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Living Storied Lives

by

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For all those concerned to live as they ought,

but unsure what that means for them.
ABSTRACT

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Philosophy should help guide our lives. After all, the central question of ethics, one of philosophy’s central fields, is, “How ought one to live?” Yet, philosophy’s answers are inadequate, not because they are illegitimate, but because they are incomplete, pressingly so. I believe that by and large philosophy's life-guiding prescriptions are correct—be moral, flourish, pursue goals and desires important to you, make room for pleasure. I also believe that they do not guide well enough, that they fail to reach a heightened yet still-meaningful level of specificity that agents rightly seek. A kaleidoscope of patently feasible yet clearly incompatible lives face any agent concerned to live as she ought, all of them perfectly permissible by the lights of philosophy’s standard norms. So, which ought I to pursue? How ought I to live?

This dissertation aims to help alleviate this problem of incompleteness. I argue that, within the basic moral boundaries of respect toward others and prudential boundaries of your own well-being, one ought to live a storied life. By looking at certain aspects of your personal history as the basis of, or material for, an unfolding narrative of growth, redemption, overcoming—in short, of progress—you will find specific enough next steps. Besides providing heightened guidance, this new philosophical prescription will lend your life a higher degree of intelligibility. You will have a life with rich explanatory power, a life of which you can be proud to tell. In sum: while many lives
available to you are fine by the lights of morality and prudence, some bring forward your particular past in a more intelligible way, and these are worth your attention.
I want to thank a non-philosopher first, my dear friend Phillip Borzilleri. Phillip, you were there week after week, after week; year after year. You encouraged me, comforted me, brought levity, or gravity, each as the situation required. You took me out to dinner—countless dinners. You helped to quiet the negative chatter. You were a light in the last, difficult years of this project. Thank you so very much.

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I must thank my friend and fellow Kantian-Hegelian (do we know even yet what we are?), Jesse Slavens. The specification of many of the central ideas in this book took place over the course of several score one-on-one meetings with him, by far the most satisfying philosophy I have ever done—neither one-sided, nor incomplete, neither in content nor, most importantly, in form. Jesse and I connected quickly as mates in the same cohort, hiked the Sierra Nevadas with his pup Floyd and kept up our conversations over Skype even when life got in the way for both of us. Let the discussions continue.

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Introduction

Ethics is supposed to guide our lives, for the promise of guidance inheres in its original question, “How ought one to live?” Yet philosophy's answers are inadequate, not because they are illegitimate, but because they are incomplete, pressingly so. I believe that by and large philosophy's life-guiding prescriptions are correct. I also believe that by and large they don't guide well enough, that they fail to reach a heightened yet still-meaningful level of specificity that agents rightly demand.

Take for granted—assume as true and legitimate—all of the familiar prescriptions to live a moral, prudent, flourishing, satisfying and pleasurable life. Still there will be a great many kinds and ways of life open to you. I could be a philosopher, yes, but I could also be a doctor, a historian, a businessman, a journalist, an artist, athlete, coach or carpenter. On the personal side, I could lead the more traditional family life, have children and host church barbecues on Independence Day; I could marry but have no children; or I could be a bachelor, teach college and travel the world over summer. I could be cosmopolitan, living here and there in a great many places, or I could put down roots in a small rural town. Adjust the lists to suit your temperament and preferences. You, too, will find a great many possibilities, all of them perfectly moral and prudent, perfectly healthy, desirous, pleasurable lives. Yet our question remains. Which ought I pursue? *How ought I to live?*

We don't have to move to the realm of the fantastic, of *mere* possibility, in order to make this point (although that does seem to be enough to go on to write a philosophy
A kaleidoscope of perfectly permissible, patently feasible yet clearly incompatible life alternatives face any thoughtful agent concerned to live as she ought. If you are toward the end of life you can point to a kaleidoscope of lives that could have been yours. Thusly are philosophy's answers to the question of ethics pressingly incomplete. There is a meaningful level of specificity in guidance that agents legitimately demand from philosophy and which philosophy has clearly failed to provide.

We need better guidance, in the sense of more, in the sense of greater specificity as to how each of us, in particular, ought to live, in particular. I'm not asking ethics to tell me how I should tie my shoes (ought I put the left-hand lace down first or the right?), or whether I should eat bananas or apples with my oatmeal for breakfast today. But I am asking ethics to guide our lives. It's not too much to ask, given the nature of its question.

This book aims to make a start at alleviating this problem of incompleteness.

What consideration could discharge this task? My intellectual instinct is to turn first to objective, universal conceptions of the good life. These lists of life goods—again we are assuming legitimacy here—have the helpful quality of being strong, stable guideposts. Whatever else you do, make sure you practice your rational faculties. Whatever else you do, be sure and cultivate your body. Whatever else you do, make room for the awareness of beauty.

Trouble is, in order to avoid absurdity these lists must remain vague—they are thick insofar as they draw substantive, objective lines in the sand but still vague insofar as they allow for differential specification. So imagine a list that wasn't vague. Imagine one that told you not just to cultivate your rationality but to focus on mathematics, not just to develop your body but to be a tennis player, not just to have awareness of beauty but to emphasize on portraiture. Such a list, holding itself to be objective, would say that this is
what everybody should do. It would be “thick specific.”¹ It would provide all of the specificity of guidance that even I could ask for. And it would be absurd.

So, we must go subjective. I'm not saying we should go only subjective. Remember, I think that all of the basic parameters of living laid down by philosophy are true and legitimate, objective lists included. I'm saying that, beyond the basic boundaries of morality and objective conceptions of human flourishing, we should go subjective. We must go subjective in order to find the specificity of guidance we seek.

The advantage of subjective considerations is that they allow for a great diversity and at least seem to give fairly precise direction to each. Take the prescription to follow your desire. You may want to live in the mountains and I in the city. We are both doing the same thing insofar as we are doing what we want, so it's a nice principle—universal in a way (in form, rather than content). Yet, we are both doing very different things insofar as you are living in one type of place and me in another.

The trouble with desire—as well as pleasure and identity-based or self-concept approaches—is that it lacks stability. I once wanted a tattoo. I thought carefully, still wanted it, and wanted it strongly. It was a few words carrying meaning for most of my identities. I followed some good advice to wait for one year. I still wanted it strongly. Then I waited six more months simply because recuperation was a minor headache I didn’t then care to tolerate. One more month passed, and the desire left. I came to believe it was more important to build the words’ meaning into my character, not my skin.

Here was a desire, stable and strong for eighteen months, desiccated. The problem is not that what you want differs radically from what I want. That's a good

¹ The phrase is a take on Martha Nussbaum’s “thick vague” description of her own list. See her “Aristotelian Social Democracy,” 217.
thing. The problem is that *what I want differs radically from what I want*. That’s not good guidance.

Another example. Sometimes I like (desire or take pleasure in) philosophy, sometimes I don’t, and higher-order likes, putting aside the infinite regress problem, are higher-order precisely because more non-individualistic, more objective or universal, and *a fortiori* more vague. Desire, pleasure, identity or self-conception, and personal autonomy or authenticity—all of the traditional subjective considerations on offer in normative ethics—can too easily jump back and forth between endorsing, renouncing, ignoring and re-endorsing the same project. Not all tokens of the standard subjective considerations are this fickle of course, but many are, and all tokens of the standard types can be.

Our tattoo example is actually an example of a rare and commendable type of desire. Insofar as desires go, being strong and stable for many months is rare. Most desires are far more fickle than this. Yet, even stable desires are unstable. They are with us, they seem like they won’t go away, and then they vanish. We can’t easily live by these knowing this. I’m not saying we shouldn’t live by these because doing so is immoral, because to be a follower of desire is to be a servant of the flesh, or any such thing. I am ruling them out for merely practical reasons—they are *bad leaders*, not because of what they tell us to do but because they change their mind too much. They point this way and then that, and even when they’re strong they can’t be trusted to stay around.

The instability of the usual subjective considerations—I am referring to them all here—seems to be due to their residence in the agent’s highly internal personal

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2 See my critique of second-order or corrective theories of pleasure and desire in Ch. 1.
reflections about her individuality. Who I am, what I want, what I take pleasure in, what my goals are, which things express “me”—thoughts about these must be important for some purposes (we sure do talk about them a lot) but they are not high quality guides. Such thoughts can skip, double-back, and crisscross; they are often inconsistent. The fact that paying too much attention to them makes for analysis paralysis is evidence of their flitting nature.

Normative ethics needs to get close to the agent in order to know what is good for him but not so close that it is prey to his vicissitudes.

So, we need a consideration that is subjective, that picks up on some aspect(s) of the individual that is unique to you, i.e. that is individual. Yet, it must also have the quality of stability that we liked about objective lists. Such a thing would both allow for the great diversity that we must allow for, give specific enough direction to each, and give that direction with a steady hand. What aspect of you is both unique and stable?

I propose it's your personal history. Put aside for a minute the objections that no doubt spring to mind and which will be, in due course, dismissed. And look. Your personal history—by which I mean what actually happened therein rather than what we remember and how we remember it—is not only stable but permanent. It is also causally and thereby explanatorily prior to desire, et. al.: your history is a (though of course not the only) source for who you are, what you want, and what brings you pleasure, but these are no source for your history.

Moreover, it's also highly—indeed I think the case can be made, maximally—unique to you. Many people have wanted to go off and live in the mountains after all, but how many have lived in Oakland, California, worked as a full-time volunteer for a homeless drop-in center, and acted in a play written by these homeless men and
performed in front of local church audiences, to take a personal example? Your history is even more stable and more unique than your abilities and your knowledge base—two other good candidate features of your subjectivity also rarely discussed in an ethical vein but with more stability and at least as much individuality as the usual suspects.

But how does history guide? It's unique to you, it's certainly stable, but how does it generate that specificity in guidance that we require? Through a narrative relationship of a certain sort. I argue that by looking at your personal history as the basis of, or material for, an unfolding narrative of a certain type you will find specific enough tentative next steps. These futures matter more because, in virtue of instantiating this type of narrative relationship, they lend your life a higher degree of intelligibility. These are the two central claims of my positive argument. Let me say more about both of them.

The type of narrative I have in mind is distinguished by the family resemblance attending familiar literary tropes of growth, development, redemption, reconciliation, the coming of age, overcoming, reparation, recovery, and even, importantly, transformation. There is an abstract structure to these tropes, a common way in which they unify their events. I call it progress, sometimes “comedy” in the ancient sense. In all of these cases a type of struggle is followed by, and related to, a type of victory. There is an upward curve, a progressive or comedic shape, that can be “seen” when one pictures the unity of these cases. In all of these cases, what would in isolation be considered a bad is followed by what would in isolation be considered a good.

Why draw on these cases? Why this type of narrative unity? Because this type of narrative unity is the type that seems, intuitively, to matter ethically (as opposed to

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3 I don’t believe in and in fact argue against planning the whole rest of your life on these or any other grounds. Living is, in experience and according to my theory, an open-ended pursuit, one that evolves, that is dynamic. However, as I show, this doesn't mean it's radically open-ended that one can't discriminate better and worse next steps.
aesthetically) and to matter in virtue of the narrative character present. When a bad follows and is appropriately related to a good, the whole that results is better than the whole that would result were the same underlying events reversed. The converse structure—regress, or tragedy—is worse, ethically (though not aesthetically). We don't wish tragedies on our loved ones, nor upon ourselves. Tragic lives, beautiful though they can be, are not the kind of lives we think we ought to lead.

But progressive lives are. Imagine you are in your old age and a young relative approaches asking you to tell of your life. You do not hope to tell her a tragic story about, e.g. how despite being given all that you could ask for you squandered away your monetary, intellectual, or emotional riches. But tell the child a story of growth, redemption, overcoming, or reparation, of the coming of age, of recovery or transformation—now you have something. Tell the child one of these stories and you satisfy the desires awakened by her approach. You excite not just her aesthetic sense but her ethical one. This is the type of story the child hopes for, the type we want to tell, and, so I argue, the type we ought to live out. Our being inundated and perhaps bored with these tropes at the bookstore and theater only testifies to their irresistibility. These tropes won't go away. If I'm right, there is a reason—they matter for the living of a good life.

In making this argument I draw on a small but growing literature on the putative ethical or broadly speaking moral value of having narrative coherence in one's life. It is precisely cases of what I call progress that dominate. However, few—in fact but one author that I have found—have tried to isolate what is common about these cases and to say what it is about the commonality that makes them matter ethically. 

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4 That one is Annti Kaupinnen, “Meaningfulness and Time.” However, Kaupinnen understands certain instances of regress to be superior to certain instances of progress. For example, a downward trajectory, just think of it as a failure, which occurs despite an agent’s best efforts to the contrary is superior to an
most are concerned only to exploit the intuition in order to support theses from tangential domains. Few take on the value of narrative unity directly, and nobody has tried to make the result action-guiding.

So, what I argue is common about these cases is the abstract structure of their unity. But what is it, beyond their intuitive ethical appeal, that makes them important? Why in other words to they excite us? Why does this type of narrative unity of life matter ethically?

I argue that progressive unity lends a high degree of intelligibility to one's life, higher than regress and higher than a mere causal, “low level of biography” type of unity. Now, this is a rather controversial thing to say. Just as comedy has nothing that makes it necessarily more aesthetic than tragedy, so there is nothing prima facie which seems to make it necessarily more intelligible.

As a general definition, by “intelligibility” I mean what is usually meant by the word, viz. susceptibility to human explanation and understanding. Since things can be more or less susceptible to human explanation and understanding, they can be more or less intelligible.

The concept of intelligibility seems to have two aspects. According to the first aspect, the simplest things are the most intelligible. That $2 + 2 = 4$, that heavy objects dropped from above fall to the ground, that I exist, and many more besides—are facts of upward one that's due to luck. I don't deny this particular claim. The problem is that the example incorporates an interfering consideration, the virtue of agential activity. The “noble failure” as he calls it is better than the lucky success, yes, but not in virtue of the cases' narrative characteristics. Instead, our intuitions about the virtue of agency are interfering with the full display of the value of narrative coherence which only, so I argue at length in Ch. 2, attends upward trajectories.

One of the more popular exploits is end of life issues. See Fischer, Our Stories, 3-26, 129-78; and McMahan, The Ethics of Killing, 174-6, 496-503. If event series can have a holistic structure whose value is independent of the agent's well-being at each end then this might be an additional reason to support some cases of physician assisted suicide for example. The same last year of life for two different people might be worse for one depending on the earlier parts of his life.

The phrase is Arthur Danto’s. See his The State of the Art, 216.
the highest degree of intelligibility according to this aspect. These facts are so clear and simple that they are *easily completely understandable*.

But there is another aspect of the concept. And this is not the clarity and simplicity of the fact understood but its *richness*. Paradigm examples here include “E=mc²,” “I think therefore I am,” and “voluntary exchange benefits everyone involved.” These are highly intelligible facts too, but in a different way. They pack together a fascinating variety of interconnected truths, all unified in a bite-sized morsel. These are loaves-and-fishes type truths. As you eat them, break them apart, more truths appear, and as you eat those, more again, all leading you down a great journey of understanding through diverse fields of inquiry. There is great diversity, yes, but in the end a great diversity *unified*, woven together in a great whole. This is what I mean richness.

Lives which can be told of through tropes of growth, redemption, etc., are more intelligible in this second sense, are *richer* lives. It's easy to see how such lives are richer than the low-level biography—they incorporate a higher degree of unified diversity, i.e. are more parsimonious, both saying more and saying more with less. But how are they richer than tragedy? The full answer is in the final section of Ch. 5, but in a nutshell because we don't consciously aim at failure, lives which are failures, even despite all noble best efforts, will be lives where we are working at cross-purposes with ourselves. In these lives there is not so much narrative rupture, as in an inadequately related turn of events, but two narratives interfering with each other, vying for attention. A life that deteriorates, a failed life, is what it seems: a life in disarray.

So progress is the common feature of cases of narrative unity that matter for ethics. And progress is good because it produces enhanced intelligibility. But why think
intelligibility matters for ethics? Maybe comedy is more intelligible than tragedy, but why care about making my life intelligible?

This work offers no deep answer to that question. Such an answer it seems to me would require another book, bridging, as the proposition does, the fact-value distinction. But I can say this. First of all, we are inquiring animals. Even where things don’t make sense we try and force them to do so. Thus, a more intelligible life has the quality of more deeply satisfying this basic, shared drive.

Second of all, I believe this type of intelligible life matters because it is *ethically inspiring*. What I mean is that it inspires one to the living of life itself—not always good and happy and easy, but still *worth it*. Remember the child at your knee. The storied lives of progress excite not just her aesthetic sense, but her ethical one. This is at least one thing that tragedies lack, rich though they might be in some sense. If we already believe life is worth it, tragedies might help us as lessons in what not to do or what to be aware of. But they don’t directly replenish our commitment to living itself. Storied lives do.

Finally, and fortunately, I am not the only one working with the assumption that intelligibility can drive our moral norms. It is here where I am perhaps most indebted to J. David Velleman's work.⁷ He has single-handedly made it respectable to discuss the cases of narrative value upon which I draw and to discuss intelligibility as a valid ethical concept. However, while I side with him insofar as I think intelligibility matters in our lives, my conception of intelligibility—both the norms I think in play and the instances of practical reasoning which I think it favors—are decisively different. Bottom line: for Velleman, comedy, tragedy and low-level biography are all relatively equal in

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⁷ See Ch. 2, n. 2.
intelligibility because they all participate in the necessarily thin conception of narrative unity per se. But if we are to have any hope of guiding agents beyond the basic moral boundaries, of reaching the heights of specificity that we are seeking we will at least have to distinguish among types of narrative unity.  

I have distinguished a type of narrative unity, given it a normative foundation in intelligibility and said a bit about why intelligibility matters. How, finally, does the result guide at the heightened level of specificity with which we opened? The idea is to use your personal history and I've said that you should link for progressive linkages between your current history and feasible next steps before you. But how does it work?

The full program requires an involved analysis of your history and current circumstance. You want to find the story-line of your individual life so far, recognizing that you will not be planning the entire remainder of your life. This can still sound daunting. But the great variety of items that can and should be folded in is actually an advantage. The more data points, the more nodes in the narrative, the more likely we will be able to see the progressive shape. Remember we looked to your personal history because it was not only stable but highly unique to you. So, the nodes you should be looking for are the ones that make your life, your story, a unique one.

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8 This is not, I should add, an objection to his account. Velleman's interest is with the structure of agency, with the nature of autonomous action. This makes his work the present-day example of the historical role that philosophers have tried to make narratives play in ethics. Historically, when discussing narratives in ethics, philosophers have attempted to make the structure of narrative relations per se be the “glue” which held action together with self, which transformed activity into action, into a self-directed activity, into an instance of personal autonomy. So it makes sense that he's going to license a wide variety of cases of narrative unity. It may very well be that Velleman has finally make narratives stick. But his success is not going to help us. What does help us is the idea that intelligibility can matter for ethics, but we will need a new conception of intelligibility, one that can drive not narrativity itself but narrative unity of a certain sort which can in turn be specific enough to adequately guide action. My work is in developing that conception of intelligibility, articulating that certain sort of narrative unity, linking the two, and saying how the result guides action.
To find these you can look to a large variety of aspects of your self as found in your history. Goals, desires, plans, pleasures, self-concept and practical identities can re-enter here, but so can other things: your accomplishments or achievements, knowledge-base, abilities, your personal values (by which I mean that unique ways you have discharged general positive duties), and your moral character (by which I mean your particular strengths and weaknesses vis a vis the moral law). Traditional subjective features can re-enter here but no one of them, nor any other aspect, is to be considered foundation or necessarily dominant. We are looking not at a present-moment, static snapshot of you, but at the diachronic, dynamic unfolding of your life.

A long example of what I have in mind is contained in Ch. 6 but for introductory purposes a few rules of thumb, suggested by the progressive shape itself, can here be articulated. First of all, you should complete things already begun. You should see things through. For example, if you are writing a book or an essay, you should finish it. If you are pursuing a degree, get it done. If you are questioning a relationship, give your heart to it and really find out if it will work. If you are wondering whether a certain career, a certain position within that career, or a certain organization is the best fit for you, give your all to it and find out. In doing these things you will be using your history, developing in light of it, creating the progressive curve and thereby adding intelligibility, building a more intelligible, richer life about which you can be proud of telling at the end.

All of this is of course assuming that all of these situations are basically morally good and healthy, conducive to flourishing. I would never tell you to stick it out in an abusive relationship or with an abusive boss. This whole inquiry is conducted, this whole book written, about considerations beyond those basic boundaries and I believe those
basic boundaries to be preeminent, to override storied considerations, and to override in lexical order (morality first, prudence second, storied living third).

Of course, even within these boundaries sometimes our projects fail. Sometimes we've given our all to life's current offerings and found ourselves road blocked. When this happens, the guidance from my theory is to learn from these failures, to carry them forward in a new light. Let us say you gave your heart to that relationship and it disintegrated. Let us say it did so as a result of both parties refusing to adjust their differing visions for how the relationship, and the joint future, should go. You had one set of priorities, he another and neither would budge a reordering or even a reweighting.

You learn from this in two ways. Either, next time you pick a mate who has a similar vision or you become flexible, or some of both. The key is that, in doing these things, you make what would otherwise be a wasted part of your life (insofar as intelligibility is concerned) a profitable one.

In general, the guidance resulting from my theory is rather conservative. I encourage you to, in a phrase, develop your evolving given. Much of the time this means staying in your current jobs and relationships, going ahead and taking over your father's business as he's been grooming you, becoming the philosopher, accountant, or artist that you are already being. But it's not just this. You should develop these things, take them to new heights and see where those new heights lead and develop from there. You shouldn't merely stay, in other words, nor should you leave. You should stay and develop.

And yet, sometimes to develop is to transform. I don’t support radical breaks, where you jump from one thing to another without foreshadowing. What I support is change within limits, and sometimes, depending on what comes before, those limits can
permit serious change. Sometimes we can be headed in a direction that is planting seeds for another. At the right moment, large structural changes can make great sense indeed. Thus, I don’t think my account is too conservative either.

In sum, we seem to be of split mind in this terrain, the more personal side of ethics. When looked at objectively, from the most distant third-person, from the perspective of the impartial observer, as if we are intelligent aliens looking down, this time not on the human race, its language or its collective habits, but instead looking squarely at ourselves, each of us individually at each of us individually—we are likely to be breathless at the possibilia, at the stunning variety of possible lives that could have been ours. From this perspective, even that I was born here instead of there, with this type of personality rather than that, with the upbringing I got whatever its quality—all of these are up for grabs. Even more so are the structural parts of our selves, our major decisions, career choices and personal relationships. Yet even more so are our particular goals, plans, desires and pleasures. All of these seem equally good, no one having more reason than any other.

But when we settle down into the first person, there each of us is, having been born where we were, with our particular upbringings, abilities, career choices, life decisions, personalities, expertise, desires, goals, plans and pleasures. We have the sense that this is our material, the material we have been given, that this is the hand we are dealt. I can play it, or I can not play it. But I can't play a different hand.

The trouble is, we have trouble finding a reason why we should play this hand, even recognizing that it is the only one we can play. This book gives us a reason. It's okay. Yes, in some sense you could have been given a different hand but that doesn't undermine the reasons you have to play this one. In a way, you could see this book as a
response to the existentialists though it certainly has not been written in that manner. Existentialism is notorious for saying that we are radically free, and thus that it doesn't really matter which direction we take as long as we take it in good faith, that is, in full awareness or recognition of the fact that we have just as much reason to take it as any other. The only real choice is choice *per se*. I am going to argue that we do have a reason to take one path rather than another and in particular that we have reason to continue the path that we are on.

As a matter of fact—armchair empirical claim here—I believe most of us are already doing do what I am going to advise us to do, but in a half-measured way. So I see myself more so as resolving a layer of questioning, of self-doubt, rather than as producing a new stand-alone layer. I see my theory as allowing us to get on with the business of living that we are already engaged with as we are already engaged with it, but now with increased vigor and enhanced excellence since we will not be delayed by doubt. Doubt delays in at least two ways, by keeping us only half engaged with our current lives and by sending us on long life detours. Less of either of these types of delays is what I hope this work provides its readers.

We shall need to map this argument onto the chapters that follow. The first thing to see is the argument's motivation. We must see the full case for the incompleteness of the standard philosophical prescriptions. You might have been curious to hear more, for example, about why desire satisfaction or hedonism doesn't spell out enough ground-level specifics as to which life is good for you. This is what Ch. 1 does.

I put all the major families of philosophical answers to the question of ethics into two categories. There are prototypical moral answers, moral theories *par excellence*—
consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, etc. “How ought you to live? You should live right by others, respect them, adequately take them into account in your actions.”

Then there are what I call the answers of prudence, which I define broadly to be any theory of self-interest or well-being, of what is good for you assuming you have already met the requirements of morality. These include theories of human flourishing (e.g. objective list theories), desire satisfaction, hedonism and personal autonomy. The point of Ch. 1 can thus be put this way: to satisfy ourselves that “How ought one to live beyond the boundaries of morality and prudence” is a legitimate and pressing question.

The remaining chapters flesh out my positive argument. Since the proposal is to apply a narrative relationship of a certain sort to your personal history the first thing we will want to see is what this narrative relationship of a certain sort is. Thus, in Ch. 2 I isolate its structure, the progressive curve, by canvassing the cases of valuable narrative unities in life and showing what distinguishes them.

Ch. 2 also shows that the value of these cases is not due to any usual prudential good. When you look at cases of progress you are likely to think that their goodness is due to some other factor. For example, project success is a simplistic example of the progressive curve. But successful projects, you might think, are good not because of any narrative unity contained therein but simply because they are cases of good, hard self-directed activity, e.g. of the virtue of human agency manifest. You might worry that the value of narrative unity is a chimerical value in other words. I dismiss this worry through examples of narrative unity scrubbed clean of interfering considerations.

Ch. 3 and 4 do more analytical work. When we see cases of progress freed from interfering considerations we see what is sometimes referred to as retrospective value enhancement. A curious thing seems to happen to the structure of the value of these
events. The earlier bad in a case of progress seems better in relationship than in isolation. Consider training to be an elite soldier, a Navy Seal or Army Ranger. Such training is grueling to say the least. It involves intense suffering. Considered in isolation, treading water until you nearly drown yourself, resisting food until you nearly starve yourself or building a tolerance for torture could only be the delights of masochists. But when followed by the result of becoming an elite soldier those goods seem not only less bad but positively good, not in and of themselves, but in relationship to the later event. I call this the compensation phenomenon and it's an analysis of the structure of the value of these cases.

This compensation phenomenon in turn raises curious metaphysical questions. There is a sense in which later events, or perhaps their values, seem to cause changes to earlier events or perhaps their values. If one undergoes Navy Seal training and then fails, then the training is not what it would have been. Yet we cannot abide reverse causation. So what is the explanation? In Ch. 4 I show that one can be both an analytic philosopher and a self-respecting fan of the compensation phenomenon with all of its attending language of value change. The explanation is that the training, as with any earlier event in a case of progress, is the beginning of an evolving, unfolding extended metaphysical event. Its metaphysical status and concomitant value is dependent upon its role, upon the relationship it has to other, later events of this extended process.

Besides going further into understanding the nature of progressive unities, Ch.s 3 and 4 also point to intelligibility as the underlying normative foundation for storied living. The thought is that intelligibility has the property of being open-ended enough, flexible enough, in short dynamic enough in just the right way to support the compensation phenomenon and its attendant metaphysics. Yet, in conjunction with your
personal history, it also has the specificity and stability in guidance that we seek. It’s hard to imagine any good on offer in normative ethics that has this unique set of properties.

Ch. 5 thus shows why progressive unities are more intelligible than other types. I provide a schema of various types of unity one might glean from a life and situate progress within that schema. I then articulate a conception of intelligibility and argue that progress has more of it than all the other types of unity.

Finally, Ch. 6 returns us to the question with which we opened. It shows, through a long example, how one can tell the story of her life in a progressive manner, and how such a telling provides specific enough guidance as to what she ought to do next.
It goes without saying that there are many important decisions with regard to which moral considerations are simply not decisive, and which must accordingly be based, at least to some extent, upon considerations of nonmoral kinds.¹

Chapter 1

The Incompleteness of Morality and Prudence

We begin with a question. I call it the animating question since its importance enlivens this very book, this very book being one long answer.

Within the boundaries of morality and prudence, how ought I to live?

You might think there is nothing left to specify, no further ought to explore. Yet, the question of ethics is taken to be “how ought I live” full stop.² For sure, “act according to the rules of morality and prudence” is a legitimate answer to the question, but it is only a partial answer. Why so?

¹ Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” 258.
² “How should one live?” is the first sentence of the first chapter of Shelly Kagan’s well-regarded textbook Normative Ethics, the first section of which is entitled “What Normative Ethics Is.”
It is the case that every non-maximizing theory of morality and every non-maximizing theory of prudence declines to categorize all actions as either required or forbidden. Many actions are simply permitted. Maximizing theories are also sometimes in this position, such as when there are ties of utility, when situations do not permit utility translation, or when utility concerns themselves advise against resource-intensive utility discernment. Therefore, theories of morality and prudence, maximizing and non-, underdetermine how I ought to act in many circumstances.

Suppose, as it is thus reasonable to do, that, taken together, a joint theory of morality and prudence permits six courses of action, that each action is feasible, but that it is not feasible to do more than one. You can pick only one, in other words, but whatever you pick is fine by both morality and prudence.

I can still ask: Which of the six ought I pursue? Which should I undertake? What is the right way to proceed? There is still a further ought here. And where there is a further ought, there is the prospect of an ethical theory.

I am distinguishing, as this short argument suggests, ethics from morality from prudence. And this is because there are three important divisions to make, attendant on three different questions. There is first the most general ought question, the unqualified “how ought I to live?” One is likely to hear this question more narrowly than I intend, so I've found another way of putting it that I enjoy. It is this: what considerations are there, of whatever sort, that lean on me, so to speak, as to which way I live my life? Many call this unqualified question the question of ethics. So let ethics be defined as that branch of

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3 Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” 258.
4 I am taking time to show what Frankfurt (epigram) says goes without saying.
inquiry which studies any and all answers to the question, “how ought I to live?”

whatever their guise. “Ethics” is therefore a very general term in this book.

But then there is a narrower question. Something such as: how ought I live my life so as to appropriately take the interests of others into account? Or: which ways of living are respectful of others and which are not? This question is the preoccupation of many people we would call moral philosophers, and theories we would without reservation term “moral theories” are likewise squarely concerned with it. So “morality” seems the right term to apply here. To be rigorous: morality is that branch of inquiry which specifies actions as forbidden, required, or permitted in light of considerations about “what we owe to each other” to use the titular phrase of Scanlon’s work. Morality is all about the appropriate way to interact. It’s about acting in light of the fact that there are others to be taken into account. It's about balancing the interests of self and other.

There is yet a third question, however. Putting aside others for the moment, how ought I live my life so as to best further my own interests? What life is best, happiest, flourishing, healthiest, or most fulfilling for me? “Prudence,” which I understand as the art or practice of furthering one’s own interests, seems the right word here. If morality is about balancing the interests of self and other, prudence is about balancing the interests of self only. We can define it rigorously in way parallel to morality, as theories that specify actions as forbidden, required, or permitted in light of considerations about what

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5 My endorsing the title of his book as a general definition of morality does not commit me his particular theory of morality.

6 It may seem strange to speak of balancing the interests of self. Doesn’t the self have only one interest? But figuring out what is best for me is very much an art of balancing competing internal drives. Not only do desires regularly conflict with each other, but there are other non-desire-based drives that compete.
is in my own best interest. So, on this way of mapping the terrain, morality and prudence are species, ethics the genus.  

The point with which I began can now be made more vivid. It is this: even taken together and defined as inclusively as I have just done, morality and prudence are nevertheless highly partial answers to the question of ethics. There much more ethics to be done even if we assume that all moral and prudential matters have been settled, even if we assume a theory of each. I like to say the two are pressingly incomplete. What I mean by this phrase, to be precise, is that they fail to guide agents at a heightened yet still-meaningful level of specificity. The result is that agents need further guidance ought even once inside the boundaries of morality and prudence.

The generous inclusiveness of my definitions must be emphasized. I have defined the terms at the highest level of abstraction commensurate with distinguishing them. Every major family of ethical theory falls under one category or another. So, it is my

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7 My use of “prudence” draws on only half of the common meaning. Typically, by that word we mean someone who guards her interests carefully. A prudent person carries an umbrella whenever there is a non-trivial chance of rain, for example. But I don't mean exactly that. I don't mean, necessarily, that one should be risk-averse although a kind of conservative does emerge from my account, as mentioned in the introduction. I am instead picking up on the fact that the focus of prudence is on one's own interests. You might have thought, upon reading the introduction, that I would argue that we should stay and develop on grounds of prudence. Once we're on a path—chosen a particular career for example—we should, ceteris paribus, stick with it because, given the fact that we're all mortal, we will have a better chance at success. One needs to reach a certain level of competency of skill before he can effectively exploit it for gain. If you're always trying new things then you never become excellent at any one, undermining your ability to provide for yourself, your needs, interests, goals and plans. But far from arguing on grounds of prudence so conceived, I show that it fails to help. What is the “gain” or “need” that prudence is trying to protect or promote? Prudence does not specify these. It is too formal, or regulative. As with efficiency, so with prudence: we can efficiently secure X only after X is specified, and I can prudently protect my interests only after those interests have been specified. The text is about to investigate the various theories as to what those interests might be, rejecting them all as adequate bases of guidance. In response you might think the idea is that prudence is the best bet in terms of acquiring what John Rawls calls the primary goods, the general goods that everyone needs to live out whatever her conception of the good—love, education, wealth, health, etc. But suppose I have plenty of these already. Now what ought I to do? How ought I to live in particular? Prudence doesn't really answer our question. At its best, it can only build up stores of resources in anticipation of answering, in anticipation of really living.
claim that every major family of ethical theory is insufficient in the sense of being pressingly incomplete. That is a large claim. You wouldn’t be wrong in asking for more argument. Let me now provide it.

Start with morality. To show indubitably that there is still a further ought to explore once all moral matters have been settled, assume a morality. Commonsense morality\(^8\) will do nicely, but I invite you to assume any flagship you like.

Suppose I am living in accord with your morality. Is there still traction to the question “how ought I live?” Of course there is, because many kinds and ways of life are still open to me, morally speaking. For example, I could lead the family-oriented kind of life, obtain a good education oriented toward a high-demand career like accounting or engineering, land a well-paid corporate job, have several children, coach little league baseball on the weekends, live in the suburbs, and host my church friends for barbecues on the Fourth of July. Nothing morally impermissible about this.\(^9\) Or I could lead the life dedicated to human rights and environmentalism, work for a non-profit serving the homeless or the elderly, live in community with other like-minds in downtown urban spaces and travel by public transit. Alternatively, I could lead the life of the intellectual, have a few children or none at all, and eschew the corporate job for a more independent, idea-based existence. Yet another option: I could live more simply, work with my hands as a carpenter or mechanic, join the union, play rec league softball on Saturdays. I could be a cosmopolitan, work for the State Department, live abroad and, as a hobby, write reviews for travel magazines. I could be an artist—a painter, musician, or novelist—

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\(^8\) The phrase is Shelly Kagan's: *Normative Ethics*, 25.

\(^9\) Some moral theories, e.g. Peter Singer's, may demand that we all live a life dedicated to justice. But, if that be your theory I simply ask you to imagine that all are living a sufficiently decent life where that is defined according to Singer's theory. *Now ask:* how ought I live?
work part-time shift work at the local coffee shop until the big break comes, and build a social network composed primarily of peers and friends rather than family and co-workers.

All of these modes are open, all are fine by morality, and still our question remains. Which ought I pursue? *How ought I live?*

Out for #1, of course.

It is at this point, in other words, that theories of prudence naturally enter. And they so enter because “further your own best interests” is a natural response to the question we are now asking (and whose relevance was just proven), viz., “how ought I live, assuming that I’m already living morally?” Nothing wrong with—indeed, much to be said on behalf of—furthering your own best interests assuming you to be already moral. We ought to live right by others _first_, indeed. Beyond that, however, we should live right by our selves; we really ought to actively pursue our own interests.

But what is in my own best interest, after all? What is it to live “right by the self?” To ask this is to ask after theories of well-being. To be sure, theories of well-being eliminate some options left open by morality. Among all the morally permissible lives, some are better than others in the sense that they better promote the individual's interests, however those interests be described. It is my claim, however, that the resultant narrowing is still not enough. Theories of well-being nevertheless remain pressingly incomplete.

Consider once again the six lives I just characterized. Ask yourself whether each of those lives aren't lives of well-being, aren't lives, that is, where the beings that are living them are living well. Put another way: is each of those six lives good? The correct
answer is that they are. *They're all not just moral lives, but good, well-lived lives,* an agent reasonably concludes, *so which ought I live?*

Am I being too quick? I'm afraid I am, though I maintain the conclusion. Let me put it on more solid ground.

The argument was too quick because theories of well-being come in many varieties, and at least two promise the requisite specificity. Take mental state hedonism, the view that the only good life is the one that maximizes the experience of pleasure. True, we may not be able to know right now which of those lives actually will maximize pleasure for the agent (isn’t that a reason in my favor?). But one of them will in fact do so. And it is *that* life one ought to live within the boundaries of morality. Or take a pure desire satisfaction theory, the view that well-being consists ultimately in the satisfaction of your actual (rather than informed) desires, of getting what you want in the present moment, whatever that is. Again, we may not be able to know which of those six will satisfy more of the agent's desires (again, doesn’t this fact almost prove my point?), but one of them in fact will do so. And *that’s* the one she ought to live. So there are at least two theories of well-being that are equipped to be the total remaining answer to the question of ethics.

This response always confuses me. “Ah, what has happened is that you misunderstood the question,” I'm inclined to say. “What I'm talking about here with this term 'well-being,' is not merely enjoyment. I'm talking about theories of *being well,* about theories of the *well lived life.* I'm asking after theories which tell me which mode of human existence—of human *beingness*—is the most laudatory, is the one that I should adopt. Enjoyments such as pleasure and the satisfaction of desire are definitely a part of
any laudable mode of being. Any human existence—Aristotle was surely right about this—that lacks a good dose of enjoyment is missing something. But enjoyment is only a part, one aspect, of the well lived life.”

This is how I tend to respond but other philosophers have held that enjoyment is *all* there is to well-being. The charitable way to proceed is thus to consider “well-being” ambiguous. Some people hear that phrase and they immediately think of the life of enjoyment. By “enjoyment” I mean to refer to pleasure and desire satisfaction. Others like me hear it and they think of a well lived life, of a laudable, excellent existence and they tend to think that such a human affair will include things other than pleasure and desire, indeed, will include many things that are not pleasurable or desired (at the first-order) at all.

Theories of well-being that are also monistic, maximizing theories of first-order enjoyment, I am thus prepared to admit, can adequately discriminate *in theory only* among the six example lives. But if *that's* all there is to well-being then we are very far indeed from guiding the agent as to how she ought live assuming she's already living morally. Why? The answer is elegant and, to my mind, irresistible.

There is more to life than enjoying yourself. To see that this is true simply imagine a life of incredible enjoyment. You're getting everything you want and you're experiencing a generous helping of pleasure along the way. You're getting pleasure not only from the things that your wants are delivering (you're thus an *accurate* judge of what you want), and not only from the fact of getting what you want, but also from unexpected sources. You're *lucky* too, in other words. It's
really a fantastic life assessed in terms of any or all of your favorite positively-valanced psychological attitudes. I call it the Yummy Life.

The Yummy Life does not have to be the Pig's Life, the life of low and indecent pleasures. It also does not have to be the Fool's Life, the life of low but non-indecen pleasures, e.g. watching football and Hollywood action flicks all day long. It could be a very sophisticated life since everything depends only on what you want and what brings you pleasure. What you want may very well be to travel the world and study history.

You're living the Yummy Life. Is there still room for you to wonder how you ought to live? May we still say, “yeah, you're getting everything you want alright, but is that how you should live?” You want to study business and get a high paid corporate job.

But is that what you should do? The cosmopolitan life promises to bring you the most pleasure—few things delight you as much as traveling the world and learning about new cultures. But is that the life you should live?

I'm not here questioning the normative legitimacy of desire and pleasure, though I know it sounds as though I am. Nor am I running a version of Moore's open question argument, though it sounds that way too. Instead, I mean the questioning here to point to our need for a higher degree of assurance than enjoyment seems capable of providing. When asking how we ought to live we are seeking a measure of assurance or security that isn't too easily doubted.

In my book it's too easy to doubt desire and pleasure. Why is this? I think it's because these things are too focused on the present-moment self. It's not that we don't trust desire, it's that we don't trust our momentary selves. Things change so much and so fast. As I sit and listen to my desires and pleasures of the moment, a multitude of things
spring to mind. It's bewildering, and bewildering advice is not good guidance. This is related to what I said in the introduction about these considerations being too close to the agent, all the way inside to her present-moment mental machinations. We need to get close, but not too close. Enjoyment is too close.

We seem to need something outside of ourselves in order to get the stability we seek. Yet, that source can't be too far outside. Since the Enlightenment we have learned to be suspicious of the edicts of culture and religion. As individualists we are suspicious of the advice of parents or teachers if that advice doesn't ring true with our particular selves.

Objective lists are outside of ourselves in a sense, outside of our particularity, but they're not too far outside since they're typically, as with perfectionism, grounded in some shared feature of our humanity. Its being a shared feature is what keeps list the list vague. But its still being a feature in which we participate is what allows us to listen. So we rightly listen to objective lists, but they just don't go far enough.

So this is another reason I favor one's personal history. It is ours, it is part of each of us, but it is also outside of the present self. So it gives us that stability, that particularity, and that assurance. It's outside but not too far. It's close, but not too close.

There is a second problem with enjoyment. Ask yourself: is there nothing to be said for honor and knowledge and friendship and intimacy and valor and excellence of all kinds and achievement and the exercise of free choice and courage and beauty and loyalty? Of course there is. All these things are valuable.

