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CARE FOR ONE’S OWN FUTURE EXPERIENCES

Marc Slors

We care for our own future experiences. Most of us, trivially, would rather have them pleasurable than painful. When we care for our own future experiences we do so in a way that is different from the way we care for those of others (which is not to say that we necessarily care more about our own experience). Prereflectively, one would think this is because these experiences will be ours and no one else’s. But then, of course, we need to explain what it means to say that a future experience will be mine and how knowledge of this fact renders it rational for me to care for this experience in a special way. Indeed most philosophers take this route. But in doing so, they quickly stumble on insuperable problems. I shall argue that the problem of egocentric care, as it is sometimes called, can be solved by turning things upside down: it is much more fruitful to think that the special kind of care we feel for some future experiences (and not others) is part of what makes them ours should they occur. This requires an explanation of egocentric care for future experiences that does not draw in a theory of personal identity, but rather contributes to one. I will attempt to provide this explanation by making use of the idea of a diachronic mental holism.

I. Perry, Persons and Projects

The problem I will discuss is far from original, so let me illustrate it with a far from original example. Here’s a quote from John Perry:

You learn that someone will be run over by a truck tomorrow; you are saddened, feel pity, and think reflectively about the frailty of life; one bit of information is added, that someone is you, and a whole different set of emotions rise in your breast. (Perry 1976, 67)

I rehearse this well-known example because it illustrates the following problem beautifully: what you or I actually experience is only what we experience now. Therefore, someone else’s future experiences and my own future experiences are similar to me now in that I, at this moment, do not feel or experience either of them. Yet I do feel a very different kind of concern for my own future experiences than I feel for someone else’s. In the above example, upon learning that I shall be run over, my melancholy will turn into straightforward panic. The problem is how to explain this difference in attitude towards future experiences, given their similar status relative to our present consciousness. This is the problem of care for one’s own future states, or in short: the problem of egocentric care.

Of course we can say that I care for my own future experiences, or in general my own future mental and bodily states, because they will be mine. But in order for this ‘solution’ to be informative we need (i) a theory of personal identity over time and (ii) a way of explaining my special care for my own future states in terms of this theory. This is the route Perry takes, and his solution is of great influence to other philosophers. To see how and why,
something needs to be said first about the dominance of and the difficulties with what is known as ‘the complex view’ on personal identity.

Theories of personal identity can be subdivided into two groups. On the one hand, there are theories that fall under what is known as ‘the simple view’. According to this view, a person is a simple, indivisible entity and personal identity over time is not analysable in terms of discrete temporal stages of this entity and their interrelations. If the simple view is our basis of fulfilling (i), (ii) cannot be fulfilled. For if personal identity over time is unanalysable, there is no way for us to explain how and why it yields egocentric care.

The rival of the simple view is the complex view. According to this view, persons are complex, analysable entities and personal identity over time consists in the person-co-constituting items and their synchronic and diachronic interconnections. The complex view usually invokes the notion of ‘a person stage’, a person as a discrete entity at one point in time, and views personal identity over time as whatever it is that connects these discrete person stages over time. If this is our way of approaching (i), the discreteness of these person stages and the person-co-constituting items makes it tremendously difficult to fulfil (ii).

But not, according to Perry, impossible. Omitting many details of Perry’s account, the key elements of his solution are, on the one hand, a Lockean (conceptual but not ontological) distinction between human beings and persons, and on the other hand, acknowledgement of the fact that people have various projects that structure their lives and give them purpose. Let me briefly say something about each of these elements.

(i) Although, for all we know, all existing persons may well be human beings, the terms ‘person’ and ‘human being’ are not equivalent. There could have been non-human persons. And there probably are humans that are not yet persons (e.g. newborn babies) or not persons anymore (e.g. severe Alzheimer’s patients). Human-being stages are related in a specific way (causally connected body-and-brain stages). They are, as Perry calls it ‘H-related’. The theory that tells us how humans may be expected to think and act is called ‘the H-theory’. On top of the H-theory we need a theory that tells us how these stages are related such that they do not just form a human being through time, but a person as well. That theory is called the P-theory and the relation between person stages it describes, the P-relation. The P-theory does not tell us exactly what we should expect people to think and how we should expect them to act; that was the domain of the H-theory. The P-theory should tell us why people think and act as the H-theory tells us they do.

