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Self-Bias, Time-Bias, and the Metaphysics of Self and Time

1: Self-Bias

It is common to have a slightly exaggerated sense of the significance of your own joys and miseries, but *grand* self-importance is rare. Louis XIV was grandly self-important. He believed that, when he consumed too much foie gras, France suffered gastric pain. When he took satisfaction from the construction of a new fountain in the grounds of Versailles, that feeling would settle over his natural kingdom – from the frigid, poxy docks of Brest to the steaming, cholera-ridden slums of Marseilles. For Louis, self-indulgence was a national mission.

When we have the state in mind, we are working for ourselves. The welfare of the one creates the glory of the other. When the former is happy, lofty and powerful, he who is the cause of it has glory too and consequently should enjoy more than his subjects with regard to himself and to them everything in life that is most pleasant.¹

We, the undistinguished masses, are less fortunate than Louis. As one of the masses I know that I have a set of unique qualities – a unique height, a unique weight, a unique time and place of origin... and so forth – but these give me scarce grounds for thinking that I occupy a special place in the larger scheme of things, that my pleasures and pains are more significant than anybody else's. I am not the physical embodiment of a national

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¹ Louis XIV, *Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*, Paul Sonnino trans. and ed., New York, 1970

spirit. I have not been chosen by God as his special representative on Earth. I am hardly stronger, faster, or more delicate than the next person. And there are seven billion next people.

This means that, although I may be no less chronically attentive to my own comfort than Louis was, my self-attention is internally problematic in a way that his was not. Louis took his pleasures and pains to be especially important, so when he deliberated he discovered a neat harmony between *egocentric-hedonistic considerations* (of the form: ‘overall, I will suffer less if I do ___ rather than ___’) and *considerations of the greater good* (of the form: ‘overall, things will be better if I do ___ rather than ___’). When I deliberate I discover no such harmony. I am continually faced with situations in which these considerations conflict, situations in which I can make the world better at a cost to my comfort, and myself more comfortable at a cost to the world.

That may seem a very obvious point. Of course people tend to be disproportionately preoccupied with their own comfort. Of course to be so preoccupied is not to be preoccupied with the greater good.

Can it be denied?

To get a grip on this question, let’s consider the position of a *peacemaker*, a person whose desire for the kind of psychological harmony enjoyed by Louis leads her to be resolutely committed to the view that, for the most part, concern for one’s own comfort and concern for the greater good align. The peacemaker notes that although most of us are not *extreme egocentric-hedonists*, caring only about our own pleasures and pains, we are at least *mild egocentric hedonists* – all other things being equal, we prefer that pain

befall others rather than ourselves, and pleasure befall ourselves rather than others. The peacemaker then claims:

(Harmony) Whenever a mild egocentric-hedonist favors a scenario in which she suffers less, she thereby favors a simply better maximal state of affairs.

I have used some quasi-technical terms here, and they need to be glossed. What is it to for one thing to be ‘simply better’ than another? Let’s just say what it isn’t – not better in some qualified or three-way relational sense of the word, not better *for me*, or better *for some purpose*, or better *in relation to a particular set of interests*, but better *period*. What is a ‘state of affairs’? Think of a state of affairs as a way for things to be. So the way things in Yosemite National Park are is a state of affairs. The way things in the Russian economy are is a state of affairs. What is a ‘maximal state of affairs’? Well, some states of affairs can be parts of others – the way things in my laundry cupboard are is a part of the way smelly things in the Boston area are. A maximal state of affairs is one that is not a proper part of any state of affairs. It is a way for everything to be. Finally, what is it to ‘favor a scenario’? I mean the notion of ‘favoring’ to be understood quite broadly: one way to favor a scenario or state of affairs is to bring it about, another is just to desire that it obtain. So, according to (Harmony), it is not just that the actions of a mild egocentric-hedonist bring about the good (when she brings about a situation in which she suffers less, she brings about a better maximal state of affairs), it is also that the desires of a mild egocentric hedonist align with the good (when she wants a situation in which she suffers less to come about, she wants a better maximal state of affairs to come about.)

Is the peacemaker’s claim credible? Well, three seemingly insurmountable obstacles stand in the way of my believing it.

The Grounding Problem

First, if I am to believe it, I must take it to be true of *me* that when I enhance my own comfort the expense of other people, I am making for a better overall state of affairs. So I must adopt a picture of the world in which my comfort makes an especially weighty contribution to the value simpliciter of a state of affairs. Call this the *Grounding Problem*: my picture of who I am, and of how I fit into the world, must somehow give me grounds for thinking that my pains and pleasures have an especially important place in the larger scheme of things.

But how could this be? I am not the Sun-King. I am mundane in all measurable respects. So perhaps my only hope is to believe that I am extraordinary in some immeasurable respect, that I am *metaphysically unique* in some way that bears upon the intrinsic value of my suffering. For example:

The Solitary Utility Monster

My physiology is not unusual in any measurable way – I wince when punched, smile when pleased and frown when saddened, just like anyone else. But there is one important, hidden difference between me and other people: my experiences are, qualitatively, far more intense than theirs. If their experiences are like water-colors by Turner, mine are like oil-paintings by Francis Bacon. Drinking tea feels to me just the way that taking morphine feels to them. A touch of indigestion feels to me just the way that being disemboweled feels to them.

If this bleak picture were accurate then perhaps I should be self-interested. For surely, one could argue, what is intrinsically good or bad about pleasure or pain is its phenomenal aspect. Hit your hand hard against your desk. What is bad about pain is *that* feeling. Run your fingers gently across your scalp. What is good about pleasure is *that* feeling. And there are more of those sorts of feelings associated with my experiences than with anybody else's.

But the picture is, of course, ridiculous. Serious philosophers do not believe that they are metaphysically unique. At best they use the idea as a foil – the *problem* of the 'problem of other minds' is almost always taken to be the problem of how one can know that other people's mental states are just like one's own, very rarely taken to be the problem of whether other people's mental states are just like one's own. And to my knowledge, no serious philosopher has ever even considered the view that I, Caspar Hare, am metaphysically unique. It hasn't even been in the ball-park!

So this doesn't seem like a very promising strategy. If I am to solve the Grounding Problem, I must do so without committing myself to a wildly implausible metaphysical picture. And that appears impossible.

The Generalization Problem

Furthermore, if I am to argue, quite generally, that there is no conflict between the considerations that move a mild egocentric-hedonist and considerations of the greater good, it is not enough just to show that there is no conflict in my own case. I must show that *any* mild egocentric-hedonist, in favoring scenarios in which she suffers less, is

favoring better maximal states of affairs. And it is very difficult to see how this can be so.

Call this the *Generalization Problem*.

To see the difficulty, imagine a situation in which my interests are at odds with someone else's. For example:

Competing for a Scarce Resource

Jane and I are competing for a scarce resource. Jane will suffer less if she gets it. I will suffer less if I get it.

