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## PRUDENCE AND ANTI-PRUDENCE

Evan Simpson

### I. THE OPTIONALITY OF PRUDENCE

Philip Larkin says that “days are where we live,” suggesting that “We are not suited to the long perspectives.”<sup>1</sup> They show past and future loss, sometimes all too clearly. The resulting pains of sadness or grief may discourage recollection and make the habit of active foresight a questionable virtue. More mundanely, it has frequently been observed that the immediate and present nature of very many person’s lives “puts a premium on the taking of pleasures now, discourages planning for some future goal, or in the light of some ideal. ‘Life is no bed of roses,’ they assume; but ‘tomorrow will take care of itself.’”<sup>2</sup> Many intelligent people prefer to live each day as it comes without worrying about pension plans or making other provision for the future.

Doubts about the “telescopic faculty” have philosophical as well as poetic and popular expressions. Derek Parfit advocates a “present-aim theory” against the view that all reasons for action extend over time.<sup>3</sup> Joyce Trebilcot advocates “living only for the moment” and choosing the present over the future well-being of the self.<sup>4</sup> However, these anti-prudentialists have not persuaded advocates of temporal neutrality who maintain that we should avoid a dominant concern for any particular part of life, the mere timing of an event not by itself being a reason for preferring

it.<sup>5</sup> After all, egalitarian time-preferences appear appropriate to the age of reason. It is only “for children,” as Ian McEwan observes, that “it’s always the present . . . Today is what they feel.”<sup>6</sup>

Although many writers prefer a definitely prudential or anti-prudential position, Carol Shields’ novel, *The Stone Diaries*, respects a pair of contrary options.

In his early married days Cuyler Goodwill came close to weeping as he observed the arrangement of his wife’s kitchen shelves, the stacked plates and separated cutlery, the neatly stored foodstuffs—rice, flour, sugar—that represent her touching, valiant provisioning for the future, but in fact, it is only the present that he requires.<sup>7</sup>

Among philosophers David Gauthier asserts a similar optionality. Distinguishing between “prudence-based and preference-based accounts of rational choice,” he suggests that “one may take an interest in one’s future well-being now, preferring a satisfying life to more immediate gratification. But also, one may not.”<sup>8</sup> Gauthier has it right, I think, at least in part. It is plausible that one should look at one’s life as a whole and act accordingly, but it is also difficult to show that Cuyler Goodwill’s lackadaisical outlook is misguided or that the active anti-prudence suggested by Larkin’s poems is childlike or unreasonable. However, Gauthier’s account rests upon the questionable thesis that “preferences . . . are not subject to rational

assessment in terms of their contents.”<sup>9</sup> This thesis is either false or it simply recommends criteria of rationality that are not themselves subject to rational defense according to these criteria. By examining preferences whose contents are open to assessment, a less question-begging account of optionality can be developed.

Significant preferences are embedded in familiar backward- and forward-looking emotions, such as regret and pride, fear and hope. One would prefer not to have done certain things or endured certain failures; one prefers security to impending danger and ultimate fulfillment to disappointment. In one respect such preferences are trivial, simply displaying the formal structure of emotions, which ascribe properties to their objects and include corresponding desires. One normally prefers security to danger because this preference is typical of fear and the desire to be free from threat. In another respect, though, emotional preferences are not at all trivial, since they can be tested for appropriateness in particular circumstances. In general, experiencing a particular emotion is appropriate only if the judgment characteristic of the emotion is justified. When the judgment that one is in danger is warranted, fear is appropriate, as is the motive to avoid the threat. This desire or preference is thus clearly subject to evaluation. If one can be brought to realize that the thing feared is harmless, then the desire to seek safety from it is misguided. One still has a general preference for security over danger, but the preference to pursue safety over other purposes in these circumstances would not be reasonable.

It is an important feature of prudential emotions (as I will refer to fear and hope) that in experiencing them one is not normally an onlooker but a potential agent. In fearing something, one does not only believe it to be dangerous but also seeks safety. If safety is unobtainable then resignation

may be more appropriate than fear. For similar reasons hope is distinguished from wishful thinking. If one wants something but is unable to take actions to secure it, then hope may be vacuous. In incorporating assumptions and expectations about things that matter to us, prudential emotions thus express forward-referring concerns about which something can be done. They are not brute reasons for action but ones whose expressed preferences invite assessment for accuracy and realizability. When on certain occasions these expectations and assumptions are unwarranted—when, for example, an expectation is groundless or a good unobtainable—the emotion and the accompanying preference are appropriately given up. The assessment of preferences that are tied to emotions includes the assessment of the corresponding judgments in this obvious way.

