

## **Atomism and Holism in the Theory of Personal Well-being**

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*Penultimate draft*

forthcoming in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-being* (ed. Guy Fletcher)

### **1. Introduction**

Atomism in a particular domain claims that some phenomenon can be wholly understood in terms of its proper parts and the intrinsic properties of these parts. Holism denies this. Instead, holism claims that the thing in question must be understood also in terms of the relations among these parts, or in terms of irreducible properties of the whole. Holism is a major theme in Leibniz's writings on fundamental ontology and the problem of evil, Spinoza's writings on human nature, and especially the metaphysical works of Hegel. Atomism, by contrast, is a major theme in the early works of Russell and Wittgenstein.

Prominent ethical theorists including Franz Brentano, the British Hegelians, G.E. Moore, A. C. Ewing, Roderick Chisholm, and Robert Nozick have held that there are important evaluative phenomena that cannot be understood exclusively in terms of the intrinsic properties of their most basic parts. Most famously, Moore formulated the doctrine of organic unities, according to which the intrinsic value of a whole "*bears no regular proportion to the sum of the values of its parts*" (Moore 1993 [1903] 79; emphasis in original). Chisholm also sought to defend a view according to which several good parts might combine to form a whole the goodness of which was enhanced (i.e., greater than the goodness of the parts taken individually), partially or wholly defeated (i.e., less than the goodness of the parts taken individually, so that the whole might even be of neutral value), or even transvalued (i.e., made bad on the whole) (Chisholm 1986).

The ethical theorists just mentioned were concerned mainly with worldly intrinsic value, the sort of value that a benevolent God would consider when deciding which possible world to actualize. But the atomism / holism distinction also arises in the context of well-being and prudential value. This is the sort of value that is connected to personal benefit and harm: when a person is benefitted, their well-being is increased; when a person is harmed, their well-being is

diminished. Most theories of well-being aim to explain what determines a person's level of well-being at a particular time, what determines a person's level of well-being over intervals of time, and what determines the prudential value of a person's life, i.e., what makes a life go well (or badly) for the person who lives it.

It may not be possible to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for whether a theory is atomistic or holistic. Still, the distinction is a useful one, and it can be generally said that atomistic theories of well-being endorse several related theses about the metaphysics of prudential value and its aggregation. Specifically, atomistic theories endorse (a) *the explanatory priority of momentary well-being*, (b) *momentary well-being internalism*, and (c) *neutrality about the order of episodes when aggregating well-being over time*. Theories are holistic in one respect or another if – and to the extent that – they depart from these theses.

The first of these, (a) *the explanatory priority of momentary well-being*, states that instantaneous, momentary, or synchronic well-being is a more fundamental or basic evaluation than well-being over longer intervals of time, up to and including a whole life. Momentary well-being, on this view, does not derive from diachronic or global features of lives.

The second thesis, (b) *momentary well-being internalism*, holds that well-being at individual times depends exclusively on the intrinsic properties of those times. Or a bit more liberally, an agent's well-being at a time, *t*, is not affected by anything that occurs at any time other than *t*. This thesis appears to follow from a plausible supervenience principle about non-instrumental prudential value. This principle states that, if a condition, situation, outcome, event, or time is non-instrumentally valuable for a person, then its value supervenes entirely on its intrinsic properties.

Momentary well-being internalism has two important corollaries, the first axiological and the second metaphysical. First, the fundamental bearers of prudential value – i.e., the things that are most fundamentally good or bad for one – will be instantaneous or momentary

occurrences that are desirable simply for their own sakes, in isolation from other goods.<sup>1</sup> Second, because the value of these fundamentals depends exclusively on features internal to them, they will have their respective values necessarily: if a state of an individual has prudential value  $n$ , then it's necessary that the prudential value of that state is  $n$ . This means that atomism involves a commitment to *invariabilism*, the thesis that the fundamental bearers of prudential value make the same contribution to the value of a life at a time, regardless of the context or the combinations in which they occur (cf. Fletcher 2009).

Finally, thesis (c), *neutrality about the order of episodes when aggregating well-being over time*, states that an agent's well-being over intervals of time – up to and including the agent's life – is a simple function from his or her well-being at the smallest well-being-evaluable intervals, whether these turn out to be times, moments, or episodes of longer duration. The most straightforward and popular way to affirm (c) is to adopt additivity about well-being over time. However, averaging views also affirm (c), because they pay no attention to the temporal or narrative order of the smallest intervals.

