

Regret and the Prudential Rationality of Near-Term Bias

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Abstract

Near-term bias (NTB), a preference for nearer over later goods of equal value, is widely thought to be prudentially irrational. Dale Dorsey has recently argued that it is, but by an argument that avoids the question-begging character of the traditional appeal to anticipated regret. On his view, it is unsavory to regret a past act performed from NTB while being presently disposed to perform the same act, and this shows NTB to be irrational. I argue that Dorsey's argument does not improve on the traditional one: the unsavoriness he identifies depends, in the end, on the expectation of future regret, and the claim that regret's action-guiding force must be heeded itself presupposes that NTB is irrational. I then propose an alternative account on which NTB is contingently irrational. Where regret for past NTB reveals enduring values that conflict with one's present pro-attitude toward acting from NTB, acting on that pro-attitude is prudentially irrational, independently of any anticipated regret.

Keywords: Near-term bias, Temporal neutrality, Regret, Revelatory regret, Prudential rationality, Time preference.

1. Introduction

We often prefer goods to come sooner rather than later, all else being equal. This bias toward the near-future—"near-term bias," or NTB¹—appears to be a pure time preference, in the sense that it does not seem to depend on uncertainty about future events, or on there being a reason to think that benefits will be greater if they come sooner. If you are offered a choice between two goods and you are certain that the later good will be just as valuable when it comes as the earlier good is, you may still prefer the early good. Can this preference be rational? The proponent of temporal neutrality says no, at least where prudential rationality is

¹ Note that I'm using 'NTB' to refer simply to the near-term bias as such, rather than to the claim that near-term bias is prudentially rational. I'll use 'NTBR' (short for Near-Term Bias is Rational) to refer to the latter claim.

concerned.² She argues that if a later good is just as valuable as an earlier good, then it cannot be in your interest, other things being equal, to discount the later good. After all, doing so disposes you to trade greater for lesser goods, which makes you worse off overall.

Temporal neutrality has a long line of defenders, including Rawls, Sidgwick, Hume, and many others (see Rawls 1971, Sidgwick 1981, Hume 2003). Dale Dorsey has recently argued however that there is a case to be made for a form of prudential rationality that permits NTB which traditional defenses of temporal neutrality fail to address (Dorsey 2019). Basically, the idea is that what we owe ourselves is structured by intrapersonal “bonds of concern” which give rise to special reasons to care for our near-term future selves more than our distant future selves. This is analogous to the view that what we owe each other is structured by interpersonal bonds, including bonds to family members and close friends, which give rise to special reasons to assist, care for, and nurture those to whom we bear such bonds.

Despite the attractions of this view, Dorsey offers his own argument against the rationality of NTB, which appeals to negative intrapersonal reactive attitudes, such as regret, remorse, and blame. Roughly, the argument is that there is a tension between blaming one’s past self for having acted from NTB and being presently favorably disposed towards the very same act: While this combination of attitudes may not be inconsistent, it is nevertheless one that does not cohere with the aims of a prudentially rational agent.

My aim in this paper is twofold. First, I will examine Dorsey’s account and its relation to the more traditional account that he seeks to distinguish it from, and I’ll argue that Dorsey’s account does not in fact improve on the traditional account, as he claims. While I agree with Dorsey that the traditional account fails, I do not conclude that NTB is prudentially rational. Instead, in the second part of the paper, I sketch an alternative account of the prudential irrationality of NTB, which takes NTB to be contingently (i.e., not inherently) (ir)rational—that is, an account on which NTB is (ir)rational *under certain conditions*. The account maintains that (present) NTB is irrational where regret for acting from (past) NTB is *revelatory*, in that it reveals a commitment to certain enduring values that conflict with one’s present commitment or disposition to act in just the way one regrets having acted.

The account I offer is intended to be only partial: it does not aim to specify exhaustively conditions under which NTB is rational, but simply to specify a certain sufficient condition for its irrationality. I leave open whether NTB may be irrational in other circumstances, where one does not have revelatory regret for having acted out of NTB. I think it’s plausible, for instance, that even where you have no revelatory regret it may be clear to you that you have a certain general commitment which is in conflict with your present NTB-motivated desire to ϕ ; in such cases, it may be irrational for you to act from NTB.

My overall conclusion will be that the source of the irrationality of NTB is independent of any tension that exists between regret and other attitudes espoused by those who are near-term biased. The source of the irrationality of NTB, on the account I propose, is instead a conflict between one’s considered values and present pro-attitudes toward particular actions motivated by NTB.

² We may understand prudence as a normative standpoint whose evaluations are in some sense determined by facts about what’s good and bad for us (Cf. Brown 2023). Dorsey defines prudence as “the domain or standpoint from which I determine what I owe to myself, specifically as concerns my well-being or the quality of my life” (Dorsey 2019: 462).