The conception of emotions and their conditions of appropriateness sketched here resemble the central features of David Wiggins’s “sensible subjectivism.” This view agrees with classical emotivism that in making value-judgments “there is nothing more fundamental than actually possible human sentiments,”<sup>10</sup> but it is not stuck at the emotivists’ position where the occurrence of an emotional response is sufficient for ascribing a valuational predicate, for example, “fear worthy.” Without trying to provide a strict definition or complete analysis of emotions, they can be further characterized as states of persons that form pairs with qualities in objects that typically evoke them, as certain properties produce fear. These <property, response> pairs, as Wiggins calls them, are susceptible of refinement and extension in the course of discussing what a thing has to be like for there to be reason to say that it is dangerous or fear worthy. The formal condition that an emotion is appropriate only if the characteristic property is reasonably

thought to be present thus works in the context of the collaborative project of identifying emotion-appropriate properties. I will exploit this feature later in order to show that the optionality of prudence is consistent with defeating skepticism about prudence.

Although prudence is not itself an emotion, it is closely related to persistent attitudes of fearfulness and hopefulness about the future. I will sometimes speak of prudence itself as an attitude in order to note its relationship to these more particular dispositions, which when habitual become traits of character. Because they include a capacity for fear and hope it is possible to model prudence on these emotions and to justify providing for the future under appropriate conditions. To a first approximation prudence is reasonable when fearfulness and hopefulness are, and these attitudes are themselves reasonable when one's experiences of fear and hope are appropriate. As a consequence, the desirability of prudence will remain as open as that of the emotions themselves. We can agree on the truism that if there is reason to anticipate a good then hope is appropriate but disagree about the identification of such reasons. A philosopher might argue that hope is never justified, the past providing no guide to the future; another might argue that all hope is justified, there always being a possibility that the most unlikely strategy will actually succeed. While these extreme positions seem logically impregnable, however, it is also the case that emotions make assertions that possess a presumption of validity. Thus, hope is evidence of a realizable expectation and fear is evidence of danger. Although emotions are not self-validating and can therefore always be coherently challenged, they can be said to be learned through paradigm scenarios that have an evolutionary explanation. There are normal responses to the

objects characteristic of particular emotions, with emotional competence shown by responding appropriately to the right objects. The responses are moderated and the identification of the objects is refined by learning, reinforcing expectations that occurrences of emotions include dependable claims.<sup>11</sup> Of course, evolutionary processes permit unlearned individual variation. Some rational persons permit themselves to hope more readily or strongly than others do, but practical reasonableness avoids extremes that ignore the lessons of biology and experience.

A welcome consequence of this position is that evolution has not given people irrational temporal biases. Compulsively fearful concern for the future at the expense of all present satisfactions or unconquerably hopeful disregard for all distant perils would warrant this characterization. To be sure, we are naturally subject to hope and fear and their derivative dispositions, but we are dealing with emotional states in which human evolution has made room for judgments whose truth-conditions are matters of reasonable discussion. Emotional capacities confer an obvious selective advantage; but the advantage is enhanced if the capacity is discriminating. Discrimination is a power of judgment, combining a biologically based pattern of response with the wisdom of experience that discourages absolutist stances, such as the philosophically extreme positions on hope. Learning shapes the naturally occurring emotions, influencing interpretations of danger and loss and helping to define the criteria according to which situations can be recognized as worthy of fear or sorrow. Because the causes of the beliefs, emotions and attitudes in question include the possibility of their justification any initial prudential or anti-prudential biases are subject to rectification. Prudential emotions arise from the genes, but this original cause melds with

circumstantial judgments that may justify practical interest in the future in spite of the painful losses it holds or preference for today in virtue of the inevitability of these losses.

From the standpoint of prudence, these observations might be tested against the hard case suggested by Larkin, who may be suspected of forsaking the requirements of rational choice. The long perspectives appear too painful for him to do what reason requires. However, the suggestion rests on prudence-based criteria of rationality, which are not among our assumptions. Rather, when preferences are subjected to tests of rational adequacy, prudential preferences fall under preference-based criteria of choice as thus opened to examination. As long as these criteria permit alternative choices under suitable circumstances, there is no a priori requirement to take the long view. The question, therefore, is whether the evil of emotional pain justifies a focus on the present. It can, since concern for the future no matter how painful is reasonably considered undue masochism. To be sure, one may be criticized for being overwhelmed by grief at future losses, as one can be criticized for fear of routine dangers, but because some of these losses are enormous for every human being and concern things we cannot change the criticism is not conclusive. Learning, experience, and social comparison discourage extreme positions but do not preclude them. All parts of the spectrum of propositions about time-preferences thus represent possible preferences, leaving the question of their adoption open from the perspective of reason.

