

# Living Your Best Life

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Leading public figures have put forth strong positions about the general conditions under which it makes sense for a person to choose to die rather than to go on living and when it makes sense instead to go on living. These views run the gamut, from Ezekiel Emmanuel's view that it is unreasonable (for just about anyone) to engage in extensive life-saving measures after age 75 to Atul Gawande's dictum that it is "always possible to find beauty or meaning in what's left" (Emmanuel 2014, Gawande 2015). By contrast, I share with Frances Kamm the general orientation that there is nothing quite so idiomatic and generalizable to say about the matter.

In *Almost Over: Aging, Dying, Dead*, Frances Kamm embraces a humane middle position that seeks to make sense of (and to some degree, vindicate) people's widely variant choices about which lives they would choose to continue living (Kamm 2020). While much of the book consists of criticism of different overly generalized positions, she also puts forth a principle to support her conclusions that she calls the Prudential Prerogative. In analogy to the Moral Prerogative that she argues for elsewhere, which supports the permissibility of engaging in personal projects in lieu of spending all of one's time volunteering, the Prudential Prerogative holds that in a fairly wide range of conditions we are under no intrapersonal rational obligation to choose either to die or to live on. According to Kamm, there is often sufficient reason to either live on or to die (and thus no decisive reason for or against living on) even when that choice is in tension with living the best life that one could live.

The Prudential Prerogative stands in contrast to two competing views about when it is and is not reasonable to choose for your life to end:

*Additivism*: It doesn't make sense to choose for your life to end unless the sum of goods (taking into account degree) left in your life minus the sum of bads (taking into account degree) is negative.<sup>1</sup>

*Life Holism*: It doesn't make sense to choose for your life to end unless the life you would have if you end it now is better than the life you would have had if you lived on, when the two lives are considered as wholes.<sup>2</sup>

The Prudential Prerogative holds, by contrast, that it can make sense to end your life even if neither of these circumstances are the case. There is, instead, a different set of principles governing the bounds of which lives one has sufficient prudential reason to choose to end:

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<sup>1</sup> Kamm refers to this as the method that Shelly Kagan favors in [Kagan 2012](#).

<sup>2</sup> As Kamm notes, [Kagan 2012, pp. 368](#) mentions but does not necessarily endorse this alternative view. She also attributes something like this view to Ronald Dworkin in [Dworkin 1993](#).

1. Only very serious personal costs can stand in the way of getting a greater good for oneself (Kamm 2020, pp. 46). So, it does not make sense to choose to die in order to avoid having a relatively minor outpatient surgery.
2. It is not just that there is some threshold severity of badness that makes it unreasonable to go on, because it can be reasonable to undergo a significant period of torture in hell to gain eternal life with God. (Kamm 2020, pp. 47). In order to decide whether it is worth living through some amount of pain, you must consider not only the degree of the bad you'll endure but also how good the payoff is for living through it, in ratio to each other. The ratio must be great enough to make it reasonable.
3. While it would be unreasonable to refuse to currently suffer some amount of bad to forego a greater future bad, it is not similarly unreasonable to refuse to suffer a significant bad that is bundled with a great amount of good (Kamm 2020, pp. 47). So, whereas you are rationally required to choose the moderately painful death that would happen now over the excruciatingly painful death that would happen a few minutes from now, you are not required to endure something similarly painful in order to stay alive to get further goods.

Within these bounds, that are here roughly gestured at, you are prudentially justified in deciding to end your life or deciding to continue on, even when doing so is at odds with what it would take to make it true that you had lived a better life.

While I agree with Kamm that Additivism is false, I find her Prudential Prerogative to be unmotivated. In this article I will do two things. First, I'll show that in terms of life or death cases, Life Holism fares at least as well as the Prudential Prerogative in its ability to capture the normative phenomena that Kamm is interested in. Next, I'll argue that the features of the Moral Prerogative that make it an attractive principle do not transfer to the Prudential Prerogative. Kamm's arguments in *Almost Over* should not sway us from our conviction that we ought to try to live our best lives.

