

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# A new well-being atomism

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Email: [hersch@vt.edu](mailto:hersch@vt.edu)**Abstract**

Many philosophers reject the view that well-being over a lifetime is simply an aggregation of well-being at every moment of one's life, and thus they reject theories of well-being like hedonism and concurrentist desire satisfactionism. They raise concerns that such a view misses the importance of the relationships between moments in a person's life or the role narratives play in a person's well-being. In this article, we develop an atomist meta-theory of well-being, according to which the prudential value of a life depends solely on the prudential value of each moment of that life. This is a general account of momentary well-being that can capture different features of well-being that standard atomistic accounts fail to capture, thus allowing for the possibility of an atomism that is compatible with a variety of well-being theories. Contrary to many criticisms leveled against momentary well-being, this well-being atomism captures all of the important features of well-being.

**KEYWORDS**

Well-Being, Atomism, Aggregation, Relationalism, Narrative, Redemptionism, Hedonism

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Many philosophers have rejected the view that well-being over a lifetime is simply an aggregation of well-being at every moment of one's life, and thus they reject theories of well-being like hedonism and concurrentist desire satisfactionism (Slote 1982; Velleman 1991; Temkin 2012; Rosati 2013; Dorsey 2015; Kauppinen 2015; King 2018). These philosophers raise concerns that such a view misses the importance of the relationships between moments in a person's life or the role narratives play in a person's well-being, and argue that aggregation is not an appropriate approach to well-being. In this article we outline a new meta-theory of well-being, which we call well-being atomism. According to well-being atomism, the prudential value of a life depends solely on the prudential value of each moment of that life, and the value of each moment of a life is independent of other moments, of the order in which moments occur, and of other features above and beyond the individual moment. We argue that, contrary to many criticisms leveled against momentary well-being, well-being atomism can capture all of the important features of well-being.

Well-being atomism is constructed out of what we call comprehensive momentary well-being, which is a notion of well-being that is broad and ecumenical, such that it can incorporate what people find compelling about various theories of well-being. While there are ostensible components of well-being that well-being atomism cannot incorporate, our account provides a rationale for omitting these as components of well-being. Rather than a well-being theory, well-being atomism is a meta-theory of well-being because it sets out the bounds of what an acceptable theory of well-being can be committed to. If well-being atomism is true, then the only viable theories of well-being are those that are compatible with well-being atomism.

Well-being atomism is an interesting thesis for three reasons. First, its defense amounts to a refutation of non-atomistic theories of well-being and the commitments that animate them, like the view that the shape of a life matters in ways that cannot be captured by atomism. Second, many argue either directly against atomism or against views that depend on or entail atomism.<sup>1</sup> Third, because we claim our version of atomism is broad and ecumenical, its ecumenical nature helps narrow the debate over well-being: all plausible theories of well-being can be (and thus ought to be) versions of the well-being atomism we defend here. Well-being atomism, if it is true, introduces conditions on an adequate theory of well-being that theories should respect. Thus, a defense of well-being atomism has significant implications for general debates regarding theories of well-being.

We begin in §2 by explaining our basic atomistic approach and detailing comprehensive momentary well-being which underlies our new well-being atomism. We explain away worries regarding relationalism in §3. In §4 we discuss ways in which atomism can accommodate narratability. In §5 we discuss some more general worries about aggregation and the extent to which they are problems for atomism. §6 returns to the broad view of atomism and elaborates on how comprehensive momentary well-being is a kind of atomism. We conclude in §7.

## 2 | A NEW WELL-BEING ATOMISM

Well-being atomism is a meta-theory of well-being. This means it is a theory about the content of theories of well-being rather than a theory of well-being itself. It holds that all true theories of

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, Raibley (2012) endorses holism *contra* atomism, and Bramble (2018) argues that there is no such thing as momentary well-being, thus ruling out atomism.

well-being are atomistic. We follow Jason Raibley in using the term atomism to describe theories with three commitments: “(a) *the explanatory priority of momentary well-being*, (b) *momentary well-being internalism*, and (c) *neutrality about the order of episodes when aggregating well-being over time*” (Raibley 2016, 342). According to (a), “instantaneous, momentary, or synchronic well-being is a more fundamental or basic evaluation than well-being over longer intervals of time, up to and including a whole life” (Raibley 2016, 343). “Momentary well-being, on this view, does not derive from diachronic or global features of lives” (Raibley 2016, 343). According to (b), “well-being at individual times depends exclusively on the intrinsic properties of those times. Or a bit more liberally, an agent’s well-being at a time, *t*, is not affected by anything that occurs at any time other than *t*” (Raibley 2016, 343). According to (c), “an agent’s well-being over intervals of time—up to and including the agent’s life—is a simple function from his or her well-being at the smallest well-being-evaluable intervals, whether these turn out to be times, moments, or episodes of longer duration” (Raibley, 2016, 343). As Raibley notes, these three features are not meant to be accounts of necessary and sufficient conditions for an atomistic well-being theory. But our well-being atomism instantiates all three features, so our atomism is a genuine atomism, and these features help to illustrate the contours of our atomism and of atomisms generally, so they are a good place to start.<sup>2</sup>

Well-being at a moment is defined as comprehensive momentary well-being. Well-being over some time is the sum of well-being at each moment over that time. Thus, lifetime well-being is the sum of one’s momentary well-being at each moment of one’s life (and perhaps at moments after one’s life, if ‘lifetime well-being’ can depend on posthumous events).<sup>3</sup>

Momentary well-being is, as Joshua Glasgow puts it, “the non-relational well-being enjoyed at any given moment” (Glasgow 2013, 666). This means that “instantaneous, momentary, or synchronic well-being is a more fundamental or basic evaluation than well-being over longer intervals of time, up to and including a whole life. Momentary well-being, on this view, does not derive from diachronic or global features of lives” (Raibley 2016, 343). If momentary well-being is the only kind of well-being, then any ostensible value attached to relations among events, like the relation that obtains when events get better over time (and thus the relation that obtains when one’s life slopes upwards), or the relations that constitute a narrative, are in fact reducible to, dependent on, and nothing over and above the values of individual moments of the life.<sup>4</sup> Different authors hold different views of well-being atomism, including hedonists, who are the paradigmatic atomists, and desire satisfaction theorists who accept concurrentism about benefit, according to which satisfied desires count for well-being only when they are satisfied at the same time that one has the desires (Bradley 2009, 22; Lin 2017). However, these other versions of well-being atomism rest on a simple notion of momentary well-being which is suited only to certain theories of well-being, like hedonism. We provide a more general account of momentary well-being, one that can better capture the different features of well-being that standard atomistic accounts fail to capture, thus

<sup>2</sup> Our theory is, to our knowledge, the first self-consciously atomistic meta-theory of well-being. There are atomistic theories of well-being, but the typical approach is to present a particular atomistic well-being theory which has a variety of commitments, atomism included, rather than to defend atomism itself. The chief discussions of atomism on its own are attacks on it, like Raibley’s (2012).

<sup>3</sup> This does not conflict with momentary well-being internalism – (b), above – because the claim is not that posthumous events change one’s well-being during one’s life but rather that “lifetime” is a misnomer, and we should instead talk about “total” well-being over a time which extends past the time of one’s life. Whether posthumous events can contribute to one’s well-being depends on one’s theory of well-being: different theories have different views.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth when we speak of value we are referring only to prudential value, which is the value relevant to well-being.

allowing for the possibility of being an atomist without also being a hedonist or a concurrentist desire satisfaction theorist.

