Philosophers' Imprint

VOLUME 24, NO. 14
SEPTEMBER 2024

Prudential Redemption and Its Significance

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DOI: 10.3998/phimp.3181

As fallible and limited beings, we all make mistakes in life, some of which might even cause disastrous failures, meaningless sacrifices, or irreparable losses. Obviously, we cannot rewind time and change the past, but the idea of *redemption* suggests a possibility of salvaging bad episodes in our life. Despite the religious connotation, redemptive narratives are prevalent in secular movies, novels, and even real-life stories. While some philosophers in the literature on well-being mention or briefly discuss the idea of redemption, none of them has attempted to provide a systematic account of it.[1] This by no means indicates that redemption has nothing philosophically interesting to theorize about. What does it mean to redeem the past in secular settings, and why does redemption even matter without the religious underpinnings?

Debates surrounding the *Shape-of-a-Life* phenomenon give us at least one theoretical motivation for addressing these questions. Consider two life trajectories, one upward and another downward. Suppose their good and bad times map onto each other perfectly in terms of momentary well-being (i.e., the intrinsic prudential value contained in the corresponding moment or period). Many are tempted to think that the upward trajectory is better than its downward equivalent. This phenomenon suggests that, besides momentary well-being, the overall structure — or "shape" — of a life also has significant influences on one's lifetime well-being (i.e., the intrinsic prudential value of a life as a whole). Current debates mainly focus on explaining or debunking our intuition about the phenomenon, but they do not exhaust all interesting issues about the significance of a life's shape.[2] If we hold fixed

1. See Velleman (1991, 54–55), Kamm (2003, 223), Kelly (2004, 70–73), Bradley (2011, 55–59), Rosati (2013, 50), Kauppinen (2015, 207–208), and Dorsey (2015, 311–312). Portmore (2007) and Dunkle (2022) are two exceptions, but their goals are different from mine.

2. To situate my project in the literature, I divide existing views into three positions. First, one might deny that the overall structure has influences on a person's lifetime well-being. See Bradley (2009, 6–7) and Hersch & Weltman (2022) for proponents of this position. Second, one might try to accommodate our intuition but insist that the overall structure matters *only if* the person cares about it. See Feldman (2004, 124–141) for a hedonist version and Bruckner (2019) for a desire-satisfaction theorist version. Third, one might

the sum of momentary well-being in an *upward* trajectory, are certain ways to improve from the bad times better than the others? Velleman (1991) suggests that a *redemptive* trajectory can be better than a bare upward trajectory. But without a clear understanding of redemption, it is hard to appreciate how this global feature affects one's lifetime well-being.

In this paper, I aim to develop an account of redemption that can accommodate our intuitions about this concept but also bring out its normative significance in prudential contexts. I will argue that, in a redemptive trajectory, there is a *mediating factor* that bears certain relations to the redeemed and the redeeming events, respectively — one that does not necessarily appear in a bare upward trajectory. In virtue of this mediating factor, the weight of a redeemed event is reduced in the calculation of one's lifetime well-being. Hence, a redemptive trajectory has greater prudential value than a bare upward trajectory.[3]

The paper proceeds as follows. I will first motivate a mediating factor account of redemption by discussing the inadequacy of what I call the *bare causal account*, which is explicitly employed by psychologist Dan P. McAdams in his method for coding redemption narratives (1999) and implicitly endorsed by several philosophers in the literature (Section 1). I will then elaborate on the mediating factor that makes redemption possible, using failures caused by one's mistakes and self-sacrifices in pursuit of long-term goals as examples (Section 2). After that, I will discuss the significance of prudential redemption on one's lifetime well-being (Section 3). Before concluding, I will point out two implications of my account, one for decision-making in face of equally good options and another for evaluating the rationality of honoring sunk cost (Section 4).

1. The Inadequacy of the Bare Causal Account

What makes a later event redeem an earlier one? Some scholars explicitly or implicitly appeal to the causal relation between two events. Psychologist Dan P. McAdams considers a sequence of events to be redemptive when "a demonstrably 'bad' or emotionally negative event or circumstance leads to a demonstrably 'good' or emotionally positive outcome" (1999, 1); one way to cash out the lead-to relation is causation (1999, 3). Recently, Dunkle (2022, 587) observes that philosophers such as Velleman (1991), Portmore (2007), and Dorsey (2015) converge on a certain conception of redemption, according to which some later prudentially positive event(s) redeem some earlier prudentially negative event(s) if the latter directly or indirectly enables the former; the enabling relation, Dunkle clarifies, should be conceived as a causal relation.[4] I will label views in the same vein as a *bare causal account of redemption*.

Consider this formulation of the bare causal account:

hold that the overall structure matters independently of the person's attitude, though proponents of this position disagree on how to explain our intuition. *Improvementists* like Kamm (2003, 222–223) and Glasgow (2013) argue that a gain in momentary well-being is intrinsically good and a loss intrinsically bad. *Narrativists* like Velleman (1991), Kauppinen (2015), Dorsey (2015), and Dunkle (2022) contend that an upward life is better because of the narrative relation it instantiates. I adopt the third position and side with narrativists.

3. Some might wonder how this claim bears on a narrativist approach to explaining the *Shape-of-a-Life* phenomenon. Several narrativists consider redemption as a partial explanation for the value of upward trajectories; this treatment implies that, without a narrative of redemption, *bare* upward trajectories are no better than their downward equivalents. To clarify, the claim I am making here is comparative and remains agnostic about the prudential value of bare upward trajectories. But this does not undermine a narrativist approach. Even if it turns out that a bare upward trajectory does not enhance one's lifetime well-being, narrativists can still appeal to narrative relations such as corruption to explain how lifetime well-being can be diminished by downward trajectories.

4. Dunkle also includes this feature in the conception: "[The subject] would regard [the negative event] as having been (to some extent) worthwhile in light of [the positive event] upon consideration" (2022, 587). I will return to this issue in Section 3.