“Yes, but only insofar as we want them or only insofar as they bring us pleasure insofar as we want them.” But now the enjoyment theorist is really pressed, because now
all we have to ask is whether it is possible to be a person who neither wants nor takes pleasure in some item on that list, say, knowledge, or friendship. Your first option—“it's not possible”—is a bad response. Whether or not it's normal or typical in terms of human psychology, it will always remain a theoretical possibility since nothing about such a life violates scientific laws. “Those things aren't really valuable,” you're only other response, is also bad since we already agreed that the items are valuable. Therefore, there must be more to life than enjoyment.

Enjoyment theories of well-being do a bad job theorizing our considered convictions. The propositions that friendship, loyalty, courage and the rest are parts of the good life for you and everybody else, are part of your well-being, is something close to a bedrock belief. They are among our “considered convictions,” use to Rawls's phrase. These are the kinds of beliefs we don't want to do without, the kinds of beliefs that, should our theory fail to uphold them, we should reject our theory not our beliefs. But enjoyment theories will permit these to not be aspects of our well-being. It just seems to high a price to pay.

There is a third option, actually. The way out of the dilemma is to revise your theory of enjoyment, to make it more sophisticated so as to both support our convictions and provide higher quality assurance. “That possible person, the one who doesn't like knowledge or friendship, or whatever; that may be what she actually wants, but it's not what she really wants. What she really wants is what she would want if she underwent a suitably described deliberation procedure.” We are thus led from theories of first-order pleasure or desire satisfaction to theories of informed pleasure or desire satisfaction, to corrective or second-order theories.
There seem to be two kinds of informed desire satisfaction theories. On the one—Peter Railton's view—what we would want is simply what we actually want when we're given full information. This theory fails, for our purposes, immediately. It is still quite possible for someone to not want knowledge or friendship even after she receives full information. You may, again, make empirical arguments about what human psychology will tend to permit under suitably described deliberation procedures and those will be interesting for other purposes. But those empirical arguments would not address whether we should seek those things. It might still be true, in other words, that fully-informed Icarus should be an artist even though, fully informed, he wants to be an engineer.

The other way to go is with a reason-responsiveness type view: what we would want is what we have best reason to want. Informed desires are the desires we have once we are thinking not just with full information but also most clearly. These views adjust not only what the agent is given in terms of information but also how she uses or interprets or reads that information. The first view adjusts what goes into the agent's filter but leaves the filter itself unchanged. The second view adjusts the filter. On the second view, our informed desires are what we want when we're thinking soberly and in a calm and deliberate manner. It's what we want when we are thinking with the light of reason. It's what our reason tells us we want.

This view escapes the dilemma since there seem to be a variety of reasons to want the various things on our list. We can imagine, for example, arguments that the various things on that list are intrinsically good or otherwise good whether or not we actually

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10 “Facts and Values,” 570-75.
want them. If they have such reasons to back them up, then the agent under the second view will necessarily take them under consideration. We have thus rescued the values on our list.

But we have done so at a price. Notice how far we have traveled from the Yummy Life. To my mind, this is good. We are, it seems to me, getting closer and closer to an accurate account of well-being. But notice something else. We are also traveling closer and closer to the second, more robust sense of well-being, the concept not of enjoyment but of a well lived life, of being well, of a beingness or human existence that is also laudable or excellent whether or not it is one that we want or find pleasurable. Why are we closer to this second side of the ambiguity of “well-being?” Because it is only from this perspective that you can provide reasons to think that such and such is an element of well-being regardless of whether such and such is wanted or pleasurable.

Consider the question we are now asking ourselves in light of our critiques of prudence. It's something such as this: “whether or not X is wanted or pleasurable, whether or not X is enjoyable, what reason do we have to think that X is a constituent of well-being?” This is the question the informed desire satisfaction theorist must ask because she's interested in what reasons there are, besides wanting or desiring, for living this way rather than that, what reasons she has to want X. But to ask this just is to ask after what makes for a well-lived life in the second, more robust sense.

Let me run the argument again, more concisely. “Well-being” is ambiguous. With it, you refer either to the enjoyable life or the excellent life. If you refer to the enjoyable life then you will be lead to think that the really enjoyable life is the life that we have the most or best reasons to want. But the life that we have the most or best
reasons to want is the life that has the most or best reasons to back it up, the life that has
the most value. But the life that has the most value is the life that we are led to believe,
by reason and argument, is the life that is best, objectively speaking. The life that we
believe is best, objectively speaking just is the excellent life (that's all I mean by
“excellent life”).

We have left behind enjoyment-theories of well-being and have been led to the
second sense of well-being. But the argument for the incompleteness of prudence is not
yet finished. Remember that we began this foray into pleasure, desire satisfaction and
their ilk because we were interested in whether theories of prudence—theories of self-
interest—might be specific enough answers to the question “how ought I live assuming
I'm living morally?” I said that they weren't because, as with morality, they couldn't
adjudicate among six fairly simple yet incompatible life constructions. The response was
that certain kinds of theories—enjoyment-theories of well-being—could. My rejoinder
so far is that such considerations are too unstable (too close to the self), poor theorizers of
our considered convictions about the good life, or else that they reduce to the second
sense of well-being. But now we must ask: what about this second sense? Might it not
be enough? Might theories of prudence that take up this second sense of well-being—
thought of the excellent life, so-called objective list theories—be the total remaining
answer to the question of ethics? I shall argue, as you might have anticipated, that they
are not.

An objective list theory of the good argues that a number of entities are each and
every one good, that is, constituents of the good life. These lists, of course, have certain
known weaknesses. They are so controversial that both skepticism and reasonable
pluralism about the good are viable positions, both of which threaten objective lists' ability to answer the animating question.

Skepticism, if true, undermines in an obvious way. If there is no objective good then there is no good reason to think that the items on the list are good and so no reason for our morality-abiding agent wondering how she ought to live to think that she ought to seek these goods.

But many, myself included, are disinclined to uphold the skeptical position. You might conclude with John Rawls, not that there isn't any good, but that we are in a situation where we are faced with many reasonable arguments for incompatible formulations of the good life. Each formulation starts with plausible, even compelling, premises and proceeds cogently to its respective conclusions. It's not that all arguments for the good are bad (the skeptic’s take), but that all arguments for the good are pretty good.

On the face of it, reasonable pluralism also seems to undermine objective lists. If there is a reasonable pluralism about the good then a conscientious agent will see that reasonable pluralism and will therefore lack any compelling basis for living in accord with one rather than another. *All the objective lists are good ones,* she will conclude, *so which ought I live by?* Objective lists cannot be used to answer the question, “which objective list?”

But perhaps it is too demanding to assume that agents will see the reasonable pluralism. It's not that typical agents couldn't see the reasonable pluralism even if it were presented to them. It's that it may be too much to ask to have agents put in the time
necessary to get stepped enough in the arguments to see that reasonable pluralism. There are many things to do in life, moral philosophy but one.

I consider it non-negligent, in other words, if an agent, in seeking out reasons to live this way or that, lands on one set of arguments for one among the many reasonable conceptions of the good. Seeing just this conception and its arguments, she concludes that this is the objective good. Thinking that this is the objective good, she considers herself to have all the guidance she reasonably requires. Morality and prudence, taken together, are a sufficient answer to the question of ethics.

Well, not quite. Even an objective list, assumed true, does not do the job. Why?

In developing his theory of perfectionism George Sher adopts a list of goods proposed by Derek Parfit, a list that “combines (versions of) the most popular and appealing elements” of a variety of such lists. It's a good list of goods, in other words, so it's good enough for me to make my point. That list includes the following:

- moral goodness
- rational activity
- development of one's abilities
- having close interpersonal relationships
- knowledge
- awareness of true beauty.

Now recall the six ways of life I proposed above: the conservative family life, the artist, the cosmopolitan, etc. All of these can easily incorporate all of these goods in (roughly) equal measure. All of the individuals living those lives have moral goodness: ex hypothesi they're living within the boundaries of morality. They’re all practicing rational activities, whether writing articles, designing bridges, solving social ills. They’re all developing their talents along a variety of dimensions. Each has close interpersonal

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relationships; each is seeking knowledge of various parts of the world, etc. In short, *they're all good lives*, just as I initially said. So which ought I live?

There is a second respect in which objective lists are insufficient. Not only can two lives have each good in (roughly) equal measure and be very different lives; two lives can have different amounts of each good and nevertheless be (roughly) equally good. Surely the life that has 5 units of rational activity, 3 units of knowledge and 4 units of everything else cannot be said to be objectively better than the life that has 3 units of rational activity, 5 units of knowledge and 4 units of everything else.

You might say that the life that has 5 units of everything is objectively better than both, but there is reason to avoid saying this too. Lived lives are inevitably lived diversely. And this is because the world does not permit such an equal-measured pursuit. Choices must be made. If one wants, for example, to attain the good of knowledge at the highest levels you will have to sacrifice the good of interpersonal relationships, say, at least a bit. In other words, we shouldn’t turn objective list theories of the good into a quantitative, maximizing utilitarianism of goodness. We are doing a qualitative comparison here. It’s not a completely inept analytic strategy—we can tell when one life, severely lacking in a number of objective goods, is better than another, robustly full of them. I shall grant that at the margins it will be hard to tell a difference. But that’s just my point—if they both look pretty good, if they are similar in terms of their objective goodness “score” (though quite different in terms of their specific content), then they are roughly equally good. As objective list theorists we have to help ourselves to this vagueness—the inherent vagueness of life is part of *why* we became objective list theories. My argument simply picks up on this fact. I don’t use it as a reason against
objective lists *per se*. Instead, I simply use it as a reason to show that objective lists are also pressingly incomplete.

It's important to see that these problems with objective lists apply even if you deny a reasonable pluralism about the good. Reasonable pluralism is, after all, a controversial position. But now we see that we need not chase down that dialectic here since it has been shown that *even if* there is one true objective list of goods, such a list is insufficient, in two regards, to help answer the animating question.

Perhaps we have not gone far enough with our objective list. The list is quite vague—it just says to practice rational activities, but doesn't say what kind. It says to develop your talents but doesn't say which. It says to have true beauty in your life but doesn't say what type. The list is inherently vague and it is this vagueness which produces the list's insufficiency.

Why not eliminate the vagueness? There's surely an argument out there for a *thick specific* objective list.12 Such a list, for example, would not just say to develop your talents but to develop your *athletic* talents. And don't just practice rational activities but practice *philosophy*. And don't just have an awareness of true beauty but focus on *portraiture*. This list is now in the position of claiming that a life that includes these specific things is superior, objectively, to a life that includes the rational practice of mathematics, the development of musical talents and the awareness of beautiful architecture, for example.

Silliness. But why is this silly? It's silly because the fact of reasonable pluralism reemerges, but this time with a vengeance that even objective list theorists like Martha

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12 The phrase is a take on Nussbaum's description of her own list as “thick vague.” See her “Aristotelian Social Democracy,” 217.
Nussbaum and George Sher are not willing to deny. You may deny a reasonable pluralism which claims that we cannot agree on any fundamental premises about the good. But it would be crazy to deny a *heightened* reasonable pluralism which claims that there will be different, incompatible ways of spelling out the ground-level specifics, producing different lives, each equally good. To see this, simply compare the life of the philosopher-athlete-portrait-lover and the mathematician-musician-architecture-lover. One is clearly not *objectively* better than the other. These lists must be appropriately vague otherwise they become absurd.

To complete the argument I only have to add that, unlike the case with fundamentals, I *will* hold an agent accountable for seeing the heightened reasonable pluralism about the specifics of the good life. Heightened reasonable pluralism about the specifics is not controversial and it does not take much time or effort to grasp it. One only has to observe a handful of different lives. One barely has to look beyond her family—and maybe not even that—much less her tribe, in order to see the host of different, incompatible lives, all equally good.

So, either objective lists are too controversial from the start in light of skepticism or reasonable pluralism about the fundamentals of the good life, or, even if we can get agreement about the fundamentals, the lists are necessarily too vague to provide the kind of guidance we are now seeking.

A handful of cascading arguments are now complete. With the end of the argument for objective list's insufficiency comes the end of the argument for the incompleteness of prudence. And with the end of the argument for the incompleteness of prudence comes
the end of the argument for the claim that both morality and prudence are pressingly incomplete. And, finally, with the end of that comes the rise of the animating question.

Every argument I have marshaled so far, in other words, has been in service of animating the animating question. I opened this chapter with that question, but immediately the thought was that the question did not need to be asked, that the question of ethics is exhausted by the answers of morality and prudence, that, given some theory of each, we will have spelled out all the oughts we could ask philosophy for, that, as I said in the beginning, there is no further ought to explore.

Since the animating question is the question that animates this entire book, I was concerned to address this objection. I thus went about defining morality and prudence in a manner quite broad and asking, in the face of those definitions, whether the question of ethics could still be asked. I have argued, not just that it can be asked, not just that some combination of morality and prudence fails to spell out all of our ethical oughts, but that that failure is pressing. Any agent concerned to live as she ought more than reasonably requires more. If that failure is pressing then the animating question is not just alive and well, but an ethical question of urgency. It is the argument for that failure which is now complete. We can now ask, without any doubt as to its importance and with a sense of urgency:

Within the boundaries of morality and prudence, how ought I to live?

There is one preliminary answer that I think we (the privileged Western set) would give, which is also something I'll argue we all (whatever your culture) should give. And it is
this: live autonomously. To live an autonomous life, in the sense I mean here, is to live a life directed by considerations—reasons in the broad sense—that are, in some sense, one's own.\textsuperscript{13} Put another way: it is to choose how you ought to live on the basis of reasons, broadly construed, that you endorse. I employ here a notion of individual, or personal, autonomy, rather than a notion of moral autonomy, or the capacity to legislate the moral law. Personal autonomy is the trait of living a self-directed or self-governed life.

This strikes me, first of all, as the thing we would say, as the next natural response. “Be yourself” is a canonical edict in the ethics of the common Westerner, and “live autonomously” is the rigorous philosophical workup of that injunction. How ought I live, assuming I’m living a moral and good life? Well, be yourself; live authentically; be true to yourself, to a life plan of your own making. In short: go and build your own life. Yes, that is what you should do.

But besides being what we would say, “live autonomous” is also what we should say. Granted: articulating what it means for a consideration to be “one's own,” or to be “authentic,” or to be “endorsed,” is a tricky matter. But at this level of specification autonomy is subject to far less controversy than objective list theories; it has been called an “irrefutable value,” and for good reason.\textsuperscript{14} Consider what forms of life the directive to live autonomously rules out. One who lives out a life without thought as to how she should live, as an automaton, for example, will not qualify as autonomous: she is not self-directed at all, but through and through reactive. Similarly, a life of servility, where one

\textsuperscript{13} Christman, ”Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy,” Section 1.0. This is an article from the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See bibliography for URL. Since the SEP has no page numbers, I've used its section breaks, which are numbered.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
lives this way rather than that simply because mother, or partner, or brother, or Culture demands it, is not autonomous.\textsuperscript{15}

These kinds of lives, it's safe to say, are objectionable at a very deep level. They jettison the Enlightenment Imperative to think for yourself. In a deeply felt sense, these kinds of lives aren't really \textit{lived} at all. These individuals are mere objects, an instrument of another, or of their own whimsy.

In discussing his experience machine Robert Nozick makes this point in a lovely one-liner: “Perhaps what we desire is to live (an active verb) ourselves” (45). What's upsetting about the experience machine is that it is in conflict with a desire \textit{to live}, where “to live” describes an active process. Lives \textit{qua} living entity (rather than \textit{qua} existing entity) are meant to be active, rather than passive, where “active” takes on the meaning of

\textsuperscript{15}There is an interesting dialectic to chase down here. Ask: why is the automaton or the life of servility non-autonomous? Because folks living these kinds of lives are choosing, if they're choosing at all, either thoughtlessly or by appeal to authority. Objection: But can I not choose, on the basis of reasons, to live as an automaton or to live out the program of life that mother orders? And, if I do, am I not being autonomous? Response: You may be autonomous at the moment of choice, but what the choice amounts to is a choice to no longer choose. And once that life is being lived, it is no longer being lived autonomously, thus violating the edict to live autonomously. Objection: But why isn't the autonomous-ness of the earlier choice inherited downstream? Acting in accord with non-rationally induced preferences is often considered non-autonomous. But I can choose to induce a regime of non-rational preference modification in order to, say, quit smoking. The intuition in this case is that I'm still being autonomous throughout. The autonomous-ness of the choice to quit smoking non-autonomously gets inherited downstream throughout the quit smoking process, so it seems like an autonomous choice to live non-autonomously should likewise remain autonomous. I don’t have another rejoinder at this point but resolving this dialectic isn’t necessary for the argument in the text to succeed. The argument in the text is about the insufficiency of personal autonomy to guide. Suppose one can autonomously will himself into a non-autonomous situation and that, in so doing, he remains autonomous throughout. Might this be a way out of the problem of incompleteness? Could I not swear myself to a wise master who then meticulously outlines for me my every next step? You certainly \textit{could} I suppose. And you might even be autonomous if you do. But there is no reason of personal autonomy to pick that life as opposed to the many other available autonomous lives. Autonomy might support your picking it, but it would also support your picking many others, any of the six constructions with which we opened in fact. So, how is it again that I ought to live? How is it that autonomy is giving me specificity in guidance? It's not.
self-control, self-direction. To fail to live autonomously is to fail to live (an active verb) ourselves.\textsuperscript{16}

In light of these considerations I adopt “live autonomously” as a necessary but not sufficient answer to our animating question. Why not sufficient?

When you think about it, to say “be autonomous,” is to say very little about how I ought actually to live. In fact, it dodges the question a good bit. We were asking how I ought to live and the response now is to tell the agent that \textit{she} must answer the question herself. “Go and build your own life” has a nice ring, but which life, exactly, should I build?

We need to keep in mind that the edict to live autonomously isn’t \textit{completely} empty. As I’ve shown, it rules out certain lives, the life of the automaton, the life of servility, perhaps other lives (it is hard to imagine them passing the test of the good life, but if personal autonomy isn’t included in the list, it becomes easier—a forced or servile living out of a life otherwise quite healthy and flourishing—a child with the virtue of discipline). But having ruled these out, you might wonder whether autonomy isn't a more sufficient answer than I’ve just now suggested. Aren't some of those lives more autonomous for a given agent than others? Won't some, perhaps most, agents be able to discriminate between the six example lives on the basis of whether or not they have authentic desires which direct them toward those lives?

\textsuperscript{16} What's objectionable, I should note, is not someone who fails to self-direct at every step of the way. We'd go crazy if we tried to choose every little thing we did each day or even to direct every major aspect of our lives. Thanks to Henry R. West for pointing this out to me. Some things—many things—are outside our control. What's objectionable is someone who exerts no effort in the way of controlling their own lives, in deciding for themselves how to live, in choosing and reasoning about the shape of their goals, aspirations, and dreams.
As tempting as it is to think of theories of personal autonomy as giving you a method for finding your “one true self,” as it were, that’s neither what they do nor what they need to do. The idea of personal autonomy is to lead a life that is of your own making. But it is perfectly consistent with this idea that there be many such lives. Many lives are available for autonomous choice. In fact, there seems to be an association between the idea that one should live a life of personal autonomy and the idea that there are many lives which fit this bill for any given agent. Fans of personal autonomy—liberals and libertarians say—are also many times fans of the idea that there are, and should be, many options in life, all of them perfectly well and good. This is not an argument against personal autonomy per se, it’s just an argument that autonomy doesn’t guide well enough.\(^{17}\)

That’s my basic argument against personal autonomy—again, as with objective lists, lacking in specificity.\(^ {18}\) Let’s make the argument a bit more vivid by looking more closely at theories of personal autonomy. There are many ways to map the terrain here but there is a distinction between ideal and non-ideal theories which is a generally accepted first coordinate.\(^{19}\) Let me paint two pictures. Here is Sally A. She is living the artist's life—the coffee shops, the peer-only networks, the late boozy nights, the piecemeal gigs, the charity of her equally-smart corporate-successful friends, and, eventually perhaps, the big break, the contract, the stage, the big screen. Sally A. does all this in accordance with a desire she uncovered at an early age, a desire which she

\(^{17}\) Thanks to Baruch Brody for helping me hone this point.

\(^{18}\) There is also an argument that it lacks stability, of the sort marshaled earlier against desire. Personal autonomy is eventually going to have to appeal to some internal aspect of self—one’s considered desires or one’s self-conception, or one’s values, etc. But these, as the other hyper-individualistic aspects of self are also too close to the agent, too prey to his vicissitudes.

\(^{19}\) Christman, 1.1.
followed and which never went away despite the protestations of her family and her more utilitarian-minded friends, despite the poverty-level existence, despite the uncertainty and the plain old difficulty of creative processes. Sally A., it’s safe to say, is through and through authentic: her major goals and plans and the entire arc of her life are unimpeachably self-directed, lived, that is, according to wishes that stem from a self which is “maximally authentic and free of manipulative, self-distorting influences.”

But now look to Sally B. She does all the same things as Sally A. From the coffee shop to the big screen, she lives the same basic life. But Sally B.'s desires have a different internal structure. She was raised by artists. And while her parents never pressured her into art she grows up to be an artist anyhow, despite her more authentic yearnings for the worlds of business or engineering. She does this, leads this whole life, all in order to please the parents that don't even need pleasing.

The crucial question: is Sally B. autonomous? The correct answer is that it depends on which idea of personal autonomy you hold in your mind. It depends on whether you're employing the ideal or the non-ideal conception of autonomy.

[W]e must keep separate the idea of basic autonomy, the minimal status of being responsible, independent and able to speak for oneself, from ideal autonomy, an achievement that serves as a goal to which we might aspire and according to which a person is maximally authentic and free of manipulative, self-distorting influences. Any plausible conceptualization of basic autonomy must, among other things, imply that most adults who are not suffering from debilitating pathologies or are under oppressive and constricting conditions will be autonomous. Autonomy as an ideal, on the other hand, may well be enjoyed by very few if any individuals, for it functions as a goal to be attained rather than a condition assumed for most people.

\[20\] Ibid.
\[21\] Ibid.
This preliminary distinction is important, Christman goes on, because some notion of personal autonomy is invoked when granting the basic rights and responsibilities of citizenship such as the right to vote and the right to be punished (rather than treated—treatment being the appropriate response for someone who lacks basic autonomy, someone who is suffering from debilitating pathologies). Think of the rights protected under Rawls's first principle of justice. We can't be stingy with these. And, since the wide distribution of these rights is based on the presumption that most human beings are in some sense self-directed, we also can't be too stingy with the ascription of basic personal autonomy either.

In other words, even Sally B. should be able to vote. And if she commits a crime she should still be punished. And this is because there's no reason to think that Sally B. suffers from a debilitating pathology or is otherwise under the influence of extremely distorting factors. Many of us struggle to be free of our (notion of our) guardians’ dreams for us. Moreover, while Sally B. may not be maximally autonomous, there's no reason to think that she isn't exerting some influence on her own life. She may fail to be through and through authentic, but still avoid being through and through servile as well. Maybe she never breaks free of the art world, but maybe she does create art that comments on the structure of corporate organizations, perhaps creating a sculpture that plays with the idea of structure itself, thus combining art with both of her utilitarian passions. If Sally B.’s life takes such a turn she still lacks ideal autonomy but she clearly has non-ideal, or basic, autonomy.

So, theories of non-ideal autonomy are important. Indeed, “a guiding consideration in evaluating particular conceptions of autonomy,” says Christman, is
“whether it connects properly to...ancillary judgments” such as the considered conviction that most human beings living under decent conditions exhibit the trait of basic personal autonomy. On such a theory even Sally B. will, and should, qualify as autonomous.

Yet non-ideal theories of personal autonomy—important as they are—fail to be sufficient answers to the animating question. It is precisely because they apply to most human beings, precisely because both Sally A. and Sally B. are autonomous on a non-ideal conception, that “live autonomously in a non-ideal sense” is pressingly incomplete, just like morality and prudence. Return once more to my six example lives. It now should be clear that an agent can pursue any of these lives in an autonomous manner if we have in mind a non-ideal conception. All of them are available for autonomous choice, in other words. So which ought I live out?

“The ideally autonomous life.” Could it be, as I mentioned before, that only a very few—maybe only one—of those six lives will be truly your own in the sense of being the one(s) that are chosen by a self which is “maximally authentic and free of manipulative, self-distorting influences.” In this way one might hope to develop a theory of autonomy that is the total answer to the animating question.

But this move plunges us into a cauldron of difficulties. With it, we are led in search of a “true self” and we will have to take up the critiques of Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Robert Nozick, to name a liberal, a communitarian, and a libertarian.22 Let me preview the difficulties enough to convince you that it is worth seeking an alternative answer to the animating question.

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22 These are theories that do not usually agree, but they all agree on this point. This is one of the themes of Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* but see especially p. 179. It's also thematic across several
To be maximally free is to be free of all “distorting” influences, including those of culture, family, education, including, presumably, all of the influences that operated before the arrival of one's rational faculties. To be maximally free is to be totally unencumbered, as Sandel would say, by external forces. But Sandel and others have convincingly shown that a totally unencumbered self is also a totally emaciated self.23 An emaciated self is one who has no guiding values, no “context of choice,” to use Will Kymlicka’s phrase.24 It is, in a tragic irony, a self that can no longer choose. This situation is first an irony because the whole point of pursuing a capital-T True Self was so that we could be assured of choice that was maximally free and maximally our own. The whole point was so that we could follow Kant and make choice the cornerstone of ethics and politics. It's a tragic irony if you think that only such a conception of selfhood can drive the only acceptable form of Liberalism, i.e., the strongest form, the form that protects individual rights resolutely.

Recall Nozick's criticism of Rawls's objection to libertarianism. Rawls objects that allowing the distribution of primary goods to follow whatever pattern emerges from a system of free exchange based on mutual consent (governed by a set of Nozickian entitlement theory regulations) would be inappropriate because it would reward the natural lottery—the distribution of natural or innate talents and the distribution of good quality upbringings, both influential factors outside the individual's control. Since the natural lottery is, in Rawls's famous phrase, “arbitrary from a moral point of view,” we

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23 Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, 179.
24 Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, 83.
ought to adjust the resultant distribution to be more in line with whatever the moral point of view tell us is right.

Nozick responds that to imagine what people would choose once we eliminate all of their features that are arbitrary in this way winds up “attributing everything noteworthy about the person completely to certain sorts of ‘external’ factors [emphasis in original]”\(^{25}\). Nozick means “everything” when he says it here. Think about how much is excluded from the notion of self under the “nothing arbitrary” principle. Immediately expunged, for example, are our talents. “Good,” you might say, “it's not really fair anyway that Johnny is naturally a better athlete or better writer or better chef since he didn't do anything to deserve it.” But being a better athlete or better writer, or better whatever, is one of the most important traits that make us who we are, that makes up the unique human being that is each of us.

Nozick's point is that if you take away everything that's arbitrary you also take away everything that's unique about me. And if you take away everything that's unique about me you take away everything that's individual about individual choice. He is forceful on this point, not just in language, but also in logic:

So denigrating a person's [non-ideal] autonomy and prime responsibility for his actions is a risky line to take for a theory that otherwise wishes to buttress the dignity and self-respect of autonomous beings; especially for a theory that founds so much (including a theory of the good) upon persons' choices. One doubts that the unexalted picture of human beings Rawls’ theory presupposes and rests upon can be made to fit together with the view of human dignity it is designed to lead to and embody.\(^{26}\)

Notice that Nozick's critique applies only if we assume an ideal conception of autonomy.

And this is because a non-ideal conception, as we saw earlier, is going to allow in the


\(^{26}\) Ibid, 214.
features of persons, such as innate talents, that Nozick criticizes Rawls for discharging. Non-ideal autonomy ducks Nozick’s criticism but is insufficient. Ideal autonomy does not duck the criticism.

Now, I take no stand on whether Rawls in fact did assume an ideal conception, or whether he needs to do so in order to complete his theory, or even whether we need to do so in order to have a liberal political philosophy. I do agree that the project of ideal autonomy is subject to Nozick's critique here and that, absent a very strong response, we should abandon it.

Have I convinced you that the cauldron is a cauldron? Even if I haven't—even if there was greater hope of shoring up some notion of ideal autonomy resilient enough to overcome the powerful objections of Nozick and the communitarians—we would still be justified, I think, in looking past ideal autonomy to answer the animating question. This is because, even if ideal autonomy does not construct an emaciated self, it is still “an achievement,” according to Christman, a state of self-direction that is “enjoyed by very few if any individuals, for it functions as a goal to be attained rather than a condition assumed for most people [emphasis added].”27 But agents are pressed into living now. They do not have even a half-lifetime, much less a whole lifetime or two (how long would it take for me to achieve ideal autonomy?), before they more than reasonably require some substantial basis on which to formulate their major, at least intermediate, life goals and plans.

This point is worth emphasizing. It's not simply the popular “but ideal theory doesn't apply to our real lives” objection. The point is that even a successful ideal theory

27 Christman, 1.1.
does not address the concerns that animate this book. From the start, my motivation has been to help guide agents who are concerned to live as they ought. It was suggested, after morality and prudence both failed to provide sufficient guidance, that the edict to live autonomously would be enough. But now we see that ideal conceptions of autonomy will require very large amounts of time to manifest (few if any have it) and that this is time that agents, who are pressed into living now, do not have. The original motivation for seeking out notions of ideal autonomy was the hope that they would adjudicate among the six example lives. But now we see that they won't do so until after we have lived one or the other or parts of both of several of those lives. Presumably, it is only after we have bumbled through life that we can finally know who we really are, if we can know that at all. That is all well and good as far as ideal theories of autonomy are concerned, i.e. it's not an objection to theories of autonomy per se. But agents are still justified in wondering which of those six ought they ought to live in the meantime. Moreover, since “in the meantime” in this case means my entire life or most of it, the question we're really asking is none other than the animating question itself. In short, an agent is still justified in responding, “I see that I should live autonomously (ideally or non); so how is it, again, that I ought to live within the boundaries of morality and prudence?”

It will help to have a summary of the territory we have traversed. Large as that territory is, a short series of questions and answers, starting with the question of ethics, will do nicely.

Q: How ought I live?
A: Morally. Respect others.
Q: And beyond that, how ought I live?
A: Live the good life. Pursue eudaimonia.
Q: And beyond *that*, how ought I live?
Q: And beyond *that*, how ought I live?
A: Live a Storied Life.

Each question assumes there is a “beyond that.” It has been the burden of this chapter to show that this assumption is true at each step. The rest of the book is spent saying what that last answer means and why it is a good one.
We have seen that the traditional considerations of ethics fail to guide agents as they deserve and in what manner they fail. If the guidance wasn’t lacking in specificity, it lacked stability. The rest of this book is spent on a solution to that problem of incompleteness. The solution is to lead what I call a storied life, which is a life that exhibits a certain type of narrative unity. Your personal history, being a feature of your subjectivity that is both stable and unique to you, is the basis out of which that unity ought to be generated, the material for the story of your life.

A natural first question is what this certain type of narrative unity amounts to. I’m not invoking theories of narrative per se, i.e. theories about what distinguishes a narrative from other genres of communication.¹ Instead I am invoking a certain, thicker type of unity which also happens to fulfill the conditions of being a narrative per se. So, what does my thicker type look like? What are some examples of lives, or portions thereof, that have the unity I have in mind? I present some of these examples, drawing on the small but growing literature on the value of narrative unity in life.² We will find out that

¹ More on this in ch. 5.
² The seeds of this literature are the discussions about the role narratives might play in the nature of human agency. See Taylor’s “What is Human Agency?” and “Self-Interpreting Animals;” and MacIntyre, *After*
one common thread is the abstract structure of their unity. In these cases there is a progressive unfolding, an upward-tending curvature to the events' overarching structure. I name it progress.

We find these cases not just by canvassing the literature but also by looking at the place where our intuitions about good narrative life patterns converge with our intuitions about what matters beyond morality and prudence as hitherto conceived. The proposal after all is to follow a narrative trajectory, but it must be one that it matters to live out, i.e. that matters ethically and not just aesthetically. We shall isolate in the process what I call the narrative ethical intuition. This is the intuition that it matters to bring about (some type of) recognizably narrative pattern of events in your life.

If this intuition points to a third species of ought, it must be the case that it matters to bring about recognizably narrative life patterns even when morality and prudence are

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Virtue, 204-226. The way I see it, J David Velleman is the contemporary iteration of this discussion, though he has gone to greater lengths to specify the nature, and ground, of agential narratives. See his “Well-being and Time,” reprinted in The Possibility of Practical Reason, 56-84; the introduction to the same book; and “Narrative Explanation,” reprinted as “Meaning” in How We Get Along, 185-206. “Well-being and Time” then sparked a debate in its own right. In it Velleman argues that your total well-being cannot be the sum of your life's momentary time slices of well-being. This thesis had been argued before. See Brentano, Foundation and Construction of Ethics, 194-199, Ewing, Value and Reality, 219, and Slote, Goods and Virtues (one of the book's major theses but see esp. ch. 1). Velleman differed in that he suggested it was the narrative quality of these cases that gave rise to their holistic contribution to welfare. A debate around the question of whether the shape of one's life matters for one's own well-being thus emerged. What animated most folks was the question of why shape might matter, and many tried to say it was in virtue of the fact that such shapes contributed to the meaningfulness of one's life. This, in turn, raised the question of what meaningfulness is and what its ground might be. Others were interested in how the shape of life thesis furthered inquiry into theses from other domains, most notably that of end of life considerations. Curiously however, nobody has taken on the question of the shape of shape, i.e. has analyzed the structure of shapes that seem to matter, i.e. has said what types of shape matter (the exception is Antti Kauppinen whose “Meaningfulness and Time” we will discuss in ch. 5). I suspect this is because nobody was concerned to exploit it for action-guidance. For a more articulate version of all of this history, see the introduction and first section of Connie Rosati's “Story of a Life.” For arguments that shape matters for reasons of meaningfulness see: Kauppinen, “Working Hard;” Kekes, “Meaning and Narratives;” Neil Levy, “Downshifting and Meaning in Life;” Metz, “New Developments in the Meaning of Life;” Raibley, “Welfare over Time and the Case for Holism;” and Roberts, “Narrative Ethics.” For discussions about how the shape of life thesis affects end of life considerations see: Fischer, Our Stories, 3-26, 129-78; and McMahan, The Ethics of Killing, 174-6, 496-503.
silent. If this intuition points to a new token of known ought types, or a new way of organizing known oughts, then it must be the case that it matters to bring about recognizably narrative life patterns that are not captured by our current theories of morality and prudence. Therefore, after canvassing the cases and isolating their common structure, I argue that the intuition is explained neither by morality nor prudence as hitherto conceived. What then remains at the end of the chapter is a vivid and compelling intuition, uncluttered by theory (we’ll do plenty of cluttering later).

This latter investigation is important because in many of the typical cases it’s not clear that the narrative ethical intuition isn't tracking any of the variety of known prudential goods. For example, project success is a simplistic example of the progressive curve. But successful projects, you might think, are good not because of any narrative unity contained therein but simply because they are cases of good, hard self-directed activity, e.g. of the virtue of human agency manifest. You might worry that the value of any narrative unity is fully reducible, in other words, and therefore less interesting theoretically. In a long footnote John Martin Fischer calls for precisely this type of further investigation:

Whereas Velleman's contention [that some cases are valuable in virtue of their narrative unity] is appealing, it is tantalizingly underdeveloped. One problem is that there is a limited number of examples actually offered; also, as I point out in the text, Velleman does not offer any general formulaic explanation of narrative value. Perhaps not surprisingly then, various philosophers have suggested to me that there are other potential explanations for our intuitions or judgments about various lives that are at least as plausible (as 'narrative value'). Thaddeus Metz has suggested to me that we can account for the judgments...by keeping in mind that stretches of one's life...can have instrumental value as well as intrinsic value.... David Hershenov has suggested that the judgments can be explained...by the moral value of...self-improvement, and so forth. … These matters require much more attention that I can give.³

³ Fischer, Our Stories, 162.
I respond directly to this call for further research, offering a full set of examples, a formulaic expression, and arguments that these and other alternative considerations do not succeed in debunking narrative value.

I

We begin with the most popular case from our literature, Michael Slote's case of *The Politician*. This will be our flagship example, reprising again and again throughout the arguments of this book. It's the flagship it's the most familiar, operates at the right degree of abstraction and does not automatically rule out the objection which figures in the second half of this chapter. It's neutral (enough), in other words, too.

*The Politician*.4

Scenario 1 – Steady Fall: A young politician enjoys a meteoric beginning. She becomes a United States Senator with no previous public service, heralded a prodigy. She does substantial good in her six years, passing the Humane Treatment of Animals Act, but for unexplained reasons her promise dwindles and her Senatorial career ends after just one term. She spends the rest of her political life at the state and local level, a victory here and there, but mainly losses and setbacks. Her power eventually vanishes after four years post-Senate.

Scenario 2 – Steady Rise: A young politician starts out slow, a victory here and there but mainly losses and setbacks early on at the local level. She stays in the game, however, and after four years becomes a steady

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4 Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, 23-24. I have added details to help me make some points Slote didn't. This example has been taken up by Velleman in “Well-being and time,” Fischer and Kauppinen. See n. 2. Slote's original purpose with this example had nothing to do with narrative unity. His broader concern was to argue against a Utilitarian conception of one's own personal good, what I called prudence in the previous chapter (remember that Rawls argues for a utilitarian conception here, though decidedly not for morality). Under such a conception, there is the strong presumption that *when* a good occurs in life makes no difference as to the goodness of one's life overall. However good a given good is, it should carry no more goodness just because it occurs at one point in one's life, rather than another. As we will see in the following chapter, Slote argues for a “time of life” theory of goods whereby a good's contribution to your total personal good is affected by the period of life in which it occurs. I am in the same camp as Slote in one way: we are both against time-slice, quantitative views of how to measure well-being over time.
player on the state scene. She is then elected United States Senator and
passes the Humane Treatment of Animals Act, but for unexplained
reasons quits after her first term.

Many share the intuition that Steady Rise is favorable.

All of the cases I present exhibit this form. They compare two similar scenarios,
one progressive and one regressive, where the progressive scenario is intuitively
favorable even though (as I'll show later) neither has the upper hand with respect to a
target theory of morality or prudence. Here is another, where the intuition is even more
compelling than in The Politician, J. David Velleman's example of an entire life
trajectory.

*Whole Lives*\(^5\)

Scenario 1 – A childhood of hardships both material and emotional is
followed by a steady diet of failure. The individual tries and fails at
sociability, career and education. But she never gives up and by the middle
of life finds traction. By the last third of life she exercises her capacities
fully, a confident, effective, powerful woman, satisfied, free, and content.

Scenario 2 – A wonderful childhood, a loving environment, and an
excellent start is followed by a steady diet of early success: great
education, excellent job opportunities, an early love. But by the middle of
life she plateaus as the anxiety sets in. Over time confidence dwindles, the
love fades, the job disappears. Despite much effort, her life ends after a
long period of depression and despair.

Which of these two scenarios do you wish for yourself? For your children and friends?

The first life is clearly favorable. Alternatively, consider merely a

*Single Day*

One time I asked a friend, “How was your day?” “It ended well.” “That's
better than ending badly!”

We prefer days that end well after a bad start over days that end poorly after a good start.

We also prefer days that start good and end *great* over ones that start great and end
merely good, and (just to cover the logical space) days that start terrible and end merely

badly over days that start badly and end terribly. We can plausibly imagine that the amount of well-being generated, or the number of objective goods attained, at either end of any of these two-day sets is about equal. Still, we seem to want to say that a day which ends better than it began is a better day than one that ends worse.

We could go even more austere yet and look to Franz Brentano's *Bonum Progressionis*. Let us think of a process which goes from good to bad or from a great good to a lesser good; then compare it with one which goes in the opposite direction. The latter shows itself as the one to be preferred. This holds even if the sum of the goods in the one process is equal to that in the other.

Brentano calls this the principle of *bonum progressionis*, which has its companion *malum regressionis*. Could it be that even if your entire life happens to you, i.e. that even if you exert nothing significant in the way of self-governance—that if nevertheless your life happens to you in such a way as to move from bad to good, or good to great, then, you have a better, more valuable life in virtue of that fact?

*The Experience Machine Arcade* You see the sign for the experience machine arcade. You enter and decide to play for one year. There are only two options on the dial: a year of increasing pleasure, or a year of decreasing pleasure. Which do you choose?

Perhaps you are losing your grip on the intuition at this point. Does it return with Annti Kauppinen's case?

*Sheer Luck* James is born into a lower middle class family and does badly at school. After dropping out, he takes up a position as a night janitor at minimum wage. One night he happens to see a drug deal gone badly wrong in the parking lot: two dealers shoot each other just before money is about to change hands. There is no police around yet when James cautiously steps forward to check what is in the suitcase, and discovers $10 million in

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6 Brentano, *Foundation and Construction of Ethics*, 196-197. Brentano's case has been picked up by Velleman and Kauppinen

7 The experience machine comes from Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 42-45. The adaptation here is my own.

8 Kauppinen, “Meaningfulness and Time,” 348-9. No details were added to this one.
unmarked notes [sic!]. He takes the money, leaves the drugs, and takes a Greyhound to Manhattan. He buys a new suit, opens up a bank account, and leases a penthouse by East River. Over the next decade or so, he uses it as a base for many successful escapades into Manhattan nightlife, living it up big time.

Is James's life better than it would be were he to have been given $10 million only to squander it (or have it taken away), spending the rest of his days a night janitor at minimum wage?

It's hard to say no. But it's also quite tempting to say that we favor the progressive scenario for non-narrative reasons. For example, perhaps we prefer Sheer Luck over the reverse because, in the reverse, James exhibits a failure of virtue or, if his riches are taken from him, our distaste is tracking the moral wrong done to him. In the next section we will address these objections.

For now I want to point out a few things. First, plausibly, the ordering of events seems capable of making a difference in the value of an event series overall. This makes it possible to consider the thesis that this holistic value accrues as a result of the events' narrative structure. Secondly, there is a common feature to the events' putative narrative structure here. If you were to represent, i.e. to depict, the type of unity contained in each example, you would draw a positively sloped line or curve connecting one point at a lower and earlier spot to another at a later and higher spot. Let us call the unity contained in and exhibited by these cases “progress.”

