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Time, Ethics and Experience: Review of David O. Brink's Prospects for Temporal Neutrality

Abstract
Are temporal locations of harms and benefits important to human existence? Conventional wisdom unambiguously suggests so, albeit interpretations of various dogmatic texts and beliefs. Discussions about pain, grief, and suffering are commonly favored within past temporal settings, unlike those of happiness, comfort, and wellbeing that permeate conversations with future temporal locales. Past pain is preferred to future pain, even when this choice includes more total pain (Callender, 2011). Should these positive and negative qualifiers that constitute conscious existence have privileged temporal locations? This ethical question, like many others surrounding temporality, inherits both theoretical and pragmatic inquiries - becoming indispensable within moral and juridical dispositions. The concept of temporal neutrality, which posits that agents should not attach normative significance to temporal locations of benefits and harms, all else being equal, is central to the present philosophical investigation.

In his Prospects for Moral Neutrality chapter of The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time (2011), David O. Brink articulates what exactly temporal neutrality requires and why we ought to care about its precepts. As they are assessed by how they distribute benefits and harms across people's lives through interpersonal distributive justice, actions and policies can also be assessed by their distribution of benefits and harms across time. This concept of intertemporal distribution is a normative demand of temporal neutrality, and according to some philosophers it makes temporal neutrality an essential part of rationality (Brink, 2011). However, establishing an impartial foundation for temporal neutrality often appears controversial and counterintuitive.

Keywords
temporal neutrality, ethics

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Time, Ethics, and Experience: Review of David O. Brink's Prospects for Temporal Neutrality

Pedja Ilic

Introduction

Are temporal locations of harms and benefits important to human existence? Conventional wisdom unambiguously suggests so, albeit interpretations of various dogmatic texts and beliefs. Discussions about pain, grief, and suffering are commonly favored within past temporal settings, unlike those of happiness, comfort, and wellbeing that permeate conversations with future temporal locales. Past pain is preferred to future pain, even when this choice includes more total pain (Callender, 2011). Should these positive and negative qualifiers that constitute conscious existence have privileged temporal locations? This ethical question, like many others surrounding temporality, inherits both theoretical and pragmatic inquiries - becoming indispensable within moral and juridical dispositions. The concept of temporal neutrality, which posits that agents should not attach normative significance to temporal locations of benefits and harms, all else being equal, is central to the present philosophical investigation.

In his *Prospects for Moral Neutrality* chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time* (2011), David O. Brink articulates what exactly temporal neutrality requires and why we ought to care about its precepts. As they are assessed by how they distribute benefits and harms across people's lives through interpersonal distributive justice, actions and policies can also be assessed by their distribution of benefits and harms across time. This concept of intertemporal distribution is a normative demand of temporal neutrality, and according to some philosophers it makes temporal neutrality an essential part of rationality (Brink, 2011). However, establishing an impartial foundation for temporal neutrality often appears controversial and counterintuitive.

Prudence and Temporal Neutrality

Temporal neutrality is reflected in the demands of prudence: the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason (Meriam-Webster, 2014). Prudence requires agents to promote their own "good" throughout their lives. But the "good" can, and arguably should, be promoted to all parts of the lives of others too. Brink (2011) implies that, while prudence requires temporal neutrality, temporal neutrality is not limited to prudence. Reflecting on Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith's claims surrounding temporal neutrality, as explained in his seminal work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790), Brink (2011) affirms that temporal neutrality does not need to be confined to prudential concern with one's own wellbeing, but can extend to concern for the wellbeing of others. Temporal bias spurred by an agent's disproportional ascription of normative significance to the short-term, while discounting long-term harms and benefits, is often thought to be the reason for various moral failings (Brink, 2011).

Following in the steps of Adam Smith, British utilitarian philosopher and economist, Henry Sidgwick, in his *The Methods of Ethics* (1907), further qualifies normative aspects of temporal neutrality as a response to British philosopher Jeremy Bentham's normative inclination to temporal proximities of pleasures and pain, calling it "*the most prominent element in the notion of rational*" (Brink, 2011, p. 355). Sidgwick elaborates on the aspects of temporal neutrality and prudence, first by recognizing that prudence's temporal neutrality is constrained about the distribution of harms and benefits over time within a single life, and is impartial about the content of the good. And since there are different conceptions of the good as in preference-satisfaction terms, like Sidgwick's hedonism, he concludes that what is indeed good is conditioned upon an agent's character and psychological states (Brink, 2011). Sidgwick also acknowledges that temporal neutrality is not limited to neither his hedonistic prudence, nor prudence in the commonly understood sense. Since prudence is intrinsically concerned with the magnitude of benefits, but not their temporal location, temporal location can inherit significance when correlated with factors affecting the magnitude of harms and benefits. In this sense, temporal neutrality seems to justify temporal bias, precisely because the same resources yield goods of different magnitudes for both present and future (Brink, 2011).

