

ORDERING PREFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the problem of the ordering of preferences and the neutrality we should have with respect to their temporal location if we are to maintain a largely impartial position in ethical deliberation. I show how some difficulties may arise if we understand the ethical stance not only as a propensity towards impartiality, but also as a way of constructing our own personal ethical narrative.

KEYWORD

Preference, Parfit, neutrality, self, personal identity.

1. The value we assign to different preferences often seems to be a function of the possibility of satisfying them in a certain portion of future time, because if they were satisfied in another, the degree of satisfaction we would attribute to them would be different. It is, for instance, this presumption about the different ways in which we discount the future that has driven the offer made by some large corporations to some of their female employees to pay the cost of extracting, freezing, and storing oocytes, so that they can devote themselves to their careers, without the usual worries of not being able to satisfy their future desire for motherhood, as long as they devote themselves to multiplying the shareholders' profits. Of course, looking at the arrow of time, this can also be seen from the perspective of the past. Assuming that in the course of your life you happen to suffer from toothache, which would you prefer now: that the toothache is an event of the past or that it still has to happen in the future? I think that, unless we are masochists, most of us would answer that it is better for the pain to be in the past rather than an experience to be experienced in the future. It could be said that if we look forward, we do not really know how to discount the future; if we look backwards, well... there is little we can do. This does not mean, however, that there is not much to think about.

The problem of how to discount the future has a close connection with the problem of personal identity. Ultimately, you have to try to imagine rather precisely the subject you will be in order to imagine the future weight you will give to some

preference of yours. The problem of the relationship between time and preference then has important connections with the theory of value, as much as it can incorporate certain characteristics such as integrity. Integrity can, in fact, be seen as a way of attempting to give order to one's personal list of preferences in order to construct some guidance in the elaboration of the later selves we would like to be. With regard to the experiences we have and our preferences with respect to them, it may be necessary to recognise that pain is an experience *sui generis*, which cannot simply be considered one experience among others. This might indicate that, at least in some cases, we cannot make a plausible case for time-neutrality, as Parfit would have it. It could be, however, that this same neutrality is instead a plausible perspective in other circumstances.

Parfit's basic idea in his influential *Reasons and Persons*¹ is that knowing that something may happen in the future time is not a sufficient reason to have a positive or negative preference for this same thing. Now, it would seem that time cannot be said to be irrelevant in our preferences. I would not have wanted to become a father while I was starting my university studies. You can't help but consider it a mockery of fate to realise a big lottery win when you are a centenarian with no heir. Except that fate has nothing to do with it at all, while everything has to do with your dramatic shortage of time, which means that you cannot rationally have the same preferences now as you would have had fifty years ago, except as an indulgent and perhaps even somewhat masochistic fantasy. Think now of this experience that has happened, perhaps more than once to each of us: the writing of a curriculum vitae. A CV describes our life in terms of an area we consider relevant to what we aim to achieve by writing it. To this description, the time dimension is essential and not contingent, i.e. it is an integral part of the CV itself. In certain circumstances, therefore, it is important that the experiences are arranged in a precise temporal order. Years ago an American cousin of mine, single at the time, complained to me about her unsatisfactory social life, telling me that she was not even divorced. It was a cleverly paradoxical statement, which had the virtue of emphasising the mutual temporal dependence of different experience groups. It would seem, therefore, to confirm the idea that temporality is essential to the satisfaction of preferences, in at least some circumstances, and not simply one quality among others. We are often induced to make plans concerning segments of our lives. We can consider these same plans as complex preferences. These complex preferences are also stretched over time by the time sequence we have constructed in our imagination. If I plan a trip after I have completed that monograph that has kept me busy for so long, I really cannot imagine that the experience of that trip that I would like to take could be done in the same way even without completing that work that I care so much about. They are two qualitatively different experiences and only the first one really corresponds to my project. Without the possibility of tracing them back to a specific

¹ D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

and individualised temporal order, many experiences would lose the characteristic of being our own experiences and perhaps even lose the possibility of being included in the web of knowledge.

2. Aristotle argues at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that memory (along with sight) is proper to animals that can know, and even distinguishes it from the simple memory caught in the mind, which belongs to animals that are unable to know, at least in the complex manner reserved for us. Without going into further challenging considerations, which would take us to ontological shores, currently beyond my interest, on the intrinsic historicity of human nature, it suffices for now to observe that we often consider our existence in a narrative, i.e. temporal, manner, and that this narrative mode is simply our way of experiencing the world. The temporal order of our experiences, whether of the most significant ones, which ultimately constitute us as the people we are, or of the more mundane everyday ones, which is manifested as temporal in reflexivity (but which evidently must have been so regardless of this, otherwise there would be no need to have bought a train ticket before finishing one's journey), has a clear connection with experience.