We take comprehensive momentary well-being to be a function of three things:

1. **Discrete momentary well-being**, which is equivalent to Glasgow's understanding of momentary well-being as a whole: well-being enjoyed discretely in a moment, apart from those features of well-being which are captured in the next two features.
2. **Retrospective momentary well-being**, which is a function of any features of preceding times in a life that are relevant to the current moment, like instances of discrete momentary well-being, or events that had no effect on well-being at the time. This is calculable at any given moment: we do not need to wait until a life is over for us to arrive at a measure of retrospective momentary well-being for any given moment. Thus, retrospective momentary well-being is synchronic rather than diachronic, although it is calculated in light of the past.<sup>5</sup>
3. **Expectational momentary well-being** is a function of one's possible, rational, or actual expectations at a moment of future instances of discrete momentary well-being.

Comprehensive momentary well-being can explain features of well-being that are difficult to account for with a simple concept of momentary well-being. For example, according to simple momentary well-being, it is hard to explain the contribution of crowning achievements in one's life, like winning a Nobel Prize. However much benefit one might derive at any particular moment from contemplating the receipt of the prize, receiving the prize, and reflecting back on having received the prize, it seems implausible to say that these three things together account for the entirety of the Prize's value to someone's life. Indeed, one might not spend much time reflecting on the possibility of receiving the prize, or contemplate the possibility with anxiousness rather than pleasure; upon receiving the prize one might be numb with surprise; and afterwards one might be inclined not to gloat over one's achievements. Thus, it would seem the Nobel Prize would entail relatively little benefit, and this would implausibly suggest it does not contribute much to the value of one's life.<sup>6</sup>

Comprehensive momentary well-being can capture the value of the Nobel Prize, and consequently it allows us to retain the view that lifetime well-being is nothing besides the sum of well-being at each moment of a life. Discrete momentary well-being captures the hedonistic aspects of the Prize, as described above, to the extent they exist. Some theories of well-being, like hedonism, can be captured entirely by discrete momentary well-being.

Retrospective momentary well-being captures the value of the Prize from the moment of its receipt up through the end of one's life. At the moment one receives the Prize and at each moment afterwards, we can look back at the features of one's life that make the Prize valuable (like the intellectual achievements that led to the Prize, the hard work underlying those intellectual achievements, and the good results engendered by those achievements) and say that, in light of these things, receipt of the Prize is at this moment valuable. Retrospective momentary well-being

<sup>5</sup> On its surface it may not be clear how something calculated in light of the past can be synchronic rather than diachronic, and so retrospective momentary well-being may appear to conflict with momentary well-being internalism as described above. Below we address this worry.

<sup>6</sup> This is why some find hedonism to be an implausible account of well-being. A hedonist will disagree (see e.g. Feldman 2004, chap. 6), but a hedonist will already accept our account of comprehensive momentary well-being, because the hedonist account is captured entirely by the first aspect, discrete momentary well-being. This is one way in which our theory is ecumenical: it accommodates, but does not mandate, hedonism.

does not require that one *in fact* look back at one's life, in the sense of literally taking a moment to relive one's memories. If one does this, and derives pleasure or some other benefit from it, that will be discrete momentary well-being. Rather, retrospective momentary well-being obtains in virtue of the *present* fact that one's past contains certain features which we can understand the present in light of. If there need be no conscious acknowledgement of or interaction with these features, then well-being obtains without one experiencing it in the form of pleasure. In other words, comprehensive momentary well-being does not require that a theory of well-being meet the experience requirement, which is the requirement that "differences in subjects' levels of welfare or well-being require differences in the phenomenology of their experiences" (Lin 2021, 867). It is compatible with it, and those who endorse the experience requirement, like hedonists, will accept comprehensive momentary well-being because they think everything can fit into discrete momentary well-being. But others who reject the experience requirement can accept comprehensive momentary well-being too, because it contains retrospective momentary well-being, which captures the goodness of things like having worked towards the Nobel Prize, and expectational momentary well-being.

Expectational well-being is the final component of comprehensive momentary well-being and it can also help explain examples like winning the Nobel Prize. If one wishes to say the Prize is valuable even before one wins it, this can be captured by instead saying one's expectation (or, as we explain immediately below, possible or rational expectation) of the Prize in the future contributes to well-being as expectational momentary well-being. These need not be actual expectations the agent has: perhaps the person has never imagined winning a Nobel Prize.<sup>7</sup> But if they could have good reason to expect this, or even just any reason to expect this, then we can say this adds to their well-being by attaching this value to the expectational well-being component of comprehensive momentary well-being. This once again highlights how comprehensive momentary well-being need not endorse the experience requirement: it is an ecumenical measure of well-being that is compatible with views which reject the requirement. One's particular theory of well-being will specify which expectations (actual expectations, reasonable expectations, or any possible expectations) ought to factor into someone's well-being at a moment.

Retrospective momentary well-being is the present value of the narrative or narratives that one can or does tell about one's life, given what has occurred. "Narratives" here is a broad technical term. It refers to judgments about value (at the moment) which depend on what has happened in the past. The narratives can be actual narratives, in the sense of a story or something like this. But the technical sense of "narrative" encompasses all calculations made on the basis of backwards-looking concerns which result in value at the moment. If, for instance, having tapped one cat on the nose on Monday and two cats on the nose on Tuesday adds to the value of tapping three cats on the nose on Wednesday, then when someone taps three cats on the nose on Wednesday, their well-being will be increased by some amount just in case they tapped one cat on Monday and two on Tuesday, and this increase will be captured via retrospective momentary well-being, because the Wednesday tapping can be viewed in light of having tapped on Monday and Tuesday. We choose the term "narrative" because narrative theories of well-being argue that the value of a life depends on its narrative structure, and thus more broadly we can think of a narrative as a series of events and their relations to each other which, at least on the surface, seem to have value over and above each individual component.

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<sup>7</sup> This again shows how well-being atomism does not entail the experience requirement and is not equivalent to hedonism. A hedonist (who endorses the experience requirement) will say that expectations that we *could* have had, but which we did not in fact have, cannot have any impact on the value of our life.

Expectational momentary well-being is like retrospective momentary well-being, except that it is directed at future events rather than past events. Because future events have yet to occur, it is determined not by the events themselves but by expectations of these events. Like “narrative,” “expectation” is a technical term which includes not just actual expectations (like someone’s present plan that they will attend a birthday party tomorrow) but warranted expectations, unwarranted expectations, or anything else that is relevant depending on one’s preferred theory of well-being.

These are narratives that one can or does tell and expectations that one does have or can have: but being *able* to tell a narrative is very different from *actually telling* a narrative, and having an expectation is different from being able to have an expectation. Which possibilities are the ones that are captured by retrospective and expectational momentary well-being? All of them. Comprehensive momentary well-being is an ecumenical measure. If one’s preferred theory of well-being requires that one does in fact tell the narrative, like for instance if one has to have had certain attitudes in the past and other attitudes now in order to count as telling the narrative, then this is captured by retrospective momentary well-being. If one’s theory of well-being only requires that the narrative *could* be told, this is also captured by retrospective momentary well-being.<sup>8</sup> If one includes only the expectations that in fact exist, then this is captured by expectational momentary well-being. And so on. This is what it means for well-being atomism to be a *meta*-theory of well-being: on its own, it does not require us to settle every question about well-being. It is only when it is paired with some more specific theory of well-being that we settle every question about the content of comprehensive momentary well-being and its constituents.

