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“The Self and the Past”

It is often appropriate (and rational) to have certain attitudes towards our pasts and our futures. We often appropriately regret bad things we do, feel guilty about wrongs we have committed, and are glad about the good things that we do and that happen to us. We rationally fear anticipated pain and look forward to expected pleasure. In “The Self and the Future”, Bernard Williams famously suggests that certain attitudes towards the future (namely fear) can survive significant psychological disconnect between you and your future self—it is still rational to fear coming torture even if you are informed that you will first be given a radically different psychology (that is also not continuous with your current psychology).

In this paper, I suggest the same is true of attitudes (such as regret and gladness) towards the past. It is appropriate to regret things or feel glad about them even if you are not psychologically continuous with your past self. The appropriateness of certain attitudes towards the past survives psychological discontinuity. Perhaps, however, such attitudes will (and should) be tempered, and accompanied by other attitudes not usually present. It is appropriate to be somewhat ambivalent about the actions of one’s past selves.

My conclusion and Williams’s do not sit well with psychological continuity accounts of personal identity. All the worse for such accounts, so say I. Still, I do think such accounts capture something right: a lack of psychological continuity explains why we should be ambivalent in our attitudes. Furthermore, those future and past people with whom we are psychologically continuous can also appropriately occasion attitudes such as regret, gladness and fear. The appropriateness of such attitudes follows both our bodies and our minds.