The division of labour yielded by this distinction is important because it renders the problem of egocentric care more precise. While the H-theory is factual, the P-theory is normative. The H-theory may well be a psychological theory. It explains in psychological, folk-psychological, biological or neurological terms the fact that people do actually care for H-related future experiences. This is not the proper terrain for philosophers, and not the area of the problem of egocentric care. We know that we care for some H-related experiences, and we agree that there must be some scientific explanation of that fact. What we’re interested in as philosophers is why it is rational or prudent to care for these future experiences. This is the normative area of the P-theory.1

(ii) The P-theory is not well-developed by Perry. But it contains at least the notion of ‘projects’, and that notion does a lot of explanatory work. Perry acknowledges that the normal way in which person/human stages are H-related over and in time allows us to
have and carry out various projects, and furthermore that these projects are really what matters to humans as persons. I have many projects, e.g. writing this paper, for which it is essential that my person stages are interconnected in the normal human way or any other way that allows me to stick to my projects (if I get teletransported every five minutes this project becomes problematic). We care for our projects. And hence, we care derivatively for whatever facilitates them. Among other things this includes the fact that the experiences of my most likely successor stages be such that they allow me to carry out my projects. Thus, since I will be unlikely to continue this article should I be in severe pain for some time in the near future, and since I care about writing it, I thereby care for the quality of the future successor experiences of my present one.

Perry’s proposal is attractive. We do have lots of projects and it seems right to say that a lot of our egocentric care for future experiences is explained as being rational or prudent through these projects. But there are serious problems with the view as well. One problem begins to surface when we realize that Perry’s proposal turns every instance of rational or prudent egocentric care into derivative care: according to Perry we care first and foremost about our projects and only derivatively for whatever facilitates them. It seems, however, that we sometimes care for future experiences in a non-derivative way, in complete abstraction from projects.

There are lots of examples of non-project-related care, but severe future pain is probably the most powerful example (Williams 1957). Human beings tend, in general, to avoid pain (that is part of the H-theory), and hence so do all human persons. But this avoidance does not necessarily rest on projects. The best way to show this is by acknowledging that pain may be part of some project of ours despite the fact that we normally tend to avoid it. Going to the dentist to have a painful job done in order to avoid further and more severe pain is a good example of such a project. When we have such a project, we nevertheless have reason to be scared of the dentist. And sometimes we are (but nevertheless we go). That kind of care is not care that is explained by the project, but care we feel despite the project. So one first problem for Perry is that he makes projects all-explanatory (as far as egocentric care goes) whereas they are not: there is non-project-related egocentric care.

There is a second problem that is more serious. What explains our interest in projects? This problematic question is highly relevant. For, suppose we take projects to be given facts. If so, we cannot really derive rational or prudent reasons for egocentric care from them. For we cannot derive ‘oughts’ from ‘isses’. However, if we take projects to involve normativity, if projects themselves are rational or prudent, we can derive the ‘oughts’ they yield, but we have not explained the normativity present in projects themselves. And hence we haven’t explained the ‘oughts’ but merely traced them back to further ‘oughts’ that are themselves not explained.

Simply put: we should answer the question why it is rational or prudent to have projects. And we should do so in such a way that it is clear why I should follow my own projects and not somebody else. This is rather crucial. For it seems rational that when I have a project P I care for and when I know that John is better able to carry out P than I am, I should want John to carry out P. But my wanting John to carry out P precludes P from explaining my egocentric care. Thus, we should explain the rationality/prudence of my projects in such a way that it is rational/prudent for me to want only myself to carry out these projects.
So, Perry has two problems: (i) projects are presented as all pervasive (i.e. all egocentric care is project-related) while they are not, and (ii) projects are considered explanatory while their own rationality/prudence is not explained. The second problem I take to be the most serious one (because once that problem is solved, the first one is solved as well; see Section IV). It brings us back at square one. For Perry is explicit about the fact that he wants to explain egocentric care in terms of a theory of personal identity. If in order to do so the rationality/prudence of projects has to be established, then that should be explained in terms of a theory of personal identity. But it isn’t. And it is very hard to see how it can be explained in such a fashion. At any rate no presently available theory of personal identity can do the job.

