

A Defense of Temporal Well-Being

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In his recent book “The Passing of Temporal Well-Being,” Ben Bramble argues that there is no such thing as temporal well-being. This is very surprising. Talk of temporal well-being is ubiquitous and seems to make sense. For example, we talk about a life that starts off badly and gets better, or vice versa. It would be better if we didn’t have to say that all such talk is nonsense. In what follows I first explain some views about temporal and lifetime well-being. I then examine Bramble’s main argument against temporal well-being and argue that it does not succeed. Next I raise two potential problems for Bramble’s lifetime-centric approach. Finally, I show that the difference between Bramble and his opponents is not as radical as he thinks.

I. Basic Welfare Value, Temporal Well-Being, and Lifetime Well-Being

Here are some possible views one might have about temporal and lifetime well-being.

Lifetimes First: Both temporal and lifetime well-being exist, but lifetime well-being is more fundamental than temporal well-being.

Moments First: Both temporal and lifetime well-being exist, but temporal well-being is more fundamental than temporal well-being.

Only Lifetimes: Lifetime well-being is fundamental, and temporal well-being does not exist.

Basics First: Both temporal and lifetime well-being exist, but neither is more fundamental than the other; both temporal and lifetime well-being are constructed out of something more fundamental.¹

Bramble defends Only Lifetimes. Most of his arguments seem to be intended to show that Only Lifetimes is more plausible than Moments First. He does not, however, consider Basics First. Let me briefly explain Basics First, since I believe it to be the correct view.

According to Basics First, the fundamental welfare facts are facts about what is basically intrinsically good or bad for someone (Harman 1967; Feldman 2000). Call these “the basics.” The basics are instantiations of the fundamental welfare properties. Hedonists think the basics are episodes of pleasure and pain. Objective list theorists think there are several kinds of basics: episodes of pleasure and pain, instances of knowledge and false belief, instances of virtue and vice, and so on. The concept of basic intrinsic value is necessary to avoid certain double-counting problems. For example, if Connie is happy to degree 10, and this is intrinsically good to degree 10, and Tatjana is happy to degree 10, and her happiness is also intrinsically good to degree 10, then the combination of Connie and Tatjana being happy is intrinsically good to degree 20. But the combination of Connie and Tatjana being happy derives its value from the values of its parts. It has merely derivative intrinsic value; the components have basic intrinsic value. Without such a distinction, we might think that the intrinsic value of the whole situation is 40 (10 for each of the parts plus 20 for their combination).

On Basics First, both temporal and lifetime well-being are built up out of the basics. Both have intrinsic value for someone, but it is *derivative* value. The value of a time for a person is determined by the values of the basics (for that person) that take

¹ One might wish to hold a view according to which the basics are moments or lifetimes. Such a version of Basics First would not compete with the other views under consideration here, so I assume that the basics are not themselves moments or lifetimes.

place at that time. The value of a life for a person is determined by the values of the basics in their life. On the simplest version of Basics First, you get both values by *summing* the values of the basics. Some do not like the summative view. For instance, some think that it is better for a life to go from worse to better than from better to worse, even if the values of times in the two lives can be put into 1-1 correspondence (Chisholm 1986; Velleman 1991). This view can be incorporated into Basics First by allowing basics to be complicated enough to include states that obtain over a long period of time.

We also need to make a corresponding distinction between ultimate reasons and derivative reasons. The basic welfare components provide ultimate reasons. Things composed of them provide reasons, but they are typically derivative. If A and B would each get 10 units of pleasure from some act, how much reason do we have to do the act? We have an ultimate reason that comes from A's pleasure, and we have an ultimate reason that comes from B's pleasure, but we do not have an ultimate reason that comes from their combination; their combination would provide merely a derivative reason.

Derivative values do not necessarily provide derivative reasons; at least, we cannot define our terms in this way without begging substantive questions. For example, someone who thinks equality matters might want to say that to determine what we ought to do, we have to compare lifetime well-being facts; what matters is equality of lifetime well-being. Some think equality across times matters; they will say that temporal well-being also matters (McKerlie 2012). On both of these views, there are some ultimate reasons that depend on derivative intrinsic values. Perhaps welfarists can accept a tight connection between basics and ultimate reasons, but others cannot. Nevertheless, avoiding double-counting of reasons requires us to make a distinction between ultimate and derivative reasons just like avoiding double-counting of welfare requires us to distinguish basic and derivative welfare value. I'll focus my discussion on value; the considerations carry over straightforwardly to what Bramble says about reasons.

