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Narrativity, Freedom, and Redeeming the Past

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Many philosophers endorse the view that global features of a life – what we may call "narrative" features – at least partly determine its value.[1] A life that starts poorly but improves over time and ends well is thought to be better than a life that starts well and gets worse, even if the total sum of momentary happiness in each life is the same. A life in which the subject redeems her past failures and sacrifices with later successes is thought to be better, *ceteris paribus*, than one in which her later successes are unrelated to her previous misfortunes. In what follows I distinguish some views about narrative value and raise a number of problems for the idea of narrative value.

I. Varieties of Narrativism

Narrativism is an answer to the question "what determines how well a person's whole life goes for her?" This is a question about prudential value, or personal well-being. Here are two simple principles about well-being: (i) the prudential value of an individual's life is just the sum of the prudential values of the moments contained in the life ("additivism"); (ii) the prudential value of a moment within a life is determined just by what happens at that moment, not at any other moments ("internalism"). The view I will call "narrativism" either rejects internalism, claiming that the value of a moment can be determined by what happens at other moments, or rejects additivism, claiming that the

[1] A few examples are Fischer 2009, chs. 9-10; Portmore 2007; McMahan 2002, 174-83; Brännmark 2001; Velleman 1993; Slote 1982; Lewis 1955, 68. For recent arguments against such views, see Feldman 2004, ch. 6, and Strawson 2004.

value of a life cannot be determined by summing the values of the moments.[2] For now, I will suppose that narrativists reject additivism. (I will consider internalism in Section VI.)

Narrativism, so defined, is compatible with the view that momentary well-being determines the value of a life, but in a way more complicated than by simple addition of the values of the moments. For example, it is compatible with the view that well-being later in life counts for more than well-being early in life (Slote 1982). We might call "strong narrativism" the view that there is no function from momentary well-being to the value of a life.

Narrativism, as stated, is merely a negative thesis; it tells us how *not* to determine the value of a life; it is the rejection of other positive views about well-being. The narrativist must also provide some positive theses that tell us what features of a life endow it with positive or negative narrative value. Here are some examples.

Franz Brentano claimed that it is better when things go from worse to better than when they go from better to worse, other things equal. He called this the principle of *bonum progressionis* (Brentano 1973, 196-7). Let us call "improvementism" the principle that "uphill" shape increases the value of a life, and "downhill" shape decreases it. More recent BP-narrativists include C.I. Lewis (1955, 68) and Michael Slote (1982). Improvementism entails narrativism, but not strong narrativism.

[2] Douglas Portmore believes that the narrative features of a life affect how well things are going for someone at particular moments within that life (personal correspondence); Velleman believes that narrative features are relevant only to the value of the whole life (1993). Thus Portmore rejects internalism but accepts additivism, while Velleman does the opposite. Nevertheless, as we will see, their views are sufficiently similar that it makes sense to call them both "narrativists." Fischer seems to endorse Velleman's way of thinking when he claims that "the lives of [persons] have a dimension of value over and above the accumulation of momentary well-being" (151), but he is not focusing in particular on a distinction between a view like Velleman's and one like Portmore's.

David Velleman claims that it is better to have a success that is the result of prior effort than an otherwise similar success that is merely a fortunate occurrence, unrelated to past efforts. Take someone who has had marital difficulties and undergone counseling with his spouse. That person would have a better life if he stayed with his spouse and lived happily than if he split with his spouse and lived equally happily with someone new, because if he stays with his spouse, his life is a story of efforts rewarded, lessons learned, and sacrifices redeemed. Call this view "redemptionism." John Fischer (2009) and Douglas Portmore (2007) have also defended redemptionism.[3] Redemptionism entails strong narrativism, and is compatible with improvementism.

