task of acknowledgment that concerns us here is a collective one, but what is true of the individual is here true of the collective as well. A society, call it Rememberland, which had total recollection as its supreme, pervasive, and dominant project would after a fashion abolish its present and would deplete its future. Houses would be built, food produced, and citizens reproduced, but the energies of the populace beyond those required for sustenance would be relentlessly devoted to discovering more of the past and propagating its memory. Each person's life would be devoted to the recollection of the lives of others and to that recollection's transmission to other recollectors. In Rememberland it would be the present, not the past, that is dead. The duty of acknowledgment does not conclude in any such mad, impossible place. Rememberland gives us the picture of a human past *usurping* the present and the future, not of a human present that acknowledges its station between the future and the past.

Activities of remembrance, of preservation and of conservation: it is these which I take the past, as it were, to ask of us. And these are not costless. Of course these demands of acknowledgment must compete, in any given present, with other purposes. And the *ought* of acknowledgment must be weighed against competing *oughts*. I take for granted that the present state of humankind is sufficiently affluent that there is good room, in our ethical budget, for the

devotion of significant resources to activities of recollection and preservation. This is not to deny that in the present world numerous needs than which none could be more urgent–needs begotten by disease, war, and poverty–remain unmet. But it is not our affection for ancestral things and ways which leads to this neglect of our contemporaries. Frivolity, greed, failures of imagination and sympathy, along with a good measure of uncertainty, in many cases, as to how present evils are to be overcome without creating even greater ones, are the principal culprits. A certain sort of moralist might object to giving our energies to the preserving and remembering of our lost worlds, or on the granting to such activities the weight of any moral ought, on the ground that living human needs have absolute priority. Such an objection would be misguided, for the reasons just given. And the denial of high importance to anything but the relief of human suffering reflects nearly as perverse a system of values (even if not nearly as vicious a one) as does the blithe ignoring of such suffering by those privileged to spend their time and energies upon grander and finer things.

Artifacts frequently outlive their makers. Made things–texts, temples, tombs–remain after their authors and builders have died. Intentionally or inadvertently, they are a means by which the persons of the world's former stages live with us and speak to us. It is, among other things, historical piety that says we ought to keep them. It is not *only* historical piety that motivates their perpetuation, of course.

We may believe, for instance, that the Mayan ruins at Palenque should be preserved. Part of our reason for believing this is that the ruins are exceedingly beautiful, that is to say beautiful *now*. That is not primarily a reason that depends upon their pastness. Were a perfect replica of those ruins to be constructed, however, we should not then be indifferent to the destruction of the original. The ruins are preserved in the name of knowledge and that too might appear to be a value other than that of being rightly related to the past. But it is not very plausible that we could take historical knowledge to be worth pursuing without in so doing expressing an attitude toward the past. It is not as if we regard knowledge as a value all independently of what that knowledge is knowledge of. To want to know the life and thought of the people who built the Jaguar throne is to take knowing of them, those past people, to be a valuable thing. One hears it said that historical knowledge has pragmatic value, that it can provide guidance for present action. This is no doubt true, but it does not account for the value we find in such activities as the deciphering of the script of the ancient Mayans. It accounts for only part, at that perhaps a small part, of the value such knowledge is taken to have.

It is likely not to have failed to occur to the reader that the Mayans are not especially "others whose labors we are entered into", if anyhow by 'we' is meant persons sharing the heritage of Western civilization. They belong to a branch of the human family whose grander accomplishments have been overtaken and laid waste to, indeed by that very Western civilization and with considerable

cruelty and injustice. Their descendants still live, precariously continuing elements of the great culture that flowered in the Central American jungles and highlands long ago. But it is not the case, apart from fruits of the land and labor that have been stolen from them, that we are direct beneficiaries–inheritors– of the long ago flowering of their culture. So the element of gratitude which constitutes one ground of the duty of acknowledgment might be thought absent, in the case of Palenque.

There is, though, a denotation of 'we' that includes both latter day European descended preservers of the inscriptions and the number- and star-obsessed human sacrificers who built them. There is reason, in the present context, to embrace this wide denotation sense of 'we'. The present condition of the world drives the varied branches of humankind into a common fate, so much so that the image of branches is less apt, for certain purposes, than is the image of converging streams. Economic and technological changes are occurring with a convulsive rapidity that tends to sever our links to what has gone before. Memory is in many respects at risk in unprecedented ways. More stable portions of history than the present one find ways and understandings passed on and preserved in a semi-conscious fashion, continuities with forebears preserved in the normal course of life. Such continuities are being eroded and abolished at dizzyingly accelerating rates. So the attempt explicitly to preserve the past–its things, its words, some memory of its ways– has, in the present present, a peculiar urgency. And means of preservation are available to us, thanks to our

affluence and technology, which our predecessors lacked. Our ability to remember is enhanced, even as the forces of amnesia are strengthened. We are human beings, living in a single world. We are now being driven to a shared fate, for better or worse. We are, apart from that, sharers of a common essence–an essence, to be sure, which in its manifestations exhibits a tremendous plasticity. Pathos, as well as an *aporia*-like puzzlement, strikes us as we confront the variety of forms the lives, expressions, aims of humankind have taken. Sameness and difference, the alien and the recognizable, are simultaneously present when we regard our past fellowmen's histories and productions.

These last considerations in favor of the wide reading of 'we' in the context of our relation to the past move us away from the theme of acknowledgment, to more self regarding reasons for protecting the remnants of past persons' lives and attending to their histories. Self-understanding is to be had through these activities, of a sort whose philosophical explication is not simple or free from controversy. That we understand ourselves by grasping the processes through which we have become as we are, is probably the most readily understandable of the ways in which self understanding is linked to an understanding of the past. But, as the Mayan example illustrates clearly, there are reasons apart from the cognitive virtue of grasping the genesis of the present for taking the things made and done by past persons to contribute to our self-understanding. The recognition of humanity within the otherness of the shapes our life has taken at other times and places seems a *sui generis* kind of human

understanding, not reducible without remainder to, say, the formulae of belief desire explanation. We are given a chastening and broadening sense of what we are, through our attention to these other things which we have been. We are, thereby, perhaps, warned against making humankind in our own image.

The historian Burckhardt wrote "It is self-evidently the special duty of the educated to perfect and complete, as well as they can, the picture of the continuity of the world and mankind from the beginning. This marks off conscious beings from the unconscious barbarian. The vision of both past and future is what distinguishes human beings from the animals; and for us the past may have its reproaches, and the future its anxieties, of which the animals know nothing."[8] In this stern, romantic passage we find historical understanding held up as something without which our humanity cannot be adequately realized. There is, certainly, much with which one might quarrel, and much that one might question in Burckhardt's claim. The legitimacy, in particular, of the analogy between the individual's grasp of herself as possessed of a past and a future, her not being human were she to lack such a grasp, and the grasp by ourselves of ourselves as having a past and a future, our grasp of our historicity, as being necessary to our existence as "conscious" beings is, perhaps, not self evident. (One might, as well, object to the reference to "the" picture of the continuity of the world, on the ground that no single such picture shall ever come to our possession, but only a ceaseless contest of such pictures. This objection I take to be hyperbolical, both in general and as an objection to

Burckhardt in particular since the Swiss historian was quite sensitive to the play of perspective upon historical appearances. In general, the hope that one might construct historical narratives that possess objectivity is not a forlorn hope, even if one must concede that such narratives are liable to be anchored in a particular valuational point of view. There is a great distance between "difficult" and "impossible". A good deal of bargain basement scepticism hinges upon the denial of that distance, the conflation of the former and the latter. Nor does the persistence of well-nigh ineliminable controversy regarding the significance of this or that particular episode or figure warrant our abandonment of the aspiration to grasp objectively the course of past doings and sufferings.) I do not know, really, how to argue conclusively for the merit of Burckhardt's view. But the image of persons of a given present who take that present, its conditions and assumptions, to be all they need concern themselves with, who take as irrelevant the conditions and assumptions with which historical others have confronted the tasks of life, is a morally disquieting, even a repulsive, image. For such persons see only themselves, and to see *only* oneself is, aside from everything else that may be said against it, exactly *not* to see oneself. This criticism does, however, appear to condemn morally those who, because of exigencies, isolation, or other reasons, find themselves creatures of a present, lacking consciousness of an historical past. But it is not the same thing to refuse historicity as to have it effectively unavailable to one. The barbarians are blameless, when they have not chosen that condition. We may envy them. But so too may we envy the animals,

without for a moment endorsing the deliberate descent into their condition. It must be borne in mind that these remarks leave open the question of exactly who is and who is not a barbarian. They are not intended to suggest that historical memory is a moral cure all, either.

