

“I’LL BE GLAD I DID IT” REASONING AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FUTURE DESIRES

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I. Two Puzzles

We use “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning all the time. For example, last night I was trying to decide whether to work on this paper or go out to a movie. I realized that if I worked on the paper, then today I would be glad I did it. This enabled me to see that I should work on the paper rather than going out to a movie. This looks like excellent reasoning:

Paper Argument:

1. If I work on my paper, I’ll be glad I did it.
2. Therefore, I should work on my paper.

When we’re having trouble making a big life decision, we often try to picture what will happen each way we might choose, and imagine how we’ll feel in that outcome. When choosing between two jobs, we might use this reasoning. Suppose you are choosing between two jobs and you know quite a lot about what the two jobs will be like. In one, you will make a lot of money but have to work eighty-hour weeks and see little of your family. In the other, you will make considerably less money — though enough to support yourself and your family. You’ll have much more time for your family. The money is attractive. But overall, you realize that if you take the second job and have the time with your family, you’ll be glad you made that choice. It seems this is a good way of realizing that you should take the second job.

Now consider a very different case in which one might use this reasoning. Suppose you and your spouse have just had a baby, Stevie, and Stevie turns out to be deaf. The doctors tell you that you can choose whether to cure Stevie’s deafness: you can choose to give Stevie a cochlear implant and this would enable Stevie to hear and to grow up able to function normally in the

hearing community: Stevie would be able to understand spoken language and would develop the capacity to speak himself. Stevie wouldn't ever be able to hear as well as people without any hearing impairment, but his disability would not fundamentally impact his life. In the alternative, you might choose not to cure Stevie's deafness. Suppose you focus on this option. Indeed, suppose you think of this as the default option, since other things being equal you would prefer not to put your baby son through an invasive surgical procedure. You realize that if you choose not to cure Stevie's deafness, that Stevie will very likely grow up to be a happy deaf adult. Furthermore, Stevie's life and personality will in many ways be shaped by his deafness. His disability will lead him to have certain strengths he otherwise would not have had, and it will shape his interests and his friendships. He will have access to deaf communities and culture, and these will play valuable and significant roles in his life. Deaf culture will give him valuable experiences that have no equivalent in the hearing world. You know all this, because you have several adult friends who are deaf, and you see how their deafness has played a substantial role in shaping their personalities. You recognize that they would have been completely different people if their deafness had been cured when they were young (though, in fact, it couldn't have been, as the technology didn't exist then). Were they to ask themselves whether they wish they had been cured as babies, they would say "no" — they value the lives they have had and the selves they have become. They don't identify with the utterly different people they would have been if their deafness had been cured, and so they don't wish things had gone that way. Similarly, the parents of your deaf friends do not wish their children had been cured of deafness when they were babies: they love their children as they are and as the people they have become. They don't wish their children had become utterly different than they in fact are. Thinking of your own case, you realize that if you choose not to cure Stevie's deafness, he will become a deaf adult whose personality and character have been shaped by his deafness. You will then love him as the person he is, and you will be glad you chose as you did; you will not wish he had become an utterly different person, as he would have if his deafness had been cured. You thus reason as follows:

Deafness Argument

1. If I do not cure my baby of deafness, I'll be glad I made that choice.
2. Therefore, I should not cure my baby of deafness.

So you choose not to cure your baby of deafness. (And notice that the argument is strengthened by considering the future wishes of your baby. As an adult who has been shaped by her deafness, it's very likely that your child will be glad her deafness was not cured when she was a baby.)

If the reasoning that leads me to work on my paper rather than going out to a movie is good reasoning — and surely it is — then it looks like the Deafness Argument must be good reasoning as well. But it may not strike us as good

reasoning. This is the first puzzle that my paper is concerned to address: is “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning good or bad? It seems it can’t be bad, in light of the Paper Argument, which clearly exhibits good reasoning. But it seems it can’t be good, in light of the Deafness Argument.

While the Deafness Argument may just seem to be making a mistake (though we haven’t figured out what that mistake is yet), it’s related to another argument that’s taken very seriously today in discussions of deafness and cochlear implants. There is a strong movement among deaf advocates to argue that deafness should never be cured in babies. One of the arguments that deaf adults make, in support of this position, can be summarized as follows:

General Deafness Argument

1. I’m glad I wasn’t cured of deafness.
2. My preference is reasonable — indeed, it is the preference that everyone should have about my situation.
3. Therefore, everyone should have had this preference even back when I was a baby.
4. There’s nothing special about my case.
5. Therefore, in general, everyone should prefer not to cure babies of deafness.
6. Therefore, everyone should not cure deafness in babies.

This argument spells out the way that some deaf adults take affront at the idea that deafness should, and may, be cured in babies. They think that to prefer curing deafness in babies mandates the view that those who are glad their deafness was not cured are making a mistake — and it mandates that we wish their deafness had been cured, so we do not value them as they are.¹

The reasoning in the General Deafness Argument is similar to “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning. In “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning, we move from a preference held *after* an action to a preference that we should have *before* choosing whether to perform the action—which then guides the agent in acting. The General Deafness Argument similarly moves from a preference held *after* something is settled—whether deafness was cured in childhood—to a preference that should be held *before* that issue has been settled. The second puzzle I will address is: what is wrong with the General Deafness Argument and arguments like it?

The first puzzle also arises in a case in which a woman is pregnant and trying to decide whether to continue the pregnancy. She thinks about what things will be like if she continues the pregnancy. She will end up raising the child, and she will love him. Once she has the child, she realizes, she will love him as a mother typically loves her child. At that point, she will treasure him and be very glad to have him. She will prefer things as they are, that her child exists; she will certainly not wish that she had chosen to abort him. The woman thus reasons as follows:

Anti-Abortion Argument

1. If I don't abort, I'll be glad I made that choice.
2. Therefore, I should not abort.

Like the Deafness Argument, this argument seems suspicious. Some people will say that it clearly does not exhibit good reasoning. But it is hard to see what is wrong with it, when we compare it with the argument that I should work on my paper rather than go out to a movie.