2. The Dorseyan Account of the Irrationality of NTB

2.1. Parfit & Dorsey

Dorsey's idea is that NTB is shown to be prudentially irrational by the fact that it leads to certain combinations of attitudes that are *unsavory* even if they're not *inconsistent*. For instance, if I'm near-term biased, I might (in pursuit of short-term pleasure) decide now to act in way that I know I've acted before, and in a way that I presently regret having acted. That is, I may well commit to doing something that I know my past self has done (e.g., drink to excess) and that I now have negative reactive attitudes against. This combination of attitudes, Dorsey claims, cannot be prudentially rational.

This argument will be elucidated further below, but it's important at this stage to distinguish it from another argument that also appeals to consideration of regret, one that is mentioned by Derek Parfit.³ In a discussion of time bias, Parfit considers the following defense of temporal neutrality:

You do not now regret your bias towards the near. But you will. When you pay the price—when you suffer the pain that you postponed at the cost of making it worse—you will wish that you did not care more about your nearer future. You will regret that you have this bias. It is irrational to do what you know you will regret (Parfit 1984: 187).

Call this the *standard (regret-based) argument* against NTBR. It is based on the principle that it's prudentially irrational to do what you foresee you'll regret. This principle, which I'll follow Frank Arntzenius (2008: 277) in calling "Piaf's Maxim", is an attractive one.⁴ However, as Dorsey (2019: 470) points out, in holding Piaf's Maxim, the proponent of the standard argument seems to be presupposing that you ought to care about your later regret in a way that you don't *given your near-term bias*. As such, the standard argument against NTBR looks question-begging: it presupposes that later goods should be valued just as much as nearer goods, and hence, that NTB is irrational.

The point is not that if NTB makes you indifferent now about your later regret, this lack of concern is thereby prudentially rational. The point is rather that if the standard argument presupposes that you *should* care about your later regret—more than you do, if you're near-term biased—then obviously it will have no force against the proponent of NTBR. As Dorsey claims, it's not inconsistent

³ Tomasz Zuradski notes (Zuradski 2016: 156) that Parfit's views on the rationality of future bias (past discounting) are not entirely clear, but that he is explicitly critical of NTB. For instance, Parfit writes, "on all plausible theories one point is agreed. When we are deciding what is in someone's interests, we should discount for uncertainty but not for remoteness. We should not give less weight to this person's further future, or give greater weight to his present desires... We should give equal weight to all the parts of this person's life" (Parfit 1984: 162).

⁴ The principle needs refinement, given there are cases where an individual may know that she'll irrationally regret some action that is in fact in her best interest. Imagine that you are considering whether to take a medicine that will cure an illness, and you know that one of the side effects is that it will cause you to regret taking it for some trivial reason. The fact that you know you'll regret taking the medicine does not make it prudentially irrational for you to take it. For further arguments that it can be rational for you to do something you know you'll regret, see Humberstone 1980, Strotz 1956, Weirich 1981.

for you to acknowledge that you'll later regret your present bias toward the near, while retaining this bias (hence, not *presently* regretting it) and using it to guide your practical decision-making. This combination of past-directed reactive attitude and present commitment to act is consistent, because the interests of your future self do not weigh heavily in your present deliberations. Moreover, it is not clear it is prudentially problematic for you to combine such attitudes. After all, while this combination of attitudes may *seem* prudentially irrational to someone who's *not* near-term biased, this is not necessarily a reason to regard it as prudentially irrational. Whether it is irrational may depend on the agent's own prudential perspective—a perspective that not only may change over time, but that may involve a *risk function* that weights expected utility of decisions quite differently from those of others.⁵ For instance, an individual who is highly *risk-inclined* may value a possible benefit in the present much more than a moderately risk-inclined, or a risk-avoidant, individual, even as that benefit becomes less and less likely (and associated costs in the relatively distant future become more and more likely).⁶ In such cases, the risk-inclined individual will tend to discount the future at a higher rate, and so be more heavily biased toward the near future.

Dorsey does not think the standard regret argument works, then. Foreseeable regret for having acted due to near-term bias does not establish that one is irrational for having such bias. But, as I indicated, Dorsey thinks that there's another version of the argument from regret that does succeed. The thought is that it is prudentially problematic to regret one's past NTB *while at the same time displaying the same NTB in the present*. Here is Dorsey:

Because I am biased toward the near, I will, at least on occasion, rationally prefer to engage in actions that fail to conform to the demands of my future self's prudential perspective—actions that, in other words, have the same benefit-and-burden profile that I *right now* maintain negative reactive attitudes toward. In effect, I am displaying anger, remorse, regret over past actions that currently sabotage my well-being, but *refuse* to *avoid* such actions in the present moment.... While this combination of attitudes is not strictly inconsistent, it is nevertheless *unsavory*—one that an agent who conforms to what she owes herself ought not to have.... [W]hen combined with NTB the person taking such an attitude both holds that one's past self should have taken one's current perspective more seriously, while *refusing* to take seriously a similar demand on behalf of one's (far) future self—a refusal which is a direct result of the near-term bias. It is hard to see how this combination of attitudes could be consistent with a prudentially rational agent (Dorsey 2019: 471).

