

Additive Value and the Shape of a Life*

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Abstract: The shape of a life hypothesis holds that the temporal sequence of good or bad times in a life can itself be a valuable feature of that life. This is generally thought to be incompatible with additivism about lifetime well-being, which holds that lifetime well-being is fully determined by momentary well-being. This discussion examines Dale Dorsey's recent argument that these views are in fact compatible. I argue that accepting the conjunction of these views requires stronger commitments that Dorsey recognises. After arguing that these commitments are problematic, I conclude that we should reject the compatibility claim.

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What is the relation between how well one's life is going at any particular moment and how well one's life goes as a whole? A straightforward answer is as follows: how well one's life goes is fully determined by how well one's life is going at each moment of one's life. More simply: lifetime well-being is fully determined by momentary well-being. Call this thesis the additive view of lifetime well-being. Many take this thesis to be undermined by the significance of the shape of a life. To get a grip on the phenomenon, consider the following example due to Velleman:

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Consider two different lives that you might live. One life begins in the depths but takes an upward trend: a childhood of deprivation, a troubled youth, struggles and setbacks in early adulthood, followed finally by success and satisfaction in middle age and a peaceful retirement. Another life begins at the heights but slides downhill: a blissful childhood and youth, precocious triumphs and rewards in early adulthood, followed by a midlife strewn with disasters that lead to misery in old age.¹

Velleman's idea is that even if both lives contain equal sums of momentary well-being, the 'uphill' life in which momentary well-being increases over time is preferable to the 'downhill' life in which it decreases. Taking this preference at face value, a number of philosophers believe that the 'shape' of a life is itself a valuable feature of one's life.² But this appears to be inconsistent with the additive view, as it seems to identify a determinant of lifetime well-being over and above momentary well-being.

Dale Dorsey has recently argued that this appearance is illusory.³ According to Dorsey, the best explanation of the significance of the shape of a life is compatible with the additive view. The basic idea is that the value of the shape of a life can contribute to lifetime well-being *indirectly* by first contributing to momentary well-being, which is then aggregated to determine lifetime well-being. In this discussion, I argue that while the significance of the shape of a life as such does not entail the falsity of the additive view, there are nonetheless strong reasons for rejecting their conjunction. Specifically, I argue that the shape of a life proponent who wishes to embrace the additive view requires taking on stronger commitments than Dorsey recognises. However, these commitments are implausible. As such, we should reject the compatibility of the two views. Or so I shall argue.

¹ David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," in *Beyond Price: Essays on Life and Death* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), 144.

² See also Frances Kamm, "Rescuing Ivan Ilych: How We Live and How We Die," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 202-233 and Joshua Glasgow, "The Shape of a Life and the Value of Loss and Gain," *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013): 665-682.

³ Dale Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," *Ethics* 125 (2015): 303-330.

Following Dorsey, I understand the shape of a life hypothesis as follows:

(SLH) *Shape of a Life Hypothesis*. The temporal sequence of good and bad times in a life can be a valuable feature of that life as a whole.⁴

Assuming that SLH is true, why is it true? After surveying and rejecting a number of possible explanations, Dorsey endorses what he calls the ‘relational view’. The basic idea is that events or other goods in one’s life can be intrinsically valuable in virtue of the relations they stand in to other events or goods in one’s life. So, for example, the ‘peaceful retirement’ of the uphill life in Velleman’s example might be good not only because of how well that life is going at that time, but also because of the relations it stands in to events at other times in that life.

What sort of relations might these be? While the relational view as such is neutral with respect to this question, Dorsey suggests we follow Velleman in taking the relevant relations to be *narrative* relations. Narrative relations are understood in terms of long-

⁴ Ibid., 305. It’s worth noting that Dorsey formulates SLH “as ecumenically as possible” so that the thesis is in principle compatible with a psychological or instrumental explanation of its truth (ibid., 306). As it stands, one might worry that SLH is too weak to be in tension with the additive view, as Dorsey seems to accept (ibid., 308). Arguably, therefore, proponents of the significance of the shape of a life take some different thesis to be at issue (compare Guy Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-Being: An Introduction* [New York: Routledge, 2016], 135). However, given that Dorsey argues for an explanation of SLH that *is* taken to be in tension with the additive view, we can set this worry aside. Moreover, in the present context, it would beg the question to *define* SLH such that it entails the falsity of the additive view. Thanks to Guy Fletcher for pressing this point.

