

PRÉCIS OF
THE PASSING OF TEMPORAL WELL-BEING

Ben Bramble

The goal of this book (2018) is to question a major assumption of much recent work on well-being: that there is any such thing as *temporal* well-being, or how one is doing or fared during particular times or periods of one's life shorter than one's whole life. The thesis of the book is that temporal well-being does not exist. The only kind of well-being that exists is *lifetime* well-being, or the value for one of one's life *considered as a whole*. While we often say things like "I had a good day," "my twenties were the best years of my life," "John is thriving at the moment," "I'm better off now than I was four years ago," and so on, when such statements are true, they are true only metaphorically, not literally.

In the book, I give two arguments for this surprising claim. The first is the *normative significance argument*. It goes like this: well-being is the thing that provides us with our self-interested reasons. That is, when you have a self-interested reason to do something, it is a reason to do what will promote your well-being in some way, and your reason is that it will promote your well-being; however, it is only lifetime well-being that provides such reasons. It is only because something will add to your lifetime well-being in some way (or make you better off in some respect in your life considered as a whole) that you ever have a self-interested reason to do it. So, well-being is just the same as lifetime well-being. There is no other kind of well-being.

My second argument for the claim that there is no temporal well-being is the *no credible theory argument*. While there are many credible theories of lifetime well-being, there are at present no credible theories of temporal well-being, and it is hard to imagine what one might look like. Theorists might be failing so badly here because there is no genuine phenomenon to account for.

Start with hedonism. The reason hedonism cannot be the right theory of temporal well-being has to do with the length of a moment. If a moment has no duration or is extremely brief (e.g., the Planck length), then it will be too brief for a pleasure even to occur in (pleasures take some time to occur). If a moment is supposed to last longer than this, then we need to specify how long one is, and any answer to this question (say, the minimum amount of time it takes to experience a pleasure) raises other big problems that I outline in the book.

What about objective-list theories of temporal well-being? Such a view cannot be true because of the truth of *internalism* about temporal well-being. Internalism says that temporal well-being is determined just by the intrinsic state of the world at the time in question. But the sort of items that typically feature on objective-list theories—for example, nature-fulfillment, achievement, and knowledge—exist (including at particular times) only in virtue of what happens *at other times*. If you take the present moment independently of the past and future—if it somehow existed in isolation from the past and future—there is no nature-fulfillment, achievement, or knowledge in existence right now.

What about desire-based theories of temporal well-being? They are also defeated by internalism, because the sort of things we typically desire for ourselves are the same sort of things that objective-list theorists identify as the basic ingredients in well-being—namely, nature-fulfillment, achievement, and knowledge—and, again, none of these things can exist in just a single moment (i.e., a moment considered independently of other times or periods).

The next part of the book addresses some important objections to my thesis. The most important of these is this: If there is no such thing as temporal well-being, then what are we doing when we say things like “I had a good day,” “my twenties were the best years of my life,” “John is thriving at the moment,” “I’m better off now than I was four years ago,” etc.? I offer a number of different suggestions. For example, in saying that a certain period was especially good for me, I might, strictly speaking, be saying that it involved certain events and experiences that will, by the end of my life, have made an especially significant positive contribution to my lifetime well-being. Alternatively, I might be suggesting that the events of this period caused or paved the way for later events and experiences that themselves will make a big contribution to my ultimate level of lifetime well-being.

In the final part of the book, I consider some implications of my thesis. One of these is that philosophers who theorize about the nature of temporal well-being are wasting their time. Another is that philosophers who think that lifetime well-being is in some sense made up out of temporal well-being are mistaken. But there are other, more practical or real-world, implications of the thesis. A central goal of public policy is to make people as well off as possible. Policy makers often appeal, either implicitly or explicitly, to momentary well-being. They ask (1) how well off are people *right now* (i.e., at the present moment) and then (2) how we can make them better off at future times. If my thesis is correct, these questions are (at least, as commonly understood) deeply flawed. Instead of trying to make people better off later than they are now, we should be trying to make individuals (existing and future ones) as well off as possible in their lives considered as wholes. Right now, given the way things are, there are facts about how well off people are going to end up in their lives considered as wholes. We

should be making policies that increase these ultimate lifetime values. The goal shouldn't be getting people to a certain high 'level of well-being' at a particular time and sustaining them there, but rather ensuring that they get to have a certain life trajectory, with various different things happening over time, perhaps in a certain order, or bearing a certain relationship to each other.

Am I proposing that we stop talking and asking about how people are faring at times and during periods? No. Most ordinary people use such talk simply as shorthand for the sort of talk I outlined here (talk, for example, about the contributions of the events of particular times to ultimate lifetime well-being). This is harmless. The danger is when we intellectualize such talk and construe it literally, as attributing what philosophers have in mind by temporal well-being, something that would have to have ultimate normative significance that is independent of any contribution it happened to make to lifetime well-being. It is fine for us to keep saying things like "I had a good childhood" and "How is John faring these days?" in just the same way it is fine for us to talk about how our car or plant is doing. Such talk is merely metaphorical.

Ben Bramble
Australian National University
E-mail: Ben.Bramble@anu.edu.au

References:

Bramble, Ben. 2018. *The Passing of Temporal Well-being*. New York: Routledge.