

Well-Being, Time, and Dementia

(approx. 4,500 words)

Philosophers often discuss what makes a life *as a whole* good. Moreover, it is often assumed that beneficence, which is directed at the well-being of another person, is concerned with the good of that person's life as a whole. The latter claim, however, strikes me as wrong. I believe that we have a number of loosely related ways of talking about the value of a life. But not all of these ways of evaluating lives track genuine prudential value. By prudential value I mean the type of value a theory of well-being is *about*. It is the type of value that is normative for practical reason concerned with self-interest as well as practical reason concerned with beneficence towards others. It is the kind of value we speak of when we speak of what is good *for* an individual. We typically assume that what is good *for* A is reason-giving for A insofar as he is concerned with his own interest. We also assume it is reason-giving for those who care about A and wish to benefit him or keep him from harm.¹

Reflections on the following type of case have led me to doubt that talk about the good of a person's life as a whole is talk about well-being. Consider the following:

Rupina wrote an advanced directive stipulating that if she should ever develop Alzheimer's, she should not receive treatment for any potentially fatal condition. Rupina was well informed about dementia. She understood

¹ Some philosophers express skepticism that anything fills all of these roles, but addressing such concerns is beyond the scope of this paper. See e.g. T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 3.

that it progresses slowly so that honoring her request might substantially shorten her life. She also understood that the experience of dementia is variable and that some dementia patients seem quite happy and content. By making her request, she was not simply trying to avoid either the final vegetative stages of the illness or the objectless confusion and distress that some patients experience throughout. She just did not like the thought that the final stage of her life should be a demented phase. Unfortunately, Rupina developed Alzheimer's. Luckily for her she has turned out to be happy and content most of the time as opposed to anxious, distraught, or sad. She is now in the middle phase of Alzheimer's, which means that she still has certain cognitive capacities as well as many things she cares about. Overall, she appears to be enjoying her life. Suppose she were to develop a case of pneumonia. It is often fatal if not treated, but responds well to antibiotics. What would be best for Rupina?

Ronald Dworkin and Jeff McMahan argue that it would be *best for Rupina* to let her die.² Both reach their conclusions by appealing to what would be best for Rupina's life as a whole. It strikes me, however, that what is *best for Rupina* is to receive antibiotics. In what follows, I shall defend that conclusion by arguing that considerations about the shape of a person's life as a whole are much less important, at least from the standpoint of beneficence, than many suppose. It is important, however, not to confuse the question of what should be done all-things-considered with the question that concerns me here. It

² Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

may be that considerations of respect dictate adhering to her directive against the urgings of beneficence. I take no stand on that question in this paper. I am simply interested in what beneficence demands.

§1

Dworkin builds his argument on assumptions about well-being that he thinks many theorists accept. He first distinguishes between what he calls ‘critical interests’ and ‘experiential interests,’ which for simplicity I shall refer to as ‘critical desires’ and ‘experiential desires.’ Critical desires reflect “critical judgments” of the person about “what makes a life good.”³ Experiential desires, on the other hand, are simply desires for pleasant experiences. Dworkin assumes that the kind of desire expressed in Rupina’s directive is critical, whereas Alzheimer’s patients such as Rupina have only experiential desires.⁴ He also assumes, plausibly enough, that satisfying critical desires matters much more from the standpoint of well-being than the satisfaction of merely experiential desires.

He also rejects what has come to be known as “the experience requirement.” Theorists who reject such a requirement maintain that when a desire has been satisfied there is no need for the individual to *feel* satisfied, indeed, no need for her to know her desire has been satisfied, in order for it to be good for her. This sets the stage for his

³ Dworkin, p.202.

⁴ Agnieszka Jaworska challenges Dworkin’s claim that Alzheimer’s patients have merely experiential desires. However, it turns out this is irrelevant to my argument, for her claim by itself is not sufficient to undermine Dworkin’s view about the interests of patients like Rupina. I explain this in more detail in the full-length version of this paper. Agnieszka Jaworska, “Respecting the Margins of Agency: Alzheimer’s Patients and the capacity to Value” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 28: (1999): 105-38.

claim that it can still be good for Rupina if her old critical desire to avoid dementia is satisfied, even though she is now incapable of deriving satisfaction from this event.

