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Past/Future Attitude Asymmetries

Values, Preferences, and the Phenomenon of Relief

Christoph Hoerl

Human attitudes to non-present events can depend greatly on whether these events have already happened, or whether they are yet to happen. In this chapter, I will discuss two relatively separate bodies of work in philosophy that have discussed such temporally asymmetrical attitudes.

One issue that philosophers have debated is whether temporally asymmetrical attitudes are rationally permissible, or whether they constitute an irrational psychological trait. Spinoza famously claims that, '[i]n so far as the mind conceives a thing under the dictate of reason, it will be equally affected, whether the idea be of a thing present, past, or future' (Spinoza, 1677/1985: IV. lxii). He is thus advocating a form of temporal neutrality—that the time at which an event happens should make no difference to our assessment of it.¹ Yet, it seems that some temporally asymmetrical attitudes are quite deeply ingrained in our lives, and hard to shake off.

One of the most extended discussions of this issue can be found in Derek Parfit's (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Central to Parfit's discussion is his influential thought experiment featuring a person who knows that they have a medical condition requiring a painful operation, and who wakes up in hospital not knowing whether they have had the operation already or whether they are yet to have the operation. As Parfit points out, in such a case most people would expect the person to have a preference for the former to be the case, rather than the latter. Moreover, Parfit also claims that people would have such a preference for the operation to lie in the past even if they knew that, if the operation has already happened, it lasted for 10 hours, whereas if it is yet to happen, it will last for only one hour.²

I will label the attitude asymmetry at issue in Parfit's discussion the 'preference asymmetry'.

¹ See also Sullivan (2018). Callender (this volume) and Greene et al. (this volume) discuss different notions of temporal neutrality.

² See Lee et al. (this volume) and Greene et al. (this volume) for discussion of empirical work exploring the extent to which, and the conditions under which, people do indeed exhibit these preferences.

The preference asymmetry: (At least other things being equal) people prefer unpleasant experiences to lie in the past, rather than the future.³

As I indicated, Parfit's concern with temporally asymmetrical attitudes, like Spinoza's, is a normative one: with whether our attitudes towards events *ought* to be sensitive to the time at which they happen, or whether our attitudes should be temporally neutral.⁴ However, philosophers have also connected temporally asymmetrical attitudes with metaphysical questions—questions concerned with the very nature of time itself.

In this second context in which philosophers have discussed temporally asymmetrical attitudes it is typically taken for granted that they are rationally permissible—or at least that there is some feature of reality to which they answer. Arthur Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument (Prior, 1959, 2003b) famously asks us to consider the characteristic way in which our attitudes towards an event can change as time goes on. First we anticipate the visit to the dentist with dread, then the day comes and we undergo the painful root canal, and once it is finished we say 'Thank Goodness that's over.' Insofar as we consider this change in attitudes appropriate, Prior thinks, it commits us to thinking not only that *things* can change but that *events* undergo change too—that an event's turning from being present into being past constitutes an objective change in the properties of that event itself, rather than just in our perspective on it. He concludes that 'pastness, presentness and futurity are properties of events that are independent of the observer; and under favorable conditions they are perceived properties of events' (Prior, 1996: 49).⁵ In other words, if our relief that an unpleasant situation is over answers to some feature of the world, Prior argues, it must answer to the fact that reality itself is tensed. Reality itself must be temporally asymmetrical—there must be a real difference between the past and the future—to explain what makes our relief that an unpleasant event that was once future now lies in the past appropriate.⁶

I will discuss this argument in more detail in section 2. For the moment, we can label the psychological asymmetry at issue in it the asymmetry of relief:

³ Parfit also discusses the counterpart of this asymmetry, the preference for pleasant experiences to lie in the future. I will focus specifically on asymmetrical attitudes towards unpleasant experiences.

⁴ See also Brink (2011), Dougherty (2015), Greene and Sullivan (2015), Hare (2013).

⁵ Despite here framing the point in terms of talk about events and their having certain properties, Prior ultimately thinks that such talk does not provide a metaphysically perspicuous representation of reality, and that 'what looks like talk about events is really at bottom talk about things, and that what looks like talk about changes in events is really just slightly more complicated talk about changes in things' (Prior, 2003a: 16). I will set this aside for current purposes.

⁶ I will set aside for present purposes views on which time is asymmetric, but which do not cash this out in terms of there being an objective difference between the past and the future (see e.g. Maudlin, 2015). An early version of Prior's argument can already be found in Broad (1933/38, Vol. II, Part I: 266–7). See also Zimmerman (2007) and Pearson (2018) for recent endorsements of the argument, and Fernandes (2021) on details on what such an argument would have to look like.

The asymmetry of relief: We feel dread at the thought of impending unpleasant experiences and relief once an unpleasant experience is over.

Relief is arguably just one instance of a larger set of temporally asymmetrical emotions, also sometimes referred to as *tensed emotions*. But relief is probably the paradigm example of a tensed emotion; so, like Prior, I will focus on it in what follows.

