Note to Colloquium Participants

The text I am circulating is a slightly revised version of the Kant Lectures that I gave at Stanford last May. The lectures derive from a longer manuscript, and I have no future plans for them in their present form. But I do intend to keep working on the longer manuscript, and so I will be very grateful for your comments and questions. To give you a sense of how the lectures are related to the longer manuscript, I include here the Table of Contents for that manuscript. Lecture I contains material from Chapters One, Two, and Three. Lecture II contains material from Chapters Seven and Eight.

Chapter One    Introduction: The Lure of Detachment
Chapter Two    Temporal Neutrality and Temporal Bias
Chapter Three  As Time Goes By
Chapter Four    The Time of Our Lives
Chapter Five    Aging and the Threat of Normative Poverty
Chapter Six     The Historician Sensibility
Chapter Seven   Attachment, Partiality, and Deference
Chapter Eight   Leading Lives
Epilogue        Contingency, Control, and Particularity
What is it to lead a human life? Viewed in one way, this is an odd question. Many people manage to lead their lives quite successfully without ever asking it, while those for whom life is a struggle are unlikely to be helped by posing the question or contemplating possible answers to it. So why ask it in the first place? The primary reason is to gain self-understanding. Even if we don’t need to ask the question, we may learn things about ourselves and our situation by trying to answer it. And so, in the longer manuscript from which these lectures will be drawn, I develop my own understanding of what is involved in leading a human life.

In doing so, I am guided by a few basic beliefs. I believe that I have only one life to lead, and that the same is true of each of you. Right now I am living my one and only one life, and I cannot live yours or anyone else’s. Similarly, you are living your one and only life, and you cannot live mine or anyone else’s. Although some of us will live longer than others, each of us is a finite creature, living for a relatively short period of time, with a (reasonably) determinate beginning and a (reasonably) determinate end. Prior to that beginning, we did not exist at all, and after that end, we will never exist again.

I also believe that some of the most important constituents of a good life are our relationships with and attachments to other people, which enrich our lives beyond measure. I mean not only our relationships with particular individuals but also our
wider social relations and our membership in groups and organizations. And in addition to attachments to individual people and groups, there are other forms of attachment or engagement that are also important constituents of a good life: including engagement in extended purposeful activities of the kind that philosophers, following Bernard Williams, have come to call “projects.” What additional forms of attachment can make sense and be rewarding is an interesting question, which need not detain us here.

The beliefs I have listed may strike you as commonplaces, as truths so obvious as to go without saying. They strike me that way. Yet many people have thought that far from being obvious truths, they are not truths at all, or that they are merely superficial truths that mask some deeper underlying reality. Some people have thought, for example, that our lives will continue in some form after our deaths: that there is an “afterlife” in which we will survive and remain recognizably ourselves in crucial respects. Others have thought that we do or can have an eternal existence that transcends time. Still others have thought that, at some fundamental level, we are not separate individuals at all, at least not in any very deep sense, but rather parts of nature or the cosmos or the universe, and that, as such, we will exist for as long as it does.

Those who endorse such views often place great emphasis on the importance of what they call *detachment* or *self-transcendence*. When we are caught up in our day-to-day lives, they believe, we fail to appreciate the full truth about ourselves. Our focus is too narrow, and so we make epistemological and metaphysical mistakes. We also

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1 Some philosophers dislike this use of the term ‘projects’, which seems to them to misrepresent the character of people’s aims, activities, and choices. See, for example, Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 266-7. However, I regard it as a useful term of art. For Williams’s own use of the term, see his “A Critique of Utilitarianism” (especially Section 5), in J.J.C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism For & Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).
invest transient personal concerns with greater normative and evaluative significance than they actually have. We worry too much about our careers, our mundane successes and achievements, and even our personal relationships. We spend too much time doing things of little significance. To appreciate the truth about ourselves, we must step back from our day-to-day concerns and take a more detached perspective. Then we can form a clearer picture of the underlying metaphysical reality and achieve a better grasp of how we should live.

One can find versions of such ideas within many traditions, including Stoicism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucianism. My own understanding of what is involved in leading a human life, by contrast, offers an alternative to ideals of detachment. Because it emphasizes the role of personal attachments in leading a good life, I call it an “attachment-sensitive” conception. I will say more about this conception during these lectures, but it has one feature that I want to highlight now. That is the importance it assigns to two very general distinctions and, corresponding to those distinctions, two basic dimensions of human life. The two distinctions are the distinctions between past and future and between oneself and others, and the two dimensions are the temporal and interpersonal dimensions.

Because of the importance it assigns to these two dimensions of human life, the attachment-sensitive conception is usefully contrasted with a tendency toward detachment that is manifested not within the traditions I have mentioned but within contemporary analytic philosophy. This is a tendency to see us as subject to practical norms that mandate certain forms of neutrality. These may be norms either of prudence or morality or both. When they are norms of prudence, the relevant form of neutrality is temporal neutrality. Here the thought is that we should be neutral among different temporal stages of our lives, and that it is irrational to be biased, as most of us
appear to be, in favor of our future selves. When they are norms of morality, the relevant form of neutrality is what David Brink calls “person neutrality.” Here the thought is that the partiality we display toward family members, friends, and others with whom we have close relationships is not defensible, at least at the level of fundamental principle, because it draws distinctions among people based on factors that have no moral force. “Utilitarianism,” Brink says, “is interpersonally neutral; it assigns no intrinsic significance to whom a benefit or burden befalls.” By contrast, he says, prudence “is temporally neutral and assigns no intrinsic significance to when a benefit or burden occurs in a person’s life.” As Brink sees it, temporal neutrality and person neutrality are responses to two parallel distributional problems. “Time and person,” he writes, “are parallel distributional dimensions; we need to decide where to locate goods and evils in time and among persons.” The temporal neutrality that is a feature of prudence is a response to the first distributional problem, while the person neutrality that is a feature of utilitarianism is a response to the second. Norms of these two kinds may be combined and are sometimes taken to be mutually supporting. When combined, they tell us that we should transcend both our attachments to particular individuals and our bias in favor of our future selves. We should adopt a more thoroughly neutral stance both toward different people and toward different stages of our own lives.

The attachment-sensitive conception affirms the importance of the temporal and interpersonal dimensions of human life, and it sees these two dimensions as being

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3 Ibid., p. 360.

4 Ibid., p. 362.
intimately related. To that extent, it agrees with the neutralist view just sketched. But whereas the neutralist view is that “time and person are parallel distributional dimensions,” the attachment-sensitive conception interprets the relation between the two dimensions differently. Both dimensions are fundamental features of human experience, and to lead a human life we must have some way of understanding both of them. We need some way of understanding ourselves as temporally extended creatures and some way of understanding the normative significance of our personal and social relations. Yet both dimensions present us with puzzles and challenges, and the best way of developing the requisite understanding is to examine the character of those puzzles and challenges and the ways people respond to them. If, instead, we approach the temporal and personal dimensions of human life through the lens of a master distinction between neutrality and bias, this is liable to occlude our view and distort our understanding. In today’s lecture, I will discuss the temporal dimension and the question of future bias. Tomorrow I will discuss the personal dimension and the question of partiality.

The idea of temporal neutrality has been philosophically influential. The conviction that rationality requires an equal concern for all parts of one’s life has been endorsed by many philosophers, including those, like Henry Sidgwick and John Rawls, whose views are in other respects sharply opposed. In endorsing temporal neutrality

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5 Sidgwick says that an “equal and impartial concern for all parts of one’s conscious life is perhaps the most prominent element in the common notion of the rational – as opposed to the merely impulsive – pursuit of pleasure” (The Methods of Ethics, 7th edition, republished by Hackett Publishing Company [Indianapolis, 1981], p. 124n).

6 Rawls writes:

“In the case of an individual the avoidance of pure time preference is a feature of the rational. As Sidgwick maintains, rationality implies an impartial concern for all parts of our life. The mere difference of location in time, of something’s being
neutrality, Sidgwick and Rawls are primarily concerned to reject what Derek Parfit calls “the bias towards the near.” They mean to insist that, other things equal, one should forego a lesser good sooner in order to secure a greater good later and incur a lesser cost sooner to avoid a larger cost later. A failure to do the former amounts to an irrational failure to exert impulse control, and a failure to do the latter amounts to an irrational form of procrastination. Yet, as Parfit argues, the requirement of temporal neutrality also conflicts with a different kind of “bias,” which he calls “the bias towards the future.”

In the example that Parfit uses to illustrate this form of bias, you awake in your hospital bed with no memory of having gone to sleep. You are told by a nurse that either you are the patient who underwent ten hours of painful surgery without anesthesia yesterday, after which you were given a drug to cause you to forget the experience, or else you are the patient who will undergo one hour of painful surgery without anesthesia today, after which you will be given the same drug. Which would you prefer to be true? Most of us would prefer to have undergone the longer operation earlier or later, is not in itself a rational ground for having more or less regard for it. Of course, a present or near future advantage may be counted more heavily on account of its greater certainty or probability, and we should take into consideration how our situation and capacity for particular enjoyments will change. But none of these things justifies our preferring a lesser present to a greater future good simply because of its nearer temporal position” (A Theory of Justice [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971], pp. 293-4).


8 Ibid., p. 160.

9 Preferences are sometimes understood as dispositions to choose. But, in this case, there is no question of choosing between the two operations; either you have already had the longer operation or you haven’t. So, when Parfit asks us which of the two descriptions of our situation we would prefer to be true, he must be understanding preferences in a different way. He is, it seems, asking us which set of facts would make us feel better, or which we would hope to learn were the actual facts.
yesterday. Using this and other examples, Parfit argues that we display a bias toward the future in the following respects. We would rather have experienced pain of a given intensity and duration in the past than to experience it in the future. We would even prefer to have experienced a longer period of pain in the past than to experience a shorter period of pain in the future. With respect to pleasurable sensations, we have the reverse preferences. We would rather experience pleasure of a given intensity and duration in the future than to have experienced it in the past. And we would even prefer to experience a shorter period of pleasure in the future than to have experienced a longer period in the past. Taken together, these claims ascribe to us a general preference that our pains be in the past and our pleasures in the future. In that sense, we are biased toward the future.

Many people agree that the bias toward the near is irrational. But temporal neutrality also condemns the bias toward the future and, as Parfit notes, it is more difficult to accept that this kind of bias is irrational. Can we really suppose that rationality requires us to hope that we will undergo the painful surgery today? As Parfit says, “Most of us would find this hard to believe.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, some writers have insisted that future bias is irrational. In fact, Parfit himself takes this view, even though his discussion in Reasons and Persons does not make that clear, and has left some readers with the mistaken impression that he is a defender of future bias.