term goals or projects that unify a large number of events across one's life.⁵ On this view, the shape of a life can have value insofar as it is a sign or feature of a good 'life story', in which one's projects are achieved and one's goals are fulfilled. Thus, the 'misery in old age' of our downhill life might be bad not only because of how things are at that time, but also because of the failures of that life to achieve goals and projects that were intended to be fulfilled and maintained during old age (assuming that both lives contain the same degree of project realisation and so on).

Let's assume that Dorsey is right that the relational view is the best explanation of SLH. (Nothing here will turn on whether the narrative view is the correct version of the relational view.) What does this tell us about the additive view? Relationalists like Velleman argue that it implies its falsity: "the 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."⁶ Intuitively, the idea is that lifetime well-being can't only be a matter of aggregating momentary well-being because momentary well-being is temporally local while relational value necessarily involves many moments.

Slightly amending Dorsey's reconstruction of Velleman⁷, we can spell out the argument more explicitly as follows:

- (1) The additive view is true only if lifetime well-being can be fully determined by the sum of momentary well-being across one's life.
- (2) The relations between intrinsically valuable but temporally discrete events or other goods can themselves be a determinant of lifetime well-being.

⁵ Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," 312-13.

⁶ Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 143.

⁷ Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," 324-5.

- (3) The relations between intrinsically valuable but temporally discrete events cannot be reflected in the contribution of these events to per se momentary well-being.
- (4) Hence lifetime well-being cannot be determined by summing momentary well-being during a life.
- (5) Hence, the additive view is false.

Dorsey's proposal is that we should reject (3). In its place, we should accept the following alternative thesis:

- (3') The relations between intrinsically valuable but temporally discrete events *can* be reflected in the contribution of these events to per se momentary well-being.⁸

In other words, while momentary well-being itself is temporally local, the determinants of momentary well-being need not be. If we endorse (3') in place of (3), we can reject the above argument against the additive view as unsound.

Should we endorse (3') in place of (3)? Dorsey provides three reasons to do so. First, he argues that (3') is independently more plausible. To see why, consider the following example:

[I]magine that a person simply stumbles randomly into a theater packed with college athletes and happens to win the Heisman Trophy. We might characterize this event as a good thing for this person. But this moment (i.e., the moment of winning the Heisman Trophy) would surely not be as good for that person as the very same moment in the life of a person who worked for years to develop the skill and talent to win the Heisman and displayed consistent excellence on the field.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 325.

⁹ Ibid., 327.

The idea is that relational considerations seem just as relevant in our ordinary judgments about momentary well-being, not just lifetime well-being. Second, Dorsey argues that Velleman provides no real argument against (3').¹⁰ Third, he argues that (3) and (3') need not issue distinct judgments as to the value of a life.¹¹ As such, Dorsey claims that there is little at stake between which we choose. While these last two considerations only provide reasons to not reject rather than to accept (3'), taken in conjunction with the first they provide the relationalist with positive reason to accept (3') rather than (3). Dorsey concludes that the relationalist is therefore entitled to accept SLH and the relational view without rejecting the additive view.

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Grant for the sake of argument that (3') is true. What's not clear is that accepting (3') puts the relationalist in a position to accept the additive view. The idea seemed to be that if we accept (3'), then considerations about narrative relations and the shape of a life do nothing to undermine the additive view. However, this doesn't follow for the following reason. (3') opens up the possibility that narrative relations can be a determinant of momentary well-being, through which they *indirectly* contribute to lifetime well-being via aggregative principles. However, this does not rule out the possibility of narrative relations *directly* contributing to lifetime well-being (which is just Velleman's original view). So we have two distinct possible ways in which narrative relations might be a determinant of lifetime well-being. However, the additive view requires that lifetime well-being is *fully* determined by the sum of momentary well-being. So (3') is not strong enough to save the additive view from the relational view because it does not rule out the possibility that narrative relations contribute directly to lifetime well-being.

