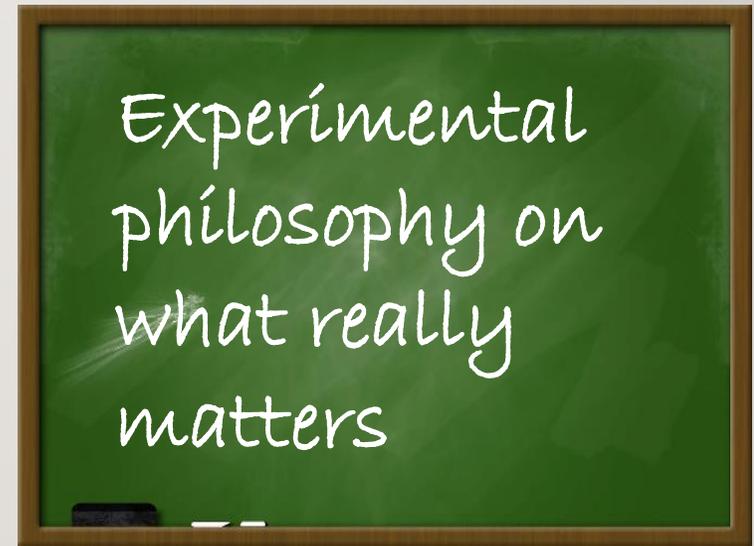


A BETTER LIFE OR A BETTER FUTURE?: CALLING OUT OUR BIAS AGAINST THE PAST

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NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION OF PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCE, 2 DECEMBER 2016

A TIP OF THE HAT AND THEN SOME



A BETTER LIFE OR A BETTER FUTURE?

- Which would you prefer?
- If each of your years are happy, would you rather live for 30 or 60 years?
- If each of their years are happy, would you rather good people got to live 30 or 60 years?

- For happy lives, longer is better

JUDGING A LONG-LOST RELATIVES' LIFE IN THE MOMENT

Imagine that you hear you have a long-lost relative in a remote location on the other side of the world. You know that you will never get to meet or be in contact with this person, but you are currently pondering what their life is like.

Assuming that the stipulations about their happiness and length of life (below) are true, and that they are too remote for you to ever be in contact with them, which of the following options would be the best for your long-lost relative?

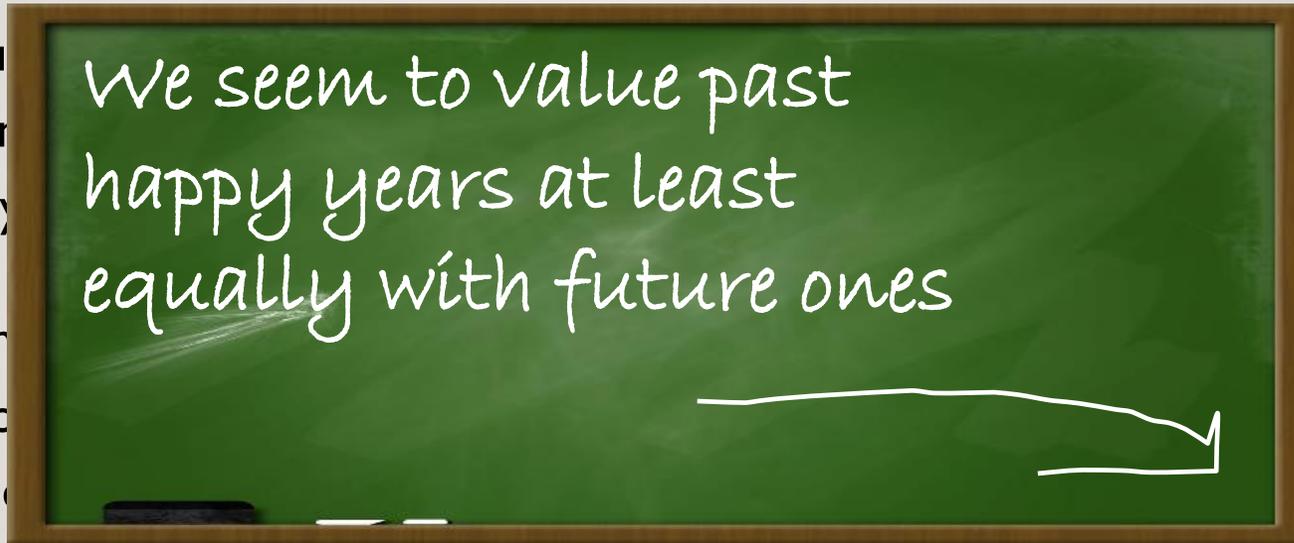
1. The long-lost relative has lived 70 happy years so far, and will live 1 more happy year.
2. The long-lost relative has lived 40 happy years so far, and will live 30 more happy years.