In this situation there seem to be two possible ways for things to go:

Possibility (1)	CJH gets the resource and is happy	Jane misses out and is miserable
Possibility (2)	CJH misses out and is miserable	Jane gets the resource and is happy

Being a mild egocentric-hedonist, I favor (1) over (2). Being a mild egocentric-hedonist, Jane favors (2) over (1). But, if the notion of 'better simpliciter' is to remain coherent, it can't both be better simpliciter that the state of affairs represented by possibility (1) obtain and better simpliciter that the state of affairs represented by possibility (2) obtain. So surely in this case at least one of us, in favoring the state of affairs in which we suffer less, is not favoring a simply better maximal state of affairs.²

² This is the thought behind the famous argument against egoism in Moore's *Principia Ethica*, section 59: 'The only reason I can have for aiming at 'my own good' is that it is good absolutely that what I so call should belong to me – good absolutely that I should have something, which, if I have it, others cannot

The Problem of Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences

The third problem arises from the fact that, for me, caring about CJH's comfort and caring about *my* comfort do not always amount to the same thing. Given that I am broadly egocentric, and that I believe myself to be CJH, I want to promote my comfort and the comfort of CJH. But, given that I am broadly egocentric, the moment I ceased to believe that I was CJH, I would cease to care about *him* and continue to care about *me*. There are imaginable situations in which this might happen:

After the Train-Crash

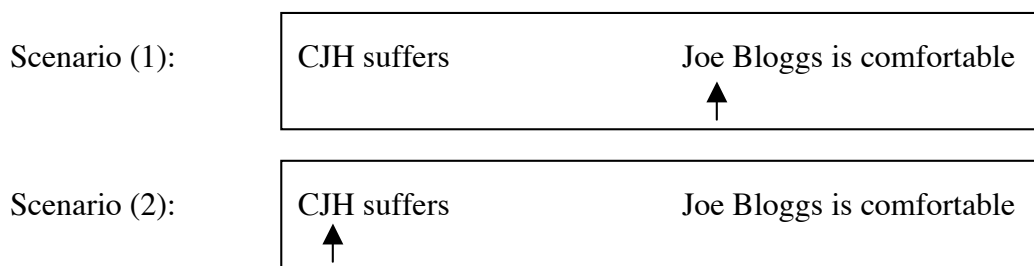
I wake up in hospital, achy and bewildered, unable to remember who or where I am. I try to move, and find that my body is swathed in rigid plaster and my head is locked in a brace. I call for help and receive no reply. But, happily, some kind nurse has placed a television directly in front of me. From it I learn that there has been a terrible train accident, that only two survivors, CJH and Joe Bloggs, have been pried from the wreckage, and that both have been taken to hospital and placed in full-body plaster casts, from which they are watching this very program on television.

"Interesting!" I think, "I now have a vivid picture of what's going on in this hospital, and I know a lot about CJH and Joe Bloggs, although I still don't know which of them I am." Next the television tells me that one of the two

have... What Egoism holds, therefore, is that each man's happiness is the sole good – that a number of different things are each of them the only good thing there is – an absolute contradiction!' Moore (1903).

is scheduled to have an extremely long and painful operation in a few hours time. “Interesting!” I think, “I hope that’s not *me*.”

My first concern in this situation, is for me, not CJH. If I were to discover that CJH was to be the unfortunate subject of this operation, I would be neither happy nor unhappy, because two importantly different possible scenarios would remain open, scenarios that we can represent like this (with arrows to represent who I am):



I very much want the first scenario to obtain. I want to be Joe Bloggs, the person who will not be suffering.

But surely this is a clear example of a person favoring a scenario in which he is better off without thereby favoring a better maximal state of affairs. For, on the standard account of the content of ‘self-involving’ propositional attitudes,³ when I hope, desire, believe or discover that scenario (1) obtains, I do not hope, desire, believe or discover that the world is a certain way. After the operation I already know everything relevant about the way the world is, about the nature of the maximal state of affairs – I know who will suffer, when they will suffer and how much they will suffer. My preference for (1)

³ Classic variants of which are in Castañeda, (1968), Lewis (1979) and Perry (1979).

over (2) is not a preference that the world be one way rather than another, but rather a preference that I be one way rather than another; it is, to use some jargon, an irreducibly *de se* preference, a preference with no *de dicto* content.

In light of the Grounding, Generalization and Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences problems, it appears that (Harmony) must be rejected and the peacemaker's project must be abandoned. The pressing question for ethicists to address is not whether the considerations that move a mild egocentric hedonist misalign with considerations of the greater good, but how we should respond when they do. And, sure enough, ethicists have been responding to some form or other of this question for a very long time.

That may seem like a compelling argument, but it relies upon some substantive and questionable assumptions about the metaphysics of the self. Perhaps the clearest way to bring this out is by looking at an analogous argument, to the conclusion that we cannot find harmony between considerations of the greater good and time-biased considerations.

2: Time-Bias

Some people care not only about *what* things happen, but also about *when* things happen. One way to care about the *when* as well as the *what* is to care about how events are ordered over the course of history – a history across which good and bad things are evenly sprinkled, for example, might seem preferable to one with good things clumped at one end, bad things clumped at the other.⁴ Another way is to care more about what happens at some times than others – what happens on the first day of the year 2000, for example, might seem to matter more than what happens on the three hundred and twenty

sixth day of the year 1994. Another way is to care about when things happen relative to the present moment. Call someone who cares about when things happen relative to the present moment *time-biased*.

Of the many ways in which one might be time-biased, the two that have received most attention from philosophers⁵ are *hedonic bias toward the future* (all things considered, I prefer that pains be past rather than future, and pleasures be future rather than past), and *hedonic bias toward the near* (all things considered, I prefer that pains be in the distant future rather than the immediate future, and pleasures be in the immediate future rather than the distant future). Everybody seems to some extent vulnerable to these kinds of bias. Wouldn't you prefer to be walking out of your dentist's office, with the pain in your tooth subsiding, than to be walking in, with the bulk of the pain still to come? Wouldn't you prefer the drill to be a week, rather than an hour away?

Let's restrict our attention to pain. Someone who has these sorts of biases may give them a role in her practical reasoning by taking considerations of the form 'there is less future pain in ___ than ___' and 'there is less near-future pain in ___ than ___' to support favoring one scenario over another. But obviously it would be hasty to take such considerations to provide the last word in practical deliberation, because sometimes they will misalign or conflict with considerations of the greater good. Sometimes, when you desire, or make it the case that there is less future or near future pain, you do not desire, or make it the case that things overall are better.

⁴For life-histories, Slote (1982), and Bigelow, Campbell and Parfetter (1990), have argued that the value of a life-history is not given by the sum or average of momentary well-being over the course of that life-history. The order in which good things happen matters.

⁵ Largely due to the discussion in Parfit (1984) Chapter 8.

Why is this obvious? Once again it will be useful to consider a *peacemaker*, who wants to claim that time-biased considerations are in harmony with considerations of the greater good. The peacemaker is committed to:

(Harmony 2) Whenever a person favors a scenario in which there is less future, or near-future pain, she thereby favors a simply better maximal state of affairs.

Can she really believe this? Three familiar obstacles stand in her way:

The Grounding Problem

First, she would have to adopt a metaphysical picture that gave her some grounds for thinking that future pains are in themselves worse than past pains, near-future pains in themselves worse than far-future pains. Her picture would need somehow to support the idea that Joan of Arc's suffering on the pyre matters less than mine at my next workout. Here's a picture that would work:

Divine Novocain

At the dawn of creation God faced a problem: He would not allow himself physically to intervene in the course of history, for fear of compromising our freedom, but he wished to protect us from the evil consequences of that freedom. So he created *Divine Novocain*, a drug that dulls the qualitative aspect of suffering without inducing any physical changes in the sufferer. In the past he has administered this drug liberally, to all sufferers, pure and fallen, but now (confronted with famine, war and disease on a scale that even he could

not have anticipated) he finds his stocks to be running low. He will be forced to ration. So he decides that he will administer none for a short while, and then gradually build up the doses, though never to their pre-2005 level.