¹⁰ Ibid., 327-8.

¹¹ Ibid., 328-9.

In order for the relationalist to accept the additive view, she must accept the following stronger premise:

(3*) The relations between intrinsically valuable but temporally discrete events can be reflected in the contribution of these events to per se momentary well-being, *and these relations cannot directly contribute to well-being in any other way.*

So for present purposes, the real question is whether the relationalist is entitled to accept (3*). It seems to me that Dorsey's arguments mentioned at the end of the previous section only go as far to support (3') and not (3*). However, the following argument could be made in support of (3*). If (3*) can sufficiently explain the facts about how the relations between events in one's life contribute to lifetime well-being, we have no reason to evoke a distinct 'direct' way that such relations contribute to lifetime well-being. In other words, (3*) might be defensible on grounds of theoretical parsimony. Moreover, accepting (3') while rejecting (3*) might raise worries about 'double-counting' relational value in assessments of lifetime well-being.

This argument only holds if (3*) *does* sufficiently explain the facts about how the relations between events in one's life contribute to lifetime well-being. In the next section, I argue that there are strong reasons to doubt this. Before proceeding, however, it might be worth highlighting another way in which one might argue for (3*). If one believes that there are good independent reasons for accepting the additive view, one might defend (3*) on the assumption that the additive view is true. It would be beyond the scope of this discussion to address any such argument. However, I think proceeding this way would also mischaracterise the dialectic. The challenge before us is whether the best explanation of SLH gives us reason to doubt the additive view. To assume the additive view therefore seems to beg the question. As such, general arguments for the additive view will not be considered here.

There are at least two reasons to doubt whether (3*) can sufficiently explain how narrative relations contribute to lifetime well-being. The first reason is that (3*) entails controversial commitments concerning the relation between momentary well-being and future events. The second reason is that (3*) seems to undermine the shape of a life example that motivated the relational view in the first place. I take each point in turn.

A. Retroactive Welfare Effects

One reason that Velleman rejects the idea that momentary well-being is determined relationally is because of the implausibility of "retroactive welfare effects", where momentary well-being is determined by future events.¹² Dorsey's argument for the independent plausibility of (3') appealed only to our judgments about how a moment's relations to *past* events can contribute to momentary well-being. To support (3*), Dorsey must also show that this holds for *future* events. This is because according to the relational view, the badness of (say) a person's being raised in adversity might be partially off-set if her ambitions and goals come to be achieved in later life, assuming her achievements stand in appropriate narrative relations to events in her early life. In other words, relational value flows both ways. Any account of lifetime well-being must explain this.

Granting Dorsey the plausibility of the Heisman Trophy example, the retroactive case appears far less plausible. Suppose the athlete who trained to win the trophy ended up losing all their friends a year later at an anniversary celebration where the triumph went to their head and they acted insufferably to all their friends. If (3*) is correct, then it might turn out that the athlete's momentary well-being at the moment of being handed the trophy was in fact far less than it appeared. But this seems implausible. If we have any use for a notion of momentary well-being that is more fundamental than lifetime well-being, then surely how well I am faring at a particular moment can't be

¹² Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 154-5.

radically indeterminate or else in principle unknowable until my life has come to an end (or perhaps even further if things can be good or bad for me after my death).

Could it be argued that retroactive welfare effects are independently plausible? Dorsey's official line is that they are independently plausible but that nothing he discusses hangs on this.¹³ To the extent that Dorsey only sets out to defend (3'), it is true that nothing he discusses depends on there being retroactive welfare effects. However, if the relationalist needs to defend (3*) to secure the additive view, it is hard to see how (3*) could be anything other than dependent on there being retroactive welfare effects for the reasons given above.

