

PRUDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY TO SELF IN AN IDENTITY CRISIS

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Abstract: A comprehensive theory of rational prudence would explain how a person should adjudicate among the conflicting interests of her past, present, future and counterfactual selves. For example, when a person is having an identity crisis, perhaps because she has suddenly become disabled, she may be left with no sense of purpose to keep her going. In her despondent state, she may think it prudent to give up on life now even if she would soon adopt a different set of values that would give her a renewed sense of meaning. Yet we may think that, in many cases, it would be irrational for such a person to allow herself to die. My aim is to explain this prudential intuition by developing a partial framework of rational prudence that interprets and applies the idea that a prudent person acts in ways that are justifiable to herself over time.

1. Introduction

We sometimes face decisions that will either favor the satisfaction of our current desires at the expense of conflicting desires we have at different times in our life, or favor satisfying those earlier or later desires rather than our present ones.¹ A teenager, for example, may have little interest in earning his diploma but know that he will later regret not doing; an older person may prefer to abandon her religious practices while she earlier hoped to continue them throughout her life; or an idealistic youth may want to commit his inheritance to liberal causes even though he will later wish he could use the money to promote conservative aims.²

¹ I am grateful to Thomas Hill, Peter Vallentyne, David Wasserman, Robert Johnson, Markus Kohl, John

² The last example is a variant of Parfit's (1984, 326-328) Russian Nobleman.

Other kinds of decisions we face will affect what desires we will come to have in the future or even whether we will have any future at all. If someone decides to pursue a career in medicine, for example, she is likely to internalize a different set of values than if she instead chooses to pursue philosophy. Or, a person might be contemplating suicide as a means of satisfying her current desires even though she would later be glad that she refrained from doing so.

A comprehensive theory of rational prudence should explain how we should balance the interests we have at one time in our life against conflicting interests we have at another time in our life. Such a theory should also explain how we should make decisions that will affect the kinds of desires we will come to have in the future or that determine whether we will exist in the future at all.³

One kind of context in which these cross-temporal conflicts are especially apparent is when a person is having an identity crisis, perhaps as a result of a divorce, family tragedy, reversal in economic fortune, or serious accident that has left her disabled. When a person has suddenly lost the values, loyalties and commitments that she once identified with and finds herself with no deep values or sense of meaning to replace them, she may wonder whether the prudent thing to do is to give up on life by committing suicide or otherwise allowing herself to die. She may know that, if she could just make it through this trying time, she would come to adopt a new and different set of values that would give her a renewed sense of purpose. She may also know that the convictions she once had strongly oppose ending her life now. In her state of despondency, however, the values that she affirmed in the past or would affirm in the future have little or no interest

³ For discussions of these prudential issues, see (Arntzenius 2008, Parfit 1984, Harman 2009, Howard 2015, Setiya 2014, Chang 2015, 2012, Paul 2014, Greene and Sullivan 2015, Bratman 1998, Elster 1979).

to her now, so she may decide that the most rational way to adjudicate these conflicts is to favor her current desires and so end her life now. Yet we may think that, apart from any moral objections there may be to killing herself, it would often be imprudent or irrational for such a person to commit suicide even if this is the most effective way for her to satisfy the desires she currently has. My aim is to explain this prudential intuition by developing a partial framework of rational prudence that interprets and applies the idea that a prudent person acts in ways that are justifiable to herself over time. My focus is on *objective* rational prudence, which specifies how we are rationally required to pursue, reflect on and prioritize our desires in light of all relevant empirical facts, although the view I develop could be extended to a *subjective* theory of rational prudence, which would specify how we should pursue and organize our desires in light of our reasonable beliefs about our circumstances.

Addressing the general question of how to adjudicate conflicts among our past, present, future and counterfactual desires is especially important for thinking about the pressing practical issue of what a person should do if she suddenly and unexpectedly finds herself with a severe disability that has upended her plans and sense of self. A common and natural reaction, in such circumstances, is to experience painful feelings of despondency, powerlessness and disorientation when she realizes that many of her most fundamental plans and projects have failed and that her way of life, as she knew it, is over (Rolland 1987, Karp 1999, Bauby 1997, Kerr and Thompson 1972, Vash and Crewe 2004). Those who have recently and unexpectedly become disabled may have misconceptions about what their lives will be like as a disabled person or they may be suffering from temporary shock or depression, but even those who are clear-eyed about

their prospects may nonetheless wonder whether there is any point to going on in life. As much as we may sympathize with a person who has suddenly become blind, Deaf, paralyzed or cognitively impaired, we may also think that she should not give up on herself so soon but instead begin working to develop different aims and commitments that will give her a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. The problem is that the person may not have any deep values and aims now that can propel her through the intervening period of inconvenience and hardship that would be required in order for her to eventually take on a new practical identity. It is difficult to explain why such a person has non-moral reasons to undergo such a difficult transition when she could instead spare herself the trouble and simply end her life now.

My plan for this essay is as follows: In Section 2, I describe a person I call Lois who is undergoing an identity crisis because she has recently suffered an accident that has left her paralyzed. In Section 3, I highlight an ambiguity in the traditional principles of rational prudence and explain why, on some theories of rationality, Lois should end her life even though she would soon regain a sense of meaning and purpose if she were to go on living. In Section 4, I argue that rational prudence requires an impartial concern for all moments of one's life and that one way to interpret this notion of impartiality is that prudence requires us to act on plans of life that are justifiable to ourselves at every moment in our life. In Section 5, I describe three criticisms of this principle of responsibility to self. In Sections 6, 7 and 8, I sketch a prudential framework that interprets and applies the idea of responsibility to self and explain how it avoids the three criticisms I raise. And in Section 9, I argue that, if this prudential framework is basically

correct, Lois should take the necessary steps to maintain her life, in part because of the meaningful and prosperous period that she would soon enjoy if she were to go on living.

2. Lois' Identity Crisis

Lois is a successful concert pianist who has built her life around playing music with skill and mastery. She loves playing the piano well for its own sake, but she also deeply values the relationships, community ties and professional successes that her playing has made possible. Her closest friends, including her husband, are fellow musicians who share similar musical aims and aspirations; she thoroughly enjoys performing in groups; she is devoted to her piano students and past teachers; she has strong community bonds with fellow members of an organization that mentors aspiring female pianists; she enjoys the accolades that come from her playing; she has a strong sense of solidarity with those who, throughout history, have played and appreciated classical piano; and she has deeply held convictions that underlie and reinforce these goals, aspirations, projects and allegiances. Lois has come to identify with this set of fundamental values and convictions in the sense that they are what keep her going, they define her way of life and what she sees as worth doing and striving for in the world, and they give her life its point, purpose and meaning.

