It's Not the Slope that Matters: Well-Being and Shapes of Lives

Many believe that an upward sloping life is better than a downward sloping life because of its shape. This is a common way of formulating the shape of a life hypothesis. We argue that the hypothesis is mistaken. We need not assume that there is something intrinsically valuable in the shape of one's life to justify the tendency to judge an upward sloping life as better than a downward sloping one. Instead, we can appeal to more fundamental and less controversial claims to justify such judgments. What one might justifiably judge to be better are features of lives which are often (though not necessarily) correlated with, rather than constituted by, an upward slope.

1. Introduction

Compare two lives. One, measured according to whatever makes a life go well, slopes upward. The life starts off not particularly good and gradually gets better. At the end of the life it is very good. Another life starts off very good and gradually gets worse. At the end of the life it is not particularly good. Many believe that the first sort of life – the one with the upward slope – is better than the downward sloping life because of its shape. The view that an upward sloping life is better than a downward sloping life because of its shape is a common way of formulating the shape of a life hypothesis.[1]

This hypothesis is mistaken. Lives are not better *because* they slope up rather than slope down. We need not assume that there is something intrinsically valuable in the shape of one's

[1] There are a variety of ways one could cash out the shape of a life hypothesis. Our formulation is one popular way, and it is also an entailment of many of the other ways of framing the hypothesis. Guy Fletcher (2016, 135) describes the hypothesis as stating that "[o]ther things being equal, the lifetime well-being of an uphill life is greater than the lifetime well-being of a downhill life." According to Stephen Campbell (2015, 569) the shape of a life hypothesis entails that it's "prudentially preferable to have a life that gets progressively better… than a life that gets progressively worse," all else held equal. Joshua Glasgow (2013, 667) writes: "We want to know whether the uphill life is better than the downhill life, other things equal… Once we make this stipulation [that other things are held equal], it still seems to many of us that [the uphill] life is in fact better than [the downhill] life. This is the shape-of-a-life phenomenon." See also Brentano (1973, 196-7).
Not everyone articulates the hypothesis this way. Dale Dorsey (2015, 305) defines the hypothesis as holding that "The temporal sequence of good and bad times in a life can be a valuable feature of that life as a whole," as does James Brown (2019). Our target is one common way of formulating the shape of a life hypothesis, not all conceivable formulations of the thesis.

life in order to explain and justify the judgment that an upward sloping life is better than a downward sloping one. Instead, we can appeal to more fundamental and less controversial claims to explain and justify such judgments. What one might justifiably judge to be better are features of lives which are often (though not necessarily) correlated with, rather than constituted by, an upward slope—having better things in our future, having worse things in our life in our past rather than in our future, and having as a good a life as we can get.

The debate over whether slopes matter is an interesting one on its own, and philosophers have argued for a variety of positions (Brännmark 2001; Feldman 2004, 124–41; Portmore 2007; Dorsey 2015; Clark 2018; Bruckner 2019; Dunkle 2022). But this debate is also relevant to broader questions about well-being. One question is whether one ought to be neutral about when goods in our lives are distributed: am I better off if something great happens later in life, such that I am justified in sacrificing some well-being for the sake of getting more of my total well-being in the future, or am I better off if my life instantiates the highest possible amount of well-being, no matter when it occurs (Sidgwick 1981; Slote 1982; Brink 2011; 2021; Scheffler 2021)? Defenders of the shape of a life hypothesis are committed to the claim that the temporal location of events affects a person's well-being, whereas opponents of the shape of a life hypothesis can endorse temporal neutrality.

Another question is whether the well-being of a life is reducible to the sum of the well-beings at each moment in the life, or whether there are additional components of well-being. According to what Johan Brännmark and Samuel Clark label "compositionalism," the value of a life for the one who lives it depends not just on the values of each moment but on how they all fit

together (Brännmark 2001; Clark 2018).[2] Compositionalism is endorsed by (among others) those who think that the narrative structure of a life affects its value, such that a life with a better story is better than a life with a worse story even if the two lives are otherwise equal (Velleman 1991; MacIntyre 2007; Rosati 2013; Clark 2018). Compositionalism is denied by hedonists and others who think that the value of a life can be determined entirely by the "area under the curve" (Feldman 2004). According to non-compositionalists, what matters is only how well each moment goes, not how those moments relate to each other. Similarly, what Owen King labels "aggregationism," the thesis that "the goodness of a life is the life's aggregate well-being," is a live topic of debate (King 2018). Slote rejects aggregationism, based in part on concerns related to the shape of a life hypothesis, while hedonists accept aggregationism (Slote 1982).

The judgment that upward sloping lives are better than downward sloping lives is one key factor in these debates. In this article we argue that when lives that slope up are better than lives that slope down it is not *because* of their shape. If our argument succeeds, this lends support to non-compositionalism and aggregationism, to neutrality about the location of goods in lives, and to other related positions. The implications of our position are therefore substantial. But our goal is not to settle all of these debates once and for all, nor is it to propose a positive argument for neutrality with respect to when goods occur in one's life or to attack compositionalism and anti-aggregationism directly.[3] Our goal is narrower: it is simply to argue that the view that upward sloping lives are better than downward sloping lives can be justified by other judgments

[2] From now on, we will talk simply of "the value of a life," omitting the clarification that we are talking about this value for the one who lives it. Our topic is well-being and the relevant value is prudential value. Other ways lives can be valuable are irrelevant.

[3] One reason we do not aim to solve every question here is that we are only attacking one version of the shape of a life hypothesis. To clear the way for non-compositionalism, temporal neutrality, and similar views, one would have to refute not just the particular shape of a life hypothesis we attack, but all shape of a life hypotheses. For arguments against other formulations of the shape of a life hypothesis see [citation omitted].

regarding well-being, ones that are more plausible and less controversial than the judgment that some lives are better *because* of their upward slope.[4]

To compare lives with different slopes that are otherwise equal, consider Benjamin Button. Benjamin Button, a character from a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is born an old man, ages backwards throughout his life until he becomes an infant, and then dies. Although Button is abnormal in this way, in other ways his life can have many normal features. Imagine old Button putters around, middle aged Button runs a business, young adult Button attends university, and child Button does childlike things. For Button (hereafter "Backwards Button") these things happen in the listed order: old age first, and so on. But we can also imagine a Button living a life in the normal order (hereafter "Forwards Button"). Forwards Button is like us: he is born an infant, ages normally, and so on.[5]

Apart from going forwards or backwards, the lives of the two Buttons are the same: at each stage of their lives, they are doing the same thing, and we will stipulate that both lives have the same overall amount of well-being, or in other words the same amount of area "under the curve." For instance, each Button gets 2 units of well-being during infancy, 5 during childhood, 10 during young adulthood, 15 during middle age, and 20 during old age. The only difference is whether the resulting slope goes up (for Forwards Button) or down (for Backwards Button): the area under the curve is 52 for both Buttons.