There is no need to carry out complicated Heideggerian analyses of being-in-the-world, nor to toil Kantianly over the relations between pure forms of intuition and categories in order to subscribe to what seems to be a fact of our psychological experience in a broad sense. I will not venture to say that temporality is the essence of man, for this seems to me an overly demanding assertion, but I will limit myself to these observations, which might even have the flavour of a given. Even, then, the most rigid and objectivist of moral realists will certainly not be able to escape the fact that we live our experiences of value in certainly different ways depending on the period of our lives in which we find ourselves. We can say what we like, for example that 'love has no age', but behind this superficial and ultimately consumerist slogan is not at all the experience of a feeling laden with value meanings (which are not always positive, by the way) that are always identical to themselves, but rather the reality of an experience that cannot be lived identically regardless of age. Adolescent love is not the same experience as mature love, even though some of the values that the two experiences convey may be close or even identical. Think again of the experience of courage, which in our post-heroic societies is increasingly a residual experience. Courage, which used to be a warrior virtue, is now either the prerogative of the military in war (but less and less, because this contrasts with the aseptic nature of technologised wars) or of extreme sports champions. Both of these categories are populated and predominantly made up of young people. Courage is not something for old people, with some exceptions. Our personal relationships also change over time. The relationship between two young newlyweds does not remain the same until maturity or old age or the first child, assuming that marriage lasts that long. The path of lasting friendships is somewhat reminiscent of the ups

and downs of stock markets: there are periods of closeness, others of estrangement. Not to mention the radical changes that can occur in our own personal identity. Often a severe illness can alter people's character; if they manage to survive, they can change their attitudes towards the world and their priorities. Without making the usual reference to Phileas Gage, each of us, I believe, has had the experience of that particularly arrogant or annoying colleague or relative who suddenly mellowed after an illness, having had direct and traumatic experience of their own frailty.

Personal identity, with all the preferences that make us up, is immersed in the flow of time. The same experience can have very different meanings with respect to the sensations it accompanies. Pepperoni as a child may disgust you, but you can learn to appreciate it as an adult. Perhaps even at least some pleasures are related to the different seasons of life. If I can't get into video games, maybe that is because I am not a digital native. Choices, let's say sometimes, have to be made at the right time, in life as much as in games. To come to terms with our mortality is to recognise that time (or rather: the irreversible flow of time) is too important for us not to take it into consideration, even when this consideration takes the form of denial. Even if it were true what Magritte said, ironically, that it is always the others who die, the fact would still remain that they disappear one after the other. We do not know what the experience of an immortal individual might be, perhaps an infinite boredom from a certain moment onwards, but precisely boredom is a kind of temporal disgust; or it might be just what we imagine it might be for us, namely the excitement of continually having experiences. Perhaps it is not part of the essence of humankind, as some existentialists would have it, but it is hard to imagine that living our experiences in temporality is not always a central and sometimes essential element of these same experiences. It has been said of the ability to choose the right time to make a choice. The English expression *bad timing* indicates this momentary inability to make choice and time coincide. The idea of enjoying a given pleasure in the future can be part of the pleasure itself in such a way that too much anticipation of that plan would make it different. For example, it is clear to everyone (but to women, I think, more so than to men) that the game of seduction has to do with temporality.

3. Since preference ordering is an activity involving moral judgement, often to a complicated extent, it is not difficult to subscribe to the thesis that many preferences (perhaps most preferences) are temporalised. Choice (the judgmental activity of choosing) occurs over time. This activity is exercised over something we believe to be within our capacity. Actually, it is not enough to say this, since a madman might consider it within his power to reach for the moon with a leap or to soar by throwing himself off the ledge of his flat after doing crack. None of these actions were within the realm of the agent's possibilities and therefore not within the spectrum of his available choices. Choosing cannot simply mean making the selection of an option

based on the belief that this option is actually available to the agent, because this belief may be false. Thus, to choose is not the same thing as to choose reflexively and to choose reflexively is not the same thing as to choose rationally. To choose rationally is to select an option from those available on the basis of the best information currently available to the agent. It is necessary for the choice for one of these actions to be at least partially consistent with some purpose that the agent has. Many of the options being discussed in the bioethical field presuppose such a structure, and my idea is that this structure will become more and more apparent as the options relating to the so-called post-human become viable and extended to the general population. This would lead us to a complicated discourse on preference formation, which I will not address here.

There is something implied in this structure, which could perhaps be a problem, and it is an apparent truism: the choices available always have to do with temporality in a different sense than we have discussed so far, since they cannot be exercised over time as an unconditioned totality, but only over a portion of it, i.e. the present and the future, while the past remains excluded and perhaps for this very reason is massively represented in art, just as all artistic production concerning the possibility of time travel is intense. Given this frustrating reality, it is not surprising that almost all contemporary ethical theory in philosophy ignores the past. Yet many things have happened in the past that are relevant to us and options have been made that deliver us to the present for what we are and partially bind us to the future for what we believe we would like to be.