It is clear that Dorsey's idea is quite different from Parfit's. Parfit's⁷ is that it's irrational to do what you know you will eventually regret. Dorsey's is that it's irrational to do *again* what you now regret having done at some point in the past. These views can be stated more formally, treating regret and knowledge as three-place relations, thus using ' $R(x, \varphi, t)$ ' for x regrets φ -ing at t ; ' $K(x, p, t)$ ' for x

⁵ On the notion of a risk function, and for a permissive account of rationality which appeals to the fact that there are a range of permissible risk functions, see Buchak 2013.

⁶ I do not deny that someone can be highly risk-inclined for the sake of distant future benefits, as e.g. an investor might be. In such cases, risk seeking need not lead to greater future discounting. (Thanks to David DiDomenico.)

⁷ Note that I am not attributing the view to Parfit.

knows that p at t ; using ' $RA_p(\varphi, x)$ ' for φ -ing is prudentially rational for x ; ' φ_t ' to indicate the time at which φ occurs; where $t' > t$:⁸

(P) $x \varphi_t$ -s & $K(x, R(x, \varphi_t, t'), t) \Rightarrow \sim RA_p(\varphi_t, x)$

(D) $x \varphi_t$ -s & $R(x, \varphi_t, t') \Rightarrow \sim RA_p(\varphi_t, x)$

P and D are logically independent. P does not entail D: If foreknowledge of one's regret for having φ_t -ed suffices for the irrationality of one's φ_t -ing, this does not entail that the fact that one regrets φ_t -ing at t' suffices for the irrationality of one's φ_t -ing. Nor does D entail P. Since $K(x, R(x, \varphi_t, t'), t) \Rightarrow R(x, \varphi_t, t')$ (presuming the factivity of knowledge), it follows that D cannot hold unless it's also the case that $x \varphi_t$ -s & $K(x, R(x, \varphi_t, t'), t) \Rightarrow \sim RA_p(\varphi_t, x)$. But P does not follow, since $\sim RA_p(\varphi_t, x) \nRightarrow \sim RA_p(\varphi_t, x)$. So, $D \nRightarrow P$. These formulations seem to reveal that the role of NTB in discounting future regret is irrelevant to D, since, according to D, it is not one's anticipated regret but one's present regret that is supposed to cause trouble for NTBR. The proponent of NTBR might take the fact that I give little weight to the interests of my future self, and consequently give little weight to the fact that I'll probably end up regretting my present decision to φ , to rationalize my decision to φ . And if the critic of NTBR objects that it cannot be prudentially rational for me to do what I know I'll probably regret, it seems reasonable to reply that this is uncharitable to the proponent of NTBR. But if, while not giving weight to my future self's interests, I also currently regret not having given weight to the interests of an earlier self, then it is not clearly uncharitable for the critic of NTBR to claim that this is prudentially problematic. After all, it is the same act type that is the object of both the retrospective regret and the present pro-attitude. I am thus refusing to take seriously the same demand by a later self that I am now making to my past self. In these circumstances, it seems that my reasons for taking such a demand seriously should not depend on *when* it occurs.

But here it is important to notice that Dorsey's view is substantively different from Parfit's only if the former is understood as maintaining that it's irrational to do again what you now regret having done *regardless of whether this is grounds for believing that you will later regret it (again)*. Otherwise, the argument would, like Parfit's, seem to presuppose that you should care about your later regret just as much as you care about your present regret—which is, of course, more than you *do* care given your NTB. In fact, there's reason to think that Dorsey's claim that it is prudentially irrational to refuse to take seriously the demand of your future self, given your present negative reactive attitudes toward your past self, depends on the assumption that, because you regret not taking seriously a similar demand of your past self, you will *also* very likely regret not taking the anticipated demand of your future self seriously. Thus, there's reason to think Dorsey's idea is not substantively different from Parfit's, after all.

To see this, let's imagine that there's an act, φ , such that you have *no* reason to think that you will regret φ -ing again, although you do regret having φ -ed in the past. (Maybe you are confident that you'll die before such regret could arise. Or maybe you are confident that your φ -ing will—this time—make possible some compensating good that will then obtain.) It is not clear why combining present commitment with present regret would be unsavory, in such a case. In fact, this is not a mere hypothetical, but a fairly common sort of situation. For instance,

⁸ Actually, this is not quite right, since t' must be *significantly distant* from t , and not simply greater than t —but this point will not matter in what follows.

while you may distinctly regret having taken on that extra commitment (e.g., helping a neighbor in need, teaching an extra class, signing up for that demanding training program) because it ended up being a much greater responsibility than you anticipated, you may also be determined when faced with the same situation in the future not to let the task overwhelm you and confident in your ability to prevent it from doing so. In such a case, you presently commit to doing the very same thing you now regret having done before, and it does not seem unsavory or otherwise problematic to do so.⁹ In general, whether such a decision is unsavory when combined with present regret depends *inter alia* on whether certain further commitments are made this time around. In the absence of such commitments, it may be reasonable to anticipate regret, in which case, the decision is more likely to be unsavory. This suggests that Dorsey's argument against NTBR relies implicitly on Piaf's Maxim, since it is that principle that seems to be what ultimately explains the unsavoriness in the relevant cases. That is, it is only if your present regret is taken as evidence of likely future regret that commitment to doing again what you presently regret having done seems unsavory.