> **Prudential Redemption (Bare Causal Account)**: A prudentially negative event E_N in a person P's life is redeemed if (a) at least one prudentially positive event E_P[5] happens to P after E_N,[6] and (b) E_N causes E_P.[7]

An *event* can refer to a one-off experience or a period with certain qualities. Flawed characters are often thought to be redeemable; I will treat them as some qualities instantiated by actions in a certain period. An event is *prudentially negative* when it instantiates bad-making properties (e.g., pain or financial loss) that directly or indirectly diminish a person's well-being; for an event that *by itself* does not enhance or diminish well-being, it can be still prudentially negative if there exists another path the person could have chosen in which she would have been much better off.[8] Among different types of prudentially negative events, philosophers of well-being are especially interested in self-sacrifices in pursuit of a long-term goal and failures caused by one's own mistakes. Here, I will focus on these two types, and more generally, on negative events that stem from one's active exercise of agency, for they are often thought to be paradigmatic cases of redemption. I will leave out negative events that simply happen to the person, since it is unclear whether a person has the *standing* to redeem negative events for which she is not responsible.[9]

The initial appeal of the bare causal account lies in its ability to differentiate between the kinds of success due to redeeming self-sacrifice and those due to pure luck. Consider two songwriters, Alexa and Alexander, who made the same degree of sacrifices to pursue careers in music and eventually became world-renowned producers. Alexa is famous for her versatility, thanks to those unsuccessful music experiments she had done previously, whereas Alexander won a huge lottery ticket and used the money to generate enormous publicity. Intuitively, Alexa's sacrifice is redeemed by her success, but Alexander's is not. The bare causal account can offer a good explanation. Alexa's case satisfies both condition (a) and (b), for her later success is caused by her earlier sacrifice. By contrast, Alexander's success is caused by the lottery winnings, which is totally irrelevant to his earlier sacrifice. In his case, only (a) is satisfied.

Condition (b) is crucial to show how a redemptive trajectory is more than a bare upward trajectory, but it is still insufficient to capture what makes a trajectory redemptive. Specifically, (b) cannot rule out cases where the cause of the positive event is something *peripheral* or *incidental* to the negative event. Consider another songwriter story:

> **Ayumi** leaves her family and friends in her hometown, moving to L. A. alone to pursue musical opportunities. Driven by her love of music, she often experiments with different styles, but doing so does not bring her much recognition. Eight years after her debut, she still struggles to make a living by music and relies on several part-time jobs to make ends meet. Later, Ayumi encounters Sergio, a frequent customer at the coffee shop where Ayumi works part-time. After hanging out for a while, they find each other to be excellent partners because they both

5. A prudentially negative event might be redeemed by a *morally* positive event, but this possibility depends on one's other theoretical commitments (e.g., whether prudential and moral values are comparable). For my purpose here, I only discuss purely prudential cases.

6. (a) can accommodate the possibility that the positive event is posthumous. However, whether posthumous events affect a person's *lifetime* well-being is controversial. Here, I only discuss positive events during the person's lifetime.

7. Dunkle is indifferent about whether the causal relation is real (2022, 587), and McAdams allows the causal relation to be subjective — i.e., the person *believes* that the positive event would not have occurred had the negative event not "caused" it (1999, 3). However, (b) only concerns the actual causal relation.

8. I remain neutral on the debate about ill-being — i.e., whether there are intrinsic bads that directly contribute to one's life going badly. Ill-being advocates (e.g., Kagan 2014) might find both characterizations of prudentially negative events acceptable, but the counterfactual characterization is still friendly to ill-being skeptics (e.g., Rice 2019).

9. This concern stems from a related issue regarding whether one has the standing to apologize or make amends for wrongdoings committed by others, for which one takes no responsibility.

> enjoy outdoor activities. Although Ayumi is still an unknown songwriter, she maintains a meaningful relationship with Sergio for years.

Intuitively, Ayumi's sacrifice for music is not redeemed by her relationship with Sergio. Those who believe in destiny might think that the purpose of her earlier struggle was to create this opportunity for meeting Sergio. Nonetheless, the sacrifice she has made for music does not contribute to her meaningful relationship in the way it would have contributed to her career success had she made it. It is the latter that we normally call a story of redemption. Indeed, if the story had gone differently — e.g., if Ayumi and Sergio shared an interest in music rather than outdoor activities — there is still an intuition that Ayumi's sacrifice for music is somewhat redeemed. But in the original case, music does not play any role in cultivating or maintaining their relationship. Still, a causal relation holds between the negative and the positive events — i.e., Ayumi's moving to L. A. and working in that coffee shop are parts of the causal chain that lead to her encounter with Sergio. In this sense, condition (b) is too weak.

One way to fix (b) is to stipulate that the negative event must *directly* cause the positive event (e.g., Sergio must fall in love with Ayumi because of her sacrifice for music). While this move can tighten the causal connection by removing irrelevant intermediate events, it might improperly exclude cases where the redeeming event is *indirectly* caused by the redeemed event. Consider this case:

> **Ding** marries Daisy after knowing each other only for a short time. Without adequate preparation for establishing a family, Ding has a hard time maintaining the marriage. Whenever he quarrels with Daisy, he never communicates or compromises. This unhappy marriage ends in divorce. Upon reflection, Ding learns that being passive-aggressive is the wrong way to handle conflicts and decides to be more open-minded and conciliatory in the future when disagreements arise. This change eventually wins him a promotion in the workplace. Ten years after his divorce, he operates an international company and achieves great career success.

We can see that Ding's unhappy marriage somehow leads to his career success, but the former does not directly cause the latter. Instead, the causal relation is mediated by a lesson he learns. Thus, restricting (b) to direct causal relations will be under-inclusive. However, if (b) also includes indirect causal relations, it will create an over-inclusive problem — for there is no way to exclude cases like **Ayumi**. It seems that the bare causal account is caught in a dilemma.