Holists deny some important part of this picture. Some holists deny (a). It might be that *neither* momentary well-being nor well-being-over-time has explanatory priority. One radical possibility is that there is no relation between these phenomena, so that a person could be faring well at each moment of his or her life, but badly overall. Another possibility is that the prudential value of a life has explanatory priority, so that well-being at a time derives from lifetime value. A more popular view is that there are temporally extended conditions, situations, or events that are just as important as momentary occurrences when it comes to understanding well-being at a time or well-being over time.

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<sup>1</sup> It is widely assumed that the fundamental building blocks of well-being will be episodes that are desirable for their own sakes. However, Bishop's recent network theory of well-being questions this assumption (Bishop 2015). For this reason, it can be seen as yet another challenge to atomism.

Many holists who deny (a) are also led to deny (b) on the grounds that the values of the fundamental bearers depend also on their extrinsic features. But if, e.g., relational properties make a difference to the values of the fundamentals, various questions arise.

First, there is a question about *how* they make a difference. As Ewing noted, it may be because of “the parts producing an additional value or disvalue in the whole when combined in certain ways while remaining the same in value themselves,” or it may be because of “the value of the parts being itself modified by their relation to each other” (1973 215). In the former case, the inventory of fundamental bearers of prudential value must presumably be expanded to include certain non-instantaneous and relational phenomena. This results in a comparatively weak form of holism: it amounts to saying that there are some fundamental bearers of prudential value that are not momentary phenomena. (A variety of views might be held about how these bearers affect the value of individual times or moments.) But in the latter case, relations among the smallest evaluable episodes *transform* the values of these very episodes. This suggests that the *fundamental* bearers of prudential value are really larger, more complex situations, i.e., that the episodes whose values were transformed were not really fundamental bearers to begin with. Either approach requires that both (a) and (b) be false, though (c) may be trivially true in the latter case.

Another question, of course, is *which* relational phenomena are relevant in this context. Various suggestions have been made, here. (Some are discussed in greater detail in section 3, below.)

It might be important that the fundamentals occur in certain balanced combinations. This *balancing* view is as old as Plato’s *Philebus*, where Socrates suggests that neither a life dedicated exclusively to pleasure, nor a life dedicated exclusively to wisdom, would be ideal. The best life, he holds, would combine both these goods in a particular way (63c-65a). And so episodes of pleasure or knowledge may make a different contribution to synchronic well-being, depending on whether they operate in isolation from other such episodes, or in combination with them (cf. also Hurka 1993).

Another potentially relevant phenomenon is *temporal order*, especially improvement or diminution. Brentano famously held that an “uphill life” is better than a “downhill life” in virtue of the fact that it improves (1973 [1876], pp. 196-7). Michael Slote states that “a good may itself be greater for coming late rather than early in life” (1983, 25). On Slote’s view, later as opposed to earlier goods have enhanced value. More recently, Joshua Glasgow has affirmed that it is “bad to be worse off than you used to be ... [W]hen I go from a high level of momentary well-being to a low level of momentary well-being, that *itself* is bad for me” (Glasgow 2013 668). F. M. Kamm holds a similar view, according to which the *loss* of well-being is non-instrumentally bad (Kamm 2003).

Various other temporal relations might partially determine the values of times or lives. John Broome mentions *evenness*: perhaps it is best for a life “to pass at an even level of well-being, rather than [to] oscillate up and down” (2004 220). Another possibility, suggested by certain passages from Nietzsche, is the value of having a *high peak*. “At the extreme,” Broome writes, “one might think the peak is the only thing that counts; the only point of life is to live very well once” (228). Yet another value that might be missed by momentary analysis is *longevity*. John Harris (1985), for example, argues that lives are marred by not reaching a certain minimum length.

Another popular family of views can be grouped together under the moniker of “*narrativism*.” These views hold that narratable relations among the events of one’s life make a difference to its value. Theorists are split on which narrative relations matter and how.

A moderate view held by Dorsey (2015) is that narrative relations that tie the events of one’s life into global projects, goals, and achievements help to constitute new, additional fundamental bearers of value: “some contributors to the intrinsic value of a life ... cannot be locked down to an individual moment, but necessarily involve many moments throughout a life and the relationship between them” (§4). Narrative relations therefore have signatory value – they are signs that one’s actions fit into valuable patterns. But it is the achievement of aims or the realization of valued projects that is, strictly speaking, non-instrumentally good for one.

Dorsey therefore accommodates narrativist intuitions by adjusting his axiology. But he agrees with atomists about (c), above: the temporal location of good and bad times does not affect their value, and well-being over time can still be aggregatively calculated (§6).