Here is a possible rejoinder. It might be claimed that the unsavory cases are ones in which your commitment to doing what you currently regret having done has a similar expected outcome. In such cases, the acts you presently commit to performing are given as having the same "benefit-burden profile" as ones you now regret having done. Hence, you have no reason to think that any further commitment you make this time, or anything you do differently, will lead to a different outcome. It seems unsavory to combine present commitment with (present) regret in these cases. However, note that these are cases in which you can reasonably expect to *regret* your present decision to φ . In fact, the unsavoriness seems to depend on this expectation of regret. I am suggesting, then, that the Dorseyan account faces a dilemma: either the cases of unsavoriness that are taken to be evidence of prudential irrationality are stipulated to be ones in which the act that is presently committed to has the same benefit-burden profile as the act that is regretted, or they are not. If it is stipulated that the act has the same benefit-burden profile, then any unsavoriness involved is due to the reasonable expectation of regret; in which case, the argument implicitly relies on Piaf's maxim. If it is not stipulated that the act has the same benefit-burden profile, then present commitment to φ from NTB is not necessarily unsavory; whether it is depends on what benefits and costs are reasonably foreseeable.

In addition to cases in which you can reasonably expect not to regret doing again what you now regret having done, there are at least two other cases in which it is not irrational to combine regret for having φ -ed with a present commitment to φ (a commitment that may be driven in part by NTB)—despite the fact that it is reasonable to anticipate further regret for having φ -ed. First, there are cases of

⁹ It is not crucial that you have absolutely no reason to think you'll end up regretting this decision; the point is that even if you do, you also have good reason to think that you *won't* regret it. Another thing worth noting here is that you might recognize that your regret is likely only temporary. In that case, it does not seem prudentially problematic to commit to doing what you presently regret having done. I might, for instance, presently regret my decision to set out on a long training run, since I'm not particularly enjoying it, and am dreading all the miles that lie ahead. But I might know that my regret is likely temporary, and that by the end of the run I will be glad for having done it: "The risk of regret, and experience of temporary regret, can be counterbalanced or even outweighed by the expected or even unexpected benefits of our potentially regrettable choices" (Bnefsi 2023: 7).

certainty or inevitability of value loss. There is some amount of regret that is inevitable regardless of what you do in life, due to the plurality of values on offer and the fact that you must choose which ones to realize and thus which ones to forego. Such regret does not necessarily involve any perceived mistake, and so does not necessarily involve self-blame; but it does involve an experience of loss of some significant good. Connie Rosati, for instance, notes that we may experience a kind of “choice-regret” about having to choose a certain path and consequently lose an option we regarded as desirable. She notes that such regret “involves no sense that we have chosen mistakenly all things considered” and that it “expresses a kind of grief, a mourning of our lost lives and selves”.¹⁰ As such, it is not irrational in such cases to continue to act as you regret having acted. Justin White for instance notes (White 2017: 229) that I may regret not volunteering for a certain organization because my time is limited between family and work commitments, even though I would continue to choose family and work over volunteering.

There are also cases of *uncertainty of relative value*. There is often significant uncertainty about the relative importance of values at stake in our decisions. For example, suppose a longtime friend has recently died. I regret not having done more to cultivate our friendship. I might think it is a great loss, a neglected opportunity—that I could have been closer to this person. Our friendship could have been deeper and more meaningful for both of us, if only I had put more effort into it. Nevertheless, I may continue to neglect to cultivate remaining friendships, in favor of competing ends. It is not that I fail to recognize the value of doing more to cultivate these relationships, or that I think my other pursuits are more important. Still, I might feel unsure about the overall value of spending more time on developing my relationships and less on my current projects. After all, it is not something that is easily or clearly quantifiable, and comparison here is imprecise and somewhat subjective. It is not just that I may be certain that there is some guaranteed loss here, however I choose to trade off these goods. I might also remain uncertain about their relative value. It is not irrational for me to combine regret for having φ -ed with present commitment to φ in such cases.