[4] Thus, our project is analogous to Chad Stevenson's (2018). Stevenson discusses certain judgments about well-being (those concerning the Experience Machine). These are thought to be judgments about what is prudentially valuable, but he argues that insofar as these judgments make sense, they are actually judgments about prudential pay-offs and trade-offs. We argue that judgments that are thought to be about shapes of lives, insofar as these judgments make sense, are actually judgments about other things.

[5] Compare Dale Dorsey's discussion of O. J. Simpson and J. O. Nospmis (Dorsey 2015, 304-5). Our arguments agree with Dorsey's conclusions about the shape of a life hypothesis, and thus compliment his arguments. However, we disagree with Dorsey on topics unrelated to the hypothesis, like about whether compositionalism is true. See also footnote 21.

If the area under the curve is all there is, and if it is possible to have lives which are mirrors of each other and which have the same area under the curve, then the Buttons have equally good lives. Our arguments below set out to show how it is possible that Forwards and Backwards Button can have otherwise equal lives, and precisely the same lifetime well-being, despite having lives with opposite slopes. If what we say below is plausible, then it can make sense to see the two Buttons as having mirrored but otherwise equal lives. If our arguments below fail, then we accept that it is implausible to hold the well-being of both Buttons equal. Forwards and Backwards Button as described are thus a *potential* illustration of a counterexample to the shape of a life hypothesis. The goal is now to explain how we could have certain judgments about the value of the lives of the Buttons and yet not endorse the shape of a life hypothesis.

To make our argument we explore the issue from two perspectives. In §2 we argue that, from the perspective of someone living the life of one of the Buttons, one might justifiably judge as better things which would result in an upward sloping life, but these judgements are not about an upward sloping life as such. In §3 we argue that holistic evaluations of lives from the outside need not recommend upward sloping lives. These slopes do not necessarily result in better narratives, and there are many circumstances in which one might evaluate a downward sloping life as better as long as the area under the curve is larger due to the downward slope. In §4 we differentiate our approach from the one pursued by other opponents of the shape of a life hypothesis, like hedonists. §5 concludes.

2. Perspective at a Given Moment

In this section we describe three justifiable judgements one might make from the perspective of a given moment in their life. When what these judgments deem good is present, the result is often an upward sloping life. However, the truth of these judgments does not provide support to the shape of a life hypothesis. These are judgements that it is good if, out of the possible futures, our future is one of the better alternatives; that it is good for the bad things in our life to be in our past rather than our future; and that it is good to have as a good a life as we can get, overall. We now turn to discuss each in turn.

2.1 Hoping for Good Things to Come

First, at any given moment in our lives we might judge that it is better to have blue skies ahead: that is, we might believe it is good for us that the future bodes well, in the sense that among the possible alternatives in the future, better rather than worse alternatives obtain.[6] This judgement that it is good for good things in our lives to be ahead of us often entails, but does not necessitate, a judgement that an upward slope is better than a downward slope.

Say you are Forwards Button (whose life is always getting better) or Backwards Button (whose life is always getting worse). Looking into your future, what are you going to judge better? No matter how well one's life is going, at any given moment, if one gazes into the future of one's life, an upward sloping life will be getting better when the alternative is the equivalent downward sloping life. *At any given moment*, we think it is better if our lives are about to get better rather than get worse, given the choice. Thus someone who judges that it is good for better

[6] Similar judgments we could make are that it is good for our future life to be good (whether or not there are various alternatives open to us), that it is good for our future life to be better than it is right now (whether or not there are various alternatives open to us), and that it is good if our future life is better than it is right now so long as it is also good (that is, merely getting better is not good if the result is still overall bad). These other judgments are similar to the judgment we discuss here, and with few or no modifications, our arguments work with respect to these judgments too. For simplicity's sake we focus here only on the judgment we mention above. We thank a reviewer for this journal for suggesting we clarify the relevant judgment in this section.

rather than worse alternatives to obtain in the future will, at any given moment of the lives, prefer Forwards Button to Backwards Button's life.

Notice though that this judgement that it is good to have better things in the future is not about the *overall* slope of one's life, and thus provides no support to the shape of a life hypothesis. At any point in Backwards Button's downward sloping life, he has the exact same judgement as Forwards Button: looking forward, he judges that it would be better for him for his future to be better (like Forwards Button), rather than worse(like his actual future, unfortunately).For Backwards Button, what he judges as better for himself does not materialize. He continues to lead his life, not Forward Button's life. This generates a downward sloping life. But the issue here is not the slope that is generated, but rather the fact that Backwards Button gets worse things, rather than better things. If halfway through his life, Backwards Button's prospects begin to improve such that he now gets well-being equivalent to what Forwards Button gets at each relevant moment, then from this point onwards he will get better things, and the resulting life shape will be a V, rather than an upwards or downwards slope. So, this judgement that it is better for him to have better things rather than worse things in the future is not a judgement directly about the slope of a life, and it does not support the view that slope is what matters. Things can go well in the future without the shape of a life resembling an upward slope or any other ostensibly valuable shape. If for instance Backwards Button faces a choice between his current trajectory or a straight line at his current level of well-being, then the judgment that it's better to have the better alternative in the future recommends picking the straight line. This does not give Backwards Button an upward slope, but it is a better choice than his original downward slope. Similarly, someone whose life has been flat so far and who gets to choose between the life remaining flat or the life sloping downward would judge that remaining flat is

better. This is a sensible judgment, but it hardly supports the shape of a life hypothesis. And so the judgment that Forwards Button's life is, at any given time, a better alternative than Backwards Button's life because it has a better future does not support the shape of a life hypothesis either.

Frances Kamm, by contrast, suggests that we judge that it is better for the *overall slope* of our life to be towards the good and not towards the bad (Kamm 1998, 68). The judgement Kamm describes, if legitimate, justifies the view that it is better for a life to slope upward rather than downward, and it does so *because* the upward slope is better. The question then is which one appears more plausible: do we care about our life's shape or do we care about our life being better from this point onwards, compared to the alternatives? Both Kamm's explanation and our own justify a judgement that it is good to have good things in the future. Yet Kamm's explanation also includes a commitment to the claim that an upward sloping life is good in itself, which we do not need to commit to in order to justify the judgment that we claim is defensible. Our explanation is more parsimonious while remaining neutral between compositionalism and non-compositionalism. In a debate more narrowly over the shape of a life hypothesis and more broadly about compositionalism, we should prefer our explanation because it is more parsimonious and because it does not beg questions. Our judgment is compatible with the shape of a life hypothesis, but unlike Kamm's, it does not assume it.

