

ARTICLES

The Significance of a Life's Shape*

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The *shape of a life hypothesis* holds, very roughly, that lives are better when they have an upward, rather than downward, slope in terms of momentary well-being. This hypothesis is plausible and has been thought to cause problems for traditional principles of prudential value/rationality. In this article, I conduct an inquiry into the shape of a life hypothesis that addresses two crucial questions. The first question is: what is the most plausible underlying explanation of the significance of a life's shape? The second question is: given its most plausible explanation, what does the shape of a life hypothesis teach us about the nature of prudential value?

In a classic episode of the television drama *Mad Men*, a young, and apparently brilliant, advertising executive named Guy MacKendrick is appointed head of Sterling Cooper (the agency around which the show revolves). The show portrays this as a moment of great triumph for MacKendrick. Later in the episode, however, a drunk member of the administrative staff accidentally destroys Guy's foot in a horrific accident. His career is, apparently, over (at least according to his superiors). The lesson is summed up by Joan Holloway like this: "That's life. One minute you're on top of the world, the next minute some secretary's running you over with a lawn mower."

Reflecting on MacKendrick's case, one is tempted not just to say that his accident is a misfortune, but that this misfortune is magnified by the fact that it was preceded by a relative high: MacKendrick's life, at least in the short period about which we know, takes a manifest downward slope. But imagine a contrast case: imagine, for instance, that MacKendrick had

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terrible difficulty in early childhood, suffering disease and disability, finally allowing his talent to carry him to the top of a prestigious ad firm later in life. While this upward-sloping life may have just as much success and misfortune as its mirror image, we would certainly regard it as preferable, other things equal.

This phenomenon has played a major role in the literature on well-being. The *shape of a life hypothesis* holds, very roughly, that lives are better when they have an upward, rather than downward, slope in terms of momentary well-being. The shape of a life hypothesis is plausible in its own right, so plausible that many have taken it as dispositive evidence against popular axiological principles. This includes the principle of *intra-life aggregation* (according to which the welfare level of an individual's whole life is an aggregate of momentary welfare) and the principle of *temporal neutrality* (according to which the temporal location of a good moment in and of itself is irrelevant to its contribution to the value of a life). In this article, I conduct an inquiry into the shape of a life hypothesis that addresses two crucial questions. The first question is: what is the most plausible underlying explanation of the significance of a life's shape? The second question is: given its most plausible explanation, does the shape of a life hypothesis threaten intralife aggregation or the principle of temporal neutrality?

The plan of the article is as follows. In Section I, I motivate the shape of a life hypothesis, and in Section II, I discuss the lessons typically drawn from it. In Sections III–V, I outline five potential explanations of the welfare value of a life's shape and critically examine them. In Sections VI–VII, I argue that the best explanation need not of itself threaten the principles of temporal neutrality or intralife aggregation. Whether we should accept or reject such principles is independent, or so I claim, of our commitment to the significance of a life's shape. In Section VIII, I conclude by briefly suggesting what I take to be the genuine lesson of our reflection on lives like MacKendrick's.

I. THE SHAPE OF A LIFE

To see the issue I'm interested in discussing, contrast

O. J. Simpson. O. J. Simpson was a celebrated college and professional football running back, film actor and producer, and sports commentator. In his mid-forties, in the midst of his success, Simpson was put on trial for murder. And though he was acquitted after a lengthy and highly publicized trial, many were convinced of his guilt, and as a result his reputation had been effectively ruined. Following his acquittal, he was held civilly liable for wrongful death in the same event and was later convicted of burglary in Las Vegas, was sentenced to thirty-three years in prison, and is currently serving his sentence at Lovelock Correctional Center, Nevada.

with

J. O. Nospmis. J. O. Nospmis grew up in the midst of gang-related violence and crime, was suspected at an early age of murder, and was eventually sentenced at age twenty-five for a series of armed robberies. Following her stint in prison, Nospmis was released and given an opportunity to coach basketball at a local club for troubled youth. Her success at this endeavor, along with her rapport with players and amazing life turnaround brought her to the attention of high schools, later universities. She retired after having coached her team to back-to-back NCAA Final Four appearances, and spent her remaining years as a popular and trusted broadcaster, offering insightful color commentary on professional and college basketball.

As we all know, O. J. Simpson experienced one of the most dramatic downfalls in American public life. Nospmis, though fictional, displays just as dramatic an improvement. In comparing Nospmis with Simpson, we may be tempted to ask: who had the better life? And some may be tempted, as I am, to say: Nospmis! But even if the matter is not quite so clear, we can at least ask ourselves: is there something positive about Nospmis's life that Simpson's lacks? Even if this isn't enough itself to render Nospmis's life on the whole better, there surely is something that Nospmis has that Simpson doesn't: Nospmis's life featured a dramatic upswing; Simpson's a horrific downfall. Thus, a consideration of Simpson and Nospmis supports the

(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.

Two interpretive notes are important here. The first concerns the phrase "good and bad times." In ordinary language, we have a tendency to speak of, for example, "good times" and "bad times" in a life, and so forth. But what does this mean? Times, after all, are not among the bearers of intrinsic value. The quality of my life is determined by the occurrence (or lack thereof) of events, states of affairs, activities, objects, and so on, that are themselves intrinsically good for me. Rather, when we talk about good times, we appear to be talking about times during which we are benefited (or, perhaps burdened) by the genuine bearers of intrinsic welfare value, namely, individual objects, events, or states of affairs. Times possess a form of what one might call derivative value—value that derives from the extent to which an individual is benefited during those times by relevant welfare goods. Thus, when using the phrase "good times," I simply refer to times during which one is net benefited by particular welfare goods, times at which one has a high level of synchronic welfare. Second: my goal here is to interpret SLH as ecumenically as possible. With this in mind, I interpret the phrase "valuable feature" widely, to include any appropriately welfare-relevant value. By this I mean, simply, value that is explained in part by

facts about a person's welfare. This could include, for example, intrinsic welfare value. But it needn't: nothing in SLH guarantees that the value possessed by the temporal sequence of good and bad times in a life is intrinsically welfare valuable rather than, say, instrumentally welfare valuable.¹ While I ultimately argue that such a weak interpretation of the significance of a life's shape fails (see Sec. III), I don't wish to rule it out analytically. (Note also that I've refrained from stating SLH in a way that would commit it to the claim that an upward trend is the preferred shape. Though it may be implausible, we would certainly say that any view according to which a downward slope is better than an upward accepts the significance of a life's shape. But as it won't have any bearing on the arguments herein, I'll concentrate on the more common "upward-is-better" version.)

II. LEARNING FROM SLH

Most theorists who discuss the shape of a life hypothesis do so to draw a series of lessons. Most importantly, many have held that SLH implies the denial of standard principles of prudential axiology/rationality.² For instance, SLH is thought to cause trouble for:

(ILA) *Intralife Aggregation*. The welfare of an extended period of time (diachronic welfare), including the welfare of a whole life, is determined by an additive function of the welfare of individual times in that period (synchronic welfare).

Why might SLH threaten intralife aggregation? The answer appears relatively simple. If the temporal sequence of good and bad times in a life matters to the quality of that life, it would appear, first, that a determination of the quality of a whole life, or indeed any extended temporal period in a life, cannot be a simple summation of the welfare values of individual times or moments in that life. One might put this in terms of information. To determine the relative quality of two lives, one must know not just how good the individual times in those lives were. One must also know whether the good times preceded the bad, or vice versa. But because its temporal location is irrelevant to a time's contribution to the total, a

1. I use the term "welfare-relevant" value to distinguish other potential sources of value that don't seem relevant to SLH, e.g., aesthetic value.