It is one thing to claim (for instance) that retrospective momentary well-being accounts for the value of a narrative. It is another to actually show this to be the case. Those who reject atomism will claim either the variables above leave out important features of well-being, or it is implausible to think that the variables can be given any determinate content. The well-being atomist must show either that comprehensive well-being can capture the relevant values, or that the values are not actually relevant to well-being. We cannot here prove this for every single value one might have in mind. Instead we pick three key values which are both common in the literature and, at least *prima facie*, seem to conflict with atomism. These three are the value inhering in relations between moments rather than at a particular moment (§3); the value of a life viewed as a narrative (§4); and the value of a life with a certain overall shape or some other characteristic beyond a mere aggregation of each moment (§5). For each of these values we argue that either they can be accommodated by atomism or should be discarded. This accounting is not comprehensive: there are other features of well-being one might think are incompatible with well-being atomism. But together these values cover the key objections to well-being atomism.

### 3 | RELATIONALISM

The first value that appears at odds with well-being atomism is relationalism—the thesis that one’s overall lifetime well-being does not depend only on their well-being at any moment, but also, as Connie Rosati puts it, “on the value-affecting relations among its parts” (Rosati 2013, 29). These relations help determine “the welfare value of a life in a way that is not reducible to the contribution any other factor makes to the value of a person’s life” (Rosati 2013, 30). This seems

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<sup>8</sup> For discussion of these sorts of distinctions see de Bres (2018).

prima facie incompatible with well-being atomism, according to which the welfare value of a person's life depends on its value at each moment and the value at each moment does not depend on any of the other moments. How can relations, which exist between one moment and another moment, be captured entirely in a moment?

Relationalism, the bare claim that relations contribute to the value of a life, can be separated from the claim that well-being cannot be understood atomistically. Rosati argues that "the issue of whether the welfare value of a life is additive and the issue of whether narrative relations contribute distinctively to the value of a life are separable, and my interest lies with the latter issue" (Rosati 2013, 32). But even if additivity and relationalism need not conflict, on many views they do.

For example, according to Dale Dorsey's relational view, some elements of well-being "cannot be locked down to an individual moment but necessarily involve many moments throughout a life and the relationship between them" (Dorsey 2015, 310). Dorsey objects to the priority of temporally discrete events, whereas comprehensive momentary well-being atomism is committed to the priority of nothing except temporally discrete events.<sup>9</sup> This amounts to a conflict between well-being atomism and Dorsey's relationalism.

Dorsey (2015; 2018) endorses relationalism because it can account for the value that events have in virtue of their contribution to some long-term or global goal, project, or successful achievement.<sup>10</sup> He objects that a view like ours cannot account for cases in which someone is dead but their life project is completed by someone else, thus increasing the value of the dead person's life (Dorsey 2018, 1908). It is true that well-being atomism would have to account for this value entirely by adverting to the degree to which this completion was or could have been part of the dead person's expectations when they were alive.<sup>11</sup> Upon reflection, though, this makes sense.

Take Dorsey's specific example, according to which Albert, a physicist, dies a year before completing his lifelong research, and his research is completed by one of his students, Joan, who completes the research for the sake of Albert. Joan, like Albert's other students, is a talented physicist who was trained by Albert, and in light of her training and in light of the "tools and theoretical apparatus Albert had constructed during his lifetime" she is able to complete the project, not for herself but for Albert (Dorsey 2018, 1908).

All of the features of the example which lead to Joan's completion of Albert's project also make it rational to expect completion of the project. Had Albert trained no students, or had he trained no talented students, or had he not constructed the requisite tools and theoretical apparatus, or had Joan not cared about Albert and his life project, the project would never have been completed. But all of these things are in place before Albert dies. These things are in place in large part due to Albert and his conscious efforts, which make the eventual completion of his project far from an unpredictable fluke.

It is true that if some strange occurrence rendered all of these things inefficacious and if Albert's project remained incomplete, our view could not account for the ostensible damage this has done to the value of Albert's life. And so we must bite the bullet and accept that we cannot capture

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<sup>9</sup> Dorsey is also a partial ally of well-being atomism in that he endorses the priority of synchronic welfare to lifetime welfare, because this means that lifetime well-being is just the sum of momentary well-being (Dorsey 2015, 325–26) (Cf. Brown 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Dorsey also argues that while there is nothing intrinsically valuable about the shape of a life, a good shape is evidence of good relations between events (Dorsey 2015, 329). As we argue in §5, comprehensive momentary well-being captures everything relevant about the idea that the shape of a life matters.

<sup>11</sup> Or by allowing someone to have momentary well-being when they are dead.

the entirety of the intuition Dorsey wishes to capture, which is that if Albert's project fails due to an unpredictable fluke, this makes Albert's life worse. But we also need to take care to make sure our intuitions in the case are not infected by our beliefs about the value of the project, apart from its value for Albert's lifetime well-being. There may be perfectionist reasons to care about the completion of Albert's project, such that there is less value in the world if, due to a fluke, it remains incomplete forever.<sup>12</sup> And there of course may be reasons attached to the value of other people's lives to care about the completion of Albert's project: Joan may care about Albert's project due to its impersonal value, or due to the value it had (*n.b.*: not the value it *has*) for Albert's life. All of these (perhaps rightly) incline us to think that completion of the project is good. But we should not be misled into thinking the only value of the project is its contribution to Albert's lifetime well-being. It is his project, but it is not only his project, and whatever value is held hostage by its actual completion is not value for Albert, whose life is now over.<sup>13</sup>

Dorsey's relationalism is incompatible with atomism. Nevertheless, atomism does have the resources to account for the value that events have in virtue of their contribution to some long-term project, even if it can only do so by adverting to the extent to which such a contribution could be expected. We now turn to address a second value—the value of a life viewed as a narrative.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4 | NARRATABILITY

More specific than the view that the value of one's life stems from relations between moments rather than from moments alone, is the view that the narrative of one's life affects how well one's life goes. Narratability is a feature which is variously thought to attach to moments, events, stretches of time, or lives. If something is narratable, there is some story that can be told about it. This feature, according to many, can impact someone's well-being (Velleman 1991; Rosati 2013; Dorsey 2015; Kauppinen 2015). Lives are not just aggregated moments but also stories, and better or worse stories have more or less value. Given that this is a diachronic process, it seems difficult to explain with a synchronic momentary understanding of well-being. How does comprehensive momentary well-being accomplish this?

Note that the diachronic nature of a narrative is actually one reason why retrospective well-being in fact *can* capture the value of the narrative. A narrative is diachronic because it unfolds over time. Narratives have beginnings, middles, and ends, or at least they have a series of events that relate to each other in various ways. One event occurs after the other: were the events ordered differently, the narrative itself would be different. This means that to know what to say about an event *X* in a narrative at *particular* time *t*, and thus what to say about the entire narrative, we need to know what has happened already up until this particular moment. In other words, we need to know what we have available to us *at this moment* in terms of the narrative we can tell. We want to *presently* tell the narrative: our task at any given moment is a synchronic one, not a diachronic one.

<sup>12</sup> This perfectionist value is distinct from the perfectionist value involved in perfectionist accounts of well-being (e.g. Dorsey 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, one could endorse the possibility of posthumous well-being. This is also compatible with well-being atomism.

<sup>14</sup> We return to Dorsey in §6 to explain how his relationalism rejects, whereas ours accepts, momentary well-being internalism, which is one of the three components of atomism.