Thirdly, there is a distinction to be drawn among the cases of progress I've just presented. In The Experience Machine Arcade, A Single Day, and Bonum Progressionis the only information with which we are presented is that fact of improving welfare over time (or in Brentano's case the even more austere fact of improving value over time). By contrast, in The Politician, Whole Lives and Sheer Luck, we are given, in addition, a thick
description of underlying events. Nevertheless, I'm arguing that all of these are instances of the type of narrative unity I favor, which I call progress.

Before moving on to the objection that these cases are driven by non-narrative goods, it's worth point out that there is an argument to be made by looking across the cases. Maybe each individual case has an intuition that is due to the presence of various alternative goods, some moral some prudential. Or, maybe the fact that they are all so similar shows that there is a narrative good in there somewhere even if there are moral and prudential goods too. There should, you might think, be a common explanation for all of the cases. The narrative explanation accomplishes this but a divergent set of error theories does not.

II.

Our task now, having presented examples and isolated one of their common features, is to show that what is driving the ethical intuition behind them is not any of the usual considerations of morality or prudence. In other words, we need to see that we favor the progressive scenarios but that such favoring is not due to some usual element of prudence, an extra measure of pleasure, a virtue of agency or autonomy, or perhaps some moral consideration.

Recall from Chapter One that I identified two senses of “well-being” which together capture the landscape of prudence. The first, which I will hereafter call pure well-being is that what matters prudentially is simply bringing about the greatest sum total of first-order, present-moment pleasures or desire satisfactions. The second, which I will call being well, is that what matters prudentially is bringing about an excellent, well-
lived life which includes many elements neither pleasurable nor desirable at the first order. Recall finally, I argued that theories of second-order, or rational desire satisfaction actually reduce to questions of being well. What we need to see then, is that there are cases of recognizably narrative life patterns where considerations of morality, pure well-being and being well are all indecisive. This section addresses morality and pure well-being, the next being well.

That the intuition is non-moral is easy to see. Return to *The Politician*. In both scenarios, absent further information, our politician has been perfectly moral. She neither wronged anybody nor violated a duty. In neither has she failed to deliver on what we owe each other. So, if we favor Steady Rise, such favoring has nothing to do with our moral sense.

We can see this vividly by adding a moral consideration. Suppose that in Steady Rise the politician scores her legislative victory through deception or bribery. Now we have introduced a specifically moral element. My claim is that such specifically moral elements are absent in this case and that it is easy to imagine many two-scenario cases like this one such that both scenarios are equally moral. The further cases below will suffice to make this point if you are not already convinced, though I will refrain hereafter from saying that each case relies on a non-moral intuition.

What is harder to show is that neither scenario has the upper prudential hand. Let us start with pure well-being.

Why am I concerned to show that pure well-being is indecisive when I showed in the previous chapter that such theories are illegitimate answers to the question of what matters beyond morality? That argument showed not that pure well-being was
illegitimate *per se* but that it was an illegitimate life organizing principle. Pleasure and desire still matter—I granted that some pleasure and desire are necessary elements of the good life but argued that they aren't good guides. But if pleasure and desire still matter then I need to show that they are not pumping the intuitions in these cases. This turns out harder than it seems.

Here is the easy first attack. Whatever first-order, present-moment pleasure or desire you identify in Steady Rise can be incorporated into Steady Fall in such a way so as to preserve the overall intuition while correcting for detected differences of pure well-being. All I have to do is add that same measure of pleasure or desire to Steady Fall. Indeed, we can make the scenarios step-by-step reverse-identical. What I mean is that we can create the example such that every single-moment event that happens in the first scenario happens in the second example but in reverse order. Since pure well-being looks only at the moment and sums the total of those moments, it will be unable to favor one scenario.

Take the politician's legislative achievement. In and of itself, isolated from previous and future events, this event generates X amount of pure well-being. But, in and of itself, the legislation is the same in both scenarios. Therefore, X is the same. We could repeat this thought for every significant event contained in each reverse-identical scenario and thereby conclude that pure well-being is not pumping the intuition.

To my mind, the most natural way to capture the intuition here is to move to theories of being well. If we do that we can say that the legislation is more valuable in Steady Rise than Steady Fall precisely because of what came before or after. We can say the following. There exists, in addition to the synchronic event of the passing of the
legislation, a diachronic event extending from the earlier struggles through the later passing, or extending from the earlier passing through the later struggles. This additional diachronic event in Steady Rise is more valuable than its analogue in Steady Fall. It is more valuable because it is a case of achievement, or deserved reward for virtue displayed—there are many ways to describe it. In Steady Fall it is a case of wasted talent, deterioration, or decline, an anti-achievement, if you will.

To make this natural move is to invoke notions of being well, to which we shall turn in the next section. But pure well-being has more resources.

A theorist of pure well-being can draw on the existence of this new metaphysically distinct diachronic event. She can say, however, that it is more valuable only instrumentally to the purpose of bringing about greater pleasure (or desire, etc.) later on. Alternatively, she can deny the overall intuition while explaining it away. It's important to this second option that it explains the intuition away.

The instrumental response grants that things like achievement or desert exist but argues that their value reduces completely to the value of first-order, present-moment pleasure. It's a plausible enough explanation since these things do tend to create more pleasure in the long-run. If we reward people for their hard work then they will be more likely to engage in hard work going forward. And hard work, in turn, plausibly creates more pleasure. Suppose I like watching television—it's my personal _sumnum bonum_. Now I face a choice: watch more TV or dig the holes to build the fence that prevents my dairy cows from wandering off property. If I put in the hard work then I preserve my cows. If I preserve my cows I have more wealth. More wealth, more TV, more pleasure overall.
There are two weaknesses with this response. First, it entails that goal-directed suffering is only instrumentally valuable. And this seems false. In the actual world goal-directed suffering surely does produce pleasure in the long-run. But imagine a different possible world. Imagine a universe consisting only of one single event, the event of unconsummated goal-directed suffering. This universe consists solely in five minutes of a philosopher struggling in thought through a complex argument. Intuitively, this is still a valuable event. Yet it has no tendency to create future pleasure since there is no future in this universe beyond those five minutes. The explanation for the additional unit of pleasure entails that unconsummated goal-directed suffering is not intrinsically valuable. This entailment seems false. Therefore, the explanation should be rejected.

The only way out here is to deny the legitimacy of the Five Minute Universe intuition. The intuition might be tainted: when we understand ourselves clearly we shall see that, in fact, unconsummated goal-directed suffering isn't valuable because it isn't pleasurable. Moreover, this tainting has an explanation.

Reconsider the actual world. It could very well be the case that since we know that hard work produces more pleasure in the long run, we have habituated in ourselves a “pro” attitude toward it. Thus does the Five Minute Universe seem valuable. But this habit has been programmed only because we have learned that, overall in our world, hard work produces pleasure. And this programming taints us philosophers judging the case. If our imaginations are strong enough we shall realize that, in the Five Minute Universe, hard work does not produce pleasure and we shall be relieved of the intuition that it is a valuable Universe.
To the extent that your intuition about the Five Minute Universe is weaker than your intuition about Steady Rise you might be inclined to buy the tainted intuition response. This brings me to the second weakness with the appeal to instrumentality.

When we chase it down fully, the explanation actually entails denying that there is anything better about Steady Rise. In other words, my response is that pure well-being must, in the end, assert that there is nothing of greater value in Steady Rise, not even the presence of an additional unit of first-order, present-moment pleasure.

Think once again on the original case in light of the explanation on offer. There is an additional unit of pleasure, pleasure in the different diachronic event in Steady Rise. We can describe this diachronic event several ways, as deserved reward, achievement, etc. Let us stick with achievement for the moment.

In what does the achievement consist? Without marshaling a detailed theory we can say that it consists in goal-directed suffering plus the successful attainment of that goal. Achievement is goal-directed suffering consummated.

In both scenarios there is the passing of the legislation. But the proposal now is that in the one, that legislation is an achievement, and in the other, not, and that this achievement is only valuable insofar as it creates more pleasure over the long run. This additional pleasure must be in virtue of the passing of the legislation, the goal-directed suffering that precedes it, or the organic unity that emerges when the two combine in the right way.

It can’t be in virtue of the passing itself. Again, by itself, the passing of the legislation creates some amount of pleasure, X, and, with respect to this event described in just this way, X is the same in both scenarios.
It can’t be in virtue of the goal-directed suffering either. According to the explanation on offer it makes some sense to say that we can take pleasure in goal-directed suffering in the actual world since we know that a habit of goal-directed suffering produces more pleasure later on. And the original example is in the actual world. But look: both scenarios contain goal-directed suffering. There's no reason to think that the politician in Steady Fall was any less motivated to be politically accomplished. This is borne out by her post-Senate struggles at the state and local level.

So it’s not pleasure in the passing that explains, it’s not the goal-directed suffering, is it the organic unity? What *extra* pleasure is there in the organic unity of the achievement? An aesthetic one? We can see why goal-directed suffering creates pleasure in the long run. But the achievement? You can’t say it’s more pleasant because achievements are valuable. Perhaps the thought is that with achievement, since we get success after goal-directed suffering, the pleasure of the success will reinforce goal directed suffering in a way that it won’t if the pleasure comes first. In other words, there is more pleasure in Steady Rise because it is of a set of “touchstone” cases of reinforcing the habitual pro-response which we saw was good for the world since it increases pleasure overall.

But for this to work it has to be the case that it is a habit. Otherwise there is no value in hard work when it doesn’t result in reward and no general tendency to engage in goal-directed suffering that sometimes won’t succeed. But habits are, and should be, blunt. The habit doesn’t seem likely to distinguish the two kinds of goal-directed suffering. The fact that the organic unity in Scenario 2 reinforces the habit doesn’t make it any better for the agent. The agent, if the pure well-being explanation is going to work
at all, is under the lash of a habit, a habituated pro-response to the presence of hard work. She isn’t likely to distinguish the difference between the suffering of an organic whole and plain old suffering. The agent isn’t experiencing any more pleasure overall in Steady Rise than she is in Steady Fall, if pure well-being is correct.

And the fact that we easily can distinguish the two sorts of suffering is just more reason to reject theories of pure well-being. Charles Taylor talks about our ability to make qualitative distinctions between various events and the different ways we value those events.9 Something is not just more or less pleasurable or desirable. It can be more or less meaningful, rich, rewarding, “higher and lower, virtuous and vicious, more and less fulfilling, more and less refined, profound and superficial, noble and base.”10 Similarly, our lives and segments of our lives can be judged as “fragmented or integrated, alienated or free, saintly, or merely human, courageous or pusillanimous,” not just as more or less satisfying.11

Indeed, sometimes the less satisfying life is the more courageous, or free, or noble one. Pure well-being must be eliminativist about these distinctions in the face of the fact that they seem to be of qualitatively different sorts.

So if the additional pleasure is pleasure in achievement, then it is pleasure in hard work plus consummation. But hard work is contained in both scenarios and the fact that it is consummated in the one doesn’t make the hard work any more pleasurable for the agent, the possible presence of an organic unity notwithstanding. But Scenario 2 does seem better for the agent, makes for a better, well-lived life.

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9 Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 16.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
The attempt to explain the additional unit of pleasure is thus self-defeating. It begins by admitting that there exists an additional unit of pleasure. In its attempt to explain this additional unit it ends up denying it. The explanation must be abandoned. The only way out is to admit that there is no additional unit of pleasure, that there isn't anything better about Steady Rise, but to provide another tainted-intuition response. Our original (and rather strong) intuition that Steady Rise is better overall is tainted, like the intuition in Five Minute Universe.

Is it tainted for the same reason, the pro-response habit of the real world? Are we led astray by this habit when we reflect on Steady Rise? This habit is directed toward hard work. But hard work, once again, is present in both scenarios. That the politician in Steady Fall is working hard is not something that is easy to miss.

Is it that when we judge the case we are conflating good and good-for? The achievement’s being a touchstone case of habit reinforcement is not something that creates more pleasure for the agent but it is something that we, judging the case, can see is better for the world from the perspective of pure well-being. So the thought here is that we’re seeing that it is better for the world, even though it’s not better for the agent, and that is what explains the intuition. But the intuition is that it is better for the agent to be the Steady Rise politician.

I cannot think of any other reasonable grounds for asserting a tainted intuition. The original intuition therefore stands. Pure well-being, moreover, does not have an explanation for it. Absent a full-on critique of intuitions generally, something beyond the scope of this book, we can now safely conclude that there is something better about Steady Rise and that whatever it is, it isn't pure well-being. I only note that such a full-on
critique would have to be a critique and not skepticism about intuitions. It cannot be full-on skepticism about intuitions since this theorist is still beholden to explaining at least one intuition, namely, that pleasure is valuable and pain not.

I have used the attractiveness of being well against pure well-being in my arguments so far. But I do not want to stop there. I am also going to argue that the narrative ethical intuition outstrips being well. To do this, I need a new example.

III.

The Strange Relationship

Suppose you have a romantic relationship where you both decide to prioritize career over relationship even though you’d both like to have someone to come home to. You have a mutual understanding about this so there is no animosity or resentment. Neither of you is self-deceptive about the goals you have prioritized. You both do what is minimally necessary and respectful; beyond that you try and just enjoy each other as much as possible with as little effort as possible.

Scenario 1 – Great Start: For the first ten years it is just great. You’re both working hard but also enjoying each other’s company. You feel very close and you have a lot of fun together. Then, as time passes, the joy starts to fade. But since you’ve both agreed that you don’t want to “dig deep” in the relationship department there is nothing to stop the descent. You spend the next ten years together but relatively annoyed. You’d both rather just be alone.

Scenario 2 – Great Finish. You start a relationship and it is rocky from the beginning. Fear and hypersensitivity grip both of you causing unnecessary hardship. But since you’ve both agreed not to “dig deep” in the relationship department, and since neither wants to be alone, as hard as things are, you stay. And then, as time passes, through no fault or choice on anybody’s part, the joy starts to rise. Circumstances change, people change. Sometimes things just get better of their own accord. This is the situation here. You spend the next ten years happy, eager to be in each other’s company, still working hard, but together as much as you can be, pleased, satisfied, excited.

Many share the intuition that Great Finish is favorable to Great Start.
It is important to this case that, in each scenario, the ebb and flow of relationship quality is equally free of agency. If, in Great Finish, the couple also engaged in difficult but valuable self-searching during the first ten years—worked hard to improve things, in other words—then we will have reintroduced a clear consideration of being well which would fog the intuition.

This is a difficult case for the being well theorist. Since the scenarios are equally free of agency and hard work with regard to the relationship, there is no obvious achievement or desert differential. Yet, Great Finish is favored. I will assume, moreover, that moves similar to the ones I made with The Politician can be marshaled here to eliminate pure well-being.

Is there some other objective good contained in Great Finish? They both have the same quality of relationship for the same amount of time. They both have the same quality career, the same (zero) development of character. I cannot think of any usual objective good contained in Scenario 2 not also contained in Scenario 1. That is, unless we talk about a narrative good—an aspect of the well-lived life derived from the existence of some sort narrative patterns such as the progressive, down-up pattern displayed here. But to talk about this is to move into the arguments of the next chapter.

Nevertheless, the case that traditional considerations of prudence aren’t driving things is not yet finished. Recall the Whole Lives example from Section I. My concern is to show that prudence can’t handle the difference but it seems that, in this case, being well conceived along many traditional lines has a ready explanation. Scenario 2 is a flourishing life because in that scenario, the agent worked hard for and successfully attained eudaimonia. She achieved it, in other words, and the presence of achievement
explains the intuitive differential. In Scenario 1 she worked hard, to be sure, but she wasn’t successful. Since achievement requires hard work plus success, there is no achievement in Scenario 1. Moreover, since the achievement at issue is a grave one—the achievement of an excellent well-lived life, of eudaimonia or bliss—this explanation has power commensurate with the vibrancy of the *Whole Lives* intuition.

What’s tough and compelling about this objection is that it appeals to a global achievement, and that appeal makes it impossible for me to marshal my usual move. I cannot just scrub the example clean of the achievement like I did when I shifted from *The Politician* to *The Strange Relationship*. If I take away what seems to be Scenario 2’s achievement then I also take away its bliss and I lose the intuition. But I want the intuition so I want the example.

I have a delicate argument before me. On the one hand, what I’m concerned to show is that it matters to lead the life of Scenario 2. On the other hand, I want to say that prudence, broadly conceived and as hitherto theorized, which I’ve been assuming includes considerations of the value of achievement and other virtues of agency, is insufficient. I’m going to do this by taking on board the intuition that Scenario 2 is a eudaimon life while Scenario 1 is not. But I will show that it is not for any agential reasons. It is *not* because in Scenario 2 the individual worked for what she got that makes it a more valuable. It is good that she got what she worked for, but her working for it is not what makes Scenario 2 more eudaimon. If her working for it is irrelevant, if Scenario 2 is not better for any agential reasons, then there will be no achievement to explain the differential.
I will accomplish this by arguing that, in this case, the eudaimon-differential between Scenario 1 and 2 can be due to luck and that, even if it is, Scenario 2 remains better. The presence of luck is typically considered an undermining consideration—if luck is what makes the situation valuable then it must not, in fact, be more valuable or it must not be that lucky after all. But I will conclude differently. Luck here determines and does not undermine the situation.

I shall turn to Aristotle for help and assume for the course of this argument Aristotle’s virtue ethics. I will show that Aristotle—who thought of eudaimonia as activity reinforced by habit and therefore largely under our control—nevertheless admits that a certain kind of luck can affect the status of one’s eudaimonia. I will then argue that he was right about this, that luck sometimes creates an event ordering which produces a more eudaimon life. Since this event order is lucky its value cannot be explained by the virtue of agency. The completion of this argument will bring this chapter to a close.

Let us call the “luck gap” the gap between how eudaimon we would be if the dice went our way and how eudaimon we would be if they didn’t, holding everything else constant. For the most part, we like to think that eudaimonia is under our control, but most of us stop short of the Stoics who thought it was totally under our control, who thought the man on the rack could be happy. Our thinking thus also allows there to be a role for luck or chance in the quality of our lives. When we look at Whole Lives we say “ah, yes, Scenario 2 is better.” But when we find out it is better because of chance, we stammer. If I am right we can stop stammering.

It is vital here that what is at issue is eudaimonia and not pleasure or happiness as a mental state. Good fortune is surely a positive psychological phenomenon giving rise to
pleasure which is a *prima facie* good. However, eudaimonia is living the best life, the life of being well I described in Chapter One. It’s an excellent, well-lived life which will include much pleasure but also much pain. The point is this: when speaking of eudaimonia we cannot jump quickly from the thought that good luck is good to the thought that the lucky life is therefore better with respect to eudaimonia. It is, and should be, hard to show that luck is important to eudaimonia given how agent-centered that notion is for Aristotle and for us.

It is also vital to assume that, in both Scenarios, there was nothing reasonable that either agent could have done to enhance their chance of achieving eudaimonia. Let us assume, despite the second life’s steady decline, that she was nevertheless adequately suited with the time and money to practice the virtues. Let us assume further that in both cases each individual was equally even maximally rational and smart in their choices. They both did everything they could reasonably be expected to do. They exercised practical rationality excellently. It’s just that, in one scenario, the world responded favorably, in another disfavorably. In one case, it all came together, though no additional fault or choice of the agent. In the other, it didn’t.

Imagining the scenario this way eliminates one kind of luck that Aristotle seems committed to, the luck of being born with, or given, a sufficient amount of external goods which he thought necessary, but not sufficient, for eudaimonia. He says that we cannot be eudaimon if we don’t have enough wealth and leisure. We need wealth and leisure in order to practice many of the virtues, intellectual virtues, beneficence, and magnanimity, for example. So one kind of luck is just whether or not you happen to have these goods.
This is a less interesting kind of luck. The question we are asking here is not “is the one who has external goods more eudaimon than she who doesn’t even if nobody did anything wrong?” That’s the question of the man on the rack. And that question is settled for Aristotle. We’re asking, instead, “is the one who did have enough external goods, who did practice the virtues excellently, still less eudaimon simply because the world was trenchant for him?” In other words, it’s a question directed at a later part of Aristotle’s theory.

First of all, the idea that the man on the rack is not eudaimon is very compelling. Surely some pleasure, some freedom of movement, some physical activity is necessary to flourish even if this is a matter of luck. Secondly, however, this role of luck is more easily prevented through redistribution of wealth. Everybody needs sufficient (opportunity for) external goods, so we just insure that through taxation, education, etc. In this way we can eliminate the role of this kind of luck, at least in ideal theory. Under the proper redistributive scheme whether you have enough external goods to practice the virtues is totally up to you.

But Aristotle also talks about a different kind of luck. The starting point here is not the man on the rack, but, I submit, Socrates. Unlike the man on the rack Socrates had ample wealth, leisure and free time. Famously, he lived virtuously—tip top exercise of his rational social self. Would Socrates have had more eudaimonia if his peers has acquitted him, or perhaps given him the same rewards they gave Olympians (the reward Socrates claimed he deserved)? Would his life have been objectively better—better with respect to the things that really matter in life—if he had not drank the hemlock? I will argue that Aristotle would say yes.
On the one hand, eudaimonia, consisting of the exercise of virtuous habits, is largely within our control for Aristotle. Eudaimonia “will be something widely shared; for it can attach, though some form of study or application, to anyone who is not handicapped by some incapacity for goodness.”\textsuperscript{12} Again: “That the most important and finest thing [eudaimonia] should be left to chance would be a gross disharmony” (1099b24). So it is a good thing that, in fact, it isn’t left completely to chance, that virtuous activity in accordance with the soul is something we can do, not a “divine dispensation,” even though getting it is surely a “divine possession” (1099b10-15).

On the other hand, eudaimonia is not totally under our control. Aristotle distinguishes three grades of misfortune, the last of which affects the status of our eudaimonia (1100b23-1101a15). The first grade consists of “[l]ittle pieces” of good or bad luck which “clearly do not disturb the tenor of life.” Second are “great strokes” of bad luck which, while they “restrict and spoil our felicity,” i.e. the ease with which we can practice the virtues, they can nevertheless be faced or borne without affecting the overall quality of our lives:

\[\text{E}\text{ven here, when a man bears patiently a number of heavy disasters, not because he does not feel them but because he has a high and generous nature, his nobility shines through. And if, as we said, the quality of a life is determined by its activities, no man who is truly happy [practices the virtues] can become miserable [lead an objectively bad life]; because he will never do things that are hateful and mean (1100b35).}\]

So far, so Stoic.

But there is a grade of misfortune that does prevent full eudemonia.

\[\text{[Though] the happy man can never become miserable…he cannot be \textit{entirely} happy if he falls in with fortunes like those of Priam. Nor indeed can he be variable and inconstant; for he will not be dislodged from his}\]

\textsuperscript{12} Aristotle, \textit{Nichomachean Ethics}, 1099b17-20. All subsequent references to Aristotle are in-text and from this work.
happiness easily nor by ordinary misfortunes—*only by a succession of heavy blows, and from these he will not quickly recover his happiness*; if he does so at all, it will only be at the end of a long interval in which he has attained great and splendid achievements [emphasis added] (1101a5-15).

Two comments. Misfortune of this third grade can affect our eudaimonia. Secondly, however, its effect is limited: it doesn’t necessarily make us unhappy, it just prevents us from being “entirely” happy. It’s not the case that Priam is happy even though he also isn’t unhappy or miserable. It’s the difference between ~p and p. It’s the difference between being happy and not being unhappy. It’s the difference between the decent, non-miserable life and the great life of earlier.

What happened to Priam? Priam, the king of Troy, saw his first son killed, the body disgraced by Achilles. Escorted by Hermes, Priam visits Achilles and begs him to return the body. He invokes this act of humiliation in seeking Achilles’s favor: “I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before—I put my lips to the hands of the man who killed my son.”

Achilles relents and the son is buried properly. Years later, in the sack of Troy, Priam is killed by Neoptolemus, Achilles’ son, but only after watching Neoptolemus graphically murder another of Priam’s sons. So Priam humiliated himself to give his first son a proper burial only to witness another son’s graphic murder immediately before dying himself. Aristotle: “Nobody calls happy a man who suffered fortunes like his and met a miserable end” (1100a8).

Aristotle thinks that Priam is not “entirely happy,” that he suffers a “miserable end,” even though we may admit that he is not totally miserable. Priam, after all, accomplished many great and splendid achievements throughout his life. We may assume

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14 It’s important here that this is not just one of those moments when Aristotle is taking the common pulse. This is part of his conclusion of his whole discussion of misfortune.
that, like Socrates, he was highly virtuous. He suffered one major blow with the death of his first son. We can assume that either this was misfortune of the second type and therefore represents no setback to eudaimonia, “heavy disaster” though it be. Or we could assume that it was a misfortune of the third type which was nevertheless offset by a “long interval” of “great and splendid achievements” between the deaths of his two sons.

Whatever the case, the circumstances of the death of Priam change the status of his eudaimonia. Since there is no potential for future great and splendid achievements for Priam he is left, if Aristotle is right, with a less than fully flourishing life even supposing, in the presence of plenty of wealth and leisure, he accomplished a great many things worthy of high honor throughout his life.

Suppose the situation was reversed. Suppose Priam suffered these two successive heavy blows and then accomplished a great many splendid things. In that case, even if it was misfortune of the third type, Aristotle clearly says Priam could have been fully eudaimon, not just non-miserable, but “entirely happy.”

If eudaimonia is completely agent-centered then we will be saddled, as the Stoics are, with the man on the rack. “But my theory of the good isn’t totally agent-centered, in order to be eudaimon you have to actually have the things I say you have to have.” But this move cannot handle Priam and Whole Lives. For, in these situations, all the goods or virtues were instantiated or practiced equally well. The only difference is one of timing. Yet, in one scenario, we have the strong intuition that there you have eudaimonia; in the other, a strong intuition that there you have misery, or mere decency, not just a bad ending but a bad ending that affects the quality of the whole.
It is when you line up all of these cases—Priam, *Whole Lives, Single Day, The Strange Relationship, and The Politician*—that I believe you get an argument that Aristotle was right to make a little room for luck in his ethics. We have a strong intuition in all of these cases that one scenario is favorable, yet our attempts to explain it by reference to pleasure, desire, agency, and now perfectionism all fall short.

Aristotle provides us a cryptic but not entirely useless explanation for why, as I have interpreted him, luck matters.

The future is obscure to us, and happiness we maintain to be an *end* in every way utterly final and complete (1101a18-19).

The emphasis this time is in the original. Aristotle invokes both senses of the word “end,” that of a goal or pursuit, but also the sense of an ending. In the footnote to my translation Jonathan Barnes says that the Greek word here is *teleios* which conveys both meanings of “end.” That Aristotle says it is an end “in every way utterly final and complete” is further evidence.

Aristotle thinks that it matters how we end our lives. A misfortunate end can prevent us from complete happiness even if, through it all, we had practiced every virtue masterfully. Priam is not completely eudaimon even supposing him to have done everything he could to be virtuous.

It is ironic that, in the end, we must have an end that is not the end of our life. What I mean is, in the last analysis of what makes a good life, we apparently need an ending to our lives that can be luck-determined and therefore not a part of the *telos* of our existence, namely, virtuous exercise of our rational and physical capacities.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) We could make a grand speculation to explain this in an Aristotelian vein. Perhaps we have mixed things up. Perhaps, precisely *because* Aristotle thinks that our eudaimonia is at least partially bound up with luck it is also the case that he takes luck and chance to be part of our *telos*. Perhaps it is part of who we
The crucial point is this: the mere order of events matters to the status of your eudaimonia independently of agential involvement. The very same two events, such as the death of one or both of Priam’s sons, if placed differently on the timeline of your life, differently affect the status of your eudaimonia, even holding everything else constant. Luck matters in the sense that it can give rise to an event order which, in turn, produces, in the case of Priam, a eudaimonia penalty, or, in other cases, a eudaimonia bonus. So it’s not that luck itself is important, but that luck can create an ethically important event order, an importance due solely in virtue of the ordering, not in virtue of the content, so to speak, of any of the events themselves. This is what I meant when I said luck “determines but does not undermine” the situation.

Entailed by the claim that order matters independently of agential involvement is something of a deflation of the role of agency in determining the quality of our lives. Misfortune can matter despite the presence of great displays of agency and virtue. Good fortune can matter and matter not just in the sense that it provides pleasure or satisfaction but in the sense that it makes us more eudaimon, more flourishing. Things are, once again, as they seem.

You might think that this is a reason to reject the intuition. If the intuition allows for luck to determine the quality of our life then the intuition must be flawed. But that is to close the subject before entertaining alternate explanations. It is to abandon the strong pattern of intuitions identified in this chapter. Instead, the intuition deserves a hearing not just on the basis of how vibrantly it strikes our consciousness, but on the basis of the

are as human beings to lead rational, strongly agential, i.e. autonomous, active lives in the face of chance. If we build luck and chance into our notion of what it is to be human, into our essential function, then we can resolve the tension between the ideas about what makes us human being and the ideas about what makes for eudaimonia. Both our function and our eudaimonia involve both agency and chance. Chasing down this thought would be another study.
promise that it might help complete ethics, might take at least one step toward addressing the incompleteness of morality and prudence. I will not argue, of course, the incoherent claim that we should instantiate luck in our lives. Instead, as it will turn out, the reason that luck is valuable here—the ethically relevant event-order—is something that can be instantiated. So I will argue that, to the extent that we can, we should instantiate this event order within the boundaries of morality and prudence.

I have been concerned throughout this chapter to show that there is a certain type of recognizably narrative pattern backed by a strong intuition, what I am calling the narrative ethical intuition, which is not captured by our theories of morality and prudence as hitherto conceived. To show this I first had to clear away theories of pure well-being, first-order hedonism and desire satisfaction. We did this by observing that we could imagine, as with *The Politician*, two-scenario cases where each scenario was step by step reverse identical. This meant that whatever pleasure or desire that attached to individual events, was present in equal amounts in both scenarios. Yet, one was strongly intuitive.

I next had to show that the intuition outstrips the resources of our more plural theories of being well. To do this we needed to imagine scenarios where not only pleasure and desire were held constant but also various other objectively valuable goods such as the values of agency. Since the pattern identified in *The Politician* often involved the display of agential values such as hard work and achievement, we searched for scenarios scrubbed clean of agency such as *The Strange Relationship*. That brought us eventually to Aristotle and the role of luck and the argument that luck can create a good ending which can, in turn, contribute to eudaimonia.
The Value Structure of Progress

In the previous chapter we canvassed unities that seemed narrative in flavor and also seemed to matter ethically, i.e. intuitive cases of ethically important narrative unities. In so doing, we found a pattern. In all of these cases an earlier bad, or struggle, is followed by, and appropriately related to, a later good, or victory.\(^1\) If you were to represent, i.e. to depict, the type of unity presented, you would draw a positively sloped line or curve connecting one point at a lower and earlier spot to another at a later and higher spot. Hence, I call the unity contained in and exhibited by these cases “progress.”

However, there is more to this unity than just its abstract structure. Another thing that is distinctive of these cases is the way in which the events influence each others' value. The later events in our cases seem to bring forward, make good on, redeem, in short to enhance the value of the earlier events. But not only this, the earlier events also seem to enhance the later. Both ends progress in other words are enhanced in light of each other.

Reconsider *The Politician*. The later legislative victory of Steady Rise seems to “make up for” the earlier struggles in the sense that the struggles are more valuable in

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\(^1\) I'm not claiming to have found all there is to ethically important narrative unities. Instead, I am claiming merely to have found one type of unity that is ethically important. There may be others.
light of the victory. The struggles are *struggles*, not mere suffering; they are that which was overcome. In so being they are more valuable than they would be in isolation. In addition, the victory also seems more valuable in light of struggles. The legislative victory is a *victory*, in other words, an overcoming, a success against a background of struggle. In so being it is more valuable than it would be in isolation.

It is quite common to talk this way. Consider training to be an elite soldier, a Navy Seal or Army Ranger. Such training is grueling to say the least. It involves intense suffering. Considered in isolation, treading water until you nearly drown yourself, resisting food until you nearly starve yourself or building a tolerance for undergoing torture techniques could only be the delights of masochists. But when followed by the result of becoming an elite soldier those goods seem not only less bad, but positively good, not in and of themselves, but *in relationship to the later event*.

I shall call this the compensation phenomenon, and it's an analysis of the dynamic structure of the value of these cases. The compensation phenomenon has its converse, *decompensation*, which can be found in cases of regress. In the Steady Fall scenario of *The Politician* case, the relationship *diminishes* the value of both the earlier good and the later bad. The earlier success, in light of the later failure, becomes promise evaporated or talent wasted; and the later failure, in light of the earlier success, the dying breath of a once-promising protégé.

The compensation phenomenon helps us to further discriminate, to find, isolate or understand the type of unity I have in mind. Of all the types of plausibly narrative unity one might find in her life, it's not just the ones that have an abstract progressive structure to them but the ones with this dynamic value relationship. You might have thought,
based on the examples such as “Whole Lives,” or “Bonum Progressionis” that what is progressing is the agent's well-being. You might have thought that progress is progress of the agent's well-being over time. But other examples contest this. In “The Politician,” for example it's not so much the agent's well-being that is being tracked but the unfolding of the events, a kind of natural ordering of the events themselves (which in turn accounts for the improving well-being). A mere improving amount of well-being or pleasure or any other good is an example of this type of ordering or unfolding. But it is not the essence of it. Instead the essence is the compensation phenomenon. Whatever the nature of the underlying events or life data points—even if they be nothing more than the charting of well-being over time—their structure is progressive if and only if the value of the earlier is enhanced in light of the later and the value of the later is enhanced in light of the earlier.

By furthering our understanding of progress, the compensation phenomenon also helps to see how this unity can guide agents. With the compensation phenomenon in mind agents can ask themselves which of the available options will bring aspects of their past forward in a value-enhancing manner. For example, successful goal-directed activity has the progressive structure and compensation phenomenon associated with it. So, that is why my theory recommends completing projects already begun. If you are in the middle of a project you have the potential to enhance the value of your earlier efforts by completing it.

As another example, consider learning from your mistakes. This also has the progressive structure and compensation phenomenon associated with it. If you have
failed, then that failure will be less bad—maybe even positively good (a failure can be transformed into a training exercise)—if you learn from it.

You can still ask why. Why is successful goal accomplishment better? Why is learning from your mistakes better? In one way, I have answered. Because it enhances the value of composite events. But you can still ask on what grounds they got enhanced. “Okay, it's more valuable, but more valuable in virtue of what?” Ultimately, the answer is: in virtue of enhancing the degree of intelligibility that attends your life. It makes for a stronger story in the sense of a better explanation to successfully consummate your goals and to learn from your mistakes. But there is much work to be done before we arrive there.

For now the point is to further analyze the progressive unity through the compensation phenomenon as one of its distinctive features. In short, this chapter argues for the compensation phenomenon, arguing that it is a valid ethical concept. I do so along several lines. First, we saw that, plausibly, the narrative-ethical intuition is there and that it remains even once we correct for interfering considerations of prudence. The compensation phenomenon supports this intuition, and the intuition supports it. The two ideas mesh well together, in other words.

If you are not a fan of intuition, you might worry that I'm arguing for the ethical validity of progress solely on the basis of the previous chapter's intuition. But this is not the case. I certainly welcome the data from intuition, but I use it only to help create, and generate plausibility for, my central claims. Later on I provide the normative defense, on grounds of intelligibility, of these claims. In this and the previous chapter I am more so
creating my claims rather than defending them. I am creating (or finding) a special type of narrative unity by analyzing the structure of its events and their dynamic valuation.

To that end part of the “argument” here for the compensation is in large measure simply the articulation of it, the exhibition of it in its full form. We will see that it is an elegant principle, multi-pronged, logically consistent and highly unified.

I construct the compensation phenomenon out of the failure of Michael Slote's “pure time preference” thesis that goods which come later in life are ipso facto better. Slote's thesis is important because it is an alternative, non-narrative explanation for the narrative-ethical intuition presented in the previous chapter. In addition however, Slote picks up in an inchoate way on the compensation phenomenon and uses it as partial evidence for his pure time preference thesis. I shall argue that he had it backwards: to the extent that we favor what will have to be an impure time preference it's because of the compensation phenomenon. In short, I argue for a reordering of the direction of explanation.

The result of the chapter is ethically palatable but metaphysically strange. If the value of an event at t1 can change depending on what comes later, is that because what that event was changes? I.e. is the value change due to a metaphysical change? If so, that sounds at least a little spooky and needs defense. If not, supposing it to be “merely” a value change, am I saying that the same event takes on a different value, that there is a value exchange or substitution? Or is it that the same event takes on a new, additional value? And anyway, how is it that an earlier event can later have more or less value? In other words, what is easily said and thought in common language—that the value of historical events change—becomes a challenge metaphysical puzzle. We will
investigate this in the next chapter. For the purposes of this chapter I try to stay neutral on these questions. My focus is on the construction of the compensation phenomenon and on its ethical plausibility.

I.

All the cases of the previous chapter exhibited a common form. They all compared event series that moved from worse to better, to a similar series moving from better to worse. In each case, the scenario that moved from worse to better, the progressive one, was deemed intuitively favorable. We saw, moreover, that we favor progress over regress even when it does not create more prudential value as that value has been traditionally conceived (along hedonic or perfectionistic lines).

In other words, mere progress just seems better—the bonus for progressive trajectories is applied regardless of the presence of virtuous agency. In the limit case, it could be that your entire life happens to you, that you exert nothing significant in the way of self-governance. If, however, life happens to you in such a way as to move from bad to good, or good to great, then, you have a better, more valuable life simply in virtue of that fact.

In his *The Foundation and Construction of Ethics*, Franz Brentano captures the point nicely.

Imagine a process that brings about evil out of good or less good out of greater good and compare it to one leading in the opposite direction; the latter appears preferable, even if the total sum of good is the same in both cases. And this preference is experienced as being correct. This is what we mean by a *bonum progressionis* and a *malum regressus*.²

Brentano asks us to compare a process that moves from better to worse (brings about evil out of good or less good out of greater good) to one that moves from worse to better (brings about good out of evil or greater good out of less good). If we imagine a spectrum of value and divide it into the quadrants greater bad, less bad, less good, greater good, then there are six ways to move from better to worse and six ways to move from worse to better:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greater Bad</th>
<th>Less Bad</th>
<th>Less Good</th>
<th>Greater Good</th>
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**Bonum progressionis**
1. Greater bad → less bad
2. Less bad → less good
3. Less good → greater good
4. Greater good → less good
5. Less bad → greater good
6. Greater bad → greater good

**Malum regressus**
7. Less bad → Greater bad
8. Less good → Less bad
9. Greater good → Less good
10. Less good → Greater bad
11. Greater good → Less bad
12. Greater good → Greater bad

The first six processes get a value bonus. Whatever the value of the process we deduce by summing the initial value of its parts, we need to add to that sum an additional value in virtue of the process itself. If we simply sum the value of the parts of each of the process, then $1 = 7, 2 = 8, 3 = 9, 4 = 10, 5 = 11,$ and $6 = 12$. But, intuitively, $1 > 7, 2 > 8, 3 > 9, 4 > 10, 5 > 11,$ and $6 > 12$. Hence, if the process moves from worse to better it gets a bonus, a *bonum progressionis*. If it moves from better to worse it gets a penalty, a *malum regressus*. 
Presumably the size of the *progressionis* (*regressus*) is directly proportional to the size of the *bonum* (*malum*). And this, also, is intuitive. If a process moves from bad to not so bad it gets one size bonus, but if it moves from bad to *great* it gets a bigger one. So we could divide the spectrum into more subparts and produce variously sized *bonums* and *malums* depending on the variously sized *progressioni* and *regressi*. None of this is captured if we simply sum the value of each component part at a time.

Let us now turn to Slote whose theory promises to capture these intuitions without narrative appeal. He does so through a controversial extension of his more general time of life theory of goods. That more general and less controversial theory goes like this.\(^3\) Goods characteristic of life's different time periods—childhood, prime of life, and old age—are differently weighted in terms of their contributions to the value of one's life overall. Two goods equal in terms of their period-relative goodness may be different in terms of their contribution to life's overall value. The good of winning the spelling bee in middle school, relative to one's youth, can be equal to the good of publishing in *The New Yorker* as an adult, relative to one's prime. Overall, of course, the publication has greater weight. The puzzle is how to explain this.

Slote argues persuasively that the easy explanan—the greater objective value of the publication—is insufficient, even though we grant that it is objectively greater. If its objective goodness was sufficient then we would have to say that children who vigorously pursue goods appropriate to childhood are actually behaving at least somewhat irrationally since they are pursuing goods of poorer objective quality. They will be like a willing addict, “fraught with the desire for and valuing of things one

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shouldn't value." But pursuing the spelling bee is far indeed from being irrational. A theory of the good which failed to incorporate period relativity would thus not be able to say two things we want to be able to say: (a) that the goods typical of one's prime are better than the goods of childhood, but also (b) children who vigorously pursue the goods appropriate to childhood are doing nothing inappropriate—quite the contrary—they are doing everything right.

This more general theory is not without a problem. Children are, after all, a little like a willing addict. They do (should?), in fact, pursue goods of lesser objective value. It is not controversial to say that children are sometimes highly irrational. It's also not controversial to say that they are often somewhat irrational. In short, far from being surprising, it seems quite appropriate to say that vigorous pursuit of a spelling bee is somewhat irrational (imagine seasoned professors engaged in such a game). Therefore the greater objective goodness of goods typical of the prime of life is all the explanation we need.

But this misses Slote's point. That it misses, is captured in the parenthetical "(should?)" above. Children may indeed be sometimes highly irrational, perhaps most of the time they are somewhat irrational. What they are not always, however, and what they are definitely not during the spelling bee, is irrational for children. From a standpoint that takes into consideration the current abilities and stage of the development of the child, a child pursuing the spelling bee isn't irrational at all. Yes, they should pursue goods of lesser objective value. But, if we completely ignore period relativity then we will have to say that this child is somewhat irrational. And this is what we don’t want to say. We want to say, instead, that this is somewhat irrational behavior if this were an

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*Ibid*,16.
adult, but this is not an adult, so this is not irrational—quite the contrary, it is certified
Grade A Rationality, something they child should be doing. Without period-relativity we
cannot say this.

I therefore admit the more general and less controversial time of life theory of
goods. However, with The Politician, Slote takes his theory to greater heights of
controversy. Recall the case: we had two career trajectories; in the one, Steady Rise, ten
years in the political wilderness was followed by legislative success; in the other, Steady
Fall, an early success was followed by ten years in the political wilderness. Note that
period relativity of goods does not explain the intuition here since, in both scenarios, the
entire trajectory takes place during the prime of life.