For this reason I propose to investigate the possibility of an explanation of the rationality/prudence of projects and of egocentric care that does not first require a theory of personal identity (it may require an H-theory, though). Such a solution, I submit, is likely to contribute to a theory of personal identity, but not the other way round: I do not care for some future experiences because they will be mine; rather, the fact that I care for some future experiences in a particular way (see below) is part of what makes these future experiences mine should they occur.²

In what follows I would like to sketch this solution. In the course of doing so the first problem Perry is faced with can also be tackled. But of course a solution to the problem of egocentric care that does not draw on a theory of personal identity requires a formulation of the problem of egocentric care that does not mention personal identity. So let me first turn to a reformulation of the problem.

II. A Reformulation of the Problem

With the explicit rejection of the idea that we should first provide a theory of personal identity and only then an explanation of egocentric care, the problem of egocentric care ought to be reformulated. We can no longer ask: ‘why do I care in a special way for experiences that will be mine’. That question forces us to start with a theory of personal identity, and the considerations given above suggest that that is not the right way to go. So there is need for a formulation of the problem that captures the same worry but does not draw us into theories of personal identity. That is, we need a formulation that does not characterize the future experiences I care for in a special way as ‘mine’ or ‘one’s own’ etc.

To see how ‘care for one’s own future states’ can be conceptualized without the ‘one’s own’, it is important to be precise. What has to be avoided in the definition of the problem of care is the concept of personal identity over time. But non-descriptive, directly reflexive or purely indexical uses of terms such as ‘I’ or ‘my own’ can be allowed since they do not imply a concept or theory of identity over time. Following Castañeda (1966), I shall qualify ‘I’ or ‘my own’ in indexical senses as ‘I/C’ or ‘my own/C’. The fact that direct reflexive senses of ‘I’ or ‘my own’ are allowed is important because it allows us to make use of a crucial tool or resource that philosophers in general do not make use of: one’s attitudes towards one’s present experiences and states.

It is a phenomenological fact that I—‘I’ in an indexical sense—care for my present experiences in a special way.³ This fact does not stand in need of a deep explanation.
I cannot but experience the states I am presently in, so of course I feel a special kind of care for them: the kind of care for things I experience such as the toothache I want to get rid of, or the pleasurable experience of listening to music I want to continue, etc. In fact, the care and the experience itself can hardly be separated. That I care in an unparalleled, direct way for my own present experiences is simply given with these experiences.

My proposal, now, is to conceive of care for one’s own future states in terms of a relation of kinship between the kinds of care one feels for one’s own present states and one’s own future states. The kind of care I feel for experiences and future states that I refer to as ‘my own’ is of a kind with the kind of care I feel for my present states. Of course, I may care less for states that are in the distant future. But what is at issue here is not quantity of care, but quality. And the kind of care I feel for future states that I would like to call my own—in a non-indexical sense—has a qualitative feel to it that is closer to my care for my present states than it is to the kind of care I feel for someone else’s states. I take my own phenomenology here to be no different from most people.

So, all non-indexical senses of ‘one’s own’ have to be eliminated from a definition of the problem of care. This can be done by forgetting about persons for a while and just considering the total set of possible future experiences of all persons, irrespective of who has them. This set of all future states has a small subset of states towards which I feel a kind of care that is akin to the kind of care I feel for my present states. If we can find a way of singling out this subclass in an explanatorily informative way—that is, in such a way that this subclass coincides with what we intuitively consider to be our own future states while the singling out does not require a theory of personal identity—I have solved the problem of care.