Douglas Portmore endorses a similar view: when an achievement is made possible by past acts of self-sacrifice, the harmfulness of these sacrifices is mitigated – though it cannot be cancelled or erased, because then the acts would no longer be self-sacrificial (to be self-sacrificial, they must lead to lower overall lifetime well-being than available alternatives).

Portmore also considers the more radical view that such episodes might affect well-being over time without affecting momentary well-being (Portmore 2007 26-7).

Antti Kauppinen (2011, 2015) endorses a more robust form of narrativism: he states that there are some narrative relations that might obtain among the events of an agent's life which are themselves fundamental bearers of value. For example, if individual accomplishments add up to success in broader worthwhile projects – or constitute success in a series of coherent and mutually-reinforcing projects – this makes a life more meaningful, and meaningfulness is non-instrumentally good (cf. McMahon 2002 175-185). By contrast, Rosati (2013) holds that it is not the objective existence of narrative relations, but the form of the agent's narrative self-understanding that confers additional value or disvalue on moments and/or longer temporal intervals.

Most of the views just discussed require denying both (b) and (c). However, some theorists *accept* (b) while denying (c). For David Velleman, it is *not* that the narrative relations among one's life events affect the value of those events as they occur. Rather, narrative relations affect the meaning and the value of one's life while leaving the values of moments unchanged. Velleman writes: "[T]he reason why well-being isn't additive is that how a person is faring at a particular moment is a temporally local matter, whereas the welfare-value of a period in his life depends on the global features of that period" (2000 58). On his view, "an event's place in the story of one's life lends it a meaning that isn't entirely determined by its impact on one's well-being at the time" (63), but "a person's well-being at each moment is

defined from the perspective of that moment" (74). For Velleman, well-being over time depends on diachronic features of one's life, but well-being at a time depends only on synchronic features of the person's life.

The remainder of this article will investigate various forms of atomism and holism in greater detail by explaining and evaluating some of the main arguments for and against them.

## 2. Atomism

Many atomists draw inspiration from G. E. Moore's metaphysics of intrinsic value, perhaps approaching the theory of well-being with the idea that instances of positive human welfare will also be bearers of worldly intrinsic value, and so will need the features appropriate to this role. Moore held that a thing's worldly intrinsic value supervenes exclusively on its intrinsic properties. And if a thing has its intrinsic properties of necessity, then any intrinsic value it has is also had of necessity. Perhaps the thing must also be such that it would continue to have its value, even if it were alone in the universe (though see Lemos 1994 and Zimmerman 2005 for critical discussion of this idea).

Atomists about well-being have sought to defend some analogous claims about non-instrumental prudential value. They begin with the thought that we should look to see whether there are momentary episodes or states that appear to be non-instrumentally good for people, good in virtue of their intrinsic properties, and good irrespective of context. Atomism about well-being can then be thought of as the faith that we can find such episodes and build up from them in a straightforward way to explain all the facts about well-being that there are.

Atomism's best-known defenders, Fred Feldman and Ben Bradley, are *hedonists*: they believe that all and only episodes of pleasure are non-instrumentally good for people. Bradley is explicit that pleasures are non-instrumentally good for people in virtue of their intrinsic properties (2009). They have their intrinsic properties necessarily, and so they are necessarily non-instrumentally prudentially good. Other axiologies are also combinable with atomism. Among monistic theories, non-hedonistic happiness-centered theories fit nicely with atomism.

Weaker versions of atomism can be endorsed by desire-satisfactionists and life-satisfactionists. It is even possible to be a pluralistic atomist and hold (e.g.) that both episodes of pleasure and episodes of knowledge are directly good for one in this way – though goods like knowledge may require weakening (b) moment internalism.

No matter the particular axiology, atomists insist that diachronic or patterned features of lives are not relevant to their value. It might seem that the uphill life is better than a downhill life, even if both lives are equal with respect to pleasure or desire-satisfaction. But this seeming may simply indicate that there are relevant value-laden aspects of the situation that have been overlooked, where these aspects can be recognized from within the confines of atomism. Alternatively, the seeming may be based on a confusion of aesthetic evaluation with prudential evaluation (cf. Zimmerman 2005; Feldman 2004 124-141).

An atomistic theory of well-being must do several things. It must explain which states are fundamentally and non-derivatively good for people – i.e., it must specify the “atoms” of well-being. It must also say what determines *how* good or bad these states are. Additionally, it must explain how to determine the values of other things, such as times, periods of time, and whole lives (cf. Bradley 2009 5).