JUDGING A LONG-LOST RELATIVES' LIFE IN THE MOMENT

Imagine that you are on the other side of the world. You know that your long-lost relative is currently living a happy life.

Assuming that the information that they are too good to be true, and the following options would be available to you:



the other side of the world. You know that your long-lost relative is currently living a happy life.

Assuming that the information that they are too good to be true, and the following options would be available to you:

1. The long-lost relative has lived 70 happy years so far, and will live 1 more happy year. **(82%)**
2. The long-lost relative has lived 40 happy years so far, and will live 30 more happy years. **(18%)**

JUDGING YOUR LIFE IN THE MOMENT

Imagine that you awake in a hospital after a minor surgery. You feel groggy and confused because a side-effect of the anesthetic has caused you to temporarily forget the details of your life. The surgery was a complete success. You are now in excellent health and will remain so until your death. The doctor tells you that your life so far has been happy each year, and each of your future years will also be happy.

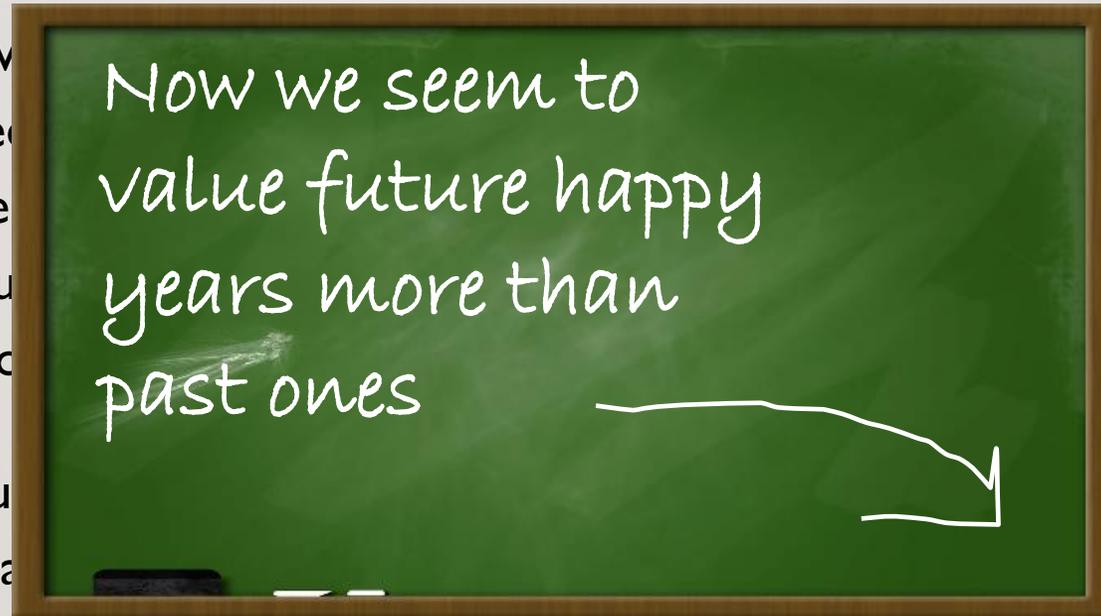
Thinking only about what is good for you, and assuming the claims about your health and happiness (above) are true, what would you prefer to hear?

