PESSIMISM, WELL-BEING, AND THE GOODNESS OF LIVES

PESSIMISM, WELL-BEING, AND THE GOODNESS OF LIVES

By MIRIAM BRONSKI, B.A, M.A

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Lay Abstract

This dissertation grapples with the fundamental question of what makes life worth living. I consider some under-appreciated arguments in favor of pessimism, the view that life is not worth living. I demonstrate that while these arguments for pessimism are more plausible than many philosophers suppose, they are ultimately defeated by my own hybrid holist theory of well-being. On my view, life is worth living because both subjective and objective goods confer value on one's existence. Moreover, I also argue that when we account for the narrative features of a person's life, there is far more value than pessimists suppose.

Abstract

Moral philosophers have long sought to define what constitutes a good life, or what things make a life go well for the person living it. Common candidates are achievement, friendship, knowledge, among others. Typically, it is widely assumed that these goods are often attainable, leading to the belief that life is generally worth living. However, a significant debate in nineteenth century German philosophy challenged this assumption. Philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer, history's most famous advocate of pessimism, argued that a deeper, unbiased examination of human life – characterized by futile striving and pointless suffering – would reveal that existence is something to be regretted rather than celebrated. Schopenhauer even suggested that the world's non-existence would be preferable to its existence.[1] This view, known as philosophical pessimism, sparked extensive debates, particularly during what became known as the "pessimism dispute" as thinkers grappled with the question of whether life is worth living. This dissertation is a concerted effort to rejoin pessimism and propose a philosophically satisfactory account of how life, in many cases, is worth living. Schopenhauer himself made the fatal error of assuming that life is worth living only if there is a highest good, where goodness gets construed as a state of affairs that is valuable simpliciter. However, he fails to consider how prudential value can still render a human life worth living. While Schopenhauer's pessimism does not ultimately succeed, there are contemporary reformulations of pessimism, for instance from David Benatar, that still require refutation. In this dissertation, I contend that while contemporary pessimism remains plausible, there is nevertheless a novel hybrid theory of well-being that can account for why many lives are ultimately worth living. In fact, a decisive reason to favor the hybrid theory over its competitors is the extent to which it resolves various philosophical problems posed by contemporary pessimists better than alternative

[1] Arthur Schopenhauer, *World As Will And Representation Vol. 2,* trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Chrisopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 592.

accounts of well-being.

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Introduction

In recent years, the concept of well-being has attracted significant attention across fields as diverse as public health, philosophy, psychology, theology, and even neuroscience. Much has been written about the factors that contribute to a good life. These discussions often focus on things that are considered to make lives go better such as achievement, friendship, knowledge, *inter alia*. However, despite the abundant interdisciplinary discourse surrounding well-being, there is a dearth of discussion concerning one of the most fundamental issues pertaining to it: i.e. the pessimistic view that life, with all its suffering and futility, is ultimately not prudentially valuable enough to be worth living in the first place. The challenge of philosophical pessimism raises questions about the value of existence itself that have indeed been largely elided in the contemporary well-being literature.

The present dissertation aims to fill this important gap by not only offering a rejoinder to the pessimist's challenge, but also by defending a novel hybrid theory of well-being. The dissertation's primary contributions are, then, threefold: first, it links the pessimism literature with what is often seen as an unconnected discourse on well-being, highlighting how the philosophical arguments in each area are closely connected; second, it proposes a novel framework for understanding well-being that integrates the most plausible ingredients from pre-existing theories; and finally, it argues that this theory is particularly well-equipped to address the pessimist's challenge to the worthwhileness of human life itself. In doing so, the thesis seeks not only to offer a robust theory of well-being, but also to demonstrate the type of response that more sophisticated discussions of well-being should consider when confronting questions about the value of life itself. By tackling this challenge, the dissertation contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of well-being, one that grapples

seriously with the possibility that life may in fact not be worth living.

The central argument of this dissertation is that my novel view of well-being – what I will call hybrid holism – is better suited than its rivals to respond to the pressing problem posed by pessimism. One key advantage of hybrid holism is that its hybrid nature allows for a wider range of things to be considered prudentially valuable, making it more generous than non-hybrid views in what it acknowledges as contributing to well-being. However, alongside this expanded scope of positive prudential value, hybrid theories also risk admitting too many sources of ill-being (negative prudential value). Therefore, while the hybrid feature is important, it is not sufficient on its own to address the challenge of pessimism. This is where the second key feature of my theory – the narrative aspect – becomes crucial. In addition to being more inclusive, hybrid holism incorporates a narrative structure that allows it to factor in the impact of distribution of well-being and ill-being over time. Specifically, the narrative feature enables my theory to discount the impact of ill-being, as seen, for instance, in cases of redemption, where past suffering can be mitigated by later well-being. This narrative component, I argue, is what makes hybrid holism uniquely well positioned to respond to pessimism. I delineate the aforementioned arguments across four interrelated chapters.

In chapter one, I explicate the notions of prudential value and well-being in depth, offering a survey of the existing literature on the topic. My goal is not only to set the philosophical stage for my ensuing discussion, but also to highlight some of the preliminary problems plaguing pre-existing accounts of well-being. Specifically, as I will argue, the major non-hybrid theories fail to meet the "comprehensiveness criterion", which requires being thoroughly inclusive of all sources of prudential value and excluding nothing. I argue that these theories prove to be either under- or over-

inclusive, or both in what they consider prudentially valuable. [2] Additionally, they struggle to meet two plausible requirements for theories of well-being (simultaneously), namely the *internal resonance* criterion and the *worthiness* criterion. My aim is to propose a new hybrid theory that combines the strengths of existing accounts while addressing these issues.

In chapter two, having outlined the pre-existing theories and explaining their shortcomings, I then formulate my own hybrid holist view of well-being. My view combines elements of both subjectivism and objectivism, while avoiding the under-inclusiveness problem by rejecting the dual-criteria requirement. My defense of hybrid holism unfolds in three stages. First, I motivate hybridism in general and expand on the two widely held desiderata for well-being, namely *internal resonance* and *worthiness*. I argue that current subjectivist and objectivist theories fail to meet both criteria simultaneously, making them under-inclusive. In response, I introduce hybrid theories. I then discuss a challenge arising from the joint-necessity condition, which is commonly endorsed by most hybrid theories. I argue that these theories are susceptible to this joint-necessity difficulty. Second, I present my hybrid holist theory and its three main components. Finally, I explain why my theory is preferable to the most plausible versions of the theories discussed in chapter 1 across a variety of adequacy constraints on any plausible theory of well-being. Specifically, I argue that it better satisfies the internal resonance and worthiness criteria, while avoiding the difficulties associated with joint-necessity.

In chapter three, I then outline the most plausible arguments for philosophical pessimism, illustrating how the pessimists and their contemporary progeny – the anti-natalists – pose serious philosophical problems with which any theory of well-being must contend. More specifically, I first

[2] I adopt Joseph Van Weelden's terminology as discussed in *The Disjunctive Hybrid Theory of Prudential Value*

present the classic argument in support of anti-natalism. This argument states that if a life features any badness, it is not worth starting, and that since all lives feature some badness, all lives are not worth starting. I refine this classic formulation of the anti-natalist argument and argue that *many* lives are not worth starting, since many lives feature more badness than goodness. Secondly, I offer the most compelling support for this argument by citing examples of widespread suffering, such as poverty, violence, mental illness, and other atrocities. Additionally, I show how the intensity and duration of suffering may plausibly be thought to far outweigh the fleeting nature of pleasure. Thirdly, I address and refute three popular reasons why many philosophers believe the anti-natalist argument fails. Specifically, I discuss objections like Parfit's non-identity problem and two difficulties associated with measurements of well-being. The upshot of this discussion is that suffering often outweighs well-being in human life. Anti-natalism is accordingly more plausible than many philosophers are willing to concede and is therefore a serious threat with which any theory of prudential value must contend.

Chapter four then shows how hybrid holism should be further favored as a theory of prudential value because it is uniquely positioned to resolve the problems posed by pessimism and anti-natalism. That is, it does not merely presuppose that life is worth living (as other theories of well-being are wont to do) but actually provides a more fundamental explanation of why life is, in the preponderance of cases, prudentially valuable in the first place. I argue that hybrid holism offers the most promising response to the pessimistic claim that ill-being outweighs well-being in a typical human life. Hybrid holism does so for two main reasons: it both recognizes a wider range of well-being sources and also incorporates a narrative component, which helps mitigate the effects of ill-being. The chapter begins by reviewing the three components of hybrid holism (introduced in chapter 2) and explaining how this framework allows for a broader range of well-being sources. I

will show that simply adding more sources of well-being is not enough to counter pessimism, as it may also introduce more sources of ill-being. The remainder of the chapter focuses on how the narrative component of hybrid holism helps reduce the impact of ill-being, offering significant advantages over rival views in addressing these concerns. Given hybrid holism's plausibility and its ability to rejoin the pessimists and anti-natalists, it ought to be endorsed.

Methodology

In theorizing about human well-being, it makes sense to consider not only what humans are actually like but also what they commonly value. Since well-being is conceptually tied to what is good *for someone*, a viable theory should reflect that person's ordinary experiences, social, cultural practices, and so on. Accordingly, the arguments developed in this dissertation draw upon a range of data types, including appeals to intuition and empirical research alongside theoretical analysis.

Appeals to intuition are a widely employed method in philosophical literature on well-being and ethics. It is widely granted that intuitions are fallible, but they often serve as starting points or tests for proposed principles and theories. Intuitions are defeasible and can be undermined by contextual factors, weakened when the credibility of their source is called into question, and overridden by stronger, countervailing considerations. Recent literature has indeed raised concerns about the reliability of intuitions. The concerns chiefly pertain to their sensitivity to philosophically irrelevant factors. For instance, they are subject to imaginative distortion (i.e. where individuals simulate thought experiment scenarios erroneously),[3] cognitive biases,[4] framing effects, or even demographic variation.[5] These concerns warrant a cautious approach in appealing to intuitions.

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[3] Weijers noted two confounding factors involving imagination: imaginative resistance and overactive imagination which distort judgment about the Nozick's experience machine thought experiment. Imaginative resistance is when individuals reject or ignore a thought experiment's core stipulations and overactive imagination involves people adding unintended or emotionally charged elements to the scenario and so judging it based on irrelevant factors.

Dan Weijers, "Nozick's Experience Machine is Dead, Long Live the Experience Machine!" *Philosophical Psychology* 27, no. 4 (2014): 513-535.

[4] Philosophers have suggested that widespread agreement on an intuition does not necessarily indicate its correctness but may instead reflect a shared cognitive bias. Many have also stated that intuitions are prone to the status quo bias, in particular, which is a well-documented psychological tendency to irrationally prefer current conditions over change.

Jennifer Nagel, "Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 3 (2012): 495-527.

Felipe De Brigard, "If You Don't Like It, Does It Matter If It's Real?" *Philosophical Psychology* 23, no. 1 (2010): 43-57.

[5] Empirical studies shoe that intuitions vary by language, gender, culture, and age.

However, I nevertheless maintain that intuitions are not globally unreliable and are often our best guide to tracking the truth about well-being. When intuitions are stable, widely shared and associated with a high degree of confidence, they tend to be relatively immune to irrelevant influences. This suggests they may be truth-tracking to some extent and so may count as credible sources of support. They can therefore often be employed to provide *supporting reasons* for premises in arguments, notwithstanding their potential epistemic shortcomings and inability to prove a premise definitively. Since, as I had earlier stated, intuitions are employed within the mainstream literature on well-being, there is a high degree of consensus concerning their suitability to support philosophical reasoning about the nature of well-being. Since this dissertation is not a meta-philosophical inquiry into the methodological foundations of the well-being literature itself, I will not provide further vindication of this point. Indeed, taking a cue from Sumner, I take it as a criterion of descriptive adequacy that a theory of well-being should aim to be "faithful to our ordinary concept and our ordinary experience." This does not demand complete consistency with all commonsense views, which may themselves be confused or conflict with one another. But it does require that a plausible theory of well-being resonate with the most deeply held, robust pre-theoretical judgments about what makes life go well. In short, intuitions *are* likely an appropriate guide to the philosophical task on which this dissertation is focused.

Realizing that some philosophers will not be swayed by intuitions and that intuitions are admittedly fallible under certain conditions, I will however appeal to a broader philosophical audience by supplementing arguments from intuition with other forms of philosophical

Krist Vaesen, Martin Peterson, and Bart Van Bezooijen, "The Reliability of Armchair Intuitions," *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 5 (2013): 559-578; Wesley Buckwalter and Stephen Stich, "Gender and Philosophical Intuition," in *Experimental Philosophy Vol* 2, ed. Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 307-316; Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions," *Philosophical Topics* 29, no. 1 (2001): 429-460; David Colaco, Wesley Buckwalter, Stephen Stich, and Edouard Machery, "Epistemic Intuitions in Fake-Barn Thought Experiments," *Episteme* 11, no. 2 (2014): 199-212.

argumentation. Indeed, throughout the dissertation, I will stitch empirical evidence into the underlying fabric of my philosophical argumentation. Evidence from psychology, sociology, and related disciplines helps illuminate what people in fact pursue, value, and report as enhancing their lives. Such data provides insight into the enumerative question (what things are good for a person) and the explanatory question (what makes those things good for the person). Empirical evidence can also be conscripted into the service of bolstering some of the pessimistic observations made in this dissertation. For instance, empirical facts about the prevalence and severity of human pain and misery should certainly be cited in any arguments concerning the worthwhileness of life.

Given my appeal to both intuitions and other forms of philosophical argumentation (e.g. the citing of empirical evidence and theoretical analysis), my methodological approach can rightfully be classified as pluralism. The approach of this dissertation therefore integrates ordinary thought, common sense intuitions, citations of empirically observable reality, and logical argumentation based upon the implications thereof. These different kinds of data contribute to the descriptive adequacy of a potential theory of well-being. While it is not the purpose of this dissertation to defend a meta-philosophical approach to how one ought to conduct philosophical analysis itself, I take it that the approach outlined above is broadly appealing to both the mainstream consensus with the well-being literature and those of alternative philosophical persuasions. Ultimately, these methods need not be seen as conflicting because reasons to believe the truth can be *overdetermined*, i.e. there can be more than one argument, reason, or methodology whose results yield the same philosophical conclusion. The fact that varying styles of philosophical argumentation can lend credence to my conclusions only counts as a further point in favor of the dissertation's veracity, or so I shall contend.

Chapter 1: Prudential Value and Well-Being: Surveying the Philosophical Terrain

In Act II Scene II of Shakespeare's Macbeth, Macbeth maliciously murders Lord Duncan, ultimately ensuring that he will be crowned the new King of Scotland. It is bad that Lord Duncan died. But there are at least two ways to construe that normative claim: either Duncan's death could be bad for him, or Duncan's death could be objectively bad, i.e. from a stance-independent perspective. While the first construal refers to the notion of prudential value, i.e. that which is good or bad for a person, the latter denotes goodness simpliciter, i.e. that which is good or bad intrinsically. In this chapter, I explicate the notion of prudential value in more detail than the initial gloss provided above. It is universally understood that prudential value amounts to a goodness-for relation, but there remains considerable controversy concerning what deeper analysis of that relation holds: what does it take for x to be good for S? Since my dissertation aims to provide an analysis of prudential value, it is imperative to first spell out what it means.

As a rough overview: this chapter starts by clarifying the concept of prudential value and its relation to well-being, and then proceeds to a critique of the major theories of well-being. In the first half of the chapter, the distinction between prudential value and well-being is outlined, along with an explanation of how they relate to each other. The chapter then emphasizes the subject-relative nature of prudential value. Lastly, it discusses various approaches to evaluating well-being, introducing factors that could affect well-being assessments. This preliminary explanation is crucial, as I categorize the major theories in terms of how they conceptualize prudential value – whether something is prudentially valuable in virtue of a person having the right kind of pro-attitude towards that thing, or in virtue of that thing having the right kind of attitude-independent value, or some combination of both.

In the second half of the chapter, I move on to a discussion of the major theories of well-being. I will also provide a preliminary sketch of some problems plaguing pre-existing theories with the ultimate aim of setting the stage for the necessity of endorsing a new hybrid picture of well-being. The theories prove to be either over- or under-inclusive regarding what is prudentially valuable. Indeed, I take it that the central problem afflicting all the following accounts is their failure to meet the *comprehensiveness* criterion, which requires "including everything and excluding nothing" that has prudential value.[6] Another limitation of all the theories is their inability to simultaneously satisfy two widely recognized desiderata for theories of well-being: the *internal resonance* criterion,[7] which is the idea that what is good for someone should reflect their cares or concerns, or the *worthiness* criterion, the requirement that prudentially good things have genuine worth (at least as a regulative ideal). Subjectivist views struggle to satisfy the worthiness criterion, while objectivists face difficulties accounting for internal resonance. The aim of this discussion is to lay the groundwork for a new theory – one that synthesizes the compelling features of the leading accounts while addressing their limitations.

1. Prudential Value Unpacked

Given my aim to advance a theory of well-being and prudential value, a natural starting point is to clarify the foundational concepts involved. In this section, I will examine the distinct but closely

[6] Tim E. Taylor (2012) characterizes the comprehensiveness criterion in a similar way.

[7] This idea is found in Brink (2008) and Railton (2003) who call this "the resonance constraint" and "the non-alienation condition" respectively.

David O. Brink, "The Significance of Desire," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3 (2008); Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," in *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

related concepts of well-being and prudential value.[8] Often these terms are used interchangeably,[9] but I think it is philosophically beneficial to treat them as distinct concepts. While well-being pertains to the ontological state of things going well for a person, prudential value refers to those things that contribute to well-being. I make this distinction to avoid confusion, as the term "well-being" is often used in varied and sometimes conflicting ways in ordinary language. When I later delve into discussing the major theories, this distinction will help ensure precision in classifying the theories in terms of how they identify the specific bearers of prudential value.

1.1 Prudential Value and Well-Being: A Conceptual Distinction

Well-being, in its ordinary usage, is typically discussed in connection to what is "good for" a person. In the literature, it tends to be associated with a multitude of terms such as welfare, flourishing, happiness, self-interest, and prudential value. While the common understanding of well-being may be vague, any meaningful theory of well-being should offer enough clarity to permit effective theorizing. Illuminating this concept is the task with which I will be concerned in the first part of this section. In simple terms, well-being is what a person has when they are thriving or doing well. When we assess how well a person is faring in general, we are invoking the concept of well-being as it pertains to the features or facts about a person's life that make it go well for that person.

[8] The distinction between these two concepts is also emphasized in Taylor (2012) p. 15-17, Taylor (2013) p. 10- 12. Dorsey (2021) p. 43, and Lin (2022) p. 3,

Tim E. Taylor, *Knowing What is Good For You: A Theory of Prudential Value and Well-Being* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Tim E. Taylor, "Well-Being and Prudential Value," *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2013): 10-12; Dale Dorsey, *A Theory of Prudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 43; Eden Lin, "Well-Being, Part 1: The Concept of Well-Being," *Philosophy Compass* 17, no. 2 (2022): 3;

[9] See Crisp (2008) for instance.
Roger Crisp, "Well-Being," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Winter 2008, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/

Prudential value, on the other hand, is what something has in virtue of which it is good for a person. That is, it is what contributes to a person's well-being. It concerns the numerous things that have an impact on whether one fares well or badly. Roughly, then, well-being is what a person has when they are faring well and prudential value (for that person) is what a thing has if it contributes towards making that person fare well (i.e. towards their well-being).

The way that prudential value relates to well-being is by positively contributing to someone's well-being, whereas prudential disvalue decreases their well-being.[10] To say that *x* is good for S is to say that S stands in a special beneficial relationship to *x*, i.e. it is something that improves S's well-being. We can understand this as the following identity relation:

X has positive (negative) prudential value for S

is equivalent to:

X increases (decreases) S's well-being.[11]

It is worth noting that well-being should also be distinguished from subjective states of positive moods, affect, emotions, happiness, or even judging one's life to be satisfactory.[12] It is not obviously true that the extent to which a person has well-being is just the extent to which they are

[10] See Campbell (2016) p. 403 and Parfit (2011) p. 31 for an explanation of 'good for' in terms of 'well-being' or 'prudential value'.

Stephen M. Campbell, "The Concept of Well-Being," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-Being,* ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 403; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters,* vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

[11] Tim E. Taylor, "Well-Being and Prudential Value," *Philosophical and Public Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2013): 3.

[12] See Haybron (2008) p. 27-29 for the conceptual distinction between well-being and happiness.
Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27-29.

happy. It seems conceivable that a very happy person who has no close relationships and who achieves nothing of value might have a low degree of well-being. Happiness is here understood as a descriptive notion referring to some psychological state, whereas well-being is a normative notion, which may or may not refer to a psychological state, and which signifies what is good for an individual. For this reason, when discussing what makes life go well for a person, I believe it is preferable to use the term "well-being" rather than "happiness".

1.2 Subject-Relativity of Prudential Value

A further feature of prudential value is its *subject-relativity*, i.e. the fact that its value is always relative to a welfare-subject. Although seemingly mundane, this is a foundational point. As Douglas B. Rasmussen puts it, "human flourishing involves an essential reference to the person for whom it is good as part of its description."[13] That is, prudential value is not an impersonal value but it is essentially indexed to the individual whose well-being we are considering. By "relative" I do not mean arbitrary or subjective in the sense of being based merely on preference. A way to clarify this idea of subject-relativity could be to contrast it with the notion of subject-neutrality in action theory. Subject-neutral reasons are those that apply to everyone equally. For instance, if a given course of action advances a person's values, a subject-neutral framework would treat this fact as offering no special reason for that person to choose it over some other course of action. By contrast, prudential reasons are subject-relative. They derive their normative force in part from their connection to the specific individual whose well-being is in question. If a course of action promotes that individual's values, then this provides a reason for that person (and not necessarily for others) to pursue that course of action.

[13] Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Human Flourishing and Human Nature," *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation* 16, no. 1 (1999): 7.

1.3 Evaluating Well-Being: Distribution Effects

In terms of making well-being judgments, a person's well-being can be evaluated at either particular segments of one's life or over the totality of a lifetime.[14] For instance, J. David Velleman distinguishes *momentary well-being*, i.e. the amount of well-being that obtains synchronically at a given slice of time, from *lifetime well-being*, i.e. the level of well-being exhibited over an entire lifespan.[15] I will assume that lifetime well-being is the normatively significant notion. In other words, it is lifetime well-being that is worth promoting for one's sake. Some might suggest that lifetime well-being is simply an aggregation of momentary well-being (that one simply sums momentary well-being together to yield lifetime well-being). However, this "naive additivism" about well-being (as I will call it) does not account for how the *narrative distribution* of well-being can impact lifetime well-being. For example, a lifetime with a positive narrative arc, in which previous ill-being is redeemed by later well-being, can arguably have a higher lifetime well-being than a life that follows the arc of an Aristotelian tragedy, (the life starts off well, but gets progressively worse). In considering lifetime well-being, we should not consider just the sheer quantity of prudential value units, but also their context and distribution across a lifespan – or so I shall maintain.

2. Critiquing Major Theories of Well-Being: Towards a Hybrid Approach

Having clarified the concepts of well-being and prudential value, I will now explicate the leading theories of these interconnected concepts. The key distinction between different approaches to well-being lies in their analysis of prudential value. I divide these theories according to whether

[14] Some examples of those who draw this distinction include Bradley (2009), Bramble (2014), Broome (2004), Brink (2010), Campbell (2016), Dorsey (2009), Feldman (2004), Griffin (1986), Kauppinen (2012), McMahan (2002), Portmore (2007), Raibley (2012), and Velleman (1991).
[15] Ibid.

they emphasize a person's positive subjective state, their having a range of objective goods, or a combination of both. I will survey some of the main theories of well-being, organizing them into three broad categories: i.e. subjectivism, objectivism, and hybridism. Along the way, I will highlight their strengths and weaknesses. I do this to prepare the way for presenting my own theory.

I take it that the central problem afflicting all the following accounts is their failure to meet the *comprehensiveness* criterion, which requires accounting for the full range of things that hold prudential value and excluding nothing. Another concern for all the theories is their difficulty in simultaneously satisfying two desiderata – *internal resonance* and *worthiness* – that I argue should both be incorporated into a plausible theory of well-being. My ultimate aim is to develop a theory of well-being and prudential value that not only resolves common weaknesses in leading theories but also preserves (wherever possible) their most compelling insights. Most importantly, this account is intended to withstand the challenges posed by pessimism.

To offer a general overview of the three dominant kinds of theories of prudential value, I provide a brief definition of each. Subjectivist theories hold that prudential value is tied to a person's attitudes or concerns and that a person can instill things with prudential value by caring about them. This idea is captured by what Peter Railton calls *internal resonance*, which states that something is good for someone only if they care about it in some way.[16] The standard motivation for endorsing subjectivism is to accord a key role to a person's attitudes or concerns in determining their well-being. Conversely, objectivism emphasizes the impact of attitude-independent value on well-being, holding that certain things have genuine worth, regardless of a person's preferences. This is captured

[16] Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," in *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

by what I call *worthiness* – the idea that prudential value should be tied to genuine worth. As will be shown, each of these perspectives can uphold one of these constraints, but often at the expense of the other. Hybrid views are typically endorsed as a way to combine both insights, incorporating elements of both subjectivity and objectivity.

To summarize:

Subjectivism: *x* contributes to S's well-being iff S holds favoring attitudes towards *x*.

Objectivism: *x* contributes to S's well-being iff *x* is objectively valuable.

Hybridism: *x* contributes to S's well-being iff *x* is objectively valuable, and/or S subjectively engages with *x* in the appropriate way.

I argue that hybridism, which combines elements of both subjectivism and objectivism, offers a more promising approach than either subjectivism or objectivism alone. This discussion will pave the way for a hybrid theory that synthesizes plausible features of existing accounts while avoiding their core weaknesses.

---Pure Subjectivism---

Subjectivist accounts of well-being are those that accord a central role to the subject's attitudes or mental states in determining what is good for them. Broadly, such accounts hold that a thing, *x*, has prudential value for a subject, S, *because* S has a certain sort of pro-attitude towards *x*. The relevant pro-attitudes can be cashed out in various ways: in terms of pleasure, enjoyment, desire, liking, favoring, or a sense of satisfaction. Most versions of hedonism, desire-satisfaction theories, and life-satisfaction theories belong to the subjective category.

I further divide this class of theories with respect to their 'degree' of subjectivity. Such theories can be partially or purely subjective.[17] According to purely subjective theories, an individual having the appropriate pro-attitude towards an object is necessary and sufficient for conferring prudential value on that object. These theories hold that something has prudential value for a person *only if* that thing bears the appropriate relation to that person's attitude. Partially subjective theories, on the other hand, are not committed to the dependence of prudential value on pro-attitudes. They recognize that pro-attitudes can be sufficient to create prudential value but maintain that they are not always necessary. Such theories claim that: *at least some* of the things that are good for a person have prudential value *at least partially* because the person has the appropriate pro-attitude towards them. Understood in this way, partially subjective theories can take many forms. They can hold that some things have prudential value *only* due to an individual's pro-attitude towards them, while simultaneously allowing for other grounds for prudential value. As an alternative, they can claim that *all* prudentially valuable things derive their prudential worth partially from an individual's pro-attitude and partially from meeting different conditions. Another possibility is to claim that some things are prudentially valuable *only* due to an individual's pro-attitude, while others derive their prudential value *partially* from such attitudes *and partially* from meeting other conditions. Regardless of the strength of the respective subjective component across various accounts, partially subjective theories are more accurately classified under the heading of hybrid theories. This section will limit its scope to discussing purely subjective theories in order to examine the strengths and weaknesses of subjectivism specifically.

[17] This helpful distinction is found in Van Weelden (2018) and MacLeod (2015).

1. Hedonism

In this section, I will present the typical version of hedonism. I will outline some of its challenges, and then refine the theory to present a more plausible version, free from these issues. Ultimately, however, I will argue that purely subjective hedonism cannot satisfy the comprehensiveness criterion. In particular, it succumbs to the over-inclusiveness objection, by counting worthless things among what is deemed prudentially valuable, and is also under-inclusive, as it neglects the impact of objective facts on well-being.

To offer a more detailed preview of the upcoming section, I will begin by outlining hedonism as the view that locates prudential value exclusively in pleasure. I will then address the challenges involved in defining pleasure. This will lead to a discussion of Fred Feldman's intrinsic attitudinal hedonism, which seeks to avoid these difficulties. Then, I will articulate some objections to hedonism, all of which can be understood as failures to meet the comprehensiveness criterion. I will address the under-inclusiveness objection to hedonism, using Robert Nozick's experience machine and Shelly Kagan's deceived businessman cases as examples. These suggest that attitude-independent factors, such as the authenticity of experiences, matter to well-being. I will then address the over-inclusiveness objection by discussing G. E. Moore's pigsty dweller case and J. J. C. Smart's electrode stimulation case. These cases are meant to substantiate the claim that hedonism fails to satisfy the worthiness criterion, as they show how the theory can mistakenly treat what are typically considered worthless objects as prudentially relevant.

1.1 Introduction and Early Challenges

Hedonism typically belongs to the purely subjective category of theories of well-being. It can be defined in various ways, but in the most minimal sense, it identifies prudential value with pleasure and the absence of pain, or, more broadly, with enjoyment and lack of suffering.[18] According to the simplest version of hedonism, pleasure and pain are the only things that have prudential value or disvalue, and one's amount of well-being is equal to the net amount of pleasure experienced (i.e. the total amount of pleasure experienced minus the total amount of pain).[19]

The nature of pleasure is a contentious topic. A significant portion of the discussion centers on a key issue: the heterogeneity of pleasures. It is questionable whether every experience that people consider pleasant involves a single, distinct feeling.[20] The pleasure in consuming a savory meal seems very different from the pleasure of aesthetic appreciation. Following recent practice, I shall use the term "internalists" to refer to those who maintain that pleasure is a distinctive sensation, meaning that the experiences from which one derives pleasure share a distinctive phenomenology. In other words, experiences are pleasurable in virtue of how they *feel*.[21] Internalism can be further divided into two versions: one where pleasure is a specific sensation,[22] and another where pleasures share a common felt quality but are not tied to any particular feeling.[23] Externalists, on the other hand, hold that experiences are pleasurable in virtue of a pro-attitude towards those experiences.[24] This broadens the concept, allowing various mental states to count as pleasures.[25]

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[18] Roger Crisp, "Well-Being," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2013, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/well-being/

[19] This is endorsed by Bentham (1822), for instance.
[20] Feldman (1997)
[21] Bramble (2014); Crisp (2006); Smuts (2011); Labukt (2012)
[22] Bramble (2014)
[23] Smuts (2011)
[24] Heathwood (2006)
[25] Sidgwick (1907) talks about 'desirable consciousness', p. 397; Parfit (1984) uses the term 'preference', p. 494; Feldman (2004) discusses 'intrinsic attitudinal hedonism'

This, however, gives rise to a further question of what these different pleasures have in common, i.e. how the various mental states can be unified under the target concept of pleasure. These various mental states could be understood in terms of physical sensations, emotions, phenomenal states, cognitive attitudes, preferences,[26] or desired experiences *inter alia*.[27]

This problem of defining pleasure might appear completely pedantic or semantic, but it is profoundly important. Indeed, before being able to state clearly what pleasure is, it is not possible to properly evaluate hedonism. It seems pleasure can only increase a person's well-being if it is desirable to that person.[28] Consider, for instance, a case in which a masochistic person wishes to be tortured. This person might cry out in pain during the torture but also insist that he in fact enjoys it. If pleasure is understood merely as a physical sensation without specifying any further details, then it turns out that the torture would be bad for the masochist. This understanding of pleasure would make the view an objectivist one, since it would imply that pleasure's felt-quality positively impacts a person's well-being regardless of their attitudes towards it. However, if pleasure is construed as a desirable state of consciousness, then it actually implies that the torture is good for the masochist.[29] So, unless one knows what pleasure *is*, there will be cases that yield contradictory results about a given person's level of well-being.

Pleasure might seem to be something akin to a bodily sensation. It is a momentary experience with a qualitative character and it can be produced by some activation of a person's body. However, Gilbert Ryle distinguishes pleasure from other bodily sensations, since pleasure can be

[26] Parfit (1984), p. 494
[27] Sidgwick (1907), for instance, denies that pleasure is a common subjective state and holds that pleasures are episodes of a person's conscious experience in which the person views those episodes as intrinsically desirable, p.397-399
[28] This is a feature of what Railton (1986) calls the resonance constraint, p. 9.
[29] If the intensity of the pleasure outweighs any simultaneous episodes of pain.

enjoyed at some times and not at others.[30] It is possible to ask a person about a sensation whether they enjoyed having it or not, so there seems to be a distinction between the enjoyment taken in something and the accompanying bodily sensation. Furthermore, if pleasure requires a bodily sensation, then the enjoyment taken in intellectual things, for instance, would need to cause a simultaneous bodily state of pleasure in order to make a contribution of positive prudential value. This result seems implausible.

1.2 Feldman's Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism

Having raised challenges in defining pleasure, I now turn to an alternative view that conceptualizes pleasure as an intentional attitude that is directed towards states of affairs (not just experiences). For instance, we can be pleased that some event has happened. This view effectively addresses the heterogeneity objection and excludes scenarios in which a person feels a physical sensation of pleasure yet remains indifferent to it. Feldman, a modern hedonist, calls this "attitudinal pleasure."[31] He states that "a person takes attitudinal pleasure in some state of affairs if he enjoys it, is pleased about it, is glad that it is happening, is delighted by it."[32] The way that this responds to the heterogeneity objection is by claiming that the commonality between the different pleasurable experiences is this pro-attitude towards those experiences. Feldman also holds that pleasure involves an element of belief, since things can cease to provide pleasure for someone when their beliefs about it change. For example, a sprinter might take pleasure in having beaten their sprint record until they realize they set a faulty timer. Unlike sensory pleasure, attitudinal pleasure can be taken in a broader range of objects. Any state of affairs is a potential object of someone's pleasure. A person could take

[30] Ryle (1949) p. 109
[31] Feldman (2004), p. 56.
[32] Ibid.

attitudinal pleasure in reading a good book or studying philosophy, for instance. Conversely, attitudinal pain is taken in states of affairs when the person is pained by them. Attitudinal pleasure should be distinguished from other similar pro-attitudes, such as approval. For example, Lawrence Sumner writes "it might be acceptable to approve of the punishment of the guilty, for instance, but quite indecent to take pleasure in it."[33] Another key distinction is made between pleasure and desire. Feldman states that "a person may enjoy something he has never desired, and a person may desire a thing he never enjoys."[34] Feldman's characterization of pleasure allows for a wide range of attitudes to belong to this concept. For instance, a person can be glad, overjoyed, happy, delighted that *p*. All these attitudes would count as taking pleasure in *p*.