Amnesia does have its sober advocates. Those most obviously beholden and loudly devoted to historical memory tend, as often as not, to be partisans of ancient hatreds who would find expression of their piety in vengeance. A world without memory may readily seem preferable to one in which the role of consciousness of the past is the resurrection of hells. Attachment to the past, even when it is not bloodthirsty, has an air of the irrational about it. The 'traditional' is one of the antonyms of the 'rational'. The ways of those who've preceded us have seemed to some so pervaded by an array of disvalues that they are better forgotten and replaced by the new and more rational understanding that the present makes available.

The amnesiasts may go on to note the selective character of those elements of history which are chosen, in any given time and place, as the favored objects of recollection. History turns out to be, insofar as it is a lively power in the present, not the impartial record of what past persons have done and undergone, but rather an edifying tale of heroes and villains which bears only a tenuous resemblance to the actual past. That history which grips the imagination is, on the amnesiast's view, itself largely imaginary. It is a thing more of fiction than of

fact. Our progress to a world actually better requires the dismissal of such illusions.

The complaints of the amnesiasts, aside from ignoring the role of counter-histories in furthering our moral improvement, depend upon the assumption that the principal ways in which we can be consciously connected to our predecessors are pathological. That historical imagination exhibits the pathologies upon which they base their case against concern with the past is not to be denied. What the defender of historical piety must claim is that sane and progressive modes of recollection and acknowledgment of the past are possible. This, surely, is not a utopian thing to believe. It ought as well to be noted that fantasy and pathological illusions are constant enemies of our being rightly connected to one another: the people of the past are scarcely the only ones whose reality is frequently subordinated to the demands of the solipsising self. Contemplate the relations of men and women in this regard: a tortured dialectic of the imaginary and the actual afflicts them chronically. (I disregard here the more benign ways in which we make of one another creatures of imagination and the intricate complicities such processes involve.) Past persons differ from present persons with respect to such matters mainly in that they cannot protest their appropriation by the imagination. But this does not support any argument for forgetting them.

Preservation may seem a matter of small importance for a reason fairly deeply rooted in our culture. The Hindu trinity of Gods has Creator, Preserver,

and Destroyer. Giving preservation a significance equal to creation is quite alien to the culture of the West, it seems. The doctrine of continuous creation, which has it that the world is sustained from instant to instant by creative acts of God no less momentous than (perhaps in some sense identical to) the divine deeds recounted in Genesis, indeed seems to bestow a sense of awesome significance upon preservation, but only by means of assimilating it to creation. Descending from the theological plane to the human, founders, originators, inventors and so forth possess tremendous prestige in the cultural imagination. It is their stories which are remembered most avidly, their acts which are honored most highly. The preservers, by and large, lack any comparable regard. This suggestion is offered with considerable tentativity.

I have tried to argue for the significance of recollection and preservation. Interest in the past is a human disposition, of variable potency depending on circumstances of time and place. It is commingled, in a given individual or in a given culture, with an array of motives and purposes, and is unlikely too often to be met with in a pure state. I take it to be quite a bit more, despite its propensity to ally itself with our conceited fantasies, than simply one of the good things whose exercise or fulfillment is optional. A given individual, certainly, might be wholly indifferent to the past and lead an exemplary life. But attention to the past is called for by a variety of virtues. Justice demands that we give to those who gave our world to us their due. Courage demands that we face the difficulties of our genesis and our nature, as we seek wisdom, which requires us

to know ourselves. Fidelity, too, requires something of us in our relations to the past.

But to what shall we be faithful? With this question we return to the notion that there are projects begun before our lives began, to which we owe allegiance. We have looked at some problems that such a claim faces. Here are some more. It is to the good that fidelity is ultimately owed. Our choice of undertakings ought to be governed by their worth, not in the consequentialist sense that one ought always to do the very best thing, but in the more limited sense that it is the goodness of an undertaking which qualifies it for our allegiance. If a project begun long ago warrants our participation, that is because it is a good thing to do, not because it was begun long ago. We'll call this 'the good objection' to the claim that we owe it to our predecessors to continue their works.

The 'good objection' adverts to a problem raised at the outset of this discussion, the problem of selecting from the plethora of projects bequeathed to us. It is pretty plain that an historical pedigree does not give us any reason to continue a practice if that practice is a bad one. Nor, we may think, does it give us reason to continue a practice or project if there is a better practice or project to hand. But this last thought, if reflected upon, discloses complexities in the notion of continuing. If a technique or method *for the achievement of a given end* is supplanted by one that is better, then the project which the old ways had served

is being continued. And often projects and practices are continued, but the ends they serve are transformed.

The 'good objection' is not, to my mind, to be rejected because of its somewhat platonistic formulation, though I can imagine persons of particularist bent objecting to its being said that something called 'the good' is the proper object of our faithfulness. But it does fail. It is a *non sequitur*. That practices and projects are to be judged worthy of continuing on account of their goodness, or unworthy of continuation on account of their badness, is true. This simply does not rule out continuity itself as a good. Its goodness is, to be sure, defeasible. But that is a familiar fact about goods generally. And it is a substantial bad if we waste our predecessors' labors.

We present persons are also predecessors. The question of how we ought to think about, and act in response to, the fact of our being inheritors receives part of its answer from our attitude toward those who shall succeed us and inherit from us. The usual manner in which moral philosophical questions about future persons are raised is as some variant on the question of what we owe to them. I wish to start here with the not unrelated question of what we might take them to owe to us. Suppose we present persons have built something fine: a law, a theory, a story, a dwelling, a bridge, a game. If we contemplate the fine thing being nullified, forgotten, razed, or in whatever way destroyed by our successors, and we imagine further that this destruction is careless and not a response to need or other weighty reasons, shouldn't we be aggrieved? Of

course, an expectation that the things we make shall be given "immortality" can be pathological or absurd. But the thought of fine embroidery being used as a receptacle for filth, the thought of a carefully crafted law being altered in order that the powers of a particular moment should gain ephemeral advantage, or the thought of knowledge frivolously lost offends and wounds us. If these imaginings tell us something about what we should expect of our successors, then they equally reflect what we owe to our predecessors. To think otherwise would be inconsistent.

If we imagine a disaster pushing our species to extinction, where does the evil of that greatest of evils lie? Let's make our disaster slightly unreal, for the sake of clarity. The genetic engineer of the instrument of our doom has devised a universal euthanasia bacterium. Everyone will get a good death, in the sense that the prelude to extinction will be quite unlike that brought to us by other plagues: instead of a death agony, the last people will experience a death ecstasy of incomparable sublimity. The last days of humankind on earth are, in this scenario, the happiest we've ever known, a rapturous annihilation. Where, in this case, which withdraws the suffering of the last persons from the reckoning of the evil of the end of the human world, is that evil to be found? In all that is lost, of course. And the question arises "lost to whom?" To those who would have lived, we may wish to reply. But they, given the success of the wicked endeavor, are denizens of non-being. As such, we cannot say–barring Meinongian

commitments–that they have lost anything. It is the people who lived, the past actuals, to whom a loss can be ascribed without metaphysical shenanigans.

This suggests to me the consequence that there is a respect in which, as is often said for reasons bad and good, our lives are not wholly our own. There are ways of leading a life not one's own that are a very bad thing, a kind of bondage. But if we consider that there are things entrusted to us, which have their life in, or better, *through* us, if we attend to our lives under the aspect of our being builders of something the building of which began before us and continues after us, why need this oppress us? Why need it stand opposed to our leading lives which are in every proper and needful sense, our own? To continue the past works is not in general simply to repeat them, after all.

All of which may sound quite grandiose, and a bit vague as well. Most of what we do just does not look to have world historical significance. But the teaching of a lovely song to a child, a song that was first sung by grandfathers of that child's grandfathers, does not pretend to be an act of world historical significance, is no piece of grandiosity. As to vagueness, I plead *nolo contendere* . It is only the charge that the claims above made are vague to the point of emptiness that I would resist. Much of the past is not dead, unless we kill it. Such killings, I have tried to argue, are *ceteris paribus* a bad thing. Of course much of the past is such as nothing can be done about it: I cannot beget the child a lonesome cowboy longed for in 1875.