I have given the two attitude asymmetries at issue in Parfit's and Prior's arguments two different labels, but it might well be asked whether we are in fact dealing with two separate phenomena, or whether Parfit's and Prior's examples involve just two different ways of describing the same basic underlying phenomenon. Indeed, Parfit himself switches from framing his thought experiment in terms of the notion of preference to framing it in terms of the notion of relief: 'It is either true that I did suffer for ten hours, or true that I shall suffer for one hour. I ask the nurse to find out which is true. While she is away, it is clear to me *which I prefer to be true*. If I learn that the first is true, *I shall be greatly relieved*' (Parfit, 1984: 166, my emphases). Whether these two things are indeed the same is one of the questions I want to examine in this chapter.

I think one thing that can help us get clearer about this question is considering a third kind of temporal attitude asymmetry that has started to attract attention in psychology recently, which I will label the valuation asymmetry (see also Ramos, Caruso, and Van Boven, this volume).

The valuation asymmetry: People seek and offer more compensation for future compared with past events.

In a study carried out by Caruso, Gilbert, and Wilson (2008), for instance, participants were asked to imagine that a friend had offered them use of his or her holiday home. They were then given descriptions of eight wines, including their price, and they had to pick an appropriate bottle of wine as a thank-you gift for their friend. There were two different task conditions. In one of them, participants were asked to imagine that they had just come back from a one-week stay at the holiday home; in the other, they were to imagine that they were about to go there for a one-week stay. Whether they imagined the stay at the holiday home as lying in the past or in the future turned out to significantly affect which wine participants chose: They gave the friend a bottle that was 37% more expensive when they imagined that the stay in the holiday home was yet to come than when they imagined a stay in the past. Similar studies have also shown that people are likely to charge more for work that they have yet to carry out than work they have already completed (Caruso et al., 2008), and that more compensation will be judged necessary for future compared with past harm (Caruso, 2010).

What I want to argue is that, by carefully comparing these three attitude asymmetries with each other, we can show that evaluating Parfit's and Prior's respective positions requires distinguishing between at least two quite different sets of psychological phenomena, which existing discussions of attitude asymmetries in both philosophy and psychology do not clearly distinguish between.⁷ The distinction is directly relevant to both Parfit's and Prior's argument. With respect to Parfit, I will argue that the claim that 'people prefer unpleasant experiences to lie in the past, rather than the future' may not identify a well-defined psychological phenomenon, which can be measured through responses to Parfit-style scenarios.⁸ Relatedly, with respect to Prior, I will argue that existing attempts to debunk Prior's argument by providing alternatives to his explanation for the asymmetry of relief fail, because they don't identify the right phenomenon that requires explanation. I will also outline an alternative explanation that does so.

1. Temporal Asymmetries and Metaphysics

The context of Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument is the debate between what are often referred to as the A-theory of time and the B-theory of time (although Prior himself did not use those terms). Crudely speaking, the B-theorist's ontology is one in which reality is simply made up of events that stand in relations of precedence or simultaneity to each other. We can indicate these relations by assigning dates to the relevant events, and, according to the B-theory, a description of every event in history giving its date—where this encompasses events that, from our perspective, are still in the future as well as past events—would be a complete description of temporal reality. According to the A-theorist, by contrast, such a description would be crucially incomplete (if not fundamentally misleading). The key thing which it would miss out on is which moment in time is present. Thus, for the A-theorist, there is one objectively present moment in time, and hence also an objective past and an objective future. Reality itself is tensed. (A-theorists typically combine this with the claim that which moment in time is present changes, so that different moments in time become present in turn, but this will be less central in what follows.)

⁷ Note that I use the term 'attitude asymmetry' stipulatively as a common name to cover what I call the preference asymmetry, the asymmetry of relief, and the valuation asymmetry. For my purposes, I need a term that can cover all three of these (at least conceptually distinct) asymmetries, but my use of the term 'attitude' should not be seen to carry any substantive implication. For the time being, what I am calling the preference asymmetry, the asymmetry of relief, and the valuation asymmetry are perhaps best understood as names for *psychological measures*, rather than entailing any commitments about the underlying psychology. Part of the question I want to raise is precisely whether they are measures of the same thing.

⁸ Strictly speaking, I should therefore talk about the 'purported preference asymmetry'. But I take this to be implied when I speak of the 'preference asymmetry' in what follows.

B-theorists typically motivate their position by arguing (following McTaggart, 1908) that the A-theory is self-contradictory (see e.g. Price, 2011), or by arguing that the A-theory is incompatible with Special Relativity (Putnam, 1967; Saunders, 2002). Yet, even if these arguments carry some weight against the A-theory, a crucial further task that remains for the B-theorist is to provide an explanation as to why, if the A-theory is false, it nevertheless seems to capture key aspects of our everyday thinking about time, such as the way in which we regard the future as ‘open’ and the past as ‘fixed’.