1.3 Objections

Having characterized hedonism at length, I now turn to articulating some objections to it, explaining why it fails to serve as a fully satisfactory theory of well-being. I argue that the main objections fall under the broader comprehensiveness criterion discussed earlier. These objections can be grouped into two main issues: over-inclusiveness and under-inclusiveness. The over-inclusiveness problem arises when the theory includes things that do not seem prudentially valuable for a person, such as worthless or trivial things. A subset of this problem is hedonism's failure to satisfy the worthiness criterion, which I will also address. The under-inclusiveness problem occurs when it excludes intuitive contributors to well-being, such as objective goods that hold inherent worth. I will address both issues sequentially.

[33] L. W. Sumner, "Feldman's Hedonism," in *The Good, the Right, Life, and Death,* ed. McDaniel et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 85
[34] Feldman, (2004), p. 70

Under-Inclusiveness

Robert Nozick delivers an influential objection to hedonism through the use of his famous Experience Machine thought experiment.[35] According to this thought experiment, neuropsychologists invented a machine which has the capacity to simulate any possible experience a person desires while their actual body in reality is floating in a tank with electrodes attached to their brain. This person is given the option to plug into this machine for their entire life and consequently have the rest of their life experiences programmed. The upshot of this is that although the person plugged into the machine would be unaware their experiences are illusory, Nozick argues that such an existence is much less prudentially favorable than one in which the person engages with reality.

Arguably, hedonist theories are unable to accommodate the intuitive difference in prudential value for a person in the experience machine versus in reality. Since life within the experience machine contains more pleasure, hedonist theories would be forced to say that such a life is preferable to one in the actual world. After all, within the machine, all of one's wildest dreams would be realized. One's life would be replete with numerous and intense episodes of pleasure. Yet, ordinary intuition suggests the veracity of experiences within the actual world is valuable. Arguably, a life that was phenomenologically indistinguishable from the life in the experience machine but was also lived in contact with reality would be judged as superior to the simulated one.[36]

[35] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 42-43.

[36] A note on commonsense intuitions as evidence: it seems reasonable to require that things align with most of our pre-theoretical intuitions and in particular the ones that are most deeply held. When something fails to be consistent with these intuitions, that counts as some evidence against it.

Shelly Kagan presents a similar case (which does not involve science fiction) of a deceived businessman who mistakenly believes he has achieved everything he ever wanted in life – a family who loves him, a business community that respects him, and a great deal of success in founding his own business. In actuality, his wife has been unfaithful and his family and the community with which he is involved all privately disrespect him.[37] The deluded businessman's life seems decidedly inferior to one in which his delusions were grounded in facts that actually obtained in the world, even though the subjective ignorance of his plight allowed him to enjoy his life.

The intuition that the authenticity of at least some pleasurable experiences impacts well-being suggests that prudential value cannot be fully accounted for by subjective attitudes alone. This implies a need to build in mind-independent considerations into well-being assessments. Consequently, hedonism may be seen as under-inclusive, since it fails to acknowledge the prudential value of mind-independent properties of pleasurable experiences (such as their authenticity). What is notably absent from hedonist accounts is an objective component.[38]

Over-Inclusiveness

A second objection to hedonism is that it is too permissive, or over-inclusive. That is, it misattributes prudential value to experiences or states of affairs that plausibly lack prudential value. Consequently, it misidentifies what truly benefits a person.

[37] Shelly Kagan, "Me and My Life," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94 (1994): 311.
[38] Anticipating this worry, Feldman modifies his hedonist theory to incorporate a truth requirement. This move transforms his theory from a purely subjective to a partially subjective one, making it hybrid instead.

G.E. Moore presents such an objection to hedonism with the following case:[39] suppose a person derives a high degree of pleasure from spending all his time in a pigsty and engaging in obscene sexual activity. He has no human friends and no other sources of pleasure and yet he somehow manages to avoid any pains. He never experiences loneliness or boredom. Hedonism implies that this person's life contains a large amount of prudential value, but this result just seems implausible. Although the pigsty dweller's pleasure in his state of affairs appears to somehow benefit him, his life seems miserable and is certainly not enviable. We would be inclined to say that this, along with many other base pleasures, does not constitute a prudential benefit. Such pleasures seem to lack any independent value. This is a case of over-inclusiveness, which is the problem of treating (what are typically taken to be) worthless objects as prudentially relevant.

Another similar objection to hedonism comes from J. J. C. Smart, who presents the following case: suppose psychologists performed experiments with rats in which they inserted electrodes into their skulls in order to stimulate various brain regions. For some of these regions, the rats displayed behavior that was characteristic of pleasure (i.e. the rats would press a lever for an extended period of time in order to request more electrode stimulation, often while neglecting their needs for food.) Now suppose that this technology was adapted for humans and people could be connected to pleasure-stimulating electrodes that would replicate the physical pleasures of food, drink, and sex. Even if the electrodes provided the greatest possible pleasure and there were no negative consequences or accompanying pain associated with this treatment, Smart argues that such a life would contain a very low amount of well-being and writes that "men were made for higher things."[40]

[39] G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge University Press, 1903), 146-7.
[40] J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For & Against.* (Cambridge University Press. 1973), 18-20

Although plugging into the electrode stimulator may very well be, in certain circumstances, a prudentially rational choice, such as in cases where one's life is filled with unbearable mental or physical torture, hedonism would imply that such a person was giving himself an excellent life. The most that could be said for this case is that the electrode stimulated life would be less bad than the one of persistent torture. If this person were capable of finding alternative activities more enjoyable, then no matter how much they genuinely value the pleasures produced by the electrodes, their life would still be deficient in well-being. A good human life seems to require more than a mere abundance of pleasure. At least so the objection goes. A response which claims that people typically prefer healthier activities and relationships over perpetual physical pleasure is not available to the hedonist. The difference in the amount of enjoyment would have to be explained by a difference in either the number of episodes of pleasure, their intensity, or their duration.

The objection suggests that there may be a better *type* of pleasure. The hedonist could employ a distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Some pleasures (e.g. base or trivial ones) seem to be clearly inferior to others, and some seem to lack any prudential value whatsoever. There are possible lives that contain a high balance of pleasure over pain that do not contain a proportional degree of well-being. However, what exactly accounts for the qualitative difference that makes some pleasures better than others? Guy Fletcher acknowledges that "the notion of quality remains somewhat mysterious."[41] What determines a pleasure's value, and what does it mean to say that one pleasure is qualitatively superior? It cannot simply be that they feel different; they must have some distinct property. Otherwise, the objection from base, perverse, or trivial pleasures would still apply.

[41]Dale Dorsey, "The Consistency of Qualitative Hedonism and the Value of (at least some) Malicious Pleasures," *Utilitas* 20 (2008): 467.

Feldman suggests that hedonism can be amended to deal with this problem by assigning greater value to pleasure derived from worthy objects than from inappropriate ones. He supports this idea by claiming that it is reasonable to describe certain objects as deserving to be objects of pleasure.[42] However, in order for this view to avoid issues like those posed by the pigsty or electrode cases, it must not rely on a subjective notion of worthiness. The pigsty dweller might consider his sexual desire a worthy object of pleasure, but it seems like a prudentially valueless pleasure nonetheless. Ultimately, the problem with this response is that it would need to appeal to extra-hedonic values to account for differences in quality of pleasures, making it an inadequate solution for the hedonist.

In sum, hedonism succumbs to the over-inclusiveness objection as well. It allows things to be prudentially valuable when they lack any independent value. This can also be referred to as failing to meet the worthiness criterion, since it assigns prudential value to base, perverse, or trivial pleasures. Hedonism seems to fail to factor in the independent value of those objects that bring pleasure.

1.4 Conclusion

A central issue with hedonism can be summed up as follows: it assigns excessive importance to one's subjective states in establishing what has prudential value. As a consequence, it fails to withstand both the under- and over-inclusiveness objections. It is under-inclusive because it overlooks the prudential value of goods beyond pleasure, and over-inclusive because it permits any pleasurable experiences, no matter how trivial, perverse, or base, to fully exhaust well-being. Nonetheless, it seems to capture a truth about well-being, namely that pleasure is good for us. It can

[42] Fred Feldman, "The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3 (2002): 619.

satisfy the resonance criterion (assuming it is attitude-based) by recognizing the value of a person's pro-attitudes toward prudentially valuable objects, but fails to meet the worthiness criterion by being too permissive in what it regards as prudentially valuable, and thereby including worthless objects.

2. Desire-Satisfactionism

This section will begin with a brief overview of the typical version of purely subjective desire-satisfactionism, which identifies prudential value with the fulfillment of one's desires (provided that the individual believes those desires to have been satisfied). I will then turn to a discussion of Chris Heathwood's account, which serves as a particularly clear and straightforward example of this type of theory. Following this, I will show these theories succumb to the over-inclusiveness objection by including defective desires. This can also be described as failing to meet the worthiness criterion. Finally, I will argue that these theories are also under-inclusive, as they treat the satisfaction of desire as the sole determinant of well-being, neglecting other important factors.

2.1 Introduction

A common question that we pose to ourselves when we strive for greater well-being is "What do I want?" It is a widely held idea that obtaining the objects of our desires can be an effective way to enhance our lives. Desire-satisfaction theories hold that what is good for a person is simply for their desires to be satisfied. Their main claim is: a thing, x is good for a subject, S, if S has the right kind of desire for x.[43] There is a wide range of views about what is required for a desire to be of the right kind. Desire-satisfaction theories are usually assumed to be purely subjectivist,[44] however, most desire-satisfaction accounts accommodate an objectivist strand (i.e. facts about states

[43] Prominent proponents of this view are Railton (1986), Heathwood (2006), Bruckner (2016), Sobel (2016)
[44] A primary motivation for endorsing desire-satisfaction theories is to accord a central role to a person's pro-attitudes.

of the world) into their analysis of how well a person is faring. They usually hold that what makes a difference to a person's well-being is whether one's desires are *actually* fulfilled, not merely whether they are believed to be fulfilled. For this reason, I will include these latter theories under the hybrid category. The pro-attitude of desiring admits of multiple formulations. Some analyses of desire focus on preferences, others on aims. Those that retain desires as the relevant pro-attitude sometimes apply the condition that they must be either intrinsic (i.e. the things desired must be desired for themselves, rather than as means to some other desired end), ideal, local (only about one's own life), or global (about a part of one's life considered in relation to the whole, or about one's whole life).

The central idea underlying desire-satisfaction theories is often expressed by the claim: "better satisfied than frustrated."[45] As Luca Hemmerich observes, however, this claim only applies to desires that already exist. It states that satisfying pre-existing desires is better than not satisfying them, but it tells us nothing about whether forming or losing desires is prudentially valuable. Desire-satisfaction theories are incomplete without an aggregation principle, one that explains how individual desire satisfactions contribute to an overall level of well-being. Hemmerich further notes that most aggregation principles available to the desire-satisfaction theorist generate what he calls, the "proliferationist" worry. They imply that the continual creation and satisfaction of new desires invariably contributes positively to well-being. For instance, if the desire-satisfaction theorist adopts totalism, the view that a person's well-being is the sum of their satisfied desires (weighted by their strength), then it entails that it is prudentially good to increase the number of satisfied desires. However, as I will argue shortly, it is this implication that gives rise to a significant problem for desire-satisfactionism.[46]

[45] Luca Hemmerich, "Trivially Satisfied Desires: A Problem for Desire-Satisfaction Theories of Well-Being," *Utilitas* 35, no. 4 (2023): 277-291.
[46] Hemmerich (2023) articulates this concern in terms of the problem of trivially satisfied desires.

2.2 Heathwood's Desire-Satisfactionism

In what follows, I will discuss Chris Heathwood's purely subjectivist desire-satisfaction theory. Heathwood's theory is particularly well-suited for this discussion because it provides a clear instance of this kind of theory. I will focus on partially subjectivist desire-satisfaction theories (i.e. those that include an objective component) in the hybrid theories section.

Heathwood advances an unrestricted desire-satisfaction theory according to which all of a person's desires are relevant to his well-being, provided that they are believed to be fulfilled. Merely having a desire for something along with the belief that it is satisfied is sufficient to grant positive prudential value to a person.[47] Conversely, something confers negative prudential value to a person if they desire it, and it is not the case that they believe they are getting it. The degree of prudential value obtained is commensurate with the degree of the person's pro-attitude. On this view, *actual* states of affairs do not matter to prudential value. What matters is whether the person *believes* that the states of affairs they desire obtain (whether or not they in fact obtain).

2.3 Objections

Over-Inclusiveness

Similar to hedonism, as discussed earlier, this view succumbs to the over-inclusiveness objection, specifically by considering defective desires as part of what is prudentially valuable. A worrisome implication of this view is that it leads to the "proliferationist" problem. The view entails it is better to have a greater number of desires that are easily satisfied desires. Parfit presents the following thought experiment. Suppose that a doctor injects a person with an addictive drug that

[47] Heathwood "Desire Satisfactionism and Hedonism" *Philosophical Studies* 128 (2006): 539-563

causes them to have an extremely strong desire for another injection of this drug. Having the desire itself is not pleasant nor painful, but will cause pain if it is not fulfilled within one hour. The person is provided with an unlimited supply of this drug, so there is no worry of it running out and they will be able to fulfill their desire for the drug daily. The drug's effects are neither pleasant nor painful.[48] Heathwood's theory implies that such a life would be high in well-being and that it would be prudentially rational to choose to be injected in the first place. To most of us, however, this seems like a sad life. It involves satisfying random and meaningless desires instead of pursuing things that the person actually values. While many of our desires are clearly prudentially relevant, others intuitively are not.[49] The problem here is that such theories are over-inclusive. Creating and then subsequently satisfying a multitude of meaningless desires does not seem to benefit a person in any prudentially relevant way. It does not appear to be the case that well-being may be derived from adding up all satisfied desires over a lifespan.

Furthermore, this theory is no better equipped than hedonism to handle cases such as 'the deceived businessman'. We assume that the businessman desires genuine love and respect and believes he is getting those things. Even though he does not realize it, it certainly seems bad for the businessman to be a cuckolded fool. Something other than the businessman's desires and his beliefs in their fulfillment seems to play a part in what is prudentially valuable for him.

The central claim of desire-satisfaction accounts – that a person's cares or desires play an important role in determining their good – has a certain appeal. It makes sense of a strong intuition

[48] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 497

[49] Hemmerich (2023) identifies a class of prudentially irrelevant desires that he calls "trivially satisfied desires", those that are already fulfilled at the moment they are formed. He defends both the psychological plausibility of such desires as well as their status as genuine desires.

that we have about well-being, that whatever is good for us engages us or resonates with us in some way. Peter Railton calls this the internal resonance constraint.[50] He points out that according prudential value to something that fails to engage a person in any way would be unacceptably alienating. Desire-satisfaction accounts do seem to capture an important part of prudential value. However, there appear to be many cases in which a person's desires conflict with what is intuitively good for them.[51] In other words, purely subjectivist desire-satisfaction theories tend to overlook the independent value of desired objects, and so fail with respect to the worthiness criterion. They disregard that some things can have objective worth and may be more worthy of desiring than others.

Under-Inclusiveness

Alongside being over-inclusive in what these accounts count as prudentially valuable, they are also under-inclusive. The view that desire-fulfillment is the sole determinant of well-being fails to account for things that are objectively beneficial even if a person does not desire them. A person may not consciously desire close friendships or strong social networks, either because they are introverted or have different priorities. However, psychological research consistently shows that the presence of supportive relationships is strongly correlated with better mental and physical health, as well as higher life satisfaction.[52] Such studies admittedly show general trends rather than universal truths. They show what is statistically associated with human well-being, not what is necessarily good for every person in every case. Empirical findings obviously cannot establish conclusive answers, but

[50] Railton (2003)

[51] See Sumner 1996, ch. 5

[52] Yingying Su, Carl D'Arcy, Muzi Li, and Xiangfei Meng, "Trends and Patterns of Life Satisfaction and its Relationship with Social Support in Canada, 2009 to 2018," *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 9720 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-13794-x.

they can provide (defeasible) support for certain claims about human well-being. Empirical data can provide some insight into observable patterns in human lives. It can show correlations between specific conditions of interest and indicators of well-being. These studies provide some support for the idea that certain goods may contribute to well-being independently of whether they are desired. This suggests the possibility of the existence of objective prudential goods that are independent of individual preferences.

2.4 Conclusion

To summarize the case against purely subjective desire-satisfaction theories: desires on their own cannot account for everything that could reasonably be considered relevant to well-being, while also being overly broad in what they identify as prudentially valuable. Desires are overly narrow by failing to include things that are intuitively good for a person, despite lacking a desire for them. Desires are also overly broad, since a person can desire things that have no connection to their well-being.

In sum, purely subjectivist approaches not only fail in evading the under- and over-inclusive worries, but also fail at the explanatory level – they are unable to provide a plausible explanation of why some things have prudential value whereas other things do not. The subjectivist holds that caring about something (sufficiently and in the right way) confers prudential value upon that thing, but this is neither always necessary to confer prudential value nor always sufficient, so it cannot be the correct explanation for why certain things are bearers of prudential value.

---Pure Objectivism---

As in the subjectivism section, I will distinguish between two types of objective theories: partially and purely objective. Partially objective theories claim that *at least some* prudentially valuable things derive their value *at least partially* from attitude-independent value, whereas purely objective theories hold that *all* prudentially valuable things have their value *only* from attitude-independent value.[53] This section will focus on purely objective theories.

Purely objective theories allow things towards which one has no pro-attitude to count as constituents of well-being. A primary motivation for adopting objectivism is the belief that there exist certain things that are simply good for individuals, regardless of their personal desires or attitudes. Derek Parfit articulates this point, stating that according to objective theories "certain things are good or bad for people, whether or not these people would want to have the goods, or to avoid the bad things."[54] Such theories clearly reject the subjectivist resonance condition, since they permit things to be prudentially valuable for a person independently of whether these things resonate with that person.

3. Perfectionism

In this section, I will present the standard version of perfectionism, which locates prudential goodness in the exercise or development of the excellences or capacities inherent in human nature. I will discuss the theories of three prominent perfectionist philosophers: Thomas Hurka, Antti

[53] Van Weelden (2018) draws this helpful distinction.
[54] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 499.

Kauppinen, and Gwen Bradford. Following this, I will argue that these theories are susceptible to the under-inclusiveness objection, as they seem to exclude pleasure and desire-satisfaction from the things that contribute to an individual's well-being. Lastly, I raise the alienation concern, which is a version of the over-inclusiveness objection.[55]

3.1 Introduction

The distinctive claim of perfectionism is that the things that are prudentially valuable for a person are so in virtue of the fact that they involve the exercise or development of the excellences of human nature. It is considered objective, as it grounds well-being in facts independent of individual subjective attitudes, preferences, desires, or mental states. This family of theories traces its origin back to Aristotle, who identifies the good for humans with *eudaimonia*[56] (imprecisely translated as happiness or flourishing). Aristotle gives an account of *eudaimonia* as the activity of the soul in conformity with *aretē* (often translated as virtue, but perhaps more accurately translated as excellence). In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* he argues that what is good for something is what perfects its distinctive function (*ergon*) and the *ergon* of humans is what is unique to them and not shared with other animals (i.e. rationality).[57] So, it is the exercise of the virtues associated with rational activity that constitutes leading a good life. Modern neo-Aristotelians depart from Aristotle in certain details but follow him in holding that what is good for a subject is being a good instance or specimen of one's kind, or exemplifying the excellences characteristic of one's nature.[58]

[55] Joseph Van Weelden (2017) contributed the useful insight that the alienation worry can be understood as a form of over-inclusiveness.
[56] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge University Press, 2014)
[57] Ibid., 1097-1098
[58] L. W Sumner, L. W. *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23

There are various forms of perfectionism, as philosophers debate what constitutes human nature, and what the relevant capacities are. A modern version of perfectionism has been advanced by Thomas Hurka, who acknowledges its Aristotelian roots. Hurka takes the essential capacities of human-beings to be theoretical rationality, practical rationality, and the physical essence of the human body.[59] Well-being, on this view, is a matter of cultivating and exercising these capacities to their fullest potential.

3.2 Varieties of Perfectionism

Antti Kauppinen argues for a different version of perfectionism, one that considers well-being across time rather than in isolated moments.[60] On his view, the relevant capacities are those that are "characteristic of one's biological species" and whatever contributes to the optimal exercise of these capacities throughout one's lifetime is what is beneficial for a person. He argues that the best approach for maximizing prudential value is one that involves a balanced exercise of one's capacities throughout one's life. To achieve this balance, an individual must avoid disproportionately focusing on one capacity at the expense of others. For instance, a person who concentrates solely on developing their physical capacities while largely neglecting their intellectual development would likely have a lower level of well-being compared to someone who cultivated these capacities more evenly.

Gwen Bradford refines the traditional perfectionist framework by distinguishing between capacities, activities, and functions.[61] She explains that humans possess certain characteristic

[59] Thomas Hurka. *Perfectionism (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 51
[60] Antti Kauppinen (2009) "Working Hard and Kicking Back: The Case for Diachronic Perfectionism," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2008): 1-9.
[61] Gwen Bradford, "Perfectionist Bads," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2021): 586-604.

capacities (such as theoretical rationality) designed to enable certain activities (like thinking and forming beliefs) with the ultimate aim of attaining some objective good (e.g. knowledge). On this view, what is best for a person is achieving the intended outcome of the exercise of one's capacities. However, the exercise of one's capacities still offers prudential benefits, even if it does not lead to the desired result.

3.3 Objections

Under-Inclusiveness

A common objection raised against perfectionism is that it is arguably under-inclusive, as it fails to count as good certain things that intuitively improve one's quality of life. We often assume that pleasure is, all things being equal, better than pain. We assume that a life in which no desires are satisfied is missing out on something. The importance of satisfying our desires and having a pleasant life is straightforward and intuitive. Perfectionist theories seem to conflict with commonsense intuitions about what is good for us. L. W. Sumner argues that perfectionist theories are not plausible theories of well-being because they fail to take into consideration an agent's evaluative perspective in determining what is good for him.[62] Hurka points out that "perfectionism does not find intrinsic value in pleasure, not even pleasure in what is good."[63] This worry applies to the value of desire-satisfaction as well, since it also does not seem to be involved in perfecting one's nature. Arneson raises the cheap thrills challenge. He explains that cheap thrills seem to make our lives go better without the exercise or development of any of the agent's capacities.[64] It seems that the leading theories imply pleasure and desire-satisfaction can only play an accidental or instrumental

[62] L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 26.
[63] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 190.
[64] Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing Verus Desire Satisfaction," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, (1999): 120.

role. There are some things which typically seem good, but they are not obviously linked to the development of excellences.

Additionally, traditional perfectionism struggles to explain the prudential disvalue of pain. While the capacity to feel pain is a crucial part of being human, developing this capacity should not enhance well-being. Although pain is essential for proper functioning (such as alerting us to harm), it is generally perceived as detrimental to well-being. Arguably, neither Hurka's nor Kauppinen's theories adequately address why the experience of pain is considered bad. Bradford, who addresses this issue directly, argues that feeling pain is not a capacity, but rather a failure of one's practical rationality to function effectively. Pain results from failing to achieve an intended goal, which subsequently harms well-being. However, arguably this perspective does not fully capture why pain is prudentially bad. Hurka recognizes that this departure from common-sense intuitions lowers the plausibility of perfectionism. Nonetheless, he finds the idea that human good is grounded in the ideal of human nature compelling.

Over-Inclusiveness

Perfectionism also succumbs to the over-inclusiveness objection, specifically in its failure to meet the resonance criterion. Perfectionist theories connect one's nature, standardly defined by species membership, to what is prudentially good, but do not provide a clear explanation of how or why characteristics of human nature are linked to prudential goodness. For example, are things like physical health or social relationships good for a person because they align with species membership or because they are grounded in individual desires or preferences? No justification is offered for why certain things are considered good based on group membership. This leads to the alienation worry,

as it fails to grant sufficient weight to a person's attitudes or preferences. In this sense, perfectionism falls prey to the over-inclusiveness objection, as it treats things as prudentially valuable even when they do not resonate with a person.

4. Objective list theories

In this section I begin by defining paradigmatic objective list accounts in terms of their common claims – namely attitude-independence and pluralism. I then briefly discuss the intuitive appeal of such theories. Following this, I argue that these theories are over-inclusive, as they allow for a disconnect between an agent's affective or attitudinal state and what is considered good for them. Lastly, I contend that objective list theories can also be under-inclusive, as they fail to account for individual variation among specific persons, thereby excluding intuitive goods.

4.1 Introduction and Appeal

While there are various versions of objective list theories, the paradigmatic cases share two central claims: attitude-independence and pluralism. These theories propose an authoritative set of goods which are considered to be universally valuable, regardless of individual preferences. These goods (such as knowledge, friendship, and achievement) are considered objective components of a good life. The boundary between this approach and Aristotelian theories is not entirely clear, since the former also features a sort of list containing things that objectively constitute flourishing. The most notable difference however is that the perfectionist Aristotelian approach also includes a unifying notion of what it means for a person to flourish, which is usually based on an ideal of human nature. By contrast, objective-list theories tend to treat actual (rather than ideal) human

nature as defining prudential value. A notable proponent of this approach is John Finnis, who constructs a list of seven basic values: life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability, practical reasonableness, and religion.[65]

An attractive feature of objective list accounts is that they attempt to systematize ordinary intuitions about what we would normally take as being good for us. Such accounts align with widely held pre-theoretical intuitions. If you were to ask people what they ultimately want for themselves and their loved ones, they would typically cite things like health, friendship, or achievement. These are often assumed to be good for us, regardless of our desires, beliefs, and other attitudes. For instance, we often assume that knowledge can enhance our well-being, regardless of our attitudes towards it or how we apply it. The mere possession of knowledge is seen as having inherent value. It can enable personal growth and a deeper understanding of the world.

Over-Inclusiveness

A notable objection raised to objective list theories is their tendency toward over-inclusiveness, which could lead to alienating individuals from their own good. If someone has no interest in a basic good and does not care about it, objective list theories imply that the person could have a high level of well-being despite being left cold. John Finnis states that "a participation in basic goods which is emotionally dry, subjectively unsatisfying, nevertheless is good and meaningful as far as it goes."[66] It is worth noting that this does not apply to all goods, since some goods are partly

[65] John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
[66] Ibid., 97.

constituted by affective or attitudinal states.[67] If happiness, for instance, is included on the list, it inherently involves positive affective or attitudinal states. Still, the concern of alienation cannot be entirely dispelled by this approach, as there will always be goods that are not constituted by any affective states.

Under-Inclusiveness

Objective list theories may also be vulnerable to under-inclusiveness. These theories tend to expect that a single list can apply universally to all humans. This raises the concern that objective lists fail to account for goods that are specifically valuable to certain individuals but may not be universally applicable to everyone. The list could presumably accommodate some individual variation, but it would be limited to allowing differences in how the goods are realized, rather than altering the list of goods itself. In this sense, objective list theories can be under-inclusive, neglecting to recognize goods that are intuitively good for specific individuals, even if they are not universally prudentially valuable.

4.3 Conclusion

Objectivism's main claim – that certain things are good for any person regardless of whether that person has any pro-attitude towards those things – contains a plausible truth. It respects the worthiness criterion, that some things have inherent value independent of personal preferences. However, by asserting that objective, mind-independent value alone is sufficient for well-being, they leave little room for pro-attitudes to play any significant role. This raises a concern: the claim that

[67] Guy Fletcher, "Objective List Theories," in *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Routledge, 2016), 148-159.

objective value is sufficient for well-being seems to alienate a person from their own good. Given the relativity of prudential value, we might expect a person's well-being to "fit" with their individual needs and preferences, so that any improvements in their well-being genuinely resonate with them and don't leave them cold. This highlights a challenge in meeting the resonance constraint, which is one of the main reasons cited in the literature for why these theories are rejected. Either objective theories are under-inclusive, by failing to include attitude-dependent things among what has prudential value, or they are outright alienating. It seems natural to assume that something cannot be prudentially valuable for a person unless there is some positive association – such as psychological engagement, enjoyment, or a lack of alienation – between that thing and that person's psychology.

If we accept the criticisms that the theories on both sides of the subjective-objective divide face, namely that they are either too permissive or insufficiently inclusive, then a reasonable response would be to attempt to combine elements of both in order to avoid these problems. As mentioned earlier, the key motivation for adopting subjectivism is to reflect the idea that well-being is fundamentally tied to a person's attitudes, feelings, and preferences. It is often said that one cannot be alienated from one's own interests and that enhancements to a person's well-being must resonate with them. Indeed, the resonance constraint is said to be "the standard reason in the literature to reject" objectivist theories of well-being.[68] The main strength of objectivism is its claim that certain things have intrinsic worthiness independent of personal attitudes, or at least that subjective attachment alone is not enough to confer value. Hybrid theories aim to integrate both of these compelling features (i.e. the resonance constraint and the worthiness constraint) in an effort to avoid the shortcomings of exclusively subjective or objective views. I will now discuss hybrid theories.

[68] Ben Bramble, "A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being," *Ergo* 3, no. 4 (2016): 85- 112.

---Hybridism---

Hybrid theories are usually adopted in order to correctly limit the scope of things that hold prudential value. However, the primary issue that plagues them is that they tend to be too stringent when they also require meeting the joint-necessity condition.

5. Hybrid Hedonism

The first kind of hybrid theory I will consider is hybrid hedonism. I present two modifications of Fred Feldman's intrinsic attitudinal hedonism: one incorporates a pleasure-worthiness function, and the other introduces an objective truth requirement. I argue that both are problematic. The former requires abandoning hedonism to explain the basis for differences in pleasure-worthiness, while the latter's truth requirement appears overly restrictive.

5.1 Feldman's Altitude-Adjusted Hedonism and Objections

To address the intuitive value difference between various types of pleasure, Feldman proposes a modification to his attitudinal hedonism. He suggests that the prudential values of different pleasures can be adjusted according to their *suitability* to be objects of pleasure. This suitability function introduces an objective aspect into his theory. He calls this modified version of his view "altitude-adjusted" hedonism. This allows for a distinction between what Mill refers to as "higher" and "lower" pleasures. On this view, admiring an aesthetically pleasing artwork has greater prudential worth than the enjoyment taken in mud-wrestling for the reason that the former is better suited to be an object of attitudinal pleasure. Feldman leaves the question of what justifies this

ranking of pleasures unresolved. He suggests that beauty and truth might be pleasure-worthy objects,[69] but offers no explanation why. It seems we need to depart from hedonism to address what is fundamental to the pleasure-worthiness of objects. In sum, this view leaves the justification for these rankings unexplained and ultimately requires a shift away from hedonism to account for the reasons why certain pleasures are more valuable.

5.2 Feldman's Truth-Adjusted Hedonism and Objections

Feldman also advances another possible version of his view, which includes an objective truth requirement. On this modified view, prudential value is enhanced when a person takes intrinsic attitudinal pleasure in *true* states of affairs.[70] Hence, one's *actual* circumstances impact well-being.

A question that arises about this view is whether this objective requirement is too stringent. It seems that, at least in some cases, the pleasure of an experience is not affected by its veracity. This represents a version of the under-inclusiveness worry, as it excludes experiences from being prudentially valuable when the pleasantness they bring is independent of their veracity. Suppose someone were to have a highly pleasant dream in which they are eating a Dairy Queen blizzard. It might not matter to this person that the contents of the dream do not actually obtain. In this case, it does not matter for well-being whether the dream is true or not. Consider another case, however. Suppose someone takes pleasure in having won a marathon. If some technicality revealed that he was not actually the winner, then his pleasure in this fact would cease. Nonetheless, the objective truth requirement overly restricts the scope of prudential value by assuming that the truth of a state of affairs *always* affects the value of an experience. One way to capture the intuition that truth

[69] Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 121-22
[70] Ibid., 111

matters in some cases but not in others might be to assign values based on how much the truth of a state of affairs matters to a subject. Then, we could multiply the amount of pleasure taken in it by that number, reflecting the varying importance of truth in different contexts. In any case, Feldman's view seems to undermine the authority of the person in determining the value of different sources of their own well-being. It seems more reasonable to assess pleasures according to the context in which they arise, as their meaning could be influenced by their circumstances.

6. Happiness Theories

In this section, I will present L.W. Sumner's happiness account of well-being, which integrates both subjective attitudes and objective elements such as information and autonomy. First, I will outline the main features of Sumner's theory, emphasizing how it defines well-being in terms of "authentic happiness," which combines both affective and cognitive components. Next, I will explain the two necessary conditions for authentic happiness – information and autonomy – highlighting how they aim to prevent errors in life satisfaction evaluations. I will then discuss the advantages of Sumner's theory, particularly how it avoids the difficulties of other approaches due to its focus on overall life satisfaction. Finally, I will address the disadvantages, particularly how (despite its restrictions) Sumner's account is over-inclusive, as it potentially includes factors like external circumstances that have little to do with actual well-being, thus expanding the scope of what counts as prudentially valuable beyond what is truly relevant.

6.1 Sumner's Happiness Account

A class of hybrid theories, which I will refer to as 'happiness accounts,' take the relevant mental state for prudential value to be happiness, rather than mere pleasure or enjoyment.

Happiness is at times characterized as an emotional state, or as a disposition to experience certain positive states.[71] Some theorists define happiness in terms of one's satisfaction with either one's life as a whole, or certain parts of it. L.W Sumner proposes a theory which identifies well-being with what he calls "authentic happiness." I consider Sumner's view within the section on hybrid views, since it incorporates an objective element. Here is how he summarizes the main features of his account:

> The theory I shall defend does not simply identify well-being with happiness; additionally, it requires that a subject's endorsement of the conditions of her life, or her experience of them as satisfying or fulfilling, be authentic. The conditions for authenticity, in turn, are twofold: information and autonomy. Welfare therefore consists in authentic happiness.[72]

It would be useful to expand on the components listed: happiness, authentic endorsement, information, and autonomy. Sumner defines happiness as having an affirming attitude towards the conditions of one's life. He roughly describes this as "receiving or responding to [one's experiences] in a positive way: liking them as they are happening, finding them rewarding or satisfying, welcoming them."[73] It should be emphasized that happiness is more than merely being content. It requires a higher degree of endorsement. He identifies the main way in which we use the term 'being happy' and judges it to involve "both an affective and cognitive component." Cognitively, happiness "consists in a positive evaluation of the conditions of your life, judgement that, at least on balance, it

[71] See Haybron (2008)
[72] L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
[73] Ibid., 142

measures up favorably against your standards or expectations." The affective component consists in feeling a sense of well-being and finding one's life rewarding, enriching, or fulfilling.[74] So, happiness involves not only a judgment that things are going well, but also a *feeling* that they are going well and that one's activities are meaningful and worthwhile. Happiness in Sumner's sense is not reducible to pleasure and pain. They are not the only determinants of happiness, but so are other things like success and failure in the pursuit of one's goals. For this reason, Sumner sees his view as combining the main merits of both hedonism and desire-satisfactionism.