Fischer also claims that free action is necessary for narrative value. When one acts freely, one writes a sentence in the story of one's life. According to Fischer, this is a sort of artistic activity that makes one's life go better (Fischer 168). Perhaps cows do not act freely. In that case, there is a sort of value that a cow's life cannot have. Its life is just a sequence of moments; it does not tell a story. Call this view "free will narrativism." Free will narrativism cannot stand alone, because not just any free action results in a life with positive narrative value. Rather, the thought is that there are certain features of lives that give them narrative value, but only if the subject of the life acts freely. So, for example, a "free will improvementist" might say that when a life goes uphill, it is better than a life that goes downhill, amounts of happiness held equal – *but only if it goes uphill as a result of the agent's free actions*. This leaves open questions such as: How much free action must a life contain in order to have narrative value? Is more free action better than less? When a life gets *worse* as a result of the free actions of

[3] Fischer does not give arguments for redemptionism, but agrees with the judgments about Velleman's scenarios involving redeeming the past and argues further that those judgments change if it turns out that the agent's actions are being secretly manipulated (2009, 13-14, 162n11).

the person living the life, does the free action make the life less bad, or even worse, than a similarly bad life devoid of free action? No obvious answers to these questions suggest themselves, so I hereby put them to the side.

Fischer also claims that there need not be a single story of one's life. Rather, for each life there may be many ways to tell the story of that life. When one writes a sentence in one's life story, one thereby constrains the possible stories that can truly be told, but nevertheless, more than one story may be told (Fischer 172). This follows from "the purpose-relativity of explanation, together with the multiplicity of human purposes" (172). Let us call "interpreter-relative narrativism" the view that (i) irreducibly global features of a life (such as improvement or redemption features) partly determine its value, and (ii) in at least some cases, whether a life has those features, and which of those features it has, is relative to an interpreter.

No doubt there are many other varieties of narrativism. I will focus on these four positive narrativist views (free will narrativism, interpreter-relative narrativism, improvementism, and redemptionism) and examine the plausibility of each. I will then give a more general argument against narrativism.

II. Freedom

Recall that free will narrativism is the view that a life has narrative value only if its agent acts freely; otherwise, the value of the life is just the sum of the values of its moments (Fischer 152). Is this true? I think at least some intuitions about narrativity are robust enough to survive the elimination of free will.

Suppose A lives an uphill life: it gets better and better throughout, as a result of A's free actions. B's life gets worse and worse. The sum of momentary well-being in the two lives is the same. Many will say that A's life is better than B's. Now suppose A and B lack free will; neither of them ever acts freely. What this supposition involves depends on what free will amounts to. If incompatibilism is true, then the supposition that A and B lack free will could just involve thinking of their lives as like any other lives; if compatibilism is true, then it might need to involve imagining that A and B are being manipulated or controlled in some way. If free will improvementism is true, then when we learn that A and B are unfree, the judgment that A's life is better should evaporate; we should be inclined to think their lives are equal in value. But I don't think it does evaporate.

Suppose we think that the improving life with free will is better than the improving life without free will, other things equal. It is possible that this judgment is based on a more general judgment about freedom and well-being: that free will is necessary for a life to have any value whatsoever. If this more general judgment were true, then A and B would have equally worthless lives – but it would not be because of anything to do with narrativity. In order to be sure the judgment about the case is relevant to free will improvementism in particular, let us suppose that A does act freely, but the improvement in A's life is not the result of any of A's free actions. Rather, some very fortunate occurrences, completely out of A's control, happen to A in the second half of A's life, whereas similar fortunate occurrences happen in the first half of B's life. I suspect that many people with narrativist inclinations would judge that A's life is better.

If so, then free action does not seem quite so vital to judgments concerning narrative value.

A more modest, and I think more plausible, view is that free action makes a difference to narrative value without being a necessary condition for such value.[4] It is a value enhancer; the uphill life that contains free action is better than the uphill life without free action, even though the uphill life without free action (or with free action that is irrelevant to the improvement) is better than the downhill life. But this judgment is compatible with the view that free action affects only *momentary* value, not narrative value. Why not think that things are going better for a person, other things equal, during those periods of life when she is acting freely, and thereby engaging in what Fischer calls a form of artistic self-expression, than when she isn't? If what is valuable about free action is that it is a kind of valuable activity, why wouldn't those moments when one is engaged in that activity be particularly valuable moments? And why wouldn't this exhaust the value that free action has – why would we need to think that it also affects *narrative* value?

