

Caspar Hare

March 2007

In the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 2, 2008 – please cite that version.

A Puzzle About Other-Directed Time-Bias

Many of us, when we think about our own joys and miseries, are time-biased. We don't just care about what happens to us, we also care about when it happens. In particular, we care about whether it is past or future – other things being equal, we would prefer miseries to be in our past and joys to be in our future. But what happens when we turn our attention to other people? Are we time-biased on their behalf? That depends. Our attitude is sensitive, in a curious way, to things that typically come with distance.

To get a grip on the attitude, imagine yourself in a couple of situations, both of which feature two kinds of drug that can be used to dull the pain associated with wisdom-tooth extraction – *zombomol* and *subzombomol*. *Zombomol* is an effective local anesthetic. Under its influence, extraction is an unpleasant but not painful ordeal for the extractee. *Subzombomol* is cheaper and much less effective. Under its influence, extraction is painful. But neither drug has any significant impact on the success of the operation, neither drug has any significant side-effects and neither drug in any significant way directly or indirectly infects the quality of an extractee's future experiences – a *subzombomol*-tinted extraction is not so very terrible that it is likely to traumatize you, or to cause you to wake up weeks later, covered in cold sweat, or such-like.

Case 1: The Far-Away Daughter

Your beloved daughter is spending her summer at a monastery in northern Japan, far from phones and email. You will not see her until September. On the morning of July 28th you receive a postal letter, dated July 19th, from the administrator

overseeing her time at the monastery. He writes that she needs to have her wisdom teeth removed. This is nothing to get too worried about. Japan has the highest standards of dentistry in the world, so the operation is safe. It is also pre-emptive, her teeth are causing her no immediate bother. Furthermore the dentist will not inform her of its necessity until the day before it happens, so she will be spared long periods of anxious waiting. But there is one small complication. Her medical coverage makes some drugs available and others not. Depending on availability, she will either have a painful, subzombomol-tinted extraction on July 27th or a merely unpleasant, zombomol-tinted extraction on July 29th. From afar, sitting at your breakfast table, which drug would you prefer to have been available?

Case 2: the Nearby Daughter

In this case you receive her letter on July 26th and immediately board a plane. Arriving at the monastery on July 28th, you find her asleep. She appears a little restless, but you cannot for the moment tell whether this is a sign of post-operative discomfort or pre-operative anxiety. From nearby, sitting at her bedside, which do you want it to be?

I find that the large majority of people to whom I present these cases say that they would prefer, in the first case, for their daughter to have the merely unpleasant operation on the 29th, and, in the second case, for their daughter to have had the painful operation on the 27th.¹ Furthermore, in each case they feel that it *makes sense* to have the

¹ Derek Parfit once observed what he called ‘a surprising asymmetry in our concern about our own, and other people’s pasts.’ We tend to care about our own past suffering only insofar as it impacts upon our

preference, given the way in which it is appropriate to care about a daughter. While they would be loath to condemn a parent with different preferences, they feel that such a parent would be making a kind of mistake.

What's going on? Here's one theory-laden interpretation of the majority view. When we are thinking about another person's well-being we can focus our attention on her *life* or her *predicament*. Think of a life as a way for things to go for a person, from her coming into existence to her leaving it (neatly represented by a <world-history, person> pair). Think of a predicament as a position for a person to be in, with a certain past behind her and a certain future ahead of her (neatly represented by a <world-history, person, time> triple). Now, it is natural to think that a predicament in which you had a painful operation yesterday is better than an all-other-things-equal predicament in which you will have a merely unpleasant operation tomorrow – after all, in the former predicament your ordeal is *over*.² And it is natural to think that a life in which you have a painful extraction on a certain day is worse than an all-other-things-equal life in which you have a merely unpleasant extraction two days later³ – after all, worse things happen

future, but we care about the past suffering of a beloved for its own sake – if Parfit were to discover that he suffered terribly last year it would trouble him little, but if he were to discover that his dead mother suffered terribly in the year before she died, it would trouble him greatly. See Parfit (1983) section 69. Fair enough, but, as the nearby and far-away daughter cases illustrate, there are curious asymmetries *within* the way in which we care about other people's pasts. (Incidentally, I take it that Parfit is aware of this because, in an effort to elicit the *better-life* intuition, he stipulates that he is distant from his mother: 'I am an exile from some country, where I have left my widowed mother. Though I am deeply concerned about her, I very seldom get news...')