However, Dworkin needs one last element for his argument to go through. He needs to explain why the old desire is still relevant *at a point in time when Rupina no longer holds it*. Dworkin simply asserts that the kind of value contributed to a life by the satisfaction of a critical desire is not temporally delimited. *If* that is so then, because the past desire still counts, and critical desires trump experiential ones, it follows that we do most good for Rupina by satisfying her old critical desire.

It is Dworkin's assumption that certain kinds of prudential value are not temporally delimited that seems odd. At the very least, that would seem to depend on whether a person changes. Even critical desires—desires a person has about the kind of life she wants and what she wants to achieve—can change if the person's *values* or *circumstances* change. When this happens, we typically assume that what's good for the person changes as well. Dworkin, however, equates a person's best interests with what is good for her life as a whole and thinks certain things are good regardless of change, because despite personal change they remain good for the life as a whole. Moreover, whereas ordinary thought about best interests is exclusively forward looking, Dworkin thinks we may have to look to the *past* to determine best interests, since we have to consider how the future will fit with the past. As he puts it, "When we consider how the fate of a demented person can affect the character of his life, we consider the patient's whole life, not just its sad final stages, and we consider his future in terms of how it affects the character of the whole."

Dworkin is minimally right that when we think of best interests we typically adopt a temporally extended perspective on a person's good as opposed to a temporally local one. However, here the parallel ends. Ordinarily the search for what is in a person's best interests is the search for the best balance between the goods of various times—specifically the best balance between present good and the potential goods of the future. By good-at-a-time I do not simply mean what is good at a single moment. Rather, I am invoking our ability to focus on temporally limited goods of various sizes as well as temporally limited portions of our lives that might contain those goods. While it is, of course, possible to narrow one's focus to the good of a single moment, we more often focus on the good of a day, a week, a month or even the good of a few years. All of these are still much less, however, than focusing on the good of the whole or the good of the entire future. This way of thinking of interests as requiring balancing over time is compatible with the idea that as an individual changes her good may change as well and what once appeared to be in her best interests may no longer be so. It is, at any rate, well worth asking whether the critical desires Dworkin appeals to are really prudentially authoritative for the person's whole life. Despite being attitudes *about* the whole (what will make the whole best), do these attitudes authoritatively determine what is good *for* the whole? Can such attitudes matter for our well-being once we no longer embrace them?

In more recent work, Jeff McMahan defends the same conclusion in a different way.⁵ Since McMahan embeds his discussion within a larger project, it is necessary to give some background. Prudential concern is that type of concern that an individual can

⁵ Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing*.

only have for himself. It is a matter of debate whether prudential concern rationally extends across all temporal parts of a single life, i.e. whether it is personal identity that grounds prudential concern. While most theorists assume that it is, McMahan follows Derek Parfit in claiming that prudential concern need not extend to all temporal phases of the same individual. On McMahan's view, the rationality of prudential concern depends on the relative strength of what he calls "the prudential unity relations." These are functional, organizational, and psychological relations the number and strength of which determine the degree of *psychological unity* that holds between any two temporal phases of an individual. Two temporal phases of a single individual may or may not be related by strong prudential unity relations. When the relations between two phases are strong their interests do not differ. We can speak simply of the person's best interests. When the relations are weak, however, each phase is said to have time-relative interests that may differ from one another.

McMahan's notion of time-relative interests is not the same as the notion of what is good-at-a-time. Like the notion of best interests, which adopts the global perspective on the life, the notion of time-relative interests adopts the global perspective on a single, psychologically unified person-phase. McMahan follows Dworkin in equating best interests with what is good for a person's life as a whole. Similarly, the notion of time-relative interests points to what would be best for a psychologically unified phase, viewed as a whole. McMahan intends to capture the idea that a person has a stake in what happens to her during any part of her life (however long that is) to which she is related by strong prudential unity relations. But she may have little or no stake in what happens to her during a phase that is dramatically psychologically isolated from the rest of her life.