To theorize the intuition Slote says that goods (period-relative or absolute) that
come later are, ipso facto, more valuable. He posits a “pure time preference,” a “sheer
preference for goods that come later,” the proposition that “a good may itself be greater
for coming late rather than early in life.”5 If such a pure time preference exists, then it
would explain the intuition driving The Politician. Since the good of political success is
achieved later, it is more valuable in Steady Rise than Steady Fall even though the
entirety of both processes takes place within the politician’s prime.

Besides explaining The Politician, the pure time preference is backed, according
to Slote, by our mixed feelings about the value of endings, for example the value of old
age, the ending of periods within life, and the ending of life projects such as careers.6 We
are concerned that life, its periods, and its projects, should end well. We feel sadness or
pity when we observe Ronald Reagan's Alzheimer's or when an all-star athlete (Michael

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5 Ibid, 25
6 Ibid, 26-27.
Jordan, Muhammed Ali, George Foreman) comes out of retirement a shadow of his former self even though we know all is as it should be. There is an intuition that “it is better for an older person to die in harness,” that a productive career should end during its prime. In some moods we even think life should end in its prime. For example, we sometimes romanticize the ending of James Dean, Jimi Hendrix, or Janis Joplin. We don’t admire the kind of death they experienced, of course, but we sometimes admire its timing.

These feelings about endings mix in with our period relative judgments. If period relativity was all, someone in their twilight pursuing goods appropriate to that period should be analogous to the child pursuing goods appropriate to childhood. We should be similarly completely satisfied, or proud. But we are not. We are not totally dissatisfied or upset, either. Instead, our feelings are mixed. Our thinking about the value of childhood is not analogous to that of old age, and the pure time preference explains the disanalogy. While we recognize that a retired politician working his golf handicap down to par is doing only what is appropriate for his current time period (period-relativity of goods), we are also sad that he is no longer the blockbuster he once was (pure time preference). The pure time preference explains why we are sad, period relativity why we are not upset.

As a third piece of evidence for his pure time of life preference, Slote identifies in an inchoate way what I will eventually refer to as the full compensation phenomenon.

We may say that later political success can 'compensate' or 'make up' for (someone's) years in the political wilderness; but it would be an abuse of language to describe early successes as 'compensating' or 'making up' for later failures or miseries. And lest someone reply that this is merely a fact of linguistic convention, can it not be said further that the very fact that we

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7 Ibid, 26.
have expressions for the way later goods can counterbalance earlier evils, but none at all for the counterbalancing of later evils by earlier goods, is a rather good indication of our common belief in the greater intrinsic importance (value or disvalue) of what comes later in life?\footnote{Ibid, 25.}

Slote is taking the compensation phenomenon, the idea that later goods can compensate for earlier bads, as a reason to believe in the pure time preference. But look at what kind of reason this is: it is an appeal to explanatory power. The pure time preference explains the compensation phenomenon. But there may be other explanations.

Indeed, upon reflection, Slote’s entire argument is an appeal to the best explanation. Three phenomena exist—the intuition of the Politician, the mixture of feelings about endings, and the compensation phenomenon. Slote offers the pure time preference as one single explanan for all of these explananda. Unfortunately this elegance is bought at the price of cogency. Slote’s argument to the best explanation lacks in both content—it appeals to false propositions—and form—its propositions, if true, do not really explain the explananda, as I’ll show.

The content problem first: the pure time preference just seems a false proposition about the world. As David Velleman points out, within one’s prime, it does not matter when the good comes, \textit{ceteris paribus}.\footnote{Velleman, \textit{The Possibility of Practical Reason}, 62-63.} Velleman asks us to imagine ourselves behind a veil of ignorance—ignorant about who we are and specifically about our past. Behind the veil, if the Nobel comes at 55 instead of 35 or 45, it isn’t any more valuable \textit{ipso facto}. Of course, as I’m going to argue, it might be more valuable in virtue of what came earlier or what is yet to come. Achievements that come late in life often have many strong and interesting relationships to the earlier events of life. So, later goods will often indeed be more valuable, but not just because they are later.
The second and bigger problem I think is one of form. Slote only scratched the surface of what turns out to be a robust, multi-pronged, and logically elegant compensation phenomenon. As such he settled for an explanation that is much too weak.

But the failure will be instructive. Once we see the full compensation phenomenon we will see not only the inadequacy of the pure time preference’s explanatory power, but also that it, and not the pure time preference, is the place to look for an answer to this chapter’s question. The compensation phenomenon explains the bonum progressionis and the malum regressus. It is the (structural) theory behind the intuition of progress, not the pure time preference.

What I am arguing for, then, is a restructuring of the form of explanation. Instead of thinking of the pure time preference as explanan for three explananda—The Politician, the mixture of feelings, and the compensation phenomenon—we should, instead, think of the compensation phenomenon as explanan for the Politician, the mixture of feelings, and, indeed, for what would have to be an impure time preference.

The result, I should add, is no less elegant than Slote’s original proposal. Quite the opposite: it is more parsimonious, having more layers all of them working together in a coherent manner. More importantly, the explanation is strong in both content and form.

So, two main tasks remain. First, we will see that Slote’s explanatory form doesn’t work. We already saw an outright reason to reject the pure time preference, to think it, simply, a false proposition. But now we need to see that, even if true, it does not do the job Slote assigns it. It misses at least half of the full compensation phenomenon. To do this I will articulate the compensation phenomenon in full and then identify the parts of it ignored by the pure time preference.
The second main task will be to see how well this full compensation phenomenon works as explanan for, rather than peer explanandum with, the Politician, the mixture of feelings about old age, and all of the signal cases from Chapter Two. I will therefore reprise all of these data points and show how well the full expression of the compensation phenomenon works as the theory behind the intuition of progress, as the reason for the bonum in the progressionis and the malum in the regressus.

II.

To keep ideas clear it will help to depict the explanatory form argued for by Slote alongside mine. The arrows are arrows of explanation, moving from explanan, that which explains, to explanandum, that which is explained:

**Slote’s Explanatory Form**

-The Politician- 
Mixture of feelings about endings 
Compensation 

Pure time preference 

**My Explanatory Form:**

All cases of progress preference  
Mixture of feelings about old age  
(Im)pure time 

Compensation Phenomenon 

Let us work slowly. The most easily recognized part of the compensation phenomenon is the idea that, in a bad-good pattern, the later good enhances the value of
the earlier bad. Remember *The Politician*. The later legislative victory enhances the value of the earlier struggle. Those earlier years in the political wilderness are no longer merely pain and difficulty. Instead, they are the training ground, the difficult tilling of the soil which later blossoms. “Five years in the political wilderness followed by legislative victory,”—those five years themselves—are better, in other words, than “five years in the political wilderness.”

But when we look carefully we see not just that the earlier struggles are enhanced but also that the later victory is enhanced. The legislative victory, in the context of the progressive pattern, is better than a legislative victory by itself. It becomes a *victory*, a struggle overcome, the fulfillment of a promise made.

This means there are actually two faces to the compensation phenomenon. It’s not just that (a) the earlier struggles under Steady Rise are more valuable than struggles in isolation, but also that (b) the later achievement of the legislative victory under Steady Rise is more valuable than an achievement in isolation. Steady Rise should get a *double* bonus because its victory and its struggles are both greater than they would be in a vacuum, or isolated from each other. Therefore, later goods “make up for” earlier bads in two ways, by enhancing both ends of the curve.

1. **The Compensation Phenomenon 1.** In a pattern of progress, later goods compensate for earlier bads in that those earlier bads are more valuable than they would be if isolated from the later goods. The later legislative victory of Steady Rise “makes up for” the earlier struggles in the sense that the struggles are more valuable in light of the victory. The struggles are *struggles*, not mere suffering, they are that which was overcome. This phenomenon is true.

2. **The Compensation Phenomenon 2.** In a pattern of progress, later goods compensate for earlier bads in that those later goods are more valuable than they would be if isolated from the earlier bads. The later legislative victory of Steady Rise “makes up for” the earlier struggles
in the sense that the victory is more valuable in light of struggles. The legislative victory is a victory, in other words, an overcoming, a success against a background of struggle. This phenomenon is true.

Next consider, as Slote mentions, the fact that earlier goods do not make up for, or compensate, later bads. The earlier victory of Steady Fall does not make up for the later struggles. Call this the Reverse Compensation Phenomenon, which would also have two faces, this time both false:

3. The Reverse Compensation Phenomenon1. In a pattern of regress, earlier goods compensate for later bads in that those earlier goods are more valuable than they would be if isolated from later bads. The earlier victory of Steady Fall “makes up for” the later struggles in the sense that the victory is better in light of the later struggles. This phenomenon is false.

4. The Reverse Compensation Phenomenon2. In a pattern of regress, earlier goods compensate for later bads in that those later bads are more valuable (less bad) than they would be if isolated from earlier goods. The earlier victory of Steady Fall “makes up for” the later struggles in the sense that those struggles are less bad in light of the victory. This phenomenon is false.

We now have a logical pattern to exploit even further. The next two iterations Slote didn’t see at all. There is, first, the Decompensation Phenomenon. In a pattern of regress, later bads decompensate earlier goods. In The Politician it is intuitive that, in Steady Fall, the earlier victory was also not an achievement in a vacuum, it was something less in light of the later struggles, an “anti-achievement,” a case of “talent wasted,” or a “one hit wonder.” It is not just that the progressionis is a bonum but also that regressus is a malum. The later struggles of Steady Fall not only don’t enhance (Reverse Compensation is false) but actually detract from the earlier victory. The Decompensation Phenomenon has, like Compensation, two true faces:

5. The Decompensation Phenomenon1. In a pattern of regress, later bads decompensate for earlier goods in that those earlier goods are less
valuable than they would be if isolated from later bads. The later struggles of Steady Fall “detract from” the earlier victory in the sense that the victory is less valuable in light of the struggles. The earlier victory becomes promise evaporated or talent wasted, for example. This phenomenon is true.

6. The Decompensation Phenomenon2. In a pattern of regress, later bads decompensate for earlier goods in that those later bads are less valuable than they would be if isolated from earlier goods. The later struggle of Steady Fall “detracts from” the earlier victory in the sense that the later struggles are less valuable in light of the earlier victory. The later struggles are not just struggles, but the dying breath of a once promising protégé, say. This phenomenon is true.

Finally, covering our logical bases, there is the Reverse Decompensation Phenomenon with its two false faces:

7. The Reverse Decompensation Phenomenon1 (this one is hard to see even conceptually, but it’s there). In a pattern of progress, later goods decompensate earlier bads in that those earlier bads are less valuable (more bad) than they would be if isolated from the later goods. The later legislative victory of Steady Rise “detracts from” the earlier struggle in that the earlier struggles are even worse in light of the later victory. This phenomenon is false—the earlier struggles are enhanced in light of the later victory.

8. The Reverse Decompensation Phenomenon2. In a pattern of progress, later goods decompensate earlier bads in that those later goods are less valuable than they would be if isolated from the earlier bads. The later legislative victory of Steady Rise “detracts from” the earlier struggle in that the later legislative victory is less valuable in light of the earlier struggles. This phenomenon is false—the later victory is enhanced in light of the earlier struggles.

This is the full expression of the compensation phenomenon, multi-pronged and logically elegant. Now ask: can the pure time preference explain all of this? Not even close.

First, regarding (1) and (2), it only allows a single bonus, the bonus of the later good in light of the fact that it comes later. It does not pick up on the second part of the double bonus, on Compensation2, the bonus that attends the earlier bad of a bad-good pattern.
Second, it ignores both faces of Decompensation. Later goods are *ipso facto* given a bonus. But, in a pattern of regress, where later bads are doing the work, there is nothing to generate a penalty, much less a double penalty. Yet Decompensation says such a double penalty applies.

Perhaps I am not being generous enough. Can Slote not extend the basic thought of the pure time preference to encompass not just a bonus for later goods but also a penalty for later bads? He does say, in the passage quoted earlier, that the linguistic evidence “is a rather good indication of our common belief in the greater intrinsic importance (value or disvalue) of what comes later in life [emphasis added]” (25). In this, one of the final paragraphs of the chapter on the time of life theory of goods, he seems perceptive to a dual operation, a dual operation which went missing for the majority of the chapter.

Nevertheless, let us revise the canonical statement of his thesis to be not that later goods are *ipso facto* better (the way he originally put it) but that later time periods are *ipso facto* more important. This will allow us to say that whatever happens, good or bad, its value effects are enhanced if they happen later.

Note first that a dispreference for later bads is subject to the same content objection that it just seems a false proposition. To my mind it seems even less plausible. A depression in the 30’s does not seem worse than a depression in the 20’s just because it came later (i.e. not because of some other reason, such as that it is easier to suffer when you’re young).

But even if we buy the tenuous truth of the intrinsic importance of later time periods, we would only save one half of Decompensation. There is nothing in the revised
thesis that would allow earlier goods to be penalized. It would also do nothing to rescue the other half of Compensation. There is nothing in the revised thesis that would allow earlier bads to be enhanced.

Am I still being too quick? Can Slote not extend his thesis even further to say that later time periods are intrinsically more important and that earlier time periods are intrinsically less important? This would allow us to say not just that the value effects of the later are enhanced—the goods more good and the bads more bad—but also that the value effects of the earlier are diminished—the goods less good and the bads less bad. If we can say both of these things then it seems we can rescue both faces of Compensation and Decompensation:

1. Compensation1: In progress, the earlier struggles are less bad (have more value) because they came earlier and earlier bads are less bad than later bads.
2. Compensation2: In progress, the later victory is more good (has more value) because it came later and later goods are more good than earlier goods.
3. Decompensation1: In regress, the earlier victory is less good (has less value) because it came earlier and earlier goods are less good than later goods.
4. Decompensation2: In regress, the later struggle is more bad (has less valuable) because it came later and later bads are more bad than earlier bads.

The first thing is that quality of form here is now costing quite a lot of quality of content. As implausible as it seems to say that the Nobel at 55 is better than one at 45 (original thesis), it seems less so that a depression at 55 is worse than one at 45 (revision #1), and even less so to say that a Noble at 45 is worse than one at 55 and a depression at 45 is better than a depression at 55 (revision#2).

The second problem regarding the doubly revised thesis is that it is in conflict with the more general time of life theory. Goods typical of childhood are now getting a double penalty—they are not only less objectively valuable, but further diminished in value because of the intrinsic unimportance of earlier time periods. It will be harder for
the period-relative goodness to overcome a double penalty—to support our intuition that, from the childhood standpoint, the child is not being irrational at all. In our attempt to stretch Slote’s thesis, it is becoming more and more like his original target, the one that has to say the child is like a willing addict.

Finally, on the doubly revised thesis, never can an earlier bad be transformed into a good. The thesis says that the earlier is intrinsically less important. So however good or bad it is, it is less so if it came earlier. While making an earlier bad less bad is one way to give it more value (which is what Compensation says), there are times when earlier bads don’t just become less bad but become positively good. On the double revised thesis the best you can do, at the limit, is neutralize the earlier bad. You cannot make it a good.

But there are cases where earlier bads actually become positively good. The Politician strikes me as one of these but consider a different one quickly: intensive training to become a Navy Seal. In light of the later accomplishment, that training—intense suffering though it was at the time—is now not just neutralized, but something positively good. It seems very much a constitutive part of the accomplishment of becoming a Navy Seal, which itself is good.

A similar observation runs the other way. While making an earlier good less good is one way to make it less valuable (which is what Decompensation says), there are times when earlier goods don’t just become less good but become positively bad. There are all kinds of lower pleasure imprudences that take on this form. As good as the high was when you lit up, it seems positively bad in light of the later crash.
You don’t have to agree with me that these are cases of bads turned goods and goods turned bad. I only have to convince you that such a thing is possible. For, in that case, there will be a compensation possibility that escapes the pure time preference.

So, regarding the first half of the full compensation phenomenon we can say a few things. The less controversial the truth of the pure time preference’s commitments, the greater its weakness of form. Conversely, the stronger its form, the more controversial its commitments. However, even at maximum controversy—that is, granting it every last strength of form—it still fails to fully account for Compensation and Decompensation, maximally allowing for neutralization, and not transformation, of values.

And that’s just half of the full compensation phenomenon. Let us now address Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation.

Recall that we must not only explain the fact that later goods can compensate earlier evils, but also that earlier goods cannot compensate later evils. As Slote says “it would be an abuse of language to describe early successes as ‘compensating’ or ‘making up’ later failures.” Upon analysis, however, the pure time of life preference traffics only in a weak sense of compensation that permits both.

On a weak sense of compensation, any good, at whatever time, can “compensate for” another at a different time in the sense that it can figure into an all things considered judgment. To compensate in this sense is just to be one among many values available for consideration on a principle of summation. In this sense of compensation even a hedonist can say that pleasure at t2 compensates for pain at t1. But this sense of compensation also allows earlier goods to compensate for later bads. If the pain at t1 is the same as the
pleasure at t2 the net overall value will be zero. But this is precisely not what is meant by the compensation phenomenon Slote adumbrated. It is precisely the following fact that we are trying to account for: the fact that a pain of (-1) at t1 followed by a pleasure of (+1) at t2 is not in these cases an overall net zero value, i.e. we are trying to account for the very fact that Steady Rise ≠ Steady Fall. The weak sense of compensation does nothing to so account. Therefore, the sense of compensation at issue must be more robust.

The sense at issue is akin to the way punishment compensates or rectifies crime, or the way wages compensate for labor. In these cases the punishment or wage is not offered simply as a +1 to the earlier -1. The -1 of punishment or the +1 of wage is not merely a +/-1, it is deserved +/-1. What’s going on here is that the two events match up with each other, or fit together, in a normatively satisfying way. There is a third ethical element, beyond the +/-1 that is instantiated. Perhaps they create a new, third event, diachronic in nature, which has its own additional value, or perhaps the later event “reaches back” and changes the metaphysical or value status of the earlier event.\footnote{We will address these metaphysical questions in the next chapter.} However you want to spell it out, there is a more robust sense of compensation, or else Steady Rise = Steady Fall. What I need to show now is that the pure time preference traffics only in a weak sense.

Imagine three sequential events of predetermined value, a bad event at t1, a good event at t2, and another bad event at t3. All that the pure time preference says is that the good event at t2 gets a bonus for being later in time (though its bonus isn’t as high as it would be if it came at t3). Remember, the pure time preference is a sheer preference for goods simply in virtue of their placement on the timeline. Now when we add up the
overall value of t1+t2 we get something greater than the original sum of its parts. And we say that the good at t2 compensates for the bad of t1.

But this is only the weak sense of compensation. For, when we add up t2+t3, t2 is still given its bonus for being later on the absolute timeline and its greater value in light of the pure time preference is added to the value of the bad event of t3. So the good at t2 is compensating the bad at t3, though only in a weak sense. But notice—and this is the key—we have done nothing different here than we did when we added t1+t2. So there is nothing in the pure time preference which points to a more robust sense of compensation which would block Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation.

All told then, at its maximum heights of controversy, the pure time preference explains all of (1) and (6), much but not all of (2) and (5), and fails completely to account for the falsity of the Reverse Phenomenon [(3), (4), (7), (8)], i.e. it explains somewhere between 25% and 50% of the full compensation phenomenon. At a more reasonable level of controversy, it explains only two of the eight faces, (1) and (6), or 25% only. If we take Slote’s original statement, it only explains one of eight, (1), or 13%.

In sum, the pure time preference admits of three grades of interpretation, which, in terms of content, move from lesser to greater heights of controversy. Even at its minimal level of controversy, the pure time preference seems false, as Velleman argued. Nevertheless, by building in more controversy, we get better form. However, even at the maximum heights of controversy, the pure time preference explains less than 50% of the full compensation phenomenon. At the mid-level of controversy it explains only 25%, and at its minimal level only 13%. In other words, quality of form is inversely
proportional to quality of content and the absolute best quality of each remains weak.

The failure is spectacular, indeed.

We had reasons to outright reject the pure time preference and now we have seen the weakness of the pure time preference’s explanatory power. Slote’s non-traditional account does not seem a promising way to answer the question which it is this chapter’s business to explain, viz. why does it matter to instantiate progress, why is Brentano’s bonus progressionis a bonus at all?

But look at what Slote started. He scratched the surface of a phenomenon which I will now argue works as an excellent explanan of, rather than peer explanandum with, The Politician, the mixture of feelings about old age, and all of the signal cases from Ch. 2.

III.

It's common to talk in a way which suggests that history can change its value. Consider George W. Bush and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In 2003 that event had one sort of value. It was, say, a controversial and assertive use of military power. By 2008 it had become something very different. It had become, perhaps, a bloody nation-building campaign. For some it had also become a situation of injustice and George W. Bush a moral outlaw. Suppose it is now 2025 and Iraq has become a stable democracy, a full-blooded free society, peaceful, just, and prosperous. Suppose further this transformation begins to create budding democracies among its neighbors, just as G.W. Bush predicted in 2003.
The 2003 invasion becomes something yet again different. At the maximum, it becomes a wise instance of foresight and G.W. Bush becomes the father of peace in the Middle East. There will be those who not unreasonably see similarities to Lincoln’s suspension of *habeus corpus*—forever controversial, but now also a bold response to an immensely complex and non-ideal situation. At the minimum, the invasion and the bloody nation-building aftermath becomes an INUS condition for peace in the Middle East. Even those against the 2003 invasion will have to admit “it lead to good things.” That makes it at least slightly more valuable than originally thought.

You may disagree with my descriptions of these events, but my point rests only on their possibility. For now my point is that we often talk as though the value of past events changes in light of later events. The 2003 invasion becomes something different, and less valuable, in 2008 than in 2003 and something different again, and more valuable, in 2025. Other rough and ready examples: The pain of a sustained depression becomes something different once it is over, the difficult seeds of self-discovery perhaps. The rocky start to a relationship which later blossoms into health becomes something different retrospectively. Pre-revolutionary France is something different afterward, different again after Napoleon’s rise, and again after Waterloo. The value status of pre-revolutionary France changes—it has one status after the revolution, another after Napoleon, and another after Waterloo. The value of our history is often shape shifting before our eyes, in light of later events.11

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11 One of the crucial things we will see in the next chapter is that we are not undermining, or forgetting, the original badness of the previous event. I am not saying that someone who recovers from a severe trauma, for example, has eliminated the badness of that trauma from her life, that that trauma is any less bad considered in and of itself. Instead what I will say is that we have the trauma with its badness, as well as the trauma considered as a part of the process extending from trauma to recovery. *As a part,* that trauma is less bad than it is without the recovery. The value of the life considers the trauma and the
And the compensation phenomenon explains all. The bloody nation-building, for example, diminishes the value of the initial invasion; and the later democratic success enhances it. The compensation phenomenon says why our history can shape shift: later events change the value of earlier events, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

Recall now the signal cases from Chapter Two. In *The Politician* we had two career trajectories. In the one, Steady Rise, ten years in the political wilderness was followed by legislative success. In the other, Steady Fall, an early success was followed by ten years in the political wilderness. We saw in Chapter Two that neither pure well-being (first order pleasure or desire) nor being well (achievement, desert, and the like) could explain the intuition. But the compensation phenomenon can. As I said when I drew out the phenomenon’s various faces:

- In Steady Rise,
  - the earlier struggles are more valuable in light of the later victory, and
  - the later victory is more valuable in light of the earlier struggles.

- In Steady Fall,
  - the earlier victory is less valuable in light of the later struggles, and
  - the later struggles are less valuable in light of the earlier victory.

If Compensation and Decompensation are true, then Steady Rise is better than Steady Fall, tracking the intuition, with appeal neither to being well (perfection) nor to pure well-being (pleasure, desire).

Next, reconsider *Strange Relationship*. In that case’s first scenario, Great Start, the relationship moves from good to bad through no fault or choice by either party. In the trauma-recovery process as two distinct events but considers them both together in the overall valuation.
second, Great Finish, it moves from bad to good again without any effort. If Compensation and Decompensation are true, then Great Start is better than Great Finish, tracking the intuition, without appeal to pleasure or perfection.

Finally, reconsider Whole Lives. In the first scenario, a whole life which moves from good to bad, with respect to some ethical baseline (we used Aristotle’s), is compared to one that moves from bad to good. There was the strong intuition that a progressive life is better. If Compensation and Decompensation are true, then the progressive life is better because its later goods enhance the value of the earlier and the later, and the regressive life is worse because its later bads diminish the value of the earlier and the later.

The intuition that Priam’s bad ending affects the quality of his life, even though it came by luck, is also explained. Since a pattern of progress or regress can be instantiated through no fault or choice on the part of the agent, it can be instantiated through luck. And, when luck creates progress, it makes for a better life overall, and when it creates regress, a worse life overall. That, at any rate, was the data from intuition which is now theorized by the compensation phenomenon: later events can enhance, or diminish, the value of the earlier and the later.

Is the full compensation phenomenon too harsh on regress and too friendly toward progress? As I have shown, progress gets a double bonus and regress a double penalty. You may worry that doubling up the doubles is an overreaction to our original intuition, i.e. that the theory makes Priam’s life, for example, worse than intuition would have it. Let me assuage this worry.
Consider two lives with respect to the ethical baseline of pure well-being.

The sum total of well-being on both curves is equal, 300 points (20+40+60+80+100 = 300). Yet, progress is better, ending well is better. Why? The compensation phenomenon answers. Suppose a pure well-being score > 60 is “happy” and one < 60 is “unhappy.” On the progressive curve, the happy years 40-80 increase the value of the unhappy years 0-40. On the regressive curve, the unhappy years 40-80 diminish the value of the happy years 0-40. So the answer is that a day, career, or life of progress is more valuable, overall, than one of regress, just as our intuition says. However, this value is not generated by the sum of time-slices of well-being. It is generated by looking at temporally extended time periods (in this case, the whole life), judging the value of the earlier in light of the later, the later in light of the earlier, and incorporating both of these judgments into our judgment of the value of the whole.

If you want to quantify this judgment you will have to draw a different chart, where the two lives have very different scores. Let us apply our double doubles. In regress, Years 0-40 receive a penalty in terms of that period’s contribution to the overall
value of one’s life; and so do years 40-80. In progress, Years 0-40 receive a bonus, and so do years 40-80.

Everything, of course, turns on the size of each value change. How can we give meaning to any suggested value change? Relatively. We have supposed that a pure well-being score less than 40 is “unhappy” (supposing you’re a hedonist) and anything above 40 “happy.” So, if we size each value change at 20 we will be saying that each bonus or penalty is of roughly the same (dis)value as half the distance from misery to decency. That’s a big value change.

Yet, even with such a large value change, the result is still plausible. The new chart would look like this:

![Graph](image)

This figure charts not the curve of time-slice well-being but the curve of contribution to overall value. It is artificial insofar as I have taken holistic judgment, one that cannot be made of the individual parts, and then divided it equally across the various parts. So it is not quite accurate but it is the best we can do if we want to quantify the point I am trying
to make. I’m trying to make a qualitative point, in other words, to those quantitatively inclined.

Total value of one’s life is now very different. The progressive curve gets a score of 400; regress 200. Indeed, there is only a small period of twenty years (assuming discounts and bonuses applied equally) when the regressive life is better than the progressive one. This revised score still accords nicely with our intuitions about the value, overall, of these two lives. A life that slowly improves over time and ends quite well really is about twice as valuable a life as one that slowly deteriorates over time from an excellent beginning. If we took those two whole lives, compared them in a vacuum, and asked ourselves which is better and by how much, saying the life of improvement is about twice as good as the life of deterioration is a respectable reaction.

What about our mixture of feelings about the value of endings, our last data point? Recall Slote’s observation here: even though we are not upset at the once blockbuster politician working his golf handicap down to par (period relativity), we also are not equally proud of him as we are of a child winning the spelling bee. The compensation phenomenon, tempered by period relativity, which I buy, does the job just fine. The golf game, in the context of earlier accomplishment, somewhat diminishes both the value of the earlier accomplishment and the value of the golf game itself. The sight of once-blockbuster playing golf strikes a chord of disharmony when compared to average Joe retiree golfer. We know all is as it should be (period relativity) but still, we dislike seeing it. Why? Because it detracts from the value of his earlier career, it makes for a pattern of regress, rather than progress. For an average Joe retiree golfer such a
sight does not detract as much since retirement golf does not create as big a regressive slope in his case.

Compensation also explains why we sometimes romanticize early endings. If the political blockbuster dies suddenly, right after finishing out his last term, those accomplishments are never diminished in value. Consider why some recent accomplished politicians are so concerned with legacy. They don’t want to be seen playing golf. Instead they do speaking engagements, they create foundations, i.e. they try and become elder statesmen. They are trying, in my view, to continue a pattern or progress or at least to forestall the inevitable instantiation of regress.

It’s an implication of my view, you might be noticing, that for all those who live to a good old age, their lives will be somewhat diminished in value since their later activities will necessarily be of lesser quality. The mind can pick up when the body leaves off for a good while, but the mind too always eventually fades with age.

Is this a problem for my account? You might think that someone who does what is appropriate for a child as child, what is appropriate for the prime as an adult, and what is appropriate for the elderly as an elder, has actually done a better job living than one who succeeds in expanding the scope of her prime. Is there not something to be said for leading a life that fits naturally into life’s cycles, in other words? Might such an individual have a better life than even the mythical one who is prime throughout?

All things considered, I can make no judgment. The life that does a good job fitting its activities to its periods has something that the life of pure progress doesn’t. And the life of pure progress has something that the other doesn’t. I buy the general time of life theory of goods, which may explain the value of the fitting life, though more
theory may be needed or wanted. Regardless, my business here has only been to establish that there is something to be said for progress (Chapter Two) and to find an explanation, a theory, which would explain it (the current chapter). The thought that a fitting life has something that a progressive life doesn’t, or even an argument that it is better, all things considered, is therefore an objection that is irrelevant to my argument here.

IV.

So progress is not an absolute good—it does not trump every other value of life—but I maintain that it is a universal good. In other words, wherever you have progress, there you have an additional measure of value. Progress is always a good; regress always a bad.

But so understood, my claims about full compensation’s various faces now look suspicious. In particular, if taken as universals, my claims about the falsity of Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation phenomena seem false. Is it really never the case that earlier goods enhance the value of later bads (Reverse Compensation), or that an earlier bad diminishes the value of later goods (Reverse Decompensation)? Slote calls it an abuse of language, but as much as I begrudge it, I disagree: we sometimes do viably talk in this way.

And, if our talking this way turns out to track the truth, my universal claims are falsified. Saying that the Reverses aren’t always false is another way of saying that the non-Reverses sometimes are false. In other words, it is to say that progress is sometimes
worse and regress sometimes better. Unlike the thoughts about the fitting life, this would be a true objection to my position.

So we must give this objection a full hearing. I first provide examples of cases where we do talk as though progress is worse, regress better. I then entertain simply circumscribing my universals. While putting existential rather than universal quantifiers on full compensation’s faces does not diminish entirely the utility and viability of the full compensation phenomenon, I ultimately reject this strategy and reassert the universals. I will show that what seems to be a problem—the fact that we viably sometimes talk as though progress is worse—not only isn’t that big of a problem, but actually works to my advantage.

The full hearing first. Reconsider Reverse Compensation1. Is it never the case that earlier goods make up for later bads? Sometimes earlier goods do seem to “cushion the blow” of later bads (so much for the abuse of language point). Pete Sampras loses the US Open, in September, in the first round after winning Wimbledon, in July. The Wimbledon Championship seems to make the US Open loss a little less bad, at least in some moods, from some perspectives.

Reconsider Reverse Decompensation1 as well. Sometimes we talk as though an earlier bad “infects” or “tarnishes” downstream goods. In The Words, Bradley Cooper plays Rory Jensen, a struggling, aspiring writer. His MA in creative writing not yet paying any dividends, he copies word for word and takes as his own, a manuscript he discovers in a hidden compartment of an antique briefcase. It is a sensational bestseller; critics low brow and high love it. Can anything he publishes later on, no matter how good, ever be as good as it would be isolated from this earlier misstep?
Moral missteps, in particular, such as Jensen’s plagiarism, strike us as not just weighty but also sticky. Such things are likely to stick to surrounding events; they tend to infect, tarnish, or take away from both the earlier and the later. If Jensen plagiarizes later rather than earlier, then that seems, too, to detract from whatever earlier successes we can imagine.

I find I have to push my imagination to its limits (not very far) to find cases where we talk as though Reverse Compensation2 and Reverse Decompenasation2 are true. Is there any good-bad pattern where the earlier good is made better in light of the later bad? Is there any bad-good pattern where the earlier bad is made worse in light of the later good? Here’s a go. I publish something mediocre; then I publish something great. Is the mediocre thing worse in light of the great thing? We could call it a case of not tapping my potential, revealed only later on, I suppose—a weak early attempt, in other words, made weak only in light of the later. I publish something great, then something mediocre. Is the great thing more great in light of the later mediocre thing? I suppose if it’s the only great thing I ever publish then we could characterize is as my career’s one single “gem.” Some things are better because rarer. (So don’t publish more than one great thing!)

The first thing to say in light of this suspicion is this: the intuitions supporting the progressive patterns of The Politician et. al. affirm the Compensation and Decompenasation Phenomena and deny their Reverse counterparts. I admit that there may be other contexts, like the ones I’ve tried with extra effort to imagine, where the Reverses are in play. But as far as The Politician and related cases are concerned, it is clearly not the case that earlier goods (bads) are enhancing (diminishing) later bads (goods). In other
words, we lean naturally in these cases toward the Compensation and Decompensation Phenomena.

Note that this natural leaning is a product of taking a special sort of retrospective view. When we look backwards upon the history of our lives or portions thereof, later goods seem to enhance things all around. But this view is not purely retrospective. It’s actually a kind prospective historical view, if you will, a view that’s looking at history with an eye toward how the earlier blossomed or degraded into the later.

But what Sampras and Jensen show is that, when we look back, we can look back in another way, too. We can look backwards upon a given period of time and be more conservative about it, by which I mean we give less weight to change. It is change that Compensation and Decompensation emphasize. They see a bad-good pattern and they say that that earlier bad is transformed, redeemed or overcome. Likewise, when they see a good-bad pattern, they say that the earlier good was also transformed, not redeemed or overcome (since those words have positive connotations), but demolished, forfeited, lost.

But a different perspective sees the bad-good pattern and says that the earlier bad sticks to the later good, that it sets the parameters or the tone of everything that comes later, a parameter or tone that can only be overcome with time and effort. This retrospection is less seduced by change and focuses more on the baseline from which change is asserted. They see change and call it deviation or variation, not transformation.

The first group of folks are more likely to be both utopian—declaring the end of racism with the election of Barack Obama, for example—and also dystopian—declaring the end of art with the onset of the avant-garde, or the end of Liberalism when the political pendulum swings paternal once again.
What do I say? One response is just to affirm it all, to admit that all eight of the desiderata are sometimes, but not always, true. This isn’t a terrible response because all eight do share a structural similarity. Supposing the Reversals sometimes true, this is all the more evidence for one point that I’m trying to make which is that the relationship between goods and bads sometimes changes their value status. All eight of the full compensation phenomenon’s faces have this aspect in common.

But I’m not satisfied with that. For one thing, I want the universals. For another, to leave things here is to leave the complexity under-explained. It is okay to grant that things are complex (they usually are), but what we want in addition is an explanation, a way to chart the waters. However, by itself, the value-change insight is not enough to handle the complexity, to understand it, to explain it. Without further explanation we seem lost in a sea of variable patterns of value change without any map to chart our course. Chapter Four will no doubt help but it would be nice if something could be said now.

The third and biggest problem with a blanket existential affirmation is that I begin to lose the primacy of the progressive pattern. The reverse phenomena say that progress is sometimes worse. But the hope I argued for in Chapter Two was that we might find some tangible event pattern which could be instantiated in order to help agents find their way, a way, some way, through the generous forest of morally-sanctioned, prudentially-respectable life paths. To just say that values can change is not enough help for those concerned to live as they ought. How should they exploit that fact? Without a tangible pattern, no answer is forthcoming. Instead, we only find out afterward that our past has
changed its value. We may thus be granted gratitude, or regret, but not guidance. And
guidance was Chapter One’s clarion call.

What I’m going to do now is articulate a principled way to distinguish times when
it is appropriate to invoke the Reverses and when it isn’t. When it is appropriate, the
Reversals will temper the impact of what turns out to be the original and more
fundamental Compensation and Decompensation phenomena, which therefore remain
intact and exploitable. Once we have this principled way of distinguishing we will then
be able to see that, unencumbered, progress retains its value and retains it simply in virtue
of the event order. In short, properly understood, the universals are still true.

In addition, the principled distinction will also help us see that when the Reverses
are in play it is due in virtue of the same structural similarity. The fact that values change
is what explains the Reverses and I will affirm that fact. But rather than being a blanket
affirmation it will be an affirmation with a distinction in hand. We will thus have a way
to handle the complexity and will produce a map which permits guidance.

The distinction was mentioned earlier. Rory Jensen’s plagiarism and moral
missteps in general, I said, are not just weightier but also stickier. Stickiness is different
from weight, though there is a strong association: weightier things tend to stick.
Nevertheless, an event can have high negative or positive weight and little stickiness, or
be sticky with little weight. A very bad harm can be almost totally relieved of its
stickiness (but not its weight). Suppose a parent leaves an infant on the stranger’s
doorstep in order to protect it against certain death. The abandonment, we say, is as bad
as it ever was qua abandonment (if we still think it abandonment), but it doesn’t stick to
surrounding events in the way it would if the parent left the child out of laziness or fear.
Going the other way, events can be sticky and of little weight. One little lie, nearly harmless in itself, can sometimes infect downstream utterances for quite a while. How many truths does it take to overcome a lie? More than one, no doubt. The value that attends a pattern of progress is less vivid when the bad-good pattern is one of liar turned truth teller. Eventually, the progressive pattern does enhance things, but only over time. Only after a lot of truths are told, does one’s past as a liar become something of a learning experience, something of enhanced value. But since, in this case, lying is so sticky, it takes a lot more time and a lot more truths to overcome than, say, the suffering ahead of a political achievement.

It is when events strike us as sticky in this way that the Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation phenomena take hold. The first few truths told after the liar turns his leaf are penalized, are of less value than they would be isolated from the earlier lies. In this way the Reverses are sometimes true. When they are true it is because of that event’s stickiness.

But now that we have identified stickiness as explanan, we can control for it. Once we do, the full compensation phenomenon—the true faces true, the false false—once again blossoms. We see it in the case of The Politician where stickiness is absent. We see it in the case of the reformed liar just presented where, over time, the progressive bonuses reemerge. In general, instances of immorality are stickier than those of imprudence. So we should expect to see the effects of progressive value enhancement less vividly in moral cases and more vividly in prudential cases. And that is exactly what we see.
When we control for stickiness, what happens is that earlier goods no longer enhance later bads, and earlier bads no longer detract from later goods. Instead, later goods enhance the earlier bads (and the later goods), and later bads detract from the earlier goods (and the later bads). *Mere progress* is, once again, held to be better *ceteris paribus* and mere regress worse *ceteris paribus*. They are better and worse, respectively, in that Compensation and Decompensation are true and Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation are false.

Remember the argument from Aristotle at the end of the previous chapter. There we identified three grades of misfortune, only one of which had the power, at the end of life, to diminish the overall quality of one’s eudaimonia even if one had been up to that point thoroughly virtuous. There I was only concerned to show that the timing of the third grade of misfortune mattered. The same misfortune placed in the same virtuous life, sometimes prohibited eudaimonia and sometimes permitted it, depending only on timing. Now I’m going to draw something else out of it.

While the third and highest grade of misfortune, unlike the others, can affect the status of a virtuous man’s eudaimonia, it was also the case that it could be overcome only by a long series of honorable activities. The third grade of misfortune is sticky, in other words, like Jensen’s plagiarism.

So, a bad event can be bad in two ways; it can be weighty or sticky. Weight does not automatically inhibit the value change attendant on the progressive event series type, as the abandonment example showed. Stickiness inhibits but does not cancel it. So we now have some way of making sense of the occasional Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation.
I’m tempted to say that stickiness is independent of the full compensation phenomenon—an irrelevancy, like Slote’s pure time preference. If that were the case then my argument could proceed full speed ahead. But that is to pass over the fact that stickiness is diachronic and, like all the faces of the compensation phenomenon, involves a value change in light of the relationship between goods and bads.

And now we can see how stickiness actually works to my advantage. I’m happy to have there be contexts where we lean toward a historically conservative analysis, when we look at earlier events as setting the stage for later ones rather than as events overcome, overturned, modified, or rectified. I am happy to admit this because a historical conservatism still relies on the fundamental insight that additional value can be created (or discovered) in light of the relationship between values. All eight of the full compensation phenomenon’s faces traffic in what we might call meta-value change, a value change due to the relationship between values.

However, there remains a crucial difference between the operations of stickiness (the Reverses) and Compensation and Decompensation. It remains the case that, with respect to Compensation and Decompensation, the value change (the bonus or penalty) is due merely and directly in virtue of the pattern. In these cases nothing else is going on except the fact that a good is following a bad, or a bad a good. In contrast, with stickiness, we have an additional piece of conceptual machinery. That additional machinery is also diachronic in nature and also traffics in a value change. However, the target of the intuition behind stickiness is not the diachronic relationship itself, but the diachronic properties of a synchronic entity, the earlier good or bad.
Stickiness says “look at this one particular event; it has a certain property, the diachronic property of potentially infecting or cushioning the later.” The full compensation phenomenon—the true faces true, the false false—says, “look not at any one event, but at the relationship between these two events; this diachronic relationship has a property, the property of enhancing or diminishing the earlier or later.” We see the difference when we control for stickiness.

It is therefore in the following sense that we can carefully, but confidently, say that the Reverse Compensation and Reverse Decompensation Phenomena are false and a fortiori reassert the universal claims of the full compensation phenomena. Never do the Reverses operate on the mere pattern of goods and bads. Insofar as the relationship between goods and bads are concerned, there is neither a Reverse Compensation nor a Reverse Decompensation Phenomenon. There is, however, a Compensation and Decompensation Phenomenon.