One day, on their way to a concert, Lois and her husband are involved in a serious automobile accident. Lois awakens to learn that her husband has died and that she has suffered a stroke, which has left the right side of her body permanently paralyzed. Her doctors tell her that intensive and long-term physical therapy would improve her muscle

strength, sensation, and coordination but that, at best, she would regain only limited control over the right side of her body.

Lois is devastated by this information. At first, all she can do is mourn for her husband, but as the full extent of her impairments sinks in, she realizes that she will never again perform Bach's "Goldberg Variations," learn Balakirev's "Islamey" or play any of the other pieces that were once so meaningful to her. Her piano teaching days, she also thinks, are over; she seriously doubts that she can be useful anymore to aspiring female pianists; and she strongly suspects that her friends and acquaintances in the music world will gradually fade away.

These realizations lead to a sudden and profound repudiation of the projects, commitments, affections and convictions that Lois once had, leaving her with no deep values or convictions to replace them. In her state of despondency, nothing seems worth doing or striving for anymore to Lois; her previous affections are gone; and her prior religious beliefs now seem hollow. Her identity crisis has left Lois feeling lost, dispirited and confused; her world has crumbled around her and she now lacks any serious values and convictions to orient her practical thinking.⁴ Lois still has tastes, preferences and urges of various kinds, but all of them lack any deep significance to her. She is not clinically depressed nor does she have any other mental disorder, according to the accepted diagnostic criteria for psychiatric conditions.⁵ After careful and informed

⁴ These notions of 'identity' and 'identity crisis' figure prominently in the work of Charles Taylor (1992, 1989, 1985b, a) and Bernard Williams (1973a, 1981c, b, d, 1973b). For further discussions of 'practical identities' see (Sandel 1998, Korsgaard 1996, 2009, MacIntyre 1984, Frankfurt 1988, DeGrazia 2005).

⁵ *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition) notes: "Responses to a significant loss (e.g., bereavement, financial ruin, losses from a natural disaster, a serious medical illness or disability) may include the feelings of intense sadness, rumination about the loss, insomnia, poor appetite, and weight loss noted in Criterion A, which may resemble a depressive episode. Although such symptoms may be understandable or considered appropriate to the loss, the presence of a major depressive episode in addition to the normal response to a significant loss should also be carefully considered. This decision inevitably

reflection, she no longer sees any point to going on: “The old Lois is gone,” she often thinks to herself “and I don’t know who I am anymore because I’m no longer anyone at all, so I might as well have died in that accident along with my husband.”⁶

As Lois lies in her hospital bed recovering from her injuries, she contracts a serious bacterial infection that, if left untreated, would result in her death. When Lois reflects on whether to allow her doctors to administer the necessary antibiotics, she first recalls her prior values and convictions, which strongly favor accepting the life-saving treatment. She then tries to imagine what her life would be like in the future as a disabled person living with hemiparesis. She is initially quite pessimistic about her prospects, but conversations with others as well as facts Lois knows about herself lead her to think that she would eventually develop goals, affections and convictions that would give her a new and different sense of meaning and purpose in her life than what she had before.⁷ Lois becomes convinced, in particular, that her love of music would return to some extent but that her life would be mostly dedicated to the values, loyalties and principles of advocacy for people with disabilities, which she would pursue reasonably well throughout the remainder of her natural life.

requires the exercise of clinical judgment based on the individual’s history and the cultural norms for the expression of distress in the context of loss” (2013, 161). Lois, in particular, does not satisfy five or more of the nine listed criteria for major depressive disorder (2013, 160-8): She is not indecisive nor does she have a diminished ability to think and concentrate (criterion A8), her weight (criterion A3), appetite (criterion A3), energy levels (criterion A6) and sleep patterns (criterion A4) have remained relatively stable, she gets some pleasure from certain activities of daily life (criterion A2), and she does not exhibit psychomotor agitations such as hand-wringing (criterion A5).

⁶ This example draws on real-world cases in which successful concert pianists suddenly became paralyzed but, after a period of despondency, returned to playing pieces written for the left hand (Hayashi 2007, Leslan 2011).

⁷ Psychological research suggests that humans are often subject to various biases that interfere with our ability to predict and vividly imagine what kinds of experiences, desires, values and affects we will have in the future, especially after we have undergone a profound shift in circumstances (Wilson and Gilbert 2003, Woodzicka and LaFrance 2001, Finkenauer et al. 2007, Eastwick et al. 2008). In order to isolate the problem I want to focus on, however, I assume that Lois is fully aware of what her life will be like if she were to accept the antibiotics.

Lois finds, however, that this knowledge about the kind of self she used to be or the kind of self she would likely become have no interest to her now. She does not affirm either set of basic values and convictions in her present condition and she does not see why the aims, values or successes she had in the past or would have in the future matter at all to her present choice about whether or not to end her life. She admits that if she now had certain aspirations, hopes or aims that were connected with her previous or future selves then they could give her reasons to accept the treatment. But as things stand, Lois sees herself in the past and in the future as strangers. She is alienated from the values and convictions she had before the accident and from the ones she would have if she were to go on living. The prospect of a meaningful future period of her life leaves Lois cold. When she confines her practical reflections to the desires she currently has, Lois decides that her moderate pain and discomfort along with her feelings of powerlessness and despondency are significant enough that, with no deep values and convictions to keep her going, the most effective way to satisfy her current desires as a whole is to allow her life to end now. Not everyone would react in the same way that Lois does, but she concludes that the prudent thing for her to do is to refuse the antibiotics, even though she recognizes that doing so will result in her early death and thereby prevent her from enjoying what would otherwise be a happy and meaningful period of her life.

Lois' decision to refuse life-sustaining treatment may be objectionable on various moral grounds. Some may think, for example, that Lois has self-regarding duties to preserve her life, to develop her talents and to maintain a sense of her own worth. She may also have special obligations to friends and family as well as a general duty to promote the happiness of others that require her to maintain her existence.

Apart from a proper moral assessment of Lois' choice, there are also questions about whether it is *prudent* or *sensible* for Lois to refuse life-sustaining aid in light of her own values, aims, ends, convictions and other desires. If Lois were to ask for our advice and counsel about whether to accept the antibiotics, she would not necessarily be asking for a moral appraisal of her decision; instead, she would be asking us to take up her perspective and give our considered opinion about the most rational course of action for her to take from her point of view. Many of us may be conflicted or unsure about what recommendations we would give in this advisory capacity, but we may be tempted to say that, all else equal, it is imprudent of Lois to refuse the antibiotics because doing so would prevent her from having a successful and meaningful period of her life. Even if we were convinced that refusing the treatment is the most effective way to satisfy the desires Lois now has in her current, despondent, state, we may at least think that it is prudent for her to take account of the kind of life she would eventually come to have if she were to go on living. We may even think that, as a matter of prudence, she should also consider how the values and convictions she had in the past might bear on her decision now even though she does not affirm them in her current state.