Here is a passage that might provide an indication of why Fischer thinks free action affects narrative value: "we are engaging in artistic activity in freely writing the stories of our lives, and… such free activity helps to endow our life-stories with the distinctive features of certain works of art" (170). Those distinctive features are narrative, global features; one does not get a good piece of art merely by sticking together some individually beautiful things. Free action endows its product, a whole life, with these global features. But if this is why free action is supposed to be particularly relevant

[4] In his reply to his critics at the Pacific APA, Fischer indicated that he really intended to endorse the more modest view.

to narrative value, then free will seems to be relevant only to producing an *aesthetic* feature of lives, not a prudential one. Fischer correctly notes that the product of aesthetic activity need not be evaluated primarily aesthetically. But if the narrative features of a life are aesthetic features, then free will seems to affect only the aesthetic value of a life, not its prudential value.

III. Multiple Interpretations

Recall interpreter-relative narrativism: (i) irreducibly global features of a life (such as improvement or redemption features) partly determine its value, and (ii) in at least some cases, whether a life has those features, and which of those features it has, is relative to an interpreter. Why believe interpreter-relative narrativism? According to Fischer, the narrative of one's life is a kind of explanation of the life, providing a kind of understanding of what happened in it. But people investigating a life might be looking for different sorts of understanding. What counts as a good explanation depends, at least to some extent, on the purposes of the person seeking the explanation. So different people might interpret the life differently, and see different stories in it. The best we can do in developing our life stories is to *constrain* the plausible stories that can be told. There is no single, privileged interpretation of a life – not even the interpretation that would be given by the person living the life. "Our bodily movements and behavior are subject to different interpretations from different perspectives… at least in certain contexts, our stories are told by others—our behavior is at least in significant respects interpreted by others" (Fischer 172).

It would be surprising if an individual's well-being were constituted by something subject to this sort of interpretation by others. In the theory of well-being, it is standard to make a tripartite distinction between hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, and pluralism (perfectionism often being understood as a sort of pluralism). Pluralists believe that there is more than one sort of thing that is intrinsically good for someone – e.g., knowing things, or developing one's human nature – but it is an "objective" list, meaning that if something is on the list of intrinsic goods, it is good for someone no matter what the person's attitude is towards it. Hedonists believe that only pleasure is intrinsically good, but they agree with the pluralist that when something is intrinsically good for someone, it is good for that person whether the person wants it or not; unwanted pleasures are still good. On the other hand, desire-satisfaction views are often said to be "subjectivist." How well-off one is depends on the extent to which one gets what one wants; thus, how well-off a person is at some time depends on that person's subjective attitudes at that time.[5] I doubt a principled distinction between objective and subjective theories can be maintained, or has any real importance, but that doesn't matter here. The crucial thing to notice is that while some believe that how well-off someone is depends on nobody's attitudes, and others believe how well off X is depends on X's own attitudes, *nobody believes that how well off X is depends on the attitudes of some person other than X*.[6] So interpreter-relative narrativism is a radical new position in the theory of well-being.

[5] On some desire satisfaction views, what is good for S is the combination of P and S's desire that P. On such views, those combinations are good for S no matter what attitude S takes toward the combinations. So at least some desire satisfaction views are hard to classify as "subjectivist."

[6] This is a slight overstatement. A desire-satisfactionist will say that if X desires that Y have some attitude, then X's well-being depends on the attitudes of Y. MI-narrativity entails that X's well-being depends on Y's attitudes no matter what X's attitudes are concerning Y's attitudes.

Fischer has only provided us the sketch of an interpretation-relative view of well-being. We cannot pin counterexamples on his view in the absence of a more specific view; but we can draw attention to some potential pitfalls. If a person's well-being were relative to an interpretation of the person's life, then some disturbing conclusions might be drawn. There is no objective fact of the matter about whether someone is harmed by my actions, because whether anyone is harmed is relative to an interpretation. There is no objective fact of the matter about whether my killing someone is wrong, or whether the tax code is good for society. Relative to one interpretation of the victim's life, killing him is wrong, but relative to another, it isn't. Relative to one interpretation of how well-off the members of society are, the tax code is good for society, but relative to another, it is bad for society. And so on. These conclusions are intolerable. Since facts about well-being play an important role in determining facts about moral obligation and distributive justice, relativism in the theory of well-being threatens to wreak havoc in most of moral and political theory. We should be suspicious of interpreter-relative narrativism unless it can be shown not to have such implications.

