

# REPLIES TO BRADLEY, ROSATI, AND VISAK

Ben Bramble

Let me start by thanking Ben Bradley, Connie Rosati, and Tatjana Visak for engaging with my work. They are three of my absolute favorite philosophers, and it is a thrill to have them read, let alone comment on, this book. I found their pieces extremely stimulating. In what follows, I will address what I take to be their most central concerns.

## 1 Bradley

According to Bradley, both lifetime well-being and temporal well-being are determined by the same thing: the value for one of “the basics.” These basics (or “value atoms”) might be (depending on the right theory of well-being) pleasures, desire-satisfactions, or things like friendship, knowledge, achievement, etc. The idea is that these things are good for you *independently of everything else*. And it is only *because* they are good for you in this independent way that having them in your life, or at some time, makes your life, or that time, better for you in some respect.

By contrast, on my view, pleasures, desire-satisfactions, or whatever the relevant items might be, cannot be good for you *independently of everything else* in the way Bradley has in mind. This is because whether a particular thing, like a pleasure, is good for you depends *on everything else in your life*, and in particular *how the thing fits into your life considered as a whole*. It is just its place or role in this larger whole that determines whether it has any value for you. To be sure, how good your life considered as a whole is for you is determined by what happens *in* it, but not by particular things within it *having some independent value*. It is not *because* a given pleasure is good for you that it makes your life as a whole go better for you. Rather, the relevant items in your life come together to make for a *whole life* that is good for you (in various ways or respects), and it is only for this reason (by playing a role in the value for you of this larger whole) that they count as themselves, individually, having any value for you.

Bradley objects to my view as follows:

[On Bramble’s view,] lifetime well-being is determined by the pleasures and pains in it, [but] not the *values* of those pleasures and pains. The pleasures and pains themselves do not have value. But what is the attraction of a view that says that pleasures and pains are intrinsically worthless but make a life better? Why would they make a life better if they were worthless? (This volume, 121)

The answer is that they make your life better for you because of *how they feel* (or more precisely, because they make a difference to how your life as a whole felt for you). Indeed, surely Bradley himself has got to say something similar about why pleasures (on the assumption they are basics) have independent or prior value. Why are they basically good for you? Presumably because of how they feel.

Now, why favor my view over Bradley's? It is because of the normative significance argument I mentioned in the *précis*. What matters for us, at the end of the day, is just how good our lives were for us *considered as wholes*, or how fortunate we were *all up*. It is just this, ultimately, that is what we should be trying to boost for people. And we should be wanting to boost it, not as a mere byproduct or upshot of giving these people particular things that are independently good for them in Bradley's sense, but rather *because* our doing so will boost it. Similarly, it is only because someone's overall fortunateness or lifetime well-being is determined by what happens by various events and experiences within their life that we should be interested in these particulars. If lifetime well-being were somehow determined not by the parts of lives but by something else, then the parts would be normatively irrelevant. We can know that the whole matters *even before we've had the thought* that there are parts that might determine it.

Let me now consider two additional worries raised by Bradley. The first is this:

If there is no diachronic personal identity [identity over time], then there is no lifetime well-being. Thus the extreme holist is committed to denying a view in metaphysics. . . . Being committed to diachronic personal identity is not that big a deal, but it is a nice feature of Basics First that it carries with it no such commitment. (121)

But if there was no identity over time, there might still be identity at times. Selves could exist only momentarily. The lifetime well-being of these selves would be their welfare at the relevant moments. So, on my view, there would still be some point to making these moments for these beings as good as possible.

That said, if there was no identity over time, then intuitively this would have huge implications for how we should go about benefiting beings (which is exactly what my view predicts). There would be no point in working toward goals, trying to have pleasures that last longer than a moment (like those of listening to an album, having a conversation with a friend, making love, etc.), and so on.

