

The Narrative Calculus

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In this paper, I undertake the potentially quixotic task of quantifying the prudential value of a good life story (or life history, as some might prefer to call it). Whether or not the effort turns out to be successful, it forces us to think systematically about the good-making features of life stories, instead of merely relying on intuitions about cases. If we can identify independently plausible principles, they will also support particular narrativist intuitions.

Let's begin with a well-known story deriving originally from Michael Slote. Imagine two politicians, Uphill and Downhill. Uphill begins in political wilderness, isolated, bitter, and unhappy, and then in the middle of his career becomes successful and happy, finishing on a high note. Downhill begins with a meteoric rise to the top, and is just as successful and happy as Uphill ends up being. But in the middle of his career, Downhill succumbs to a scandal, and disappears in the political wilderness, isolated, bitter, and unhappy, ending on a low note. Even if the total sum of the kind of things that are intrinsically good for a person at a given moment considered in isolation – such as, perhaps, happiness, desire-satisfaction, exercise of human potential, or goal-achievement – is the same in these two lives, as it surely may be, many have the intuition that Uphill's life is better. They'd rather lead that kind of life, and want it for people they care about. As Slote puts it, "Without hearing anything more, I think our natural, immediate reaction to these examples would be that the first man was the more fortunate" (Slote 1983, 23). If this reaction stands up to scrutiny, it seems that the shape of a life matters in addition to the sum of moment-by-moment value it contains.

What best explains the apparent significance of a life's shape – for short, the shape-of-a-life phenomenon? Perhaps the most popular account is what I call *temporal distributivism*. According to it, the order in which non-relationally good and bad things happen in someone's life affects its prudential value. I argue that this is false, but we may be misled into thinking otherwise by the fact that certain temporal distributions are characteristically linked with prudentially good life stories. According to *narrativism*, in turn, it is the narrative (or *narratable*) relations among events and segments of one's life that explain why Uphill's life is better. While narrativism has had influential defenders, such as David Velleman (1991/2000), Jeff McMahan (2002), John Martin Fischer (2005), and Connie Rosati (2013), there are few if any *theories* about what makes for a good life story.

In Section 2, I sketch such an account. I first turn briefly to narratology to argue that our lives are narratable because narratives concern the adventures of planning agents: events have narrative significance in virtue of their role in goal-directed pursuits. Contrary to some narrativists, I argue that it is not the stories that we actually tell about our lives that make a difference to its value, but rather the objective narratable relations that obtain between the events that constitute our lives. (This is why some might prefer to call the object of my inquiry life *histories*.¹) I argue that the narrative value of events is a multiple of three main factors: their positive or negative causal contribution to the agent's present or future goals, the value of the those goals, and the degree to which success in achieving the goal is deserved in virtue of exercising agential capacities. This Narrative Calculus yields a prudential narrative value for each event in an arbitrary period (or at least provides a heuristic for arriving at one), and allows for adding up those values to arrive at the value of the whole story for an agent. In spite of being additivist, it is holistic in that momentary narrative values of events can be retrospectively changed by their instrumental contribution

¹ This term was suggested to me by an anonymous referee for this volume.

and prospectively changed by desert. Since the Narrative Calculus assigns a value to events on the basis of their contribution to giving a progressive shape to one's life, I call my variant of narrativism *progressivism*.

Progressivism cashes out value-relevant narrative characteristics in teleological terms. In Section 3, I argue that doing so suffices to capture and buttress the kind of intuitions that motivate the narrativist approach. Section 4 defends the view against criticisms leveled recently against similar accounts. In the final section, I make a few observations about the deeper rationale of progressivism. The core idea is that narrative value is the measure of how we fare as temporally extended planning agents vulnerable to fate. We are not just subjects of better or worse experience at various moments, but active shapers of our stories over time. Considered under this aspect, our lives can go better or worse for us in virtue of having a more or less progressive shape.

1. From Temporal Distribution to Narrative Shape

To state the various views aiming to capture or debunk the shape-of-a-life phenomenon, I need to introduce some terminology. I will call an individual's level of well-being (the intrinsic value of life for her) at a moment the *momentary value* of life for her at that time. It could be that momentary value is determined exclusively by the intrinsic features of an individual's life at the time, such as her hedonic level or perhaps level of actualizing human potential (I'll try to remain neutral on these issues here). Call this thesis *moment internalism*, and the kind of momentary value that depends only on non-relational features of life at a time 'atomic value'. Its denial, *moment externalism*, maintains that it is possible for momentary value to depend on what happens at other times, that is, the relational features of the individual's life at the time.

The simplest way to arrive at the value of a whole life (or a segment of a life) for an individual is adding up the momentary values at each moment during her life. Call this principle *additivism*. If additivism is combined with moment internalism, we get a thesis concerning the value of a whole life that I'll call *atomism*. For a very clear example of an atomistic theory, consider Fred Feldman's (2004) version of hedonism. According to it, the intrinsic value of someone's life for her is simply the sum of hedonic values at all the times in her life. The shape-of-a-life phenomenon poses a challenge to this theory and other forms of atomism. If Uphill's life is better than Downhill's in spite of containing the same sum of pleasure, self-actualization, and other atomic goods, something has to give. This motivates adopting some form of *holism*. Since atomism is a combination of additivism and moment internalism, holism comes in two main varieties. *Internalist holism* keeps moment internalism, but rejects additivism. The value of a whole life is not the sum of momentary values at each time during it, but contains some additional factor. Velleman's view is of this type. *Externalist holism*, in turn, keeps additivism, but rejects moment internalism. It holds on to the idea that the value of a life is the sum of how well we fare at each moment, but denies that momentary value is determined *only* by what happens at the time. My view will be a version of externalist holism.