For McMahan, dementia represents a case where a single individual is nonetheless divided into temporal phases between which there is little psychological unity. Rupina as she was when she wrote her advanced directive is so different from the Rupina who is contented in her dementia, that we can speak of each phase of Rupina as having time-relative interests. It is in the time-relative interests of the earlier Rupina to avoid dementia.⁶ But it is in the time-relative interests of the demented Rupina to continue to live. McMahan is not only claiming that what was good for Rupina in the past is different from what is good for her now. He is also claiming that the earlier Rupina has no basis for prudential concern about what happens to the demented Rupina. Nor does the demented Rupina have any basis for prudential concern about her earlier self.

Nonetheless, despite his emphasis on time-relative interests, McMahan appeals to considerations about the good of the person's life as a whole to support his ultimate conclusion. What is best overall for someone like Rupina is to satisfy her past desire. This is because we must think about the way the parts of her life contribute to the value of the whole. The period in her life before dementia was rich, complex, and characterized by a high degree of psychological unity. That segment of her life, in which she cared so much about avoiding dementia, would be made better by honoring her past wishes. Of course, we could also do some good for Rupina in this phase of her life by allowing her to live. But McMahan argues that making the earlier segment better would do *more* good for her life as a whole than would making the current segment better by letting her live.

⁶ Not because it will be unpleasant. She has little basis for prudential concern about the experiences of her later demented self. Rather, her current interest is in having a certain kind of life with a type of unity that would be marred by a period of dementia.

Though operating within different frameworks, both Dworkin and McMahan take best interests to be the same thing as the good of the person's life as a whole, and both appeal to the good of the whole to reach their conclusions. They also both assume that at least sometimes prudential value can best be served by attending to a desire from the past, because by doing so the life as a whole is better served. In what follows I shall attempt to expose the flaw in this way of thinking.

§2

I wish to begin by emphasizing the radical nature of one of the key claims Dworkin and McMahan make. The idea that prudential value can sometimes be best served by attending to a past desire certainly runs counter to our ordinary intuitions in non-dementia cases.

To see this, consider the example of Fariya who originally wants to be a poet.⁷ She devotes a number of years to writing poetry and perfecting her craft. During this time one of her greatest desires is that her poetry be published. After a number of years, however, she decides that she wants instead to pursue a career as a literary critic. We need not concern ourselves with the reasons for the change. Let us just stipulate that her desires during both phases are entirely genuine.

Suppose that, wanting to benefit Fariya, I take her old poems and arrange for them to be published. However, at this point in her life, Fariya couldn't care less about those old poems. Given this fact, it would seem odd to say I have *done something good for her*.

⁷ This is an elaboration of an example of Derek Parfit's. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 8, p.157.

I have certainly satisfied an old critical desire of hers. But precisely because it is not her desire any longer it seems bizarre to think that my action serves her interests.

In case one has doubts, consider this variation. Imagine there is a widespread, irrational belief among literary critics that good critics cannot be artists themselves. Thus individuals who are published authors are not taken seriously as critics. Fariya is extremely ambitious for her new career and now counts it lucky that she never published any of her old poems. Once again, without her knowledge I arrange for them to be published. In this case, it should be clear not only that I am not benefiting Fariya, but that I am harming her.

Someone might object to the example by claiming that it is a case where the good of the person's life as a whole is much *more* likely to be furthered by attending to the present. Thus the intuitions elicited don't support the claim that beneficence never directs us to past desires. They merely reveal that in the case of someone with a rich and complex future ahead it is almost always better to attend to current desires and aims. I do not think this response works, however. To see this, consider one last variation.

Suppose Fariya makes her transition from poet to literary critic, but not too long after the change she is diagnosed with an incurable and fast progressing brain tumor. Hence we can now see that the portion of her life devoted to criticism will be very small. Sadly, despite her initial hopes, she will not accomplish much as a critic. However, the period leading up to the illness was a lengthier, rich period in which Fariya achieved quite a bit as a poet. Fariya is devastated by the news, but she does not in any way regret her earlier change nor does she alter her desires. She simply regrets her cruel luck. Once again, it seems bizarre to imagine that I might do the most good for my poor friend Fariya

by arranging to have her earlier poems published. After all, she cares *nothing* about this and may even, under the circumstances, view it as a cruel joke. Thus even when it is clearer that the good of the person's life as a whole (in the sense discussed by Dworkin and McMahan) would be best served by attending to a past desire, our intuitions about *beneficence* do not recommend such an action.