II. Bramble's Arguments Against Temporal Welfare

While Bramble's arguments are primarily aimed at Moments First, his arguments, if successful, would seem to apply equally well to Basics First. Bramble claims, for example, that "it is contributions only to lifetime well-being (rather than to any other sort of putative well-being) that can make [a] difference to the value of outcomes and be the ultimate source of reasons" (17).² This seems to rule out the possibility that lifetime well-being is composed of any more fundamental well-being components, be they basics or moments.

Bramble claims that "if temporal well-being were to exist, it could not have the sort of normative significance it would need to have in order to count as a genuine kind of well-being." He has several arguments for this claim, but in general they rely on the idea that momentary well-being cannot have normative significance because if it did, there would be too much well-being, or too much normative significance. He says: "If temporal well-being were intrinsically normatively significant, then one's overall fortunateness would be equivalent to one's lifetime well-being plus one's well-being during one's first second... and so on... This is highly implausible" (20). The problem he notes here is the same double-counting problem that inspired axiologists to employ the notion of basic intrinsic value, as noted above. So, unsurprisingly, basic intrinsic value provides the reply to Bramble's argument. Overall fortunateness is not calculated in the way Bramble suggests it would have to be in order for temporal well-being to have intrinsic normative significance. It is calculated by adding only the *basic* intrinsic values. So there is no double-counting problem.

Bramble discusses a reply to his argument that is in some ways similar to the reply I have just given. This is what he calls the "composition objection." The reply on

² All page citations in this paper are to Bramble 2018.

behalf of the defender of temporal well-being is to say that lifetime well-being is composed out of temporary well-being. Thus it is no surprise that temporal well-being cannot have normative force that is *independent* of lifetime well-being. If one thing is part of another, they can both have normative force without having independent normative force. I would only add to this objection that it is not necessary to say that lifetime well-being is composed out of temporal well-being. On Basics First, both lifetime and temporal well-being are composed of the same stock of basics. But the point is similar: since both complex items are composed of the same things, their normative force need not be independent.

Here is Bramble's reply:

But even if lifetime well-being were necessarily constructed out of temporal well-being, this could have been false. It might not have been true. Lifetime well-being might have been determined or constructed in some other way. What sort of normative status would temporal well-being have had in this alternative scenario? My claim is that, in such an alternative scenario, it wouldn't necessarily have had any normative significance at all. This shows that the ultimate source of our self-interested reasons, even if lifetime well-being were in fact constructed out of temporal well-being, is just the lifetime well-being itself. (30)

I think that theories of well-being are necessarily true if true. So I cannot accept what Bramble says here. I think that if lifetime well-being is composed out of temporal well-being, or out of basic welfare components, it is composed in that way in every possible world. But let us suppose I am wrong about that and Bramble is right. Suppose that in the actual world, lifetime well-being is composed out of temporal well-being, but in other worlds it is not. It seems to me that this would mean that whether temporal well-being has normative significance is a contingent matter. In the actual world, temporal well-being has normative significance. Maybe it wouldn't at some other world, but if we accept Bramble's premise that theories of well-being are contingent, the falsity of a theory at some other world has no bearing on its truth at the actual world. If

Bramble's argument worked, it could work just as well in the other direction: since temporal well-being has actual significance, it would have significance in other merely possible scenarios as well. Bramble has given us no reason to prefer one of these arguments to the other. We might even ask: why does Bramble suppose that if temporal well-being did not constitute lifetime well-being, lifetime well-being would have been constituted by something else? Why could it not have been the case instead that lifetime well-being would not exist if it were not constituted by temporal well-being?

Bramble has other arguments; I don't have the space to discuss all of them, but it seems to me this is his most central argument, and it does not work. I'll now present two challenges for views like Lifetimes First and Only Lifetimes.

III. Lifetimes Are Not Fundamental, part 1: the Values of Pleasures and Pains

If we take lifetime value to be fundamental, we face a difficulty in explaining how it seems that particular events like pleasures and pains seem to make a life go better or worse. Even Bramble seems to want to say that pleasures make a life go better; for example, in arguing against momentary well-being, he says that there is a plausible version of hedonism according to which "lifetime well-being is determined directly by our pleasures and pains. There is no need for an intermediary such as momentary well-being" (44). If Bramble is saying that lifetime well-being is determined directly by the *values* of pleasures and pains, then he has a problem, because in this case, lifetime well-being fails to be an ultimate source of value.

However, that is not what Bramble is saying. Rather, I believe he is saying that lifetime well-being is determined by the pleasures and pains in it, not the *values* of those pleasures and pains. The pleasures and pains themselves do not have value. But what is the attraction of a view that says that pleasures and pains are intrinsically worthless but

make a life better? Why would they make a life better if they were worthless? This seems like a challenge for Lifetimes First and Only Lifetimes.

