

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 45 | Number 1

Article 1

8-23-2016

Well-Being at a Time

Ben Bradley

Syracuse University, wbradley@syr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Bradley, Ben (2016) "Well-Being at a Time," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 45 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol45/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Well-Being at a Time¹

Ben Bradley
Syracuse University

1. Introduction

Philosophical theories of well-being almost always focus on the value of an entire life. There is some reason to be especially focused on lives: they are big and inclusive. It would be strange, for instance, to be focused only on what happens to you right now, or in the month of February. You'd be imprudent to ignore what happens at all the other times in your life. Prudence dictates caring about *all* the parts of your life; so it makes sense that prudence would focus on whole lives rather than smaller parts.

But it is a mistake to focus *exclusively* on whole lives. We should also care about welfare levels at particular times and at intervals of time smaller than a whole life. Consider, for example, the famous question Ronald Reagan asked the American public in October 1980: "Ask yourself: Are you better off than you were four years ago?" This is a question about temporal well-being. If all we have is a theory about welfare in a whole life, we cannot answer Reagan's question.

There are several other reasons we might think it is important to know how well-being is distributed throughout a life. The first concerns equality. Suppose we have two societies whose citizens are identical in lifetime well-being, but in society A well-being levels

¹ Versions of this paper were presented at the 2013 Princeton Workshop on Well-Being, the 2013 Paris Workshop on Well-Being, the 2014 APA Central Division Meeting, the 2014 conference on hedonism at Oxford, the 2014 meeting of the International Society for Utilitarian Studies in Yokohama, and at SUNY Brockport in 2016. Thanks to all those present on these occasions for their helpful comments. Unfortunately I have by now forgotten many of these comments and who said them, but I am pretty sure I had helpful feedback from at least some of the following people: Matt Adler, Gustaf Arrhenius, Gordon Barnes, Krister Bykvist, Richard Chappell, Dale Dorsey, Fred Feldman, Hilary Greaves, Liz Harman, Chris Heathwood, Nils Holtug, Eden Lin, Connie Rosati, and David Sobel.

are constant throughout people's lives, whereas in society B, on any given day half the citizens are extremely well-off and the other half are miserable. We might think there is an important difference between these societies, since in A there is constant equality whereas in B there is constant inequality (though over time it evens out). Relatedly, some think that there is such a thing as *justice within a life*—that there is a kind of injustice or objectionable inequality in a situation where an individual is better off at one time than another.²

The second concerns the alleged effect of *improvement* on lifetime well-being. Some think that it is better to have an improving life than a declining one.³ Imagine two lives that are mirror images of one another: one starts poorly and ends very well, the other starts very well and ends poorly. According to defenders of this view, it is better to have the first sort of life than the second. Whether this view is true or not, in order even to understand the view, we must be employing the notion of well-being at a time.

The third concerns harm. There are many views about what makes an event harmful to someone; one view is the “historical worsening” view, which states that one is harmed if one is made *worse off than one was before*.⁴ The historical worsening view presupposes that there is such a thing as well-being at a time.

On some views about well-being, temporal well-being is a simple matter. For example, according to hedonism, what is good for someone is pleasure. What makes it the case that things are going well at a time for someone, then, is just that the person is getting pleasure at that time. On other views it is less clear what to say about temporal well-being. In particular, desire-based views of well-being seem to face a challenge in accounting for temporal well-being.

According to a desire fulfillment view of well-being, what is good for someone is getting what she wants, while what is bad for someone is failing to get what she wants. A primary motivation for this view is what has been called the “resonance constraint.”⁵ According to this constraint, nothing can be good for someone unless it “resonates” with that person—that is, the person must

² McKerlie 1989

³ Chisholm 1986, 71; Velleman 1991; Glasgow 2013

⁴ Rabenberg 2015

⁵ Railton 2002, 47; Dorsey 2012, 275.

find the thing attractive or good or desirable in some way. The good for a person cannot leave her cold.

The crucial thing to note about desire fulfillment views is that there are *two* things that are responsible for things going well for someone: the person having a desire for something to be the case, and that thing actually being the case. The desire and its object might, and often do, occur at *different times*. This is what gives rise to the difficulties in determining when a desire fulfillment benefits someone.⁶

Suppose S desires that P. Suppose the desire happens at time t1, and P obtains at time t2. When, if ever, is S benefited by this? There are four answers that have been defended:

- at t2 only (the “time of object” view);
- at t1 only (the “time of desire” view);
- at only whichever of t1 or t2 is later (the “later time” view);
- at t1 *and* t2, if t1=t2; otherwise at no time (the “time of both” view).