2. See, for instance, David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 56–84; Michael Slote, "Goods and Lives," in *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 9–37; Larry Temkin, *Rethinking the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3; Joshua Glasgow, "The Shape of a Life and the Value of Loss and Gain," *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013): 665–82, 667–69; David Brink, "Prospects for Temporal Neutrality," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Time*, ed. Craig Callender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 353–81, 358.

sum of synchronic welfare will not (or will not necessarily) be equivalent to an individual's lifetime well-being.

This very reasoning is on display in the following passage from Temkin:

There are many factors that seem relevant to the overall goodness of a life besides merely the sum total of local goodness or badness that obtains within that life. One such factor might be referred to as the "pattern," "direction," or "shape" of a life. To illustrate this . . . let's just divide [a] life into five twenty-year segments and say that as the life progresses, one's levels would be 10, 30, 50, 70, and 90, respectively. In the second scenario, the pattern is reversed. . . . Specifically, as the life progresses, one's levels would be at 90, 70, 50, 30, and 10, respectively. On the simple additive approach, the two lives are equally good, and if, in fact, the second life ended at level 12 instead of level 10, then that life would be better than the first all things considered.³

According to Temkin, an additive approach (ILA) must say that the lives in question are equally good. But insofar as taking the shape of a life seriously seems to require us to declare that the former life is better, or at least can be better, SLH seems to imply the denial of an additive view. Along the same lines, Fred Feldman holds that SLH is an attack on his preferred hedonism simply on the basis that his preferred hedonism accepts ILA.⁴

In addition to ILA, SLH is also standardly thought to threaten:

(TN) *Temporal Neutrality*. The temporal location of the good (or bad) times in one's life, of itself, makes no difference to their contribution to a life's overall value.

TN is most canonically stated by Sidgwick: "Hereafter *as such* is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now,"⁵ but this principle also features prominently in Rawls: "The intrinsic importance that we assign to different parts of our life should be the same at every moment of time."⁶ In addition to its importance as an axiological principle, TN can also be expressed as a principle of prudential rationality. Once again, Sidgwick: "this equal and impartial concern for all parts of one's conscious life is perhaps the most prominent element in the common notion of the *rational*—as opposed to

3. Temkin, *Rethinking the Good*, 111.

4. Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 127.

5. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981; originally published 1907), 381.

6. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 420; rev. ed., 369.

the merely *impulsive*—pursuit of pleasure.⁷ (I'll focus on the axiological statement of temporal neutrality here.) However, if SLH is true, temporal neutrality is threatened. (Indeed, Temkin treats his attack on ILA as a de facto attack on Sidgwick's principle of temporal neutrality.)⁸ After all, if an upward-sloping life is to be preferred to a downward-sloping life, the temporal location of good times versus bad times obviously makes a difference when it comes to how good one's life is. When it comes to prudential rationality, the rational planner will prefer, other things equal, that good times arrive when they best contribute to her life's upward slope, namely, later rather than earlier.

I'm not going to take a stand on the truth or falsity of TN or ILA here. Rather, I'm more interested in the relevance of SLH to their truth or falsity. To begin, note that though the reasoning from SLH to the denial of ILA and TN is relatively straightforward, it is not neutral between competing explanations of SLH (especially given my ecumenical interpretation here). Thus to determine the fate of ILA or TN given SLH, we need to know what sort of value is possessed by a life's shape and just what explains the value it has. Indeed, many such explanations have been offered; I'll explore five here. One note, however: while each explanation is generally congenial to distinct theories of well-being, they are not mutually exclusive. These explanations can be mixed and matched; indeed, there is nothing incoherent about the acceptance of all five. In examining the best account of the significance of a life's shape, therefore, I will attempt to determine whether each explanation is sufficient to account for the significance of a life's shape, as guided by our considered judgments.

III. EXPLAINING SLH: THE INSTRUMENTAL AND PRO-ATTITUDE VIEWS

Call the first explanation of SLH the Instrumental View. On this view, SLH is explained by the fact that living a life with a specific (say, downward) shape is typically instrumentally disvaluable and that living a life with a contrary shape (say, upward) is typically instrumentally valuable. SLH is thereby explained: the temporal sequence of good and bad times can be an instrumentally valuable feature of a life—instrumental, say, to the pain or unhappiness (or vice versa) someone might feel strictly as a result of a life with a particular shape.⁹ Indeed, that the shape of a life might have such an effect seems easy to believe. We often lament lost goods; the fact that I lost something that matters to me (such as a job I valued or, e.g., my public reputation) seems to cause further bad things to happen. And hence loss seems to be an instrumental bad (and a gain an instrumental

7. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 124n. See also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 60–61.

8. See Temkin, *Rethinking the Good*, 96–97, 108–9.

9. Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 132–34.

good), which would seem to explain the relative value of Simpson's and Nospmis's lives, at least under normal circumstances.

Call the second explanation of SLH the Pro-attitude View. This view allows that the shape of a life could be intrinsically valuable or disvaluable (thus explaining SLH). But its intrinsic value is a result of the fact that most people will desire or prefer to live lives with upward-sloping shapes.¹⁰ For the Pro-attitude View, the significance of a life's shape is contingent, namely, on the pro-attitudes we maintain: if Simpson does not possess any intrinsic preference for an upward rather than downward life, the shape of his life itself possesses no significance for its quality. This view is obviously congenial—but not exclusive—to theories of welfare that treat the satisfaction of one's desires or other pro-attitudes as a primary determinant of well-being.

Neither explanation plausibly captures the extent to which a life's shape is significant. Take first the Instrumental View. We can certainly stipulate that the mere shape of a life itself has no instrumental effects. We can imagine, for instance, that Simpson's pain, and so on, is not generated by the mere downward slope of his life. We could imagine that he doesn't suffer a lick when it comes to the fact that he was once better-off, but instead cares very deeply only about the wretchedness of his life now, namely, that he's in jail.¹¹ (Vice versa for Nospmis.) Even with this stipulation, however, the fact that Nospmis's life takes an upward trajectory and Simpson's life takes a downward seems to say something very

10. Whether the Pro-attitude View assigns intrinsic value to a life's shape depends on how we interpret the evaluative significance of pro-attitudes. Most will hold that pro-attitudes confer intrinsic value on their objects. Indeed, this is the interpretation of the "desire satisfaction" view held by Hobbes (*Leviathan*, I.6), Sidgwick (*The Methods of Ethics*, 111–12), R. B. Perry (*The General Theory of Value* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954], 115), Peter Railton ("Facts and Values," in *Facts, Values, and Norms* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 43–68, 54), David Lewis ("Dispositional Theories of Value," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 [1989]: 113–37, 117), among others. However, some hold that the best construal of a desire-satisfaction view holds that the bearer of intrinsic value is a conjunctive state of affairs in which a person desires that ϕ and ϕ occurs. Under this interpretation, the Pro-attitude View would not allow that the shape of a life itself possesses intrinsic value (instead perhaps a form of contributory value); intrinsic value is possessed only by the conjunctive state in which one takes a pro-attitude toward the shape of a life and in which that shape occurs. I have argued elsewhere that the former approach is to be preferred (see "Intrinsic Value and the Supervenience Principle," *Philosophical Studies* 157 [2012]: 267–85) and so will assume that the Pro-attitude View is best interpreted as imparting intrinsic value to a life's shape. Not much rides on this claim, however, insofar as the Pro-attitude View in either interpretation can in principle offer an explanation of SLH (whether the shape of a life is intrinsically or simply contributorily valuable), and its failure will have nothing to do with this interpretive issue. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this issue.

11. A reviewer suggests that this way of putting the example makes it sound far-fetched. But I don't share this skepticism. While it may be atypical, we could imagine that Simpson just doesn't care about the past—perhaps he has some sort of psychological disposition to just "let the past go," as it were. Even in this case, I hold that there is something good that Nospmis's life has that Simpson's lacks.

important about the quality of their lives; and if this is right, the significance of a life's shape cannot simply be confined to instrumental value in a way sufficient to accommodate a commonsense reaction to the difference between their lives.