So, I shall define care for one’s own future experiences/states as follows:

*Care for one’s future experiences* = _def._ care for experiences that differ from the ones one has now (in time of occurrence and probably in contents) that is akin to the care one feels for one’s present experiences and in that respect radically different from the kinds of care one feels for all other experiences.

Note that this definition is non-circular: on the left-hand side of the ‘=’ sign there is only a non-indexical, indirect reflexive sense of ‘one’s own’, while the right-hand side contains only indexical, direct reflexive senses. This non-circularity allows for a real solution to the problem of care formulated as a kinship problem:

The problem of care for one’s own future states = _def._ explain how it is possible that the class of all possible future states has by all people contains a small sub-class for which one feels care that is akin to what one feels for one’s present states from one’s present first-person perspective (in such a way that that subclass coincides with what we pre-theoretically understand to be our own possible future experiences).

**III. Diachronic Holism**

The solution to the problem defined above that I would like to defend in this paper starts with a preliminary: we should acknowledge the fact that mental holism is not just
synchronic, but diachronic as well. Later on this will allow us to determine the way in which the past and the future are part of the present contents of a given person's mind. And that, in turn, will be a crucial part of the solution to the problem of egocentric care.

The idea of diachronic holism, despite being neglected, is not far-fetched. In fact, the possibility of the complete absence of diachronic constraints on the contents of mental states is hard to imagine. The idea of an experience at one point in time that has a content that is completely isolated from what has been going on in one's mind and one's life before, is close to a conceptual impossibility. Thoughts usually are related to previous thoughts, and/or to internal and external causes that gave rise to them. Likewise with emotions. Sensory perceptions are intelligible only given a previous context. Not only are they often theory-laden—which requires an earlier context of learning—they are most often only intelligible as part of a huge train of perceptions issued by one body. Desires might seem to be exceptions to this rule of diachronic constraint: it does seem possible that desire arises 'out of the blue'. But even then, in order for us to be able to interpret the contents of the desire, knowledge of what the world is like in terms of possible ways of satisfying the desire is required in order to grasp the intentional object of the desire. And that means that the desire requires a context of previous learning, experiencing, in short, of living.

By what norms is diachronic holism governed? The usual norm that is mentioned in connection with mental holism is rationality. Beliefs, desires and perceptions constrain each other along the lines of the dictates of reason. This is undoubtedly correct. But rationality in a strict sense is not enough to explain diachronic constraints. Let me give two examples of other norms that govern diachronic constraint and then fuse them into one.

A first axis along which mental (and bodily) states constrain each other diachronically is provided by the fact that we are embodied beings. Let's start with the way perceptual mental states are ordered in such a way as to reflect the four-dimensional path through space-time described by the body. On the one hand, these states do have a particular order objectively—one cannot be in Amsterdam now and in Paris the next second, one can expect a sound to become louder when one approaches its source, one cannot under normal conditions look up and see one's feet, etc., etc. But on the other hand, knowledge of these constraints, which is informed by knowledge of the physical world of medium-sized objects including one's own body, will reinforce these constraints subjectively. That is, knowledge of the way bodies move in this world and of the features and laws of this physical world will help us interpret present experiences as following very specific earlier ones and being followed by very specific states that are not yet determined, but fall in a class whose size is diminished considerably by knowledge of one's earlier whereabouts.

Elsewhere I have defended the thesis that the sequence of perceptual states of a person provides the backbone of psychological continuity (Slors 1998, 2001a, 2001b). It can be considered as a diachronic ‘map’ or timescale (correctly or incorrectly remembered and/or anticipated) on which we can locate experiences and significant biographical events. This cross-connects these other mental states and biographical events through the way in which they mutually constrain and shape each other due to conceptual, evidential and biographical links, mediated, of course, by what we know about the
career of our bodies through space-time. I cannot say more about this here, but I hope that the idea is at least intuitively clear.