Sumner also specifies that one's endorsement of one's life conditions should be authentic. On his view, happiness on its own is not sufficient for well-being. Since happiness involves a cognitive component, it allows for the possibility of error. A person might be happy as a result of positively evaluating their life circumstances and feeling a sense of well-being, but they might also be mistaken or deluded in the beliefs upon which their attitude is based. Sumner states that if one's self-assessment is "based on factual error"[75] then one is not faring as well as one thinks. Suppose that an ill patient judges his life to be going fairly well and feels a sense of fulfillment from the conditions of his life. He specifically experiences this sense of happiness as he ingests a drug from his doctor that he believes is a cure for his illness but is in fact a lethal poison. We would be inclined to say that the patient is not faring well and that the conditions of his life do not benefit him. Sumner's own example is that of a woman whose positive evaluation of her life is based on the belief that she has a devoted partner. Her partner is in fact unfaithful. After her delusion is exposed, she could still admit that she was happy at this time of her life but deny that she was faring well. This brings us to the 'information' component of Sumner's view. He doesn't require that a person's judgments with

[74] Ibid., 146
[75] Ibid., 156

regards to their life conditions be entirely free from factual error, since, as he notes, there conceivably are cases in which the comfort derived from a false belief (perhaps during a difficult time) can still grant prudential value, even when the falsity is exposed. Rather, Sumner suggests that one's judgments "are authoritative unless we have some reason to think they do not reflect the individual's own deepest priorities."[76] In other words, Sumner thinks the person should be informed to the extent that he does not lack any information that would cause him to change his evaluation of his life.

Authentic endorsement also has a further requirement: autonomy. This means that one's judgments and the values by which a subject evaluates his life should be truly his own. He describes this as "not being subject to the will of others,"[77] by exploitative means, for instance. He believes that self-assessments of life-satisfaction are dubious if they were influenced "by autonomy-subverting mechanisms of social conditioning, such as indoctrination, programming, brainwashing, role scripting, and the like."[78] Although Sumner emphasizes that a person's self-assessments of their life determine well-being, they are defeasible. Nonetheless, these self-assessments should be taken as authoritative unless there is good reason to doubt them. The fact that they are defeasible means that states of the world play a role in determining whether one's happiness contributes prudential value.

6.2 Evaluation

I will now offer my evaluation. Happiness accounts of well-being have the advantage of bypassing some of the difficulties which plague hedonism and desire-satisfactionism (i.e. in summing

[76] Ibid., 161
[77] Ibid., 167
[78] Ibid., 170

the prudential value gained or lost from many different pleasures and pains, or from the satisfaction or frustration of many different desires, in order to make an overall assessment of well-being). Focusing on a subject's attitude towards their life as a whole certainly offers a more convenient and efficient means of judging their well-being. This approach also has its disadvantages, however. A person's satisfaction with their life can be affected by a wide range of other factors, many of which have relatively little to do with their well-being. For instance, "research indicates that reported life satisfaction is influenced by the current weather."[79] Hence, this succumbs to the over-inclusiveness problem. Defining the contributors of prudential value in this way makes it include prudentially irrelevant things. A further issue is not accounting for individuals who lack an attitude about their life as a whole. Things can certainly be prudentially valuable for a person even though that person is unable to form an evaluative attitude about their life. These theories are unable to evaluate well-being for such people. It is also worth mentioning that a difficulty specific to Sumner's account is the ambiguity of the concept of 'autonomy'. Sumner acknowledges that autonomy is impacted by "socialization processes" and the fact that "we are all historically embedded selves" so it is difficult to determine "how much emancipation from [one's] background and social conditions a subject must exhibit in order for [one's] self-assessment to be taken at face value."[80] Furthermore, given Sumner's conception of autonomy, there is no guarantee that what a subject autonomously endorses will reflect what they truly find most important and to which they feel most attached. He admits that, "if a system of indoctrination is sufficiently thorough then it will be capable of structuring not only an individual's life goals but also the values to which she appeals in reflecting on these goals."[81]

[79] Daniel Kahneman and Alan B. Krueger, "Developments in the Measurement of Subjective Well-Being" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20, no. 1 (2006): 6
[80] Sumner, 168
[81] Sumner, 169

7. Hybrid Perfectionism

In this section, I will discuss Richard Kraut's neo-Aristotelian 'developmentalist' account of well-being. First, I will outline how Kraut combines hedonism with a perfectionist framework. Then, I will argue that his theory is prone to being under-inclusive, given its 'joint-necessity' structure, which requires both objective development and subjective enjoyment for something to count as prudentially valuable. This potentially excludes goods that contribute to well-being but fail to meet both criteria.

7.1 Kraut's Developmentalism

In this section, I will discuss Richard Kraut's 'developmentalist' account. Some neo-Aristotelian well-being theorists aim to accommodate common-sense intuitions about pleasure (a subjectivist element) within a perfectionist framework, and Kraut is one such thinker. According to his account, an organism flourishes when it does well *qua* the type of being that it is. This is achieved through the possession, development, and exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers that are characteristic of beings of this kind. But in addition, these must also be accompanied by enjoyment if they are to count as good for the individual.[82] This move is preceded by Aristotle's view, which holds that pleasure "perfects" every activity. When a human faculty is functioning well, the exercise of that faculty is pleasant.[83]

[82] Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 127-130.
[83] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge University Press, 2014): 1174-1176

7.2 Joint-Necessity Objection

Since both the subjective and objective elements are necessary on this theory, it is what I will call a "joint-necessity" hybrid theory. Such theories are by their nature highly susceptible to the under-inclusivity objection. They are designed to rule out certain goods as counting towards prudential value. Kraut's theory requires both participation in the development of human faculties and the subjective experience of enjoyment from exercising these faculties for something to count as prudentially valuable. This makes the theory prone to excluding things that intuitively contribute to well-being but fail to meet both conditions. For instance, a person may engage in activities that enhance their cognitive abilities, but fail to derive any enjoyment from them, such as a person who performs well in a challenging intellectual pursuit but suffers during the process. Although the activity may involve suffering in the moment, it could arguably be said to enhance the person's overall well-being. On Kraut's framework, this activity would not qualify as prudentially valuable, due to the absence of subjective enjoyment. I want to distinguish such cases from those involving mere duty-fulfillment that can plausibly detract from an individual's well-being (such as military service). The point is that there may be a class of activities that are not enjoyable but still prudentially valuable. The concern, then, is not that Kraut's theory fails completely, but that its strict joint criterion risks excluding cases where objective goods can contribute prudential value in the absence of subjective experience.

Similarly, a person may experience genuine enjoyment in activities that are clearly not part of the development of their faculties, such as participating in trivial pleasures (e.g. eating a tasty treat). It could plausibly be argued that leisure, rest, and recovery are necessary for the balanced cultivation of human capacities, but *some* forms of enjoyable leisure lack a necessary connection to the exercise

or cultivation of human capacities. If such activities are excluded from what counts toward well-being solely because they lack developmental significance, Kraut's theory risks being overly restrictive. As a result, his theory can be seen as under-inclusive and overly restrictive, failing to account for prudentially valuable activities that fall outside the theory's criteria.

8. Hybrid Desire-Satisfactionism

In this section, I outline Henry Sidgwick's ideal desire-satisfaction theory, which he advances based on the insight that actual desire is not a reliable indicator of prudential value. I raise the under-inclusiveness objection to his theory, highlighting how its restrictive criteria may exclude things that intuitively contribute prudential value. Similarly, these concerns apply to other ideal desire theories, such as those proposed by Railton, Lewis, and Brandt, which differ in how they define rational or informed desires but face the shared challenge of identifying which desires genuinely track well-being.

8.1 Sidgwick's Ideal Desire-Satisfaction Theory

Henry Sidgwick proposes a theory that, while often interpreted as a form of hedonism, can arguably be more accurately understood as a version of ideal desire-satisfactionism. Although he identifies prudential value with what he labels "pleasures," he defines pleasure not in the traditional hedonistic sense, but as a form of "desirable consciousness."[84] That is, pleasure consists in episodes of conscious experience that are apprehended as desirable for their own sake. This characterization

[84] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981, Original work published 1907), 398.

of pleasure makes the view more akin to a desire-based account, specifically one grounded in *ideal* rather than actual desires.

Sidgwick stresses the need to exclude problematic desires – cases in which the satisfaction of a desire does not enhance well-being. He illustrates this with the problem of "Dead Sea apples" referring to outcomes that appear desirable but ultimately prove unsatisfying upon attainment. He writes:

> What is desired at any time is, as such, merely apparent Good, which may not be found good when fruition comes, or at any rate not so good as it appeared. It may turn out a mere 'Dead Sea apple', mere dust and ashes in the eating: more often fruition will partly correspond to expectation, but may fall short of it in a marked degree.[85]

Such cases, he argues, reveal that actual desire is not a reliable indicator of prudential value, as the dissatisfaction stems from a misjudgment about the object of desire. In response, Sidgwick contends that what is good for a person should be identified not with what is in fact desired, but with what is genuinely *desirable*.[86] This leads him to endorse a form of *ideal* desire-satisfactionism, where the relevant desires are those a person would have under idealized conditions. According to Sidgwick, the desires relevant to well-being are those that a person would hold if they possessed "a

[85] Ibid., 110
[86] Ibid., 111

perfect forecast, emotional as well as intellectual"[87] of the experience of attaining the object of desire. This introduces an objectivist element to the theory.

8.2 Objections

Sidgwick's theory imposes stringent conditions on desires, which risks rendering the theory under-inclusive. It permits cases in which a person appears to lead a fulfilling and prudentially valuable life, yet their desires fail to meet the theory's conditions. For example, consider a person who desires to become a school teacher, and finds personal fulfillment in that role. If, under conditions of perfect foresight, they would have preferred the life of a university professor, Sidgwick's criteria would imply that their actual life was not prudentially good for them, rather than being suboptimal. This suggests that the theory may discount lives that are intuitively prudentially good by failing to accommodate non-ideal, yet satisfying, desires.

Other idealized desire-satisfaction accounts face similar challenges. Peter Railton, for instance, proposes a view in which well-being consists in what a fully rational and informed version of oneself would desire for one's actual self.[88] Central to all such theories is the question of which conditions render a desire prudentially relevant. A commonly used criterion is the property of being rational. Yet, interpretations of "rational" vary. David Lewis specifies this requirement as having full imaginative acquaintance with the object of desire.[89] Richard Brandt views rational desires as those that would survive cognitive psychotherapy (i.e. confronting the relevant facts and deconditioning

[87] Ibid.
[88] Peter Railton, "Facts and Values" *Philosophical Topics* 14 vol.2 (1986), 173-174
[89] David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," in *Ethics and Social Philosophy,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 121-126.

oneself to eliminate desires that were formed in the wrong way.)[90] However, these idealizing filters remain contentious, and it is unclear whether they correctly identify which desires truly promote well-being without excluding that which intuitively has prudential worth.

Another objection, raised by Johannes Steizinger, concerns the nature and stability of the "ideal self" invoked by idealizing theories.[91] Over the course of a person's life, even their idealized self is likely to evolve in response to new experiences, values, and altered self-conceptions. If the ideal self is understood as too detached from the empirical self, then it risks becoming empty and irrelevant. If it is too closely tied to the actual self's history and psychology, it becomes contingent on the features it was meant to idealize beyond. This raises a further worry about the coherence and usefulness of the "ideal self" notion.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed and critiqued the major theories of well-being, categorizing them into subjective, objective, or hybrid. I argued that the currently reigning subjectivist and objectivist theories fail to meet the comprehensiveness criterion, which requires including everything with prudential value and excluding nothing. Additionally, they cannot satisfy two widely recognized desiderata for theories of well-being simultaneously: resonance (i.e. what is good for someone should reflect what they care about) and worthiness (i.e. what is good for someone should – at least as a regulative ideal – be of genuine value, not worthless).

[90] Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979): ch. V and VII
[91] Johannes Steizinger, personal communications, April 15, 2025.

Although many of the arguments that have been presented in this chapter for and against the various accounts of well-being and prudential value are specific to each particular theory that was considered, many of these arguments also reflect deeper issues related to the merits and weaknesses of subjective and objective accounts in general. In the next chapter, I present my own view – a hybrid view I call "hybrid holism." I motivate my hybrid approach by discussing the main lines of argument in support of and against both the objective and subjective approaches, as presented in this chapter. In summary, it seems that the core concern underlying the objections to pure subjectivism is that people's subjective attitudes are unreliable and subject to distortion, and are thereby unsuitable for grounding prudential value judgments. People's desires and other attitudes and their resulting assessments of what is prudentially valuable and how well they are faring are distorted by extraneous factors which give us reason to question the credibility of their judgments. Pure objectivism, by contrast, faces the problem of undermining a person's authority in determining what is good for them, as well as succumbing to the alienation worry. Both purely objective and subjective theories succumb to over- and under-inclusiveness worries, meaning they can be seen as too permissive, including things as being prudentially valuable that do not intuitively contribute to our good, or as too restrictive in what they count as prudentially valuable.

Chapter 2: Hybrid Holism Defined and Defended

In recent years, philosophers working on well-being have become increasingly interested in *hybridism*, that is, in accounts of prudential value that synthesize components from more than one theory of well-being.[92] For standard forms of objectivist-subjectivist hybridism, *x* counts as prudentially valuable for *S iff x* is objectively valuable *and S* subjectively engages with *x* in the appropriate way. These hybridists, then, typically endorse what Christopher Woodard coins the *joint-necessity condition*, the claim that objective value and subjective engagement are each *necessary* conditions for well-being.[93] For instance, Shelly Kagan discusses a theory according to which well-being involves enjoyment of the good. The subjectivist component is that someone must *enjoy* the constituents of well-being, and the objectivist component is that the items one enjoys must themselves be *good*.[94] However, many find fault with this joint necessity condition, for on such views "enjoyment without goodness counts for *nothing*, and goodness without enjoyment counts for *nothing*."[95] The intuition is that trivial pleasures should count for *something*, and a high degree of objective goodness (e.g. knowledge, beauty, or achievement) should count for *something*, even if one

[92] Some prominent hybridists include Shelly Kagan, Richard Kraut, Joseph Raz, Christopher Woodard, Neera Badwhar, and Brad Hooker. Even Steven Wall and David Sobel (who had previously defended subjectivism) have recently become hybridists about well-being.
See: Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 68 (1994): 39-54; Shelly Kagan "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, (2009): 253-272; Brad Hooker, "The Elements of Well-being," *Journal of Practical Ethics* 3 (2015): 15-35; Neera Badhwar, *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Steven Wall and David Sobel, "A Robust Hybrid Theory of Well-Being," *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 9 (2020): 2829-2851; Christopher Woodard, "Hybrid Theories," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being,* ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge Publications, 2016), 161-74.
[93] Christopher Woodard, "Hybrid Theories," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being,* ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge Publications, 2016), 164.
[94] Shelly Kagan "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 253-272.
[95] Christopher Woodard, "Hybrid Theories," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge Publications, 2016), 169.

lacks favoring attitudes towards those objective goods. The joint necessity condition thereby renders the account under-inclusive by excluding prudential goods that intuitively should be considered valuable, such as trivial pleasures, objective goods with which one is not subjectively engaged (or are not subjectively favored). This gives us good reason to consider hybrid views that reject the joint-necessity condition.

In this chapter, I formulate and defend a view, which I call *hybrid holism*. This is a form of hybridism with perfectionist characteristics that can respond to the worries about joint-necessity. Hybrid holism combines three theses:

1) *Prudential Value Pluralism*, an objectivist component, claiming that there is more than one kind of objective goodness for persons.

2) *The Narrative Theory of Selfhood*, a subjectivist component, equating well-being with the development of the narrative self.

3) *Holism,* the claim that the subjectivist or objectivist component increases well-being to the extent the other is present, but neither component is strictly speaking a necessary condition for something to have prudential value.

I defend hybrid holism in three phases. In Section one, I begin by briefly motivating hybridism in general. I note there are two widely recognized desiderata for theories of well-being: i) *resonance*, i.e. what is good for someone should reflect what they care about; and ii) *worthiness*, i.e. what is good for someone should (at least as a regulative ideal) be of genuine value, not worthless. I claim that the currently reigning subjectivist and objectivist theories of well-being cannot satisfy both desiderata simultaneously. In Section two, I then propose that my hybrid holist view proves more propitious. I situate my view within the broader literature and provide a detailed exposition of its

three subsidiary theses. In Section three, I then proceed to explain why hybrid holism, thus understood, is preferable to neighboring forms of hybridism. I demonstrate that it not only satisfies the internal resonance and worthiness desiderata better than neighboring views, but also has the further virtue of avoiding the joint-necessity problem.

1. Motivating Hybridism

In the well-being literature, there are three dominant theories of prudential value:

1) *Subjectivism*: x is a constituent of S's well-being iff S holds favoring attitudes towards x.

2) *Objectivism*: x is a constituent of S's well-being iff x is objectively valuable.

3) *Hybridism*: x is a constituent of S's well-being iff i) x is objectively valuable, and S subjectively engages with x in the appropriate way.[96]

While subjectivism and objectivism have many proponents, hybridism is attracting increased support because i) subjectivists struggle to satisfy the worthiness criterion, and ii) objectivists face difficulties accounting for the resonance criterion. By contrast, hybridism seems well-positioned to fulfill both demands simultaneously: by requiring that only objectively valuable things constitute well-being, hybridists satisfy the worthiness criterion; and by insisting that individuals must be subjectively engaged with those objectively valuable things, hybridists also appease resonance requirements. I refrain from unpacking the expansive literature on these topics (which has already received ample attention), but briefly want to expand on two points: i) precisely how subjectivists struggle with the worthiness criterion; and ii) the details of objectivism's failure to account for

[96] As Christopher Woodard (2016) notes, hybrid theories of well-being "combine elements of two or more kinds of theory." There are, then, subjective-subjective hybrid theories that combine elements from two kinds of subjectivist theories, and objective-objective hybrid theories that conjoin two different kinds of objectivist theories. In this paper, I set such theories aside and refer only to subjective-objective hybrid theories of well-being.

resonance. Both these problems constitute a version of the over-inclusiveness objection. I thereby hope to motivate hybridism.

1.1. Subjectivism and Worthiness

The central problem with subjectivism is that it entails valueless things can have prudential value. Ben Bradley puts the point well: "for subjectivists things are good for us merely because we care about them, no matter how worthless, trivial, or immoral those things might be."[97] This result strikes many as implausible.

A popular subjectivist rejoinder involves distinguishing *actual* preferences, which refer to the empirically present attitudes a person happens to hold, from *idealized* preferences, which refer to the attitudes someone would hold given full information.[98] Some subjectivists believe that individuals would not desire valueless things under idealized conditions. For instance, Victor might happen to desire opium, but if he possessed full information about the substance, the havoc it wreaks on his health, and was not under the psycho-physical distress of addiction, his desire for it would fade. Does idealization allow subjectivists to accommodate the worthiness criterion?

The persisting problem is that, on strictly subjectivist assumptions, individuals could still desire valueless things even under idealized conditions. Sharon Street refers to such individuals as *Ideally Coherent Eccentrics* (ICE), people whose desires are intrinsically defective, even under idealized

[97] Ben Bradley, "Objective Theories of Well-Being," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism,* ed. Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller (Cambridge University Press: 2014): 221.
[98] David Sobel, "Subjectivism and Idealization," *Ethics* 119, no. 2 (2009): 336-352.

conditions.[99] For instance, Hume's *Treatise* famously recounts an individual who prefers destroying the entire world to the scratching of his finger. More recently, Rawls writes of a person who considers interminably counting blades of grass to be an intrinsically worthwhile life pursuit;[100] and Parfit discusses someone with so-called "future Tuesday indifference," i.e. she prefers experiencing excruciating agony on a Tuesday in the future over suffering the slightest pain on the current Wednesday.[101]

Since the subjectivist cannot invoke objectivist constraints on what kinds of things are of *actual* value, their only recourse is to impose restrictions on the idealization process itself, ones that would, for instance, preclude someone from ever having future Tuesday indifference. But, as Dave Sobel notes: "it is hard to see how to vindicate...one idealization over another, without presupposing that there are already facts about what is the right answer for the idealization to hit."[102] Critics conclude that, for subjectivists, the idealization procedure is at best "an attempt to gain extensional adequacy by rigging the account so as to get plausible, non-subjectively grounded answers."[103] Accordingly, many have maintained that subjectivism cannot satisfy the worthiness criterion.

1.2. Objectivism and Internal Resonance

Does objectivism fare any better? Part of objectivism's appeal is that it provides a powerful reply to the worthiness criterion. It ensures that well-being's constituents are of actual worth or

[99] Sharon Street, "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters." *Philosophical Issues* 19 (2009): 273-298.
[100] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. (Harvard University Press, 2020), 432.
[101] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford University Press, 1984), 124 and Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 2, sec 7.
[102] David Sobel, "Subjectivism and Idealization," *Ethics* 119 (2009), 338.
[103] Ibid.

value and cannot be the fancies of the ideally coherent eccentric. For instance, many prominent objective list theories claim that only uncontroversially valuable things, such as knowledge, friendship, or achievement, have prudential value.[104]

But objectivists purchase this robust kind of value at the expense of inviting concerns about what Peter Railton calls *internal resonance*: for *x* to be good for someone, it "must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive."[105] Many find it implausible to think that goodness for a person could bear no relation to her beliefs, desires, or values. But objectivism requires precisely that assumption: if certain things just *are* prudentially valuable, then they can be completely disconnected from a person's beliefs, desires, and values. For instance, visual beauty could count as constitutive of well-being, even for a blind person who cannot derive a single ounce of pleasure from it.

Often, objectivists rejoin that an individual can be mistaken about what is ultimately good for them. For instance, a diabetic can desire to consume an unhealthy diet, despite the grave health risk that it poses to her, or a conspiracy theorist can have no desire to receive a life-saving vaccination; or someone might desire to drink a refreshing gin and tonic that, unbeknownst to them, is laced with cyanide. Many objectivists accordingly maintain that internal resonance should not be an adequacy constraint on theories of prudential value. Something, they claim, can clearly be good for a person irrespective of their beliefs, desires, and values, especially when the latter are mistaken.

[104] John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)
[105] Peter Railton, "Facts and Values" *Philosophical Topics* 14, no. 2 (1986), 6. See also: Connie Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person," *Ethics* 106, no. 2 (1996), 297-326.

Against this, critics of objectivism maintain that internal resonance cannot be discarded so easily. Appealing again to idealization, they claim that the above individuals would not hold those irrational desires under ideal epistemic conditions. If, for instance, the conspiracy theorist were purged of disinformation, he *would* desire to receive the life-saving vaccine after all. In short, it seems reasonable to require that what is good for someone should at least connect to their second-order desires, beliefs, or values. As Railton writes: "an individual's good consists in what he would want himself to want" from a standpoint "[...] fully and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or lapses of instrumental rationality."[106] Opponents accordingly uphold the importance of satisfying internal resonance as an adequacy constraint on theories of well-being. Since objectivism does not accommodate internal resonance, that counts as a decisive strike against it.

2. Hybrid Holism Explained

Hybridism about well-being is increasingly attracting support because it satisfies both desiderata better than the subjectivist and objectivist views just considered. Hybridism's ability to meet these criteria is, however, already a well-documented finding in the well-being literature. Accordingly, the novel purpose of the present chapter is to formulate and defend *which* hybrid theory of well-being should be preferred.

[106] Ibid., 10

As stated, in this thesis I defend hybrid holism, a view that combines three subsidiary theses: i) prudential value pluralism, ii) the narrative theory of self, and iii) holism. I now want to unpack these three theses in greater detail.

2.1. Prudential Value Pluralism

Prudential value pluralism (PVP) is the most straightforward feature of my account; it claims that there is more than one intrinsic good or bad for a person. PVP can be contrasted with prudential value monism, according to which there is only one intrinsic good or bad for a person. Hedonism is a paradigmatic monistic theory, claiming that only pleasure can be good for a person, and only pain can be bad for them. By contrast, PVP claims there is more than one basic good or bad for a person, perhaps a vast multitude. In my account, I want to remain largely non-committal about what the exact list of goods includes and to claim only that there is presumably a wide range of intrinsic prudential goods and bads.[107] My view – which I will elaborate and defend in what follows – is that each individual has a distinct set of goods that correspond to features of their narrative self. It seems reasonable to assume that there may be a wide spectrum of goods. Many argue that PVP is the majority position on prudential value, and there have been recent attempts by Eden Lin and others to defend prudential value pluralism as such without presupposing any particular theory of what the list includes.[108] I am happy to side with the majority on this issue.

However, one distinctive feature of my version of PVP, on which I *am* committal, is that the

[107] I will further refine and unpack my account of the prudential goods in the forthcoming chapter. But, for now, I will assume some basic goods and bads for the sake of argument throughout my analysis. If those specific goods and bads do not ultimately make the list, only the examples require modification, not my theory itself. I do think, for instance, that beauty and achievement are highly likely to wind up on any correct list of objective goods.
[108] Eden Lin, "Pluralism About Well-Being," *Philosophical Perspectives* 28 (2014): 127-154.

range of objective goods contributing to well-being includes not only the list of good things that one might *achieve* or *have*, but also the *development* of certain human capacities. So, for instance, knowledge is objectively good, but so is the development of the human capacity for theoretical rationality that engenders that knowledge. The view is deeply pluralist, then, because it includes both *objects* that bear objective value, and also the development of one's capacities that lead to the successful attainment of those objects. This is clearly an Aristotelian feature of the theory, but I believe – and will indeed *argue* momentarily – that Aristotle errs by insisting that *species* capacities must be the ones whose cultivation leads to well-being. I maintain, by contrast, that there is a deeper and more calibrated form of personal identity – i.e. narrative selfhood – whose development generates well-being.

2.2. Narrative Theory of Selfhood

I turn now to the subjective component of hybrid holism: the idea is that well-being is constituted, at least in part, by the development of one's narrative self. This is a subjectivist component because the development of the narrative self is a matter of what one cares about or values, and one's own subjective perspective also has hegemony over the narration process itself.

In claiming that well-being is partly constituted by the development of the narrative self, my view shares characteristics with a family of theories that are often called perfectionism or developmentalism. These views are what Daniel Haybron calls *nature-fulfillment theories*, meaning that they treat well-being as being constituted, at least in part, by fulfilling fundamental human capabilities, or by the growth and development of the self.[109] For instance, Gwen Bradford's

[109] Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

perfectionism equates well-being with excellently exercising characteristically human capacities;[110] whereas Richard Kraut's developmentalism construes well-being as the growth or development of human powers.[111] On any such view, a common problem involves identifying the nature of the *self* whose fulfillment constitutes well-being.

The first solution to the problem of identifying the *self* whose fulfillment constitutes well-being is what Thomas Hurka calls the *human-nature solution*, according to which prudential value consists in excellently exemplifying capacities that are characteristic of the human species at large.[112] The second is what Hurka calls the *individual-essence solution*, a view traced back to Rousseau that associates prudential value with excellently exemplifying capacities of one's individual nature or essence. Both solutions are problematic, as Hurka himself observes. One concern with the human-nature solution is that it risks grounding prudential value in traits whose relevance is unclear. Bernard Williams mocks this idea by citing irrelevant and anathema traits as "distinctively human." He writes:

> If one approached without preconceptions the question of finding characteristics which differentiate men from other animals, one could as well, on these principles, end up with a morality which exhorted men to spend as much time as possible in making fire; or developing peculiarly human physical characteristics; or having sexual intercourse without regard to season; or despoiling the environment and upsetting the balance of nature; or killing things for fun.[113]

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[110] Gwen Bradford, "Problems for Perfectionism," *Utilitas* 29, no. 3 (2017): 344-364.
[111] Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[112] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

[113] Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64.

I admit that Williams' critique depends on a selective and outdated view of human distinctiveness. More recent accounts, such as those proposed by Tomasello et al. suggest that "the ability to participate with others in collaborative activities with shared goals and intentions"[114] is a "species-unique"[115] human capacity that may be more relevant to well-being. A fundamental difficulty lies in specifying what counts as "human nature" in a way that is both well-being relevant and empirically credible.

At this juncture, it would be helpful to distinguish between what philosophers have recently coined "thick" vs "thin" conceptions of human nature. Thick conceptions are normatively loaded accounts of human nature. For instance, Plato's tripartite theory of the human soul, which claims that reason ought to govern the passions for humans to find happiness, would count as a thick conception of human nature. It loads in many normative assumptions about what human beings are and how they ought to act, assumptions that go beyond empirically verifiable reality. By contrast, a thin conception of human nature is a minimalist theory that equates human nature with the empirically observable features of human beings on which there is broad consensus. For instance, humans are thinking creatures and social animals. In what follows, I want to contend that while there are good reasons to think that a thick conception of human nature cannot normatively ground prudential value, a thin conception can still serve as a plausible way to normatively ground prudential value. However, to *identify* what features within that thin conception will be prudentially relevant, the narrative self will be required.

[114] Michael Tomasello, Malinda Carpenter, Jose Call, Tanya Behne, and Henrike Moll, "Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28, no. 5 (2005): 675.
[115] Ibid.

To begin, recent work in the dehumanization literature reveals a host of difficulties in defining a thick conception of human nature. For instance, Maria Kronfeldner outlines several philosophical and scientific challenges that complicate the concept of human nature. These include:

(a) *The dehumanization challenge*, which highlights how the concept is often used to marginalize or devalue certain groups. This problem is intensified when human nature is framed in essentialist terms which posits a fixed and universal essence that certain individuals or groups allegedly fail to realize.

(b) *The Darwinian challenge*, which arises from evolutionary biology's rejection of essentialist views. Since traits in biological species are fluid, contingent, and variable, it is questionable whether there exists a stable human essence that can serve as a meaningful foundation for defining human nature.

(c) *The developmentalist challenge,* which criticizes the idea of the nature/ nurture dichotomy and claims that human development is highly complex and interactive. Since traits can't be neatly attributed to either genetic or environmental factors, this makes identifying fixed or natural traits problematic. [116]

Kronfeldner also criticizes the idea that human nature can be understood through the concept of "innateness" since it fails to capture the actual complexity involved in the development of human traits. She instead advances the notion of "stability", arguing that rather than being fixed, traits are stable, meaning they reliably recur over time due to what she calls "inherited developmental resources". This poses a challenge to the prevailing interactionist views though. Kronfelder also proposes a "post-essentialist, pluralist" conception of human nature that distinguishes between three

[116] Maria Kronfeldner, *What's Left of Human Nature? A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist, and Interactive Account of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

senses: classificatory, descriptive, and explanatory. Since different disciplines emphasize different senses, the concept of human nature becomes fragmented and context-dependent. She also raises the issue of "explanatory looping effects" where explanations of human nature can influence human self-understanding and consequently behavior, thereby shaping human nature through interpretation and feedback. All these complexities result in the elimination question in her last chapter which asks whether we should abandon the term "human nature" altogether given its ambiguity and instability.

Mari Mikkola similarly recognizes the difficulty in defining human nature.[117] She identifies a central tension: grounding human nature in biological traits renders the concept normatively too "thin" while grounding it in values makes it persuasive to those who already share the same values. As a result, the concept is either devoid of meaningful normative content or fails to have broad consensus. Mikkola thus questions whether an inclusive and useful account of human nature can be formulated at all.

However, even if it *were* possible to have a thick account of human nature, identifying the traits that are widespread across our species, that would not *ipso facto* establish their prudential relevance. So, invoking a thick conception of human nature seems appealing since it could offer a solid foundation for understanding human well-being, but it raises complex and seemingly intractable problems.

By contrast, some philosophers have sought to obviate the problems surrounding thick conceptions of human nature by employing the notion of an individual essence, i.e. a nature that is

[117] Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and its Role in Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

unique to *particular* members of the human species without necessarily being shared by all the members of that genus. This solution is not, however, without its own problems. Indeed, if one endorses the individual-essence view, then Hurka claims that one of two problems ensue. For Hurka, the candidates for an individual essence are either (a) a Kripkean account of personal identity according to which "the fundamental individually essential property is that of being descended from a particular sperm and egg;" or (b) "what her origin brings, namely a continuing genetic endowment."[118] If one assumes "(a)," then there is a problem with explaining how excellently exemplifying the capacities of that individual sperm and egg makes sense. The most natural explanation therefore requires endorsing option "(b)," meaning that the capacities a person should exemplify are the capacities that are unique to their genetic endowment, e.g. the set of talents for which they have a natural aptitude.

However, even this formulation has serious difficulties. First, as contemporary biology emphasizes (especially in the context of epigenetics and the interactionist challenge to genetic determinism) genes are not independent determinants of human development. They require inputs from the environment and social context to be expressed, and their influence is shaped by a complex interaction between biological and environmental factors. Maria Kronfeldner, for instance, emphasizes that appeals to genetic endowment risk oversimplifying this interaction and reinforce outdated assumptions about innateness.

Also, even if certain capacities and talents are genetically influenced, it would be imprudent to claim that realizing them is always prudentially valuable. For instance, if someone has a natural aptitude for writing, but is bereft of any opportunities to develop their capacity, it would be

[118] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

imprudent to suggest they should direct all their efforts towards that pursuit to maximize their well-being. As Hurka writes: "any broad perfectionism [...] agrees that we should normally be more active where we have more talent."[119] But since pursuing talents that have no chance of coming to fruition is clearly imprudent, Hurka concludes that the individual-essence solution is also untenable.

I believe Hurka's dismissal of the individual-essence solution to the problem of how to specify the self to be perfected is too hasty. He assumes that *only* the genetic origin theory *or* the characteristics (such as talents) endowed by one's genetic information can count as individual-essences whose fulfillment would lead to well-being. Perhaps, these two options do exhaust the metaphysical candidates for an individual person's essence, but they are based on assumptions that are getting increasingly questioned. The idea that one's genetic makeup could be what defines a stable and essential core of the self has been widely criticized. Modern biology shows that genes do not function in isolation. They require interaction with environmental factors to be expressed, and even then, they can be shaped or silenced by those external factors. This undermines the idea that a person's essence can be fixed by genetic inheritance alone. Even early thinkers such as Francis Galton recognized the influence of both genetic and environmental factors in the development of intelligence.[120] Currently, most scientists accept a more interactionist view on which development results from a complex interaction between genetic and environmental factors. So, it seems mistaken to construct a theory of well-being on the idea that an individual's essence is genetically determined. It rests on outdated biological assumptions. If well-being is connected to the realization of one's essence, then that essence should involve something besides genetic potential.

[119] Ibid.
[120] I thank Johannes Steizinger for bringing this historical example to my attention.

We need not restrict the prudential value to the development of *essential* traits (genetic or otherwise). There may be *non-essential* properties of a person whose development could be prudentially valuable. The narrative theory of self is one such non-metaphysical view; it does not claim that the narrative self is the *essence* of a person, only that it is a meaningful part of personal identity whose development plays an important role in well-being.

To explain the narrative theory of self, we can follow Marya Schechtman in distinguishing two questions that can be posed about personal identity:

The Numerical Identity Question

(1) What are the conditions under which a person *p* at t_1 is the same person *p* at t_2?

The Characterization Question

(2) What are the conditions under which "actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on (hereafter abbreviated 'characteristics') can be attributed to a given person?"[121]

The first question addresses a logical and metaphysical issue about what constitutes personal identity, where personal identity is construed as the "relation which every object bears to itself and nothing else."[122] That is the only form of personal identity that Hurka entertains. But there is another equally important form of personal identity addressed by the characterization question; it concerns which characteristics can *truly be attributed* to the deep or true self, i.e. "the set of characteristics that make a person who they are."[123]

[121] Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 73.
[122] Ibid., 76.
[123] Ibid.