The problem is even more serious for the Pro-attitude View. To say that the evaluative significance of a life's shape is sufficiently explained by appeal to value-conferring pro-attitudes is to insist that for the shape of a life to contribute to its value, its shape itself must be the object of a such an attitude. But let's say that we learn that neither Nospmis nor Simpson maintained any desires (pro or con) for a particular life's shape. In other words, let's say that Nospmis, while she desired to get out of prison, desired to be a successful coach, desired, even, to learn from her early mistakes or in some other way to redeem them, never actually possessed a desire, the object of which was to have a life that maintained an upward direction. Furthermore, let's say that while Simpson desired not to have his reputation sullied, and desired not to end up in the custody of the Nevada state authorities, he doesn't actually take any specific con-attitude toward the shape of his life. In these cases, would we refuse to grant the fact that Simpson's life was such a tremendous downfall, and that Nospmis's life was such a magnificent turnaround no further evaluative significance when coming to a judgment about the value of their lives? I think the answer here is almost assuredly no. Or, at least, that is my considered judgment.

For this reason, even if the principles behind the Pro-attitude or Instrumental views are true—which, as far as I can tell, they may very well be—they are not of themselves sufficient to explain the significance of a life's shape.

IV. EXPLAINING SLH: THE RELATIONAL, LATER-IS-BETTER, AND INTRINSIC VIEWS

The next three views are more promising. Call the first of these the Relational View. For this view, the shape of a life is not intrinsically valuable but is not strictly instrumentally valuable, either. Rather, the shape of a life has signatory value: value as a sign of intrinsic value. According to the Relational View, that which the shape of a life is a sign of contributes to the intrinsic value of a life but is itself not temporally discrete: some contributors to the intrinsic value of a life, on this view, cannot be locked down to an individual moment but necessarily involve many moments throughout a life and the relationship between them.

This approach is advocated by David Velleman, who writes:

Why would a person care about the placement of momentary goods on the curve that maps his changing welfare? The answer, I believe,

is that an event's place in the story of one's life lends it a meaning that isn't entirely determined by its impact on one's well-being at the time. A particular electoral victory, providing a particular boost to one's current welfare, can mean either that one's early frustrations were finally over or that one's subsequent failures were not yet foreshadowed, that one enjoyed either fleeting good luck or lasting success—all depending on its placement in the trend of one's well-being. And the event's meaning is what determines its contribution to the value of one's life.

The meaning attached to a quantity of momentary well-being is determined only in part by its place in the overall trend. The meaning of a benefit depends not only on whether it follows or precedes hardships but also on the specific narrative relation between the goods and evils involved.¹²

For Velleman, an essential element in determining an individual's lifetime welfare is not just the temporally discrete events that make up one's life, but the meaning of these events. However, the meaning of an individual event is, unlike the event itself, indeterminable simply by considering the moment at which the event occurs. An event's meaning can only be determined by considering the relations—in particular narrative relations—between this event and other events past or future. The meaning, for instance, of Nospmis's achievements in basketball coaching is very different than the meaning of Simpson's Heisman Trophy victory: one is the culmination of a story of redemption, the other a prelude to shame and disaster.

By way of an illustration, Velleman speaks about the value of learning from one's misfortunes:

Conferring instrumental value on a misfortune alters its meaning, its significance in the story of one's life. The misfortune still detracted from one's well-being at the time, but it no longer mars one's life story as it formerly did. A life in which one suffers a misfortune and then learns from it may find one equally well-off, at each moment, as a life in which one suffers a misfortune and then reads an encyclopedia. But the costs of the misfortune are merely offset when the value of the latter life is computed; whereas they are somehow cancelled entirely from the accounts of the former. Or rather, neither misfortune affects the value of one's life just by adding costs and benefits to a cumulative account. The effect of either misfortune on one's life is proportionate, not to its impact on one's continuing welfare, but to its import for the story. An edifying misfortune is not

12. Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 63. Note that Velleman does not explicitly advance the thesis that the shape of a life is signatorily valuable; nevertheless, this appears to be an adequate reconstruction of his proposal.

just offset but redeemed, by being given a meaningful place in one's progress through life.¹³

For Velleman, though a misfortune is certainly bad, its impact on the extent to which one lives a good life must be accounted for in terms of its meaning, which cannot be determined in temporal isolation. The meaning of some event in one's life will depend on the narrative relations between that event and other events, past and future. Worth stressing here is that, for the Relational View, the mere trend is not itself intrinsically good. For Velleman, it would not be just as good to learn from one's mistakes as it would be to fail to learn from one's mistakes and to receive an equivalent benefit. However, even if it fails to assign intrinsic value to a life's shape, the Relational View still offers an explanation of SLH. An upward-sloping life is signatorily valuable: a sign that the events of one's life are narratively related in valuable ways. The fact that Simpson's life takes such a manifest downward slope is a sign that his life, though it was marked by a number of valuable events (such as his Heisman Trophy win), is an overall failure. The shape of Nospmis's life, on the contrary, indicates a "rags to riches" story of redemption, the project of being a successful basketball coach and inspiring public figure. Though they both spend time in jail, Nospmis's time is a meaningful and important facet of those valuable narratives. Simpson's, on the other hand, is the sorry culmination of a wrecked public figure.

The Relational View admits of a variety of interpretations depending on how one answers (at least) three questions. First, must we construe the contribution of an individual event to the value of a life as in part a function strictly of its narrative relations? The answer here, as far as the Relational View is concerned, is surely not. It could be that various other relations between the events of a life can affect their value. Thus focusing on narrative relations is an interpretive choice on Velleman's part and is not essential to the view. (I will focus on narrative relations simply for the sake of honing in on a particular interpretation; nothing in what follows will ride on the precise category of relations we identify.) Second, assuming we select narrative relations as the proper category, which narratives contribute positively to the quality of a life, which negatively? (Velleman punts on this question, claiming that a "good life story" just is the story of a good life.)¹⁴ My proposal—again not essential for present purposes—runs as follows. The narrative relations between events that affect meaning in the most axiologically significant sense are those that help to tie these events into something we might characterize as a global or long-

13. *Ibid.*, 65. A similar proposal is also advocated by Douglas Portmore in "Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3 (2007): 1–28.

14. Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 59.

term “project,” “goal,” or, when successful, “achievement.”¹⁵ On this view, someone maintains a long-term project when reference to this project narratively unifies a significant number of discrete events throughout their lives. For instance, one might maintain the project of being a world-class tennis player; this project is made up of and helps to narratively unify discrete events, such as taking up tennis, practicing, entering in tournaments, winning, and so forth. An electoral victory can be part of a long-term project of a successful political career; but it can also (if a prelude to subsequent failures) be part of a project best characterized as a failed political career, and less valuable given its failure.¹⁶

Third, the Relational View admits of a number of different ways to understand the contribution of relevant narrative relations to the value of a life. One might say that the narrative relations are themselves intrinsically valuable. Antti Kaupinnen accepts something like this interpretation: “Meaningfulness [construed by Kaupinnen as possessing valuable narrative relations] is, I claim, non-instrumentally or finally valuable.”¹⁷ Velleman, instead, rejects the claim that narrative relations bear intrinsic value.¹⁸ For Velleman, the events that make up a life are intrinsically valuable (or disvaluable), but the contribution of these events to the intrinsic value of someone’s life (in other words, how good or bad these events are when it comes to the quality of one’s whole life) depends on the narrative or other relations borne between that event and other events past and future. On this proposal, valuable narrative relations are not intrinsically valuable, but instead possess “contributory” value: these relations increase (or decrease) the contribution of said events to the overall value of a life. (Once again, I’ll focus on Velleman’s proposal for the remainder, noting that we needn’t accept Velleman’s proposal to accept the Relational View. This particular interpretive choice makes no difference to the coming argument—save for one minor caveat; see n. 39.)