Recent responses to this challenge typically seek to explain our tendency to think that time itself exhibits an asymmetry by pointing to other temporal asymmetries that are better described as asymmetries exhibited by *things in time* (Price, 1996: 16), and which, it is argued, even the B-theorist can acknowledge. Specifically, they appeal to the causal asymmetry—that earlier events cause later events, but not vice versa—and the related knowledge asymmetry—that we have records of the past but not the future.

Eric Olson (2009: 446) illustrates the general explanatory strategy at issue in the relevant explanations by using an analogy:

If it were a law of nature that light never travelled southwards, everything to the south of you would appear bright during daylight hours, while to the north you would see only darkness. Your latitude would appear unique: it would seem to be the boundary between the illuminated part of the earth and the dark part. If you moved north, the darkness would seem to recede, so that more of the earth became bright. The boundary would appear to move, as if the dawn were following you. But this would all be an illusion. In reality there would be no boundary between the bright latitudes and the dark ones. They would all be equally bright. Nor would the overall pattern of illumination change as you moved. It is the same with the present.

Part of Olson’s point here is that an asymmetry in the way things are arranged in time, even though it applies to all points in time equally and thus does not involve there being any real difference between different regions in time, can nevertheless make it *appear* to a subject at each moment in time that that moment marks a cusp between two quite different regions of time. Thus, it is equally true at times in the past, the present, and the future that earlier events cause later ones, rather than vice versa. Relatedly, it is also equally true at times in the past, the present, and the future that we can have records only of events earlier than these times, but not of ones later than these times. Yet, even though there is therefore no difference between past, present, and future moments in time with respect to the causal asymmetry and the knowledge asymmetry, these asymmetries can nevertheless make us regard past moments in time themselves as very different from

future ones—regard time itself as split into two quite different regions. As we could also put it, there are real *earlier/later* asymmetries the existence of which the B-theorist, too, can acknowledge, and their existence can explain why it appears to us that there is a *past/future* asymmetry.⁹

In a somewhat similar fashion, B-theorists have also tried to explain psychological asymmetries such as the asymmetry of relief. This is meant to counter Prior's more specific argument that the relief felt after an unpleasant experience has ended is not intelligible unless there is a genuine change events themselves undergo when they turn from being present to being past. Again, the causal asymmetry plays a central role in the alternative explanations of the asymmetry of relief that B-theorists have given, which are typically cast in evolutionary terms. The basic idea behind them is that, since an agent's deliberations cannot causally affect what happened in the past, but can causally affect what will happen in the future, it is advantageous for the agent to assign past events less value than future events, thus prioritizing the latter in their deliberations. (An alternative way of characterizing this point is that it is more advantageous for agents to prioritize the satisfaction of present and future desires over the satisfaction of past desires.) This line of argument is first spelled out in Horwich (1987), and further developed in Maclaurin and Dyke (2002), but perhaps finds its fullest articulation in Suhler and Callender (2012, see also Callender, 2017).¹⁰ Suhler and Callender also think that this line of argument can draw on support from recent empirical research.

Suhler and Callender (2012) take their explanandum to be what they call 'the temporal value asymmetry', and effectively treat what I call the preference asymmetry, the asymmetry of relief, and the valuation asymmetry as all different manifestations of this temporal value asymmetry.¹¹ More specifically, they view past/future attitude asymmetries in general as a discounting phenomenon. To illustrate this idea, Suhler and Callender draw a parallel to the well-studied tendency humans have to discount larger later rewards in favour of smaller, sooner ones. In a similar fashion, they argue, past/future attitude asymmetries can be conceptualized in terms of the idea that past events are discounted in favour of future ones. (See also Callender's as well as Sullivan's contributions to this volume.)

⁹ This argument will not constitute a successful defense of the B-theory if the causal and knowledge asymmetry themselves have to be explained in a way that presupposes a difference between the past and future—e.g. in terms of the idea that the future is 'open' and the past 'fixed'. B-theorists therefore typically argue that the causal and knowledge asymmetries can instead be explained by even more fundamental temporal asymmetries that the physical world exhibits. For examples of such explanations see, among others, Reichenbach (1956) and Albert (2000).

¹⁰ Parfit (1984: Ch. 8), too, mentions the idea that 'temporal biases', as he calls them, might have an evolutionary explanation. Horwich (1987) takes himself to provide an elaboration of Parfit's suggested explanation.

¹¹ Parfit's thought experiment, Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument, and the research by Caruso et al. (2008) on what I am calling the valuation asymmetry are all discussed in the course of Suhler and Callender's paper, but they largely abstract from any potential differences between them.