IV. Lifetimes Are Not Fundamental, Part 2: Personal Identity

Lifetime-centric views face difficulties concerning diachronic personal identity. What is a life? Presumably it is a sequence of events involving a single individual. When do we have the same individual at different times? There are several answers to this question and I won't go through them all. I will just mention two that seem problematic.

Some deny that there is any such thing as diachronic personal identity. You might be tempted by such a view if you think the puzzles of personal identity, like split-brain cases, are unsolvable. If there is no diachronic personal identity, then there is no lifetime well-being. Thus the extreme holist is committed to denying a view in metaphysics. Maybe this seems like a small price to pay. Being committed to diachronic personal identity is not that big a deal, but it is a nice feature of Basics First that it carries with it no such commitment.

But that is not the only potential problem in this area. Suppose four-dimensionalism is true, and a person is a space-time worm. Typically, four-dimensionalists think there is no deep metaphysical fact about what makes a bunch of temporal slices a single worm; worms are fusions of slices, and our practices pick out certain fusions as individuals. Worms can overlap in cases of fission or fusion. There can be vagueness concerning whether some fusion qualifies as a single individual or two individuals (Lewis 1976; Hawley 2018).

I see a couple of potential problems for lifetime-centric views given four-dimensionalism. (1) The facts about lifetime well-being will depend on our conventions

for identifying worm slices as parts of the same worm. Many will not want the welfare facts to be convention-dependent in this way. (2) Taking lifetimes as fundamental blocks some views we might find plausible concerning how much welfare there is in certain situations. Consider a case of fission, where an individual splits into two, each sharing the mental states of the pre-fission individual. Let A be the pre-fission individual, and B and C be the post-fission individuals. Typically, a four-dimensionalist says there were two people there all along: the fusion of A and B, and the fusion of A and C. The two people overlapped at A and then stopped overlapping when fission occurred. Suppose A got 10 units of pleasure, as did B and C. Lifetimes First entails that A&B constitutes a life with value +20, and so does B&C. So we get a total welfare value of +40. We are committed to that because our fundamental elements of value are whole lives, and there are two whole lives here. That view might be right! But we might want to be able to say something else. We might want to say that the total amount of welfare value here is +30: 10 each for A, B and C. I think this is the more plausible view, and it is incompatible with Lifetimes First and Only Lifetimes.

Perhaps Bramble will want to reject four-dimensionalism on these grounds. But again, this is an advantage for Basics First, because as long as the basics are small, we don't need to say anything about diachronic personal identity to identify the basics.

V. Reconciliation

In the end the dispute between Bramble and the defenders of temporal well-being is much less significant than Bramble thinks. Bramble's arguments, at best, would support Lifetimes First, not Only Lifetimes; and Lifetimes First is a less radical view than Only Lifetimes.

At times Bramble seems open to agreeing that there is temporal well-being in some sense. Late in the book, discussing a claim I make about things being bad for

people at some times but not others, Bramble says this: “To say that the toe-stubbing was bad for me at these times might be to say just that it was at these times that the toe-stubbing had consequences (say, pains) that themselves directly reduced my lifetime well-being.” (47) Here Bramble seems to accept that there is a way to understand temporal well-being talk in terms of contributions to lifetime well-being. If Bramble is generally willing to accept such interpretations of temporal well-being statements, then I wonder whether he really denies that there is any such thing as temporal well-being. He agrees (i) that there is lifetime well-being, and (ii) that lives have components, and (iii) that some of those components affect lifetime well-being more than others, and (iv) that the components happen at times. So it seems we can give a definition of temporal well-being in terms of things Bramble believes in. The only remaining dispute would be over which direction of explanation is better – i.e., whether to accept Lifetimes First or Moments First.

This suggests that the radical claims Bramble makes at the end of the book are unjustified. We don’t need to stop talking about temporal well-being even if we accept Lifetimes First. Consider this provocative claim Bramble makes: “Philosophers are wasting their time trying to work out how lifetime well-being is constructed out of temporal well-being.... An Uphill Life cannot be better for one, other things equal, than a Downhill Life. The question of whether it is, is simply ill-conceived” (54). But Bramble has himself given us a way to understand this question: is it better for the components of one’s life that contribute to lifetime well-being to take place earlier or later in a life? Philosophers who worry about how temporal well-being goes together to compose lifetime well-being are doing the same thing Bramble will have to do: explain how lifetime well-being is determined by the components of the life and their arrangement. Bramble won’t understand this project as the project of determining lifetime well-being based on the *values* of the parts of a life; but that is relatively unimportant. We can all relax and pursue the same problems we have been working on, perhaps from different perspectives, without wasting our time.

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