Why, then, be prudent? The upshot of the foregoing observations is that there is no definitive answer. If emotions are properly assessed through the complex and debatable judgments they reflect, any satisfying answer will be more like a convincing story than a logical demonstration. Narratives of

danger and anticipation can encourage foresight, but they do not compel it, for the claims of prudence often comport better with the novelist's appreciation of ambiguity than with the rationalist's desire to identify the right answer to any genuine question. It is thus a burden of this discussion to show convincingly that prudence remains open to rational acceptance even if its desirability over anti-prudence cannot be logically demonstrated. As an overall result, conceptions of reasonableness that require all rational persons to arrive at the same conclusions on the basis of the same evidence give way to a more expansive conception, although not a less rigorous one. This conception does not occur, as perhaps with Hume, at the expense of resting prudence on sentiments so deeply rooted that they resist examination altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Exploring prudence through emotions and the preferences they include yields three important results. One is that cultivating habits of prudence can call upon sensitivity to the circumstances of particular persons rather than depending upon relatively simple principles of time-preference supposed to govern all rational beings. Such sensitivity is needed at least because the conditions of appropriateness of emotions are often complex and may never be exactly repeated. The approach has the advantage of avoiding the skepticism invited by resting the issue of prudence or anti-prudence upon plausible but conflicting principles of temporal neutrality and temporal bias. Another result is that the rationality of prudence and alternatives to it is not based on a fact beyond the experienced and envisaged course of one's life, such as some deep identity of the self through time. Criteria for self-identity can then be described without having to invoke philosophical assumptions whose questionableness would again threaten

practical foresight. These criteria thus permit distinguishing sharply between practical and philosophical concerns about persons. The third result is that prudence is a trait of character rather than a requirement of morality or metaphysics, leaving open the question whether it is a virtue. The validity of so regarding it needs some other, more contingent rationale.

## II. SKEPTICISM ABOUT PRUDENCE

When it comes to literary and philosophical reflections on past and future, there appear to be reasonable alternatives. In the absence of inherently compelling reasons for favouring any part of life, it is reasonable to question any such preference, thereby keeping a strictly egalitarian view an option; but, finding no decisive reason to favour all parts of life equally, rational persons may also consider preferable the nearer interests they actually prefer. However, not every imaginable viewpoint is an equally easy option for most people. Some, like the view that we should avoid all temporal biases, may seem too extreme or not discriminating enough. One then resembles the enemy of hypocrisy who insists upon complete openness all the time, being offended not only by affectations of virtue but also by every slight or harmless pretence.<sup>13</sup> This anti-hypocrisy is a possible view, as is the Machiavellian cunning at the other extreme, but the basic philosophical rationale in defense of both ideas is just that they can be consistently maintained. The anti-hypocrite may confidently assert that one should not lie simply because doing so is advantageous. The Machiavellian reasonably argues that one should not say the truth simply because it is the truth. While such principles seem perfectly valid, they omit the complexities of finely-textured lives and the competing demands made by honesty and friendship, pride and ambition, etc., leaving the most difficult questions

about honesty open. In the same way, prudential principles—one should not prefer something to another simply because of its temporal position, for example—may leave open the most interesting questions about concern for one's future. Worse, time-neutral and time-relative principles come into conflict. It may be possible to decide the issue in the context of a broader theory,<sup>14</sup> but as long as plausible theories themselves continue to conflict the unresolved disagreements between the principles they support point towards skepticism about prudence.

This problem does not arise when prudence is modelled on emotions of fear and hope and attitudes of fearfulness and hopefulness. Thinking of prudence in this way also invites no puzzles of the sort: If I know I will want something in the future but don't want it now, do I now have reason to provide for it? The question does not arise for fear and hope, which bring future contingencies within the scope of present desires. The view is not without problems of its own, however, leaving open the possibility of philosophical doubt. The assumptions typical of particular future-referring emotions and attitudes take it for granted that the future matters. Dangerous situations are certainly fearful, but this does not explain why one should view any event as dangerous; for events are not dangerous unless the future matters, and that arguably remains to be shown. One response would be to reject the question as misconceived, insisting that fear and hope constitute the future as important and, having made it so, are not susceptible to further challenge on the point. There is something to this, as I will argue in due course, but the authority ascribed to future-directed emotions may appear to beg the question in favour of prudence. It remains possible to ask why one should not be perplexed by valiant provisioning, so that skepticism remains viable.