1. You have lived 70 happy years so far, and you will live 1 more happy year.
2. You have lived 40 happy years so far, and you will live 30 more happy years.

JUDGING YOUR LIFE IN THE MOMENT

Imagine that you are a surgeon because a side-effect of your life. The surgeon will remain so until you die, and each of your

Thinking only about your happiness (above) and



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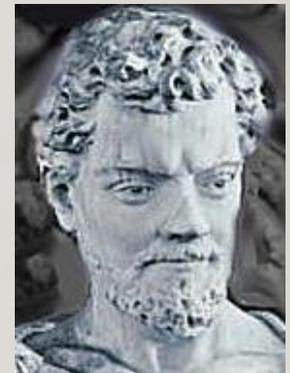
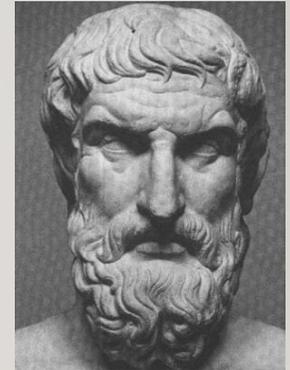
1. You have lived 70 happy years so far, and you will live 1 more happy year. **(14%)**
2. You have lived 40 happy years so far, and you will live 30 more happy years. **(86%)**

THE PUZZLE

- So, which is correct?
 - Are past happy years just as valuable as future happy years, or
 - Are future happy years *more* valuable than past happy years?
- Are we wrong in our judgments about our lives or about the lives of others?

THE PUZZLE IN CONTEXT

- Whether we should value potential happy years in the past as much as potential happy years in the future bears on an important puzzle in the history of philosophy...
- The puzzle of past and future nonexistence (Epicurus/Lucretius):
- We do not mourn our past nonexistence, so why should we mourn our future nonexistence (after our death)?



A BIAS TOWARDS THE FUTURE, A RATIONAL PRIVILEGING OF THE FUTURE, OR...?

- PARFIT: we have a bias towards the future
- MOST OTHERS: the past is the past, we should focus on the future
- US: we have a bias against the past
- Thought experiments can expose the bias via putting someone else in your shoes



WORKING OUT WHO TO GIVE THE GOLDEN TICKET TO (START)

Imagine that a woman died recently, and you are organizing her posthumous affairs. The woman's will includes the instructions to liquidate all of her assets, except for her golden ticket, and to use the money to cover her expenses and donate any remainder to Oxfam. The golden ticket is currently blank. Once a name has been written on the non-refundable and non-transferable golden ticket, it allows the named bearer of the ticket entry to the most fantastic show on Earth—a strictly invite-only one-off event that will occur in a month's time. The will stipulates that you should give the ticket to one of the woman's two only distant relatives. Specifically, the ticket should be given to the distant relative that has, all things considered and in your judgment, the worse life.



WORKING OUT WHO TO GIVE THE GOLDEN TICKET TO (END)

The first relative has lived happily each year for 70 years, and will enjoy 1 more happy year. The second relative has lived happily each year for 40 years, and will enjoy 30 more happy years. Both relatives have been and will be in good health every year of their life. To carry out your duty, you have to decide which relative has the worse life, write their name on the ticket, and send it to them.