With these terminological stipulations in place, I can state the most popular view that tries to capture the shape-of-a-life phenomenon:

Temporal Distributivism

The temporal arrangement of atomic values non-instrumentally matters to the overall welfare value of a life.²

² I draw here on Dale Dorsey's (forthcoming) formulation.

The most common form of temporal distributivism holds that it is better to start out with low atomic well-being and end up with high atomic well-being than vice versa (e.g. Kamm 2003, 222). Call this type of view *improvementism* (Bradley 2011, 48). Other variants are possible: Slote (1983), for example, thinks that atomic benefits in the ‘prime of life’ count for more in overall evaluation than benefits early in life. But besides being *ad hoc*, Slote’s type of view doesn’t account for common intuitions about the preferability of improvement (in some sense) in more restricted periods. Joshua Glasgow offers a clear example:

[I]magine that you can choose between living a year that begins unemployed and lonely and ends up with you in love and happily employed, or living a year that begins with you being involved in fulfilling work and head-over-heels in love and ends up out of work and alone. All else is equal: your achievements and failures even out (the love and work you find or lose is found or lost by sheer luck), your meals contain the same foods, and so on. ... Despite other things remaining constant, the uphill year seems preferable to the downhill year. (Glasgow 2013, 668–9)

Why is the Uphill year preferable? The improvementist holds that “It is bad to be worse off than you used to be” (ibid., 668). Importantly, according to improvementism, this is not the case because people are made unhappy by their life getting worse (this would mean that the sum total of atomic values would be different in the two lives), or because people happen to prefer their lives to get better in terms of atomic benefits (this would leave it contingent which year it is better to live).³ It claims, instead, that *improvement* in atomic value is an *additional* intrinsic good in Uphill (Glasgow 2013, 670).

I share the intuition that Uphill is a better year to live than Downhill. But I don’t believe that improvementism is the correct explanation. In fact, I believe that the temporal distribution of well-being, as such, doesn’t make any difference to the subject’s total welfare. It only misleadingly seems so to us. Why? It could be, as Fred Feldman (2004) suggests, that we tacitly attribute additional pleasure deriving from observing improvement in one’s life to Uphill, although we’re not supposed to. In that case, Uphill’s life will really be better, but

³ These points are nicely made in Dorsey (forthcoming).

this is straightforwardly explained by the atomist. Or alternatively, perhaps we find “a sort of excellence, or beauty, or appropriateness” (135) in Uphill’s life that is missing in Downhill’s. But this intuition, Feldman points out, does not target the *prudential* value of the life, its value for Uphill himself, but rather a kind of *aesthetic value*. This is an important challenge that it is good to bear in mind; I will return to it in Section 4.

The two debunking explanations that Feldman offers may explain away intuitions about some cases with an Uphill/Downhill structure. But I believe that the actual Uphill/Downhill cases offered by shapists are more robust. However carefully I focus on prudential value and remind myself to regard the sum of atomic values as identical, Uphill still seems like the life I’d prefer for someone I care about. But it doesn’t follow that it is better *because* of the temporal arrangement of moment-internal values. Indeed, according to (strong) *narrativists*, an Uphill life is better than a Downhill life if (and only if) and because its *story* is prudentially better. The narrativist thus offers a kind of debunking account of why improvement seems to matter: it is typically, but not necessarily, *associated* with a better underlying story.

The best-known, if partial defense of narrativism is offered by David Velleman (1991/2000). Velleman is in fact best classified as a hybrid theorist, since he also endorses temporal distributivism. Nevertheless, he influentially maintains that “The meaning of a benefit depends not only on whether it follows or precedes hardships but also on the specific narrative relation between the goods and evils involved” (Velleman 1991/2000, 63). Why think so? Because, first, two lives that have a different narrative structure can have a different prudential value, even if we hold fixed both the sum *and* the temporal distribution of atomic values. And second, two lives that do *not* differ narratively and contain the same total of atomic value will be equally good for someone, *even if* the temporal distribution of

value is different. Here's Velleman's famous example of the first kind of scenario, with names added for convenience:

Megan/Betty

"In one life [Megan] your first ten years of marriage are troubled and end in divorce, but you immediately remarry happily; in another life [Betty] the troubled years of your first marriage lead to eventual happiness as the relationship matures. Both lives contain ten years of marital strife followed by contentment; but let us suppose that in the former, you regard your first ten years of marriage as a dead loss, whereas in the latter you regard them as the foundation of your happiness." (Velleman 1991/2000, 65)

The Betty scenario seems better for you, because the first ten years are not a dead loss but foundation of happiness (let's assume that you're correct in regarding them as such). As Velleman puts it, "The bad times are as bad in both lives, but in one they are cast off and in the other they are redeemed. Surely, these two decades can affect the value of your life differently, even if you are equally well off at each moment of their duration." (1991/2000, 65–6). This is a very plausible explanation. Velleman also offers a number of other scenarios to the same effect, but no systematic theory of what makes a life story prudentially good.

As Glasgow observes, temporal distributivists can accept Velleman's claim if they modestly maintain that temporal distribution of atomic values is just one factor in determining whole life value. Yet there is reason to think that even this more modest thesis is false. When temporal distribution of goods and evils is dissociated from narrative progress – which is no easy task, since the two tend to go together – we can see that on its own, the former makes no difference to the value of the life. Dale Dorsey (forthcoming) offers a number of examples, of which the simplest and perhaps most convincing involves two people in an Experience Machine. One has an Uphill experience and the other a Downhill experience. Arguably, there is no narrative difference in such cases: both are simply subject to an illusion, which is also equally pleasant overall. Arguably, also, there is no difference in how good the lives are – *meaningless* gains and losses do not make a difference to welfare.