Finally, Bradley says that

At times Bramble seems open to agreeing that there is temporal well-being in some sense. Late in the book, discussing a claim I make about things being bad for people at some times but not others, Bramble says this: "To say that the

toe-stubbing was bad for me at these times might be to say just that it was at these times that the toe-stubbing had consequences (say, pains) that themselves directly reduced my lifetime well-being” (47). Here Bramble seems to accept that there is a way to understand temporal well-being talk in terms of contributions to lifetime well-being. If Bramble is generally willing to accept such interpretations of temporal well-being statements, then I wonder whether he really denies that there is any such thing as temporal well-being. He agrees (i) that there is lifetime well-being, and (ii) that lives have components, and (iii) that some of those components affect lifetime well-being more than others, and (iv) that the components happen at times. So it seems we can give a definition of temporal well-being in terms of things Bramble believes in. (122–123)

It is open to me to say that one is doing well at a given time just in case at this time one is having some of the events or experiences that will add to one’s lifetime well-being. But I prefer not to say this, because, as I argue in the book, well-being is intrinsically normatively significant. If it were literally true that my performing a certain action would mean that I would fare well at some later time—say, tomorrow—then this fact alone would provide me with a self-interested reason to perform the action *independent of its contributing to my lifetime well-being*. But there can be no self-interested reasons whose ultimate source is something other than lifetime well-being.

## 2 Rosati

Rosati shares some of Bradley’s worries. She writes, “The goods that make a stretch of time good for us are essentially the same goods that make for good lives. . . . Well-being, whether periodic or lifetime, is constructed out of some basic building blocks.” She argues for this view as follows:

I find it mysterious why these goods would be reason-giving only in relation to our lives as a whole but not in relation to the periods in which they occur. . . . I am inclined to think that there is really no making sense of lifetime well-being without making sense of temporal well-being, and vice versa. It is hard to see why those same goods would contribute intrinsically to lifetime well-being without contributing intrinsically to well-being for a shorter period of time, why they would contribute to well-being only by contributing to lifetime well-being, why they would have intrinsic normative significance only insofar

as they contribute to lifetime well-being. (This volume, 136–138)

Rosati's idea here seems to be that lifetime well-being is just a species of temporal well-being. It is just the longest period of an individual's life. For this reason, what enhances the latter should enhance other periods as well. But I deny that one's life considered as a whole is just 'one of the periods of one's life.' It is special in the way I have described here and in the book.

Rosati also shares Bradley's worry about how things within one's life could get to bear on lifetime well-being "if they are not themselves intrinsically normatively significant." She writes:

The years an individual spends, say, in a happy marriage are not *instrumental* to achieving lifetime well-being. They might be partly *constitutive* of her living a life that is good for her. But it is puzzling how they could be so constitutive without themselves having intrinsic normative significance. (128)

But how, on Rosati's view, do these years of marriage get to be good for one in the first place? What makes them good for one? It is presumably things like the pleasures involved in them, the closeness, the shared efforts or projects, etc. Whatever the answer, *that* is the sort of answer I would want to give to the question of how the years of marriage make one's life as a whole better for one.

The next worry of Rosati's I want to address is that my view has a counterintuitive consequence—namely, that

Larry Becker's time spent in an iron lung due to polio, John McCain's years as a prisoner of war, and Harriet Tubman's and Frederick Douglass's years of enslavement were all without intrinsic normative significance. (133)

But, she writes:

[I]t strains credulity to believe that those years had normative significance only in relation to Becker's, McCain's, Tubman's, and Douglass's lifetime well-being. Surely the badness of people's experience with polio provided urgent reasons to find a polio vaccine, not just because having polio and the paralysis it sometimes left in its wake would decrease lifetime well-being, but also because of the intrinsic badness of the affliction itself. (133)

I am unsure what Rosati means here by the "badness of the affliction itself." I agree that having polio is bad for one not only because of its causal effects, but because of "people's experience" of it. The pains involved in polio are themselves bad for one. But this, on my view, is because they reduce lifetime well-being. My view is not that they start to count as bad for

one only once one has died and so one's lifetime well-being has become settled. If they will later count as reducing one's lifetime well-being in some respect (which, plausibly, they would), then they reduced it all along. It is nonetheless the case that their badness for one is fully explained by their role in one's lifetime well-being.

Rosati anticipates this sort of response. She asks whether we would choose the experiences of Becker, McCain, or Tubman for a friend or loved one. She then writes:

Would we be inclined to withhold judgment until we knew whether these years decreased that person's lifetime well-being? I think it obvious that we would not choose these years for these persons, and that we would, without a moment's hesitation, judge those years bad. Bramble might suggest that we wouldn't hesitate, but only because we consider the implications these years have for lifetime well-being, reasonably judging that such years couldn't help but negatively impact lifetime well-being. But this strikes me as a much less plausible explanation of why we wouldn't hesitate than the fact that we recognize straightaway the badness of these years for the persons involved. (133)

Why exactly is mine a less plausible explanation? We can, I believe, recognize straightaway that such years reduce lifetime well-being.