There is a general analogue of this argument that raises the second puzzle. This argument is often made by those whose parents seriously considered aborting them. These people think to themselves that we should all be glad they were not aborted, because they are wonderful, valuable people. But they realize their cases are not special. So, they conclude that we should prefer that all abortions not occur — and that all abortions would be wrong.

General Anti-Abortion Argument

1. My parents and I are glad I was not aborted.
2. Our preference is reasonable — indeed, it is the attitude everyone should have.
3. Therefore, everyone should have had this preference even back when I was a fetus.
4. But my case is not special.
5. Therefore, in general, everyone should prefer not to abort.
6. Therefore, everyone should not abort.²

Like the General Deafness Argument, this argument moves from a reasonable preference after-the-fact (after an abortion was not performed) to a reasonable preference before a decision is made. It is the second puzzle of this paper to say what is wrong with arguments like this.

II. Expanding on the First Puzzle

In this section, I will mention two more arguments that raise the first puzzle. But first I will note one refinement we can make in our understanding of “I'll be glad I did it” reasoning.

Sometimes “I'll be glad I did it” reasoning is *clearly* bad reasoning. Suppose I am asking whether to take a drug that would warp my perceptions of the world so that, although the drug would lead me to make terrible choices that would seriously harm me, while I make those choices I would be very happy with them and glad that I took the drug. In this case, my being glad I did it will be unreasonable. If I know all this ahead of time, then I know that if I take the drug, I'll be glad I did it; but I won't infer that I should take the drug. For another example, suppose that I know that if I go on a certain exploration, I

will encounter a lot of misleading evidence that will convince me I have made an important discovery and the expense and inconvenience of the exploration is worth it — though that won't be true. In this case, though I know that if I go on the exploration, I'll be glad I did it, I won't infer that I should go on the exploration. These two cases show us that "*I'll be glad I did it*" reasoning is bad reasoning in some cases: it is bad reasoning when I know that my being glad I did it will be unreasonable or a result of misleading evidence. But notice that the deafness case does not have either of these features. It is perfectly reasonable to be glad that one is the person one is, with one's particular personality and character traits, and not wish to be different; and it's reasonable to love one's child as he is and to be glad he is as he is. Furthermore, these attitudes do not result from any misleading evidence. Rather, they result from an accurate understanding of the situation: that the deaf adult's life has been shaped by his deafness, and that he would have been different had his deafness been cured.

In light of this, I will restrict the first puzzle to cases in which the agent's predicted later attitude, being glad she did it, will not be unreasonable or due to misleading evidence. The puzzle is: in these cases, is "*I'll be glad I did it*" reasoning good reasoning? If not, then much of our ordinary reasoning is bad reasoning. If it is, then the Abortion Argument and the Deafness Argument exhibit good reasoning.

Another argument that raises this puzzle might be made in the following case. Suppose that a fourteen-year old girl is considering conceiving a child. She knows that she is very young, and that it will be easier for her to be a mother when she is older. She knows that if she has a child now, it will be much harder for her to get a good education; she may well have a less meaningful and fulfilling professional life if she conceives now. Nevertheless, she also knows that if she conceives now, she will raise a child whom she will love dearly. She will love him and be glad that he exists; she will not wish she had waited to conceive later in life. She reasons as follows:

Teenage Mother Argument

1. If I conceive now, I will be glad I did it.
2. Therefore, I should conceive now.

This strikes us as bad reasoning. She should wait until she is more prepared to be a good mother. But what can we say to explain why it is bad reasoning?³

I will mention one final argument. Suppose that it is a time of peace, when joining the Army Reserves carries little risk of being thrown into serious combat, and little risk of death. I might consider whether to join the Reserves, and I might reason as follows. If I join the Reserves, it will change me in significant ways. I will become more respectful of authority. I will become tough, strong, self-assured, and more able to take care of myself. My attitudes toward these

character traits will also change. I now don't mind what others would call my "laziness" and "wimpiness"; and I like my tendency to challenge authority. But I realize that if I join the army, I will come to value the changes it will bring about in my character. I might then be moved by the following argument:

Army Argument:

1. If I enter the Army Reserves, I'll be glad I did it.
2. Therefore, I should enter the Army Reserves.

This may seem like good reasoning. But I'll argue for a view on which it is not good reasoning.

(Note that it can be easily *shown* that something must be wrong with "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning, at least sometimes. In the cases of the Deafness Argument, the Anti-Abortion Argument, and the Teenage Mother Argument, whether the agent chooses to act or to refrain from acting, she can predict that she will be glad she chose as she did. Two applications of "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning would yield the two incompatible conclusions that she both should and should not perform the action in question. Both conclusions cannot be true; so in at least one case, the reasoning is going wrong. These considerations do show that something goes wrong in such reasoning, at least sometimes. But these considerations do not provide a diagnosis of how this reasoning goes wrong; nor do they explain why "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning sometimes seems to be good reasoning. I discuss these points further in section VI.)

III. The Reflection Principle for Desires

In order to solve the first puzzle, let's consider what *explanation* might be given for "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning. What might make this good reasoning? I propose that the following principle might seem to underlie this reasoning:

Reflection for Desires: If a person reasonably believes that in the future she will reasonably prefer that p be true, and she reasonably believes that she won't be in a worse epistemic or evaluative position at that time, then she should now prefer that p be true.

This principle might underlie "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning as follows. We might expand that reasoning in this way.

1. I predict that in the future I will be glad I made choice C — I will prefer to have chosen C — and this preference will be reasonable and not based on misleading evidence.
2. Reflection for Desires

3. Therefore, I should now prefer to make choice C.
4. Therefore, I should make choice C.

(Note that this argument only applies to cases where we have already decided to make choice C; the argument can be used to try to justify that choice. If the choice hasn't already been made, then the agent can't predict that she *will* have the relevant preference in the future, so Reflection for Desires won't apply.)

Reflection for Desires can also be seen to underlie the General Deafness Argument and the General Anti-Abortion Argument, if we expand that argument type as follows:

1. My parents and I are glad that p is true.
2. This preference is reasonable, and it was predictable back when my parents were determining whether to make p true.
3. Reflection for Desires.
4. Therefore, at the time that my parents chose whether to make p true, they should have preferred to make p true.
5. There is nothing special about our case.
6. Therefore, everyone in situations like ours should make the choice that corresponds to making p true.