Free will narrativism and interpreter-relative narrativism are interesting but unnecessary accretions to more basic narrativist theses. I turn now to those more basic theses.

IV. Improvement

Recall that improvementism is the view that in the evaluation of a life, improvement is a value-enhancer, and decline is a value-detractor; if two lives contain the

same total amounts of momentary well-being, but one gets better over time while the other gets worse, the one that improves is better. Velleman uses this principle to argue for narrativism, but he does not actually endorse the principle. He claims most people would agree that the improving life is a better life-story. But he does not wish his argument for narrativism to depend on the *truth* of the claim that the improving life is better.

> I offer it merely as an intuitively plausible illustration of the possibility that periods containing equal sums of momentary welfare can have different overall welfare values… Even those who do not agree with the present value judgment, or can imagine disagreeing with it, will at least acknowledge that it is a reasonable judgment to entertain; whereas it would be ruled out *a priori* if well-being were additive. (Velleman 331-2)

This argument is puzzling. Additivists are not committed to saying that it is unreasonable to entertain the judgment that an improving life is better than a declining life. One can hold that a thesis is true, but not so obviously true that even to entertain the possibility of its falsehood would be unreasonable. One can believe this even if one believes that the thesis is knowable *a priori*. If this were not so, philosophical disagreement would nearly always be unreasonable.

A better argument would simply appeal to the truth of the judgment that the improving life is better than the declining one. And this is not so bad; after all, many people would be inclined to agree with this judgment. But of course some would not

agree, so it would be helpful to have an argument for the judgment. Velleman attempts to support improvementism by pointing out what he considers to be a counterintuitive consequence of additivism:

> If the value of a life were additive, then a life could be forever spoiled or saved by its initial segment. Every year of well-being would raise the minimum value to which one's life could possibly fall; every year of suffering would lower the maximum value to which one's life could possibly rise… But surely, we do not think, after reading the first few chapters of a biography, that they have placed limits on how well or how badly the subject's life might possibly turn out. (332-3)

This argument is not as convincing as Velleman seems to think. First, supposing that someone has a terrible first 15 years of life, there is little reason for the additivist to think that the life is "forever spoiled". The remaining 60 years could be very good, and more than outweigh the initial segment. Of course, the badness of the first 15 years would still count against the total value of the life, according to the additive view. And this is what Velleman finds implausible. But how could things be otherwise? Surely the badness of those years counts for *something* when determining the overall value of a life. Otherwise there would be little reason to care about child welfare except insofar as the suffering of children would cause problems later in life. The first years of life *can* place limits on the total value of a life.[7]

[7] This assumes that there is a limit to how well or badly things can go for someone at a time, and to how long the person can live. The second assumption is plausible; the first is perhaps more questionable. If there is no limit to how well a day may go for someone, so much the worse for Velleman's argument,

The case for improvementism must rest on bare intuitions about cases of improvement and decline. But we have some reason to be suspicious of these intuitions. Some well-known experiments show that people place undue weight on the last part of an experience when evaluating it. Kahneman has shown that people rate a surgery as less painful if the pain is gradually lowered at the end, rather than stopped entirely – even though this actually involves inflicting more pain on the patient overall (Kahneman *et al* 1993). It might be thought that this is just a problem with our memories, and not relevant to the evaluation of these lives in the abstract. But the James Dean Effect suggests otherwise (Diener *et al* 2001). Suppose A and B live equally very happy lives until age 30. A dies, but B survives several more years at a reduced, moderate level of happiness. People have a tendency to judge A's life to be better, even though the only difference between the lives is that B's contains some extra happiness at the end. This is not a defect in people's memories, but a defect in their value judgments.[8]

Even if these value judgments are defective, this would not show that improvementism is false. But in any case, I don't think Velleman is particularly concerned to defend improvementism. Indeed, Velleman claims that facts about *timing* are irrelevant in and of themselves (335). Rather, it is the notion of *redeeming the past* that drives Velleman, Fischer and others.[9] So I turn now to redemptionism.