As Feldman notes, previous formulations of atomism have run into serious problems in trying to accomplish these tasks (Feldman 2000 319-325). Some versions of hedonism, for example, have stated that (a) *only* episodes of pleasure or happiness are non-instrumentally good for a person, while (b) longer temporal intervals (up to and including whole lives) are *also* non-instrumentally good for a person. This appears to be a contradiction. Some versions have also run into problems of “double-counting” when explaining how to estimate the values of life-segments, because they imply that the same life-segment might contain multiple, overlapping situations or events that are welfare-evaluable.

Feldman outlines a form of atomism that avoids such problems. *Basic intrinsic value states* (or “basics,” for short) are central to his approach. Basics will be states whose values do not depend on the values of their parts. They are pure attributions of whichever properties or



relations turn out to be of non-instrumentally valuable for a person. They attribute determinate and precise degrees of non-instrumentally valuable properties to subjects at precise instants – e.g., “Jones being happy to degree +12 at noon, March 25, 2000.” They attribute valuable properties to subjects through directly-referring tags, and not *via* descriptions or properties. They contain no superfluous information.

An axiology stated in terms of such basics could be adopted by both monists and pluralists about the ultimate sources of well-being. Monists will say that the basics all involve attribution of the same property (or perhaps the same pair of properties, if there are both positive and negative basics). Pluralists will hold that some good basics are pure attributions of one property, while other good basics are pure attributions of others (e.g., “S has an insight at t that  $3+3=6$ ,” “T is pleased that S is happy to degree +12 at t”).<sup>2</sup>

Feldman, of course, is a monist. He suggests that the property that features in attributions of fundamental goodness is *being happy*, where happiness is ultimately analyzed in terms of attitudinal pleasure (Feldman 2000, Feldman 2010). The property that features in attributions of fundamental badness is *being unhappy*, analyzed in terms of attitudinal pain. The value of happiness and the disvalue of unhappiness are perfectly commensurable. Happiness and unhappiness both come in intensities; these intensities can be measured on ratio scales. Both are nearly instantaneous occurrences. Feldman assumes that time can be “discretized,” or broken up into a sequence of intervals of very tiny duration, such that no two of these intervals overlap, and no period of time falls outside this collection (Feldman 2004 174).

On this view, the things that are most fundamentally good and bad for people are states-of-affairs, but times and lives have a derivative form of non-instrumental value. The prudential value of a time for a person is equal to the sum of the non-instrumental values of the positive and negative basics that are about that individual and time. How happy or unhappy a person is

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<sup>2</sup> However, if one embraces pluralism, the requirement that only situations with *determinate* non-instrumental value bear upon the values of the wholes in which they figure may need to be relaxed (Lemos 2006). It is very difficult to assign precise and commensurable prudential values to episodes of pleasure, knowledge, achievement, virtue, and friendship.

over time is a simple additive function of these nearly-instantaneous values. The prudential value of an individual's life is the sum of all the basic intrinsic value states that are about that individual and that are true of him or her (2000 324).

This approach appears to address the problems mentioned above. First, the view does not say that happiness or pleasure is the sole bearer of non-instrumental goodness, and that situations and lives are also good. Rather, it says that the non-instrumentally good basics are all pure attributions of pleasure. Second, it does not involve double-counting, because the basic bearers of non-instrumental value are minimal and pure attributions of happiness (pleasure) and unhappiness (pain).

It is part of Feldman's conception of basic intrinsic value states that their values cannot be defeated by their context. He writes: "If we have chosen our basics correctly, then we have chosen our basics in such a way that their value is infeasible" (2000 333). Later, he adds: "We have to be sure to choose them in such a way that their values will never be obliterated" (334). By this, he means that, if the basic non-instrumental value for S of a state-of-affairs is  $n$ , then any world containing that state-of-affairs must be  $n$  units better for S than the world just like it there that state-of-affairs fails to obtain (334). And so if it turns out that happiness is *not* non-instrumentally beneficial when it is *undeserved* – or when it is *taken in acts of wickedness* – then pure attributions of happiness cannot really be basics. For in this case, the value of an episode of happiness *could* be obliterated by a change in context. Consequently, the real basics would have to be more complex.<sup>3</sup>

Bradley has developed an event-based version of hedonism closely modeled on Feldman's approach. Bradley is more direct about his acceptance of both the supervenience thesis (for him, the idea that when an event is a basic bearer of intrinsic value, its value supervenes entirely on its intrinsic features) and moment internalism.

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<sup>3</sup> Feldman himself sometimes seems to prefer a theory that would take into account whether the objects of a person's happiness deserve to have happiness taken in them (2004 172-182; 2010 210-215).