So, these two types of argument might exhibit good reasoning *if* Reflection for Desires is true. But why should we think Reflection for Desires is true?

We might suppose that Reflection for Desires is true because we independently think an analogous principle holds for beliefs:

Reflection for Beliefs: If a person reasonably believes that (a) she will reasonably have a certain degree of belief in p in the future, and (b) she won't be in a worse epistemic situation at that time, then she should have that degree of belief in p now.⁴

Some philosophers have argued that this principle is true. They find this principle plausible because they reason roughly as follows. If one's future self is in at least as good an epistemic situation as oneself, then one should treat one's future self as an *expert* or *authority*. If an authority reasonably believes p to a certain degree, then one should believe p to that same degree. Analogous considerations may seem to support Reflection for Desires.

One might object to Reflection for Desires right off the bat. One might argue that desires are not rationally constrained *at all*. But even if we think that no desires are rationally required, and that no desires are rationally forbidden, we should acknowledge that there are rational requirements that desires be *consistent* in certain ways: in particular, there are rational requirements that all-things-considered desires be consistent. Thus, while it's perfectly consistent to have both the desire that you eat the piece of yummy chocolate cake being offered to

you and the desire that you refrain from eating the cake, you shouldn't have both desires as all-things-considered desires. And similarly, if you know that watching a movie tonight would prevent you from finishing your paper tonight, then you shouldn't have both an all-things-considered desire to finish your paper tonight and an all-things-considered desire to watch a movie tonight.

Someone might deny that there is a rational *requirement* that we not have inconsistent all-things-considered desires; rather, it might be claimed, it is simply *impossible* to have inconsistent all-things-considered desires. That's a lot like claiming that it is impossible to have inconsistent beliefs. People do have inconsistent beliefs all the time. But when two beliefs are obviously inconsistent, and the person is aware that she has both beliefs and that they're inconsistent, it becomes less plausible that the person actually holds both beliefs. Nevertheless, people often have inconsistent beliefs because they either don't realize the beliefs are inconsistent or they don't ever, at one time, realize that they hold both the beliefs (though they know them to be inconsistent). Similarly, people may hold inconsistent all-things-considered desires because they either don't realize the desires are inconsistent or they don't realize they hold both desires.

Throughout this paper, I am only concerned with all-things-considered desires. So I leave the modifier “all-things-considered” implicit. Furthermore, I am concerned not only with desires about states of affairs in the future, or of which the person is ignorant; I am also concerned with desires *about the past*, where the person knows how the past happened. We often wish that something had happened differently in the past. And we also often don't wish that things had happened differently — more than that, *we are glad things happened as they did*. This attitude is difficult to describe properly, because while we say “I'm glad that happened” or “I'm glad I did it” to express this attitude, having the attitude is not *feeling happy*: it is *preferring* what has actually happened to what would have happened otherwise. I would like to say it is *desiring* that things happened as they did rather than otherwise, but this sounds awkward. We typically think of desires as about things that haven't happened yet, and might still happen (but not always; we can say that Tom desires Mary's love, though he knows he will never get it). So I will use the word “preferences” for all-things-considered desires.

Just as preferences are rationally constrained to be consistent, they may be subject to other rational constraints. Reflection for Desires may be one of those constraints.

IV. Criticizing the Arguments

As I have noted, it looks like something is wrong with the two Deafness Arguments, the two Anti-Abortion Arguments, and the Teenage Mother Argument. (And I claim that the same thing is wrong with the Army Argument, but this is less intuitively apparent.) If we want to criticize these arguments, one

thing we could do is deny Reflection for Desires, which they can be interpreted as relying upon. However, someone might want to preserve Reflection for Desires, thinking it is true for similar reasons to the reasons he thinks Reflection for Beliefs is true. Can we criticize the arguments without giving up Reflection for Desires?

We might deny that the preferences on which the arguments rest would be *reasonable*. According to this line of thought, the preferences of the deaf person's parents have been warped by their attachment to their child as he is. They fail to see that things would have been better if their child had been cured, and that they should therefore *prefer* that their child had been cured, although their child would then have had a completely different character. Similarly, consider the fourteen-year-old who becomes a mother. She loves her child and is glad that her child has come to exist — she prefers that she conceived. But it would have been better if she had waited until she had gotten older. Again, her love for her child warps her understanding and leads her to prefer the current state of affairs, which is actually worse.

This line of thought relies on the following claim:

- (*) If one way the world might have been is *better* than another way the world might have been, and a person is in a position to know that fact, then she should prefer that the world be the first way.

(*) is an attractive claim, but it is false. The deaf child's parents could grant that things would have been better if their child had not been deaf. But things would then have been *very different*. They feel that they would have then had a *different child*—not numerically a different child, but a child with a completely different personality, character, and sense of self from the child they actually have. In loving their child, they love who he has become. They are glad he has become who he is, they value him as he is, and they cannot prefer that he had come to be so different — indeed, they prefer things as they are. Surely these preferences are utterly reasonable.

Similarly, consider the woman who became a mother at 14 years old. She may well recognize that things would have been better if she had waited to become a mother later and if she had had a different child. The case here is even easier to make out than for the deaf parents, because this woman would literally have had a different child if she had waited. She may recognize that if she had waited, she would have come to have a wonderful child that she would have loved and that that relationship would have been *as good* as her current relationship with her child. She may even grant that it would have been *better*: there would have been far fewer strains, because she would have been mature enough to be a more responsible parent. She may conclude that things would have been, overall, *much better*, if she had waited. Nevertheless, she loves the child she actually has, and does not wish that she had not conceived — she prefers things as they are. This preference, I claim, is utterly reasonable.⁵

Consideration of these cases reveals the following claim to be true:

Preferences for Loved Ones are Okay: It can be reasonable to prefer that someone one loves has come to be the person she is, or that someone one loves has come to exist, although one recognizes that there is an alternative in which things would have been *better*.