Sidgwick further explicates this point by drawing distinctions between objective and subjective reasons and rationality. Assertions of objective rationality stipulate what an agent has reason to do under the circumstances, whether or not an agent is aware of these facts or in a position to recognize the reasons they support. Conversely, assertions of subjective rationality stipulate what an agent has reason to do, given their beliefs under the circumstances. It is this dichotomy that gives rise to possible situations where objectively rational actions can be subjectively irrational and *vice versa*. This situation compels us to think of prudence purely in terms of an objective reason. Objective reasons are central to the retrospective evaluations of one's conduct, and subsequent adjustment to one's conceptualization and behavior stemming from prior successes and failures. Objective reasons have what Brink (2011) calls "explanatory and theoretical primacy" in discussions about practical reason (p. 357).

Prudence defined along these lines consents dissimilar treatment of different temporal locations in an agent's life. Brink (2011), alongside David J. Velleman, argues that it is possible to hold a version of this view that treats lives within certain narrative structures as more valuable, all else being equal, than other lives; this might be particularly true of lives whose upward trajectory is defined by preceding harms endured to facilitate future benefits, over those lives in which benefits came first, all else being equal. This seemingly unequal *treatment* of temporal locations is justified by an equal *concern* for all parts of one's life and is, in fact, required by temporal neutrality if, and only if, temporal distribution of harms and benefits within a life actually contributes to the total value of that life; temporal locations hold no independent significance. Brink (2011) simplifies this concept as *now-for-later sacrifice*. He further argues that intrapersonal conflicts of value, in which what one does affects both the magnitude of benefits and harms in one's life, as well as their temporal ordering, are expected and do not compromise the concept of temporal neutrality.

While Sidgwick supports this notion of temporal neutrality as a central aspect of our concept of rationality, Brink (2011) contends that Sidgwick does so out of his sympathy for hedonism; if all this principle does is limit its application to intrapersonal conflicts where temporal location is the only variable, the principle is overly restrictive. Sidgwick's hedonism, as a monistic theory of good, permits us to make assumptions and restrict the application of temporal neutrality only to homogenous goods. Brink (2011) disagrees with this line of reasoning, and suggests that this problem is best avoided if we allow temporal neutrality to apply to conflicts with multiple variables, insisting only that it prohibits assigning value to temporal location insofar as this affects the value of the whole. This would open up avenues for the application of temporal neutrality to heterogeneous conflicts recognizable by the pluralistic theories of good (Brink, 2011).

Compensation and the Rationale for Temporal Neutrality

Brink (2011) asks, is there a rationale for temporal neutrality? This question becomes important considering that temporal neutrality requires sacrifice that can be justified by the demand. *Now-for-later sacrifice* is a perfect example that provides us with an answer: compensation. Since prudence is temporally neutral, utilitarianism as a theory of normative ethics, which holds that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority, is person-neutral. Since temporal neutrality requires intrapersonal balancing, person-neutrality requires interpersonal balancing; benefits to some ought to be balanced against harms to others, if needed, in order to produce optimal interpersonal outcome overall (Brink, 2011).

American philosopher John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971) accepts prudence's intrapersonal balancing, but points out how utilitarianism's interpersonal balancing is highly problematic, for it "…conflates all persons into one… and does not take distinction between persons seriously" (Rawls, 1971, p. 27-28). In other words, balancing of benefits and harms is acceptable within a life, but not across lives. Brink (2011) explains this point as follows: in the intrapersonal case, benefactor and beneficiary are the same person and compensation happens automatically; in the interpersonal case, benefactor and beneficiary are different people and unless the beneficiary somehow reciprocates, the benefactor's sacrifice will not be compensated. The critics of utilitarianism find this approach unacceptable; there ought to be independent principles of interpersonal distribution for each agent individually.

Rationalizing the Hybrid Structure of Prudence

The hybrid structure of prudence comes from being both temporally neutral and agent relative, and as such can be contrasted against two non-hybrid theories; *neutralism*, which holds that an agent has reason to do something just insofar as it is valuable, regardless of temporal locations and who the beneficiaries are; and *presentism*, a completely relative normative theory regarding an agent's reasons for action being grounded in his or her present interests. Since time and person are parallel distributional dimensions, it must be decided where to locate harms and benefits in time and among persons. However, when this particular perspective is adopted, prudence becomes somewhat of an unstable hybrid since it stipulates to whom a benefit or harm falls, but not when (Brink 2011, p. 361).