If so, all that matters for how someone fares is the sum of atomic benefits and the shape of her story.

2. A Narrative Calculus

But what kind of life story is it good for one to have? Can we go beyond examples and formulate some general principles? Let us begin by acknowledging that the common terminology is potentially misleading. A narrative or story in the most obvious sense is a *representation* of a life, or at a minimum a sequence of events. In my view, it is not intrinsically valuable that some kind of story can be told of our lives.⁴ After all, the many different true stories could be told of the same series of events. What is good for us is rather that certain *narratable* relations obtain between the events that constitute our lives. In deference to convention, I'll continue to talk about narrative value, but it is worth bearing in mind that I am really referring to the intrinsic prudential value of narratable features of a life. What I say is therefore compatible with claiming that people who do not see their lives in narrative terms can lead perfectly good lives, as Galen Strawson (2004) famously maintains. Indeed, they can lead lives that are high in narrative value in my sense.

What Is a Narrative?

⁴ To be sure, it can be *instrumentally* good for us if we tell ourselves a story of our life that makes us feel good about it, since it contributes to our level of happiness at the time of telling. I discuss the relationship between personal stories and happiness understood as a comprehensive affective condition in Kauppinen (forthcoming). I thus partially agree with Rosati when she says that storytelling is good for us because it helps us “see ourselves and our lives in a way that supports our sense of our own worth, that stimulates us to move forward, that helps to secure our sense of who we are and a sense of direction, and that moves us forward as a matter of our own volition” (Rosati 2013, 45). This is only partial agreement, however, since on my view, such storytelling has only instrumental value for happiness. Rosati explicitly denies this (ibid., 48), but I suspect it is because she doesn't think things like sense of worth or direction are components of happiness, while I argue they are.

Still, it is worth thinking about narratives in order to understand what kind of relations are potentially narratable. I said that a narrative represents a sequence of events, but not all such representations are narratives. Consider the following:

9 am meeting with Arya. 9.30 am meeting with Benjen. 10 am meeting with Cersei.

The extinction of dinosaurs was caused by a change in the global temperature, which resulted from a comet hit.

Finely chop a carrot, two stalks of celery, and a large onion. Lightly fry them without colouring for at least 20 minutes in olive oil and butter. When they are soft, add a dash of salt and white wine.

The first is a mere list of events, perhaps a diary entry, the second a (dubious) causal explanation, and the third a recipe for a delicious soffritto. There has been a lot of debate and little agreement among narratologists about what minimally distinguishes narratives from such non-narrative representations of event sequences. But the various definitions and theories tend to point in the direction of goal-directed human agency extended over time. For example, Jerome Bruner says that the subject matter of narratives is constituted by “human or human-like intentions and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (Bruner 1986, 13). Kenneth and Mary Gergen observe that “An intelligible story is one in which events are selected that serve to make the goal more or less probable” (Gergen and Gergen 1988, 21). Finally, David Herman argues in the same vein that “the property of narrativehood attaches to sequences of states, events, and actions that involve an identifiable participant or set of participants equipped with certain beliefs about the world seeking to accomplish goal-directed plans” (Herman 2004, 90).

Without getting any deeper into the debate among narratologists, I’m going to assume that narratives concern the *exercise of planning agency over time and its*

consequences. Once we move from proto-narratives describing simple agent-involving transitions from one state to another to descriptions of incidents that occur in pursuit of long-term goals, further characteristic (and perhaps essential) features of stories emerge. Here is a sketch of the standard, basically Aristotelian model that one can find in screenwriting guides and narrative psychology (McAdams 1993, 25–30). First, there is some initiating event. The normal run of things is disrupted by something that calls for action. Maybe a prince and a princess are supposed to get married, but a dragon snatches him away. The princess adopts the goal of rescuing him. Here begins the rising action or complication of the story: the protagonist engages in instrumental reasoning and makes an attempt to reach the goal. Maybe the princess builds a ladder to climb up to the dragon’s lair. But we don’t always get what we want so easily: we face obstacles and challenges. The dragon burns down the ladder. The princess has to rethink, try again, seek help, and change. Maybe she enlists a giant eagle to carry her up to the lair. Eventually, the story reaches a turning point: either the protagonist exhausts the available means and fails, or is guaranteed to succeed as long as nothing out of the ordinary happens. So in the dragon’s lair, the princess slays the dragon and rescues the prince. Resolution or denouement follows: they marry.

But only in fairy tales do they live happily ever after. In real life, one episode or chapter of life is followed by another. As long as we live, we face new problems, and must seek new solutions. Contrary to what Alasdair McIntyre (1981) claims, life doesn’t really have a beginning, middle, and end in the Aristotelian fashion. It is not about solving a problem to restore equilibrium. Nonage isn’t a complication and dotage isn’t a resolution. Rather, life consists of a chain of chapters that can be linked in various ways. If the whole has a narrative arc, it has to be understood in different terms. I’ll say that a whole life story can be predominantly *progressive*, *regressive*, or *stagnant*, in spite of lacking the classical three-act structure. But how can we talk about progress across distinct projects, in the

absence of a single ultimate *telos*? The answer must lie in the way earlier projects influence later ones or in the way later projects alter the meaning of earlier ones. I'll discuss different possible relations below.

When Is a Story Prudentially Good?

Our aim in working out a narrative calculus is to give an account of the contribution of individual events to making a story prudentially good. Since stories concern the pursuit of goals, the most obvious way your story can go badly for you, other things being equal, is if you fail to reach your goal. In turn, the good kind of story arc will result in success, again other things being equal. If we focus on the various actions and mere happenings that take place in the course of your story, we see they will either promote or hinder that goal, or don't form part of the story. (Goal-related events are the *basic atoms* of the story.) If your goal is to rescue the mountain gorillas in the Congo, a successful fundraiser or the passage of a new conservation law will move your story forward, while contracting a tropical disease will slow it down. The narrative value of these events hangs, in part, on just how much they contribute to reaching or frustrating the goal. This is what I'll call the Instrumentality Factor (IF).