Pointing to empirical research such as that by Caruso et al. (2008), Suhler and Callender argue that humans' tendency to discount past events in favour of future ones is connected to what I will call *psychological process asymmetries*, that is, ways in which thinking about the past versus the future involves different psychological processes, or involves some psychological processes to differing degrees. Thus, research in psychology has shown, for instance, that contemplating future events produces greater affect than contemplating past events (Van Boven and Ashworth, 2007), and that future events seem closer in time than past events (Caruso, Van Boven, Chin, and Ward, 2013). Furthermore, research also seems to show that the degree to which people discount the value of past events is predicted by the degree to which they exhibit these psychological process asymmetries. Suhler and Callender argue that it is process asymmetries like these that are the product of our evolutionary history, and that they, in turn, can explain what they call the temporal value asymmetry.

2. On the Idea of Relief as a Discounting Phenomenon

In this section, I want to suggest that the proposed evolutionary explanation just sketched fails to provide a satisfactory answer to Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument, because it fails to identify and give an account of the relevant phenomenon at issue in Prior's argument. It may give a successful account of the valuation asymmetry, but the asymmetry of relief is a distinct phenomenon from the valuation asymmetry. Relief cannot be reduced to a discounting phenomenon.

To bring home this point, it might be worth looking at Prior's argument in some more detail. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Prior, which constitutes one of his statements of the 'Thank Goodness' argument:

I have a very good friend and colleague in Australia, Professor Smart of Adelaide, [who is] an advocate of the tapestry view of time [i.e. the B-theory], and says that when we say 'X is now past', we just mean 'The latest part of X is earlier than this utterance.' But, when at the end of some ordeal I say 'Thank goodness that's over', do I mean 'Thank goodness the latest part of that is earlier than this utterance'? I certainly do not; I'm not thinking about the utterance at all, it's the *overness*, the *now-endedness*, the *pastness* of the thing that I'm thankful for, and nothing else. (Prior, 1996: 50, italics in original)

For present purposes, the key issue we can take Prior to be highlighting here is that, as an emotion, relief has an object—it is directed at a state of the world that, in the eyes of the person feeling the relief, makes it appropriate. Yet, he thinks only the A-theorist can give a satisfactory account of the object of relief. For the B-theorist to be able to provide an account of the object of relief, Prior thinks, it

would have to be possible to give some B-theoretical description of that object. Yet, any such B-theoretical description fails to capture what makes relief appropriate.

One way the B-theorist might attempt to provide a B-theoretical description of the object of relief is by saying that when we are relieved that an unpleasant event is over, we are relieved that the unpleasant event is before a certain other event, such as one's current thinking or speaking about the event. But, as Prior's remarks bring out, this mischaracterizes the object of relief. When I utter the words 'Thank Goodness that's over' that utterance does come after the unpleasant event, but my relief isn't about my making that utterance. Moreover, the thought that my saying 'Thank Goodness that's over' comes after the unpleasant event is one that I can also have at times other than the one when I utter those words. In particular, it is a thought that I can also have *before* the unpleasant event is over (perhaps I am anticipating my reaction to the relief I will feel). But then that again shows that this thought can't capture what I am relieved about, because I won't feel relieved unless the unpleasant event is in fact over. It seems that nothing other than the 'overness', as Prior calls it, of the event itself can play the required explanatory role. But if it is to do so, the event's being over, being in the past, must make an objective difference to the way the world is. And that seems to commit us to the metaphysical reality of tense.¹²

Another way in which B-theorists have sometimes reacted to this argument is by agreeing that the tensed character of the sentence 'Thank Goodness that's over' is essential to the sentence capturing the relief I feel,¹³ but then simply subsuming tense under the more general phenomenon of indexicality (Callender, 2017: 267f.; Hardin, 1984). One way of fleshing out this position is by pointing out that spatial indexicals, too, are not reducible to non-indexical expressions, and that, just as we can be relieved that a visit to the dentist is over, we can, for example, be relieved that the fire is over there, rather than here.

The problem with the latter suggested analogy, though, is that the two cases are not actually analogous, as they seem to involve two at least conceptually different forms of relief. The relief that the fire is over there, rather than here, is arguably what I elsewhere refer to as an instance of *counterfactual relief* (Hoerl, 2015). It turns on the idea that the fire could have been here, but isn't. The temporal equivalent to this form of relief would be relief that I could have an unpleasant

¹² As Chen (2011) has pointed out, Prior's argument needs to be seen as a form of transcendental argument, and more specifically a version of what is sometimes referred to as a 'belief-directed' (or, in the current context, one might say 'attitude-directed') transcendental argument. That is to say, the argument strictly speaking establishes at best that we cannot rationally hold on to our attitude of feeling relief that the unpleasant experience is over whilst at the same time denying the objective existence of a difference between past, present, and future events. As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, for any metaphysical conclusion to follow from this, if at all, it must also in fact be the case that it is appropriate to feel relief once an unpleasant experience is over.