Another response would be to invoke the metaphysics of self. The assumption that the future matters is supported by a self-concept that identifies certain future interests as one's own. If one's present aims matter, these future interests also matter. However, this response is challenged by disagreements about which interests those are. Correspondingly different interpretations of the concept—varying conceptions of self—may arise. One can view self- or personhood as subject to differences of degree, thinking that in later life one may gradually become a different person; and one can thus understandably ignore the more distant future in a way that seems imprudent and irrational to another person who holds the self to endure throughout life. The conflicting conceptions suggest the problem of demonstrability that has already appeared in connection with principles of pure time-preference. Because it is unlikely that either of the contrary metaphysical views can be shown to be correct, there appears to be no satisfactory appeal to the nature of persons in assessing provident habits. Appealing to metaphysics thus encounters difficulties that render theories of the self questionable for defending prudential reasons.

Of course, problems are made to be solved. One of the competing metaphysical accounts of personhood might after all be shown to be correct, or this high standard of proof for metaphysical positions might be shown to be excessive. Some philosophers, especially those who think that justifying prudence amounts to showing that all rational persons will display the same patterns of temporal concern, will continue to search for a uniquely and demonstrably correct conception of the self as temporally extended. However, any such ambition faces at least two further obstacles, which also confront the suggestion that the standard of proof might be lowered.

One is a problem of independence and one a problem of priority. The former identifies prudential thinking as a practice independent of the metaphysical foundations proposed as its support. The latter accepts the existence of a relationship between prudence and metaphysical theories of persons but holds that there is no determining whether a theory is the intellectual basis of prudential thinking or only an expression of such thinking. It is by no means evident how to defend the assumption that a metaphysical conception of the self is a foundational reason for prudence rather than a rationalization of the practice. If this is so, then there is no falling back to the less demanding idea that one's view of prudence is based upon one's non-demonstrable metaphysical views.

The independence problem directly challenges the line of thought from philosophical doubt to the metaphysical speculations whose failures ultimately seem to sustain sceptical reservations. It questions the proposition that by changing our philosophical theory of the self our emotions should change. Those changes may of course occur together—gifted philosophers attest to the connection—but no reason clearly compels it. Reflections on the nature of the self are wholly absent from Larkin's musing, in which distant parts of his life remain fully his. It is arguable that he mistakenly supposed that issues of the nature of the self are irrelevant to prudence, but his example strongly suggests that the prudent or anti-prudent self may be perfectly well understood when disconnected from the metaphysics of personal identity.<sup>15</sup> If this is so, then the rationality of prudential emotions need not rest on a fact beyond the actual course of our lives.

Now, emotions are subject to reflection, as we have already noted. The judgments they make can be cast into doubt, undermining those feelings. So change of belief

does have important effects, but the independence problem is that these judgments are related to the emotions in a different way from theories of the self. Rejecting such a judgment may properly silence an emotion in particular circumstances, but such failures do not undermine the presumption of validity for emotions described earlier. Although instances of fear and hope are unwarranted when a supposed threat is absent or a good is unobtainable, in other cases the emotions are well-directed. This permits saying that the future matters because it is the object of defensible future-directed emotions. The framework of theories of self conflicts with this by insisting upon the possibility that no threat is serious or no good obtainable if the self does not extend beyond the present. Such a position supposes that there is something more fundamental than actually possible human sentiments. On my contrary view, whoever fears constitutes the future as important without departing from Hume's view of self-conceptions as arising from "some fiction or imaginary principle of union."<sup>16</sup> Such imaginative creations can be tested in their particular circumstances in various ways, but because there is no sufficient factual evidence for their validity—because they are fictions in this sense—there is no purchase for metaphysical arguments in favour of or against extended fear or hope. Nowhere does the question whether the self has a metaphysical identity linking the experiences of a single person come to play importantly upon our prudential emotions.

The priority problem arises especially clearly when there is no pretence of demonstrating a metaphysical conception of persons but only of identifying an "imaginary principle." As long as a conception of self is not presented as true, we have not advanced far beyond notions of "constituting the future," gaining only a more fully articulated presupposition of prudence, a

"descriptive metaphysics" of the self.<sup>17</sup> Such accounts thus leave dissociation from one's future and denial of its significance no offence against reason, for they express what it is like to think prudently rather than requiring such thinking. Consequently, acts of presupposition, imagination and constitution provide no obvious defence against philosophical doubts. In order to explain this more fully, I will elaborate an important point about the justification of emotions.