Indeed, focusing on the bare causal relation between the negative and the positive events might not be the best approach to theorizing about redemption. The occurrence of the positive event might causally depend on many previous events, not just the negative one that calls for redemption. Yet, the bare causal account has limited resources to explain how and why the to-be-redeemed event is distinct from the others. Using the degree of causal contribution to differentiate between events might be an option, but *whether* a negative event is redeemed does not seem to hinge on that. For Ding, even if the lesson he has learned makes a smaller causal contribution to his success than other things (e.g., a favorable international environment), his unhappy marriage is still redeemed, though to a smaller degree.

If the bare causal account is inadequate, what is the alternative? Again, Ding's story might give us a hint. What makes his story redemptive seems to be the special nature of the mediating factor between the redeemed and the redeeming events. The lesson he has learned about the source of his failed marriage plays an important role in leading to his career success. If so, a more promising approach to theorizing about redemption is to pin down the kinds of mediating factors that make redemption possible.

2. A Mediating Factor Account

I propose a *mediating factor account of redemption* for prudential cases as follows:

> **Prudential Redemption (Mediating Factor Account)**: A prudentially negative event E_N in a person P's life is redeemed if (a) at least one prudentially positive event E_P happens to P after E_N, and (b) there is a mediating factor between E_N and E_P.

Compared to the bare causal account, condition (a) remains the same but (b) is different. Previous discussions suggest that the mediating factor must be related to something central to the past event as a *negative* event, and it also needs to make the right kind of connection to the positive event. Thus, the mediating factor in (b) can be defined as follows:

> A **mediating factor** is some physical or mental state S of the person P, which satisfies the following conditions:
>
> (i) **Relevance**: The content of S or the explanation of how P comes into possession of S makes essential reference to the cause or the bad-making property of the prudentially negative event E_N;
>
> (ii) **Manifestation**: S either is indispensable for bringing about the prudentially positive event E_P or constitutes a good-making property of E_P.[10]

The relevance and manifestation conditions identify the general form of mediating factors. Depending on the nature of the negative event, the substance of the mediating factor can be instantiated differently. In what follows, I will use failure caused by one's own mistakes and self-sacrifice for pursuing a long-term goal to illustrate.

2.1 Failure Caused by One's Mistake

While many things can causally contribute to an unsuccessful project or a broken relationship, the kind of failure under discussion mainly results from one's own mistake — i.e., without the mistake, the relationship or the project would have continued smoothly.[11] In some cases, others might also suffer from one's failure. For simplicity, I will focus on the harms that accrue to the person who made the mistake. What makes such a failure prudentially negative, then, is the fact that the person would have been better off had she not made the mistake.

The mediating factor for failures under discussion is *most likely* to be some lesson(s) the person has learned from the very experience.[12] A lesson that directly responds to the relevant mistakes meets the relevance condition because its content makes essential reference to the cause or the bad-making features of the negative event; the reference is essential when the lesson cannot be adequately described without referring to the latter. It is worth explaining more about what counts as a lesson. Typically, a lesson contains some backward-looking thoughts

10. This account does not intend to capture the usage of redemption in retailing. Sometimes, customers make purchase and receive some form of reward (e.g., miles) which looks like a mediating factor. But in retailers' language, customers redeem rewards for future benefits (e.g., free tickets) instead of the initial purchases; in other words, they redeem the mediating factor (for a positive event) instead of the negative event. The word 'redeem' in retailing, indeed, is interchangeable with 'in exchange for', but the sense of redemption under discussion concerns how to make bad things less bad.

11. Note that some failures might mainly result from factors that are outside one's control or cannot be reasonably anticipated, even though one also makes other mistakes. Indeed, there can be a spectrum of cases depending on how much one's agency is involved in causing the negative event. One extreme is pure failure, where one's mistake is the sole cause of the negative event. Another extreme is pure misfortune, where one's agency is not involved in the cause at all. Although I only focus on cases closer to the pure failure extreme, the mediating factor account can accommodate cases across the spectrum — for the relevance condition does not put constraints on what causes the negative event. However, whether such generalization is theoretically warranted or desirable is a separate question; it hinges on whether one has the standing to redeem negative events for which one is not (entirely) responsible. My answer is positive, but a full defense will require another paper.

12. Velleman (1991, 55–56) introduces learning lessons as a mechanism for redeeming past mistakes. It is possible that there are other unique mediating factors in *a specific case*, but they might not be as prevalent as lessons among various kinds of failure.

about what one could have done better, which can be translated into forward-looking maxims that safeguard against future failures. Also, a lesson often comes with information that is new to the person, whether it is a belief about some new subject matter or a novel manifestation of some existing belief. For the purpose of redemption, even if the person does not receive any new information, an existing belief becoming motivationally efficacious also qualifies as a lesson. In this case, the RELEVANCE condition is met because the *explanation* of how the person acquires this lesson essentially refers to the cause or the bad-making features of the negative event. A reasonable lesson does not have to be a correct diagnosis of one's failure, though a correct diagnosis is more likely to meet the MANIFESTATION condition.

The MANIFESTATION condition guarantees that candidates for the mediating factor (i.e., lessons that have met the RELEVANCE condition) establish the right kind of relation with the later event. Here, it is helpful to make a distinction between the instrumental and the intrinsic value of the candidates. If a candidate *only* has instrumental value, it must bring about something positive to redeem the negative event. Imagine that Melissa, who has failed several midterms, learns she should never stay up late the night before an exam. This lesson has no value except that it might improve her performance in future exams. If the lesson does not make her do any better in the next exam than the previous ones, merely learning it does not suffice to redeem her past failures. But even in the successful case, if the lesson only plays a dispensable role in the process, her previous failures are still not redeemed. Suppose Melissa did well in her final exam, but her success was overdetermined. That is, even if she stayed up late the night before the exam, she would still get a good grade because the exam was too easy or she was over-prepared. It seems her previous failures cannot be redeemed via that specific lesson she learned.

