

THE NORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF TEMPORAL WELL-BEING

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Most well-being theorists maintain that not only can a person have a life that is good for her, but she can also be well off at a moment or for some more or less extended period of time; she can thus have *temporal well-being* and *lifetime well-being*.¹ In *The Passing of Temporal Well-Being*, Ben Bramble argues against the widespread view that well-being comes in “kinds or levels” (Bramble 2018, 1). The only genuine well-being, he maintains, is lifetime well-being. He offers two arguments in support of his position: (1) the Normative Significance Argument (NSA) and (2) the No-Credible Theory Argument. Although Bramble regards both arguments as important to making his case, the NSA strikes me as the more critical of the two. For if temporal well-being lacks normative significance, it can have no bearing on what we have reason to do, for ourselves or for others, and no bearing on our moral obligations or efforts to construct effective public policy. It therefore couldn’t play anything like the role we ordinarily take well-being to play in our lives and in our normative theorizing and decision-making.

In my view, Bramble’s NSA does not succeed, and seeing why may be instructive for future theorizing about well-being. In particular, it may help us to see that questions about the existence of and relation between temporal and lifetime well-being would be better addressed in light of a clearer view of the principal ingredients of well-being or personal good and, thereby, a better understanding of what would make either a life or a period within it good for a person.² With this understanding, we can begin to see why lifetime well-being cannot be, as Bramble claims, “singularly normatively significant.”

1 The Normative Significance Argument

Bramble says somewhat different things about temporal well-being. He argues, via the Normative Significance Argument (NSA), that it lacks *intrinsic* normative significance. This would seem to allow that temporal

¹ Bramble (2018, 1) explains that some use the label “temporal well-being” to encompass both “momentary” and “periodic” well-being. I shall herein use the label “temporal well-being” to encompass both momentary and periodic well-being, though when I use it, I usually have periodic well-being in mind.

² I prefer the term ‘personal good’ to ‘well-being’ when referring to the good of persons. Herein, I use them interchangeably.

well-being might exist; it would just lack the normative significance theorists have taken it to have. As he remarks at one point,

It is important to note that my claim here is not that temporal well-being, if it were to exist, could not have normative significance for us. . . . It is just that this significance could not be *intrinsic*. It could have normative significance for us only to the extent that it happened to bear on our lifetime well-being. It would not be worth promoting or seeking for its own sake, or independently of such implications. (Bramble 2018, 15)

He also denies its existence and claims to be offering an error theory about temporal well-being (15). These claims can be reconciled, of course. What Bramble means to deny is the existence of a period of well-being *shorter than a lifetime* that has the normative significance that well-being theorists think it has—or at least that Bramble thinks it would have to have. Only lifetime well-being has that.

What is that normative significance? Bramble explains it and begins his argument by distinguishing between the genuine well-being that persons (and perhaps other sentient beings have) and the merely metaphorical well-being of cars and trees. Genuine well-being has two features that constitute its normative significance. First, it matters intrinsically, in that it makes things better *simpliciter*: “One way to make things better simpliciter is to make them better for some being or beings” (Bramble 2018, 14). Second, it serves as a source (or ground) of reasons for action, whether these reasons are agent-neutral, applying to all agents irrespective of their particular desires and concerns, or agent-relative, applying to particular individuals because of their particular interests and concerns. Bramble goes on to argue that only lifetime well-being has these features, so only lifetime well-being has normative significance.

The second feature I take to be relatively uncontroversial, with disagreements focused on whether well-being provides agent-neutral or only agent-relative reasons. The first, however, is more controversial than Bramble acknowledges. Philosophers such as Judith Thomson have denied the existence of good or value simpliciter, insisting that things can only be good for or good in a way (Thomson 2001). Some would argue that well-being or personal good has normative significance independently of the relationship between good-for and good simpliciter (Rosati 2008 and Rosati forthcoming). What we say about the normativity of well-being might make a difference to what we should conclude about the relative normative significance of temporal and lifetime well-being, but Bramble doesn’t consider this possibility. Let us grant his characterization of the normative significance of genuine well-being, however, and focus on deeper problems with Bramble’s argument.