Fear is justified when one is endangered, but when is that? The identification of danger is subject to reasonable disagreement. Originally, fear is evoked by the particular properties of the environment characteristic of its paradigm scenario, but as the appropriateness of these properties is discussed and their identification is collaboratively refined they also become on Wiggins's account "incurably anthropocentric" and "essentially contestable."<sup>18</sup> Some people might thus come to count as dangers only threats to the spirit, not the body, so that in developed <property, response> pairs the properties need bear no general and illuminating relationship to those in the original scenario. Even if physical injury is imminent, one can intelligibly deny that one's situation is fear worthy. To represent a situation as dangerous is thus not only to describe but also to assess it, so that factual descriptions of reality alone do not conclusively justify emotions. "If you smoke your health will eventually suffer" gives a reason for judging smoking to be dangerous, but its force need not be compelling. Health counts as a reason because it is part of a well-functioning organism. It is a good of the sort that sharpness exemplifies in knives. However, sharpness need not be a virtue if knives are given a purpose other than cutting, and one can intelligibly avoid warnings about smoking by acknowledging the likelihood or even the inevitability



of injury to one's respiratory and cardiovascular systems while refusing to consider this fact relevant to one's purposes. Physical deterioration is not in this person's catalogue of dangers. In general, the rationality of an emotion cannot be displayed through descriptions of events alone.

The priority problem arises because the place of a self-conception in prudence can be compared to a judgment of danger rather than to the perception of physical injury. The latter is a matter of describable fact, while the former includes an ascription of fearfulness.<sup>19</sup> Seen descriptively it would be easy to determine that certain future interests are part of the system of psychological continuity that makes them one's own, but nothing would follow about making provision for them. The complete reasoner can identify future interests as part of one's self-conception without evaluating them as worthy of consideration. (Imagine persons who consider themselves worthless and their interests not to warrant attention although still recognizing certain future interests to be their own.) Seen ascriptively something's being in a person's future includes an assignment of importance. To count something as among one's future interests in this way is to view them as interests that matter, so that identifying them is no less an evaluation than the claim that something is dangerous: my self-conception including this interest, I accept it as warranting attention. Giving prudent attention to a future situation includes in the identification of one's future interests the judgment that they matter in the same way that fear adds a sense of danger to the expectation of physical injury. To view the self as enduring throughout life is then to regard neglect of the future as irresponsible, and that view is equivalent to the idea that the more distantly future interests warrant consideration along with today's concerns.

However, no one has to identify one's future interests in this way, so that the ascriptive view will not serve as a dependable foundation for prudence. It can instead be an expression of this constant attitude.

On the ascriptive account, as on the descriptive one, both prudence and anti-prudence are possible. Neither stance towards the future is demonstrably wrong, suggesting that a reasonable preference will depend upon contingencies. Of these the most important is surely the capacity to make a difference to the future.<sup>20</sup> I will tend to count future states as among my interests to the extent that I am able to influence their occurrence, but I will not be fixated upon events beyond my control. It is depending upon such circumstances, then, whether nearsighted and farsighted principles express tenable biases. The outcome of intelligent reflection depends upon these circumstances because the capacity to make a difference is a necessary condition for serious fear and hope, that is, for emotions that have practical effects, such as finding security or promoting one's good. Nevertheless, it is not a sufficient condition. The presumption in favor of prudential concern for the future is strong to the extent that the long view is a good way of living one's life. Without concern for the future, much else is forsaken. On balance, one may find it better to have this concern, but it will never be clear that one needs it. Because the options continue to exist skepticism about prudence and anti-prudence alike is defeated. Philosophers who prefer prudence are therefore obliged to develop arguments showing that it represents a most desirable, not the most rational, way to live.

### III. PRUDENCE, METAPHYSICS AND MORALITY

The independence and precedence problems, I have suggested, imply that the rationality of prudential emotions does not

depend upon facts of personal identity that should determine the actual course of one's life. The question whether the self has a metaphysical identity linking the experiences of a lifetime in a single individual has remarkably little bearing upon attitudes about the future whose assessment rests upon contingencies of circumstance. Considering the way in which fear and hope express the prudent self's interest in survival enables us to see this more clearly. The metaphysical dimension of this interest disappears when such emotions are examined in the light of the philosophical problems of replication raised by Derek Parfit's imaginary travels into the world of teleportation.