¹³ A certain amount of unpacking is required to capture the precise tensed character of the sentence. Whilst the grammatical surface tense of the sentence is the present tense, the semantics of the adverb 'over' introduces a past-tensed element into the sentence. See Hoerl (2015).

experience now but I do not.¹⁴ That this is different from the type of relief at issue in Prior's argument (which I elsewhere refer to as *temporal relief*) can be seen from the fact that there is nothing temporally asymmetrical about this type of relief. If the relief at issue in Prior's argument was just relief that I could have been in an unpleasant situation now, but I am not, I should be able to feel it before the relevant unpleasant situation occurs as much as after it has ended. In Prior's example, by contrast, it is a particular species of the unpleasant experience not being present that I am grateful about—it's not being present *because it is in the past*—again it seems that the 'overness' of the event plays an ineliminable explanatory role. (See Hoerl, 2015, for further discussion of this argument.)

What I have tried to highlight in this sketch of Prior's argument is that it turns on the idea that in order to explain the emotion of relief, we need to give an account of the object of relief that makes it clear what makes feeling relief appropriate. His starting point is the observation that we normally think we have reason to feel relieved when an unpleasant event is over, and that that reason is the fact that the event is over. I think this observation, by itself, shows that there is something wrong with attempts to address Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument by treating relief as a discounting phenomenon and explaining it in evolutionary terms along the lines sketched in the previous section.

Consider, for instance, Suhler and Callender's (2012) response to Prior, which, as I said, seems to assume that there is just one explanandum, which they term the 'temporal value asymmetry', of which the valuation asymmetry, the preference asymmetry, and the asymmetry of relief are manifestations. That something must have gone wrong somewhere in this line of thought is clear from the fact that the asymmetry of relief and the valuation asymmetry, at any rate, are demonstrably two quite distinct psychological phenomena. In their research on the valuation asymmetry, Caruso, Van Boven, and their colleagues could only demonstrate the asymmetry by using studies involving between-subjects designs. That is to say, the valuation asymmetry only manifested itself when one pool of participants was given an example asking about the appropriate compensation for an event in the future (e.g. 'How much money would you charge for five hours of boring data entry that you will carry out next week?'), and a different pool of participants was given an example asking about the appropriate compensation for an equivalent event in the past (e.g. 'How much money would you charge for five hours of boring data entry that you carried out last week?'). When individual participants

¹⁴ Conversely, Gallois (1994) argues that the correct spatial equivalent of the type of relief in question in Prior's argument would involve one preferring to suffer unpleasant experiences elsewhere rather than where one is located, purely on the basis of the difference between locations. He adds: 'To my knowledge no one has such an attitude, and no one has any reason to have such an attitude. I might prefer to suffer a headache elsewhere rather than here because there are no pain killers here. I will not prefer to suffer a headache elsewhere simply on the grounds that I will then be suffering it elsewhere' (ibid. 58). Thus, unlike in the temporal case, there is no explanatory need to invoke a special kind of fact.

were asked to judge about both past and future events, they judged that they should receive the same compensation.

Thus, the valuation asymmetry is one that people themselves do not judge to be rational, and that disappears when people become aware of it.¹⁵ As we have seen, the same can clearly not be said about the asymmetry of relief. Whatever one might think about the metaphysical conclusions Prior aims to derive from his argument, or even about the *de facto* rationality (or rational permissibility) of feeling relief, Prior is surely right in his initial observation that people normally think that they have a reason to feel relieved once an unpleasant experience has ended, and do not cease to feel relief once it is pointed out to them that relief is a tensed emotion. Thus, the asymmetry of relief and the valuation asymmetry must constitute two separate psychological phenomena.¹⁶ Therefore, the existing evolutionary accounts which run them together do not provide a successful response to Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument.¹⁷

I want to connect this point also with Parfit's discussion of the preference asymmetry. As already mentioned, there is a tendency in the existing literature to run together the preference asymmetry, the asymmetry of relief, and the valuation asymmetry, by conceptualizing all three of them as discounting phenomena akin to the well-studied discounting of larger, later rewards in favour of smaller, sooner rewards. The implication being that they are to be described as cases in which the value of an event at one time is traded off against the value of an event at another time. Thus, Parfit (1984), for instance, refers to the preference asymmetry as the 'bias towards the future' and discusses it alongside what he calls the 'bias towards the near' (ibid. 160). In a similar vein, Callender (2017) draws parallels between what he calls the 'past/future asymmetry' and the 'proximal/distant asymmetry', suggesting that considerations as to how to explain the latter carry over to the former. He even provides a graph, which is meant to provide an illustration of both asymmetries in terms of discount curves sloping down from the present into both the future and the past direction. A graph representing the preference asymmetry as a discount curve also appears in Sullivan (2018: 78).¹⁸

¹⁵ On this, and its philosophical significance, see also Fernandes (2021), where she uses this to argue that (what I call) the valuation asymmetry does not support a tensed metaphysics. Part of my point here is that this is not enough to address Prior's argument, as Prior's argument is about the asymmetry of relief, which needs to be seen as a different psychological phenomenon.