All this can easily be recognised and has its relevance in a general discourse on the role of morality and ethical judgement, whereas it seems to have considerably less relevance with regard to the problem of choice, which that temporal impossibility must take into account. Things can get complicated, however, when we make the simple point that the past has a causal effect on the present. This is what commonly occurs with people who have suffered some kind of trauma. It is also what is commonly assumed by the criminal justice system. It is a view, which according to Parfit is called into question by preference hedonism, that focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on present mental states of the agent that emerge to consciousness or are otherwise precisely identifiable. It is these states and only they that are worthy of consideration. This would mean that a trauma suffered and a trauma only imagined, but of whose past existence one is convinced, should have equal weight in our considerations. This is a very questionable assumption of course. Take multiple personality disorder, about whose very existence we question ourselves. Should we give equal weight and consideration to each of the personalities that merge into consciousness? I think not. I also think that to answer in the affirmative is to have already answered the question about the person's personality, which is perhaps what is at issue. Should a promise or contract and the fictitious belief that a promise or contract has been made be treated similarly,

arguing that what matters is not the reality of linguistic acts uttered with performative intention or contracts actually signed, but the belief about what has taken place, regardless of whether such beliefs are justifiable and are true? Imagine a criminal justice system based on this theory. The consequences would certainly be peculiar: the beliefs of victims and perpetrators could radically diverge and both be held to be true. Our criminal justice system relies on third parties to try to establish what has happened in reality and also in the minds, i.e. in the intentions, of the defendants, but it certainly cannot take into account the beliefs of each of them without the slightest consideration of past reality. The reason is simple: the penal system operates on realistic assumptions and moral realism is its appropriate metaethics most of the time. The very idea of punishment and rehabilitation of the offender would have no meaning without this metaethical assumption. The past does indeed have an ethical bearing on the present choice, because questioning what we have done often entails a strengthening of the idea of personal responsibility or, at the very least, an appropriate critical excavation of this crucial notion, a critical dissection that should not be polluted by bad faith.

Another important part played by the past concerns a function of integrity that the ethical dimension fulfils. It is a function that has been frequently emphasised in the history of ethics and concerns the possibility and ability to look at one's life, at least as far as its moral dimension is concerned, as a whole. I will not go into the epistemic soundness of this belief, which entails an important commitment to one or at least some solutions to the problem of personal identity. To this holistic and all-encompassing gaze (insofar as it extends from the past to the future as well), the consideration of character cannot be indifferent, as well as other considerations that may relate to the so-called *akrasia*, i.e. the weakness of will, which in its individual forms dwells in each of us. In any case, this view of the totality of our ethical life (1) presents us with a deeper and more persuasive vision of ourselves than any other view concerned solely with the conditions currently present in the choice or its effects on our future mental states; (2) reminds us of a fact that is always effectively present, even if often as an unheard background, namely that of our fragility, which should instead constitute one of the main motivations for assuming a critical attitude in ethics.

Another reason not to set aside this holistic view of ethics is that most of us do not just want to do the right, proper, or even good deeds (those infrequent times when we happen to do good not just by omission, but actively), but have the ambition to live a life that has been good, just, decent, and as free as possible of intentional harm to others. This could be expressed another way, by saying that many of us are not concerned exclusively with doing, but also have a certain being in mind. This being is as much about oneself as it is about one's surroundings no less than one's personal history. In other words, using a slogan that is not too inaccurate for once, many of us are concerned with making our being a value.

Those who interpret their preferences for some actions rather than others can, however, claim that their concerns are for present and future mental states, while interest in the past is entirely absent? It is not easy for me to imagine how to make, not so much consistent, but constant over time an attitude of absolute disinterest in the past, which I consider impossible, and the continuous renewal of this disinterest in every action. I think a few observations must be made on this point:

- (1) First, I would say that this disinterestedness does not seem entirely credible to me insofar as it presupposes at least an interest in disinterestedness, and therefore rather than a strategy of interpreting choice, it seems to me to be a normative programme;
- (2) The idea that one must disregard the past is not entirely harmless, because it excludes the question 'how should I have acted in that circumstance?' from being relevant. But this same question must also be relevant for those who consider the past to be ethically irrelevant as much as theirs is a critical approach. Ultimately, even to assert that everything that should guide us in our choice of preferences in action is to be found in our present subjective mental states, you must still have exhibited reasons that derive from your reflection on the past;
- (3) In the selection of available actions, imagination about future consequences from the selection of past action patterns often plays an important role. When we imagine a heroic act of extreme courage we select from our knowledge of heroic acts of extreme courage of which we have knowledge, i.e. which occurred in the past. We would not know that we could perform an act of heroism and extreme courage, nor would we be adequate to its demand, if we did not know what it means and what it entails to perform such acts. This knowledge is about something that has already happened.