### *1. Life Holism, the Prudential Prerogative, and Individualized Choices*

The heart of Kamm's view, I take it, is this: people can have different perspectives on what is and is not worth living for and one person's perspective is not necessarily more reasonable than the next. Kamm uses the Prudential Prerogative to support, for example, the view that people can vary fairly widely in the amount of suffering they are or are not willing to endure to accrue future benefits while remaining reasonable from a prudential perspective, (Kamm 2020, Ch. 2). She also argues that it is not unreasonable to choose to live on in old age only if one will have access to future goods that will provide meaning in one's life, and it is not unreasonable to choose to live on without them (Kamm 2020, Ch. 6). The reason that there are different responses to this situation that would be justified is, I take it, that it is just a matter of whether or not the person happens to care about their future having goods that will provide meaning in their life or not.

Notice, though, that one does not need to adopt the Prudential Prerogative in order to accommodate this perspective. Life Holism can also hold that for some people a life that ends with a period devoid of meaningful pursuits will be worse than a life that ends before such a period occurs, but for some people the reverse is true. Life Holism can also hold that suffering has different value in different lives; perhaps the suffering of a martyr contributes to the value of her life in a different way than the suffering of a cancer patient. Given Life Holism you can have two cases in which the rough description of the choice situation is the same but you end up with two different answers to whether or not the person ought prudentially to continue living because the case lacks relevant facts about the person as an individual.

Take, for example, the following set of cases:

Amani is an 80-year-old woman who has an injury that is painless but will prove rapidly fatal if she does not undergo a particular operation. While the operation is proven to be 100% successful, it involves a lengthy and excruciatingly painful recovery period. Her life is otherwise going very well, and she is sure to have 10 years of reasonably blissful and meaningful existence post-recovery.

Beatriz is another 80-year-old woman who faces the same circumstances as Amani; she too faces the choice of whether or not to undergo the surgery given the choice between letting the injury take its course, or undergoing a period of excruciating pain followed by ten great years.

The Additivist must conclude that Amani and Beatriz either both have decisive prudential reason to undergo the surgery or both have decisive prudential reason to refuse, determined exclusively by just how good those ten years will be and whether that goodness outweighs the amount of badness incurred during the recovery period. The Life Holist, however, can be open to the possibility that Amani has decisive prudential reason to undergo the surgery and Beatriz has decisive prudential reason to refuse (keeping all of the facts about the recovery period and the following decade the same) given differences about what makes for the better overall life for them *as individuals*.

Perhaps Amani's life has been full of trials and tribulations. She is ready to take on her next challenge, and facing this operation bravely fits with her conception of herself and of the life she is meant to live. She doesn't derive any additional source of pleasure from this, but rather, simply sees this as a fitting next stage of her life. Beatriz, on the other hand, we can imagine, has always intentionally arranged her life first and foremost so as to avoid discomfort. Her parents were migrant laborers who physically toiled to provide for a comfortable life for her, and she has come to embody this destiny. One of the ways that Beatriz honors her parents and her sense of self is by maintaining a peaceful and pleasant life of simple pleasures with no great obstacles to overcome. To now undertake this surgery would, for her, be a betrayal of her deeply felt priorities and the project of living that has provided the scaffolding of her life story. The Life Holist can hold, in one sense, that people can vary fairly widely in the amount of suffering they are or are not willing to endure to accrue future benefits while remaining reasonable from a prudential perspective. But, the Life Holist will claim, there is some sort of explanation available as to which

option, for that person, will make the most sense, from the perspective of what makes for the best life that that individual person can have. So, while people differ widely from each other as to what amount of suffering is worth it for themselves, there is still a correct answer for each individual, taking into account the kind of life that is best for them.