One might object that the relevant considerations are not exhausted by comparing the judgment we describe with the judgment Kamm endorses. Kamm's judgment may be less parsimonious and more question-begging, , but there may be something we can say in favor of Kamm's judgment that we cannot say in favor of our judgment: upon reflection, we decide the shape of a life *does* matter, and so a judgment the content of which assumes the truth of the

shape of a life itself (like Kamm's) is more defensible than our judgment, which is neutral with respect to the shape of a life.[7]

Kamm is not very committal about why her judgment makes sense. She describes eleven factors which may be relevant to explaining why her judgment is sensible, but she finds reasons to reject many of them, and eventually settles on six as defensible (Kamm 1998, 68-70). The most compelling of these is that a downward-sloping life has less good in each additional moment than the life has previously had, and it's bad to have less good in each additional moment than one has had so far (Kamm 1998, 69). As she puts it, in a downward-sloping life, "in moving on we increase our total of the goods of life, but the per-unit amount decreases. A more perfect scenario involves simultaneous increases in simple existence and per-unit figures," or in other words a more perfect scenario involves an upward-sloping life (Kamm 1998, 69).

However, just as above we pointed out that positively judging a life that gets better at each moment does not necessarily entail thinking that lives are better because they have upward slopes, in this case, getting a higher per-unit figure in each moment does not necessarily entail an upward slope. If one starts this pattern in the middle of one's life, after a period of decline, then the resulting life is a V. Surely the V is better than continuing the downward slope. The reason is that per-unit increases at each moment going forward entail more overall well-being, even if they don't result in an overall lifetime upward slope. Unless Kamm can explain why we would positively judge a per-unit increase for reasons other than the well-being this affords, it is much simpler to think that what makes a per-unit increase good is the fact that it gets us more well-

[7] We thank a reviewer for this journal for raising this objection.

being than a per-unit decrease (even if the latter would still get us more total well-being than if we just died immediately).[8]

2.2 Putting Bad Things Behind Us

A judgement that an upward slope is better than a downward slope is also often entailed, but not necessitated, by a judgement that it is better for the bad things in our lives to have already occurred and be in our past (Parfit 1984, 164-7).[9] Given a choice between a bad thing happening tomorrow or a worse thing having happened yesterday, we are inclined to pick the latter. And at any given moment in the life, Forwards Button's life will have relatively bad things in the past and relatively good things in the future, whereas for Backwards Button the opposite will be true. This means that a judgement that it is better that bad things are in the past will be better met at any given moment in Forwards Button's life than in Backwards Button's life. This can explain why we would justifiably judge the upward slope of Forward Button's life as better than Backward Button's downward slope, but again it is not necessary that the shape of a life hypothesis is doing the work. Rather, the judgement that it is better that the bad things in life are behind us justifies how we see the two lives from the perspective of a given moment in a life.

In effect, when we look at the lives from the perspective of someone currently living them, we tend to treat the past as if it were a sunk cost about which we are being economically rational, especially when it comes to bad things that have occurred in the past. Sunk costs are costs that have been incurred in the past. Economists suggest it is irrational to take these into

[8] Kamm's other factors are that a downward-sloping life entails that our efforts are counterproductive, that it is bad for our lives to decline if we don't deserve this, that we want to move to a position that is as good or better than our present position, that an upward slope heads towards the good, and the right relation to value is to move towards it, and that the person in the decline loses what was already his (Kamm 1998, 68-9). We think there are reasons to reject these arguments, but space precludes discussion of these points.

[9] Parfit argues that it is hard to defend these sorts of temporal biases.

consideration when making decisions about the future, because it is too late to change them. If I purchased a $50 ticket for a show tonight, I should disregard the cost of the ticket when deciding whether to attend. The $50 is a sunk cost I cannot recoup. I should only pay attention to how much I will enjoy the show, regardless of the cost of the ticket (and, thus, regardless of considerations about slope).[10]

In addition to judging that it is better to have the bad things in our past, we might also judge that it is better to have them as far in our past as possible. This judgement is better met by upward sloping lives than downward sloping lives, but it is not a judgement about slope in particular. The adage 'time heals all wounds' suggests that the more time we put between us and the badness in our life, the better. Thus, anyone who wishes to avail themselves of the healing properties of time will wish their badness to be as far in the past as possible. This can be done by having an upward sloping life rather than the equivalent downward sloping life, but it can also be done by having lives of all sorts of shapes, like a life with many bad years at the beginning, and then fluctuation between very good and good years throughout the middle and the end, or a life with many bad years at the beginning, many good years in the middle, and many merely okay years at the end. Nothing about this judgement entails that the shape of a life is what matters, or that the upward slope is itself a better shape than the downward slope. The judgement is just about it being better to get the bad as far behind us as possible. Thus, this judgement does not provide a reason to endorse the shape of a life hypothesis.

Another way to think of this is in terms of saliency. If the near past is more salient than the distant past, and if it is better to reflect on good times than bad times, then I should judge that

[10] For an analysis of sunk costs and prudence which objects to our general approach, see (Kauppinen 2020). Kauppinen's approach depends to a large extent on his views about meaningfulness and narratives (Kauppinen 2012; 2015). We concur with Hersch and Weltman who argue that Kauppinen's view is not compelling (Hersch and Weltman 2023).

it is better for my past to be ordered such that the better the event, the closer it is in time to the present. If the more recent past events are better, it could allow me to have fonder reflections on the past, to feel better about the general tenor of my life, and so on compared to a situation in which the more distant events are better. An upward sloping life accomplishes this ordering better than a downward sloping life, because the upward sloping life has better events in the near past than in the far past.

However, this judgement lends no weight to the shape of a life hypothesis, because when we compare the two entire lives against each other, they both have an equal amount of time spent reflecting on good, salient near pasts. The only difference is that Forwards Button enjoys the best reflection time at the end of his life, whereas Backwards Button enjoys equally good reflection time at the beginning of his life. Thus, what matters in this case is not the slope of the lives but rather the capacity to remember back to good, near events. Both Forwards and Backwards Button, viewed from the perspective of their entire lives, are equal on this matter.

Indeed, any considerations about the value one might obtain from looking back on parts of one's life (or even looking forward to potential good times in the future) cannot by themselves support the shape of a life hypothesis without begging the question. This is because the shape of a life hypothesis asks us to hold the value under the curve of two lives constant while varying only the shape, and to then conclude that the upward sloping life actually has more value which cannot be captured by the area under the curve. But anyone who denies compositionalism will either deny that looking back on good times can lend value to one's life (which is implausible) or, more plausibly, simply claim that looking back on good times adds value to one's life not in a holistic manner but *at the times one looks back*. Thus, two lives with different slopes and "equal" area under the curve will not in fact have equal area under the curve. The upward sloping life

will have more area at the moments the person is looking back (Feldman 2004, 124-41).[11] The compositionalist must show that looking back on one's life does not improve it at the moments one looks back, but it is hard to see why this would be true.[12]

2.3 Wanting as Good a Life as We Can Get

One way to compare Backwards and Forwards Button is to imagine being one of them and comparing yourself to the other. Imagine that you are Backwards Button and someone asks you whether you judge that it would benefit you to switch your life with Forwards Button's life. There are two ways to think about making this comparison at any given moment.