² We can say this while leaving it open whether facts about the past may have some bearing on the value of a predicament.

³ Things get complicated when all other things are *not* equal. Suppose, for example, that the later extraction brings with it two extra days of stomach-clenching dread. Then perhaps your daughter will have a better life if she suffers the earlier, painful operation and cuts short all that dreading. But, in the case we are looking at, there is one day of dreading either way. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for showing that the case needs to have this feature.

to you in the former life.⁴ So in the far-away and nearby daughter cases you must choose, if you are to have a preference at all, between preferring that your daughter have a better life and preferring that she be in a better predicament. The majority view is that in the far-away case you should prefer that she have a better life, and in the nearby case you should prefer that she be in a better predicament.

This raises a *psychological* question – why do the majority think that their preferences should switch in this way? I won't attempt to give an answer here, beyond observing that at least three differences between the cases seem to play a significant role in triggering the switch. There's the distance, obviously. There's the fact that you can see her in the nearby but not the far-away case (intuitions get muddy if you add an international video-feed to the far-away case). And there's the (implied) fact that you will talk to her before her operation in the nearby case, but not in the far away case (intuitions get muddy if you add an imminent telephone call to the far-away case).⁵

The question I will address is *normative* – are the majority right? Are their preferences really the sensible expression of appropriate concern for your daughter? Does appropriate concern for your daughter in any way mandate that you have these preferences? I answer no, because I see no good reasons to think that it does, and I see good reasons to think that it doesn't. Let's take these in order.

⁴ This much is not controversial, although of course the precise way in which the distribution of good and bad things across lives determines their relative value *is* controversial – see Slote (1982), Velleman (1991) and Broome (2004).

⁵ I don't know of any research on the psychology of time-bias on behalf of other people. But there has been a good deal of research on the psychology of time-bias on one's own behalf – summarized in Ainslie (2001) chapter 3. And Yaacov Trope has conducted some very suggestive research on the way in which empathizing is sensitive to spatial and temporal distance – see Trope, Fujita, Henderson and Liberman (forthcoming).

2. Bad Reasons to Think that Appropriate Concern Mandates the Switch

Some people who wish to defend the majority view sometimes observe that in the nearby case your daughter's present predicament is psychologically salient to you in a special kind of way – you are *confronted* with it. Then they argue that this makes a normative difference. Good parents, when confronted with their children's distress, are quick to empathize. Empathizing involves (among other things) caring about another's predicament as if it were your own. So when her present predicament is salient to you there is a failure of proper empathy on your part if you do not prefer it to be better. When it is not then you are free to disregard it, to concentrate on her life as a whole.

I find this argument unconvincing. After all, psychological salience does not play this role in other contexts. Suppose that you love your three children equally, and discover over a static-ridden mobile phone, while taking Billy to school, that either he will need to have a dental operation or both Bobby and Barry will need to have a dental operations. Once again you face a choice between projecting yourself into a psychologically salient pair of shoes (which would involve wanting Billy's predicament to be better) and taking a more detached attitude (which would involve wanting things to be better, overall, for your children). But appropriate parental concern does not mandate that you do the former, that you prefer that Bobby and Barry have the operation.

There is an important disanalogy between this inter-personal case and the intra-personal nearby daughter case, of course. In the nearby daughter case your daughter's predicament on the 18th is not just uniquely salient, but uniquely *present*. Of all the predicaments she has ever been in or ever will be in, it alone is her predicament now. Perhaps one might say that in the nearby daughter case this gives you special grounds for

concern for her predicament on the 18th. But then it gives you the same grounds in the far-away case – after all, in that case her predicament on the 18th is no less her predicament *now*.

Second, some people argue that the crucial difference between the cases is *influence*. In neither case do you have any influence over whether or when your daughter's operation occurs. But in the nearby case, if the operation will occur, at least can you have some influence over how it will feel to her, by preparing her for it in one way or another. It is generally true that you should care more about things you can influence than things you cannot. So you should care more about her future than her past, in that case. So you should prefer her ordeal to be past, in that case.