In this lecture, I have three aims. The first is to argue that a temporally neutral stance, if thoroughly internalized, would compromise our ability to form and sustain the personal and social relationships we most value. The second is to argue that temporal neutrality is not a requirement of rationality, so the fact that future bias

¹⁰ Reasons and Persons, p. 170.
represents a departure from neutrality does not make it irrational. My most important aim, however, is to argue that an excessive reliance on the framing distinction between temporal neutrality and temporal bias is liable to distort our understanding of the diachronic dimension of our lives. To suppose that future-bias poses a distinctive problem, to which temporal neutrality is a plausible solution, is to miss most of what is puzzling and interesting about our complex attitudes toward time and its passage. It is more illuminating to see future bias as a special case of a more general phenomenon, namely, that many of our attitudes change with the passage of time in ways that seem appropriate and yet difficult to understand.

Parfit is cautious in characterizing the scope of future bias. He says it is not a feature of our attitudes toward “events that give us either pride or shame; events that either gild or stain our picture of our lives.”\(^\text{11}\) I take this to mean that our future bias does not apply to events that affect our assessment of our lives independently of whether we experience pleasure or pain at the time we undergo or live through them. We may, for example, take pride in having written an excellent novel whether we enjoyed writing it or not. And we may be ashamed at having acted disgracefully, whether doing so was unpleasant at the time or not. If our bias toward the future applied to these cases, then it seems that we would prefer to write one excellent novel in the future rather than to have written five in the past. And we would prefer to have acted disgracefully five times in the past rather than to do so once in the future. But Parfit does not say that our future bias applies to cases of this kind. So what are the

\(^{11}\text{Ibid.},\ p.\ 160.\)
cases to which it does apply? His says it “applies most clearly to events that are in
themselves pleasant or painful.” Beyond that, he does not commit himself.

Despite his caution about its scope, Parfit believes that the bias toward the future
is quite robust and that virtually everyone has such a bias. Although he believes it is
nevertheless irrational, he spends more time arguing for a related claim, namely, that future-bias is bad for us. We would be better off without it.

In developing this argument, he asks us to consider someone he calls Timeless, who lacks future-bias. Timeless’s attitudes toward his past and future experiences of pleasure and pain are maximally symmetric, within the applicable conceptual and metaphysical constraints. So although Timeless can’t, for example, remember the future or cause things to happen in the past, he finds looking backward to past enjoyments just as pleasant as looking forward to future ones, and looking backward to past pains just as distressing as looking forward to future ones. If we were like Timeless, Parfit says, things would be in some ways worse for us. For example, we would not be relieved when bad things were in the past. We would feel no better knowing they were over than we would knowing they were still to come. On the other hand, we would not be sad when good things were over. We would be just as happy knowing they had already happened as we would knowing they were about to happen. Moreover, we could be selective about which events we chose to look backward to, dwelling mostly on the good ones. In consequence, he says, the net effect of these changes would be positive.

Ibid.

Parfit seems to understand looking backward to past enjoyments as not requiring memory of those enjoyments. Although, as he emphasizes, the memory of a pleasurable experience can itself be pleasurable, Timeless enjoys knowing that he had pleasant experiences even if he has no memory of them.
Furthermore, we would gain enormously in our attitudes toward our deaths. Although, as death approached, we would have less to look forward to, we would have more to look backward to.

Parfit says “[i]t would be better for us if we were like Timeless.” There are several reasons for thinking that he is wrong about that. Rather than canvassing all those reasons, I want to focus on the effects that “Timelessness,” as I shall call it, would have on our capacity to form and sustain valuable personal relationships. But first a preliminary point. Timeless’s attitudes toward his past and future experiences of pleasure and pain are meant to be maximally symmetrical. But there are two ways in which this symmetry might be conceived. Parfit assumes that Timeless has the attitudes that we do toward future experiences, but is unlike us in having the same attitudes toward past experiences. In other words, Parfit holds our actual attitudes toward the future fixed and adjusts Timeless’s attitudes toward the past to match them. So looking backward to past enjoyments is just as pleasant for Timeless as looking forward to future enjoyments is both for him and for us, and looking backward to past pains is just as distressing as looking forward to future pains is for him and for us. But a neutrality of attitude toward past and future experiences could also be achieved by holding our actual attitudes toward the past fixed and adjusting Timeless’s attitudes toward the future. In that case, the point would be that looking forward to future enjoyments is no more pleasant for Timeless than looking backward to past enjoyments is for him and for us, and that looking forward to future pains is no more distressing


than looking backward to past ones. Parfit’s version of Timeless levels up; it makes Timeless’s attitudes toward the past as intense as his (and our) attitudes toward the future. The alternative version levels down; it makes Timeless’s attitudes toward the future as anemic as his (and our) attitudes toward the past. If the aim is to describe someone who has symmetrical attitudes toward past and future experiences, there is nothing to choose between leveling up and leveling down. Although Parfit levels up, he might just as well have leveled down.

The question I want now to consider is how human relationships would be affected by the elimination of future-bias. Consider the mundane fact that we often look forward to seeing our friends. Timelessness would mean that it would be just as satisfying to look backward to having seen them in the past. But if that were so, how motivated would we be to arrange future visits with them? Why make plans to spend time with your friend next weekend when you could simply think back to having spent time with him last weekend? Of course, looking backward might not be as pleasant as actually spending time with him next weekend would be, but, on the other hand, spending time with him next weekend might be no more pleasant than spending time with him last weekend was. So if looking forward to the next visit also had no advantage over looking backward to the last one, there would be no obvious reason to make plans for next weekend. But then how, in the absence of essentially forward-looking desires for new interaction, would valuable relationships be sustained or even formed in the first place? A shared history may be part of what makes a valuable
relationship valuable, as some philosophers have suggested, but a shared commitment to the future is essential if it is to be sustained.

It may be said in reply that the pleasure Timeless takes in looking backward and forward to seeing his friends need not exhaust his attitudes toward his friendships. He may also assign independent value to those friendships, and that value may support essentially future-oriented desires and commitments of just the kinds that are required. After all, Timeless’s neutrality does not extend to all his evaluative attitudes, only his attitudes toward past and future experiences of pleasure and pain. It would be odd, however, for the value Timeless assigns to his friendships to be independent of the pleasure with which he anticipates future meetings with his friends. The idea would be that he takes no more pleasure in looking forward to future meetings than in looking backward to past meetings, but that, for independent reasons, he recognizes an essentially future-oriented imperative to arrange new meetings, although this gives him no special pleasure. As I said, this seems odd. But it also points to a deeper problem about the relation between Timelessness and the joys and sorrows of friendship. Recall

\[\text{17} \quad \text{Mightn't Timeless make plans to see his friend next weekend because he wants to accumulate as many pleasant experiences as possible that he can contemplate with pleasure both prospectively and (later) retrospectively? This assumes that, for Timeless, having many pleasant experiences to contemplate is itself more pleasant than having only a few, even if he could spend as much time pleasurably contemplating the few as he does the many. Perhaps he finds reflective variety intrinsically pleasurable. If this is what motivates Timeless to make plans to see his friends, then that motivation might diminish as he accumulated more and more pleasant experiences to contemplate. Timeless might thus become a less faithful friend with the passage of time. As this suggests, the desire to accumulate a storehouse of pleasant experiences as a repository for pleasurable reflections does not amount to a commitment to a friendship.}\]

that Parfit is discussing our prospective and retrospective attitudes toward “experiences that are merely in themselves pleasant or painful.” The relevant comparison is between the way we look backward to past pleasures (or pains) and the way we look forward to future pleasures (or pains). Pleasure (or pain) enters into this comparison twice. Timeless experiences pleasure or enjoyment now, when looking back to a past experience that was at the time it occurred “merely in itself” pleasant. Similarly, he experiences pain or distress now, when looking back to past experiences that were “merely in themselves” painful or distressing at the time they occurred. And, of course, he experiences comparable pleasure or pain when looking forward to future experiences of pleasure or pain.

But what exactly is an experience that is “merely in itself” pleasant or painful? We might call such experiences purely pleasurable or painful experiences. But what is a purely pleasurable or painful experience? Enjoyable or distressing experiences rarely consist in simple pulses of pleasure or pain. Often our enjoyment or distress has intentional content. We are pleased or pained about something. In the cases of greatest interest here, our pleasure or pain is essentially a response to, or a way of experiencing, events in the world that are freighted with independent significance for us. We may call these event-dependent pleasures and pains. For example, it may be pleasant for me to spend time with my friend, and I may subsequently look back with pleasure to having done so, but both forms of enjoyment, as well as the value I assign them, depend on the thought that I was spending time with my friend. It is noteworthy that, when we are speaking about event-dependent pleasures and pains, the simple terminological distinction between pleasure and pain is apt to seem unduly limiting. We frequently

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18 Reasons and Persons, p. 172.
make finer-grained distinctions, and employ a more expansive vocabulary, when characterizing our positively and negatively valenced experiences in such cases. We use such terms as *joy* and *sorrow*, *exhilaration* and *distress, elation* and *disappointment*, and many others. I will continue to speak of event-dependent pleasures and pains, but the categories of pleasure and pain must be interpreted expansively if they are to do justice to the nuanced variety of our event-dependent responses, and I will draw on a richer vocabulary as seems appropriate.\(^1\) Keeping this in mind, let us ask how Timelessness would affect our attitudes toward the joys and sorrows of friendship.

Consider two cases in which my actual attitudes toward an event-dependent pleasure or pain appear not to be temporally neutral. In the first case, the relevant experience is an experience of intense joy at being reunited with a friend after a long period of enforced separation. In the second case, the relevant experience is my experience of grief about the death of a good friend. In the first case, I am not indifferent between having the experience in the past and having it in the future. I would rather have it in the past. In the second case, I am again not indifferent. I would rather have the experience in the future. These preferences are not temporally neutral,

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\(^1\) In his article on “Hedonism” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ([https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hedonism/), October 17, 2013), Andrew Moore construes pleasure broadly to include “contentment, delight, ecstasy, elation, enjoyment, euphoria, exhilaration, exultation, gladness, gratification, gratitude, joy, liking, love, relief, satisfaction, Schadenfreude, tranquility, and so on.” And he construes pain or displeasure broadly to include “ache, agitation, agony, angst, anguish, annoyance, anxiety, apprehensiveness, boredom, chagrin, déjection, depression, desolation, despair, desperation, despondency, discomfort, discomfiture, discontentment, disgruntlement, disgust, dislike, dismay, disorientation, dissatisfaction, distress, dread, enmity, ennui, fear, gloominess, grief, guilt, hatred, horror, hurting, irritation, loathing, melancholia, nausea, queasiness, remorse, resentment, sadness, shame, sorrow, suffering, sullenness, throb, terror, unease, vexation, and so on.” The fact that the second list is so much longer than the first may be related to Tolstoy’s famous observation in *Anna Karenina* about the difference between happy and unhappy families.
though neither do they manifest a bias toward the future. If anything, they seem to manifest a bias toward the past. In the first case, I would prefer to have a pleasant experience in the past rather than in the future, while in the second case I would prefer to have a painful experience in the future rather than in the past. What explain these preferences are my attitudes toward the events to which the experiences are responses. I would prefer to have the joyful experience in the past because it is essentially a response to a separation from my friend which I would prefer to have in the past. And I would prefer to have my grief in the future because it is essentially a response to the death of my friend, which I would prefer to have as far in the future as possible. What attitude would Timeless have toward these experiences?