In there being "nothing to be done" about aspects of the past we will find one answer to a problem Derek Parfit raises for the TNT, a variation on the dead past problem which we will call the 'perspectival asymmetry argument'. To it I wish now to turn.

In the course of an extremely scrupulous and ultimately agnostic examination of temporal neutrality in Part Two of Reasons and Persons, Parfit, echoing a puzzle posed by Prior in a paper opposing tenseless theories of time[i], asks us to imagine a patient in a hospital bed conversing with a confused nurse. The nurse is unsure which of two charts is that of the patient. One chart has a patient enduring, without anesthesia, ten hours of surgery on the previous day. The other has a patient shortly to be wheeled to the Operating Room for three hours of therapeutic agony. Neither the nurse nor the patient knows which of these charts is the patient's. (The patient's uncertainty is secured by the philosophico-pharmaceutical artifice of post-operative administration of amnesia medicine to those who undergo the procedure.) The patient very well knows which fate he'd *rather* were his. His secure preference for suffering more on the previous day over suffering less in the near future is one which few persons would fail to share. This preference, which it would appear bizarre to call irrational, contradicts the putative dictate of reason, foundational to the TNT, that we choose the better life. Three hours of agony, though bad, are not as bad as ten. Our man in the bed is exhibiting a preference for the worse, a preference which an external view must condemn as irrational.

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[i] A.N. Prior "Thank Goodness That's Over" *Philosophy* 34, 1959, pp.12-17.

So much the worse, we are invited to conclude, for the external view. The argument depends upon a deep asymmetry that exists between our attitudes towards what is, as we say, before us and what is behind us. It rests on the radically temporally perspectival stance which we take towards certain kinds of experience of good and ill. Temporal perspectivality, in particular the granting of special weight to the view "from now", is exactly what the TNT opposes. In this sort of case, however, such opposition scarcely seems a demand of reason. It seems, rather, altogether reasonable to be relieved when a bad or difficult experience is over. Certainly it would in many ways be bad for us if we were not relieved, if temporal propinquity "from behind" occasioned the same, or comparable, sorts of discomfort as does anticipation of disagreeable experiences. And we may think that the adoption of an attitude or pattern of response which is bad for us, or the rejection of a pattern of response which is good for us, to be on its face irrational.

The neutralist may answer the challenge Parfit's tale presents with several arguments. The first, alluded to above, claims that certain peculiarities of the story severely limit its relevance to questions of what is practically rational. Call this the 'irrelevance' objection. The second is not so much an argument flat out against the point the story wishes to make as an observation -interesting on its own account-as to the narrowness of the axiological phenomena to which it even has hope of applying. Call this the 'narrowness qualification'. The third is an attack upon perspectivality itself. Call it the 'perspectivality objection.' The fourth

claims that the emendation of the TNT towards which the perspectival asymmetry argument draws us is patently unacceptable. Call this the 'defeat of agency 'objection.

The first neutralist response, 'irrelevance', reminds us that the patient in the bed exhibits a preference which is impotent to issue in a choice. This surely limits the story's relevance to our understanding of practical rationality, which is, after all, concerned with correct deliberation, with how it is we may decide rightly what to *do*. There is nothing he can do about his situation. Our patient's preference could have direct practical relevance only in a world in which backward causation occurs regularly. It is, though quite fanciful, not without point to ponder what rational agency might look like in such a world. Assuming what is not at all obvious, that we could form any intelligible picture of agency under nomological conditions which differ in this profound way from those which obtain in the actual world, it seems to me that a world in which we might causally influence the past would drive rational agents ineluctably to neutralism. The actual world grants persons at earlier periods of their lives the power to limit the possibilities they will later have available to them. Present concern for the future may be regarded as, in part at least, a means by which we defend ourselves against the tyrannical tendencies to which the present's monopoly of causal power give rise. A world in which all causation worked from future to past has no bearing on our present concern, though it is perhaps not without interest. In a world with two way causality an agent at any given time would

need most desperately to "make a deal" with those other stages of her self whose choices might affect her in innumerable important ways. Present Edwina, for instance, would, in a world of backwards-forwards causation, not merely be called upon to inculcate solidarity with Future Edwina so as not to impose undue sufferings or constrictions of possibility upon the latter. She would in addition need to protect herself against future Edwina's attempts to tamper with her welfare. If a person regularly engaged in backwards deferment of unpleasant experiences, that person might render her past so dismal as to provoke an attempt at suicide during that past period which she has made a dumping ground for miseries. Of course, the attempt would fail, lest it render its cause non-existent. But lesser retaliations of the past against the future's neglect of its welfare would not be subject to necessary failure.

The point of this flight of fancy, which we entertain while remaining uncommitted to its metaphysical possibility, is that the patient's preference, were it made a genuine object of deliberation, would more likely than not be different. Rational agency in a world of temporally bi-directional causation would be neutralist.

It is probably worth noting, as within the ambit of this 'irrelevance' objection to the perspectival asymmetry argument, that Parfit turns our attention to experiences that are quite atypical in order to effect his persuasive purpose. Through the whimsical device of induced post-operative amnesia, Parfit contrives to present us with a preference between experiences that do not ramify.

The two periods of pain are presented as isolate clusters of awful qualia, dispossessed of relevance to the overall quality of the life of which they are possible parts. As such, they do not well resemble–in a way that matters–many of the sorts of experience from among which we, in actual life, must choose. Experience as we have it is not, by and large, atomistic. It does not consist of discrete parts that are but the neighbors of their successors and predecessors. It is more deeply unified than that. Or so, anyway, many of us find it.

Parfit famously embraces a neo-Humean account of personal identity that is sceptical of the self's unity, or anyhow of the notion that such unity as a self possesses over time is as deep and significant a matter as it has been taken to be. We might take his choice of atomistic experiences in the story of the two operations as a tendentious anticipation of, or a covert appeal to, the disuniting account of personal identity that he favors.

That being said, it can't convincingly be denied that human beings are frequently in the grip of temporally future biased attitudes. Noting that we have a tendency to wish that the good things be before us and the bad behind, we may fail to note that this bias is not at all our natural attitude toward all goods and ills. Many of the things we value we naturally value in a thoroughly temporally neutral way. A composer, a philosopher or for that matter a cabinet maker would in the normal case prefer having produced something truly fine and rare in the past to producing something which is merely OK in the future. Having written *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* some time ago would presumably be happier for a noted

philosopher of mind who called that work "the book [he] most wishes [he] had written" than writing *Psychosemantics*, an actual work of his that is quite able and charming but hardly epochal, next year.[10] Examples of this sort might easily be multiplied. They are the basis of the 'narrowness qualification.'

Some kinds of good are interestingly variable in the temporal attitudes that they call forth. One might suppose, for example, that the satisfaction of gustatory or sexual appetites is subject to future temporal bias. But this is not always the case. Erotic connoisseurs might prefer having had trysts with the likes of Tallulah Bankhead or Casanova to the prospect of numerous lesser liaisons in the future. A meal superlatively exquisite, cooked by the finest chef, might be preferred in a temporally neutral way to an abundance of very good meals. Which shows us something about our capacity to transform values which have their origin in one domain (appetite) into values belonging to another (say, expression.) *Vis a vis* temporal neutrality the lesson to be learned is that goods of achievement are strongly resistant to temporal bias. Insofar as we hold to the traditional line that such goods are "higher" than the paltry benefits of transient pleasures, then temporal neutrality finds itself one of the marks of higher good. Certainly one can make the case that the devotee of virtue ought to prefer the attainment of the highest moral excellence, or the performance of the more morally worthy deed, without regard to its temporal location in her life.

Or perhaps this last example strikes you as odd. Comparing moral achievement with achievements of other sorts might look as if it implies some

sort of contest for a gold medal, which does not suit virtue nearly so well as it suits gymnastics. Virtue sought for such a motive would be undermined. But this misconstrues, not the pursuit of virtue, but the pursuit of other excellences. Why, ideally, does the cabinet maker wish to make a cabinet of unexampled fineness or the athlete a leap of unprecedented length? Because a kind of *eros* drives him toward the fineness of these achievements. The role of vanity is secondary: it is only because the thing made or done is fine that vanity might come into play at all. Further, we must ask how it could be taken as an indication of a lack of vanity if a person bore a temporally asymmetric attitude towards her virtue. Were she unwilling to risk a future descent into corruption for the sake of an extremely morally good state, surely we'd be justified in taking her reluctance as an instance of moral vanity, or cowardice. We'd not take it as evidence of the strength of her commitment to virtue. (I am imagining here cases which find a task needing to be done, with near certainty that, if it is done, it will realize a great good. But the hazards of the task threaten to mar the person's character.)