The example of Lois illustrates two puzzles in the theory of rational prudence. First, how should we rationally balance the interests we have at one time in our life against conflicting interests we have at another time in our life? A theory of rational prudence should explain how to adjudicate the conflict between Lois' past self, who would want her to accept the treatment now, and her current self, who prefers not to do so. Second, how should we make decisions that affect the kinds of desires we will come to have in the future or that determine whether we will have any future at all? A theory

of rational prudence should explain whether or not Lois ought to accept the treatment in part because doing so would lead her to develop a new set of desires that she would satisfy reasonably well in the future.

3. Prudential Rationality and Pure Time Preference

Objective rationality, in its prudential sense, specifies standards that are to guide a single person in her practical deliberations about her own desires and the means she can take to achieve them in light of all the relevant facts about her circumstances in the past, present and possible futures (Rawls 2000, 46-47). A person's desires, in the broad sense of 'desire' that I am using, include her likes and dislikes, aims, aspirations, values, loyalties, affections, convictions and other practical attitudes. Although there is disagreement about the best way to interpret this concept of rationality, theories or conceptions of objective rational prudence typically include principles that require, all else equal, taking the most effective and probable means to satisfying our desires, reflecting on our desires in various ways, and prioritizing and scheduling our final desires when they conflict with one another (Rawls 2000, 46-47, Sidgwick 1981, Book II, O'Neill 1990, 90-93, Broome 2013, Williams 1981a, b).

Rational deliberation on the basis of these traditional principles can lead a person to lose some of her final desires, perhaps because she finds that they are based on false beliefs, or to acquire new ones, once she fully imagines, for example, what it would be like to achieve some goal. Our final desires, however, can also change as a result of non-rational processes such as shifts in circumstances, natural patterns of growth and

development, psychological transitions and our own free choices.⁸ A person can simply find herself at one time of life with a different, and perhaps conflicting, set of final desires than the ones she has at other times in her life. She can, for example, acquire new values, lose certain affections, revise her goals and undergo a religious conversion, all in ways that are not fully explained or mandated by principles of rationality.

The remarkable and deep shifts that can occur in a person's set of final desires highlight an ambiguity in the traditional principles of rational prudence. On the one hand, those requirements may refer to all of a person's desires throughout her life, including ones she does not have during the time in which she is currently deliberating about prudential questions. On the other hand, the principles may only refer to desires that the person has while she deliberates about such questions. According to the first, diachronic, interpretations of rational prudence, Lois has reason to examine, effectively pursue and balance all of the desires she had in the past, has at present and will or would have in the future. According to the second, synchronic, way of understanding the traditional principles of rational prudence, Lois is rationally required to investigate, efficiently satisfy and prioritize only the present desires she has as she deliberates about whether or not to accept the antibiotics.

Synchronic principles of rational prudence, which are relativized to a person's current set of desires, could nonetheless imply that it is rational for a person like Lois to accept life-saving aid. We might suspect that if Lois really would come to affirm a new set of values in the near future then, deep down, she now affirms those same values or ones closely connected with them. We might also presume that Lois is depressed or has

⁸ For discussions of so-called 'future selves,' see (Whiting 1986, Wolf 1986, Bratman 2000, Parfit 1984, Velleman 2006, Scheffler 1982, Schultz 1986, Taylor 1985b, 1989, Williams 1981c, b, Nagel 1978).

some other kind of mental illness. We might think that Lois is subject to various biases that prevent her from vividly imagining what her life would be like as a disability advocate. And we might think that she has second-order desires to continue to exist, to have new experiences, to live a meaningful life in the future, to develop new values and to reflect on old ones. Perhaps, then, deeper imaginative reflection about what she really wants in her present state, further empirical information about her abilities, circumstances and future desires along with adequate mental health treatment would lead Lois to discover latent and unnoticed desires in herself, form new aims and commitments, reassess how she prioritizes her final desires, and, as a result, come to see that accepting the antibiotics is the most effective way to satisfy her current set of rational desires as a whole (Williams 1981c, 10, 13).

There is no guarantee, however, that full rational reflection on the basis of one's present desires would always lead a person in Lois' situation to preserve her own life. We can stipulate that Lois is not clinically depressed, that she has sufficient mental capacity and competence to make decisions about her own treatment, and that she has rationally deliberated about her current desires and the best means of satisfying them. Lois, we suppose, still finds herself with no deep values to keep her going and no interest in living a pleasant and meaningful life in the future, so she remains convinced that the most effective way for her to satisfy her current desires is to allow herself to die.

Bernard Williams would agree that the most prudent option is for Lois to refuse the life-sustaining antibiotics, regardless of what her prior convictions and values imply or how meaningful and successful her life would otherwise come to be for her (1981c, 11-12). "The perspective of deliberative choice on one's life," Williams says, "is

constitutively *from here*” and “*from now*” (1981b, 35, 13, his italics). All principles of rational prudence, in his view, are synchronic, they are relativized to the desires a person currently has or would have as a result of her present rational deliberations (1981b, 31-32, 35, 1981a, 103-104, 109, 111-112, 1973b, 84-85, 1981c, 11, 12n). These principles, in particular, do not require us to take an intrinsic interest in our past or future desires we do not now share unless there is a “sound deliberative route” from our current desires to a concern for those other ones (2001, 91).⁹ In order for a person to have “some interest now in what he will do or undergo later,” Williams says, he must have “some desires or projects or concerns now which relate to those doings or happenings later.” Someone could have such an interest in his future if, for example, he has “some present projects which directly or indirectly reach out to a time when those later projects will be [his] projects”, if “the future prospect were of something now identified as a growth in enlightenment,” if he has an intrinsic concern for himself in the future, or if “the mere hope of other things” led him to take an interest in his future values and commitments. But it is also possible, according to Williams, that significant psychological changes to a person’s present set of desires “would put his future after such changes beyond” and “over the horizon” of his “his present interest” (1981c, 8).

Lois correctly predicts that the final desires she would eventually come to have are very different from the ones she currently finds herself with, yet her rational reflections about her present desires have left her without any concern for those future interests. The prudent thing for her to do, on Williams’ synchronic conception of rationality, is to take the most effective means to satisfying the desires she does have now, which in this case is to the refuse life-sustaining treatment and allow herself to die.

⁹ See also (Williams 1981a, 1995, 2001).