Stated simply, my interpretation of the Relational View runs like this: the shape of a life is a sign of (and is thus a signatorily valuable indicator of) the existence of important narrative relations between a life’s significant events, relations that constitute the achievement (or failure) of long-

15. See Dale Dorsey, *The Basic Minimum: A Welfarist Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chap. 2.

16. A reviewer asks about the significance of the fact that a particular project is “long term.” Could this in itself be an aspect of its value? Plausibly, yes. Maintaining a project that structures and unifies one’s life over the long haul is a sui generis intrinsic value, a value not possessed by projects, aims, etc., that happen, say, over the short term. But notice that this is an interpretive choice; those who prefer a different view can accept the Relational View without commitment to my axiological intuitions.

17. Antti Kaupinnen, “Meaningfulness and Time,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2012): 345–77, 371.

18. See Velleman, “Well-Being and Time,” 59, esp. 59 n. 8.

term projects or the fulfillment of (or the failure to fulfill) valuable long-term goals, and so forth, and which help to determine the contribution of these events to the overall quality of a life.

A fourth view—dubbed here the Later-Is-Better View—also treats the shape of a life as maintaining signatory, rather than intrinsic or instrumental, value. The most important proponent of the Later-Is-Better View is Michael Slote; I'll let him speak for the view as follows:

A given man may achieve political power and, once in power, do things of great value, after having been in the political wilderness throughout his earlier career. . . . By contrast, another man may have a meteoric success in youth, attaining the same office as the first man and also achieving much good; but then lose power, while still young, never to regain it. Without hearing anything more, I think our natural, immediate reaction to these examples would be that the first man was the more fortunate. . . . [This seems to reflect] a sheer preference for goods that come later, of our assumption, even, that a good may itself be greater for coming late rather than early in life.¹⁹

On this proposal, the signatory value possessed by a life's shape is relatively straightforward: intrinsic welfare goods get a multiplier for the time at which they occur. The later the benefit, the greater the multiplier. This explains the significance of a life's shape: because we prefer goods that occur later, Nospmis's life is better because the goods she obtains are subject to a higher multiplier than Simpson's. Simpson's burdens, rather than benefits, are magnified. And this is simply a result of the time at which they occur in the individual's life. Like the Relational View, the Later-Is-Better View does not hold that the evaluative significance of a life's shape is intrinsic, but rather signatory: a sign that the best things occurred when they were most valuable.

The strongest interpretation of the significance of a life's shape is the Intrinsic View. In essence, this interpretation says that the right temporal ordering of momentary intrinsic benefits within a life is intrinsically valuable. In favor of this view, Joshua Glasgow writes:

Reflect on how we feel about the losses of well-being that we suffer. They are regrettable, they disappoint. We are inclined to sadness or even hopelessness and depression when we reflect on the more significant losses. Losses are, not coincidentally, a "downer." If Dora loses a loved one, it is bad for her not just that she has lost a loved one, and that she is saddened by the fact for very many moments, but also that her momentary well-being has been so significantly

19. Slote, "Goods and Lives," 23–25.

diminished. It is bad to be worse off than you used to be. . . . There is . . . badness in the losing: when I go from a high level of momentary well-being to a low level of momentary well-being, that *itself* is bad for me.²⁰

A similar proposal is found in the work of Frances Kamm.²¹ According to this view, the shape of a life is intrinsically valuable: it is worse in itself to start high and end low, better in itself to start low and end high.

Before I evaluate the comparative merits of these explanations, a point of comparison is worth noting. First, for the Relational View, though lives displaying an upward, rather than downward, shape will typically maintain the relevant underlying feature (i.e., a successful long-term project or achievement, say), this is merely typical. After all, someone could maintain a long-term project or achievement even if her life peaks earlier rather than later. Thus, and this is the point of contrast, it could be that, all other things being equal, a downward-sloping life is just as good as an upward-sloping life. Not so for the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views. The Later-Is-Better View presents an instance of what Slote calls "pure time preference": we value goods that occur later in life, and hence (other things equal), it is always better to have an upward, rather than downward, sloping life. In addition, the Intrinsic View holds that a downward trend is itself intrinsically bad, and an upward trend is itself intrinsically good; intrinsically good life-shapes are those that start (comparatively) low and end (comparatively) high. Keeping everything else constant, then, the Intrinsic View will always claim that the upward-sloping life is the better one. But for the Relational View, an upward slope is a good, but imperfect, sign of a life's comparative quality.

V. IN FAVOR OF THE RELATIONAL VIEW

In this section, I hope to show that the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views go wrong in ways that tend to support the Relational View. I offer four arguments.

A. *The Lost Weekend*

Both the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views must say that the fact that good moments within a life occur later enhances the value of that life. But I think there is very little reason to suggest that this holds across an entire life but not across temporally extended segments within a life. If we wish to say that a life with an upward trajectory is better than a life with a down-

20. Glasgow, "The Shape of a Life and the Value of Loss and Gain," 668.

21. Frances Kamm, "Rescuing Ivan Ilyich: How We Live and How We Die," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 202–33, 222–23.

ward trajectory, other things equal, then we should say, for instance, that a year with an upward trajectory is also better than a year with a downward trajectory, and a weekend with an upward trajectory is better than a weekend with a downward trajectory, other things equal.²²

With this in mind, take the following two cases. First:

The Lost Weekend. On Friday, I went over to a friend's house to watch a Friday Night Football game, had a great time, but drank rather too much. As a result, I was feeling very bad on Saturday, and recovered only slightly on Sunday.

Second:

The Found Weekend. I drank rather too much on Thursday night. As a consequence, was feeling very bad Friday, recovered only slightly on Saturday, but was feeling fine on Sunday, when I went over to a friend's house to watch Sunday Night Football, and had a great time.

In both cases, I'm interested only in the relative quality of the temporal segment Friday–Sunday (call this “the weekend”). In the first case, the weekend took a downward trajectory. Friday was great, but Saturday was awful, and though Sunday was slightly better, it was still part of an overall downward trajectory from Friday. In the case of the found weekend, however, Friday starts out quite poorly, improves slightly, and gets much better, ending up with a Sunday that was just as good as the lost weekend's Friday.

Is it plausible to say that the found weekend is better than the lost weekend, if we assume that the lows are just as low and the highs are just as high? I think not. The mere fact that one was sick on Friday and Saturday rather than Saturday and Sunday seems to me to make very little difference to the overall quality of the Friday–Sunday temporal segment. But according to the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views, the found weekend must be preferable. For the Later-Is-Better View, it would appear that the welfare benefits that occur during the found weekend occur later than the welfare benefits that occur during the lost weekend. And hence if we have a general preference for late-occurring welfare goods, we should prefer the found weekend to the lost weekend. For the Intrinsic View, the found weekend is surely better insofar as it takes an upward trajectory rather than a downward trajectory. But both answers seem wrong. Generally, though it may seem plausible to prefer later-occurring goods rather than early-occurring goods, or a gain to a loss, the plausibility of

22. To put this somewhat more precisely, the value of a year in which the synchronic welfare score of later times is higher than that of earlier times is better than a year in which the synchronic welfare score of earlier times is higher than that of later times (other things being equal); *mutatis mutandis* for weekends, etc.

such an idea wanes when focused on short-term rather than long-term periods.