V. Redeeming the Past

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because the additivist could agree with Velleman's claim that a life cannot be spoiled by its initial segment. Thanks to Liz Harman for discussion of this point.

[8] For more on the defectiveness of these value judgments, see Bradley 2009, 157-62.

[9] Portmore argues that the plausibility of improvementism depends on the plausibility of redemptionism (Portmore 2007, 21-24). I suspect improvement will seem better than decline even when the improvement does not involve redeeming the past.

Recall that redemptionism is the view that it is better to have a success that is the result of prior effort or sacrifice than an otherwise similar success that is merely a fortunate occurrence, unrelated to past efforts or sacrifices. The following example from Velleman illustrates redemptionism:

> In one life your first ten years of marriage are troubled and end in divorce, but you immediately remarry happily; in another life the troubled years of your first marriage lead to eventual happiness as the relationship matures… In the former, you regard your first ten years of marriage as a dead loss, whereas in the latter you regard them as the foundation of your happiness… You can simply think that a dead-end relationship blots the story of one's life in a way that marital problems do not if they lead to eventual happiness… What is valuable is living out a story of efforts rewarded rather than efforts wasted. (337-8)

In the second life, but not the first, the past is redeemed. What is the difference between suffering that is redeemed and suffering that is merely outweighed by other benefits? What exactly does redemption amount to? According to Velleman, the difference between a sacrifice that is redeemed and one that is merely offset by an unrelated misfortune is that when a sacrifice is redeemed, it no longer mars one's life story; "the costs of the misfortune… are somehow canceled entirely" (337). This

suggests that when a misfortune is redeemed rather than offset, from the standpoint of the value of the person's life, it is as if the misfortune had not happened at all.

In such cases we might even wonder why the "sacrifice" is a sacrifice or misfortune at all, since it does not detract from the value of the life. Velleman claims that well-being is bifurcated; there is momentary well-being and there is whole-life well-being, and they are entirely different things (1993, 343). Perhaps a redeemed sacrifice may be thought to be a sacrifice due to the fact that it involves a lowering of *momentary* well-being, which does not affect the value of the whole life.[10] But Velleman's "cancelling" view still has this surprising implication: it is impossible to sacrifice one's lifetime well-being unless the sacrifice fails to achieve its purpose. An attempt to sacrifice one's well-being for a worthy cause, say by undergoing some injury, will fail to be bad for the subject as long as the injury furthers the cause and is thereby redeemed. This strikes me as an implausible sort of imperviousness to misfortune.

Here is another sort of problem. We sometimes tend to focus on sacrifices that directly affect the value of the sacrificer's life. For instance, we might imagine someone undergoing a painful experience in order to bring about some good result; we might think that the more painful the experience is, or the longer it lasts, the more important it is that the sacrifice be redeemed, and the more the sacrificer's lifetime well-being is affected by the redemption of the sacrifice. But not all cases of sacrifice have this structure. Consider two individuals, X and Y. Until now, X and Y have lived very similar lives; but X has a much better future in store than Y. An important and valuable cause now requires X and Y to sacrifice their lives. Their sacrifices are redeemed; the cause is

[10] In cases where the sacrifice involves death, Velleman cannot argue that the sacrifice involves momentary well-being, because he holds an Epicurean view according to which death does not result in any decrease in momentary well-being, only lifetime well-being (Velleman 1993, 357).

furthered by their deaths. Thus, the costs to the lifetime well-being of X and Y have been cancelled. This means, if I understand Velleman's view correctly, that X's actual life is just as good as it would have been if X had not sacrificed her life, and Y's actual life is exactly as good as it would have been if Y had not sacrificed her life. Thus, X's actual life is much better than Y's, since X's counterfactual life is much better than Y's. But this is implausible. Their actual lives were similar up until the sacrifice, and then they both died. Surely their actual lives are equally good for them.