So, the fact that we’re embodied beings puts severe constraints, not just on our perceptual states, but on all beliefs, desires, emotions, etc., that are induced or constrained by the logic of perceptual state succession. As these constraints follow the logic of the physical world we as embodied persons inhabit, the second kind of constraint I want to focus on follows from our understanding of the logic of the social world we inhabit.

People play various social roles that are relatively tightly connected to specifically regulated behaviour. We can be parents, professors, musicians in a group, part-time helpers for Amnesty International, etc., etc. Usually we play very many of these roles, the amount increasing as we grow older and our lives become more complex. Of course, being able to play these roles requires thorough understanding of one’s embodied being in this four-dimensional world. But I shall leave that aside. What I want to call attention to is the way in which social roles shape our lives in such a way that they let our mental representations of this life put very severe constraints on each other.

In order to consistently play the role of postman, say, one’s mental life at the moment of playing that role is a perfect example of perceptions, thoughts, desires, etc., being moulded by one’s awareness of the fact that one plays this role. One is not wondering constantly what one is doing on the streets all day, one knows what these paper things are that one is putting in slots, one knows what these little stickers on them are, etc. In short, one’s function as a postman provides a ‘format’ for the way individual experiences, beliefs, perceptions, etc., ought to mould, constrain and shape each other. The same goes for various other social roles.

For the sake of brevity I shall not provide endless examples. Again I hope the point is intuitively clear. Now I want to merge these two axes through which diachronic mental holism is mediated into one. The ways in which the mental states of one person/human being constrain and influence each other, the ways in which they shape and mould each other over time are governed by norms. These norms follow directly from our knowledge of our being embodied beings in a four-dimensional physical world that play various social roles. The norms, in short, are set by the fact that we live structured lives and are aware of that fact. The concept of ‘a life’ as it is used in ordinary parlance is what governs diachronic mental holism. This norm, despite its present vagueness, is much richer than rationality narrowly conceived.

Consider a given experience, or other mental state, a person can have or be in at any given moment in time in view of the diachronic holism just sketched. In a sense, this holism can be viewed as limiting the usefulness and sensibility of the notion of a ‘person-stage’ at one point in time. Surely at each moment of a person’s life, there is a person with specific thoughts, experiences, etc. But the contents of these thoughts and experiences—instantiated at one point in time—cannot be specified by minding only what happens at that point in time. Especially the past enters into virtually every thought and experience: language or acquired knowledge that allows us to interpret the present, or in general every acquired skill and/or bit of information required to have thoughts and to experience something as something (e.g. to see ‘that greyish thing’ as ‘a chair’) and as something that is related in a broad sense to one’s biography (e.g. ‘that chair’ as ‘that chair I have never seen
before') are prerequisites for thought and experience. In that sense, the past always enters into the contents of present thoughts and experiences.

A similar, though more abstract and less salient story can be told about the future entering into the contents of present thoughts and experiences. Experiences are not just interpreted in light of earlier knowledge, they are also interpreted in light of the fact that we are agents. Our actions are based, on the one hand, on our intentions and plans. On the other hand, these intentions and plans require anticipation of the future in order to determine courses of action. In that sense, the future is also represented, albeit in a much more abstract way than the past, in present thoughts and experiences.

More can and needs to be said about the idea that the past and the future enter into the contents of present thoughts and experiences. Two (imperfect) comparisons might help to do this briefly. Compare first diachronic holism and the notion of a dynamic thought. There is a parallel. For instance, the thought ‘I am walking towards the door’ is couched in a series of consecutive qualitatively different mental states had at different stages of the process of walking towards the door. Yet at all these moments, the same dynamic thought can be ascribed to a person walking to a door. This is because the person realizes that her mental states at each point in time of walking the trajectory are shaped, moulded and constrained by her preceding states and expected future ones. This constraining and shaping and moulding prevents us from ascribing a series of singular thoughts to the person: ‘I am five meters from the door’, ‘I am four meters from the door’, etc. Instead one dynamic thought is ascribed, providing a less distorted ‘picture’ of our mental lives.