Rosati continues:

If we learned that those years in some way contributed to greater lifetime well-being, would this alter our view that those years were intrinsically bad for them? (134)

On my view, no, since these years involved (at least) pains that reduced the lifetime well-being of these individuals *in one respect*.

Rosati concludes with another fascinating objection. She says that, on my view, nothing could go well or badly for an immortal being, since such a being would not have any lifetime well-being.

However, if the life of an immortal ends up repeating in a certain way, then this could count as an ending in the relevant sense, and so enable this being to have a lifetime well-being. What about an immortal whose life does not end up repeating in any way, but continues to change, in relevant ways, forever? I'm not sure this is conceptually possible. But suppose it is. In this odd case, I am willing to accept that such a being might not be able to be benefited or harmed by things, even pleasures or pains. If this seems counterintuitive, I would point out that it is pretty hard to imagine an immortal being whose life changes forever. So, I think, it is hard to have reliable intuitions about what could harm or benefit them.

### 3 Visak

Visak begins by rejecting my definition or analysis of the concept of well-being. She writes:

According to Bramble, that welfare is per definition normatively significant best explains the fact that most people and some animals are genuine subjects of welfare, while other things that can also fare well or poorly in some sense, such as cars and trees, are not. Cars and trees, according to Bramble are not genuine subjects of welfare, because what happens to them is not of ultimate moral significance. I think that Bramble's explanation stands things on their heads. I wouldn't say that trees are not subjects of welfare because what happens to them is not ultimately normatively significant. I would rather say that what happens to trees is not ultimately normatively significant because they are not subjects of welfare. (This volume, 142)

I agree with Visak that it is because trees are not subjects of welfare that what happens to them is not ultimately normatively significant. My point is that what marks welfare out from other ways in which lives might be assessed, or properties of them, is that it is the sort of thing that provides reasons or explains value.

Visak thinks there is some other way of distinguishing genuine welfare from other properties or assessments of lives, and from the sorts of metaphorical well-being that cars, trees, etc., can have. For example, she suggests that what might explain the difference here is that, when it comes to trees, cars, etc., "there is nothing it is like to be in their position." I agree that this is part of why such entities cannot have welfare. But *why* is it? Why does the fact that there is nothing that it is like to be in the position of these entities make it impossible for them to have welfare? Why do you need to have a position or experiences to have welfare? My answer is that it is because it is only when you have a position or experiences that you can be the relevant source of value and have the relevant sorts of reasons.

What about other "common conceptualizations of welfare," like the rational care analysis, which holds "that 'p is good for S' means 'if S is worthy of care, then there is reason to desire p out of care for S.' . . . [or] the positional analysis [on which] 'p is good for S' means 'p contributes to the desirability of being in S's position.'" These, Visak points out, don't "tell us that we should care for S or that it is good simpliciter that S possesses p." It is true that these accounts don't tell us this, but such accounts are, I think, inadequate (for reasons I discuss elsewhere).

Visak next complains that I have misunderstood internalism about temporal well-being. When the internalist says that how well off one is at a given time is determined just by what is happening at that time, this is not,

Visak claims, to say that it is determined by what is happening at that time if there were no past or future. It is determined by what is happening at that time in some sense taking into account what is happening at other times. I do not think Visak is right here about the best way to understand internalism. I would have been interested to hear more from her about how it should be understood in the terms she suggests.

Not content to show that the arguments of *The Passing of Temporal Well-Being* fail, Visak concludes by claiming that their failure undermines a particular theory of lifetime well-being which I defend elsewhere, a theory she calls Theory B: “S’s pleasure at  $t_2$  benefits S if and only if and because S has not derived pleasure from a similar experience before.” Theory B, she says, “cannot account for intrinsic temporal welfare.” So, if temporal welfare exists, Theory B must be false. (She speculates that my reason for arguing that temporal well-being doesn’t exist is that I see the problem it poses for Theory B, and wish to shore up Theory B.)

However, Theory B is a theory only of *lifetime* well-being. It neither says nor entails anything about temporal well-being. It certainly does not, as Visak says, “assume that how well off someone is at some point in time depends on how the events at that point in time hang together with what happens at other points in time.”

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