4. Prudential Rationality and Temporal Neutrality

The verdict Williams would come to in cases like that of Lois, as well as the synchronic conception of rationality that he affirms, may strike some of us as counter-intuitive. We may think that it is somehow imprudent for Lois to end her life rather than undergo some moderate pain and inconvenience that would allow her to soon identify with and successfully pursue a new set of values and convictions. Beyond any moral concerns we may have about what Lois should do, we may think that a fully rational person would take some intrinsic interest in what kind of person she would be in the future and perhaps also in what kind of person she has been in the past. How can we explain these prudential intuitions?

One possible explanation is that it is arbitrary to ignore our past or future interests simply because they are not our present interests. Sidgwick and Rawls have suggested that it is prudentially irrational to take the “mere difference of location in time, of something's being earlier or later [in one's life]” as in itself “a rational ground for having more or less regard for it” (Rawls 1999, 259).¹⁰ According to their diachronic conceptions, rationality “implies an impartial concern for all parts of our life” (Rawls 1999, 259). Whereas Williams incorporates pure time preference into his theory of rational prudence by assigning absolute rational priority to a person's present set of interests, Sidgwick and Rawls claim that it is irrational for a person to assess the interests of herself in the past, present and future “by different weights based solely on this contingency” (Rawls 1999, 260).

¹⁰ See also (Sidgwick 1981, II.II.1, Nagel 1978, 19, 46, Smart 1961, 26, Parfit 1984, 134-5, 312-13). For criticisms and further discussion of temporal neutrality, see (Lowry and Peterson 2011, Johansson and Rosenqvist 2015, Lowry and Peterson 2015, Brink 2011, Dougherty 2011, Greene and Sullivan 2015).

Rawls argues that pure time preference is irrational because “it means that [a person] is not viewing all moments as equally parts of one life.” He claims that “[we] are to see our life as one whole, the activities of one rational subject spread out in time,” so the “[i]ntrinsic importance that we assign to different parts of our life should be the same at every moment of time” (1999, 260, 369).¹¹

There are different ways of interpreting the idea that conceptions of rationality must be temporally neutral. Sidgwick, for example, holds that we are rationally required to maximize the overall fulfillment of our past, present and future interests over our entire lives (1981, Book II).¹² Rawls suggests a different way of avoiding pure time preference. Although he does not pursue the idea in much detail, his proposal is that we are rationally required to act in ways that are somehow *justifiable* to ourselves at each moment in our lives in virtue of the set of desires we have at those times.¹³ If we think of rational deliberation as aimed at formulating an overall plan for how to live one’s life as a whole then, according to Rawls, this plan should be one that we always would rationally affirm and never rationally regret at every moment of our life, no matter how varied and conflicting our desires may be at different times (1999, 370-1). In Rawls’ view, we avoid the irrationality of pure-time preference by ensuring that we are, in this way, “responsible to ourselves as one person over time.” As Rawls says: “One who rejects equally the claims of his future self and the interests of others is not only irresponsible with respect to them but in regard to his own person as well” (1999, 371).

Sidgwick and Rawls both think that we are rationally required to take an intrinsic interest in the claims of ourselves in the past, present and future. They also agree that

¹¹ See also (Rawls 1999, 371-2).

¹² Our interests, according to Sidgwick, are only in pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

¹³ Similar ideas are discussed in (Hill 1991, Taylor 1985b, 1989, Nagel 1978).

when the claims of our self at one time conflict with the claims of our self at a different time then principles of rational prudence are needed to properly resolve such cross-temporal disputes. Moral principles of right and wrong, in Rawls' view, have a similar adjudicatory function, which is to properly balance conflicting claims among different persons (1999, 113, 115, 167, 249, 393, 416-17, 371, 472, 490). According to Sidgwick's substantive theories of prudence and of morality, both kinds of disputes are properly adjudicated by principles that maximize the overall good, whether that of a single person, in the case of prudence, or the good of all persons, in the case of morality (1981, Books II and IV). Rawls, by contrast, argues that both kinds of disputes are properly settled by what is justifiable to all, whether a person at all times of her life, in the case of prudence, or all persons, in the case of morality (1999, 371).

5. Criticisms of Responsibility to Self

Rawls' basic idea, which is that prudence requires following a plan of life that is justifiable to ourselves at all times, may have some initial appeal, especially to those who favor analogous conceptions of interpersonal morality. His view, however, has faced serious objections, three of which I describe in this section.

First, the principle of responsibility to self holds that a person's plan of life must be justifiable to herself at all times of life on the basis of desires she has at those times. There seem to be significant limitations, however, to the kinds of desires a 'time-slice' self can have 'in an instant.' One concern is that a momentary self is not psychologically capable of possessing various kinds of values, loyalties and commitments that can only occur over longer periods of time. A momentary self, for example, could not apparently

be in love because having that attitude requires more time than a single moment (Wolf 1986, 709). A related concern is that a momentary self will not have desires that are directed to the past and future if that self knows that she will cease to exist in the next instant. The principle of responsibility to self seems to exclude both kinds of desires that nonetheless seem relevant for assessing overall plans of life (Korsgaard 1989, 113-4, 126-7, Perry 1976, 89).

A second objection is that plans of life that satisfy the principle of responsibility to self will tend to be overly cautious. If I must act in accordance with a plan of life that is justifiable even to later versions of myself who have final desires that conflict with the ones I have now then it seems that those later selves would object to any risky behavior on my part that would jeopardize the satisfaction of their desires. By analogy, if I am a trustee for a different person then I am apparently required to play it safe with regard to her interests, so I should also be especially cautious about protecting and promoting the interests of my future selves if I am a trustee for them as well (Williams 1981b, 34, 1981c, 12-13n). Yet we tend to think that a prudent person can take significant and calculated risks for the sake of expected future gains even if it later turns out that a future version of herself is worse off as a result.

Even if these issues could be resolved, a third objection to the principle of responsibility to self is that it faces a version of the non-identity problem, which threatens to make the idea of justifiability to one's future selves incoherent in many kinds of cases.¹⁴

¹⁴ For discussions of the non-identity problem for separate persons, see (Parfit 1984, Kavka 1982, Woodward 1986), and for proposed solutions, see (Boonin 2008, Heyd 1992, Singer 1993, McMahan 2006, Velleman 2009, Harman 2004, Roberts 1998).

When a person is making a decision that will benefit or harm the interests of a future version of herself then it could make sense to say that she should now choose in accordance with a plan of life that is justifiable to herself as well as that future self. If, for example, I will deeply enjoy opera in retirement then that later version of myself would be better off if I were to begin learning Italian now even if I have no interest in doing so in light of my current set of desires. When we assess alternative plans of life from the perspective of a future self *who would exist under both plans* then that self could be better, worse or equally well-off depending on which plan we follow now.