I have considered two interpretations of the idea suggested by Dorsey: (i) it’s irrational to do what you currently regret having done, because in this situation you have reason to think you will later regret the current action (and it’s irrational to do what you have reason to think you’ll later regret); (ii) it’s irrational simply because it’s unsavory to combine the past-directed negative reactive attitude toward an act with a present commitment to performing the act. (We might refer to (i) as the *forward-looking* rationale, and (ii) as the *non-forward-looking* rationale.) I think it’s only (ii) that promises any improvement over the standard argument against NTB. ((i) may be dismissed by the proponent of NTB as presuming that the interests of one’s distant future self merit greater consideration than NTB involves.) However, as I’ve argued, (ii) still exhibits an implicit bias *against NTB*, in that *it presumes that the prudential rationality of the current act cannot be determined solely by its near-term benefit-and-burden profile*—i.e., that it must depend in part on the *overall* impact of a given instance of the act (past or future) on one’s prudential interests. In acting from NTB, I give more weight to my present and near-term prudential perspective than to my

¹⁰ Rosati 2007: 247. Also relevant here is the phenomenon of “alternative outcome bias”—where there is a missed alternative outcome that would have had a more positive outcome than the actual outcome. (See Seta et al. 2015.) Regret associated with this bias need not make it irrational to continue to act in ways that have the same expected outcome.

far-term prudential perspective. It simply matters more to me now that I indulge my interest in exploration and adventure, while I am relatively young and able-bodied, even at the cost of doing considerably less to develop certain talents and enhance my understanding of various subjects of interest than I would otherwise be able to do. While I understand that it's not unlikely that I will regret this decision when I'm older, this fact does not weigh heavily in my deliberation.¹¹ And although my decision may be (foreseeably) regrettable, it's hard to see why it should for that reason be seen as irrational from a prudential perspective that includes NTB—*unless NTB is regarded as inherently irrational*.

2.2 The Normative Action-Guiding Nature of Regret

Perhaps the defender of the Dorseyan account can avoid the objection of implicit anti-NTB bias by appealing to the normative, action-guiding nature of regret. That is, the Dorseyan might argue that, supposing your regret for having φ -ed is justified, it is not possible for you to respond to this regret in the right sort of way unless you are disposed to avoid φ -ing at present. To commit to φ in such circumstances is unsavory, it seems, precisely because it fails to take seriously the *normative* nature of the regret. Consider a simple example that illustrates this point.¹² Suppose you're offered \$1 at t_1 or \$2 at t_2 (where t_1 is very close to the present moment, and t_2 is relatively close to (say, within a day of) t_1). And suppose that you choose the first, and later regret this decision, knowing you could have obtained more value had you deferred gratification. Now suppose that you're given the same offer at t_3 : either \$1 at t_3 or \$2 at t_4 . It would seem foolish for you to make the same mistake. Why? Because your regret is action-guiding. By choosing \$1 at t_3 , you fail to take seriously your own assessment of your past act of choosing \$1 at t_1 .

The crucial question is whether your present commitment to forego some future good for the sake of a lesser good at present shows a failure to take seriously your negative assessment of your past decision to do the same. The answer depends on what that negative assessment is, exactly; and on what "taking it seriously" requires. Let's start with the question of what sort of negative assessment *regret* typically involves. First, note that regret might be understood minimally as a *preference for having done otherwise* (or that things *had been* otherwise). This attitude might be combined with the judgment that things *would have gone better* had the regretted act or event not occurred. But it need not be. In this sense, I might regret having been quick to criticize a family member or friend, or having prepared too much, or too little, for a lecture, without judging that if I had done otherwise then things would have gone better. (I might withhold judgment about whether they would have gone better; or I might actually think this is unlikely, and have good reasons for thinking so.) In any case, it is not regret in this minimal sense that the

¹¹ Compare Parfit's expression of the views of Proximus (the partisan of near-term bias) (Parfit 1984: 188): "My future regrets will indeed, impartially considered, outweigh my future gladness. But I do not consider my future impartially. I care more about what is near. Since my future gladness is nearer, it outweighs my future regrets".

¹² Dorsey offers a similar example—see Dorsey 2019: 475. I note that the example might strike the reader as fairly trivial and as having little or no bearing on our understanding of what prudence demands when it comes to difficult decisions that may affect the entire course of one's life. Such decisions have distinctive features that merit serious consideration. But the example has the virtue of isolating a key feature of regret in cases of actions that are clearly repeatable, viz., it's action-guiding nature.

Dorseyan account is concerned with. Rather, the relevant sense of regret involves a kind of intrapersonal *blame* or attribution of *wrongdoing*. While it is possible to regret an event (the suffering caused by the war in the Middle East, for instance) in the minimal sense without thinking that you bear any responsibility for it, it is not possible to regret having φ -ed, in the Dorseyan sense, without attributing a kind of wrongdoing to your past self.¹³ So, in the intrapersonal cases of interest, we'll assume that you count as regretting having φ -ed in case you not only prefer that you had not φ -ed, but also judge that you ought not to have φ -ed.¹⁴

We should also distinguish between the idea that regret for having φ -ed involves a (perhaps implicit) *general* normative judgment (i.e., one that is not directed towards any particular act) and the idea that regret involves a *particular* normative judgment. If your regret for having φ -ed involves the general judgment that you ought not (ever) to φ , then your commitment to doing what you regret having done would seem straightforwardly prudentially irrational. But if your regret need not involve such a general normative judgment—if it requires only the particular judgment that *you should not have φ -ed when you did*—then it remains an open question whether it can be prudentially rational to combine regret for having φ -ed with a present commitment to φ .