The perspectival asymmetry argument does not even appear to apply to a great deal of what we most care about.

And its very perspectivality should, we may think, call it into question. Before the event, that is to say well before the event, the patient would choose the briefer procedure. Well after the event he would, if indeed he were not indifferent about the matter, prefer to have had the briefer procedure. These observations may be of limited force. Parfit's story is designed precisely to make

persuasive the rationality of some promptings of present want, regardless of their failure to be congruent with past and future want, so any attempt to impugn those promptings' rationality which appeals to their intertemporal incongruity is going to be circular. I doubt that it is viciously so. And there is yet another incongruity, noted by Parfit, which the perspectival asymmetry exhibits. We are less temporally biased towards the sufferings and joys of those we care about than we are about our own sufferings and joys. The pain of the ones we love often enough pains us little less for its being past. This is odd–if the ones we love are like ourselves, then *they* care less about their past pains and logical sympathy ought, one would think, to conform to the patterns of caring of those about whom we care.

(Except of course in such cases as find their patterns of caring deviating harmfully from their good. But to make this claim about our temporally biased unconcern with past goods really is implausible. For our unconcern is, indeed, good for us. The temporal bias against the past is most flagrant in the case of sensational goods or ills–our attitudes towards physical agony and the pleasures of the senses are its supreme exemplars. We remember very well how horrible or delightful such moments or periods of life had been, but our memory is quite unable to reproduce or vividly to represent the particular qualitative content such moments or periods possessed. Contrast this with, for example, the sort of vividness and force which attaches to the recollection of an event which was the occasion of one's humiliation, or of one's triumph. The feebleness of sensational

memory serves us well *qua* adaptational response subserving our survival. Were the sensual ecstasies of times gone by regularly to present themselves in recollection with the intensity they'd possessed as they were happening, we'd be susceptible to the temptation to substitute the reliable satisfactions of recollection for the precarious pursuit of more of the same. And this would bode ill for our chances at successful reproduction. Physical pain interferes with activity: when severe it monopolizes our attention, when mild it merely distracts us. Anxious anticipation of the painful serves, if quite imperfectly, to help us avoid it. Relief that an episode of suffering is over allows us the more easily to get on with things. All of which suggests that natural selection would favor the temporally biased pattern of response. But this advantageousness should not be thought to settle the question of the pattern's rationality.)

The familiar time bias whose problematic character Parfit has brought to our attention is intertemporally and interpersonally incongruous. It shows itself from one point of view and vanishes from others. An explanation can be found of its presence in us that does not amount to an endorsement of it. This advances the neutralist's case.

But perhaps it is more attractive to emend the TNT in light of this powerful, familiar, unextirpable bias. Toward the present and the future, neutrality is the proper attitude, we may wish to say. They are the temporal scene of our deliberations, which can only so to speak face forward. The past

should not be given weight in our deliberations for the simple and familiar reason that there is nothing to be done about it.

This emendation has a grave shortcoming, however. When we consider that the present and the future are headed towards the past, it becomes clear that a forward restricted temporal neutrality is self-subverting. This is the basis of the 'defeat of agency' objection to the emendation of the TNT.

Consider the situation of the rational agent who reasons that the past, being fixed, is beyond the reach of his actions and so is properly an object of temporal bias. Intentions and experiences which belong to times gone by are, on this view, rationally ignorable, but present and future ought indeed be treated without bias since they are alike within the purview of his effective agency. This person would embrace an indexed neutrality. But he would not long be glad to have done so. As present persons plan their futures they need to rely on their future constancy, their future faithfulness to the course they've chosen. The taking into account of future good of course involves ensuring future fidelity by granting weight, in present planning, to reasons which do not yet obtain. But if aims and reasons originating in the desires and understandings that obtain at the time of planning forfeit–as a matter of principle– any justifiable claim upon the agent, once that time is past, then the planning agent is operating under the specter of futility. To be sure, most persons' personalities are not too terribly labile. There is considerable basis in brute psychological fact for confidence in the rationality of planning. We take this lack of lability to be on the whole a good

thing, however. It is not just one more contingent and intrinsically evaluatively neutral fact about ourselves of which we are obliged to take account.

The notion that reason will condemn a person's present aims, his plans and present actions in furtherance of those aims, to a status of categorical ignorability *just because they are past* is the granting of rational warrant to futility. A past-excluding temporal neutrality pushes us toward an effective nihilism about practical reason. The defeat of agency objection succeeds.

The reader may feel, however, that a questionable move has just been made. We began with a discussion of the dead past, a description that allowed for the existence of a past that is not dead. The defeat of agency objection seems directed, however, at the somewhat different claim that the past is dead. But of course the objection is only directed at an apparently attractive emendation of the TNT that arises in the course of considering the role of past intentions, projects and so on.

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[1] The line here taken about posthumous harms follows the thinking of George Pitcher in "The Misfortunes of the Dead" which is found in John Martin Fischer's anthology *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993) Chapter Nine.

[2] I do not claim to have provided here an exhaustive dichotomous taxonomy of promises. At least one other sort of promise, which does not seem to me to fall easily into either category, readily comes to mind. Often a person will ask another to do or refrain from doing something as a means of affecting the promiser's life. "Promise me you'll not abandon medicine" is an imaginable request of this sort. For promises of this sort to be valid, the would be promissee must, presumably, be in some standing relation to the one he would so obligate

which gives him the moral authority decently to make such a request. Such promises, when valid, strike me as likely to be makings explicit of claims which in some sense already obtain.

[3] Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion* (New York: Knopf, 1993) Chapter Eight.

[4] Charles Taylor 'What is Human Agency?' in *Human Agency and Language Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1985)pp.15-44.

[5] I am thinking here of some remarks of Gauthier *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986) p 18n and Chapter IX.

[6] It is not always the case that it is permissible to aid someone in the commission of an act which it is permissible for them to perform. Abdul is a prisoner of war. Michelle, his captor, does something permissible when she shoots at Abdul's comrades. But Abdul would not be doing something permissible were he to aid Michelle. One must suppose, nonetheless, that permissibility is *prima facie* transmissible from an agent to those who would aid her.

[7]*Gospel According to John*. 4:38

[8] Jacob Burckhardt *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. Oswyn Murray, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998) p.12.

[9] A.N. Prior "Thank Goodness That's Over" *Philosophy* 34 (1959) pp.12-17.

[10] The philosopher in question is Jerry Fodor, his characterization of Goodman's book appears as a blurb on the back cover of its 4th edition. *Psychosemantics* was published by MIT Press in 1989.

Chapter 5

Temporal Axiological Holism and the Futurity of Value

It was held in the previous chapter that one shortcoming of Parfit's patient-uncertain-of-his-fate example is its reliance upon atypically, indeed well nigh unreally, atomistic experiences. The suggestion was made that experiences typically ramify in various axiologically pertinent ways that Parfit's thought experiment ignores, and that this ramifying is something of which account must be taken in an adequate reckoning of the good in, or of, a life. For the neutralist, however, this line of criticism may threaten only to take him "out of the frying pan." The "fires" into which axiological dependencies of part upon whole threaten to land the TNT, as well as ways in which such landing can be avoided, are the topic of the present chapter. Our concern here will be with various holistic characteristics of the ways in which lives can be good, and of the goods in lives. The value of a given element is *holistic* insofar as it depends upon other elements. Holistic value characteristics bear upon the TNT insofar as they (a) conflict with the assumption that value is additive, (b) render obscure, indeterminate or unintelligible the very idea of the value of a given time's contents, or (c) exhibit temporal asymmetry. Examples should clarify the meaning of all this.

Imagine that a book falls from a shelf, and opens upon a certain page. A person who is unacquainted with the text lifts up the book and discovers that Blanche says "I have always relied upon the kindness of strangers." Our chance

reader certainly reads the very same sentence as do readers who arrive at that sentence having begun at the beginning of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and read straight through.[1] But our chance reader certainly does not grasp the same devastating ironic significance as does the reader of the whole play. The point is quite obvious: a given part of experience depends for its significance upon other parts and upon wholes to which it belongs and contributes.