Some of the decisions we make now, however, will affect what final desires we will come to have in the future while others will determine whether we have any future at all. The identity of a self is defined by the complete set of final desires a person has at that time. Therefore, the various plans of life a person might choose to follow at one time can determine the identity, in this sense, of her future selves. What could it mean to say, in such cases, that we should follow a plan of life that is justifiable to one of my future selves when the “standpoint of that retrospective judge who will be my later self will be the product of my earlier choices” or when there would be no future self to justify my decision to if I decide to end my life now (Williams 1981b, 34). It might be, for example, that studying Italian now would eventually lead me to develop an overriding interest in opera while spending that time learning about auto-mechanics would instead lead me to become a car enthusiast in my later years. Assuming that these are very different paths my life could take, with their distinct values, loyalties, affections and projects, how can my current decision about what to study now be justifiable to my future self given that my decision will determine the later standpoint from which I could assess it, whether that

of an opera lover or a car enthusiast? This problem is especially pronounced when a person is deciding whether or not to commit suicide or otherwise end her life because such decisions will determine whether there is any future perspective at all from which to evaluate those choices (Williams 1981c, 9-13, 1973b, 88-9, 92, 1981b, 34-35, 34n).

We can put the issue another way. Suppose that the justifiability of a plan to a self depends only on how she would actually fare under that plan as compared to how she would fare under alternative plans. The principle of responsibility to self, on this actualist reading, does not require us to follow plans of life that are justifiable to possible, but not actual, versions of ourself in the past, present and future. When we assess possible plans of life from the perspective of a self *who will exist under one of the plans but not the others* then the concept of justifiability in terms of comparative benefit and harm does not apply because it is not possible for that potential future self to be better, worse or equally well-off under one plan than she would be under the other plans. Either we follow the plan that brings her into existence, in which case she would usually have no comparative grounds for complaint, or we follow a plan that does not bring her into existence, in which case she will not be around to regret our decision. Although Lois would eventually become a successful disability advocate if she now chose to accept the antibiotics, that version of Lois would not exist if she instead allowed herself to die from her infection. Other things equal, the principle of responsibility to self does not seem to apply to this kind of choice because, if Lois ends her life now, there will be no future version of herself to justify that decision to. The principle of responsibility to self, in other words, apparently allows Lois to ignore the interests of the kind of person she would become when deciding whether or not to end her life now. Whichever choice Lois makes, she

could still be taking an intrinsic interest in all moments of the *actual* life she would lead, even though one of those lives would be shorter than the other.

In sum, the principle of responsibility to self may have seemed initially promising as a requirement of rational prudence, in part because it resembles moral theories that require us to follow principles that are justifiable to everyone. When we examine the principle more closely, however, we encounter serious difficulties about the nature of momentary selves, the overly cautious plans that the principle seems to imply, and the ways that our choice of plans can affect the identity of our later selves. These problems are compounded by the fact that Rawls offers almost no guidance about how, more specifically, he thinks the principle of responsibility to self is to be understood. My aim for the remainder of this essay is to sketch one example of a prudential framework that interprets the idea of responsibility to self in a way that mitigates the three difficulties described in this section and that provides some guidance in cases in which our decisions now will affect what, if any, values, commitments and projects we will have in the future.

There are many ways of characterizing a substantive prudential theory of this sort, just as there are many kinds of moral theories that take justifiability to persons as their most basic moral requirement. The framework I describe is far from complete and, more than likely, there are superior alternatives that have yet to be worked out, but there is some value in illustrating how a plausible version of the principle of responsibility to self could be developed that would require people like Lois to go on living because of the values and convictions they would soon adopt and successfully pursue.

6. Momentary Selves

The task of developing a robust conception of responsibility to self is somewhat less daunting than it may initially appear if we look to analogous ideas from moral theory about how to interpret the notion of justifiability to persons. Although we must be careful not to equivocate or to draw inappropriate parallels between justifiability to selves and justifiability to persons, there may be lessons to be learned about the former from the substantial progress that has been made in thinking about the latter. This, at any rate, is how I will proceed for my illustrative purposes here, which is to draw on some of the abstract ideas that Rawls incorporates into his theory of justice and, with some modifications, put those same basic ideas to use in a kind of prudential framework that Rawls himself probably never envisioned nor endorsed. Before I get to that, however, I first need to say more about the notion of a momentary ‘self’ and, in particular, what kinds of desires a momentary self can have.

One way of understanding the concept of a self is that a self is a person at a moment in her life who has a *deliberative perspective* consisting of the complete set of final ends, values, loyalties, convictions and other final desires that the person has at that time. I am also assuming that, for the practical purpose of developing the idea of responsibility to self, a person remains the same person through any changes to her final desires even though her practical identity may change substantially.¹⁵ We often affirm the same basic deliberative perspective through long stretches of our lives, so the selves that exist in those periods more or less agree about what is most important and worth pursuing in life. Our deliberative perspectives also tend to shift and change over the

¹⁵ In making this assumption, I am attempting, as far as possible, to set aside metaphysical questions about the sameness or identity of a person through various changes over time.

course of our lives, sometimes quite suddenly and drastically, as in the case of Lois who unexpectedly finds herself with a deliberative perspective that does not include any fundamental values that she identifies with.

If we think of desires as complicated sets of *dispositions* to think, feel and act in various ways then the fact that a self exists only for a moment does not prevent that self from having desires of various kinds. At the moment immediately before her accident, for example, Lois was in love with her husband, committed to her career and loyal to her friends because she possessed the dispositions that are constitutive of having those attitudes.

The desires of a self are also not confined to the present, even if a self only exists for a moment. The set of values, convictions and other desires that a person has at a time of life make up her conception, at that time, of what is valuable and worthwhile in life. From the perspective of one of her selves, a person can evaluate her own life as a whole by assessing choices she made in the past, deliberating about what to do now, and making judgments about how she would like her life to go in the future in light of what she now sees as worth pursuing. Her desires may be forward-looking, as when she wants her children to succeed and aims to finish a book, as well as backward-looking, as when she wishes she had saved more for retirement, regrets what she now sees as her misspent youth or is glad she devoted so much time to music. From the perspective of an earlier or later self, however, the same person may reach different conclusions about the decisions she has made in the past or should make in the future on the basis of a competing set of values, aims and aspirations she affirms at those different times. In order to treat all of her selves as equally important, the principle of responsibility to self requires her to follow a

plan of life that would be justified to her from all of the deliberative perspectives that she affirms at every time in her life.