Again, this is an unconvincing argument. Even if it is generally true that we should devote more attention to ordeals we can influence than to ordeals we cannot (debatable, given that anticipation can magnify pain), it does not follow that we should want ordeals to be such that we cannot influence them.

Third, people sometimes say⁶ that in the far-away case (but not the nearby case) it would be inappropriate to care about your daughter's present predicament because in this case (but not the other) there is just no fact of the matter about what your daughter's present predicament is. You and she are on opposite sides of a spinning globe, traveling very fast in opposite directions. In such conditions special relativity tells us that relative to some rest-frames she is presently in some predicaments, while relative to other rest-frames she is presently in others.

⁶ I should emphasize that this argument has never been made in print. The cases have never been discussed in print. But it has popped up several times in my undergraduate lecture class, so it may be worth addressing here.

This is true of the far-away case, so long as predicaments are individuated in a sufficiently fine-grained way, but it is also true of the nearby case, so long as predicaments are individuated in a sufficiently fine-grained way and you are not perfectly motionless relative to your daughter. What makes the cases different? Perhaps the idea is supposed to be that, in the far-away case but not the nearby case, there are rest-frames relative to which the later operation is past or rest-frames relative to which the earlier operation is future. But this turns on a misunderstanding of special relativity. There are no rest-frames relative to which events in Cambridge on the morning of July 28th are prior to events in northern Japan on the afternoon of July 27th, and no rest-frames relative to which events in Cambridge on the morning of July 28th are subsequent to events in Japan on the afternoon of July 29th. So, when you open the letter at your breakfast table in the far-away case (and when you stand beside your daughter's bedside in the nearby case) it is either true that for any rest-frame, R, her predicament relative to R is one in which she will have a merely unpleasant operation or true that for any rest-frame, R, her predicament relative to R is one in which she has had a painful operation.

Perhaps there are better arguments in support of the majority view. Perhaps, one might say, very little by way of argument is needed. It is just a fact that in some circumstances it is appropriate for parents to project themselves into their children's present shoes, so to speak, and prefer them to be in the better predicament, while in other circumstances it is appropriate for parents to be more detached, and prefer them to have better lives. This is not something we need to justify or explain.

No matter, because there are good, independent reasons to think that the majority view must be mistaken.

3. Good Reasons to Think that Appropriate Concern Does *Not* Mandate the Switch

First, the majority view has it that whether or not you should prefer that your daughter have the better life or be in the better predicament depends upon whether certain conditions obtain. Call these, the conditions that play a significant role in distinguishing the nearby case from the far-away case, the *proximity conditions* – that you are near to her, that you can see her, that you are in a position to communicate with her...etc. But we can tweak the cases so that whether or not the proximity conditions obtain is a matter of no importance to your daughter. Consider:

Case 3: The Nearby Northern Daughter

You receive her letter on July 26th, but are unsure of precisely where it came from. She is either staying in a monastery in the far-north of Japan or staying in a monastery in the far-south of Japan. You immediately head for the northern monastery, while your spouse (who has an equally close relationship with her, and is equally adept at providing solace and succor) heads for the southern monastery. On July 28th you arrive at the northern monastery and find your daughter asleep.

Case 4: The Far-Away Southern Daughter

On July 28th you arrive at the northern monastery and discover that your daughter is far-away to the south, with your spouse.

The majority view still has it that when the proximity conditions obtain, in Case 3, you should prefer that she be in the better predicament, and when they do not, in Case 4,