This would do the trick. But it is mad. On any sane view, Joan of Arc's suffering is no less intense and no less significant for being past.

The Generalization Problem

Second, it is not enough for our peacemaker to show that considerations of the greater good align with time-biased considerations *now*, in 2007. She needs to show that they *always* do. So she needs to deal with cases where time-bias leads us to have different preferences at different times about the same states of affairs. Here's an example of such a case, where the preferences are generated by bias toward the future.⁶

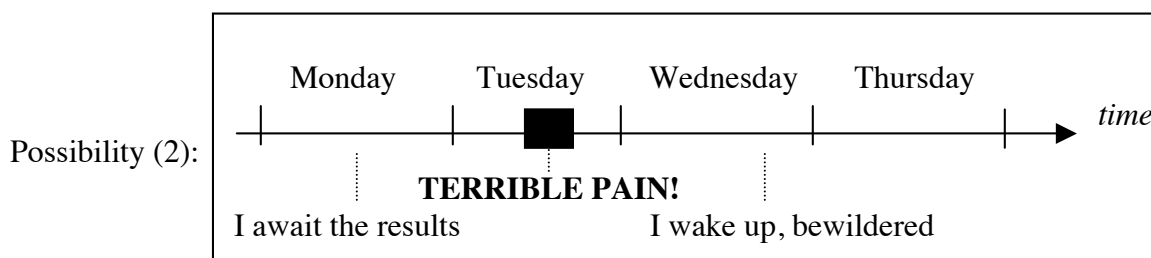
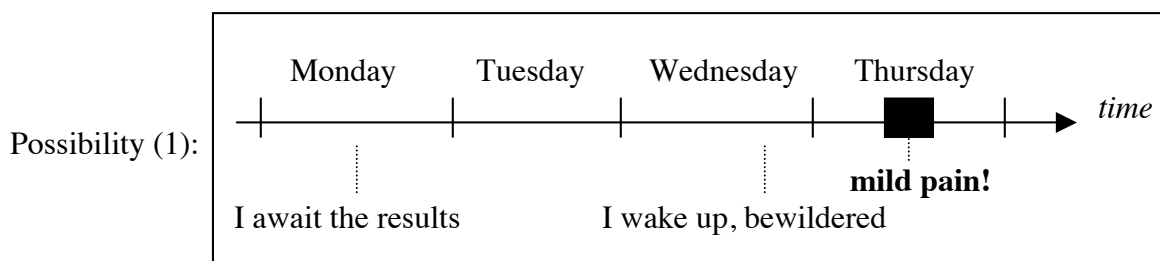
Bad and Worse Operations

I must have an operation. It's a safe operation, but it involves some nasty stuff: some cutting, some scraping, some poking of optic fibers down blood vessels... and so forth. On Monday doctors perform tests on me and declare that, depending on the results of these tests, I will either endure the operation under the influence of a local anesthetic (unpleasant, but not painful) on

⁶ Are there similar such cases where the preferences are generated by bias toward the near? This will depend upon the rate at which you discount for temporal distance. If you discount exponentially (for example, where i is the intensity of a future pain and t is the temporal distance, by taking its significance to you now to be given by $i/2^n$.) then your preferences will not change over time. If you don't then they will. See Parfit (1984) section 62 and elsewhere.

Thursday, or endure the operation under the influence of no anesthetic at all (terribly painful) on Tuesday. On Monday I hope to have the unpleasant operation on Thursday. But on Wednesday evening I wake up, bewildered, unable to remember if I have yet been operated upon, and, since I am biased towards the future, I hope to have had the terribly painful operation on Tuesday.

Here the possible world-histories seem to be:



On Monday I prefer (1) to (2), while on Wednesday I prefer (2) to (1). But it can't both be better simpliciter that the maximal state of affairs represented by possibility (1) obtain, and that the maximal state of affairs represented by possibility (2) obtain. So on at least one of the two days considerations of the greater good do not align with future-biased considerations. On at least one of the two days, in favoring a scenario in which there is less future-pain, I am not favoring a better maximal state of affairs.

The Problem of Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences

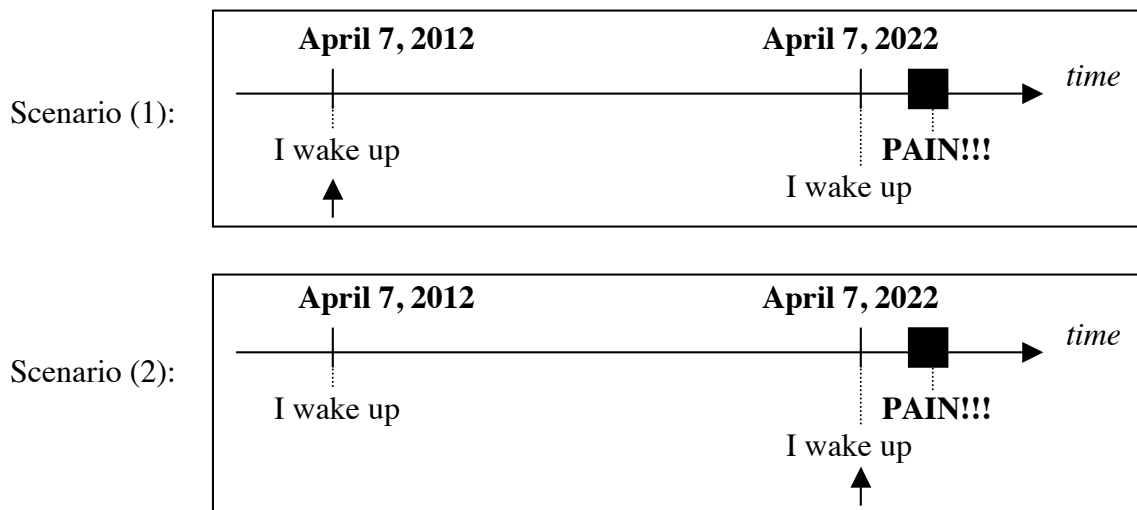
Third, the peacemaker must face cases where time-bias leads us to have irreducibly egocentric preferences. Here is an example of such a case, where the preference is generated by bias toward the near⁷:

Waiting For My Painful Operation

Early in my life, clever doctors find that I have a rare genetic condition that will most likely cause me to contract cancer of the x (substitute whatever organ you feel most anxious about for x) in late middle-age. Happily, they can eliminate the risk by removing organ x from my body. Unhappily, the necessary operation is agonizingly painful. Knowing all this, I schedule such an operation for soon after April 8, 2022, my fiftieth birthday. I am always perfectly sure that the operation will take place, that I will survive it, that it will be successful, and that it will hurt like anything. Then, one night, I wake up from a fretful dream and look at the date on my malfunctioning alarm clock. It says ‘**April 7 ...2**’. Is it April 7, 2012 or April 7 2022? For the moment I just don’t know. But I do know what I want. Being biased toward the near, I want it to be 2012.