For instance, if Val wins an Academy Award for best actor in 2005, the value of the narrative that involves this win will depend on what Val has been doing earlier in life: toiling in obscurity, or perfecting the craft of acting, or winning other awards, or anything else. At the moment Val wins the award, a new chapter is added to the narrative. The nature of the narrative shifts (and so the value of the narrative in terms of how each subsequent moment is judged also shifts). If Val was toiling in obscurity in 1980 through 2004, then the narrative is (let us assume) a more valuable narrative upon receipt of the award. It is, after all, a great story to toil in obscurity and then to have one's brilliance recognized.<sup>15</sup> At this moment of recognition, Val's momentary well-being is quite high, and for as long as this recognition matters for Val's life, Val's momentary well-being will continue to be high. This is not because the recognition on its own has this effect, but because it has this effect in light of having toiled in obscurity.

The value of winning the award is thus relational in a sense. But the "relation" exists entirely in the moment, and is contained entirely within Val's present situation. The greater pattern formed by the narrative is a pattern built out of pieces that exist entirely in the present: the fact of Val having done certain things in the past, and the fact of Val having won the award in the present. How can the value of Val's narrative be momentary well-being, if the value seems to depend on the past toils? The answer is that the value consists of looking back on the past toils, or being able to look back, depending on one's preferred theory of well-being.

The value is not in the toils themselves (which had value, if any, only at the moment, like everything else), nor is it in the relationship between the award and the toils. The value is in the award viewed in light of the toils, at this moment. This is entirely momentary value. The only relation here is a synchronic one. The value obtains in the present in light of relationships between present things: the present fact of having toiled in the past and the present fact of winning the award.<sup>16</sup> The toils themselves (and, once the award is in the past, the winning of the award itself) never change in their contribution to well-being. They never become more or less valuable: atomism requires that all value in a moment is fixed, such that moments in time never alter in value later. What becomes more or less valuable is the story one can tell at the present moment, looking back on what has come before. As that story becomes a better story, it can provide Val more momentary well-being in the present.

According to some theorists, like Rosati, one's narrative need not be limited to what has occurred (Rosati, 2013). One's narrative can also incorporate expectations of the future. We account for this with expectational well-being. Val's story at the moment, which constitutes part of Val's momentary well-being, may be one that includes not just what Val has done and what Val is doing but what Val plans or could plan to do, what Val expects to happen or could expect to happen, and so on. Perhaps we can engage in "imagining our futures," and observers can similarly imagine our futures (Rosati 2013, 46). Thus, the narratives can be forward-looking: "we are looking not merely for a story we can live with but for a story that enables us to live" (Rosati 2013, 47).

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to imply that narrative value attaches only to stories of success. For a discussion of the relation between narratives, failure, and well-being see (Rosati 2013).

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Kraut's similar point about how we can judge someone's state at a moment by saying: "he is now someone who was once much better off. We look not just to his mental condition now, to assess the quality of his present life, but we also compare it to his earlier state and judge his present state to contain a great disadvantage that must figure in our assessment of it. It is bad for him now that he used to be so much better off" (Kraut 2018, 173). (The example Kraut uses is one which technically does not have to do with well-being, but this is for reasons irrelevant to our argument.) (See also Kraut 2018, 208.)

Rosati is a narrativist whose view is clearly compatible with well-being atomism. She argues that:

[I]nsofar as our successes and failures affect the value of our lives for us, our story-telling can affect our welfare only presently and prospectively: presently, by affecting our current condition, and prospectively, by thereby putting us in a better position to alter what we do in the future as we work to make our lives better... Insofar as narrative or narrative relations can distinctively enhance the value of a life for the person living it, it is not by adding a distinct substantive value of their own; narrative relations have no value of their own. And it is not quite by altering the meaning of events and so the contribution those events make to the value of a life, at least not directly. (Rosati 2013, 48)

What matters instead are “the effects of *recounting to ourselves* stories about our lives, and so on the effects of how we depict events and relations among events in our lives” (Rosati 2013, 43). On Rosati’s view, we can evaluate the good of someone’s past by incorporating it into the present value of their narrative, rather than by changing our evaluation of their well-being at any of those past moments.

Not all narrativist views are compatible with atomism. According to Antti Kauppinen, well-being consists of the fact that “certain *narratable* relations obtain between the events that constitute our lives” (Kauppinen 2015, 202). From these relations we develop the “Narrative Calculus” which describes the prudential value of an event: “The intrinsic prudential narrative value  $NV(e)$  of an event  $e = \text{contribution of } e \text{ toward the agent’s concurrent and non-concurrent goal(s)} \times \text{objective non-narrative value of the goals } e \text{ contributes to} \times \text{degree to which success in achieving the agent’s goal(s) is deserved in virtue of her actions}$ ” (Kauppinen 2015, 208). The Narrative Calculus gives us lifetime well-being by summing the narrative value of every event in someone’s life. Although we sum the values, narrative value “is not *atomistically additive*: we can’t look at the value of what happens at each moment in isolation from what happens at other times, and sum the atomic values up to arrive at the value of the life for the agent. This is because the  $NV$  of an event depends on what happens at other times” (Kauppinen 2015, 209).

Kauppinen’s narrativism is not entirely compatible with our calculation of the value of a life. We believe well-being is calculable at each moment and is not influenced by future events, whereas according to Kauppinen’s Narrative Calculus the value of an event can rise or fall based on what happens in the future. For example, according to Kauppinen, an athlete’s painful training positively contributes to their well-being if they win an important championship in the future (due in part to the training) and negatively contributes if they lose the championship in the future. We would instead say that the training positively contributes to the extent that one can (or does) expect that this will contribute to one’s winning, and vice versa for training that one cannot expect will contribute to victory. Our redescription only partially captures the intuition. It captures the intuition that training (which seems to have negative momentary value) in fact has positive value sometimes. But it does not capture the intuition that the value hinges on the actual outcome. On our view, if one can expect the training will contribute to winning, the training has value. On Kauppinen’s view, the value is held hostage to the actual outcome.

The view we endorse is more compelling. The impulse to attribute value to the training only if it turns out well, rather than if one can expect it will turn out well (or expect that it will

raise the chances of things turning out well) is driven by three commitments which are not defensible.<sup>17</sup>

First, the tendency to overvalue successful narratives (“good endings”) often causes people to undervalue other constituents of a good story in the absence of a good end, but this is not reasonable. Insofar as one rationally believes that one’s efforts increase the chances of achieving a good end, whether one in fact achieves a good end is a combination of effort and luck. The effort (in the example, training) is up to us, so the well-being contribution of effort obtains while one trains. Luck plays a role in our well-being by determining whether we get a good outcome, but for luck to infect the effort by reaching backwards in time is to fail to give credit where credit is due. The story of the ant who saves for the winter and the grasshopper who wastes the time away is a story about prudence even before we learn whether the ant gets unlucky and loses their stores in a freak, unpredictable accident. The ant acts prudentially, and we know this before we hear the end of the story. It is also better for the ant if things turn out well, but that additional value obtains when things turn out better, not while the ant is saving up.