Bradley thinks that this supervenience claim follows from the idea that the basic bearers of intrinsic value are “instantiations of the fundamental good- or bad-making properties – the properties that are fundamentally and completely responsible for how well a world (or a life) goes,” together with the thesis that the non-instrumental value of something depends solely on its intrinsic properties (19). Given these claims, he argues, the denial of the supervenience thesis leads to absurd results. He writes:

Then there could be two properties, F and G, such that the only intrinsically good states of affairs are those involving the instantiation of F alone, but whose values are determined by whether there are any instantiations of G. But if that were true, then F would fail to be a *fundamentally* good- or bad- making property, for instantiations of F would fail to completely determine what value there is. The fundamental good- or bad-making property would involve both F and G, contrary to our assumption. (Bradley 2009, 19)

Dale Dorsey (2012b) and Jens Johansson (2013) have pointed out a problem with this argument. While Bradley may well be correct that the basic bearers of value must be instantiations of fundamentally good- or bad- making properties, and that the values of these basics must depend on their intrinsic features, this does not mean that basic bearers cannot be complex situations or situations with relational parts. As Kauppinen notes, “Something can be valuable for its own sake or non-instrumentally just because of its relational properties” (2012 375). For example, a desire-satisfactionist can hold that the situation consisting in *a present (“now-for-then”) desire for something at a later time, plus the fulfillment of that desire at that later time*, is a basic bearer of prudential value.

Additionally, Dorsey writes, the more general demand that the non-instrumental value of a situation supervene on its intrinsic properties “would exclude ... any resonance-respecting theory as a genuine theory of well-being” (284). What does he have in mind? In order for a condition, outcome, or event to be good for a person at a time, Dorsey suggests, this condition, outcome, or event must be positively endorsed by the person at that time. But those theories that respect the supervenience claim above, such as hedonism and concurrentist desire-satisfactionism, violate this constraint. They hold, e.g., that *pleasure* is good for one, whether or not one endorses it, or that *desiring that p while p is true* is good for one, whether or not one

actually has any positive attitude towards  $p$  or this conjunction. Only theories that allow that relational properties such as *being endorsed by S* ground the non-instrumental goodness of a thing for  $S$  can capture the importance of resonance (280). But Bradley seems committed to the view that such theories entirely miss the concept of well-being.

However we evaluate this criticism, we should note that Bradley holds that the supervenience thesis also applies to times or moments. This commits him to (b) moment internalism. He believes that times and moments are bearers of prudential value, and so when a time is non-instrumentally good for a person, its value supervenes entirely on its intrinsic features. Hedonism is compatible with this idea: “The value of a time for a person is determined by the values of the pleasures and pains experienced by the person at that time” (2009 18). But, Bradley says, so-called “correspondence” theories of well-being (theories of well-being that require a world-to-mind-fit, such as desire-satisfactionism and aim-achievementism) deny this.<sup>4</sup> However, as already noted, few people believe that times are *fundamental* or *basic* bearers of well-being-value. More usual candidates in this context included states-of-affairs, events, conditions or states of people, or lives. And so even if we accept the supervenience thesis when it comes to well-being basics, it is questionable whether it applies to times. Additionally, since no event is literally instantaneous, it is not entirely clear that isolated instants or moments – or even the tiny, discretized intervals described by Feldman – are the sorts of things that can have value for people on most axiologies.

The supervenience thesis and moment internalism can be criticized on more specific axiological grounds. Jeff McMahan explicitly rejects the view that a person’s well-being is “entirely a matter of the person’s intrinsic properties at that time.” While it would be a mistake

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<sup>4</sup> More broadly, Bradley argues that correspondence theories have difficulty explaining when benefits occur. This is because, on such theories, it is not clear whether benefits accrue at the time a desire or aim is *formed*, at the time at which it is fulfilled, or during the time at which it both desired or aimed at and fulfilled or achieved (21-30). However, it seems natural to say that what benefits people is for them to get what they want while they still want it (or for them to achieve an end while they still value it, aim for it, or intend it) (Heathwood 2005). And so a natural answer to Bradley is that the benefit represented by a desire-satisfaction or achievement occurs *during* the time that the pro-attitude and its object coincide.

to deny that “the subjective character of a person’s mental state” is an important dimension of well-being, well-being is “multidimensional and ... some of its dimensions are relational” (2002 180). McMahan argues that the value of a life is enhanced if the elements in it fit together to form a meaningful whole, replete with “intelligible purpose, direction, and overall structure” (175). The next section discusses a number of other axiologies that are in serious tension with the supervenience thesis and moment internalism.