Because this claim is true, we cannot criticize the arguments laid out in sections I and II by saying that the later preferences they discuss are unreasonable; these later preferences are clearly reasonable.⁶

My discussion in this section so far has not taken into account the following: there is not just a single way of being *better*. There are several ways of being better that might seem to be at play in the two claims I have just discussed (claim (*) and Preferences for Loved Ones are Okay): there is *what is better overall and impersonally*, there is *what is better for the agent*, and there is *what is better for someone she cares about*. The dialectic between the two claims has to be clarified and revised to take account of this.

A proponent of (*) would revise it as follows:

(*-revised) If one way the world might have been is *better* than another way the world might have been — better in every way a particular person should care about — and that person is in a position to know that fact, then she should prefer that the world be the first way.

This claim, like (*), provides a way to criticize the preference of the parents of the deaf adult. There is no way of being better that they should care about on which things are better with their child not having been cured of deafness: as things actually are, they are impersonally worse, worse for the parents, and worse for their child than things would have been if their child had been cured. (But note that this claim provides no way to criticize the preference of the woman who had a child at age fourteen: if she had waited to conceive later, things would not have been better in every way that should matter to her, because they would not have been better for her daughter. Her daughter would not have existed if she had waited to conceive later.⁷)

Correspondingly, let's revise my claim:

Preferences for Loved Ones are Okay-Revised: It can be reasonable to prefer that someone one loves has come to be the person she is, even if one recognizes that there is an alternative in which things would have been *better*, in every way of being *better* which one should care about. It can be reasonable to prefer that someone one loves has come to exist.

This claim can help us to see where the Deafness Argument goes wrong. The argument overlooks the way that desires can be reasonably influenced by things

like *whom we love*. In the cases talked about by the arguments laid out in sections I and II, the time between the action choice point and the later preference about that choice, does not involve a change in information or a change in ability to judge what is desirable, so it may look like what it is reasonable to desire does not change between those two times either. However, the time between the action choice point and the later preference does involve a change in whom the agents love. It makes sense to prefer one's twenty-year-old deaf child *as she is* because one loves her *as she is*. But when the child is a baby, one does not yet love her *as she will (or may) become at 20* if her deafness isn't cured; because one does not love her in that way, it is not reasonable to prefer that her deafness not be cured. So such a preference can't make it reasonable to fail to cure the deafness. Similarly, having become a mother at 14 years old, a woman may love her child and reasonably prefer that her child exist. But before conceiving, she does not yet love her child, so her preference to have a child then is not reasonable (since things will be so much worse if she conceives now rather than waiting). So, such a preference cannot make it reasonable to conceive now.

It seems that there is an explanation of the reasonableness of the preferences at the later times — due to whom the agents love — while having those same preferences at the earlier times cannot be similarly shown to be reasonable. So the later preferences are reasonable although acting in line with those preferences at the earlier time is not reasonable.

V. Why the Arguments Fail

I claim that the arguments fail because they rely on later preferences that are reasonable at that time, but that would not be reasonable at the earlier time.

More specifically, the arguments fail because Reflection for Desires is false:

Reflection for Desires: If a person reasonably believes that in the future she will reasonably prefer that p be true, and she reasonably believes that she won't be in a worse epistemic or evaluative position at that time, then she should now prefer that p be true.

This raises the following question. Suppose that Reflection for Beliefs is true. Must Reflection for Desires also be true? It need not also be true.

Reflection for Beliefs might be true because beliefs, at whatever time they are held, always have the same goal: the truth. If beliefs always aim at the truth, and what's true doesn't change over time, then beliefs always aim at the same thing over time. Given that, a future belief held in a position that is epistemically as good as, or better than, one's current position, should, it can be argued, be treated as the belief of an expert or authority.

Similarly, it might be tempting to think that preferences always have the same aim: the valuable, or the best. Or we might think the following weaker

thing: acknowledging that there is more than one way things can be *better*, we might think that if a particular outcome is better *in all the ways the agent should care about*, then she ought to prefer it; this is the claim that (*-revised) makes. I've argued that the case of the parents of the deaf adult child undermines this claim.⁸

Because preferences for one's loved ones can be reasonable, what is reasonable to prefer *changes over time*. This is because whom we love changes over time, and the natures of the people we love change over time.

It can be unreasonable for me to prefer that I suffer a terrible life-changing experience later this year, from which I would emerge with a particular set of life lessons and character traits, even though, after I have gone through that experience (assuming I in fact will), it will then be reasonable for me to prefer that those things have happened. This shows that *as identity changes*, what it's rationally permissible to desire changes too. (This is the "mushy" kind of identity — as character, personality, and personal history changes, so what it's permissible to desire changes too. This isn't, of course, numerical identity.)

We can understand what sometimes goes wrong in "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning as follows. When this reasoning goes well, that's because the fact that I'll be glad I made a certain choice is an indication that that choice would be *best* (in all the ways I should care about). Often I should do what would be best (in all the ways I should care about). So, in these cases, the fact that I'll be glad I did it does reveal that I should do it. However, sometimes when I'll be glad I did something, that preference will be *reasonable* although it won't be a preference for what would be best (in all the ways I should care about); in these cases, "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning leads one astray. The key point is this:

Sometimes it is (or will be) reasonable to prefer an outcome even though the alternative would have been better (in all the ways one should care about). It is reasonable of parents to prefer that their adult deaf child have come to be who she is, even though it would have been better (in all the ways they should care about) if their child had been cured of deafness. A teenager who has chosen to conceive will later be reasonable in preferring that her child exists, even though it would be better (in all the ways she should care about at the time she chooses) if she waits to conceive later.

I think that this point is generally not recognized, and failure to recognize it has a great deal of responsibility for the current movement among deaf advocates against curing deafness in babies. They think that their preferences for their actual lives are reasonable if and only if their actual lives are best for them.⁹ So they conclude that they must think that in general it's best for deaf children not to be cured of deafness. And they think that others, who think curing deafness in children is best, must conclude that any preferences against a deaf child's being cured, or having been cured, is unreasonable: so deaf adults attribute a critical view of their own preferences for their own lives, to anyone who advocates in

favor of curing deafness. They feel that those who cure deafness in children are treating those with disabilities as inferior.