Despite this obviousness of the basic point that the significance of our experiences (and, hence, their value) exhibits contextual dependency, we need to examine in more detail the varieties of such dependency. For it is to be found, we shall see, at several levels and in varied aspects of our lives. From the texture of experience to the architecture of a whole life, and beyond, holistic properties are to be found.

Consider Rachel, who is walking of an afternoon on a tropical beach. The moments of her walk are as vaguely bounded as are the waves and dunes and clouds that surround her. To construct an axiological measure of her outing in an aggregative fashion (i.e. the good of the outing = the good of outing moment m_1 + the good of outing moment m_2 +. . .the good of outing moment m_n) would be wildly misleading. She arrives at a promontory on the beach's far end, from which she regards the path she's just taken. It would be folly to divide this walk on the beach into discrete parts with respect to its value. The walk has parts, to be sure. But its value is not neatly distributed among them. The looking back is a looking back upon the path followed, the following of that path was itself filled

with richnesses of observation that modified each other and was suffused with anticipation of arrival at the very place from which the looking back would take place. The looking back is a looking back upon the places from which she looked forward to that very looking back, is a looking back upon that looking forward to that looking back. Anticipations and retrospections cohabit each of her walk's moments. (One wonders, in light of this—for we take Rachels' walk to be representative of a general character of experience—just what it is that the blithe advocates of "living in the present" really have in mind.) Now suppose that Rachel's afternoon on the beach, a temporal whole whose form I am reluctant to assimilate to the category 'narrative', is an element of her year in the tropics, a yet larger temporal whole which also possesses value of a sort that aggregation of the values of its parts is unlikely to characterize adequately or accurately. Her year in the tropics occurs during a great war which dominates the larger life of the human world to which she belongs. That war will define for her, as a being sensitive to the connectedness of her own life to that of others, yet another temporal whole in which her year in the tropics is ingredient. She is, as well, pursuing a vocation as a naturalist. Her afternoon at the beach, her year in the tropics, are parts as well of a whole that is defined by this vocation. She returns to the beach, at widely separated intervals over many years, to observe changes in its flora and fauna. All these visits constitute a temporal whole as well. So there are scattered objects in our inventory of temporal wholes. There is often a peculiar, consoling enjoyment in the repeated returning to a place and the

resumption of activities there. The times between one's visits can seem as if bypassed or transcended. Though it is either hyperbole or illusion to claim that such experiences "defeat time", they do constitute, through their reorganization of moments along thematic lines, a genuine, if partial and limited, liberation from the tyranny of succession. The Thursday night poker game is equally a possible example of a temporally scattered whole.

These temporal wholes gain their status as wholes, of course, by being in some fashion unified. They exclude such mereological curiosities as we might construct by collecting the first, second, third, fifth, eighth and so on Fridays of a person's life. A person's Fibonacci Friday life, barring an extremely improbable psychological discovery, does not possess the sort of significance that her poker life or her life in Venice can have. The purposes that guide a life are the most obvious source of such unity. However—if the example of the walk on the beach did not make this point evident enough—the sort of unity possessed by the experience of listening to an extended piece of music suggests that there are sources of axiologically relevant unity other than purpose.[2] Persisting background conditions and situations confer a unity upon periods of time that is quite other than that which actions possess by virtue of being subordinated to a purpose.

I have noted so far only the interpenetration of moments' contents, the importance of context and the participation of a given temporal part in more than one temporal whole. Temporal wholes also exhibit temporally asymmetric

axiological structure. Most significant for our purposes here is the power of later and last elements in a whole to reverse or nullify or overcome the value character of that which has preceded them. "All's well" the saying goes, "that ends well." Whether and when this is true would likely require some delicacy to determine, but it is hard to imagine that alien cast of mind which would have it that all is well that *begins* well. Early badnesses of one sort or another can be redeemed by subsequent goods, a stretch of experience which turns out well may be assessed as good in a fashion that discounts those ills which it had contained. In a parallel fashion, affairs and projects that end badly find, often enough, the bad end tainting them entirely. The promising beginning of an enterprise which ends calamitously may indeed seem only to have made that enterprise worse than it otherwise would have been. In such a case we sometimes find a reversal of value: the good part making the whole worse. (Or, perhaps, the whole revealing the goodness of the part to have been illusory.)

The order in which goods and ills come, the pattern of their distribution through a life, can matter as much as their magnitude. If the TNT simply denies this, it is flying in the face of data that seem nearly as hard as any there are in this somewhat nebulous domain. The commonest example of this independent significance of pattern as against quantity in the literature is offered by Lewis, Broad, Slote and Findlay.[3] These authors note the preference we have for inclines over declines, for blossoming over decay. They ask us to imagine two lives, or stretches of experience, which contain equal quantities of good. The two lives are

mirror images of each other. In the first, the life starts at a high point and descends. In the second, the life starts at a low point (quantitatively the very same low point at which the first life ends) and ascends to a point as high as that at which the first life began. Our authors affirm that we are anything but indifferent between the two lives. The second is a better life. Yet its betterness does not appear, so to speak, *in* the graph that measures the goodness it contains.

Yet another way in which later elements may be taken to outweigh earlier is through the interpretations of the earlier that obtain at the later times. Consider some event significant in a person's life. Allow that that event possessed a determinate value at the time of its occurrence. Quite apart from the issue of the consequences of an event for future good or ill, which issue we'll take up presently, the significance and value of the event will not be exhausted within the moments of it happening. It will be recollected at various times, under the varying conditions of the person's life. Sometimes there will be a terminal recollection, one that passes a true verdict on, or issues a final authoritative interpretation of, the recollected happening. For example, one hears remarks made by a teacher in a lecture, remarks which both grip and puzzle one's mind and come back to one from time to time. One day something happens and one finds that *now* one truly understands the thing heard said long before. But the sort of case that is of most interest to us here is not of that kind. Rather, we are here concerned with hermeneutically labile events. The thing that happened undergoes metamorphoses in one's understanding, now betokening good, now

bad. It will not do, in such cases, automatically to give authority to the chronologically terminal (or, more plainly, *last*) interpretation. A youth goes to war for what he takes to be a glorious cause. He has an interpretation of his experience before he enlists. During the war his sense of what he is doing oscillates between disillusion and enthusiasm. After the war his experience is for a time an object of pride, and, as he thinks, a source of understanding and a kind of measure of what life is about. But the political life of his nation goes badly. The cause for which he'd fought is thereby rendered to his mind dubious, and so are rendered dubious the terrors and losses which he'd undergone in service to that cause. Those he'd known who'd avoided participating in the great struggle do far better in the world than he. As a result, his understanding of what he'd done and undergone takes on a still more bitter hue. Yet later in life he gains a pension from his wartime service and gathers with veterans from time to time. Bitterness has faded and pride resumed, the recollected pains and joys of the long ago struggle dwell in a satisfying light. *Qua* source of contentment, it may be a good thing for our veteran that he concludes his understanding in this way. But it does not follow from this, surely, that his final understanding is authoritative or correct.

The axiologically varying consequences of actions over time may raise problems quite similar to those raised by variation in interpretations. (Distinguishing interpretations from consequences does not have the absurd implication that consequences can be understood apart from any scheme of

interpretation. Nor does it require that we deny that the interpretations a person places upon events are consequences, though it is not the case that a person's coming, for example, to regret that he had done a given deed is reliably counted among the consequences of the doing of that deed. The appeal to future regret is, to be sure, one of the commonplace manifestations of the neutralist attitude. Coming to regret having done act A does in the usual case have the doing of act A among its necessary conditions, but that does not entail that the regret is most usefully thought of as a *consequence* of the act.. Suppose, at time t_1, Freddy, a tolerant agnostic struck by the ascetic beauty of a Christian maiden, decides to refuse to throw some Christians to the lions. Years later, a profound hatred of Christianity having taken hold of Freddy's mind, he deeply regrets his earlier refusal. What he had once seen as a principled act, he now regards as a lost opportunity. The change in Freddy's view of Christianity is not a consequence of his earlier refusal: it has arisen from his meditations upon human nature. I think it mistaken to regard his regret simply as a *consequence* of his act.) Suppose, in any case, that we look in a consequentialist way at the good yielded over time by any given item. This yields the dizzying prospect that the axiological character of an action may rise and fall like the needle on a lie detector. The correct judgement upon the value of the things we do may have to wait upon the end of time, if we regard the value of these things done as ultimately and genuinely consisting in the value of their consequences. (Note that here we don't have the

usual sort of an instance of holism: value, in this case, *is* additive. We simply have not arrived, at any given moment, at its sum.)