What if a candidate for the mediating factor has some intrinsic values? Suppose Melissa gains from her academic failures some important self-knowledge — say, she realizes that her perfectionist tendencies have become a source of anxiety that prevents her from making progress. Some might think that merely acquiring this piece of self-knowledge without it leading to any further positive events can directly redeem previous failures; after all, learning something about oneself can be seen as a positive event. But the issue is more complicated than it appears, for even intrinsically valuable things might causally contribute to something bad. Imagine that Melissa adopts some strategies to counter her perfectionist tendencies — say, she stops polishing her essay or paying attention to details in her exams. Unsurprisingly, her academic performance gets even worse. If learning about her perfectionist tendencies causes *all and only* negative events in her life, we might hesitate to say that her previous failures are redeemed by the newly acquired self-knowledge, for it is incompatible with our intuition about redemption — namely that negative events can somehow influence one's life *positively*. Thus, even if a mediating factor possesses intrinsic values, it needs to be *manifested* in a positive way. Suppose Melissa, upon learning the source of her anxiety, instead begins to meditate regularly, which allows her to ruminate on the newly acquired self-knowledge and eventually helps her overcome the unhealthy perfectionist tendencies. The mediating factor (i.e., self-knowledge) is distinct from the positive event (i.e., fruitful meditation); nevertheless, the former constitutes a good-making property of the latter.

Lastly, let us use **Ding** to test these two conditions. Ding's self-reflection about his unhappy marriage yields a lesson whose content makes essential reference to the cause of the negative event — namely, his passive-aggressive way of handling conflict. This self-reflection is translated into a maxim that later helps him navigate through workplace conflicts, which is indispensable in bringing about his promotion and career success. Thus, the mediating factor account can provide an adequate explanation of Ding's case.

2.2 Self-Sacrifice for Long-Term Goals

Self-sacrifice under discussion refers to the costs a person has paid for the sake of a goal whose achievement will benefit her in the future.[13] The costs are broadly construed as whatever the person has given up in order to increase the likelihood of achieving the goal; they include, but are not limited to, the person's material, financial, intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal resources. What makes this kind of self-sacrifice prudentially negative is that the person's well-being *at the moment* is diminished, regardless of whether the goal will be achieved later.

Given the nature of self-sacrifice, the mediating factor will be whatever one obtains *for the sake of the goal through the costs one has paid*; they can be specific skills, habits, perspectives, products, etc. that one has cultivated, accumulated, or created along the way. Call these things *assets*. Assets satisfy the RELEVANCE condition because the explanation of how the person acquires them makes essential reference to the bad-making feature of self-sacrifice. Consider Ayumi, who spends time in L. A. receiving music training and putting on shows. An adequate explanation of her being able to obtain all the assets must refer to the fact that she separates from her family and friends in her hometown and works multiple part-time jobs to survive in L. A. Note that the following ways to obtain the assets are irrelevant to self-sacrifice. If the assets are obtained for a long-term goal *but not through one's own resources*, there is no *self*-sacrifice involved; if they are obtained through one's resources but *not for the long-term goal*, there is no self-*sacrifice* involved — for the assets are immediate compensation for one's investment.

Relevant assets must also meet the MANIFESTATION condition to redeem past sacrifices. The most straightforward way to do so is to achieve the goal one sets out to pursue. Think about Alexa and Alexander. Alexa's sacrifice for music is redeemed because the relevant assets play indispensable roles in bringing about her success. However, if the assets do not play an important role, if any role whatsoever, we tend to think that the past sacrifice is not redeemed. Alexander is a good example. His international reputation is brought by the lottery winnings, whose acquisition cannot be explained by his sacrifice for music. The relevant assets (e.g., his songwriting skills), however, do not make salient contributions to his success. Hence, my account can yield a result that accords with our judgments about both cases.

In the case where the person fails to achieve the initial goal or abandons it halfway through the pursuit, past sacrifices can still be redeemed if the relevant assets contribute to her other goals, either existing or newly adopted ones.[14] For Ayumi, her other existing goals include maintaining a relationship with Sergio. Suppose Sergio begins to play some guitar, and they often practice together. The fact that music now becomes an important way to maintain their relationship somewhat redeems Ayumi's earlier sacrifice, though to a much smaller degree than achieving her initial goal. This is because different goals often require different packages of assets, and it is not always easy to fully utilize the assets ready for one goal in another pursuit — unless the new pursuit is carefully tailored to the existing assets. Suppose Ayumi eventually gives up on songwriting and becomes a music teacher. Even though the initial goal is not achieved, her sacrifice for music can still be redeemed to a decent degree.

Now, a similar question arises: Can past sacrifices be redeemed *directly* by assets with intrinsic values? Assets are likely to contain intrinsic values, for activities that exercise rational capacities are valuable in themselves. But given that a package of assets is often tailored to a certain pursuit, I suspect that the *whole* package has more instrumental than intrinsic value in many cases. Even for the portion with intrinsic value, we should not forget the corresponding costs of these assets. If the costs outweigh the intrinsic value, obtaining the assets alone is insufficient to *fully* redeem the sacrifices; the assets must contribute to some future goal(s) to offset the remaining costs. Although

13. This definition excludes the kinds of sacrifice one has made for something that benefits one immediately or sacrifice for others in ways that do not benefit oneself at all.

14. Harman (1976, 461–462), Portmore (2007, 15–16), and Kauppinen (2015, 207) express a similar idea.

the sacrifices, in this case, are partially redeemed by the assets as the mediating factor, the MANIFESTATION condition is still essential — for its purpose is to ensure that the assets exert positive influences on one's life. Now, suppose the costs are outweighed by the intrinsic value of the assets. The person's sacrifice, in this case, is immediately compensated, which means her momentary well-being is not diminished and the event overall is prudentially positive. If so, my account no longer applies because nothing needs to be redeemed in the first place.