The NSA, as presented thus far, is seriously incomplete. Consider the steps of the argument.

1. *The Significance of Genuine Well-Being* (SNOG): Genuine well-being both matters intrinsically, or makes things better, and provides reasons for action.
2. *The Singular Significance of Lifetime Well-Being* (SSLW): Only lifetime well-being matters intrinsically and provides reasons for action.
3. Therefore, only lifetime well-being is genuine well-being.

Whether the argument can succeed depends on what support can be given for the critical second premise. Bramble offers a number of arguments for SSLW, but as I will explain, these arguments don't seem to provide the needed support.

2 Arguments for SSLW

According to Bramble's first argument for SSLW, "the crib argument," in looking down at our newborns, we want things to go as well for them as they possibly could (Bramble 2018, 16). The object of our desire when we do so, he claims, is their lives "considered as a whole." Insofar as we might contemplate periods of our newborns' lives, such as their teenage or college years, we contemplate these, he maintains, only for their implications for our newborns' lives as a whole. We do not want them *both* to have a happy childhood and good life as a whole, thereby double counting their happy childhood as a matter of temporal well-being and as a matter of lifetime well-being.

Leave this final point to one side; I'll return to it shortly. The crib argument may accurately report Bramble's thoughts in regard to his newborn. Perhaps others share his thoughts, but even if all new parents thought about their newborns in this way, that would hardly show that there is no such thing as temporal well-being, that only lifetime well-being has normative significance. Nothing follows about the *nature* of well-being just from how we *think* about the well-being of our offspring; and so nothing follows about the *existence and normative significance* of temporal versus lifetime well-being from how we *think* about their well-being. Perhaps Bramble just means for this argument to test our intuitions, but intuitions differ and, in any case, cannot alone establish metaphysical claims.

In his "historical figures argument," Bramble focuses on our debates regarding whether historical figures, such as Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, or Martin Luther King, Jr., had fortunate lives and who among them had the most fortunate life (Bramble 2018, 16). He contends that in making our evaluations, we do not consider their lives as a whole, and then add to our estimates of the fortunateness of their whole lives the fortunateness of the various periods within those lives. Insofar as we may talk about good

or bad periods in their lives, our interest in doing so lies only with their implications for lifetime well-being.

I can't recall ever engaging in such debates, and certainly not debates as to which historical figure had the *most* fortunate life. I doubt that we can sensibly or meaningfully speak of the "most" fortunate life. But leaving those doubts aside, notice that the historical figures argument has the same basic structure as the crib argument. The arguments first claim that we are really interested in the lifetime well-being of newborns or historical figures; it then acknowledges that we do, in fact, think about and evaluate as good or bad different periods of individuals' lives, but then contends that we are interested in the good or bad of periods of lives only because of their bearing on lifetime well-being. But how exactly could they have a bearing on lifetime well-being if they are not themselves intrinsically normatively significant? The years an individual spends, say, in a happy marriage are not *instrumental* to achieving lifetime well-being. They might be partly *constitutive* of her living a life that is good for her. But it is puzzling how they could be so constitutive without themselves having intrinsic normative significance. It would have been helpful to hear more from Bramble about the sense in which the apparent goodness or badness of a period of an individual's life "bears on" her lifetime well-being.

Bramble also contends in both arguments that we would have to be engaged in double counting if we were to consider both periods of well-being and lifetime well-being in making our assessments of the goodness of a life for the individual. This suggests that when those who believe in the normative significance of temporal and lifetime well-being consider both a period of years and a person's life as a whole, they must then sum up the respective temporal and lifetime well-beings to determine her lifetime well-being, which would indeed be double counting. But I doubt that this is what goes on when we consider both periods of well-being and lifetime well-being. When we consider them, we focus on distinct objects of normative assessment, and in so doing, we needn't be committed to a particular view about the precise relationship between them. Of course, many well-being theorists would contend that temporal well-being "bears on" lifetime well-being because lifetime well-being is made up of our well-being over the various periods of our lives. Bramble denies this, but I don't see how those who accept it, or anyone else who thinks temporal well-being has intrinsic normative significance, could reasonably be accused of double counting.