The possibility of replication of the self raises more interesting questions than cases of division and duplication in which two identical persons come to exist where there was but one. Duplication does not presuppose death, in contrast to resurrection, which creates genuine sceptical difficulties. If a doctrine of resurrection requires that human beings truly die, then because to die is to cease to exist God's re-creations would seem logically limited to copies of persons formerly alive. Death is a theological problem because the very possibility (not just the hope) of resurrection requires faith beyond understanding. The difficulty is generalized and secularized by imagining a process of teleportation in which a person's body is disintegrated at the departures terminal in order for one to be reconstituted at arrivals. Such a process appears to justify Parfit's "fear that in teletransportation, *I* shall not get to Mars,"<sup>21</sup> for although survival in this case does not require a miracle the place of the body in personal identity remains an issue. It would not be reassuring to know that at the moment one was to die an exactly similar person would appear on Mars as a quantum-mechanical fluke,<sup>22</sup> so that

anxiety about entering the transporter on Earth seems perfectly warranted.

However, one of the advantages of understanding prudence in terms of forward-looking emotions is that this makes it difficult to believe that there is a deep question about the continuity of the self through physical dissolution. It is certainly possible to imagine fear of dying during teleportation while believing that someone just like oneself will wake up at the intended destination, but it is also possible to imagine confidence in the process rather than the threat of extinction. Notably, one's concern in the imagined situation is only prospective. After the fact the person at the destination might feel relief. It is therefore easy to imagine that, once teleported or resurrected, one is not bothered by the question, "But did *I* exist before?" After the fact, one need not worry, since the present state is as good as surviving. (Or almost as good. If we suppose that one is a new person rather than a continuation of the old, then one might as well be in Bertrand Russell's world that was created only five minutes ago.<sup>23</sup> All of one's more distant memories would be pseudo-memories, falsely representing themselves as events in one's own life. If one knew this to be the case one could regret the illusion, but there would be no obvious reason for existential concern.) Retrospective questions about the continuity of the self will not evoke severe anxiety.

So, too, for prospective questions about personal continuity. They do not appear to be any better founded, for doubts about replication, like sceptical doubts, are metaphysical, and metaphysical doubts differ sharply from fearful doubts. Emotional doubt can be relieved by experience. Nothing is easier than to suppose that once teleportation became an established practice it would no more occasion anxiety than any mode of normal activity. After the

event, or after the entrenchment of the practice, doubts are no longer practical doubts. Why then before? Being teleported during the system's early, unreliable days when people might disappear en route was occasion for anxiety, but now things seem safe. There is ample evidence that life goes on, even though there is still no evidence at all that addresses the philosophical problem of pseudo-survival.

These observations do not simply describe how people might respond to events. They also display the positive side of the independence problem, enabling prudential emotions to be judged as rational without reference to metaphysical theories of personal identity. Understanding prudence as an outcome of emotional discrimination shows why practical freedom from sceptical doubts is reasonable rather than a failure to think through questions of personal identity. Of course, the conjectured relief at successful teleportation might be taken to imply that people do tacitly operate with a metaphysical theory—namely, the theory that identity is psychological constancy and coherence—but in refusing to rest identity on some deeper fact this thesis only recognizes the difference between philosophical and practical doubts once again. The suggestion that concerns for the future are independent of significant philosophical, theological and metaphysical theories generally is thus reinforced. Human emotions and attitudes maintain the same logical distance from metaphysical theories that they have from neutrally described facts. The mutual independence of philosophical and emotional doubts thus implies that metaphysical reflection should not succeed in calling emotional judgments into question. Even consistently maintained, skepticism would have a negligible effect on our emotional life, doing nothing to remove the capacity for fear, hope, and practical forward references generally.