Our inventory of temporal wholes, though perhaps not complete, is done. The problems they raise, or appear to raise, for the TNT must be addressed in turn. The first of these concerns the additivity of value. Call value additive just in case the value of a whole equals the sum of the values of its parts. (Such summing plainly includes the subtraction of disvalues.) It is characteristic of axiological holisms that they deny additivity. It is not that value is never additive, but that it is not always so, which the characteristic claim of holism. The most influential axiological holism in the literature is that of Moore, whose theory of organic unities was exactly an examination of the non-additive manner in which value contributing elements can combine to create axiological wholes. Moore's concern was not with temporal wholes, but rather with such complex intentional states as delight in the cruel. Delight is good, cruelty bad. But on Moore's account we do not arrive at a correct estimation of the value of an instance of delight in cruelty by subtracting the badness of the cruelty from the goodness of the delight. The whole, quite to the contrary, is *made worse* by the delight. It does not subtract from the cruelty's badness, instead it so to speak multiplies it. (Moore does not speak in this quantitative way. I trust I've not deviated from his meaning.)[4]

The discussion of the axiological interdependency of the parts of an experience owes much to J.N. Findlay and C. I. Lewis. They were both concerned

to give a phenomenologically accurate account of experienced value. And they both took such an account to show to be inaccurate to the point of nonsensicality any Benthamite reckoning of experiential goodness. What is phenomenologically incorrect in the Benthamite felicific reckoning is precisely its attribution of axiological separability and hence additivity to the temporal parts of an experience. Findlay and Lewis, in examinations of value that were conducted separately and from rather different philosophical starting points, emphasized the centrality of *consummations* in experienced value. There exist—though Findlay and Lewis do not use this language —*internal relations* among experienced time's parts' contents. To use one of Lewis's examples, the circus performance seen by the youth who has worked hard to earn the money for the ticket has a value different from that it would have had had he got the ticket in another way. And so too was the labor he engaged in for the purpose of purchasing the ticket infused with qualities it would have lacked had it been conducted for other aims or with other attitudes.

Now this line of thought would be lethal to the TNT were that thesis wedded to the doctrine of the additivity of value. The thesis does find a natural home in that doctrine. It is easiest to comprehend the TNT's demands if we take it that the following sort of claim is true. Boris ought not choose good G of magnitude M over good G' of magnitude M', where M'<M, just because of the time at which G is available. And that sort of claim is most obviously true when

we can compare the goods in question in the straightforward arithmetic fashion that additivity permits.

Benthamite hedonists are hard creatures to find these days. Reasons for this are many. Aside from the objection that not *only* the fluctuations of our sentience are to be counted as the bearers of good, it is plausible to think that the retreat from pleasure stems from reluctance to build a theory of value on the foundation of subjective states, elusive as quicksilver even to those in a position directly to apprehend them and metaphysically hidden from public view.[5] Bentham's account of such states is of course madly unsubtle. It may be unfortunate that the scrutiny of the subjective has been so thoroughly abandoned as it has been, since it is a principal locus of our good. But those who would treat the problem of good's measure in a serious way have not failed to come up with replacements for the hidden thing, replacements more amenable to the demands of objectivity. Additive theories of value of a non-Benthamite sort, theories that would have us maximize the satisfaction of rational preferences, for example, are still robustly with us. Discussions of such theories abound in problems structurally similar to those the Findlay-Lewis critique of Benthamite hedonism reveals. A set of preferences, we are told, is only rational if it is transitive. So one who prefers reading Mann to reading Wolff, and prefers reading Wolff to reading Stone, should prefer reading Mann to reading Stone. Yet we may happen upon a person who violates this preference pattern, who chooses Mann over Wolff, Wolff over Stone and Stone over Mann. And we may find ourselves

reluctant to call our reader irrational for having this preference set. Our reason for such reluctance is likely akin to the reasons Lewis and Findlay offer for rejecting Benthamite calculi. Context influences preference, goods modify each other. Mann's aspects when compared to Wolff are quite different from those that appear when Mann is compared to Stone.

Our concern here is not to deny that transitivity may be a requirement of rationality. Failures of transitivity can amount to failures of consistency, and failure of consistency is a hallmark of irrationality. It is not our intention here to embrace a line of thought that would culminate in nihilism about our ability to judge comparative goodness. Such nihilism is as implausible as it is extravagantly despondent.

Apparent failures of transitivity are resolved by more finely discriminating among the items being ordered. Mann as contrasted with Wolff may be treated as a different object from Mann as contrasted with Stone. The holistic point here is that we must, prior to measuring goods, properly individuate them. If the part cannot be adequately comprehended save as the part of a given whole, then the sensible evaluator ought regard the wholes as the proper objects of comparison. (We must add that, for all that the successive parts of experience depend upon each other for their significance and value, no recognizably human life, at any rate, is relentlessly a continuum in this regard. The blending and interacting elements in our lives are counterbalanced by diverse boundary creating elements, conclusions, realizations of purpose,

transitions and so on. Were this not so, talk of 'wholes' would not be apt. A life that is nothing more or other than a series of crescendoes and diminuendoes along various dimensions is a fit object of fantasy for a voluptuary or phenomenologist; it is not a human life.)

Yet we have suggested that a given experience may participate in a multitude of wholes. This may be so in the way that a given activity may be part of a project that is itself a part of a yet larger project. Or it may be so in the way that a given activity may be a part of more than one project, and may have quite a different worth when viewed in the light of its contribution to one of the projects of which it is a part than it will have when viewed in the light of its contribution to another. Of course, viewed from the standpoint of prudence—mother virtue of the TNT, when that thesis is considered only with reference to an individual's life—there is a master whole before which all others are subordinated, one's life, one's whole life. To that claim we should now turn.

That one of the reasonable, or perhaps necessary, starting points of ethics is the question 'how should one live?' I take to be basic. That that question, in turn, carries within it the presupposition that there is such a thing, or could be such a thing, as a good life, I also take to be basic. It is one's life that one lives—what on earth else? To ask how one should live entails the question 'what is a good life?' Complications are many, here. Though the good life question is reasonably seen as basic, it certainly does not follow from this that all the ethical questions we might raise are to be referred back to this question. And for all that

I take the notion of a good life to be ineluctable and an anchor of ethical reflection, I want to call into question, after a fashion, the notion of a good life as the maximal whole to which our aims ought be subordinated. There is an obvious way of doing this: for all that enabling the living of good lives is, or ought to be, a central aim of various of our institutions and for all that living a good life ought be a dominant aim of rational individuals, it is in ever so many ways and for ever so many reasons often the case that a given individual will rightly subordinate the goodness of her life to some larger thing, will sacrifice it. This, at once supremely important and supremely banal, is not the fact that troubles our present concern. There are things more important than an individual's life. And an individual who fails to recognize this does not well understand her own life. And a life lived without understanding is a poor life. So one might, through such dialectical acrobatics, almost reconcile the sacrifices sometimes required with the living of a good life. This seems at once true and evasive. Our primary concern, in any case, lies elsewhere.

Is there, really, always such a thing as *the* life a person leads? To deny that there is seems, for the most part, to be deceit or evasion or perhaps the mistaking of a metaphorical figure for a fact. Yet consideration of the variety of wholes, thematically or otherwise axiologically unified portions of a life, which are compresent in a given individual's life (call her 'Given'), coupled with a denial of additivity, leads to the result that we may be unable to pronounce upon the goodness of the whole of Given's life. Given lives, lets say, in several spheres. In

some she is radiant. In others her life is quite dismal. Still others find her in various intermediate states. It is imaginable that one could not, in the end, arrive at a determinate judgement as to the good of her whole life: that whole might not resolve the radically different aspects revealed in or by the different and disparate wholes which are, as we sometimes say, the 'lives' she led. While I think the failure of an overall estimate of the good of Given's life is possible, and so the standing of the whole life as a final axiological arbiter is called into question, the drastic step of denying that there is such a thing as her whole life is, indeed, unwarranted.