¹⁶ The same conclusion might also be argued for on different grounds, as it is not clear how feeling the positively valenced emotion relief could simply be the result of us discounting the value of past events.

¹⁷ It is important in this context to distinguish between two ways in which emotions can exhibit asymmetries. On the one hand there is what Suhler and Callender (2012: 7) call 'the "affective asymmetry"'. This is one of the abovementioned psychological process asymmetries, which consists in people's tendency to feel stronger emotions when imagining future events as opposed to past events. The emotions at issue in this tendency are not (or at least not necessarily) themselves temporally asymmetrical in the way tensed emotions are.

¹⁸ See also Callender's and Sullivan's contributions to this volume.

That there is something potentially quite misleading about this attempt to model the preference asymmetry after the discounting of future awards in favour of more immediate ones becomes clear, I think, as soon as we ask what the discount function for past events might look like. Sullivan (2018: 78f), for instance, suggests that Parfit-style scenarios should lead us to think that ‘[i]n the case of “pure” experiences of pains and pleasures, it seems that our discount functions are absolute: for any amount of time that has elapsed, we assign no value to a merely past painful experience or pleasurable experience.’ By contrast, a recent empirical study has found that while people presented with Parfit-style scenarios do trade off future pain against past pain when the same amount of pain is involved, many of them switch their preferences if the amount of pain in the past exceeds that to be endured in the future (Lee et al., 2020).

This might of course just be a case of philosophers’ intuitions not tracking those of the general public, but I think it might also be evidence of a potentially deeper problem with Parfit’s thought experiment. Above, I emphasized the fact that the valuation asymmetry and the asymmetry of relief must constitute two separate psychological phenomena. What should we say about the preference asymmetry? As Parfit makes clear, the preference asymmetry is one that people themselves don’t regard as irrational (never mind whether it is deemed irrational on philosophical reflection). As such, it must again, like the asymmetry of relief, be a somewhat different psychological phenomenon from the valuation asymmetry, which people do not regard as rational when they become aware of it. But it seems that the preference asymmetry must also be different from the asymmetry of relief. If the two came to the same thing, it would be difficult to escape Sullivan’s conclusion that people discount past pains absolutely, and we should find people trading off large amounts of past pain against very small amounts of future pain, which it turns out people don’t in fact do.

Thus, one possibility is that the preference asymmetry actually constitutes yet another separate psychological phenomenon, different from both the valuation asymmetry and the asymmetry of relief. However, I think a more interesting possibility is that the preference asymmetry actually represents an amalgam of the valuation asymmetry and the asymmetry of relief. Recall what the phenomenon is supposed to be that I am calling the preference asymmetry: It is the purported tendency people have (other things being equal) to prefer unpleasant experiences to lie in the past, rather than the future. This may seem like a straightforward description of a tendency we can recognize in ourselves. However, once we try to make concrete what it might take for people to actually manifest this tendency, thus described, it turns out that we have to think up rather contrived scenarios, such as that devised by Parfit. And once we do credit people with a general tendency, thus described, it becomes easy to think of other scenarios in which it

would lead people to do things that are manifestly irrational (Dougherty, 2015; Greene and Sullivan, 2015; Sullivan, 2018).¹⁹

Thus, I think one possibility is that there is no one psychological phenomenon that might be described as a tendency people have to prefer unpleasant experiences to lie in the past, rather than the future, which could be measured by measuring people's responses to Parfit-style scenarios, and the rationality of which we could enquire into. Rather responses to Parfit-style scenarios might reflect more than one psychological trait and may therefore not be stable. Some of them may be driven to a greater extent by the valuation asymmetry and others to a greater extent by the asymmetry of relief.²⁰

3. Explaining Relief—A Sketch

I have argued that existing evolutionary debunking arguments against Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument fail. However, this does not mean that I think Prior's argument succeeds. Its crucial shortcoming is that it is non-explanatory. Even if it provides us with a property that, in some respects, looks like it has the right structural features to explain why we feel relief only after a painful event has ceased, doing so is not sufficient to show what makes feeling relief an apt response to such a property being instantiated by an unpleasant event. As Simon Prosser writes:

We are so used to the fact that we *do* have these attitudes, which we describe using words like 'past' or 'over', that it can seem obvious that our attitudes would be appropriate. But if pressed for an explanation of *why* the attitudes are appropriate, it is not clear what the A-theorist can say. [T]his is an area where the A-theorist, as much as the B-theorist, owes us more of an explanation. (Prosser, 2016: 72, emphases in the original; see also Callender, 2017: 269)

Intuitively, we might perhaps think that the idea of the *passage of time* provides us an explanation of why future unpleasant experiences are to be dreaded, whereas we feel relief once they are over. William Laine Craig (1999: 537), for instance, writes:

¹⁹ Many aspects of people's actual behaviour also don't seem to fit the idea that they have a general tendency, thus described. For instance, if they really prefer unpleasant experiences to lie in the past, why do people prevaricate, rather than get them over with? (I owe this observation to Teresa McCormack.)