It might be thought that an important detail has been omitted from my story: do X and Y know how much they are sacrificing?[11] Suppose they do know. Then it could be argued that X's sacrifice is more admirable than Y's, since X knowingly sacrifices more than Y. Someone who knowingly sacrifices her life for a good cause certainly seems more admirable thereby than someone who sacrifices a fingernail for that cause. Perhaps more admirable sacrifices make one's life go better than less admirable ones, in which case it would not be so implausible to say that X's actual life is better than Y's. And if they don't know how much they are sacrificing, then the redemptionist could argue that not all sacrifices affect well-being – only known sacrifices do. But it does not seem plausible to me that only known sacrifices could matter. For one thing, someone who sacrifices her life rarely knows just what she is sacrificing; she can make only educated guesses about how things would have gone if she had lived. What seems relevant is the actual sacrifice that was made. But if X and Y do not know the sizes of their sacrifices, it is hard to see why X would be more admirable than Y in making the sacrifice merely because her actual sacrifice was greater.

[11] Thanks to Liz Harman for suggesting this reply.

Rather than saying that the badness of a sacrifice is *canceled* when the sacrifice is redeemed, we could say that the sacrifice is less bad (but still bad). This is Douglas Portmore's view, which he calls the "Not-for-Naught" View (Portmore 13). According to this view (NN), "the redemption of one's self-sacrifices in itself contributes to one's welfare — the closer that one's self-sacrifices come to being fully redeemed, the greater the contribution their redemption makes to one's welfare" (13). According to NN, the size of the sacrifice makes a difference to how important it is that the sacrifice be redeemed. "We determine the extent of a self-sacrifice by comparing the agent's actual welfare with what it would have been had she instead acted so as to produce the prudentially optimal outcome for herself" (14). If the sacrifice is redeemed, the value of the agent's whole life goes up by some amount less than the amount of the sacrifice; the greater the sacrifice, the more the value of the life goes up if the sacrifice is redeemed. But it never fully compensates for the sacrifice, it only mitigates it. Thus a sacrifice is a genuine sacrifice even if it is redeemed.

But NN does not get around the problem involving X and Y. According to NN, greater sacrifices contribute more to well-being than lesser sacrifices. Since X makes a greater sacrifice than Y, and their lives are otherwise similar, X's actual life must be better for X than Y's is for Y.[12]

[12] Portmore suggests in personal correspondence that he would prefer to say that in cases such as this, the amount of sacrifice does not affect the value of the actual life. This requires him to reject the claim that the badness of the sacrifice is determined by the difference between the values of the actual and counterfactual lives of the sacrificer. To clarify: Suppose there is a third person, Z, of whom the following is true: (i) Z sacrifices her life for a cause that is just as worthy as the cause for which X and Y sacrifice; (ii) Z's counterfactual life would have been exactly as good as Y's counterfactual life; and (iii) Z's sacrifice is not redeemed. Suppose Z's actual life is exactly as good as Y's. Then the sacrifices made by Y and Z are equally bad for them, because their actual and counterfactual lives are equal in value. In order to be able to say that Y's sacrifice is less bad for Y than Z's is for Z, we must either reject the claim that their actual lives are equal in value, or that their counterfactual lives are equal in value, or that the badness of the sacrifice is determined by comparing those two things; Portmore now wishes to take the third of these

For those who might not yet be convinced, let me elaborate further on this problem. Suppose that the reason X had such a good life in store, compared to the life in store for Y, is that some time in the future (years after the sacrifice made by X and Y), a scientist develops a life-extending drug that would have added 20 happy years to X's life had X survived. This has the effect of making X's sacrifice much greater than it would have been had the drug not been invented. The drug would not have worked for Y. So the scientist's breakthrough retroactively makes X's life have gone better for her, but not Y's. I take it this is not a plausible result. While it is arguable that there are ways to make someone's life go better retroactively – say, by fulfilling the person's goals after she dies – this is surely not one of them. The actual lives of X and Y are similar in every relevant way; they differ only counterfactually. This counterfactual difference in well-being levels should not bleed over into actuality. Having a counterpart who is well-off is in no way beneficial to the actual me.