One possibility is that Timeless exhibits neutrality of attitude both toward the experiences and toward the events to which they are responses. He is indifferent as to whether his long separation from his friend and the joy of their eventual reunion occur in the past or the future. And he is indifferent as to whether his friend’s death and his own grief are located in the past or the future. But these attitudes seem incongruous with his having a valuable friendship in the first place. How valuable can a friendship be if one is indifferent as between one’s friend’s dying in the future and his having already died? Another possibility is that Timeless exhibits neutrality of attitude with respect to the experiences of joy and grief, but not with respect to the events to which they are responses. So he would rather that his separation from his friend was already over than that it was yet to come, but he is indifferent as to whether his joy at their reunion is experienced in the past or the future. And he would prefer that his friend die in the future rather than the past, but he is indifferent about whether he experiences grief about his friend’s death in the future or the past. This combination of attitudes is no easier to reconcile with genuine friendship than the previous one. On this
interpretation, Timeless remains indifferent about when he experiences grief at his friend’s dying, but he prefers that his friend die in the future rather than having died in the past. So even if, as he prefers, his friend is still alive and will not die for a long time, Timeless would be content already to have grieved about his death. It is not clear that this combination of attitudes is even coherent. A third possibility is that Timeless’s neutrality of attitude does not extend to event-dependent pleasures and pains like the joys and sorrows of friendship. But that is as much as to concede that a more thoroughgoing neutrality would be incompatible with the attitudes characteristic of valuable personal relationships. On none of these three interpretations, then, is neutrality a viable stance toward the joys and sorrows of such relationships.

There is another interpretation of Timeless’s attitudes that may seem more plausible. On this interpretation, as on the second interpretation, Timeless is not neutral with respect to the underlying events to which his experiences of pleasure and pain are responses. He would much prefer that his friend die in the future rather than having died in the past. At the same time, he would prefer to experience grief in the immediate aftermath of his friend’s death, whenever that may occur. So he would prefer to grieve for his friend in the future if, as he hopes, his friend dies in the future. But, failing that, he would prefer to have grieved for his friend in the past if his friend actually died in the past. Now the problem with this interpretation is not that this combination of attitudes makes no sense. The problem is that Timeless is no longer neutral with respect to the timing of his experiences; he would prefer to grieve for his friend in the future rather than the past because he would prefer that his friend die in the future rather than the past. In fact, this interpretation is simply a description of our actual attitudes. We too would prefer both that our friends die as far in the future as possible and that we grieve for them whenever they die. We may well think it would
be better for Timeless if these were his attitudes too. But this shows, not that we would be better off if we were like Timeless, but rather that he would be better off if he were like us.  

Recall, however, that temporal neutrality could be achieved either by leveling up or leveling down. Parfit’s version of Timeless levels up; it stipulates that Timeless’s attitudes toward past pleasures and pains are as intense as his (and our) attitudes toward future pleasures and pains. But we might instead level down; we might stipulate that Timeless’s attitudes toward future pleasures and pains are as anemic as his (and our) attitudes toward the past pleasures and pains. Would leveling down make it easier to reconcile temporal neutrality with valuable personal relationships? No. Each of the possibilities just canvassed would encounter the same difficulties. And the idea that a Timeless person’s attitudes toward the joys and sorrows of friendship might be more anemic than ours is not a promising way of demonstrating the compatibility of Timelessness with valuable relationships.

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20 Consider still another possibility. Perhaps, contrary to appearances, Timeless has the same preferences that I do. He would rather experience the joy of the reunion in the past and the grief at his friend’s death in the future. But that is because he assumes that the joy would be more intense in the past than in the future, and that the grief would be less intense in the future than in the past. But these assumptions are unfounded. In any case, I would prefer to have the joy of the reunion in the past even if I thought a future reunion would be still more joyful. And I would prefer to have the grief at my friend’s death lie in the future even if I thought it would then be more painful than it would have been in the past. But perhaps, it might be said, the net balance of “friendship pleasure” over “friendship pain” would be greater over the course of Timeless’s life if the reunion were in the past and the death were in the future. Perhaps. But my preference to have the reunion in the past and the death in the future does not depend on such calculations. To the extent that I can make sense of the notions of “friendship pleasure” and “friendship pain,” I would prefer that my friend die as far in the future as possible even if, owing to our more tempestuous relations in later years, the net balance of the one over the other would then be lower. In any case, a desire to maximize that hedonic balance is not the same as the desire to sustain a friendship.
I have been arguing that an attitude of temporal neutrality, if thoroughly internalized, would compromise our ability to derive value from personal relationships. In this respect, it would not be a good attitude for us to have. Might it nevertheless be rationally required? Parfit maintains that the question whether neutrality is rationally required is independent of the question whether it is good for us. He thinks both that the bias toward the future is bad for us and that it is irrational. But he does not think it is irrational because it is bad for us. He insists that “the rationality of an attitude does not depend on whether it is bad for us.”²¹ I have suggested that it is temporal neutrality, not the bias toward the future, that would be bad for us. But if the rationality of an attitude does not depend on whether it is bad for us, then temporal neutrality might still be rationally required. And the bias toward the future might still be irrational. So, it seems, we must consider the rationality of these attitudes no matter what we think of their goodness or badness. One question is why Parfit himself thinks the bias toward the future is irrational, if not because he is convinced that it is bad for us.

His discussion leaves this obscure. My conjecture is that he accepts a simple argument that he articulates when discussing the bias toward the near, but which might also be applied to the bias toward the future. Parfit formulates the argument as follows: “A mere difference in when something happens is not a difference in its quality. The fact that a pain is further in the future will not make it, when it comes, any less painful.” Parfit comments: “This is an excellent argument. It is by far the best objection to the bias toward the near.”²² As applied to the bias toward the future, the argument might be put this way: “A mere difference in when something happens is not a difference in its quality.”

²¹ *Reasons and Persons*, p. 185.

quality. The fact that a pain is in the past does not mean that it was, when it occurred, any less painful."

We know that Parfit thinks the bias toward the future applies most clearly to events that are "merely in themselves pleasant or painful." In assessing the force of the "excellent argument" he mentions, therefore, we should focus on episodes of pleasure or pain with minimal intentional content. These are the kinds of event with respect to which it seems clearest that our prospective and retrospective attitudes diverge. They are also the kinds of event to which Parfit’s argument seems most readily applicable. Since more complex, event-dependent pleasures and pains are responses to events in the world whose significance may vary with time, it would not be surprising if a "mere difference" in the timing of such pleasures and pains affected their quality. But with purely pleasurable and painful events, Parfit’s "excellent argument" seems harder to answer. What is it about tomorrow’s painful dental procedure that makes me view it with dread when I scarcely think about yesterday’s procedure? It may be the difficulty of answering this question in a non-question-begging way that tempts Parfit to think the bias toward the future is irrational. But it leads me in a different direction.

Even though our future bias may seem difficult to rationalize, I don’t find the case for temporal neutrality persuasive. I find it impossible to believe, for example, that I am irrational to be relieved when a painful episode is over. Relief of that kind is deeply embedded in our attitudes, and most of us find it acceptable on reflection. We don’t view it the way we view manifestations of the bias toward the near, such as a tendency to procrastination or an inability to defer gratification. So I’m inclined to view even the best arguments for temporal neutrality not as establishing their ostensible conclusion but as giving expression to a form of puzzlement. The puzzle is why our
prospective and retrospective attitudes toward purely pleasurable and painful episodes differ so greatly in their intensity.

That’s a good question. But I don’t think that our primary aim, in trying to answer it, should be to establish that a bias toward the future is rationally required or permitted. I am sympathetic to the bias where it exists and is deeply entrenched, and I’m disinclined to criticize it in the name of an abstract norm of rationality. But my inclination to defend the bias, or at least not to criticize it, has less to do with a belief that it is endorsed by such a norm than with a conviction that it is woven into the fabric of human life in such a way that dislodging it would compromise much that we care about and much that makes us recognizable to ourselves. We may, of course, treat this conviction as itself establishing the rational permissibility of future-bias, but, if so, then we’re drawing conclusions about rationality from our investigation of future bias and not the other way around.

Rather than attempting to assess the rationality of future bias, I want to place it in a broader perspective. The question to which Parfit’s “excellent argument” directs our attention is best seen as an instance of a more general puzzle, which is to make sense of the ways in which the passage of time affects various of our attitudes. And even that more general puzzle is only one of several puzzles and challenges that arise in thinking about the diachronic dimension of our lives. Some of these are puzzles and challenges we confront as theorists. They’re problems of philosophy. Some of them are puzzles and challenges we confront as individuals in trying to lead our lives. They’re problems of living. The two sets of problems overlap, and none of them turns on the distinction between neutrality and bias.

The puzzle of which future-bias should be seen as an instance arises from the fact that certain of our feelings and emotions change with the passage of time in ways that
seem both appropriate and difficult to make sense of. This is not true of all of our feelings and emotions, and that only sharpens the puzzle. On the one hand, some feelings and emotions may persist and continue to seem appropriate indefinitely. If you saved my life, then I may reasonably remain grateful to you forever. We do not tell the grateful person to get over it, or to move on. On the other hand, there are cases in which it seems appropriate that one’s feelings or emotions should change with the passage of time because, at some point, there ceases to be any reason to have those feelings or emotions. Suppose I am terrified because a maniac is on the loose. Once the maniac has been captured, my fear should dissipate. Fear is a warranted response to danger, and the fact that the maniac is no longer on the loose means that there is no longer any danger. In still other cases, we think it appropriate for a feeling or emotion to change even though the original reason for the attitude appears to persist. Suppose Elmer seems to be in an extremely upbeat mood, and I explain that he is elated about the birth of his daughter. You will naturally assume that his daughter is a newborn, and if I explain that she is twenty years old, Elmer’s elation may begin to seem odd. After twenty years, we expect that his elation should have subsided, however much he loves his daughter. Nor do we find this expectation especially puzzling, despite the fact that the reason for Elmer’s original elation seems to persist. He was elated because his daughter was born, and it is still true that she was born. Still, we find it both appropriate and unremarkable that Elmer’s elation should have subsided.