The idea that the selection of preferences for action is only concerned with present mental states appears, therefore, to be at least strongly biased. Some overall consideration for the good life appears to be not only an incidental view of action, which would also have the merit of some consideration for the past, but rather one of the main constituents of the ethical dimension and, perhaps, the one that gives morality its peculiar all-pervasive characteristic. Behind this recognition there is nothing vague and inaccessible nor anything particularly grandiose; there is instead the recognition that because we are what we are, the weight of what we were cannot have dissolved. It should also be added that this last statement, which, moreover, is meant to be a pure statement of fact, is by no means even a first option for a naturalistic and deterministic conception. This conception seems to me to be false, because in the ethical experience of each of us there is ample room for improvement, for moral progress, for change, as well as, we must never forget, even

for the most varied and atrocious forms of moral regression, reminding us of our ethical fragility.

4. The past, in this sense, is not an obstacle to change, but its prerequisite. To say this is not a trivial profession of historicist faith. Just think of the phenomenon of forgiveness, or if we want to dramatise less, think of that moral behaviour we call 'putting a stone on it'. Both the former and the latter presuppose various levels of even sophisticated analysis of what precisely happened, the impact, meaning and relevance it had for us, and why it is better to exercise forgiveness, if we feel particularly noble, or to put a stone on it, most of the time we feel like normal people instead. These phenomena, which many consider particularly important, could not otherwise take place in a moral experience focused on the subject's present mental states. It would then be both a blocked moral experience, because it is punctual, and a potentially mindless and decidedly monotonous moral experience, which would have to dispense with or deny the moral importance of phenomena such as, precisely, putting a stop to them. It would therefore be a less rich and incomplete experience, and one that would be less renouncing than the self-reflexive consideration that the moral phenomenon requires.

Time, at least in its three dimensions that are accessible to us (perhaps there are others that we are not even able to imagine) is both a general temporisation of ethical experience and a temporal consideration of the values we bring into play (the placing of value is incomprehensible without this temporisation of value). Perhaps then we can return to the idea put forward by Parfit, that there is no good reason to give more weight to a preference on the basis of its temporal location, with more solid theoretical equipment. One of the difficulties that make this idea attractive is the well-known difficulty of discounting the future, i.e. the idea that something we strongly desire at time t_1 might not give at time t_2 the satisfaction we imagined at t_1 , perhaps because it has brought us so much more. Actually, Parfit can support his position, which is strongly counterintuitive, because it is supported by a specific conception of personal identity and perhaps even by a specific metaphysical consideration of the person.

It is difficult to say whether Parfit's conception of the self as a collection of successive selves can account for ethics as a way of looking at one's life as a whole. Some might think that the idea of neutrality with respect to the temporal location of preferences simply sweeps away the very possibility of looking at oneself through the lens of the moral account. If so, then this would simply sanction the pre-eminence of metaphysics over ethics, as it would at least make the ethical narrative, which we constantly employ, something less than *fiction*. The recitation of Leporello's catalogue would be a macho boastfulness with no basis in fact; our laboriously getting up from the cosy couch to go to the strenuous training of that martial art we undertook years ago would merely be the mindless contrast to

laziness. It is unrealistic to believe that all this is an illusion without any solid ontological basis. The very idea of the later self is of course fraught with implications because it could make the idea of responsibility far less solid than we are willing to concede and because it makes the act of self-imputation potentially unfeasible.

There are, as one progresses in age, for certain categories of actions more and more cases as the years go by, in which it is difficult to recognise oneself in relation to one's past. Years ago I read a beautiful interview with Franca Rame, actress and wife of Nobel Prize winner for literature Dario Fo, who spoke at one point about something like this Franca Rame had happened to see sex depicted rather explicitly in a film. The actress found herself thinking that she too had done exactly those things and this thought almost filled her with amazement. Was she really that person having sex as she imagined it stored in her memories? That question was not an impossibility in law, but sanctioned a perplexity in fact. How much does a person have to have changed in order to no longer regard as their own deeply intimate preferences they had had? Perhaps not by much; perhaps it is enough for new hormonal balances to occur for those memories, once so essential, to eventually appear so distant. But did Franca Rame deny those memories? Obviously not, nor did she disengage herself from her past, nor did she imply that she would rather not have experienced them. Perhaps, placed in the position of exercising options for the distant future, FR1, a young woman, would have wished to have sexual urges even as an old woman. FR2, an older woman, would then have discovered that she probably would not have known what to do with them. And with this example we are back to Parfit's problem, namely the difficulty of discounting the future. FR's solution, however, is not temporal neutrality, but questioning itself within a problematic continuity. Assuming it was such an answer that FR could have formulated, one must not hide the fact that such an answer would also have contained some normative consideration of temporality. Perhaps it would even have contained two of them, namely (1) that it is the temporal dimension that is ethically relevant and not some specific partition of it; (2) that perhaps there are no obvious reasons to privilege any of them. If this is the case, then it is the time we experience that changes some aspect of our reference values. The value demonstrated by the courageous actions of a teenager named Achilles cannot be that of an Achilles who survived the siege of Troy and became a mature man. Does the ideal of political participation in changing the world no longer belong to us in the same way now that we are members of a university corporation? It is in many cases incorrect to say so, whereas it might be a more insightful description to think of those ideals in the light of the disenchantment of the passing of time. This last example is perhaps the most illuminating because it shows us that we can give positive assessments to both declinations of that value, without being forced to embrace relativistic or particularly cynical views. However, it is also true that it is always wrong to give an overly conciliatory account of our moral experience. The

young idealist we were may have traded his personal identity for a career and a salary; the young romantic lover, all generous impulses, may have turned into the frequenter of luxury escorts.