In "Identification and Externality," Harry Frankfurt illustrates the importance of answering the characterization question:

> We think it correct to attribute to a person, in the strict sense, only some of the events in the history of his body. The others – those with respect to which he is passive – have their moving principles outside him, and we do not identify him with these events. Certain events in the history of a person's mind, likewise, have their moving principles outside of him [...] they are likewise not to be attributed to him.[124]

Frankfurt discusses how the events that occur in a person's life wind up being part of that person's personal identity. He distinguishes which events in a person's life are truly "the person's" and which are not, based on what could be understood as the degree of agency or control the person has over those events. There is, then, a distinction between events that are internal to a person (i.e. those that are connected to their self-understanding or are the result of their own actions and decisions) and those that are external (i.e. those that happen to the person but are not controlled by or caused by them). He argues that we should only attribute certain events to a person – those in which they actively participate or that reflect their desires and will. Similarly, Frankfurt extends this idea to the "psychological domain."[125] Events that occur in a person's mental life, but that are caused by external factors should not be considered part of the person's true identity. There is, then according to Frankfurt, a set containing all the mental events that ever occur in a person's

[124] Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 61
[125] Ibid., 59

psychological history. Only a subset of those events are identity-constitutive.

Without presupposing anything about the metaphysical nature of the self, the narrative theory of identity offers a plausible way to identify the subset of mental events that are identity-relevant. Indeed, as David Shoemaker writes, without the narrative self:

> The events would be unified in a purely passive respect, simply as the experiences contained within the life of that subject of experiences. But for that subject to be a person, a genuine moral agent, those experiences must be actively unified, must be gathered together into the life of one narrative ego by virtue of a story the subject tells that weaves them together, giving them a kind of coherence and intelligibility they wouldn't otherwise have had.[126]

Crucially, this narrative self should not be confused with one's metaphysical essence or human nature, but is instead a merely phenomenological category, referencing how one's identity is *experienced*. It is also not an entirely pre-determined entity, but something we *create*, in and through the process of making sense of our lives and the events they contain. So, none of the problems Hurka raises for the individual essence view apply, since there is no attempt to identify the narrative self as the ultimate metaphysical essence of the person. Rather than being the metaphysical essence of the person, the narrative self provides an answer to the characterization question: it explains

[126] David Shoemaker, "Personal Identity and Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/identity-ethics/

which actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on (hereafter abbreviated 'characteristics') can be attributed to a given person.

There is, however, a legitimate lingering concern about what it means to *develop* such a narrative self. Before turning to the third and final feature of my view, I briefly want to explain what I have in mind.

On my account, the development of the narrative self consists of two interconnected processes: (i) interpreting our lives (from previous experiences to the present) through the construction of a coherent life narrative and (ii) shaping our future through the development of our capacities in pursuit of meaningful goals.

The first process is similar to interpreting a narrative. It involves forming connections between past experiences, events, and actions with present ones to form an intelligible whole, which enables individuals to identify their goals, values, and priorities. This helps them to make sense of their lives and their identity. This interpretive process bestows a specific narrative significance on life events and actions, thereby impacting their prudential weight. To take an example, health is generally considered an objective good, but, on my account, its specific prudential value depends on how *important* it is *to* that person, how they *perceive* their own health, and how it fits within their broader life narrative. The prudential weight of any objective good can change based on how it is *experienced*, *evaluated*, and *integrated* into that person's life story. Suppose being a philosopher is central to someone's life narrative and this person discovers the precise term for an obscure concept related to their research area. This seemingly insignificant event would carry substantial prudential weight for them. Conversely, a loss of physical vitality would be less prudentially disvaluable for the philosopher than for an athlete, given their aims and values. This interpretative process can be

equally applied to past events (not just to present ones). Negative past events can be reinterpreted as instrumental goods. For instance, a person can reinterpret past obstacles as major learning opportunities that enabled personal growth. The person may eventually frame their trajectory as a story containing themes such as resilience and perseverance, integrating their past adversities into important features of their identity. This is one way in which the narrative self is developed.

The second way involves molding one's future by pursuing goods and aims through the exercise and development of capacities. While the first process is concerned with past and present life events, the second one is future-oriented. The pursuit of meaningful goods and aims through the exercise and development of one's capacities, shapes the trajectory of a person's life narrative. These pursuits take on a narrative significance by featuring as important events in their life story and connecting to the larger narrative representing their identity and values. The prudential value gained from pursuing goods and aims does not merely amount to their achievement. Rather, the pursuit itself is prudentially valuable, as it involves personal growth through the cultivation and enhancement of one's skills and talents and through shaping one's identity. For instance, suppose a person takes up martial arts training in their thirties. Initially, they might not be very skilled, but they commit to the process of learning and practicing. Over time, as they gain proficiency and develop their unique strategies for executing techniques, they begin to see themselves not just as a person who trains, but as a martial artist. The development of their athletic capacities became a central part of their life narrative. It may be a meaningful experience wherein they overcame their lack of confidence and self-doubt. The individual may frame their story around the theme of transformation – from wimp to warrior. Pursuing goods and aims, then, is a part of narrative self development.

These two processes involved in developing the narrative self are interrelated and involve continuous self-reflection as well as reinterpretation of past events. For instance, a person who was formerly depressed and isolated and who overcame their struggles might reflect on past life events and view the activities involved in the development of emotional intelligence as important events in their life story. The times in which they overcame social anxiety, practiced meditation, and formed friendships became plot points in their story and contributed to their understanding of their identity. They may frame these past events in terms of themes such as resilience or self-improvement, thereby impacting the prudential weight of these past events. Looking forward, they might set the goal to continue improving and developing these abilities and seek out more difficult challenges. Pursuing their goal, then, is a continuous process that involves interpreting their past experiences again and developing further. So, the two processes are not separate. Developing the narrative self is both interpreting the past and present in a coherent way, and also engaging with the future through the exercise and development of capacities in pursuit of significant aims.

While my view adopts a feature of objective list theories by positing the presence of objective goods, it differs in the basis for identifying these goods. Rather than claiming that the basic goods are simply good[127] or that they are grounded in human nature,[128] I contend that the list of goods is derived from features of the particular *individual* - more specifically from their narrative self. My view also adopts the perfectionist characteristic of linking well-being with the development and exercise of important human capacities. However, rather than grounding human capacities in what

[127] See for instance Arneson (2010).

Richard Arneson, "Good Period," *Analysis* 70, no. 4 (2010): 731-744.

[128] Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

humans share in common as a species, my account grounds the capacities in distinctive features of each individual.[129] This does not, however, imply that human nature plays *no* role in normatively grounding prudential value. Indeed, the narrative self is first and foremost a *human* being and also participates in the capacities of which human beings are capable. Rather, the *subset* of human capacities (however those are construed) that will count as prudentially valuable for a person will be narrowed down by what resonates with their narrative self. For instance, all human beings have the capacity for practical reasoning *(phronesis*), but there might not be some thick form of Practical Reason writ large that all human beings must perform to count as having well-being. Instead, we are the kinds of creatures who are capable of practical reasoning (given our human nature), but the goals and ends towards which practical reasoning is being directed get relativized based on the unique nature of the individual's narrative self. In other words, we can concede the earlier observations made by Mikkola and Kronfeldner that a *thick* (i.e. normatively loaded) conception of human nature is an unsuitable foundation for normatively grounding prudential value. But there is nevertheless a *thin* conception of human nature that remains intact. The features of the thin conception that will be *prudentially valuable* are the ones that link up to the unique features of an individual's narrative self, as described above. These cannot be any idiosyncratic features, but must be connected to basic, shared human capacities. This, then is what I mean by the narrative theory of self-hood, and how it factors into my theory of well-being. I turn now to my theory's third subsidiary thesis: holism.

2.3 Holism

One might be tempted to think that hybrid holism, as I have presented it so far, is committed to joint-necessity. For if *both* resonance with the narrative self *and* the presence of

[129] Sangmu Oh defends a version of an individual-based perfectionist view in "An Individual-Based Hybrid Well-Being Theory," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 25, no. 112 (2024)

objective goods are required, that seems to imply two necessary conditions, a subjectivist and an objectivist component. That would carry a problematic consequence that a moment with only one of those factors contains no prudential value. For instance, a moment of pleasure for the narrative self has zero prudential value, unless the pleasure was taken in something objectively valuable. Similarly, a life could be replete with various objective goods, such as beauty or knowledge, but would have no prudential value unless one's narrative self held favoring attitudes to those goods. But surely pleasure taken in subjectively valuable things, or the sheer presence of objective goods, should make *some* contribution to one's well-being.

To avoid such cases, I endorse holism, the view that "the contribution made by each [i.e. subjective or objective] component depends in some way on the degree to which the other is present."[130] Holism, then, does not require that either the subjectivist or objectivist component "is a necessary condition of the other's making any contribution at all to well-being."[131] For instance, a moment in which one experiences pleasure has some prudential value, regardless of whether the pleasure is taken in something objectively valuable; but its prudential value would be significantly amplified if that pleasure is taken in objectively valuable things. And objectively valuable things offer some prudential value, regardless of whether one takes pleasure in them; but that value is further amplified when one takes pleasure in them, or is engaged by them in some other positive way.

3. Hybrid Holism Defended

[130] Christopher Woodard, "Hybrid Theories," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (Abingdon: Routledge Publications, 2016), 161-174.
[131] Ibid.

Having explicated my view, I now want to motivate the view by showing how hybrid holism responds to various problems better than neighboring theories. For comparison, I also consider two other, influential forms of hybridism: 1) Joseph Raz's *Worthwhileness View*, according to which "well-being is constituted by success in pursuing worthwhile goals";[132] and 2) Shelly Kagan's *Valuable Pleasure View*, according to which well-being is constituted by finding pleasure in objective goods.[133] I begin by giving a brief but charitable reconstruction of each view. I then consider how each view fares with respect to the two adequacy constraints: resonance and worthiness, as well as their ability to bypass the problems associated with the joint-necessity condition. After showing that neither view fares particularly well, I demonstrate that hybrid holism proves more propitious.

3.1 Raz's Worthwhileness View

In *The Morality of Freedom*, Raz maintains that "well-being is constituted by success in pursuing worthwhile goals."[134] He construes "goals" broadly, including any "projects, plans, relationships, ambitions, commitments, and the like."[135] The objectivist component of his view is that such goals must be objectively valuable. He writes that individuals "engage in what they do because they believe it to be a valuable, worthwhile activity."[136] But he insists, not only that someone's "belief that his goal is valuable does not make it so," but also that "to the extent that their valuation is misguided it affects the success of their life."[137] Accordingly, if someone

[132] Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom,* (Clarendon Press, 1986), ch 12.
[133] Shelly Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 253-272. While there are admittedly other hybrid views, I believe that these two compose a representative sample and the arguments advanced against them can easily generalize to neighboring views.
[134] Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom,* (Clarendon Press, 1986), ch 12.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

successfully pursues *worthless* goals, their personal well-being will not be increased. Since they can be mistaken about whether something is worthwhile, there must be some objective standard for whether a goal counts as worthwhile.

Raz does not articulate an explicit theory of "worthwhileness," but his account seems to include three conditions for a goal being worthwhile. First, on his view, for a goal to be worthwhile, it must have objective value – that is, it must be valuable, irrespective of whether an individual desires it or not. He connects worthwhile goals with good reasons for action. In general, reasons for performing action $\boldsymbol{\varphi}$ are considerations that genuinely count in favor of $\boldsymbol{\varphi}$-ing. Raz requires that worthwhile goals are the kinds of things that give you a *good* reason to do something. In other words, the pursuit of worthwhile goals is justified by objective reasons. A person has good reasons to pursue a worthwhile goal, not simply because they desire it, but because the goal itself has value that can be recognized as worth pursuing. These reasons for action are grounded in the goal's inherent value. For instance, he cites the example of the worthwhile goal of becoming a physician. It is the kind of thing that gives you a reason to engage in certain subsidiary actions, e.g. learning biology, studying for the MCAT, having sleepless nights during residency, and so on. Even if you do not personally desire to be a physician, you still might have a good reason to pursue it because it has objective value – such as contributing to society. In this way, the pursuit of the worthwhile goal is rationally justified by reasons that are independent of individual preferences. A person can recognize that becoming a physician is a good and worthwhile pursuit because it promotes human flourishing. The objective value of it provides rational grounds for this person to pursue the goal. Second, a worthwhile goal must also have what he calls "desirability characteristics," i.e. be the kind of thing that is worth desiring even from an impersonal perspective. The idea here is that someone merely desiring x is not sufficient to make x worthwhile. Instead, each person "wishes to engage in pursuits

which are as valuable as any he can manage. In that he judges their value from the impersonal point of view."[138]

Finally, Raz qualifies this last feature of his view by claiming that worthwhile goals must be *accessible* to individuals, meaning not only that the individuals must personally have the capacities to successfully achieve the goal, but also that they must be a social form within their society. In other words, goals can be worthwhile for someone "only if they can be *his* goals and they can be his goals only if they are founded in social forms."[139] So, for instance, a disabled person cannot have the goal of becoming an esteemed writer if they have severe aphasia, and no one can have the goal of becoming a writer within that society unless that profession is itself recognized (e.g. it clearly would not be possible to become a writer in a strictly oral culture, or in an illiterate society).

While there is, then, a strong objectivist component to Raz's view, many scholars have noted that his stance also includes subjectivist components. For instance, Brad Hooker writes that "facts about the individual subject's intentions and psychological engagement matter crucially. In Raz's view, someone would fail to benefit from having good things in her life like knowledge and friendship if she did not have the right intentions and attitudes towards these things."[140] There is, then, a need for appropriate subjective engagement with objectively worthwhile pursuits.

Having briefly explicated Raz's view, I now want to consider how it fares on the two adequacy constraints for any theory of well-being.

[138] Ibid., 299
[139] Ibid.
[140] Brad Hooker, "The Elements of Well-Being," *Journal of Practical Ethics* 3, no. 1 (2015): 27

First, Raz's view clearly satisfies internal resonance. It ensures not only that individuals must have the appropriate subjective engagement with worthwhile goals, but also that worthwhile goals themselves must be relativized to a person's individual capacities and society. The only issue is whether the kinds of attitudes he requires ensure internal resonance, but that kind of objection applies to *any* theory with a subjectivist component that remains even somewhat committal on what subjective states are needed for well-being. Since he does not spell out too explicitly what the subjectivist requirements are, I prefer not to concentrate my counter-argumentation on speculation.

Raz's view confronts a similar worry about whether it accommodates the worthiness criterion, but this time the problem is more serious. Raz *does* give a very specific list of requirements for something to count as objectively worthwhile, but his view seemingly excludes items that intuitively contribute to well-being. His view entails there is nothing possessing all of the following three properties: i) being prudentially valuable, ii) not being a worthwhile goal, and iii) being something towards which one does not have subjective engagement (e.g. not enjoyed, desired, or pursued). However, there seem to be counterexamples. For instance, suppose that someone unexpectedly inherits a large estate that allows them to be emancipated from a dreary life of menial labor. It is true that research on the long-term effects of sudden wealth (e.g. lottery winnings) on well-being shows mixed results.[141] For instance, the winners may experience negative outcomes such as social alienation or fraud vulnerability. But there is also evidence from psychological and economic research that moving from poverty to financial security is generally associated with

[141] See for instance: Erik Lindqvist, Robert Ostling, and David Cesarini, "Long-Run Effects of Lottery Wealth on Psychological Well-Being," *The Review of Economic Studies* 87, no. 6 (2020): 2703-2726 and Kim Seonghoon, "Happy Lottery Winners and Lottery-Ticket Bias," *Review of Income and Wealth* 67, no. 2 (2021): 317- 333.

substantial improvements in well-being.[142] The point here is not to suggest that unearned wealth always enhances well-being, but that some good fortunes (especially those that meet basic needs) can increase well-being, even if they were not pursued as a worthwhile goal. In the case presented, acquiring the wealth was not the result of a worthwhile goal the person was pursuing, but occurred out of sheer luck, so they had no subjective engagement with the goal, nor was inheriting the estate itself a worthwhile pursuit in which they were engaged. To claim that moving from poverty to affluence has no positive effect on one's well-being seems highly counter-intuitive, but this case does not satisfy any of the features Raz thinks are necessary for well-being. The upshot is that his account is too restrictive, given its exclusive focus on goals; it does not account for objectively good things that can happen through luck, rather than through the active pursuit of a life goal.

I think Raz's view further suffers from a commitment to joint-necessity. Since his view requires both subjectivist and objectivist features, it seems he must claim that goods lacking subjective engagement count for nothing. For instance, if a person unexpectedly falls into a beneficial relationship due to a chance encounter, but that relationship was not part of a worthwhile goal in pursuit of which they were subjectively engaged, then the relationship makes *zero* contribution to their well-being, on his view. Likewise, if that person's life contains a high degree of objective goodness (e.g. knowledge, achievement), but that objective goodness is not linked to a

[142] Matthew A. Killingsworth, Daniel Kahneman, and Barbara Mellers, "Income and Emotional Well-Being: A Conflict Resolved," *Psychological and Cognitive Sciences* 120, no. 10 (2023): 1-6.

This recent joint study was done to reanalyze earlier findings on the link between income and happiness. In a prior study, Kahneman and Deaton (2010) found that happiness increases with income but flattens out around $75,000/year. In another study, Killingsworth (2021) reported that happiness keeps rising steadily with income, even beyond $200,000/year. This new joint study concluded that both prior claims were correct. For the least happy 15-20% of people, happiness increases with income up to around $100,000 and then flattens. But for the majority, happiness continues to rise with income, and for the happiest people, it rises even faster after $100,000. So, unhappy people benefit most from income up to a certain point and happy people keep getting a little bit happier with more income.

worthwhile goal with which they were subjectively engaged, then it seems it would count for *nothing,* on his view. In this way, Raz's account is under-inclusive.

3.2 Kagan's Valuable Pleasure View

On Shelly Kagan's proposal, "I am well off if and only if there are objective goods in my life and I take pleasure in them."[143] While Kagan concedes there is a broader notion of enjoyment, including pro-attitudes other than pleasure, he treats enjoyment as synonymous with pleasure for the purposes of his paper. Kagan adopts, then, an explicitly hybridist view, one in which the objectivist component is that well-being's constituents must actually be good, and the subjectivist component is that one must take pleasure in those goods.

Kagan also maintains that one's pleasure must be an appropriate reaction to the good-making features of the goods in one's life. The good-making features of a good must, then, provide a reason for adopting the pro-attitude of pleasure toward that good. On Kagan's view, these good-making features are the characteristics that make something truly valuable. For instance, if a person experiences pleasure from consuming a meal, this pleasure should be an appropriate reaction to the inherent goodness of the food (e.g. its taste, its nutrition, or the good of the communal aspect of sharing a meal). The enjoyment derived should reflect some kind of understanding that the meal is indeed something worthwhile. He clarifies that one may enjoy the good directly without explicitly recognizing why it is valuable. However, Kagan believes that virtue is required for enjoyment to be connected to the goodness of the object. For instance, a virtuous person would take enjoyment in their honest, hard work, not only because of the immediate satisfaction their efforts instill, but also

[143] Shelly Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 255.

because they appreciate the virtues of honesty and hard work. Having briefly explicated Kagan's view, I now want to consider how it fares on the two adequacy constraints for any theory of well-being.

From the perspective of internal resonance, my main concern is that Kagan's theory does not allow warrantless pleasure to play any role in well-being. Since one's pro-attitudes must be responsive to the good-making features of objective goods, it follows that pleasures that are taken in non-objective goods cannot count towards well-being. David Sobel and Steven Wall put the point well: "We are benefitted by getting tastes, seeing colors, listening to sounds, and having tactile sensations that we happen to like even though the objects of our favoring attitudes in these contexts do not warrant such an attitude."[144] Warrantless pleasures are pleasures that, while not taken in something bad, and not linked to objective goods, are not entirely worthless. It is counterintuitive to claim that such pleasures do not make a person's life go better, yet this is what Kagan's theory entails. So, since Kagan claims there must be a robust connection between pleasure and the good-making features of objective goods, he winds up excluding many other forms of pleasure from playing a role in well-being. So, the view fares poorly on internal resonance and is thereby under-inclusive, since it excludes things (i.e. warrantless pleasures) that intuitively have prudential value.

James Delaney makes a similar point, challenging Kagan's view of well-being as a function of the amount of pleasure times the size of the good (W = P x O).[145] This function appears plausible in some cases where the pleasure level in an objective good is zero. However, if someone takes

[144] Steven Wall and David Sobel, "A Robust Hybrid Theory of Well-Being," *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 9 (2020): 2839.
[145] James J. Delaney, "Taking Pleasure in the Good and Well-Being: The Harmless Pleasures Objection," *Philosophia* 46 (2017): 281-294.

pleasure in something with zero objective goodness, Kagan's theory seems highly counterintuitive. How should we account for harmless pleasures?[146] These intuitively improve a person's life, even though they are not linked to objective goods.

In developing this objection to Raz's view, Delaney helpfully distinguishes between two types of harmless pleasures: pleasures in things that are objectively neutral (neither good nor bad) and "brute" pleasures that are not tied to any specific object. Hurka suggests that fame could be an example of an objective neutral. It does not seem good in the way that other list items are and does not seem bad in the way that the corresponding bads are bad. Anonymity (the opposite of fame) also appears neither good nor bad. This implies both fame and anonymity have an objective good value of 0. Brute pleasures, which are simply pleasurable sensations that are not tied to any object, would receive a value of zero.[147] Again, on Kagan's view, pleasure must be connected to some objective good to generate well-being. If the theory is adjusted to include either of these kinds of harmless pleasures, then it faces the same issue that affects hedonism: pleasures independent of goods hold little value.

Another issue with Kagan's view concerns determining how much weight should be accorded to harmless pleasures. If they are assigned a positive value, then they would be treated in the same way as other positive goods. One possible response is that pleasure in fame could be reduced to pleasure derived from another good that it provides, such as love or achievement. However, the problem persists for pleasures in activities that seem neutral. Brute pleasures are even more difficult to explain. Kagan argues that a person may take pleasure in a massage because they

[146] I will not consider controversial cases in which a person takes pleasure in objectively bad things, such as delighting in the suffering of an innocent creature.

[147] Feldman (2004) denies this conception of brute pleasure and argues that even sensory pleasures require a pro-attitude.

are in fact taking pleasure in a healthy state of their body. However, pleasures can be derived from activities that damage health and can still be found pleasurable despite one's knowledge of this fact. Oftentimes, pleasures are linked only to themselves and not to any corresponding goods.

A complication in Kagan's view concerns whether the value of pleasure is attitude-independent. Kagan does not commit to a specific definition of pleasure, implying there may be multiple interpretations of his view – whether pleasure is based on felt-quality or attitudes. If pleasure is understood as attitude-independent, then his account would fail to accord sufficient weight to a person's cares and concerns, thereby failing to meet internal resonance.

In terms of the worthiness criterion, Kagan's view fails to account for the idea that some objective goods can affect well-being independently of subjective engagement. For instance, consider two people: Reflective Ryan who desires to engage in deep contemplation, and Unreflective Ryan, who shows no interest in such activities. Even though Unreflective Ryan lacks a positive attitude toward contemplation, it seems that this activity would still be objectively valuable for him since it involves the development and exercise of theoretical rationality. This line of thought reflects a perfectionist view. I do not claim that contemplation is unqualifiedly good, but when it involves the development of the human capacity of theoretical rationality, it may have objective value. Many individuals experience contemplation as unpleasant, reporting boredom when left alone with their thoughts. A recent empirical study on "spiritual boredom" found that even in spiritually meaningful contexts such as meditation and silent retreats, individuals frequently reported boredom, especially when they felt under or over challenged.[148] This suggests that philosophical contemplation may not

[148] Thomas Goetz, Jonathan Fries, Lisa Stempfer, Lukas Kraiger, Sarah Stoll, Lena Baumgartner, Yannis L. Diamant, Caroline Porics, Bibiana Sonntag, Silke Wurglauer, Wijnand A. P. van Tilburg, and Reinhard Pekrun, "Spiritual Boredom

be *experienced* as contributing to well-being. Under Kagan's view, since Unreflective Ryan does not enjoy it, philosophical contemplation would not contribute to his well-being, even though it plausibly has intrinsic value. The view fails to account for the idea that some objective goods can affect well-being independently of favorable attitudes, thus making the account under-inclusive.

When considering the problems associated with the joint-necessity feature, however, there is considerably more room for criticism. There is, of course, the point already addressed: that pleasure should count towards well-being, even if it is not a response to the good-making features of objective goods. But there is also the parallel worry that objective goods should count towards your well-being, even if you do not find pleasure in them. For instance, an athlete might take no pleasure in certain forms of training that are genuinely a prudential benefit to her. They constitute an objective good (e.g. the achievement of lifting more weight than one ever has), but she does not take any pleasure in that good, and might even find it excruciatingly painful. I must admit that pleasure operates in a more complex way than we often assume. The pleasure of overcoming a challenge or realizing an achievement can outweigh the pain of the prior experience. But my point is that even if no pleasure were present (before, during or after) there seems to be prudential value in exercising one's capacities with objective goods. Kagan's view risks excluding such cases and thus may be overly restrictive.

Having explicated and evaluated both Raz's and Kagan's rival forms of hybridism, I now want to show how my hybrid holist view satisfies the two adequacy constraints.

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is Associated with Over- and Underchallenge, Lack of Value, and Reduced Motivation," *Communications Psychology* 3, no. 35 (2025): https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-025-002167

3.3 Hybrid Holism

In terms of internal resonance, a primary possible concern about my view is that some subjective values should contribute to well-being, even if they play no narrative role. For instance, the problem that Sobel and Wall detected for Kagan's account would seem to recur again for my view in a modified form. Intuitively, it seems the simple pleasures of listening to certain sounds, enjoying tastes, and witnessing colors should figure in well-being, but it is not immediately clear whether those experiences will always play a role in someone's life narrative. It seems, moreover, that their value shouldn't necessarily depend on whether they are incorporated into a life story. These experiences could have strictly episodic or synchronic values that are not connected to any broader life narrative. For instance, hedonists will argue that brute instances of pleasure will count towards one's well-being regardless of whether they play any narrative role. Does this show that hybrid holism does not adequately capture the subjectivist component of well-being?

My main response is that a narrative self can, in many cases, accommodate trivial pleasures. Part of being a narrative self is having a particular set of values and concerns, regarding certain things as relevant to one's life narrative. Much as an author treats certain details as worthy of incorporation into a story, out of the vast multitude of possibilia, so too does the narrative-self treat certain things as *mattering*.[149] There is no reason in principle why trivial pleasures could never play a role in one's life narrative. If they are the kinds of things one cares about and values, or that carry a specific meaning in one's life, they would certainly count towards well-being, on my view.

[149] For a different take, see: Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Chapter 6

A further benefit of the narrative view, in fact, is that it does not say whether trivial pleasures necessarily *have to* count towards well-being. It leaves that question up to the narrative self. If someone is the kind of person who values and cares about such things, then they count towards their well-being. But if a person does not care about such things, then they will *not* figure in the narrative and accordingly will play no role in such a person's well-being. In that regard, the view handles the problem of trivial pleasures at least as well as any subjectivist theory of well-being. There is no reason to find my view wanting on the internal resonance requirement.

In terms of the worthiness requirement, a primary possible concern with my view will be that prudential value pluralism offers too vague an account of objective goodness. As Kagan writes: "the most pressing issue, no doubt, concerns the exact list of objective goods."[150] For if my prudential value pluralism identifies the wrong kinds of objective goods, that would show that it does not adequately satisfy the worthiness requirement.

For my purposes, I have remained non-committal on what the exact list of objective goods includes. Throughout the discussion to date, I have employed certain examples of objective goods that seem to appear on almost every list theory, e.g. achievement, knowledge, and beauty. But I have not enumerated the exact list of objective goods. Ultimately, that debate is far broader than the concerns addressed in the present thesis. I am happy to accept whatever items ultimately belong on the list of objective goods. Even if one of my proposed examples were wrong, and e.g. knowledge does not belong on the objective list, that would only show that the example requires modification, not the theory of prudential value pluralism itself. Although controversies exist surrounding certain

[150] Shelly Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 255.

outlier objective goods, there is a high degree of consensus on a core set of members. I contend that these controversies do not pose a threat to the claim there may be a consensus.[151]

However, I cannot merely stick to the list without any further elaboration, for that would prove to be a weak argumentative move. I contend that the capacities for practical and theoretical rationality must be included in any plausible account. The reason, which I am not the first to recognize, is that all goods included on the list theories presuppose the presence of theoretical or practical reason. These are, moreover, capacities that any thin conception of human nature would necessarily include because they are empirically undeniable. Indeed, in the *Meditations* Descartes notes that the reality of oneself as a thinking being is even more certain than the reality of the external world itself. Furthermore, theoretical and practical rationality must also be included because they are conditions for the possibility of other items that are plausible contenders to make the list. For instance, achievement – which is itself another plausible contender – is a manifestation of the successful use of theoretical and practical reasoning across various domains of thought and action. Even health – which is often included on the list – requires the successful implementation of practical and theoretical reasoning. If an individual reasons wrongly and consumes a poisonous mushroom instead of an edible one, the good of health will be thereby extinguished. I will therefore largely stick to examples of goods that are linked to the core human capacities of practical and theoretical rationality, but remain open to the list being expanded beyond them, albeit with the caveat that goods bearing weaker relations to those core capacities seem less normatively grounded and therefore are more suspect with discussing prudential value. We must moreover avoid relying on a theory of human nature that is too thick or normatively loaded, for reasons outlined above.

[151] William Lauinger (2012) argues there are substantial similarities among the basic goods lists of prominent objective list theorists.

One further benefit of my view in this regard compared to standard "objective list" theories is that it provides an explanatory account, answering *why* certain items on the objective list are good for someone. Those items enhance or improve someone's life narrative.

An individual's nature, while unique, is a subset of human nature, and so the objective goods corresponding to each person are a subset of the general goods for all human beings. The process through which human beings exercise and cultivate their capacities (through struggling, striving, overcoming challenges, and ultimately growing) resembles the structure of a narrative arc. In this way, the development of an individual's nature resembles an unfolding story. The concept of narrativity helps explain how well-being is not simply an aggregate of isolated moments or "atoms" of prudential value. Rather, the arrangement of these moments within a larger narrative structure plays a significant role in determining their prudential value. For instance, on this view an arc of redemption, on which later goods redeem earlier struggles or mistakes, is better than an arc of unresolved struggle or unending hardship. Exemplifying individual nature, then, takes the form of a narrative arc that involves struggle, development, and eventually growth.

However, given that my response to the worthiness criterion has a subjectivist component, it also confronts another problem with which many subjectivist views must contend: the problem of defective desires, according to which one can desire or care about worthless, even sordid things. Some instances of the problem include the benign cases discussed above, e.g. Street's ideally coherent eccentrics who desire to count blades of grass interminably, or who exhibit future Tuesday indifference. But other instances of the problem include persons who desire that which is outright vile or sadistic. For instance, there are the Richard Ramirezes of the world, who desire to torture

their victims before consigning them to a horrifying, early death.[152] How does my hybrid holist view rejoin such cases?

There is indeed a legitimate worry that my view does not ultimately satisfy the worthiness requirement, for it is not immediately obvious what constraints could be placed on a narrative self that narrates its experiences along the lines of a Richard Ramirez. If what someone cares about and desires is intrinsically defective, and even includes harming and maiming other people, how do we preclude such things from being well-being constitutive for that person? There are two responses to which one can appeal.

First, taking a cue from Chris Heathwood, one could claim that there are no intrinsically defective desires.[153] On this response, even Ramirez's sadistic activities can be prudentially valuable for him. However, on this view, such activities ought to be forsworn for reasons unrelated to their prudential value. For instance, Heathwood discusses how such actions fail to exemplify human excellence or are grossly immoral. One can condemn such actions and find them anathema without thereby having to insist they have no *prudential* value for anyone under any conditions. In other words, moral value and prudential value can be disentangled: something can be prudentially valuable for a person, even if it possesses no moral value, or is clearly immoral.

Some philosophers find this doubling down on subjectivism unsatisfactory. To those readers, I offer a second response, one that upholds the connection between moral and prudential value. On this second response, my view rejoins Ramirez cases by claiming that one's narrative must

[152] Richard Ramirez was a shockingly vile and notorious serial killer who terrorized the greater Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas between 1984-1985.
[153] Chris Heathwood, "The Problem of Defective Desires," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 4 (2005), 487-504.

be constrained by facts, including those pertaining to other people. Any event in a person's life admits of many interpretations. This observation is not unique to me and has compelling advocates within the Continental tradition since Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. For instance, the death of a spouse can be construed as a turning point through which the life became increasingly tragic, or can be interpreted Stoically as a passing of the inevitable, or could even be interpreted as a largely positive event because the deceased was not deprived of many future goods by dying at that time, and because his death allowed the widow to have an increased quality of life all things considered. The way in which a given person will interpret such events will depend on psychological facts about the narrator, e.g. their resilience to grief, their level of anhedonia, a holistic picture of other events that happen in their life, and so on. However, I should note that I am not suggesting that the sheer underdetermination is sufficient to ground normativity. Indeed, while there are a variety of valid interpretations of the meaning of any given event, and while there does not always seem to be a fixed meaning to certain events in one's life, it would be fallacious to assume there are *no* factual constraints on how we interpret events. Analogously, although literary theory permits a wide range of interpretations of a given text, there are obviously still better and worse interpretations, including some interpretations that hold no merit. One could not, for instance, interpret Edgar Allan Poe's short horror story *The Black Cat* as a comedy. Likewise, while the events in one's life admit of varying interpretations, there are some factual constraints on how to construe events. On my view, interpretations are superior when they promote things like insight and integrity, reflecting the development of central human capacities like practical and theoretical rationality. Interpretations that promote self-deception and evasion of responsibility are prudentially worse. My view insists that a prudentially good life narrative requires more than subjective resonance but also responsiveness to facts about human nature. A life story that justifies cruelty or delusion doesn't meet this standard.

In the Ramirez type cases, then, one could appeal to the fact that Ramirez is committing an obvious misinterpretation of an event. For instance, when he tortures or harms another innocent human being, and views this as a development of his narrative self, his interpretation of the event is obviously demented. He has not accorded any role to obvious facts that should have a bearing on his interpretation, e.g. he has accorded no role to the subjective experiences of his victims and how the actions will reflect poorly on even his status as a moral agent within his community. He becomes blameworthy and has harmed others, and himself, but has a deluded interpretation of the events that does not recognize even the most obvious of facts. He becomes like the interpreter of a story who myopically focuses on one fact (e.g. the pleasure felt by one character) to the exclusion of everything else that is occurring in the storyline. He has obviously misconstrued the narrative, just like (to expand on my earlier example) a reader who claims that *The Black Cat* is a comedy by focusing on the narrator's cunning laughter over the sadistic murders he has committed. I claim, then, that appealing to factual constraints on the narration of events will allow one to account for the worthiness criterion. If someone's interpretation of events is so manifestly false, then it cannot count as an accurate narration of the events. That person's well-being, then, would be illusory since it is predicated upon an obvious falsehood. Does this response fully account for the worthiness criterion?