The autonomy of prudence from metaphysics leaves open the possibility of its subordination to other forms of thinking. Questions of prudence might be so connected with moral thinking in particular. Considered abstractly, practical reasoning includes few restrictions upon the preferences that motivate action. It is essentially instrumental, deliberating solely about means to ends whose validity is not in question. When Gauthier contrasts preference-based and prudence-based accounts of rational choice, he is effectively noting the important difference between purely instrumental accounts of practical reasoning and accounts that include prudence as selecting certain ends that need attention, namely a person's future interests. Precisely because there are no indisputable criteria of correctness for this selection it can be asked why any particular importance should be placed upon satisfying an interest simply because it is one's own. It is therefore arguable that prudence should be governed by morality, whose characteristic ends include the interests of people generally. Provident self-interest can then be regarded as a rational stance if it falls under the requirement of moral rationality that what happens to everyone should be taken equally into account. At the same time, anti-prudence comes clearly into question. If it is unacceptable to impose great risk of harm on anyone, including a future self, serious failures of prudence appear morally wrong.<sup>24</sup>

This line of reasoning is plausible, but it is more convincing in suggesting that prudence and morality both belong within a theory of rational choice than in saying that one should be subordinated to the other. The argument expresses doubts that can arise over any purpose whose origins can be traced to emotions. It therefore applies to moral interests as well as prudential ones. Furthermore, taking seriously the

proposition that moral and prudential emotions are primary for moral and prudential judgments again leads to the conclusion that the relationship of prudence to morality is not a matter of one being based upon the other. Given the primacy of prudential emotions in prudential judgments, it is better to have had a pain than to expect one because past pains are not feared.<sup>25</sup> Given the primacy of moral emotions in moral judgments, it is bad for others to bear pain because we pity or love them. This is not to deny that these emotions can be effectively appraised and educated but only to say that they initially locate us in the world both temporally and socially. The manifold of feelings creates a dense network of relationships that can be missed when attending to prudence alone, but once appreciated it is clear that because each person's place in this network is different everyone has a distinctive identity and is confronted with a unique set of problems. For some, whose capacity for fear and hope remains relatively weak, a number of these problems may be resolved in favour of anti-prudence. For some, whose capacity for pity and love is weak, many problems may be settled in favour of selfishness. However, these are generally differences of degree, and since most people sometimes fear and hope for others the distinctions between prudence and anti-prudence, morality and selfishness, are often tenuous. The prudential and moral emotions mix and interact, and there is no discernible hierarchy or even a clear distinction to be drawn between moral deliberation and prudential calculation. To this extent it is possible to join Richard Rorty in noting a breakdown in "the distinction between moral guilt and practical inadvisability, thereby blurring the prudence-morality distinction."<sup>26</sup> However, in so far as fear and hope, pity and love make distinguishable judgments, prudence and morality can be differentiated if not divided

sharply into distinct and possibly competing modes of reasoning.

Julia Annas has also insisted that any distinction between prudence and morality should be drawn with care. If she is right, it does not appear in ancient theories of reasoning, not even in the notion, familiar now in people like Gauthier, that "morality is really a complicated form of prudence."<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the modern view that places prudence first as a form of thinking that needs no defense, those ancient theories work within a single ethical framework. Drawing upon the account of prudence and anti-prudence I have given, the relationship can be explicated in the following way. The ethical framework is a common sense of good and evil, of desirable purposes, within which reflection on one's life as a whole is itself good. This framework can be disrupted by the loss of any such common agreement and the consequent replacement of prudence by the instrumental reasoning that includes no assessment of preferences and that may be supported by the theory that no such assessment is possible. Even though the preference of prudence over anti-prudence may remain it lacks any rational defence. By denying the last of these claims I have argued that prudence remains open to rational reflection and acceptance, although nothing compels acceptance.

The argument does not resolve the demonstrability problem that also arises for other approaches to prudence, but that is in no case the chief problem. My task has been to show convincingly that prudence can be justified through its relationship to rational emotions and attitudes alone. This might still be doubted. One might argue, for example, that while it is not rationally required to experience any emotion even in the face of an appropriate object some degree of prudence is nevertheless rationally required. People are irrational if they

do not care at all that they are performing actions that will result in something dreadful happening to them tomorrow. But this objection is incorrect. One is normally irrational if one promotes what one dreads, since this is acting contrary to one's purposes, but if one's actions result in what one considers worthy of dread, then one may simply be listless rather than irrational. Such listlessness poses a difficulty for the view that people are motivated by their moral and prudential beliefs,<sup>28</sup> but this view has not formed part of my argument. If, occasionally, someone genuinely does not care about dreadful consequences, then it is appropriate to ask what that person means by the contestable notion of dreadfulness, but no irrationality need be evident. Prudence remains possible, but so does anti-prudence.