5. All this suggests that there is a core within our experience of value, which makes value recognisable and perhaps even in some cases enables its permanence and integrity. Consider the case of honesty. Certainly this is a virtue that has contextual aspects, since it could be argued, for example, that it is declined in different ways in different professional orders. One could thus say that the honesty of the doctor is different from the honesty of the journalist, because the professional order to which he or she belongs is different. But can this really be the last word we will have to settle for? I don't think so, because there are limits that honest behaviour incorporates and that are common to both doctors and journalists. Among these normative limits we can safely include not appropriating public money for private purposes. Since this is a behaviour that simply qualifies honest people, we cannot say that it is a temporally qualified behaviour, as perhaps courage can be. This temporal dimension does not seem to be present in the same way with regard to honesty. In the case of honesty, an option for time-neutrality seems plausible, whereas this might be the case for courage or behaviour such as 'putting a foot down'. It is perhaps possible to hypothesise that there is a class of moral values that have little temporal dependence. However, if in this case the scope is indeed broader, this does not mean that where the scope is narrower, then we are dealing with values of lesser importance. It could be more simply a matter of the fact that opportunities to exercise honesty are ubiquitous. Ultimately, if we do not pay the bus *fare*, we are acting dishonestly. Getting on a bus is a much more frequent action than 'putting a stone on it', which indeed qualifies an action with the character of exceptionality, whereas if it were an overly frequent action it would denote a certain lack of character. But does the fact that it is exceptional behaviour make it less important? Clearly not, also because of another consideration that one would rather naturally make. Why is 'putting a stop to it' in certain circumstances to be considered virtuous behaviour? I think because it is a value that recalls other values that we would perhaps like to associate with our personality, at least in certain circumstances: values such as the willingness to revise one's judgements, not to fossilise by focusing on the past, to show a fine-grained sensitivity to changes in our and our interlocutors' personal identity. Time-neutrality is thus not a precondition for the preferences we should assume, but I have the impression that it should be confined to well-defined and partial cases compared to the totality of moral experience.

The need to endow ethical experience with a more impersonal depth, which is one of the objectives of Parfit's challenging proposals, cannot, I believe, be satisfied through temporal neutrality, which runs the risk of becoming, outside of certain

important but still circumscribed experiences, which have precisely the characteristic of pervasiveness, such as honesty, a sort of *pladoyer* for banality. In fact, in order to make the experience of temporal neutrality make sense, the temporal distance of preferences must be narrowed down to make them assimilable. Would you rather sip your Cuba Libre now or five minutes from now on the tropical beach on which you are on holiday? It might not make any substantial difference, whereas there is a difference between sipping it now and sipping it a month from now in your suburban office amidst depressing autumn fog. You would like to start a romantic relationship with that girl you are strongly attracted to: is it really believable that it should be indifferent for you to have this preference now or in twenty years? Clearly not, whereas it may be really indifferent to go out to dinner this weekend or next. We are not beings who live in a universe where time is a spatial dimension and for whom imagining the past could be the vivid experience of walking in a canyon and looking forward to the future that of visiting a new city.

6. Having said this, it is still not entirely clear why the idea of temporal neutrality is so strongly counterintuitive and indefensible. Let us think of pain and imagine that it is my own pain, that pain which affects my own body. According to the idea of temporal neutrality, I should be indifferent to preferring past pain to future pain. Our intuition is that things cannot be this way, i.e. that past pain must be of less importance to us than future pain. The problem is trying to find a good argument to support this. Remember what was said about the importance of the past in contrast to the theories that advocate a hedonism of present mental states: the past is important because we want our ethical experience to be an integrated experience, one that tells a story, our own and that of our changes. There can also be room for the pain felt by my body in this story. For example, I can remember how moderate dehydration can make me nervous and even aggressive towards others. But that I fractured my thumb years ago falling off my bike, what relevance does that have on the construction of my personal identity? Most pain does not have much relevance, whereas it can if it involves a long period of infirmity, if it also involves the people around us, whereas for most painful experiences this is not the case, since they are episodes that rather marginally disturb the normal course of our lives. Their importance has been low and their current relevance is nil: they have not turned into vectors along which our lives have been reshaped. The anxiety that parents may feel about minor incidents involving their children is usually not so much a concern for the small significance of the event itself (although for hyper-anxious parents anything can be a threat to the lives of their little ones), but a concern for how the son/daughter may perceive the external environment, i.e. as excessively hostile. It is well understood that past pain will hardly have any relevance. The scar left on your knee as a reminder of a disastrous fall on the gravel during a Sunday outing as a

child is now just an embroidery on the skin of a mature man and no longer evokes the pain of the wound.