First, we might imagine that such a trade would entail getting Forward Button's upward slope from now on. If the goal is to get as much area under the slope as possible (and thus to live as good a life as possible), it will always make sense to wish you could swap from Backwards Button to Forwards Button, and it will never make sense to wish you could swap from Forwards Button to Backwards Button. This is true not because of the slopes, but merely because of the amount of well-being you would get if you could swap. At any time t along the slope of each life, one will end up with more area under the slope at $t+n$ by being on an upward slope like Forwards Button's compared to a downward slope like Backwards Button.

A second way we might imagine what such a trade entails is that one does not simply "get the other's slope" from now on, but rather that one also gets their current level of well-

[11] The exception is that Backwards and Forwards button have equal areas under the curve, but this is only because they both get more value at the time they look back. Backwards Button does all his looking back in the earliest parts of his life. For normal humans this is not possible, because infants are not able to reflect on the good old days, but when Backwards Button is just 1 year old, he has 1 great year to look back on. When he is 2 years old, he has 2 great years to look back on. And so forth.

[12] The compositionalist could accept that looking back improves the life at the moment, but *also* improves the life more broadly. But it is implausible to double count like this. If we already accept that looking back is valuable at the moment, this allows us to explain the phenomenon entirely without positing extra value.

being. Imagine the midpoint between birth (t_0) and death (t_d) as the point at which the area under the curve that Forwards Button had until now ($t_{0\rightarrow d/2}$) is equal to the area under the curve that Backwards Button will have from now on ($t_{d/2\rightarrow d}$), and vice versa.[13] The optimal time for Backwards Button to switch lives with Forward Buttons is at the midpoint. This will get him the most area under the curve. But even for this way of framing the question, it still holds that at any moment one gets more area under the curve if one switches from Backwards Button to Forward Button than one would have if one were just either Backwards Buttons or Forward Buttons the whole time. And one would get even less area if one switched from Forward Button (FB) to Backwards Button (BB) at any given moment:

$$(BB_{t_0\rightarrow t_x} + FB_{t_x\rightarrow t_d}) > [(FB_{t_0\rightarrow t_d}); (BB_{t_0\rightarrow t_d})] > (FB_{t_0\rightarrow t_x} + BB_{t_x\rightarrow t_d})$$

So, measuring the value of a life by the area under a curve, and making that measurement from the point of view of someone at any point *t* along either curve, it will always make sense to judge that it would be better if one could have an upward slope for the future. This is true whether one has been on an upward slope or a downward slope so far. The reason this judgement does not support a general judgement in favor of an upward sloping life compared to a downward sloping life is that it relies on the idea that more area under the curve is better, and if that is our criterion, then two lives with equal area must be equally good, regardless of slope.[14] Although it always makes sense to judge that it would be good to swap from a downward to an upward slope, this is not because the upward slope itself is a better shape for a life. It is because it gets you more area under the curve than your present course. From the point of view of

[13] Forwards and Backwards Button as described above do not line up like this, but this is immaterial. Buttons with 45-degree angle lives sloping up or down and crossing at the midpoint, like the letter X, have lives like this.
[14] Recall that if we think area under the curve is all that matters, we are denying, rather than endorsing, compositionalism.

someone who is not thinking about swapping from one life to the other but just about evaluating the two lives, the two Buttons are identically good because they have equal area under the curve.

Joshua Glasgow's (2013) account, which is rooted in the goodness of the gains themselves and the badness of the losses themselves, provides an alternative explanation for why we might think it is worthwhile to swap lives. According to his view, if you go from 5 well-being on Tuesday to 10 on Wednesday, your life improves not by 5 but by more, because it now contains a gain, and that gain *itself* has additional value. Glasgow's account purports to explain the judgement that a life with an upward slope is better than a life with a downward slope. The upward sloping life is made up of gains, which are themselves good. The downward sloping life is made up of losses, which are themselves bad. It is not merely that we judge having the good things in our future as better; it is that the change itself from lower to higher levels of well-being is good too.

Glasgow's account, however, requires introducing a layer of episodic well-being that piggybacks on every pair of moments that feature increases (or decreases) of overall well-being.[15] Glasgow needs to show that gains are good and losses are bad aside from the fact that gains bring us good things and losses bring us bad things. The intuition that gains are good and losses are bad is not easily divorced from what gains and losses bring us. We need a reason to think gains and losses matter in a way that cannot be explained by pointing to the good things gains lead to and the bad things losses lead to. This reason has to be good enough for us to accept Glasgow's more complicated picture according to which gains are themselves a special kind of good.

[15] Hersch and Weltman (2023) discuss an alternative approach that captures the intuitions Glasgow aims to 5accommodate while also endorsing non-compositionalism, which Glasgow denies.

But Glasgow finds it hard to defend the complexity. If we come to accept that gains and losses are themselves good or bad, Glasgow notes that we might think this will entail some odd conclusions. Someone might worry, for instance, that the thesis "means we should not benefit someone who is about to suffer, for that would increase the steepness of the slope that she slides down" (Glasgow 2013, 680-1). His response is to argue that the importance of the shape of a life is likely outweighed by the other well-being adjustments in cases like this: "while steepening a person's downhill slope does cost them, that cost might be easily outstripped by the benefit given" (Glasgow 2013, 681). In fact he suggests that, when it comes to deciding whether to (e.g.) cause more pain for the sake of creating a better slope, "a plausible weighting is that the disvalue of the extra pain will *always* outstrip the benefit of the slope," such that we should perhaps conclude that "the dis/value carried by the shape of a sequence of moments is *always* less than the difference, in momentary value, between the terminal moments of that sequence" (Glasgow 2013, 681, emphases added). In principle this response is fine, but it adverts to exactly the same datum that the skeptic of the shape of a life hypothesis relies upon, which is that overall well-being ought always to be pursued at the expense of giving up an otherwise appealing life shape. The worry for Glasgow is that it seems like overall well-being is doing *all* the explanatory work, and the shape of a life hypothesis is just parasitic on the fact that most upward slopes also result in more well-being for the extrinsic, non-necessary reasons we describe.