In this case there are two possible scenarios I might be in (with arrows to represent what the time is now):

⁷ Future-bias generates many similar preferences – e.g. when I wake up, knowing that I have a painful operation on a particular date, but not knowing whether it is in the past or future.



But these two scenarios do not represent different ways for the world to be, different maximal states of affairs. My ignorance in this case is, in the jargon, irreducibly *de se* – I know everything relevant about the history of the world, but don't know which person-slice *I* am. So, in favoring (1) over (2), I am not favoring one maximal state of affairs over another. So, in favoring the scenario in which there is less near-future pain, I am not favoring a better maximal state of affairs.

As before, these three problems seem to be insurmountable, so it seems that the peacemaker must give up, and concede that no plausible metaphysical picture grounds general time-bias. Time-biased considerations do not always align with considerations of the greater good.

3. Time-Bias and the Metaphysics of Time

The argument above is structurally just like the argument from Section 1, the argument that egocentric considerations do not always align with considerations of the

greater good. Is there anything wrong with it? Well, this time around we have at least some reason to suspect that there might be something wrong with it, because its conclusion is controversial. Certainly, many influential philosophers (including Sidgwick⁸ and Rawls⁹) have had a low view of time-bias, arguing that it is petty, unenlightened, or, in the extreme, irrational, but others (including Bentham¹⁰) have thought it to be perfectly rational, and furthermore a bias toward what is *better*. It is better that, for example, suffering be in the past rather than the future.

One way to accommodate this intuition would be to take issue with my characterization of the sorts of states of affairs whose intrinsic value gives rise to considerations of the greater good. I took them to be maximal states of affairs, but one could perhaps take them to be proper parts of maximal states of affairs. In favoring better futures I may, then, be favoring intrinsically better ‘states of affairs’ of the relevant kind. (Lars Bergstrom once endorsed this view, arguing that, for consequentialists, ‘the future is more important than the total state of the world.’¹¹) Or, for a quite general solution to problems of agent and time-bias, one could stipulate that the relevant ‘states of affairs’ are $\langle World, Agent, Time \rangle$ triples, the ‘centered worlds’ that figure prominently in recent decision theory. It may be the case that (e.g.), in always favoring better futures, I am always favoring better ‘states of affairs’ in this sense, because it may be that whenever $\langle w_1, a_1, t_1 \rangle$ and $\langle w_2, a_2, t_2 \rangle$ are such that there is less suffering in w_1 after t_1 than in w_2 after t_2 , then $\langle w_1, a_1, t_1 \rangle$ is simply better than $\langle w_2, a_2, t_2 \rangle$.

⁸ See Sidgwick (1907), pp. 381, 382

⁹ See Rawls (1971), Section 45

¹⁰ ... on one reading of Bentham (1789), Chapter IV. Bentham’s views are somewhat under-determined by the text.

¹¹ Bergstrom (1966), p. 125

But there is something fishy about this suggestion. For one thing, notice that there is negligible difference between saying that the triple $\langle w, a_1, t_1 \rangle$ is simply better than the triple $\langle w, a_2, t_2 \rangle$, and saying that world w is better for, or in relation to, a_1 at t_1 than for, or in relation to a_2 at t_2 . For another thing, it mis-characterizes the nature of considerations in question. Considerations of the greater good gain their force from the thought that what matters is the way that everything is, not the way that everything is relative to a time, place or person. But the triples $\langle w, a_1, t_1 \rangle$ and $\langle w, a_2, t_2 \rangle$ do not represent different ways for everything to be.

Another, much better way to accommodate the intuition is to question whether facts about what the time is *now* do not somehow enter into the way that everything is. This involves making some substantive assumptions about the metaphysics of time.

Four-Dimensionalism

One vexed question in the metaphysics of time concerns the ontological status of past, present and future entities (moments, events, objects). Does Julius Caesar exist? Does the 90th President of the United States exist?

Call someone who believes that past and future entities (moments, events, objects...etc.) exist an *eternalist*. Some eternalists are *ersatz realists* about the past and future, they believe that present things are concrete, past and future things abstract. Others believe that past, present and future things are equally real, equally concrete. 'The world consists of a four-dimensionally extended space-time manifold,' these people say, 'the past, present and future are ontologically on a par. Just as a thing is no less real for

being to my left or right, so a thing is no less real for coming before or after me'. Call such people *block universe theorists*.

Another vexed question concerns the status of tensed properties. What is it for something to be past, present or future? Some block universe theorists think that there are no monadic tensed properties, only relational tensed properties – the death of King Harold is not monadically past, present or future, it is past relative to the death of Ann Boleyn, future relative to the death of Jesus, and present relative to William's invasion of England. 'All things are on a par with respect to tense', these people say, 'all things are future relative to things that come before them, present relative to things with which they coexist, and past relative to things that come after them. No moment has the privileged status of being the present one.' Call such people *four-dimensionalists*.¹²

Now, if we accept four-dimensionalism, then the Grounding, Generalization and Egocentric Preferences problems really are insoluble. With respect to grounding, past pains are just as real as future pains, so we have no real grounds for thinking them less important simpliciter. With respect to generalization, in the Bad and Worse Operations case, my preferences on Monday and Wednesday are indeed inconsistent. On Monday I favor the one space-time manifold over the other, while on Wednesday I favor the other over the one, so I cannot, on both days, be favoring better ways for everything to be.

With respect to irreducibly egocentric preferences, in the Waiting for my Painful Operation case, my desire that pain be in the far future rather than the near-future does

¹² This term has been used by several different philosophers in several different ways – sometimes to mean the block universe picture, sometimes (as here) to mean the block universe picture conjoined with the view that tensed properties are relational, sometimes to mean the block universe picture conjoined with the view that tensed properties are relational conjoined with perdurantism about persistence over time. So, for maximum precision, perhaps I should use a different term, but I find the one that suggests itself – 'the uncentered block theory' – unacceptably clunky.

indeed have no de dicto content. I am not favoring one space time manifold over another, so I am not favoring a better over a worse way for everything to be.

So if we accept four-dimensionalism then the argument goes through – considerations of the greater good do not always align with time-biased considerations. But what if we deny it? What if we insist that there are monadic tensed properties, that tense is built into the way the world is?

Alternatives to Four-Dimensionalism

There are several ways to accommodate this basic thought. Advocates of *hyperkenesis*¹³ retain the block universe ontology, retain the idea that the world is a four-dimensionally extended space time manifold, but say that one moment has the interesting and unique property of being the present one. Which moment? Well, that changes as time goes by (think of a spot-light moving remorselessly along the block). Others imagine that the past exists but the future does not. The present is the outermost skin of a block that expands as time goes by.¹⁴ Others imagine that the future exists but the past does not. The present is the outermost skin of a block that contracts as time goes by¹⁵. Others imagine that the future branches off in many directions while the past remains fixed. The present is the first point at which multiple branches split off from the bare tree-trunk of the past.¹⁶ Presentists¹⁷, meanwhile, hold that only present objects, events, moments exist (along, perhaps, with timeless things like gods and numbers). There are no past or future things.

¹³ See, for example, Schlesinger (1994)

¹⁴ This view may have origins in Aristotle. A contemporary version has been proposed by Tooley (1997)

¹⁵ Though many people have imagined this, I don't know of anyone who has endorsed it. Surprising, perhaps, because it seems uniquely well qualified to explain why the future matters and the past does not.