We can value those with disabilities as they are, preferring them as they are, even while we recognize that an alternative for them would have been better and even as we choose that alternative for others.

VI. Some Conclusions

I have now presented most of the material necessary to argue for several of my conclusions. My first conclusion is that Reflection for Desires is false. My argument is by way of counterexample: both the case of parents who have decided not to cure their baby of deafness and the case of a fourteen-year-old who has decided to conceive are counterexamples. In each case, the agent can predict that she will come to reasonably prefer to have acted as she is about to — and this preference will not be based on misleading information — yet in each case it is not the case that the agent *should* have this preference now. Indeed, in each case the agent *should not* have this preference now. A fourteen-year-old should prefer to wait to conceive when she is more mature. Parents of a deaf baby should prefer to cure their baby of deafness. This later claim is controversial, but I think it is true. Being deaf limits one's life possibilities in important ways. While it also provides unique experiences, such as access to deaf culture and the experience of being deaf, these do not outweigh what is lost. This strong claim — that it is worse to be deaf than to be hearing — is not necessary for my claim that the case provides a counterexample to Reflection for Desires (all that I need is the claim that it's false that the parents *should* prefer not to cure their baby of deafness); but I do need the strong claim for one of my other conclusions.¹⁰

To motivate my second conclusion, I will consider an objection to my diagnosis of how the arguments laid out in sections I and II go wrong.

Some of the arguments I discuss are susceptible to the following worry. The Deafness Argument, the Anti-Abortion Argument, the Teenage Mother Argument, and the Army Argument are all arguments from the claim that a person will be glad if she takes a particular option to the conclusion that she *should* take that option. The worry is that in these cases, it's also true that if the person takes the *other option*, she'll be glad she did. Consider the case of the fourteen-year-old who is deciding whether to conceive now. Suppose that if she does not conceive now, she will wait and conceive a different child later, in her twenties. She will grow to love this child and be glad she had this child; call him Tommy. She will realize that if she had conceived at fourteen, her life would have taken a different path and she would never have had Tommy. The result is that if she chooses not to conceive now (at fourteen), she will be glad she did. So either way she chooses, she will prefer her actual choice. We can then consider an argument parallel to the Teenage Mother Argument, with the conclusion that she *should not* conceive now. Obviously something must be wrong with the "I'll be

glad I did it” reasoning behind the Teenage Mother Argument if such reasoning can also lead to an incompatible conclusion, given the same basic facts of the case.¹¹

Does recognition of this problem with the arguments demonstrate everything that’s wrong with “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning? It does not. We tend to think that cases in which either option will leave one glad one did it are cases in which both options would be *reasonable*. We might say, “in this case you just can’t go wrong!” It may seem that the following two arguments, made by the fourteen-year-old, both exhibit good reasoning:

The Modified Arguments:

1. If I conceive now, I’ll be glad I did.
2. Therefore, it’s reasonable to conceive now.

1. If I don’t conceive now, I’ll be glad I didn’t.
2. Therefore, it’s reasonable to not conceive now.

The Modified Arguments are not incompatible. Their conclusions could both be true. But nevertheless, the first argument exhibits bad reasoning. The fact that if she conceived a child, she would come to love the child and be glad she conceived, is *not* a consideration that justifies the belief that it would be reasonable to conceive now. Her life will go so much better if she waits to conceive, that it would be unreasonable to conceive now; and an ordinary fourteen-year-old is in a position to see that this is true.

Thus, to fully see what’s wrong with “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning, we need the explanation I have given, that sometimes reasonable future preferences would not be reasonable now.

Consideration of the Modified Arguments also shows us that a weaker version of Reflection for Desires is false. The Modified Arguments might seem to rely on this claim:

Reflection for Desires — Weaker Version: If a person reasonably believes that in the future she will reasonably prefer that p be true, and she reasonably believes she won’t be in a worse epistemic or evaluative position at that time, then *it is reasonable* for her to prefer that p be true.

This claim is false because it implies that it is reasonable for a fourteen-year-old who has decided to conceive now to prefer to conceive now. If we rely on my assumption that being deaf is worse than being hearing, then the case of parents who have chosen not to cure their child of deafness is also a counterexample: Reflection for Desires — Weaker Version implies that they are reasonable in preferring not to cure their baby of deafness, although they are not.

My second conclusion is that Reflection for Desires — Weaker Version is false.

My third conclusion is about the nature of reasonable desire. I have argued that reasonable desires do not always aim at what is best, in any way of being best that the agent does or should care about. More specifically, my third conclusion is that it can be reasonable to have an all-things-considered preference for a state of affairs that is not better than the alternative (in any way of being better the agent should care about), and is indeed much worse than the alternative (in some ways of being worse the agent should care about). To establish this conclusion, I need the strong claim that it is considerably worse to be deaf than to be hearing. The parents of a deaf adult are reasonable in not wishing their child had been cured of deafness as a baby, I have argued, even though — as I am assuming — things would have been much better if he had been cured: things would have been impersonally better, and they would have been better for everyone concerned. (Note that the case of a woman who had a child at fourteen does not show my third conclusion to be true: while this woman reasonably prefers an outcome which is much worse *for her* and which is *impersonally* worse, this outcome is better in one respect she should care about: it is better for the child she actually has.)

My fourth conclusion is that the General Deafness Argument fails. This conclusion is important because arguments along the lines of the General Deafness Argument are taken seriously in popular discussion of curing deafness. Again, the argument is:

General Deafness Argument

1. I'm glad I wasn't cured of deafness.
2. My preference is reasonable — indeed, it is the preference that everyone should have about my situation.
3. Therefore, everyone should have had this preference even back when I was a baby.
4. There's nothing special about my case.
5. Therefore, in general, everyone should prefer not to cure babies of deafness.
6. Therefore, everyone should not cure deafness in babies.

It fails because the inference from claim 2 to claim 3 fails. That a preference is reasonable given that a person has a certain character does not imply that the preference is reasonable before the person has come to have this character.¹² It is reasonable to prefer that deaf people not have been cured of deafness because their characters and personalities have been shaped by their deafness; it is reasonable to value them *as they are*. However, when we are trying to decide whether to cure a baby of deafness, the baby has not already been shaped by a life of being deaf and so this justification is not available to vindicate a preference against curing the baby of deafness.