Two responses to this argument are worth considering. First, the partisan of either the Intrinsic or Later-Is-Better View might suggest that there is no reason to believe that the significance of a life's shape must also extend to the significance of a weekend's shape. But this response is implausible and ad hoc.²³ In particular, we could imagine a life that simply consisted of a weekend of this kind. Why not think about the cases above simply as lives that "pop into existence" on Friday, and then pop out of existence on Sunday? Surely this is at least coherent.²⁴ In this case a weekend's shape just *is* a life's shape. But even so, it seems wrong to think that the life consisting in the found weekend is better than the life consisting in the lost weekend. Second, both the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic Views seem explicitly committed to the claim that the shape of a weekend can affect its value. If, as is held by the Later-Is-Better View, we have a pure time preference for later-occurring goods, then this pure time preference surely applies to goods that occur later in temporal segments of a life, as well as the life as a whole. And if, as is held by the Intrinsic View, losing is itself a disvalue, it must be the case that the lost weekend is worse than the found weekend: the latter features gain, the former features loss.²⁵

23. Kamm writes that one potential explanation for the intrinsic value of a life's shape is that "decline within a life emphasizes vulnerability, of both a higher state and retention of what one has already had, within life. Ending on the high point means that only death, not life itself, in fact ends the good" (Kamm, "Rescuing Ivan Ilyich," 222–23). But even if we accepted this explanation (indeed, Kamm offers a further explanation that is compatible with believing that the lost weekend is worse than the found weekend), this explanation would also support the value of the found weekend if life ended on Monday. But this is no more plausible.

24. A reviewer casts doubt on the coherence of this idea. One might say, for instance, that a mere three-day period couldn't properly be called a life, just as three pages out of a novel couldn't properly be called a story. But I doubt the analogy. Surely we could imagine people, if purely as an exercise in thought, that pop into existence on Friday, pop out of existence on Sunday. And while we might not think of this as anything like a typical human life, it is still a life. It doesn't have much of a story, perhaps, but it certainly can have a shape.

25. Glasgow explicitly accepts this result. See Glasgow, "The Shape of a Life and the Value of Loss and Gain," 670. However, it is unclear whether Slote would accept it. For Slote, our "sheer preference" for later goods goes hand-in-hand with a preference for later times of life (say, the "prime of life" in comparison to childhood or old age). And given that the difference between Friday and Sunday doesn't constitute a difference between times of life in this sense, there may be no reason to display a preference for the found weekend. But there are reasons to believe that Slote, in fact, does accept an evaluative difference between the lost and found weekends: Slote presents the "sheer preference for goods that come later" as a distinct thesis from our preference for the prime of life (Slote, "Goods and Lives," 23–25); and hence—insofar as there is reason to believe that this preference operates whenever goods occur later rather than earlier—Slote's account would prefer the found weekend to the lost weekend. This reading, however, is somewhat tentative, in which case I'm willing to withdraw the present objection as an objection specifically to Slote's view, rather than other versions of the Later-Is-Better View (and the Intrinsic View).

Second, it might be suggested that I've cooked the books by adding that the found weekend includes Thursday night. Here's why. By including this, it would appear that the found weekend and lost weekend are really the same in terms of their activities, it's just that the found weekend begins, more or less, on Thursday, the lost weekend, more or less, on Friday. According to the views in question, the temporal ordering of one's momentary goods matters, but it doesn't matter whether a particular temporal sequence of goods begins on Thursday or Friday. Response: this misses the point of the objection. A life can be carved up into many different temporal segments. But the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views are committed to the relevance of shape for any such temporal segments. Thursday might be relevant, of course, to the overall quality of life. But this is not at issue here. We're interested only in the relative quality of the weekend.

The Relational View can avoid this problem. After all, part of the explanation of the significance of a life's shape for this view is that it generally has a tendency to signify the presence or absence of long-term projects or achievements (or, more generally, valuable narrative relations between significant life events). But whether or not one was hung over on Friday and Saturday rather than Saturday and Sunday surely has very little to do with the extent to which a given person achieved his or her goals or maintained long-term projects. And hence the Relational View appears to be able to distinguish the shape of a weekend from the shape of a life in a way that the Later-Is-Better or Intrinsic views cannot.

Someone might claim that the Relational View's advantage here is chimerical. Surely there are narrative relations between the events that occur during the lost and found weekends. After all, the lost weekend is a lost weekend!²⁶ Of course, this is correct. Indeed, it may seem perfectly trivial that any "upward-downward" or vice versa arrangement of temporally discrete benefits could be unified by at least some sort of narrative relation. But the question here is: does the most plausible interpretation of the nature of valuable narratives deliver the verdict, contrary to considered judgment, that the found weekend is better than the lost weekend? No. Two points: first, nothing in my own interpretation of the Relational View yields this verdict. After all, whether one had a found or lost weekend surely does not influence the extent to which one's long-term projects were valuable and/or successful. Of course, it's open to anyone to reject my interpretation of the Relational View in favor of another. But the second, more important, point is that in coming to a proper first-order theory of valuable narratives, it is open to the partisan of the Relational View to consult our considered judgments concerning the value of lives or temporal segments that display those narratives. If we find, as I do, that there is no difference in the quality of the lost weekend or the found

26. Thanks to Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for helpful comments here.

weekend, this should be evidence enough that whatever narrative relation the found weekend displays is not of value. Unfortunately for the Later-Is-Better or Intrinsic views, there is no such intuitive flexibility: they are simply stuck with the value of the found weekend, rather than the lost. This is an advantage, if modest, of the Relational View.

B. *Sensory Pleasure*

Another feature of the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views is that it is good for someone to have an upward-sloping order of intrinsic benefits and burdens, no matter what these benefits or burdens are.²⁷ But this, it seems to me, is extremely implausible.

Take, for instance, two individuals hooked up to machines that when activated stimulate their neural pleasure receptors.²⁸ The only intrinsic benefits these individuals maintain while they are hooked up are momentary instances of sensory pleasure. And let's say that they are hooked up for the duration of their lives. No plausible theory of welfare will claim that the pleasure they experience is not of intrinsic value. But we might now compare two different experiments. The first person is hooked up to a pleasure-stimulating computer with software designed to start his life at a neutral level; no pleasure, no pain. Gradually, say, twice a year, the pleasure is increased in a linear fashion. The second is precisely the opposite: this person's machine starts out with quite a lot of pleasure. Gradually, also twice per year, the software decreases the pleasure in a linear fashion, such that both people, over the course of their lives, will generate the same amount of sensory pleasure.

For the Later-Is-Better view, the upward-sloping life is better, not because of the intrinsically valuable slope, but because the instances of pleasure are themselves better when they occur later rather than earlier. In addition, according to the Intrinsic View, the first person lives a better life than the second. But this seems to me, once again, quite implausible. If I live my entire life simply being sensorily stimulated by some computer, simply undergoing the barest sensory pleasure, how could it possibly matter when this pleasure occurs? Once again, the Relational View holds serve. Because the only intrinsic values that the people in question maintain are bare moments of sensory pleasure, there is no chance of either person developing or living according to long-term projects or goals or developing any other set of valuable narrative relations between a life's events. Thus an upward or downward trend for those whose only welfare goods are instances of the barest sensory pleasure makes no difference.

27. A similar argument is given in Dale Dorsey, "First Steps in an Axiology of Goals," *International Journal of Wellbeing* 1 (2011): 167–85.

28. I mean this to be similar to J. J. C. Smart's human analogue of an infamous experiment based on self-stimulated rats. See J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 18–20.

C. The Consistently Well-Off

One thing that seems to lend plausibility to SLH is a consideration of lives, like those of Simpson and Nospmis, for which the highs are pretty high and for which the lows are pretty low. But what if we abstract from this feature and instead assume that, no matter what happens, the people in question are doing very well?

Imagine, for instance, two people whose lives are equally successful. They achieve all they set out to achieve and do so with a high degree of accomplishment. Further, assume that their success is more or less constant throughout their lives and, to the extent that this is possible, one can assume that the narrative structures of their lives aren't marked by any substantial lows. Also assume that these individuals, once a week, have a glass of red wine and enjoy it, and take the same total amount of pleasure in wine throughout their lives. But now assume that the extent to which both individuals take pleasure in their weekly wine decreases and increases, respectively; the first starts his career by taking substantial pleasure in wine, but slightly less as the years go on, opposite for the second person. If we assume that everything else is equal, we should also assume that the first person's life, on the whole, gets worse as it goes on, the second person's life, on the whole, gets better.