¹⁶ A view developed in McCall (1994)

¹⁷ The first and most famous presentist was Saint Augustine. For more up-to-date expositions of the view, see Bigelow (1996) and Zimmerman (1998).

The best we can say is that it used to be the case that they existed, or it will be the case that they exist.

I think that presentism is by far the most coherent and philosophically defensible of these theories, but for present purposes that is beside the point. The point is that each of them is a theory about the nature and extent of all that there is, where ‘all’ is understood in an unrestricted sense – a theory about what maximal states of affairs are like. And, according to each of them, it is part of the nature of maximal states of affairs that present things are different from past and future things. So, according to each of them, the Generalization and Egocentric Preferences problems do not arise. With respect to generalization: in the Bad and Worse Operations case the maximal states of affairs that I discriminate between on Monday (one in which mild pain is in the far future and one in which terrible pain is in the near future) are not the same as the maximal states of affairs that I discriminate between on Wednesday (one in which terrible pain is in the past and one in which mild pain is in the near future), so is quite possible that, on both days I am favoring a simply better maximal state of affairs. With respect to irreducibly egocentric preferences: in the Waiting for the Painful Operation case, the two scenarios that seem open to me really do represent two different maximal states of affairs (in the one case a maximal state of affairs in which pain is in the far future, in the other a maximal state of affairs in which pain is in the near future), so it is quite possible that, in favoring one scenario over another I am favoring a simply better maximal state of affairs.

So, if a dedicated peacemaker rejects four-dimensionalism, and accepts that there are monadic tensed properties, she can solve the Generalization and Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences problems by stipulating that, all other things being equal, states of

affairs in which pain will occur are worse than states of affairs in which pain has occurred, and states of affairs in which pain will happen soon are worse than states of affairs in which pain will happen a long time from now.

Would this solve the Grounding Problem? Would the metaphysics somehow make it seem plausible that pain with the monadic property of being in the future is in itself more significant than pain with the monadic property of being in the past? Well, unless our peacemaker adopts the ‘shrinking block’ view, the metaphysics will not explain why past pains matter less than future pains. But maybe no explanation is needed. If the peacemaker has a strong (though perhaps defeasible) conviction that future pain is intrinsically worse than past pain, the metaphysics does nothing to undermine her conviction.

3: Self-Bias and the Metaphysics of the Self

We can make peace between considerations of the greater good and time-biased considerations by adopting an appropriate metaphysical picture. Can we perform an analogous trick for egocentric considerations? What sort of picture would allow us to say that, when we favor scenarios in which we are better off, we favor simply better maximal states of affairs? Well, at a minimum the picture would have to imply that, in the After the Train Crash case, where I have an irreducibly egocentric preference, the two possibilities represent different ways for the world to be. But since these ‘possibilities’ differ only with respect to which of the injured parties is *me*, the picture would have to imply that this property, *being me*, somehow enters into states of affairs.

The analogy to four-dimensionalism and its denial should be clear. According to a widely accepted view of the self, if ‘being me’ and ‘being other’ are properties at all, then they are relational properties. CJH is me relative to CJH, other relative to Stalin. Stalin is me relative to Stalin, other relative to Lenin. And everybody is, in the relevant sense, *on a par* with respect to these properties – we are all me relative to ourselves, and other relative to everybody else. But according to the rather unorthodox view we would have to take, it would have to be the case that in any given maximal state of affairs, one and only one person has the non-relational property of being me. There is a unique *I* at the center (so to speak) of all that exists. After the Train Crash, I am comparing maximal states of affairs in which the thing with the monadic property of *being me* is in pain, with maximal states of affairs in which the thing with the monadic property of *being me* is free of pain.

Won’t this turn out to be just another theory of the kind we considered in Chapter One, another theory that says I am metaphysically unique? Well, yes, but if it is to solve the Generalization Problem then it needs to be considerably more subtle than those were. Let’s say that I am CJH, and Jane and I are each contemplating a state of affairs in which CJH suffers and Jane prospers. Our theory will need to explain why, although the state of affairs I am considering is one in which the thing with the intrinsic property of being me suffers, the state of affairs Jane is considering is not. And it will need to explain why, when Jane says ‘I am going to prosper’, the proposition expressed by her sentence is true.

It may be helpful to see how a someone who believes in monadic tensed properties (henceforth a *monadic tenses*¹⁸) deals with the analogous ‘problem’. Let’s say that it is presently noon, and Joe at noon and Joe at 11am are both contemplating a

¹⁸ Such people are sometimes called *serious tenses*. But that seems prejudicial to me.

situation in which Joe at noon suffers, and Joe at 11am prospers. The monadic tensor must explain why the state of affairs that Joe at 11am contemplates is one in which Joe presently prospers, not one in which he prospered one hour ago. And she must explain why, when Joe at 11am says ‘Joe is not suffering’, the proposition expressed by her sentence is true.

Obviously this poses no real difficulties for the monadic tensor. If it is presently noon, and Joe is suffering, and Joe at 11am was thinking about this, then the situation that Joe at 11am *was* contemplating *was* one in which Joe *wasn't* suffering.

The point is that the monadic tensor makes use of operators – *it will be the case that* and *it was the case that*¹⁹, that enable her to make sense the states of affairs that past and future people consider, and to make sense of past and future tensed utterances. If Saint Augustine said ‘It is now 400 A.D.!’ the monadic tensor need not label his utterance false. His utterance was true, because *it was the case that* (‘It is now 400 A.D.’ is true), because *it was the case that* (it is now 400 A.D.).

And the operators enable monadic tensors to take the some of the counter-intuitive sting out of their metaphysical commitments. For example, a presentist can say that, although Anne Boleyn does not exist, she is not like Santa Claus – because it was the case that (Ann Boleyn exists). Although my first grand-daughter does not exist, she is not like the boogeyman – because it will be the case that (my first grand-daughter exists). In general, for any thing that the four-dimensionalist believes to exist, the presentist can say

¹⁹ Monadic tensors typically also avail themselves of so-called ‘metric’ operators: for any n, the monadic tensor has operators *in n seconds it will be the case that* and *n seconds ago it was the case that*. But we won’t need these for the moment.

that either it exists, or it will exist, or it has existed. The present is special, then, but not quite as special as it might at first have appeared.

The theory we are groping towards is going to need operators that, in a similar kind of way, allow us to make sense of self-referential sentences uttered by other people, and of the ‘possibilities’ that other people consider. Which operators we use will depend on the details of the theory we adopt. I will outline a theory²⁰, call it *Egocentric Presentism*, which seems to me attractive and simple.

Egocentric Presentism – An Introduction

The best way to introduce this theory is with a story. Imagine that, in a fit of Cartesian pique, I throw away all of my cherished beliefs about how the world is, and about how I fit into it. I no longer accept that the earth is round, that there are material objects, that I am CJH, or, for that matter, that I am anything at all. In this epistemically emaciated state I retire to a secluded room and attempt to build up a world-view from the raw materials of what is unquestionably *given*. A series of insights strike me.