3. The Significance of Prudential Redemption

In this section, I will argue that prudential redemption, by virtue of the mediating factor, can enhance a person's lifetime well-being independently of her attitude. Hence, a redemptive trajectory is prudentially better than a bare upward trajectory when the sum of momentary well-being is held fixed. In what follows, I will first clarify the relation between the mediating factor account and the effect of redemption — i.e., making the past less bad. Then, I will provide what I call the *weight reduction proposal* to illuminate the mechanism by which a redeemed negative event contributes less to a person's lifetime well-being. Lastly, I will show that, by adopting the weight reduction proposal, the mediating factor account is equipped to resolve a dilemma posed by Dunkle (2022) to theorists of redemption.

3.1 Mediating Factor and the Effect of Redemption

Let us begin by distinguishing an *improvement* sequence, in which the negative and the positive events only satisfy condition (a) in my account, from a *redemption* sequence, in which both (a) and (b) are satisfied. Put differently, there is a mediating factor between the negative and the positive events in a redemption sequence, one that does not necessarily appear in an improvement sequence. While this distinction highlights how a redemptive trajectory is more than a bare upward trajectory, why the distinction must be drawn in the way I have described might not be self-explanatory. After all, the negative event in many cases does not just precede the positive event. Ayumi's sacrifices for music and her relationship with Sergio bear a causal relation, which is stronger than temporal adjacency but does not count as redemption on my account. Without articulating the explanatory value of the mediating factor, it is unclear why the distinction between redemption and improvement is not arbitrary.

According to our pre-theoretical understanding, the central idea of redemption is that some negative things in the past are somehow made less bad.[15] The mediating factor, indeed, is defined for the sake of *stably* producing this effect; its purpose is to guarantee the right kind of relation between the negative and the positive events such that the evaluation of the former can be improved by the latter. In the case of failure, the past mistake is *overcome* or *rectified*; in the case of self-sacrifice, the costs one has paid are *justified* or *rationalized* without going to waste. Of course, one's well-being *in the past* cannot be improved by the later event, unless we endorse some highly controversial claims about backward causation. But this does not prevent us from reevaluating the significance of past events to our life. Once a redemption sequence is complete, a diachronic perspective can be constructed based on the mediating factor. When being evaluated from this perspective, a redeemed negative event becomes less bad to *one's life as a whole* than it otherwise would.

By contrast, for improvement sequences where the negative event merely precedes the positive one, the negative event cannot be reevaluated in a similar way due to the lack of mediating factors. It is undeniable that the positive event contributes to the person's *current* well-being; without it, the negative event might persist indefinitely. But however good it is, this positive event can only be seen as a standalone event. At most, it might make the person feel glad that the negative event is prevented from making her life even worse; if two events are similar in kind, the positive event might even make the person feel

15. Velleman (1991, 55–56) endorses a "cancel-out" view about redemption, according to which the redeemed event ceases to be bad at all. This seems unnecessarily strong and should rather be treated as a special case.

less painful when she looks back. Still, the evaluation of the negative event remains the same.

However, it is reasonable to doubt whether my claim is also true for improvement sequences where the negative event causes the positive one. Suppose Andy hits several cars on the highway while rushing to the airport and thus misses a flight that ends up crashing. Some might have the intuition that avoiding the plane crash makes the car accident less bad. Yet the bare causal relation between the two events seems sufficient to produce this effect. My response to this objection is threefold. First, cases like Andy are not counterexamples to my account, for my account does not claim that the mediating factor is *necessary* for making the past less bad. Second, there is good reason to think that mere causation is insufficient to produce the said effect *in general*, considering why we move away from the bare causal account at the outset. Third, even if causing a positive event, in some cases, can compensate the loss incurred in a negative event, the redemption sequence still involves a distinct way of making the past less bad — namely, by improving the evaluation of the negative event. In Andy's case, avoiding the plane crash merely *mitigates* how bad the car accident is, but it does not *rectify* what makes the accident bad — i.e., his reckless driving.

Some might complain that focusing on redemption distracts us from more natural ways to explain why overcoming failures and getting sacrifices compensated are good for our life. According to Dunkle (2022, 588–589), overcoming failures has more to do with the person's growth in motivation or ability, which is itself a valuable feature of life. Compensated sacrifices tend to be discussed together with achievement (Portmore 2007) or the completion of projects (Dorsey 2021, 158–176). Along these lines, Clark (2018) appeals to self-realization to identify the value of upward trajectories more generally. What these views have in common is the idea that the positive present deserves more attention than the negative past.

These seemingly competing explanations, however, do not necessarily exclude each other and might well coexist. Ding's unhappy marriage is made less bad by his personal growth and subsequently his career success. If Alexa redeems her sacrifices for music, it sounds reasonable to say that her journey is also one of self-realization. Indeed, competing explanations can be seen as different ways to describe the same process. I mainly focus on the negative events here because my goal is to identify the structural features shared by cases of redemption. Although the idea of growth might capture the value of redeeming failure, it does not offer a natural explanation for redeeming self-sacrifice. After all, having to make self-sacrifice does not mean that our motivation or ability is weak, and redeeming them does not require us to grow in either way. By contrast, appealing to achievements might account for the value of redeeming self-sacrifice but not for that of redeeming mistakes, since not every mistake is redeemed by completing a valuable project. While self-realization has the potential to accommodate both, it is too broad to pick out what is unique about redemption — for growth, achievement, etc. might also involve self-realization. Thus, making the past less bad is a better candidate than the alternatives.