Furthermore, when we give positive value to redeemed sacrifice, we commit ourselves to the sensibility of certain trade-offs that do not seem sensible. Suppose Harry is engaging in a painful sacrifice for a worthy goal. Suppose he will succeed in achieving this goal. Voldemort can make his pursuit of the goal more painful, causing his sacrifice to be greater, thereby bringing about some pleasure for Severus. (To simplify matters, let us suppose that Severus's extra pleasure would not be malicious pleasure taken in Harry's suffering, but innocent pleasure taken in something else.) Unfortunately, for every 10 units of pain added to Harry's sacrifice, only 6 units of pleasure are produced for Severus. Insofar as we care about the total amount of well-being in the universe, this

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options. Portmore also wishes to say that the extent of the sacrifice is not the same as the badness of the sacrifice. I will postpone evaluation of this alternative set of views until another occasion.

seems like a bad deal. Inflicting the suffering would surely result in a net decrease in the amount of well-being in the universe. But wait! The disvalue of Harry's pain is discounted. Given that he will succeed in his goal, and his sacrifice will be redeemed, for every 10 units of pain he endures (with value of -10 for him), he receives a bonus of (let's say) +5. Thus, the net value for Harry of each 10 units of redeemed pain is only -5. So Voldemort can in fact increase the total well-being in the universe by inflicting a large amount of pain on Harry in order to bring about a relatively small amount of pleasure for Severus. This is implausible.[13]

Redeeming past sacrifices is supposed to be a paradigmatic example of narrative value, but redemptionism seems untenable. Of course, other narrative views need not face the problems I have noted for redemptionism. So I turn now to a more general problem for narrativism.

VI. A Dualism of Prudence?

Suppose that narrativism is true. Recall that a narrativist might hold one of two views: he might say that the value of a whole life is not determined by the sum of the values of the moments in it (rejecting additivism), or he might say that the value of a moment is not determined just by things happening at that moment (rejecting internalism).

[13] One might think that by behaving in this way, Voldemort makes the world worse, due to the injustice involved in the redistribution of well-being. Or perhaps Voldemort's reasons not to inflict the suffering outweigh the reasons to bring about the pleasure. Some such view might be true, but my argument concerns the total amount of well-being in the universe, not the value of the universe, nor what Voldemort has most reason to do.

Let me begin with the first of these views, which is Velleman's view. If the value of a life is not determined by the sum of the values of its moments, then one might find oneself in a situation in which there is a conflict between two courses of action, A and B, such that A leads to a better future (perhaps because it contains more momentary happiness than the future promised by B), while B results in a better overall life, due to the superior relations between future and past events. In such a situation, which course of action should one choose?

One might think that one should choose B, since it leads to the better overall life. But I see nothing in the notion of prudence to indicate that one should focus primarily on one's whole life. Why not care only about one's future well-being? If someone chooses the best future available to her, it seems difficult to accuse her of being imprudent.

Note that I am not merely asking why one should care about narrative facts (though of course that is worth asking as well). One might assess one's future in different ways; perhaps the best future is the one that tells the best story. Even one who is convinced of narrativism will face the question of whether it is the story of one's whole life, or the story of one's future, that is relevant to prudential evaluation. (We will see, shortly, that it is difficult to allow narrative facts to play a role in prudential evaluation of the future.)

Perhaps prudence is concerned with *both* future well-being and whole-life well-being. For example, we might think that what is most prudent to do at time t is whatever maximizes the *sum* of the values of one's whole life and one's future as of t. But this view results in oddities. Consider a slightly modified version of Velleman's example of the person deciding whether to stick with his spouse or start new with someone else. Let

t1 be the time the person must decide. Let Y be the life in which he sticks with his spouse; let Z be the life in which he starts new with someone else. Suppose, with Velleman, that Y scores better on the narrative value scale. But suppose that Z scores better for the period of time after t1. This would be a case where the better future and the better life are different. On the summative account under consideration, to determine what is prudent, we sum the value of Y and the value of Y after t1, and compare to the sum of the value of Z and the value of Z after t1. If the value of Z after t1 is sufficiently greater than the value of Y after t1, then it will turn out that prudence dictates choosing life Z at t1. But imagine that we faced a choice of Y or Z at the start of the life, knowing full well how the lives would turn out. Then the very same view would have us choose Y over Z. But the only thing that has changed between the start of the life and t1 is that some time has gone by, and some of the life has been lived in just the way we knew it would. It cannot make sense to choose one way at the start, knowing full well what is to happen, and then change one's mind only because some time has elapsed.[14]