Unfortunately, it is not easy to quantify the contribution of individual events to reaching a goal. It is tempting to think that IF hangs on the extent to which an event increases or decreases the odds of achieving the goal, but I'm not at all sure if that will get the right results. After all, there isn't even a consensus on when one event is the cause of another, not to mention on the measure of one event's causal contribution towards another. So I will have to rely on an intuitive understanding of promoting a goal. It will turn out to be important that what we do can contribute not only to the goals we pursue at the time (our concurrent goals), but also subsequent goals. I'll return to this point below. Finally, it's

perhaps worth emphasizing that Instrumentality Factor is a component of intrinsic value, not instrumental value. It is *intrinsically* good for us that our efforts turn out to be instrumental in bringing about a goal. This may be most obvious when our goal is to benefit someone else. Suppose I succeed in such a project without ever coming to know it. In that case, the actions that bring about benefit for another are not instrumental in bringing about something that is intrinsically valuable for me. But I maintain it is still intrinsically good for me that I've spent my time and energy usefully – *that* is what contributes to my well-being.

The second feature that makes a difference to how good it is for us to live a story is what I will call the Value Factor. It doesn't just matter to the progress of our story how effective we are in pursuing our goals, but also what direction the story is heading – how *valuable* those goals are, non-narratively speaking. I take it to be quite obvious that the story of a life spent in the challenging and successful pursuit of counting blades of grass is not the story of the best kind of life for the protagonist. If our efforts can be wasted by being unsuccessful, they can just as surely be wasted by being misdirected. I emphasize that this is a matter of self-interest: it is not, or not just, that the subject's life is morally better, for example, if she pursues objectively valuable goals, but that it is better *for her* to invest her limited time in genuinely worthwhile activities. I'm not going to assume any particular view of which things are non-narratively valuable. Plausibly, one's own happiness has some non-narrative value, and justice or beauty or understanding have more. The Value Factor does not play a large role in the debate about narrativism, so I will not defend it further here.

The final factor of narrative value I'll discuss here, the Desert Factor, is somewhat complex. The rough idea is that we have more at stake in goals that we have acted to bring about than in goals we have done little to achieve. So if I spend day and night working on my rice paddy to have enough to eat for the winter, and you do hardly anything on yours, success or failure contributes less to the value of your story. There's various ways people

have proposed for capturing this element, but I think it's best to talk about a variety of desert I'll call *agential*. The idea is that in a familiar but non-moral sense, we deserve success in a pursuit when we exercise the capacities that make us the kind of agents we are. This is related, but not identical with the idea that *effort* is the desert base. I prefer to focus on exercise and development of our capacities, since mere effort is often stupid: you don't do well as an agent if you expend a lot of physical effort instead of making use of intelligence and self-control, for example. This is the point at which considerations relating to responsibility and determinism interact with narrative value: if it were the case that we weren't capable of the kind of agency in virtue of which we deserve success, but mere drifters in the flow of events, our lives would have little narrative value.

I believe the best way to calculate the Desert Factor is allowing the degree of desert to intensify the narrative value of all events promoting or hindering the goal. The reason for thinking this way is that not only actions, but also non-actional events are better for our story, when achieving the goal they advance is more deserved. If I've exerted myself more than you to make the rice grow, the rain that saves both our crops means more to me than to you. So non-actional events that turn out your way can also positively contribute to the narrative value of your life for you. Nevertheless, the more success hangs on non-actional events, the lower the Desert Factor will be. So other things being equal, the less your success is explained by lucky happenings, and the more it is explained by the exercise of your capacities, the better your story is for you. If all you did to grow your rice was to put out a sack of grains, which were serendipitously spread on the paddy by ducks, fertilized by your neighbour's cows, and watered by the rain while you were cavorting with your neighbour's spouse, your agricultural success contributes little to the value of your story. Similarly, actions and mere happenings that hinder success are the worse the more richly deserved the success is. If you exerted you intelligence to the utmost to be the first to solve a math

problem, and failed just because a meteor hit your house as you were almost there, being hit by a meteor is worse for you than it would have been had you made only nominal effort.

Before summing up these factors in a narrative calculus, I need to say a little more about narrative relations on a larger scale. It turns out to be crucial for explaining narrative intuitions that events can play a role in the pursuit of non-concurrent goals. There are at least three kinds of narrative progress among episodes or segments of one's life. The first and simplest is if two episodes are unified by a higher-order goal. Maybe my higher-order aim is to bring about basic income. I first pursue it by campaigning for the Green Party, who has it in its platform, and when that fails, engage in a media campaign that persuades the Conservative leadership of the idea. I've made narrative progress in the sense of approaching realization of the same goal. What I've already said about Instrumentality and Desert suffices to capture this.