Kamm's Prudential Principle goes further in claiming that it doesn't need to matter to Beatriz or Amani's deliberation which overall life would be better. Given that the ratio between the blissfulness of the ten years and the painfulness of the recovery is in the right range, neither Amani nor Beatriz has decisive prudential reason to choose either way, even if their choices are in direct conflict with living the lives that would be best for them as individuals.

While it's a benefit of a view that it can accommodate the fact that Beatriz and Amani can both be fully justified in their decisions of whether or not to undergo the surgery while coming to opposite conclusions, I do not see how it is a further benefit to say that either of them could choose against the option that would lead to the best life for them while remaining justified in their choice. Notice that Amani can ask the question *In the long run is the best thing for me to do to get the surgery?* and have the answer be *Yes*. So you would think that what Amani ought to do is to get the surgery, but Kamm says that (so long as the painful recovery period is at least painful to some reasonable degree relative to the goodness of the following ten years) Amani would nevertheless have sufficient reason to not get the surgery. This is a strange implication; what kind of reason is it to make your choice if it's not coming from what your prudentially best option is?

Kamm says in a footnote (Kamm 2020, pp. 53, fn 28) that Kieran Setiya has suggested that the Prudential Principle is in tension with the buck-passing view of goodness, according to which saying that something would maximize the good in one's life means that there is the most reason to choose it.<sup>3</sup> Kamm suggests that this tension may not exist, but if it does, she thinks, so much the worse then for the buck-passing view. But the Prudential Principle seems to be in conflict not just with a certain account of reasons, but also with the common-sensical intuition that the buck-passing account aims to explain by giving an analysis of goodness in terms of reasons: namely, that we ought to do things that are good for us, and if something else would be even better then we ought to do that instead. In severing the tight connection between goodness and reasons, Kamm's view is not only in tension with the buck-passing view, but also the main rival view that goodness is fundamental and reasons are explicable in terms of goodness. Life Holism need not be construed as having the same tension. The fittingness of undergoing the surgery for Amani's life story, and the fittingness of refusing the surgery for Beatriz's life story may be construed as goods for these respective agents that make their different life paths most choiceworthy.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Life Holist can claim that maximizing the goodness of one's life will always be consistent with what one has the most reason to do (when considering only one's own interests.) But, nevertheless, one's own good can be maximized by goods that are only available to a person as an individual with all of her particularities. If it is possible to capture the important results Kamm aims

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<sup>3</sup> For a (critical) overview of buck-passing accounts of prudential goodness see Fletcher 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Since Beatriz's refusal of the surgery is, in effect, a choice to become non-existent, there are open questions about when exactly, the good of the fittingness of this ending is meant to accrue. Here, the Life Holist can perhaps offer a kind of partners-in-crime defense; whatever the right answer is as to when the badness of death would accrue to Amani were she to refuse the surgery can also explain when the goodness of Beatriz's death accrues to her.

to explain by reference to the Prudential Principle without having to take recourse to a principle that betrays this seeming truism that goodness and reasons have a tight connection, then we should try to do that.

Suppose now that the injury Amani and Beatriz are suffering from is a kind of injury that painlessly makes a person slip into a coma until the surgery can be performed. Instead of being faced with the choice of whether or not to undergo the surgery themselves, their loved ones are instead faced with making the choice on their behalf. Their loved ones, let's suppose, want to act in accordance with Amani and Beatriz's reasons, not on their own self-interested reasons. According to Kamm's picture, it seems as though both women's loved ones have sufficient reason to choose to either subject them to the surgery or not. What's strange here is that Kamm wouldn't want to deny that there is a fact of the matter about whether or not the surgery would be the best for Amani and Beatriz with regards to what is good *for* them in the sense that it leads to the best possible life for them. But their loved ones, it would seem, need not take this into consideration, since the facts that justify either choice are just the ratio of the degree of harm that will be caused by the recovery period in proportion to the goodness of the years to follow. These reasons, unlike the reasons that make one life course better or worse for Amani or Beatriz in particular, seem strangely impersonal, and non-specific to the individuals in question. In this way, Life Holism actually seems able to do better in terms of taking into account the perspectival interests of Amani and Beatriz; it predicts that Amani's loved ones ought to elect the surgery and Beatriz's loved ones ought to refuse it on her behalf.