Those who do maintain that lifetime well-being is made up of temporal well-being would, for related reasons, also reject Bramble's third, "too much well-being argument." According to the latter argument, "if temporal well-being contributed to overall fortunateness independently of its contribution to lifetime well-being, then most of us would up with far more well-being than is plausible" (Bramble 2018, 17). Those who take lifetime well-being to be composed of temporal well-being would not maintain that the later

contributes to “overall fortunateness” independently of its contribution to lifetime well-being. Rather, they would likely point out that temporal well-being contributes to lifetime well-being, and “overall fortunateness” is just lifetime well-being by another name.

Bramble’s “merely momentary misfortunes argument” appeals to an idea defended, perhaps most strikingly, by David Velleman, that even though momentary misfortunes are bad for a person when they occur, they might not reduce lifetime-well-being if they are redeemed by later choices or events (Bramble 2018, 17–18; Velleman 1991). According to Bramble, if this is true, then we should not mind or regret the occurrence of such misfortunes, nor should we dread their future occurrence. Velleman’s claim implies, Bramble says, that these misfortunes are “intrinsically normatively insignificant” (Bramble 2018, 18).

I’m not certain why Bramble thinks Velleman’s claim implies this. Indeed, the alleged implication is inconsistent with both Velleman’s claim that such misfortunes are bad when they occur *and* that they would require something like redemption so as not to reduce lifetime well-being. As a conceptual matter, something with no intrinsic normative significance could neither be redeemed nor stand in need of redemption. Velleman’s overarching theme, in “Well-Being and Time,” is that there are distinct dimensions of well-being—synchronic and diachronic—neither of which is reducible to the other and each of which matters. And a critical part of Velleman’s view is that diachronic well-being is not additive, contrary to what many well-being theorists suppose. To claim that a misfortunate can be redeemed and, thereby, “cancelled out” so that it does not reduce *diachronic* well-being, is not to claim that it didn’t have the *synchronic* badness that it did. Considered in context, Velleman’s claim about momentary misfortunes does not imply that they are not intrinsically normatively significant.

In the “trade-offs argument,” Bramble asks us to consider what one might do if one had the option of making a particular period of one’s life much better at the cost of reducing one’s lifetime well-being.

Imagine, for example, that one could make the final stage or period of one’s life much more physically comfortable, but only by doing something that would compromise a key mission or project of one’s life—say, by taking a drug whose use one has opposed for most of one’s life or by cashing in on a scheme or scam one has lobbied hard against. (Bramble 2018, 19)

Bramble maintains that, intuitively, one has most self-interested reason not to make the trade-off: to opt instead for a higher level of lifetime well-being. But if temporal well-being had intrinsic normative significance, he contends, there should be some such trade-off that would make decreasing one’s lifetime well-being worth it.

The example Bramble employs, however, does not really establish what he intends it to. Notice first that the example involves a trade-off between physical comfort during the final period of one's life and a key mission or life-project. Insofar as most of us would not make the trade-off, that fact is explicable for reasons that plausibly have nothing to do with maximizing lifetime well-being. The good of persons, or human agents, consists not only in physical comfort but in a variety of undertakings, commitments, and projects that come to form a part of our identity and our sense of what gives our lives meaning. Except perhaps in the case of inescapable excruciating pain, there is ordinarily not much contest between those elements of our well-being that do not bear on our sense of who we are and what our lives are about and those that do. Notice, too, that the trade-off really concerns, not time periods (less-than-a-lifetime versus a lifetime), but rather those *goods* that make our lives go well, both at a time and over time. Partly for the reasons already given, these goods are not simply interchangeable in their importance to us.

These considerations seem to count not only against Bramble's trade-offs argument, but also against his "many additional moments argument," which seems to be a variation on the too-much-well-being argument. According to the many additional moments argument, if temporal well-being were intrinsically normatively significant, then we could simply increase a person's overall well-being by adding, say, additional pleasant moments. But it is doubtful, he claims, that doing so "would add much . . . to one's overall fortunateness" (Bramble 2018, 20).