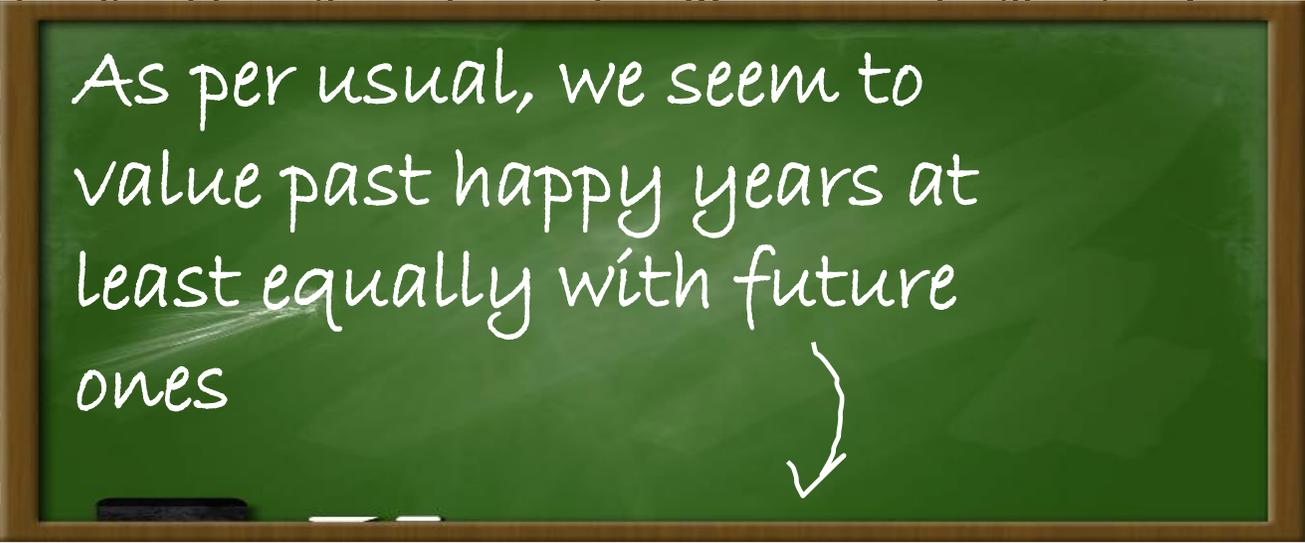
Assuming that the claims about the deceased woman's relatives' future years are true, which relative has the worse life and should receive the ticket?

1. The first relative, who's lived happily for 70 years, and will live happily for another 1, has the worse life and should receive the ticket.
2. The second relative, who's lived happily for 40 years, and will live happily for another 30, has the worse life and should receive the ticket.

WORKING OUT WHO TO GIVE THE GOLDEN TICKET TO (END)

The first relative, who's lived happily for 70 years, and will live happily for another 1, has the worse life. The second relative, who's lived happily for 40 years, and will live happily for another 30, has the better life. Both relatives have the same amount of happy years. Both relatives have the same amount of happy years. To carry out your duty, you should give the Golden Ticket to the first relative, and send it to the first relative.

Assuming that the above assumptions are true, which relative has the worse life?



As per usual, we seem to value past happy years at least equally with future ones

1. The first relative, who's lived happily for 70 years, and will live happily for another 1, has the worse life and should receive the ticket. **(19%)**
2. The second relative, who's lived happily for 40 years, and will live happily for another 30, has the worse life and should receive the ticket. **(81%)**

WORKING OUT WHETHER YOU SHOULD GET THE GOLDEN TICKET (START)

- Same scenario, but now you are one of the deceased woman's two relatives, and Frank is now in your shoes, working out who should get the ticket

WORKING OUT WHETHER YOU SHOULD GET THE GOLDEN TICKET (END)

The first relative has lived happily each year for 70 years, and will enjoy 1 more happy year. You are this first relative. The second relative has lived happily each year for 40 years, and will enjoy 30 more happy years. Both you and the other relative have been and will be in good health every year of your lives. To carry out his duty, Frank has to decide which relative has the worse life, write their name on the ticket, and send it to them.