Whether and how much failures of axiological measurement matter depends, in the end, on what we need measurement for. It is a question of considerable theoretical interest how much we can measure. And perhaps a complete measure of the value of all things is possible in some sense. From a variety of standpoints that we actually occupy, however, any complete measure is unavailable. Most of our choices are made within frameworks that don't demand completeness. Various horizons bound our choices, and an indefinite array of considerations might lead us to call one or another of those horizons into question. Milton decides what he will do on a particular afternoon: the whole of his life is not consciously before him as he makes this choice. It would most likely be dreadful if it were. But this does not preclude the TNT from being an element of the horizons that bound his choice. And if, among the afternoon's prospects there appears one that might damage his future or betray his past, then the

claims of neutrality would rise up. (The claims of morality play a similar role in our practical thinking.) Of course, when we do not know which of two alternatives is better, temporal neutrality is simply irrelevant. Our scepticism, at any rate, about the reckoning of value has arisen in the context of axiological contemplation of whole lives and their parts. Such contemplation should act in some ways as a guide for choice. But the judgements in which it issues are necessarily retrospective; they are not the judgements available to the agent considering his own life and its course from his constrained and partial standpoint..

The attention to context and its complicating relations to identifying *the* value of a given time's contents has a further neutrality challenging feature, quite apart from the problems of separability and additivity. Our lives seem to be axiologically temporally asymmetric inasmuch as later elements matter more than earlier ones. That, of course, was the point of the discussion of the preference for upward axiological movement exhibited in the thought experiment concerning the two stretches of experience equal in amount of contained good but differing in axiological direction (the one gets better and better, the other, less and less good.)

One might try to hold, in defense of the TNT, that the thought experiment involves a covert distortion. The apparently equal segments of the two lives are actually (or would actually be) unequal, on this account, because the imaginers have neglected to include in the measurement all sorts of second order attitudes,

of hope, despair and the like on the part of the persons whose fates are being graphed, as to how things are going. If those reflective responses had been included, the quantities would have come out differently, on this objection. To a given upward movement must be added delight at that movement; from a given downward movement must be subtracted regret or despair at that movement. To this the champions of incline can respond that they are not imagining a simple case of "running the movie backward", which would be absurd, but rather that they can readily include such reflective attitudes in the hypothetical measurement and still come up with the picture of lives equally good as to magnitude of contained good but nonetheless, due to the basic betterness of inclines over declines, lives that are not equally good. In turn, the would be blocker of this line of thought can ask where *in* the graph the betterness of incline is to be found, which is as much as to ask when in the life of the incliner this betterness is disclosed. Of course, his last life segments are better than those of the decliner, so there is in that trivial sense a temporal location of betterness in his life. But if the imagined graphs are supposed to represent goodness overall, and their goodnesses are unequal, then their *areas* ought to differ. If the difference in goodness is wholly a matter of pattern, then it seems a skeptical objection emerges. One is proposing to find goodness in a life that is not located *at* any of that life's temporal parts. If one asks of such goodness "Where is it?", the answer appears to lie outside the life in question. (The problem is not unlike one that confronts some advocates of equality as a basic, non-instrumental moral

value. A pattern of distribution, in this latter case between people rather than between times, is said to be good independently of its contribution to the measurable goodnesses of the elements (in the equality case, the lives of persons) concerned. This can seem troublingly mysterious. If inequality makes someone's life worse, then she will have evident grounds for complaint. But if a pattern of inequality is as such a bad thing, then it looks as if inequality might be bad *without* being bad for anyone. The topic is obviously an enormous one and is broached here only for the light it might shed on the issue at hand.)

This line of resistance to the advocate of incline seems, all things considered, to be a bit of obstinacy, dogged unwillingness to get the point. Brentano held it an *a priori* axiological principle that there is such a thing as a *bonum progressionis*. If A is a situation which finds a movement from lesser to greater good, and B is a situation which finds a movement from greater to lesser good, then it is evident that, even if the sum of goods which A contains is equal to the sum of goods which B contains, A is preferable to B.[6] To this, the resister may wish to reply "mystical claptrap." But this reply seems inadequate, for all that there may be something healthy to scepticism concerning our powers of *a prioristic* intuition of truths about the good. Whatever merit such skepticism possesses when abstractly considered, however, I confess to finding it impossible to deny that the pattern of progress is better than that of regress. And that not simply hedonically, but intrinsically. It seems, *ceteris paribus*, quite irrational to hold the reverse preference. It seems irrational as well to be indifferent between

the two. (We may further ask where the hedonic payoffs of attitudes toward incline, and hedonic deductions of attitudes toward decline, come from. To some extent they may be arational or instinctual. But they accord with a view that distanced reflection has difficulty resisting.)

Can we safely be unconcerned about cases in which we find the best ordering of two goods, courses of a meal perhaps, to be the one that places the really grand thing first, with the lesser thing second? Such patterns do sometimes obtain, but do they manage to call into question the general preferability of upward axiological movement?

Well, they do suggest that, when we depart from the pure case that the thought experiment presents, matters become quite complicated. The examples above suggest that the betterness of the pattern of upward movement does not obtain in every context or at every "degree of resolution". Further complications suggest themselves if we examine trade-offs between direction and quantity. It certainly is not the case that upward direction stands in a lexically higher relation to quantity. Suppose for the sake of argument that metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly is an instance of dramatic upward axiological movement. Suppose as well that the life of a bat is of greater value than that of a butterfly (it lasts longer, for one thing, and it presumably has a richer cognitive life, for another) but that it exhibits little in the way of (axiological) ascent. Should we take it that the presence of axiological ascent in the former life outweighs in

value the greater goodness of the latter. (The example may be taken to be metaphorical.) This seems unlikely.

Nonetheless, if the rejector of the axiological significance of inclines and declines compares expulsion from a paradise with arrival at a promised land, he must hold (given certain assumptions about the comparative magnitudes of good of the paradise, the promised land and their successor and predecessor conditions) that there is no reason to think the one pattern of life better than the other. Such a blindness to the independent contribution of the narrative dimension to the goodness of lives is difficult to fathom. "You were in paradise, which was very nice, and now you are in the desert, which is not so hot. He was in the desert, which was bad and is now in the promised land, which is wonderful. But your lives on the whole are equally good. And it is your life on the whole, not your present woe, that possesses authority." Shall the expelled—assuming that she is able to adopt a view "on the whole" rather than simply the standpoint of her present—be consoled by this? We are entitled to our doubts!

The preference for progress over regress is the rational preference. Granting that one should not always demand that more and more good come one's way, that a plateau ought to be acceptable in many cases, one sees in progress or the avoidance of regress the pattern which successful deliberation will produce. Regress is the pattern which botched deliberation will produce. So the preference for inclines is a corollary of commitment to rational agency, if we take rational agency to include a commitment to movement towards, rather than

away from, the good.[7] Of course, our fates are not exclusively the products of deliberation, their goodness not exclusively a measure of how well we've exercised the rational will. Fortune plays a very big role in shaping the narrative of our lives. And we lament declines, and rejoice in inclines, when fortune is their author. But perhaps this is a transposition of attitudes that have their proper home in the domain of deliberation to the domain of fortune.

Why is all this a problem for the TNT? It holds that we should choose goods without regard for their temporal location. But if the temporal order in which goods occur is a constitutive element of their goodness, then the TNT seems to be subverted. The asymmetric temporal axiological wholes that we have looked at seem to have the feature that later goods contribute more decisively to overall good than do earlier goods. *Mere* temporal location, in such cases, does seem to matter. We might conclude from this that postponing a good will enlarge it.

This last reflection should give us pause, and may help to show us how the TNT can be defended. There are versions, or interpretations, of holism which defy belief. There are good reasons to believe that there are limits to the powers of retroactive transfiguration that the future may possess. Were this not the case, we could envision—as something other than a rare and extremely extraordinary occurrence—axiological alchemy, wherein the taking place of a suitably good event at the end of a life or long stretch of life would transform all the leaden elements that preceded it into gold. (Certain religious views seem to allow this.