However, there is room for a large-scale progress even if there's no unifying aim organizing distinct pursuits. Most importantly, it may be that earlier efforts make later pursuits more successful. First, they may transform or position the subject in such a way that she aims at more valuable goals than she would otherwise. This is most dramatic in the case of *redemption stories*, in which (say) an alcoholic has to hit rock bottom to come to realize that taking responsibility for one's family is more important than chasing the fleeting high.⁵ But you can, of course, also gain insight from doing something that is successful on its own terms, such as a career in science. Second, earlier segments may be instrumental in making one's later pursuits more successful than otherwise, either by way of improving the agent's abilities or changing her environment, including her external resources. Successfully

⁵ The psychologist Dan McAdams (2006) argues that redemption stories form a characteristically American genre of thinking about one's life. People who think in redemptive terms will describe something bad that happened to them, but then say that it "ended up making me a better person," or "taught me to love my family," or "toughened me up for the challenges ahead." (McAdams 2008, 24) Redemption stories contrast most sharply with contamination sequences, in which "the bad ruins, spoils, sullies, or contaminates the good that precedes it" (McAdams 2006, 211).

completing a PhD (somewhat) improves your odds of success in pursuing an academic career, while it won't help you with a career in bartending. And, again, growing up as the child of an alcoholic can have the partially redeeming feature of "toughening you up" for later pursuits. It is to capture this potential narrative role that the Instrumentality Factor needs to include a reference to contributing to non-concurrent goals. And finally, perhaps earlier efforts can make later success more deserved even if they weren't directed toward the later goal. Here I'm thinking of someone who tries his hand at everything but always fails for reasons beyond his control, and then finally succeeds at something completely new, like being a cook. It isn't outrageous to think that such a person's eventual success is agentially deserved, and better for her than for someone who hasn't experienced a similar odyssey.

Since the narrative value of an event is the result of the interaction of all these factors, it is best to express it as a multiple of them:

The Narrative Calculus (NC)

The intrinsic prudential narrative value $NV(e)$ of an event e = contribution of e toward the agent's concurrent and non-concurrent goal(s) \times objective non-narrative value of the goals e contributes to \times degree to which success in achieving the agent's goal(s) is deserved in virtue of her actions.

Let me immediately grant that the narrative calculus is inferior to the hedonic calculus that inspires it in terms of precision (though we shouldn't exaggerate the exactitude of the hedonic calculus either). There is no algorithm for assigning values for the different factors involved. In spite of the rather grandiose name, I only mean to provide a heuristic for the purposes of comparing the narrative values of options. Further yet, the three factors that I list are almost certainly not the only ones that matter. For example, not all of our goals are

equally comprehensive or central to defining who we are, so it would make good sense to factor in the time-relative centrality of the goal that an event promotes or hinders.

Our interest is rarely in the narrative value of a singular event, but rather in the narrative value of a sequence of events or a possible life. Since NV is defined for events, there is a straightforward way of calculating the narrative value of a sequence for an agent, namely adding together the NVs of all the events that comprise it:

Additivity of Narrative Value

The prudential narrative value of an agent's life during period from event e_1 to event e_n , $NV(e_1-e_n) =$ the sum of $NV(e_1) \dots NV(e_n)$

When the events between which narrative value is summed up are birth and death, we get narrative value for the whole life:

Whole-Life Narrative Value

The prudential narrative value of a whole life L , $WLNV(L) = NV(\text{birth}_x - \text{death}_x)$

It bears emphasizing that although NV is additive, it 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. Given the Instrumentality Factor, the extent of the contribution of an event to the agent's concurrent goals depends on what happens at other times, and its contribution to the agent's non-concurrent goals on what goals the agent will have and how her pursuit will be affected by the event. Given the Desert Factor, the NV of an event depends also on what the agent deserves in virtue of actions at other times during pursuit of the goal (and perhaps actions in pursuit of other goals, if the desert base is broader). This is why NC is holistic in spite of being additivist.

Since NC aims to capture the contribution of events to narrative progress through one's whole life, I will call the view that endorses it as the measure of holistic value *progressivism*.

Progressivism vs. Achievementism

The picture of narratable features of life that I sketched on the basis of narratological literature emphasizes the importance of goal-directed pursuits for narrative value. I will finish this section with a brief comparison between progressivism and *achievementism*.

Achievementists maintain that the achievement of goals that one has invested in, or perhaps a valuable or rational subset of them, independently contributes to the value of one's life. According to Thomas Keller's (2004) unrestricted achievementism, the attainment of any goal through one's own efforts is good for one (and the better the more effort one has made), while Thomas Scanlon's (1998) rational aim view counts only success in achieving rational goals.

Achievementist views no doubt tap into some of the same intuitions as progressivism. But there are at least three major differences. The first has to do with bookkeeping. Goal-achievement is a matter of attaining a goal through one's actions. NC factors out the value of goal-achievement to the value of the actions that promote the goal and the value of goal-attainment itself. The latter may have little or no narrative value. What is narratively paramount is moving our story forward in the direction of a (valuable) goal in a way that will result in deserved success, not goal-attainment as such.⁶

Second, achievementists think that the more one has already invested in the pursuit of a goal, the more valuable its achievement is, other things being equal. The notion of

⁶ So, for example, if you achieve your goal posthumously, it increases your level of welfare during those times of your life you exercised your capacities in its pursuit. It turns out you weren't wasting your time. This has the advantage that there is no need to postulate a level of welfare while you're dead.

investment can be cashed out in terms of effort (Keller 2004) or self-sacrifice (Portmore 2007). Portmore argues convincingly that mere effort will not do as a measure of value. In one of his examples, Fred and Greg both spend the same time in training for the Olympics with the aim of winning a medal, making an equal effort, but while Fred loves nothing better than solitary practice, Greg doesn't like it, and would rather be with his family. Portmore argues that winning a medal is more valuable for Greg, since he's sacrificed more for the goal (2007, 20–21). Can progressivism, which says nothing about effort or sacrifice, capture this intuition? Yes. Progressivism will understand investment differently, again focusing on the NV of one's actions rather than goal-achievement. If one has invested in a goal, then one has performed actions in order to promote it. Other things being equal, 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, whether it is because of some insurmountable obstacle or abandoning the goal for a different one. (In either case, there will be the possibility of redemption.) In the Fred/Greg case, both perform the same actions. But as I see it, 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. (Something analogous will be the case whenever you knowingly sacrifice something for the sake of something else.) So Greg is more deserving of success. That's why his story is better than Fred's, if they both win a medal.