However, there are also cases in which our emotions change in ways that seem at once appropriate and yet puzzling or even disturbing. Consider the case of grief. When a loved one dies, people often experience grief so intense that it seems to them it will never end. Yet it usually does end and, by the time that happens, its doing so usually strikes us as appropriate. We tend to regard it as worrisome if a person goes on
grieving indefinitely. Here we do think that the person needs, at a certain point, to “let go,” or to “move on.” It’s not just that it would be better for them if they did. It’s that the failure to move on seems like a mistake. Beyond a certain point, grief is no longer called for. But this seems puzzling. On the one hand, grief seems responsive to reasons. When a person we love dies, that gives us a reason to grieve, and we are making a mistake of some kind if we fail to grieve. And our reason for grief – namely, the death of the person we love – does not come stamped with an expiration date. Once five or ten years have passed, the person will still be dead, and our loss will still be a loss. Yet by then it may seem that something has gone wrong if we continue to grieve. Why? The philosophical puzzle is not simply that there is a gap between the persistence of our original reasons for grief and the transience of the grief itself. The puzzle is that, although the original reasons for grief persist, the fact that our grief comes to an end seems appropriate, or fitting, or reasonable. The dissipation of grief strikes us not merely as a brute psychological fact but rather as an appropriate change in our attitudes. But how, if the reason for our grief persists, can we have reason to stop grieving? Why exactly should we let go, or move on? How can the mere passage of time affect our reasons? Of course, we might ask these questions about Elmer too. But in the case of grief the questions seem not only philosophically puzzling but also, to many people, humanly troubling. Often the bereaved themselves struggle to reconcile themselves to the dissipation of their grief. Even though it seems in one way appropriate, they worry that it amounts to a kind of disloyalty to the deceased or an indifference to their value.\footnote{For relevant discussion, see Berislav Marušić, “Do Reasons Expire? An Essay on Grief,” Philosophers’ Imprint, Vol. 18, No. 25, December 2018; Dan Moller, “Love and Death,” Journal of Philosophy 104(2007): 301-16; Moller, “Love and the Rationality of}
One response to the puzzle of grief holds that, contrary to what I have said, grief is never a response to reasons. It is not a reason-sensitive attitude, and individual episodes of grief are neither rational nor irrational. Instead, grief is linked to loss not rationally but causally. It is a typical though not universal response to the experience of personal loss, and it may well serve important functions. But people who fail to experience grief are not making a mistake. They are simply behaving atypically. Similarly, the fact that most people who do grieve eventually cease to do so is also not puzzling. Granted, there is no reason for grief to end, but neither was there any reason for it to begin. Just as it is normal for people to experience grief in response to a loss, so too it is normal for that grief to dissipate. And just as the grief itself may have certain benefits or serve certain purposes, so too does the dissipation of grief. But since neither grief nor its cessation is a response to reasons, there is no puzzle to be solved. The passage of time does not affect the reasons for grief because there are no such reasons.

A second response holds that, although grief is a response to reasons, the cessation of grief is not. The death of a loved one is a reason for a person to grieve, but there is no reason for the person to stop grieving. People simply do stop, most of the time, and it benefits them to do so. But the cessation of grief is not a response to reasons. It is a purely causal phenomenon. The reasons for grief are never defeated by countervailing reasons, and in that sense they persist. They are not affected by the passage of time, and so, again, there is no puzzle about how time can have effects on our reasons, for it has no such effects.

_Grief,” in C. Grau and A. Smuts eds., The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love (Oxford, Online Publication Date: April, 2017), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.013.35._
A third response holds that there are reasons for grief to diminish with time, but not because the passage of time itself provides such reasons. Instead, the passage of time brings about changes in the circumstances of the bereaved, and these changes in turn provide reasons for grief to diminish, in much the same way that the capture of the maniac provides reasons for my fear to diminish. One’s original grief, it may be said, is a response to the death of a person who played an important role in one’s life. But with the passage of time, the role played by the deceased is filled in other ways, or else one’s life is reconfigured in such a way that the role becomes less significant. In either case, one’s reasons for grief diminish. The onset of grief was a reasonable response to a radical change in one’s circumstances, namely, the disappearance of a person who played an important role in one’s life. But then the circumstances of one’s life gradually evolve in such a way that grief ceases to make sense. It is no longer appropriate.

There is one way of elaborating this response that merits special comment. According to this interpretation, it is a mistake to construe grief as the entirety of the response that is rationalized by a loss. Instead, when someone we love dies, this gives us reason for a sequence of responses, of which grief is only the first. Consider again the case of elation. It is appropriate for Elmer to be elated at the birth of his new daughter, but it would be peculiar if he were still elated twenty years later. But rather than wondering why, since it remains true that his daughter was born when she was, Elmer should no longer be elated after twenty years, we may think of his daughter’s birth as giving him reason for a sequence of attitudes. The first of these is elation, which is appropriate when his daughter is a newborn and her arrival marks a drastic.

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24 A view of grief roughly along these lines is suggested by Martha Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
change in the conditions of Elmer’s life. But as she grows older and is integrated into the lives of Elmer and his family, various successor attitudes become appropriate: such as deep satisfaction, gratitude, and a richer appreciation of her individual qualities. Her birth is not simply a reason for elation, considered as a fixed state of mind that is made appropriate when she is born and is presumptively rationalized forever after. It is rather a reason to undertake a temporally extended sequence of attitudes, of which elation is only the first. So the appropriateness of elation is time-limited from the outset.

In principle, according to this interpretation, something similar is true of grief. A painful loss gives one reasons to move through a sequence of attitudes, of which grief is only the first. If there is a special problem about grief, the problem is that it is difficult in this case to give a convincing specification of the successor attitudes. It is not troubling when elation is superseded by more settled forms of satisfaction, because those successor attitudes, like the original attitude of elation, continue to acknowledge the value of, for example, one’s daughter. But in the case of grief, people sometimes struggle, once feelings of acute grief have subsided, to find ways of thinking and feeling that continue to do justice to the value of the deceased person and the enormity of what was lost when that person died. Often it seems as though, when grief dissipates, one simply resumes one’s life, sparing only occasional thoughts for the person one loved. And this can seem unsatisfactory. It’s not that there’s a general question about how the reasons for an attitude like elation or grief can expire. It’s rather that there is a special problem – as much human as philosophical – about what comes after grief in particular.

Still, this version of the third response, like the original version, says that insofar as there are reasons for grief to diminish over time, this is not because the passage of
time itself provides such reasons. Instead, the passage of time brings about changes in the circumstances, and those changes make different attitudes appropriate.\footnote{The idea that the appropriateness of grief (or elation) is time-limited from the outset has something in common with Oded Na’aman’s claim that certain attitudes are “rationally self-consuming,” by which he means that they become less fitting the longer they endure, even though the facts that constituted the original reasons for them persist. Na’aman defends a “process view” of emotional change, according to which the fittingness of an affective attitude can depend on its role in a process it is fitting for one to undergo. More specifically, the fittingness of an attitude may be temporally limited because the process to which it belongs assigns it a temporally limited role. Whether Na’aman’s view coincides with the one I have sketched above depends in part on the explanatory status of the idea of a fitting process. On the view I have sketched, changes in the prevailing circumstances provide reasons for the original attitude to give way to the successor attitude. On Na’aman’s view, the fact that both attitudes are part of a fitting process is what makes the transition fitting or rational. The question, then, is what makes the process fitting. If it is fitting because each of the individual attitudes it comprises is a fitting response to the circumstances that then prevail, then the two views may substantially coincide. But if what makes each individual attitude fitting instead depends on its role in a process we have independent reason to regard as fitting, then they may diverge, and some other explanation of the fittingness of the process is required. See Oded Na’aman, “The Rationality of Emotional Change: Toward a Process View,” *Noûs* (2019), and “The Fitting Resolution of Anger,” *Philosophical Studies* (2019).}

However, there is also a fourth response, which insists that the passage of time, by itself, does provide reasons for grief to diminish. Or, at any rate, it provides such reasons on the assumption that each of us has a life to lead, and given a certain understanding of what leading a life involves. A central element of that understanding is that the idea of leading a life is an essentially forward-looking notion. To lead a life is to seek to project oneself into the future on terms that accord with one’s ends, aims, and values. And the way one projects oneself into the future is by deliberating and acting, which is to say by exercising one’s agential capacities to help determine one’s future. One does this, moreover, with the understanding that one’s future is limited. At each moment, we have less time left than we have ever had before. We lead our lives against the background of these assumptions, and once they are in place, it seems clear that the
passage of time can affect the reasons we have for acting and reacting in various ways. It can affect one’s priorities and what one has reasons to do. So long as one takes oneself to have a life to lead, then, one will recognize the passage of time as producing changes in one’s reasons.

What does this have to do with grief? As long as one is committed to leading one’s life, one has standing reasons to exercise one’s agential capacities to help shape one’s future in accordance with one’s ends, aims, and values. Grief, according to the fourth response, involves an emotionally wrenching but rationally intelligible and evaluatively appropriate disruption of this commitment. When one is in the throes of grief, one’s forward-looking orientation is suspended, as much as it can be consistently with one’s continuing to engage in the mundane activities required for survival and for grieving itself, and one’s attention is devoted to the person who has died, which is to say to the past. One’s thoughts and feelings are now dominated by a backward-looking focus. Up to a point, this redirection of one’s attention is a reasonable response to the gravity of one’s loss. But, with the passage of time, one’s commitment to leading one’s life gradually reasserts itself, and one again becomes receptive to one’s standing future-oriented reasons. It is less that there is a discrete reason for grief to end than that the reasons to lead one’s life, which never themselves expired, gradually prevail. This is not, however, simply a brute causal process, for what grief rationalizes is a temporary suspension of the commitment to leading one’s life and not its permanent abandonment. The loss of a loved one, however devastating, is not (normally) a good reason to cease living oneself. So, eventually, grief should dissipate. Or so the fourth

26 Although I have been discussing the cessation of grief and the phenomenon of resilience in the face of personal loss, it is also true that a few people never recover from grief. They never cease to grieve, and that means they never reaffirm their commitment to leading their lives. Instead, they find ways to die themselves, as in cases where a
response maintains.

I shall not attempt to adjudicate among these responses. My aim is not to solve or to dissolve the puzzle of grief. Instead, I simply want to observe that this puzzle is not generated by the presumptive rational authority of an idea of temporal neutrality. None of the responses to the puzzle holds that our grief should be distributed evenly over time or that we should feel just as much grief about deaths that will occur as we do about deaths that have occurred. The framing distinction between temporal neutrality and temporal bias has no role to play here. And, in the end, it is more illuminating to see Parfit’s puzzle, too, not as a puzzle about our deviation from a presumptively rational ideal of temporal neutrality, but rather as one of several puzzles about the effects of time’s passage on our attitudes.