§3

Of course, intuitions alone are not decisive. But they can highlight tensions within our thinking that need to be explained. I shall now set out the explanation that strikes me as most plausible and then defend it.

As I see it, the problem with the idea of beneficently satisfying past desires is *not* that doing so has no effect on the goodness or badness of a person's life as a whole. It *can* have such an effect. Of course, we can't change the past, but we can change the relations between past and present and in so doing alter the value of the whole. David Velleman, for example, has argued that we should conceive of this value in narrative terms. On such a view, one might have reason to satisfy an old desire because by doing so you would alter the meaning of a previous segment of a life and thereby the value of the whole. For example, by completing a project that a person once desired to finish you could make it true that a previous period of intense effort was not wasted. Of course there are many ways of assigning value to a life as a whole, narrative value being just one example. Other evaluative frameworks could also support the idea that sometimes the whole can best be improved by satisfying a past desire. The problem is that these ways of thinking about the good of a whole have no relation to genuine well-being.

My argument appeals to what I take to be a necessary condition for the truth of any claim of the form “B is good for A.” The principle is this: In order to establish that B is good for A it must be possible to locate an authoritative perspective from which A herself would appreciate B and see it as good *for* her. This perspective could be actual or hypothetical, but it cannot be chosen arbitrarily. It must be reasonable to suppose that the perspective selected is one that supports good prudential judgment.

As stated, this is actually a weak requirement, one that most theorists of well-being would, I think, accept. I say that A must be able to *appreciate* B because this leaves open the exact nature of B’s effect on A. So, for example, I do not assume that B must make A happy. I say that A must *be able to* appreciate B, to emphasize that even if A never actually experiences B it might still be true that B is good for her (if she would appreciate it if she knew about it under the right conditions). Hence, the principle does not presuppose an experience requirement. Since theorists of well-being are all too familiar with the fact that an individual’s actual perspective on her life may be flawed in various ways (by lack of knowledge, irrationality etc.), I emphasize that the authoritative perspective may be actual *or* hypothetical, leaving it open what the best hypothetical conditions would be, just so long as they can plausibly be related to good prudential judgment. Finally, since this requirement is necessary *but not sufficient* for B’s being good for A, the principle can be adopted by a range of theorists.

Since we are concerned with the normative force of considerations about what would be good for a person’s life as a whole, we must ask whether there are facts about the good of the whole that satisfy this condition. In order to establish that B, which is good for A’s life as a whole, is good *for* A, there must be an authoritative perspective

from which A herself would appreciate B and view it as good *for* herself. If no such authoritative perspective can be found, then we will be forced to conclude that facts about what is good *for* A do not include facts about what would be best for her life as a whole.

Consider first McMahan's way of viewing cases like Rupina's. According to him, she is composed of two psychologically isolated temporal parts, each with distinct time-relative interests. This means not only that what is good for Rupina in her demented phase is quite different from what was good for her before, but that neither temporal phase has any reason to care about the good of the other phase. Given this account, it is odd that McMahan appeals to what would be best for Rupina's life as a whole. After all, from what perspective is such a judgment made? If we wish to claim that B is good for Rupina's life as a whole, there must be a prudentially authoritative perspective from which Rupina herself would see B as good *for her*. What perspective could this be, however?

It is not difficult to locate a perspective from which Rupina will agree with McMahan. The problem is finding a perspective that has *prudential authority*. The earlier, pre-dementia Rupina would certainly endorse McMahan's conclusion. But there is no reason to view her as she was at that particular time as prudentially authoritative for the whole of herself. Indeed, because she is not concerned about the good of all temporal parts of herself, her views about what makes a life as a whole good have no special authority for her later self who is so different. Demented Rupina probably lacks any view about what makes a life as a whole good. But even if she had such a view, the same argument would apply to her. Given how different she is from her former self, her views about her own good have no authority for her whole self.