The third difference is that because achievementism doesn't factor out the value of goal-promoting actions, it also doesn't capture the significance of promoting future goals. As Portmore rightly observes, achievementism has no room for redemption of past efforts that were invested in a different goal (2007, 23–24). Focusing on individual aims misses the bigger picture, even if narrative meaning hangs in part on goal-achievement. In including the contribution to future goals, NC resembles Portmore's Not-for-Naught view, according to

which the redemption of one's self-sacrifices in itself contributes to one's welfare (Portmore 2007, 13). But as before, the notion of sacrifice plays no role in progressivism.

3. Testing the Theory

The aim of the Narrative Calculus is to give a systematic account of what makes one life narratively better for the subject than another. But does progressivism capture the intuitions that motivate the narrativist approach in the first place? Let us start with the Uphill/Downhill case. I believe our judgment doesn't result from the mere fact that the bad segment precedes the good in one and succeeds it in the other. It is rather that we assume that Uphill's struggles in early life instrumentally contribute to his success in later life (giving their Instrumentality Factor a boost) and maybe teach him to pursue more valuable goals. Meanwhile, perhaps, Downhill's early success has the opposite effect of contributing to later failure, as his pride goeth before the fall. We may also think that given his early tribulations, Uphill's in itself equal success in pursuing his political goals is more *deserved* than Downhill's, which comes about with relative ease. If this is the case, the Desert Factor must be based in part on non-concurrent goal-directed activities, as speculated above.

What about the Megan/Betty case? From the perspective of progressivism, the features that make the Betty choice better turn out to be similar to the Uphill/Downhill scenario. Call the husband in the scenarios Don. Only in the Betty life, the events of the first marriage – the marriage counseling, the painful arguments – end up having a positive instrumental contribution to later success, so they have a higher narrative value. That's what makes the scenario a classic redemption story. It is of course a possibility in real life that struggles in one marriage pay off in a new marriage to someone else – but in the case as described, it is postulated that the success of the Megan scenario doesn't in any way owe to the events of the first marriage. Further, Don's later happiness is more deserved with Betty

than with Megan, since it results directly from his intentional actions and so owes less to the sheer luck of meeting a compatible person.

A third kind of case that narrativists often appeal to involves contrasting a windfall with an earned reward. For example, Simon Keller (2004, 29–30) contrasts two authors, Bill and Steve, who each aim to write and publish a novel. Only Bill succeeds, and his life improves in many non-narrative ways, such as increased self-esteem and enjoying the cathartic experience of being in the public eye. Steve, however, fails to complete his novel, but wins the lottery, and enjoys the same atomic goods as Bill, forgetting all about his failure to complete the novel. Keller maintains that Bill’s life is better of the two, because the story of this part of his life is “a story of hard work leading to a successful culmination” (Keller 2004, 30). If we take the case as Keller describes it, it is trivial for progressivism, as only Bill’s actions sufficiently promote his goal, while Steve fails. It is somewhat more interesting if we assume that both really aimed at self-esteem and fame, but while Bill achieved this through his own efforts, Steve achieved it by chance. In that case, the difference comes to the Desert Factor: while both reached an equally valuable goal, the narrative value of the events that promote Bill’s goal is enhanced by his deserving the success more as a result of bringing it about (to a greater degree) by the exercise of his own capacities.

Fourth, NC helps us see why the persuasiveness of Glasgow’s Uphill/Downhill year case after all hangs on its narrative structure. Recall that the comparison is between “living a year that begins unemployed and lonely and ends up with you in love and happily employed, or living a year that begins with you being involved in fulfilling work and head-over-heels in love and ends up out of work and alone” (Glasgow 2013, 668). I believe we only have the intuition that Uphill is better because we assume that the characters aim at employment and love all along. For some reason we’re not given, Downhill’s pursuit of these goals eventually

fails, while Uphill's eventually succeeds. It is thus not credible for Glasgow to postulate that there is no narrative difference between the cases.⁷

4. Objections

In the previous sections, I have sketched an account of what makes narratives prudentially good, and used it to explain common narrativist intuitions. But what about objections to narrativism? One common objection is that stories are one thing and life another: we can tell many different true stories about a life, so how could a story determine how good someone's life is for her? This objection fails to make the distinction between a narrative and the narratable features of a life that it is about. As I have emphasized, NC is exclusively concerned with the latter. While any actual narrative is inevitably selective, the features of a life that are relevant to NV include all potentially narratable events. Another common objection is that narrativists confuse prudential and aesthetic value – that life stories can be more or less entertaining or dramatic, but we shouldn't think that aesthetically better stories are better for the protagonist.⁸ It is one motivation for developing NC to make clear that what is at issue is not aesthetic judgment. A peak-to-peak type of life story may be aesthetically boring, but that doesn't reduce its prudential value – other things being equal, we are better off without episodes of failure and hardship.

There are, however, more serious and specific challenges. I will focus here on potential obstacles for combining holism with moment externalism, as it is central to the way

I have formulated NC that later events can alter the momentary value of earlier events. In

⁷ Elizabeth Harman suggested a better comparison. Suppose one gay man lives through social change from exclusion to acceptance (and thus experiences a change from fear to joy), and another through social change from acceptance to exclusion. Importantly, the pattern of change in atomic value in no way owes to what the protagonists personally do. Other things being equal, wouldn't we still prefer to lead the former life? That seems right. Here's a speculative response to this kind of intriguing case. For the gay *community* as a whole, the first is a tale of narrative success and the other of failure (during the characters' lifetime). Perhaps when people identify with a group, the story of their life becomes intertwined with that of the group, and gains or loses value accordingly, independently of their individual role.