7. A Partial Prudential Framework

The principle of responsibility to self requires us, as a matter of rational prudence, to conform to a plan of life that is justifiable to ourselves at all times in the past, present and future. What, more specifically, is required for a plan of life to be justifiable to each of our various selves throughout our life? One way to answer this question is to interpret the principle of responsibility to self as a constructivist principle that requires us to follow a plan of life that would be affirmed at each time of our life if we were to take up a suitably impartial point of view. This hypothetical standpoint is ideally meant to collect and represent, in procedural form, all of the norms and criteria of correct prudential reasoning about what plan it is rational for us to follow over the course of our life. Our prudential reasoning is valid or sound, on this view, just in case it satisfies the requirements of this procedure while our actions are prudent or not depending on whether they conform to a plan of life that would be affirmed if the procedure were carried out correctly. Although my aim is not to describe a complete procedure of this sort, the partial framework I sketch highlights several features that may figure in a more comprehensive theory of rational prudence.

The first step in characterizing a constructivist conception of rational prudence is to describe some of the main ideas that should be incorporated, in some way or other, into the procedure and which ones should be left out. The criteria and norms that are included must only reflect, as far as possible, aspects of prudential reasoning about a person's own

desires and ways of satisfying them. The procedure should thus incorporate, but somehow go beyond, traditional principles of rational prudence that are relativized to a person's current set of desires. These synchronic principles require, all else equal, taking the most effective and probable means to satisfying our current desires, reflecting on those desires in various ways, and prioritizing and scheduling our final desires when they conflict. The procedure should also reflect our conception of ourselves as continuing persons over time by ensuring that we have an impartial concern for each part of our life in the past, present and future. The procedure should take account of the fact that the plan of life we follow can affect the identity of our later selves as well as prevent some of some possible future selves from coming into existence.¹⁶ And, although a person may, at various times in her life, affirm moral values and hold sincere moral convictions, such a procedure must not, as far as possible, incorporate any moral elements as such. Finally, the constructivist procedure I describe does not rely on or refer to objective values that are independent of the procedure itself, although a full theory of prudential rationality could incorporate such elements.¹⁷

The second step is to imagine a person, at any specific time in her life, taking up a hypothetical point of view.

We suppose that this person is motivated only to satisfy the values, aims and other desires she has at that moment, which are not necessarily desires for herself but may also include concern for other persons or for herself at different times of life. We further

¹⁶ There are other elements that could be included in a more comprehensive theory than the one I am sketching here. Those who think, for example, that plans of life should play a guiding role in the actual deliberations of human persons might also require that such plans must be understandable to a person at all times in her life as well as public among her various selves. For analogues to these constraints in the moral domain, see (Rawls 1999, 112-118).

¹⁷ Comprehensive conceptions of rationality could include presumptive requirements about how to respond to objective values as well as ones about how to organize and pursue our desires within those constraints. See (Nagel 1978).

assume that she is fully rational with regard to the traditional (synchronic) principles of rationality: She is pictured as having rationally deliberated about what she really wants and as moved only to satisfy the interests she currently has in the most effective ways possible.

The ultimate task of a self who takes up this point of view, we suppose, is to select an overall plan that will govern her own actions as well as those of all past and future selves over the course of the single life that they all share. Although this self knows that deviations from the plan she chooses are possible, we further assume that she initially operates under the idealized assumption that the plan she selects will be strictly complied with by all of the selves who make up the same continuous person. If there is a plan that a person would choose if she were to take up this hypothetical perspective at every time in her life then that plan is most rational for her as a continuous person over time.

It is very unlikely, however, that all of the selves that make up a single person would agree on the same plan of life if they were each to take up this hypothetical point of view, as we have so far described it. The values, aims, commitments and other desires a person has at one time of her life likely conflict with ones she has at other times. The overall plan that an earlier self would choose in light of her own interests is probably not the same as the one that a later self would select on the basis of the interests she has. If Lois, before the accident, were to take up this standpoint then she would likely choose a plan of life that is very different from the one that Lois would select in her despondent state or from the one she would prefer in the future once she immersed herself in the Disability Rights Movement.

The procedure, however, must also be suitably impartial so that the resulting plan of life does not favor the interests of one self over another simply because those selves exist at different times. We can reflect this aspect of rationality by supposing that any self who takes up the idealized point of view does not know what desires, realized talents, psychological propensities, social position or other particular features she has that distinguish her from any other self in the overall life that they share. This limited ‘veil of ignorance’ is meant to prevent any self from rigging the outcome in her own favor.

Setting aside, for the moment, whether there is any remaining basis for self-interested choice once this abstraction is made, we further suppose that any self who takes up this hypothetical point of view has access to all other empirical information that may be relevant to her choice of a plan of life on the basis of her own interests, to the extent that she can determine them. She can know and fully imagine all there is to know about human nature and the natural world, including the genetic make-up, gender, ethnicity, psychological tendencies and desires of the person whose life she knows she is part of. Except for the information that is excluded by the limited veil of ignorance, she also has access to all counterfactual information, including the kinds of selves that would result if she were to choose various plans of life. And she knows that she will exist under any plan she chooses. The only facts she cannot know are ones concerning the time of life that she would exist or what particular desires, abilities or level of satisfaction she would have under alternative plans of life.

There are several reasons for allowing access to this very extensive set of facts. One is that we apparently do not have any grounds for placing further restrictions on the information that is available to the chooser. A limited veil of ignorance, which excludes

knowledge of the particular self who takes up this point of view, models the idea that a rational person affords equal consideration to the interests she has at all times of her life. What other aspect of prudential rationality could justify a further restriction on the information that is available to a hypothetical self who is settling this kind of question? A second, related, reason for allowing access to this information is that doing so reflects the idea that a prudent person tries to investigate and satisfy her desires on the basis of the most specific and extensive set of relevant information she can access. Finally, allowing access to nearly all empirical facts is appropriate for a theory of *objective* rational prudence, which concerns how we ought to act in light of our actual circumstances, although further restrictions on information may be justified in a different kind of *subjective* prudential theory that aims to specify what plan of life we should follow in light of, say, our actual beliefs or available evidence.