I will argue that the last of these, the “time of both” view, is the most plausible, but that there is yet another view that has not been discussed—I’ll call it the “later desire” view—that is nearly as plausible as the time of both view. But I will also raise problems for the time of both view and the later desire view.

2. The Time of Object View

The time of object view has some initial plausibility. It would be natural to think that the time things go well is *at the time you get the thing* you were wanting (Baber 2010). Nevertheless this view can be eliminated quickly. It would seem strange to say that things are going well for us at times before we are born or after we are dead; but our desires often take as objects states that obtain only after we are dead, and occasionally take as objects states that obtained before we were born. For example, if I now want it to be the case that humans visit Mars, and they do so in the year 2400, the time of object view entails that things are going well for me in 2400, even

⁶ See Bradley 2009 Ch. 1, where I explain some of these difficulties.

if I died centuries earlier.⁷ Or if I now desire that my ancestors did not commit atrocities, but they did commit atrocities 400 years ago, the time of object view entails that things were going badly for me 400 years ago. This is absurd. Hence it is difficult to find anyone who endorses the time of object view.

Even in cases where the person exists at the time the object of her desire obtains, the time of object view seems unintuitive. If I am asked how things are going for me now, it makes little sense to say “it’s going great. I am now getting things I used to want but no longer care about.” As Dale Dorsey points out, this would violate the resonance constraint on well-being, which is supposed to be the main part of the attraction of desire-based views of well-being in the first place (Dorsey 2012, 275; Dorsey 2013, 156).

3. The Time of Desire View

The time of desire view has recently been defended by Dorsey and Donald Bruckner. Bruckner gives a somewhat complicated argument for the view (Bruckner 2013). The argument turns on the thought that when someone desires something, and the thing desired takes some period of time to happen, the person may be getting what she wants at times during that period, even though whether she is getting what she wants at one of those times depends on what happens at later times. To illustrate, Bruckner gives us the following pair of cases (Bruckner 2013, 17). (1) Lenny desires to have a long romantic kiss from t_0 - t_{12} . He has this desire from t_0 - t_{12} . He gets the kiss that lasts from t_0 - t_{12} . (2) Same case, but the kiss is interrupted at t_5 . In the first case, according to Bruckner, Lenny is getting what he wants throughout t_0 - t_{12} . This is good for Lenny from t_0 - t_{12} . But in the second case, he is *never* getting what he wants, not even from t_0 - t_5 , given that the kiss will be interrupted; so nothing good happens for Lenny at all. He desires a long kiss. So what happens after t_5 affects how things go for Lenny from t_0 - t_5 , because in the first case he is getting what he wants at those times and in the second he isn’t.

It is important to distinguish between the claim that Lenny is *getting* what he wants at that time, and the claim that he *gets* what he

⁷ Baber seems to accept this conclusion: “If my paper is accepted for publication after my death, the posthumous time of the decision is the moment at which I benefit” (Baber 2010, 264).

wants at that time. Lenny is getting what he wants at t_3 , but does not get what he wants at t_3 ; he only gets what he wants at the end of the period, or maybe at the whole period (Bruckner 2013, 20). According to Bruckner, we should say that things are going well for someone at the time he is getting what he wants, even if he has not yet got what he wants.⁸

So far, Bruckner has not given a reason to accept the time of desire view. After all, the time of object view also entails that things are going well for Lenny throughout t_0 - t_{12} . So Bruckner now asks us to consider two more examples (Bruckner 2013, 21-22). (3) Olivia desires, all day, to work all day, and she does. (4) Paul desires, all day, to submit a paper by 6pm, and he does. Given what has already been said about Lenny, it seems Olivia benefits in the morning, since she desires in the morning to be working all day, and in virtue of working all day (which is an ongoing process that includes things that happen in the morning and after the morning), she is getting what she wants in the morning. According to Bruckner, we should treat Paul the same way. We should say that he is benefiting in the morning. The object of his desire does not obtain at all until the afternoon, so he is not yet getting what he wants in the morning; but since, given the Lenny case, how things are going for someone at one time can be affected by what happens at some later time, there seems no reason to say that Paul is not being benefited in the morning.