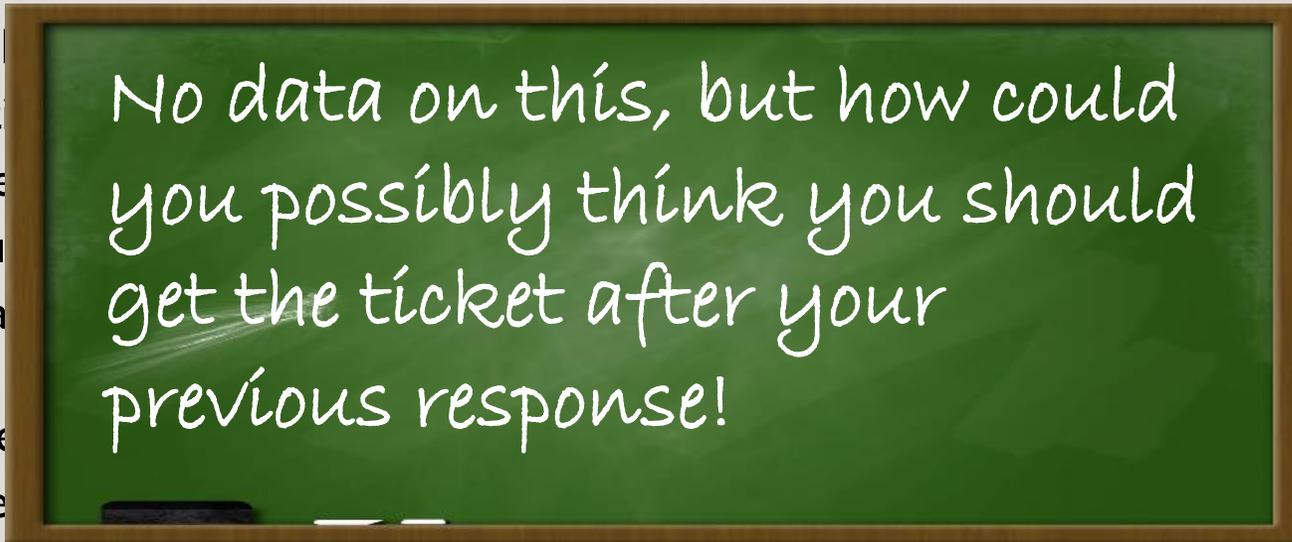
Assuming that the claims about your and the other relative's future years are true, which person has the worse life and should receive the ticket?

1. The first relative, you, who's lived happily for 70 years, and will live happily for another 1, will have the worse life and should receive the ticket.
2. The second relative, who's lived happily for 40 years, and will live happily for another 30, will have the worse life and should receive the ticket.

WORKING OUT WHETHER YOU SHOULD GET THE GOLDEN TICKET (END)

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2. The second relative, who's lived happily for 40 years, and will live happily for another 30, will have the worse life and should receive the ticket.

A JURY OF YOUR PEERS, OR EVEN OF YOURSELF!

- Do you have grounds to complain that Frank hasn't done his job right if you don't get the ticket?
- If you protested, what would a jury say?
- You know from the last scenario that you are failing to value your past happy years



BIAS AGAINST THE PAST VS. BIAS TOWARDS THE FUTURE

- It makes sense to value the future highly, the problem is not valuing the past much or at all in certain circumstances

BIAS AGAINST THE PAST – AN ADAPTATION?

- Your genes don't care whether you have already eaten, sheltered, and procreated, they want you to get out there and do it all again



WE HAVE A BIAS AGAINST THE PAST WHEN JUDGING OUR LIVES IN THE MOMENT

- When we take a detached, holistic view, we can see that the past matters just as much as the future for others and ourselves
- Undervaluing the past only makes sense from our genes point of view