What Parfit’s puzzle has in common with the puzzle of grief is the fact that, in both cases, our attitudes change, as time passes, in ways that seem fitting or appropriate but for which it is difficult to give a clear reason. It seems appropriate that my misery at the thought of my painful dental procedure tomorrow should abate once the procedure is over, but why? It looks as if the passage of time has itself affected my reasons, or the appropriateness of my attitudes, but is not clear why it should. In the case of grief, what seems puzzling is not that the intensity of the experience is affected by its moving from the future into the past, but rather that grief ceases, and it seems appropriate that it should, despite the fact that the reasons for it appear to persist. The two cases can be viewed as manifestations of a single general puzzle: how can the passage of time, by itself, affect not only our attitudes but also the reasons for, or the

bereaved but otherwise healthy spouse – usually elderly – dies not long after the death of his or her partner. The fourth response need not insist that this is always unreasonable or irrational.
appropriateness of, those attitudes? In the first case we can ask: why are we so fearful or excited about tomorrow’s pains and pleasures, only to lose interest in them once they are over? In the second case we can ask: Why do we stop grieving, even though the person for whom we grieve is still dead? In both cases, we can ask: Why, as time passes, do we move on?

The two puzzles share a certain abstract form. In each case, there is a contrast between an initial attitude and an eventual attitude. In each case, in other words, we begin with a certain initial attitude: grief in the one case, and our feeling about a prospective pleasure or pain in the other. As time passes, however, our initial attitude changes in ways that seem at once appropriate and puzzling. In the case of grief, our attitude changes as the event to which it is a response moves from the very recent past to the somewhat more distant past. In the case of future-bias, our attitude changes as the experience to which it is a response moves from the future to the past. And in both cases, there are several different ways of understanding the relevant change. As we saw in the case of grief, and as is also true in the case of future bias, one might think that neither the initial attitude nor the eventual attitude is responsive to reasons, or that the initial attitude is responsive to reasons but that the eventual attitude is not, or that both attitudes are responsive to reasons.

This does not mean that the same answer will seem correct in both cases. In addition to similarities, there are also differences between the puzzles that may affect the plausibility of candidate responses in the two cases. Perhaps the most important difference is this. The phenomenon of future bias, as described by Parfit, concerns the discrepancy between our prospective and retrospective attitudes toward certain of our own mental states. In the case of grief, by contrast, the question has to do with our changing attitudes toward events that are independent of our mental states, such as the
death of a loved one. We will learn more from and about the phenomenon of future bias by exploring these similarities and differences than by treating it as a presumptively irrational deviation from a norm of temporal neutrality.

There are also more general lessons to be learned here. As we have seen, the passage of time affects different of our feelings and emotions in different ways. These differences merit further investigation. We need to consider individually the “diachronic profiles” not only of grief, fear, elation, gratitude, and our attitudes toward past and future pleasures and pains, but also attitudes such as anger, pride, shame, guilt, remorse, regret, and many others.

But there is a forest here and not only individual trees. The fact that our emotions and feelings have different diachronic profiles is symptomatic of the complexity of our response to the temporal dimension of our lives. We are, after all, temporally extended beings. We live always in the present, yet at each moment most of our lives lie either in the future or in the past. How exactly do we make sense of this? How do we make sense of ourselves? Just who do we think we are? To philosophers, such questions are an invitation to theory. But all of us need working answers to these questions: we need ways of making sense of our lives and experience as these unfold over time. Our feelings and emotions, with their differing diachronic profiles, are part of the answer we give. Taken together, they provide a subtly modulated picture of stability and change that helps us navigate the passage of time in ways that make sense to us. If we judge it appropriate for gratitude to endure but for grief to fade, if we judge that future pain merits fear while past pain merits relief, and if we make analogous judgments about the diachronic profiles of our many other emotions and feelings, then these judgments, taken together, tell us a great deal about who we think we are. We are creatures whose nature allows our current feelings and emotions to be linked in all the
ways we deem appropriate to our past and future feelings and emotions. In this way, the temporal modulation of our emotions helps us to define and to understand our relations to our pasts and our futures.

It also teaches us something about what is involved in leading a life. The fact that many of our feelings and emotions change with the passage of time, and that we have an implicit understanding of when and how it is appropriate for them to do so, teaches us that to lead a life is in part to be subject to such changes. If someone can’t “move on” when we think it’s time for them to do so, if they remain unable to “let go” of their anger or grief, or if they remain fixated on an episode of pain once it has receded into the past, this compromises their ability to lead their lives, which is why, in extreme cases, we tend to pathologize such behavior. Leading our lives requires us to move on, even if we do so ambivalently at times. And moving on means allowing various of our feelings and emotions to change with the passage of time, in ways whose responsiveness to reasons may at times elude or trouble us. The point is not that the need to lead our lives is itself a reason for our emotions to change. Nor is it that our determination to lead our lives is the cause of these changes. The point is that being subject to such changes is part of what it is to lead one’s life. Leading one’s life is not only an agential undertaking but also an emotional and affective one. This is a lesson that should, perhaps, be obvious. But this is one of those cases in which our apprehension of the obvious may be clouded by deference to the presumed authority of an abstract philosophical distinction. If we take the lesson to heart, and resist the temptation to view the diachronic dimension of our lives through the lens of the distinction between neutrality and bias, then we will have reclaimed an important element of our self-understanding, and taken one important step toward the development of a more compelling conception of what it is to lead a human life.
These lectures address two interdependent dimensions of human life: the temporal and the interpersonal. As such, they are meant to contribute to the development of an “attachment-sensitive” conception of what it is to lead a human life. This conception contrasts with the ideals of detachment that have been popular in many intellectual, religious, and philosophical traditions. But I have taken as my rhetorical foil a form of neutralist detachment that has been influential in recent analytic philosophy. For the neutralist, as David Brink writes, “time and person are parallel distributional dimensions,” and both are subject to neutralist distributional norms. Norms of temporal neutrality require that we display equal concern for all stages of our lives and hold that it is irrational to be biased in favor of our future selves. Norms of personal neutrality require that we display equal concern for all people and hold that it is morally objectionable to be partial toward, or biased in favor of, those with whom we have close personal relationships.

In yesterday’s lecture, I argued against temporal neutrality. The distinction between neutrality and bias does little to illuminate, and may in fact distort, the temporal dimension of human life. In order to understand that dimension of life and its significance, we do better to investigate the puzzles and challenges we face, as individuals, in seeking to make sense of, and come to terms with, the diachronic character of our experience and our engagement with the world. I focused special
attention yesterday on the way in which various of our feelings and emotions change with the passage of time in ways that can be difficult to understand. There are other puzzles and challenges as well. For example, there is what I call the problem of temporal dissonance: the problem of how to reconcile our understanding of ourselves as temporally extended creatures with our understanding that we live always in the present moment. There is the normative problem of aging, which concerns some of the ways in which our reasons change as we move through the stages of life. And there is the question of how the value of our activities is affected by what happens after our deaths.

Rather than discuss these questions today, I will turn instead to the interpersonal dimension of human life. One of my aims will be to argue, against the neutralist, that partiality is an inevitable feature of the personal relationships and other attachments that we value most deeply. As in the temporal case, a norm of personal neutrality, if internalized in a thoroughgoing way, would compromise our ability to derive value from the relationships and attachments that are central elements of a successful life. The partiality that we display toward our intimates is not a form of objectionable bias or a presumptively unjustified departure from an authoritative norm of equal concern. It is essential to social life, and social life is not simply a vehicle for achieving distributional aims.

I have made similar arguments in the past, as have many others, and so in this part of the lecture I will be covering relatively familiar ground. But I do so in order to pave the way for the development of a point that has less often been emphasized. Partiality is not the only normatively significant aspect of our relationships and attachments. There are other features that are just as important and more fundamental, and we are likely to neglect them if, because of an excessive emphasis on the
distributive implications of partiality, we focus exclusively on the contrast between partiality and neutrality. We also misunderstand the role of partiality itself if we consider it in isolation from those other features.

Let me begin, however, by reviewing the reasons partiality is an inevitable feature of our attachments. I will first discuss interpersonal relationships, then forms of group membership, and finally the extended forms of purposive activity that philosophers call personal projects. All these count as attachments in the broad sense I am using, and all of them are sources of partiality. So consider first the case of interpersonal relationships. Most people regard such relationships as being among the most important constituents of a good life. We hope that the people we care about will succeed in forming and sustaining such relationships, and our own close relationships are among the aspects of our lives that we value most dearly. But what exactly does this mean? What is it to value a personal relationship? In general, valuing as I understand it involves a complex syndrome of attitudes and dispositions. This syndrome includes a belief that the thing one values is indeed valuable. It also includes a liability to experience a wide range of context-dependent emotions depending on what happens to the thing or how it fares. One may be distraught if it is harmed or damaged, delighted if it flourishes, anxious if it is in danger, and so on. Emotional vulnerability is one of the constituents of valuing. Finally, the syndrome includes a disposition to see considerations pertaining to the valued item as providing one with reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts. Although everyone has generic reasons to treat valuable things in certain ways solely in virtue of their value, those who value a thing, in my sense, recognize additional reasons in addition to these generic

reasons. They see themselves as having reasons with respect to the particular item they value that they do not have with respect to other valuable items of the same kind.

To value something, then, is not merely to regard it as valuable or to believe that it has value. Valuing something also involves a kind of attachment or engagement or investment. This kind of attachment or engagement comprises the other elements of the syndrome. It comprises a form of emotional vulnerability and a certain practical orientation: a disposition to treat considerations pertaining to the thing that one values as providing one with distinctive reasons for action in suitable contexts.

So far this is a general characterization. It applies no matter what kind of thing one values. Before turning to the question of what is involved in valuing a personal relationship in particular, there is one lesson to be learned from the general account. The lesson is that valuing is a selective or contrastive notion. There is no limit to the number of things whose value one can recognize, but the fact that valuing comprises emotional investment and a distinctive practical orientation means that one cannot value everything. In part, the reasons for this are practical and psychological. We finite creatures do not have the time or the psychological capacity to be emotionally invested in the fate of every valuable thing. But the reasons are also conceptual. To form an evaluative attachment is to make a selection: to invest something with differential significance in one’s life and psychic economy. Someone who was attached to everything would be attached to nothing. This has implications for norms of personal neutrality which require that we display equal concern for all people and hold that it is morally unacceptable to be biased in favor of those with whom we have close personal relationships. There are indeed contexts in which we are duty-bound to treat each of a number of people with equal concern, at least with respect to a certain range of issues or goods or decisions. However, to adopt a stance of equal concern as a thoroughgoing
attitude toward all persons in all contexts would be incompatible with valuing one’s relationships with anyone. Displaying differential concern for the people with whom one has close personal relationships is not a form of bias. It is part of what valuing such relationships consists in. That much follows simply from the nature of valuing in general.