Kamm also goes on the offensive against Life Holism, writing that "there is no duty fulfilled, or even virtue in, maximizing the overall goodness of one's life, let alone by sacrificing what would give one a good enough future" (Kamm 2020, pp. 175). On the face of it, this does seem concerning. Why should acting according to your prudential reasons ever require (rather than merely allow) sacrificing your good future? I want to suggest that the sting of this criticism can be alleviated by adopting a form of Life Holism that has a subjectivist component.

To illustrate, let's examine what Kamm says about the following case:

What if additional life would be deeply "inconsistent" with previous life or with past current reasonable values but it would be just as good or even a better life according to different reasonable values? (An example might be being an esthete and then being a monk.) This could yield an entire life with no connectedness between its past and its future. I do not think that continuing in such a life is necessarily worse than nothing for a person even though judged as a whole it may seem odd. I don't think it is necessarily senseless to choose such a life or to choose death in the absence of sufficient connectedness. There could be sufficient (just not decisive) reason to do either (Kamm 2020, pp. 44).

Now, one way to be a Life Holist is to claim that the narrative coherence of one's life overall, or the fact that a person has an upward sloping trajectory rather than a downward sloping trajectory, are additional quite weighty objective goods that can outweigh momentary objective goods like

pleasure.<sup>5</sup> If we suppose, for the sake of argument, that the life of the monk involves only a small amount of pleasure, then Kamm's criticism makes sense here. It seems that this kind of Life Holist cannot say that it makes sense for the esthete to live on if his only option for doing so is to become a monk, given the fact that he would miss out on the great good of having a narratively coherent life.

But another (and, I think, a preferable) way to be a Life Holist is to claim that there is more value in a person living the lives that she would prefer to live if she were suitably idealized when ranking her possibilities.<sup>6</sup> This introduces at least some subjective component that ties the normativity of prudential reasons to what one cares about. When suitably idealized it may be that the esthete prefers the extended life with the monastic final chapter over the shorter life, or it may be that his preferences are the other way around. The Life Holist in this way can agree that it is not necessarily senseless to choose the longer life or to choose death in the absence of sufficient connectedness. But, in doing so, she need not hold that one and the same individual has sufficient reason to either live on or not to. It may be that in most cases the person prudentially ought to continue on as a monk because most people would prefer to have a life with the monastic pleasures in it to one with the narrative coherence. Or, they might even find enough of value in the overarching narrative of a person who was once an esthete but then became a monk to recommend it. The only cases in which the person prudentially ought to choose against living on as a monk are cases in which he, when suitably idealized, would find living out one final chapter of life as a monk not worth it, given just how strongly he prefers the coherent life of the esthete. So, in these cases if the man were to ask why he ought to end his life and not continue on as a monk, the Life Holist can respond as follows: if you could really appreciate what each of these potential paths would mean for you, you'd see that it's not really worth it to you. It is this that makes choosing to go on not just non-obligatory but actually an unreasonable choice.

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<sup>5</sup> This kind of Objectivist Life Holist could also hold that a high concentration of bads in a short amount of time can constitute a reason to disprefer a certain life above and beyond the reasons given by the sum of the individual bads. One version of this view would hold that sums of bads and goods can contribute to the goodness of a life as well as the distribution of those goods and bads across the span of the life. This accords with the views Kamm attributes to Temkin (Temkin 2012; Kamm 2020, pp.54, fn 39).