One more sophisticated worry, broached by Johannes Steizinger, is that my account would allow Hitler*, an individual with a similar self-narrative to the actual Hitler. Steizinger writes "Hitler* feels a strong capacity to dominate others. He organizes his narrative self around this feature: his craving for and capacity of dominating. This drive is so strong that he becomes a dictator, ready to conquer half of Europe. Moreover, a very strong form of domination is to decide over life and death of other people, entire groups of people. Hence, he decides to exterminate the Jews* living in the

countries he has conquered. All this contributes to his sense of selfhood, enabling him to actualize the narrative self he has chosen for himself."[154] Clearly, a theory of well-being would be lacking if it cannot place normative constraints on Hitler*. Indeed, something would truly have gone awry with the objectivist component of my theory if there are no normative constraints restricting Hitler*. More must accordingly be said to assuage this philosophically sophisticated concern. I will offer two ripostes in particular.

First, as noted earlier, there are *alethic* constraints on what contributes to someone's well-being. If Hitler* considers the domination of entire races prudentially valuable, he is simply mistaken because dominating others is not an objective good. For disordered people, there may admittedly be some pleasure derived from wrongdoing, even of the most grievous variety. That pleasure helps to explain how some prudential value is derived from even sordid acts. However, the life project of dominating others and its concomitant narrative are clearly defective. Indeed, my view holds –as a minimal condition – that there must be alethic constraints on well-being, meaning that one's well-being cannot be predicated upon false moral beliefs. The reason is that theoretical rationality is one of the core human capacities that even a thin conception of human nature uses to normatively ground prudential value, and the aim of theoretical rationality is clearly *truth*. One does not need to import normatively loaded assumptions about human nature to realize that theoretical rationality tries to arrive at an accurate instead of a deluded picture of the world in which it navigates. Since "dominating others without a just cause" is wrong – both morally and factually speaking – Hitler* is not actually meeting the normative constraints of my theory.

[154] Johannes Steizinger, personal communication, April 13, 2025

Secondly, and more importantly, the Hitler* cases present an important opportunity to clarify my view. There is a spectrum of positions available for normatively grounding well-being. On one side of the spectrum, what I will call "rigid views" propose a very narrow vision of human nature and claim that prudential value is normatively grounded in the exercise of those limited capacities. On the other end of the spectrum, there are what I will call "permissive individualist views" that normatively ground prudential value in whatever an individual happens to be. The latter view is popularized in John Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* in which he proposes that "existence precedes essence." For a philosopher of well-being persuaded by Sartre's philosophical anthropology, there essentially is no human nature aside from the one that individuals freely create through their own actions. While Sartre himself sees this freedom as a call to responsibility, it is easy to see how having no constraints on what constitutes human nature might lend itself to the types of worries raised by Hitler* cases. To adapt the earlier terminology, Sartre employs a *maximally thin* conception of human nature. If *any* individual capacities can serve as the normative grounds for prudential values, then surely Hitler*'s can. However, my view repudiates not only the Charybdis of rigid views but also the Scylla of permissive individualism. My view admits that a thin – but not maximally thin- conception human nature circumscribes the normative boundaries for what capacities can contribute to prudential value, and merely insists that an individual's narrative plays a role in determining *which* of those capacities will be prudentially relevant and *how* they will contribute to well-being. For instance, suppose that human nature includes a capacity for practical and theoretical reason, an empirically observable fact with which even a thin conception of human nature can concur. Given an individual's intellectual disabilities, she may only be able to engage in practical reason and the realm of theoretical reason remains largely beyond her grasp. On my view, that means that practical reason will normatively ground how her individual essence is expressed, but her individuality will determine which of the capacities are relevant and how they play out. This

does not, however, imply that *any* feature of her individuality can normatively ground prudential value. She might be a deviant person with a penchant for petty larceny as well. That does not mean that her tendency for larceny normatively grounds prudential value for her. Rather, there must be a connection to human nature's core capacities, but *which* capacities will be relevant and *how* they will be relevant is determined by features of the individual. In the Hitler* cases, then, the connection to the core capacities of human nature is absent. So my views commitment to relativizing well-being to the narrative-self does not entirely jettison all of the normative guardrails put in place by a thin conception of human nature. Accordingly, such cases do not pose a decisive objection to my view.

In terms of the problems associated with joint-necessity, my view clearly carries the benefit of allowing for the subjectivist and objectivist components each to contribute somewhat to well-being, even though the other might be absent. On my view, trivial pleasures count for *something*, and objective goods count for *something*, even without favoring attitudes. But one lingering worry might be whether my view avoids the problems associated with joint-necessity at the expense of compromising theoretical unity. For instance, one benefit of perfectionist accounts is that they identify the excellent exercise of uniquely human *capacities* as the unifying factor for explaining *why* something is good for a person. But, it might be argued, my view appears to be a collage of different positions with no such unifying theoretical thread that weaves them all together. There is just a subjectivist component, which is supposed to be sufficient for well-being and an objectivist component, which also independently permits well-being; but no underlying unity to the account itself that explains why having those two parts together perfects or completes one's well-being.

In response, I contend that an explanatory theory of well-being can offer multiple, even disjunctive, explanations for *why* something is well-being-constitutive. I recognize that theoretical

unity is an epistemic virtue, but within the context of well-being, there are reasons to think unity may not be attainable. Well-being seems inherently pluralistic and might not be reducible to a single explanatory principle. Some unified theories subsume human goods under one fundamental good (e.g. pleasure, desire-satisfaction), but these reductions usually fail to account for many intuitions a theory of well-being should explain. I maintain the explanatory disunity is not a flaw but reflects the multifaceted nature of well-being. It is perfectly coherent to claim that well-being is overdetermined, i.e. that multiple independent causes can be sufficient to engender it. Unless a unified theory can offer some positive reason to reject the overdetermination of well-being, I do not think there is a very strong reason to prioritize unity. In the absence of such a reason, the objection can be set aside.

My account admittedly adopts the perfectionist characteristic of linking well-being with the development of the self. But there is no concomitant requirement that one must exemplify certain, thick species-wide capacities excellently. The view therefore offers a far more inclusive account of well-being than traditional perfectionism. Indeed, by indexing well-being to the development of an individual's narrative self, it permits people to enhance their life narrative along whichever dimensions they are able. For instance, if someone is a talented writer, and has the values and concerns related to becoming an author, engaging in those creative activities and creating a beautiful literary work will be prudentially valuable. However, if a cognitively disabled person is incapable of excellently exercising his faculties in that way, his life is not thereby rendered well-being defective. Both are normatively grounded by a thin conception of human nature while allowing for individual variation via the unique narrative self.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for three main claims, culminating in a *pro tanto* defense of my hybrid holist view. First, I have argued that objectivism and subjectivism cannot individually satisfy the worthiness and internal resonance criteria simultaneously. I thereby motivated the importance of adopting hybridism in general. Second, I explicated precisely what my particular hybrid holist view states, concentrating on its three subsidiary theses, i.e. prudential value pluralism, the narrative theory of self, and holism. Finally, after explicating the view, I explained why it should be preferred over the neighboring hybrid views, such as those proffered by Raz and Kagan. I established that my view should be favored for meeting certain adequacy constraints on theories of well-being, i.e. not only the worthiness and internal resonance criteria, but also avoiding the problems associated with joint-necessity. The upshot is a *pro tanto* defense of my hybrid holist view. To the extent that those adequacy constraints capture what we want from a theory of well-being, my hybrid holist view appears particularly propitious.

Chapter 3: Pessimism, Anti-Natalism, and the Optimism Assumption

Most moral philosophers subscribe to not only "the quality of life view," according to which "the value of life is instrumental, in providing a vehicle for a life of sufficient quality,"[155] but also *optimism*, the view that life is almost always worth living. When combined, these views imply that 'quality of life' is the metric for whether a life is worth living, and that human lives almost always have a high enough quality of life to render their life worthwhile. Call this dyad of views *the optimism assumption*. Anti-natalism belies the optimism assumption. It holds that starting to exist is unworthwhile because the quality of human life is surprisingly low.[156] In this chapter, I maintain that since the strongest reasons for rejecting anti-natalism fail, the view poses a serious philosophical problem for which moral philosophers must provide a solution.

I work towards supporting that thesis in three phases. First, I begin by formulating the strongest argument for anti-natalism. Second, I then briefly state the most compelling support for that argument, thus understood. Finally, I conclude by considering three popular reasons why many philosophers think that argument fails. In each case, I explain why they are mistaken.

1. Introduction

Taking a cue from Peter Singer, many philosophers endorse *wrongful life cases*, instances in which a person's quality of life is so low that their life is not worth starting. Bringing a child into

[155] John Keown, "Quality of Life," in *The Value of Human Life* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018), 42.
[156] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Benatar, *The Human Predicament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chapter 4; David Benatar, "The Misanthropic Argument for Antinatalism" in *Permissible Progeny* ed. Sarah Hannan and Samantha Brennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

existence under such circumstances constitutes grave moral harm. Singer's hallmark case is severe anencephaly, a terminal neural tube defect leading to a brief and painful existence.[157] Jeff McMahan elsewhere explains the intuition underlying Singer's reasoning: "that a person would have a life that is not worth living – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing."[158]

In *Better Never to Have Been*, Benatar starts with the plausible claim that there are such wrongful life cases, but seeks to expand it radically. He claims not only that *some* births are wrongful life cases, but rather that *all* lives are not worth starting. In what follows, I identify and then defend what I take to be the strongest argument for a slightly weakened version of that radical conclusion, maintaining that *many* lives are not worth starting.

2. From Pessimism to Anti-Natalism

Pessimism is the view that life is not worth living. The position was famously defended by Arthur Schopenhauer in his seminal *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818), and attracted some support in the latter half of the 20th century and a lot of support in the second half of the 19th century, but thereafter fell into disrepute. Benatar is one of the few contemporary philosophers who continues to endorse pessimism; and he conscripts it into the service of defending his anti-natalist position. Anti-natalism is the view that bringing new beings into existence is morally impermissible

[157] Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics,* 3rd edition (Oxford University Press, 1980).
[158] Jeff McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist," in *Harming Future Persons*, ed. M.A. Roberts and D.T. Wasserman (New York: Springer Publications, 2009)

since life is not worth starting. This view extends and radicalizes pessimism, which states that life is not worth living. The core premise of anti-natalism is that *if* the quality of human life is sufficiently poor, then it would be worse than non-existence. Benatar develops this argument, drawing upon the insights of pessimism, and refining them into a rigorous philosophical position. He takes the inchoate insights of pessimism – such as the idea that suffering predominates over joy – and articulates them in more detail, arguing that their logical conclusion is anti-natalism. In doing so, Benatar not only clarifies the implications of pessimism, but also extends its reach, arguing that if life is not worth living, then it is also not worth starting. Benatar argues that bringing a child into existence harms that child by forcing them to live an unworthwhile life, instead of simply never existing at all, which would have been neither a harm nor a benefit, but strictly neutral, i.e. *not bad*. Here is the first formulation of his argument for anti-natalism, following from pessimism:

1. If a life *L* features some badness, then *L* is not worth starting.
2. All lives *L* are such that they feature some badness.
3. Therefore, all lives *L* are not worth starting.

Benatar highlights "a common assumption in the literature about future possible people" according to which "all things being equal, one does no wrong by bringing into existence people whose lives will be good on balance."[159] He impugns that assumption, maintaining that suffering *any* badness is sufficient to show a life is not worth starting. Indeed, he even states that "if someone will

[159] David Benatar, "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1997): 345.

suffer even the tiniest pinprick, it is prudentially bad for them to be brought into existence, no matter if the rest of their life was spent in ecstasy."[160]

That claim seems highly implausible, but Benatar seeks to support it through a form of *negative utilitarianism*, according to which minimizing suffering should take moral precedence over maximizing happiness. Roughly, the idea is that it is more important to eliminate suffering altogether, rather than risking a large amount of suffering for the sake of some compensatory happiness. As it stands, the argument's first formulation is highly controversial, relying on an extreme version of negative utilitarianism that few philosophers find persuasive. I accordingly set this first formulation of the argument from pessimism aside.

However, there is a further formulation of Benatar's argument, one that coheres with the widely shared intuition that lives with more goodness than badness are worth starting. It more plausibly follows from the core pessimist insights on which the earlier argument draws. The argument, moreover, draws a slightly weaker conclusion than Benatar intends, but is thereby more plausible. Indeed, rather than claiming *all lives* are not worth starting (as his famous axiological asymmetry argument claims), this modified argument maintains that *many* lives are not worth starting. I intend to concentrate on this latter formulation of the argument:

1.If a life *L* features more badness than goodness, then *L* is not worth starting.

2. Many lives *L* are such that they feature more badness than goodness.

3. Therefore, many lives *L* are not worth starting

[160] Aaron Smuts, "To Be or Never Have Been: Anti-Natalism and a Life Worth Living," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (2014): 711-729.

Having identified this most plausible formulation of the argument, I now want to articulate a case in favor of it. Many agree with the highly plausible first premise that lives with more badness than goodness are not worth starting. Recall McMahan's claim: "that a person would have a life that is not worth living – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing."[161] I will accordingly concentrate on the highly controversial second premise, according to which *many lives* in fact feature more badness than goodness. What can be said to support that seemingly improbable position?

3. Supporting the Second Premise

Before defending the premise itself, however, a few clarificatory remarks are in order. The first point to mention is that Benatar is comparing the value of *non-existence* with any of the possible kinds of lives that someone could have. Deliberately bringing someone into existence requires, on his view, that the quality of life should be *not bad*, meaning there is on balance more well-being than ill-being. He concedes, however, there is also another way in which a life could be not worth starting, namely when the ill-being reaches a certain threshold, regardless of what the ratios of well-being to ill-being happen to be.

[161] Jeff McMahan, "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist" in *Harming Future Persons,* ed. M.A Roberts and D.T. Wasserman (New York, Springer Publications, 2009)

As noted above, most moral philosophers concede there are *some* cases that meet one of these two criteria for a life not worth starting. But I now need to argue why it is plausible to think that *many* lives are not worth starting.

The salient point to highlight is that many people either have more ill-being on balance, or undergo such egregious experiences that no amount of later well-being could compensate for it. Benatar illustrates the latter circumstance with the case of Dax Cowart, a pilot who suffered excruciating burns and a horrendous treatment for them that amounted to being skinned alive. Cowart reports that even though he later recovered, became a lawyer, and enjoys a good quality of life now, no amount of future happiness would warrant undergoing the suffering he experienced. Cowart's case is admittedly graphic and rare, but Benatar points out how experiences of extreme suffering are surprisingly commonplace.

Indeed, according to the UN, at the present time, over 920 million people globally live in abject poverty. 515 million experience chronic hunger and malnourishment. Approximately 150 million human beings are homeless and a staggering 1.6 billion suffer from "inadequate shelter," meaning they dwell in highly unsanitary and hazardous living conditions.[162]

In addition to poverty and inequality, as of 2019,[163] figures indicate that an estimated 280 million people suffer globally from depression and an even greater figure suffer from at least one - often debilitating- mental illness, resulting in close to a million suicides globally every year. The

[162] The UN and WHO reports: https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml ; https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression

[163] WHO reports: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders#:~:text=Depression,medication%20may%20also%20be%20considered.

World Health Organization estimates that between 76% to 85% of people suffering from a mental illness in low to middle income countries are unable even to receive any form of treatment due to global inequalities in access to healthcare.

Approximately one person dies from violent homicide every minute, one person is sexually assaulted every second, and at least one person dies in armed military conflict every 100 seconds. Violent and especially sexual crimes are underreported or left undocumented, so the confirmed case count supplies a very conservative estimate. Frequently, the victims of these crimes and misfortunes are already suffering from oppression and systemic discrimination. For instance, Inuit persons in northern Canada are over six times more likely to commit suicide than the average Canadian, and members of the poorest and most vulnerable populations almost invariably experience greater degrees of sexual and violent crime.

The fate of many innocent people is often far worse. For instance, Benatar recounts how the kidnapping, exploitation, and torture of children is surprisingly widespread. Over three hundred thousand child soldiers are currently involved in armed combat. Often these children are torn from their family's arms, forced to murder relatives as a proof of loyalty to their kidnappers, and lose all human dignity as they are transported to a life of slavery, often in fetid conditions from which they suffer or even die. The legacy of colonialism also paints a bleak picture, with countless lives lost and families broken by genocide, residential schooling, indentured servitude, and other forms of systematic extermination, violence, and cultural genocide.

Benatar depicts these atrocities for pages, but I shall spare the reader the details of things that are better left gestured at than described. The main point is obvious enough: suffering, pain, and

malevolence are surprisingly prevalent. Indeed, they might be said to be ubiquitous characteristics of the human condition. To rejoin, the optimist will likely insist that while the amount of badness in human life is indeed quite staggering, there is ultimately a greater amount of goodness to counteract it. Anticipating this response, Benatar impugns that possibility, pointing to asymmetries in the intensity and duration of pains versus pleasures. He notes, for instance, how there is chronic pain, but no such thing as chronic pleasure. No one would accept the greatest possible pain to access the greatest possible pleasure. Pleasures are often fleeting and hard-won, whereas pains occur all too frequently. For instance, the pleasure of an achievement or sexual gratification is often fleeting, even momentary, whereas pains are persistent and can recur quite easily.

Benatar believes that such asymmetries between goodness and badness are exhibited by other bad-good-pairings, not just pain versus pleasure. For instance, take the pairing of knowledge versus ignorance. Knowledge is very difficult to procure and can be easily lost (e.g. by a minor accident or trauma to the brain, or the destabilization of belief through seemingly credible disinformation), whereas ignorance is readily accessible, even unavoidable. He thinks that similar asymmetries are observed in other good-bad pairings, *mutatis mutandis*.

Having defended Benatar's argument at some length, I now want to engage with the most popular objections to it. In the literature, there are at least two popular replies to the argument: 1) Parfit's non-identity problem, according to which future persons cannot be harmed by being brought into existence; and 2) the measurement problem, according to which well-being and ill-being do not admit of measurement in the first place. I consider each in turn, ultimately illustrating how the revised version of Benatar's argument withstands both objections.

4. The Non-Identity Problem

By claiming that a life is "worth starting," Benatar means that the life would be choiceworthy from the perspective of the person living that life, that is, that their life would have more well-being than ill-being on balance. He claims that bringing a child into existence under worse conditions is morally impermissible, since the child would thereby suffer grave harm.

Some philosophers take issue, however, with the notion that future persons can ever be harmed by being brought into existence, even under conditions in which their lives are not worth living. Parfit's non-identity problem is the most plausible and widely discussed formulation of this view. To illustrate the problem, consider two cases:[164]

Case 1: Elizabeth creates a child who suffers a short life riddled with severe congenital illness.

Case 2: Elizabeth waits and has another child who flourishes.

Most people consider Case 2 morally preferable to Case 1. It would be better for Elizabeth to have a healthy child than one whose well-being is severely compromised. But it is difficult to account for how the child in Case 1 can be harmed by being brought into existence, regardless of how poor the child's quality of life becomes.

[164] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 363

Indeed, for Parfit, harming the child would involve making the child worse off, a two-state relation in which the child has less benefits in state *a* than they would have in state *b*. In Case 1, state *a* involves the child never existing, and state *b* involves the child existing, but with very poor quality of life. If harm is indeed making someone worse off than they otherwise would have been, it is difficult to see how state *b* is worse for the child than state *a*. Since the child does not even exist in state *a*, no meaningful comparison can be made. The non-identity problem therefore poses a serious threat to the wrongful life cases on which the argument from pessimism depends. It seemingly shows that the child cannot be harmed by being brought into existence, no matter how bad the child's quality of life will be.

While I will not pretend to pose a definitive solution to the non-identity problem, I claim there are many plausible rejoinders to which the anti-natalist can appeal. These rejoinders appear plausible enough to warrant belief in wrongful life cases, i.e. that it can indeed be impermissible to bring someone into existence.

First, there are noncomparative notions of value, ones that are not individual-affecting. For instance, Benatar claims that "[f]or something to harm somebody, it might be sufficient that it be bad for that person on condition that the alternative would not have been bad."[165] There is no asymmetry concerning life being bad for a person: it can be non-comparatively bad for a person to exist, if the alternative of not existing would not have been bad.

[165] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) chapter 1

Second, one could also respond to the non-identity problem by denying that being "worse off" requires the same individual to exist across both state *a* and state *b*. By analogy, one can meaningfully claim a person would be better off dead, that his life is worth terminating. But that does not imply there needs to be a post-mortem state in which the person exists that is better than their current terrestrial life. Rather, if their quality of life is sufficiently poor, it would be preferable to not exist. So, if we accept it can sometimes be better for a person to die, we should agree that comparing the existence and non-existence of a person does not necessitate comparing two conditions of that person.[166] Instead one can simply compare the existence of that person with a state of affairs in which she does not exist – the states of affairs in which that person does not exist can be better than the one in which she does.

I do not pretend to have adequately addressed the non-identity problem, only to have given good reasons to think it does not undermine the argument from pessimism. For my purposes, the most salient problem for the anti-natalist is the argument from pessimism's second premise, i.e. that the bads in human life outweigh the goods.

5. Measurement Problem

To unpack the problem, consider a measurement principle that many find plausible:

Measurement Principle: If the relative quantities of x and y can be compared, then there is a common cardinal unit by which x and y can be measured.

[166] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter 1

The measurement problem states that attempts to compare the levels of goods and bads in life will inevitably violate the measurement principle. Frederick Beiser illustrates the problem with the case of measuring pleasures versus pains: without a "hedonic calculus...it is impossible to determine for even a single ordinary day in a person's life whether pleasures or pains predominate."[167] On this account, being able to determine whether the bads in life outweigh the goods requires a common cardinal scale by which we can measure pain and pleasure to determine the ratio. Since pains and pleasures lack such a cardinal scale, the anti-natalist's claim that bads outweigh the goods violates the measurement principle.

This objection begins to unravel when one considers the distinction between incommensurability and incomparability. Following Ruth Chang, we can distinguish incommensurability from incomparability. Chang states that two phenomena (e.g. pleasure and pain) are incommensurable "if there is no cardinal scale of value according to which both can be measured."[168] The measurement objection claims that since there is no common cardinal scale through which the various goods and bads in life can be measured, one cannot ultimately determine whether the bads outweigh the goods.

The pessimist claims, then, that most human lives are not worth living because within many lives the bads outnumber the goods. And this claim seemingly requires that one can *weigh* the positive and negative aspects of a life against each other in some meaningful way. A prominent objection to pessimism contends that goods cannot be weighed or measured against bads because

[167] Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy 1860-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
[168] Ruth Chang, "Value Incomparability and Incommensurability" in *The Oxford Handbook of Value*, ed., Jonas Olsen and Iwao Hirose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

they are incommensurable. The variegated goods and bads that populate a given life are too qualitatively distinct to admit of measurement along any common scale. Michael Hauskeller, for example, writes that,

"Ultimately, however, the question whether there is more good or more bad in life is undecidable because life's goods and bads do not come to us in measurable units. They are different for each of us, and we experience them in different ways and in different combinations, which sometimes makes all the difference."[169]

Hauskeller correctly notes that the goods and bads of life do not come in measurable quantities. There is indeed a striking variety in the nature of what people find valuable: intellectual discovery, friendship, aesthetic experience, sensory pleasure, physical rigor, and so on. Each seems valuable in its own way and this variety lends credence to *value pluralism*, the view that there are multiple, fundamentally distinct values.

However, this raises a significant problem. If pluralism is true, then how are we able to make rational, meaningful comparisons between different values, especially in situations of conflicts or trade offs between competing values? For example, how can a person facing immense suffering plausibly say that a sense of purpose or love still makes their life worth living? If values were radically incommensurable, such comparative judgments would be unjustifiable. And yet people make these types of value judgments all the time in meaningful, coherent, and well-reasoned ways. If pluralism is true, then we would except some form of comparability to be possible. And if some

[169] Michael Hauskeller, "Anti-Natalism, Pollyannaism, and Asymmetry: A Defence of Cheery Optimism," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 31.

degree of comparability obtains, the pessimist's claim that we can weigh or rank the various values in our life appears more promising.

Some theorists try to address this issue concerning how meaningful comparisons can be made while endorsing value pluralism by distinguishing between radical and moderate forms of pluralism. According to *comparabilist radical pluralism*,[170] even if fundamental values are metaphysically distinct and not reducible to a single underlying value, they may still be rationally comparable. This comparison is made possible not through cardinal measurement, but through the faculty of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). On this view, agents can discern which value is better simpliciter in a particular context without requiring further justification.[171]

But the notion of "better simpliciter" has been criticized for its ambiguity. As philosophers such as Judith Jarvis Thomson[172] and Ruth Chang[173] argue, all rational value comparisons require a standard in terms of which they are made. We do not simply compare values in the abstract, but always with reference to some "covering value": a higher-level, unifying value.[174]

According to Chang, fundamental values can be weighed by appealing to covering values, which are often context-specific standards that allow for comparison without collapsing

[170] Blum (2023) employs this term.
Christian Blum, "Value Pluralism versus Value Monism," *Acta Analytica* 38 (2023): 627-652.
[171] Anderson (1993) defends such an approach.

Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Harvard University Press, 1993)
[172] Judith J. Thomson, "Evaluatives and Directives," in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity,* eds. Gilbert Harman and Judith J. Thomson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 124-154.
[173] Ruth Chang, "Introduction," in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason,* ed. Ruth Chang (Harvard University Press, 1997): 1-34.
[174] Ibid.

metaphysical pluralism (i.e. maintaining the "incommensurability" of the values). These covering values are constituted by the fundamental values they encompass. Chang presents the following case: suppose a philosophy department is hiring a new professor. The two final candidates each exemplify different fundamental values. A is highly original but lacks historical sensitivity and B has high historical sensitivity but lacks originality. Two fundamental values are conflicting here. Originality favors candidate A and historical sensitivity favors candidate B. How should the hiring committee compare them to decide who to hire? Both values can be evaluated in reference to a covering value. In this case, philosophical talent is the covering value. Originality and historical sensitivity are parts of what it means to be philosophically talented (in a constitutive sense). They both contribute to philosophical talent along with other values (e.g. clarity, logical sophistication, pedagogical skill, and so on). The decision gets based on who has greater philosophical talent, or, in other words, the distinct values exemplified by the candidates can be compared in terms of how much they contribute to the covering value: philosophical talent.[175]

Covering values are necessarily less fundamental than the values they unify. In metaphysical terms, they are *grounded* in fundamental values. Grounding is a non-causal explanatory relation that accounts for why something is the case in virtue of more basic facts. For example, a glass is fragile because of its molecular structure, or an act where someone keeps a promise is morally right because it is an instance of promise-keeping.[176] In a similar fashion, higher-level evaluative properties, such as being a good philosopher or having a worthwhile life, can be understood as grounded in more fundamental values or goods.

[175] Ruth Chang, "All Things Considered," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 1-22.
[176] I borrow these helpful examples from Blum (2023)

This grounding structure can be applied to value pluralism. There can be a hierarchy of fundamental values. The most basic fundamental values are those that are not grounded in other values, while derivative or less fundamental values are grounded in the former.

The pessimist could apply this to the domain of life's values. They might say something along the following lines:

(1) Certain goods in a life (such as friendship, achievement, pleasure, and autonomy) are basic goods that are not grounded in other goods. These correspond to fundamental values in the structure of well-being.

(2) The goodness of a life for a person is grounded in these more fundamental goods. It serves as the covering value, unifying disparate goods under a higher-level standard of what contributes to well-being.

(3) Therefore, these basic goods can be rationally compared with respect to how much they contribute to the covering value of a life being good for the person who lives it.

This structure allows for meaningful comparisons among plural goods without reducing them to a single currency. It respects their distinctness ("incommensurability") but permits meaningful and rational comparative evaluation, i.e. it upholds comparability.

A further possible objection here is that, in many cases, we lack clear or commonly recognized covering values to make our comparisons. But a further response could be along the lines of what Chang points out, "namelessness [...] is accidental."[177] This is merely a contingent feature of our linguistic practices. This reflects naming gaps, not structural problems. The absence of

[177] Ruth Chang, "All Things Considered," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 1-22.

a term does not indicate the absence of a standard. The evaluative structure may remain intact even if we lack a clear label for it.

So, if pluralism is true (i.e. life's goods and bads are diverse and irreducible), we might still be able to rationally weigh them. The goods and bads in a life might not be incommensurable in the stronger sense that precludes meaningful comparison. They can be related to a hierarchical evaluative structure, where less fundamental covering values provide the necessary standards for weighing and assessing the fundamental goods of a life.

Not everyone will accept the notion of incommensurability implied in this framework and insist that comparing incommensurables is, by definition, a paradox.[178] On the standard interpretation, incommensurability entails the absence of a shared evaluative standard by which the value of one item can be compared to that of another. If, however, the two values are able to be related to a common covering value (like Chang proposes), then they would by that very fact be commensurable. Whether this reinterpretation of incommensurability is ultimately persuasive remains open to debate. However, it offers a theoretical option for the pessimist who requires the rational comparability of highly distinct heterogenous goods and bads in lives.

So far, I have considered whether tokens of goods and bads admit of measurement, e.g. whether an individual pain should be weighed more heavily than a particular pleasure. Even if they do not admit of precise measurement, they appear comparable enough to make the comparisons that the anti-natalists require. Minimally, the pessimist and anti-natalist offer a compelling enough

[178] For instance see Williams (2011).

Anthony Mark Williams, "Comparing Incommensurables," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 45 (2011): 267-277.

case that their views must be taken seriously by philosophers of well-being. However, many have maintained that the most plausible formulation of the measurement problem concerns whether it is possible to aggregate all the goods and bads across a *lifetime* and arrive at an all-things-considered verdict about whether the goods outweigh the bads. In short, even if momentary well-being admits of measurement, one might worry whether there is a function from momentary to lifetime well-being.

I will not defend a theory of how to measure lifetime well-being, but I will illustrate that there are many plausible options. As such, the problem of aggregating lifetime well-being appears to admit of resolution. The anti-natalist can appeal to any of the following theories which ultimately proves most plausible.

In the literature,[179] the simplest solution to the problem of measuring lifetime well-being involves endorsing two theses: i) internalism, the view that an individual's well-being at a time *t* is determined by what happens only at time *t* and no other moment; and ii) additivism, the view that lifetime well-being is just the sum of all instances of momentary well-being in a person's life. On this account, then, a life is neatly partitioned into temporal units, each of which has a certain well-being or ill-being value. To determine lifetime well-being, one simply needs to sum them all together.

However, one might doubt whether simple addition is a valid method for aggregating well-being. For instance, suppose a Likert scale ordinal ranking system from 0-10, in which 0 is the worst possible ill-being, 5 is a neutral state, and 10 is the highest well-being. Then, ordinal rankings [9,1] and [5,5] would have the same sum, but correspond to very different distributions of well-being.

[179] Ben Bradley, "Narrativity, Freedom, and Redeeming the Past," *Social Theory and Practice* 37, no. 1 (2011): 47-62.

The former would involve one moment of intense well-being and one moment of intense ill-being, whereas the latter would involve just two neutral states. Clearly these cannot be considered equivalent for the purposes of measuring a life's degree of prudential value, even though their averages and sums are identical. Indeed, a moment that is very much worth living plus a moment that is not worth living at all cannot be considered equivalent to two moments about which one should remain neutral or indifferent.

Moreover, many philosophers have impugned additivism because it ignores not only the distribution of well-being across a lifespan, but also that previous ill-being can be redeemed. The former endorse "narrativism," the view that lifetime well-being is not merely the sum of momentary well-being, but must also consider the narrative arc of how that well-being is distributed across one's lifespan. The latter endorse "redemptionism," the view that prior ill-being can be discounted when it was instrumental to bringing about later well-being. Both views take a cue from Franz Brentano's principle of *bonum progressionis*,[180] maintaining that lives that go from bad to good are better than lives whose trajectory goes from good to bad (assuming that both lives have the same total momentary well-being).

For instance, imagine a life that begins with suffering and struggle but that later results in success and a triumph over adversity. Using the same ordinal ranking from above, the beginning, middle, and end of the life could be represented as [1,7,9]. By contrast, a life that begins well but gradually descends into chaos and tragedy is arguably worse, even if it contains an identical sum of lifetime well-being, e.g. [9, 7, 1]. The intuition is that, in the first life, the earlier badness gets

[180] Franz Brentano, *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics* (Routledge, 1973), 196-197. (Original work published 1897).

redeemed because the life's narrative arc renders it instrumental in achieving greater well-being later. So, the lifetime well-being of the first life would wind up higher because we would discount the suffering that occurred in the earlier phases of the life, whereas in the second life the value of the earlier suffering stays fixed.

For instance, Doug Portmore argues that the suffering from self-sacrifices can be redeemed by the later achievements they engender.[181] Having struggled through a marriage and eventually achieving a flourishing relationship is better than having suffered meaninglessly and then finding happiness elsewhere. In the first instance, the suffering and struggle are somewhat redeemed because they served as a foundation for one's later happiness, whereas in the second case the suffering was for naught and lacked even instrumental value. So, the first life's value is higher than the second, given the global properties or the narrative arc of the life.

There is, then, no problem *per se* with measuring life-time well-being. One can adopt a strict additivism, as many philosophers do. Or, if one wants to account for the nuances of a life's narrative arc, i.e. how well-being is distributed across a lifespan, then they can adopt a narrativist approach. I am happy to embrace whichever theory of measuring lifetime well-being proves most plausible. The main upshot, however, is that lifetime well-being *does* admit of measurement, contrary to the measurement problem.

6. Summary

[181] Douglas Portmore, "Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 2 (2007): 1-28.

In this chapter, I have not only formulated and defended what I take to be the most plausible version of Benatar's argument for anti-natalism, but also addressed the two most popular reasons for repudiating it. In both cases, the counterarguments were found defective. I accordingly conclude that Benatar's argument is more plausible than many moral theorists currently concede. Anti-natalism, then, upsets the assumption of optimism. This does not amount to a defense of anti-natalism *per se*, but is rather a call for theories of well-being to address more explicitly how their accounts of prudential value address the question of whether life is worth living in the first place.

Chapter 4: Hybrid Holism Contra Pessimism

In chapter 3, I bolstered the pessimist's claim that life overwhelmingly features more ill-being than well-being. Minimally, the pessimist can muster a plausible case for the claim that suffering often outweighs happiness in a human life. How does hybrid holism nevertheless show that most lives are worth living? In this final chapter, I demonstrate why hybrid holism provides the most propitious reply to the pessimist's and anti-natalist's common claim that ill-being outweighs well-being in a typical human life. There are two key reasons for this: first, hybrid holism recognizes a wider range of sources of well-being than rival theories, and second, its incorporation of narrative structure helps offset the impact of corresponding forms of ill-being.