This brings us to the question of what is involved in valuing a personal relationship in particular. What forms of emotional vulnerability and reasons-responsiveness are characteristic of such cases? When one values a personal relationship, one’s emotional vulnerability has a dual character. One’s emotions are sensitive to what happens both to the person with whom one has the relationship and to the relationship itself. You may be sad or anxious or concerned if your friend is injured or becomes ill, and delighted if she recovers. But you may also be sad or anxious or concerned if your friendship with her seems to be in jeopardy, even though both of you are in perfect health. Valued personal relationships involve an attachment both to the person with whom one has the relationship and, although it may sound awkward to put it this way, to the relationship itself.²⁸

Consider next the kind of reasons-responsiveness that is part of valuing a personal relationship. In general, to value one’s relationship with another person non-instrumentally is, in part, to see that person’s needs, interests, and desires as providing one, in contexts that may vary depending on the nature of the relationship, with reasons for action that one would not otherwise have, and with which the needs, interests, and desires of other people do not provide one. If I have a relationship with you, and if I attach non-instrumental value to that relationship, then I will see myself both as having

²⁸ See Niko Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship,” esp. sections 5 and 6.
reasons to do things in your behalf that I have no comparable reason to do for others, and as having reason to give your interests priority over theirs in at least some cases of conflict. This is part of what valuing one’s relationships involves. Of course, these relationship-dependent reasons need not be seen as absolute. They may be treated as defeasible reasons that can be outweighed or undermined or silenced by other considerations in particular cases. But if there are no contexts in which I would see your needs and interests as giving me reasons of this kind, then it is not true that I value my relationship with you.

The dual character of one’s attachment is evident here too. In addition to seeing your needs and interests as giving me reasons, I will also see myself as having reasons to sustain the relationship. I will see myself as having reasons to ensure that it continues to flourish and to try to repair it if it has been damaged. I may, of course, decide that I want a previously valued relationship to end but, if I do so, that means I no longer value it the same way. If I profess to value a relationship but see no need to take steps to preserve it if it is in jeopardy, then, absent some special explanation, I do not value it, however favorable my attitude may be toward the person with whom I have the relationship. This means that there is a diachronic dimension to valuing a personal relationship; to value such a relationship normally involves wanting to sustain it going forward.

Despite what I have been saying, some people doubt that personal relationships feature prominently among the types of thing that we value. The truth, they suggest, is quite different. What we value, when we participate in a close personal relationship, is the person with whom we have the relationship. To suppose that it is the relationship that we value is to construe our evaluative attitudes as oddly self-referential. It is to suppose that we value others only insofar as they have something to do with us. But,
the objection runs, it’s not all about us. If one participates in a close personal relationship, one loves or values the other; one does not love or value one’s relation to the other.²⁹

However, valuing a relationship is not best thought of as an alternative to valuing the person with whom one has the relationship. Part of what it is to value a relationship is to see the needs and interests of the person with whom one has the relationship as giving one reasons for action. In addition – and not as an alternative -- one sees oneself as having reasons to sustain the relationship. Similarly, one’s emotions, when one values a relationship, are sensitive to what happens both to the person with whom one has the relationship and to the relationship itself. This is what I meant when I said that the attachment we exhibit when we value a personal relationship has a dual character. One is attached to the person with whom one has the relationship but one is also attached to the relationship.

Granted, it may sound odd to speak of being attached to a relationship. But the fact that we value our relationships, and not solely the people with whom we have them, is the most familiar fact in the world. What contributes to a good or successful life is not the mere existence of people one admires, but one’s relationships with (some of) those people. Consider how much emotional energy people devote to thinking and worrying about their relationships with their children, their parents, their friends, and their partners, and how much people suffer when they are estranged from someone with whom they once had a close relationship. One’s child or one’s friend may be flourishing, but that does not make the pain of estrangement disappear. Estrangement is a misfortune. On the other hand, consider the extent to which flourishing

relationships are sources of contentment and satisfaction for those who are lucky enough to have them. It is both because they are sources of contentment and because estrangement is so painful that people make such efforts to sustain their relationships and to repair damaged relationships when that is possible. It goes without saying that the people with whom we have close relationships matter a great deal to us, but so do our relationships with those people. They affect our reasons and our emotions in precisely the ways that are characteristic of valuing. Whether we tend to put it this way or not, we value and are attached to the relationships as well as to the people with whom we have them. Nor is there anything self-referential about this. A personal relationship is a joint human creation or construction. To suppose that valuing a relationship is self-referential is to elide the distinction between this joint creation and oneself. And to suppose that we value only our fellow creators and not the thing we have together created is to ascribe to us an unduly atomistic view of human interaction and its fruits.

Let me turn now from personal relationships to membership in groups. Our lives can be enriched not only by our relationships with other individuals but also by our wider social relations. People value their membership in groups and associations of various kinds. Sometimes they value group membership even when the groups in question are large enough that there is no prospect of knowing individually, let alone having a personal relationship with, each of the other members. It is possible, of course, to value one’s membership in a group in a purely instrumental way. But often people value their membership in groups non-instrumentally. They find membership rewarding in its own right.

What is involved in valuing non-instrumentally one’s membership in a group or association? As in the case of personal relationships, and as with valuing more
generally, valuing one’s membership in a group is partly a matter of recognizing certain considerations as reason-giving. In the case of groups, I’ll call these considerations membership-dependent reasons. In general, these are reasons for doing one’s share, as defined by the norms and ideals of the group, to help sustain it and contribute to its purposes. Most groups and associations have formal or informal norms of individual conduct that are meant to define the responsibilities of members. To value one’s membership non-instrumentally is, in part, to see these norms – provided they are neither gravely unjust nor irrational – as giving one reasons for action in a way that the norms of other worthy groups do not. As in the case of relationship-dependent reasons, membership-dependent reasons are defeasible; they can be outweighed or defeated or silenced by other considerations. But if I never see myself as having such reasons, then it is not true that I value my membership in the group non-instrumentally.

Why, though, do membership-dependent reasons take the form of reasons to comply with the group’s norms? In the case of relationship-dependent reasons, the idea was that to value one’s relationship with another person non-instrumentally is to see the person’s needs, desires, and interests as providing one with reasons for action. Why should the group’s norms play the role in this case that the needs, desires, and interests of the individual play in the case of personal relationships?

Whenever we value an interpersonal bond, whether it is a personal relationship or a form of group membership, we recognize reasons to act in ways that manifest our responsiveness both to the value of the bond and to the value of those with whom we

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30 The proviso reflects a conviction that one can value one’s membership in a group non-instrumentally while failing to see its unjust or irrational norms as giving one reasons for action.

31 I am grateful to Michael Bratman and John Tasioulas for pressing versions of this question.
have created the bond. In the case of personal relationships, one important way in which such responsiveness is manifested is through our recognition of the needs, desires, and interests of the people with whom we have formed those relationships as considerations to be taken into account in our deliberations. Furthermore, it is manifested in our deference, across a wide range of cases, to their understanding of their needs, desires, and interests. To be sure, there are occasions when we must instead act on our own understanding of their needs and desires, especially if they cannot communicate their needs and desires to us or if we believe that they are profoundly misguided in the way they understand those needs and desires. But, in general, there is a strong presumption of deference to their understanding. If, as a routine matter, we simply act on our own judgments about their needs and desires, and disregard their judgments, then we are not genuinely responsive to them: to their status and value as the independent agents with whom we have formed a common bond.\(^{32}\)

In the case of groups, we again recognize reasons to respond to the value both of the social bond we have formed and of those with whom we have formed it. But here what we see as called for is not direct pairwise responsiveness by each individual member of the group to the needs and desires of every other individual member. In large groups, the individual members will in most cases not know one another, and their responsiveness to the other members is mediated through their responsiveness to the needs, desires, and interests of the group of which all are members. But how does the group express its needs, desires, and interests? This is the role of group norms. In effect, these norms play the role of communicating to members what it is that the group

wants and needs of them. And, as in the case of valued personal relationships, there is a presumption of deference on the part of individual members to the group’s understanding of its needs and desires, as reflected in its norms. To be sure, there will be times when individuals must act on their own understandings instead, especially if they are convinced that the group’s norms are seriously unjust, manifestly irrational, or profoundly misguided. And, of course, individuals may try to bring about changes in the group’s norms. But if, as a routine matter, one simply substitutes one’s own judgment about the group’s needs and interests for the judgments of the group itself, as expressed in its norms, then one is not responsive to the group and its members as sources of value independent of oneself.

This means that, if one values one’s membership in a group, one will see oneself as having reasons to do things that one would not otherwise have done and even, on occasion, things that one regards as ill-judged on the merits. Much the same thing is true in personal relationships. If I value my friendship with someone, then I will see myself as having reasons to do things with or for my friend that I would not otherwise have chosen to do, and on occasion I will see reasons to assist my friend even though I regard what he is doing as silly or ill-judged or unwise.\footnote{Related points are made by Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett in “Friendship and Moral Danger,” \textit{Journal of Philosophy} 97(2000): 278-296, though they go further in some respects than I would. See also Koltonski, \textit{op. cit.}} As a general matter, to value one’s ties to individuals and groups is to recognize certain limits to one’s authority to determine the content of one’s reasons for action; some of that authority is shared with one’s intimates and associates.\footnote{The discussion in the last few pages has been drawn, with some modifications, from my more detailed discussion in “Membership and Political Obligation,” \textit{Journal of Political Philosophy} 26(2018): 3-23.}
It is clear from what has been said that to value one’s personal and social relationships is inevitably to display certain forms of partiality. If one values one’s relationship with another person, for example, then one will see that person’s desires and interests as giving one reasons for action in a way that other people’s desires and interests do not. That is part of what it is to value the relationship. One will also see that person’s desires and interests as taking priority over the desires and interests of others in at least some cases of conflict. That too is part of what it is to value the relationship. In these respects, one will display partiality toward the person with whom one has the relationship.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think that partiality is the only normatively significant upshot of our attachments. Consider first the case of membership-dependent reasons. If one values one’s membership in a group, one will see the norms of that group as giving one reasons for action in a way that the norms of other groups do not. In this respect, one will be partial toward the group and its members. In explaining what this form of partiality involves or amounts to, we might say that one distributes the benefits of one’s compliance to this group and its members in preference to other groups and their members. But that is not all there is to it. As we saw, one’s responsiveness to the group’s norms also involves a posture of deference. In treating the group’s norms as reason-giving even if one disagrees with them, one concedes to the group a degree of authority over the content of one’s reasons. Deference, no less than partiality, is involved in valuing one’s membership in a group. In fact, the relevant form of partiality cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the role of deference. Part of what it is to be partial to the group is to defer to its norms.