British philosopher Derek Parfit, in his *Reason and Persons* (1984), also voices concern about the hybrid structure of prudence, which he calls a self-interest theory (S):

> As a hybrid S can be attacked from both directions. And what S claims about one rival might be turned against it by the other, In rejecting Neutralism, a Self Interest Theorist must claim that a reason may have force only for the agent. But the grounds for this claim support a further claim. If a reason can have force only for the agent, it can have a force for the agent only at the time of acting. The Self-interest Theorist must reject this claim.

> He must attack the notion of a time-relative reason. But arguments to show that reasons must be temporally neutral, thus refuting the Present-aim theory, may also show that reasons must be neutral between different people, thus refuting the Self-interest Theory. (p. 140).

Sidgwick disagrees with Parfit and argues that prudence in its hybrid character can indeed be defended as long as the *separateness of persons* is recognized, and Humean's skepticism about personal identity over time is rejected (Brink, 2011). However, Brink (2011) questions if the compensation principle, as seen among intertemporal and interpersonal distribution, provides enough rationale to defend the hybrid theory of prudence; he asks: "could not doubts about interpersonal balancing be extended to intrapersonal balancing? If the separateness of persons defeats interpersonal balancing, why does not the separateness of different periods within a person's life defeat intrapersonal balancing?" (p. 364). He sees Sidgwick's argument about the separateness of persons as requiring temporal impartiality, in addition to temporal neutrality. The problem of compensation turns to the sub-personal perspective, whose limit is a fully relative momentary time slice – a single segment of the person. And, in order to determine if compensation has occurred, the subject needs to be clearly determined. This becomes increasingly difficult when we talk about arbitrary person-segments; people's lives constitute multitudes of past, present, and future segments, not only individual time slices, therefore, the subject cannot be an individual person-segment, but a person as a complete entity (Brink, 2011).

Lastly, Brink (2011) dispels the problem of conceptualizing a person as "all there" in relation to the subject/person being a complete entity; if person-segments extend in the future, they, by default, are not "all there," hence undermining the concept of an agent as a determinate subject. The present self-acts as a representative of the temporally dispersed entity, the subject, by acting in the interest of this being. Therefore, the fact that the temporally extended person is "not all there" at the time of action, is not a reason to deny that it is the subject whose interests determine what agents have reason to do. Under this hypothesis we, once again, have intrapersonal compensation; therefore compensation does justify temporal neutrality (Brink, 2011).

Personal Identity and Temporal Neutrality

The rationale for temporal neutrality appears to rest on certain assumptions about personal identity. In the long tradition of thinking about personal identity in terms of psychological continuity and connectedness, Parfit (1984) argues that *psychological reductionism* has a potential to undermine prudence's demand for temporal neutrality. Psychological reductionism argues that two persons are psychologically *connected* insofar as the intentional states and actions of one influence the intentional states of the other; they are psychologically *continuous* insofar as they represent links in the chain or series of people in which contiguous links in the chain are psychologically well connected. Also, continuity and connectedness can be matters of degree (Brink 2011). Parfit further attacks temporal neutrality with the concept of *discount rate* of connectedness, arguing that, "since connectedness is nearly always weaker over long periods, I can rationally care less about my further future" (Parfit, 1984, p. 313). This becomes problematic since psychological reductionism does not justify duty or permissibility to discount; if the improvement involves psychological change that diminishes connectedness, then there are less prudential reasons to undertake it.

However, provided that one plays a suitable role in generating and shaping the change in his or her beliefs, the change in character presents no obstacle to preservation of connectedness over time. Likewise, the argument about transitive relations – if A=B and B=C, then A=C – qualifies personal identity, but not the psychological connectedness. In the case of continuity, as opposed to connectedness, if A is connected to B, and B is connected to C, then A and C will be continuous, even though they are not well connected. Regardless of this situation, Brink (2011) argues that diminished connectedness between A and C does not diminish the continuity between A and C; if reductionism is formulated in terms of continuity, rather than connectedness, then diminished connectedness over time does not justify a *discount rate*. Even in the case that connectedness actually matters, the reductionist case for discounting confounds parts and wholes. As long as it is the person who is the agent and whose interests are at stake, differences in connectedness among the parts of a person's life should not, as such, affect the person's reasons to have equal regard for all part of the life. Brink (2011) ultimately concludes that such considerations undermine the reductionist case for *discount rate*, leaving rationale for temporal neutrality metaphysically robust.