### 3. Holism

The leading idea behind well-being holism is that a situation or event that appears to be non-instrumentally good or bad for a person runs the risk of having its value modified by its occurrence in some larger context. While episodes of pleasure appear to be beneficial, perhaps pleasure taken in acts of cruelty is *not* beneficial, or is *less* beneficial. Or perhaps pleasure is of diminishing benefit if it occurs in a life bereft of knowledge, achievement, and virtue. Or perhaps spikes of intense pleasure cannot fully compensate for brief episodes of truly excruciating pain. Or perhaps a high amount of pleasure packed into a very short life would be less good than the same amount of pleasure spread over a long life.

Thoughts such as these suggest that longer temporal intervals may have explanatory priority when it comes to personal well-being. Since some of the contextual features that may alter the value of a particular episode are properties of whole lives, it may be thought that the value of a life has explanatory priority. Such *lifetime well-being holism* amounts to the rejection of both (a) the explanatory priority of momentary well-being and (b) moment internalism. The value of a moment, on this view, derives from the contribution that moment makes to lifetime well-being. This view, favored by Kauppinen (2012 374-5) among others, does not require the rejection of Feldman’s framework of basic intrinsic value states – the basics are just very large.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kauppinen defines the value of a moment or time for a person as how non-instrumentally valuable the moment would be for them *if it were considered in isolation from the rest of her life* (347). It seems better to say that this is the *virtual* non-instrumental value of the moment or time for the person, while its *actual* non-

Similarly, it does not require abandoning (c) neutrality about the order of episodes when it comes to aggregation. Once the non-instrumental values of moments are correctly calculated by looking first at their place in the entire life, their values may sum to equal the value of the life.

The idea that the whole has explanatory priority is one way to go. But there are also more moderate forms of holism. On such views, *some* basics are momentary occurrences whose values are entirely internal to them and beyond the threat of alteration or obliteration. The values of conjunctions of these (and only these) states might be perfectly summative. However, there are *other* basics whose values supervene on their relational properties (cf. Dorsey 2015 325). This form of holism is compatible with (c), so long as we calculate the values of moments or times in full view of their relational properties.<sup>6</sup>

As noted earlier, there is another form of holism, adopted by Velleman, that involves the rejection of (a) and (c), but not of (b). On this view, which we can call *organic well-being holism*, when it comes to calculating the value of a whole life, features that have no bearing on the value of its moments become important. This form of holism closely resembles Moore's organic unity doctrine: the parts (here, the *moments*) of a life have specific, determinant values, but there is no simple function that takes one from the values of these parts to the value of the whole. This view has some important considerations in its favor. It does not imply, as versions of lifetime well-being holism and moderate well-being holism may, that we cannot specify the value for a person of a moment or an interval of time without waiting to see how their whole life turns out. Additionally, it avoids the strange idea that future events can affect one's current momentary well-being. Still, it is somewhat mysterious why well-being at a time and well-being over time would be as disconnected as Velleman proposes.

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instrumental value derives from the contribution that it makes to the whole (i.e., is equal to its *contributory value*, as Kauppinen defines this term) (cf. Zimmerman 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Another form of moderate holism might accept (b) but qualify (a), saying that there are *some* basics that are non-momentary phenomena; these basics do not have an impact on momentary well-being, but *do* have an impact the values of longer stretches of time, up to and including whole lives. This form of holism could be compatible with (c), provided that, when aggregating, we included all the temporal intervals necessary to capture the extant basics within a given time-frame.

Ought we to accept one of these forms of holism? Here, axiological considerations are decisive. We must ask: does the true account of well-being require us to recognize value-conferring or value-transforming relations that would mandate some such approach? The remainder of this article presents and discusses several such relations that have been mentioned by holists. It does not discuss every possible variant of holism, and space-constraints prohibit the thorough evaluation of any particular proposal.

### A. Temporal Order

Brentano was an early advocate of the importance of temporal order and his principle of *bonum progressionis* states that processes that go from bad to good are better than processes that go from good to good, which are themselves better than those that go from good to bad (1973 196-7). As mentioned above, Joshua Glasgow and F. M. Kamm also hold that going from high to low levels of momentary well-being is non-instrumentally bad, and that going from low to high levels of momentary well-being is non-instrumentally good. Relatedly, it was noted that Michael Slote holds that later-occurring goods have enhanced value, so that their value is greater than goods occurring earlier in life.