A brief roadmap to what follows: I begin by reviewing the three components of hybrid holism (that were introduced in chapter two) and explaining how this framework enables my account to incorporate a broader range of well-being sources. I will expand on this further in the following section. However, it will quickly become clear that simply admitting more sources of well-being is insufficient to counter pessimism, as it also allows for more sources of ill-being. The remainder of the chapter will focus on showing how the narrative component of my account helps mitigate the impact of ill-being. I will simultaneously explain how these components of my view provide significant advantages over rival views, especially in how they address ill-being.

1. Hybrid Holism Components

In chapter two, I presented hybrid holism's three key components: prudential value pluralism, narrativity, and holism. I stated that my theory accepts prudential value pluralism in

recognizing a multitude of prudential goods. My theory also includes a narrative component that connects life events and actions to their prudential value for a person. The final component of my view is holism, which is essentially hybridism without joint-necessity, i.e. the view that both subjectivist and objectivist features are prudentially valuable, and that both do not need to be simultaneously present at a given moment. I will expand on these components.

1.1 Prudential Value Pluralism

Prudential value pluralism, the first component, of my view, allows for a broad range of goods, since it does not reduce everything to a single basic good. My primary motivation for endorsing pluralism is that it accords with widely-held, clear-eyed intuitions about well-being. Given that well-being is closely tied to subjective experience, I argue that what is prudentially valuable for an individual is grounded in features of that specific individual, rather than (only) in their species membership. Specifically, I argue, what holds prudential value for a given individual has its basis in their narrative self. From this, I think it is reasonable to assume that there can be a multitude of objective goods that correspond with each person's life narrative. On my view, objective goods gain prudential value for a person when they fit into their narrative framework, which is what integrates the features that comprise the narrative self (e.g. the person's goals, values, commitments).

1.2 Holism

In this section, I will expand on this third feature of my view, holism, showing how it helps directly meet the challenge raised by pessimism by making the theory more inclusive than both joint necessity hybrid theories and purely objectivist or purely subjectivist theories (since it permits more

sources of well-being). However, it will quickly be shown that having more sources of well-being would likewise multiply the potential sources of ill-being, thereby nullifying any advantages the hybrid holist view seems to hold over its theoretical rivals in responding to pessimism. Despite this challenge, I will argue that the concept of *narrativity* helps mitigate the negative impact of prudential bads by incorporating structural and contextual features within a life. Even when the bads outnumber the goods, narrative features like *cohesion*, *thematic consistency*, and *narrative arc* will be shown to mitigate overall ill-being, while also serving to enhance the value of some prudential goods.

In chapter 1, I raised extensional adequacy concerns about the major theories of well-being. I argued that both purely objectivist and subjectivist theories succumb to the over-inclusiveness objection, viz., by permitting too many counter-intuitive sources of prudential value. I raised the alienation worry against objective theories, as they allow things toward which one has no favorable attitude to count as prudentially valuable. This is a common criticism of objectivist views – that they offer an alienated conception of an individual's good.[182] For instance, pure objectivists implausibly insist that visual aesthetic beauty is prudentially valuable for everyone, even for the visually impaired. I argued that pure subjective theories (on the other hand) are overly permissive in what they count as prudentially relevant. They fail to adequately account for the independent value or objective worth of the objects of one's pro-attitudes. An individual could have pro-attitudes towards trivial, base or immoral objects (e.g. having a desire to torture someone sadistically should not count as prudentially valuable). Objective and subjective theories, then, both fall prey to a common fatal flaw, i.e. *over-inclusiveness.*

[182] Railton (2003); Haybron (2008); Rosati (1996); Fletcher (2016)

In response to such criticisms, these accounts are usually remedied by incorporating a necessity condition that limits the scope of prudentially valuable things. For instance, subjective theories could be supplemented with full information constraints and objective theories could include a resonance constraint. This move, however, leads them to become overly *exclusive* instead; or so I have argued. In advancing my view, one of my central aims is to carefully avoid under-inclusiveness. I propose that the priority for constructing any theory of well-being should be to avoid excluding anything that plausibly has prudential value. This is especially important if the theory is to be well-equipped to counter pessimism. The focus should be on creating a maximally inclusive framework that does not unnecessarily limit what can be prudentially valuable for people. At the same time, we must aim for a balanced approach, striving for the golden mean between the excesses of over-inclusivity and the deficiencies of over-exclusivity.

Given the holist nature of my view, a straightforward response to the problem of pessimism emerges – my view permits more sources of well-being. The standard motivation for adopting holist theories of well-being is to expand the scope of prudentially valuable items. On these accounts, the objectivist and subjectivist sources of well-being both get included when calculating lifetime well-being. On some such theories, the amount of well-being is further augmented whenever subjective and objective features combine. This seems to straightforwardly suggest that holist accounts are better placed to respond to the challenges posed by pessimism and anti-natalism. However, one might worry whether increasing the sources of well-being would result in more sources of ill-being as well. For instance, if one allows both the subjective good of pleasure and the objective good of achievement to increase well-being, then one is faced with the possibility of greater prudential disvalue as the subjective bad of pain and the objective bad of failure could also combine. Simply increasing the sources of well-being does not *ipso facto* ensure that there is more lifetime well-being

overall, for the sources of ill-being could likewise multiply. This shows that this holist component alone is insufficient to meet the challenge posed by the pessimist. In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of the narrativity component, outlining how it can help offset the impact of ill-being.

1.3 Narrativity

In what follows, I will explain how the narrativity component of hybrid holism can alleviate the effects of ill-being. This third and final component of my view ensures that hybrid holism is uniquely well-positioned to address pessimism. I identify three narrative features – cohesion, thematic consistency, and narrative arc – that, I argue, have the ability to redeem experiences that would otherwise be considered prudentially bad. Before expanding on these features, I will first clarify that for them to serve this redemptive function, the theory must avoid the atomistic approach to evaluating well-being taken by some competing views. I will show how my theory sidesteps such atomism through its incorporation of structural and contextual features. By excluding these atomistic features, my approach holds an advantage over rival views in addressing pessimism. I will conclude this section by characterizing these value-adjusting structural and contextual elements and showing how they are best understood through the concept of life narrative. Additionally, I argue that using the life narrative concept provides an intuitive way to understand the prudential value of life events, as it links them in an intelligible way to one another and to broader goods and aims. It also helps explain the connection between grounds of value and the quality of being valuable for a person.

To reiterate, the holist aspect of my view, while expanding the sources of well-being, also leads to an increase in sources of ill-being. However, my view can rejoin that concern. In contrast to

rival accounts, my view holds an advantage in its treatment of the various forms of ill-being posited by these theories (e.g. pains, desire-frustrations, life-dissatisfactions, and objective bads) because of its narrativity component. As has been previously discussed, the core pessimist contention is the empirical claim that life features more badness than goodness (i.e. that there are more ways to be badly off than well off). Furthermore, some pessimists also argue that there exists an asymmetry between the prudential weights of pleasure and pain, as well as between the effort it takes to sustain goods versus bads. On my view, *even if* the pessimist is right about this, it does not follow that ill-being outweighs well-being in a typical human life. This is because the narrative features of hybrid holism can discount the impact of ill-being while also enhancing some sources of well-being. In the later sections, I will show how the narrative component performs its redemptive function within the frameworks of hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, happiness theories, and objective-list theories respectively. For now, however, I will elaborate, in general terms, on the necessity of assuming a non-atomistic structure in order to allow the narrative features in my account to serve their redemptive role. I argue that this dissent from atomism provides an advantage over competing views.

In the current literature, there seems to be a strong tendency to take an atomistic, enumerative approach to evaluating a person's overall lifetime well-being. Hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, and objective list theories are typically developed in terms of an additive atomistic structure, according to which overall well-being corresponds to an aggregation of discrete atomistic units. Many recent critics have challenged this atomistic view, arguing that it overlooks the significance of structural features of lives.[183] Structural features might include: temporal relations

[183] Michael Slote, "Goods and Lives," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (1982): 311-326; David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48-77; Larry S. Temkin, *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideals*

between events and actions as well as narrative meaning. Another objection raised by critics against atomistic theories is that they tend to characterize well-being in terms of the *possession* of certain prudentially valuable items, whether these are pleasurable experiences (in the case of hedonism), satisfied desires (in desire theories), or objective goods like achievements and friendship (in objective-list theories). While this is a common approach to theorizing about well-being, it seems to conflict with the highly intuitive notion that well-being is molded by the dynamic ways in which lives unfold. It seems inadequate to focus solely on the individual factors that contribute to or detract from a person's well-being. It would be preferable to examine sets of individual factors and the interactions between them, rather than viewing them in isolation. In this important respect, the major theories all seem to resemble list theories, since they tend to enumerate some set of individual factors that contribute to well-being, while disregarding the importance of the relations between them.

My view rejects this atomistic way of thinking and recognizes the importance of structural and contextual factors that impact prudential value. I categorize these factors into two groups: (i) temporal relations and (ii) narrative significance. I maintain these factors are crucial in determining the full meaning of an event or action in a life, which cannot be fully understood by merely examining its atomistic parts. By the "full meaning" of an event or act, I am simply referring to "the

and the Nature of Practical Reasoning, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Connie Rosati, "The Story of a Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30, no. 2 (2013): 21-50; Dale Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," *Ethics* 125 (2015): 303-330; Antti Kauppinen, "The Narrative Calculus," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, vol. 5, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 196- 220; Owen C King, "Pulling Apart Well-Being at a Time and the Goodness of a Life," *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 5(2018): 349-370 argue for the importance of relational or narrative features to well-being.

most apt description of it for the purposes of evaluation."[184] To properly assess something's contribution to prudential value, these factors must be considered.

I will now elaborate on the first of these elements, temporal relations. This label refers to the objective temporal connection between events or actions in a life. It is a rather mundane point that part of the meaning of life events and actions depends on the past and/ or future. Alasdair MacIntyre describes an action as "a moment in a possible or actual history or in a number of such histories."[185] His point is that knowing the full nature or meaning of an act presupposes knowing its place in a history. To know if an act is being repeated (for example) is only possible if it is considered within the context of its occurrence in a temporal sequence.

The second element, narrative significance, refers to the variable meanings attached to life events and actions based on how they figure within a life story. I argue that considering the narrative significance of life events and actions can alter their prudential value. Using the narrative framework to represent life events and actions offers a coherent structure that connects heterogeneous elements and provides context. A life narrative serves as a model by providing a simplified and more intelligible representation of a person's reality with an emphasis on select features, which makes it helpful for identifying one's goals and values. The narrative framework unifies life occurrences within a broader context, thereby impacting their corresponding prudential weight. Items that are naturally associated with well-being such as likings, fulfillment of desires, preferences, and objective goods seem to derive a large part of their meaning from how they feature in a broader life narrative. That is because narrative provides their context. One function of context is its supplementary role:

[184] N R Smith, "Well-Being, Narrative Value, and Virtue," in *Virtue, Narrative, and Self,* vol. 1, eds. Joseph Ulatowski and Liezl van Zyl (New York: Routledge, 2020), 151-169.
[185] Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* Third Edition (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 214.

"it is brought in, or added to the understanding of [an object] that would not have been adequately understood had it been considered in isolation […] A context thus *completes* the conditions for understanding the focal object."[186] One way in which it does so is by mirroring what is meaningful to an individual. An individual plays a selective role in determining the most relevant features for an object's context. The features that are selected out of the large mass of material that life provides reflect one's perspective and reveal one's values. The result of this selectivity process is a lesser quantity of material that can be treated more rigorously. Organizing complex life experiences into a coherent whole allows for certain events and connections between them to assume a salience, resonance, and significance that they otherwise would not have had. The concept of narrative enhances the understanding of the significance of life events and actions, so it makes sense to take narrative relations into account when evaluating their prudential value.

The process of forming a life narrative can coherently connect life events not just to one another but also to broader aims or goals. It highlights the connections between events and the bigger picture. Often, life events acquire intelligibility from considering their relations to overall plans and goals, a dynamic that the narrative concept captures. This is why many narrative theorists describe life events in terms of goal-directed pursuits. For example, Kauppinen characterizes life events as relating to each other through "goal-directed human agency."[187] Bruner likens the content of narratives to "human or human-like intentions and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course."[188] David Herman writes that "the property of narrativehood attaches to sequences of states, events, and actions that involve an identifiable participant or set of participants equipped with

[186] Nina B. Dohn, Stig B. Hansen, and Søren H. Klausen, "On the Concept of Context," *Education Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2018): 111.
[187] Antti Kauppinen, "The Narrative Calculus," in *Oxford Studies in Ethics,* vol. 5, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 196-220.
[188] Jerome Bruner, "Two Modes of Thought," in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 13.

certain beliefs about the world seeking to accomplish goal-directed plans."[189] Hinchman claims that forming and acting on intentions can be understood as acting out a narrative.[190] Many, then, have recognized narrative as a useful tool for understanding goal-directed behavior. Goal-directed behavior includes adopting long-term goals, forming concrete plans about how to reach them, engaging in activities directed towards them while simultaneously exposing oneself to obstacles, difficulties, fortune and misfortune that may impact their realization. It seems that there is a story to be told about such life events and actions. It is useful to situate the relations and processes involved in well-being within a narrative, as this avoids the problems associated with simply understanding well-being as the static *possession* of good things.

This shift away from atomism enables the narrative factors postulated by my account (that I will soon describe) to play their redemptive role with respect to ill-being. To reiterate, while the holist aspect of my view is important, it alone is insufficient to fully counter the challenge of pessimism, which is why the narrative component is essential. The narrative component offers a unique advantage by having the capacity to discount ill-being, in ways I will describe. Simply relying on holism does not preclude the possibility that typical lives may contain more bads than goods, as it increases the sources of *both* well-being and ill-being. The idea that narrative relations play a large role in determining prudential value seems highly compelling, but it is surprisingly difficult to spell out. I will attempt to do so in the next section.

2. Narrative factors

[189] David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
[190] Edward S. Hinchman, "Narrative and the Stability of Intention," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2015): 111-140.

To recap, in section one of this chapter, I outlined the three components of hybrid holism, offering an overview of how they both individually and collectively enable my theory to address the challenge of pessimism. My analysis ultimately showed that the holist aspect of my view is insufficient on its own to alleviate the pessimism concern, as it increases both positive and negative sources of prudential value. As a result, I introduced narrativity as a core component of my theory, explaining how it offers a unique advantage, by altering the prudential value of life events, particularly by lessening the impact of ill-being.

In this section I outline what I consider to be three specific value-adjusting narrative features (i.e. the features that attach to a life story that can alter its value). Given that there is enough of an agreement on these features across diverse accounts of narrative value, it is warranted to combine these insights into three main groups: cohesion, thematic consistency, and narrative arc.[191] After providing a brief overview of each narrative feature, I will consider each in more detail within the context of each main theory's analysis of prudential goods and bads. In doing so, I will show how these narrative features equip my theory with an advantage over other prevalent views in addressing the pessimist's challenges.

2.1 Cohesion

The first narrative element is cohesion. A life narrative is cohesive to the extent that series of events are more causally connected, rather than disconnected. Cohesion results from synthesizing

[191] I draw on Amy Berg's insights with some slight modifications:
Amy Berg, "Do Good Lives Make Good Stories?" *Philosophical Studies* 180 (2023): 637-659.

heterogeneous life constituents into a unified whole, by identifying meaningful patterns between them and considering the larger context in which they occur.[192] A life high in cohesion is one whose activities are centered around central core projects and pursuits. I submit that cohesion adds prudential value, all else being equal. This idea is supported by Kauppinen, who states that "it may be rational for someone who has invested twelve years of her life in studying philosophy to prefer a job as a philosopher even over a somewhat more satisfying (and in all other respects equally good) life as a lifeguard, *just because* those past twelve years would otherwise be wasted."[193] The cohesion in the former life can generate further prudential value even though it contains less pleasure. I don't necessarily hold that the good of cohesion can always outweigh the value of other prudential goods. Nevertheless, I maintain, it can adjust prudential value significantly.

Before proceeding further, I want to clarify that cohesion as I understand it does not imply that our lives need to be devoted to a single aim or must maintain continuous commitment to goals and projects. However, I maintain, it is generally better for major projects to display higher consistency and less oscillation.[194] It seems reasonable to think that the less oscillation a life displays, the more likely that agent could be viewed as pursuing his deepest aspirations.[195] An instability in aspirations suggests that they do not reflect one's core commitments, whereas a consistent adherence to major projects and goals is a good indicator that one's core values frame one's life.

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[192] Helena De Bres, "Narrative and Meaning in Life," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15, no. 5 (2018): 545-571.
[193] Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, no. 2 (2012): 345-377.
[194] John Broome suggests that a life with an even level of well-being may be preferable to one that oscillates up and down.
John Broome, *Weighing Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220.

[195] See Jason Raibley, "Well-Being and the Priority of Values," *Social Theory and Practice* 36, no. 4 (2010): 593-620.

I am far from the first person to connect cohesion with well-being. For example, Jason Raibley argues for the importance of cohesion. He holds that a life lacking cohesion, in which a person has inconsistent aims or values, is bad for that person.[196] On his view, if someone were to realize several values that happened to conflict with one another, this would constitute a prudential value loss in contrast to a scenario wherein one realizes the same individual values without such conflict.[197] It seems bad to lead a life marked by internal conflict and discord. Kauppinen also argues for the importance of cohesion, suggesting that it adjusts prudential value in the following way: the prudential value of a series of achievements is enhanced when the achievements complement and build on one another (especially when later activities are "positively informed" by earlier ones), whereas the value of a series of achievements should be discounted if they are very disconnected from one another in such a way that they have nothing to do with each other.[198] Kauppinen supports this by relating cohesion to the notion of progress. On his view, when events and actions cohere in the right way, this results in progress. He notes that clear cases of progress are when one performs different actions for the sake of the same goal, but progress can also be made in the absence of one unifying goal. All that is needed, it seems, is for the actions and events to be intelligibly connected by working together and building upon each other. Since earlier efforts employed towards one goal that was never ultimately achieved can translate into advancement towards another goal, progress can take many forms. It can involve facilitating growth, learning life lessons, or creating redemptive meaning. These forms of progress would all amount to cohesion. Cohesion, or lack thereof, is what determines whether a life is broadly progressive, regressive, or

[196] Jason Raibley, "Welfare Over Time and a Case for Holism," *Philosophical Papers* 41, no. 2 (2012): 239-265.
[197] Jason Raibley, "Atomism and Holism in the Theory of Personal Well-Being," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-Being,* vol. 1, ed. Guy Fletcher (London: Routledge, 2015), 343-354.
[198] Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, no. 2 (2012): 366-368.

stagnant in its structure.[199] Cohesion is therefore one way to capture how various elements in a life combine to affect well-being.

2.2 Thematic Consistency

The second narrative element is thematic consistency. Themes can be applied to the various occurrences in one's life, reflecting one's interpretations of these events that are made in relation to one's values. Amy Berg defines thematic consistency as the tendency of one's values to recur in one's life.[200] While cohesion connects disparate events under unifying projects or aims, themes also provide a cohesive structure. Themes combine varied life episodes under meaningful, unified concepts. Jack J. Bauer et al. suggest that "narrative theme conveys the narrative's orientations of value, motive, and other sources of meaning (i.e. the reasons for which an event is meaningful to the narrator)."[201] Plausibly, it seems good for a person to have distinctive values feature across different parts of their life story. This seems reasonable enough, since it appears bad to carelessly forego one's commitments to important values. This insight accords well with empirical data in positive psychology. It is reported that higher subjective well-being correlates with the degree to which daily activities match and express what people regard as personally important to them.[202] However, I want to avoid making the strong claim that one should attempt to live a "one-dimensional life",[203] but that it seems bad for a life to exemplify a chaotic compilation of themes. My claim is *not* that it is better

[199] Antti Kauppinen, "The Narrative Calculus," in *Oxford Studies in Ethics*, vol. 5, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 207.
[200] Amy Berg, "Do Good Lives Make Good Stories?" *Philosophical Studies* 180 (2023): 643.
[201] Jack J. Bauer, Laura E. Graham, Elissa A. Lauber, and Bridget P. Lynch, "What Growth Sounds Like: Redemption, Self-Improvement, and Eudaimonic Growth Across Different Life Narratives in Relation to Well-Being," *Journal of Personality* 87, no. 3 (2019): 546-565.
[202] Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi, Louis Tay, and Ze Zhu, *Handbook of Subjective Well-Being* (Nobascholar, 2017).
[203] Berg (2023), 57.

to limit one's choices to *prospectively* pursue thematic unity. Here, I understand "themes" as features of our lives that we identify *retrospectively*. Determining whether a life displays thematic consistency is a matter of *retrospectively* evaluating one's actions and decisions and judging whether they intelligibly cohere with other actions and decisions, and assessing whether they can be framed in a way that reflects one's identity and values. Through the formation of a personal narrative, one naturally identifies themes as characterizing certain significant episodes of one's life. This enables individuals to bestow a special meaning on those episodes. This type of retrospective identification of recurring themes in one's past serves as a way to confer special value on events that may have seemed bad or meaningless at the time they occurred but ended up being meaningfully integrated under unifying concepts.

2.3 Narrative Arc

The third value-adjusting narrative feature is narrative arc. Not only are life constituents organized under cohesive pursuits and overarching themes, but their events and themes combine to form a specific narrative arc (into which they are embedded). Each arc typically follows the general structure of a beginning baseline or steady state, a complication (an instigating action or event), a middle or rising action (activities in response to the complication), a climax or crisis, and an end (in which some resolution is achieved). This could involve something like: deciding on some goal, striving for it, facing challenges in its pursuit, achieving it, then perhaps feeling some sense of satisfaction from the achievement. There is no uniquely best narrative arc for a life to have, but it should contain some resolution at the end of each one. Possible resolutions include having goals achieved or sacrifices redeemed.

Here is an example of this. Suppose Lee Ji-eun wants to be a K-pop idol. She performs a series of actions (gaining experience in singing and dance training, preparing for the audition) which are cohesively connected by being part of the goal of becoming a star. Lee experiences a great deal of hardship and difficulty, but her life exemplifies the themes of resilience and perseverance. Eventually, her efforts proved worthwhile, and she achieved what she had set out to do. When a positive resolution is achieved, the life narrative's value is enhanced. This does not necessarily imply that people should always successfully fulfill the conclusions of every narrative arc that their life begins. Sometimes, an arc can simply conclude with the enjoyment gained from that story unfolding. This can still plausibly count as an arc with a resolution. For example, suppose Clive sets out on a goal of achieving mastery in wrestling and thereby begins a narrative arc of bringing his best capacities into fruition in order to attain athletic excellence. Eventually, at some point along his quest, Clive is given the opportunity to advance to a championship which would require even greater investment into this pursuit. Clive ultimately turns down this opportunity to stay committed to his job and other hobbies. Although Clive's narrative arc did not contain all the possible achievements he was capable of attaining, the enjoyment he was having and the skills he was developing can be considered a resolution to the arc. Kauppinen calls this a "reflexive" pursuit, according to which the aim of that pursuit is realized throughout the pursuit's duration, rather than at the end.[204] Reflexive pursuits are still prudentially valuable, although they might not be as valuable as achieving the end that was originally intended.

These are the main ways in which I argue narrative features adjust prudential value. I want to clarify that I don't hold that all goods we experience are tied into the narrative of our lives.[205] Rather,

[204] Antti Kauppinen, "Against Seizing the Day," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 11 (2021): 103-104.
[205] Johan Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," *Philosophical Papers* 32, no. 3 (2003): 335 makes this point.

my claim is that the life narrative "is the background against which our options, and the features which characterize them, get their meaning, and thus in the end get their value or, perhaps better, their importance for the goodness of our lives as wholes."[206] The upshot of this is that narrative meaning carries significant prudential weight. I hope to have shown some of the main ways this plays out. In the next section, I criticize the leading theories of well-being (as they are typically advanced) for their failure to appropriately take account of structural/ contextual factors.

3. Major theories of well-being

I will now examine the major views of well-being, considering how they would fare with regards to the challenge of pessimism, beginning with hedonism. My analysis will follow this general structure: I will begin by briefly outlining the typical version of each view, arguing that their adoption of an atomistic structure (as is often the case) is what ultimately weakens them. I argue that each of these major views is prone to unintentionally overestimating ill-being. I will then demonstrate that my view is better equipped to handle the challenge of pessimism thanks to both its hybrid component, which permits more sources of well-being, and its narrative component, which helps to mitigate the impact of corresponding forms of ill-being.

3.1 Hedonism

I begin by characterizing hedonism, as it is typically advanced, and explain why it is especially susceptible to the challenge of pessimism, highlighting its tendency towards having atomistic features. I will also examine variations of hedonism that may be considered more plausible. I will ultimately show that hybrid holism offers important advantages over hedonism in general, especially

[206] Ibid., 342.

in its treatment of ill-being. Recall that hedonism has been generally associated with atomism.[207] Typically, hedonist accounts posit discrete atoms of prudential value (i.e. moments of experiencing pleasure or taking attitudinal pleasure in states of affairs). Evaluating the prudential value contained within a life (or segment of a life) amounts to adding up these discrete units of prudential value at each moment. The value of these moments, however they are parceled (whether they are very small or larger more complex units), is determined exclusively by the intrinsic features of these moments without reference to any relational features.[208] Each of these discrete units make up the hedonic values of one's life and can be summed up to arrive at a quantitative calculation of someone's overall lifetime well-being.

For the hedonist, experiences of pleasure (or, on some views, attitudinal pleasure in states of affairs) and experiences of pain are the sole bearers of positive and negative prudential value respectively. Pleasures and pains are the only factors that contribute to the value or disvalue of a life. A life is better than another to the extent that it features a higher amount of pleasure and a lesser amount of pain. This is problematic in my view, since it fails to factor in the full *meaning* of an event into the calculation which would impact its prudential import. On hedonist views, a full account of the prudential value of an event is simply a description of how much pleasure or pain it causes the subject.[209] These episodes of pleasure and pain are then (on typical hedonist views) simply aggregated, and each is weighed independently of its structural features.

[207] It is important to note that while not all hedonists are atomists, the two are typically associated in the vast majority of cases.
[208] Jason Raibley calls this "moment internalism"
[209] Different forms of hedonism propose different factors that affect the value of pleasure and pain. While all versions acknowledge that pleasures and pains vary in intensity and duration, some also consider their quality.

At this juncture, it is worth reminding the reader why hedonists are particularly vulnerable to the objection from pessimism. Although it is the consensus that pains worsen lives in general, hedonists cannot account for the relevance of narrative meaning in determining the extent to which pains worsen our lives. For instance, a life that contains love might be abundant with pains, but given that love is such a meaningful pursuit, the disvalue of these pains would not be nearly as much as they would be had they been suffered for the sake of pursuits with little meaning. Since pleasures, on the hedonist view, are simply taken to be discrete events, there seems to be little meaning to many of them. Their quantitative features are what determine their level of prudential value (at least according to simpler forms of hedonism). It therefore seems that, for the hedonist, a life can be easily tainted by even the slightest amount of pain, provided that the pain exceeds the total pleasures. And if the pessimist's assumption is correct – i.e. that most human lives feature more pains than pleasures and that the pleasures anyone can ever experience are fleeting and lack very much value – then the hedonist would be forced to concede that most lives are unworthwhile. The hedonist is accordingly ill-equipped to account for how lives containing a large quantity of pain can be replete with prudential value.

I will now examine an alternative form of hedonism that may be considered more plausible than the classic accounts. I argue that its more compelling aspects are grounded in what I identify as narrative features. This supports the credibility of the narrative component in my theory. While the following account improves on the classic versions of hedonism, I maintain that hybrid holism retains a distinct advantage over narrative hedonism, due to its capacity to mitigate pains.

Feldman claims that his version of hedonism survives the classic objections raised against hedonist theories in general. On his view, the ultimate sources of prudential value are episodes in

which the individual takes intrinsic attitudinal pleasure in propositional objects. He presents various slight modifications of his theory to show its flexibility in accommodating holistic intuitions. One such modification involves incorporating the "altitude" of pleasures in the value of those pleasurable experiences. This accounts for the intuitive distinction between higher and lower pleasures. Altitude is defined as the objective suitability of a thing to serve as an object of pleasure. The aim of this adjustment is to accommodate the intuition that quantity alone is insufficient to estimate prudential value. This move, however, fails to avoid issues related to the scarcity and short-lived nature of, especially, "higher" pleasures. Feldman later introduces another modified version of his view designed to accommodate differences in value arising from the distribution patterns of pleasures. He first suggests that his view could incorporate the pleasure derived from a person's contemplation of their pursuit of love (for example), adding this to the overall prudential value calculation. Another possible route is to adjust the value of a pleasurable experience to reflect the qualities of its object. For example, one could argue that it is better for a person to derive pleasure from a more pleasure-worthy state of affairs. One thing I note about this approach, however, is that it seems to resemble narrativism. This process of reflecting on an event in one's life – whether pleasantly or painfully – involves narrative elements. This is because such contemplation implies making a value judgment about the *significance* of the event, which requires placing it within a narrative context. The meaning assigned to the event emerges from its integration into one's life story, and this meaning can enhance or decrease the value of pleasures associated with it. For contemplation of an event to result in a greater pleasure, the event must carry a different meaning. This new meaning is derived from how the pleasure is woven into a cohesive life narrative. So, even Feldman's view cannot lessen the disvalue of pains without appealing to narrative features.

In what follows, I will demonstrate some of the ways my hybrid holist view can lessen the disvalue of pains as well as enhance the value of pleasures. Just as pains can be discounted and incorporated into an overall life narrative, certain pleasures can be enhanced by considering the context in which they occur, the narrative features (coherence and thematic consistency) that attach to the events, and the potential for these events to belong to either a redemptive or anticipatory striving narrative arc structure.

(i) Temporal context

I will now consider how contextual temporal relations have prudential import. *Where* an episode is situated within a series of other events matters to prudential value. To take a trivial example, Kahneman points out that lunch after tennis is usually better than tennis after lunch.[210] Or consider two scenarios which feature the same amount of pain. Both contain the same degree of extreme muscular pain, but in the first, the cause is sprinting right before the finish line in the context of a race, whereas in the second, the cause is myositis, an autoimmune disease.[211] Hedonists would divide these experiences in terms of units of pain and consider their hedonic disvalue equivalent. However, intuitively, the prudential value of the pain is different in the two cases, even though the experience is just as painful for the runner. The temporal context influences the weight of these pains. The race context serves to mitigate the negative effect of pain, even though it does not completely eradicate it.

[210] David Kahneman and Jason Riis, "Living and Thinking About It: Two Perspectives on Life," *The Science of Well-Being* 1 (2005): 293.

[211] This example is adapted from Soren Harnow Klausen "Happiness and he Structure and Dynamics of Human Life" in *Perspectives on Happiness*, and Soren Harnow Klausen "Having or Being? Happiness and the Structure of Human Life" Kultura – Media – Teologia 2018, 35: 24-38

I will consider a possible response the hedonist might make. The hedonist might retort by claiming that the pain in both contexts is equivalently bad, but insist that the pain of the runner is temporary and is offset by compensatory pleasures of racing, whereas the pain of the sick person is persistent and unremitting (and without compensatory pleasures). So, the hedonist can insist that pleasures do in fact outweigh pains overall. To address this response, I will present another example in which no convincing compensatory pleasures can be identified.

The audience of a painful art form, such as a tragic film or melancholic music, might experience the same intensity and type of negative emotion as someone who is undergoing a tragic life event. However, intuitively the prudential disvalue differs in these two cases. The hedonist might argue that the art forms generate compensatory pleasures that outweigh any pain that they cause. However, one issue with this is that it's unclear which specific pleasure does the compensating work. People do not seek out these experiences with the hope of gaining more pleasure than pain; rather they are drawn to them despite their intense unpleasantness. Audiences of horror films, listeners of melancholic music, viewers of dark devotional religious art intentionally seek out these forms of art for the painful reactions they illicit, fully aware that they will evoke painful feelings of dread, disgust, regret, inconsolable longing, shock, or disturbance. Yet their emotional pain takes on a different significance due to the context in which it occurs.

If one accepts the intuitions such examples are designed to prompt, then it seems well-being cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of pleasant or painful experiences, considered in isolation. An experience can be more or less harmful depending on its place in a series of events.

(ii) Redemption in narrative

Here I will show how my view has the capacity to mitigate ill-being owing to its narrative component. I will then clarify what I identify as two types of narrative arc relations that help mitigate pains: redemption and anticipatory striving. Although it could be plausibly doubted that the shape of a life[212] matters for well-being,[213] it seems less contentious to assume that the more specific narrative structure of a life does matter. To illustrate, it seems reasonable to assume that the incarceration of Nelson Mandela must (in retrospect) be considered less bad for him than the incarceration of an average criminal. The fact that Mandela eventually emerged as a transformative leader makes his time in prison appear less harmful. Although it was still a painful experience for him, it can still be viewed as a worthwhile sacrifice and a successful test of character, so as a significant part of a highly positive overall picture.[214] How do we explain cases like this?

Narrative relations reflect the importance of the overall form of a life, considered as a system of related events and actions. Consider the following scenario presented by Velleman:

> In one life your first ten years of marriage are troubled and end in divorce, but you immediately remarry happily; in another life the troubled years of your first marriage lead to eventual happiness as the relationship matures. Both lives contain ten years of marital strife followed by contentment; but let us suppose that in the former, you regard

[212] Shape of life theorists argue that certain life trajectories are intrinsically better.
[213] See J. David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48-77; Dale Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," *Ethics* 125, no. 2 (2015): 303-330; Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84, no. 2 (2012): 345-377; Nicholas Ryan Smith, "Well-Being, Narrative Value, and Virtue Ethics," in *Virtue, Narrative, and Self: Explorations of Character in the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, vol. 1, eds. Joseph Ulatowski and Liezel van Zyl (New York: Routledge, 2020): 151-169.
[214] This is an example from David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 65.

> your first ten years of marriage as a dead loss, whereas in the latter you regard them as the foundation of your happiness.[215]

In both lives, the period of strife is identical. Both contain equal amounts of pain. Assume that the pleasure experienced in both trajectories is also equivalent. I argue that the prudential value of pleasure is enhanced in the second life and the prudential disvalue of pain is lessened. The main difference between these cases is that in the second life, the past is *redeemed*. The prudential value adjustment is a function of the structural narrative features: cohesion, thematic consistency, and redemptive narrative arc. The painful actions and events constitutive of that life, such as attending counselling sessions and having difficult arguments, end up having a positive contribution to later success. This story demonstrates cohesion, since these actions are intentionally structured under the aim of saving one's marriage and the painful events constituted the progress made towards this end. Framing these painful events in terms of progress lessens their prudential disvalue. The story also displays thematic consistency, since the life exemplifies stable values related to concerns about the success of the marriage. The events and themes combine to form a redemptive narrative arc with a successful resolution of the initial aim. This narrative arc serves to enhance the pleasure gained from the successful resolution. This can be explained in terms of a change in the 'meaning' of the successful outcome, specifically by being merited and being related to the prior adverse circumstance. The success achieved reflects that one's efforts and struggles paid off. They form a necessary part of the story in explaining the eventual positive outcome. Velleman claims this is "a well-earned reward and would prove his struggles to have been a good investment."[216] In the other scenario, it seems the suffering spouse struggled in vain. It is stated that he views his first ten years

[215] David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 55.
[216] Ibid., 54

of marriage as a dead loss. If his pains had instead translated into something useful, the earlier years of conflicted marriage could be redeemed.