Perhaps one should also reflect on this: while it is quite easy for us to recall a pleasant experience in a moderate way, we find it impossible to do so for moderate pain. I recall the pleasant experience of the concert of the young Cuban pianist playing Gershwin in a small theatre in my town. I remember how pleasant it was to close my eyes and be carried away by the music in the midst of the small audience. It is impossible for me to remember the pain I felt from that annoying gum inflammation that lasted me two days. Instead, I can remember the dismay and grief at the sudden loss of a loved one. I can almost still feel pain after years have passed. My impression is, however, that even in the case of intense pain it is not possible to recall it vividly in the same way and with the same intensity with which we can recall even moderate pleasure. It may be that there are evolutionary reasons for this different way of experiencing the past. Pain is regressive, it blocks and annoys us even when it is moderate. Pleasure, on the other hand, is propulsive and incites us to action. Even a strong ability to vividly recall past pain could very easily translate into a block for action. This, too, is basically an indication of what kind of person we wish to be. Barring masochistic pathologies, we want to be people who do not suffer and who have not been devastated by past pain. It even seems superfluous to insist on the relevance of the pain that one might experience in the future. This pain could make us different and worse people than we would like to be, even if only momentarily. Pain therefore constitutes in principle and *ceteris paribus* an obstacle to the actions we would like to take and could take if we did not experience it. In our consideration of pain, the temporisation of suffering is not indifferent on the basis of the simple consideration that the past of pain is irredeemable, but would clearly have been avoided had it been within our power to do so.

Pain and suffering interfere in our plans in a way that can be profound. If they do not confront us with the typical question of dramatic situations ('what should I do?'), they affect ethics at a perhaps deeper level, because they can influence the person I would like to be and the good life I would like to lead. If pain prevents me from reading that book I have on my desk, from going out to see that film everyone is talking about, from sharing a banquet with my friends, these are important limitations on the person I would like to be. One would be tempted to say that because pain takes away portions of meaning from my existence, then it is itself meaningless, but that would be a mistake. Rather, one must say that it has negative meaning because it does not allow my personal identity to unfold according to the value project (the person I would like to be) that I had in mind. It is right, then, and entirely sensible to insist on the negativity of pain, but to put a minus sign in front of what we would like to be is not the mere underlining of a non-being, but a being quite different from the one we would have liked to experience. Of course, this too can be part of the project of what I would like to be in a different way, but it requires

the additional strength to transform an obstacle into something positive. Beyond all the rhetoric that even here some would not fail to bring to bear, the fact remains that we would have preferred if pain and suffering had not been there. These, too, are considerations that strongly incline towards the temporal importance of preferences regarding pain, which we wish were always relegated to the distant past and did not reoccur in our lives either now or in the future. This applies especially to physical pain and not to what is causing psychological suffering or moral distress. In fact, if we think about the experience of remorse this aspect is easily clarified. Remorse is knowing that we should have acted differently than we actually did. Unlike physical pain, the pain we feel for not having done what we should have done may say a lot about us, about our bad faith, about our inability to adhere to a good life, which remorse shows to be only an imagined and unrealistic project. Cheating on one's partner may be an indication of a lack of willingness to keep commitments made within a romantic relationship; cheating on a friend may be an indication of a lack of ability to engage in sympathetic behaviour.

Pain is of considerable relevance in evaluating the course of action in which we find ourselves immersed or in which we estimate we will find ourselves involved in the future, but it is of little relevance if it has had no otherwise relevant effect in the consideration of the past. The consideration of experiencing pain in the future may be a sufficient reason to avoid doing an action, but the memory of a pain experienced in the past, even if that pain was intense, may not be a sufficient reason either to wish not to have had that experience in which the pain is present or perhaps even embedded. The painful gum inflammation that afflicted you shortly before you obtained your doctoral degree is generally not a reason to wish you had not obtained your degree. One might say that it is obvious for the obvious reason that the experience of toothache does not incorporate the experience of obtaining the degree. Consider, however, the often intense experience of bonding with one's parents. Generally, parents do not outlive us (it is considered unnatural for a parent to survive the death of their offspring; not surprisingly, one might say, this event produces some of the most intense psychological suffering imaginable); that is, we know that sooner or later we are likely to experience mourning for their loss. This mourning is increasingly preceded by a period of physical decline that is a veritable *memento mori* for us. The experience of having parents therefore incorporates, at a very high level, the experience of suffering their loss. This, however, is hardly considered by anyone as a reason to prefer not to have parents. Once our parents have passed away and we have experienced that grief, absorbing it and overcoming it, as far as possible, we do not evaluate the experience of not having parents negatively because of the pain we felt at their disappearance. We think of a romantic relationship we had that ended causing us intense sorrow. Often not even this grief we felt is reason enough to wish we had not experienced the emotional involvement that that romantic and/or sexual relationship allowed us to have. This again means

that the pain experienced is not a relevant element for an overall or even partially negative evaluation of those experiences in their entirety.