The problem has nothing to do with the additive aspect of the view. Consider a disjunctive view according to which it is prudent at t to choose either the best post-t future or the best life. On this view, facts about whether a course of action is prudent will change over time in the same strange ways. It would not be prudent at the start of the life to choose life Z, but it would be prudent at t1. I believe this problem will arise for any view according to which facts about whole-life value and facts about future value are both held to be relevant to prudence.

It would be better for the narrativist to say that there is a dualism of prudential reason. We can reason prudentially based on facts about the future, or we can reason

[14] For similar arguments see Huemer 2003, 160-61, and Bradley 2009, 160.

prudentially based on facts about our whole lives. These are incommensurable ways of reasoning, based on values that cannot sensibly be combined or compared.[15] We might say that there is prudence$_L$ (prudence concerning one's whole life) and prudence$_F$ (prudence concerning one's future). But notice that, due to the problems just raised, prudence$_F$ must be additive. If narrative facts are relevant to prudence$_F$, then it could be prudent$_F$ to choose life Y at the start of life even knowing exactly what is to come, but prudent$_F$ to switch to life Z at t1. Narrative value can be relevant only to prudence$_L$.

A significant drawback of this position is that it renders unintelligible a kind of question that seems perfectly intelligible. If I am in a situation where the best future does not result in the best overall life, I might be puzzled. I might ask, "What should I do?" I seem to be asking a question about the prudential ought. But according to this view, there is no such thing. There is prudence$_L$ and prudence$_F$. I am not asking what I should$_L$ do; nor am I asking what I should$_F$ do. I know the answers to those questions. And there is no overarching prudential ought, for the reasons just explained. Thus, according to the dualism of prudential reason, there is no sensible question I can be asking to which I do not already know the answer.

As mentioned at the start of this section, there is another way to be a narrativist: we may reject internalism, and deny that the value of a time for someone is entirely determined by things happening at that time. Rather, an event happening now can affect the (intrinsic) prudential value of a past or future event. For example, consider Velleman's example of the man who undergoes sacrifices for the sake of his marriage, and those sacrifices are redeemed when his marriage is saved and he lives happily with his wife. According to the view in question, as a result of the redemption, there is some

[15] Compare Velleman on momentary and whole-life values (1993, 353).

time at which the man is better off. Which time might this be? There are two possibilities: a *prospective* view and a *retrospective* view.

Perhaps the man is better off when he is happily married as a result of the sacrifice (the prospective view). Although the *amount* of happiness in store for him in the future is the same whether he gets divorced or stays with his wife, the *value* of the happiness he would get in the future by staying with his wife would be enhanced by the redemption of the past. The problem is that sometimes sacrifices are redeemed posthumously; in such cases this view commits us to saying that a dead person has a positive well-being level at times at which she is dead. I take this to be an unacceptable consequence.

The other possibility, the retrospective view, is that the man is better off during the time at which he was sacrificing as a result of the later redemption of the sacrifice. I am inclined to agree with Velleman about this view: "Nor do we say, of a person raised in adversity, that his youth was not so bad, after all, simply because his youthful hopes were eventually fulfilled later in life" (1993, 340). But even if Velleman is wrong on this point, the retrospective view entails a dualism of prudence, for the man deciding whether to stick with his wife or start fresh with someone else will have to decide whether to take his past well-being into account when making his decision. So the retrospective view offers no advantages.[16]

In summary: if we reject additivism, we are committed to an implausible dualism of prudence. If we reject internalism, we must hold a retrospective view or a prospective view; the retrospective view faces the same dualism of prudence, while the prospective

[16] For further criticism of the view that the intrinsic value of an event depends on what happens at other times, see Bradley 2009, 19.

view yields implausible results concerning posthumous harm. I do not see a good way forward for narrativism.[17]

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