In defence of retroactive welfare effects, Dorsey refers us to an earlier paper.¹⁴ In this paper, he argues that desire-satisfaction theories of well-being must accept retroactive welfare effects to explain momentary well-being, and that such a position is dialectically defensible assuming well-being consists in desire-satisfaction. However, this cannot help us in the present context. First, it is not clear that desire-satisfaction theories are compatible with the relational view, which is being assumed throughout. Indeed, Dorsey himself argues that desire-satisfaction theories cannot sufficiently explain SLH.¹⁵ At the very least, it would be a big cost if only desire-satisfaction views could accommodate retroactive welfare effects. In any case, recall that what we need is an *independent* reason for accepting the plausibility of retroactive welfare effects. Appealing to what is dialectically defensible given a desire-satisfaction theory of well-being is therefore dialectically ineffective for present purposes.

¹³ Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," 326.

¹⁴ Dale Dorsey, "Desire-Satisfaction and Welfare as Temporal," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2013) 16: 151-171.

¹⁵ Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," 310.

In a more recent paper, Dorsey defends the idea that retroactive welfare effects are plausible given a wide range of views.¹⁶ First, Dorsey notes that even if we reject desire-satisfaction views of well-being, it nonetheless seems plausible that the satisfaction of at least some valuing states can contribute to well-being, perhaps as part of an objective list or an aspect of perfectionist value.¹⁷ He then asks: when exactly does the satisfaction of such a desire benefit an individual? Plausibly, either (a) at the time of the attitude or (b) at the time of its satisfaction.¹⁸ If (a), then retroactive welfare effects can occur when one satisfies an appropriate past attitude. If (b), then retroactive welfare effects can occur when one adopts a valuing attitude toward things that have occurred in the past. Dorsey then goes on to make a similar point about long-term projects. For it seems plausible that the success of a long-term project affects our judgments about the value of engaging in that project prior to its success.¹⁹

However, it's not clear that these considerations help in the present context. This is because it is possible to explain these facts without supposing that the success of a project or satisfaction of a valuing attitude affect one's *momentary* well-being. Rather, the value of (say) engaging in a project prior to its success can be explained in terms of how well one's life has gone across the whole period. Or at least it is possible to explain *some* of these facts without reference to momentary well-being, which is all that is required to undermine support for (3*). So these considerations fail to provide *independent* reason for accepting the plausibility of retroactive welfare effects, which is solely about momentary well-being. Indeed, the issues here seem orthogonal to the precise nature of the relation between momentary and lifetime well-being.

Perhaps one might simply deny the intuition that there is anything strange about retroactive welfare effects. Thus, while the above considerations do not independently

¹⁶ Dale Dorsey, "Prudence and Past Selves," *Philosophical Studies* 175 (2018): 1901-1925.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1904.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1905.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1907.

support their plausibility, it begs the question to reject them on these grounds. At this point, it is worth recalling the overall dialectic. The present question is what best explains the value of narrative relations to lifetime well-being. We have two possible answers. One is the straightforward and intuitive answer that narrative relations directly contribute to lifetime well-being. The other is that narrative relations indirectly contribute to lifetime well-being by affecting momentary well-being *inter alia* via controversial retroactive effects. Given that Dorsey says nothing to undermine the claim that narrative relations might directly affect lifetime well-being, the straightforward view is by far the more plausible explanation. So the argument concedes to Dorsey that, strictly speaking, the relational view as such does not entail the falsity of the additive view. However, it does show that the relational view can only embrace the additive view given other implausible commitments. This gives us sufficient reason to reject the conjunction of these views.

B. SLH Debunked?

SLH is motivated by the following kind of case. Person A begins well in life, and over time A's momentary well-being decreases. Person B begins badly in life, and over time B's momentary well-being increases. Suppose that we can map each good and bad time for A to a correspondingly good or bad time for B. In this example, the sum of A and B's respective momentary well-being is equivalent. However, it seems that B's life is better than A's. Hence SLH, and hence the relational view that best explains SLH.

Now consider the following question: how does the truth of (3*) affect our evaluation of A and B? Answering this question raises a dilemma. On the first horn, assume that the example has *not* included relational value in the calculation of A and B's momentary well-being. This would mean that we need to alter the original values of A and B's momentary well-being in order to take relational value into account. However, once we do this, there is no longer a mapping of equally good and bad times from A to B and no longer any puzzle about why we think that B's life is better than A's. We have simply changed the example. SLH is motivated in the first place on the assumption

that A and B's lives have equal sums of momentary well-being. If B's life contains a higher sum of momentary well-being, there is no need to invoke SLH to explain why one life is better than the other.