⁸ Fischer (2005, 380) seems content with narrative value being a species of aesthetic value, but he is an exception in this regard.

this respect, it contrasts clearly with Velleman's view, which does not allow for retrospective change of momentary value – he says that “when subsequent developments alter the meaning of an event they can alter its contribution to the value of one's life, but they cannot retroactively change the impact that it had on one's well-being at the time” (1991/2000, 68). However, as Jeff McMahan points out, Velleman's commitment to moment internalism is dialogically indefensible, since he does allow for retrospective change in the prudential value of life during a longer period, and there is no ontological difference between life at a moment and life during an extended period (McMahan 2002, 180). Narrativists, at least, lack sufficient reason for endorsing moment internalism.

Ben Bradley raises several more serious challenges to moment externalism. His general claim is that only moment internalism is compatible with the supervenience thesis that the intrinsic value of something depends solely on its intrinsic properties (Bradley 2009, 19–20). After all, moment externalism maintains that the intrinsic value of someone's life at a time can be affected by its relational, extrinsic properties. But why would this be a problem? Bradley claims that this would undermine the whole project of locating fundamental good- or bad-making properties (*ibid.*), that is, the properties whose instantiation completely determines what value there is. But this is a strange claim. What the moment externalist maintains is that the intrinsic value of S's life at t depends on a) the intrinsic properties of S's life at t and b) the relational (narrative) properties of S's life at t . This is to say that the instantiation of the intrinsic and narrative properties of S's life at t together completely determines what value there is. There is no reason to think fundamental good-making properties couldn't be holistic.

Bradley's second charge is that allowing retrospective value change cannot account for prudential choice in certain situations. For concreteness, suppose that Don faces the following choice at t_1 :

Betty

Stay with Betty, with whom Don has been married for 20 years (since t_0). Their marriage has had its ups and downs, but after their struggles, Don and Betty have found a way to live together that makes them both pretty happy.

Megan+

Leave Betty and marry Megan+, a young and attractive secretary, who is head over heels in love with Don.

Let us stipulate that in this variant, life with Megan+ would be somewhat *better* for Don than life with Betty *from t_1 onwards*. It doesn't matter for the argument whether this is because he would be happier, or because the narrative value of his life from t_1 would be higher, or both. Nevertheless, if Don's choice of Betty at t_1 would sufficiently increase the value of his past life for him (for the reasons rehearsed above), the value of his life as a whole would be higher with Betty. (For this to be the case, it can't be true that future with Megan+ would be very much better than future with Betty.) The question is: what should Don do, prudentially speaking?⁹

One simple answer from the narrativist perspective is that what is best for someone is always to maximize the value of her whole life. After all, we are not creatures living in this one moment, but temporally extended beings whose 'past selves' are really just past aspects of the one and the same self. Shouldn't we be concerned with our lives as a whole? Some narrativists say so. Jeff McMahan says that what a cross-temporally psychologically unified individual "has most egoistic reason to want, at any given time, will be what would be best for his life as a whole, and this will be importantly affected by considerations of narrative unity" (McMahan 2002, 176). Bradley protests:

I see nothing in the notion of prudence to indicate that one should focus primarily on one's whole life. Why not care only about one's future well-being? If someone chooses the best future available to her, it seems difficult to accuse her of being imprudent. (Bradley 2011, 59)

⁹ Let's assume we won't settle for a satisficing view, on which it is prudentially permissible for Don to choose an option that is sufficiently good either from a whole-life or future perspective.

Perhaps, but perhaps not. Consider the case of Martin Luther Bling, whose life until around 1966 is the same as Martin Luther King's. However, in 1966, MLB decides to cash in on his achievements, selling his name and likeness to advertisers, and starting a civil rights theme park with a name resembling "Negroland" and segregated facilities for black and white visitors, which contributes significantly to undermining the achievements of the civil rights movement. As a businessman, he is fairly happy and somewhat successful, until he dies of a heart attack in 1969, thus leading a life that is plausibly somewhat better during that last three years than MLK's troubled years after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts. However, given that MLB's post-1966 actions undermine the contribution of his pre-1966 activities to the objectively highly valuable goal of racial equality (while increasing their contribution to the less valuable goal of his personal wealth), it is also plausible that the his life as a whole is prudentially worse than MLK's. It doesn't seem to me like a terribly tough bullet to bite to say that it would be good prudential advice to MLK in 1966 to implore him not to tarnish the worth of his past achievement by trading meaning for cash. Someone with strong narrativist intuitions might well accept that the prudential choice in each case is the one that maximizes whole life value.

Nevertheless, I'm not going to rely on this assumption. I'll grant that the value of future activities – for short, future value – can have prudential weight *in addition* to its contribution to whole life value. This is a kind of *future bias* in Parfit's (1984) sense.¹⁰ Combined with retrospective value change, it threatens to result in what Bradley labels "dualism of prudence": the impossibility of giving a single answer to what is in one's self-interest when faced with the choice of a better life as a whole or a better future (Bradley 2011, 60–61). To avoid such implausible dualism, there must be some way of mapping

¹⁰ Interestingly, Parfit observes that bias towards future "does not apply to events that give us either pride or shame: events that either gild or stain our picture of our lives" (1984, 160). While it is a relief to discover that a painful operation is in the past instead of ahead of us, it is no relief to discover we've done something shameful in the past. It may be a general truth that future bias is rational, if at all, only with respect to experiential goods and evils, but not with respect to non-experiential ones – such as narrative goods and evils.

whole-life and future values on a single scale. The suggestion I want to try out is that we can leave determining the relative weights of whole life value and future value to the individual subject (or, say, her ideal advisor). While it is not up to you what kind of life story is best for you or what kind of future is best for you, it is to some extent up to you how much relative weight they have in arriving at a unitary measure of prudential value, which could be just the weighted sum of WLNV (and the sum of atomic welfare values) and future NV (and the sum of future atomic values). But not entirely up to you: the stronger your psychological connectedness to your past selves is, the more weight the value of the past has in determining your self-interest. Let us say your weighting preferences are *sensitive* when they reflect the degree of psychological unity. But although you must give more weight to whole life welfare when you're more rather than less psychologically connected, it's up to you just how much weight it will have, given some degree of connectedness. (Perhaps there should be a minimum threshold.)