But on the contrary, there is in fact a reason not to say that he is benefited in the morning: in the morning, Paul is not yet getting anything he wants. This seems like an important difference between Olivia and Paul. Olivia is getting what she wants in the morning, and Paul isn't. The most we can say about Paul is that in the morning, he is *going* to get what he wants later. Why think he is better off in the morning in virtue of that fact obtaining? After all, it is true of *all times before he gets what he wants* that he is later going to get what he wants. Bruckner offers the following in defense of the claim that Paul benefits in the morning:

⁸ I believe that focusing on the time one is getting what one wants will lead to strange results in many cases, implying that it is better to desire things that take a long time to happen. But I will not pursue this here.

If we were not to admit that his success in the early evening makes it that he fared well in the morning, then we would be severely limited in what we could say about how he fared in the morning. As far as his morning desire to submit his paper by 6 p.m. goes, the later satisfaction or frustration of that desire would not affect his welfare either positively or negatively. Indeed, its satisfaction or frustration could not possibly affect his welfare either positively or negatively. (Bruckner 2013, 22-3)

Reading Bruckner's argument uncharitably, we might think he is changing the subject mid-argument. We need to distinguish the question of whether Paul *benefits* from the question of whether he benefits *in the morning*. It is perfectly consistent to say both that Paul benefits from his submitting the paper and that he does not benefit in the morning. It is even possible to say that Paul benefits from submitting the paper without benefiting at any time. A more charitable reading would interpret him as referring to temporal well-being throughout the argument: Paul certainly benefits in the morning, and the only way to get this result is by adopting the time of desire view. But why think Paul benefits in the morning? It is not at all intuitive to say that he does. After all, he is not yet getting anything he wants!

Dorsey's argument for the time of desire view is based on the resonance constraint (Dorsey 2013, 159). We saw that the time of object view fails, in part, because it does not respect the resonance constraint: if I get something that I used to desire but no longer do, the time of object view entails that this is good for me now even though the thing is not resonating with me now. According to the time of desire view, something benefits me at a time only if I am desiring it at that time—so any time things are going well for me, something is resonating with me. The relevant resonance constraint is time-relative: something benefits someone at a time only if it resonates with her at that time.

The time of desire view also has an advantage over the time of object view: it does not entail that things can go well or badly for someone at a time before or after she has come into existence. Since you must exist to have a desire, when you go out of existence you stop having temporal well-being.

However, the time of desire view is just as unintuitive as the time of object view. When you are desiring something and have

not yet got it, or are not get getting it, things are not yet going well for you. Nothing good is happening for you yet! Consider a young girl who wants to become an astronaut, and then as an adult does become an astronaut. Would anyone say that this girl had a wonderful childhood because she had this desire that ended up being satisfied years later? Or if she ended up not becoming an astronaut, would anyone say this made her *childhood* go poorly?⁹

The desire fulfillment theorist might be willing to put up with this counterintuitive result if it were the only way to hold on to the time-relative resonance constraint. But in fact what these cases seem to show is that an even more restrictive resonance constraint is plausible. In order for something to go well for someone at a time, it must not only resonate with the person at that time—it must also *obtain* at that time.¹⁰ The time of desire view violates this resonance constraint. The only view that is compatible with this resonance constraint is the time of both view. But before we get to that view, there is one more view to consider.

4. The Later Time View

Eden Lin suggests that it is a mistake to identify either the time of the desire or the time of the object as the time at which someone is benefited by a desire fulfillment. Rather, he thinks it is sometimes one and sometimes the other—hence he calls the view “asymmetrism” (Lin forthcoming). But more specifically he thinks that the relevant time is whichever of the two times is later, so I will call it the “later time” view. For example, when a girl desires to become an astronaut and then becomes one as an adult, this benefits her

⁹ I think the moral of such cases is that how well things are going for you at a time is determined entirely by what is happening at that time (Bradley 2009; see Dorsey 2013, 166-70 for criticism). But here I do not defend that general principle, only the implausibility of saying that events in adulthood retroactively make your childhood better or worse.