Most of our experiences and thoughts are tied to a number (often indefinite; see Schechtman 1994) of former and possible future ones in about the same way. Not only is virtually every experience or thought interpreted in the light of a body of knowledge acquired through earlier experiences and thoughts, it is also the case that every thought or experience is part of a train of consecutive thoughts and experiences in which each thought or experience is rendered intelligible by its ‘place’ (i.e. time of occurrence) in the whole train. Take as examples the visual experiences of taking a walk through part of the neighbourhood you live in, or a concentrated thought process in which each thought follows intelligibly from the former. Just as it is artificial to cut up one dynamic thought into parts, it is artificial to do this with most thoughts and experiences.

The second partial parallel that may illuminate the idea that diachronic holism lets past and future experiences and thoughts enter into present ones is a parallel with externalism about mental content. Externalism about mental content is the widely accepted doctrine that mental contents can only be individuated in terms of objects and properties that are external to the thinker’s body. What diachronic mental holism tells us is that the contents of experiences and thoughts at one point in time require reference to earlier and later experiences and thoughts for their individuation. This is as far as the parallel goes.

IV. Diachronic Holism, Projects and Egocentric Care

By now I hope to have made plausible the idea that present experiences contain ineliminable traces of past experiences and thoughts, on the one hand, and anticipated future
ones, on the other. I haven’t mentioned care yet. But my contention is that the idea of diachronic holism allows us to solve the reformulated problem of egocentric care in a way that avoids the troubles Perry’s solution gets us in. It can do this because diachronic holism allows for a more detailed picture of the interrelation between the H-theory, on the one hand, and the important part of Perry’s P-theory—projects—on the other. This more detailed picture assigns slightly, but crucially, different explanatory tasks to the respective theories than Perry envisages.

Perry holds that the H-theory explains the fact that people behave as we know them to behave and can be expected to continue doing so. The task of the P-theory is to let us understand why people act this way, i.e. to render their actions rational or prudent to us. That is, in itself, a clear division of labour. But as we have seen in Section I, Perry is not quite as clear on how the question about the function of the P-theory is supposed to be answered. The reason is that the most powerful explanatory tool of the P-theory he identifies—projects—itself stands in need of an explanation that renders having them rational or prudent.

In order to see how projects can be understood as being rational or prudent, we have to see how they are related to individual desires and preferences that are ‘given’ in the sense that they are part of the H-theory (about a given human being). We have to be careful here because not just any desire is thus ‘given’. Desires range from, for example, half-conscious wishes to get rid of a mild itch to, for example, the desire for world peace. The desire to get rid of an itch is ‘given’ in the sense that it is neither rational nor irrational to entertain it. It is not the case that one ought (rationally or morally) to have the desire given the itch. The desire for world peace, by contrast, is of an entirely different order. It belongs to the normativity-infused realm of social, political and/or moral thought.

The desires that are neither rational nor irrational—the desires that are part of the H-theory—are what I would like to call ‘project-informing’. The idea here is that the picture of diachronic holism as being guided by principles of embodiment and socialization sketched above allows us to conceive of our projects as ways of managing current and expected \( (H\text{-theory}) \text{-given} \) preferences and desires. This requires elaboration.

Just like the past necessarily enters into our present states of mind by providing the backdrop against which present experiences are rendered intelligible, so the future enters our present states of mind because of the need to act. Acting requires anticipation of future situations, on the one hand, and minding actual or expected preferences and desires on the other. When we confine ourselves to the non-normative, given desires, we often find ourselves to be endowed with many conflicting ones. The desires may conflict in either of two ways. They can conflict in the sense that satisfying one desire precludes simultaneous satisfaction of another desire. Or they may conflict in the sense that satisfaction of one desire precludes satisfaction of another desire at all. These conflicts can often partly be resolved; roughly conflicts of the latter kind can best be settled in such a way that the strongest or most important desire wins out, while conflicts of the former kind can best be settled by attempting to satisfy as many desires as possible at different times.