Here is the best way to put it. Suppose that the only information we are given is that there is a good which follows a bad, or that there is a bad which follows a good. Suppose all we know is that there is a value pattern of progress or a value pattern of regress. Given only this, the Compensation and Decompensation Phenomena take hold and not the Reverses.

And it is precisely this thought experiment, recall, which Brentano proposed at the beginning of this chapter. He gave us no description of the events beyond their value and their order. So there was no chance for stickiness to take hold. Still, he said, we affirm that progress gets a bonus, regress a penalty.
What Brentano did not do, and what I have done in developing the full compensation phenomenon, is provide a structural account of the value of these cases. Brentano succinctly articulated the intuition targeted in ch. 2, but he did not say anything beyond “progress is good.” The full compensation phenomenon is the full expression of the idea that progress is better. It, not the pure time preference, is the robust explanan we sought.

Much has been accomplished. The primary thing is that we have a structural theory of the value of progress, a structural theory of the types of narrative unities that

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12 Supposing Brentano’s background philosophy of mind, epistemology and normative ethics, he didn’t have to say more. Brentano was a systematic philosopher taking an empirical, phenomenological approach. His primary focus in ethics was its foundation, the nature of intrinsic value, that is, what things are irreducibly good and how we come to know them. Consistent with his philosophy of mind and epistemology, that foundation is a positive emotion, similar to desire though (as translated) he prefers to speak of a love, inclination, or preference, a love experienced as being correct. See his On the Origin of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, 18. Brentano believes that, among the positive emotions, the emotions of approval, we can distinguish, on phenomenological grounds, two broad classes (Origin, 18-25). The first is bare, instinctive approval, our drives, desires, wants, appreciations, and loves. In contrast to these Brentano thinks there is a special, higher kind of positive emotion, a love experienced as being correct. This is an experience of an inclination toward a certain thing where that inclination is experienced as being, felt to be, correct, or veridical. When we are having this experience we understand that we are loving rightly, truly, or correctly. The things which we are loving when we are loving truly are rightly called “good.” These goods are, for Brentano, wholeheartedly objective. The things which we love when we love truly really are good in the full sense of the word. The normative force attending them is universal—all ought to have and pursue these things and ought to avoid inhibiting or destroying them. The objectivity of the goods loved is built into the phenomenological experience.

Given this background Brentano does have an answer to the question “why the bonus.” It’s simple and contained in the original quotation: when presented with a progressive process we have this special ethical experience, we have a “preference experienced as being correct” (Foundation, 197). This special phenomenological experience tells us that progressive trajectories really are good. Hence, they are good and that’s that. Everything, of course, turns on whether you accept Brentano’s background, especially on whether it is true that there is such a special ethical experience, a phenomenology of higher, veridical experiences of approval.

Nevertheless, if you are a hardcore Brennanoan then the argument of this chapter was irrelevant for you. You will agree that progressive trajectories are ones we ought to instantiate because you buy the background ethics (which depends on the epistemology which depends on the philosophy of mind). You don’t need further explanation. But for non-Brentanoans and those who don’t want his background premises, more is needed.

Moreover, even for Brentanoans, while the argument of this chapter is unnecessary, the argument of the book is not. Even Brentanoans will need to say how the bonus progression is applicable to human lives, how, granting that the bonus is a bonus, such a fact will guide agents. These folks will see me as doing Brentano application and I’m happy to let them think of me this way with a crystal clear caveat: precisely because I offer an alternative account of why the bonus, I am not committed to Brentano’s background theories of intrinsic value, the mind, or knowledge. I should note I’m not committed to denying them either.
matter. We also showed that it is superior to Slote’s non-narrative pure time preference. Its strength of form is impeccable—all the requisite data points, the explananda offered by Slote and the signal cases of Chapter Two, are clearly and fully explained.

But is the full compensation phenomenon really true? It works well with the cases of progress presented—that much must be granted. But are earlier events really enhanced or diminished in value in light of later events? I argued that Slote’s explanan, whatever its quality of form, was a false proposition about the world. Might the full compensation phenomenon, whatever its quality of form, also be a false proposition about the world?

Jump right to the experience machine arcade, my most difficult case. Is the earlier period of pain really better simply in virtue of the later pleasure? When we abstract from the ethical intuition, when we abstract away from all the cases and examples, in other words, it’s not just hard to see why events change in value in the way the compensation phenomenon says they do, it’s hard to see how events can change in value at all. This is the topic of the diachronic mutability of both events and value, which is the business of the next chapter.
Chapter 4

The Metaphysics of Progress

We have provided a layer of reasoning to think the progressive type of narrative unity more valuable than other types of unity. Insofar as we think that at least some cases of progress are valuable in virtue of their unity, we have a companion thesis—the compensation phenomenon—about the structure of these cases' value. These considerations work well together.

But the compensation phenomenon raises some important metaphysical questions. The value enhancement, I have said, accrues because the value of each part in relationship is enhanced. But what creates the enhancement? Do the earlier years of struggle in Steady Rise literally change what they were—were they, at t1, mere pain and suffering but now, at t2, struggle or training? Does the bonus accrue because the event-landscape changes? If it does, then we need to do some explaining: later events cannot effect a change in earlier events.

However, there are several things that later events can do.¹ First, they can change our understanding of the earlier (and later) events. The event reality of t2 cannot cause changes to the event reality of t1, but it can cause changes to our understanding of t1

¹ Thanks to Casey O’Callaghan and Michael Barkasi for helping me see the options here.
reality. Perhaps, at t1, we were simply wrong about the then-current state of the world. We thought the reality at t1 was such-and-such. But now we know better; really, it is, and was all along, something else. This later and more accurate understanding of t1 reality is itself also open-ended and subject to revision based on what comes still later.

Second, later events can change our understanding, not of the events, but of their value. It could be that the events stay put as originally understood but that later events help us see that the value of the earlier (and later) is different than we thought. At t1, suffering through the political wilderness seems to have one value, but later on we come to realize that it, event-wise being still what it was—suffering through the political wilderness—actually has, and had all along, more value than originally thought. This later and more accurate value assessment is likewise open-ended.

Thirdly, what can happen is that earlier events can change their metaphysical status, insofar as they can combine with other events or take on new properties. The value enhancement thus may be a result of an evolving metaphysical basis. Unlike the first two options, this one would let us avoid saying that the earlier event or value was all along what it now seems.

Consider the event of Babe Ruth’s last professional at bat. On the one hand, you might think that whatever at bat was his last at bat, it was that at the time it happened. We may not have known it at the time, but it was, then and there, his last at bat. That’s the type of thesis that our first two options articulate, the difference being their foci.

However, on the other hand, you might think that Babe Ruth’s last professional at bat was not so until the last out of his last game, until he retired, or perhaps until he passed away. To be clear the idea is that it was not his last at bat at the time but only at

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2 Thanks to Richard E. Grandy for help clarifying this third thesis.
which time the appropriately related future thing happened. It is only when this appropriately related future thing happens that “that at bat” is his last at bat because now that at bat has the appropriate metaphysical properties making it his last at bat. But what “that at bat” is has changed. It’s “that at bat” plus the appropriate relationship.

It’s easier to get into the spirit of this type of thesis when we imagine unexpected things. Suppose it’s the middle of Babe Ruth’s career. Now suppose that, instead of his career continuing as it did, he had a major car accident and lost his legs. “Last at bat before car accident” is, in this possible world, also “last at bat of his professional career,” but not until the accident.

Coming back to our original example, the earlier years of pain and suffering did not become the training, or the struggle, until the later victory came about. Until then they were what they seemed—pain and suffering—and then when the later thing happened they became another thing, pain and suffering plus the property of being part of the causal network that brought about the victory. This later thing, pain and suffering plus causal relationship, does not replace the earlier event, but is added to it. You have the pain and suffering, and now you have the struggle. Both are there with their different values.

As we proceed we will see even more options than this basic set. But these are enough to get us started for all attempt to respond to the metaphysical challenge while doing some justice to the compensation phenomenon adumbrated in the previous chapter. Properly understood, I will argue, one of these makes it palatable to think that later events can enhance the value of earlier ones. But which one and why?
The first section of this chapter articulates in detail all of our metaphysical options. There are options within options within options. It will help to see the full logical space even if a generous handful are clearly inadequate because there might be a non-obvious choice found in that space which does the job best. Moreover, doing so will allow us to generate stronger conclusions. In the second and following sections I will evaluate the options and take a metaphysical stand behind one.

My argument begins by subjecting each metaphysic to two tests: global theoretical consistency and general metaphysical plausibility. First, the metaphysics must be consistent with the full compensation phenomenon, it must allow the four true faces to be true and the four false, false. This is a test of this book’s global theoretical consistency: if I don’t pass this test, then my metaphysics is not consistent with my ethics.

Second, we don’t want to bite too big of a metaphysical bullet as we go about gaining consistency. General metaphysical plausibility I shall operationalize as a loose philosophical naturalism, by which I mean a prohibition against speculation that is inconsistent with science, with either the content of its generally accepted laws or with its practice. I will show, in other words, that even a naturalistic, analytic philosopher can be a self-respecting fan of the compensation phenomenon with all of its value-change language.

Only two primary competitors pass both tests, the view that the later event enhances our understanding of the earlier event’s value and the view that the earlier event takes on additional metaphysical properties. I will argue that this second more evolutionary thesis is the only one that is true if the future is genuinely open, if
determinism is false. I will then argue that, even if you stick with determinism, the first 
more deflationary metaphysics is inconsistent, not with the practice of physical science, 
but with the practice of the philosophical science we have come to know as value theory, 
the systematic study of which things are valuable and why.

Thus I defend the more global thesis where the earlier event changes its 
underlying status. Properly understood, the earlier gets enhanced in value by becoming a 
different thing, a thing in relationship, or a thing with new properties. In what sense is it 
still true then that the original thing is more valuable? As a part. A part of a painting, 
ugly in itself, can itself be beautiful, as a part. It’s not just that the whole painting is 
beautiful, in other words, but that the formerly-ugly part is too. Analogously, something 
in isolation can be disvaluable, while in relationship positively valuable—not just the 
relationship as a whole but that individual part itself, in relationship. An added benefit of 
this view is its ability to endorse the compensation phenomenon without losing sight of 
the badness of the earlier. We don't want to say that an earlier trauma, for example, is 
rendered non-bad in and of itself. The evolutionary metaphysic allows the new event to 
be distinct from, and considered along side, the earlier.

So, I have two theses. First thesis: the compensation phenomenon is subject to no 
major metaphysical objection. I will argue that the more evolutionary metaphysical 
account passes both tests and that, this being true, the compensation phenomenon is 
equipped with a respectable metaphysics. I will show that the metaphysic is worthy qua 
metaphysics. In so doing I will have shown that it permits the kind of flexible, non-
subjective analysis we find ourselves doing when thinking about whether and how values 
of events change over time.
My second thesis is that this evolutionary metaphysics is the only kind that can account for true value change. Put another way, I have identified the correct sense in which we can truly say that the same event changes in value. Among all the options that try to account, my favored metaphysics is the only one that is not just metaphysically respectable and adequately naturalistic, but also ethics-loving. If we account for value change by undermining our philosophical science of value, we haven’t really accounted. That’s why the evolutionary metaphysic is not just the best, but the only, option, and why an investigation of the full metaphysical space is important.

I.

I will begin by making a distinction between events on the one hand, and the value of events on the other. I take both to be real—that is, there really is a “what’s happening” and also there really is a “how good is it.” Both are fact-realities of the first order. There is a fact of the matter as to what happens, and there is a fact of the matter as to how good that happening is. I use the words to mark two sorts of reality—different, to be sure—but each fully in the world as the other.3

3 Some resist the assertion of a value reality. A major source of that resistance seems to me to be ardor for the five senses (“observable” in this note means observable with the five senses). Events, being observable things, have little to no pre-theoretic metaphysical burden of proof, while values, being unobservable, have a substantial one. To break this ardor, and level the burden of proof, we need only realize how hard it is to deny the reality of non-observables in general. Start by asking yourself whether boundaries per se are real. We can’t observe them in the world. Sure, you can march out and look at the sign marking the Texas-Oklahoma border. But can you see that to which the sign refers? No. It’s abstract. It’s a conceptual entity. Come to think of it: do you see molecules when you look through the microscope? No. You see black dots, or squiggly lines or shaded areas, or whatever the visual appearance is (I’ve never looked). Do you ever see that to which numbers refer? Never. You can symbolize them, draw them, depict them, talk about them, think about them, refer to them, you can use them to make real things happen. But you cannot, and will not, ever, observe them. Step 3: You must admit that some non-observables are real, that there exist non-observables in the world. This isn’t quite true, you could, instead, affirm only the existence of non-observables, You could also deny the existence of both observables and non. You could be an irrealist about everything. I do not meant to commit myself to any major metaphysical position about non-observables. Later on we will have to say
In one way “event” is meant generally—I mean it not just diachronically but synchronically—as in “events and states of affairs.” The “what’s happening” locution helpfully covers both, even the limit case of static entities (“What’s happening?” “The chair is existing.”)

In another I mean “event” more narrowly than it is sometimes meant. Some use “events” the way most use “entity” or “things.” In my sense, an event is a certain sort of thing, loosely, the physical-causal reality described by science (still quite broad). I will reserve the words “thing” and “entity” when talking at the broadest level—when talking of all that is. So both values and chairs are things, but, among the two, only chairs are events.

Now, far be it from me to deny that it is sometimes hard to grasp the truth both about what is, and about how good. Both realities are often understood poorly, many times incorrectly, occasionally, well. That doesn’t make them less real. What it does mean is that we need to keep in mind that we could be wrong, not just about what the event was, but what the value of given event was. So, we will have four working parts in our metaphysics, an event and our understanding of it, a value of the event, and our understanding of that value.

With these four working parts we can rigorously describe and categorize the full metaphysical space, a few sectors of which were sketched in an intuitive way in the introduction. Reconsider our case The Politician under the Steady Rise scenario. Focus a few things about the metaphysical status of values. But my aim in this note is simply to level the burden of proof to allow me my assumption of value reality. Once you see how hard it is to believe only in observables, it becomes plausible to assert the existence of a value reality unobservable with the five senses. Use and reference of a thing, in enough of the right kind of abundance, is a compelling reason to endorse its reality for purposes of argument. My point is that values have a quantity and quality of use and reference commensurate with that of other oft-legitimated non-observables. Thanks to Richard E. Grandy for the boundaries example (and for breaking my ardor).
just on the earlier event, “five years in the political wilderness,” and consider it first before, and then after, it enters into relationship with the later, “legislative victory.”

**Before**

1) We have the original event, the underlying set of physical-causal reality interacting under the world’s physical laws. Let the physical-causal event referred to in Steady Rise as “five years in the political wilderness” be hereafter named “E1 at t1,” sometimes just “E1” for short.  
2) E1 is then given a preliminary description, a preliminary meaning. This meaning is our understanding of E1@t1. We understand the event as “five years in the political wilderness.”  
3) E1 at t1 has a certain value. There is a value-reality underlying our understanding of the value reality, just as there is an event-reality underlying our understanding of the event-reality. Let the real world value associated with E1 be V1.  
4) V1 also has a preliminary meaning, a preliminary description. We could always be wrong about what we think the value is, just as we could be wrong about what we think the event is. For simplicity I will use quantitative value descriptions. Absent any other information, five years in the political wilderness seems bad, so let our understanding of V1 be (-2).

**After**

Now comes what we can only at this stage call a value change appearance. The situation is this:

- At t1, E1@t1 appeared to have V1 where V1 has (-2). Five years in the political wilderness seems a bad thing.  
- At t2, E1@t1 appears to have V1’, where V1’ > V1, indeed, where V1’ > 0. That is, the original E1, the E1 of t1 appears (at t2) to have a different, greater and positive value. Five years in the political wilderness followed by a legislative victory—those five years themselves—now seem not just less bad, but positively good.

What happened? That’s the question of this chapter.

There are always two main ways to handle the appearance of a change. You can either affirm that both appearances track reality, that both sides of the change are
veridical. How to do this? Reverse causation, which we will reject, is one way. But there is another: you can say that a new event (or value) is created.

The second main way to handle the appearance of change is to affirm only one side of the change, you could say only one appearance tracks reality, drawing this time on either our pre- or post-appearance, ever-fallible understandings. A third option, which we will discuss only very briefly, is to deny both appearances.

Now, within the second option you could choose to affirm either the appearance at t1 and debunk the appearance at t2, or you could affirm the appearance at t2 and debunk the one at t1. People who take this second main option usually opt for the latter—we tend, though one may wonder whether this tendency is valid, to be metaphysically partial to the appearance that is closer in time. That was the case when I sketched this option intuitively in the introduction. We tend to say, when faced with a change “aha, it is and always was the way it now appears—oh, back then?—we were simply mistaken.”

There are then options within each of these options, depending on whether you locate the change in the E, the V, or our understandings thereof. Here are all the metaphysical options outlined, the full logical space available to us that we will then, in the next section, evaluate with our two tests. The grey options are the ones that fail.

The Metaphysical Theses

1. Both Appearances Track Reality
   1.1. Reverse Causation
   1.1.1. E-to-E. E2@t2 changes E1@t1 into E1’. E1’ has V1’ where V1’ > 0 > V1.

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4 I won’t spend time wondering below because, as I show, tracking only the earlier does not consistently support the compensation phenomenon.
1.1.2. \( V \to V \). \( V_2 \) changes \( V_1 \) into \( V_1' \), where \( V_1' > 0 > V_1 \).
1.1.3. \( E \to V \). \( E_2 \) changes \( V_1 \) into \( V_1' \), where \( V_1' > 0 > V_1 \).
1.1.4. \( V \to E \). \( V_2 \) changes \( E_1 \) into \( E_1' \). \( E_1' \) has \( V_1' \) and \( V_1' > 0 > V_1 \).

1.2. Evolution.
1.2.1. E Evolution.
   1.2.1.1. \( E \to E \). \( E_1 \) comes to have a relationship to \( E_2 \) creating something of a new thing, \( E_3 \) with \( V_3 > 0 > V_1 \).
   1.2.1.2. \( V \to E \). \( V_2 \) and \( V_1 \) create a third \( E \), \( E_3 \) with \( V_3 > 0 > V_1 \).
1.2.2. V Evolution.
   1.2.2.1. \( V \to V \). Without new events, \( V_2 \) or \( V_1 \) give rise to \( V_3 \) where \( V_3 > 0 > V_1 \).
   1.2.2.2. \( E \to V \). Without new events, \( E_1 \) or \( E_2 \) give rise to \( V_3 \) where \( V_3 > 0 > V_1 \).

2. Only One Appearance Tracks Reality
2.1. Only the Later Tracks
   2.1.1. E. \( E_1 \) at \( t_1 \) has been all along \( E_1' \) with \( V_1' \), where \( V_1' > 0 > V_1 \).\(^5\)
   2.1.2. V. \( E_1 \) at \( t_1 \) had all along \( V_1' \) where \( V_1' > 0 > V_1 \).\(^6\)

2.2. Only the Earlier Tracks
   2.2.1. E. The later event appearance is false—\( E_1 \) at \( t_1 \) remains with its original \( V_1 \).\(^7\)
   2.2.2. V. The later value appearance is false—\( E_1 \) at \( t_1 \) remains with its original \( V_1 \).\(^8\)

3. No Appearances Track Reality.

II.

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\(^5\) Intuitively: at \( t_1 \) we thought “five years in the political wilderness” was mere pain and difficulty, but as it turned out, it wasn’t; the event itself was actually something different: struggle, training, or something akin; and these things have positive value whereas mere pain and difficulty have negative value. This is an intuitive option we will explore in depth.

\(^6\) Intuitively: at \( t_1 \) we thought “five years in the political wilderness” had a certain, negative, value but we now realize that that event—still what it always was event-wise—actually has different, greater value. This is another attractive option we will explore

\(^7\) Intuitively, five years in the political wilderness hasn’t changed what it is and always was: mere pain and difficulty.

\(^8\) Intuitively: five years in the political wilderness is still what it always has been—five years in the political wilderness—however, while it looks like it has a positive value, it doesn’t. We are gushing—inappropriately permitting the glow of the legislative victory to wash over its precursors. When we settle down we will realize, and remember, that five years in the political wilderness is a painful thing, no matter what happens later.
We are now equipped to evaluate the options above. In this section I will show why the grey options fail.

Test global theoretical consistency first. Both 2.2 and 3.0 are inconsistent with the compensation phenomenon. The minimal commitment of the compensation phenomenon is to the idea that the later E or V really is more valuable than it, at least, seemed earlier. Take 2.2, the conservative view that the current appearance is invalid. While it consistently accounts for the value change appearance, it does so by debunking the intuition behind that appearance, much in the spirit of the theorist of pure well-being who figured large in Chapter Two. That theorist, like 2.2, tries to say that nothing new, beyond a chimera, is on the scene. 3.0 says not only is there nothing new, but there never was. We can therefore dismiss both of these options. Put another way: we have already entertained, and ruled out, the idea that things are now as they seemed earlier. Instead, our current job is to focus on whether things always have been as they seem now, i.e. to compare 2.1. to a more global evolutionary account.

2.1 is consistent with, and explains, the compensation phenomenon but in a deflationary way. Unlike Only the Earlier Tracks, Only the Later Tracks vindicates the intuition that Steady Rise is better, but it does so by locating the change in the subjective realm, in the realm of our understandings. The appearance of enhancement is a mere appearance since E1, or V1, are and always have been E1’ or V1’.

So, on 2.1, it’s not strictly speaking correct to say that the values of the earlier and later are “enhanced” but the appearance of the enhancement is still explained and accounted for. E1 had V1’ all along, so it is still correct to prefer Steady Rise to Steady

9 The dismissal is not ad-hoc since the argument to the best explanation of Ch. 3 pinpointed the compensation phenomenon as worthy of metaphysical investigation. So it makes sense to rule out without further argument those options inconsistent with it.
Fall because, on the later and more accurate value assessment, Steady Rise gets its double bonus, Steady Fall its double penalty. It is in this way that 2.1. is consistent but deflationary: the high-flying language of value change and enhancement is actually hyperbole.

Contrast this with 1.0 which locates the change in the objective realm—it really was E1, or V1, at t1 and it really is E1’, or V1’, at t2. The evolutionary accounts of 1.0 are more robust because they offer a metaphysical basis for both sets of appearances. To categorize everything let us call the metaphysics of 1.0 robust, 2.1 deflationary, and 2.2 and 3.0 debunking.

Note that the metaphysics of 2.1 and the robust accounts are also consistent with the Reverse (De)Compensation Phenomena. For example, Reverse Decompensation2 says that later goods worsen the value of earlier bads, that progress makes things worse (I publish something mediocre, then something great, the greatness of the later publication making the earlier mediocrity even worse). Under 2.1.2, we simply say that the later good makes us realize that the earlier event now has, and always had, a value less than it seemed at the time. Under 1.2 we say a new event, overall bad, was created during progress.

That these two metaphysics are consistent with both, recalling the end of Chapter 3, is actually a good thing. We seek a metaphysics general enough to capture the general phenomenon of value change—reversals and non. All of the faces of the full compensation phenomenon traffic in this. But to find it does not threaten the primacy of progress—mere progress still is better, as Chapter Three showed.
Loose philosophical naturalism, the second test, rules out most of the options under 1.0. Elegantly as Reverse Causation (1.1) captures the compensation phenomenon (it really was E1 or V1 at t1 because that’s what it was until later events caused it to become something else), it is impossible to make reverse causation consistent with physical laws (as they stand).

I have also made grey theses 1.2.1.2 and 1.2.2.1 on grounds of naturalism since both theses grant value reality causal power. There are two basic meta-ethical views that will make values both real and naturalistically palatable. We can be supervenience physicalists and extend to values the same privilege granted social and biological facts. That is, we can say the values appear to us in the way a pattern appears upon a dot matrix, to use Lewis’s classic example. On this picture, events are the dots on the matrix and values the patterned appearances. If we want values to supervene on social or biological facts, we can simply say that values are patterns of patterns.

As metaphysicians have shown, to conclude that supervening entities aren’t real merely on the basis that they supervene is invalid. To argue that the supervening appearance is a mere appearance just on that basis is incorrect. What it does mean, however, is that supervening entities cannot cause changes to their supervenience bases. Hence, value reality cannot be given causal power.

The other way to go is to say that values are abstracta, akin to (some views on) numbers. In this case too, even if you are a supervenience physicalist, you cannot automatically conclude that values aren’t real. Abstracta, by definition, aren’t physical
and therefore are neither ruled in nor ruled out by supervenience physicalism.\textsuperscript{10} But on this view, too, value reality is bought at the price of its causal force.

Since, on either meta-ethics, values, though real, have no causal power, both 1.2.1.2 and 1.2.2.1 are ruled out.\textsuperscript{11} Supervening or abstract entities, real as they are, can be nothing more than contributory causes of events. They don’t \textit{themselves} do things. \textit{We} do things with them in mind, perhaps in some cases it can be validly said that we do things “because” of them, but, in themselves, they are causally inert.

Among the evolutionary options, then, loose philosophical naturalism so far rules out everything except E-to-E evolution and E-to-V evolution. There is clearly nothing fishy about saying that events cause events, that in so doing they can create new events, and that the new result can have a new and possibly different value. This is my favored option which we will explore in-depth later.

But what about E-to-V evolution? It doesn’t obviously fail the test of loose philosophical naturalism to say that events can create values. Indeed, it seems that in order to stay loosely naturalistic we will \textit{have} to say that events create values in some sense, otherwise there is nothing upon which the values can ride. To be a value is to be a value \textit{of}. It seems that we need to at least be supervenience physicalists about values, that the abstracta position is ruled out.

On this understanding events quite easily create values. The events, being physical things, are the dots in the dot matrix. When they line up appropriately they

\textsuperscript{10} See Stoljar, Daniel, “Physicalism,” Section 12, \textit{The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy}.

\textsuperscript{11} There are probably other meta-ethics which allow value reality causal power, but since part of my audience here is a naturalistic philosopher, it is better to pick a meta-ethics that is clearly palatable to her if I can still get everything I want out of it. It would be easy, in other words, to make what I say go through on a non-natural meta-ethics.
bring the value into existence. That value itself is not subject to physical laws the way molecules are but neither are we ascribing them causal powers.

So it is not unnatural to say that E’s create V’s. What is unnatural, however, is to say that a new V gets created without a change in E’s. We have already decided that if values exist then they must supervene on some event. Put less metaphysically: a value is always a value of something. What is entailed by the supervenience thesis is that a change in value reality necessitates a change in event reality. Physical duplicates must be duplicates simpliciter. But if that’s right, then thesis 1.2.2.2 is ruled out—while events can create values they cannot create new ones without also creating more events.

You might say that the new value is supervening on the relationship between E1 and E2. The thought here is that E1 and E2 remain exactly as they were but there is now this new physical reality, the relationship between them. We haven’t described this relationship yet—suppose for now it’s simply causal. Whatever it is, this relationship between events is a physical reality and can therefore produce a new pattern on the dot matrix, a new value.

This is a serious proposal but we shall delay its investigation since it ought to be grouped with E-to-E evolution given the generous definition of “events” I have adopted. In other words, a new physical relationship is a new event, a new happening.

For now, however, I want to take seriously, and ultimately reject, the only other remaining natural, non-evolutionary metaphysical account, Only the Later Tracks. Due to its deflationary nature, I take it to be both a serious contender and a threat. It’s a threat because, if true, the compensation phenomenon turns out to be rather humdrum: Steady Rise is better simply because its component events were more valuable all along. We
didn’t know it until later, but that is fine. There are no exciting “enhancements” of value, only the appearance of an enhancement. It’s a serious contender because it avoids cluttering the metaphysical scene with additional stuff, additional properties, relationships, etc. Everything is as it always was—we are just now better positioned to know it. It’s good metaphysics, in other words: naturalistic, allergic to spookiness, and servant of Ockham. Let me now show that it’s unacceptable.

III.

Let us start with 2.1.2, what is to my mind the more intuitive face of Only the Later Tracks. This is the thesis that later events simply increase our understanding of the value of the earlier event. 2.1.2 says that the earlier event is what it always seemed—five years in the political wilderness. It then argues that our preliminary value assessment was wrong. Five years in the political wilderness has, and always had, more value than we thought. We sometimes mean this when we talk of the value of history. We cannot, however, mean this when talking of the compensation phenomenon.

The trouble with the thesis is that, according to the theory of progress, under 2.1.2, the same event could later on come to have a different value, depending on what followed. If five years in the political wilderness is followed by victory, then it is better (V1’), but if followed by continued hardship and worsening, those five years are in fact worse (V1’’ where V1’’ < V1’). E1 actually had V1’ all along—fine—but E1 could have turned out to have V1’’.

If determinism is false, then these multiple possibilities generate a contradiction for 2.1.2. Only the Later Tracks wants to instantiate the current value appearance as the
value reality all along, it says that at t1, E1 had V1’ even though it seemed to have V1. If deterministicism if false, then E1 could have turned out to have V1 (if nothing appropriately related happened), or V1’, or V1’’. But if 2.1.2 is true, then we have to say E1 could have had V1 all along, could have had V1’ all along, and could have had V1’’ all along. But E1 could not have had all three all along—it was undetermined, at t1, what V was had by E1 if 2.1.2 is true.

Now, if determinism is true—if all events are already determined to happen the way they do—then 2.1.2 is safe because while E1 could have had, say, V1’’, if things had gone one way, it was and always would have been the case that E1 had V1’ because things were determined to go that way. So we can say E1 had V1’ all along. In the actual world, E1 had V1’ all along even though there is some possible world in which E1 has V1’’.

But if determinism is false, then, in the actual world, we can’t say that E1 had V1’ all along, even if E2 turns out to be “legislative victory.” This is because it wasn’t just that we were uncertain, but that it was uncertain, at t1, what would come to pass and a fortiori what V was had by E1 at t1. Even the Universe didn’t know what would follow. So even the Universe couldn’t say that E1 had V1’, or V1’’, or plain old V1, at t1. So, if determinism is false, then 2.1.2. must trump the Universe, and that is impossible.

It’s easy to lose our grip on this argument because we slip easily between the reality and our understanding of reality. The argument gets going by focusing on the commitments of 2.1.2 regarding the (timeless) reality at t1.

• If 2.1.2 is correct, E1 had V1’ all along.
• But if determinism is false then E1 didn’t have V1’ all along. It was undetermined what the value of E was at t1 (which is different from saying we were unsure of the value of E1). The truth at t1, if
determinism is false and 2.1.2 the true account of compensation, must be that there wasn’t a truth as to what V was had by E1. Therefore,  
• Only the Later Tracks is false, if determinism is false.

So far, then, I have shown that if determinism is false, then 2.1.2, the attractive and intuitive metaphysical option that deflates the value change appearance while affirming Steady Rise over Steady Fall, is false.

What I will now do is assume that determinism is true and argue that, even so, 2.1.2, while not outright false, does entail a radical thesis about the nature of event-value relations. The acceptance of this radical thesis means the loss of axiology, the systematic study of which things are valuable and why.

If determinism is true then 2.1.2. is, in light of the fact that E1 could have different V’s (as dictated by the compensation phenomenon), committed to the following:

   E1 has and had all along V1’ in the actual world, but
   E1 has and had all along V1” in another possible world,
   E1 has and had all along V1”” in another possible world,
   ...
   E1 has and had all along V1^n in all possible worlds.

But since, under 2.1.2., there is no change to E, E must be the same in all possible worlds as of t1. Typically we think that the same event has the same value. And we think this holds in all possible worlds. It’s the same event, after all. If the various E1’s are all the same event, then they must have the same value. But 2.1.2 is committed to saying that the various E’s have different values on pain of being inconsistent with the compensation phenomenon. Therefore, 2.1.2 is false, or else it is inconsistent with the compensation phenomenon.

Let me run the argument more slowly. There are two different ways of being “the same event.” X can be the same event as Y if it is numerically identical—if Y is just a
later version of X—or if it is qualitatively identical to it, i.e. if X has all the same properties as Y. Remember the example of twins or clones—they are never numerically identical even though it’s possible for them to be qualitatively identical.

The problem is that the various E1’s of 2.1.2’s commitments are qualitatively identical as of t1. 2.1.2. is committed to the various possible worlds being the same up through t1. They are duplicate events, or clones. But duplicate events must have the same value, or else violate philosophical naturalism. Physical duplicates must be duplicates simpliciter. Since E1 at t1 is a physical duplicate in all possible worlds and since physical duplicates are duplicates simpliciter E1 at t1 has the same value across all possible worlds. But 2.1.2. needs E1 to have different values to account for compensation. Ironically then, 2.1.2, the initially attractive deflationary metaphysics, ends up denying supervenience physicalism. It breaks the rules that motivated its creation.

The fan of 2.1.2. is not completely out of options yet. She can, instead, say that the various E1’s across the possible worlds are not duplicates but instead are the same event in the sense of being of the same kind. It is not obviously inconsistent with naturalism to say that two events of the same kind can have different values. The earlier event in one possible world is not a physical duplicate, though it's very similar. What difference is there? Assuming a deterministic world there is at least one clear, if small, difference: each earlier event has the property of being followed by a different event. It is the case now, at t1, that the various E1's will be followed by different future events. 2.1.2 must nevertheless affirm what I will call,

1. Radical Particularism about Event-Value Relations. There is no harmony between events and values, even if events or values can be
typified, put into types or kinds. Tokens of a given event type can have very different values. Implication: One cannot infer that tokens of a given event type have the same value just because they are of the same event type. Event tokens of a type do not necessarily have the same value.

If (1) were true then 2.1.2 can be true (we might have to call it a version of 2.1.1. where we change our understanding of the event, but that is an academic question). It’s still five years in the political wilderness, whatever world we are in, but since tokens of a type can have different values the various possible E1’s can have all the various V’s dictated by the compensation phenomenon.

You might argue for (1) on the basis of,

2.  *Radical Particularism about Events*. Events cannot be categorized into types. There are only tokens of events. Put another way, each token is its own type. Implication: No inferences can be made on the basis of being of the same event type.

If (2) were true then (1) would be true—if each token event is different in kind, then tokens of a “type” can have different values. Who would be attracted to (2)? Someone deeply troubled by the problems of vagueness involved in categorizing events.

However, (2) is inconsistent with philosophical naturalism, although not from the usual direction. Philosophy usually violates naturalism because it tries to do too much. It postulates things that don’t exist, causes which never happen, relations which can’t be instantiated. But there is also a limit to how deflationary it can be. Science doesn’t just say “don’t do too much,” it also says “don’t do too little.” While we are usually more apt to do too much than too little, (2) does too little.

If you think events can’t be categorized then the world can only be understood in a radically unorganized way. There is no pattern, no system, no harmony, no relationships between kinds of events. There are no “joints” to the world. Maximally,
there is just one long, near-perfect description of one part of reality followed by another. This is not what science does and not what science hopes. Science, as we know it, cannot be practiced without assuming the world is at least somewhat friendly to investigation. Science requires a non-radically-particularist metaphysics, and it requires this for its start.

But you don’t have to hold (2) in order to hold (1). You can think that the world studied by science has joints and harmony, but also that event reality doesn’t harmonize with value reality. (1) with or without (2), results in,

3. **Radical Particularism about Value Reality.** Values cannot be categorized into types. There are only tokens of values. Put another way, each token is its own type. Implication: No inferences can be made on the basis of being of the same value type.

(3) is implied by (1), whatever you think of (2), together with the acceptance of supervenience physicalism. If (1) is true, if events and values do not harmonize—if events of the same type can have radically different values—then values, because they must ride atop events, become radically particular. Even though events can be categorized for other purposes, as far as their value goes, we can look only at a given token event and assess its value without thereby gaining any value knowledge of events similar enough for prediction and implication under the sciences.

In other words, under (3), value reality becomes a radical diaspora of particulars, and while to say as much is not inconsistent with science the way we usually understand that word, it is inconsistent with doing value theory, which we can think of as a sort of philosophical science, an observation of the supervening or abstract value reality which ought to be. The problem with Radical Particularism about Event-Value Relations is that it is inconsistent with the presence even of such an investigation.
If events of the same type can have radically different values then value reality becomes akin to biology without any genus/species organization, i.e. to no biology worth the name. The only thing we could ever say was that this single non-repeatable (for value knowledge purposes) event which makes up the world exactly as it was during a certain time period, this very specific thing has a certain value. If things change only slightly then I have nothing to say about other events’ values on the basis of that knowledge.

Such inability to predict and draw implications is inconsistent with a value theory that hopes to tell us (at least weakly) generalizable truths. I take it that we want at least this much to be left to ethics in a deterministic world. The reality that axiology tracks should, if there by any science to that philosophical science, be capable of catalogue. But under (3) it is not, not in any interesting sense.

The radical particularism required for our once palatable-seeming deflationary metaphysics is thus more radical than that endorsed by Jonathan Dancy. Even Dancy wants to allow for a certain kind of moral wisdom, experience gained from judging particular cases which can be applied (albeit not in a fully principled or invariant manner) to other similar (though not duplicate) particular cases. Making value judgments even for Dancy is not a matter of “just gazing vacantly at the case before [you] and coming up with an answer that somehow seems appropriate.”12 But that seems to be what 2.1.2 requires.

We can further see how radical and anti-ethical (3), and by extension (1), is by comparing it to the thesis of the incommensurability of values. This is the thesis that

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12 Dancy, “Moral Particularism,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 7.0. “7.0” refers to the section of Dancy's article in which this quotation appears.
values different in kind cannot be adjudicated or weighed up, that there can be no truly all things considered value judgment. There are good reasons to think this thesis true. But denying that values different in kind cannot be evaluated together is very different from saying that values of the same kind cannot be. To uphold 2.1.2, in short, is to deny all significant order to value reality.

Let me sum up. If the future is genuinely open, then 2.1.2. is false straight-away. But suppose determinism is true. Then, if 2.1.2. is true, so is Radical Particularism about Event-Value Relations. As a fan of 2.1.2., you could assert that the world has joints, but also that its different parts—event and value reality—don’t harmonize or match up well enough to permit event-value inferences. Such metaphysics is inconsistent with a decent philosophical science of value. Those who want at least such an enterprise must deny radical particularism about event-value relations, meaning 2.1.2. is false for them whatever the truth of determinism.

This is because if all events of the same type have the same value of a given kind, then they have that value in all possible worlds. 2.1.2. must deny this in order to account for the clear fact that things could have gone differently in different worlds with the same event in tow. You might say, “well, that’s a different world, so a different event, so a different value.” But the denial of radical particularism about events means there is a limit to how far this rebuttal can go, without moving to 2.1.1, the metaphysic that locates the change in our understanding of the E’s. If events can be catalogued into types, as we must assume they can be, then the event referred to as five years in the political wilderness is of the same type whether it’s a Steady Rise or Steady Fall situation. 2.1.2
cannot account for this, even if determinism is true, without taking on the unpalatable radical particularism about event-value relations.

A similar argument to the above can be applied to 2.1.1., the view that E1 was E1’ in the actual world, all along. Intuitively this thesis says that while we thought E1 was one thing, it really was, and was all along, something else, a more valuable thing in Steady Rise, a less valuable one in Steady Fall. Instead of locating the change in our understanding of the value, 2.1.1. locates it in our understanding of the event.

However, on pain of being consistent with the compensation phenomenon, 2.1.1 must allow that it could be that E1 was E1’ in one possible world, E1’’ in another, E1’’’ in still another, and so on. If determinism is false and 2.1.1 true, then we must say that E1 could be E1’, could be E1’’’, and could be E1’’’’’ in the actual world. But E1 couldn’t be all those things, for the truth at t1 was that it was undetermined what E1 was. Therefore, if determinism is false, 2.1.1. is false.

Now suppose determinism is true. Then, on pain of being consistent with the compensation phenomenon, 2.1.1 is committed to the following.

- E1 was, and was all along, E1’ in the actual world, but
- E1 was, and was all along, E1’’ in some possible world, and
- E1 was, and was all along, E1’’’ in another possible world,
...
- E1 was, and was all along, E1^n in all possible worlds.

If E1’, E1’’, and so on are the same events in the sense of duplicates, then 2.1.1. violates supervenience physicalism since the associated values must be different while riding atop a physically duplicate supervenience bases. The reality up until t1 was the same in all these possible worlds. So we must instead invoke radical particularism (allow events of the same kind to have different values) or say that E1’ et. al. are different in kind.
We already saw why we shouldn’t invoke radical particularism. But can 2.1.1 say the events are different in kind? No. The reality up until t1 was the same in all these possible worlds. The possible worlds are world duplicates up to and including t1. A reality which is the same across a given set of possible worlds cannot differ in kind. But that is what Only the Later Tracks must say if it is to avoid radical particularism about event-value relations. In short, the only way to have a deflationary metaphysics that is both acceptably naturalistic and consistent with the compensation phenomenon is also to be a radical particularist about value.

To say as much is not, of course, to prove 2.1.2 false. Instead, what I have done is reveal how unpalatable the assumptions that permit its truth are. What looks to be an initially attractive deflationary metaphysics turns out to have serious consequences for a certain conviction in ethics. This is the conviction that events and values harmonize such that an event of the same type has the same value. In order to keep the metaphysics, we not only have to deny the first by denying freedom, but we must also deny the second, we must also believe not just that it’s hard to cut value reality at its joints, but that, in fact, value reality has no joints. All we could do is look at the past and try and say how good one small segment—completely different from all others—was. It would be an interesting enterprise for one who likes a simple, giant list, one with a single heading, no organizing hierarchy, and no use.

At what point shall we say Ockham cut off his nose to spite the face?

The question looms when we keep in mind E-to-E evolution. While nothing I have said here shows that value reality isn’t a radical diaspora of particulars, neither was that necessary to my task. Instead, my task was to evaluate the various metaphysical
options. And what I have shown is that what appears attractive is, in reality, not, i.e. I have shown that we have good reason to entertain the final metaphysical option. This is because we should now be interested in whether this metaphysics can pass both of our tests without requiring us to abandon the necessary conditions for the possibility of ethics as we know it. I will argue, in the next section, that this is true. With a few more working metaphysical parts we can be loosely naturalistic, consistent with the compensation phenomenon, and ethics-loving. And that, I hold, would be better.