Insight 1: There are some things: a painting of Saint George and the Dragon, a telephone, a diary, a facial itch. Their nature remains obscure. Perhaps the painting is not really a painting. Perhaps the telephone is a toy. Perhaps the diary is a bundle of sense data. Perhaps the itch is imaginary. All that

²⁰ I will not place the theory in any historical context here, but it picks up on themes from the work of a great many philosophers. It could, for example, be presented as the solution to a problem that troubled Wittgenstein, the problem of how to retain the basic Humean idea about self-knowledge (that the truth with which I am confronted, when I direct my attention towards my own experience, is not *that I am in pain* but *that there is pain*, not *that I see red* but *that there is a sensation of red*) without being forced to be a solipsist about other minds. See Wittgenstein (1922) §5.557 – §5.641 and Wittgenstein (1953) §402 – §420.

can be said for sure is that these things, whatever they are, reveal themselves at this, the first stage of the Cartesian exercise. They are *present*.²¹

- Insight 2:* The present things are perceptual objects of a sentient being, CJH. CJH sees the telephone, painting and diary. CJH feels the itch.
- Insight 3:* There are many, many sentient beings other than CJH, but their perceptual objects are not present. So as to talk about this interesting feature of CJH in an economical way, let's introduce some terms. Let 'present experiences' be short-hand for 'experiences whose objects are present.' Let 'I' (in the nominative, 'me' in the accusative) be short-hand for the definite description 'the one with present experiences'.
- Insight 4:* Although I, CJH, am unique in having present experiences, I find that I can imagine other sentient creatures being unique in this respect. I can imagine, for example, that I am Michael Schumacher (that the one with present experiences is Michael Schumacher). This involves imagining that Michael Schumacher's perceptual objects – heat, a smell of foam and latex, the wail of a ten-cylinder engine – are present. It involves imagining

²¹ This is a term of art, and I introduce it guardedly. The advantages of using the word 'present' in this context are that it supports both monadic and relational readings, and that, by doing so, I emphasize the structural similarities between this view and the analogous views in the metaphysics of time.

hoardings buzzing past me, the one with present experiences, Michael Schumacher, at two hundred miles per hour.

Insight 5: Such imaginings lead me to suspect that I am less unique than I may have thought. Michael Schumacher's experiences are not present, so things are not as I imagined them to be, when I imagined being him. But he is conscious, he has a point of view, and from his point of view things *are* as I imagined them to be – the heat, the foamy smell, and the wail of the engine *are* present. From Michael Schumacher's point of view, Michael Schumacher's experiences are present.

But let's be careful here. In saying that Michael Schumacher is conscious I am not taking presence to be a relational property – saying that his experiences are present *relative to his point of view*, while mine are present *relative to my point of view*. Presence is a monadic property that my experiences have and his do not. The construction 'from his point of view' is really an operator, the semantics for which might be given in the following way.

Semantics for a Logic of Points of View

Say that a *subject world* (henceforth an **S**-world) is a world in which there are functionally sentient creatures, the experiences of one and only one of which have the monadic property of *being present*.

At any such world, a set of *atomic* propositions hold true. Think of these as propositions having to do with the way things are, physically speaking, and propositions having to do with where the property of being present is instantiated. So, for example, at $S_{\text{HenryKissinger}}$, a world physically identical to our own, but in which the experiences of Henry Kissinger are present, the following atomic propositions hold true:

‘The sun orbits the moon’

‘There are over ten billion functionally sentient animals’

‘The person with present experiences was formerly Secretary of State’

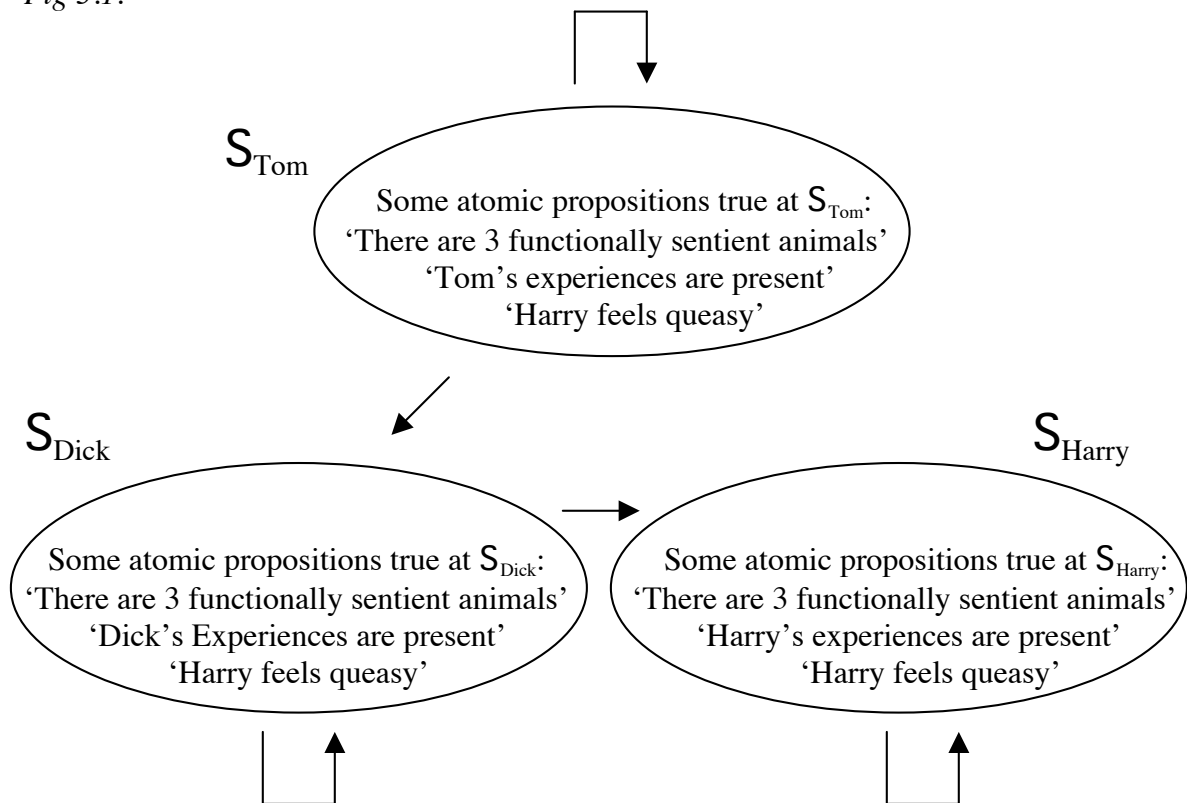
‘CJH’s experiences are absent’

...etc.

Now, let a *system* of S -worlds be a set of physically identical S -worlds such that for any functionally sentient creature in an S -world in the set, there is an S -world in the set in which that very creature has present experiences. And say that for any system of S -worlds there is a reflexive two-place access relation, the **a**-relation, defined over pairs of S -worlds in the system.

Here, for the sake of having an example to work with, is one system of S -worlds:

Fig 3.1:



(The ovals represent S-worlds. The arrows represent access relations between S-worlds:

$S_i \rightarrow S_j$ means S_i is **a**-related to S_j .) So, in this system there are three S-worlds, S_{Tom} , S_{Dick} , and S_{Harry} . They are all **a**-related to themselves, S_{Tom} is **a**-related to S_{Dick} (though not vice-versa), and S_{Dick} is **a**-related to S_{Harry} , (though not vice-versa).