Intrapersonal Conflicts of Value

By elaborating intrapersonal conflicts of value, Brink (2011) employs Parfit's *Russian Nobleman* example – whether or not one should be expected to moderate the pursuit of ideals one holds dear in the present, for the sake of ideals one presently rejects but will accept in the future – to reiterate and defend argumentation from the previous section on personal identity and temporal neutrality; provided one's present ideals are worthwhile, one can honor temporal neutrality by acting in accord with one's present ideals and thereby avoiding intertemporal conflict.

But what happens when one is faced with unavoidable intertemporal conflicts? The implications of temporal neutrality in situations involving unavoidable intrapersonal conflicts of ideals depend on the merits of the conflicting ideals; for the purpose of clarity, unavoidable conflicts are divided into two categories, symmetrical and asymmetrical. The asymmetrical conflicts are divided into cases of *corruption* – *before's* ideals are valuable, whereas *after's* are not – and *improvement* – *before's* ideals are worthless, whereas *after's* ideals are valuable. In this case, the demands of temporal neutrality are clear – one should act on the worthwhile ideals when one has them, not the worthless ones, for this is a claim about one's objective reasons. In the case of corruption, all one has to do is act on current ideals (Brink, 2011). However, the case of improvement delegates further inquiry in the light of the question: should one act on the worthless ideals one presently embraces, irrespective of the worthwhile ideals one will act upon in the future? In other words, can temporal neutrality make plausible claims about subjective rationality? Could it be subjectively rational to act on valuable ideals that one does not presently hold? Brink (2011) argues yes, provided that we understand subjective reasons as the reasons one has, not in virtue of what one now judges, but in virtue of what it would be reasonable for one to judge now if one gave the matter due attention.

In the case of conflicts with symmetrical merits, there are also multiple categories. There is a *minus-minus* situation where conflicting ideals are similarly worthless and a *plus-plus* situation where the conflicting ideals are both equally valuable. In the *minus-minus* case, neutrality argument delegates that neither ideals be embraced, favoring an alternative third ideal that might have merit. Conversely, in the *plus-plus* case, temporal neutrality recognizes a conflict of objective reasons – *after's* ideals conflict with *before's* ideals regardless of what the agent does now – among two valuable ideals and suggests a sort of neutrality among them. Brink (2011) proposes that in case of such a *genuine dilemma*, where one has to choose temporally among valuable ideals, neutrality accommodates two possible scenarios; first, one might achieve less-than-substantial success along both ideals – neither a stellar success nor an abject failure at any time; second, one might engage in the unreserved and successful pursuit of ideals either now, or later, however, not both, provided that the process of selecting the favored ideal gave equal chances of success to both ideals. Provided that merits of the conflicting ideals are not transcendent facts, these claims about the agent's objective reasons apply to subjective reasons as well. Since neither of these options is ideal, Brink (2011) offers prospective consolation by reasoning infrequency of such genuine dilemmas.

The Symmetry Argument

Unlike the previous arguments about temporal neutrality, some of the symmetry arguments brought by the Epicureans – arguments that claim philosophy should be confrontational and involve the removal of the fear of death, since it tends to cause anxiety – are concentrated on the concept of nonexistence. Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius recognizes asymmetry in our attitudes towards past and future as irrational, and in his *De Rerum Natura,* invokes symmetry between postmortem and prenatal nonexistence as follows:

1. Death brings nonexistence.
2. Postmortem nonexistence is no different than prenatal nonexistence.
3. We do not regret our prenatal nonexistence.
4. Hence, we should not regret our death.

But Brink (2011) points out that appeals to symmetry are problematic since the parity of prenatal and postmortem nonexistence can be exploited to expand and contract regret. He exemplifies it in the following symmetry argument:

1. Death brings nonexistence.
2. Postmortem nonexistence is no different than prenatal nonexistence.
3. We do regret our death.
4. Hence, we should regret our prenatal nonexistence. (p. 375).

The Epicurean symmetry argument appeals to the *existence requirement,* which delegates that one cannot be harmed if one does not exist, but it does not explain why death is not bad. One can indeed be harmed by death, since death deprives one of the goods one would have enjoyed had one continued to exist; if this is what is bad about death, then symmetry suggests that we do have a reason to regret our prenatal existence (Brink, 2011). In defense of the second symmetry argument, Brink (2011) invokes a metaphysical thesis about the *essentiality of origin*: “for something to harm me it must make me worse off than I would otherwise have been, although this does not establish the essentiality of time of birth” (p. 375-376). However, the argument stipulates that even if one assumed that one’s time of birth was essential to one, it still would not follow that one could not sensibly regret one's prenatal nonexistence. Lastly, being a coherent and legitimate object of regret does not make it appropriate for one to be preoccupied with the possibility of one's prenatal nonexistence, any more than it follows from the fact that one's death is a legitimate object of regret that one should be preoccupied with. While Epicureans most likely would not welcome the reasoning surrounding the second symmetry argument, the argument takes seriously and defends their appeal to temporal neutrality (Brink 2011).