In sum, the world has joints. Another way to say this on my ontology is that it is carved up into event types. Value reality metaphysically harmonizes with event reality in the sense that all tokens of one event type share the status of being one of a certain kind and being one of a certain kind entails the fact of having the same value. If this is right, then, even if determinism is true, Only the Later Tracks—which, by the way, is a general metaphysical argument type—is false.

IV.

Our last standing metaphysic says that E1 evolves, takes on new relationships or new properties with other things, creating something of a new event to speak loosely. E3 under Steady Rise is one event with its properties and valuation, and then there is E3’ under Steady Fall, a different event with different properties. Learning from the previous arguments, we will say that both of these events are different enough from their component parts considered in isolation, E1 and E2, to take on different values so as to avoid entailing determinism and radical particularism. Let us see first, however, that the metaphysic passes our two main tests.
We gain consistency with the compensation phenomenon because, E3 and E3’ can be events different enough in kind to carry different values, even though their component parts, considered in isolation, are the same. Five years in the political wilderness followed by victory is one thing; victory followed by five years of political hardship another. Since we are simply dealing with different metaphysical bases, we can allow for valuations appropriate to a consideration of each. So, under Steady Rise, E3 can get its appropriate value consonant with the intuition at hand (minimally, a value greater than the sum of E1 and E2); and under Steady Fall, E3’ can get its appropriate value consonant with the other intuition (a value less than the sum of E1 and E2).

Moreover, the metaphysic has good naturalist credentials. There is nothing odd in saying that things evolve or change what they are in virtue of their relationship to other things or in virtue of acquiring different properties.

Let us now see that this metaphysic is subject neither to the arguments from determinism nor from radical particularism. Let us start with the argument from determinism and show that E-to-E is true even if determinism is false, even if there is freedom in the world. Only the Later tracks got into trouble, recall, because it needed to say that E1 or V1, was different at t1 across different worlds. It needed to say this in order to explain the compensation phenomenon’s flexibility, to support the claim that the same event seems to have different values in different worlds. But our current metaphysic isn’t in need of saying that E1 or V1 at t1 was different across possible worlds, because it doesn’t need E1 to carry the load of the compensation phenomenon’s possibilities. That load is instead borne by E3 whose reality makes its appearance only
later. So, E1 and V1, as of t1, get to retain the same event and value status across all possible worlds.

E-to-E explains the compensation phenomenon’s flexibility differently. What was undetermined was not what E1 was or what V was had by E1, but whether E1 would take on the relationships to become E3. And this fact is accommodated under 1.2.1. What we say is that, in the actual world, E1 became E3, different in kind (different enough to carry a different value) from E1. In another world, E1 gets taken up into a different diachronic event, E3’, say “five years in the wilderness followed by heightened suffering.” E3’ is different in kind from both E1 and E3. Since neither E3 nor E3’ arise until later, they can be different across different worlds.

The fact that E1 and V1, analyzed in isolation, get to stay what they are across all possible worlds is what prevents radical particularism about event-value relations. We don’t have to deny that events of the same type have the same value because we are not in need of events of the same type having different value. We are dealing with different metaphysical bases.

Finally, we are not in the position of 2.1.1, the metaphysic that tried to postulate different events riding atop duplicate supervenience bases. This is because the reality covered by our new event here, E3, is clearly different, it’s a reality spanning t1 to t2, and t2 is ex hypothesi different across different worlds.

The real challenge for this metaphysic is not passing our two general tests or avoiding the pitfalls of the previous section but saying in what way, if at all, the exciting language of value change or enhancement is true. Remember, the compensation phenomenon says that the “earlier is enhanced in light of the later.” Most controversially,
this statement is taken to mean that an earlier event had one value at t1, but then that very same event—the numerically and qualitatively identical physical reality—came to have a different value later on.

One thing that the arguments about radical particularism showed is that this can’t be literally true without undermining value theory. If a numerically and qualitatively identical event can have a different value, then we cannot hope to generalize about the value of things.

But once we have the new “larger” whole we can look back and talk about the new and enhanced value of its parts. Consider this new thing that has been created, E3, and focus on one of its component parts, E1. *As a part of that whole*, what was formerly known as E1 doesn’t just seem to have, but actually does have, a different value. E1 in relationship has a different, and greater value under Steady Rise and a different and lesser value under Steady Fall.

What the arguments in these sections will force us to admit is that, technically and metaphysically speaking, once E1 enters relationship with E2, once the new whole is formed, that part that we are looking at is not really E1@t1 in isolation, it is E1@t1 plus the relationship to E2 (though not E2 itself). E1@t1 as a part of E3 is no longer E1 strictly speaking, but E1’, where E1’ just is E1 plus its relationship to E2. We need to say there is *some* change of supervenience base here so that it can carry a different value and avoid radical particularism.

Is this a giant take back? I don’t think so. That new part, which is very similar to E1 in isolation, actually has a substantially different value, a value greater than you might have thought before this analysis. Consider an analogy with art. Suppose there is a
painting with a black smudge in the bottom left corner and that all agree—aesthetes and non—that it is a beautiful painting. Suppose further there is another painting of just that black smudge and that all agree it is ugly. First of all, this is surely possible.

But second, is it also possible that the black smudge, considered not in complete isolation from the painting, but as a part of that bigger painting, is itself beautiful. A part that, as a whole unto itself is ugly, can be itself beautiful, as a part. It’s not just that the painting as a whole is beautiful, but that the parts, including the part that is ugly considered as a whole unto itself, as parts, that is, in relationship with other parts, can also be beautiful.

There are three ways of looking at wholes and their parts. You can look at a part, not as a part, but as a whole itself. You can block out the rest of the painting and see only the black smudge. You can look at “five years in the political wilderness” as an event in its own right, as its own whole. I have referred to this as looking at it in isolation.

Second, you can look primarily at the whole while only acknowledging in passing that it has parts. You could look just at the whole painting. You could look just at the diachronic event “five years in the political wilderness followed by victory.”

But there is a third way of looking. You could focus on one part without blocking out the rest. You could be looking directly at the black smudge but noting how it participates in the greater whole. You could be looking at the part in relationship to the other parts. You have the diachronic event E3, “five years of suffering followed by victory,” but you can focus just on the earlier part, those five years, now in relationship with the victory.
It is when we are looking in this third way that we want to say it—those five years—were bad, but now are—those same five years—good. Strictly speaking we will have to say that you are not looking at the qualitatively identical thing, the new value is supervening not just on those five years but on those five years plus its later-instantiated relationship. But what we have found is that there are events and then there are relationships between events. The way I have defined my terms, both are events metaphorically speaking, both part of the physical-causal reality picked up by science and which constitutes the supervenience base upon which values ride. But what we can say now is that there are events and then there are events*, more limited bounded things which interact with other things. What we have found for value theory purposes is that an event*, which has one value in isolation, can come to have a different value in relationship with other event*s. Metaphysically speaking, an event* in relationship is a different event, more extended in time, consisting of two events. But for value theory purposes it is useful to talk of an event* having increased its value once in relationship with other events.

So we can distinguish events in a thin sense and events in a thick sense. Events in the thin sense are just any physical-causal reality grasped by science and acting as the supervenience base for values. Events in the thick sense, what I labeled event*s, are a subset of thin events, they are the bounded realities that can be picked out as pieces unto themselves, as wholes, which can then, in turn, be said to interact with later things. A loose way to get at the distinction is to think about objects and causes. Both are events in the thin sense, but the objects are that which are acted upon and the causes that which does the acting. The objects here are events in the thick sense that I intend. The causes
are what I have been describing as relationships. When talking in the thin sense, we have to say that, even when looking back, when looking in the third way, when looking at E1 as a part, we are looking at different metaphysical bases. But when talking in the thick sense, we can say that the event* E1 changes in value once it enters a relationship with event* E2. E1 in the event* sense has one value when not in relationship but the numerically and qualitatively identical event* has another value when in relationship.

I have said that the same event* can take on a positive value over time if things go one way, a different and negative value if things go another way, or neither—can simply retain its original value if nothing appropriately related happens. But what makes some later happenings appropriately related and others not? Among the appropriately related ones, what makes some of them create a disvaluable diachronic whole and others a positive one?

The question is important in light of Ch. 1, the call to life-guiding-ness to which the narrative ethical intuition was offered as response. We have found that there is a plausible sense of narrative value unexplained by morality and prudence, we have interpreted as a progressive one, argued that it contains a dynamic value structure, supported it by a naturalistically-valid and ethics-loving metaphysics. But we must say more about how to incorporate this value into our lives if it is to be used to further narrow the options left in the wake of morality and prudence. If the answer to the question, “How ought I live within the boundaries of morality and prudence” is “Get some narrative value,” the question which the final two chapters aim to answer is, “How?”
Chapter 5

Why Storied Lives Matter

It matters that our lives and portions thereof make sense—are intelligible—at least to ourselves and to those dear to us. It also matters, or so I will argue, that our lives and their portions be narratively unified in the special way depicted by the progressive shape of previous chapters. I believe these two things are related. I believe lives with this type of narrative unity—a species of what I call storied lives—matter because they have more intelligibility than those without this type of unity. This chapter shows why storied lives matter.

If the argument succeeds, it follows that we ought, within the bounds of morality and prudence, to make our lives storied in at least this manner.¹ But even if it’s clear that we should, one rightly wonders how this is done in light of the interpretive nature of narrative relations. This question of linking ethical principle to action guidance is handled in the next chapter. There, I show not why storied lives matter but how to make your life storied. The special type of unity represented by the progressive shape is a bridge between intelligibility and action guidance. As promised, I will show not just how

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¹ This follows given my assumptions about the lexical ordering of ought claims—morality is prior to prudence is prior to intelligibility in terms of normative force. The lexical ordering is inversely related to the degree of specificity. So morality is less specific than prudence is less specific than intelligibility.
narrative unity can guide at all but how this type of unity guides at a heightened degree of specificity. But for now my focus is the source of storied lives’ normative authority.

That source I believe to be intelligibility. So, I discharge three basic tasks in this chapter. First, I define storied lives, set them off from other types of lives exhibiting other types of unity and show where progress fits in the resultant schema (Section I). Secondly, I develop a conception of intelligibility: I define the concept and complete it with a set norms prepared to adjudicate lives as more and less intelligible (Sections II, III and IV). It’s not obvious what norms of intelligibility can do this, and the author of the only existing theory of intelligibility-oriented practical reasoning—J. David Velleman—explicitly considers intelligibility non-prospective, incapable of guiding action. So, I create my own conception, one that is plausible as a conception of intelligibility \textit{per se} and capable of guiding action. I call it a “new old” theory because it draws on traditional, rational norms of explanation and thus is old, but conceives them in a way relevant for ethics and thus is new. While the claim that considerations of intelligibility can guide is discharged in the next chapter, my conception is developed with that claim in the background and mention of it is relevant from time to time. My third basic task is to show why the storied lives of my preferred type have more intelligibility on my conception of it than the other non-storied lives (Section V). In sum, the aim is to connect a certain narrative relationship between events in life to a certain theory of intelligibility, both of which I develop.

That intelligibility \textit{per se} matters ethically, I assume without deep argument. However, I can say three things. First, it’s not a wild assumption even if it does blur the

\footnote{2 Much more on this in Section II, but see the introduction and ch. 6 of Velleman’s \textit{How We Get Along}, 1-8 and 159-184.}
fact-value distinction. Human beings seek and value both to understand and to be understood. Thus, we should seek and value both to understand our own lives and to have them be understandable. Thus, a more intelligible life—one that is more understandable—is a better thing than a less intelligible life. It harmonizes with the fundamental drive to understand and be understood. Secondly, to assume intelligibility is important for ethics is to assume neither that it is the architectonic value, a product of the Aristotelian function, the hallmark of human agency manifest, nor that it is none of these. It might be, but that is neither here nor there for my argument. I say only that it is important, something worthwhile, worth having or seeking. Thirdly, my work makes intelligibility-oriented practical reasoning a more attractive since it makes intelligibility action guiding, a possibility that has only been mentioned in the literature, and then only by a few, but never attempted. In a way, I am completing the work started by Velleman, though some fundamentals of his theory will have to change in order to do this including his making intelligibility the fundamental source of morality. It’s his general idea that we ought to do what it makes sense to do which I am making complete by qualifying it as anterior to morality and prudence, developing a new conception of intelligibility, and giving that conception actionable proscriptive norms.

Nobody has thought at length about the importance of narrative unity or intelligibility conceived as a fully operationalized action-guiding (or, as I like to say, life-guiding) principle. This note reminds us of ground covered in ch. 2, n. 2. Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor have of course thought at length about narrative unity, but as a foundational concept, as the core of agency (Taylor) or morality (McIntyre). Velleman has been specific about narrative unity and intelligibility, but his concept—even if we could make it proscriptive—provides the wrong kind of guidance. I argue this point at length in Section III. Besides these, we get suggestions about how the value of a narratively unified life may influence our thinking about the badness of death and the morality of abortion, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide. Being suggestions, these arguments give no specific content to the idea of narrative unity. Finally, there are works focused only on the normative explanation of the value of narrative unity that make no claims about narrative’s prospects for action guidance.
A good theory of practical reasoning is not good enough if it does not guide action. Guidance is an essential feature of ethics, a feature we cannot do without and still say we are doing ethics. Guidance is essential because it inheres in the subject’s fundamental question, “How ought I to live?” It is on this question’s face. When we ask this question we are necessarily not only asking after the value of things as if their having value would not lean on my action, as if all we were interested in was a near-ethical, aesthetic or quasi-scientific dispassionate inquiry into which things are valuable and why: “axiology,” the study of the value of things disconnected from the study of righteous living—as if we could study the good apart from the right. If ethics is but the inquiry as to “the value of things” where such discoveries make no claim on my life, press upon none of my actions, then it will have to change its question.

In sum then, my primary aim across these final two chapters is not to develop a justification for, but a concept of, intelligibility that provides guidance at the heightened level of specificity. That guidance is found by linking intelligibility to the discriminatory potential of a special type of narrative unity. Put another way, I am focused on what can be said to clarify and operationalize—make ready for ethical guidance—considerations of intelligibility, not on defending the ethical importance of intelligibility itself. My claims are that narrative relations of a certain sort have more intelligibility—the claim defended in this chapter—and that this same sort can guide agents well—the claim defended in the next. With both of these in hand we will have made intelligibility more intelligible by making it more tractable for agents wondering how they ought to live.⁴

⁴ If the concept of intelligibility becomes strange, then more argument as to why that type of intelligibility matters will be needed. This concern does not arise for me because my concept of intelligibility is grounded in the traditional philosophical criteria on a good explanation. However, I will argue in places that my competitors are saddled with this concern, among others.
I. Storied Lives

A General Definition

A life, or portion thereof, is storied iff:

(a) it is important ethically but for reasons neither of morality, prudence, nor aesthetics;
(b) it exhibits narrative unity;
(c) it is capable of guiding action well, i.e. with an appropriate degree of specificity; and
(d) its ethical importance is intimately related to its unity—(a) is intimately related to (b).

Conditions (a) and (c) flow from the problem of incompleteness, capturing both the critical idea that our given norms do not guide well enough and the hopeful idea that there are other norms that can. Conditions (b) and (d) flow from my general hypothesis as to a solution to incompleteness—that narrative unity, or some type thereof, can guide and that it is precisely in its being a narrative unity that explains its importance for ethics. Any type of unity that resonates as narrative, that guides well, and that matters ethically yet appeals neither to morality, prudence nor aesthetics for its importance, is the type we seek. I will defend one such type.

In the introduction to Ch. 2—the chapter that marked the beginning of my positive claims—I said that the solution to the problem of incompleteness is found at “the

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5 What I mean by “narrative unity” is explained in detail below. See Comment 4 in “Comments on the Categories.”

6 The ought of aesthetics is the only major one not canvassed in ch. 1. Until now I have assumed without comment that the normative force of aesthetic considerations simply do not rise to the occasion that is the question of ethics. (“How ought I to live?” “Live beautifully.” The concepts don’t match to my mind.) I could have appealed to aesthetics instead of intelligibility as the source of storied lives’ importance, but that would have saddled my account with the well-known objections to an aesthetics-driven ethics. Yet, my account, if it were not qualified within morality and prudence, would be subject to similar worries. Many immoral lives are as intelligible as they are beautiful. So why think that aesthetics is any less worthy than intelligibility at this third degree of lexical priority? Aesthetic considerations clearly do, and ought, to guide action at some level—they rightly guide many a painter’s hand. However, it’s my view—an assumption, I admit—that they ought not to guide our lives. This chapter’s guiding thought experiment, presented shortly, goes some way toward saying why. Nevertheless, I admit that I have not, and will not, give aesthetics a full hearing.
place where our intuitions about good narrative life patterns converge with our intuitions about what matters beyond morality and prudence as hitherto conceived.” Eventually is now upon us. The purpose of this book from Chapter 2 onward has been to identify (Chapter 2), analyze (Chapters 3 and 4), normatively justify (Chapter 5) and operationalize (prepare for action guidance, Chapter 6), at least one type of unity at this convergence. I claim to have found one such type. I have described and will continue to describe it as progress, though more detailed or richer types of progress will soon be presented—we will see the relationship between progress and familiar literary tropes of growth, redemption and transformation.

Yet, there might be other types of unity, non-progressive, at this convergence. These other types could be competitors or compliments to my theory. In addition, one could agree with my favored type but give it a different analysis, defense or operationalization. Thus, I want to reserve “storied life” as the neutral term for any type of solution to the problem of incompleteness that appeals to narrativity. There could of course be non-narrative solutions. For example, one might create a new and improved theory of personal autonomy or informed desire that guides agents with specificity and has nothing to do with narrativity. But in this case the term is valid since issues of narrativity would be irrelevant.

What if those new and improved theories appeal to narrativity? In that case, they are parties to my debate, yet the term remains neutral on account of its definition. Such theories would show that certain narrative structures enhance personal autonomy or give

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7 Ch. 2, p. 1 of this dissertation.
8 I actually have something in mind here. In ch. 1 I said that personal autonomy will not alleviate incompleteness because its ideal versions are too distant (both conceptually and temporally) from the agent and its non-ideal versions are too permissive. However, someone may create an in-between version that specifies a method for developing from non-ideal to ideal personal autonomy. Such a theory may get traction at the level of specificity demanded by the incompleteness problem.
good and specific answers to what I truly want. And, I have left it open in this definition what the ultimate source of storied lives’ normative authority is, saying only (d) that its importance should be intimately related to the life’s narrative structure. And this caveat must remain if we are to remain in the ballpark of my general hypothesis.

There is a distinction between narrative unity per se and the types of unity that happen to be narrative but also matter ethically and guide well. I use the terms “story,” “storied lives,” and “storied unity” to mark this distinction. I aim neither to redefine narrative per se, nor stories per se whatever that might be. Instead, I use “story” to refer to a concept I am helping to create, the concept of narrative structures important for ethics, what I call narrative-ethical unity.

A Guiding Thought Experiment

What types of narrative unity meet the conditions of a storied life, i.e. are narrative structures important for ethics? What types of unities are narrative-ethical unities? This question is best approached through a thought experiment that puts our minds at the convergence mentioned in Chapter 2. It is a simple one:

Suppose in your old age a child approaches, saying, “Tell me about your life.”

When imagining this, I believe most of us feel the appeal of telling a rather rich narrative history of our lives. A fortiori, we find appealing lives that permit such a telling. In addition, the appeal of such a response—the reason rich narratives matter here—seems to go beyond morality and prudence. “I have lived a good and moral life” warms the heart but does not excite as the child wants to be excited, and as we want to excite her.
Thirdly, the appeal of a rich narrative also goes beyond aesthetics. The child wants to be *ethically* uplifted—inspired, even exhilarated. The “goods” at issue here are akin to the goods found in reading not a *beautiful* novel but a *good* one, one that is rich and insightful, one that changes us, stops us, surprises us, reaches inside and rearranges us. Morality, prudence and aesthetics do not, even in concert, explain or underpin this experience, obviously ethical in nature. Neither do they constitute satisfactory answers to the child. We want our response, and we want to have lived a life, that will inspire the child to the living of life itself—not all good, perfect and easy but still *worth it*.

Fourthly, the thought experiment foreshadows intelligibility. A rich narrative, whatever that might be, surely has heightened intelligibility and intelligibility seems the kind of consideration that can ethically uplift without appeal to the traditional goods of moral philosophy. In short, the experiment draws us toward the ethical importance of (some) narratively unified lives while tapping reasons neither of aesthetics, morality, nor prudence. So, in finding answers that would satisfy the child and reflecting on the reason(s) why, we just might find what we are looking for. The thought experiment is not full evidence for my claims, but does guide their generation and lend them plausibility.

In imagining satisfactory answers, we shy away from some histories that could otherwise be quite “rich” and “narrative:” lives of tragedy, deterioration, failure, and false starts; in short, instances of the regressive shape of earlier chapters. Beautiful though it can be, tragedy is not the kind of story the child is hoping for, not the kind we want to tell, and, so I shall argue, not the kind we ought to live out.⁹ She loves you and you love

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⁹ Sometimes I think I am merely arguing that tragic lives are ethically worse than victorious, successful, or “comedic” ones. Am I? If so, why is this not trivial? Four comments. First, some might think tragedy
her and so beauty is not the issue here. If the story was being told by an unrelated third party, tragedy might be appropriate as a lesson in what not to do. But she is looking to you as a model. It is as if she is really asking, “Tell me what type of life is worth living; tell me how I might live out my life so that it be worthwhile.” The child seeks positive answers.

As the thought experiment draws us away from tragedy, it draws us toward the converse: lives of growth, development, redemption, and reconciliation; of the coming of age, of overcoming, reparation, recovery, and even, importantly, transformation; in short, toward instances of the progressive shape of previous chapters. Tell the child one of these stories and you satisfy the desires awakened by her approach. This is the type of story the child hopes for, the type we want to tell, and, so I shall argue, the type we ought to live out. Our being inundated and bored with this type at the bookstore and theater only testifies to its irresistibility. These tropes won’t go away. If I’m right, there is a reason—they matter for the living of a good life.

At the very least these are of one type of answer that would satisfy the child, and one type of answer I shall defend. Might there be another type of narrative unity, non-

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is not clearly ethically worse. Second, while it may be obvious to you (as it is to me) that tragedy is worse, it’s far from clear as to why, especially in light of ch. 2 where I showed that no traditional appeal to pleasure or virtue can account. Time-slice views of well-being are non-starters: a tragic structure can contain events that are relevantly reverse-identical to a comedic one. But I even showed that more sophisticated, diachronic views of well-being that appeal to virtue or eudaimonia also fail. To have no good explanation for a thing of obvious importance is to be in a situation not trivial but urgent. Third, the reason that I offer to favor comedy is counter-intuitive. If anything doesn’t come to mind to make comedy better than tragedy, it is intelligibility. This is because there are countless examples of rich, highly intelligible tragedies from literature. *Prima facie*, tragedies are not less intelligible than comedies. Finally, even if we knew that comedy is better, and why, it is hard to see how they might guide. What relationship must be established between events such that it becomes comedic in nature? Aren’t there many—too many—events that could do the job?

10 Am I saying that you should instantiate bad things in your life so that you might recover from? That we should be one way just so that we might transform? These and similar questions are handled in the next chapter. For now I am simply presenting a specific type of unity and showing that it has more intelligibility.
regressive yet non-progressive that would work? Of course. But this one is enough for my purposes. I am not theorizing narrativity *per se*, nor even narrative-ethical unity in total. Instead, I am simply locating one narrative-ethical principle by which to guide our lives.

So, I do not deny that tragedy can make for a great story depending on what you mean by “story.” I just mean something different by “story” and “storied lives.” I am not tracking the aesthetic dimension, which would point us toward some tragic lives (the beautiful ones) and not others, and some “comedic” lives and not others. Instead, I am tracking the dimension tracked by this thought experiment, roughly the tragic-comic divide itself where “comedy” loses its connotations of humor and satire but keeps its progressive, happy-ending shape.

To track more closely now, look again at the quick list of answers that I said would satisfy: growth, development, redemption, reconciliation, coming of age, overcoming, reparation, recovery, even, importantly, transformation. I am sure other words could be added here, that other literary tropes belong. But look at the set. It’s a *set*. Its members have a commonality. In all cases, some struggle is followed by, and related to, some victory. The struggle is of different sizes, the victory timed differently, but the family resemblance is clear. These are richer, more nuanced cases of progress. They are tokens of that type of unity.

The relationship between the main events of these cases is such that we are at least tempted by the compensation phenomenon, the idea that the earlier struggle is enhanced in light of the later victory, which in turn is supported by the metaphysics of

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11 While I do (shortly) define narrative-ethical unity *per se*, I do not go deeper, as I do with storied unity, as to the source of this more general category’s normative authority.
Chapter Four. You can see in a rough way how these ideas fit together. For example, in a case of growth or development—imagine your typical successful academic career—the earlier stages are brought forward and enhanced in value in light of the later successes. The intellectual challenge of doctoral candidacy reaches a kind of fulfillment as its ideas are developed during early professorship and published in their mature form. As part of the whole developmental process, the earlier years of struggle are of greater value than they would be in isolation—the same goes for the later success. Each is more valuable as a part of a new, extended developmental event. We have here an iteration of the *The Politician* from earlier chapters. This example typifies what we will see is a type of the progressive type of narrative unity I prefer, a sub-sub-category of storied lives. I call it *development.*

A life of redemption is another type of progress. Make the years of graduate school more difficult and insert a multi-year post-graduate nervous breakdown followed by reentry and success in the field. Even a life of transformation fits in this family, as long as the seeds of transformation are sowed in some manner before the change itself. Indeed, that my theory allows for transformation is a crucial element because it shows that storied lives do not objectionably tie us to our pasts.

Connie Rosati has used the helpful term “shape” which can be another way to understand what I mean by narrative-ethical unity. In my own words, the shape of a life is the pattern or picture, the conceptual and impressionistic event-connectivity image depicting the manner in which relevant events are unified. In Connie Rosati’s terms, it is

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12 A full categorization schema is coming soon.
13 The case of transformation must be handled with care, so I find it best not to mention a one-off example. Instead, I will present a detailed example in the next chapter, which is anyhow its proper place. Here we only need the central case so that we might find the source of its normative authority. Then, so goes the hope, we can see why (certain types of) transformation also carry that authority.
the manner in which the “sundry elements” of “what occurs within [a] life” are
“integrated.” There is a rough image that can be used to represent a life that exhibits
integration, an image that depicts the unity, or lack thereof, therein. Depending on how
the life is lived, different types of integration emerge and so different shapes can be
“seen.”

“Shape” can be taken in a thin or neutral sense and in a thicker, normative sense.
Thus far defined, “shape” is neutral—whatever unity is in your life, even if it be none, it
can be represented or depicted, if even by a blank page or flat line. Take a life, draw its
unity or lack thereof, and there you have its shape, its unity represented.

But those unities that matter for ethics are shaped in a normative sense of
“shaped.” These lives have a shape (neutral sense) that has curvature. They have shape
to them—edges, ups and downs. The unity depicted is at least a sloped line but often
more than that, i.e. often curved. In geometry, to be a shape is to be more than a flat line.
The normative sense of “shape” works with this idea.

Understood normatively, “shape” can help us define narrative-ethical unity per
se, a distinct concept from narrative unity per se. The narrative unities that matter for
ethics are those that have shape to them, those that have a unity whose representation is
more than a flat line, often curved.

Not all elements of life go into forming the shape (neutral sense), i.e. are the
relevant events comprising the potential narrative-ethical unity. A large part of Chapter 6
is spent dealing with the crucial question “which?” To preview: the relevant events are
any aspect of an agent’s individuality, those events which are making you the unique

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15 Much more on this below in Comment 4 of “Comments on the Categories.”
person you are becoming. This set includes but goes far beyond your desires, self-concept, and life plan. It includes your abilities, talents, projects, and knowledge base. It even includes formative events not of your own making, such as traumas or inspirations. The key is that no one of these aspects is foundational, though, depending on the case, one may be the dominant aspect around which the unity is formed. No one aspect inherently occupies a position of authority. Instead, they all work together to establish a shape.

As with most parties to the inchoate debate on narrative-ethical unity, Rosati does not articulate the various types of shape (neutral sense), the different types of integration or unity that seem possible. The exception is Antti Kauppinen. Unfortunately, his schema lacks the kind of detail that could provide good guidance. He articulates the basic contrast classes of disconnection and repetition, but his positive claims appeal to a catchall category of “coherence.” This is not unreasonable given his large aims, but we shall need more. We need to specify types of coherence (or unity or narratives) if we are to guide well.

16 In fact, I believe these attributes are overly mentalistic and fickle, and thus ought to be among the less important nodes from which to draw the story of your individuality. Abilities, talents, knowledge, and transformative events that happened to you are far more stable. Ch. 6 goes into this in more detail.

17 One does not have to have a dominant element. What I mean by “dominant” and how an attribute can become dominate though never foundational is discussed in ch. 6.


19 This contribution was actually quite helpful—it gave an overall structure to my thinking on the categories.

20 He excludes “single purpose” from the category of “coherence,” arguing that while it, unlike disconnection and repetition, has positive value, it has less than coherence. With everything directed toward a single purpose otherwise perfectly worthy pursuits are relegated, becoming “underemployed sources of potential meaning” (368). Delightful as this thought is I find it odd since on any pre-theoretic conception of coherence a life organized around a single purpose clearly counts as coherent.

21 Like MacIntyre and Taylor, Kauppinen holds his concept to be a foundational one—seeking coherence in our lives is how we lend them meaningfulness, and the lending of meaningfulness to our lives, he suggests by the end of the paper, turns out to be one of our essential capacities, laying the foundation for a new perfectionism.
I have defined narrative-ethical unity by appeal to shape and spoken in a rough and ready way of different types. We need to put all of this together and to do so with precision. The basic concept is unity. So start here: lives surely can have unity. Now ask: what types of unity might be present in a life? There are many, and different methods by which to categorize them. Since my argument turns on degree of intelligibility I categorize with respect to it, though why one category has more cannot be understood until later. On the next page is a full schema of the types of unity of a life that I can see. Each type is more fully described in the comments that follow.

The Categories: Types of Unity of or within a Life

A. Unities that are Not Narrative-Ethical:
   1. Complete Disconnection: the Null Hypothesis
   2. Narrative Unity *per se*

B. Narrative-ethical but Non-storied Unity:
   3. Repetition.
   4. Regress or Tragedy.

C. Narrative-ethical Unity that is also Storied:
   5. Progress or Comedy.
      a. Development
         a.i. Single-purpose
         a.ii. Linear
         a.iii. Organic
      b. Redemption
     c. Transformation
Comments on the Categories

Several comments on these categories are in order so that the reader may have a sure grasp of what I mean.\textsuperscript{22} I begin with two comments about the schema as a whole. Next, I discuss each type of unity, giving each more description and clarifying any natural confusions and tensions. \textit{Every} term in the schema carries a meaning specific to my theory. Each shares a heritage with common or philosophical use, but is amended to my purposes.\textsuperscript{23}

(1) The Schema’s Hierarchy

The highest level categories, (A) through (C), are in order of increasing intelligibility. So, I believe, and argue on the basis of this chapter’s following sections, that: storied unity has more intelligibility than mere narrative-ethical unity, and mere narrative-ethical unity more than non-narrative-ethical unity. C > B > A in terms of intelligibility, on my conception of it.

However, I do not detect principled differences of intelligibility within any of the categories. For example, I do not mean to say that tragedy necessarily has more

\textsuperscript{22} An \textit{exact} grasp is improbable. I don’t have that myself—the nature of the material here does not lend itself to exactitude. This means neither that the insights won’t be clear enough, nor that they are any less important or true. It takes time to see the bridge in Monet’s \textit{The Japanese Footbridge, Giverny} (1922, Houston Museum of Fine Art). So, the clarity of one’s perceptions of impressionistic material is indeed scalar. I do need to make my bridge clear enough, and this I believe I have done. However, one will never see “a bridge” as clearly in this work as she will in a photographic realistic painting such as Richard Estes \textit{Brooklyn Bridge} (1993, Marlborough Gallery, New York). You will never see my bridge that clearly. Yet, Monet’s work is no less important, weaker, or \textit{even less clear} on account of that. Estes can never communicate what Monet communicated. There are some insights that can only be gained through impressionistic painting (and philosophy). And yes, I suppose there are some that can only be gained through photographic realistic painting (and philosophy).

\textsuperscript{23} Since I am only telling you what I mean by progressive and storied lives, and not yet defending their importance, this is permissible. One must have something to defend before she can defend it. The terminological amendments are \textit{ajustificatory}, neither justified nor justifiable. It is only the amendments themselves that are \textit{ajustificatory}—the whole result is fully defended in the following sections (and chapter).
intelligibility than repetition, nor that transformation necessarily has more than development, nor that organic development has more than single-purpose development. Within each category the degree of intelligibility requires the particulars of the case. In sum, the structures of each major and minor category are equally capable, while the structures of the highest categories, (A) through (C), are not.

“Progress” refers to an open concept, but “storied lives” does not. It is open whether there are other types of storied lives but the concept itself is not open—it has clear necessary and sufficient conditions. Progress, on the other hand, does not have clear necessary and sufficient conditions. Whether a candidate type of unity is a type of progress is left up to a more impressionistic, family resemblance type of reasoning.

I have to leave it open that there are other types of storied lives. To presume progressive lives are the only type of storied life, the only type that matters ethically, is to presume a background theory as to what matters in general. And this I do not have.

(2) An Alternate Schema

There is another way to categorize unities here, via shape. Both progress and regress have something in common—their shapes are curved—while causal unity has a flat shape. Many things may happen in a life with mere causal unity, but the unity itself is completely one-dimensional. The more accurate way to put it, since hardly anyone really lives a merely causal life, is this: if you believe all there is to narrative-ethical unity is causal unity, then you have failed to appreciate the richer ways in which that life’s diversity is related.
Repetition is a borderline case. It is nearly flat, an endless series of rolling hills, identically-peaked. One can see the entire life from beginning to end from atop any one of its hills. Yet, it has hills, so we must grant it some curvature. By contrast, with causal unity you can see the entire life from any point—there are no hills at all to climb. These metaphors become tangible in Section V.

Here is the alternate schema:

No Shape
  1. Complete Disconnection.
Flat Shapes
  2. Narrative Unity *per se*
Curved Shapes
  3. Repetition
  4. Regress or Tragedy
  5. Progress or Comedy

If our concern is only to fully analyze shape, this might be the best way to categorize.

But my argument turns on the differences of intelligibility, which is why I use the original schema. The original schema tracks the distinctions to which the opening thought experiment guides.

However, the alternate schema figures in my argument at two points. First, it brings out the important point that one of my burdens is to show that progress is more intelligible than regress. This is a significant burden because intelligibility is not *prima facie* capable of discriminating between the two—tragedy, unfortunate though it is, seems capable of being as rich and intelligible as comedy. I will show that, on a certain and appealing conception of intelligibility, it actually isn’t (Section VI).

Secondly, the concept of shape allows us to define *narrative-ethical unity per se*. To have narrative-ethical unity is to have a life whose unity or integration is shaped. Thus defined, progress, regress, and repetition are all types of ethical-narrative unity,
though progress is the only one of the three that is storied, that matters enough and guides well.

(3) Complete Disconnection

Some people live, and any could live, in a disconnected or random manner where “disconnected” and “random” are taken in a colloquial sense. Try this thing, try that, go back and forth or constantly go for the new. It can be so hard to make sense of these lives that we reach for the unconscious in order to do so. Here is Annti Kauppinen’s nice example:

Think of a Visiting Assistant Professor who after four years of short-term success leaves academia to train as a registered nurse, quits that to become a business reporter, and so on. [Note that] for these chapters to be [truly] disconnected, it cannot be the case that one’s experience carries over. From the perspective of the present, the past might as well not have happened.  

Now, of course, we could imagine a life where these same events happened but in such a way as to not be disconnected, in such a way where one’s experience does carry over. But that’s not a problem. Even if you think one can’t try all sorts of things without some sort of experience carrying over, you will still be able to distinguish richer from thinner versions of carrying over. And it’s those distinctions that I’m drawing here, even if impressionistically.

(4) Narrative Unity per se

To begin, we must distinguish narratives from other types of communications.

There is wide agreement on two necessary conditions and wide agreement that these are

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not jointly sufficient.\textsuperscript{25} To be a narrative, a communication must (i) sequentially order more than one event and (ii) “manifest at least one unified subject [matter].”\textsuperscript{26} Communication that merely orders events is not a narrative but an \textit{annal} according to the literature. Consider:

(A) Socrates died, then the U.S. bombed Vietnam, then Joe Adams drank a glass of water.

This is clearly not a narrative even though there is a temporal relationship communicated. Moreover, the mere addition of a subject matter does not make it one:

(B) Socrates was born, Socrates spoke in front of crowds, Socrates ate, and then Socrates died.

(B) is likewise non-narrative. Instead, the literature calls this a \textit{chronicle}. There is nothing communicated, explicitly or implicitly, about the relationship of these events beyond the fact that they are in this order and about Socrates. The events, I like to say, are not in \textit{active relationship} with each other.

Everyone agrees that (i) and (ii) constitute necessary but jointly insufficient conditions. Everyone agrees that \textit{something else} is needed—the specifically narrative connection. This is because, intuitively, we feel a difference between the set of articulations we call annals and chronicles, and the set we call narratives.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{26} Carroll, \textit{Beyond Aesthetics}, 119-120. The subject matter need not be a person and the narrative may of course exhibit more than one unified subject matter.

\textsuperscript{27} Carroll also makes the important point that these distinctions are worth making \textit{and clear} regardless of your intuitions about which referents are properly called narratives. See, Ibid., 122 and 128.
On most accounts, the specifically narrative connection is a type of causal relationship between events.\textsuperscript{28} What is meant by “cause” can vary. On Noel Carroll’s account, one of the most highly respected accounts of the nature of narrativity \textit{per se}, the concept of cause in use is J.L. Mackie’s concept of an “INUS” condition.\textsuperscript{29} According to the INUS account of cause, X causes Y iff X is an insufficient but necessary condition for an unnecessary but sufficient condition of Y. Consider a siege of a town, to use Carroll’s example, whereby the besiegers withdraw and, in so doing, their whole campaign falls into confusion.\textsuperscript{30} We want to say that the withdrawal is narratively connected to the campaign confusion (it’s no mere chronicle or annal) and also that that is because the withdrawal, in some sense, \textit{caused} the confusion. But in what sense? Well, it’s obviously not a sufficient condition—not all of this army’s withdrawals have resulted in campaign confusion. Instead, it’s a necessary but insufficient condition of whatever state of affairs \textit{is} sufficient for the campaign’s confusion (say, withdrawal plus an unexpected attack on the besieger’s capital). But of course, this sufficient state of affairs for campaign confusion is not necessary—many things could have caused this army’s campaign disarray.

There is another concept of cause that I think could do the narrative trick, and it’s what Christopher Hitchcock calls the “folk attributive” concept.\textsuperscript{31} In his delightful

\textsuperscript{28} An exception is David Velleman who thinks that while cause is necessary for narrative connectivity, it’s not sufficient but needs to be combined with what he calls “emotional intelligibility.” Events are emotionally intelligible with respect to each other when they are the types of events that arouse and resolve natural emotional cycles. We will discuss this later.
\textsuperscript{29} Carroll, \textit{Beyond Aesthetics}, 118-133.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{31} Hitchcock, “Three Concepts of Causation,” 511-513. The other two concepts for Hitchcock are: (a) the scientific concept of cause as causal model, relying on a counterfactual dependence idea that can be expressed mathematically, and (b) the metaphysical concept where events cause events without any principled distinction between background conditions and causes. Under the metaphysical concept, the withdrawal \textit{and} oxygen in the air are both equally causes, both one of many ever-diasporic causes of the above campaign’s confusion. Under the scientific concept, the withdrawal may or may not be a cause
example, taken from an experiment conducted by Knobe and Fraser, suppose that a computer system crashes whenever more than one person logs on. Now suppose there are two users, Lauren and Jane, that Lauren and Jane have separate terminals, and that only one person at a time can log on. To avoid crashes, company policy states that Lauren can use it only in the morning, Jane only after noon. Next suppose both Lauren and Jane log on in the morning, Jane in violation of the policy. The computer crashes. Now ask: who caused the crash, Lauren or Jane?

Depends on what you mean by “cause.” The folk-attributive concept is the fun one that tracks the part of our mind which says that Jane caused it, obviously, because she wasn’t supposed to be on the network at that time. But of course on the less value-laden theories of cause, they both caused it to crash, their both being logged on being necessary conditions.

Hitchcock says X is a folk attributive cause of Y iff “some intervention or deviation from the standard course of events … results in some outcome distinct from” the standard course (512). I think this definition accords nicely with the kinds of things we tend to call narratively related. The withdrawal’s causing the campaign confusion was unexpected in a way. In a standard course of events, an army withdrawals and that’s that. But in this case, there was a departure from the standard. That is in part why it’s interesting and, I think, also why it’s narrative.

I believe that connections are narrative insofar as they teach us something about the world they describe, insofar as they tell us new or interesting or unexpected or

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32 Ibid., 512.
surprising information about the world. So, I think the folk-attributive, interventionist style of cause will do about as nicely as Carroll and Mackie’s INUS condition.

The point for now is only to have before your mind a sure grasp of what the unity that attends narrativity *per se* amounts to. The answer is: not very much. *Whatever* the narrative connection—the theorization of narrative unity *per se*—turns out to be, it will be too thin and thus too permissive to guide action. Any theory of the narrative connection will have to be thin enough to account for the undeniable fact that a wide diversity of representations of event relationships ought to count as narratives, i.e., that a wide diversity of event relationships will have to count as INUS conditions or folk-attributive causes. However, precisely because any good account will have to be thin in this way it will fail to guide action well: far too many lives can easily incorporate narrative connections if all we have in mind is a theory of narrative unity *per se*. Narrative unity *per se* falls afoul of the problem of incompleteness.

Theories of the narrative connection are too permissive for my purposes. Nearly any life can be given a narrative description, if by “narrative” all we mean is a rough commonsensical causal connection between events sequentially ordered through a unified subject matter. The ups, downs and turns of far too many lives feasibly facing any agent are sequentially ordered, about a single subject, and related in this rough causal manner. A life of disconnection might even qualify.