There is much more to be said about these conflicts and ways of resolving them. But for now it is important to emphasize (and here diachronic holism is essential) that these conflicts force us to interconnect intentions for action over longer periods of time. When
we are rational, we are inclined to form strategies for dissolving given-desire conflicts as optimally as possible. We forgo direct impulses to satisfy an acute desire in order to satisfy more important expected desires, for instance. The dentist example is a case in point.

Sometimes our strategies for dissolving given-desire conflicts are straightforward and not very complex. Most of the time, however, these strategies are complex, because we have very many, very different desires. The ‘task’ of a strategy is not merely (i) to attempt to satisfy as many desires as possible irrespective of which desires are satisfied in the end. An equally important part of such a strategy is (ii) to assign priorities to given desires: which desires are the crucially important ones, and which desires are to be sacrificed. This requires (fallible) self-knowledge. One has to anticipate whether, for example, sacrificing x on behalf of y ultimately leaves one more satisfied overall than the converse. And for that, finally, (iii) a strategy involves an idea of what ‘overall satisfaction’ means. This will differ from person/human to person/human—for a Buddhist it will involve calm eradication of desires through dis-identification, while for a thrill-seeker overall satisfaction will consist of ecstatic satisfaction of as many violent desires as possible. It will not be necessary to stress elaborately that such (fallible) self-knowledge, partly based on autobiographical knowledge, presupposes diachronic holism.

The integrated action patterns Perry calls ‘projects’ are in reality strategies for solving given-desire conflicts. They appear to be aimed at satisfying one big desire, say the desire to become an Olympic champion. But satisfying this one big desire usually is a means of satisfying the desires that are given priority by the strategy—say, the desire for recognition, the desire to do a lot of sports, etc. In the common, complex cases, strategies for dissolving (H-theory-)given-desire conflicts really are Perry’s projects and I shall refer to them as such.

Projects are thus ‘informed’ by a specific (larger class of) partially anticipated) desires in the sense that they are strategies for satisfying them optimally. Before countering the claim that this boils down to hedonism, it is important to see the advantage of this scheme in relation to Perry’s problems mentioned in Section II. The project-informing desires are not themselves rational or irrational. They are given and can in all likelihood be explained in biological, evolutionary and/or neurological terms. But the strategies for satisfying them optimally are not given with the desires—we make them up on the basis of our knowledge of our own given desires and our rationality. Projects can be rational, less rational or irrational, depending on their expected success in satisfying a bunch of desires optimally. Thus, projects are normative, even though the desires on which they are based aren’t.

This scheme solves both of the problems that face Perry. Not only can we now explain why we have projects, why we value having them and why they can be rational or irrational; we can also explain why we are the ones best suited to carry out our own projects: we are the only ones to be in the epistemologically privileged situation to have the best overview of our given and anticipated desires. Thus we can solve the most important problem facing Perry. But we can also explain that we sometimes care for our own future experiences while this care is not derived from the worth we attach to projects, the less important problem facing Perry. This is the case with project-informing desires. Such desires are ways of caring about future experiences that inform our projects. Thus such care cannot be derived from projects. It is best explained in biological, evolutionary and/or neurological terms.
Before indicating how all this solves the reformulated problem of egocentric care, the impression must be undermined that projects understood as ways of ‘managing’ (biologically) given desires, are necessarily hedonistic. For one thing, nothing said so far precludes the possibility of project-informing desires being altruistic. In fact, evolutionary biologists and psychologists have devised well-known explanations for given altruistic desires. Projects are generally informed by (among others) desires for other people’s well-being.

But there is another consideration. Projects can also generate ‘new’ desires that are very rarely purely hedonistic. An overall scheme for satisfying an immense number of desires optimally can be grasped or articulated through abstraction. Thus I may have a project of ‘writing a book’. In fact, this project is an immensely complicated set of activities. Many of these involve the conscious neglect of acute but unimportant desires (e.g. going on writing when one is hungry). But other, more important and more pervasive desires are satisfied by the project—or I am at least expecting them to be satisfied. This is one way of describing things. But the more usual way is to say that I desire to write a book. That desire is not a summary of all the desires I expect to be satisfied when I write a book. It may be desirable because through writing a book I may satisfy a lot of my more pervasive desires, but writing a book is a further desire on its own. It is what I shall call a ‘project-derived’ desire. Project-derived desires are often our best ways of describing or naming our projects. Thus, even the desire for world peace can be a project-derived desire.