Hedonists would be unlikely to share Bramble's doubts, but those who are not hedonists would have ways of explaining why adding such moments wouldn't add much, without drawing Bramble's conclusion that lifetime well-being has singular normative significance. Consider again the differences among those goods that make our lives go well. The greatest contributors to our well-being are plausibly those commitments and projects in which we are most invested and around which our lives are centered. Adding mere moments of pleasure may not do much to increase one's overall fortunateness, but adding, say, the moments necessary to complete the final paragraph of one's most important work in philosophy surely would. Considerations like these suggest that what we say about temporal versus lifetime well-being depends crucially on how we answer our most fundamental questions about personal good. These questions concern the various kinds of goods that make our lives go well: their structure, relative importance, and varied contribution to our living well.

In his final argument for SSLW, "the need for a unified account," Bramble contends that if lifetime and temporal well-being each had intrinsic normative significance, we would face the problem of deciding rationally between what we had most self-interested reason to do from the standpoint of lifetime well-being and what we had most self-interested reason to do

from the standpoint of temporal well-being (Bramble 2018, 19). But to decide between them, we would need a common currency; it is hard, Bramble says, to see what it might be. This is a problem because (it seems) “there is always (or, at least, usually) a fact of the matter about what we have most self-interested reason to do” (Bramble 2018, 19). Bramble concludes that “to avoid this sort of dualism about prudential reason, we need to posit a single, ultimate source of self-interested reasons, and this should be lifetime well-being” (Bramble 2018, 20).

The difficulty here is that even if Bramble is right that lifetime well-being is in some sense the ultimate source of self-interested reasons, he doesn’t show that temporal well-being does not provide self-interested reasons. On the contrary, the self-interested reasons lifetime well-being provides arguably derive from the components of lifetime well-being, as suitably selected and coordinated.

3 Why Lifetime Well-being Cannot Be Singularly Normatively Significant

I have argued thus far that Bramble’s arguments in support of SSLW fail to support his claim that only lifetime well-being is intrinsically normatively significant. In addition, I have intimated in addressing Bramble’s tradeoffs argument that we need to look more closely at those goods for persons that make a period of time and a life as a whole go well. I want to briefly consider our talk about temporal well-being and the goods and bads that figure in our talk. Doing so will help us to see why lifetime well-being cannot be singularly normatively significant.

People commonly talk about having had a good (or bad) moment, a good (or bad) day, or a good (or bad) year or more extended period of time. People also commonly talk about having had a good (or bad), happy (or unhappy) life. Our everyday talk thus seems to distinguish between how we are faring for shorter or longer periods of time and how well our lives as a whole have gone for us.

What do we register when we talk in these ways? I believe that our talk about good and bad periods of a life does not rest on an error, and the goodness or badness of periods of our lives have intrinsic normative significance quite apart from their contribution to lifetime well-being. Temporal well-being has intrinsic normative significance and for the same reasons that lifetime well-being has intrinsic normative significance.

Think first about the sorts of things we ordinarily have in mind when we say that we have had a bad day. An ordinary day may have various annoyances, upsets, or disappointments: a misunderstanding or quarrel, a bent fender, an allergic reaction, a temporary setback of some project or plan, all can make for a bad day. This is unsurprising; we all need, more or less, to feel connected, understood, cared for, and appreciated; we all need

to feel we are making progress in our projects and endeavors; and we all dislike inconveniences and other minor irritants.

Still, in the vast scheme of our lives, the occasional bad day seems to be of little consequence, partly because such days can be of real instrumental value. We learn through our mistakes, upsets, and disappointments, and doing so helps us to grow and improve our relationships, our work, and our lives. These instrumental benefits, along with the expected intrinsic benefits they bring, can seem to offset any intrinsic badness. One indicator that such days are of little consequence is that, lessons learned, we tend to forget them or at least cease to think about them. But even if bad days may seem to lack intrinsic normative significance, they don't always, and in any case, their general lack of normative significance would not itself show that the notion of temporal well-being is incoherent or otherwise problematic. To the extent that bad days lack or have at least some intrinsic normative significance, that would be because of the sorts of things that tend to make for what we call a day bad.