On this picture, it will be in someone's self-interest to maximize whole life value even at the expense of future value, if they are strongly psychologically connected to their past selves and care about their life as a whole. Others, however, may be relatively disconnected and care little for anything but the future. Imagine that Don is such a *future-oriented* person through his life. This has the interesting consequence that what prudence recommends him to do changes with his temporal perspective. Bradley puts it as follows (substituting my names):

If the value of [Megan+] after t_1 is sufficiently greater than the value of [Betty] after t_1 , then it will turn out that prudence dictates choosing [Megan+] at t_1 . But imagine that [Don] faced a choice of [Betty] or [Megan+] at the start of the life, knowing in advance exactly how things would develop. Then the very same view would have [Don] choose [Betty] over [Megan+], since at the start of the life, the whole life and its future part are the same. But the only thing that changes between the start of the life and t_1 is that some time goes by and some of the life gets lived in just the way [Don] knew it would. It cannot make sense to choose one way at the start, knowing full well what is to happen, and then change one's mind only because some time has elapsed. (Bradley 2011, 60)

Bradley is right in drawing out the implication for the future-oriented: if the future segment of your life has value for you above and beyond its contribution to the value of your life as a whole, mere passage of time can change what it is prudential for you to do. But *contra* Bradley, this is a feature, not a bug. Mere passage of time does change one thing: what is past and what is future, your temporal perspective. If, like Don, you're future-oriented, change in temporal perspective will change what is in your self-interest even though nothing else changes. (If you're uncomfortable with this, maybe you need to be whole-life-oriented.)

So I think it does make sense for Don to change his mind about what's best for him when he arrives to t_1 . But that doesn't mean it wouldn't be prudentially rational for Don to precommit to Betty at t_0 in full knowledge of the facts. For example, he should take steps to ensure that he'll never meet Megan. If it is not obvious why this is the case, imagine that at t_0 Don meets an angel who shows him, *It's a Wonderful Life* -style, how his life will be in the two options. He'll see that after t_1 , he'll be somewhat better off with Megan. But he'll also see that the next 20 years of his life will be somewhat pointless, unless he binds himself to Betty now. Being concerned with what is the future segment of his life at t_0 , he will maximize his self-interest by precommitting. Of course, he knows that his future self will have different interests. But they're not his interests at t_0 , and the psychological connections to his future self will be weak. So it is prudential for him at t_0 to ensure he won't ruin a good thing 20 years hence.

5. Conclusion

The life of an animal, with some possible exceptions at the more cognitively sophisticated end of the spectrum, consists of isolated pursuits: find food, find a mate when in season, protect the offspring until it can fend for itself, begin again. Such a life can go better or

worse for the animal, but there is no reason to think that it is better for a dog, say, to have an unhappy puppyhood and a joyous adulthood than vice versa, as long as the two lives offer an equal sum of satisfactions.

The shape of a life begins to matter when there is a story to be told about it. And there's a story to be told whenever an agent adopts long-range goals, forms concrete plans about how to reach them, takes some means to her ends and thereby exposes herself to luck and obstacles, and meets with success or failure. Such narratable episodes add up to a whole life with a narrative shape when earlier goals, efforts, and incidents inform later pursuits, or fail to do so. I've argued above that the events that comprise the agent's life gain in intrinsic value for the agent when they contribute to merited success in pursuit of valuable goals, whether the agent has the goals at the time of action or not – for short, when they contribute to giving the life a progressive shape.

But why should we think it's intrinsically good for us to lead a life with a progressive shape? Why should it matter to our self-interest whether a certain kind of true story could be told of our life? Here we approach the bedrock at which answers give out. We can just point to lives that differ narratively and say "Look, isn't this better for a person?". But it may be worth considering what kind of answer might be given to a parallel question about pleasure or happiness. Nearly everyone agrees that they are among the things that are intrinsically good for us. But why? One kind of thing we can say begins with an appeal to the kind of beings we are. It is a deep fact about us that we are *subjects of conscious experience*. As a result of this, events can affect us in ways they can't affect trees or stones: they can change the felt quality of that experience for the better or for the worse. This is a kind of explanation of why pleasure or happiness is good for us. It looks to our nature to locate a dimension along which our good can be directly affected.

But we are not just subjects of experience. We are also the kind of beings who take charge of the world we live in, *active agents* who choose ends and means. How we fare in our pursuits matters to us beyond the associated experiences. That's why we wouldn't trade a successful career for a perfect illusion of one inside an Experience Machine. Imagine you're on your deathbed after a life rich in narrative value. You have not wasted your brief time on this Earth – what you did made a difference for the better, objectively speaking, and made your own subsequent pursuits better, too. You had luck, both in having opportunities for pursuing valuable goals, and in things turning out your way. But your success wasn't due to sheer luck, or it wouldn't be as richly deserved as it is. It is fitting for you to look back on your life with a mix of pride and gratitude, and for others to look on it with admiration and even wonder.¹¹ Now wouldn't that be a life worth wanting, for your own sake?

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¹¹ I argue elsewhere (Kauppinen 2012) that the value such a life instantiates to a high degree is *meaningfulness*. But the argument of this paper does not hang on this controversial identification of meaning in life with having a good life history.

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