A further worry is that Glasgow is correct to point out that losses are bad, but this only tells a partial story.[16] Missing out on well-being is also bad, even if you never had that well-being. An upward sloping life misses out on just as much well-being as the equivalent downward

[16] This is not to accept Glasgow's point that losses are bad *qua* losses. Our argument here is compatible with thinking that losses are bad for other sorts of reasons, including reasons that apply equally to things that do not necessarily cause downward sloping lives.

sloping life loses. This is because the upward sloping life starts off low, while the downward sloping life starts off high, and thus at the beginning of the lives, the upward sloping life is missing out on lots of well-being that the downward sloping life is enjoying. For this reason, by the end, both lives are equally good: everything the downward sloping life lacks is equaled by what the upward sloping life loses out on. Consider the sorts of things Glasgow points to in order to explain that losses are bad: "they are regrettable, they disappoint. We are inclined to sadness or even hopelessness and depression when we reflect on the more significant losses" (Glasgow 2013, 668). The exact same can be said about failures to gain, which are present all over the upward sloping life near the beginning. If you apply for your dream job and lose out, and end up stuck working a job you do not enjoy very much, then you lose out on a lot of potential well-being, even though your well-being never goes down (and indeed it may continually improve, if other things in your life keep getting better). Losing out on the job can certainly be something you regret and a cause of disappointment. It may incline you to sadness or even hopelessness and depression.[17]

The regrettable nature of missed opportunities for well-being is most obvious when we are anticipating the well-being and it fails to materialize. But equally regrettable (though not equally epistemically accessible) are missed opportunities that we never know about (and perhaps even missed opportunities that were not real opportunities because they were always out of our grasp). Forwards Button's life starts off bad (unlike Backwards Button, who starts off very well), and although Forwards Button perhaps never realizes it, it's unfortunate for him that things did not start off as good as they did for Backwards Button. Forwards Button's upward sloping life misses out on all the early well-being that the downward sloping Backwards Button gets. So,

[17] For an example from philosophy, see (Sheredos 2019).

although Backwards Button leads a life full of losses which he might regret, Forwards Button leads a life without the early benefits Backwards Button has, and Forwards Button has just as much cause to regret this as Backwards Button has to regret the losses. Indeed, their regrets should be exactly equal, since Backwards Button loses exactly as much as Forwards Button fails to start out with.

Ultimately, it makes sense to value more well-being in our lives, no matter what slope it takes to get this and no matter how many gains or losses our life might include. Say a genie offers you the following option: they can alter history such that a period of your life that went badly instead went very well. For instance, the genie will replace the past 5 years of suffering with 5 years of happiness. If you are currently happy, it would be strange to refuse the genie's offer because this will wreck the upward slope of your life and instead turn the slope into a flat one. It would be similarly strange to ask that the genie improve your life by adding gains into your past, rather than via some magic that increases well-being without adding any gains. If a genie offers you a chance to cure your illness without taking medicine, there would be no reason to reject the offer for the sake of having a reason to take the medicine. We should say the same about slope and about gains (and about avoidance of losses): we value increases to our lifetime well-being even if this wrecks the upward slope or misses out on some gains, which suggests the slope and the value of gains are an artifact of what causes value, rather than valuable in and of themselves.

2.4. Justifying Judgements

Our arguments in this section aim to establish that one could justifiably make judgements from within the perspective of a life which do not amount to a judgement that an upward sloping life is

better than a downward sloping one, even though these judgements might seem to be in favor of an upward-sloping life. If our arguments have succeeded, then we have shown that we can simultaneously endorse two claims: 1) these judgements can be sensible and justifiable, in the sense of being judgements that can in fact be correct about what makes our lives better, and 2) lives with certain shapes are not better because of their shapes. They are better because it is better for the good things in our life to still be in our future, better to have the worse things in our life to be in our past, and better to have as a good a life as we can get.

3. Lifetime Perspective

One might think that judgments of life's value should be "the sort of evaluation we might undertake at a person's deathbed: How has she done in life, all things considered" (Alexandrova 2012, 627).[18] If this is the (or a) correct approach from which to approach well-being evaluation, this might seem to lend itself to endorsement of the shape of a life hypothesis. Ending on a low point doesn't seem appealing. But the deathbed perspective is merely a special case of the perspective at a moment—the last moment in one's life.[19] As we have argued in the previous section, judgments that upward sloping lives are better than downward sloping ones can be justified by less controversial commitments than holding that the shape of a life is intrinsically valuable. We have argued that this is true when viewed from within lives, and this also generalizes to times when we are on our deathbeds looking back at our lives. But one might

[18] Raffaele Rodogno (2015) suggests that this sort of evaluation is characteristic of perfectionist theories of well-being like Aristotle's.

[19]One might deny this point. Insofar as it is incorrect, then only the arguments in this section will be relevant to the deathbed perspective. If it is correct, then many arguments in the previous section will work too. But our arguments in this section do not depend on those in the previous section. We thank a reviewer for this journal for noting that one might object to characterizing the deathbed perspective as a perspective from a moment in a life.

argue that even if what we have said thus far is correct, upward sloping lives are intrinsically more valuable than downward sloping ones once we assess lives from a neutral perspective. We should adopt something akin to Nagel's "view from nowhere" and use one or more objective measures of well-being to see how the shape of a life matters (Nagel 1989). We now argue that this approach does not vindicate the common articulation of the shape of a life hypothesis either.

Some theories of well-being already deny the hypothesis. Most forms of hedonism offer a good example. As Feldman points out, the hedonist can argue that either Forwards and Backwards Button notice the trajectories of their lives and get additional pleasure or displeasure from the slopes, in which case what matters is not the shape of the life but the additional pleasure or displeasure; or, Forwards and Backwards Button *do not* notice the trajectories of their lives, and they neither take pleasure from nor suffer from anything having to do with the shape of the lives, in which case it is implausible to say the shapes had any impact on how their lives went (Feldman 2004 , 131-4).

One might however take this to be a *reductio* against views like Feldman's, rather than evidence against the shape of a life hypothesis. For this reason, other approaches to well-being include components which are designed to be sensitive to the shape of a life. For instance, theorists like Connie Rosati, who argue that the narrative of a life can be relevant to its value, can account for importance of shape by suggesting that an upward slope is a better narrative than a downward slope (Rosati 2013).[20] Dale Dorsey similarly argues that views of well-being that concern narrative value can best explain the shape of a life hypothesis (Dorsey 2015).[21] Many

[20] Rosati does not think that better narratives automatically make for better lives, but she, like other narrative theorists, endorses the thesis she labels "narrativity," which is that "the welfare value of a person's life depends, in part, on the specifically narrative relations among its parts over time; that is to say, the relevant value-affecting relations are *narrative* relations" (Rosati 2013, 29). We thank a reviewer for suggesting we clarify Rosati's position.
[21] Dorsey further argues that views which accept the shape of a life hypothesis can be compatible with the view that the value of a life consists of the sum of values at each moment. If this is true then there is less at stake in this debate than we have argued. However, we take Brown's reply to Dorsey to be convincing (Brown 2019). Brown argues that

others are attracted by some version of the narrative view (e.g. O'Neill 2008; Kauppinen 2015; Clark 2018).[22] Thus, we must give some reason to think these views are either implausible or that they are compatible with rejecting the shape of a life hypothesis.