The final step in characterizing this prudential procedure is to define, more specifically, what question the hypothetical self is supposed to settle. One natural way of framing this kind of choice is to imagine that all selves in a life take up this hypothetical point of view and attempt to settle on a plan of life that is acceptable to all of them in light of their own interests, as best they can know them. The problem with this approach is that, as we have seen, the choice of a plan of life can determine the identities and existence of future selves. What could it mean to say, for example, that a plan of life in which Lois ends her life now is justifiable or not to herself in the future given that there would be no future self who could assess that plan? We might try to expand the framework by assuming that plans of life must be justifiable to all *possible* selves, but it

is difficult to see how such a requirement could make sense or why prudence would mandate concern for one's possible selves.¹⁸

A different strategy that aims, as far as possible, to avoid the non-identity problem altogether is the following: We imagine that the hypothetical chooser is initially given what we assume is a finite list of possible plans that she could follow throughout her life. By consulting the empirical and counter-factual knowledge that is available to her, she next lays out, for each plan, what kinds of selves would exist and how those selves would fare if those plans were perfectly followed. Some plans, for example, would result in an early death while others would lead to a long life; the selves under some plans would affirm many different conceptions of the good while the selves under other plans would mostly have the same basic values and aims; some plans would favor the interests of earlier selves while others would favor the interests of later selves; and some plans would result in significant disparities among the level of satisfaction that the various selves would achieve while others would ensure that these levels are more equitable.

Once she has developed a complete description of the possible lives that would exist under the various possible plans that are available to her, the hypothetical chooser is then asked to decide *which of these possible lives she would like to join and become part of*. Behind the limited veil of ignorance, the hypothetical chooser does not know which self she would be or what interests she herself would have in any of the possible lives that would come about under the various plans she is considering. She does not know, for instance, whether she would exist at an early or a later stage of life, which set of desires she would have, or what level of fulfillment she would achieve. She assumes, however,

¹⁸ For discussions of whether we have moral obligations to possible persons, see (Hare 2007, Velleman 2008, Weinberg 2013, Kavka 1982).

that her choice of which life to join and the plan governing it will become actual and that she will then occupy the position of one of the selves that fall under it, with all of that self's goals, ends, aspirations, circumstances, abilities, and level of satisfaction.¹⁹

In choosing which possible life she would like to join by imagining herself in the position of the various selves who would come to exist, the hypothetical chooser thereby chooses a plan of life. She need not assume that the same selves will exist under different plans, nor need she make comparisons about how numerically identical selves would fare under them. And she does not make her decision based on the interests she actually has outside of the procedure, because she does not have access to that information. She instead reflects on the various possible lives that would come about under the plans she is considering and tries to decide which life would best promote the interests she would come to have if she were to exist in them. If, for example, one possible life would be short and filled with misery while another possible life would be long and continually prosperous then, even if the selves who would exist in these lives are quite different, the hypothetical chooser can still assess how she would fare in each of them, even though she does not know what self she would turn out to be once she has made her choice.

In sum, the hypothetical standpoint I have described ensures that, no matter what time of life a person takes up this point of view, her motivations and available information are virtually the same. We have abstracted from any characteristics that could lead a self at one time to make a different choice than a self at any other time, so the choice of life that any self would make from this standpoint is the same choice that any past or future self would make from that perspective as well. The hypothetical self

¹⁹ This way of defining the task of the hypothetical chooser is similar to Rawls' argument for average utilitarianism as a principle of justice (Rawls 1999, 141-3)

must choose to join one among many possible lives. She does not know any particular facts about her self or what position she would take up in the various lives under consideration, but she does know how the various selves would fare in each of the possible lives she is choosing from. She is not concerned, as such, about the length of life or about how many different selves would exist in it; her only concern is to choose the life that would maximize the interests she would come to have. In making such a choice, she thereby selects a plan of life, which is the one that is most rational for her and all past and future selves to follow.

8. Reasoning from the Prudential Framework

How might a person, who took up this point of view at a particular time in her life, decide which life she would like to become part of? The highly specialized and abstract conditions of the procedure I have described do not seem to entail a unique solution to this problem, while there may be a lingering concern that there is no basis for a hypothetical self to choose which life to join without knowing what present interests she actually has. The procedure can guide and constrain our prudential deliberations, but we must also rely on our prudential intuitions to determine what kind of life it is rational for a self to join. There are various forms of reasoning that might be appropriate from this standpoint, but my aim in this section is to illustrate one way in which a hypothetical self could go about evaluating the various plans of life that are available to her.

Before doing so, I should note that the procedure apparently prevents the hypothetical self from choosing which life to join simply on the basis of maximizing the total satisfaction of interests that all selves would have in those lives. The hypothetical

self, as we have imagined her, is only concerned to maximize her own interests, whatever they turn out to be, and she knows that she will be a particular self in the life she chooses, so she has no desire as such to maximize the overall utility of the selves that would make up her life.

There are, I think, at least three kinds of considerations that might figure in the deliberations of a self who took up this hypothetical perspective.

First, without knowing what particular place she would have under any of the plans she is considering, the hypothetical self would, it seems, be especially concerned to avoid plans that would lead to intolerable outcomes for any of the selves who would exist under them. A prudent person who took up this standpoint would presumably try to ensure that the basic human needs of any self she could become would be satisfied. If, for example, life under a plan would include a period of extreme deprivation but perhaps also a long period of great success then the hypothetical self would strongly oppose that plan because she could turn out to be one of the miserable selves whose essential needs were unmet. She would instead ensure, at least presumptively, that any plan she chooses would secure the essential needs of all selves who would exist in them.

Second, the hypothetical self knows that her choice of which life to join is a very important one that will determine, once and for all, what values and convictions she has as well as what success she will have in pursuing them. A rational self who is making this sort of momentous decision would, it seems, be more concerned about mitigating or preventing outcomes that could be bad for her than achieving outcomes that could be good for her. One way to formalize this idea is to say that, all else equal, a rational self in

these circumstances would be somewhat risk averse by weighting more heavily the utility of those selves whose situation is less fortunate.²⁰

And third, the hypothetical self does not know what place she would have in any of the lives she considers, but she does know that she would be one of the selves in the life she chooses. Under these conditions of uncertainty, a rational self could assume that she has the same chance of being any of the selves who would exist in each life.²¹ She could then calculate her expected utility for each life by averaging the expectations of every self who would exist in them.²² All else equal, rationality requires her to maximize her expected utility, which, in this case, implies choosing to join the life that has the highest average utility among all of the selves who would be part of it (Rawls 1999, 139-40).

The principle that a self who takes up this idealized standpoint must, presumptively, choose the life that maximizes average utility is extensionally equivalent to one that presumptively requires her to join the life that maximizes total utility, when the number of selves in those lives is the same. These principles can have different implications, however, when the length of alternative lives is different. The former

²⁰ For discussions of analogous ‘prioritarian’ ideas in moral theory, see (Parfit 1997, Arneson 2000, Rawls 1999). A more comprehensive prudential theory along these lines would specify, more precisely, how to assign such weights.

²¹ Rawls (1999, 144-50) argues that parties in his Original Position should significantly discount conclusions arrived at on the basis of probabilistic reasoning of this sort while Parfit (2009, 350-5) argues that, in constructing a choice procedure, we are free to make whatever stipulations we like as long as the theory as a whole would survive critical reflection.