Second, according to Kauppinen, the athlete’s training is valuable because it represents an investment in the eventual success (and is disvaluable insofar as it is an investment in the eventual failure). This means that two athletes who follow the same training regime and succeed equally will have different levels of well-being (in virtue of having different amounts of value attached to the training) to the extent that one found the training more effortful than the other. Kauppinen gives the example of Fred and Greg: “while Fred loves nothing better than solitary practice, Greg doesn’t like it, and would rather be with his family” (Kauppinen 2015, 210). Thus, their eventual (equal) achievements go back and raise the well-being contribution of their training, but Greg’s achievement raises the well-being more. Kauppinen explains this by claiming that “the more one has exercised one’s capacities, the more one has to lose in case it turns out the actions together fail to sufficiently promote the goal” (Kauppinen 2015, 210). So “Greg must exercise his capacities to a higher degree in overcoming his reluctance to train and his desire to be with his family. His willpower works overtime... So Greg is more deserving of success. That is why his story is better than Fred’s” (Kauppinen 2015, 210–1).

But it is not clear how Kauppinen can help himself to this assumption. If Fred is lazy, depressed, or otherwise quite bad at self-motivating, and Greg is conscientious, dutiful, and focused, then Greg hardly has to exercise his capacities to do something he dislikes, whereas for Fred it’s a struggle to do something that he admittedly enjoys. Our view handles this easily: aside from the well-being that attaches to their (equal) expectations for success, the well-being that results from training depends on how they feel about it. We cannot fully capture the notion that their sacrifices (whatever those might be) get redeemed by success, except by saying they are both equally “redeemed” by the additional well-being each gets from the equal expectations of success. But we do not want to say that their sacrifices get redeemed by success to any degree beyond this, because there is no way beyond stipulation to defend the intuition that the more effortful worker’s life goes better.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the picture Kauppinen is trying to paint, according to which our intuitive notions line up with his accounting of well-being, is not a compelling picture. Insofar as effort is redeemed, this is calculable on the basis of one’s overcoming the challenges in the moment, not on the basis

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<sup>17</sup> This is assuming one shares Kauppinen’s impulse. One might reject the idea that the value of the training hinges on its eventual usefulness. Maybe diligently training for some worthwhile goal, so long as one reasonably expects this to pay off, is a valuable way of spending one’s time.

<sup>18</sup> One might also argue that to believe the sacrifices are redeemed by success would be to require a sort of backward causation, which would be objectionable. For discussion see (Bruckner 2013, 25–26; Dorsey 2013; King 2020).

of one's future success. The right place to look to figure out if training is good for Fred or Greg is at the holistic situation in the moment, not at the holistic situation encompassing the eventual success or failure of the endeavor.

Third, Kauppinen's view wants the value of the success to reach back in time and redeem the hard work by raising the contribution of the hard work to life's well-being. This amounts to an endorsement of strong redemptionism, which we argue against below. Moreover, as suggested above, it is more plausible for the value of the success to obtain at the moment of success (and at moments afterwards, as one reflects back on it, lives one's life in virtue of having accomplished it, etc.) than for the value of the success to reach backwards. The hard work raises the value of the eventual achievement. The value of the achievement does not raise the value of the hard work. The hard work *does* have value insofar as it contributes to an expectation of success, just like an investment today has value insofar as it can be expected to grow in the future. But the hard work does not now have that value in virtue of the *actual* future success. We don't price investments on the value of their *actual* future success. We price them on the value of their *expected* success. We look at investments and say that they were unlucky if they turn out bad, but it would be unreasonable to fire an investment banker for making good investments that unluckily fail to pay out. Admitting the value of the achievement is different from admitting the value of the narrative. We accept the former and need only deny the latter (insofar as the value of the narrative can't be captured entirely in forward-looking ways).

As with the value of relations between moments in life, atomism has the resources to defend the value of some elements of a life's narrative (e.g. Rosati's), albeit entirely encompassed in individual moments (contra Kauppinen). In the next section we turn to address a third issue that is often raised as a cause for concern with atomistic approaches—the problematic nature of aggregation.<sup>19</sup>

## 5 | ANTI-AGGREGATION

Aggregation is the thesis that lifetime well-being is the sum of momentary well-being.<sup>20</sup> The value of one's life is “the area under the curve,” so to speak, where the curve is the line drawn on a chart of one's life, with time on the X axis and momentary well-being on the Y axis. It is also known as “additivism” (Bramble 2018, 7). Well-being atomism is the conjunction of comprehensive momentary well-being plus aggregation. Conjoining these two ensures that comprehensive momentary well-being is by definition comprehensive, because if lifetime well-being is only the sum of comprehensive momentary well-being, nothing else can impact well-being. Thus, a denial of aggregation is a denial of well-being atomism.

Many theories of well-being deny aggregation.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, most denials of aggregation amount to endorsements of one or more of the values that we addressed above. Here we respond to two additional anti-aggregation views: Michael Slote's and Owen King's. Slote rejects aggregation for two reasons (Slote 1982). First, one might rationally prefer goods to occur later in life. To the extent this is plausible, Slote thinks it is likely because the slopes of lives matter. According to the shape of a life thesis, lives with certain shapes (like perhaps an upward slope) are better than lives with other shapes (like a downward slope) even when the area under the curve is equivalent

<sup>19</sup> We also address another narrativist who opposes atomism, Dorsey, below in §6.

<sup>20</sup> Aggregation is a more specific thesis than the view that well-being at times of one's life are what make someone's life good for that person. For discussion see (King 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Many also endorse it, like hedonists (e.g. Bricker 1980; Kraut 2018, chap. 4).

between the two lives (Bruckner 2019). We think there are independent reasons to reject this thesis, although we do not have the space to discuss them here.<sup>22</sup> Instead we will show how atomism can, to some degree, accommodate the thesis.

All the atomist needs to say is that one cannot hold the area under the curve constant in a life while merely varying its slope. Of course, just as a matter of mathematic possibility, it is easy to do this, but the resulting graphs one would draw, with different slopes but a constant area, would fail to reflect accurate judgments about the value of the lives that the graphs are meant to represent. Varying the slope entails changing (at each moment) what has happened in the past, and thus changing the value of relational well-being at each moment, and what one can expect to happen in the future (and thus the value of expectational well-being at each moment). If a life that slopes up is better, overall, than a life that slopes down, this is because given the same events in a life, the upward sloping one will have more area under the curve in virtue of having more well-being at various moments through higher relation well-being, expectational well-being, or both.

The ways we might explain this are too numerous to list: they are specific to each sort of life. But if, for instance, it is better to have a difficult childhood and then eventually succeed than it is to have a wonderful childhood and then eventually fail, this can be because success in light of a difficult childhood is more valuable success, and so at each moment one has succeeded, relational well-being is higher than it would be in the similar downward sloping life. The details will vary depending on the lives in question and on one's theory of well-being, but to the extent the atomist needs to defend the shape of a life thesis, there is no challenge here. The only challenge is to come up with a theory of well-being which accounts for this. Perhaps no theory of well-being can account for this: maybe slopes can easily be varied while holding the area under the curve equal. If this is true, atomism can happily accept this conclusion. Slote, of course, cannot.

Second, Slote thinks we discount the impact of some moments of our life when we calculate well-being. According to Slote, we do not think good or bad dreams make our lives go better or worse, and we are inclined to say an unhappy childhood does not matter so long as it is compensated for by a later happy life (Slote 1982, 314).<sup>23</sup> So the good of a life is not merely the sum of each moment of the life. One reason to believe this, Slote argues, is that goods are "period-relative," such that behaving in a childlike fashion is only good when one is a child (and not for one's life as a whole) and winning a shuffleboard tournament as an aged retiree is only good for one's senescence (and not for one's life as a whole) (Slote 1982, 316).