Now we give truth conditions for sentences containing quantified *point of view* operators in the following way:

Definition 1: From some point of view, from every point of view

$[From\ some\ point\ of\ view\ (p)]$ is true at S_K iff for some S_J **a**-related to S_K , $[p]$ is true at S_J
 $[From\ every\ point\ of\ view\ (p)]$ is true at S_K iff for every S_J **a**-related to S_K , $[p]$ is true at S_J

So, for example, in the above system the proposition ‘*From some point of view* (there are present queasy experiences)’ is true at S_{Dick} , because S_{Dick} is **a**-related to S_{Harry} and ‘there are present queasy experiences’ is true at S_{Harry} . But it is false at S_{Tom} , because S_{Tom} is not **a**-related to S_{Harry} , or to any other S -world at which ‘there are present queasy experiences’ is true.

And we give truth conditions for sentences containing operators of the form *from H’s point of view* with the following definition schema:

Definition 2: From H’s point of view of

For any functionally sentient being H , [*From H’s point of view* (p)] is true at S_K
iff
for some S_J **a**-related to S_K , [H has present experiences, and p] is true at S_J

So in the above system, for example, ‘*from Harry’s point of view* (Harry’s experiences are present and Harry is queasy)’ is true at S_{Dick} .

Finally we stipulate that:

Definition 3: Consciousness

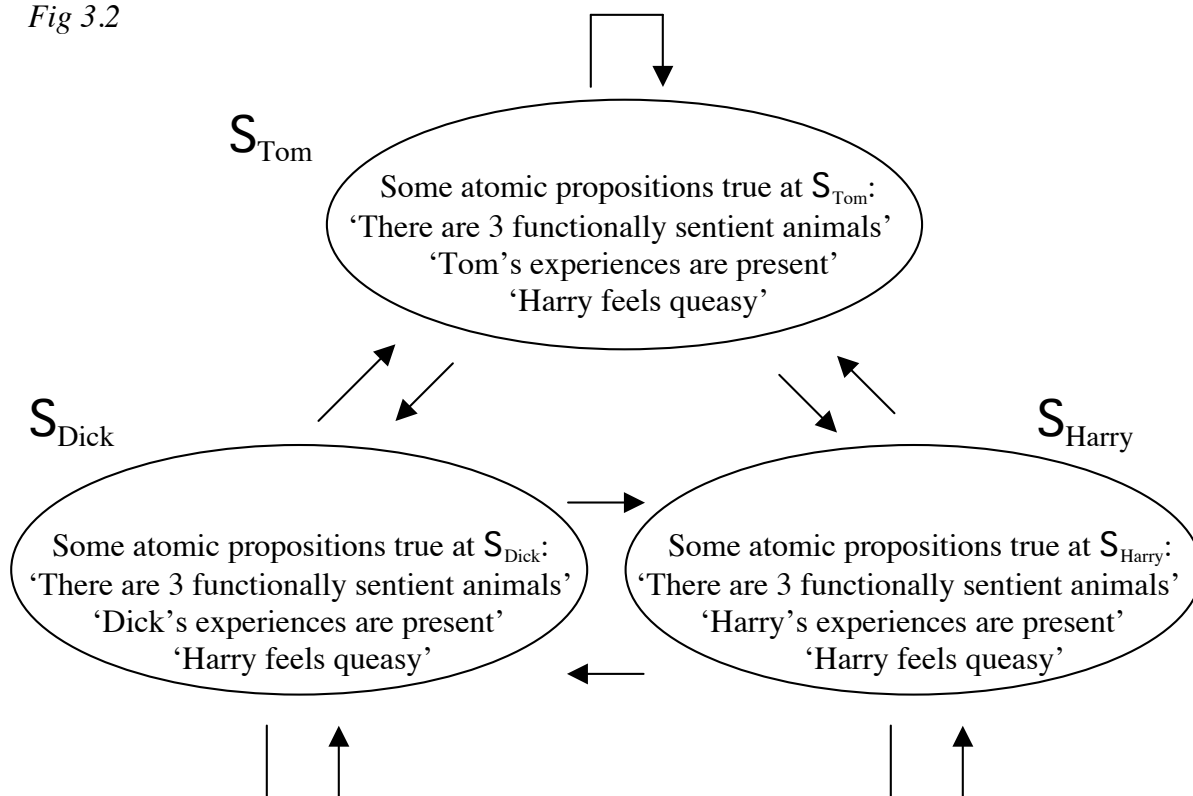
[H is conscious] is true at S_K
iff
[*From H’s point of view* (H ’s experiences are present)] is true at S_K

So in the above system, for example, ‘Harry is conscious’ is true at S_{Dick} but not at S_{Tom} , because S_{Dick} is **a**-related to a world in which Harry’s experiences are present, but S_{Tom} is

not. But ‘*from Dick’s point of view* (Harry is conscious)’ is true at S_{Tom} , because S_{Tom} is **a**-related to S_{Dick} .

Here’s a different system:

Fig 3.2



In this system all pairs of S-worlds are **a**-related. Call this a *maximally interrelated* system. So in this system ‘Harry is conscious’ is true at S_{Dick} . Indeed, at every S-world it is true that every functionally sentient creature is conscious. There are no zombies in a maximally interrelated system.

That’s the S-world semantics for a logic of points of view. It gives you, I hope, an intuitive sense of how the operators *from some point of view*, *from every point of view*... etc. work. As an egocentric presentist (pretend, for the moment, that I am one) I make use

of these operators but believe the semantics to be misleading in one important respect. I believe that all that exists is an S-world, S_{ME} , in which the experiences of one and only one person, the person I call 'me', are present. That's it. What makes the S-world semantics useful, though misleading, is that propositions containing the *point of view* operators are true or false of this world *as if* it were part of a maximally-interrelated system of physically identical S-worlds, and truth conditions for such propositions were given by the rules above. So it is true, for example, that *from Henry Kissinger's point of view* (Henry Kissinger's experiences are present), and that *from Henry Kissinger's point of view (from Condoleezza Rice's point of view* (Henry Kissinger's experiences are not present)), and that every functionally sentient creature is conscious.

An egocentric presentist's attitude towards the S-world semantics, then, is very like a temporal presentist's attitude toward the standard four-dimensionalist semantics for tense logic. The temporal presentist says that only the present moment exists, that that is all there is. But for the purposes of understanding how tensed operators (operators like *it was once the case that* and *it will always be the case that*) work it may be useful to imagine that other moments exist, because propositions containing such operators are true or false of the present moment, *as if* it were part of a system of moments ordered by an earlier-later relation and truth conditions for propositions containing the operators were given by the rules of the four-dimensionalist semantics for tense logic.

It is also very like a modal fictionalist's attitude to the possible worlds semantics for modal logic.²² The modal fictionalist believes that propositions containing modal operators (like *it is possible that* and *it is necessary that*) are true or false of the actual

²² See Rosen (1990) and onwards.

world *as if* it were part of a wider system of possible worlds ordered by an access relation, and truth conditions for the operators were given by the possible worlds semantics. But, says the fictionalist, we shouldn't let this fool us into thinking that a wider system really exists. Only the actual world exists.

Egocentric Presentism and Egoistic Considerations

If egocentric presentism is right then all that there is is an S-world. S-worlds are maximal states of affairs. So, as an egocentric presentist, I can make peace between considerations of the greater good and egocentric considerations by taking S-worlds in which I (short-hand for 'the one with present experiences', remember) suffer to be worse simpliciter than S-worlds in which I do not, and S-worlds in which I prosper to be better simpliciter than S-worlds in which I do not.