Dorsey has raised some difficult questions for these views (2015). Against Slote, if we consider a smaller time-frame – e.g., a single weekend – it does not seem reasonable to hold that later goods have enhanced value. So why, Dorsey asks, should later goods have enhanced value when it comes to an entire life? With respect to the more traditional view shared by Brentano, Glasgow, and Kamm, Dorsey points out that it seems to matter how the high levels of well-being are generated: if a life contains no bads, and the only goods it contains are sensory pleasures generated by an experience machine, it is not clear that diminution is any worse than improvement (cf. Kauppinen 2012). This suggests that the *bonum progressionis* principle is too broad. Additionally, Dorsey says, suppose we restrict our attention to two lives that are overall quite good for those who live them. Suppose that momentary well-being rarely dips low in either of these lives. Suppose, though, that the first life features modest improvement in

momentary well-being, while the second features modest decline. If the view endorsed by Brentano, Glasgow, and Kamm were true, there would be reason to prefer the first over the second from the prudential point of view. It is not clear, however, that there is such reason. If this is correct, the general principle needs to be weakened or adjusted.

## **B. Other Temporal Patterns**

Additional questions arise concerning other temporal patterns. These questions can be illustrated using a hedonistic axiology, but they arise for many other axiologies, too.

First, it does not seem prudentially irrational to prefer a life that steadily delivers medium-grade pleasures over a life of wild oscillations (i.e., a series of intense pleasures and intense pains), even if this second life features a greater sum-total of pleasure. Indeed, it does not seem irrational to seek to avoid pain, altogether. Suppose one life involves 1,000 “hedons” and 0 “dolors,” while a second life include 1,011 “hedons” and 10 “dolors.” Is it not rational to prefer the first, and for entirely self-interested reasons? If so, then (a) must be qualified, and either (b) or (c) must be false.

Or consider two lives, the first of which generates 10,000 “hedons” overall, and the second of which generates 10,010 “hedons.” Suppose, however, that the first lasts for 75 years and culminates with a peak experience of high-intensity pleasure, while the second lasts for 100 years and includes no such peak, but rather an even amount of pleasure. If it is rational to prefer the first of these lives over the second, then perhaps a life with a higher peak amount of positive value at a time is preferable. Or perhaps we should aggregate well-being over time by applying an analogue of Daniel Kahneman’s “peak-end rule,” which does seem to fit how people evaluate certain experiences. In either case, again (a) must be qualified, and either (b) or (c) must be rejected.

Yet another possibility is that longevity provides diminishing benefits beyond a certain point. This idea fits naturally with the view that there is an ideal *length* of a human life, perhaps around 85 years (cf. Harris 1985). This view could be worked out in a number of ways. We



might say that, if one dies before 85, the value of one's life is diminished in proportion to the earliness of one's death. Simultaneously, we might hold that, though it is not positively dis-valuable to live past this ideal stopping point, the value of positive experiences that occur after this point ought to be discounted. A main problem with this and similar views is the apparent arbitrariness involved in specifying an ideal length. Still, it does capture the idea that there is something especially tragic about early deaths, no matter how much pleasure, satisfaction, and achievement they contain.

On the other hand, there is the "James Dean effect" (Diener, Wirtz, and Oishi 2009 157). Many people judge that a triumphal life can actually be made *worse* by the addition of years of positive but mediocre value. The early years of James Dean's life, for example, were full of early achievement, aesthetic excellence, and enjoyment. Some people judge that his early death was *better for him* than, e.g., a normal-length life where he made B-movies and performed in Las Vegas nightclubs would have been. If this is true, it again suggests that either (b) or (c) is false.

However, Bradley points out that this assessment of Dean's life is inconsistent with the "Difference-Making Principle," which states that the value of an event for a person is equal to the difference between the value of the person's life had the event occurred, and the value of the person's life had the event *not* occurred (i.e., the value of the person's life in the nearest – and most relevant – possible world where the event does not occur) (Bradley 2009 159-160). Bradley suggests that those who believe in the James Dean effect are misled by their aesthetic intuitions: "Dean's actual life makes for a better story than the imagined longer life, but this clearly has nothing to do with whether it is a better life *for him*" (160).