Well-being atomism can accommodate this by making the value of goods which are not period-relative quite high, numerically, thus making the value of period-relative goods relatively small. So, if one happens to get non-period-relative goods in childhood or old age, these will matter as much as they typically do, but perhaps Slote is right that during these life periods, events typically only impact our overall life good a little bit. Because most events during childhood and old age are absolutely small, the period-relative goods can still be relatively large compared to other things happening during those periods. Something great (or terrible) for a child is a large good (or bad) relative to childhood. But it will be small related to events in the prime of the life. This does not show that period-relative goods are *entirely* unrelated to lifetime well-being. The small numbers still get added into the overall sum. But even Slote admits that these goals "count negligibly or not at all" towards overall life, and the well-being atomist simply picks the former option in the disjunct (Slote 1982, 316). Similarly,

<sup>22</sup> For further objections see (Feldman 2004, 124–41; Bruckner 2019; Hersch and Weltman 2022).

<sup>23</sup> For a similar argument see (Bramble 2018, 17–18).

good and bad dreams can be handled by treating “sleep” as a discontinuous and recurring period in one’s life. Good and bad dreams make this period go better or worse, and thus a good dream will be a relatively high number and a bad dream will be a relatively low number, but on an absolute level, things that occur during sleep add little to the sum of lifetime well-being.

Both these responses give us an elegant and accurate description of the relevant cases. Someone who lives a benighted childhood or a terrible old age *will* have had a worse life, overall, than someone with a great childhood or a great old age, even if the impact of catching a frog or winning at bingo will be relatively small compared to events in the prime of life. Someone who had bad dreams every night *will* have had a worse life, overall, than someone who had great dreams every night, although again the overall impact of dreams will be relatively small compared to events in waking life. Anyone inclined to think bad childhoods or bad dreams do not make life worse *at all* must contend with the efforts we go through to give our children good childhoods and to ward off bad dreams.

This solution requires us to accept, perhaps implausibly, that a very happy child is not having a particularly good life, since they have yet to reach the age where one can truly have a good life. If this is implausible, though, it is a problem for Slote, not for the atomist. The atomist need not assign low values to childhood happiness: they only need to do this if Slote is right.

King argues against aggregationism along different lines. First, King argues that “aggregationism faces a problem analogous to Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion: A sufficiently long life barely worth living will be superior to a shorter span of excellent living” (King 2018, 355).<sup>24</sup> As with Slote above, the atomist can respond by adjusting the numbers until this is false, so as to ensure that atomism properly captures the implications of one’s preferred theory of well-being. That is, make the well-being of moments in a short excellent life high enough that a very long barely tolerable life adds up to less well-being overall (for example, use a logarithmic scale to chart higher levels of well-being, so good moments of a happy life will be orders of magnitude better than any given moment of a life barely worth living).<sup>25</sup>

But more importantly, King’s argument is directed against a specific sort of aggregationist—a hedonist aggregationist. If King is right, then it is because a long life barely worth living is not in fact worth living, or at least not compared to a shorter, better life. A hedonist aggregationist cannot deliver this conclusion, at least not without introducing something like a distinction between higher and lower pleasures and filling the shorter life with higher pleasures. But other theories of well-being, like objective list theories, can avoid this objection while still endorsing aggregation. There may just not be very many (or any) things on the list which one can get over a nearly-miserable life of any length.

In other words, not all theories of well-being require us to balloon value as we balloon time in such a way as to force us to accept what we might take to be implausible conclusions. Well-being atomism certainly does not force this on us. It merely tells us that lifetime well-being is calculated by summing well-being at each moment. Perhaps the only legitimate way to fill out some moment with well-being is via things which can only occur in relatively brief great lives. And so, this is no objection to aggregation or to well-being atomism. It is only an objection to theories of well-being which, when married to aggregation, deliver the wrong verdict, like some forms of hedonism. This is why it is crucial to remember that well-being atomism is

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<sup>24</sup> For a similar argument, see (Bramble 2018, 19).

<sup>25</sup> We might also acknowledge that our intuitions about cases like these might not be delivering the right result (Norcross 1997, 146–58; Tannsjo 2002, 344; Broome 2004, 55–59).

a meta-theory of well-being, not a theory of well-being. Well-being atomism on its own does not force us to say that longer lives always add value. This is a conclusion that only obtains when well-being atomism is married to a theory of well-being which entails this commitment. If the commitment is implausible, this tells against that theory of well-being, not against well-being atomism.

As with Slote above, this solution again is not an unfortunate admission the well-being atomist must fall back on. It reflects our considered intuitions. The worry about a very long barely good life is a classic challenge for hedonists. If one finds it compelling, then it is no surprise that this will spell trouble for hedonism. But the value of well-being atomism is that it frees aggregation from its hedonistic roots. Aggregation itself is blameless, and we can keep it even in the face of King's worry. We can be atomists without being hedonists.

King also argues that aggregation must be false by presenting two examples. In the first example, he describes two possible lives for Frances the artist, one with more well-being and the other with less. King argues that the latter life is better, because it contains a stretch of poverty and dissatisfaction which influences her art that deals with poverty, compared to a similar life in which her poverty-influenced art is created based on research she did while being supported by her parents (King 2018, 357–58).

Atomism can accommodate the plausibility of the case by denying that Frances has equal well-being in the later part of her life when she is an artist. Instead, we should view her as having more well-being if she suffered through a stretch of poverty, because the possibility of looking back on that stretch of poverty makes her later achievements more valuable and meaningful. Indeed, as King notes, if “Frances herself had reflected on her reduced well-being in [the life with the poverty], she would have valued it as an element of her life” (King 2018, 358). Because retrospective momentary well-being does not require that the agent actually reflect on the relationship between this moment and past moments, but only requires that it be possible to view the agent's life in this way, we can capture this value and thus capture King's intuition that the life with poverty is better.<sup>26</sup>

Lest one worry that there is some difference between actually reflecting, as in the counterfactual modifications to the above two cases, and the possibility of reflecting, King straightforwardly denies this. “It is just that this sort of hypothetical retrospection makes for compelling cases” and so “it is not essential to [King's argument] that the protagonist, were she to reflect, would have any particular take on the relevant events” (King 2018, 359). King himself talks about what someone *would* think or feel if they reflected back on their life. Well-being atomism captures this value with retrospective well-being. So, even with aggregation (which is ostensibly incompatible with King's cases), well-being atomism delivers exactly the right result.

Finally, according to King, aggregation implies that “if a period of apparently elevated well-being in a person's life does not contribute to the goodness of that life as a whole, then we must conclude that her well-being was not actually elevated during that period after all” (King 2018, 364). But well-being atomists can deny this and just add disvalue to the later life via retrospective well-being to account for this. That is, the period of elevated well-being does not contribute to the goodness of a life as a whole because the level of retrospective well-being at subsequent periods is low in light of this earlier period. This solution also accounts for the fact that in the moment the person has no reason to suspect their well-being is lower than it seems to be (or, if they have

<sup>26</sup> King's second example, that of Wade and the son-molesting stranded motorist, admits of a similar reply (King 2018, 358–59).

reason to suspect this, due to predictions about the future, we can capture this via expectational well-being during that period).

Slote and King are not the only ones concerned with aggregation (see e.g. Temkin 2012, 113–15; 2012, 122; Kagan 1994). Ben Bramble, for instance, rejects aggregation for many reasons: for instance, he denies that adding many additional moments of momentary well-being “would add much – or, indeed, anything, depending on what these pleasures were like – to one’s overall fortunateness” (Bramble 2018, 20). If the pleasures merely do not add much, then, as above, the well-being atomist merely has to set the numbers correctly to deliver the desired result. But if they do not add anything, then aggregation is in trouble.<sup>27</sup> And one might have other reasons for rejecting aggregation. In due time, the well-being atomist owes each objection some sort of response. That is a larger project than we can accomplish in a single article.