The hedonist of the present mental states might object that these examples are by no means conclusive, since they presuppose that the relevant questions in morality are those about the good life, whereas the hedonist of the present mental states obviously denies this premise, since for him the significant question in ethics is 'what should I do to increase subjective hedonistic states in the present?' This objection can easily be answered without assuming what the hedonist claims to be proving and without running into a *petitio principii*. Indeed, one can very well decline his question to the past in order to reach the same conclusion that one would have to reach with that other assumption about the good life. Nothing can prove that we should not have engaged in a romantic and/or sexual relationship even if we could foresee that there would be a risk of some suffering. People take risks all the time and do not consider it at all obstructive *ceteris paribus* to the possibility of moral action. But leaving aside for a moment the possible examples involving forms of psychological suffering, let us think of those who practise combat disciplines. For many practitioners of these disciplines, the results to be achieved are intimately linked to the attainment of high standards of integrity. No one can, of course, argue that engaging in combat sports excludes the possibility of experiencing pain. However, even apart from ideals of integrity, which are as much a part of good sporting practice as its bad rhetoric, the experience of pain is not even here an obstacle to performing these sports. The example could easily be extended to other competitive disciplines, perhaps all of them.

7. My idea is, therefore, that the hedonism of present mental states is not so much an accomplished ethical theory as a form of scepticism towards universalist or generalist or holistic positions in ethics. After all, one might be tempted to replicate the response Aristotle gave to the sceptic who denied the relevance of the concept of truth. It is enough for this one to start talking in order to self-confirm. In a similar vein, the hedonist of the present state of mind need only ask what for him is the fundamental ethical question ('what should I do?') to find himself immersed in a network of relations, which seem to me to easily refer back to what he considers the alternative ethical question ('what life would I like to have?'), but which does not constitute a radical alternative in any sense at all. Indeed, asking 'what should I do?' as much as 'what should I do?' incorporates an evaluation of the agent's present mental states. The fact is that other far more complex things and/or processes also come into play if we have the ambition to answer these two questions. For instance, looking back on one's past actions often takes the form of a conscious reflection on alternatives that were within my grasp and that perhaps I should have practised. If this is not a mere fanciful indulgence in the *sliding doors* that might have opened or closed, then it is possible that such reflection is an expression of the critical capacity

of the mature ethical stance, which is summed up precisely in the question 'what kind of person would I like to be?' or in the equivalent and co-extensive other 'what kind of life should I live?' To put it in a nutshell: ethics is also a comparative activity. Precisely for these reasons, some forms of physical pain and some forms of psychological pain have no interesting relevance to provide any meaningful answer to those questions. When we then move into a future that becomes the present that we live in, the more these two categories of pain are scaled down. Sometimes we don't even think about it any more, a clear sign of our own evaluation.

If Parfit's idea of time-neutrality seems unsound and to be rejected in its general terms, then we should give more credit to areas of pharmacological research that are concerned with the erasure of painful experiences from our memory. It is likely that if there are promising applications of this research, even commercially viable ones, there will be an explosive demand for new categories of psychoactive drugs. Already now, after all, some recreational drugs are consumed to cope with moderate levels of stress, as is the case with some drugs that act on pleasure receptors and cancel out withdrawal crises in nicotine addiction therapy. The latter is a particularly interesting case, not only for those who have been smokers. Those who decide to quit because they are fed up with the addiction itself, why would they want to avoid the pain caused by nicotine withdrawal crises? The case is significant because such withdrawal crises are known to be much less intense than those produced by other and far more dangerous substances. There seems to be no serious reason to go through nicotine withdrawal when there is a drug available that simply cancels such a crisis. Taking the drug is not even an entirely implicit answer to the question 'what kind of person do I want to be/would I want to be?': not so much a non-smoker as an addiction-free person. The painful experience of withdrawal is therefore not considered significant. Perhaps a somewhat similar argument can be made with regard to pain therapy. Pain can deform the personality that we are and have had and there seems to be no reason not to eliminate it, not least because if we have enough time to live, the temporal location of pain and its eventual cancellation are certainly not indifferent.

As for moral suffering, which also includes shame, things are no different. I could have not behaved in that inappropriate manner that even now causes me shame. But there are also some structural elements that make these experiences unassimilable and non-overlapping. A zone of intersection does indeed exist due to the very fact that physical pain is a suffering as is the feeling of shame. This, however, is not enough. In fact, moral suffering always has to do with its own description in the form of a *Bildungsroman*, which is updated with new chapters; most of the time nothing more than tedious glosses on our existences made up mostly of a myriad of unmemorable actions; sometimes with chapters that we would prefer had never been written and that, if they have been written, would not be read by anyone but us; other times with chapters and glosses of which we are proud. The intensity of a