Something different seems to be going on when we talk about a bad period of time, when we remark that we've had a difficult year, or gone through a rough patch in our lives. Such periods, particularly the more extended ones, tend to be marked by more or less major loss or upset, by the absence of important goods, by adverse conditions, by difficult struggles, or by significant setbacks in our efforts to pursue or attain what we value most.

Those things that make a period of time especially bad for us are some of the worst things that can happen to us, and these stand to affect the quality of our lives over the course of months and years. When it comes to, for example, losing a loved one through death, divorce, or separation, losing a job or experiencing extended unemployment, being physically or emotionally abused, suffering from a debilitating illness or injury, being falsely imprisoned, being an innocent caught up in a war zone or a violent uprising or a genocide—it would be infelicitous, to say the least, to talk about the day on which these occurred or commenced as a bad day. It would sound beyond strange, for example, to say, "I had a bad day yesterday, my child died." To be sure, a person might well describe the day on which her child died as "the worst day of my life." And we might mark the beginning of the worst losses and hardships by describing it as the "day it all started." These points aside, part of what we seem to convey when we say that we had a bad day as opposed to a bad period of time is that the bad was pretty much confined to that day.

In contrast, the effects of the worst things tend to be pervasive and long lasting, if not always permanent, and these effects are an indicator of the importance to our well-being of what was lost or adversely impacted. Periods marked by the worst things seem genuinely bad for us, just considered in themselves, apart from any instrumental value they might have, and apart from their bearing on the welfare value of our lives as a whole. I

have reason to prevent the death of my child and to mourn her loss for no further reason, and the death of my child makes things worse, not only for me, but worse simpliciter. This seems so even when, as Velleman puts it, a later part of our life “redeems” an earlier period, or even when that earlier period leads to valuable development (Velleman 1991).

Just consider the counterintuitive consequences of denying this. We would be forced to say, for example, that Larry Becker’s time spent in an iron lung due to polio, John McCain’s years as a prisoner of war, and Harriet Tubman’s and Frederick Douglass’s years of enslavement were all without intrinsic normative significance.³ In my view, it strains credulity to believe that those years had normative significance only in relation to Becker’s, McCain’s, Tubman’s, and Douglass’s lifetime well-being. Surely the badness of people’s experience with polio provided urgent reasons to find a polio vaccine, not just because having polio and the paralysis it sometimes left in its wake would decrease lifetime well-being, but also because of the intrinsic badness of the affliction itself. Surely the awfulness of McCain and other service members’ abuse as prisoners of war provided the military with urgent reasons to secure their release, not just because time spent in those conditions would decrease their lifetime well-being, but also because of the intrinsic badness of existence in those conditions. Surely the horrors of slavery provided reasons for everyone, not just abolitionists and the enslaved themselves, to fight to eliminate slavery, and not just because a period of enslavement reduces lifetime well-being, but also because of the intrinsic badness of enslavement.

Suppose that we conduct an *Isolation Test*. Imagine a period of time in a life, with all its experiences, events, pursuits, endeavors, gains, and losses, and consider whether that period is one that we would choose for someone we loved—or choose for anyone—from a standpoint in which we fully appreciated his or her value as a person. Would we choose Becker’s affliction with polio? Would we choose McCain’s years in a Hanoi prison? Would we choose Tubman’s or Douglass’s early years of abuse and subjugation? Perhaps, if the only alternative was nonexistence, but set that consideration aside. Would we be inclined to withhold judgment until we knew whether these years decreased that person’s lifetime well-being? I think it obvious that we would not choose these years for these persons, and that we would, without a moment’s hesitation, judge those years bad. Bramble might suggest that we wouldn’t hesitate, but only because we consider the implications these years have for lifetime well-being, reasonably judging that such years couldn’t help but negatively affect lifetime well-being (See Bramble 2018, 22); however, this strikes me as a much less plausible explanation of why we wouldn’t hesitate than the fact that we recognize straightaway the badness of these years for the persons involved.

³ Larry Becker (1939–2018), Professor of Philosophy, College of William and Mary; John McCain (1936–2018), U.S. Senator, Arizona; Douglass 2015; Clinton 2004.