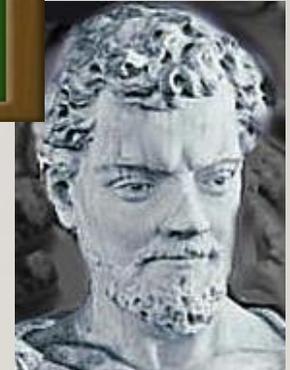
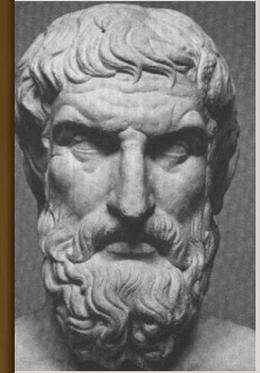
BACK TO THE PUZZLE

- So, which is correct?
 - Are past happy years just as valuable as future happy years, or
 - Are future happy years *more* valuable than past happy years?
- Past happy years are just as valuable as future happy years, so we were wrong to prefer more future happy years, but less total happy years in the second scenario
- We should want a better life (not just a better future)

BACK TO THE PUZZLE IN CONTEXT

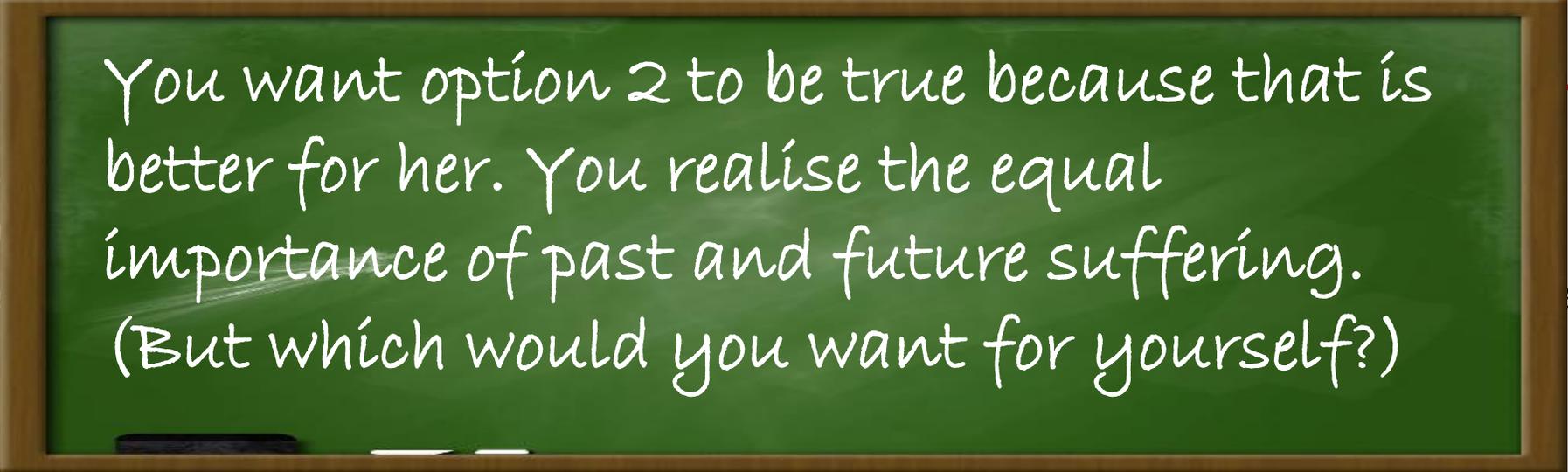
- The puzzle of the Stoic (Epicurus/Laetantia)
 - We do not mourn our past nonexistence (which is just as valuable)
- We mourn our future nonexistence (which is just as valuable)
 - We should mourn them both to the extent that they result in us living less happy years

Ending on a happy note:
Or... don't worry, be happy
(focus on your happy past and
future life/existence instead)



YOUR MOTHER'S SURGERY

- You
there
cove
very
very



You want option 2 to be true because that is better for her. You realise the equal importance of past and future suffering. (But which would you want for yourself?)

1. Your mother has suffered for 10 hours and will not suffer later today
2. Your mother has not yet suffered, but will suffer 1 hour later today