My conclusion that the General Deafness Argument fails does not depend on my claim that it is worse to be deaf than to be hearing. But the General Deafness Argument is misguided partly because it proceeds without notice of whether curing deafness would be better for the child. The argument is insensitive to whether being deaf is *much worse* than being hearing; it simply relies on the fact that deafness is *transformative* of one's character.

I will argue for two more conclusions in sections VIII and IX. In section VII, I will discuss a further question that I leave open.

VII. The Significance of Regret

One might propose the following principle:

If an agent knows that whether or not she performs a particular action, she will prefer to have performed it (and this will be reasonable, and not due to a worsening of her epistemic position), *then* she should perform the action.

This principle can also be stated in the following way:

If an agent knows that if she performs a particular action, then she'll be glad she did (and this will be reasonable, and not due to a worsening of her epistemic position) *and* she knows that if she fails to perform the action, then she'll regret it (and this will be reasonable, and not due to a worsening of her epistemic position) *then* she should perform the action.¹³

This principle is not challenged by any of the cases I have discussed. It does not give the wrong result in cases in which, no matter what the agent does, she'll be glad she did it; it is silent on those cases. But consideration of the cases I have discussed provides reason to worry about this principle, too. The cases I have discussed bring out the fact that it is sometimes reasonable to be glad that one did something, although one should not have done it and although things are worse than they would have been if one hadn't done it (worse in every way the agent should care about). This raises the question whether there are cases that are analogous but reversed: that is, are there cases in which one is reasonable in regretting what one did (wishing one had not done it), although one should have done it and although things are better than they would have been if one had not done it (better in every way that one should care about)? My discussion has emphasized the way that *loving someone* can make a preference for the actual outcome, though it is non-optimal, reasonable. Is there a kind of experience or state that would make a preference *against* the actual outcome, although it is optimal in all the ways the agent should care about, reasonable?

It might seem that being tortured is so horrible that an action that leads to one's being tortured is such that one may reasonably wish one had not performed

it, even if it was what one should have done and even if it is optimal (in all relevant ways). But it is implausible that there is any case in which one ought to cause oneself to be tortured and this is best for *oneself* yet one would reasonably regret that choice. (What is a clear case in which being tortured is best for me? Suppose it's necessary to save my child's life. But then it does not seem that I could reasonably regret it.)

The cases I have discussed all involve a reasonable *attachment* which makes a preference reasonable although it would otherwise be unreasonable. The kind of case that would exhibit the reverse phenomenon would involve a reasonable *aversion* which would make a preference reasonable although it would otherwise be unreasonable. I leave open whether such reasonable aversions exist.

If reasonable aversions do exist, then there could be a case with the following features. An agent ought to perform an action A, and things would be better in all the ways the agent should care about if she performs A, but if she performs A she will reasonably regret having done so (she will have a reasonable aversion); furthermore, if she does not perform A, she will reasonably be glad she didn't (she will have a reasonable attachment), although she ought to have performed A and A would have been optimal. If there are cases like this, then the principle I outlined at the beginning of this section is false.^{14,15}

VIII. Vindicating the Bias For the Future

The mistake I have shown to be present in some "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning is also present in an argument for a very different claim: an argument against a bias for the future.¹⁶ People naturally have a bias for the future, as is illustrated by Derek Parfit's case of the two surgeries. I know that I might either have a very painful operation on Saturday or a less painful, but still quite painful, operation on Sunday. If I were to choose on Thursday, then of course I should and would choose the Sunday operation. But suppose I wake up on Sunday morning and am told, "You may have had the operation yesterday, or not. Soon your head will clear and the memory of yesterday will come to you. Then you will know whether you already had the more painful Saturday operation or you are about to have the less painful Sunday operation." I would react by hoping—preferring—that the operation have happened on Saturday, because then it would be *over*. This preference, to have had more pain in the past rather than less pain in the future, exhibits a bias toward the future. This bias has been called irrational. One way we might argue that it is irrational is as follows:

If the bias for the future is not unreasonable, then there's nothing unreasonable about my preference on Sunday for the more painful Saturday operation. But if a preference is reasonable in the future, then it would have been reasonable in the past (if nothing is learned in the meantime). So, it would have been reasonable to prefer the more painful Saturday operation on *Thursday*. But that's false. So the bias for the future must be unreasonable.

The place where this argument fails is in the claim that “if a preference is reasonable in the future, then it would have been reasonable in the past (if nothing is learned in the meantime).” This claim is false, as my discussion above has shown.¹⁷ Now that we have seen that it can be reasonable to prefer what is non-optimal, another such permission seems plausible: the bias toward the future. And now that we no longer think a reasonable preference at a later time licenses a reasonable preference at an earlier time, we need not see this “bias” as irrational.

IX. When Is “I’ll Be Glad I Did It” Reasoning Good Reasoning?

I have argued that the Deafness Argument and the Teenage Mother Argument exhibit bad reasoning. Does this mean that the Paper Argument also exhibits bad reasoning? None of these arguments are deductively sound. Nevertheless, the Paper Argument may well exhibit *good reasoning*. In my view, it does. In the case where I am trying to decide whether to work on my paper or go to a movie, it is in fact true that things will be better (in all the ways I should care about) if I work on my paper. This very fact — that things will be better if I work on my paper — is what makes it the case that I’ll be glad I did it if I work on my paper. Furthermore, this very fact — that things will be better if I work on my paper — is also what makes it the case that I should work on my paper. So, *in this case*, that I will be glad I did it if I work on my paper is *genuinely indicative* of the fact that I should work on my paper. Furthermore, *typically*, the fact that I will be glad I did it is genuinely indicative that I should do the thing in question.

Good reasoning need not be *deductively sound reasoning*. Often we reason from premises that provide good reasons, though not conclusive reasons, for our conclusions. The Paper Argument, I claim, is like that.