If we learned that those years in some way contributed to greater lifetime well-being, would this alter our view that those years were intrinsically bad for them? We might hold, like Velleman, that subsequent events in a life can alter the significance of earlier events, thereby affecting lifetime well-being. We also can, like Velleman, believe this without mistakenly judging that what happened during these years was not bad after all, that it had no intrinsic normative significance. Even when we views those bad years in terms of how they contributed to lifetime well-being, thereby recognizing their instrumental or contributory value, we hardly give up the view that they were intrinsically bad years.

Suppose that we next conduct a *Winnowing Test* to remove the chaff, so to speak. We, in effect, think about what is or isn't wholesome in a period of time in a person's life. Which events, experiences, struggles, or losses would we remove? We would probably not focus on those day-to-day irritations and annoyances. Instead, our focus would be on those events and happenings that sharply limit our freedom to move and plan and reasonably pursue our aims and interests at will, deprivation or disruption of intimate relationships, conditions of degradation and dehumanization, and the thwarting of efforts at intellectual, physical, and emotional development. Given this focus, wouldn't we remove a great many things from Tubman's and Douglass's lives? And wouldn't we do so *on account of the badness of those things* and *for Tubman's and Douglass's sakes*?⁴ If we were to learn that those early years contributed to a higher level of lifetime well-being than Tubman or Douglass would otherwise have experienced, would that alter our winnowing? If we could, say, prevent the infant Douglass from being taken from his mother, being enslaved, and suffering the other horrors and deprivations that he did, would we now decline to do so on the grounds that we would thereby be lowering his lifetime well-being? Suppose we were to learn that Douglass's lifetime well-being would have been the same, with or without those early years, perhaps because even though without them he would have avoided the lows, he wouldn't have had the same highs. Would we now be indifferent as between the two lives for Douglass, the life with and the life without those early horrors?⁵

These questions (and what I suspect would be the answers most of us would give to them) seem to suggest a basic problem for whole-life welfarism and for efforts to deny the coherence and intrinsic normative significance of temporal well-being. If we can reasonably treat tests like Isolation and Winnowing as rough heuristics, then I think our reflection on these questions suggests that what matters is not duration, whether a period is shorter than a lifetime or an entire lifetime, but the *content* of a period of

⁴ On Darwall's (2002) view, this would be from a perspective of care or concern for the individuals involved.

⁵ Of course, some might resist because they doubt that there could be equal lifetime well-being in the two lives. See, for example, Feldman 2004, but that is just to reject the hypothetical. I share what I think would be sensible reasons for suspicion and discuss this shortly.

time: the sorts of experiences, events, pursuits, endeavors, absences, gains, or losses it contains.

Of course, *when* these occur matters as well. Some things are, other things equal, just worse for a child than for an adult, such as losing a parent. In addition, when these occur matters given the natural course of human development and the effects of early events, experiences, and conditions on development of the emotional, intellectual, and physical capacities that enable us to live the lives of persons—of well-functioning autonomous agents. The badness of an early period in life can have an outsized effect on lifetime well-being, depending on what happens during that period. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to think that what happened during that period itself has intrinsic normative significance.

What is normative significance, and more specifically, what is normative significance when it comes to personal good? I have been assuming Bramble's view of intrinsic normative significance. And I have not depended on any particular theory of well-being or personal good. On the view that I favor, the "rational fit" theory of welfare, a putative welfare object, *O*, is among the things that could be (directly or "intrinsically") good for a person, *P*, when *O* *rationally fits* or *suits* *P*. And *O* rationally fits *P* just in case

- (1) *O* is within the capacity of *P* to do or pursue or experience, as well as to desire or care about *for P's own sake*, and
- (2) Doing or pursuing or experiencing *O* is compatible with preserving the features or capacities in virtue of which *P* is valuable, and so preserving *P* as the valuable creature that she is.

Those objects that are good for *P*—that satisfy (1) and (2)—are among her possible goods. *P*'s actual good in her particular circumstances, where this includes a certain time, consists in those among her possible goods that she would choose.