We thus must drill down in a different spot. When we look back at the thought experiment with which I opened, there *did* seem to be something thicker than commonsensical cause at issue. We, or at least I, have the sense that some lives would be
favored over others as more “rich” in their narrative, as better stories, even if the less rich count as “narrative” by the lights of narrativity per se.

Instead of using our intuitive judgments about what narratives are, we will use our intuitions about ethically important life unities, about shape. Instead of reflecting on narrativity per se, we should reflect on the sorts of lives that seem to matter beyond reasons of morality and prudence. I do not rely on this intuition for justification, only to guide my attempt to create or identify or articulate some kind of tractable, thicker, concept of narrative unity. This is precisely what I have done with my schema. The answer we seek is “found at the place where our intuitions about good narrative life patterns converge with our intuitions about what matters beyond morality and prudence as hitherto conceived.” We can now see that “good” in the phrase “good narrative life patterns” neither quite means what we usually mean by prudence or well-being nor does it mean good qua narrative. It means that the instantiation of a type of narrative unity is part of the good life. The reason is that some narratives have more intelligibility when it comes to describing a life than others. So, while a necessary condition of a storied life is that it has narrative unity (narrativity per se), it’s not sufficient.

(5) Repetition and Regress

I have called Repetition and Regress “narrative-ethical but non-storied” lives. To have narrative-ethical unity is to have a life whose unity or integration is shaped. In my view, mere narrative unity is a completely flat, one-dimensional “shape.”

33 I suppose the best distinction is between non-dimensional, one-dimensional and two-dimensional forms of unity. Complete disconnection would be non-dimensional, causal unity one-dimensional—merely and completely flat—and repetition, regress and progress two-dimensional, at least a sloped line but usually curved.
They belong in the middle because while they do have intelligibility, they either have the wrong amount or the wrong type of it. Repetition has the wrong amount—I will grant it some intelligibility on my conception of it, but not enough to matter for action guidance. Regress turns out to have a lot of the wrong type of intelligibility. However, because regress is *prima facie* no less intelligible than progress, I put it here.

But what do I mean by them? Repetition is a life wherein the relevant events are more or less the same. As mentioned above, in Chapter Six I argue that the events which are relevant to shape include but go beyond desire et. al. to include formative events that happened to you, abilities you have developed, personal values you have come to adopt, knowledge you have gained, and more. So, a repetitive life is one where no one of these and no combination of them takes on a regressive or progressive shape. The causal influence of your history remains the same.

Repetition isn’t what you might think. One can work a very repetitious manufacturing job and live a storied life. Both the professional and non-professional side of life can take on the relevant shape. How could the professional life do so if we are supposing this to be a repetitious job? First, you could move to a different spot in the manufacturing process. But even if you don’t, there are adjustments to be made to the job you are doing, slightly different methods, different speeds, different timings, etc. Even within the confines of a very narrow life there are choices to be made about how to put its internal pieces together, what to do next, etc. Some of those choices will be more intelligible than others. It’s my job to show which, why and how.

Similarly, one can work a complicated job with a bewildering set of responsibilities and live a repetitive life. Is that very complicated work life evolving,
developing, i.e. moving in some direction? In short, one can progress in jail, and one can repeat as Secretary of State. This will become clearer in the next chapter. For now the point is to have a basic idea of a repetitive life in mind.

A corollary of this is that change is important to the favored life shapes, the storied lives—if you’re not changing at all you’re repeating. However, not just any change is licensed. Willy-nilly, back and forth redirection will make for a repetitive shape, or no shape at all (beyond a flat, causal shape). Some large or structural changes—what I call transformations—are permitted, but others—radical breaks—are not.

A regressive life deteriorates, goes backwards, or descends. A project that fails is a simplistic example. Others include full-on tragedy, i.e. steep falls from grace, and gradual deterioration. The body slowly deteriorates from early middle age. I believe our ethical lives can deteriorate too. An ability or knowledge base can atrophy, you may stop keeping your personal values, your plans may fall apart, or a traumatic event may go unhealed increasing its negative influence.

A research-only professor who stops writing after tenure could be an example. For it to be a proper example, we must suppose he has no personal life wherein progress could be found, appreciate that he is research-only since one can progress in teaching and administration, and remember that he has stopped writing not publishing.

This example brings into relief the fact that it is actually rather difficult to find a case of pure regress. I believe this is so because we are naturally drawn to progress in our lives. When one aspect of our career wanes, we seek to develop another, or we seek to develop in other ways. Even within confining work processes we usually can, seek to
and do, make adjustments. This is a virtue of my account for two reasons. First, it means there is plausibly some foundation for storied living deeper even than intelligibility. Secondly, it means that a storied life is available to nearly all. However, that we are naturally disposed to progress doesn’t mean that our pursuit of it can’t be made more conscious and thereby more excellent. I am helping us to know ourselves, and thereby to live, better.

(6) Progress

We now turn to my favored type of life unity, the one I shall normatively defend in this chapter and operationalize in the next, the storied lives with progressive shapes. In a rough and ready way before I introduced the schema, I used a variety of terms all of which point to a family resemblance: redemption, overcoming, progress, development, reconciliation, transformation, growth, etc. All of these connote a progressive arc, but their arcs bend with different degrees at different points along the story line. There is a common, positive slope of similar average, but with different data points creating different progressive shapes.

I believe there are three distinctions to be made among this variety. These distinctions are vague at the margins but still useful for action guidance. Recall that there is no principled differentiation of intelligibility at this level.

One can have a curve whose progress is steady. Call this “development.” Development in turn can be lock-step where each subsequent phase is informed by the earlier. In pursuing one project I learn new skills and knowledge which can give rise to a next project. I call this linear development. Alternatively, it can be what I call “organic”
where multiple steps combine, two seemingly disconnected events coming together later on to form a third or three to form a fourth, etc. Thirdly, everything could be oriented toward a single goal. This is still a case of development because long-term goals require stages, each stage building upon the rest. In all of these cases the rise is roughly steady. It’s the steadiness that makes them developmental.

However, progress can come from a long low period followed by a quick but non-sudden rise. Call this “redemption.” Finally, the positive slope can emerge from a long low period followed by a sudden rise. Call this “transformation.” The quick examples, mentioned earlier, are your classically successful academic career (development), a successful academic career reinstated after a post-graduate school exit (redemption), and, under certain conditions, a successful philosopher turned activist (transformation).

What’s going on in these cases is that more aspects of your personal history are being brought to bear on later events. In a successful academic career the graduate work is causally implicated in the early career phase is causally implicated in the later phase. But it’s not just one chapter connected to another like links in a chain. It’s also that the earlier links are causally implicated in the later links, making more for a web-like structure rather than a linked chain structure. Even in the later stages one can still “see” the earlier graduate work.

These are all of the types of unity of life, or portions thereof, which I see. For the rest of this chapter I argue that storied lives with their progressive or comedic shape are superior

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34 The concept of organic unity as that term is normally used in moral philosophy does not figure in my concept of organic development. The result of organic development is very tangible, unlike organic unities whose unity is obscure. By “organic development” I just mean that some things don’t develop one step leading directly to the next—some unities require two otherwise unrelated varieties at their base.
to the rest with respect to degree of intelligibility. Storied lives matter because they have more intelligibility than the others on my schema.

The argument proceeds in stages. First, I develop a new conception of intelligibility. This spans Sections II, III, and IV. Sections II and III are critique that help guide the central proposal presented in Section IV. Then I argue in V that storied lives have a superior degree of intelligibility vis a vis non-storied narrative lives, that progress is better than repetition and regress on my conception of intelligibility.

II.

A Conception of Intelligibility: Velleman’s Hegelianism

I begin with David Velleman whose work figures prominently at the intersection of intelligibility, narrativity, and ethics. One aim of this section is to articulate his conception of intelligibility. Originally, that was the only aim. However, in studying his conception I found that, contrary to Velleman’s own self-understanding, his ethics is not Kantian, but Hegelian. I have developed and defended this argumentative claim at some length, forming a second aim of this section. That second aim makes this section a long digression from my central claims, but will appeal to those who wish for a better understanding of Velleman or how my theory interacts with, and differs from, his.

It is necessary first to see Velleman’s most general and important thesis, a thesis about the nature of autonomous action, of action proper. The thesis is that mere behaviors, such as sneezes, and mere activities, such as mindless drumming of one’s thumbs, cannot be distinguished from full-blooded actions, such as raising one’s hand to
ask a question, unless you suppose the creature “knows what he is doing” in Velleman’s labyrinthine phrase.

Considerations that qualify as reasons for doing something are considerations in light of which, in doing it, the subject would know what he was doing. They are, more colloquially, considerations in light of which the action would make sense to the agent (PPR, 26). 36

Once you start drumming your fingers in bored resentment to call attention, for example, then, there you have an action and there you also have the activated capacity to know what you are doing. Drumming one’s fingers “makes sense,” in Velleman’s favored phrase, as the course of action.

There are many objections to Velleman’s position that self-understanding is the characteristic mark of autonomous action. For example, why isn’t end-setting what distinguishes mindless from attention-grabbing finger drumming? But our concern is not to analyze his argument for intelligibility. Instead, our purpose is to understand his concept of it. So what interests is not the link between the intelligibility of actions and autonomy, but intelligibility (in this case, of actions) per se.

Velleman begins with a colloquial description. Something is intelligible when it “makes sense.” So when does something—anything—make sense? The sense of “making sense” for Velleman is not the full-blooded sense of practical rationality (26). Sometimes when we say, “I did X because it made sense to do X” we just mean that it was the most rational thing to do or otherwise the thing one ought to have done all things considered. For example, in the domain of prudence, we might say “it made sense to do X” where all we mean is that X was the most prudent. But “making sense” here means something different.

36 I work closely in this section with two of Velleman’s books: *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, hereafter cited in-text as “PPR,” and *How We Get Along*, “HWGA”.
When I speak of “making sense,” I am borrowing the phrase from the domain of theoretical reason, where it is used to characterize phenomena as susceptible to explanation and understanding. What makes sense to someone, theoretically speaking, is what he can explain. This is what I mean when I say that reasons for doing something are considerations in light of which it would make sense. I mean that they are considerations that would provide the subject with an explanatory grasp of the behavior for which they are reasons (26).

I side with Velleman insofar as the sense of “making sense” I intend is also associated with theoretical reason. Something makes sense when it is susceptible to human explanation and understanding. That most general definition of intelligibility holds for both of us.

Where I break with Velleman is in the type of explanatory grasp at issue. For Velleman, it is a folk psychological one. In spelling out what a folk psychological explanatory grasp is, he asks us to consider improvisational acting. For Velleman, real life rational agency just is an improvisational actor playing himself: “the process of improvisational self-enactment constitutes practical reasoning, the process of choosing an action on the basis of reasons” (HWGA, 18). Stage acting is therefore no metaphor. The kind of explanation here identified is the very kind Velleman believes at work in real life autonomous actions:

The relevant notion of “making sense” is not normative: it’s not about what the character ought to do. It’s the notion of what can be understood in terms of the character’s attributes and attitudes under the circumstances. The understanding that must be possible, if an action is to make sense coming from the character, is a folk-psychological understanding that traces the action to its causes in the motives, traits, and other dispositions of the character. If the actor’s behavior cannot be attributed to causes within the character in this sense, then it will not be “in character,” and so the audience won’t attribute it to the fictional character he is portraying; they will attribute it instead to the actor, as bad acting, or even as a departure from acting altogether, an interruption of the performance (HWGA, 13-14).
The key is this: mere behavior contrasts with autonomous action because the latter can be understood as the effect of folk psychological causes.\textsuperscript{37} Those causes include a person’s first-order desires and goals and her dispositions or tendencies, but her self-concept plays the lead role. Velleman draws specifically on psychological literature that explains some of our seemingly irrational behavior as stemming from a subconscious self-concept.\textsuperscript{38} In short, when a behavior matches up with all of these factors, it is the one that makes sense.

Presumably the environment also matters even though it isn’t mentioned by Velleman here and isn’t “within” the character like desires, goals, dispositions, and self-concept. How the agent decides to act seems very clearly to depend on which options are available. The environment plays a role in determining what it makes sense to do. However, once the environment is set, the purely internal psychological attributes do seem to plausibly take the agent the rest of the way.

It’s important to see that intelligibility for Velleman is merely regulative. We don’t aim at understanding ourselves, even though the capacity for theoretical inquiry, along with objective self-awareness, is what gives rise to “reasoning about what it would make sense to do” (31). Instead, we aim at the stated things.

The aims of our actions, according to my view, are whatever they ordinarily seem to be: pleasure, health, friendship, chocolate. Self-understanding is not an aim ulterior to these aims—not something for the sake of which we pursue them. It is rather an aim with respect to our manner of pursuing these and other aims, which we pursue for their own sakes. In this respect, self-understanding is like efficiency. We cannot pursue efficiency alone; we can pursue it only in the course of pursuing other aims, by seeking to pursue them efficiently (27-28).

\textsuperscript{37} We really ought to call them philosophical-psychological since we are the only ones who speak of “folk psychology.”

\textsuperscript{38} Velleman, \textit{Self to Self}, 224-252, esp. 224-227.
Put another way, practical reasoning does not give us any content, it only gives us form. The content is our already-present desires, wishes and dreams and the kind of person we already are. Two very different sorts of people can want the same thing. Because they are different they will have different ways of getting it, and different interim actions will be intelligible.

Here is an example. Some writers produce a little bit every day and their projects build, one paragraph on top of the other, with little revision. Others write large swaths of semi-coherent language which is then multiply revised. Both writers can have the goal of publishing a book and both books can be beautifully clear. But the latter, and not the former, will tolerate paragraphs and pages of what she is well aware will be trash. The action makes sense for one, not the other.

So the first agent shouldn’t do stream of consciousness writing, say, since that’s not what she would do, given her goals and who she is. The second agent should do it since that’s what she would do, given her goals and who she is.

Note the hidden assumption about environment again here. If stream of consciousness writing is not available then it would not make sense. Perhaps the writer is in prison, has only one pencil, and that pencil has only enough lead to last for one book, without revision. In this case, stream of consciousness would not make sense even for the second agent.

In sum, Velleman is deriving the moral from the social and psychological. This is why his latest book is titled How We Get Along. It’s a very descriptive title, in both senses. It does an excellent job telling us what his book is about, a descriptive, i.e. non-
normative,\textsuperscript{39} account of morality. “[T]he grounding of morality,” reads the opening sentence, “lies closer to the social surface than philosophers like to think, neither in the structure of practical reason nor in a telos of human nature but rather in our mundane ways of muddling through together” (1). Toward the end of the first chapter called “Acting,” which he tells us is the statement of his “conception of practical reasoning,” he makes this point abundantly clear (6):

The claim that a rational agent seeks to do what makes sense is uncontroversial if “what makes sense” means what’s appropriate or right or best, or what seems so from the agent’s perspective. Yet I understand the phrase in a purely cognitive sense meaning “what is explicable in folk-psychological terms,” a sense in which it is hardly an uncontroversial description of what a rational agent seeks to do. … Whereas most philosophers think that the intelligibility of an action derives from its appropriateness or rightness or goodness, real or perceived, I am going to argue that appropriateness or rightness or goodness derives from intelligibility (26-27).

Our notions of what ought to be derive from how we actually interact, patterns of acting in light of what makes sense folk-psychologically. Group folk-psychological intelligibility, which gives rise to our shared moral norms or values, emerges from the way we tend (due in part so a partially shared human nature) to react (Chapter Two) and interact (Chapter Three). The resulting, contingent evolution of social custom accounts for the shared system of expectations which is all that morality amounts to: “Morality as I describe it is distributed holographically throughout our way of life, in the form of various attitudes and practices that are united only by family resemblances, which show forth only in a particular light” (3). What we ought to do is determined by how we

\textsuperscript{39} Of course we have to be careful with this term. It should probably be “non-normative as we know ‘normative,’” since everybody, even nihilists, give some account of the normative, if only to explain it away.
actually do, by “our way of life,” a social fabric whose unity is observed by asking what it makes sense to do, as one, as a group.

The derivation of the moral from the social is why he says, in Chapter One, “When I eventually get to talk about morality, I won’t have a lot to say” (9), and why he argues, in Chapter Six, that our moral theories are merely idealizations of the patterns already set, in the same way that theories of physics, economics, and many other disciplines, are idealizations (164-165). Theories of physics describe, not the actual world, but what would happen in the actual world assuming no friction, or a vacuum, for example. Despite this, they remain descriptive, i.e. non-normative. Analogously, theories such as Kantianism in Velleman’s view describe in an idealized way, telling us what would happen under certain assumptions. The point is that morality’s force is no longer normative. “Idealized” is actually misleading. They are, instead, simplified descriptions of our way of life.

Velleman is to morality what Quine was to epistemology.40

It is thus vexing why he would say, “[M]y metaethics is most hospitable to Kantian moral theory: no surprise there” (HWGA, 165). This can be true only if Velleman has in mind “Kantians” who have departed decisively from the universal, non-contingent, extra-customary moral foundations that Kant sought. Velleman’s metaethics is clearly much more Hegelian than Kantian first because it is grounded in our contingent, ever-evolving way of life, our patterns and habits of custom, i.e. in the way things actually are.

40 Velleman: “Lecture 6 explores what is left of normative theory under a view like mine, which regards the normative as largely an empirical matter” (HWGA, 6-7). Quine: “Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject.” Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” 82.
The second reason is that Velleman sees no room for a forward-looking morality, for truly prescriptive moral propositions:

I am also skeptical about the reach of moral philosophy. I think of practical reasoning as an experimental discipline. At the social level where morality originates, practical reasoning involves the sort of muddling through together that I describe as “getting along” [emphasis added]. Where this process will lead is as unpredictable as the outcome of scientific inquiry—which is why philosophy can provide no more than a post facto commentary on where it has led thus far. Moral philosophy speaks to morality, in my view, as the philosophy of science speaks to science—that is, as a methodological commentator and critic rather than as a substantive contributor (3).

The way I see it, this is an Anglo-American’s way of saying “The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.”41 Many think, as the editors’ note to my translation says, that “dusk” in this famous line of Hegel’s refers to the decline of a culture and thus that philosophy only speaks when the culture has begun its descent and thus that we can infer that the culture is in decline whenever philosophy speaks. But I don’t believe this, in part because when we do look back we see a progressive evolution of culture through the various philosophical revolutions. Thus, at a given time in which philosophy spoke, culture would have been at its apex, but now, from our perspective, that same time period was not an apex but a node on the upward trajectory which apexes now.

Whatever the outcome of my quibble here there is one thing that is clearly implied by Hegel’s phrase. At the least, dusk refers to the sort of analysis Hegel believes philosophy provides, an essentially retrospective rational reconstruction. Philosophy can only look back at what has come to be and analyze it, comprehend it, put it together in a more comprehensible whole. The thought picture which philosophy creates is from the point of view of dusk, a point of view where the now is at the apex. And because the

41 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 23.
rational is the actual (we’ll get to this in a moment), because an objective understanding for Hegel just *is* our most rational articulation of what is, then, if the owl is flying, it is dusk, whatever stage of the culture’s advancement or decline.

Again, I want to emphasize that this is surely one thing Hegel means even if he also means that philosophy only speaks when the culture is dying. And it is this important point of Hegel’s that makes Velleman Hegelian. Philosophy is nothing but a “post facto commentary on where it [getting along] has gone so far.” Normative theory is nothing but an idealization of how we actually interact. It does not constrict or constrain the actual; it does not guide.

Another of Hegel’s well-known lines is, “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (20). To move beyond the actual is to move beyond the rational. There is nothing rational to say beyond talk of what is. There is only the making of our articulations of what is, more rational, more comprehensible, or more intelligible. And that is philosophy’s job for Hegel and, I claim, for Velleman: to make our view of what is more comprehensible, rational, understandable, i.e. *intelligible*. In the introduction to his political philosophy, Hegel says:

> This treatise, therefore, in so far as it deals with political science, shall be nothing other than an attempt *to comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity*. As a philosophical composition, it must distance itself as far as possible from the obligation to construct a *state as it ought to be*; such instruction as it may contain cannot be aimed at instructing the state on how it ought to be, but rather at showing how the state, as the ethical universe, should be recognized [emphases in original] (21).

Hegel explicitly calls his political philosophy “political science,” saying that philosophy’s only instructions are not prescriptions for living and acting, but prescriptions for appropriately thinking about how things are, about how we already act
and organize ourselves. The state, for Hegel, can be thought of as the mother within
Sittlichkeit, the arbiter of custom within custom. Sometimes conflicts cannot be resolved
at the lower levels of sociality—in these moments the state adjudicates. Its judges judge
by appealing to the way things are, to our shared forms of life. Those moments when the
United States Supreme Court makes reference to standards of decency which they
explicitly acknowledge change, for example in deciding what is cruel and unusual
punishment, they are doing something very Hegelian.

There is only one thing above the state, and that is philosophy, which has all the
authority that God had in previous moments in history. Philosophy is supreme because it
is the only thing that thinks about thought. The rest, say for example the Supreme Court,
adjudicates our way of life at a level below philosophy since it uses thought to determine
what is appropriate by reference to the way things have been. But philosophers think
about thought and so their role is to reflect non-foundationally on the nature of thought,
by reference to the way we have thought. So when philosophy lays down its reflections,
it is the final (non-transcendent, still descriptive) word, for it is only when you make
sense of thought with thought, that you make maximal sense of all the rest.

To comprehend what is is the task of philosophy, for what is is reason. As
far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a child of
his time; thus philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts.
It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its
contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time…. If
his theory does indeed transcend his own time, if it builds itself a world as
it ought to be, then it certainly has an existence, but only within his
opinions—a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct
anything it pleases [emphasis in original] (21-22).

Velleman is simply tracing Hegel’s line of thought without referring to anything Hegel
said. How could this have happened? There is a compelling explanation. If Jesse
Slavens is right, there is an inherent logical progression from Kantianism to Hegelianism sowed in the very seeds of Kantianism. The progress is due to the emptiness of reason construed in the absence of custom.\textsuperscript{42} Velleman unwittingly yet explicitly invokes Hegel’s true\textsuperscript{43} emptiness objection—that moral rules are completely vacuous without the content of custom—quite succinctly with the metaphor he employs in the book’s opening paragraph:

Our ways of getting along [i.e. the foundation of morality] must themselves rest on the bedrock of practical reason and human nature, but they [our ways of getting along] may form, as it were, a layer of topsoil without which morality [the rules, the vegetation above the topsoil] could never take root. If so, then asking how moral norms can sprout straight out of our rationality or humanity may be futile (HWGA, 1).

What Velleman calls “morality,” Hegel called ethical life. There is thus a way in which Hegel would be proud to go unmentioned, for Velleman has co-opted the term “morality” on behalf of ethical life. If we all became Vellemanian, ethical life would then have all of the authority that morality used to have, the revolution perfectly and symbolically completed when ethical life takes morality’s name.

Let me make the point one final way. Kant, Hegel and Velleman all claim that morality is grounded in reason, but to say that you are Kantian just in virtue of this is to equivocate. Everything turns on what you mean by reason. For Kant, reason is \textit{supposed} to be outside convention and custom, pressing upon us and constraining us with an

\textsuperscript{42} Slavens, \textit{Tracking Kant’s Bete Noir}, forthcoming dissertation.

\textsuperscript{43} I say the “true” emptiness objection, because what has come to be known among Kantians as the emptiness objection is a great oversimplification, as Slavens shows. Because of this they end up making the same mistakes Kant made. For example, Korsgaard does exactly what Hegel showed Kant did, assume a \textit{thick} notion of what a deposit is in showing that willing to keep a deposit for which there is no proof is a contradiction. It is only because these concepts are already pre-loaded with normative favoritism that they are contradictory. Remove the culture, the customs, and you have an empty tautology. If “deposit” is to mean a promise in a system of private property where promises for which there is no proof must be kept, then yes it is wrong to deny a deposit for which there is no proof. But this is tautological, reducing to, “If it is wrong to fail to deliver a deposit for which there is no proof, then it is wrong to fail to deliver a deposit for which there is no proof.”
authority that supersedes the actual. The giant puzzle—many think it failed and maybe it did—is to show how it can be outside convention and custom but still licensed by a convention- and custom-free self, still, that is, autonomous rather than heteronomous. Morality is thus what this extra-conventional, extra-customary thought tells us what ought to be. For Hegel and Vellman, however, reason is worked up, pre-existing *immanent* thought and morality the worked up description of how we actually interact.

I suppose what Velleman wants us to call to mind when he says his metaethics is unsurprisingly Kantian is the fact that he still appeals to practical reason as the foundation of morality. But his conception of practical reason is anything but Kantian; it is an *immanent* descriptive understanding. And this makes not some, but all the difference. You can still say that reason is the bedrock on this conception, but on Velleman’s picture it is a bedrock that can give rise to vastly different, incompatible moral systems. What used to be called morality—the extra-customary moral law—is now given an explicitly vacuous domain. Velleman calls it bedrock. Pause on the metaphor. Bedrock is very clearly necessary for holding topsoil, but also equally clearly capable of holding *any kind* of topsoil.

There was no antecedent guarantee that such a way of life [as the one we have] would develop among rational agents, much less that moral conduct will be rationally required of every agent at all times. The most that metaethics can do in this regard is to show how the moral aspects of our way of life can be seen retrospectively as a rational development, a form of progress (HWGA, 2).

If anything can grow from the same bedrock, depending on the topsoil, then (the old) morality—*moralitate* in Hegel’s lexicon, morality conceived of as grounded exclusively in reason—is an empty formalism. You can say it is ultimately at the bottom, but as a
regulative notion, it can only work to make preexisting and possibly incompatible systems more coherent and comprehensible.

For Velleman and Hegel, reason is a sense-maker; but for Kant, reason is a legislator.

What of the appeal to human nature, the second part of the bedrock unearthed by Velleman? Notwithstanding the fact that some self-proclaimed Kantians are working this angle, Kant’s morality was a morality for rational agents, a conception of how we ought to get along that was very clearly meant to apply intergalactically, to any being with rational, not human nature. Human nature is too parochial a notion to support a truly Kantian moral framework with requirements that apply across all worlds containing beings with a rationality.

Nevertheless, there is an understandable temptation to reduce the scope of one’s moral community in this way in order to more easily thread needle. We are tempted to think we have done enough if we have established moral rules that apply to all (what words shall we use?) those like us on this planet. If we’re looking at just us (who is that again?) then maybe we can help ourselves to more content, such as biological and psychological considerations, while maintaining not full universality, a code for all rational agents, but enough universality, a code for all those similar enough to us. “Ah, well, yes it is true that there is an element of contingency in my theory,” we will admit. “What I am here calling moral rules will have no force for non-humans. But if it applies to all human beings, well, that is good enough for me.” We should look, then, at whether Velleman’s theory can work as a human nature sort of theory. It won’t be Kantian, that’s

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44 This is one of the major themes of Allen Wood’s *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, but see esp. pp. 189-195.
for sure, but it will still have a normative structure, rather than a purely descriptive one or a hybrid Hegelian-descriptive one.²⁴⁵

Human nature theories, such as Aristotle’s, are attractive. What I mean by “human nature theories” are theories that support the force of moral rules by showing that they are grounded in a human (rather than rational) nature, a shared commonality of everyone like us. They are attractive because they promise to be universal enough while also providing more content. To develop moral rules out of mere rationality is tough. But if we have access to all the characteristics of a biological or psychological category, the job at least looks easier.

So the first point is that Velleman, straight-away, offers a morality that, at its maximum, is only a morality for those like us. You might think it’s a morality for all who share our psychological makeup. We could ground a morality in a psychological essence and it could, in principle, apply intergalactically, to any being that shares this psychological essence. Might it prove just as difficult to sprout a morality out of mere psychology, since it might turn out that psychological rules themselves also need content not found in itself? Might our psychological capacities be merely regulative contraptions whose formal rules make no sense without external content?

At any rate, Velleman clearly isn’t going in for a moral theory grounded in a psychological essence. He is non-essentialist about our psychology too. It’s clear that our shared psychology also gets part of its being from still lower order, biological, facts:

Idiosyncrasy has its limits, however [idiosyncrasy of intelligible reactions]. There are many responses that all of us tend to have by virtue of our shared human nature. Such nearly universal responses include: an array of physiological appetites; an aversion to pain, separation, and

²⁴⁵ We always have to put the normative-descriptive distinction it in words such as this when talking about Hegel, since the rational is the actual.
frustration; an inclination toward pleasure, connection, and the fluid exercise of skill; the inborn and automatic fight-or-flight response; an interest in the human face and form; an initial dislike of snakes, spiders, blood, and the dark; and so on (HWGA, 44).

This is Velleman’s list of the features making up our shared human nature at the bedrock. What I’m going to show here is that each item reduces either to a biological or a social concept. If it’s purely biological then it’s a naturalistic fallacy (remember, we’re still trying to see whether Velleman is somewhat Kantian—if your Hegelian the naturalistic fallacy is no fallacy). On the other hand, the social features do not provide a meta-ethical foundation. We’re trying to construe Velleman’s ethics as a human nature theory where the human nature is supposed to be able to critique the social. We’re trying to make him fit his Kantian self-description (that it is now a daunting task, requiring us to squeeze or abandon much of what he says in How We Get Along, is precisely one way to make my point). But if what he lists here are merely social features in disguise it will not constitute the foundation we seek.

Some things on the list are clearly pure biology, our physiology, fight-or-flight, and initial dislike of snakes, spiders, blood, and the dark. Besides the fact that this is plainly a naturalistic fallacy, it is hard to see how our biology can adequately distinguish us from the other animals since it’s nothing but family resemblances that set us apart biologically. What about the other items on our list? They all either are, or reduce to, social concepts or purely biological facts. Consider pain. Some pain aversions are purely biological, the ones due to bodily damage. Others are purely social—embarrassment and the like. They are social because what embarrassment is, is determined by what people consider it to be. The universal judgment, “embarrassment is bad” is purely formal—a vacuous tautology—without some notion of what embarrassment is. To think that
“embarrassment is bad” is not tautological is to be blind to a surreptitious normative notion assumed.

Separation? When does a network of human interaction constitute separation? A U.S. American’s idea of separation is very different from that of a Guatemalan. Does Velleman simply mean “a tendency toward being aversive to being physically distant from others of the same species?” Is he simply invoking the biological fact that we are pack animals? If he is, then it’s hard to see how we’re different from canines.

Construing Velleman’s theory as a human nature sort of theory doesn’t work. The biggest objection from a Kantian perspective, of course, is that he is trying to ground the ought in the is. He’s committing the naturalistic fallacy. Kant would say that there are two worlds here, the descriptive one and the normative one. From the perspective of each, the other is illusory. But they are both real. And the important point is that normative force is built-in, a given, not a thing that we have to derive from less, or non-normative foundations. Freedom, the irreality of all irreality from the descriptive viewpoint, “may be called a fact of reason,” according to Kant:

“[T]he moral law, and with it practical reason, [have] come in and forced this concept [freedom] upon us…. Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason.”

At this point you should be thinking my argument has become a good bit unfair to Velleman. He explicitly says that his morality is contingent. He explicitly says that he

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46 Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, 163-164, 5:30-5:31.
won’t have a lot to say about morality as we knew it. He is intellectually honest about this point, and a bit unsettled about where philosophy has led him.47

My problem is not with the contingency of Velleman’s ethics, not with Velleman *per se*, but with his claim that he is Kantian. If there is anything you cannot do to lose that label, then it is break with the extra-customary normative force of morality. I have thus tried to make his normative ethics (folk-psychological intelligibility) match with some sort of extra-customary foundation. I have tried to construct a Vellemanian proposal along human nature lines in order to see if he could create that extra-customary normative force, even if it wasn’t Kantian strictly speaking (because not grounded in rational nature). This effort has failed.

However, *once we take him as Hegelian not Kantian*, the criticism of my construction falls away. If he’s Hegelian then he can get away with what he is trying to do: build up a retrospective, progressive rational reconstruction of our way of life by reference to our biology and sociology. If he’s Hegelian then he can build an ought out of an is since the rational is the actual, since epistemology and ontology are collapsed. One upshot of this discussion is that Velleman has to go this route if he is to maintain any normative force since it’s the only way to get normative force out of a contingent topsoil resting upon a vacuous, i.e. merely regulative, bedrock.

Perhaps Velleman isn’t really interested in normative force. This is a question one is left with after reading *How We Get Along*. If he’s really uninterested in giving *any* normative force to the socially-derived morality he adumbrates, then he can claim one

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47 From HWGA, 4: “Among the few and tentative practical implications that can be derived from my brand of metaethics, some have surprised even me, and not always pleasantly. For example, I find myself committed to taking a more conservative attitude toward conventional morality than I am accustomed to take. I’d like to think that my willingness…is a sign of intellectual honesty. It may just be a sign of age.”
intellectual commitment shared by Kant (as well as Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes). This is the commitment to the maintenance of a principled distinction between epistemology and ontology, the commitment to the thing in itself.

You could build up a rational reconstruction of the way things are by reference to the way they have been while being unabashed about the fact that there is nothing left of normative force. You could maintain the is-ought distinction while denying that there are any oughts. A Hegelian doesn’t do this. A Hegelian is still interested in normative force. What Hegel does is tie the two together in a circle.

We’re here entertaining a person who believes (with Kant) that the is and the ought constitute two different worlds, but who says that the ought-world doesn’t really exist, a hardcore materialist. If Velleman goes this route, then he can share an intellectual commitment with Kant. The full-blooded Kantian maintains this commitment while rescuing secular normative force. What this construal of Velleman does is have him maintain this commitment while abandoning normative force altogether. However, since this commitment is a completely general philosophical commitment, one shared by Aristotle, Plato as well as Kant, it is not enough to make Velleman Kantian. He may share one of Kant’s intellectual commitments, but the contingent, socially-laden topsoil out of which morality sprouts and the empty, vacuous nature of the ultimate bedrock add up to just the sort of decisive break with Kant that makes “Kantian” an inapt description of Velleman’s meta-ethics. In sum: he can be Hegelian, he can be neither Kantian nor Hegelian, but he cannot be Kantian. It’s actually rather generous to understand him to be Hegelian. If he is not Hegelian then there would be little to stop him from being
eliminativist about moral concepts because the project would become thoroughgoing
empirical. Velleman would become the Churchlands of ethics.

III.

A Conception of Intelligibility: the Fall of the Self-Concept Approach

We have digressed from this chapter’s primary arc but the discussion has helped us to
clarify Velleman’s account. So how does Velleman’s theory serve mine? Where am I
similar and where am I different?

I will take two things from Velleman and reject two things. First, like him, I am
going to ground my ought in intelligibility. In other words, I side with him insofar as I
would like to switch the traditional order of explanation, though I think we can only do
this at the level beyond morality and prudence. Traditionally, something is intelligible
because it is appropriate, but for Velleman and I something is appropriate because it is
intelligible. The second thing I take is the move to theoretical reason. I agree that we

48 Consider a baseball game and let us analyze a baseball action to understand how intelligibility can drive
appropriateness. It will take three iterations of a case to get there, drawing you from the traditional to
the Vellemanian idea. Suppose during a game that I am the batter and, once inside the batter’s box but
before the pitch, I use my bat as baton to pantomime symphony conduction. This action seems
unintelligible, is without a ready explanation. Yet, it is inexplicable, we must quickly add, in that it
cannot be explained with reference to the governing conventions. So, appropriateness (conformity with
governing conventions) seems to be driving intelligibility here.

Now note that governing conventions include not just the rules of baseball but appropriately related
historical events. When Babe Ruth pointed to the fence his behavior was not one described in the
written or unwritten rulebook, but it made sense with reference to what had happened in that and
previous games. We can find another case of this by revising the pantomime example. If there is a
rivalry between the pitcher and me, and everyone knew that I always do something in order to tease him
when I arrive at home plate, then the pantomime becomes intelligible again. The pitcher and I created a
new convention that others accept. It is now within the sphere of intelligible actions, though only when
I play baseball against this pitcher. Is appropriateness still driving intelligibility? It seems so.
The third iteration: remove the teasing convention. There is some sort of explanation we could provide for
my pantomime. “He’s trying to delay the game.” “He’s trying to increase his visibility in order to
increase his sponsorships.” All of these are attempts to make the behavior make sense within the
governing conventions of, in this case, professional baseball.
But now consider, “He’s simply expressing his passion for symphony.” This explanation is different
than any of the previous. Imagine the announcer saying this over the radio and assume he’s clairvoyant.
should specify intelligibility by reference to theoretical reason’s notion of it, as the
property of being more or less susceptible to explanation and understanding.

Where I part with Velleman is in the sort of explanatory grasp at issue. I don’t
think folk-psychological explanations are the sort that we should invoke when going after
a concept of intelligibility grounded in theoretical reason and applied in ethics. Instead, I
shall develop a concept of intelligibility by appeal to the more traditionally philosophical
criteria of a good quality explanation. Since this appeal will not be empirical but rational
(in the traditional, pre-Velleman sense), my chosen concept of intelligibility can at least
possibly guide agents. So my second departure is in the fact that I think ethics can guide,
in the development of a concept of intelligibility that provides not just retrospective
reconstruction, but prospective action-guidance.

Unlike Velleman’s, my intelligibility-derived ought will have full normative force
albeit only within the boundaries of morality and prudence. Its status as normative, rather

This explanation does not attempt to stretch the governing conventions, instead it appeals to a different
set of conventions. In public spaces where free expression is frequent, pantomiming a symphony with a
baseball bat (even in front of a pitcher) would be perfectly intelligible. But back in the baseball game,
public expression cannot replace swinging for a pitch without becoming unintelligible. Put another
way, in order to make it intelligible, the situation must no longer be understood to be a baseball game.
With these cases as data we now ask: is appropriateness explaining intelligibility or vice versa? On the
one hand—the traditional direction of explanation—intelligibility seems in large measure to be a matter
of conformity to governing conventions. If there is no history of teasing, no reason to delay the game,
no other evidence that I want to increase my sponsorships, then my action is unintelligible as originally
stated precisely because it cannot be explained with reference to the governing conventions. Neither
can the conventions be adequately stretched to include it, nor is there anything else that would make the
behavior conform.

But Velleman and I are interested in those moments where the conventions are stretched. We are
interested in the teasing case, or the sponsorship case. In these cases, the action is not intelligible with
respect to the governing rules, even if a good number of those aren’t written down. Instead, the action
here is made intelligible because it “fits” with a historical pattern. (The nature of such “fittingness” is
what I am here debating with Velleman.) The one who wants to preserve the traditional order of
explanation will have to explain this as a stretching of the governing convention. Yet, it remains the
case that, at that moment, what seems to make it intelligible is not any existing convention; ex hypothesi
the convention is not yet there. We can then take the long view and begin to see even the rules, first the
unwritten but then even the written ones, as products of the slow development of patterns of
intelligibility with respect to some evolving notion of fittingness. What starts as a one-off can become
part of the tradition. Velleman and I see the tradition as nothing but one-offs developed well enough
over time. On this way of looking at things, conforming to conventions is largely a matter of
intelligibility. The order of explanation has switched.
than descriptive, is completely robust, even if the strength of its prescriptions means they never trump morality and prudence. Intelligibility is lexically third in three concentric circles demarcating the boundaries of how we ought to live, circumscribing the field of ethical life possibilities. It being third does not mean it does not circumscribe.

As I said in my introduction I do not have a deep argument for the normative authority of intelligibility. I simply assume that intelligibility matters—that the universe is better place when a thing has the property of being susceptible to human explanation and understanding. Insofar as humans value understanding, it is reasonable to presume that they value understanding their own lives. Given that they value understanding their own lives, lives that are more intelligible, susceptible to better explanation and understanding, are better lives.

The rest of this section is dedicated to showing why folk-psychological intelligibility and, indeed, any notion of intelligibility that gives pride of place to self-concept, will not serve. In the next I will develop my more traditionally philosophical concept of intelligibility.

On the one hand it might seem unnecessary to find further reasons to reject folk-psychology given my need for intelligibility to have robust normative force. But this would be a bit too quick since you might want to keep Velleman’s concept of intelligibility while bracketing the discussion of its normative foundation. After all, if I can assume simply that intelligibility matters and focus the discussion just on a certain concept of it, can’t Velleman, or someone interested in spelling out intelligibility in a Vellemanian fashion?
The trouble is that folk-psychology is an inherently descriptive notion. To avoid my criticism, you’d have to come up with something that looked like Velleman’s concept of intelligibility without invoking psychology.\textsuperscript{49} This would be a theory that gave normative pride of place to self-concept, one’s prevailing dispositions, and one’s given aspirations, regardless of what psychology says.

And this is precisely the vein in which I see Christine Korsgaard working. Unlike Velleman, she is still after extra-customary moral foundations. And, like Kant, she is trying to ground our moral norms in the capacity to think and act for ourselves, independent of our way of life.

The difficult twist in her account is how our self-concepts (she calls them practical identities), which we realize to be contingent and changeable at will, nevertheless lean on us with full normative force. Her account can be explicated in terms of stages of self-awareness.\textsuperscript{50} Stage 1: I ask, “why should I do X,” for example, write a given essay. Stage 2: I answer “because I am a writer,” or professor, or student, etc. In other words, my self-concept gives me a preliminary reason to act. But then, Stage 3: I realize that my self-concept is contingent. It could have been otherwise. More

\textsuperscript{49} Surely there is some sense in which Velleman’s ethics is proscriptive? Are we not in some sense guiding our lives by the idealized description of how we get along, of the ways we have actually found in the past to live together, the ossified developmental pattern? Perhaps when Velleman explicitly says his ethics is only retrospective he means that it is retrospective only at the level of moral foundations, only at the level of justifying the force of morality per se. This seems to permit him to then claim that practical reason in its practical moments, in the moment of deciding what we ought to do, is still prospective in that in deciding what to do next we simply ask whether it conforms with the now sociological, i.e. contingent, historical, principle, “don’t do things that would require you to be an exception to the very expectations your proposed doings rely upon.” The trouble is, practical reason is supposed to be underneath the topsoil of ethical life. But to get a forward-looking practical reason it would have to be on top of it, not even the topsoil itself but something less fundamental. So, either he isn’t appealing to practical reason, or practical reason isn’t at his foundation. This criticism, which would take more time to develop well, would show that Velleman is not after practical reason, in the traditional sense, at all.