Minimizing Future Suffering

Discussions and attitudes about pain, grief, and suffering are commonly favored within past temporal settings, unlike those of happiness, comfort, and wellbeing that permeate conversations with future temporal locales. This seems to be true even in cases where this choice includes more total pain (Callender, 2011). Brink (2011) explains Parfit's "painful operation" scenario that addresses a "more total pain" instance as irrationally biased and temporally relative:

> There is a painful operation that requires patient's cooperation, and must be performed without the use of anesthetic. But doctors can and do induce (selective) amnesia after the operation to block memories of these painful experiences, which are themselves painful. One knows that one is scheduled for this procedure. One wakes up in the hospital bed and asks the nurse whether one have had the procedure yet. One knows that he or she is one of two patients, but does not know which. Either one is patient A, who had the longest operation on record yesterday, or one is patient B, who is due for a significantly shorter procedure. While one waits for the nurse to check the records, one finds having a strong

> preference and hope that one is patient A, even though A's pain and suffering was greater than B's will be (p. 377).

Brink (2011) argues that patient A's reasoning might not be entirely rational; if both procedures are viewed prospectively and retrospectively, there is a temporally neutral preference to minimize suffering; it is only when greater suffering is in the past and the smaller suffering is in the future that one displays temporally biased preference for greater past pain. However, the preference for either procedure appears unstable at best.

In support of this reasoning, Brink (2011) recalls Socrates' discussions about the weakness of will (akrasia) in the *Protagoras*; Socrates suggests that our judgments about what is best are inappropriately influenced by the proximity of harms and benefits, which leads to inflated estimates of their magnitude. It is in these instances that temporal bias is exemplified, leading to the agent's irrational decisions. The fact that a brief *hot judgment* (defined by the immediate proximity of indulgences) is preceded and followed by the prospective and retrospective *cool judgment* (defined by agent's decision to forsake short-term indulgences for the sake of later long-term ones), is the evidence that the hot judgment cannot be trusted. Socrates classifies this instance as irrational, as opposed to akratic. The bias in favor of minimizing future suffering appears anomalous against the background of prospective and retrospective cool judgments that are temporally neutral (Brink 2011).

The irrationality of temporal bias is further exemplified through the lack of generalization. As much as past pain is preferred over future pain, even in the case of more total pain, this is often untrue of *disgraces* (Brink, 2011). One is likely to prefer smaller future disgraces to larger past ones, thus indicating non-generalizability of the preference, as in the medical procedure example. Further, the preference seems to hold only for one's own pains, while the pain of others seems to be temporally neutral (Parfit, 1984). In conclusion, Brink (2011) argues that, from the evolutionary perspective, a forward-looking bias that prioritizes the minimization of future pain, as it relates to one's fitness in a way that past pain could not, might help explain why one might be subject to this bias even when it is not rational. However, any divulged bias has inherent generalizability and instability issues, making arguments about temporal neutrality relevant and indelible.

Conclusion

David O. Brink's *Prospects for Temporal Neutrality* was written as an introductory chapter to The *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time's Time, Ethics and Experience* section, and is 1 of the 23 chapters that comprehensively cover topics in the philosophy of time.

The chapter examined issues surrounding intertemporal distribution of benefits and harms within a single life. Prudence's demand of temporal neutrality as a norm of intrapersonal distribution was the main focus of the chapter. Brink (2011) argued that prudence's demand of temporal neutrality assigns no normative significance *per se* to the temporal locations of benefits and harms within a person's life, and demands equal concern for all parts of that life. The primary rationale of temporal neutrality appears to be the principle of compensation; it provides a hybrid structure of prudence by being temporally neutral and agent-biased, and by appealing to assumptions about the separateness of persons. However, controversial aspects of temporal neutrality still remain, especially within cases of interpersonal conflicts of values and ideals. The Epicurean arguments about the symmetry between death and prenatal nonexistence also appeared relatively defensible. Finally, temporal neutrality's rejection of preferences for past over future pain, even when this entails preferences of more total pain, appear unstable and non-generalizable due to bias (Brink 2011). Brinks' concluding suggestion calls for a systematic comparative assessment of temporal neutrality, acknowledging that as it stands, its prospects remain sound.

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