GF_p: *O* is good for *P* in *C* just in case *O* rationally fits *P* and *P* does or would choose to do or pursue or experience *O* in *C*, if *P* were aware of *O* as one among her available options.⁶

According to the rational fit theory, the normativity of facts about what is good for a person derive from certain objects bearing the right relation to a valuable being. Reasons of personal good are reasons given by these normative facts.

Without attempting to offer a full account of normative significance, I think that we should agree at least this much with how Bramble characterizes it: the normative significance of something lies in whether it gives us reasons for attitude and action and whether, by giving us these reasons, it is

⁶ For more discussion of the rational fit theory, see [Rosati forthcoming](#). See also [Rosati 2006, 2008](#).

action-guiding. That periods of time in a life have intrinsic normative significance is evidenced by our efforts to prevent the sorts of losses, adversities, events, and experiences that lead us reasonably to regard some periods as bad, and where such things occur, to mitigate their effects—all of which we surely have *pro tanto* reason to do. At least under favorable conditions, we attend to our children's development, we take care to avoid accident and injury, we take out insurance against the unforeseen. Where matters are beyond our control and bad things happen, we seek out counseling or join bereavement groups, or take what means are available to limit the damage or, if possible, escape the bad.

4 The Ingredients of Personal Good

I'm inclined to think that despite our talk of good and bad days or periods, it is not especially helpful to think in terms of temporal well-being and its relationship to lifetime well-being, at least in the way that some may have in mind. What matters is the content and shape of our lives over time, and what shape our lives take and how satisfying our lives are is largely a function of our nature and the kinds of goods that tend to figure in our lives. The goods that make a stretch of time good for us are essentially the same goods that make for good lives. I find it mysterious why these goods would be reason-giving in relation to our lives as a whole, but not in relation to the periods in which they occur. We can thus, I maintain, meaningful talk about a good or bad period of time as much as we can talk about a good or bad life.

Begin with our nature. We are *persons*—autonomous agents—and so the content of our good is partly fixed by our choices in response to our circumstances, as we find them and as we might alter them. We set goals for ourselves, immerse ourselves in activities we find rewarding, and try to make ourselves into certain sorts of persons. But we are *human* persons, and so the content of our good is partly fixed and constrained by the biology and psychology distinctive of human beings, and by our biology and psychology as individuals. Our good is partly determined and shaped by certain biological and psychological imperatives. As a result, some goods are, for most human persons, nonfungible.

What do these nonfungible goods include? We might debate the exact list of such goods, and we would need to allow for at least some individual variation. But the list would almost certainly include the following: having a secure sense of self-worth; being treated in ways consonant with our value as persons; personal freedom—to move our bodies at will, to form our own beliefs and identities, to pursue our chosen vocations and avocations; rewarding relationships and connection with others; and engaging in the activities and undertakings that we love. Given our human nature, these goods tend to take more specific forms. For example, all young human persons need the care of adults; most human persons of whatever age need

emotionally and physically intimate relationships; and most human persons long to parent, and for many that longing is for biological children.

I have described goods like these as nonfungible. They might also be described as answering to human needs. I use the term ‘nonfungible,’ though, to make a particular point about them and their relationship to personal good. That is, that they do not have substitutes, even if the lack of them can sometimes be compensated for to some degree. There is no substitute for a committed, romantic relationship with another person. We can fill the void by joining in group activities, cultivating friendships, and so on. But as good as these things may be, they are not the same good, and they are not something that we might just as well have instead. There is no substitute for the experience of raising one’s own child, biological or not. Working with children as a teacher, social worker, or scout leader might fill the void to some degree, but they aren’t a substitute.

In calling certain goods nonfungible, I do not mean to suggest that all of them are equally important to each of us. As I have said, we need to take account of individual variation. Some people don’t want and don’t even like children, much as some people don’t want and don’t like dogs. I do not mean to suggest that persons cannot have a good life without them; they certainly can. For those of us for whom such goods are important, it is a different good life, and we tend not to be indifferent as between these good lives.