<sup>6</sup> A natural question arises here as to which preference set of the agent we are to idealize from, given that agents' preferences are in constant flux. Here we might take a page from Phil Bricker who holds that the calculation of what constitutes the most prudent life a person can live must be determined from the standpoint of their own concept of the good. He suggests the following: "...a theory of prudence must be able to arbitrate the competing claims of past, present, and future selves. Different acts would be recommended as best by different selves; if a theory of prudence is to be able to direct the agent to do that act which is best, not for this self or that self, but for the agent timelessly considered, it must provide a method for amalgamating the various preference rankings of the earlier and later, selves into a single, timeless preference ranking. The resulting system of preferences may not coincide with any actual system of preferences that the agent has had at any time; in this sense it provides an abstract and artificial perspective. But it provides the perspective from which the agent would wish to view his life if he were, at any time, motivated to perform the most prudent act, the act that would contribute the most to his life overall" (Bricker 1980).

## 2. Moral and Prudential Prerogatives

Kamm's support for the Prudential Prerogative comes in part from her support for what Scheffler first termed the Moral Prerogative (Scheffler 1994). The moral prerogative can explain why one is permitted to go on a bicycle ride on a particular morning rather than volunteering to help the homeless. Moral prerogatives, according to Kamm, "permit an agent to (1) act in ways that do not maximize the impartial good, and (2) act for reasons that stem from his personal perspective, rather than from the perspective of an impartial judge" (Kamm 2006, pp. 15). So, the fundamental features of the prerogative are that it is non-maximizing, and perspectival.

In the prudential case, though, arguing that we are permitted to be partial non-maximizers won't do much to motivate the Prudential Prerogative over Life Holism. Prudential reasons, according to Life Holism, are already perspectival, and in at least some sense, non-maximizing. They are perspectival in that they take into account what makes sense for a person *in particular* to do, given their own values. They are non-maximizing as they allow for holistic values like the value of a particular life-narrative to trump lives with higher additive value. While the life holist is committed to thinking that a person ought to pick the potential life with the best 'score,' the score cannot be predicted by summing amounts of impartial goods contained within the life. It is consistent with life holism, for example, that a life composed entirely of components that have no value on their own may be the best only because all of the components hang together just so.

One natural way of making sense of the Moral Prerogative is to hold that prudential reasons can compete with moral reasons. We are justified in engaging in our personal projects that fail to maximize impartial good because there is some ratio at which the strength of our prudential reason competes with the strength of the moral reason enough that it may take precedence. But when we move from thinking about a moral prerogative to a prudential prerogative, it is unclear what kinds of reasons are meant to play the competing role. Prudential reasons are already perspectival—whereas impartial moral reasons can perhaps be defeated due to other worthy things you might aspire towards, it is hard to see how there could be self-focused worthy things that you would be justified in doing that are not prudentially good for you. If you want to go on a bicycle ride and you're justified in doing it, what reasons could there be to support it that are neither moral nor prudential reasons? Any plausible candidate, it would seem, would be subsumed under the realm of prudential reasons because anything you are justified in doing for your own benefit would be something that is good for you. This picture of competing kinds of reasons that can make sense of the Moral Prerogative, it would seem, does not easily transfer to a way of making sense of the Prudential Prerogative.

One suggestion that might seem to help could be the idea that it is not the competing reasons themselves which have value, but rather, the value lies in having the autonomy to make choices that conflict with what is prudentially best for oneself. In the case of the Moral Prerogative Kamm writes:

It seems...reasonable for the multiplicative factor to depend on the relative importance of the project to the agent, and even to permit the agent to give fundamental projects lexical priority relative to the impartial good. Even this seems an imperfect characterization, since

a true prerogative gives the agent the option to care *less* for himself than for others, and this does not seem to be captured by a multiplicative factor greater than one. This is a reason to think that the prerogative represents a concern for one's autonomy rather than for the importance of one's own project from one's own perspective, relative to the interests of other (Kamm 2006, pp. 16).