Next, consider what it might mean to “take seriously” your regret for having φ -ed. There is a range of things that might be thought to be entailed by taking your regret seriously, but one thing that seems to be crucially involved in the intrapersonal cases we're interested in is a *responsiveness to the action-guiding nature of such regret*. To take your regret seriously is, apparently, to allow the regret to play a significant role in your deliberations and practical decisions—and specifically, to be disposed to act in ways that you have reason to think will not lead to similar instances of regret.

Does the present pro-attitude towards φ -ing fail to respond properly to the action-guiding nature of the regret for having φ -ed? This is plausible. But notice that it does seem to presume that the prudential rationality of foregoing a later, greater good for the sake of a lesser present one cannot depend solely on the near-term benefit-burden profile of this decision. First, whatever precisely is required for *responding to the action-guiding nature* of a reactive attitude (as this notion is typically understood), it must involve a forward-looking aspect. To be guided by your reactive attitudes toward your past acts is to be presently disposed to act in certain ways in light of those attitudes. Moreover, to be guided by your past mistakes—i.e., by your understanding of their *overall* effect on your prudential interests—is to take a relatively long view of the matter; hence, it is to eschew, or at least temper, NTB. Hence, this appeal to the normative nature of regret—in particular, the

¹³ “[W]e normally associate regret with a painful feeling whose object is a lamentable situation involving the thought that one chose or acted incorrectly according to some set of value” (Bnefsi 2023: 11).

¹⁴ The nature of this ‘ought’ judgment—in particular, whether it is a moral judgment, a merely pragmatic judgment, or rather a kind of normative judgment that is distinct from either of these (a “prudential” ought judgment, perhaps)—is an issue that I cannot address here. I should however note that I take Dorsey’s account of the prudential irrationality of NTB not to depend on which type of normative judgment is involved in these cases. That is, I take his view to be that as long as one makes a relevant normative judgment of one of these types, and thus that one *regrets* a past act in one of these senses, then it is prudentially irrational to presently commit to performing the very same type of act.

thought that regret's action-guiding force ought to be taken seriously—seems to involve *anti-NTB bias*.

The Dorseyan might retort: provided your regret is rational, this provides independent justification for the kind of anti-NTB “bias” that’s involved in responding rationally to regret. Thus the fact that you cannot guide your actions in response to your regret in the way that is rationally required, without eschewing NTB, provides an explanation of the irrationality of NTB; it does not simply presuppose that NTB is irrational. But because rationality of NTB is just what’s at issue, no attitude that is inconsistent with NTB should be assumed to be rationally required *unless there’s some reason for doing so that is neutral on the question of NTBR*. Hence, if regret is understood as entailing such an attitude, then regret, or the particular aspect of it in virtue of which such an attitude is required, should not be assumed to be rational, unless there is some independent reason for regarding it as such. If the particular normative judgment, *I should not have φ -ed (out of NTB) just when I did* is rational, this does not imply that the judgment that I ought *now*, or *generally*, refrain from acting similarly from NTB, is rational. It appears consistent, then, to regard the core normative judgment involved in regret as rational, while leaving open whether it is rational to act from NTB at present.

On the other hand, if we suppose your prudential perspective involves NTB, then there seems nothing odd about genuinely regretting your past decision—and blaming your past self for the situation it has now put you in—while committing to doing the same to your future self. According to NTBR, there’s no reason to think that your past-directed attitudes should have any bearing on your present decisions except insofar as they indicate near-term benefits. Only if you *identify* with both your past and future selves, or anyway recognize certain duties, or bonds of concern, to your future self, does the commitment to acting in a way that foreseeably compromises the interests of your future self fail to comport with prudential rationality. Or, at least, that is the line that looks to be available to the proponent of NTBR, and it’s hard to see how the opponent of NTBR is going to respond without simply assuming that NTB is irrational.