moral suffering may know no significant diminution over time. I think back to those words I should not have said and still feel intense unease. I reflect on what I knew even then I should have done and did not do, and I regret it. Why do I regret it? Perhaps because I missed an opportunity to be true to what I would like to be and could have been under those circumstances. In some cases, then, it could be said that past moral pain can be the subject of a kind of redemption, redeeming the past can make us better. This usually concerns pain that either we have caused to others or that we have, even unintentionally (this is the case with certain cases of *akrasia*) self-inflicted. In the case of moral pain that has been caused to us, the discourse is usually different. There may be cases in which the negative experience can be transfigured allowing us a finer-grained future moral experience, so to speak. Sometimes, for instance, it is possible for us to transfigure negative experiences in which we have been subjected to manipulation in order to better interpret at least some of the actions, which arouse our interest and attention, even without falling into cynical nonsensical and generalised attitudes. These past events that have caused pain to our personalities by marking them are often events that have to do with humiliation. Humiliation is a wounding of self-esteem, i.e. the successful attempt to induce in a person the belief that the person in front of him or her is better because of intrinsic merits, sometimes not even dependent on his or her own personal acquisitions, and thus entitled to put us in a minority situation. The correct mode of reaction to humiliation seems to be some form of rational explanation and putting into perspective that emphasises the lack of any solid basis for the collaboration between persecutor and humiliated, which humiliation in fact presupposes. Humiliation is interesting for the discourse at hand, because I believe it can be seen as a kind of counter-eudaimony.

8. I think it will also have become quite clear to many that the idea of time-neutrality must be regarded as an ineffective tool for analysing the ethical sphere in the light of the more far-reaching consideration that the questions 'what should I/should I do?', 'what kind of person do I want to be?', 'how would I like my life to be described?' presuppose. These are, in fact, ubiquitous questions. If humiliation is a kind of ethical-practical paradigm of counter-eudaimony, many other behaviours fall under it, starting with those that are unanimously considered evil or blatantly anti-social. War itself as a solution to disputes is counter-eudaimonistic, unless it is undertaken out of force majeure, e.g. as self-defence against the danger of annihilation. Annihilation is in fact the ultimate limit of humiliation. The opposite limit of humiliation considered as counter-eudaimony then what would it be? The absence of humiliation, certainly, but combined with the absence of pain? It seems to be possible to give a negative answer. The possibility of seeing one's life as filled with meanings that make it worth living can contemplate the presence of a certain amount of pain. Even those who experience dramatic situations of

progressively disabling pathologies very often succeed in this endeavour (sometimes bordering on heroism). With this example we are confronted with a kind of ethical paradox. It boils down to this: if I think of two possible courses of my future life in one of which I am the victim of a severely and progressively disabling disease that will lead to my death, while in the other I will lead an averagely healthy existence and die of old age, there seems to be no doubt about the choice to be made. The presence of a greater amount of pain in the former makes it less of a candidate as a possible place for the realisation of eudaimonia in my life: why? What I think can be said is that eudaimonia is also the asymptotic movement of saturation of meanings in the horizon of experience of our moral world. The more these meanings themselves refer back to experiences of eudaimonia, the richer our ethical experiences become. This filling also has to do with moral progress and the inclusion of other moral experiences in mine. One thinks of the progressive inclusion in social life that has taken place in recent decades of individuals with Down syndrome. To all intents and purposes, initiatives such as these broaden the ethical dimension by making it richer not only for the actors directly involved (individuals with Down syndrome), but for the majority of us who participate in the moral enterprise, since it shows us new dimensions of eudaimonia. From this point of view, if we take a negative view of the situation of disabled people forty years ago and compare it with the undeniable progress that has been made, we do not incur the objection of judging other people's lives by our own personal and sometimes narrow criteria, but rather enter the difficult terrain of vicarious decision-making, which intersects with issues of justice and through these, once again, those of moral progress, the possibility of which these cases make clear.

These experiences also represent good practice when they incorporate the approaching of limits particular to each of us. The fact that most of the time for most of us these experiences are not at all easy should be seen as an opportunity to exercise certain virtues and character traits. After all, if the world did not oppose us, justice and cooperation would not exist either. Co-operation, with the related phenomena of trust and co-ordination, significantly involves the evaluation of the temporal dimension, further proving that Parfit's thesis on the indifference of temporal preferences must be rejected because it lacks meaningful generalities. This is because there is no single, undifferentiated way of assessing experience over time, i.e. there is no single, undifferentiated way of assessing time, just as there is no general metric for assessing the weight of pain in our experience. Instead, there are general questions ('what should I/should I have done?'; 'what kind of person would I/would I like to be?') that provide the general tone of ethics and frame the problem of temporality in the perspective from which we can ultimately reason about the specificity of, for example, that particular painful experience we are having/have had. The fact that it often happens that past pain is essentially irrelevant in the construction of our personality and in the description we give of ourselves (was that

flu attack I had thirteen years ago really important?' It would seem not.) should not lead us to underestimate the link between temporality and value. Instead, this link can be enhanced by understanding moral experience as an experience of eudaimonia, that is, of temporal valorisation of experience in the light of what we consider significant in our moral self-description.