Much the same thing is true in the case of valued personal relationships. Although valuing such relationships involves responsiveness to the desires and
interests of those with whom we have the relationships, this is not simply a matter of distributing benefits to these people that we do not give to others. It is not simply a matter of displaying distributive partiality toward them. It also involves deference, inasmuch as it involves a willingness to defer to their understanding of their desires and interests, and so to concede to them a degree of authority over the content of one’s reasons. Here again partiality and deference go hand-in-hand. And here too the relevant form of partiality cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the role of deference. The partiality one displays toward the people one loves consists in part in a willingness to defer to them.\(^3^5\)

In general, the personal relationships and social groups we most value are joint human creations in which people shape and share one another’s reasons and, to one degree or another, their lives. They are not simply distributional arrangements in which each person takes up a distributive position with respect to the other, nor is the aim of the participants to implement a mutually advantageous distribution of benefit. It is, after all, a criticism to say that someone’s attitude toward others is “transactional.” To value one’s relationship with another person or one’s membership in a group is to inhabit and try to sustain a shared practical and emotional environment which gives one’s life part of its shape. One’s aim in doing this is not to confer benefits on some

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\(^3^5\) Jorah Dannenberg uses similar language to describe the epistemic dimension of friendship. He writes: “If we should regard our friends as, other things equal, entitled to our trust, then friendship requires …. a willingness to surrender part of one’s power to author for oneself one’s own conception of the world. In other words, we are bound to our friends in a way that involves letting them take part in making up our very sense of the world and what it is like – especially, though not exclusively, the social and emotional world we inhabit along with them.” (Dannenberg, “Lying Among Friends,” in E. Michaelson and A. Stokke eds., *Lying: Language, Knowledge, Ethics, and Politics* [Oxford University Press, 2018], pp. 206-226, at p. 216.)
while withholding them from others, still less to implement a biased distribution of relationship-independent goods.

Of course, this is too simple, both because distributive issues arise within personal relationships and social groups and because the establishment of such relationships and groups affects the wider distribution of benefits among participants and non-participants even if that is not its organizing aim. That is why questions about the deontic force of relationship-dependent and membership-dependent reasons, and about the extent to which they take priority over other reasons, are persistent sources of controversy. But this does not mean that having a personal attachment simply consists in, or amounts to nothing more than, having biased distributional preferences or displaying distributive partiality. That view simply misunderstands what personal relationships and other forms of attachment are, and leaves it looking mysterious why anyone should see them as fundamental constituents of a good and successful life.

The points I have been making can be extended if we consider, in addition to personal relationships and group membership, the extended patterns of purposeful activity I have been calling personal projects. What is it to value a project, as opposed to an interpersonal attachment like a relationship or membership in a group? One complication, in trying to answer this question, is that some projects have an essentially interpersonal character. For the members of a comedy duo, their personal projects may be inseparable from their relationship with one another. In such cases, it may be impossible to isolate the normative significance of the personal projects alone. Not all projects are like this, however, and, for the sake of clarity, I will focus on “purely personal” projects that do not have an essentially interpersonal character.

At the most general level, valuing a project comprises the same three elements as the other types of valuing we have considered. It involves seeing the project as
valuable or worthwhile, being vulnerable to a range of emotions depending on how the project fares, and seeing oneself as having reasons (“project-dependent reasons” in this case) that one would not otherwise have. There are also differences, however, between valuing a project and valuing a personal relationship or membership in a group. One difference concerns the deontic character of project-dependent reasons as compared with relationship-dependent (and membership-dependent) reasons, although the difference is subtle. Reasons of both kinds may strike one as having the force of practical necessity. One may feel that one must care for one’s aging parents or one’s small child, but one may also feel that one must finish writing one’s novel or planting one’s garden. Yet most of us experience the character of the necessity differently in cases of the two kinds. We are apt to feel that we have an obligation to care for our parents or children, and that these obligations are owed to them. By contrast, we may well feel that we must finish writing our novel, but unless the novel is being written collaboratively, or unless we have made a contractual commitment to deliver the manuscript to the publisher by a certain date, we are less likely to feel that we have an obligation to finish it, let alone an obligation that is owed to some other person in particular. Although reasons of both kinds may strike us with the force of practical necessity, there is normally nobody to whom we see ourselves as answerable or accountable if we fail to act on a purely project-dependent reason. By contrast, the feeling that we are answerable to someone is a normal part of the experience of recognizing relationship-dependent reasons.

This experiential difference corresponds to a familiar moral distinction. It is often thought that, whereas we have moral duties to act on our relationship-dependent reasons, we are morally permitted but not required to act on our project-dependent reasons. Whereas relationship-dependent reasons represent obligations or duties that
are owed to certain individuals, we are entitled to pursue our projects but have no duty to anyone to do so. If I neglect my child, I violate a moral obligation. If I fail to finish my novel, I do not.

This view is not universally accepted. Some philosophers believe that we have duties to ourselves to complete our projects, and that, morally speaking, there is no deep deontic distinction between projects and relationships. Both are sources of duties. And despite what I have said, this view may coincide with the way some people experience the force of their project-dependent reasons. Insofar as they feel they must finish their projects, they may find it natural to say that they owe it to themselves to do so. The experience of practical necessity, for them, is always an experience of accountability or answerability. In the case of relationship-dependent and membership-dependent reasons, it is an experience of owing something to someone else. In the case of project-dependent reasons, it is an experience of owing something to oneself.

For our purposes, it doesn’t matter which way we characterize the relevant experiential distinction. We may describe it as a distinction between those forms of practical necessity that are experienced as involving obligation or answerability and those that are not, or we may describe it as a distinction between those forms of practical necessity that are experienced as involving answerability to others and those that are experienced as involving answerability to oneself. Either way, there is a significant difference between cases of the two types. For our purposes, that is what matters. What matters is the fact that we experience the normative force of different types of attachment-related reason in different ways.

This matters partly for negative reasons. It confirms that partiality does not exhaust the normative significance of our attachments. It is true that, if we value our relationship with someone, we will see that person’s desires or interests as giving us
reasons that other people’s desires and interests do not. And if we value a personal project, we will see it as reason-giving for us in a way that other people’s projects are not. Attachment does involve partiality. But it is equally important to recognize that we experience the deontic force of relationship-dependent and project-dependent reasons differently. Both may strike us with the force of practical necessity. But relationship-dependent reasons are associated with deference and answerability to others, whereas project-dependent reasons are associated with imperatives that derive not from other people but from patterns of purposive activity to which we are committed and around which we have organized our lives. It would be perverse to insist that, in cases of both kinds, the necessities we perceive are simply imperatives of distributive partiality: that what we see it as incumbent upon us to do is to bestow benefits on some people rather than others or on ourselves as opposed to anyone else.

The fact that we experience the normative force of different types of attachment in different ways also points us in a more positive direction. By focusing our attention on the kind of practical and emotional orientation our evaluative attachments require, and on the character of the perceived necessities associated with such attachments, it invites us to reflect on what it is about our attachments that makes them such central elements of the lives we aspire to lead. The deference and answerability to others that are associated with interpersonal attachments and the responsiveness to the demands of a purposive activity that are associated with personal projects are evidently things we seek out. We want to lead lives that are marked by these forms of deference, answerability, and responsiveness. What does this tell us about ourselves?

To answer that question, consider again the case of interpersonal attachments. The hallmarks of these attachments are accountability and deference to other people and emotional vulnerability to their fates. Insofar as one values one’s relationships with
other people, one sees oneself as accountable to them for one’s conduct; one is prepared to defer to their understanding of their needs and interests; and one is vulnerable to feelings of sadness, loss, and grief if they are harmed. More generally, the personal relationships and social groups that we value are joint human creations in which we shape one another’s reasons and through which we seek to construct a shared practical and affective environment. Our interpersonal attachments have a social character not merely because they involve other people, but because they involve mutual answerability and deference, shared practical authority, and the joint authorship of a genuinely social creation.

Consider now the case of personal projects. In valuing a project, we manifest a responsiveness to the demands of a purposive activity that compels us. If our project is to learn to speak Italian or to master the guitar or to plant a garden, the reasons for action we recognize are fixed by the nature of the language we wish to speak, the instrument and the music that we wish to play, or the flora that we wish to cultivate. In all these cases, as in the case of interpersonal attachments, we respond to the demands of something outside of ourselves, and it is, in part, the sustained responsiveness to such demands that we find rewarding.

Insofar as we seek to develop and sustain interpersonal attachments and personal projects, then, and insofar as we view such attachments and projects as among the most important constituents of a good life, we reveal something significant about ourselves, namely, that what we find rewarding is to engage with the world around us. And part of what such engagement involves is submission to constraints and

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36 My use of the concept of engagement, like my reliance on the ideas of valuing and attachment, is greatly indebted to the writings of Joseph Raz, including Value, Respect and Attachment, Engaging Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and The Morality of Freedom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Although my views do not always
requirements that originate outside ourselves. We are, and we want to be, responsive to needs and requirements we did not invent, whether these are the needs and requirements of other people or groups or instead of the worldly activities in which we wish to participate or at which we wish to excel. The idea that the world simply supplies us with materials that we use to satisfy our pre-existing desires is a distortion of our actual relation to the world. One might call it “the infantile model,” except that this would be unfair to infants, who exhibit forms of sensitivity and responsiveness to other people and to the world around them almost from the beginning.

Of course, the kind of responsiveness to external demands that we find rewarding is not usually sought just for its own sake but rather for what it makes possible: a friendship, knowledge of another language, a flourishing garden. But this does not mean that such responsiveness has purely instrumental value. Manifesting sufficient responsiveness to the vocabulary and grammar of the Italian language isn’t a means to acquiring knowledge of Italian. It is what knowing Italian consists in. Similarly, suitable patterns of mutual accountability are not instruments for the establishment of human relationships but part of what human relationships consist in. Although we do not want responsiveness for its own sake, neither do we want it for purely instrumental reasons. We want it because it plays a constitutive role in forming and sustaining the relationships and activities that we most value.

These points have a bearing on debates about the nature of the individual good. It is common for philosophical theories of “well-being,” or of what is good for an individual, to be divided into three categories: hedonist theories, desire-satisfaction coincide with his, and although I sometimes deploy such concepts for purposes different from his, there are also significant thematic affinities, and I have been greatly influenced by the use he makes of the same suite of concepts.
theories, and objective-list theories. Crudely: hedonist theories hold that what is good for a person is pleasure and the absence of pain; desire-satisfaction theories hold that what is good for people is the satisfaction of their actual or informed desires; and objective-list theories hold that what is good for people is to achieve certain objective goods, such as knowledge and friendship. None of these theories does justice to the importance of personal attachments or the role they play in our lives. Neither hedonist nor desire-satisfaction theories assign attachments any special status. Hedonist theories take note of them only insofar as they must be included among the many possible sources of pleasure and pain. Desire-satisfaction theories take note of them only insofar as they must be included among the many possible objects and sources of desire. Neither of these interpretations does justice to our conviction that personal attachments are among the central constituents of a good and successful life.