Typically, the fact that if one performs an action then one will be glad one did it is genuinely indicative that one should do it. Because of this, the fact that if one performs an action then one will be glad one did it is a reason — though a defeasible reason — to believe that one should do it. If there are no defeaters (that is, none of the claims that would defeat this reason are true), then “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning is good reasoning. If there are facts that would defeat this reason, and these facts are sufficiently salient to an agent, then “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning is bad reasoning.

There are several different kinds of defeaters for “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning. Here is a partial list: that the agent’s being glad she did it would be unreasonable; that the agent’s being glad she did it would be due to misleading evidence; that the agent’s being glad she did it would arise out of love for and attachment to someone; and that the agent’s being glad she did it would arise out of inability to identify with who she would have been in the alternative. If any of these defeating facts are sufficiently salient to an agent who engages in “I’ll

be glad I did it" reasoning, then she is engaging in bad reasoning; in the cases I have classified as bad reasoning, such defeating facts are sufficiently salient. (By contrast, if any of these defeating facts are true but not known by the agent, then she may be engaging in good reasoning to a false conclusion: she is relying on what is typically a good reason for her conclusion and the defeater for this reason is not known by her, so her reasoning does not count as bad reasoning. In such cases, the reasoner is *unlucky* but not reasoning poorly.)

My final conclusion is that *some* "I'll be glad I did it" reasoning is good reasoning. Note that I am not thereby committed to the view that sometimes the fact that I'll be glad I acted this way is what *makes it the case* that I should act this way. Rather, my claim is that sometimes the fact that I'll be glad I acted this way is *a good reason to think* I should act this way.^{18,19}

Notes

1. The New York Times (January 29, 2006) described the 2000 documentary "Sound and Fury" as follows: "The cochlear implant is a near-miracle that allows many deaf people to hear, and you'd think that any parent of a hearing-impaired child would welcome it. But, as Josh Aronson's intriguing, sometimes emotionally wrenching documentary reveals, that's not always true. Some advocates of deaf culture, which sees a world of silence and sign language as something to celebrate, oppose the implant. And some hearing-impaired people consider others' enthusiasm for the device a betrayal. As one man tells his mother, 'I didn't know you didn't accept deafness until now.'" Some of the deaf adults in that movie do repeatedly say that to attempt to cure deafness is to devalue them as people. They point out that they are glad they are deaf, and so they think others' deafness should not be cured.
2. This argument is similar to the argument discussed in Hare 1975 ("Abortion and the Golden Rule"). See footnote 12 for further discussion of his argument.
3. In this paper, I rely on the claim that the teenager should not conceive now. This claim is not controversial, though the explanation of it is. Some people believe that the teenager should not conceive now for purely prudential reasons. Others believe that the teenager should not conceive now for both prudential and moral reasons. The claim that the teenager acts morally wrongly if she conceives now is one I have defended at length elsewhere (in my 2004 and my 2009).
4. Van Frassen 1984 stated a similar principle he called "Reflection." There has been much subsequent discussion of what the most plausible version of this principle would say, and of whether any version of it is true. (See, for example, Christensen 1991, Talbott 1991, Green and Hitchcock 1994, Elga 2000 and Elga 2007.)
5. I am not claiming that *loving someone* requires *loving her as she is*. Quite the contrary is true. One might love one's child but wish she had not endured a particularly terrible ordeal — even if that ordeal was somewhat transformative of her character. One might love one's child but wish she were more sensitive to others' feelings. My claim is simply that loving someone *sometimes* centrally includes loving her as she is (in certain respects), and my claim is that in these

- cases, preferences that one's loved one be the way she is (in these respects) are often reasonable.
6. Someone might object that these preferences are reasonable only in that they are *practically* or *pragmatically* reasonable, but that they are not reasonable in themselves. This objector would point out that a belief may be epistemically unjustified, and thus unreasonable in that sense, yet it may be reasonable to have the belief because there is a *benefit* to having the belief. The objector grants that it is in some sense reasonable to have the preferences in question — but only because not having them would be bad for the agent, or only because having them is good for the agent. I reject the claims of this objector. My claim is not that having these preferences is good for the agent, or that lacking them would be bad. Rather, my claim is that the preferences are *in themselves* reasonable. That is, *if* the objector is correct that there is an important distinction between whether a desire is reasonable in itself, as a desire (which would be analogous to whether a belief is epistemically justified) and whether a desire is, more broadly, reasonable in some sense or other, then my claim is that these preferences are reasonable in the first sense.
 7. Parfit 1984 (p. 360–361) briefly comments that it is reasonable of a teenage mother not to regret conceiving although things would have been better if she had waited. I interpret him as meaning that this is reasonable although things would have been *overall and impersonally* better.
 8. It might be objected that one can build an objection to Reflection for Beliefs out of my objections to Reflection for Desires. (Thanks to Karen Bennett for raising this worry.) The objector points out that when someone has a reasonable preference for X it would typically also be reasonable for her to believe “it is reasonable to prefer X”. The teenage mother *after she conceives* will reasonably believe “it is reasonable of me to prefer that I conceived young”; but she cannot reasonably believe *before she conceives* “it is reasonable of me to prefer that I conceive young,” even though she can predict her later reasonable belief. This appears to be a counterexample to Reflection for Beliefs. The objection fails because when a preference for X is reasonable, it is only thereby reasonable to believe “it is reasonable of me *now* to prefer X”; it may not be reasonable to believe simply “it is reasonable of me to prefer X.” In the teenage mother case, she will later reasonably believe “it is reasonable of me now to prefer that I conceived” and she can predict this. But it would be *reasonable* for her to believe this claim at the earlier time: she can reasonably believe “it will be reasonable of me later to prefer to have conceived.” My objections to Reflection for Desires cannot obviously be translated into objections to Reflection for Beliefs.
 9. Barnes 2009 criticizes the view that a deaf person's preference for her life rather than a hearing life is a case of *adaptive* preference (that is, a case of sour grapes: taking a worse option to be better because one can't escape it). The view she criticizes holds that a deaf person's being glad she is deaf is *misguided*, and that therefore we should not *infer* from the existence of the preference to the claim that being deaf is just as good as being hearing. Like the position Barnes is criticizing, I argue that we should not make this inference, but my argument does not involve taking the deaf person's preference to be at all misguided. Rather, the

inference is unwarranted because it can be reasonable to prefer transformative traits, regardless of whether it is worse to have them.