We might think that the shape of a life hypothesis is akin to an aesthetic judgment about the kind of narrative the life instantiates, over and above how good the life was at each particular moment (and thus over and above the sum of those moments). An upward sloping story is a better story than a downward sloping one. The former is a triumph, the latter a tragedy. As Rosati puts it, lives with "generally uphill trajectories… naturally provide the material for compelling narratives" (Rosati 2013, 50).

But this is not so clear. Imagine that you hear the story of Benjamin Button's life: puttering in old age, running a business in middle age, and so on. But the person telling the story has forgotten one crucial detail: they cannot remember if they are telling you about Backwards Button or Forwards Button. The story is told in broad enough outlines that you are not able to determine which Button is under discussion. Nevertheless, you can still make judgments about how good Button's life was. If you learn that he generally succeeded in his endeavors, had fulfilling relationships, did not face any insurmountable setbacks, and felt satisfied with his accomplishments, you might say with some confidence that his life was good, and vice versa. It is at least partially possible to judge how good a person's life is while only having information about the components of their life without knowing anything about the order in which these components occur.

in fact hedonists and others who think the value of life can be obtained by summing the moments cannot account for the shape of a life hypothesis.

[22] For some reasons to doubt many versions of the narrative view, see (Wagner 2018; Berg 2023).

The question is whether you will have to adjust your judgment once you learn whether the storyteller was describing Backwards or Forwards Button. Put another way, the point of contention is whether it is the components of one's life alone that matter, or whether the particular order in which they occur also matters. And, more precisely, the question is whether an ordering that constitutes an upward slope makes a life better than arranging the same components in a different ordering.

Defenders of the shape of the life hypothesis will insist that however much one can make up one's mind, there is still some information missing when we are unsure whether we are hearing about Backwards or Forwards Button. They argue that this information will tell us something about how Button's life has gone. The thought is that a good ending and a bad beginning for Backwards Button, when translated into a bad ending and a good beginning for Forwards Button, yields a different narrative, and thus a life with a different value. Certainly, we are inclined to think a story with a sad end is sadder than a story with a happy end, even if the story with a sad end had a happy beginning and even if the story with a happy end had a sad beginning.

However, it is not obvious that our judgments of the values of narratives must be linked to the traditional linear "beginning to end" temporal ordering. We are able to judge narratives that are not temporally ordered from start to finish. Stories like Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*; Ted Chiang's story "Story of Your Life," and the Denis Villeneuve movie based on it, *Arrival*; Terry Gilliam's movie *12 Monkeys*; Christopher Nolan's movie *Tenet*; and similar stories suggest that the traditional linear temporal approach to evaluating life narratives is a result of how we conceptualize the progression of time and its relation to our lives and their value.

For example, the narrator in "Story of Your Life" takes a more holistic approach to evaluating the value of lives, and in virtue of taking this approach, she places more value on lives with downward slopes and interrupted upward slopes than one might otherwise be inclined to. She accepts that it is worth making one's life better by embarking on a path that will necessarily end in tragedy, because of the value that occurs in life prior to the tragedy. To put it crudely, this leads to a downward slope, but more area under the curve. The narrator accepts this because she understands her life's narrative as a whole temporally neutral unit rather than as a temporally ordered sequence. She does not care that her life has a sad ending, because she does not view her life linearly. That the sadness comes later is not a knock against the life, from the narrator's point of view. It is not clear that this perspective is any less justifiable than the more typical perspective.[23] Because she rejects the typical temporal ordering of lives, she would reject the view that an upward slope is preferable in virtue of sloping upwards. An upward slope is upwards only if we look at it from beginning to end: it is a downward slope if viewed from end to beginning, and no particular slope if we ignore its ordering. The narrator rejects any kind of ordered apprehension of her life and instead treats all moments of her life as on a par. In doing so she rejects the idea that the temporal ordering is relevant: instead, she only pays attention to the area under the curve.

Similarly, in the movie *Tenet,* two characters have a friendship that for one of them concludes and for the other begins with the series of events depicted in the movie. For the protagonist, the events of the movie depict the beginning of a friendship which will last for many more years. For the protagonist's friend, the events of the movie come near the end of that friendship. It is not clear that the value of these events in the context of the overall friendship

[23] This perspective is also illustrated in *Arrival*.

must be any different for the two individuals, even though the temporal ordering differs from one person to another. They might both evaluate the period of time depicted in the movie as being equally valuable from the point of view of their friendship, and for the same sorts of reasons. They might each tell the same story about their friendship, albeit in a different order (or they may tell the story of their friendship non-linearly, since for them the order is not crucial). In doing so they would have to disregard the temporal ordering of events within their friendship and adopt a temporally neutral viewpoint according to which the friendship's value does not hinge on the order in which its events occur.[24] If that is a plausible approach to the value that friendship contributes to a life, it could be a plausible approach to all of life's values.

According to the shape of a life hypothesis, meanwhile, these non-linear perspectives would be mistaken. The narrator in "Story of Your Life" would be confused, and one or the other character in *Tenet* ought to feel differently about the value of the events in the movie *vis a vis* the overall friendship. The shape of a life hypothesis tells us that upward sloping lives are better in virtue of having upward slopes, and the characters in these stories disregard this because they evaluate situations with downward slopes (in "Story of Your Life") or situations with both slopes (in *Tenet*, where the same situation can be part of either slope depending on whose life it is part of) as being on a par with the equivalent situation with a different slope. That is, because the narrator in "Story of Your Life" does not view her life from start to finish but as a whole in

[24] More radically, we might think it is possible to move to non-temporal life narratives as well. For instance, a life narrative can be structured spatially by grouping the events of a life based on location information. We could describe someone's life not chronologically, but by describing the places they lived and visited, and the significance those places had for the person. Alternatively, we might understand a life narrative in terms of sensory experiences. This kind of narrative structure could be appropriate for aesthetes, like for instance a gourmand for whom their life narrative would focus in large part around the kind of foods they experienced and the nature of those experiences, and less (or not at all) on what order these experiences occurred in. A third possibility could be structuring a person's life narrative cognitively, e.g. in relations to particular ideas, theories, or ideologies they found compelling. While these are not standard ways of organizing a life's narrative, they can nevertheless make for a compelling narrative and might help us make more sense of a person's life than mere linear chronological order.

which the ordering of events is not relevant to their value, she misses out on the value of an upward sloping life (if there is such value). If the protagonist and his friend in *Tenet* both judge the period of friendship depicted in the movie as (say) bittersweet, even though it forms part of a downward slope for one of them and part of an upward slope for the other, then one or the other is missing out on the fact that the period of friendship, because of its place in the slope of their life, should be seen as better (or worse) than the other character sees it.