¹⁰ See Lin forthcoming, 19. Lin introduces this principle not to endorse it, but to defend his own view from the accusation that it violates the weaker resonance constraint—the thought being that if both the time of desire view and the later time view violate some resonance constraint or other, there is no significant reason to prefer the time of desire view to the later time view.

when she is an adult, not when she is a child, according to the later time view. On the other hand, suppose I now desire not to have made a fool of myself at the party last night, and in fact I didn't make a fool of myself. According to the later time view, this benefits me now, not last night. Again, this seems like the better thing to say. The underlying thought is that one starts to benefit from a satisfaction only when *both* parts of it have happened (Lin forthcoming, 8). Nothing good has happened until both the desire and its object have happened; so you can't benefit until both have happened.

But this is not quite enough. As Lin notes, the later time view will share some of the absurd consequences of the time of object view: my desire that people colonize Mars will make me better off when people colonize Mars even if I am long dead by then. To avoid this result Lin simply adds a clause: you benefit only when both the desire and its object have obtained, *and you exist* (Lin forthcoming, 20). Of course, adding such a clause is also open to the defender of the time of object view. So we might wonder whether the later time view is very much better than the time of object view. But perhaps it is, since it does seem to get a better result in the case where I desire not to have made a fool of myself last night.

Nevertheless the later time view should be rejected. Like the time of object view, it violates the resonance constraint. In cases where the object of your desire obtains long after you have stopped desiring that thing (but you still exist), the later time view entails that things are going well for you when that thing obtains. If we are motivated by resonance constraints on well-being we should find this unacceptable.

We might also wonder about the ad hoc nature of the existence requirement. After all, if we accept the later time view, we are committed to saying that you need not desire something at a time in order to be benefited then. Why, then, do you need to exist at all? Consider this case. You desire from t_1 to t_2 that rhinos exist. At t_2 , a rhino scares away your dog and you stop caring about whether rhinos exist; and for all you know, they don't. At t_3 ($>t_2$) you die not knowing or caring whether there are rhinos. According to the later time view you are benefited from t_2 - t_3 as long as rhinos exist then, but not after t_3 . But why treat these times differently? The only reason to do so is to avoid the absurd result that the dead can be well off. The motivation does not flow from anything internal to the later time view or from the desire fulfillment view more generally. After all, on these views your welfare is determined

by things happening wholly outside you. So there is nothing in these views that should lead us to think there would be a problem with being benefited at times when you do not exist.

5. The Time of Both View

As mentioned above, the only view that respects the strong but plausible time-relative resonance constraint is the time of both view. On this view, you are benefited at a time only if you have a desire at that time and its object is obtaining at that time. This view avoids the result that you can be benefited or harmed at times before or after you exist (because you have no desires at those times). It avoids the result that you are benefited now by satisfying your long-extinct childhood desires, and also avoids the result that you retroactively benefit or harm your childhood self by satisfying or frustrating your childhood desires. These advantages are so significant that the desire fulfillment theorist should adopt the time of both view.

Dorsey wonders why we should care whether a desire and its object obtain at the same time (Dorsey 2013, 157-58). After all, we do not care whether they obtain in the same place. A desire for something to happen far away can benefit you, according to a desire fulfillment theorist, even if you don't know that it happens. Why not also say that a desire for something at a distant *time* can benefit you? Isn't it arbitrary to say that spatial distance is irrelevant but temporal distance is crucial? The answer is no. If I want to know how things are going for me *now*, it does not seem arbitrary to confine my attention to what things relevant to my well-being are happening *now*. Temporal distance matters for temporal well-being. If we had a notion of spatial well-being, spatial distance would matter to it; but we don't, it seems. (We don't ever say "I am well-off here" or "my desire is satisfied here," or "I am better off here than there," unless perhaps when talking about a body part.)

In previous work I have argued that, given how many of our desires are forward-looking, the time of both view entails that there isn't as much temporal well-being as we intuitively think there ought to be (Bradley 2009, 23). Dorsey agrees with this point (Dorsey 2013, 157). But at least concerning desire-based views, I am no longer sure whether this is an objection or merely a mildly interesting implication of the view. Maybe there just isn't all that much well-being taking place at moments or small durations of time; maybe you typically need a longer stretch of time to get some

well-being. In a case where someone has lots of satisfied desires in their life, and hence (on the desire-fulfillment view) a lot of well-being, it does not seem ideal to have to say that things are not going well for the person at very many moments in their life. We would expect there to be many good moments in a good life. The time of both view entails that, in principle, there could be an excellent life that had no good moments in it. This result could be avoided, however, by saying that in cases where a desire and its object do not overlap in time, not only is there no *momentary* well-being, there is no well-being *at all*; if you desire something at one time, and it happens at another time after you have stopped desiring it, nothing good at all has happened (Heathwood 2005).