Once again, it seems to me implausible to believe that the first life is worse than the second, simply because of the temporal order in which they take pleasure in wine. If we assume that both lives in question are relatively well-off even in their lowest moments, it seems less plausible to believe that the mere shape of a life—independently of any additional base-level goods—could matter to the quality of that life. While the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views cannot accommodate this verdict—because the enjoyment of wine increases rather than decreases, both proposals must say that the second person's life is better—the Relational View can: the extent to which my enjoyment of a weekly glass of wine increases or decreases throughout my life does not itself indicate anything like an important or valuable narrative relation between these events. No projects, achievements, or goals are affected, say, by a gradually increasing or decreasing enjoyment of wine (*ex hypothesi*). The Relational View thus can deliver the right answer.

D. The Manager and the Fullback

Finally, recall that for both the Later-Is-Better and Intrinsic views, a comparatively “upward”-sloping life is better, other things equal, than a comparatively “downward”-sloping life. To put this another way, these views claim that there is always at least *a* reason (even if not an overriding reason) to favor an upward rather than downward slope. The Relational View differs. It could be, depending on the structure of the underlying

narratives, that a downward-sloping life is just as good as its mirror image. This is the right answer. Take two examples:

Jack McKeon. Jack McKeon is a career baseball man whose playing days were entirely in the minor leagues, but who gradually showed success in the minors as a manager. In 1973 he was promoted to manage the Kansas City Royals, and went on to manage in and out of the majors with moderate success until 2003, when he took over the underperforming Florida Marlins and led them to a World Series title, retiring from baseball in 2005 (with one brief return in 2011) at age 75.

Compare McKeon with:

John Riggins. John Riggins was the fullback and primary ball carrier for the NFL's Washington franchise during the late 1970s and early '80s. Riggins was a crucial member of the high-powered 1982 and '83 offense, which included his iconic "70 Chip" touchdown run in Super Bowl XVII, widely regarded as one of most significant plays in American professional football. Riggins retired from football in 1985, and after flirting with a career in acting, eventually settled down as a regional sports broadcaster, providing occasional commentary. He is currently the host of *The John Riggins Show* on Radio WTOP, Washington.

Though there are a number of unknowns about the lives of John Riggins and Jack McKeon, one thing is relatively certain: barring some massive unforeseen set of circumstances, John Riggins's synchronic welfare levels peaked substantially earlier than McKeon's. McKeon's greatest success came as a baseball manager well into his seventies. Not so with Riggins; his life's highest point (or so we can assume for the sake of argument) came at age thirty-three. And though neither McKeon nor Riggins have had anything like the dramatic downfall of O. J. Simpson or the dramatic rise of J. O. Nospmis, we can assume that McKeon's life takes an upward trajectory, Riggins's a downward.

Without a heck of a lot more information we won't be able to say anything definitive about the relative quality of these lives. But the following seems relatively clear to me: the mere fact that McKeon's life takes an upward trend is not of itself a reason to favor his life in comparison to Riggins's. And the explanation appears to play straightforwardly into the hands of the Relational View. The life stories of both Riggins and McKeon are the stories of very good lives: McKeon's of the successful baseball manager, Riggins's of the Hall of Fame running back. Both achieved valued and highly valuable projects; the fact that Riggins's life peaked earlier and McKeon's life peaked later is appropriate to the projects they main-

tain. Just because the high points of the latter occur earlier in life than the high points of the former seems to me no reason to favor one project (or narrative, story) rather than the other. They are both excellent.

Thus where the Relational View is more restrained in its treatment of the relative value of upward and downward trends is precisely where we should be more restrained. We should not hold that the shape of a life is a *sui generis* intrinsic value; nor should we say that welfare goods are better simply because they occur later in life. But a life's shape can very often, though not always, be an indicator of an underlying benefit, namely, the extent to which the events of one's life maintain valuable relations, such as those that constitute successful projects or achievements. Given the balance of evidence, I conclude that the best explanation of the significance of a life's shape is the Relational View.

VI. DOES SLH THREATEN TN?

The Relational View is the best account of the significance of a life's shape. It seems right to say that the shape of a life is the sign of the presence of evaluatively significant projects, or other goods that are dependent on the relations between temporally discrete events. At this point I'd like to turn to the second question with which this article is concerned: does SLH, as explained here, threaten temporal neutrality or intralife aggregation?

Consider, first, temporal neutrality. TN claims that the temporal location of good and bad times does not affect their value. According to Slote and Temkin, SLH threatens the requirement of temporal neutrality in a way that tends to look bad for TN: because upward-sloping lives are better than downward-sloping lives, the contribution to the welfare of a life of a particular good time is in part determined by when it arrives.²⁹ And hence, or so it would seem, because we should accept SLH, we should reject TN. But notice that the reasoning leading from SLH to the denial of TN relies explicitly on certain explanations of the significance of a life's shape. For instance, the Later-Is-Better View is incompatible with TN—this view quite clearly violates temporal neutrality insofar as it expresses a pure time preference for later-arriving goods: later-arriving goods are better. In addition, the Intrinsic View is also incompatible with TN: because gains in welfare are intrinsically valuable, the contribution to the value of a life of a particular good time will tend to increase if the good arrives later: only in so doing can it help to represent a gain. According to the Intrinsic View, the prudentially rational agent, if he or she has the opportunity to distribute a particular welfare good ϕ either to her earlier self or to her later self, will prefer to distribute ϕ to her later self.

29. Slote, "Goods and Lives," 10–13. Temkin, *Rethinking the Good*, 96–97, 108–9.

But this inconsistency does not arise for the Relational View. The prudentially rational individual, according to the Relational View, will not prefer valuable events or other goods given their temporal location but instead will prefer goods given their narrative relations to other events, past and future, in his or her life. Whether such goods bear these narrative relations, as seen in the cases of Riggins and McKeon, does not depend on their temporal ordering.³⁰ Of course, it could be that for many events the quality of the particular narrative relations they bear can be affected by their temporal location—see, for instance, Simpson and Nospmis. But this doesn't say that the temporal location of such goods is itself evaluatively significant; any importance possessed by an event's temporal location is strictly derivative and hence compatible with TN. As far as the Relational View is concerned, the hereafter, as such, is not regarded as more or less than now.

VII. DOES SLH THREATEN ILA?

Temporal neutrality has nothing to fear from SLH. This fact is a direct result of the success of the Relational View in comparison to its most important competitors. But the news may be worse for ILA. Indeed, the Relational View might seem to obviously cause problems for an aggregative approach to whole-life welfare. After all, for this approach, the shape of a life is a sign of evaluatively significant features of a life that are not temporally discrete. But synchronic welfare is temporally discrete. One might put this more precisely: insofar as the contribution of a specific event e to the welfare quality of a life l must depend on the relations (e.g., narrative relations) between e and other events f, g, \dots , and insofar as the relations between e and other events are not temporally local to the time at which e occurs, it would appear that the synchronic welfare level a person maintains at the time of e cannot be the entire story of the contribution of e to the welfare level of the life containing e . And hence life-time welfare cannot simply be an aggregate of synchronic welfare.³¹

30. Indeed, this is true even if we hold, as Kaupinnen does, that the narrative relations possessed by life events are themselves intrinsically valuable. To see this, note that valuable relations will unfold over either the entire course of a life or simply part of a life. If the former, the valuable narrative relations themselves will not be temporally located within the duration of a life. But atemporal goods trivially satisfy TN: because they do not occur at any time during a life, the time during a life at which they occur makes no difference to their value. However, if they unfold over the course of only part of a life, the temporal segment of one's life over which they unfold is irrelevant to their value.