3. The Contingent Irrationality of Near-Term Bias

3.1 NTB & Bonds of Concern to Future Selves

I have argued that the Dorseyan account of the irrationality of NTB is subject to a version of Dorsey’s own criticism against the standard argument against NTB. The relevant combination of regret and present pro-attitude toward an act is unsavory only if the agent has a reason to think they will come to regret having performed the act. The judgment that it is unsavory thus presumes that NTB is irrational. NTBR, by contrast, can be given the following rationale (from the first-person perspective):

Pro-NTBR

“I regret that my past self didn’t care about his future self (=my present self) enough not to φ , thus compromising my prudential interests. After all, I am now worse off than I would have been as a result of my past self’s actions. And now I am faced with the same decision whether to φ , and thus whether to further compromise the prudential interests of my distant future self. While it may seem irrational for me to commit to doing again just what I regret having done before, this is only the case if I have the same bonds of concern to my

distant future self as those that obtain between my past and present selves. But, since I'm near-term biased, I don't have the same bonds of concern to my distant future self. So, the prudential interests of that self do not weigh heavily in my decision whether to refrain from compromising those interests (and to compromise my present interests). I understand that my distant future self will likely regret my decision, just as I now regret the decision of my past self. But I don't see this as sufficient reason not to make the decision, since the interests of that self are not very important to me".

I should mention that there's an issue here of whether relevant bonds of concern may hold even if they're not recognized by the agent. In the interpersonal case, we might take such bonds to be independent of the agent's awareness of them. Accordingly, we might take certain reasons to be generated by such bonds regardless of whether the agent *cares*—the relevant fact, we might think, is that the agent *should* care, given the relations he bears to others. The same might be said of the intrapersonal case. Accordingly, the critic of NTB might maintain that the fact that I bear certain relations to my far-future self implies that I ought to care about his interests, regardless of whether I do care.

This sounds like a reasonable thing to say about what grounds prudential concern for one's future selves. But note that one who is near-term biased will discount the interests of his far-future self precisely because they're *temporally distant*; he will take the fact that they're temporally distant to merit less concern for them, regardless of any other relation between his present and far-future self that obtains and that might be deemed relevant to his present prudential perspective. Thus the proponent of NTBR will reject the idea that there are relevant bonds that are independent of the agent's own recognition or concern. Perhaps this perspective is shortsighted and deficient, in some sense, but the argument that it is irrational because it fails to take seriously the interests of one's far-future self has no persuasive force for the proponent of NTBR.

Dorsey is right that regret and other remorseful attitudes are entirely appropriate when directed to past actions that make things overall worse for one's present interests. Regret cannot be irrational or mistaken in these cases. (Whether regret is rationally required is a further question.) If a theory of prudential rationality implies that such regret is irrational, this constitutes a *reductio* of the theory. The right response on behalf of NTB, then, is not to deny that such regret, and other negative reactive attitudes, are appropriate. Rather, as Pro-NTBR suggests, the proponent of NTB should deny that the combination of these past-directed attitudes and the present pro-attitude, toward the same act (type), is indeed prudentially irrational, however unsavory it may seem from the perspective of temporal neutrality.

I will now sketch an alternative account of NTB, according to which it is contingently prudentially irrational. The account is based on the idea that regret for having acted from NTB sometimes reveals enduring values which are at odds with particular pro-attitudes in the present. On this account, ϕ -ing from NTB is irrational when regret for having ϕ -ed due to NTB reveals such values.

3.2 The Revelatory Regret-Based Account

White notes that retrospective regret is often revelatory, in the sense that it can reveal to the agent something important about her own standpoint (White 2017). We sometimes come to a clearer understanding of what we value as a

consequence of regretting something we've done or have failed to do. For example, a patient who foregoes a certain medical treatment and suffers as a consequence may come to realize that he values his mobility, communication, sexual function, etc. more than he had previously thought. Someone who ends a relationship and is unexpectedly distraught over the loss may realize that she values the relationship more than she had appreciated. And so on.

The fact that regret is often revelatory in this way suggests a different account of the irrationality of NTB, one which does not take it to be explained, or revealed, by a tension between *regret* and certain pro-attitudes that manifest NTB. The basic idea is this. Sometimes when I regret having φ -ed out of NTB, I come to see that I care more about the interests of my far future self—my long-term health, etc.—than I had thought, or more than was apparent to me at the time. So even if, due to NTB, I am still strongly disposed to want to φ in the present, my present regret for having φ -ed helps me see that I have considered values that are at odds with that desire. If I am indeed committed to these values, then it seems unsavory to combine them with a present desire to φ . This doesn't seem like something that conforms to the demands of a prudentially rational perspective.

Notice that, on this account, there is no appeal to anticipated regret. Moreover, it's not the retrospective regret per se that is not rationally combinable with a particular present commitment, but rather *the values that are revealed by the regret*. In a sense, such regret reveals that you really don't want to φ , after all; or, perhaps, that you have a strong second-order desire not to want to φ , in light of your considered values. It reveals a more general commitment which is at odds with the particular present commitment or pro-attitude toward φ -ing. For example, a professional athlete may regret her decision to invest so much time and energy in her training, once she realizes it has caused her relationships with family members to suffer. The regret may lead the athlete to reflect on her reasons for having this regret and may then lead to a clearer awareness of the kind of value she sees in cultivating her relationships. Once this has become clear to her, it would seem irrational for her to continue to train as she did before, knowing the toll it will take on her relationships.