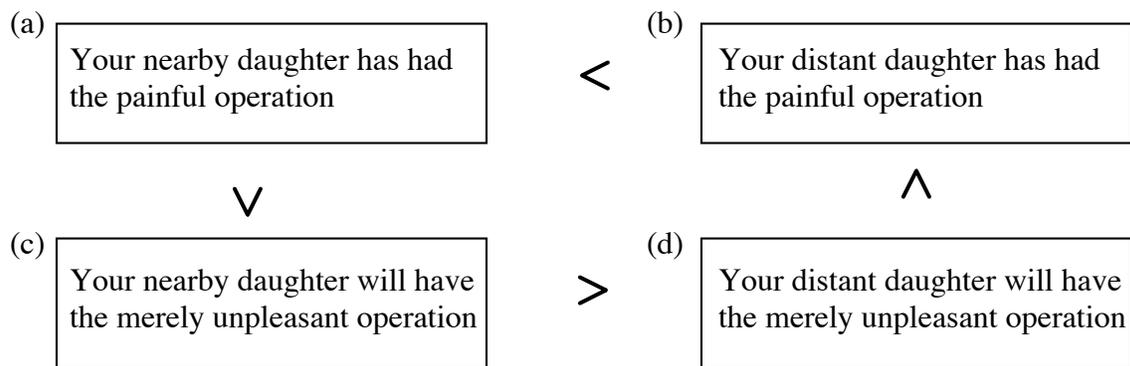
you should prefer that she have the better life. But in these cases, whether or not the proximity conditions obtain seems quite irrelevant to the condition, broadly construed, of your daughter – she is not in any better or worse a predicament either way, and she has no better or worse a life either way. So why does appropriate concern for your daughter mandate that your preferences be sensitive to considerations about which *she could not care less and should not care less*? One would think that if a kind of concern mandates that you have preferences that are sensitive to certain considerations, these considerations must be in some way relevant to what you are concerned about – in this case, the condition of your daughter.

Second, an advocate of the majority view must accept that the *mandatory to prefer* relation licensed by appropriate concern for your daughter is intransitive and circular. Consider one last, rather contrived case.

Case 5: ‘Where’s my Daughter?’

Once again you and your spouse head off to opposite tips of Japan. But in this case you are significantly better than your spouse at allaying pre-operative anxieties (with games, funny stories... etc.) and your spouse is significantly better than you at providing post-operative comfort (with hugs, grapes...etc.). On July 28th you arrive at the northern monastery and are confronted with a sleeping figure. In the dim candlelight you cannot quite tell if it is your daughter, and certainly cannot tell if your daughter has had her operation yet. How do you want things to be?

In this case your daughter might be before you or far-away, with your spouse, and she might have had the painful operation on the 27th or be about to have the unpleasant operation on the 29th. So there are four possibilities:



Appropriate concern for your daughter mandates a preference for (b) over (a) (represented by a ‘>’ in the diagram) – after all, if your daughter has been in pain, she is in a significantly better predicament *and* has a significantly better life if she is far-away, with your spouse. And it mandates a preference for (c) over (d) – after all, if she will be uncomfortable, then she is in a significantly better predicament and has a significantly better life if she is right here before you. But, if the majority view is correct, appropriate concern mandates a preference for (a) over (c)⁷ – if she is right here before you, then she is in a better predicament if she has had the painful operation (even though she would be in a yet-better predicament if she had had the painful operation and were far-away, with your spouse). And, if the majority view is correct, appropriate concern mandates a preference for (d) over (b) – if your daughter is far-away then she has a better life if she is on course to have the later, uncomfortable operation (even though

⁷ There is logical space for an advocate of the majority view to deny this, to say that once you have discovered that your daughter is here before you, it is mandatory that you prefer (a) to (c), but prior to that discovery it is not mandatory to prefer (a) to (c). But this would take a lot of motivating. Why have a preference for φ over $\neg\varphi$, upon discovering that ϕ , if you did not have a prior preference for $(\phi \wedge \varphi)$ over $(\phi \wedge \neg\varphi)$?

she would have a yet-better life if she were on course to have the later operation and were here with you.)

So, according to the majority view, the interests of your daughter mandate cyclical preferences on her behalf. I take this conclusion to be *reductio* of that view.⁸

4. What *Should* a Parent Prefer?

Let me close by indicating, briefly, what we should think about other-directed time-bias.

We must accept one of three alternatives to the majority view:

- (i) In one or both of the cases, appropriate concern for your daughter does not mandate a preference for her having the earlier, painful operation or the later, unpleasant one.
- (ii) In both cases it mandates a preference for her having the later, unpleasant operation.
- (iii) In both cases it mandates a preference for her having the earlier, painful one.