### **C. Balancing**

Balancing holism requires a pluralistic account of the basic bearers of intrinsic value. Brentano affirms a simple version of this view. His principle of *bonum variationis* states that it is better to combine two dissimilar goods than to combine two similar goods – so that (assuming perfect comparability of goods) it is better for one's life to contain  $n$  units of pleasure,  $n$  units of

knowledge, and  $n$  units of achievement, than for it to contain  $3n$  units of pleasure, alone. Thomas Hurka's perfectionism, if interpreted as a theory of well-being, is also a form of balancing holism. Hurka writes: "Even if our individual accomplishments are not great, their proportion can mirror that of Renaissance lives, and for many of us this proportion is, other things equal, a good" (88). A life characterized by over-specialization or narrowness (in knowledge or activity) is less good, Hurka holds, than a life of otherwise equal achievement that is better-rounded (cf. Kauppinen 2012). It seems natural for pluralists about the basic bearers of prudential value to incorporate balancing holism into their axiology; many of the same thoughts that motivate pluralism also motivate balancing.

#### D. Narrative Relations

Alasdair MacIntyre was one of the first to affirm the importance of narrative relations: "What is better or worse for X depends upon the character of that intelligible narrative which provides X's life with its unity" (1981 209). However, there are several importantly different ways of fleshing out MacIntyre's insight.

One idea is that the more one invests in a goal, the more its achievement contributes to one's well-being. According to Portmore, the cost of goals enhances the value of their achievement and the disvalue of their failure (2007). As he puts it: "The redemption of one's self-sacrifices in itself contributes to one's well-being – the closer that one's self-sacrifices come to being fully redeemed, the greater the contribution their redemption makes to one's well-being" (13).

Kauppinen develops another approach (2012, 2015). One determinant of the prudential value of a life, according to Kauppinen, is *meaningfulness*, which has to do with a life's degree of purpose, direction, and depth (2012 352). A life is meaningful in virtue of the fact that (and to the degree that) it objectively warrants pride, joy, self-esteem, fulfillment, and elevation on the part of the agent, and admiration and inspiration on the part of others (353). But the degree to which a life objectively warrants these feelings is determined not only by the objective value of

its projects and the degree to which the agent is suited to them and engaged by them, but also by the degree to which these projects add up to a balanced and coherent whole (2012 346).<sup>7</sup> For this reason, it is directly valuable when certain narratable relations obtain among the events that constitute one's life (2015 §2).

It is important to note that, for Kauppinen, "coherence ... is not based on any kind of story, true or fabricated, that the individual herself tells of her life, but on the strictly factual connection between earlier and later activities" (369). By contrast, for Rosati, the sense-making stories that we actually tell about our lives make a difference to their value.

### **E. Consistency, Coherence, and Practical Agency**

Some who accept conative theories of well-being such as desire-satisfactionism, aim-achievementism, or the values-realization theory believe that relations among an agent's desires, aims, or values are important when it comes to estimating well-being. Jason Raibley (2012) argues that it is bad for a person to have inconsistent aims or values, either at a time or over time. At least, the realization of several values that are at odds with one another does not make the same contribution to a person's well-being at a time (or over time) that the realization of the same individual values would if such conflict were absent. On his view, this is explained by the fact that well-being of an adult human person is largely determined by the degree to which he or she is functioning as a rational agent. Robust agential functioning requires synchronically and diachronically consistent values.

Kauppinen defends a similar view: the value of a series of achievements is enhanced when these achievements complement and build on one another (especially when later activities are "positively informed" by earlier ones), while the value of a series of achievements

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<sup>7</sup> Kauppinen has recently stream-lined his view, arguing that the value of events "is a multiple of three factors: their positive or negative causal contribution to the agent's present or future goals, the value of those goals, and the degree to which success in achieving a goal is deserved in virtue of exercising agential capacities" (2015).

should be discounted if they are radically disconnected from one another, so that they have nothing at all to do with one another (Kauppinen 2012 366-8).

These theorists also argue that the epistemic processes that determine how desires, aims, or values are selected, modified, pursued, and sometimes rejected ought to exhibit certain features. Raibley argues that it is best for a person when modifications of conative states are governed by epistemically reliable processes, so that the modifications are appropriate, given the actual features of the world, the agent's own abilities, and the agent's affective nature. Kauppinen similarly emphasizes the importance of "intelligent revision of original plans in response to negative feedback" (2012 361). Valerie Tiberius details various dimensions of practical wisdom or intelligence that are arguably non-instrumentally beneficial when exemplified (Tiberius 2008).

Atomistic conative theorists will of course insist that the "output" is all that matters: if an agent has inconsistent or disconnected desires, aims, or values, this will likely result in less satisfaction or achievement, overall. Similarly, if the agent is practically irrational or unwise, this will likely diminish their lifetime sum of desire-fulfillment or value-realization. Holists insist, though, that lives characterized by internal conflicts, disconnection, or by practical irrationality are less good simply in virtue of these facts, even in those rare cases where these features do *not* diminish sum-total satisfaction or achievement.

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