3.2 The Weight Reduction Proposal

With the contrast between redemption and improvement, it is easier to see how a redemptive trajectory is prudentially better than a bare upward trajectory. Because of the mediating factor, a redeemed negative event is made less bad and hence contributes less to one's lifetime well-being than its unredeemed equivalent. The adjustment of contribution, as I will argue, is fulfilled by reducing the *weight* of the momentary well-being associated with this event in the lifetime well-being calculation.[16] The weight reduction proposal has theoretical

16. Dorsey (2015) differentiates between the *contributory* and the *signatory* proposal to account for the value of narrative relations between life events. On the contributory proposal, "[valuable narrative] relations increase or (decrease) the contribution of said events to the overall value of a life" (313), while on the signatory proposal, narrative relations are valuable because they signify some independent intrinsic value (310). Dunkle (2022, 586) assumes that theorists of redemption must accept a signatory proposal and treat the value of redemption as one signified by an upward life trajectory. But they do not have to.

advantages over two competitors. Before discussing them, I will first unpack this proposal.

The weight reduction proposal presupposes that various life events can have different weights in one's lifetime well-being. Just like calculating course grades, while students get a score for each exam, these scores are not always weighted equally in the final grade — e.g., all midterms have equal weight, but they are less weighty than the final exam. In the case of well-being, all life events are assumed to have equal weight in the mere sum of momentary well-being. However, the overall structure can exert influence on one's life by adjusting the weight of various events in the calculation of lifetime well-being. This framework clarifies how lifetime well-being can be separate from the mere sum of momentary well-being without turning it into a mysterious whole that cannot be computed from its parts. There is no lack of intuitive support for the idea of weight and the possibility of weight adjustment. We often think that some life events are more (or less) significant than the others, and their significance can be altered by later events.[17] For example, friendship is usually considered an important prudential good. However, the later betrayal of one's friend can drastically decrease the significance of this friendship, compared to a similar friendship that naturally faded away.

Indeed, the idea of weight — especially in relation to lifetime well-being — is not entirely new in the literature. When introducing the initial example of the *Shape-of-a-Life* phenomenon, Slote (1982) contends that prudential goods obtained in one's prime bear greater significance than those obtained in childhood or dotage. On this view, the exact same achievement has more weight in one's life if it is achieved, say, in one's thirties rather than seventies. The framework I introduced earlier differs from Slote's view in one crucial respect. On my view, the adjustment of weight is based on the *relation* between events rather than the event's temporal location in a life.[18] When a redemptive relation holds between a negative and a positive event, the weight of the negative event in one's lifetime well-being will be reduced in proportion to the degree of redemption. Other relations besides redemption might possess a similar ability to adjust an event's weight. A good example is *corruption*, a relation in which an earlier positive event is made less good by a later event.[19] While the weight reduction proposal has the potential to also explain how corrupted positive events might contribute less to one's lifetime well-being, for the purpose of this paper, I will only discuss its application to redeemed negative events.

The weight reduction proposal, however, is not the only game in town when it comes to the mechanism by which a redeemed event is made less bad to one's life. An obvious alternative is what I call the *direct deduction proposal*, according to which the negative value of a redeemed event is directly deducted. Although both proposals yield a similar result (i.e., less contribution of the negative event), only my preferred proposal allows us to capture the intuition that a redeemed event is made less bad without also making one's well-being *in the past* less bad. After all, *directly* deducting the negative value of a past event amounts to increasing one's *momentary* well-being associated with that event. Yet, my preferred proposal does not have this troubling implication, for what is adjusted on this proposal is not the momentary well-being but merely its weight.[20] The more a negative event is redeemed,

17. Those who deny the overall structure's influence on lifetime well-being might also deny this claim. However, I believe they bear the burden to debunk our intuition given how widely it is shared.

18. I do not deny that temporal location or other factors might also increase or decrease the weight of an event. However, the framework I introduced is intended for relations between events.

19. Corruptive relations are best illustrated by the imagined case of Martin Luther Bling in Kauppinen (2015, 215). MLB made the same political achievements as MLK, but he later started some kind of business that effectively undermined the civil rights movement.

20. The narrative calculus proposed by Kauppinen (2015) also has this implication, for his view endorses moment externalism, according to which the *momentary* well-being associated with an event also depends on what happens at other time (198). Kauppinen's view has another counterintuitive implication: Before the person dies, we will never get a *definitive* answer regarding the momentary value of any event in her life. But my view does not have this issue.

the lower its weight will be in the calculation of lifetime well-being. In the case of full redemption, the negative event might cease to have any weight, even though the corresponding momentary well-being remains unchanged. Conversely, if a negative event is unredeemed, like the ones in bare upward trajectories, its weight cannot be reduced in the same way.

The weight reduction proposal also has advantages over what I call the *bonus proposal*, which treats the value of redemption as a separate value that emerges from a specific combination of negative and positive events. On this proposal, prudential redemption enhances one's lifetime well-being by adding extra values on top of the unadjusted values contained in all events by virtue of the redemptive relation. This proposal, however, has a different troubling implication. Note that adding bonuses in such a way amounts to claiming that the redemptive relation has intrinsic value, which gives rise to at least a *pro tanto* reason for us to pursue it. If so, we have reason not only to redeem negative events that have already happened but also to create a few on purpose merely for the sake of redeeming them later. While the first half of this recommendation sounds reasonable, the second half is clearly absurd. My preferred proposal, however, can keep the first half but leave the second. The possibility of weight reduction gives us a reason to redeem negative events, but it does not presuppose that the redemptive relation is valuable as such.

The remaining task is to explain in virtue of what the redemptive relation can reduce the weight of a negative event in the lifetime well-being calculation. It is tempting to conceive this relation as one of instrumentality, namely that something related to the negative event brings about the positive event. But this is the wrong way to look at it. Note that the redemptive relation has a certain direction, which goes from the positive to the negative event instead of the other way around. This is because the mediating factor, strictly speaking, is a relational property of the positive rather than the negative event; after all, it only makes essential reference to some specific things about the negative event, but it does not *belong to* this event. Thus, the redemptive relation, when conceived in the right way, is one in which the positive event can *transform* the past event. The redeeming event is not just something good as such; rather, it has the kind of good that also overcomes or transfigures the badness of the redeemed event by virtue of the mediating factor. To illustrate with Ding, the career success built on his open-mindedness is an explicit repudiation of his passive-aggressiveness that leads to the divorce. As the redeeming event, Ding's success carries an evaluative import that goes beyond merely compensating for the loss of momentary well-being in his unhappy marriage.