The Problem of Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences now disappears. When I have such a preference, in the After the Train Crash case, for example, the two 'possibilities' that seem open to me really do represent different ways for everything to be. My desire that I not suffer amounts to a preference for the maximal state of affairs in which there is no present suffering, a simply better maximal state of affairs.

What about the Generalization Problem? As an egocentric presentist I can make sense of the idea that other people have reason to be self-interested, even when their self-interest conflicts with my own. Recall the Competing for a Scarce Resource case, for example. In this case there seemed to be two ways for things to go:

Possibility (1):

CJH gets the resource and there is present happiness	Jane misses out and there is absent misery
---	---

Possibility (2):

CJH misses out
and there is present misery

Jane gets the resource
and there is absent happiness

Since the state of affairs represented by possibility (1) is intrinsically better than the state of affairs represented by possibility (2), considerations of the greater good support *my* favoring it, but how do such considerations bear on Jane? I might think about this question in two different ways.

On the one hand, I might think that considerations of the greater good support Jane favoring me getting the resource in just the way that they support me favoring me getting the resource. If Jane takes the resource for herself then she brings about an intrinsically worse state of affairs, and that counts against her doing so.

But there's another, better way to think about it. When I treat another person as a practical deliberator, and ask whether such-and-such considerations support her doing so-and-so, I take her to be in a particular deliberative context, *facing* choices, options, and alternatives. This involves taking the deliberative context to be present. But since Jane's experiences are not, have never been, and will never be present, she is not, has never been, and will never be a practical deliberator in this sense, so I cannot think directly about what considerations count. I must instead think indirectly, by, so-to-speak, thinking within the scope of the from Jane's point of view operator – by thinking about what *from Jane's point of view* (...is the case). When I do this I see that *from Jane's point of view* (if Jane gets the resource there will be present happiness and absent misery, if Jane misses out there will be present misery and absent happiness), so *from Jane's point of view* (it is

intrinsically better that Jane get the resource), so *from Jane's point of view* (consequentialist considerations support Jane favoring the scenario in which she gets the resource). When I think about Jane as a practical deliberator, I see that considerations of the greater good support her looking out for herself.

When a monadic tensor seeks to generalize time-bias he will feel a similar kind of ambivalence. Imagine that, in the Bad and Worse Operations case, I decide to act on Monday so as to ensure that I will have the nasty operation on Thursday, rather than the exquisitely agonizing one on Tuesday. It is now Wednesday evening, and, being biased toward the future, I am already regretting my decision, wishing that I had brought my operation forward to Tuesday. What should I now think about whether considerations of the greater good supported Monday's decision?

On one hand I might think that they weighed against my decision. As things are there will be nasty suffering tomorrow. If I had acted differently all suffering would be in the past. So, in deferring the operation, I favored an intrinsically worse state of affairs over an intrinsically better one.

But that is obviously the wrong way to think about it. Thinking in the right way about the practical considerations that bore upon Monday's decision involves thinking about a deliberative context in which I face Monday's options and alternatives, which involves thinking about that deliberative context as present. But Monday's deliberative context is not present. For me to consider it so, I must think, so-to-speak, within the scope of the *it was the case that* operator. I must think about how *it was the case that* (...things are). But since *it was the case that* (if I choose to defer the operation there will be less suffering in the future), *it was the case that* (considerations of the greater good support

my deferring the operation). When I think about the decision in the appropriate way, I see that it was supported by considerations of the greater good.

Lastly, what about the Grounding Problem? Would the metaphysics support mild egocentric-hedonism by providing grounds for thinking that, all other things being equal, it is worse that suffering be mine than someone else's? I think so. If you don't see this immediately, I urge you (really!) to perform this experiment:

Trial By Kettle

Today, many hundreds, if not thousands, of Russians will spill boiling water on their hands. Pour boiling water on your own hand and compare your present discomfort with the absent discomfort of the northern-most Russian spiller. Which is worse?

Your immediate reaction:

'This pain is *dreadful*, worse than any of those Russian pains.'

may be tempered by a sober, reflective thought:

'My pain appears worse to me because I am more intimately acquainted with it. It is present to me in a way that the northern-most Russian spiller's pain is not. But he is more intimately acquainted with *his* pain. It is present to him in a way that mine is not. Since our situations are really symmetrical, I find, on reflection, that I have no grounds for thinking that my pain is worse simpliciter than his pain.'

Well and good. But this humbling thought is not available to an egocentric presentist. For an egocentric presentist, the situations are not symmetrical. It's not that

my pain is present to me and his present to him. Mine is present and his is absent. That is part of the way things are. So there is no reason to qualify or reassess my initial judgment.

The thought experiment does not, of course, commit an egocentric presentist to extreme egocentric-hedonism – the view that only present suffering has any significance at all. It identifies one factor that makes pleasure better and suffering worse. This is quite compatible with thinking that, in evaluating the significance of suffering, there are many other relevant factors to consider – factors such as the *intensity* of the suffering, the *duration* of the suffering, and the *number* of sufferers. It may be very tricky to give these factors precise weight. Is it better that there be one hour of hand-scalding or four hours of thumb-scalding? Is it better that there be one scalded hand or four scalded thumbs?²³ Is it better that there be absent suffering from hand-scalding or present suffering from thumb-scalding? But some cases are less tricky. It is better that there be four hangnails than one crushed leg. It is better that there be present suffering from a hangnail than absent suffering of leg-crushing. After all, when there is an absent suffering from leg-crushing, and the victim is not a zombie, it is the case that *from someone else's point of view* (there is excruciating pain). And an egocentric presentist is free to take it that this matters, in just the way that a monadic tensor is free to take it that it matters that *it will be the case that* (there is excruciating pain). That is why empathy is instructive. For an egocentric presentist, empathizing with an unfortunate involves imagining that I am the unfortunate, that the unfortunate has present experiences. This involves viscerally imagining what

²³ The trickiness runs very deep. Indeed, it may be that there is no satisfactory way of answering all such questions without appealing to an intransitive 'better than' relation. See Temkin (1996) and Norcross (1997).

from the unfortunate's point of view (...is the case). And I care about the results of this exercise because I care about what *from another person's point of view* (...is the case).

So, for the mild egocentric-hedonist who adopts egocentric presentism, in some cases (e.g. comparing a state of affairs in which I suffer a hangnail with one in which someone else suffers a crushed leg) there will remain some conflict between egocentric-hedonistic considerations and considerations of the greater good. But the residual conflict will not trouble me. For an egocentric presentist, egocentric-hedonistic considerations are not considerations of a special, distinctive kind, that count towards my favoring one state of affairs over another even when I recognize that the other is better simpliciter than the one. Once I have judged that it is better that there be a present hangnail than absent leg-crushing, it isn't as if there is some further consideration – ‘but the hangnail will be mine!’ – that has independent force. I have already accounted for the presence of the hangnail, the fact that it is mine, in my judgment about which state of affairs is better simpliciter. So when egocentric-hedonistic considerations and considerations of the greater good conflict the former just fall away.

Furthermore, when the trade-off between my interests and the interests of other people is more evenly balanced, as an egocentric presentist I can indulge my mildly egocentric preferences and attend to my own pleasures and pains while enjoying the psychological harmony of Louis XIV – the serene confidence that comes with believing that in doing what's good for me I am doing what's good full stop.

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