²⁰ As the chapters by Greene et al. and Lee and McCormack in this volume show, the emerging empirical literature using Parfit-style scenarios suggests that people's responses can vary a great deal depending on exactly how the scenario is framed.

[A] past pain is a nonexistent pain, and so no pain at all! Thus, we need not be concerned about it. By contrast, a future pain is one that will become real and so ought to occasion concern.

Yet, on most versions of the A-theory according to which past pains are nonexistent pains in virtue of being past, then so are future pains in virtue of being future. Thus, this leaves at best the idea that, if an unpleasant event is in the future, it is yet to become present, whereas if it is in the past, it is no longer present. However, it is unclear whether this actually means anything more than just that the event is first still in the future, and then later in the past. So the supposed explanation ends up being tautological: future unpleasant events are to be feared because they are future, and we are relieved once an unpleasant event lies in the past because it is in the past.²¹

However, I have argued that existing evolutionary explanations for the asymmetry of relief, too, are deficient. At best they explain the valuation asymmetry, but the valuation asymmetry is a separate psychological phenomenon from the asymmetry of relief. In this section, I will therefore suggest an alternative way in which the B-theorist might try to account for the asymmetry of relief.

My account, too, will ultimately be an evolutionary one. Given that we are dealing with trying to explain the existence of an emotion, it should come as no surprise that the explanation will have an evolutionary element—it is difficult to see how to account for the existence of an emotion other than through the idea that it owes its existence to the fact that it has been evolutionarily adaptive.

Consider again, then, what it is that such an explanation needs to account for when it comes to the asymmetry of relief: It needs to explain why we feel a positive emotion—relief—after an unpleasant experience has ended. One ingredient in a possible explanation has been offered by Hugh Mellor (1981: 50), who has argued that relief only ever occurs after the relevant unpleasant experience has ended because it is *caused* by the cessation of that experience, and effects always come after their causes. This would explain why we have to wait until the cessation of the unpleasant experience to feel relief. However, the way Mellor tells the story, relief is being construed as a crude causal after-effect similar to the hangover that follows a night on the tiles. This arguably fails to capture its status as an emotion. We should therefore look in more detail at the

²¹ “We might say: “If his pain is in the future, it will get closer and closer until he is actually suffering the pain. But, if his pain is in the past, it will only get further and further away.” Such remarks seem to express a deep truth. But this truth is curiously elusive. What is meant by the phrase “it will get closer and closer”? Does this not merely mean that, at future moments, the future pain will be closer to what will then be the present moment? But at past moments a past pain was closer to what was then the present moment. Where is the asymmetry?” (Parfit, 1984: 178). See also Hoerl (2015). A similar observation is also made by Cockburn (1997), who uses it to argue that our idea of time as passing is actually grounded on our change in attitudes over time, rather than vice versa.

precise features of the emotion of relief. This is where the evolutionary element of the story comes in.

I want to approach the question as to the evolutionary function of relief by looking at two things that, on reflection, might strike one as particularly paradoxical about relief. First, given that the experience was unpleasant, it may strike us as paradoxical how its occurrence, even if now over, can give rise to a positive emotion. Wouldn't it have been better if the unpleasant experience had never occurred? Secondly, coming after that which brings it about, relief is what psychologists refer to as a 'deactivating emotion' (Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, and Perry, 2007). This is to say that there is no specific thing it motivates people to do when it is felt. But then if feeling relief does not lead to a specific behaviour that could be adaptive, how can the emotion itself be adaptive? I will discuss these two issues in turn.

As far as the first issue is concerned, I think we can see how there can be positive emotions directed at unpleasant events once we realize that, even if an experience is unpleasant, it is not always the case that it would have been better had it not occurred. There are clearly cases in which the answer is that it would indeed have been better had the relevant experience not occurred in the first place, but there are also cases in which this is not so, because we had to undergo the unpleasant experience to achieve a greater good.²² One potential role for relief to play in our psychology might therefore be to motivate us to put ourselves through unpleasant experiences in order to achieve greater goods (see also Hoerl, 2015).²³

This first issue, by itself, doesn't have anything intrinsically to do with the temporally asymmetric nature of relief as such. It is just concerned with the question as to how there can be positive emotions directed at unpleasant events. However, the answer I have suggested also bears on the temporal asymmetry of relief. Which brings me to the second issue. There are a number of emotions that play a motivating role not when they are felt, but through being anticipated. Regret—another tensed emotion like relief—has been argued to influence human decision making through this mechanism (Hoerl and McCormack, 2016; Loomes and Sugden, 1982). If relief also acts on motivation through the same mechanism of

²² In at least some of the formulations of his 'Thank Goodness' argument, the example that Prior seems to have in mind is relief felt after an examination is over. See Prior (2003b: 42). Another reason why it might be better to put oneself through an unpleasant experience is if one has to do so sooner or later, and prevaricating over it is itself unpleasant, so putting oneself through the experience decreases the overall amount of unpleasantness experienced.