I wish to elaborate on what I mean by the redemptive relation between the past events and the future outcome.[217] The outcome events E_2 in the life of subject S redeem events E_1 if:

- E_1 precedes E_2
- E_1 is a source of negative prudential value for S
- E_2 a source of positive prudential value for S
- E_1 enables E_2
- After E_2, S re-evaluates E_1 as having been worthwhile (upon reflection)

I understand this enabling relation as follows: E_1 is part of the explanation of E_2, either through simply being a necessary means for E_2 to obtain, or through bringing about some positive change in S such as personal growth or development. I take the painful events of E_1 to be redeemed when S retrospectively re-evaluates E_1. For the sake of further clarity, a redemption sequence is a narrative evaluation of life conditions that change from bad to good.[218] Redemption sequences feature themes such as sacrifice, recovery, growth, learning, and improvement. They may involve going from rags to riches, or from ignorance to enlightenment. The events contained in such trajectories take on a redemptive meaning due to their narrative context. Their relations can generate meaning when interpreted and framed by narratives.

[217] I modify this analysis of the redemption relation based on Ian D. Dunkle, "Growth and the Shape of a Life," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (2022): 581-605.

[218] Dan P. McAdams, Jeffrey Reynolds, Martha Lewis, Allison H. Patten, and Phillip J. Bowman, "When Bad Things Turn Good and Good Things Turn Bad: Sequences of Redemption and Contamination in Life Narrative and Their Relation to Psychosocial Adaptation in Midlife Adults and in Students," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 4 (2001): 474-485.

While my view may suggest that I think pure positive thinking is central to having a good life, I want to clarify that truthfulness still plays a crucial role, on my view. I draw on the distinction suggested by Willhelm Dilthey between truth and truthfulness.[219] He writes that when people express their lived experiences, these expressions are not to be judged as true or false. Instead, we could ask whether they are truthful- whether they honestly reflect what the person felt or meant. This helps explain why two people might describe the same event in different ways. They are not necessarily lying but just experienced the event differently, and their reports reflect that. The two versions show the personal meaning of the event for them. Constructing a life narrative involves making sense of one's past in a way that is faithful to one's lived reality, even though multiple interpretations may be equally truthful.

An important aim of constructing life narratives is to gain understanding about one's life. In doing so, the events and actions acquire a certain meaning. The re-evaluations made must be true enough to serve this purpose. If constructing a personal narrative is to confer meaning on a life, it should avoid major falsehoods, omissions, or distortions. Otherwise, it risks undermining genuine self-understanding, as opposed to merely the impression of it.[220] Truthfulness involves engaging with one's past in a way that does not distort nor diminish negative experiences for the sake of comfort. When we construct these narratives, we are not merely fabricating a version of events that feel satisfying; rather, we aim to faithfully reconstruct our past in a way that makes sense of our present. Even if our interpretations evolve over time, we regard this process as one of uncovering meaning, rather than imposing it arbitrarily. If someone adopts another perspective *for the sake of* viewing their

[219] Willhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*

[220] See Nozick's experience machine thought experiment. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).

life more positively, then this fails to be a redemptive process. It would be no more than delusional wish-fulfilment, deliberately denying past misfortunes and the real negative import they had, just to arrive at a more positive assessment of one's life. Redemption, however, does not require us to see past hardships as good in themselves, but allows us to recognize they can belong to a positively valuable sequence. So, this does not amount to an endorsement of full-blown subjectivism. Indeed, on my view, it is not sufficient merely that the person subjectively re-evaluates their experiences as worthwhile. Rather, those experiences take on the newly-recognized role of being instrumental for the objective goods they engendered.

My main point is that although, a person's life might have more units of pain than pleasure on balance, those units of pain can ultimately get discounted because they wind up having an instrumental value through the 'enabling' relation. They become a means through which one was able to achieve something good. In this way, past prudential bads can be redeemed. By contrast, hedonist theories must accord an absolute value to units of pains and pleasures, so the sheer quantities are all that matters. This echoes Haybron's idea that:

> What matters to us, arguably, is not just having a plurality of good moments, but having a good *life*. And we see our lives as more than just the sum of their parts. Thus the pains suffered in boot camp, in pursuit of some other achievement, might be seen as a good thing in the context of one's life as a whole. They will at least take on a different significance from the pains considered in isolation, as mere pains.[221]

[221] Daniel Haybron, "Life Satisfaction, Ethical Reflection, and the Science of Happiness," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 8 (2007): 105.

Another important relation, to which I will refer as "anticipatory striving," resembles the redemptive relation except it is directed at future events instead of past ones. It can be spelled out as follows:

- E_1 precedes E_2
- E_1 is a source of negative prudential value for S
- E_2 is a source of positive prudential value for S
- E_1 enables E_2
- During the unfolding of E_1, S views E_1 as worthwhile with the goal of E_2 in mind, or willingly endures E_1 for the sake of E_2

In acknowledging the fact that a successful outcome is not achieved in every instance, I follow Hersch and Weltman in holding that the expectation of well-being at some time in the future can discount the disvalue of present pains if they are *rationally presumed* to lead to a good outcome.[222] I will clarify what I mean by having a rational expectation. It is basing one's anticipation on evidence, past experience, and logical reasoning about future events. The reasons can be based on probability or on past successes in similar situations. This can make it rational to expect that outcome. This belief is not formed by blind optimism, but by a reasoned assessment of the likelihood of something occurring. The evidence must support the anticipation of the favorable result. These expectations can enhance well-being. Consider a student preparing for a difficult exam. Studying for several months is stressful and arduous, yet the student may reasonably expect that their efforts will significantly increase their chances of passing, based on past academic performance, understanding of the material, and the structure of the exam. Even though the exam is several months away, this rational expectation can improve the student's present well-being. The disvalue of

[222] Gil Hersch and Daniel Weltman, "A New Well-Being Atomism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 107, no. 1 (2023): 3-23.

their painful efforts involved in the pursuit of a valuable end can be mitigated insofar as they rationally believe that their current efforts increase the chances of achieving a good end. The student's present well-being can be positively impacted by how this period of studying fits into the broader narrative of their life, which may reflect a trajectory of perseverance, growth, and eventual accomplishment. The effort of studying is embedded within a meaningful trajectory that connects the present struggle to anticipated future success. The present effort becomes part of a larger story that can make it prudentially valuable despite its immediate discomforts.

The good end towards which one aspires can alter the disvalue of the pains *prospectively* before it is even attained. One can have expectational momentary well-being that involves looking towards the expected future.[223] When someone works hard and can anticipate that in the future it will pay off, then they can increase even their momentary well-being.[224] It can still be prudentially valuable to spend one's time and energy usefully. So, even if the good end is not ultimately achieved, the efforts still have some value. One's actual future success can be affected by factors outside of one's control, such as luck. But it seems reasonable to assume that hard work has value in itself insofar as it contributes to a rational expectation of success, not only in virtue of the *actual* future success.

These two narrative arc relations I've outlined suggest a mechanism by which the negative impact of pains can be mitigated, allowing for greater well-being. I will next consider how a hedonist might incorporate contextual factors. I will argue that while doing this may enhance their approach, it does not fully capture the significance of these factors. In contrast, my view considers a broader

[223] Ibid., 20.

[224] It is important to note that expectational well-being can change, as one should not always maintain the same expectations for a given event.

range of contextual factors, allowing for a more accurate representation of a person's well-being at any given moment. This allows for more well-being.

Hedonists could incorporate a holist aspect into their accounts by claiming that the pleasure taken in some experience is influenced by the simultaneous pleasures of other current experiences. For instance, a certain dish might be particularly pleasant when it is consumed while listening to an uplifting musical piece. An even greater pleasure could be generated from pleasantly contemplating this activity. This would avoid the problem of the hedonic value being a mere sum of each experience's hedonic value in isolation. However, this modified version of hedonism still would not accurately reflect how someone is faring at a time. How well-off that person is at that moment is determined by his present enjoyment of his meal and the music. This ignores all other aspects of the person's life. It is hard to believe that this could adequately represent what philosophers have intended with the notion of well-being. It does not incorporate other relevant features of a person's life such as their relationships, careers, projects, etc, which have prudential significance even at that moment, when the agent is not attending to them. Building in *some* holistic aspects is not enough. Well-being cannot be properly assessed by merely aggregating pleasant experiences. Even if the hedonist incorporates some holist aspects, my view has the advantage of being able to enhance pleasures through their connections with the various contextual and narrative factors, giving them a deeper meaning. On this approach, the experiences are understood in relation to their broader circumstances, amplifying their positive impact.

I argue that hybrid holism is better equipped than hedonism to accommodate the various facets involved in generating prudential value. In being able to accommodate more possibilities for value-adjustment, it tends to generate greater prudential value. This makes it better equipped to

respond to the challenge of pessimism. Traditional hedonism struggles to account for structural and contextual influences when assessing well-being. In contrast, my view, with its narrative component, can incorporate these factors, thereby maximizing well-being. This offers a stronger response to the concerns raised by pessimism.

3.2 Desire theories

I will turn next to desire satisfaction theories, as they are commonly presented, distinguishing between two ways of understanding the satisfaction conditions of a desire. The satisfaction conditions can be analyzed through the framework of either the object view or the combo view.[225] I show that insofar as these theories are atomistic, they are at a disadvantage in tackling the pessimism objection. If such theories assume atomistic features, they are prone to underestimating well-being. In avoiding atomism and including a narrative component, hybrid holism can accommodate more sources of well-being. This is because my view allows desires to hold prudential value that is not exhausted by, or reducible to, their mere fulfillment. I propose that the primary weakness of traditional desire theories is that they limit the value of desires to their satisfaction. In contrast, my theory, which includes a narrative component, takes into account a broader range of considerations that can enhance the value of desires.

To reiterate from Chapter 1, desire theories hold that well-being is function of a subject having more (or simply stronger) desires satisfied, and fewer (or simply weaker) desires frustrated. Also, typically, the prudential weight of a satisfied desire is seen as corresponding to the strength of that desire. While this seems simple enough, articulating these core ideas in a clear and

[225] I am using Bradley's terms (2014) p. 213; see also Heathwood (2022), p. 36 and Van Weelden (2017), p. 87

uncontentious way is unexpectedly challenging. One limitation that many desire satisfaction theories face stems from their failure to account for *why* a subject desires one thing over another, as well as from disregarding how narrative features can impact a desired object's prudential worth. I will return to this point later. First, I will examine what grounds the prudential value of satisfying a desire. There are varying perspectives on this. Desire theorists either endorse the "object" view or the "combo" view, claiming that prudential value stems from either obtaining the object of one's desire (object view), or satisfying one's desire *and* obtaining the object (combo view).[226] I will illustrate this distinction with an example: suppose S desires to eat popcorn. On the object view, eating popcorn is prudentially valuable for S. Alternatively, the combo view states that it is the combination of desiring popcorn *and* eating it that is good for S. These two formulations have very different implications.[227] On the combo view, the mental act of desiring is necessary for a satisfied desire to hold prudential value. Obtaining the desired object without having the accompanying mental state of desiring is insufficient to grant prudential value. For instance, referring back to the popcorn example, the state of affairs in which the person is eating the popcorn would not be considered prudentially valuable for that person, even if they had desired it earlier. The implication is that having had the desire earlier is insufficient to make the attainment of the desired object prudentially valuable. It seems the

[226] Hobbes (1651), Sidgwick (1907), and Railton (2003) seem to hold the object view whereas Bradley (2009) and Heathwood (2005) hold the object view, locating prudential value in the conjunction of having a desire and the conditions for the satisfaction of that desire obtaining.

See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), (Original work published 1651); Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics,* 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), (Original work published 1907); Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," in *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 43-68 (Original work published 1986); David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," in *Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 68-94 (Original work published 1989); Ralph B. Perry, *General Theory of Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954); Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009); Chris Heathwood, "The Problem of Defective Desires," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 4 (2005): 487-504.

[227] Van Weelden (2019) analyzes this in greater detail in "On Two Interpretations of the Desire-Satisfaction Theory of Prudential Value," *Utilitas* 31, no. 2 (2018): 137-156. I draw on some of his insights.

combo view implies that the act of desiring and obtaining the desired object must co-occur. This approach resembles joint necessity hybridism. On the other hand, the object view does not require the mental state of desiring for the desired object to confer prudential value. Simply attaining that object is sufficient from this perspective. This concludes my preliminary overview of these two positions. I will proceed to discuss the implications of each in the subsequent section.

At first glance, desire satisfaction theories seem well-equipped to handle the concern of insufficient well-being, since they are able to accommodate numerous sources of prudential value. They allow for a large variety of contents and types of desires (i.e. occurrent, dispositional, local, global). However, this does not render them immune to the problems afflicting other atomistic theories. Many standard desire satisfaction theories rely on the atomistic principle whereby well-being is assessed by summing satisfied desire units. Each fulfilled desire is typically regarded as making an independent contribution to a person's prudential value within a life. On this view, an optimal life would be one in which the greatest possible number of desires are fulfilled, given that such theories typically consider only the satisfaction and frustration of desires as contributing positive or negative prudential value.

(i.i) Narrative arc

In this section I show how, insofar as desire theories have atomistic features, they cannot properly accommodate structural and contextual factors dimensions of desire fulfillment that plausibly impact lifetime well-being. Hybrid holism, by considering the narrative arc to which life events belong, is better able to capture the complete prudential value of desire satisfaction.

As noted earlier, I contend that the main weakness of standard desire theories is their commitment to atomism. Such theories divide instances of satisfied desires into quantifiable units of measurement. A higher degree of well-being, on these views, corresponds to a greater number of satisfied desire units. These units are typically expressed as "moments", although they do not represent any specific amount of time. However, given the future-oriented nature of desire, there will inevitably be a temporal interval between the act of desiring and the eventual realization of the desire. This is referred to as the temporal gap problem[228] and is also commonly seen as a problem for moment internalist theories in general.[229] The temporal gap problem is particularly problematic for certain types of desires, such as what Broome calls "pattern goods."[230] These involve wanting one's life to go a certain way. Clearly, there is no moment at which these desires are satisfied, and hence no moment at which one is benefitted.[231] For instance, someone can desire that a date goes well. The start of the date does not make that person better off. The end of it does not make him better off either.[232] No specific moment in between the start and the end of the date makes him better off. The result is an absence of desire-satisfaction units. This suggests that on standard desire satisfaction accounts, there is less momentary well-being than is normally supposed.

This issue is not unique to "pattern goods". Although some present-oriented desires "can be satisfied instantaneously" (e.g. desiring to drink the glass of water in front of you and doing so),

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[228] Sumner raises this problem for desire satisfaction theories noting that desires precede the conditions that fulfill them and so may not ultimately satisfy the individuals who hold them.

See L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[229] Moment internalism is the view that the value of each individual moment of a life is independent of: other moments, of the order in which the moment occur, and of other features beyond the moments themselves.
[230] John Broome, *Weighing Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[231] This idea is found in Bruckner (2013), and I draw on his examples.
[232] If anything, it leaves the person worse off because their enjoyment comes to an end.

A similar example is found in Bruckner (2013).

others can only be satisfied "through a process" (e.g. desiring that a certain state of affairs persist).[233] In the former case, the prudential benefit is gained at the time that the desire is satisfied, which is immediately after the desire is formed (i.e. when the person drinks the water). It is more difficult to determine the time of benefit in the latter scenario. Suppose that S is cuddling his cat at t_1 and desires to continue doing so until t_{20}.[234] Does S benefit at the *end* of the interval, $t_1 – t_{20}$? Suppose his cuddling session ends prematurely at t_{10}. It is unclear whether S accrued partial benefit from t_1 to t_{10}, or none at all. S's desire to cuddle his cat until t_{20} did not fully obtain. We might say that S having the desire to cuddle his cat until t_{20} presupposes S having the desire for the activity to persist at each moment ($t_1 – t_{20}$) of the activity. But the challenge intensifies with future-oriented desires. Consider an example: suppose it is now 8am and S desires to submit an assignment by midnight. The satisfaction condition for S's desire can only obtain much later. S's desire is not for an enduring state of affairs, but for a specific event to happen at some later time. Suppose S does not submit the paper in time, despite making progress. Since the satisfaction conditions for his desire did not obtain, should we therefore deny that his hard work granted him any prudential value? The temporal gap problem is not easily dispelled.

A consequence of the temporal gap problem is restricting the number of desires that can plausibly be counted as satisfied within a life. Since many desires require temporal extension, ordinary desire theories may underestimate the number of satisfied desires, leading to deflated well-being estimates. In contrast to such views, I argue that the value of desire-fulfillment is not exhausted by, or reducible to, mere fulfillment and includes the broader significance of the desire itself and the process by which it is pursued and realized. Through its narrative component, hybrid

[233] Ibid., 15
[234] This example is adapted from Bruckner (2013)

holism is better able to account for the numerous sources of prudential value associated with desire fulfillment., including not only the satisfaction itself, but also the desire's role within a broader life narrative. An important fact about desires is that many of them are realized over some span of time. Since hybrid holism adopts a perfectionist characteristic of linking well-being to narrative self development, it can accord prudential value to even the pursuit of fulfilling one's desires. This implies that the temporal gap period can be prudentially valuable as well. In this way, my view adopts a relationalist perspective, according to which facts about the world at other times can impact the satisfaction conditions of desires. If desire theories assume moment-internalism, then all the satisfaction conditions of desires must exist at that particular moment. It is plausible, however, that other moments can influence whether these conditions obtain. For instance, it is difficult to specify the conditions under which one has realized their desire to learn a new language. Whether a person fulfilled their desire to gain fluency in another language depends on past occurrences in the causal history of this process. It is not the case that all the fulfilment conditions obtain at one moment during which the person has acquired a certain level of fluency in the language. So, again, if desire theories assume moment-internalism, many desires would fail to be satisfied.

I argue that hybrid holism's consideration of the narrative arc into which life events are embedded, allows for a greater amount of prudential value. I maintain that the prudential value of a desire is not entirely limited to its realization. Rather, working towards one's desire within the structure of a narrative arc is also valuable. A person could, for instance, form the desire to learn Greek out of a love for ancient philosophy. The person then takes the initiative to independently find resources to begin their learning journey. Upon encountering the Greek alphabet, the person faces some challenges. Despite this, they persevere and eventually come to understand the complex verb system. After some time, they become capable of reading a short story in Greek and

subsequently maintaining a conversation in Greek for several minutes. The resolution of their narrative arc consists in being able to converse fluently, decipher ancient texts, and feeling a sense of pride. The prudential value isn't solely derived from occurrences at the end of the narrative arc. The process by which the narrative self develops is also valuable. Choosing to embark on a learning journey is as important a moment in the narrative arc as is the exercise and development of one's capacities at each stage of the process. The desire's connection to an overarching aim, such as shaping one's identity as an ancient text expert also contributes prudential value. The desired state of affairs (knowing Greek) doesn't simply concern one moment at which a certain proficiency level is reached. It seems that most desires are like this. Even the prudential value of satisfying "instantaneous" desires cannot be adequately understood without considering contextual factors. Part of what explains something's prudential worth is its connection to overarching goals. When assessing the prudential import of realized desires, we implicitly consider contextual factors (which involves considering other moments). It could be argued that desire theories can avoid the temporal gap problem and offer an expanded account of the value of desires if their satisfaction can be assigned a time at which the subject benefits. For instance, if someone wants to win the science fair and subsequently succeeds, desire theorists could hold that the contestant benefits at the time he was awarded the medal. However, I maintain that a consideration of structural/ contextual features not only offers a more intuitive account of the achievement's value, but also permits the possibility of the winner gaining an even greater prudential benefit. This achievement likely occurred in the context of a narrative arc which impacted its worth. So, even if desire theories specify a particular time at which the prudential benefit is gained, they still face the issue of a shortage in desire-satisfaction units. This entails that, on ordinary desire theories, there is much less well-being in a human life than is plausible.[235]

[235] Ben Bramble makes this point in *The Passing of Temporal Well-Being* (London: Routledge, 2018).

I contend, then, that desire-satisfactions cannot be confined to moments. The way in which satisfied desires confer prudential value seems instead to reflect a narrative arc structure. Desire-satisfactions confer benefit on a subject in some non-momentary way and this can be represented by the narrative arc construct. The start of the narrative arc begins with a person forming a desire for an object, x. He then directs his actions towards obtaining x and the resolution consists in the realization of the desire for x. A range of events contained within the narrative arc are beneficial to the subject. The prudential value is not merely gained from the resolution. This coheres with commonsense views on the value of satisfied desires. Situating the pursuit and satisfaction of desires within a broader context allows for a more sophisticated treatment of how desire-satisfaction contributes prudential value. Since desires serve various functions, a satisfactory account of their value should be capable of taking these factors into consideration. Possible functions of desires include: motivating action, expressing or shaping personal identity, and promoting growth. It therefore seems reasonable to think that the process of striving towards a long-term goal, such as success in one's career, holds value even before the goal is fully realized. Thus, the value of desire-satisfaction is not confined to its fulfillment but also includes the broader experience of pursuing the desired end.

Now I will consider a possible variation of desire theory, one that includes value adjustments based on the degree of a desire's importance to one's life. I consider whether this version permits a greater degree of prudential value. To account for the varying prudential import of a wide range of desires, desire theorists could build in a value-adjusting function that proportions a desire's value to its degree of perceived importance. Desires that reflect what is most important to a person could be

assigned a greater prudential value, while more trivial desires may contribute only minimally to their well-being.

This kind of view might be motivated by the following observation. Often, the majority of people's central desires are related to important parts of their life or what they value most. We would expect such desires to have greater prudential significance. For example, an athlete would likely have numerous sport-related desires, reflecting the centrality of sport to his identity and values. The satisfaction of sport-related desires, then, has significant prudential weight. At the same time though, the athlete also presumably holds many desires concerning simple sensory experience (desires that would ordinarily be considered mundane), such as for steady breathing or moderate room temperature. Although mundane desires are typically seen as less central and of minor prudential value, if they are numerous enough, it raises the question of whether their large quantity can significantly impact a person's well-being, after being aggregated. Considering the context in which the desires occur adds further complexity. In the context of an intense match, what are ordinarily taken to be trivial desires may take on a special salience. This suggests that the prudential value of a desire can vary depending on the circumstances. As such, desire theorists would do well to build in contextual considerations into their well-being assessments. Moreover, complex desires, such as career success, winning over someone's heart, or being in [236] are often highly interconnected and their prudential worth is difficult to assess without considering other related desires. For instance, desiring to be a certain kind of person is often linked to fulfilling what one deems most meaningful. To deepen the complexity, desires have many origins as well as relational properties. They are unified by overarching goals and values. Hybrid holism accommodates this complexity by

[236] Alan Gewirth provides these examples in "Self-Fulfillment as Aspiration-Fulfillment," in *Self-Fulfillment* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.

recognizing the prudential value of not only desire satisfaction but also the desire's narrative role within a life trajectory. This framework makes it possible to consider desires in relation to the networks of which they are a part.

I now turn to Dale Dorsey's view, which is not committed to moment-internalism. I consider whether Dorsey's account fares any better with respect to accurately reflecting the value of desire-satisfaction. Ultimately, I argue that hybrid holism offers a better explanation of this account's underlying intuitions. Dorsey advances a version of desire-satisfaction intended to accommodate the "temporal phenomenon" of well-being.[237] On his "time-of-desire" view, he denies that times are "value atoms" (i.e. "instantiations of the fundamental good or bad making properties").[238] Rather, he claims that times can be *derivatively* valuable. They can be *related to* states of affairs that are themselves value atoms. This implies that we can hold that some object, x, is good for S at the time at which S desires x. I will examine how this plays out on both the object and the combo view.

If we assume the object view, then x is good for S at t, iff x is desired by S at t. Suppose S develops the desire to earn a PhD in 2018. S finally initiates the endeavor several years later and subsequently completes it in 2025. On the object view, the completion of the degree in 2025 can be good for S back in 2018, when you S initially formed the desire. In other words, at time, t_1 (when the desire is formed), some state of affairs, x, is good for S given that S desires x at t_1 and x at t_n obtains.[239] S is benefitted to the extent that S's desires are satisfied (whenever their objects occur).

[237] Dale Dorsey, "Desire-Satisfaction and Welfare as Temporal," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013): 151-171.
[238] Ibid., 168
[239] Ibid.

On the combo view, x is good for S iff x constitutes the conjunction of desiring x and x obtaining. At most, one component of the conjunction obtains at any given time. Ben Bradley notes that on the combo view, the attitude occurs at t_1 and the object occurs at some later time t_2, so the conjunction never obtains.[240] It does not obtain at t_1, (only part of it does) and it does not obtain at t_2 (since the first conjunct is now missing). This poses a problem for views that consider times intrinsically valuable. According to the time-of-desire view, the person benefits at t_1, but the desired outcome does not obtain at t_1, so t_1 cannot be an intrinsically valuable time. The combo view holds that the value of t_1 cannot be determined entirely by what occurs at that time. It depends on what happens later, at t_2. Although the conjunction state does not occur at any particular time, the combo view adherents could respond by rejecting the assumption that times themselves hold value. This conforms to ordinary intuitions. To say S is having a good day, we do not mean the day itself is valuable, but that S benefited during that day (that prudential value was gained across that time span).

A common objection raised against the time-of-desire view is that it entails retroactive causation. The time-of-desire view seems to hold that the prudential value of past events can be adjusted retroactively. What occurs at the end of some sequence of events determines whether an earlier event was beneficial. Prudential value at some time, t_1, depends on events that may not occur until some later time, t_n, (the time at which the satisfaction conditions obtain). This temporal dependence reflects the structure of what might be called a redemption sequence. In a redemption sequence, later outcomes alter the value and significance of earlier events. The eventual realization of a desire can alter the value of earlier events. Hardships and sacrifices that transpire at some earlier point in one's life can be retrospectively seen as intelligible and worthwhile in light of later success.

[240] Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 21.

Like in a story, the value of earlier occurrences may become clear only in hindsight. Applying the redemption sequence framework makes sense of the intuition that the full meaning of an event reveals itself later in time. Dorsey's time-of-desire view assumes this narrativist idea that an event's significance depends on future outcomes. The realization of a desire at the end of a sequence can redeem past suffering, suggesting that prudential value (like narrative meaning) often reveals itself retrospectively.

(i.ii) Cohesion and Thematic Consistency

A second way in which desire-satisfaction theories may under-estimate well-being is by failing to account for the prudential significance of cohesion and thematic consistency. Jason Raibley remarks that it seems intuitive to judge a life oriented around stable, long-term goals as superior to one with erratic or conflicting desires.[241] Individuals often hope that their efforts collectively culminate in a unified outcome. When lives feature internal discord, conflicting aims, or sudden shifts in projects, they tend to reflect a deep problem within a person's life and psyche. These conflicted states often suggest diminished well-being. Note that normal, more minor fluctuations in plans and projects are not necessarily harmful, especially when they can still be intelligibly linked to long-held values.[242] We might say that greater cohesion and thematic consistency in one's life corresponds to greater prudential value. But atomistic theories seem to treat instances of desire-satisfaction in isolation, disregarding how these instances fit within a broader life narrative. On such views, inconsistent desires are deemed problematic only to the extent that they hinder their

[241] Jason Raibley, "Values, Agency, and Welfare," *Philosophical Topics* 41, no. 1 (2013): 187-214. See also Jason Raibley, "Well-Being and the Priority of Values," *Social Theory and Practice* 36, no. 4 (2010): 593-620.

[242] Ibid.

successful satisfaction. They would not take into account the fact that inconsistent desires suggest a deep disunity. Hybrid holism can accommodate the intuition that cohesive and thematically consistent lives are prudentially better, even if fewer desires are satisfied. This coheres with ordinary intuitions. Indeed, even desire-theorists implicitly acknowledge the desires they deem as relevant tend to those connected with stable and enduring concerns.

I now turn to *restricted* desire theories and argue that the constraints commonly placed on them are better explained through narrative relations. Unrestricted desire theories are commonly charged with the problem of "defective" desires.[243] That is, they count irrelevant or harmful desires as prudentially valuable. In response to this, various restrictions have been proposed with the aim of excluding defective desires. As previously discussed, the main challenge for desire theories is identifying which desires are relevant. A common approach is to build in some form of idealization. However, this comes at a cost. Excessive idealization can result in the alienation worry, thereby producing a problematic conception of prudential value. In applying overly narrow criteria to the relevant desires, such theories risk excluding many legitimate sources of well-being. It seems, then, that restricted desire-satisfaction theories are especially vulnerable to pessimism, as they risk under-estimating sources of well-being.

I submit that a better approach would be to consider the narrative context in which desires are embedded. They are more likely to reflect a person's cares and concerns if they are evaluated in relation to broader goals and values within one's life narrative. Restricted desire theories could, in principle, base their restriction criteria on narrativist considerations, but this move leads to assuming relational features. The value of desire-fulfillment would also rely on how it fits in with a person's

[243] Heathwood (2005)

broader life trajectory. As a result, such views begin to ressemble hybrid theories. The prudential value of a fulfilled desire would also depend on its narrative context. Thus, desire-satisfaction theories, in attempting to preserve their plausibility, result in a view akin to hybrid holism.

(ii) Mitigating Ill-Being

I will now advance ways that my view is able to mitigate the negative impact of ill-being on a desire-satisfaction framework. This gives my view an advantage over desire theories on which desire-frustrations are taken to be the sources of harm. I will explain how these frustrations can be minimized or discounted within my framework. However, before delving into this, it is important to define the concept of ill-being (as different desire theories may hold varying perspectives). I will examine two interpretations of desire-frustration and explain how the disvalue of such frustrations can be discounted within a narrative framework. It is my aim to show that hybrid holism is better suited to address pessimism than desire theories, since its narrative component can mitigate the disvalue of ill-being on both interpretations of desire-frustration.

Desire-frustration is typically regarded as the counterpart of desire-satisfaction.[244] But what is meant by desire-frustration? It can either consist of a privation (i.e. the absence of a satisfied desire) or an experience of the mental state of frustration. If the former conception is endorsed, then the desire-frustration fails to qualify as a "robust" bad,[245] that is, a positive bad, regardless of how it compares to its contrary. I will refer to this privation view as getting the *contrary* of what one wants.

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[244] I draw on Mathison's (2018) and Woodard's (2022) analyses.
Eric Mathison, *Asymmetries and Ill-Being,* (University of Toronto, 2018) and Christopher Woodard, "The Value and Significance of Ill-Being," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 46 (2022): 1-19.

[245] Shelly Kagan (2014) argues that an adequacy constraint on theories of ill-being is that the bads should be *robust* bads.

See Shelly Kagan "An Introduction to Ill-Being," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 4 (2014): 261-288.

To illustrate: if S desires to eat a snack, then the contrary of that desire would be: it is not the case that S eats a snack. L. W. Sumner seems to endorse this interpretation of desire-frustration in at least some cases.[246] In support of the privation view, consider someone who is deprived of the opportunity to partake in any enjoyable activities. This clearly results in a prudential value reduction. Sumner admits, however, that the absence of something is insufficient to reduce prudential value in many other cases. He presents an example in which someone drinking a fairly good wine desires to be drinking an even better wine.[247] This can be appropriately compared to unreasonable desires such as winning the lottery or stumbling upon a cellphone on the street. Failing to obtain these things would not be robustly bad.

A more plausible conception of desire-frustration is desiring something that is the *opposite* of that thing's being the case.[248] In other words, if S desires to obtain x, then the corresponding bad is obtaining the opposite of x. Alternatively, this can be described as having a desire that x not be the case when x is the case (i.e. being averse to it). This amounts to getting the contradictory of what you want (rather than the contrary).

(ii.i) "Privation" View

If desire-frustrations are understood as privations, then the harm in getting the contrary of one's desires could be mitigated in two ways. First, the "harm" of such frustrations (especially in the case of unreasonable desires for unwarranted benefits, such as expecting unlikely occurrences of good fortune) could be translated into opportunities for self-reflection. The failure to obtain a

[246] L. W. Sumner, "The Worst Things in Life," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 97, no. 3 (2020): 419-432.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Chris Heathwood, "Ill-Being for Desire Satisfactionists," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 46 (2022): 33-54

farfetched desire may reveal deeper values or unmet needs underlying the desire's formation. For instance, a person disappointed by not finding a wallet on the street may uncover that they have a deep concern with financial security (perhaps shaped by past poverty). In this way, desire-frustration contributes to self-understanding. Second, desire-frustration can motivate agency. It reminds an individual that merely desiring something does not advance its realization. This recognition can motivate the person to take action towards their goals. This reinforces the idea that well-being involves actively shaping one's life. As David Velleman argues, outcomes that result from prior effort tend to be more valuable than those resulting from luck,[249] reinforcing the prudential significance of agency.

Hybrid holism is capable of offering reinterpretations of desire frustrations, thereby reducing their harm. These frustrations can be placed within a narrative arc of personal development. When setbacks and thwarted desires are integrated into a coherent narrative arc, they become meaningful parts of a pursuit towards long-term goals (rather than being isolated failures). For instance, consider an individual striving to become a teacher. He confronts many challenges, such as struggling to win the approval of superiors and his performance being repeatedly deemed incompetent, despite his best efforts. While each instance of desire-frustration may initially appear disempowering, the narrative arc (if it culminates in success), can endow the setbacks with prudential value. These obstacles can be seen as integral to the person's life narrative. This view incorporates the value of the process by which desires are pursued. The narrative arc's resolution is valuable but so is the hard work during the pursuit. The persistence and effort involved in overcoming desire-frustrations justify a higher degree of pride in the eventual success. This, in turn, contributes positively to one's

[249] David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48-77. See also Joshua Glasgow "Value in the Mere Shape of Episodes," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics,* vol 14, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford University Press, 2024)

self-conception, and enhances one's well-being. Cultivating traits during the pursuit, such as resilience and determination, is also valuable. Thus, desire-frustrations (rather than being detrimental), can be constructive when considered within the broader context of one's life narrative.

(ii.ii) "Contradictory" View

I now turn to the conception of desire-frustration as getting the *contradictory* of what one wants, or what one is averse to. I argue that the narrative component of hybrid holism can lessen the impact of these types of frustrations as well. I hope to motivate this point by presenting two examples wherein the frustrations either motivate action or contribute to self-understanding, making them instrumentally valuable in contributing to personal growth in both cases.

Aversion, as a response to certain outcomes, seems to suggest a *psychological state,* so I will proceed under this assumption. Consider the case of a person who applies for a job that exclusively involves solitary work out of their aversion towards human interaction. Unexpectedly, they are hired for a role requiring constant public speaking (an outcome that contradicts their desire). This elicits discomfort and resistance. Despite experiencing this negative affect, the experience turns out to be transformative. The discomfort prompted the person to confront and eventually overcome their aversion, thereby contributing to personal growth and the improvement of their capacities.