The picture, then, is this: acting from NTB sometimes leads to regret, and to blame of one's past self, for having so acted. This regret sometimes reveals certain values that are at odds with one's present pro-attitude towards a similar act. The regret reveals such values, in the sense that it disposes one to reflect on why one has regret, and this naturally leads to a clearer awareness of the relevant values. NTB—that is, one's present disposition to act from such bias—is prudentially irrational in these situations.

The account allows that NTB may be rational in other situations. For instance, some cases of regret are not (particularly) revelatory. They do not reveal that one cares more deeply about something than was apparent before, or that what one *really* values is y rather than x . In at least some such cases, it can be reasonable for the agent to continue to act from NTB, just as s/he regrets having done. Joe regrets not having been more assertive when arguing with his colleagues. Joshua regrets not having been more self-confident and proactive in pursuing Jill, in whom he has a romantic interest. (In each case, the passivity trades a later benefit for the nearer comfort of avoiding friction or rejection.) Nonetheless, when further opportunities arise, they are no more committed to acting with initiative than they were before. Is this prudentially irrational? Arguably, no. These might be taken as cases of weakness of will, but they need not be; it may be that, all things considered, you simply

prefer to φ now (and in general), even though you regret having φ -ed before. (Although you regret having φ -ed, this doesn't imply that you would regard it as a mistake to φ at present; cf. Rosati 2007.)

Part of the explanation of the rationality of NTB in these cases seems to be that while you may clearly value the things you regret not having done, you may value certain alternatives just as much. This is a general point that does not essentially concern NTB: regret over a foregone good is compatible with continued endorsement of one's choice. But it applies to cases in which the chosen alternative is favored by NTB, that is, where the chosen good is nearer and the good forgone is more distant. I might regret not having studied a certain subject with more commitment, rather than indulged more short-term interests, but when given a further opportunity, I might make the same decision (again, not because of weakness of will). In these cases, my regret does not reveal a failure of coherence among my values, as much as a certain ordering of those values, in virtue of which I remain unwilling to make certain trade-offs among them.

So, it appears it is coherent, and not unsavory, for one with NTB to combine regret with present commitment, in at least some cases where regret is not revelatory. Note that my regret in these cases does not reveal something about myself that I did not already know: that I was really a certain sort of person, or that I cared more deeply about something than I'd thought. I might even have predicted that I would regret what I'd done and am not surprised by the fact that I now regret it. While this doesn't necessarily mean that there is nothing prudentially problematic about presently committing to doing what I regret (in this non-revelatory way) having done, I suggest that it at least removes some tension here: if the combination of regret and present commitment in these cases is unsavory, that is not because of a clear tension between what one values and what one presently desires. Such a tension may exist in these cases—but it's not guaranteed to exist simply in virtue of the regret.

4. Conclusion

I will conclude with some brief remarks about the relevant difference between the revelatory account of the irrationality of NTB and the Dorseyan account.

The revelatory account avoids the problem of anti-NTB bias by locating the relevant tension which reveals the irrationality of NTB in a combination of present pro-attitudes: in particular, the attitude of valuing a certain kind of life, and the attitude of desiring (intending, or committing to) a particular act which does not cohere with the state of affairs valued. By contrast, the Dorseyan account ostensibly locates the relevant tension between a present pro-attitude and a (present) negative reactive attitude, both taken toward a particular type of act. But it turns out that on the Dorseyan account, the source of irrationality is, after all, anticipated regret. And the claim that such regret establishes the irrationality of NTB rests on anti-NTB bias and is therefore uncharitable to the proponent of NTBR. My account avoids this problem, since it does not appeal to anticipated regret at all; instead, it appeals to a conflict between the relevant (near-term biased) pro-attitude and one's considered values.

While the proposed account does not explicitly rely on assumptions about anticipated regret, nevertheless it may seem to explain the irrationality of NTB in terms of forward-looking considerations, since the considered values revealed by regret to which it appeals (e.g., living a good life, according to some conception)

are themselves forward-looking, at least in part. Can we be sure it does not, then, rely tacitly on any consideration of anticipated regret? Does the conflict between considered values and pro-attitude arise only on the assumption that acting on the latter is liable to lead to regret (because it thwarts one's attempt to live according to one's considered values)? I reject this idea. The relevant conflict is one that obtains prior to and independently of any anticipated regret. This is revealed by the fact that it's possible to discern the conflict in the absence of any anticipation of regret. It's possible, for instance, to see that there is a conflict between my present inclination to act on impulse and my commitment to the value of living a more reflective sort of life—one in which I do *not* tend to act on impulse—independently of any anticipation of regret due to acting on impulse. Of course, this is compatible with my anticipating regret if I do not refrain from acting on impulse—but the conflict does not depend on such anticipation of regret.¹⁵

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¹⁵ I would like to thank David DiDomenico whose extensive comments and questions on an earlier draft of this paper have helped me clarify a number of important points.