On the second horn, assume that the example *has* included narrative relations in the calculation of A and B's momentary well-being. However, if the additive view is correct, then it follows that A and B's lifetime well-being is equivalent. But this is just to deny the intuition that motivated SLH in the first place, *viz.*, that B's life is better than A's. On this assumption, we have failed to explain the significance of the shape of a life as *ex hypothesi* both lives have the same net value.

One might reply that we can retain the example of A and B in light of (3*) by redescribing the case as follows. While A and B have different sums of well-being, they have the same sum of non-relationally adjusted well-being, and this is what is described by the example. By analogy, prioritaricians might compare two populations with the same sum of non-prioritarian adjusted well-being based moral value but with distinct sums of goodness.²⁰ It is certainly possible to redescribe the example this way. First, however, note that one cannot use the redescribed example to motivate SLH and in turn the relational view. This is because setting up the example this way already presupposes that Dorsey's version of the relational view is true. Second, recall that (3*) is partly motivated by the thought that our ordinary judgments concerning momentary well-being take relational facts into consideration. If this is right, we should not expect our intuitions elicited by the original description to be responding to non-relationally adjusted value. So the redescription might allow the relationist to retain the example, but the point of the example was to provide independent grounds accepting for SLH and the relational view, which it cannot do.

None of this shows that (3*) is false. The point, rather, is that the truth of (3*) would *explain away* SLH. However, we saw that the relational view is motivated in the first

²⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

place by the fact that it can *explain* SLH. (An *ad hominem* point: Dorsey rejects instrumental and pro-attitude explanations of SLH roughly on the grounds that they would explain away SLH rather than capture its full normative significance.²¹) Perhaps a case could be made for the relational view that does not rely on the sort of case discussed above. However, insofar as we want to respect the intuitions driving the view in the first place, (3*) should be rejected.

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To sum up, I have outlined Dorsey's argument that on the best explanation of SLH, SLH is compatible with the additive view. I argued that (3') is not strong enough to secure the compatibility of SLH and the additive view. I proposed that while (3*) would be strong enough, it gives rise to implausible commitments and undermines the motivations for adopting the relational view in the first place. It was conceded that these arguments do not show that SLH or the relational view as such are conceptually incompatible with the additive view. However, a proponent of the conjunction of these views should want more than conceptual compatibility. She should also want her position to be plausible and defensible. I have argued that Dorsey's proposal fails to meet these desiderata.

If these conclusions are correct, where does this leave us? First, and most obviously, they would show that the shape of a life phenomenon constitutes a *prima facie* challenge to any theory of well-being that accepts the additive view. One lesson that Dorsey intends his argument to show is that, contrary to the received view in the literature, SLH does not present a challenge to the additive view, even if there are other reasons to reject it. By contrast, the above arguments suggest that the dialectical situation is much as it was before. Of course, I have not here argued for SLH or the relational view, only what follows on their assumption. But additive theorists still need either to explain away the phenomenon or else face the problems outlined above. And

²¹ Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," 309-310.

opponents can still appeal to SLH in good conscience as a challenge to the additive view. So business as usual, more or less.

Second, the discussion highlights an important distinction between two ways in which goods can contribute to lifetime well-being that is rarely made explicit. This is the distinction between goods contributing directly to lifetime well-being, and goods contributing indirectly in virtue of their contributing to some other good that contributes directly. While this distinction is implicit in Dorsey's argument, the failure to make it explicit obscures the full range of possibilities of how relational facts can contribute to lifetime well-being. Specifically, he fails to see that the two ways in which goods can contribute to lifetime well-being are not mutually exclusive. Further, the distinction generalises to the ways in which *any* good might contribute to lifetime well-being. It would therefore be interesting to see how the distinction plays out with respect to the relation between other putative goods and lifetime well-being.