Alternatively, the experience might reaffirm the depth of the aversion. It can reveal that disliking human interaction isn't merely a superficial preference, but a core aspect of the person's identity. In this case, the frustration serves the function of clarifying the person's values and fostering self-knowledge that can inform future decisions and life direction.

These examples are meant to show how the negative psychological state of frustration is not necessarily incompatible with well-being. As Andreas Elpidorou plausibly argues, such emotions can play an important role in human flourishing.[250] It can motivate action or reveal what truly matters to a person. The prudential value of a desire-frustration, then, is context-sensitive. Its impact depends on how it is integrated into the person's broader narrative framework.

(iii) Conclusion

In this section, I have shown how hybrid holism offers significant advantages over traditional desire theories in addressing pessimism. This is for two reasons. First, its hybrid nature allows for multiple sources of well-being, meaning that *both* working towards satisfying one's desires, *and* actually satisfying them contribute to well-being. Second, its narrative component helps mitigate the impact of forms of ill-being that arise in desire theories. I also engaged with alternative versions of desire theories, most notably Dorsey's time-of-desire view, to evaluate how they might handle the pessimism challenge. Ultimately, I conclude that the narrative aspect of hybrid holism provides a better way to explain the relevant intuitions. I also proposed that the atomistic features of desire theories weaken their ability to address pessimism. Hybrid holism lacks these features and so holds an important advantage. In the second half of the section, I explored two interpretations of the ill-being associated with desire-satisfaction and outlined ways in which my framework can lessen their impact. This further strengthens my view in comparison to desire theories, where desire frustrations are seen as the sole sources of harm.

[250] Andreas Elpidorou, "Propelled: How Boredom, Frustration, and Anticipation Lead Us to the Good Life," (Oxford University Press, 2020).

3.3 Objective-list theories

I will analyze objective-list theories in this section and identify a potential weakness in their capacity to respond to pessimism. Like other theories considered thus far, objective-list accounts risk under-estimating sources of well-being. I will then assess how a list theorist might attempt to incorporate contextual factors in order to better address the pessimism concern. I argue, however, that the narrative component of my view is better able to accommodate the prudential significance of these factors. While my view shares the assumption with list theories that certain things are objectively good, I contend that hybrid holism surpasses list theories in its ability to account for a greater number of well-being sources. In the second half of the section, my aim is to show hybrid holism offers advantages in its treatment ill-being. I examine two specific bads proposed by list theories – failure and ignorance – since they are among the least controversial, and then demonstrate how hybrid holism can mitigate their negative impact.

Objective-list theories maintain that certain goods are prudentially valuable independently of an individual's attitude towards them. According to these views, well-being usually consists in the possession of items from an authoritative list of goods such as knowledge, achievement, and friendship. These items are typically justified through intuitive appeal and consensus. On such theories, a life is better than another to the extent that it contains more items on the list of objective goods and fewer items on the list of objectively bads (e.g. failure, or ignorance).

A potential weakness of objective-list theories is that some versions may treat the mere possession of goods as sufficient to promote well-being, without considering how people engage

with and pursue these goods. Hybrid holism avoids this by emphasizing the value of actively pursuing and realizing goods, and integrating them into one's life narrative. This focus on narrative structure makes it better positioned to recognize a broader range of well-being sources. On my view, the activities involved in striving towards goods are prudentially relevant as well. If objective-list theories fail to consider structural or contextual factors, they risk underestimating the level of well-being present in a typical life.

Objective-list theorist might attempt to address this limitation by contextualizing goods. For instance, they may introduce certain conditions on the objective goods that are necessary in order for them to hold prudential value. They might argue that pleasure is only prudentially valuable when it is not grounded in delusion. However, doing so introduces needless complexity. The list theorist would have to identify all possible circumstantial features and specify the ways in which they affect the value of each objective good. Even if they managed to do so, it remains obscure *how* and *to what extent* such circumstantial features have this value-altering effect. As the list of conditions expands, the theory risks becoming overly convoluted and difficult to apply. By contrast, hybrid holism integrates contextual features through its narrative framework. This allows for a more coherent account of well-being. It can accommodate the value from not only possessing the objective goods, but also from the pursuit of goods. It can also allow the meaning and value of goods to change depending on how they are integrated within a person's life story. As such, hybrid holism can better address pessimism and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how objective goods contribute prudential value.

(i) Temporal Sequence

Hybrid holism recognizes a range of structural and contextual factors that can influence the prudential value of objective goods, thereby allowing more sources of well-being. One such factor concerns the temporal distribution of objective goods across a life. Although there is no universally optimal "shape of a life," certain temporal patterns such as upwards trends, stable trends, or certain types of variation can affect how goods contribute prudential value. For instance, even if a life is replete with objective goods, such as achievements and aesthetic excellences, it may be made worse if it is followed by a long period of mediocrity and stagnation.[251] The prudential value of objective goods, then, might not be solely determined by their presence in a life, but also by their temporal placement. A second value-altering consideration is the balance or proportion of different types of goods. Thomas Hurka, for example, emphasizes the importance of balance in a good life.[252] He writes, "even if our specific achievements are not great, their proportion […] is, other things being equal, a good."[253] He argues that a life characterized by over-specialization (in knowledge for instance) is less good than a life that contains an equal amount of knowledge but is more balanced. Similarly, Franz Brentano contends that it is better to combine two dissimilar goods than to combine two similar ones.[254] This suggests that the prudential value of objective goods can be altered by temporal sequence. Hybrid holism situates objective goods within a narrative structure and so accounts for temporal effects on the prudential value of these goods.

(ii) Mitigation of bads

[251] Deiner, Wirtz, and Oishi (2001) refer to this as the "James Dean effect"

See Ed Deiner, Derrick Wirtz, and Shigehiro Oishi, "End Effects of Rated Life Quality: The James Dean Effect," *Psychological Science* 12, no. 2 (2001):124-128.
[252] Thomas Hurka, "The Well-Rounded Life," *The Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 12 (1987): 727-746.
[253] Ibid., 732.7
[254] Franz Brentano, *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics* (Routledge, 2009) (Original work published 1897)

In this section, I will show how hybrid holism has advantages over objective-list theories in the treatment of ill-being. If the pessimist is right in claiming that typical human lives are marked by a deficiency in objective goods, then objective-list theories risk underestimating well-being in such lives. If they lack appropriate concern for contextual factors, they are especially vulnerable to the pessimist's challenge. In contrast, I argue that hybrid holism can reduce the negative impact of objective bads. I support this by focusing on the negative counterparts of two widely accepted, least controversial objective goods: knowledge and achievement. I will examine their corresponding objective bads: ignorance and failure. By focusing on them as examples, I will consider how an objective list theorist may account for ill-being and then contrast their approach with how hybrid holism treats these objective bads.

(ii.i) Knowledge

Recall that the pessimist contends that there are more ways to be objectively badly off than there are to be objectively well off. With respect to knowledge, acquiring it typically demands greater effort than remaining in a state of ignorance. Hence, according to the pessimist, the knowledge-related bads, such as ignorance, error, and delusion, tend to outweigh the knowledge-related goods in the course of a typical human life.

One might well think that the pessimist has a point here. There are indeed many ways to fall short of knowledge. As Kagan notes, many conditions must be met for knowledge to obtain.[255] Assuming for the sake of argument that knowledge is justified, true belief, it follows that there are many combinations of these conditions in which knowledge would fail to obtain. Although truth's

[255] Shelly Kagan, "An Introduction to Ill-Being," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 4 (2014): 261-288.

only contrary is falsity (it is the mere absence of the positive condition), a belief can be either justified, unjustified (the contrary), or just simply lack justification. For instance, someone could have insufficient evidence for a conclusion, or have evidence which supports the opposite conclusion, thereby undermining justification. However, most of the epistemic states that fall short of knowledge are not necessarily prudential bads. Arguably, such states can carry either a positive, neutral, or sometimes negative prudential value, depending on contextual considerations. It seems that the only plausible candidate for a robustly bad, negative counterpart of knowledge is anti-justified false belief – that is, a belief held in spite of countervailing evidence. Thus, falling short of knowledge, in many cases, does not constitute a prudential bad.

I will discuss a key advantage of hybrid holism: its ability to mitigate the negative impact of ignorance. On my view, knowledge retains its intrinsic value, but other epistemic states – such as unjustified true beliefs or justified false beliefs – can also possess instrumental prudential value. Hybrid holism, therefore, offers a nuanced framework that accommodates the complexity of how different epistemic conditions relate to well-being.

The relationship between knowledge and well-being is highly complex. Although a comprehensive treatment lies beyond the scope of this discussion, I will outline some important positions that are of immediate relevance to my view.

Since hybrid holism situates prudential goods within a narrative framework, it is able to integrate both alethic and pragmatic considerations in accounting for the prudential value of epistemic states. It is my claim that hybrid holism offers a more comprehensive explanation of how epistemic states (including those that fall short of knowledge) can contribute to well-being.

It is a widely held belief that truth holds intrinsic value. Aristotle, for instance, treats the apprehension of truth as integral to human flourishing.[256] Many contemporary philosophers similarly view what Andrew Reisner calls, "positive epistemic states",[257] such as knowing the truth or believing in accordance with reason as integral to well-being. Such views do not take the value of truth to be reducible to the instrumental utility of true belief (e.g. its role in facilitating successful action), but they are typically committed to the idea that truth is *intrinsically* valuable. But this widely shared intuition requires further explanation. Why should truth or related epistemic goods such as knowledge or justified belief, contribute fundamentally to a person's well-being?

Some attempts to explain the value of belief are in terms of *alethic* considerations: truth and justification. On this view, beliefs with equivalent epistemic status (i.e. same truth-value and degree of justification) have equivalent value. But this quickly leads to implausible conclusions. If epistemic value were fully determined by alethic properties, we would be forced to treat beliefs about trivial or irrelevant truths (e.g., the number of ants in one's garden) as having the same prudential value as beliefs about deeply meaningful or life-altering matters (e.g., the cause of a loved one's illness). Clearly not all truths are equally valuable in human life.

This variation in value is better captured by appealing to *pragmatic considerations*. These can incorporate the relevance, interest, and personal significance of beliefs. These properties are not alethic. They relate to the individual's concerns, commitments, and projects. The truth about a friend's loyalty may matter more to one's well-being than the truth about the molecular weight of a

[256] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge University Press, 2014), book X
[257] Andrew Reisner, "Welfarist Pluralism: Pluralistic Reasons for Belief and the Value of Truth," *Philosophical Topics* (forthcoming)

compound not because it is epistemically stronger, but because of its emotional and existential import.

Pragmatism rightly holds that beliefs can be valuable by contributing to well-being. Beliefs can influence action, protect from harm, support personal projects, and ground emotional experience. However, *pure pragmatism* neglects the inherent *epistemic* value of truth and justification. On a purely pragmatic account, it might seem valuable to believe some fact about space, for instance, simply because it gives someone pleasure, even if the belief is unfounded or false. But this view fails to capture why evidence and justification matter independently of practical utility.

Both pure alethicism and pure pragmatism are problematic, which is the motivation for supporting a form of pluralism that combines both the alethic and pragmatic dimensions of belief. To evaluate the value of beliefs, it makes sense to examine the nature and function of belief itself. Belief formation is a cognitive response to navigating the world. Beliefs are not passive mental states. They function as something akin to cognitive tools. They guide action, shape perception, and enable communication. Beliefs represent not only the structure and properties of one's environment, but also our perspectives and evaluations, and reflect one's relationship to ourselves and to others. In this way, beliefs are deeply embedded in the individual's life narrative.

Given this role of beliefs, beliefs matter because they aim to represent the world as it actually is. This may be what underlies the widely held intuition that true beliefs have intrinsic value. But having beliefs that reflect responsiveness to reality (tracking evidence, applying reasoning, conforming to the proper norms of justification), even if they are not true also plays a large role in the value of beliefs. Andrew Reisner makes this observation, introducing the idea of *aspirational*

veridicality.[258] This is the notion that what matters is not only whether a belief is true, but also whether it *aspires* to be true in an epistemically appropriate way. In other words, even false beliefs may contribute to well-being when they are formed responsibly and in good faith.

Reisner provides the following example. Consider two climbers. In *Scenario A*, the climber goes the wrong direction due to misleading but reasonable evidence (e.g., snow-covered paths). His belief is false, but it is grounded in a responsible interpretation of the available indicators. In *Scenario B*, the climber has perfectly accurate experiences of climbing the mountain, but they are delivered to him by a device that simulates the experience. Although *Scenario B* is accurate, it lacks any meaningful connection between the belief and the world. The former belief (though false) is *aspirationally veridical*. It results from a legitimate attempt to understand and navigate reality.

This distinction reinforces the intuitions behind Nozick's experience machine. These intuitions include: ersatz or simulated achievements are less valuable than actual ones, and genuine relationships are more meaningful than their indistinguishable counterfeits. These intuitions point not merely to the value of truth, but to the importance of being appropriately connected to reality. Our interior lives (not only our beliefs but also our aspirations to veridicality) gain prudential value when they are responsive to and situated within the actual world, even if it is done imperfectly.

Hybrid holism takes these insights seriously and recognizes both *alethic* and *pragmatic* considerations in contributing to the value of a belief. The way these considerations function becomes intelligible when we consider beliefs within a narrative framework.

On the alethic side, true beliefs formed though proper epistemic processes are valuable because they instantiate a proper mind–world correspondence. The value of truth and evidence is

[258] Ibid.

based in their capacity to connect the individual to reality, thereby enabling accurate understanding and attunement to the world, which are essential to well-being.

On the pragmatic side, beliefs have prudential value insofar as they relate meaningfully to the person's goals, identity, values, and concerns. Beliefs that matter the most (prudentially speaking) are those that have higher significance in one's life narrative such as those that ground long-term projects. These hold a value that is not reducible to truth alone.

Hybrid holism, then, can account for the prudential value of epistemic states that fall short of *knowledge*. Unjustified true beliefs and justified false beliefs may still be valuable, for their truth and for their aspirational veridicality. Hybrid holism preserves the intrinsic value of knowledge but also allows for more nuanced epistemic states to contribute positively to a person's well-being.

Unjustified true beliefs can, in certain cases, contribute positively to well-being. Consider the example of an individual who mistakenly marks down the incorrect date for a medical appointment, subsequently loses the note, but ends up misremembering the date as the correct one. As a result, she successfully attends her appointment. Although her belief is unjustified, it nonetheless leads to a favorable outcome. In this case, the prudential value of the unjustified true belief is functionally equivalent to that of knowledge.

Similarly, justified false beliefs can have prudential value. The value of justification is typically linked to reliability. There are strong reasons to favor beliefs formed though reliable cognitive processes. Since epistemic luck cannot reliably produce truth, it is rational to cultivate reasoning abilities that have a tendency towards producing true beliefs. Consistently forming beliefs through good reasoning reflects epistemic virtue, so even if a belief is false, its property of justification indicates that sound epistemic conduct was implemented. This suggests that the *process*

by which a belief is formed can have epistemic value. It seems that forming beliefs in line with the best available evidence more valuable than stumbling across truth by chance. Although it would be ideal for justified beliefs to be true as well (given the intrinsic value of truth), justification remains valuable, even if the belief turns out to be false.

By contrast, an epistemic state that is an intuitive, robust bad is holding a belief that directly contradicts what the available evidence supports. This reflects an inability to respond appropriately to evidence. This epistemic state can be referred to as what Eric Mathison calls an *anti-justified belief*.[259] Such beliefs are not only epistemically problematic, but also prudentially harmful, as they reflect a break in one's responsiveness to the world and in one's ability to form beliefs reliably through justification.

Even so, acquiring certain kinds of painful or devastating knowledge can still have intrinsic prudential value in some cases. For instance, learning the details of a loved one's torture before their death may have severe emotional consequences, yet it still remains a form of knowledge, so it carries a kind of inherent value. In such cases, learning the truth may simultaneously be prudentially good (because it connects one to reality) and prudentially harmful (due to the psychological distress it causes). Whether such knowledge is, on balance, beneficial depends on various contextual factors, including the severity of the information and the individual's capacity to process or integrate it into their psyche. In some cases, the connection to reality may be worth the emotional cost; in others, the psychological burden may outweigh the good of knowing.

Hybrid holism, with its narrative component, offers a nuanced account of the prudential

[259] I borrow Eric Mathison's (2108) helpful term for this condition.

value of epistemic states. On this view, the value of a belief depends not only on its truth or falsity, but also on how it figures within a person's broader life narrative. False beliefs are not inherently bad; their prudential significance depends on whether they support or undermine the coherence of a person's life story. This framework helps explain the intuitive force behind Nozick's experience machine case. While life inside the machine may include having true beliefs, it is regarded as worse than real life. Hurka argues this is not merely due to a lack of positive value, but also due to the presence of significant disvalue that stems from being disconnected from reality.[260] On his view, false beliefs about one's immediate environment or the external world carry particularly high prudential costs, as they distort the narrative fabric of one's life (which includes one's self-understanding and a sense of meaning). Those plugged into the machine are systematically deluded about their place in the world. This disrupts the meaningful relations between their experiences and reality, in which they are supposed to be embedded. This undermines the person's narrative coherence.

Comparatively, not all instances of ignorance or false belief are equally harmful. For instance, it would seem less bad for Aristotle to be mistaken about scientific beliefs regarding the laws of nature (even though the false beliefs might still contribute some negative value). However, if such beliefs are compartmentalized and do not have a significant impact on his narrative coherence, then their prudential disvalue is limited. The narrative structure of his life (i.e. the relations between his experiences and actions and his self-understanding) remains largely intact. Thus, hybrid holism, by incorporating this narrative component, can explain why not all absences of knowledge are equally bad and why some may hardly detract from well-being. In this way, hybrid holism is well-equipped to address the pessimist's worries about the prevalence of ignorance in human life. If false or

[260] Thomas Hurka, "Asymmetries in Value," *Noûs* (2010): 218.

missing knowledge does not undermine the meaningful coherence of one's life story, its disvalue is minimal. Conversely, knowledge that helps to maintain or restore one's life narrative coherence can enhance well-being. Epistemic shocks, however, such as discovering that one has been deeply mistaken or deceived, have the potential to disrupt narrative coherence and fragment one's self-understanding. Restoring narrative integrity, then, often requires integrating new, possibly unsettling knowledge in a way that does not fragment personal identity.

The pessimist would argue that people are most deluded about facts regarding their own life and circumstances, leading to a significant lack of knowledge. If lacking knowledge is prudentially harmful, this would result in a substantial shortage of prudential value. Hybrid holism, however, can generate more well-being through its narrative component by taking into account the context of positive illusions, wherein they sometimes have prudential value. Psychologists have maintained that people are prone to holding falsely positive beliefs about themselves, their level of control over things, and their future. These illusions are highly pervasive and are even sometimes considered adaptive.[261] However, the findings suggest that these false beliefs have instrumental value, not intrinsic prudential value.[262] Also, they *only* have this instrumental value if they meet two conditions: they co-exist well with other correct beliefs and they are responsive to environmental feedback (this is in contrast to delusions characteristic of mental illness).[263] These beliefs are adaptive insofar as they do not depart entirely from reality but rather exaggerate the real in a positive direction. For instance, someone who is moderately funny might see himself as very funny. But what matters is that he is correct about other self-assessments and that he will revise his self-conception in response to evidence of others not finding him funny. It is possible that his revision will still be slightly

[261] Shelly E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind* (Basic Books, 1989), 6.
[262] Ibid., chapter 2
[263] Ibib., 123-143.

exaggerated. Nonetheless, the exaggerations have intrinsic disvalue even though they have positive instrumental value. The value of any piece of knowledge cannot be evaluated independently of the context of that person's narrative. So, the disvalue of even the worst type of anti-knowledge (an anti-justified false belief concerning internal facts) can be mitigated. What has the highest intrinsic value is having a certain threshold amount of personal life knowledge- a picture of one's life that is accurate, covers all the main categories, and is rich enough in details to relate events to each other. Significant life knowledge is a threshold concept with a high threshold. Acquiring more knowledge than this threshold is not necessarily better. If positive illusions are a relatively small part of the total set of personal beliefs and the person is otherwise well-informed, the positive illusions don't subtract from their well-being. Hybrid holism can reflect this intuition.

In what follows, I argue that hybrid holism can enhance the positive prudential value of a particular type of knowledge (i.e. personal life knowledge) through its narrative component. Evaluating pieces of knowledge in relation to the life narrative context in which they occur captures the intuitive distinction between the value of personal life knowledge and other kinds of knowledge such as trivial facts.

I define personal life knowledge as the understanding of life's important constitutive occurrences and relations that play a crucial role in structuring one's life narrative. This type of knowledge can be grouped into four main categories: knowledge of significant life events, actions, values, and goals. The first involves knowing what important events transpired in one's life, their temporal sequencing and context, and their significance to one's overall life and to one's personal identity. The second consists of knowing one's motivations, intentions, desires, and aversions, and understanding how one's actions impacted one's life narrative trajectory. The third involves knowing

ones cares and values and how they have evolved or remained stable over time, and in response to what. The fourth is knowledge of what one will pursue and has pursued and why it matters, and knowing what one has achieved or failed at, along with the interpretation of those outcomes. Personal life knowledge provides the necessary facts to construct a coherent life narrative. It enables pattern recognition to identify common themes and form deeper connections between life's constituent events. These pieces of knowledge play a large role in shaping the relevant meanings of life occurrences. Thus, we could reasonably expect personal life knowledge to carry greater prudential significance than other forms of knowledge, as it connects disparate (formerly meaningless) experiences into a meaningful whole. Hybrid holism, with its recognition of the impact of narrative relations on prudential value, is able to account for the distinct significance of personal life knowledge.

(ii.ii) Achievement

I turn now to a second item commonly included on "objective lists" of things that contribute to well-being: achievement. I will specify plausible conditions that define achievement and argue that the degree of these conditions can influence its prudential value. Since my view includes contextual considerations, it can accommodate this variability. Having outlined the likely conditions for achievement, I will attempt to define its most plausible corresponding bad. I will then show that hybrid holism can mitigate the impact of this bad through narrativity.

I start by examining the necessary conditions of achievement. Achievement seems to involve multiple conditions. It requires both a process and the successful outcome of that process.

Moreover, the process likely needs to include effort and competence.[264] Some degree of effort is necessary for some success to count as an achievement. A fully functional, non-disabled adult succeeding at tying his shoes would not be seen as achieving anything, since that act involves no effort, but this might be an achievement for a young child or for an adult with a severe motor impairment. Competence also seems necessary, since the success should result at least partially from the agent's actions in pursuit of that end. The success should not be the result of pure chance. Competence reveals that less luck was involved. Typically, the greater the effort exerted and higher competence, the greater the value of the achievement. The narrative component of hybrid holism can capture the process-like nature of achievement, offering a more accurate representation of its prudential value.

I will expand on these notions of competence and effort. Competence is tied to whether an agent played the correct role in determining an outcome, which is partly a function of effort as well. If competence is lacking, one can make up for it with increased effort. Intuitively, competence enhances the value of achievement. When an agent dedicates more abilities and resources to an end, it reflects that end's meaningfulness for the agent. Part of achievement is forming the intention of attaining some goal. When an agent selects a goal and exercises his capacities in its pursuit, he benefits more in succeeding because that goal holds greater personal value. Competent achievement generally seems better than an incompetent one. This is not to suggest that that a stroke of good fortune lacks value, but rather that its value could be enhanced if it were caused by competence.

[264] My understanding of achievement is grounded in Gwen Bradford's analysis.
Gwen Bradford, *Achievement,* Oxford University Press: 2015.

I now analyze the negative counterpart of achievement and show how hybrid holism can discount its significance. This counterpart is usually understood as failure. But how should we define failure? Failure could be interpreted as the absence of success, but this does not seem like a robust bad. Most actions don't result in success. If this is the correct understanding of failure, then we fail a lot more than we think we do. Intuitively, the absence of success is not dis-valuable in itself. For something to be deemed a failure, it seems there must have been an attempt at achieving a goal. For this reason, it would be more appropriate to call the negative counterpart of achievement a failed attempt.[265]

Having clarified the negative counterpart of achievement, the next step is to show how hybrid holism can lessen the impact of failed attempts. Failed attempts can be mitigated when they still involve competence. The way in which this occurs can be understood through narrative features. A failed attempt cannot be understood independently of "its surrounding context, its history, and its manner."[266] Swanton presents a case of failure in an attempt:

> "Prada's failure in the America's Cup in February to March 2000. Prada, the Italian syndicate, lost the America's Cup match in Auckland, New Zealand, 0-5. A spectacular failure on the surface- they were beaten by a better crew and a faster boat." [267]

The New Zealand crew was vastly more experienced and held an unfair advantage due to their faster boat. But Swanton argues that the Italian team's failure's history included years of hard work in developing mastery. Its manner included the graciousness in defeat and impeccable execution of

[265] Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 171.
[266] Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 38
[267] Ibid., 36-37.

skills. She calls this an instance of honorable failure. The value of the crew's competence, despite their failure, can be understood by appealing to context.

Intuitively, differences in values of events result from differences in the meanings of victories, struggles, and failures. Two people can both attain the same position and struggle for an equal period of time, but their achievements and struggles are not the same, since they have different narrative meanings. Other factors that can be relevant are how the victories were achieved or the reasons why they failed. Thus, the prudential value or disvalue of achievements or failures cannot be understood apart from context, and more specifically, apart from the role each plays in a narrative.

This concludes the section on hybrid holism's advantage over many list theories. In this section, I have shown that my view allows more sources of well-being by considering the contextual relations of objective goods. I have also analyzed the negative counterparts of two widely accepted objective goods – knowledge and achievement – and have shown how the narrative component of my theory can mitigate their harm. For these reasons, hybrid holism is better placed to respond to the challenge of pessimism and anti-natalism than at least typical objective list theories.

3.4 Happiness theories

I now turn to another major category of well-being accounts: happiness theories. I will present what I consider to be a representative version of this class of theories and examine how it addresses ill-being. I will then argue that my theory has notable advantages in its treatment of ill-being because of its inclusion of contextual features. Lastly, I argue that since my view does not

assume moment-internalism, it has an advantage over happiness theories that do assume moment-internalism, as these theories may underestimate sources of well-being.

I discuss Sumner's authentic happiness theory, as it represents one of the most well-developed and influential defenses of happiness-centered accounts of well-being. According to his view, a person is faring well if they are happy and their happiness meets certain conditions of authenticity – specifically, that it is both informed and autonomous.[268] By incorporating an authenticity constraint, Sumner's theory addresses the major objections to mental state theories (such as concerns related to manipulated or adaptive happiness), making it a useful tool for evaluating the overall plausibility of happiness-based approaches. I will present the corresponding account of ill-being that arises from his theory and argue that it faces serious difficulties.

As I explained in Chapter 1, the well-being components of Sumner's view are: (i) one must have an affirmative attitude towards the conditions of one's life and (ii) this attitude must be authentic by being informed and autonomous. Being informed means having sufficient relevant information that one's life is going well. Relevant in this case means that the information would make a difference to a person's subjective assessment. Being "autonomous" means one can critically assess and select one's own values.[269] "Welfare therefore consists in authentic happiness, the happiness of an informed and autonomous subject."[270]

[268] L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 158.
[269] Ibid., 160.
[270] Ibid., 172.

I now turn to the conception of ill-being implied by Sumner's happiness account. This analysis serves to highlight the comparative strength of my own approach. I argue that my view offers a more plausible means of discounting ill-being. Sumner characterizes ill-being as follows:

> In explicating the happiness theory we have focused almost exclusively on welfare rather than illfare, happiness rather than unhappiness. But the analogous treatment of these latter notions is straightforward, resting as it does on the negative counterparts of personal satisfaction and endorsement. A life is therefore going badly for someone when she (authentically) experiences its conditions as unsatisfying or unfulfilling, or disclaims or disowns them.[271]

From this, ill-being can be either autonomous, uninformed dissatisfaction or unfulfillment, or non-autonomous, informed dissatisfaction or unfulfillment.[272]

I will first analyze the implications of the first conception of ill-being. Consider a scenario in which a person lacks information that would lead him to make a worse well-being assessment. For instance, consider Nate, a 40 year old man experiencing mild fatigue and occasional dizziness, which he attributes to stress and aging. Unbeknownst to him, these symptoms are the result of a serious medical condition. Despite his deteriorating health, Nate perceives his well-being as fair. However, if he were informed of his illness, his assessment of well-being would likely be worse due to the negative consequences. On Sumner's approach, Nate's current well-being should be discounted, as it stems from a misjudgment of his actual circumstances. We would expect an analogous discount to

[271] Ibid., 177.
[272] Eric Mathison provides a helpful clarification of this in *Asymmetries and Ill-Being* (University of Toronto, 2018).

occur in the context of ill-being when a person lacks information that would cause a *better* well-being assessment.[273] In other words, if the cause of the ill-being assessment is misinformation, it should be regarded as less harmful for the person. However, this reasoning seems problematic in certain cases.

Consider for example the following case: a man finds his wife unconscious following a car accident. Mistakenly believing she has died, he is overwhelmed by grief and ultimately takes his own life. Sumner's view implies that we should discount the prudential disvalue of the man's grief, assuming that the relevant information – that she is temporarily unconscious – would make his assessment less negative.

However, this generates the incorrect result. The emotional devastation the man experiences is indistinguishable, in its phenomenology and its consequences, from the grief he would feel if his belief were true. The mere fact that the man's suffering is grounded in misinformation does not seem to diminish its prudential significance. We should not expect a prudential disvalue difference between falsely believing and knowing that the wife is dead. This suggests that Sumner's framework, in discounting ill-being rooted in false beliefs, may yield counterintuitive results.

Now, I consider the implications of the second conception of ill-being. Sumner writes that non-autonomous happiness produces an "undefined" welfare amount. Consider the case in which a person is indoctrinated into giving an artificially lowered well-being assessment. Perhaps she was indoctrinated into believing she needs luxuries to be faring well. At some point, when she loses her life of luxury and leads an upper middle-class life instead, she assesses her life as going horribly. However, she is doing better than she thinks. Since her assessment is not autonomous, her

[273] Ibid.

dissatisfaction can be discounted. Now, consider a different case. Mackenzie finds herself joining a religious cult, which brainwashes her into adopting a negative view of life. Previously content with her life, she forms a negative assessment of her situation. Since her dissatisfaction is non-autonomous and inauthentic, Sumner would suggest it should be discounted. However, it seems Mackenzie is actually worse off than she believes. In this case, Sumner's view has an implausible implication. A more plausible approach would recognize the lack of autonomy itself as a prudential bad. To address this issue, it seems necessary to introduce a non-subjective criterion for well-being. Since my view includes an objectivist component, it can accordingly handle such cases.

A further advantage of hybrid holism is its denial of moment-internalism. If happiness theories assume moment-internalism, it would be hard to assess how pleased you are with your life in its present form, with the state of your life at this present moment, independently of what has come before and what will happen later. It seems that assessments should involve consideration of what will happen over time. What exactly does it mean to say, "I'm faring well right now"? It could mean that there have been a lot of good things happening recently that will make a contribution to my overall well-being. Or it might mean these good things made a contribution to this present moment. Or that they made positive contributions in comparison to experiences of other times in my life. Perhaps the recent events contributed more prudential value than the more distant ones, even if they are less good considered alone. Or the events contributed positive value in light to my expectations. They could have contributed more than I expected them to. Or it might mean I am on track to achieving a high level of lifetime wellbeing if things continue as they have been so far. What is meant will vary with structural/contextual factors and this can be accounted for by hybrid holism.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that hybrid holism is better placed than its rivals to respond to the challenge of pessimism (i.e. the view that most lives are unworthwhile), both because it admits more sources of well-being and also because its incorporation of narrative structure helps offset the significance of corresponding forms of ill-being. I have argued that the prevailing theories of well-being are vulnerable to the pessimist's argument that ill-being outweighs well-being in most human lives. These theories may yield an unduly negative assessment of human life, given some plausible empirical assumptions, a vulnerability that the pessimist can exploit. In contrast, I have argued that hybrid holism is not susceptible to this problem in the same way. Its hybrid component allows for more sources of well-being than non-hybrid views, as it takes both subjective states and objective goods to bestow prudential value. And its narrative component allows for contextual features to enhance well-being as well, especially by mitigating the disvalue of prudential bads. I outlined three specific narrative features that can intuitively alter the prudential value of life events, chiefly by redeeming and lessening the disvalue of prudential bads. This approach avoids atomistic features, which enables the narrative relations to serve their redemptive role. The theory thus acknowledges that human lives unfold over time and that the prudential impact of goods and bads can vary depending on how they are integrated into a broader life story. Hybrid holism also accommodates the intuition that the total contribution of any single life event to well-being is not defined in advance, but is determined by how that event is interpreted and situated within the person's evolving evaluative outlook. On this view, achieving well-being involves working back and forth between experiences, preferences, and objective goods.[274] While certain goods possess objective value, their

[274] Valerie Tiberius's "value-fulfillment theory" also emphasizes that well-being involves a process. On her view, "well-being consists in fulfilling, actualizing, or realizing, your appropriate values over time"

prudential significance should be understood in terms of *potential* rather than fixed value. My proposed view takes well-being to depend on a multitude of factors: phenomenal properties of experiences (emotions, moods, pleasures, pains), desires, evaluations, goals, plans, as well as the interactions between these. Well-being, on my view, is not constructed in the extreme sense that it reduces to mere subjective endorsement. Rather, it is partially constructed through the person's shaping of values, desires, and experiences (within limits that preserve some objectivity).

In sum, hybrid holism is able rejoin the pessimist's objection by permitting more sources of well-being and by discounting the negative value of sources of ill-being. Even in a life dominated by prudential bads, hybrid holism can show that the life is still worthwhile. As such, my view is better placed to respond to the challenge of pessimism than are its major rivals.

See Valerie Tiberius, "Well-Being, Value Fulfillment, and Valuing Capacities," in *Philosophy and Human Flourishing*, ed. John J. Stuhr, (Oxford University Press, 2023): 122.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have developed and defended a novel theory of well-being, hybrid holism, and have argued that it offers significant advantages over leading alternatives, particularly in being better positioned than them to address the challenge posed by pessimism and anti-natalism. In chapter one, I examined the concepts of prudential value and well-being, surveyed the existing literature on well-being, and raised concerns for various contemporary approaches with respect to important adequacy constraints on well-being. This initial analysis provided the conceptual framework for presenting my positive view. In chapter two, I introduced and defended my own hybrid holist theory of well-being. I argued that it satisfies important adequacy constraints for theories of well-being and that it avoids the limitations faced by its rivals. Chapter three then shifted focus to a discussion of the challenges posed by philosophical pessimism and anti-natalism. I argued that the pessimists and anti-natalists raise plausible yet underappreciated problems for theories of well-being. In chapter four, I argued that hybrid holism can address the pessimist's challenges and also explain why life is prudentially valuable in the majority of cases, without simply presupposing that life is inherently worth living. I conclude that hybrid holism offers advantages in its treatment of well-being over its main rivals, for many reasons, but especially because it offers a compelling response to the serious, persistent challenge posed by philosophical pessimism.

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