²² I am assuming, for my illustrative purposes here, that intra-self comparisons of utility are possible across a person’s life. This assumption may be too strong, particularly when the basic values and desires of different selves are significantly different. For related discussion of the problem of interpersonal comparisons of utility, see (Rawls 1999, 78-9, Hausman 1995). In some cases, perhaps only rough comparisons of utility are possible across selves, which may be enough to give a partial ordering of plans of life on the basis of the principle of average utility. If such comparisons are impossible or highly questionable then perhaps the hypothetical self would reason on the basis of a different kind of principle such as those that describe various types of bargaining solutions (Gauthier 1986). I am grateful to Peter Vallentyne for discussion on this point.

principle holds that no loss in average utility can be compensated for by more total utility as a result of a longer life whereas the latter principle denies this. If one life is twice as long as another then the second life could have twice as much total utility as the first life whereas the average utility in those lives could be the same.

One potentially worrisome implication of this presumption is that, all else equal, a self should choose to join a short life of high average utility rather a long life with only slightly less average utility.²³ The plausibility of this implication, however, depends in significant part on how it applies to particular cases. Most people, throughout their lives, have desires and aims that require their continued existence as persons. Some of these desires can even reach out to a time of life in which the person no longer has those desires. And some people, at various times in their lives, value continued life for its own sake. Once these desires are incorporated into the utility calculations of each self who may exist under various plans of life, maximizing average utility will often require adopting plans of life that favor longer rather than shorter lives. If, however, these various forward-looking desires have been taken into account then it seems somewhat more plausible that a person should, all else equal, resist plans of life that would result in diminished prospects for some of her selves simply because a longer life would bring additional selves that would increase her total utility.

In any case, one way to combine these three presumptions is to say that a self who took up this idealized standpoint would, all else equal, choose to join a life that guarantees a basic minimum of satisfaction for all selves who would exist and that maximized the average weighted utility of those selves. The hypothetical chooser can reason on the basis of these principles without knowing her own particular interests. By

²³ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this important challenge.

deciding to become part of such a life, the hypothetical self ensures that her basic needs will be met no matter what self she turns out to be; she prioritizes the interests of the less advantaged selves in case she becomes one of them; and she otherwise promotes her own expected utility.

This form of reasoning does not require the hypothetical chooser to join lives that are governed by overly cautious plans. Although she should, all else equal, avoid plans with intolerable outcomes and give some priority to selves who are worse off, she can still decide to join lives that include significant disparities in overall utility, that have long periods of hardship and struggle and that involve significant risk for the sake of future gain.

In choosing to join the life with a guaranteed minimum threshold and with the highest weighted average utility for all of the selves who would exist in it, the hypothetical chooser thereby selects the plan that corresponds to such a life, which would be, all else equal, the most rational plan for her and every other self to follow. This rational plan determines how the interests of her various selves are to be properly balanced as well as which (if any) future selves will come to exist.

9. Lois' Decision

Let's return to Lois in her hospital bed, where she is deciding whether or not to accept the antibiotics that are necessary to save her life. She knows that the earlier values and convictions she had before the accident favor accepting the treatment and she knows that if, she were to do so, she would live a meaningful and prosperous life as an advocate for disabled people. In her despondent state, however, she has no deep sense of meaning

or purpose and correctly thinks that, from her perspective, she has nothing to live for. How might the principle of responsibility to self, in the way I have interpreted it, guide her deliberations?

Suppose that Lois were to take up the hypothetical standpoint I have described. She is motivated to promote her own interests but she is behind a limited 'veil of ignorance' that prevents her from knowing, for example, whether she is an accomplished musician, a despondent hospital patient or a committed disability advocate. To simplify matters, let's suppose that Lois is asked to choose between just two plans of life and to do so only on the basis of the prospects, if any, that these three selves would have under those plans.

Under the first plan, Lois lives her life exactly as she has done until she contracted the life-threatening infection but then refuses to accept the necessary treatment. If she were to choose this plan then there would be an earlier self who is a successful and committed musician; there would be a despondent self whose prospects are quite low because she has no deep values and commitments and wants her life to end; but there will be no future self committed to disability advocacy because Lois would shortly die from her infection.

The second plan is the same as the first except that Lois accepts the life-saving treatment and, once she recovers and becomes a disability advocate, she pursues those values quite effectively. Under this plan, there would be the same musician self as before but with a slightly higher level of satisfaction because that self wants Lois to go on living. There would also be the same despondent self, whose level of satisfaction would be somewhat lower than the despondent self under the first plan because her desire to die

would be left unsatisfied. Within a few months, however, a very different self would come to exist, one who has deep aims and aspirations connected with disability advocacy. This self would achieve a very high level of satisfaction under this second plan.

From the idealized prudential standpoint I have described, Lois must decide which of these two lives she prefers to join. She does not know which self she would be under either plan but she knows that she will be one of the selves in the life she chooses. Her task is to choose the life that would best promote the interests she would have, whichever self she turns out to be.

Suppose Lois makes her decision by reasoning on the basis of the principle I have described, which requires her to choose to join the life that guaranteed a basic minimum of satisfaction for all selves who would exist and that maximized the average weighted utility of those selves. We can assume that the basic human needs of each self would be met under both plans. Lois, in her despondent state, is not in utter agony; her care-givers will ensure that her basic physical needs are met; and she is not suffering extreme deprivation. With this basic minimum assured, hypothetical Lois would then attempt to rank the plans by assuming that she has an equal chance of being any self who would exist under both of them and assessing the prospects of each of those selves. For each alternative life, she would also assign greater weight to the despondent self as compared to the other, more prosperous, self or selves. She would then calculate the average weighted utility for each plan and choose the one that is highest. The first plan, in which Lois refuses the antibiotics, would include a prosperous early self and an unfortunate present self while the second plan, in which she accepts the antibiotics, would include a slightly more prosperous early self, a somewhat more unfortunate present self, and a

prosperous later self. Depending on how much weight Lois assigns to the interests of the worst off selves, it is very likely that the average weighted utility of the second life is greater than that of the first. If so, then Lois would, all else equal, adopt the plan in which she accepts the life-saving aid. And because Lois would make the same decision no matter what time of life she took up this point of view, she is rationally required to take the antibiotics.

We can thus say to Lois, in her hospital bed, that prudence is not simply about her current desires or about maximizing expected utility; that her reasons for taking the antibiotics do not all depend on her having a contingent concern for the future or on the existence of objective values; instead, all else equal, prudence requires her to take the antibiotic because doing so is justifiable to herself as a continuous person over time.

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