The distinction between project-informing and project-derived desires parallels other distinctions made by philosophers. It is tempting to draw a parallel with Frankfurt’s first- and second-order desires (Frankfurt 1971), or, even more congenial, Taylor’s distinction between strong evaluation and simple weighing (Taylor 1989). Especially the latter distinction may parallel the one I have been sketching above. Projects often incorporate or express values and project-derived desires resemble strong evaluations, while acting on naturally given desires and preferences often involves nothing more than simple weighing. However, Taylor’s theory is thoroughly anti-naturalistic. The distinction I sketched above, by contrast, allows for a naturalistic reading in which project-derived desires (often the more loftier ones) are the result of rationally attempting to manage naturally given desires. Although I am not sure whether such a naturalistic rendering of project-derived desires really is feasible, the very possibility warns against a too easy comparison with Taylor.

As to Frankfurt, my distinction does not so much parallel the distinction between first- and second-order desires. Rather it complements it. The naturally given project-informing desires resemble Frankfurt’s first-order desires. Projects, in turn, issue second-order desires (and volitions) because they prescribe which desire is worth sacrificing and which desire is worth satisfying. Thus, Frankfurt’s distinction is vindicated.

By now I have distanced myself enough from Perry to be in a position to provide a solution to the reformulated problem of egocentric care that looks superficially very much like Perry’s. But in reality it isn’t at all like Perry’s since it is not faced with the two problems discussed above. What I would like to say is that care for one’s present experiences is of a kind with care for H-related experiences to the extent that these experiences are interpreted in the light of the same (set of) project(s). A present desire is usually experienced in the context of knowledge about one’s past and one’s most likely future, so that
the decision as to whether or not to satisfy the desire is balanced against the possible negative effects for satisfying other desires in the future. This is required of us by our awareness of our being embodied, socialized beings that can act, if we are rational. The future experiences that are the effects of either satisfying or not satisfying certain desires in the future are directly connected to a decision about acting on a present desire. They are thus of a kind in the sense of being experienced as part of the same project (where ‘project’ can be taken as individual projects, or as the project of a whole life).

So, like Perry I believe that projects are the answer. But Perry understands ‘projects’ as being issued by a theory of personal identity. He doesn’t exactly provide this theory and hence is not clear about the normative status of projects at all. His suggestion is that the source of normativity is in the concept of a person. But given the absence of such a concept, the normativity of projects is left unexplained.

I have tried to substitute a more or less impersonal (though human) basis for projects for Perry’s personal basis. Of course, I recognize that projects are tied to persons. But to recognize this it is enough to say that projects contribute to what makes us persons, among other things. And we can say that projects co-explain personhood and personal identity, since projects themselves are explained without presupposing personal identity (I do presuppose transtemporal identity of human beings, of course). So, the central point I want to make is that the problems facing Perry’s views on the issue of egocentric care can be solved by recognizing that we should not expect a theory of personal identity to solve the problem of egocentric care. Rather, a solution to the problem of egocentric care provides an important contribution to a theory of personal identity.

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NOTES

1. This does not imply that the H-theory tells us nothing about our reasons for acting. However, the reasons the H-theory talks about are merely ‘motivating reasons’, not ‘normative reasons’ (the distinction is Michael Smith’s; Smith 1994).

2. The idea that personal identity is co-constituted by care for one’s own future experiences is Marya Schechtman’s (Schechtman 1996), at least in one interpretation. Other co-constituting notions are, for example, responsibility for past deeds.

3. Some would say that I* care for the immediate future successor of this present state, just over the edge of the ‘now’. As long as this alteration does not require a theory of personal identity—and I do not believe it does—I have no problems with it.

4. In fact, the process of singling out ought to co-constitute a theory of personal identity.
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