While the redemptive relation derives its value from positive events with intrinsic value, this does not mean that, by reducing the weight of the negative event, the value of the positive event is double counted. Note that the mediating factor does not play any role in calculating the momentary well-being associated with the positive event; after all, it is not one of the relevant properties that determine the intrinsic value of any prudential goods.[21] Although the mediating factor does not have a say in how good the positive event is, this relational property is tracking to what extent the badness of the negative event is transformed by this positive event. Accordingly, the weight of the negative event will be reduced in proportion to the degree of transformation. Even if some might insist that there is still a subtle and indirect form of double counting involved, I believe the move I am making here is not entirely unwarranted.

3.3 Dunkle's Dilemma

Recently, Dunkle (2022, 596–600) posed a challenge to theorists of redemption who rely on a distinction between synchronic and diachronic perspectives on a person's well-being. According to Dunkle, these theorists face a dilemma when evaluating whether a redeemed event is good or bad for the person. If they think that the negative event, when being redeemed, is not (that) bad for the person *diachronically*

21. For this reason, it is not the weight of the positive event that got increased but the weight of the negative event that got decreased by virtue of the mediating factor.

but bad for her *synchronically*, they are committed to *two-answer redemptionism*. If they only hold that the redeemed event is not (that) bad for the person, either by prioritizing the diachronic over the synchronic perspective or by reconciling two perspectives to yield a single result, they are committed to *one-answer redemptionism.* Dunkle claims that one-answer redemptionists give the wrong answer to the question because it downplays the hardship in a person's life, and in worse cases, even apologizes for the oppression she has suffered from. By contrast, two-answer redemptionists have other problems, for they claim that the synchronic and diachronic perspectives are *not to be reconciled*. If they drop this claim and try to reconcile two perspectives, they will become one-answer redemptionists and face the trouble mentioned above. But if they leave two perspectives unreconciled, there is no reason why the person should adopt the diachronic perspective (which Dunkle considers to be delusional) rather than the synchronic perspective when evaluating the negative event.

At first glance, I seem to be a quintessential two-answer redemptionist in Dunkle's taxonomy, for my view appeals to both synchronic and diachronic perspectives on the redeemed event. However, I do not endorse the further claim that both perspectives are not to be reconciled. Although my project is inspired by Velleman (1991), I do not share his view that lifetime well-being and momentary well-being are two discrete axes of value nor that there is no algorithm for us to compute one from another (63–68). Indeed, the weight reduction proposal elaborated earlier can be considered a rudimentary algorithm to compute one's lifetime well-being from momentary well-being. It allows us to coherently hold that the redeemed event was bad for the person *during the period it occurred* and that it is not (that) bad for *her life as a whole*. Thus, even if I deny the irreconcilability of the two perspectives, it does not follow that I will end up as a one-answer redemptionist. But for the sake of argument, I will grant that two-answer redemptionists must accept the further claim attributed to them by Dunkle. Still, it is unclear why there is a problem to leave two perspectives unreconciled. After all, being a two-answer redemptionist is just to offer two answers *of equal importance* to the question "Is a redeemed event good or bad for the person?" Forcing them to choose or prioritize one over another is begging the question against two-answer redemptionists.

Yet, Dunkle might rephrase his challenge by asking why the person must adopt the (delusional) diachronic perspective *in addition to* the (real) synchronic perspective. To respond, I do not think the diachronic perspective is less real than the synchronic one, for the mediating factor account aims to identify the objective relation between the redeemed and the redeeming events. Even if no one adopts the diachronic perspective, the redemptive relation still holds. However, one reason for adopting such a perspective is to enjoy the psychological benefits derived from it. For the protagonist, knowing that a negative event in her life has been redeemed is likely to help her find closure from the past or effectively cope with negative emotions. For the audience of her story, they might also feel inspired and hence rekindle their hope in life. Even if Dunkle is not impressed by these psychological benefits, the reason *against* adopting the diachronic perspective should not be that it is delusional.

4. Implications

In this section, I will discuss two implications of my account, one for making decisions in face of equally good options and another for evaluating the rationality of honoring sunk costs.

4.1 Decision-Making in Face of Equally Good Options

Earlier, I established the claim that a redemptive trajectory is prudentially better than a bare upward trajectory when the sum of momentary well-being is held fixed. This claim has a practical implication for deciding between options that are equally good regarding their prudential values determined by *non-relational* properties.

Imagine that Ben has a history of alcoholism but later begins a new life as a law student. Now, he is choosing between two jobs, one in a law firm as an associate attorney, and another in a non-profit dedicated to helping juvenile delinquents with substance abuse problems

as a legal consultant.[22] Assuming that both jobs are equally good, the consideration of completing a redemption sequence can tip the scales in favor of one option over another. For Ben, being a legal consultant in the non-profit can redeem his dark history but working in a normal law firm cannot. Indeed, even if the redemptive option is in itself less good than the alternative, at least in some cases it is still prudent to choose it if doing so can fully redeem a very negative past event. Suppose Ben gets an offer from a prestigious law firm, which is also his dream job. When considered independently, this job might be prudentially better than the non-profit one. But given his past, the non-profit job indeed has huge redemptive value, and hence it is possible that the *overall* prudential value is still higher than his dream job.[23]

Of course, the consideration of redemption can be outweighed in many ways. If the non-redemptive option has much greater prudential value or the redemptive option can only redeem a trivial negative event, it is imprudent to choose the redemptive option. I only mean that the consideration of redemption is a *pro tanto* reason for a certain decision or course of action. It might be the case that whenever there is a negative event in our life, we have a *pro tanto* reason to redeem it. But at the end of the day, the strength of this reason depends on how negative the past event is, how much and how likely it can be redeemed, and how valuable the non-redemptive options are.