²³ This is one place at which an evolutionary element would have to come into the explanation. In part, such an element is needed to explain why we feel relief also in situations in which, according to the explanation, it actually has no adaptive benefit. The response would have to be that, even though this is so, the emotion evolved because it is adaptive in some circumstances. Note that a similar 'generalizing' story also needs to be part of the suggested explanation sketched in section 2 (on this, see also Fernandes, 2021).

anticipation, we can see how it might be adaptive, even though, as felt, it is a deactivating emotion with no specific effect on motivation.

Together, the suggested answers to the two issues I have raised thus show why relief might have just the features Prior highlighted about it, specifically that it is felt only once the relevant unpleasant experience has ceased. This is so because relief has evolved as an emotion that motivates us to put ourselves through unpleasant experiences, but one that does so by exploiting the motivating powers of anticipation.²⁴ It is precisely because we have to wait until the cessation of the unpleasant experience to feel it that relief exerts its motivating power.

In what is probably the most famous version of the ‘Thank Goodness’ argument, Prior (1959: 17) writes:

One says, e.g. ‘Thank goodness that’s over!’, and...it says something which it is impossible that any use of a tenseless copula with a date should convey. It certainly doesn’t mean the same as, e.g. ‘Thank goodness the date of the conclusion of that thing is Friday, June 15, 1954’, even if it be said then. (Nor, for that matter, does it mean ‘Thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is contemporaneous with this utterance’. Why would anyone thank goodness for that?). (Prior, 1959: 17)

The final question here shows that Prior takes the broader background to his argument to be the question as to why we feel relieved when an unpleasant experience is over. Thus understood, we can distinguish between two aspects of his challenge to the B-theorist. One part of this challenge is to explain, using only the resources available to the B-theorist, the particular feature of relief that it is appropriate to feel relief only after the relevant unpleasant event has ended. Prior thought that this feature could only be explained by postulating objective properties of pastness, presentness, and futurity. I have followed Mellor (1981: 50) in suggesting that we can answer this part of Prior’s challenge by arguing that it is the cessation of the unpleasant experience that causes the relief, and therefore the relief only comes after the experience has ended. As I have also suggested, though, this gives us only part of the story. There is an important sense in which it still leaves the question as to why we feel relieved unresolved. We can think of this as the second aspect of Prior’s challenge to the B-theorist.

In thinking that the question as to why we feel relief after an unpleasant experience has ended can ultimately only be resolved by postulating objective properties of pastness, presentness, and futurity, Prior interprets the question ‘Why would anyone thank goodness for that?’ as a question inquiring into a feature of the world to which relief answers. I have, in effect, suggested a different way of

²⁴ This is of course so far just a hypothesis, and one that might be empirically falsified if it turns out that anticipating relief does not increase the likelihood of people putting themselves through unpleasant experiences. One study that suggests that anticipating relief does have a motivating effect is Shepherd, Watt, and Lovell (2017).

understanding the question, as the question as to why we have the emotion of relief, where this is to be understood as a question about the adaptive function of relief. What I have suggested is that we have to see the adaptive function of relief connected to our capacity to anticipate relief, and the motivational role that capacity can play. If this is at least broadly along the right lines, it allows us to agree with Mellor that the reason why relief only ever occurs after the cessation of an unpleasant event is that the relationship between them is a cause/effect one. At the same time, though, it also allows us to give a much richer description of the nature of relief as an emotion with a distinctive motivational function that is embedded in our practices of looking ahead to future and looking back on past experiences as our temporal point of view on them changes.

4. Conclusion

It is a familiar theme from the literature on rational choice theory that modelling human behaviour in terms of a unitary notion of preference fails to provide a realistic account of the intricacies of human psychology (Sen, 1977). Part of my aim in this chapter was to sound a similar cautionary note regarding some oversimplifying tendencies in the existing literature on past/future attitude asymmetries. In particular, I have argued that what I call the asymmetry of relief and the valuation asymmetry, respectively, constitute two quite separate psychological phenomena, and that relief can't be reduced to a discounting phenomenon.

Once this is recognized properly, I think it becomes clear that existing responses to Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument that try to give an alternative evolutionary explanation of the asymmetry of relief fail. At best they can explain the valuation asymmetry. Similarly, I have argued that we need to be wary of thinking that what I called the preference asymmetry is actually a well-formed psychological phenomenon, rather than just an amalgam of the valuation asymmetry and the asymmetry of relief.

To take the asymmetry of relief seriously requires paying close attention to the nature of relief as an emotion, and the role of emotions in our motivational psychology. This involves recognizing that relief cannot just be subsumed under discounting phenomena, but it also helps us understand better what a successful answer to Prior's 'Thank Goodness' argument might look like.

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