Thus, we have a conflict between the shape of a life hypothesis and the competing hypothesis, which is that the shape of a life does not matter, and that therefore something else accounts for the value of the narrator's life in "The Story of Your Life" and the value of the friendship in *Tenet* as understood by the characters in the stories. Denying the shape of a life hypothesis can make sense of the value described in "The Story of Your Life" and *Tenet*. The defender of the shape of a life hypothesis, by contrast, at least owes us an argument against seeing the value in these stories as legitimate narrative value. It is not clear what argument they could provide. The perspectives from which these lives are valuable are odd ones that involve time travel, in light of which the narrator of "The Story of Your Life" and one of the characters in *Tenet* have information about the future which they use to evaluate their life narratives. Such perspectives are of course impossible in everyday life. But this does not mean the perspectives are mistaken.[25]

As we argued in the previous section, we can deny the shape of a life hypothesis and nevertheless still make sense of the judgements that could legitimate the view that the shape of a life matters derivatively. Denying the shape of a life hypothesis accommodates both the judgments expressed by, for example, the narrator in Chiang's story, and more standard

[25] A similar point can be made about the Tralfamadorians of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, whose atemporal perspective affords them the equanimity to respond to deaths, including their own, with "so it goes."

judgments regarding well-being. Accepting the shape of a life hypothesis, by contrast, can only accommodate the latter. It is thus more ecumenical to adopt our view.[26] Because temporally linear narratives are not the only way to construct a narrative, a commitment to the shape of a life hypothesis would be inappropriate and question begging compared to an alternative explanation that accounts for the value for everyone's lives, whether or not they slope upwards and whether or not people care about sloping upwards.

The narrative approach in the sense we have outlined here is not the only possible way to explain the shape of a life hypothesis viewed from the perspective of an entire lifetime. Refuting this narrative approach therefore does not eliminate all possible arguments for the shape of a life hypothesis which are based on holistic evaluations of lives. One chief competitor to the narrative approach is a more straightforward, mathematical view, according to which the shape of a life hypothesis is a consequence of the fact that holistic evaluations are not merely summative. That is, while theorists like Feldman and other hedonists would measure the value of a life by summing it, which is incompatible with the shape of a life hypothesis, we might think that the relevant mathematics are more complex: to measure the value of a whole life, we do not merely sum moments, but we look to relations between moments, and to relations instantiated by the overall arrangement of moments, and to other features of whole lives (or parts of whole lives).

Dorsey and Kauppinen both defend views like this (Dorsey 2015; Kauppinen 2012; 2015).[27] Dorsey, for instance, argues that "some contributors to the intrinsic value of a life, on this view, cannot be locked down to an individual moment but necessarily involve many

[26] See also Kathy Behrendt's discussion of how to evaluate lives in virtue of certain narrative properties and their ordering (particularly at the end of life) (Behrendt 2014).

[27] Dorsey does not think his view is in competition with those who merely sum moments, but as noted above, we take Brown's contestation of Dorsey's claim to be correct (Brown 2019). Thus, Dorsey should be read as an opponent of moment summers (like hedonists) and as a friend of the claim that holistic evaluations require more complicated math to accommodate the shape of a life hypothesis. We thank a reviewer for this journal for suggesting we say more about approaches like Dorsey's and Kauppinen's.

moments throughout a life and the relationship between them" (Dorsey 2015, 310). For the same reasons that Hersch and Weltman think we can reject Dorsey and Kauppinen's views with respect to summing well-being, we can reject Dorsey and Kauppinen's defenses of the shape of a life hypothesis (Hersch and Weltman 2023, 9-10; 12-14).

With respect to Dorsey, Hersch and Weltman argue that we can capture the value of things like completed projects entirely via momentary well-being, and thus account for the value of a life by summing each moment, and so Dorsey is wrong to think we must evaluate lifetime well-being with an eye towards relations between moments (Hersch and Weltman 2023, 9-10).[28] If they are right, then their theory of momentary well-being, which they call comprehensive momentary well-being, is sufficient for explaining judgments about shapes of lives without endorsing the shape of a life hypothesis. To do so, we can join them in saying that "[i]f 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" (Hersch and Weltman 2023, 15). This solution is compatible with all of our above-mentioned arguments.[29]

Hersch and Weltman also argue that a narrativism like Kauppinen's overvalues successful narratives and "happy endings" because it assigns too much importance to luck, overvalues contingent future success as a determinate of well-being at the time of effort, and implies an endorsement of an implausible strong redemptionism (according to which things become better for us based on events that occur later) (Hersch and Welman 2023, 12-4). In

[28] See also (Weltman and Hersch 2023, 18-21).

[29] Moreover, as we have noted above, Brown is correct to argue that Dorsey needs to defend the view that "relations between intrinsically valuable but temporally discrete events can reflect in the contribution of these events to per se momentary well-being, and these relations cannot directly contribute to well-being in any other way" (Brown 2019, 96). But, Brown is also correct to argue that Dorsey fails to defend this claim. So we should not accept Dorsey's approach here.

addition to Hersch and Weltman's points, we can add our above-adduced points about the independence of the value in a narrative from the ordering in that narrative, as in cases like the "The Story of Your Life" and the friendship in *Tenet*.[30]

Similar processes could be undertaken for others who believe that we can account for the value of shapes of lives by adverting to the relevant narratives. Moreover, a final point that applies to any view like this is that it might prove too much. Recall that our target is the shape of a life hypothesis in the form of believing that an upward sloping life is better. Many narrativists may wish to defend a more nuanced view according to which an upward slope alone is not good. (Indeed, Kauppinen's view is *incompatible* with a mere upward slope as the good-making feature. If a life slopes upward "due to sheer luck" then it does not instantiate the sort of value he is interested in.) Thus, although one might hope to save some kind of sophisticated shape of a life hypothesis, the hypothesis under examination here may be indefensible if one adverts to the sorts of considerations drawn on by Kauppinen and Dorsey.