## 6 | ATOMISM AND COMPREHENSIVE MOMENTARY WELL-BEING

Having explored comprehensive momentary well-being in detail and illustrated how it can capture features of well-being that are ostensibly incompatible with atomism, we now further demonstrate that comprehensive momentary well-being is an atomistic measure of well-being. We do this by contrasting comprehensive momentary well-being with Dorsey’s measure of momentary well-being. Dorsey, like us, presents a measure of momentary well-being which aims to capture the value of narratives and other relations, and which aims to be compatible with aggregation. Unlike comprehensive momentary well-being, Dorsey’s momentary well-being measure is not atomistic. Thus, by comparing the two views we illuminate the atomistic nature of comprehensive momentary well-being.

Dorsey aims to show that aggregation is compatible with the importance of narratives and other relations by arguing that relational properties can impact momentary well-being (Dorsey 2015). When we aggregate momentary well-being by summing the area under the curve, we capture the value of (say) a life that slopes upwards. A life that slopes upwards will have extra momentary value at each particular moment, because each moment is related to the previous moments and the future moments in a way such as to increase the well-being at that moment. Because we endorse aggregation, we accept Dorsey’s method of accounting for the value of certain shapes of lives insofar as it amounts to adding extra value to each moment.<sup>28</sup> Dorsey similarly agrees with us by holding that “synchronic welfare is explanatorily prior to lifetime welfare” (Dorsey 2015, 326).

Notice, then, that Dorsey endorses one of the three features of atomism as described by Raibley: the explanatory priority of momentary well-being (Raibley 2016, 342). Dorsey also argues that his approach is compatible with temporal neutrality (Dorsey 2015, 322–3). Temporal neutrality is another one of the features of atomism. What Dorsey is missing is the third feature of atomism: momentary well-being internalism.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For worries with and responses to Bramble’s approach here, see Weltman (2022) and Hersch (2022).

<sup>28</sup> Recall that Rosati also agrees that “the issue of whether the welfare value of a life is additive and the issue of whether narrative relations contribute distinctively to the value of a life are separable” (Rosati 2013, 32). As Dorsey points out, this is a minority view: most disagree with us, Dorsey, and Rosati and think that aggregation is incompatible with narrative value (Dorsey 2015). This is why Velleman rejects aggregation, for instance (Velleman 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Kauppinen divides theories like this: momentary well-being internalism plus aggregation entails atomism. Reject aggregation and we get internalist holism; reject momentary well-being internalism and we get externalist holism (Kauppinen’s



Momentary well-being internalism is the view that we only need to look at a particular moment to calculate well-being at that moment. This view is endorsed not just by atomists but by opponents of atomism, like Velleman, who argues that “a person’s well-being at each moment is defined from the perspective of that moment” (Velleman 1991, 63) and that “estimates of momentary well-being are made within a restricted context – namely, the context of events and circumstances of the moment” (Velleman 1991, 66).<sup>30</sup> Dorsey rejects momentary well-being internalism: according to him, when we calculate well-being at any particular moment, we look not just at that moment but also at “noncurrent events” in the past and the future, and in the relation those events have to the present moment (Dorsey 2015, 326). For instance, one person winning a Heisman Trophy may have more momentary well-being than another person winning a Heisman Trophy because the first person worked hard to win the trophy, whereas the second accidentally won the trophy by stumbling into the award ceremony (Dorsey 2015, 327). Similarly, someone who is working towards winning a trophy will have higher well-being at the moment they are working if they eventually win the trophy.<sup>31</sup>

Dorsey has three arguments against Velleman’s momentary well-being internalism. One is that Velleman merely asserts the view, rather than defending it, and so there is no reason to prefer momentary well-being internalism rather than reject it (Dorsey 2015, 328). Our momentary well-being internalism avoids this problem, because by showing how momentary well-being internalism can capture features of well-being that are ostensibly incompatible with it, we supply it with one benefit that its rejection lacks: it accounts for the relevant data in a simpler and more ecumenical way.<sup>32</sup> So, unlike Velleman, we do not merely assert momentary well-being internalism.

Dorsey’s second argument against Velleman’s defense of momentary well-being internalism is that the only positive reason Velleman supplies for his view is that aggregation is false. But, because the debate is in part about whether aggregation is false, this gives us no positive reason to accept momentary well-being internalism (Dorsey 2015, 329). It should be clear why this argument has no force against our view: we accept both aggregation and momentary well-being internalism. So we do not have to base our acceptance of momentary well-being internalism on a rejection of aggregation.

Dorsey’s third argument against Velleman is the most relevant, because in seeing where it goes wrong, we also see how our view accommodates momentary well-being internalism (and thus

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preferred view) (Kauppinen 2015). Kauppinen does not have a name for someone who rejects both aggregation and momentary well-being internalism, nor does he include temporal neutrality in his characterization of whether a theory is atomistic or holistic (although he endorses temporal neutrality). A more complete division would be this: endorse momentary well-being internalism, temporal neutrality, and the explanatory priority of momentary well-being, and you are an atomist. Reject any of the three, and you are a holist. We could come up with six labels for the six possible kinds of holism, but this would be excessive.

<sup>30</sup> Velleman also thinks momentary well-being is not the right measure to use when calculating lifetime well-being, because he denies (whereas we endorse) aggregation.

<sup>31</sup> Dorsey thus comes close to endorsing redemptionism. He does elsewhere accept redemptionism (Dorsey 2013). However, he claims that his argument for momentary well-being externalism is independent of redemptionism: “to see the difference, note that [he’s] not saying that a particular event *e* could make me better off at a time earlier than *e* occurred. Rather, [he’s] suggesting that while the synchronic welfare value of *e* accrues at its moment of occurrence, this value is in part determined by the relations between *e* and nonconcurrent events, *f*, *g*, and *h*” (Dorsey 2015, 326).

<sup>32</sup> Dorsey himself accepts that momentary well-being internalism and its denial both “pass a threshold of reasonable plausibility,” and that bare appeal to the plausibility of one or the other “will be inconclusive” (Dorsey 2015, 329).

the third component of atomism, about which Dorsey and our view differ). Dorsey argues that his view is simply more plausible in light of the Heisman Trophy example and similar examples (Dorsey 2015, 327). Because the value of winning the trophy seems to depend on things apart from what is going on at the moment the trophy is won, it seems like momentary well-being internalism is false.

However, we have suggested that past and future events can be accommodated into a measure of momentary well-being not in the way Dorsey wishes them to be (by directly allowing relations between the past and the present, and relations between the future and the present, to determine well-being) but by looking to the relations that exist entirely in the present between various facts, some of which involve the past or the expected future. Retrospective momentary well-being involves being able to look back at the past in the moment. So, for instance, when someone wins the trophy, if *at that moment* they can look back into the past at their hard work, then *at that moment* (and at subsequent moments) the looking back can increase their momentary well-being (by increasing their retrospective momentary well-being).<sup>33</sup> Expectational momentary well-being involves looking towards the (expected) future. So, for instance, when someone works hard, if *at that moment* they can look to the future and expect it to pay off, then *at that moment* the looking forward can increase the momentary well-being (by increasing their expectational momentary well-being). The relations here are relations between two things *at the present moment*: now having had worked hard in the past and winning the prize now, or working hard now and now being able to expect to win the prize in the future.