In defense of (i), one might say that appropriate concern for a daughter may mandate generally speaking, preferring that she have a better life *and* preferring that she be in a better predicament, but when these things conflict there is just no mandated tie-breaking preference. I find this hard to accept. After all, at any point in time it does (and *should*) matter a great deal to your daughter whether she has the earlier or later operation. If you take it upon yourself to care

⁸ Some may disagree. Larry Temkin, for example, believes that the relations *better for me*, *better for my daughter*, *better for Joe Bloggs* etc. are intransitive. See Temkin (1996). So I assume he already thinks that appropriate concern for a daughter mandates intransitive preferences. He, or someone like him, might be untroubled by a new example of mandated intransitivity. I won't weigh into the (considerable) debate on this topic here (see Norcross (1997), Rachels (1998), Binmore and Voorhoeve (2003), and Broome (2004) section 4.1), beyond observing that even those who are sympathetic to Temkin's view concede that the intransitivity is *prima facie* puzzling, that it deserves an explanation. But this 'Where's My Daughter?' case is very different from the familiar cases in which, supposedly, *better for...* is intransitive (typically such cases involve trade-offs between two factors that bear upon the well-being of a person – factors like the *intensity* and *duration* of a bout of suffering, or the *intensity* of a bout of suffering and the *financial rewards* that come from enduring it). So the stock explanations are unlikely to be satisfactory.

about her, how can that not involve taking a position on this question that is so important to her?

I find (ii) no easier to accept. In the nearby case, your daughter will almost certainly prefer that she be in the better predicament⁹, and I see no grounds for thinking this preference in any sense mistaken, for thinking that appropriate self-concern mandates that she prefer to have the better life. If (ii) were correct, the preferences mandated by your appropriate concern for her would contradict her preferences. She would have a strong preference, and you, sitting a couple of feet away, would be mandated to have a strong contradictory preference on her behalf, and yet you would be unable to represent her preference as in any way mistaken. Perhaps a little paternalism is unavoidable in your relations with your daughter, but this is paternalism run amok.

Which leaves (iii). In both the nearby and far-away cases you should (insofar as you appropriately care about her) prefer that your daughter have had the painful operation.

That may sound surprising. After all, in caring about your daughter's predicament rather than her life, you are adopting an irreducibly tensed conative attitude – where you care, not merely about the times at which things happen, but also about whether they happen in the past, present or future. It is tempting to think of this as a way of being *partial*. And it is tempting to imagine that, whenever we subject our other-directed attitudes to careful inspection, we will find grounds for becoming *less* partial rather than *more*. But this is a mistake. Careful inspection shows that the kind of temporal impartiality that is induced in us by distance from

⁹ To elicit this preference you would, of course, need to wake her up, and take advantage of the period of amnesia that (it is useful to pretend) follows waking.

the objects of our concerns is the result of our failing to engage, imaginatively, with their present conditions.¹⁰

References:

Ainslie, George (2001): *Break-Down of Will*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Binmore, Ken, and Voorhoeve, Alexander (2003): “Defending Transitivity Against Zeno’s Paradox”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31, No. 3, 272-279

Broome, John (1991): *Weighing Goods*, Oxford: Blackwell

Broome, John (2004): *Weighing Lives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Norcross, Alistair (1997): “Comparing Harms: Headaches and Human Lives”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26, No. 2, 135-167

Parfit, Derek (1984): *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rachels, Stuart (1998): “Counterexamples to the Transitivity of Better Than”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76, 71-83

Slote, Michael (1982): “Goods and Lives”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 63

Temkin, Larry (1996): “A Continuum Argument for Intransitivity”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, 175-210

Trope, Y., Fujita, K., Henderson, M., Eng, J., and Liberman, N. (forthcoming): “Spatial Distance and Mental Construal of Social Events”, *Psychological Science*

Velleman, David (1991): “Well Being and Time”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72

¹⁰ We had some evidence that this was true all along. After all, in the far-away case, the preference that she have the later operation becomes less and less stable as you learn more and more about her condition (as you see the video-feed...etc.). And the grain of truth upon which full-information theories of rationality are precariously balanced is that you should be antecedently suspicious of a preference that will, you know, disappear as you learn more and more about its object.