31. This argument is somewhat complicated by the fact that, as a reviewer points out, events can be extended in time. Plausibly, my daughter's birth is not located at a specific individual time but is spread out over, say, a matter of hours or days. Indeed, time may itself be continuous; hence any event is trivially temporally extended. However, these complications don't really spell trouble for the coming argument. One could simply read the

A. *Velleman's Rejection of ILA*

Velleman endorses precisely this reasoning. He writes: "Intuitively speaking, 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."³² More strongly: "The value judgments considered above are incompatible with any reduction of diachronic well-being to synchronic well-being, no matter how sophisticated an algorithm of discounting and weighting is applied. Because an event's contribution to the value of one's life depends on its narrative relation to other events, a life's value can never be computed by an algorithm applied to bare amounts of momentary well-being, or even to ordered sequences of such amounts, in abstraction from the narrative significance of the events with which they are associated."³³ Velleman's argument against ILA seems to boil down to two points. Point one: the synchronic value of a moment will be determined, strictly speaking, by the discrete events or other goods that occur at that moment.³⁴ To put this another way, the synchronic welfare value of a time t will be determined by facts that occur at t (including e). But, point two: the contribution to diachronic welfare (welfare across a period of time, including a life) of e depends on facts that occur at times other than t (including the extent to which e bears axiologically significant relations to other events past and future). Thus diachronic welfare (including lifetime welfare) is determined not simply by aggregating the synchronic welfare of the individual moments, but by taking seriously the "interactions between the value of what obtains and happens then and the value of earlier or later events."³⁵

To put it in semiformal terms, one might state Velleman's argument as follows:

1. ILA is true only if the diachronic welfare score of a segment of time can be determined by summing synchronic welfare scores of the moments that occur during that segment of time.
2. The relations (especially narrative relations) between intrinsically valuable, but temporally discrete, events or other goods can themselves be a determinant of diachronic welfare.

notion of "synchronic" well-being as the well-being scores contributed by particular events at the time or times at which they occur. The key for Velleman's argument is that these scores—the scores located in particular times contributed by events that occur at those times—do not bear an additive relation to the value of a life as a whole.

32. Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 58.

33. *Ibid.*, 72.

34. *Ibid.*, 74, 77–78.

35. *Ibid.*, 78.

3. The relations between intrinsically valuable, but temporally discrete, events cannot be reflected in the contribution of these events to per se synchronic welfare.
4. Hence the diachronic welfare score of a segment of time cannot be determined by summing synchronic welfare scores that occur during that segment of time.
5. Hence ILA is false.

B. How to Accept the Relational View and ILA

Velleman relies on a controversial assumption concerning the method by which synchronic well-being is determined. According to Velleman, as stated in premise (3), synchronic well-being cannot be affected by the narrative relations of temporally discrete welfare goods. But one can deny this. One might hold, instead, that the narrative relations borne by individual, temporally discrete events help determine not only the contribution of these events to diachronic welfare but also the contribution of these events to synchronic welfare. In other words, one might accept:

- (3') The relation between intrinsically valuable, but temporally discrete, events can be reflected in the contribution of these events to per se synchronic welfare.

According to (3'), the good times in life are better when an individual is benefited, at that time, by an event that is related in the right ways to other events, past and future (on my view, whether the events help to make up successful, rather than unsuccessful, or valuable, rather than disvaluable, long-term projects). Velleman treats the contribution of events to synchronic and diachronic welfare asymmetrically: the meaning of these events can only affect diachronic, not synchronic, welfare. I hold the opposite: the meaning of particular events—in particular, their narrative relations—can affect their intrinsic contribution to synchronic welfare (and, thereby, diachronic welfare, including the welfare of a whole life). On this view, an event's contribution to synchronic welfare is jointly determined not just by the temporally discrete features of that event but also by that event's valuable relations to other events.

This proposal is compatible with the Relational View. Recall that, for this view, the shape of a life is a sign of valuable narrative relations between intrinsically valuable events, relations that help to shape the contribution of those events to the quality of one's life. But there is nothing in the Relational View that requires one to say that the narrative relations borne by these intrinsically valuable events must only be reflected in diachronic welfare. The shape of a life continues to maintain the relevant signatory significance even if the relations borne by the relevant events can help to determine their synchronic value. For instance, consider a typically

valuable event in a life, such as winning the Heisman Trophy. This event, surely important for synchronic well-being, could be a stepping stone, or merely a teaser: early success followed by a disastrous and shameful downfall. If it is a stepping stone to future success, one might say that the synchronic value of this event is greater than the synchronic value of an identical event which is just a teaser. For O. J. Simpson, his Heisman victory was, in fact, less synchronically valuable given what we now know: that it helped to frame his ever-so-public downfall.³⁶

It is worth distinguishing the view I sketch here from other proposals Velleman addresses. First, Velleman discusses a defense of ILA that starts, as it were, backwards; by first calculating a lifetime well-being score and then dividing and assigning that lifetime welfare score to particular times within a life. In this way, lifetime welfare is explanatorily prior (but is nevertheless equivalent to an aggregate sum of) synchronic welfare.³⁷ This is not my proposal. My view holds that synchronic welfare is explanatorily prior to lifetime welfare; it just so happens that the contribution to synchronic welfare of temporally discrete events or other goods in a life can be affected by the relations these temporally discrete goods and bads bear to other events, and so forth. Second, Velleman discusses a proposal according to which events that occur in the future can of themselves determine one's past synchronic well-being. While I actually accept this view, nothing I discuss here depends on it.³⁸ It simply depends on the (to my mind rather simple) presumption that the contribution of a particular event to the synchronic welfare score of a particular moment can be affected by the relations that this event bears to future or past events.³⁹

36. One might argue that, in fact, (3') vitiates the Relational View. Because the meaning of individual events can affect their momentary value, it would appear that the relations themselves affect the value of good and bad moments. Given, e.g., that Nospmis's early failures are made better by her subsequent success, is it really the case, in other words, that her life takes an upward shape in terms of momentary well-being at all? The answer, of course, is yes. Just because a low moment can be rendered better by its narrative relations does not entail that it is not low—especially given that the “high” moments are also made comparatively better given the hardship that came before. Hence there remains a signatorily valuable shape of a life if we accept (3').

37. Kaupinnen suggests this proposal. For Kaupinnen, we “assign a value to particular moments when we have the whole life in view” (Kaupinnen, “Meaningfulness and Time,” 374–75).

38. See Dale Dorsey, “Desire-Satisfaction and Welfare as Temporal,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013): 151–71. To see the difference, note that I'm not saying that a particular event *e* could make me better off at a time earlier than *e* occurred. Rather, I'm suggesting that while the synchronic welfare value of *e* accrues at its moment of occurrence, this value is in part determined by the relations between *e* and nonconcurrent events, *f*, *g*, and *h*.

39. What about those who accept an alternative interpretation of the Relational View, namely, that narrative relations are themselves intrinsically valuable? After all, it would appear that, according to (3'), only the events that constitute such projects are of intrinsic

C. *Must We Accept (3)?*

I'd like to take a minute to review the dialectic. SLH—given the Relational View—is compatible with either (3) or (3'). Given this, anyone who insists that SLH threatens ILA must establish that there is independent ground to accept (3) rather than (3')—independent, that is, of any prior commitment to the acceptance or rejection of ILA. But this claim, or so I shall now argue, is quite implausible.