Does this treat anti-prudence too lightly? For individuals the consequences of neglecting the future are often relatively benign. Even when they are unfortunate, personal failures of foresight will rarely impact harmfully upon other individuals who are responsible for making their own decisions. However, anti-prudential dispositions can be more serious if their effects accumulate into social problems, leading eventually to distant but globally destructive consequences. The difficulties of attending to such problems are obstinate, since fear, hope and other forward-looking emotions are well suited for coping with personal situations and relationships but do not well equip people for insidious problems resulting unintentionally from a multitude of intentional actions. Emotional ideas have

practical meaning when interpreted in particular, concrete settings but do not readily generate motives to deal with thinly described misfortunes that lie in the relatively distant future. They may thus leave great society-wide and inter-generational problems beyond effective human intelligence.

Of course, nothing compels people to make a prudent response to such systematic problems. Even if individuals aspire to be prudent in their personal lives the optionality of prudence may contribute to practical dissociation from social futures. A prudential bias towards the future is justifiable, but the bias does not naturally extend far or strongly enough to satisfy needs that confront human beings for the first time. Hence, while future catastrophes are predictable there may be sufficient reason to respond to them only when it is too late to prevent a horrible existence or extinction. Since a prudential philosophy cannot demonstrate its validity, its only recourse is to develop persuasive advocacy, encouraging more people to extend their moral and prudential emotions further into the future. This is a better course than placing undue hope in deep human desires, in metaphysics or in the development of universal principles of time-preference. It is also a demanding one if, as I have suggested, it requires that people have the means to control their lives. As part of their argument philosophers of prudence should also urge that people be assured the resources that give them a significant measure of control over their lives. While this remains a privilege many people will have little reason to choose prudence.

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## NOTES

1. Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 67 (“Days”) and p. 106 (“Reference Back”). “Reference Back” intrigues philosophers, being quoted epigraphically by Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), and by Jonathan Glover, *I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity* (London: The Penguin Press, 1988).
2. See Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 110, for this characterization of working-class life.
3. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 134-35.
4. Joyce Trebilcot, “Aprudentialism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 11 (1974), 203-210, pp. 204, 209.
5. See, for example, John Rawls’s rejection of “pure time preference,” in *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 293-98.
6. Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 32.
7. Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 35.
8. David Gauthier, *Morals By Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 36-37.
9. Gauthier, *Morals By Agreement*, p. 38.
10. David Wiggins, “A Sensible Subjectivism?,” *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 188. A reader for this journal reminds me that the modified emotivism of Wiggins’ view resembles Brentano’s theory of value judgments as statements about the correctness or incorrectness of attitudes: to be good (bad) is to be worthy of love (hatred) broadly construed. See Franz Brentano, *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, trans. R. Chisholm and E. Schneewind (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 16-24.
11. Such an account is developed by de Sousa in *The Rationality of Emotion*, Ch. 7. It is a useful complement to Wiggins’s semantics for emotions, which also supports the presumption of validity.
12. On Hume’s exclusive alternative between demonstrability and sentiment see Yossi Yonah, “Categorical Desires and the Future,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, 33 (1994), 581-594, p. 586.
13. Cf. Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1984), pp. 52-53. Parfit may be attracted to this extreme view. See *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 457-461.
14. Thomas Hurka suggests, for example, that a perfectionist moral theory must be time-neutral. See his *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 61.
15. In this connection, see Susan Wolf, “Self-Interest and Interest in Selves,” *Ethics*, 96 (1986), 704-720, p. 713. See also Trebilcot, “Aprudentialism,” pp. 208-209.
16. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), p. 262.
17. Thomas Nagel’s account of the possibility of prudence provides a good illustration of this limitation. See *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 71.
18. Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth*, pp. 197-198.
19. The expressions “descriptive” and “ascriptive” are borrowed from Frederick Schauer, “The Phenomenology of Speech and Harm,” *Ethics*, vol. 103 (1995), 635-653, p. 652.

20. Note the plight of the Ik as referred to by Jonathan Lear, "Moral Objectivity," in S. C. Brown, ed., *Objectivity and Cultural Divergence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 135-170.
21. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 279-80.
22. See Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, "Personal Identity and Causality: Becoming Unglued," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 24 (1987), 339-347.
23. Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921), pp. 159-60.
24. This puts more generally an argument suggested by Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 320.
25. Although we can only fear future pains can we not regret past ones? A full answer would lead too far afield. I suggest, though, that the actual object of regret is not past pain but having done something to cause it or the lost opportunities occasioned by it.
26. Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Selfhood," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 32.
27. Julia Annas, "Prudence and Morality in Ancient and Modern Ethics," *Ethics*, 105 (1995), 241-257, p. 246.
28. See, for example, Alfred R. Mele, "Internalist Moral Cognitivism and Listlessness," *Ethics*, vol. 106 (1996), pp. 297-326.