Note that this implication is limited to comparing redemptive and non-redemptive options. For options that have the same non-redemptive *and* redemptive values, my account remains neutral between them. There might be reasons for redeeming one rather than another negative event in such cases — e.g., one redemptive option is more coherent with the person's other values or commitments than another. But these reasons are beyond the sphere of redemption.

4.2 The Rationality of Honoring Sunk Costs

A person honors sunk costs when some *unrecoverable* costs she has paid for a project influence her current or future decision. Steele considers this to be the "main form" of honoring sunk costs discussed by economists (1996, 608). But Steele also points out what he calls the "Concorde" form, according to which historical costs that have not yet been recouped call for special attempts to recoup them in the future (1996, 609). Honoring sunk costs in either way is irrational because it leads the person to adopt inferior options.

Consider Michael, an undergraduate who has not declared his major and is choosing between engineering and biology. While he likes biology more, he decides on engineering *solely* because, in his first two years, he has taken many general education courses that count toward an engineering rather than a biology degree.[24] Had he taken a different set of courses for general education, he would in fact major in biology. But considering the time and energy he has spent on studying engineering, he thinks it is better to declare that major — even if this means he will invest more in the next two years in a major he does not prefer. Michael is thought to commit the sunk cost fallacy because he regards the costs incurred in the past as the only reason to invest more in finishing an engineering degree.

Portmore (2007, 25) and Kauppinen (2020, 659) attempt to rationalize the behavior of honoring sunk costs by questioning whether the costs are *genuinely* sunk in some cases.[25] Honoring sunk costs has many similarities with redeeming self-sacrifices. If there are assets that bear a proper relation to past costs, and the assets can contribute to

22. This example is adapted from the *Lawyer in Recovery* case in Kauppinen (2020, 660).

23. For those who find this implication counterintuitive, consider this simplified calculation. Suppose the prudential value of Ben's alcoholic history, the non-redemptive option (prestigious law firm), and the redemptive option (non-profit) are -50, 50, and 30, respectively. The overall value of choosing the law firm is 0 (-50*1+50*1). Given that the non-profit job can fully redeem Ben's alcoholic history, the overall value of choosing it is 30 (-50*0+30*1). However, if the degree of redemption is low, it will be imprudent to choose the redemptive option.

24. To simplify the comparison, let us assume that biology has fewer degree requirements than engineering. Thus, Michael will pay the same tuition and graduate at the same time no matter which major he chooses.

25. See Kelly (2004) and Doody (2020) for other strategies.

the person's existing or newly adopted goals, the costs should not be considered unrecoverable. For Michael, the costs incurred in the past can be recovered by majoring in engineering instead of biology, since the relevant assets (i.e., the courses) can contribute to the former but not to the latter. Thus, there is at least a *pro tanto* reason for Michael to take the *recoverable* costs into consideration, though the strength of this reason depends on how much the costs can be recovered.

But someone can still commit the "Concorde" form of sunk cost fallacy if she holds on to the relevant assets that might redeem the recoverable costs. In these cases, questioning whether the costs are genuinely sunk misfires. Suppose Michael tries very hard to find a major that can maximally utilize the assets obtained from previous courses. Although he is not fixated on *genuinely sunk* costs, it still seems irrational for him to do so for two reasons. First, he ignores *further* costs he might have to pay (i.e., two more years doing engineering) to recover the past costs. Second, he fails to make a *comparative* cost-benefit analysis with other available options (i.e., biology). Suppose both majors require the same costs and Michael can benefit equally from both in the future. It is indeed rational to choose engineering because of its redemptive value. Things get complicated when majoring in engineering is more costly or less beneficial than majoring in biology. However, it is still rational for Michael to choose engineering if the recovered costs are greater than the extra benefits offered by biology.

So far, we have stipulated that majoring in biology cannot recover the past costs. But what if it can? Suppose some courses Michael has taken also count toward a biology degree. Is there still a way to say that choosing engineering can be somewhat rational? I think we can appeal to the idea that a package of assets is often specific to a certain goal. However well the new goal is tailored to the assets, the degree of fit cannot be compared to how the package fits the initial goal. For Michael, majoring in engineering rather than biology can *fully* utilize all previous courses. Thus, the degree of redemption will be higher, for the *whole* package of assets efficiently contributes to achieving the goal. Indeed, if the assets are unique — e.g., if Michael took archeology instead of engineering courses, sticking to one's initial goal is rather rational because finding another goal that utilizes the assets *at all* can be very difficult. Nevertheless, such decisions might not be *all-things-considered* rational. We should also consider further costs of continuing the initial pursuit and the potential benefits of changing the goal.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have provided a mediating factor account of redemption and argued that a redemptive trajectory is prudentially better than a bare upward trajectory because of a mediating factor between the negative and the positive events. Since the negative event in a redemptive trajectory is made less bad by virtue of the mediating factor, redemption can enhance a person's lifetime well-being in a way that mere improvement cannot.

This paper only discusses redemption in prudential contexts. There are comparable questions about *moral* redemption. Can moral mistakes be redeemed? If so, under what conditions does one redeem past moral mistakes, and what is the moral significance of redemption? It would be interesting to see how far the framework for prudential redemption outlined here could be applied to moral redemption.[26]

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26. I am grateful to Amy Berg, David Brink, Cory Davia, Leo Moauro, Dana Nelkin, Manuel Vargas, Monique Wonderly, and two anonymous reviewers from *Philosophers' Imprint* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. I have benefited from discussions with audiences at 2021 Austin Graduate Ethics and Normativity Talks and UCSD Workshop on Agency and Value in February 2022. Special thanks to Shawn Wang, who had many conversations with me about this paper at various stages.

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