Timing is crucially involved in securing many nonfungible goods and in the character of those goods. Obtaining a secure sense of self-worth has to start early, and to a great extent, we depend on others to cultivate it in us, or at least to support rather than subvert its natural development. When we commence our most intimate relationships makes a difference to the character of those relationships. When those relationships commence at an early enough age, our partners will usually know our parents and family members, and so will be able to understand and share certain facets of our lives. More generally, having a shared history with someone makes for a distinctive sort of relationship. For women, safe childbearing years are limited, even with new technologies. And for both men and women, having children at a late age risks missing out on crucial developmental stages as children grow into adults; it may mean not being able to experience and appreciate the individuals they become; and it risks missing out on adult friendships with one’s children. Starting a career late in life generally limits how far one can go with it, and so on.

Some goods in a life, including some of the nonfungible goods, play a crucial role in shaping our lives. Intimate relationships require work and effort, and they present different challenges and rewards as each partner develops as an individual and as the relationship itself undergoes adjustments. When we enter into certain intimate relationships, we are no longer free to simply come and go as we please, at least not if want to have and sustain a successful relationship: major planning is now done together.

Raising children doesn't happen in a moment, it takes time and effort and happens in stages, each of which presents it unique challenges and rewards. When we undertake parenting, it places constraints on our other undertakings, at least insofar as we aim to be successful parents. The same considerations hold with respect to our chief vocations and avocations.

The sorts of goods I have been discussing are the principal constituents of a good life, but they are also the principal constituents of good periods in a life. I am inclined to think that there is really no making sense of lifetime well-being without making sense of temporal well-being, and vice versa. It is hard to see why those same goods would contribute intrinsically to lifetime well-being without contributing intrinsically to well-being for a shorter period of time, why they would contribute to well-being only by contributing to lifetime well-being, why they would have intrinsic normative significance only insofar as they contribute to lifetime well-being. They certainly seem to give us reasons, just by their nature and their importance to us and all along the way.

Suppose that our nature remained essentially the same as it is now, but that we were immortal. The very idea of lifetime well-being, as it concerns human persons, is of the period of time of a human life, something that ends and hence is finite. If we were immortal, we wouldn't have a lifetime in the relevant sense, and if a period of time could be good or bad for us only insofar as it increases or decreases lifetime well-being, then it seems that we would have neither periodic well-being nor lifetime well-being. Heaven and hell—an afterlife in which we would experience happiness or misery for eternity—may be conceptually impossible, but not for this reason. Surely different periods of time in our immortal lives could go better or worse for us, supplying us with reasons for action. Suppose now that imbibing an elixir would allow us to die and so cease being immortal. It seems odd that only then would our well-being have intrinsic normative significance.⁷

Notice that the claim that we cannot make sense of lifetime well-being without making sense of temporal well-being, and vice versa, is not the same as the claim we cannot make sense of lifetime well-being without making sense of temporal well-being because the former is constructed out of the latter. Rather, well-being, whether periodic or lifetime, is constructed out of some basic building blocks, partly given to us by our nature as human persons, and partly invented by us in the exercise of our autonomous agency (Rosati 2006). This is consistent with acknowledging that lifetime well-being, a good *life* for a person, may require something in addition to these building blocks, whether it a compelling narrative arc, or meaningfulness, or something yet different from these.

⁷ For discussion of the desirability of immortality, see Williams 1973 and Rosati 2013.

5 Conclusion

There is real value in proposing and defending what many would take to be a counterintuitive philosophical position, as Bramble has done in his book. Sometimes pressing a counterintuitive view shows the more common view to be quite mistaken; just consider how the Gettier problem undermined a widespread philosophical view about knowledge. Even when a defense of the counterintuitive view fails, considering why it fails may be deeply instructive. I have explained why I believe Bramble's defense of the Singular Significance of Lifetime Well-being, and so the Normative Significance Argument itself, does not succeed. I have also considered problems for SSLW itself. Appreciating why SSLW has these problems allows us to see that we would do better in understanding the nature and structure of a person's good by setting aside the debate about the existence of and relationship between temporal and lifetime well-being. We would do better by focusing on those goods and our relationship to them that make both the periods within our lives and our lives as a whole good for us.

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