There is another “asymmetrical” view that is more plausible than Lin’s later time view, and might be as plausible as the time of both view. It is, in a way, intermediate between these views. On this view, which we could call the “later desire” view, things are going well for you at a time if at that time you have a desire about the *present or past* that is fulfilled—but not if it is about the future. This view has some advantages over other views. Concerning the person who desires not to have made a fool of herself last night, the later desire view entails that she is better off at the time of the desire. It also entails that you do not benefit from the existence of rhinos at any time after you have stopped desiring their existence, which seems like the right result. Unlike the later time view, it does not require us to adopt an ad hoc existence requirement. And, like the time of desire view, it is compatible with a weak resonance constraint, since nothing is going well for you at a time unless you have a desire at that time. (It is not compatible with the stronger resonance constraint.)

However, consider the following example. You want the Yankees to win the World Series, and they do win the world series in October. But you are stranded in Antarctica and you don’t even know what month it is. If it is September, they haven’t won the World Series yet, but they will next month. If it is November, they won the World Series last month. On the later desire view, you benefit now if it is now November, but not if it is now September. Why should these cases be treated differently?

Other views will share this problem, including the time of both view. Simply consider the possibility that it is now October, and the Yankees are now winning the world series as you desire. On the time of both view, you benefit now if it is now October, but not if it is now September or November. This seems equally wrong.

Intuitively, whether you now benefit in such cases should not be determined by what month it now is.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that the most plausible desire-based view of temporal well-being is the time of object view, or perhaps the later desire view. These views have important advantages over the time of desire view and the later time view; but we just saw that they also get strange results in certain cases where the object of the desire obtains at some faraway place. This might lead us back to the time of desire view, since on the time of desire view it does not matter whether the object obtains before or after the desire—either way, there is temporal well-being at the time the desire occurs. But we have already seen that the time of desire view is unacceptable.

I think what these cases really show is the strong attractiveness of saying that how well things are going for me now is determined wholly by my current mental states, and the deep unattractiveness of views (such as desire fulfillment views) according to which my well-being is determined by events taking place far away. More generally, I think they show that the kind of resonance that is important for well-being is not desire, but *enjoyment*. Things are not going well for you at a time unless something is resonating with you at that time—but more specifically, you must be enjoying yourself at that time. If you are enjoying the prospect of the Yankees winning, things are going well for you; if you merely want them to win, but take no pleasure in the prospect, things are not going well for you. If you now are pleased that you didn't make a fool of yourself last night, that is good for you now. If you are now enjoying the prospect that people will colonize Mars in 2400, that is good for you now too. If you aren't enjoying anything at all now, things aren't going well for you now, no matter what you *want*. To establish this, however, would take much more argument. For now, I conclude merely that if you wish to defend a desire fulfillment view of well-being, you should adopt the time of both view or the later desire view.

References

- Baber, H.E. 2010. "Ex Ante Desire and Post Hoc Satisfaction." In Joseph Campbell, Michael O'Rourke and Harry Silverstein (eds.), *Time and Identity* (MIT Press), pp. 249-67.
- Bradley, Ben. 2009. *Well-Being and Death*. Oxford University Press.
- Bruckner, Donald. 2013. "Present Desire Satisfaction and Past Well-Being." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 91: 15-29.
- Chisholm, R.M. 1986. *Brentano and Intrinsic Value*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dorsey, Dale. 2012. "Intrinsic Value and the Supervenience Principle." *Philosophical Studies* 157: 267-85.
- Dorsey, Dale. 2013. "Desire-satisfaction and Welfare as Temporal." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16: 151-71.
- Glasgow, Joshua. 2013. "The Shape of a Life and the Value of Loss and Gain." *Philosophical Studies* 162: 665-82.
- Heathwood, Chris. 2005. "The Problem of Defective Desires." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83: 487-504.
- Lin, Eden. "Asymmetrism about Desire Satisfaction and Time." *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 7, forthcoming.
- McKerlie, Dennis. 1989. "Equality and Time." *Ethics* 99: 475-91.
- Rabenberg, Michael. 2015. "Harm." *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, www.jesp.org, vol. 8, no. 3.
- Railton, Peter. 2002. "Facts and Values." In his *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge University Press), pp. 43-68.
- Velleman, David. 1991. "Well-Being and Time." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72: 48-77.