McMahan's claims about time-relative interests serve to highlight the problem. But the real issue is deeper. One does not have to accept McMahan's framework in order to generate the same kind of dilemma. Consider a non-dementia case of personal change in which sufficient psychological unity is retained that there is no point of talking of distinct time-relative interests. Two temporal parts of a single self can be related closely enough to ground prudential concern, and yet still differ enough to disagree about what would make a life as a whole good. Consider Amal who at T1 thinks that a life should have a certain narrative structure—that it must be a story of ever greater successes. Later, however, he abandons this view. At T2 he comes to believe that the value of a life as a whole just depends on the value of the parts, and that even moderate successes enjoyed by the individual can have great value for him. If there is to be a fact about what is best for this person's life as a whole, there must be some way of deciding which (if either) of these views is prudentially authoritative. But why suppose that either view is? A choice between them seems *arbitrary* since it is not obvious why Amal at T1 would be a better prudential judge than Amal at T2 or vice versa.

In other contexts, theorists of well-being searching for prudentially authoritative answers often appeal to what the individual *would* believe *if* she were fully informed or fully rational etc. Without taking up the issue of whether such conditions could ever be sufficient by themselves, it seems clear that information and rationality do serve to improve prudential judgment. So perhaps, instead of appealing to the actual views of the earlier or later Amal, we should ask what Amal would think if he were fully informed or fully rational. But there may be two answers here again. Amal as he is at T1 but with full information and rationality may have a different view from Amal as he is at T2 but with

full information and rationality. Both perspectives may count as improvements over the actual perspective in some respects. But neither seems authoritative in this matter of the good of the whole.

§4

There is a certain way of looking at a life that stands back and considers the whole life as a complex object. From this perspective there are many ways of assigning value to this life-object. We may like the idea of a life with a certain story line, or the idea of a life in which great achievements occur early, or a life in which happiness is spread evenly throughout. Whatever an individual's view at a time about the best way to evaluate her life as a life-object, I have tried to argue that there is no fact of the matter about which life-object evaluative scheme her life *should* conform to. And so considerations of this sort are limited in what they can tell us about her well-being. Insofar as she cares about leading a life that exemplifies a certain pattern, she may make choices that reflect this preference. And depending on one's theory of welfare value some of these choices may be good for her, and perhaps good for her simply because she cares about them so much. But there is no sense deeper than her own embrace of this ideal in which her life *should* live up to it. And if at some point in the future she should cease to care about it, then there would be no reason at all to make her life conform to it. If we as benefactors are concerned with her welfare, this kind of stance on a life should not be the stance we adopt.

Does this imply there is no meaning to the idea of best interests? No. But we must realize what we are speaking of when we speak of best interests.

I am not denying that as temporally extended beings we have reason to be concerned about our future or to try to make it as good as possible. I believe we generally do this by thinking about how best to fill the remainder of life with many diverse temporally local goods and some temporally extended ones, but not about how to impose some sort of pattern on the whole. Moreover, even if an individual were to conceive of her interests in terms of such a pattern, I would deny that it is in her best interests to continue in the pattern beyond the point where she thinks of her life in that way. Finally, we must recognize that our good changes as we change. Hence the attempt to conceive of our best interests is a potentially shifting enterprise.

Moreover, contrary to Dworkin and McMahan, I do not believe that we consider the past when considering best interests. We would only consider the past if we were trying to think about the relations between past and present—trying to fit the whole into a certain pattern or give the whole a certain meaning. However, if one is merely concerned with the question of how best to fill one's life with diverse temporally local goods and some temporally extended ones, there is no need to look backwards. One can't add goods to the past, so one will focus exclusively on the present and the future. Beneficence demands that we focus on what is good for Rupina now, as she is in her demented state, and perhaps—if it is relevant—on her future. But both such considerations in this case clearly speak to offering her treatment. Hence this is what beneficence demands for her.