This view is quite different from Dorsey's, for whom the relations are between two *temporally distinct* things: working hard in the past and winning the prize now, or working hard now and actually winning the prize in the future. Because the relations Dorsey discusses are relations between temporally distinct events, his view perhaps implies odd things about how time and well-being interact.<sup>34</sup> James L. D. Brown, for instance, argues that retroactive welfare effects are so implausible as to give us a reason to reject Dorsey's view (Brown 2019, 97).<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Ben Bradley argues that someone getting at  $t+n$  what they want at  $t$  cannot make their life better at  $t$  just in virtue of that fact that they're going to get what they want at  $t+n$ , because "it is true *of all times before he gets what he wants* that he is later going to get what he wants" (Bradley 2016, 6). Thus it is arbitrary to pick the moment at which one wants the thing, unless some further reason is forthcoming. According to our model, future events can only impact one's well-being insofar as they factor in to expectations of the future, and expectations of the future can change over time. It is not necessarily true of all times before some future event that we have the same expectations of that event, or

<sup>33</sup> Note that if they *actually* look back, say by fondly reminiscing about exercise, then this is merely discrete momentary well-being. This kind of looking back has traditionally been the only thing the atomist can rely on to try to explain examples like the Heisman trophy. See for instance Feldman's discussion of someone who "might take pleasure in the thought that the earlier pains... were meaningful" (Feldman 2004, 131). Our account incorporates that kind of pleasure, but it also incorporates well-being in non-hedonistic forms (if such well-being exists), like the well-being that consists in being able to look back at hard work (even when one does not in fact look back).

<sup>34</sup> For instance, on Dorsey's account, our well-being at each moment may be indeterminate until some future point. Or, it may be determinate, but only on the basis of things which have yet to occur. Both of these options strike us as odd, although even if they make sense, we think our approach is preferable. For additional discussion of this question see (King 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Brown's other main argument against Dorsey is that the only way Dorsey can incorporate the value of the shape of a life is by adding extra welfare to a better-shaped life, which Dorsey can't do because by hypothesis the lives must have equal sums of momentary well-being, or give up the shape of a life hypothesis, but Dorsey wishes to support the hypothesis (Brown 2019, 99-100). Because we explicitly endorse the first option, our view avoids this objection.

ought to have the same expectations of that event, or could have the same expectations of that event. Expectational momentary well-being need only accrue at those moments in life where it is plausible for it to accrue, like once one has put the work into securing some future success.

Thus, our view (unlike Velleman's) accounts for the different momentary value of winning a Heisman Trophy one has worked for versus winning one via a fluke: only in the former case does the trophy supply retrospective momentary well-being in the form of being able to look back on hard work. But, unlike Dorsey's view, our view does not reply on the idea that the hard work itself was valuable *at the time* because one was actually going to win the trophy later: if it was valuable at the time, it was because one could expect to win the trophy, not because one was actually going to win it.

In other words, Dorsey endorses the "Relational View," according to which "some contributors to the intrinsic value of a life, on this view, cannot be locked down to an individual moment but necessarily involve many moments throughout a life and the relationship between them" (Dorsey 2015, 310). Comprehensive momentary well-being allows us to "lock down" value to individual moments. Past things are incorporated into the moment by the *present* possibility of comparison between those past things and other features of the moment. Future things are incorporated into the moment by the *present* expectations (possible, rational, or actual) of those things. Just like a judgment that one painting is better than another is a *present* judgment, even if it is made on the basis of comparing the painting you are looking at right now with the painting you looked at yesterday, the well-being that someone gets from winning a trophy is *present* well-being, even if it accrues on the basis of viewing the win in light of hard work this person engaged in last year.

Thus, comprehensive momentary well-being does not violate the requirement of momentary well-being internalism that "an agent's well-being at a time,  $t$ , is not affected by anything that occurs at any time other than  $t$ " (Raibley 2016, 343)." The possibility of viewing one's present success in light of one's past efforts is not affected by one's *past* efforts themselves: it is rather affected by the *present* possibility of comparison. The possibility of judging the painting one is presently looking at to be better than the one saw yesterday is not (at this moment) affected by one's *yesterday* having seen the painting: anything else that afforded the possibility of the comparison would serve just as well, and what is needed is the possibility in the present, not at any other time. If there were some other way for the trophy to be valuable, or some other way to compare the paintings, without something in the past having occurred, then this would serve just as well for providing well-being or for forming an aesthetic judgment. It might be true that only past occurrences can provide the occasion for present comparisons, but this does not mean the past events are *themselves* factoring into the well-being (or the aesthetic judgment). It just means the past events are the occasions for the present comparisons.

So, comprehensive momentary well-being is an atomistic measure of well-being. It accepts the explanatory priority of momentary well-being, momentary well-being internalism, and neutrality about the order of episodes when aggregating well-being over time. Lifetime well-being, if we must measure it at all, is measured by summing up momentary well-being, which itself is determined on the basis of present features of one's life, like examining one's present situation in light of the possibility of looking back or the possibility of expecting things in the future. We endorse temporal neutrality and we have demonstrated how features of well-being which ostensibly conflict with it, like the importance of the shape of lives, can be captured by comprehensive momentary well-being.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Because we claim that well-being atomism can capture (via comprehensive momentary well-being) all the important features of well-being, one might worry that this amounts to an objection against the theory. Can well-being atomism be false if, as we claim, all theories of well-being are compatible with it? If well-being atomism applies to all theories, it seems like it is perhaps a vacuous, unfalsifiable theory.

This objection does not succeed. Our arguments above are controversial. Not all theorists will accept that comprehensive momentary well-being can capture everything important about anti-aggregation, narratability, and relationalism. Specifically, many will object to our claims that some features of these three theses ought not to play a role in a theory of well-being. In other words, they will claim that although we say we can capture the intuitive force of these ideas, in fact we cannot: well-being atomism can only support inadequate versions of these ideas. Dorsey, for instance, might claim that future events do in fact impact our present well-being, whereas we claim that the only impact the future has on present well-being is via expectations (possible, rational, or actual). Thus, an endorsement of well-being atomism amounts to a controversial claim in discussions of well-being, one which many will object to. It follows that well-being atomism is neither a vacuous nor an unfalsifiable theory. There are substantive reasons (which we disagree with) people can point to in order to reject well-being atomism. If we are right, many of the views described above will have to alter themselves in various ways. Well-being atomism is thus ecumenical but not vacuously so.

This has been a partial description of well-being atomism. Necessarily some crucial topics have been left unaddressed, like the length of the moments that are measured by comprehensive momentary well-being.<sup>36</sup> We have, however, gone some length towards articulating a comprehensive account of momentary well-being by showing how it can accommodate many features of well-being ostensibly incompatible with momentary well-being. If we are right that well-being atomism can capture what is important, and that what it cannot capture ought to be rejected, then theories of well-being should aim to be compatible with well-being atomism. Articulating the various features of well-being in a given theory in terms of the variables in well-being atomism will bring greater clarity and help adjudicate disputes between theories, and disputes about meta aspects of well-being, like aggregationism. Well-being atomism represents a significant and helpful addition to the study of well-being.

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<sup>36</sup> For one proposal see (Kraut 2018, 213). See also Feldman's discussion of "episodes" of well-being (Feldman 2004, 173-4).

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