Can we give a similar account in the case of the Prudential Prerogative? For the sake of argument, I think that we can grant that this kind of autonomy might be important to value when we're setting policy about end-of-life decisions; there's something important, perhaps, about not being paternalistic and allowing people to have choices even when they may choose against their own interest. But it doesn't follow from this that we ought to see these choices as being justified. I doubt that autonomy can undergird a story about how a person can be justified in choosing against what would be, for her, her best possible life. The problem is that autonomy involves the exercise of a certain kind of self-directed freedom *from* an external perspective. But what is the perspective, in this case, from which the view of what's best for that person is external? Or, to put the point differently, who, exactly, is claiming freedom *from* the self?

The only candidate, it would seem, would be a particular person stage. This raises concerns that the freedom sought from the whole self by a person stage is really just a time bias masquerading as a form of intrapersonal rationality. As Kamm argues, though, the Prudential Prerogative does not depend on taking a temporally nonneutral perspective on the future in the sense that it merely allows you to favor avoiding the bads you currently face at the cost of what will be good for you in the future. She has us consider the life represented in the following figure:

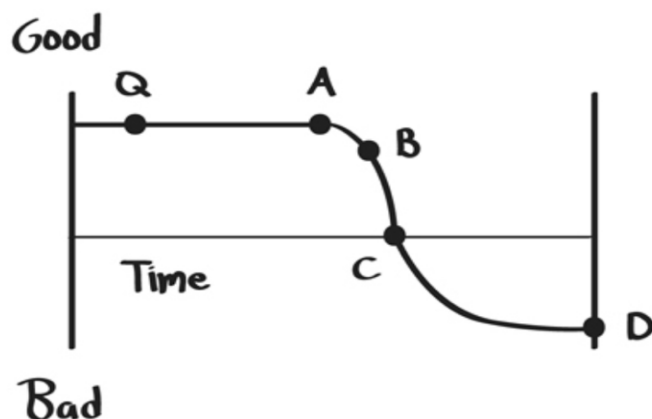


Figure 1. (Kagan 2012, pp. 329)

Suppose the last time you are able to end your life is at Q. Kamm says that the Prudential Prerogative could justify the choice to end your life at Q on the basis of not wanting your later self to suffer the bads of the period of time between C and D. She concludes that



... the Prudential Prerogative is consistent with temporal neutrality toward the future and depends on sometimes giving priority to avoiding the worst in the future rather than to having the best. It implies that it could be consistent with rationality not to allow one's future life to go below a certain level for the sake of even some greater future goods...(Kamm 2020, pp. 8).

I agree with Kamm that the Prudential Prerogative doesn't violate temporal neutrality in the sense that it doesn't rely on taking the perspective that you ought to favor your current situation. However, assuming the entire life represented in the chart is a better life than one that ends at Q, the view does seem to hold that it can be intrapersonally rational to favor the good of a certain person stage (not necessarily the one you are now) over the good of the person as a whole. You can show favoritism to any of several person stages, even when, from the view of your life overall, doing so doesn't make your life better in any way. This, to me, seems like at least some form of temporal non-neutrality. While nothing I have said is a knockdown argument against the possibility that our intrapersonal rationality does nevertheless respect the value of this kind of autonomy, justifying our choices made on its basis, it is certainly not intuitive that we have (or would even have reason to want) this kind of autonomy.

Kamm says that the Moral Prerogative "can be seen as a by-product of the fact that moral obligation is not about producing as much good as possible. It is about respect for persons and doing as much good as that requires" (Kamm 2006, pp. 16-17). This line of thought is appealing. I would argue that prudential rationality, likewise, is not about producing the greatest sum of momentary prudential goods as possible but is rather about respect for oneself as a person. Respect for yourself as a person, though, *just is* aspiring to live your best life. This is reason to favor Life Holism and not the Prudential Prerogative.

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