10. I have taken the claim that parents of a deaf baby should prefer to cure the baby of deafness to be supported by the claims that being deaf is significantly limiting and that deafness does not provide outweighing benefits. But I do not endorse the general claim that if a child's life will be more burdened in a particular state than out of it, then parents ought to take their children out of that state if they can. In the United States today, there is significant explicit and implicit racism and homophobia, such that members of minority races and non-heterosexuals are burdened. But it is not the case that if parents *could* change the race or sexual orientation of their children, they *should* do so. It is a hard and interesting question why deafness differs in this way from race and sexual orientation. The difference may be due to the facts that race and sexual orientation are burdening almost wholly because of prejudiced and misguided attitudes, and that seeking to change these traits in one's child may seem to have the expressive force of capitulation to or agreement with these bad attitudes. While some of the burdens of being deaf arise from prejudiced attitudes, most do not: some of the burdens cannot be ameliorated; other burdens are not ameliorated though they could be, where this failure results from insufficient regard for the needs of the deaf, rather than a prejudiced negative regard.
11. Someone might propose the following: if an agent will be glad she acted as she did whichever way she acts, then she ought to act in the way that she will be *more glad* to have acted. The following case undermines that proposal. Suppose that Mary has four children and is managing to have a happy, fulfilled career and family life; but she is only barely making ends meet. Mary knows that if she has a fifth child, her balance will fall apart: she and her four children will all be considerably worse off. She knows she should not have another child. But Mary also knows that if she has another child, she will love the child and she will not wish she had chosen differently; indeed, the thought of her child not existing would be unbearable to her, even as she would recognize that it would have been wiser not to have the child. In this case, whichever way Mary chooses, she will be glad she chose as she did. But she will be *less strongly and intensely glad* she chose not to conceive if she makes that choice; she will be more strongly and intensely glad she chose to conceive if she makes that choice. Prudence does not stir the same passion or intensity that love does, and so the preferences that arise from prudence are not as strong as those that arise from love.
12. Similarly, the General Anti-Abortion Argument fails because the fact that a preference is reasonable given that a fetus has grown into a child with thoughts, feelings, and relationships does not imply that the preference is reasonable before the fetus has grown into a more sophisticated being.

Hare 1975 offers an argument similar to the General Anti-Abortion Argument, based on the golden rule: we are glad we were not aborted, we should treat others as we would want to be treated, so we should not abort. The problem with his argument is that if the golden rule is true, it only applies to those beings which have moral status; it cannot be used to show that we should make sure that beings come to have moral status. Early abortion prevents fetuses from getting to live out their lives. But whether there is thereby any moral reason against early

abortion depends on whether the early fetuses that die in early abortions have moral status. See my 1999.

13. In this paper I use “regret” to refer to one kind of regret: an all-things-considered preference against one’s action (an all-things-considered wish not to have done what one did). This is not the only kind of regret. Sometimes someone regrets an action though she does not have an all-things-considered preference not to have done it: her regret is either a recognition of something bad about acting as she did or a recognition of something good about not having acted that way. (I discuss these types of regret in my 1999, in which I argue that it is appropriate to feel one kind of regret about early miscarriages but not another.)
14. Arntzenius 2008 discusses a version of a reflection principle for preferences which says, roughly, that one should not do anything one will regret. That is, one should not do anything that is such that, if you do it, then you will wish you had not done it. My objections to Reflection for Desires (from the cases of the teenager who has decided to conceive and the parents who have decided not to cure their baby’s deafness) don’t apply to this principle. But if there are reasonable aversions, and so there are cases like that of action A described in the main text, then Arntzenius’s principle is false.
15. It might be suggested that “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning goes wrong, and Reflection for Desires is false, simply because:

(#) One cannot use a fact which is dependent on one’s X-ing to justify X-ing.

One cannot use a future preference to justify a current preference, if the future preference will be held only if the current preference is held. One cannot use a future preference to justify a current choice if the future preference will be held only if the current choice is made. (Thanks to Caspar Hare for pressing me on this point.)

But if there are reasonable aversions, then (#) does not accurately capture what is bad about bad “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning. If there are reasonable aversions, then there are cases of bad “I’ll be glad I did it” reasoning of the following form. Consider the agent in the case of action A described in the main text. She might reason as follows: “if I refrain from performing A, I’ll be glad I refrained; so I should refrain from performing A.” This reasoning is bad, and my explanation does explain why it is bad, but (#) does not. (#) does not provide a way to criticize the reasoning because the fact that she appeals to — that she will in the future prefer to have refrained from performing A — is true regardless of how she acts.

16. Parfit 1984 draws attention to our bias for the future; he says we would be better off if we didn’t have this bias. (Thanks to Ben Bradley for suggesting that I discuss the bias for the future in this paper.)
17. I have argued that Reflection for Desires is false. Someone might object that I’ve only shown Reflection for Desires to fail in a certain kind of case, those involving preferences that are reasonable due to whom the agent *loves*. (Thanks to Philip Pettit for raising this worry.) I understand the dialectic differently. Once it has been shown that Reflection for Desires is false — as I have shown it to be — we should simply take its claim to be unmotivated. The general claim was making a mistake; we have no reason to think that the claim is true when it is restricted to cases other than the ones I’ve discussed.

18. By contrast, a desire-satisfaction view of well-being would hold that the fact that I'll have satisfied desires after acting does make it the case that I should act this way.
19. For helpful comments on drafts of this paper, I am grateful to Elizabeth Barnes, Liz Camp, Tyler Doggett, Ronald Dworkin, Andy Egan, Robert Epperson, Alex Guerrero, Caspar Hare, Chris Heathwood, Sarah-Jane Leslie, Sarah McGrath, Thomas Nagel, Jill North, Michael Rescorla, Brook Sadler, Jackie Scully, Brad Skow, and Ted Sider, as well as audiences at Acadia University, the Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference, City University of New York, the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, the Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, New York University School of Law, the On-line Philosophy Conference, Princeton University, the Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, U.C. Berkeley School of Law, U.C. Santa Barbara, and Yale Law School.

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