4. Other Attacks on the Shape of a Life Hypothesis

Our arguments have aimed to establish that there are justifiable judgments about features of lives which, although they may seem to support the shape of a life hypothesis, in fact do not. Instead, we can reject the shape of a life hypothesis while still endorsing judgments that upward-sloping lives are better. In addition to the virtues noted above, like parsimony and ecumenicism, our approach has an additional benefit. Traditional approaches similar to ours, like the ones

[30] Kauppinen also says that someone skeptical that the shape of a life matters brings us close to "the bedrock at which answers give out," such that perhaps the most we can do is "just point to lives that differ narratively and say 'Look, isn't this better for a person?'" (Kauppinen 2015, 218). To the extent that we can account for what seems good to us without adverting to the value of narratives, using the strategies we describe above and the ones Hersch and Weltman outline, then perhaps we can resist the pull of Kauppinen's claims in the first place.

given by hedonists, must explain desires for upward-sloping lives as a mistake, or at best as a desire for things that lead to more well-being. For instance, Feldman gives a typical hedonist response to the shape of a life hypothesis. He claims that defenders of the shape of a life hypothesis are engaged in a "sort of thinking" that "embodies a fairly serious confusion" which is to confuse the pleasure they get from contemplating lives with the pleasure someone would get living those lives (Feldman 2004, 135). Or, alternatively, they are engaging in a sort of thinking that "embodies a certain other confusion," which is to confuse "the intrinsic value of a life *for the world* with intrinsic value of a life *for the one who lives it*" (Feldman 2004, 135). A third possibility is that "certain states of affairs are more worthy of pleasure than others," and so "it is better in itself for a person to take pleasure in a more pleasure-worthy state of affairs," and thus someone taking pleasure in their upward-sloping life has a better life than someone who has an otherwise equally good life with different pleasures to balance out the pleasures taken in an upward-sloping life (Feldman 2004, 136-7). In the first two cases, the shape of a life hypothesis is a clear mistake, according to Feldman. In the third case, Feldman thinks we can vindicate something close to the shape of a life hypothesis, namely the hypothesis that upward sloping lives are more pleasure-worthy and thus it is better to take pleasure in them than to take pleasure in other kinds of things. But we still cannot say that an upward sloping life *itself* is better for someone who lives it, because what is better for them is taking pleasure in that life, not merely living the life. Thus, Feldman correctly suggests that the hedonist cannot endorse the typical shape of a life hypothesis. In this way his approach agrees with ours: we both hold the hypothesis to be a mistake.

Where we differ from Feldman and other hedonists is that our approach is neutral over whether upward slopes get us more well-being in themselves (which Feldman and hedonists

must deny, because upward slopes do not have more pleasure than downward slopes). We can be ecumenical about this and accept either possibility. We can also accept a third possibility, which is that sometimes upward sloping lives have more well-being and sometimes they do not.[31]

There are two possibilities when it comes to why one might justifiably judge an upward-sloping life as better. The first is that strictly speaking, one is not justified in making such a judgement: one is only justified in judging as better the things that are often correlated with an upward-sloping life. (This is what a hedonist must say, because an upward-sloping life does not have more pleasure than an otherwise equal downward-sloping life. Thus, one is justified in judging as better an upward-sloping life plus the pleasure one gets in contemplating living such a life, but not merely an upward slope itself.) The second option is that upward-sloping lives are better (when they are better) because they lead to more well-being, but what is better is the extra well-being they lead to, rather than the slope itself. Thus, one justifiably judges upward-sloping lives as better because they tend to, or in fact get us, more well-being, but they tend to (or actually) get us more well-being not because they slope upwards but for other reasons.

To put the point another way, we agree with hedonists that well-being is the goal, and that an upward slope is not the same as well-being. But we can be neutral about whether an upward slope will typically or always give us more well-being. The hedonist must say no: for the hedonist, it must be something like contemplation of the upward slope which gets us more well-being, if anything does. But our approach allows for the possibility that (e.g.) having better things in the future, rather than worse things in the future, gets us well-being, and when we have

[31] We thank a reviewer for this journal for suggesting we clarify whether our argument is that upward slopes lead to more well-being (and are good because of that, rather than because of the slope) or that upward slopes are linked to things that sometimes lead to more well-being (and that sometimes don't), and for suggesting we clarify how our argument differs from other denials of the shape of a life hypothesis.

an upward-sloping life, we have better in things in the future.[32] Similarly, maybe having the worse things in our past, rather than the better things in our past, gets us well-being, and when we have an upward sloping life, the worse things are in our past. Lastly, it is better to have as a good a life as we can get, and an upward sloping life is a way for that to happen. So, to the extent these are justified judgments about what makes a life good, we can endorse them and thus endorse the upward-sloping lives they recommend, although though these lives are not better because they have upward slopes.

5. Conclusion (or, for Backwards Button, Introduction)

It is hard to imagine a good life that starts off high and slopes downwards, because many of the things that we find valuable in life are not things that a baby or a young child can have. Achievements like the creation of a great work of art or scholarship, fulfilling adult relationships, athletic prowess, and so on are not open to babies. So, when we are asked to imagine a downward sloping life, it is hard to think of a good one. Benjamin Button ought to help alleviate this worry. His childhood comes at the end of the slope, rather than the beginning. He can have his crowning achievements near the beginning.

Imagine for instance that Backwards Button is an actor and in old age he gives many amazing performances and is greatly lauded. In middle age he gives fewer amazing performances (perhaps he feels like he has less to prove by this point) but he is still quite respected. As a young adult he has mostly stopped acting and as a child he isn't interested in

[32] Of course, as noted above, one can have better things in the future without an upward-sloping life, like if one has a V-shaped life or a life that has a flat slope rather than a downward slope, so this is no vindication of the shape of a life hypothesis.

acting anymore and he only does it a few times and finds it frustrating and unrewarding. This is a downward sloping life, but it is full of the sorts of good things that a typical upward sloping life would have, because it simply reverses the order.

One might worry that this Backwards Button's life is not easy to imagine. He can't work towards his early achievements his whole life (because they come at the beginning of his life) and thus they can't be as good as they would be if they came at the end of a normal life. If this is a problem, then consider instead a life of quiet religious contemplation, or a life spent teaching others, or some other sort of life that is less about achieving some sort of culmination and more about a process that occurs over time. Backwards Button spends his old age contentedly meditating, or ably teaching many children, and as he ages in reverse he gets worse at one thing or the other. If a life spent meditating or teaching children can be of value, Backwards Button gets as much of it as the equivalent Forwards Button. He just does it in the opposite order.

So, the view that an upward sloping life is better may be based in part on the thought that good things can only occur once one's life has progressed to some degree. But, as Backwards Button shows, this is not intrinsically linked to the shape of a life. Human lives may be such that we lack certain capacities that enable well-being until we have aged to some degree, but this just shows us that what matters is the amount of well-being, not the shape of the life in which it obtains.[33]

Thus, we have demonstrated that, while features of ordinary human lives might at first seem to support the shape of a life hypothesis, in fact they need not be understood in this way. It is simpler, more ecumenical, and often more reasonable to see them as instead supporting

[33] Relatedly, we might have trouble imagining life for an infant being good at all, because our theory of well-being makes it hard (or impossible) to explain how a baby could have a good life. For discussion of this topic, see Dorsey (Dorsey 2017). See also Larry Temkin's case of the dog and the case of the scientists (Temkin 2012, 113-4).

alternative judgements which are compatible with the rejection of the shape of a life hypothesis, and thus the rejection of compositionalism, endorsement of temporal neutrality, and so on for the other issues that are linked to the shape of a life hypothesis. Assuming our arguments succeed, views that bolster themselves with the shape of a life hypothesis are less defensible, and views that are incompatible with the hypothesis, like hedonistic theories of well-being, are more defensible.

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