But that is a reason to reject such views.) We would have to allow, were we to embrace an unbridled holism, the view that all that is fine and beautiful is hostage to the future. Which thought makes one think of persons who grow so despondent over the thought that the ultimate fate of the universe is a winding down into an insensate entropic soup that they lose the capacity to appreciate the delights of present life. To which quite absurd response to our (perhaps absurd) cosmic circumstance one wishes to reply by recalling to the ones in the grip of such overblown cosmic melancholy the Tin Pan Alley tune "They can't take that away from me."[8]

(Sometimes people are tempted to respond to such cosmic death despondency with more monumental testimonials to our non-futility, late Beethoven string quartets for example. But this seems to me a mistake. In this sort of context, the appeal to the noblest, gravest, most soaring products of our species concedes too much to the point of view of the victim of foolish despair. By offering the deep thing, one seems to be taking up his challenge, one seems to be going the rancid romantic route of saying "Give me your cosmic death, my Beethoven can trump it!" But trumping is not the thing to aim at, here. The committed devotee of such despair might take the very nobility of the human object offered only to make his point the more forcefully. "Even that bit of transcendent noonday brightness can't withstand the inexorable annihilating process of our alien, inhuman universe," he may say. But he'd not sensibly say that of "the way you wear your hat!" *Of course* the way you wear your hat is a

fleeting thing. It doesn't pretend to trump cosmic death. But it is lovely, and that it is lovely is really not a state of things with which a sensible person ought to let cosmological outcomes interfere.)[9]

The problem we are facing here may be called the *problem of the futurity of value*. Holism, we suggested, makes problematic the assignment of value to a given time's contents. In many instances, this simply entails that we ought to be intelligent in our choice of evaluand. And in many instances, this is not very hard to figure out. The dominant tendency of the TNT is to subordinate part to whole. (Our dominant vice requires this.) But it is possible to extend such subordination indefinitely. This problem appears most starkly in the collective case, since the circumstances of an individual's life put time limits on his projects—it can become too late to have a child, for example, and we are in any case mortal. In the collective case, if we assume an indefinitely long future and finite resources, the claims of future generations upon the present generation can become unreasonable, demanding self denial of a fairly extreme sort on the part of the present generation.[10] Simple fairness to the future members of the race, if there are enough such members (and if we face, as we hope, a very long future, there will be), can require a very great deal of us.

In the individual case, related problems appear. The whole asserts its claims over against the parts. The doings and undergoings of a given time are to be seen in the light of fruitions dwelling at another time, a future time. Yet the parts, the doing and suffering selves at a time, assert their claims in turn against

the whole to which they would be subordinated. How are we to adjudicate between these claims?

Well, you may object, these worries are the rather idle products of a speculative frenzy. Our good sense, or perhaps the mere and minimal requirements of sanity, will prevent such problems from arising in the actual realm of practice. So too, you may object, with the variant of this problem that arises when we entertain the view that, since action is inevitably directed at the future, the good is perpetually ahead of us and never, finally, arrived at. Surely this is sophistry and illusion from which any agent able to taste and see will be immune. Anxiety about the futurity of value is cured by the consummating moments that any even half decently lived life will know in good number.

It seems to me that such a response has the same degree of merit as would be possessed by the dismissal of the question of how much an individual owes to the social wholes of which she is part on the ground that persons who are well reared will divide their energies and resources in a sensible way between themselves and varied others. The enormity of the claims of others and their good impersonally considered is nothing to worry about, outside the perverse concoctions of theory, on this dismissive view. It is well known, of course, that the desire not to think has resources at its disposal that may disguise themselves in the garb of reflection. But the desire is contemptible, as are its fruits.

The claims of past and present and future goods do contend with each other, and many such contendings are reasonably understood in terms of rival

claims of whole and part. That presents ought be subordinated to larger goods is a liberating claim of rationality which gives rise to a danger, and that same rationality makes a counterclaim in the face of that danger. The present is threatened with evacuation by a too thorough subordination. Permit me to echo Mill. Rather like the State whose greatness would be jeopardized by creating too obedient and selfless a population, the wholes which, in pursuit of a life's good, would shrink or withhold the good of that life's parts, will in the end fail even to accomplish the sought after thing, having degraded and diminished the elements of which it was to have been made.[11]

Have I here not reproduced the very complaint that moments ago I held in contempt? No. Not anymore than Mill's rejoinder to the putative demands of society amounts to a holding unreal the threat such demands involve, or unreal the persuasive force they may possess. Have I not strayed from the pure and quasi-mathematical account of equality of times that the TNT in its simplicity evokes by considering somewhat more concretely the claims of past and present and future, personifying them, seeing them quasi-agentially as quarrelling with each other and the agent over what she ought to do? Yes. One needs to confront the abstract formulae with the less abstract elements to which it is intended to apply. "Do not abandon me" say the things of the past. "In me lies your realization, without me you are nothing" says the future. Between them, the present must maintain an equilibrium: neither succumbing to the inherently fleeting but none the less potent delusion that it is everything, nor finding itself—

equally delusionally— a nothing whose contents are borrowed, it must do the work of integrating past and future. So to construe the task of the present, our task, does not, as it seems to me, involve any substantial departure from temporal neutrality. Quite the opposite. If, in this or that struggle, I am a partisan of a particular tribe or party or person, is this to be taken as an abandonment of commitment to universality or equality? Only the foolish say so. (Yes, those who say so are numerous and occupy high positions. The foolish indeed are not and never have been candidates for minority status, nor has their condition ever been a bar to high office. A perennial problem.) Likewise, that I take this or that claim issuing from yesterday, or long ago, or now, or some years hence, to be of greater weight than another claim, issuing from a different time, provides no reason to think that I have, in any relevant sense, abandoned neutrality between times.

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[1] The point here made, though not the particular example, was suggested by Robert Tragesser *Husserl and Realism in Logic and Mathematics* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1984) p.66. Tragesser is concerned with the problems created for those who would "construct" the world out of experiences by the contextual variability of the experiential atoms upon which such empiricist constructions depend. The quote I employ to make a not unrelated point is from Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: New Directions, 1947.)

[2] Musical compositions are the *fruit* of purpose, but the unity they exhibit is not, or need not be, that of purpose. Unless one construes all pattern as purposive, which is unwarranted.

[3] For Broad, see *Five Types of Ethical Theory* p225, for Lewis see *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, Chapter XVI, for Findlay see *Values and Intentions*, Chapter Six for Slote see *Goods and Virtues*, Chapter One.

[4] G.E. Moore *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). Moore's exposition of the notion of organic unity is to be found in sections 18-23 of Chapter One. It is further elaborated in Chapter Six, *The Ideal.*

[5] The metaphysically hidden, private character of mental states has of course been a principal target of a quite varied array of anti-Cartesian philosophers. Wherever one stands on this issue, in particular even if one accepts it that there is no apprehension of the inner apart from its outward articulations, the elusiveness of the inner flux is a datum. Those who are derided as behaviorists have of course no reason to disagree. They explain the elusiveness by holding that the thing sought fails to exist.

[6] R. M. Chisholm *Brentano and Intrinsic Value* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp. 70-71.

[7] The definition of rationality is a philosophical can of worms, particularly when use is made of the concept in ethical contexts. I take C. I. Lewis's account of irrationality as "self-defeat", whether in thought or action, to be promising. And I take the idea that rational agency requires movement toward the good, or the attempt thereat, to be consistent with this. Deliberately to move away from the good divides one's agency, pits it against itself in a quintessentially self defeating manner.

[8] The lyrics are by Ira Gershwin, the music by George Gershwin. The tune shares a feature with many of the songs of the period, of presenting trite, ephemeral, sentiments under an aspect that defeats their sentimentality. The tune in question is a particularly potent example of this, to my mind. There is nothing, after all, or next to nothing, that they cannot take away. An ironic cum tragic feeling surrounds these tunes, when well performed. Angela Davis's recent study of Billie Holiday's singing (*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York, Random House, 1998))gets at this feature exellently, though Davis sadly feels obliged excessively to denigrate Tin Pan Alley in order to elevate Lady Day, who, dwelling so high, does not need the help. Note that the irony in question has little in common with the glib noises that currently go by that name.

[9] The thoughts here expressed are in part influenced by Frank Ramsey's 'Epilogue' in his *Philosophical Papers*, edited by D.H. Mellor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) pp. 245-250.

[10] A useful account of this problem of the optimal savings rate and intergenerational well being is found in Partha Dasgupta *Human Well Being and the Natural Environment*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001) Chapter 6.

[11] The evacuation of the present by the future receives philosophical expression in writings of the American pragmatists–note the following passage from Peirce. "Thought is what it is only by virtue of its addressing a future thought which is in its value as thought identical with it, though more developed. In this way, the existence of thought now depends on what is to be hereafter; so that it has only a potential existence, dependent on the future thought of the community." This appears in Charles Peirce *Writings* volume 2: (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 241.

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