To begin, (3') is more plausible than (3). Indeed, the synchronic value of individual events is rarely divorced from the narrative relations these events bear to others. For instance, imagine 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.⁴⁰

For this reason, I think there is good reason to dispute (3) in favor of (3'). But it is worth considering Velleman's argument against (3'). He writes: "a person's well-being at each moment is defined from the perspective of that moment."⁴¹ Again: "estimates of momentary well-being are made within a restricted context—namely, the context of the events and circumstances of the moment."⁴² Note that this claim, while plausible, permits of two interpretations. The first is to hold that the contribution

value, though part of their intrinsic value depends on the extent to which they maintain valuable relations (e.g., are part of a long-term project, say). But this does not entail that this interpretation entails (3). Consider (3''): Intrinsically valuable projects, or other narrative relations between temporally discrete events, can contribute to the synchronic welfare scores of times at which such temporally discrete events occur. Put another way, (3'') holds that long-term projects or other narrative relations are intrinsically valuable, but these relations influence synchronic welfare, in particular the synchronic welfare scores of times at which the most significant events of those projects take place. (This proposal is suggested by John Broome on behalf of the "principle of temporal good"; see *Weighing Goods* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1991], 228–29.) The fact that an event *e*, taking place at *t*, has a certain relation to another event *f* at *t*₁ is intrinsically valuable. But this fact contributes to the synchronic welfare scores of *t* and *t*₁. (If the valuable project is, say, being a successful football player, it makes sense to hold that the synchronic impact of that project is strongest at the time at which one wins the Heisman Trophy.) It seems to me that the arguments in favor of (3'), explored below, translate mutatis mutandis to (3'').

40. This advantage of (3') is also possessed by (3''): insofar as a particular event, such as winning the Heisman Trophy, is part of a project, it is plausible to say that the time at which one wins the Heisman Trophy is all the better for it, and hence if, say, long-term projects are intrinsically valuable, they can also contribute to how an individual fares at a time—the time at which the project-constituting events occur.

41. Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 74.

42. *Ibid.*, 78.

to the synchronic welfare value of a temporally discrete good (such as a particular event) is just determined by the value of the temporally discrete good that occurs at the time in question. But this interpretation does not tell against (3'). According to (3'), the contribution to synchronic value of a temporally discrete event, say, is determined by the intrinsic value of the event, which in turn can be affected by the relations this event bears to other events that occur throughout the course of a life, including narrative relations.⁴³ The second interpretation, however, is much stronger: it holds that the synchronic welfare score of a particular time must be determined by the temporally discrete goods that occur at that time, abstracting from any consideration of the relations that such temporally discrete goods bear to other goods, past or future, including narrative relations.⁴⁴ But stated this way, Velleman's claim is just a bare assertion of (3) rather than (3') and hence has no power to tell in favor of the former.⁴⁵

Indeed, there appears to be very little at stake between (3) and (3'). Premise (3') need not issue judgments concerning the quality of lives that are in any way different than (3): if we allow that the narrative relations

43. Some may argue that I'm misusing the term "intrinsic value." "Intrinsic value" just refers to value that supervenes on intrinsic properties. (See, for instance, Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 249–74.) And while I take issue with this conceptual identification, I don't wish to engage in a dispute about words. In referring to "intrinsic value" I mean simply to pick out the value that matters to the quality of a life ("final value," perhaps). Thanks to Fred Feldman for pressing this objection.

44. Indeed, it seems that this is the interpretation Velleman has in mind. See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 78. Notice that in accepting the claim that SLH tells against ILA, Glasgow simply assumes that "momentary value" is "nonrelational." But this seems to me to guarantee the denial of ILA by fiat and is utterly uninteresting to boot. Even if we adopted Glasgow's language, the most important question would be: is all momentary well-being nonrelational? A plausible answer, given my argument here, is "no." See Glasgow, "The Shape of a Life and the Value of Loss and Gain," 666.

45. One might be tempted to believe that (3') is threatened by the view according to which the intrinsic value (including intrinsic prudential value) of a particular good ϕ entirely supervenes on the intrinsic properties of ϕ . (Call this the "Moorean" constraint.) Note that (3') is incompatible with the Moorean constraint. The relations borne between a temporally discrete event are obviously not intrinsic to that event. And so if the Moorean constraint is correct, we cannot accept (3') and, hence, so it would appear, to accept the Relational View would be to reject ILA. But there are three problems here. First, Velleman's view seems to hold that the contribution of events to diachronic welfare can be affected by the relational properties of these events, and hence his view can gain no support from the Moorean constraint. Second, if we reject Velleman's interpretation and instead claim (along with [3']) that it is not the event, but rather, say, the fact of a narrative relation itself that is intrinsically valuable, there is no reason to believe that this interpretation need threaten the Moorean constraint—this proposal need not suggest that the extrinsic properties of the relevant facts affect its intrinsic value. Third, even leaving aside all this, there are well-rehearsed reasons to reject the Moorean constraint. See, for instance, Dorsey, "Intrinsic Value and the Supervenience Principle"; Shelly Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value," *Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 277–97; Tom Hurka, "Two Kinds of Organic Unity," *Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 299–320.

between events can affect the contribution of those events to synchronic welfare, it would appear that (3'), together with ILA, will rank-order lives in precisely the same way as a view that rejects ILA given (3). In addition, there would appear to be no prudential reasons that one proposal accepts what the other denies: both hold that it is better for the events of one's life to have a valuable meaning or set of narrative relations; the only difference is whether the significance of this meaning is assigned to synchronic welfare or strictly to diachronic welfare. Furthermore, while I believe that there is independent reason to accept (3'), as I already indicated, I am willing to grant that a direct appeal to the plausibility of (3) or (3') is or will be inconclusive: it could very well be that both proposals pass a threshold of reasonable plausibility.

So far, we have searched in vain to find an independent reason to reject (3') in favor of (3). Conclusion: there is no reason to reject ILA on the basis of SLH—that is, independent of the acceptance of ILA. The only reason to reject (3') in favor of (3) just is the fate of ILA itself. If we find that intralife aggregation should be accepted, we will accept (3'). If we reject intralife aggregation, we may be tempted by (3). But if the only thing that determines whether we accept (3) or (3') is ILA itself, whether we accept ILA given SLH can only be determined by a prior examination of the merits of ILA. And hence SLH of itself need not threaten the possibility of intralife aggregation. Given the Relational View, SLH is ILA-neutral.

VIII. RELEARNING FROM SLH

In this article, I have conducted an inquiry into the significance of a life's shape. I have argued that the Relational View is the most successful underlying explanation of why the shape of a person's life matters. An upward-sloping life is, typically (though not always), a sign of evaluatively significant relations (including narrative relations) between a life's temporally discrete events. In accepting the Relational View, I have denied that there is anything intrinsically valuable when it comes to the shape of a life.

In accepting this view, however, we accept a view that presents no threat to TN. In addition, the impact of SLH on ILA depends on whether we can or cannot interpret the various relations between individual temporally discrete events as having an impact on their intrinsic contribution to synchronic, or "momentary" welfare. But I have argued that whether we accept that the value of such relations is located in synchronic or diachronic (including lifetime) well-being will be determined by our prior commitment to ILA or its rejection. Hence SLH, of itself, threatens neither TN nor ILA.

Before concluding, I offer one parting reflection. I hold that a close examination of the significance of a life's shape indicates that the litera-

ture on well-being has, by and large, drawn the wrong lesson from this important phenomenon. As noted above, discussions of SLH are almost always focused on the debate between additive theorists and their detractors, lessons I have already shown it cannot teach. Though we may reject intralife aggregation or temporal neutrality, perhaps for many good reasons, it is illegitimate to do so simply on the basis of the significance of a life's shape.

But if this is correct, if SLH does not tell us anything meaningful about temporal neutrality or intralife aggregation, what is, as it were, the significance of the significance of a life's shape? What do we learn from our reactions to Simpson, Nospmis, and Guy MacKendrick? I think the answer is this. Looking closely at SLH doesn't tell us anything about how a life should be structured over time. But it tells us much about what is choice-worthy in a life at any time. Indeed, this is a result unique to the Relational View. Given this, SLH is a powerful argument in favor of admitting that the goals, achievements, and—more broadly—narratives that shape our lives as a whole are important determinants of their quality. Indeed, given the substantial intuitive significance of a life's shape, I'm tempted to claim that the most significant element of the quality of a life is its narrative structure. Whether I'm right about this or not, the point still stands—we don't learn anything from SLH about the value of a life's temporal structure. Instead, we learn something much more interesting. We learn what makes a life good whatever its shape.