Objective-list theories can in principle do a bit better, because there is room for such theories to treat personal attachments as items on the list of objective goods whose achievement enhances individuals’ well-being. But even this gets the emphasis wrong. Personal attachments are not simply items we hope our lives will contain. An old criticism of utilitarianism holds that it treats people as mere containers of valuable experiences. The theories of well-being I am discussing, including objective-list theories, suffer from a related deficiency. They take the idea of an individual’s life for granted, and hold that its quality depends on what it contains: pleasure, satisfied desires, or items from some objective list. We might call this, uncharitably, the shopping-cart view of life. One’s life, according to this view, is like a shopping cart, and how well it goes depends on which items end up in the cart. But one’s life is not a shopping cart, and personal attachments are not simply items that may or may not end up in the cart. Instead, it is largely through the cultivation and development of such
attachments, and the (sufficiently) willing submission to their demands and requirements, that we lead our lives in the first place. Although it may be possible to lead one’s life without any emotional investment at all in personal relationships, social group membership, or participation in extended purposive activities that one finds compelling, such a life will tend toward aimlessness and accidie. We lead our lives through the exercise of our agential powers and, as a matter of human nature if not of logic, we organize the exercise of those powers through the cultivation and development of personal attachments: through engaged participation in personal relationships and social arrangements and patterns of purposive activity. A person who never sought to do any of these things would not merely be missing out on important goods but would barely be leading a human life at all.

This is not a point about autonomy. My thought is not that valuable personal attachments must be autonomously chosen if they are to contribute to our well-being. I am instead making two different points. The first is that such attachments, rather than just being items that one’s life may or may not contain, are the characteristic products of the type of sustained exercise of one’s agential powers that constitutes the leading of a life. The second point is that the value of personal attachments depends on the fact that they require us to submit to the demands and requirements of people and activities outside ourselves. There is an important difference of spirit and emphasis between this view and those that emphasize the value of autonomous choice. Those views, as they are often formulated, point us inward. They emphasize the value of self-creation: of governing oneself through the choice of one’s ends and attachments. By contrast, I have argued that the value of our attachments depends in part on the fact that they orient us toward practical necessities whose source lies outside ourselves and whose content is fixed independently of our wishes and choices. Our attachments point us outward
rather than inward, by requiring us to account for ourselves to others and to submit to the requirements of activities we find compelling. We achieve good lives, according to the attachment-sensitive conception, not simply by ruling ourselves but by focusing our attention on the world around us and by developing a practical orientation that enables us to engage in ways we find rewarding with items drawn from the rich array of valuable activities and social forms that the world has to offer.

I do not mean to deny the importance of autonomy. But in thinking about the relation between autonomy and attachment there are two mistakes to be avoided. The first is to fall prey to an exaggerated voluntarism, in which one supposes that our attachments are valuable only if they are freely chosen as such. Many valuable attachments are formed or develop gradually and do not result from any single act of will. A relationship, once superficial, may deepen imperceptibly over time. A personal project, initially undertaken without much conviction, may gradually come to matter to one a great deal. A group to which one was assigned, or which one joined for purely instrumental reasons, may slowly come to play an important role in one’s life. Family and other social affiliations may be cherished, and may help to define how one sees oneself and one’s life, without one’s ever having chosen those affiliations, let alone having chosen to cherish them. To the extent that the value of an attachment depends on its satisfying the standard of autonomy, that standard must be understood in such a way as to be compatible with these facts.

The second mistake is to suppose that, insofar as considerations of autonomy bear on the value of an attachment, it is always the autonomy of the person whose attachment it is that is in question. But this is not so. The value of one’s attachment to another person depends, not solely on whether one’s attachment was formed or embraced autonomously, but on whether it is conditioned by one’s recognition of the
other person’s autonomy. If I do not accept that you are an independent agent with your own needs, desires, and interests, and that your exercise of your agential capacities is as important to you as mine is to me, then the value of my attachment to you is compromised by considerations having to do with your autonomy, not mine. Properly understood, considerations of autonomy also point us outward and not only inward.\(^{37}\)

Of course, the need to respect the autonomy of the other person does not arise if one’s attachment is to a project or activity that does not involve other people. Yet, as we have seen, an outward-looking orientation is required in these cases too. If my project is to plant a garden or to learn to speak Italian, I must be sensitive to the constraints imposed on my activities by the things I hope to achieve. I must be alert to the need of the plants for the right kind of soil, for nutrients, for shade, for sunlight, for water. I must be sensitive to the grammar and vocabulary of the Italian language. In these ways, I must respect the objects of my attachment, or else my project will fail. Indeed, it will scarcely count as a project at all. It follows that the outward-looking orientation is more general than, and does not have its source in, a concern for the autonomy of the other. It has its source, as I have said, in our desire for engagement with the world. And part of what such engagement requires is that we meet the world on its terms.

The importance we assign to personal attachments suggests that this is something we find it deeply rewarding to do. We want to meet the world on its terms, to respect its demands and requirements. This does not mean that we are passive in the face of the world as we find it. Respecting the world and the constraints it imposes is

rewarding because it makes active engagement possible. In planting my garden, I am active and not passive. I even change a little part of the world. In general, I defer to the pertinent external constraints, not because I am attracted to deference for its own sake, but in order to achieve something I could not otherwise achieve, whether it is the establishment of a personal relationship or the cultivation of a garden or the mastery of a skill or a body of knowledge. My achievement may be a creative one and it may change the world on a smaller or larger scale. Or it may be more humdrum. But the personal attachments we value all involve engagement: we interact with the world on its terms and, by doing so, we seek to establish or to create or to achieve or to sustain something of value.

These considerations shed additional light on the normative significance of partiality. I have argued that, although personal attachments do give rise to forms of legitimate partiality, such partiality is not best interpreted in distributive terms and does not exhaust the normative significance of those attachments. We misunderstand the significance of our projects and relationships if we view them solely as occasions for the display of partiality or as morally dubious departures from a presumptively authoritative norm of equal concern. And we misunderstand partiality itself if we fail to appreciate its connections to the deference and responsiveness to external constraints that are hallmarks of personal attachment. We can now go further. The partiality we display, insofar as we form and sustain personal attachments, is not normatively fundamental. It is a byproduct of the deference and responsiveness that are essential to our engagement with the world. We cannot form and sustain valuable personal relationships without seeing ourselves as answerable to the other participants in those relationships. And we cannot develop and sustain valuable projects without responding to the constraints imposed on our activities by the nature and requirements
of those projects themselves. More generally, we cannot engage with the world without meeting it on its terms, and we cannot meet the world on its terms without responding differentially – or displaying partiality – with respect to the objects of our engagement. Partiality is thus a byproduct of engagement. We cannot engage with the world at all without exhibiting forms of partiality.

This tells us something not only about partiality but also about what it is to lead one’s life. The attachment-sensitive conception that I am developing, in the manuscript from which these lectures have been drawn, is multifaceted, and I have not had time to present it fully here. One thing I have suggested is that, as a first approximation, to lead one’s life is to exercise one’s agential powers to direct or shape one’s future in ways that reflect one’s aims, values, and desires. But I hope I have also said enough to make clear that there is more to it than that. Leading a life is a conceptually-laden, intellectually challenging, and emotionally demanding undertaking. The distinctions between past and future and between oneself and others structure our understanding of what a life is -- and what it is to lead a life -- from the outset. And these distinctions give rise to puzzles and challenges that we cannot avoid, whether or not we make them explicit objects of reflection. For one thing, we must have a working conception of who we are, and so, although I have made the point only briefly and in passing, we must address the problem of temporal dissonance by arriving at some understanding of our relations to the past and the future. Because there is a sense in which we live always in the present, we must find ways to claim a past for ourselves and to arrive at an understanding of how to project ourselves into the future. In addition, as we saw yesterday, we are subject to feelings and emotions that are responsive to the world around us, and to lead one’s life is in part to exhibit changes in one’s feelings and emotions over time. One must be able to move on, or to let go, when that is called for.
Knowing when and how to do this can be difficult, not least because our feelings and emotions have different “diachronic profiles”: they are affected in different ways by the passage of time. Furthermore, although I have not had time to argue these points here, we must find ways of navigating the normative changes that accompany our passage through the stages of life and to situate ourselves in the ongoing chain of generations.

In this lecture, I have tried to take things a step further. I have emphasized the extent to which, in deploying our agential powers, we seek to cultivate and sustain personal attachments, and I have called attention to the role played in the formation of such attachments by the phenomena I have called answerability, responsiveness, and engagement. These phenomena reveal something underlying our aspiration to shape our lives by forming and sustaining valuable attachments. They tell us that the perceived necessities or imperatives with which our attachments present us are imperatives associated with the creation of shared social arrangements and environments and the successful prosecution of extended forms of purposive activity. Our determination to form and sustain such attachments, and so to subject ourselves to these necessities, reflects a more general determination to find ways of engaging with the world. And in the end, it is by engaging with the world, in ways that are allowed for by our circumstances and opportunities, congenial to our temperaments and interests, and suited to our talents and abilities, that we hope to realize our deepest values and to achieve the most rewarding and enduring forms of satisfaction. It is in this way that we seek to lead our lives.

Let me make one final point. For the neutralist, time and person are two parallel distributional dimensions. I have already argued that it is misleading to view the temporal and interpersonal dimensions of human life primarily through the lens of a preoccupation with distribution. But neither is the relation between the two
dimensions best understood as one of parallelism. It is only the preoccupation with
distribution that makes them look parallel. In fact, each of the two dimensions poses
distinct challenges that have no direct parallel in the case of the other. There is no direct
interpersonal parallel to questions about the effects of time’s passage on the emotions, for
example, nor is there a temporal parallel to questions about why we experience the
normative force of interpersonal relationships differently from the normative force of
personal projects. Rather than being parallel, the two dimensions are mutually
intertwined, and the understanding of each depends on an understanding of the other.

Let me explain. When we examine our attitudes toward the temporal dimension
of our lives and reflect on the ways in which we experience it as puzzling or mysterious
or disturbing, we see that many of the things that trouble or puzzle us presuppose the
importance of personal attachments in our lives. Whether we are trying to make sense
of the way the passage of time affects attitudes like grief, or of the way aging affects the
reasons arising from personal relationships, or of the ways in which the future of
humanity matters to us, we start from an understanding of the central role played in the
lives we aspire to lead by relationships with other people. It is partly because of the
importance we attach to other people and our relationships with them that we
experience time as puzzling and troubling in the ways that we do.

The reverse is also true. When we ask about the normative significance of
interpersonal relationships, we are taking for granted an understanding of human
beings as temporally extended creatures. The very idea of an interpersonal relationship
is the idea of a relationship between participants whose lives extend over time and are
understood by them to extend over time. It is the idea of a temporally extended pattern
of engagement and interaction between the participants, a pattern of engagement that
unfolds over time and generates a history of its own, and whose importance to them
depends on its temporal extension. So, when we find ourselves gripped by questions about the normative significance of our relationships, we are already making assumptions about the importance of the temporal dimension of human experience.

The general lesson, as I have said, is that time and person are two deeply intertwined dimensions of human experience. To lead a human life, we need some way of understanding ourselves as temporally extended creatures, and we need some way of understanding the normative significance of our personal and social relations. Yet our understanding of each dimension depends on our understanding of the other, which is to say that we need a unified understanding of both. In these lectures, I cannot claim to have achieved such an understanding, but I have tried to point us in the right direction.