\textsuperscript{50} Sources of Normativity is still considered, even by Korsgaard herself, the canonical source for this argument. See, esp., 90-130. A concise summary of the main argument can be found in her more recent Self-Constitution, 22-25.
pressingly, *I can change it.* I can adopt the self-concept of a carpenter, a fine artist, a politician, a pop star. And the new self-concept would no longer be a reason to do X.

Stage 4 is where it gets fun. Korsgaard says that it is *in realizing that I can change it* that produces the realization that I am the source of authority of this, and any, self-concept. That’s fine. But to finish the argument she needs to get here: somehow, this final stage of reflexive self-awareness that I am the only source makes it the case that the chosen self-concept has force for me, makes it the case that I am a *valid* source.

But to reach this conclusion she needs an argument for that entailment, that is, for the following proposition: the fact that I am the only ultimate source makes it the case that my will alone has authority over me, that I am a valid source. Her argument for this is to appeal to the fact that we *must* have a self-concept. In the resonant opening words of *Self-Constiution*, “Human beings are *condemned* to choice and action [emphasis in original]” (1); and action on her understanding requires a self-concept: “Every human being must make himself into someone in particular, in order to have reasons to act and to live. Carving out a personal identity for which we are responsible is one of the inescapable tasks of human life. And that is the point on which the argument turns” (24). Indeed—the wrong way.

Put aside whether or not the proposition that we must have a self-concept is true. Suppose it is and let’s look at the form of the entailment. The argument is now this: my being the only, not necessarily valid, source makes me a valid source because I have to have a practical identity and am the only remaining available source.

This form is invalid. You cannot turn *a* source, even if it’s the only source, into a *valid* source just because we can’t do without it. Suppose God was the only source, or
Culture. That wouldn’t be enough to make it valid. In other words, in just the same way we can question the divine source, so we can question ourselves as source even if we’re the last one. Why should I have any more authority than God or Culture? There’s always this hidden unsupported Enlightenment premise that the self just is a more valid source. But to assume this is to beg the question. You can try to fix the problem by appeal to reason. It’s not “all me,” or “just me,” but it’s also Reason, it’s “me plus Reason.” But in this case, it’s *arbitrary* and therefore not reason-based as to why I will this identity or that one.

You might argue that our being the sort of self-aware creature that ultimately finds out that it is the only source, means that its self-concept has normative force for it since *all* beings *ought* to be the best manifestation of who they *are*. Since we are the sort of creatures that have to have a self-concept, we should have one, and since any will do, any will do. This is the classic Aristotelian move. I am X so I ought to be an excellent X. But to shore up the ought we need at least reason. But there’s no reason I ought to be what I am. Or, if you think there is, there’s no reason why I am the way I am. Maybe—it’s questionable—maybe I ought to be the best manifestation of who I am. That’s the Aristotelian premise. But now go one step deeper: ought I to have been who I am? There is no non-arbitrary, reason-based answer to that. Why should I be *this* sort of creature, the one who ultimately has only herself for authority, rather than another sort, the sort who ultimately has only God or Culture?

I have just argued that neither Vellelman’s, nor Korsgaard’s account will provide the normatively forceful sort of ought that I am after. They are shoring up morality. I’m not doing anything so weighty. However, I was concerned to criticize their accounts in
light of the thought that one might want to construct a concept of intelligibility along their lines and apply it, as I plan to do, within the boundaries of morality and prudence. We could take a Vellemanian or Korsgaardian notion of intelligibility—one that draws centrally on self-concept—remove it from the foundation of morality, and apply it here, at the later level, all the while simply assuming that morality is intact. But now we see that such a move won’t work since we will have a concept of intelligibility without normative force.

Am I being unfair? After all, I am offering no deep argument for the normative force of my concept of intelligibility. Here is one thing I can say. My unargued-for premise is less controversial than either of these two. Mine is simply “intelligibility matters.” If intelligibility matters than it seems to matter, at least somewhat, somewhere in our ethical thinking, that we lead intelligible lives. What it means to live an intelligible life is where I see my work contributing.

Velleman’s analogous premise is “actions consistent with folk-psychology matter.” One immediately wonders about this one, about whether we ought to be good folk-psychological actors, even within the boundaries of morality and prudence. I’m living a happy, healthy, moral life. But I could lead many such. Why is it that should I keep doing and being what I’ve been doing and being, again?

Korsgaard’s analogous premise is, “practical identities matter,” or “self-concepts matter.” Again, one easily wonders about the source of these norms. Her difficult, fascinating, and in my book superior (because thoroughgoing normative) justification for it notwithstanding, the result is the same. We easily ask of Korsgaard what we ask of Velleman: why should I keep doing and being what I’ve been doing and being, again?
But “intelligibility matters?” It’s easier to be mum with this one than the others.

You can, of course, be un-mum. Why should intelligibility matter? Who cares about that? It gets very difficult to answer this question since whatever answer we give will have to be intelligible. We shall be hard pressed to avoid the objection of circularity, the charge that our justification appeals to the very notion it is attempting to justify. To get around this you’ll have to write a non-viciously circular argument for intelligibility. And this is what I see as the major and continuing contribution of Hegel, the provision of just that argument. This is part of why he’s so hard to read.

I have argued that an account of intelligibility that makes self-concept key will not have the normative force an agent wondering how she ought to live within morality and prudence needs. I shall now argue that, even supposing it does, it will not be a good concept of intelligibility. It will not produce the right kind of answers to the young relative asking us about our lives.

An emphasis on self-concept both includes cases we want to exclude and excludes cases we want to include. For the purposes of these arguments Korsgaard and Velleman can be treated the same—how a Korsgaardian practical reasoner acts within morality and prudence is very much like a Vellemanian one—consistency with the agent’s pre-established goals, self-concept, and environment, where self-concept has an overriding or “trump” quality to it. The difference is in the meta-ethics—Korsgaard actually is a Kantian—but the meta-ethics doesn’t matter for the purposes of this argument.

First, the self-concept approach excludes some highly unified, perfectly intelligible, even exciting life unities. Consider those who go through major personality

\[51\text{ Am I now saying the fact that we’re intelligibility-mongers is reason to suppose we ought to be? No. I would be after a non-viciously circular argument, not a foundational one.}\]
transformations. Psychology has well-documented such cases, perhaps the best known study is William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experiences*. It will be *impossible* for a self-concept approach to manage the transition between pre-transformation self-concept and post-. These personality shifts are transformative precisely because they involve a complete overhaul of one’s fundamental self-concept. Yet post-transformation actions only make sense in light of the *new* self-concept. Precisely because “sense-making” is tied to self-concept, the earlier and later *cannot* be made sense of together on a self-concept approach.

However, these cases ought not to all be excluded. When one responds to the child at her knee with a story of spiritual transformation, it can make the response better. The child is moved, lifted up, exhilarated even. These stories sometimes make perfect ethical sense. They matter. But the analytic of self-concept can only identify, never fully explain or theorize transformation.

That my account will include these cases I can only at this point preview. The key is that self-concept is not a central aspect of the account of narrative coherence that I provide. It matters how the *events* are connected together and the ethical narrative quality of events does not have to make reference to a subject’s self-concept, although it certainly can. One can have a narratively unified life even if one’s self-concept shifts radically—it all depends on the properties of the events.

And in the case of transformation there is clearly a unity to find. Indeed, it is found on the face of the case: contained in the concept of “transformation” are both pre- and post-transformation events. You don’t have a transformation without the pre-——

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52 Thanks to Steve Crowell for this case.
transformation setup, nor without the new post-transformation equilibrium. Both are required to complete a transformation.

The self-concept approach not only excludes cases such as transformation that we want to include, it includes cases we want to exclude. We can easily imagine someone rationally serving her self-concept and all the while setting herself up for failure. We see this all the time in other people, with respect to their professional or personal lives. Indeed, psychology traffics in these cases—these are the data that help prove the centrality of self-concept for human psychology. Setting one’s self up for failure makes sense because of whom the agent thinks, perhaps subconsciously, she is. But one does not want to tell the child at her knee a story of sabotage. That’s not the sort of sense-making we are after in ethics when we’re after sense-making. So, we must not be after sense making based on self-concept.

Velleman even gives us a case of this and claims it as a virtue of his account that his notion of intelligibility supports bears it out. He asks us to consider the A.B.D. whose work has long ago stopped being productive. Everyone, including the student, knows it is overwhelmingly likely that he won’t finish. Velleman says that it makes more sense to stay and be failed out than it does to quit. This is because failing out has a sort of emotional closure or resolution to it that quitting doesn’t. “Eventual failure provides the emotional cadence of hopes disappointed, which has a comprehensible meaning” (202). To this we can add that eventual success, despite the odds, also provides a comprehensible meaning. Quitting, however, provides no such comprehension because it fails to resolve the hope aroused upon matriculation. Quitting interrupts the cadence. If one quits she will be left wondering whether she should return, whether she could have
made it, whether, if she had made it, things wouldn't have been all for the better. Quitting leaves the emotion open-ended whereas gutting it out and eventually failing ties it up.

Velleman’s account of practical reasoning bifurcates with these cases.\textsuperscript{53} The first, and fundamental, aspect is that canvassed in the previous section, actions understood as effects of psychological causes including the actor’s prevailing dispositions, self-concept, etc. But in cases such as the A.B.D. Velleman thinks there is a different, though still psychological, sort of intelligibility at issue. Here the agent is aiming (in a regulative fashion) at understanding himself in emotional terms. I will call this “emotional intelligibility” to distinguish it from the folk-psychological intelligibility from the previous section, though we need to keep in mind that both are robustly psychological and empirical for Velleman.

Emotional intelligibility is delivered by a certain narrative (\textit{per se}) quality to the reasoning at issue in these cases, a quality that should be distinguished from the more causal quality giving rise to folk-psychological intelligibility. The form of the narrative reasoning at issue follows the ultimately natural, indeed, hyper-natural \textit{physiological} cycles of emotion.

To clarify this issue of emotional intelligibility and its connection to narrative, consider a case which Velleman says has emotional intelligibility but no folk-psychological intelligibility. Velleman uses Aristotle's example of Mitys. Mitys was a great and virtuous man who was murdered. Years later, at a civic gathering in the square, Mitys’s murderer was killed when the statue to Mitys in the square randomly gives way and falls on the murderer. It is a fitting outcome. But why? For Velleman it is because the two events are still linked, not folk-psychologically (the statue’s falling was random),

\textsuperscript{53} He admits as much. See HWGA, 7 and 186.
but emotionally. Velleman says that “the sequence of events completes an emotional cadence in the audience” (HWGA, 191).

I don’t want to deny this particular claim—there certainly exist emotional cadences and they can be aroused and resolved through witnessing or hearing about events. The murder, *qua* murder, was unjust. This reasonably arouses the emotion of indignation. The killing of the murderer, in turn, resolves the emotion by satisfying that indignation. That the killing was done by the victim's statue is just all the more satisfying. The retributive emotion, like many emotions, involves a cycle of arousal and resolution, a cycle that can be started and finished by a non-causally connected series of events. Once you realize that emotions can connect events non-causally, it's easy to think of many fun examples.

The linking of the later death to the earlier murder is done through the cycle of emotional arousal and resolution. The narrative reasoning is supervening on this cycle. So the narrative form follows the emotional cadences.

All of this fits very nicely with Velleman’s hyper-naturalism. Regular everyday practical reasoning became folk-psychological in the previous section, but now even the more strange cases become robustly empirical, a product of charting our wholly natural emotional ups and downs which are *themselves* grounded in further, purely biological terms. “The cadence that makes for [emotional intelligibility] is that of the arousal and resolution of affect, *a pattern that is biologically programmed*. Hence we understand [events ordered with respect to emotional cycles] viscerally, with our bodies” (195). Velleman earnestly thinks that the rationality of cases such as the A.B.D. and Mitys is
found, ultimately, “in experiential, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic memory—as we might say, in the muscle memory of the heart” (200). Why believe this is so?

He tells us to consider the cadence of “tick-tock”—the fact that we hear “tick” before “tock” for no apparent reason—and suggests that we ground it in the cycle of facial muscular tension and relaxation.

I suggest that we understand the cadence of tick-tock with the muscles of our face and mouth, which are tensed for the first syllable and relaxed for the second. The cycle of tension and relaxation is built in to the very nature of muscle, and it’s what leads us to perceive tick as the beginning and tock as the end. In much the same way, we understand the cadence of a [narrative per se] with the natural cycles of our emotional sensibility (195).

Tick requires more facial tensioning than tock (note that tock is not a state of complete relaxation as Velleman implies), and muscles naturally go through cycles of tension and relaxation. These facts I do not deny.

But this is not at all what leads us to perceive tick as the beginning and tock as the end. The cycle of tension and relaxation, being a cycle, does not allow any point in the cycle to occupy a position of authority. We hear tic first—I certainly agree—but its antecedence is not explained by biology. The cycle of tension is clearly not “what leads us to perceive tick as the beginning.”

Repeat tick-tock enough times with the same interval of pause between tock and tick as between tick and tock and you will stop hearing tick first. The same goes for any two-syllable pair. If your name is two syllables, keep the same pause as between the pair as between each member of the pair and you will start to hear the second syllable first. Tic’s antecedence, such as it is, is wholly normative. It is built by our consciousness not our biology.
Perhaps Velleman’s thought is that states of rest constitute the equilibrium from which states of tension depart. So, *tick*, requiring (more) tension, is heard first since it is the departure.

But we’re tensing and relaxing all the time, so it is difficult to find a basis for saying that relaxation is the equilibrium departure point. Maybe we relax so that we can get back to tensing, to getting things done. The point of life after all, is to act, to be active, living, (re)productive animals. So the state of tension should be the equilibrium departure point. Maybe biologically we are *programmed* to relax so that we can work, not work so that we can relax.

Hogwash—whatever the direction of your biological program. The only way to get *tick* to come first is to (at least surreptitiously) work in some normative notion (into a supposedly empirical account of intelligibility).

Regardless, my main problem is not with the internal inconsistencies of Velleman’s account, not with whether his notion of emotional intelligibility really does account for his cases such as the A.B.D., but with the very fact that he endorses such cases as the A.B.D. as good quality intelligibility. We don’t want to tell the story of our lives that takes the form of the A.B.D.’s degree story. The notion of intelligibility we seek must repudiate these cases, so Velleman’s notion of intelligibility won’t work for us however justified.

I’m not denying here that we are, in fact, highly committed to our self-concepts. Far be it from me to doubt the empirical claims of psychology. I am instead questioning whether being so committed to them is a good thing. For Velleman, being the good Hegelian that he is, he has to rationalize the way we are. But I don’t have to.
Now, clearly there is a good argument from prudence that we ought not to let our self-concepts play such a crucial role in our practical reasoning. It is precisely because an emphasis on them sets us up for failure so many times, and because failure is often bad for us, that we ought not to over-emphasize them and that we in fact seek therapy. But grant Velleman the boundaries of prudence. Would his conception of intelligibility work then? Not if I show that there is an argument from *intelligibility* that we ought not to serve our self-concepts. To make that argument we need a new conception of intelligibility.

IV.

A Conception of Intelligibility: a New Old Theory

I call my conception “new old” because, while it is new *qua* intelligibility theory of ethics, it is a familiar theory of intelligibility. I am giving this new direction in ethics a foundation which, in other domains, has strong pedigree. The result is a more solid, familiar source for prescriptions more in line with our intuitions—both our intuitions about what intelligibility is and our intuitions about which cases are ethically inspiring. This section comprises my attempt to get proscriptive norms to “sprout straight out of our rationality.”

What type of rationality? I can’t very well pass this question up in light of my charge that Velleman equivocates on precisely this point (at least you’ll never catch me calling my theory of intelligibility Kantian). It is strange to me that Velleman says he is going in for a concept of intelligibility derived from theoretical reason and then turns to folk-psychology. When I think of theoretical reasoning I think of reasoning that abstracts

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54 To use one of Velleman’s delightful opening phrases. See, Ibid, 1.
away from the empirical. I am much more likely to think of the *rational conditions of a good explanation*, which are to be found in the philosophy of science, not in psychology. It’s my view that by looking to the rational norms of explanation themselves we can remain far enough away from the actual in order to permit the criticism that lets in the right kinds of cases while also staying close enough to the agent to avoid the sort of vagueness that won’t guide.

So when does something make sense, not according to psychology or folk-psychology, but according to *philosophy*? Accuracy, of course, is king. However inelegant the explanation, if it does the best job of any around at accurately describing the world, then it is the winner, the better explanation. Ptolemaic cosmology was the best explanation until a more elegant one with the same or greater acuity came along.

Yet accuracy is not always available, not the only legitimate norm of explanation. Famously, Thomas Kuhn showed that, sometimes, underlying scientific commitments become questionable it is not accuracy or predictive quality that resolve the dispute. Sometimes competing underlying commitments explain the data equally well. In these moments of paradigm debate, alternative, more “philosophical” considerations of the quality of an explanation come into play.

It is important to note that Kuhn was not the only one working on this thought. W. V. O. Quine and Rudolph Carnap also observed that competing paradigms—what Quine called different “concerns” and what Carnap called different “linguistic frameworks”—are adjudicated by what we would have previously called unscientific means. They all sought to explain and as necessary to modify these “unscientific”
determinants of science in order that they be understood as rational. The alternative was to abandon the objectivity of science, which none could stomach.

Here are the lists of norms of explanation from Kuhn, Quine, and Carnap. We shall see similarities and be able to simplify and categorize.

Kuhn: generality, accuracy, simplicity, consistency, quantitative-ness, puzzle-generation, and plausibility.\(^{55}\)

Quine: simplicity, familiarity of principle, scope, fecundity, and “testable consequences…[that] have turned out well.”\(^{56}\)

Carnap: efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity.\(^{57}\)

All of the items can be put into three categories. First is accuracy. Kuhn simply calls it accuracy but Quine is more illustrative, calling it testable consequences that have turned out well. “Accuracy” in science does not only mean “in accord with the facts of reality” but also “degree of predictive reliability.”

The second category I’ll call conservatism. In this category we can put Carnap’s fruitfulness; Quine’s familiarity of principle and fecundity; and Kuhn’s consistency, quantitative-ness, puzzle-generation, and plausibility. Each of these is about picking the paradigm which requires the least revision to surrounding assumptions, beliefs from other domains that are required for the paradigm to operate. This would be the paradigm that looks toward the currently unknown in a way that draws more on areas of science already accepted and employs mathematical tools already in use. If a paradigm on offer promises to exploit the unknown at the cost of upending other areas of science, then it will, \textit{ceteris paribus}, lose to one with the same promise without the cost. In this way there is a kind of

\(^{55}\) Kuhn, \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions}, 185-186.

\(^{56}\) Quine, “Posits and Reality,” 155.

\(^{57}\) Carnap, “Testability and Meaning”, 208.
conservatism to theoretical reason—where accuracy is unavailable we gravitate toward doing as much as we can with as little revision as possible.

The third is theoretical parsimony: explaining as much as possible with the fewest possible axioms or commitments. Whereas conservatism balances the promise of an explanation against its *current cost*, theoretical parsimony balances its promise against its *future cost*. Here we can put Carnap’s efficiency, Quine’s simplicity and scope, and Kuhn’s simplicity and generality. That theory which is both the most general—covers the most ground—and the simplest—employs the fewest axioms or has the fewest metaphysical commitments—is the preferred one, the most efficient one. If you can explain more with less then, *ceteris paribus*, you have a better explanation.

People often confuse parsimony and simplicity. We must not make this mistake. Simplicity *simpliciter* is not even a small scientific good. By itself, simplicity is no norm of theoretical reason. An explanation being simpler than another where its simplicity has no relationship to the number or degree of things explained, is not a reason at all in its favor.

Simplicity of explanans is always balanced against the number or degree of explananda. Simplicity of explanation is balanced against diversity, i.e. the *complexity* of things explained. “E=mc2” is so brilliant *not* because it is simply simple but because it is a simple equation that explains a stunning variety. To put it bluntly, it explains a lot of stuff. It is only *if* one can get an explanation simpler *without* sacrificing the amount of stuff explained—the explanation’s promise, or generality—that it becomes a better explanation.
It is true that, philosophy being what it is, we are prone to overcommit, to create unduly complex theories (sometimes via undue precision)—in a word, to speculate. We thus rightly often redirect by seeking to pare back our commitments. But when doing this we must keep in mind that the point is not to pare all the way back. Theoretical parsimony dictates explaining more with less. As analytic philosophers we usually hear the “with less” side of this phrase, but we should not forget the “more” side of it. If you explain very little with very little you do not have a very good explanation.

When we appeal to Ockham’s Razor we appeal only to this “with less” side of theoretical parsimony. But there are other times when we can explain more with less by creating. There is not only Ockham’s Razor, but Ockham’s Creator if you will. Or perhaps we should call it Ockham’s Salon, capturing both sides: a place to trim, shape, or even to add to or color, all as the case requires and always in an elegant manner. Creating is not necessarily un-parsimonious.

The second and third categories work together, i.e. one is not superior to the other, though accuracy is superior to both. If you have a theory which is wonderfully parsimonious—string theory, say—but whose pressure on the current science of other domains makes operationalization difficult, then you get the current result: string theory is not yet considered the best explanation. On the other hand if you get one that is familiar and ready to be exploited, such as string theory’s competitors, but you have inelegance, then you get the flip side of the current result: string theory is not yet ruled out.

Conservatism and parsimony can be difficult to distinguish. Both are concerned to reduce theory cost. Parsimony does it by recommending theories that are internally
efficient—asking how much it costs to “operate” in terms of its particular commitments and presumptions and balancing that against the income from its operation. Conservatism reduces theory cost by sensitivity to negative externalities, to continue with the economics metaphor. We look at the theory’s effects on external, yet related or dependent surrounding theories, commitments and beliefs. Remember string theory. It is parsimonious, bringing together a large and diverse array of observables by unifying two divergent branches of science. Yet, it requires completely new mathematical analyses and highly advanced engineering which themselves require new theories. String theory is not conservative. Its purchase price is quite high, creating major burdens in other arenas, though if we could get it up and running, it would be incredibly profitable, internally highly efficient, i.e. very parsimonious.

Parsimony assumes a web of beliefs and asks how efficient it is. Conservatism asks how hard it will be to transition from an old web to a new one. It is a change management agent that seeks the most profit consistent with the least change to the surrounding web of beliefs.

There are questions about whether employing these sorts of considerations undermines the objectivity of science, and if so how much. Most seem to agree that “[h]istory, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology,” not only “could” but has on account of Kuhn himself “produce[d] a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we [were then] possessed.”58 We’re still picking up the pieces but most seem to agree that that old image, what Philip Kitcher artfully calls “Legend”

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58 Kuhn, *Structure*, 1.
(with a capital-L), requires revision. Yet, while there are serious disagreements on how to do this, on the nature of a mature objectivity, few suggest abandoning the objectivity of science altogether.

If there is good work being done on reconciling the fact that what seem to be unscientific considerations are in fact acceptable, perfectly rational methods for theory adjudication, then we can safely assume that however they end up being justified, employing these kinds of considerations makes for a better explanation. We can assume without further argument that theoretical reason validly, in other words, relies in certain moments on conservatism and theoretical parsimony. Among two explanations, both equally accurate in the requisite sense, the one which promises as much as possible while being as conservative as possible, and the one which covers more ground with less commitments, is the better theory, the better explanation, the better account.

These two “unscientific,” but rational, philosophical determinants of science are enough for me to make my first move. With these two in hand we can prioritize a unified life over a disjointed one, a life whose events are organized in some way over the life consisting of a batch of hanging irrelevancies. In other words, I am now engaging the null hypothesis of disconnection, which may very well be but a theoretical possibility depending on your background commitments.60

This is because, without yet specifying a type of unity, we can say that a unified life is more conservative and more parsimonious than a non-unified one. If there is some

59 Kitcher, The Advancement of Science, 3 (all emphases in the original): “Once, in those dear dead days, almost, but not quite beyond recall, there was a view of science that commanded widespread popular and academic assent. … I shall call it ‘Legend.’ Legend celebrated science. … According to Legend, …[s]uccessive generations of scientists have filled in more and more parts of the COMPLETE TRUE STORY OF THE WORLD (or, perhaps, of the COMPLETE TRUE STORY OF THE OBSERVABLE PART OF THE WORLD).”

60 See the categories and comments in Section I above.
organizing principle to my life—some basic core about which a variety of significant events can be said to connect even if only causally—then I will have a life more in line with theoretical reason. The basic core, first of all, allows for explanation: new events, new decisions, can be understood with respect to it.

Secondly, it is more parsimonious. Some core is going to be able to explain more with less than no core at all. In the case of an unorganized life, there are only explananda, no explanans. And, therefore, no intelligibility. It would, of course, have the useless benefit of no metaphysical commitments whatsoever.

But as I showed above (Section I), I need to do more than simply stump for some unity over none. Mere narrative unity is not a rich enough concept to guide agents beyond morality and prudence. However, I have claimed that progressive unity is and, in particular, that progressive unity is more intelligible than other types of unity that at least seem as equally rich on grounds of intelligibility, viz. regress or tragedy. Thus we must now see why progress is better than regress on grounds of intelligibility.

V.

Why Storied Unity is Best

I have shown why narrative-ethical unity is better than the alternatives: total disconnection and narrative unity per se. I now need to discriminate among types of narrative-ethical unity. Recall that there are at least two that seem highly intelligible but that lack ethical appeal: Repetition and Regress. Because these are not the sorts of stories we want to tell the child at our knee, I need an account of intelligibility that will rule
them out. I will argue that these unities, narrative-ethical though they are, actually make less sense, are less intelligible than progress with respect to my concept of intelligibility.

Repetition exhibits events whose changes are but trivial. A traditional retirement is an example. The post-career portion of life for the one who wanes his days on the golf course is repetitive. All that changes is the day and time, the location of the golf game, the names of the golfers, and other details of this sort.

Annti Kauppinen’s unfortunate example is of the constantly visiting assistant professor. This is an unfortunate example not just because many of these folks are treated unjustly, but because without further information it is not a case of repetition.

Is someone who spends ten years bouncing from school to school as a visiting assistant professor necessarily developing a repetitive shape? No. It at least depends in part on what she has done during her visits. If she teaches the same classes without change to the syllabus and if she writes nothing, yes then she has repetition, albeit only with respect to her professional sphere. We have no information about her personal sphere.

But one could bounce from school to school maintaining the same job title and undeserved income base while still developing her syllabi and research program. In this case those ten years aren’t repetitive. It’s not about the title of your job but what you’ve done while on the job that matters, and matters independently of anybody’s knowledge of it.

Imagine that both of these folks land a good tenure track job after their respective ten years. The non-repetitive ten years of visiting professorship will be a richer

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62 In Ch. 6 we will see that narrative-ethical unity can take hold within different spheres, or contexts.
explanatory base. All of that great variety of effort and work will be brought to fulfillment. By contrast, less will be fulfilled or deepened with respect to the repetitive ten years.

The one who develops has more to say without sacrifice in unity. There is more that is explained, but the degree of unity is the same. With repetition, there is certainly strong unity but little diversity. Parsimony dictates not just that explaining more with less is better, but that explaining more with less is better. Remember Okham’s Builder. If you have a unified life with more diversity explained within that unity, then you have a more intelligible because more parsimonious life.

A more diverse set of projects and abilities is good if that diversity can be brought under a unity. The storied unities of single-purpose, progress, etc., have the potential for more diversity without sacrificing unity. So, they are better explanations than repetition, which has the same amount of unity but far less diversity.

What of tragedy? Someone whose life gets worse over time may have a great amount of diverse activities and projects all of which can be subsumed under a single narrative-ethical principle. Imagine someone who was given the best start in life, the best education, a loving and supportive family life—someone who won all of the natural lotteries. Upon graduating she initially pursues a highly complex, competitive career. She fails. So she turns to a slightly less demanding career. She fails again. She continues to set her sights lower and lower and, through no fault or choice of her own, things continually backfire. Maybe she has small victories here and there but two steps back follow every step forward. Eventually she’s working a menial job with an uncongenial boss.
Here is someone who seems to have a shape that exhibits a high degree of intelligibility. It has the unity and the diversity. Her impressionistic event-connectivity image is rich, indeed. But her life is a wreck. Does her life make sense?

The unintelligibility emerges once we move from the third-person to the first-person. From the third-person standpoint, one cannot initially deny the intelligibility. Earlier events are explained in light of later events, the messed-up whole subsumed under a narrative-ethical shape of deterioration. If we read the story of this life as someone else’s, we would say that it makes a lot of sense—the life strongly hangs together, in an unfortunate manner.

However, if we imagine ourselves living the life then the lack of intelligibility emerges. People in these situations say to themselves and their therapists, “my life just doesn’t make any sense.”

Consider a very difficult failure and imagine you are the one who just failed. You worked for twelve years toward a complex, difficult goal. You wanted to achieve this goal badly. You invested a large of amount of time and energy. You scarified a great deal of other goods in its pursuit. You put a large part of yourself into this project, you got very close to success, but it just didn’t work out.

You didn’t make the cut. Perhaps, though this could not have been assessed beforehand, you lacked the ability to see it through. Or perhaps you had the ability but a weariness that you could not shake took ahold and you couldn’t take another step.

In one way, these failures are harder to take than the sorts of interruptions to our projects that we most readily say “don’t make sense,” such as the sudden and unforeseen debilitating illness, the unexpected death, the illness or death of a loved one, a disaster, or
the outbreak of war. When a young person dies we call it a “senseless” death, we say that this event doesn’t make sense. This sense of unintelligibility is not the one I am after, but analyzing it will help us distinguish, and clarify, the one I am after.

What we are really saying with regard to this more prototypical senselessness is that this event doesn’t make sense together with the earlier ones, the previous displays of agency, the great potential. Call these types of interruptions, the commonsensical type of senselessness “catastrophic.” They are catastrophic with respect to the individual’s project-pursuits because they completely undermine, directly or indirectly, the person’s agency, their very capacity to pursue projects. In short, they make one’s major goals indefinitely impossible.

Catastrophic failures don’t make sense from the third-person perspective. When we look at the life shape it isn’t a slow dwindling of ability, but a complete drop-off. It is a major structural shift of the type that is not intelligible, not a reverse transformation, but a reverse radical break.

Catastrophic failures are not as hard to take first personally as they are third personally with respect to intelligibility. Drop into the first-person and consider not your own death but other catastrophic interruptions. Suppose your child develops a long-term debilitating illness, and that you thus cannot care for him and successfully pursue your project pursuits.

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63 A direct and complete undermining would be a debilitating illness, death, or injury. An indirect, though still complete, undermining would be the debilitating illness, death or injury of a loved one, or a disaster, outbreak of war, etc. that undermined one’s surrounding society, a necessary condition for project pursuit.

64 We will see more about major structural changes in Chapter 6. Structural changes that are good by the lights of my theory, are called transformations—a total revolution whose seeds were sown earlier. Those structural changes that are bad are called radical breaks—a total revolution without precedence or foreshadowing. In Ch. 6 I argue that transformations can have strong intelligibility while radical breaks cannot. There is a first-personal asymmetry, but third-personal symmetry, between intelligibility and shape curvature. Third personally, more curvature of either sort means more intelligibility. However, first-personally, upward curvature means more intelligibility but downward curvature means less.

65 This emphasis is important. The one experiencing a catastrophic failure clearly suffers more hardship than the one observing.
career goals. The moral duty to your child clearly overrides the prudential duty to yourself. So, your career projects fail.

A healthy agent, one who realizes that morality trumps prudence, would not feel frustrated by her project failure here. She of course is bearing a great difficulty—she feels pain, she *mourns* the loss of her projects, but she isn’t frustrated, upset. She isn’t down on herself. This is a different difficulty than the one who had no catastrophic interruption and just didn’t make it. Catastrophic interruptions actually *make some sense* first personally, though not third personally.

However, the major failure that has no catastrophic cause *makes less sense* from the first-person perspective, though it may make sense third personally. It makes less sense, I believe, because this person was headed toward failure under good conditions, though she didn’t know it.

The full explanation for this is captured by the following thought, the fleshing out of which will occupy us for the remainder of this section and close out this chapter.

We don’t consciously aim for failure, but that is just the point.

Strong, non-catastrophic failure makes less sense because *if we were to aim for it, it wouldn’t make any sense at all*. By “strong” I mean the failure of something into which you put a lot of yourself. When it turns out that our projects fail, it remains the case that we were headed toward failure even though we didn’t know it. We were hoping and intending that are actions would produce X but what was actually happening was that our actions were producing not-X.
By contrast, in a catastrophic failure we weren’t headed toward failure, at least not in the same way. We were headed toward success when something unrelated thwarted it. In non-catastrophic failure, we were headed toward failure even though we thought we were headed toward success. Put another way, there is no reason to think that we weren’t on the right path, the path to success, in the situation of catastrophic failure. But with strong, non-catastrophic failure we were, though we thought we weren’t.

The distinction underwriting this argument is between causes of failure. In catastrophic failure, the cause is relevantly external, in non-catastrophic relevantly internal. I didn’t really fail under catastrophic failure—my projects did. One is tempted to add “through no fault or choice of my own,” but I believe this is a mistake. I may non-catastrophically fail through no fault or choice of my own with no diminution in the feelings of frustration. But why should I feel more frustrated for failing to know that I couldn’t make it than for failing to know there wouldn’t be a disaster, war, or illness?

We need to see first why consciously aiming at failure doesn’t make any sense at all. We then need to see why this shows that actually failing, despite our best efforts, makes less sense than actually succeeding.

Reconsider Velleman. Velleman is concerned to make failure make sense. Failing out of school is explicitly licensed as a more intelligible course of events compared to quitting. He is fascinated by when we act despite ourselves. His opening example from The Possibility of Practical Reason is Freud’s case of spilling the inkstand (2). In this case Freud seemed to spill his inkstand accidentally. Upon analysis, he realizes it was no accident—his sister had recently commented that the inkstand was the
only thing that didn’t match his otherwise well-appointed desk. His subconscious got him to spill the inkstand, an intelligible response to his sister’s comment.

We can add to the case by supposing that Freud had no conscious intention of losing that inkstand. In fact, we can suppose that he explicitly wanted to keep it despite it being a mismatch. Perhaps the inkstand has a special, personal significance for him. When we add this we make it into a representative case. Remember, these are cases that look like flawed instances of reasoning. The A.B.D. should quit; the perfectionist writer who can’t get himself to submit for publication despite everyone’s encouragements should submit; the hapless romantic who can’t stop getting into short-term relationships with low-quality partners that neglect him the way his mother did should stop; and the analyst who wants to keep a personally significant inkstand on his desk shouldn’t spill it.

These are the types of situations taken up by Freudian analysis and the types Velleman is concerned to theorize as, upon reflection, making sense, i.e. being intelligible. He is reifying this type of folk-psychological intelligibility as the philosophically normative one, subject to his descriptive understanding of “normative” here.

But consciously the agents in these cases are not—and should not be—aiming with the intentions discovered after psychoanalysis. If we were to consciously say, “oh, I’m going to spill this ink stand in order to be a slave to my sister’s comments even though I really enjoy the inkstand for personal reasons” it wouldn’t make good quality sense. If the hapless romantic were to say to himself, “yes I am going to commit to this person because she has precisely those psychological tendencies that will press my buttons,” we’d criticize him, rightly and firmly.
One reason these sorts of intentions are what they seem to be—irrational—stems from prudence. Nothing is gained by staying for the A.B.D. and much is lost; the same can be said for the hapless romantic and the perfectionistic writer.

However, to aim at failure in this way is irrational also because it’s not intelligible. There is a Korsgaardian practical contradiction of will. The agent is saying both that he wills to be with this person and that he wills not to be, since he knows it won’t work out. He is saying he both wants the inkstand and doesn’t. To aim at X is to work toward it. To aim at failing at X is to work toward it and against it at the same time. And the presence of an inconsistency like this is a clear indication of a weaker explanation. Thusly does aiming at failure make no sense at all.

Even the subconscious itself doesn’t aim at failure. Spilling the inkstand makes sense because the subconscious doesn’t care about Freud’s desire to keep the inkstand. The subconscious is aiming at successfully spilling the inkstand.

The problem is therefore not that either the conscious or the subconscious is unintelligible, but that together they are working at cross purposes. So, together they are unintelligible. Together, they are both aiming at X and at not-X. There is, in short, a disunity of self. And where there is disunity, there is less intelligibility.

The unintelligibility is on the face of these situations. Things are as they originally seemed, as I am wont to argue. We say that we set ourselves up for failure despite ourselves. The reason we say we do these things “despite ourselves” indicates that there is inconsistency or incoherence.

You might think that these arguments lead to the conclusion that we should subvert our subconscious drives. But this is not the right conclusion to draw. It’s not the
right conclusion because it is a well-documented empirical fact from psychology that we do engage in these rational irrationalities, that we do set ourselves up for failure, that our subconscious does serve its self-concept to the detriment of our conscious motivations.

What I am against is taking the incoherence that is internal to the psychological battle of selves as the philosophically respectable notion of intelligibility that should ultimately guide our ethical lives. I am against Velleman’s reification of psychology. And what I am for is integrity, i.e. integration of all of our drives, conscious and sub-

The point of psychoanalysis, after all, is to escape these irrational rationalities. There are two ways to do this, a kind of psychological reflective equilibrium that works from two ends. The goal is to be comfortably in control. But as with real conquest so with internal conquest: you can squash the enemy or assimilate him. Squashing alone doesn’t work—if it did, psychology would never have been born, the conscious will would always override, and the rational irrationalities would never have appeared. Freud would never have had a client.

So, how to assimilate? You can get him to want what you want or you can start wanting what he wants. Cognitive therapy pursues the first strategy: you combat the reasons your subconscious has to pursue its goals. Your subconscious is setting you up for failure. This is because it thinks that you are a fraud, say. All your degrees and achievements notwithstanding, this time the truth will come out, you won’t finish the current project or you’ll submit garbage to the editor which will forever stain your reputation preventing any future success. Your subconscious has a self-concept of you as incapable. So it’s making you procrastinate, for example, and then when you do miss a deadline it gets to use this as further evidence for its conclusion.
One way to get it to want what you want is by combating the reasons it has to think you incapable. You point out that your past achievements make it likely that you’ll succeed, that you recognize procrastination is part of its strategy, and so is not legitimate evidence, etc. It’s a slow process, usually requires actually writing these things out, but there is good science at this point supporting it as a good solution to depression.66

Psychotherapy usually pursues the second strategy, helping the conscious you to accept and endorse some of what the subconscious wants. You let go, at least a little. You pare back your expectations of yourself. You accept, maybe even enjoy, the fact that you can’t work like a machine all of the time. “But some of our subconscious desires are fairly vicious.” This is true but there are good work-arounds. Humans are not innately vicious, so there is probably some innocent goal or activity, some pursuit, short- or long-term, that will satisfy the root need here.

In short, the conscious you partly becomes the subconscious you and the subconscious you partly becomes the conscious you. What you achieve is harmony of the self, all parts of the self. Besides the serene mental state that comes, you also get a life that makes sense.

Why? Because you’re not flitting about. Besides the mental strife which attends setting yourself up for failure, and besides the practical contradiction of will, the events of your life will be disordered. Since you are both working for X and not-X, you will have two competing explanations of two different lives that cannot be subsumed. A disordered soul creates a disordered, less intelligible life.

66 For a good summary of this research see the introduction and Ch. 1 of Burns, Feeling Good, xvii-xxxii and 9-18.
And this disunity is what makes regress or tragedy conclusively less intelligible than progress or comedy. Initially, regress seems to have intelligibility from the third-person standpoint. Even if it does, it retains unintelligibility first-personally due to the contradiction of will. Yet when we truly appreciate this first-person disunity of self, we will see that it actually does generate a third-personal disunity. The incoherence that is internal to the psychological battle of selves reifies itself in regress, revealing its true unintelligibility.

Underneath the appearance of third personal intelligibility in regress, is a double life. Scratch the surface and we find a self, a life, and the resultant theory or description of that life, at war with itself. A regressive life is a life in disarray—normatively, descriptively, and normatively because descriptively. It is a set of projects and pursuits that cannot be easily brought under a unified explanation.
The whole of history is the structure of a full human life writ large. It is a progress, but not a linear progress. Each stage is the revolutionization of the preceding stages, until the seeds of revolution have worked themselves out.¹

Chapter 6

How Stories Guide

This chapter makes storied shapes action guiding. In the previous chapter I established that, of all the various types of unity one might add to her life, the storied type, which include the various categories of progressive or developmental unity, have more intelligibility than all the rest. On these grounds we aim, beyond morality and prudence, to model our lives on the storied shape.

So, the question here is not why we ought to live storied lives, but how—how do I make my life storied? How do I take my life as it has been lived up to this point and create a remainder that will captivate the child at my knee, not aesthetically, but ethically? Furthermore, remembering Ch. 1 and the first condition on any life being storied, we must see why storied living will guide well, with heightened specificity.

¹ Danto, “Approaching the End of Art,” 216.
I. The Answer, in Brief

To live a storied life you ought to pursue those activities which lend your life a stronger degree of intelligibility on my conception of it. These activities are those of which a more parsimonious, economical, and accurate—in short rich—narrative can be told. You figure out which those are by first looking at the options before you, the now infamous kaleidoscope of feasible, permissible, and incompatible alternatives that I argued in Ch. 1 face any agent. You imagine a handful of the next steps you would have to take in order to pursue each option. You hold before your mind your personal history. You imagine yourself carrying out each set of these next steps. You create a narrative connecting your personal history to each hypothetical future, creating as many plausible causal connections between your history and each future. Finally, you project yourself forward in time in order to look backwards upon your whole future past. You then assess the strength with which each future past can be intelligibly connected to your current past.

You tell a narrative of yourself, to yourself, from your past through your present and forward though a few of the next feasible steps before you. You ask yourself: which of those narratives makes the best story in this book’s sense of story. Those that do are those that make for the most parsimonious, economical and accurate explanation of your life up to that point. Since the shape of progress or development was shown to be the most intelligible, the next activity should roughly fit into this shape. The shape can also be used as a rough construction guide.

I don’t think you can—and so I don’t think you should—try and put the entire rest of your life in a rich narrative. I believe it inadvisable, and indeed against the spirit of
this book, to try and figure out what you ought to do with the whole remainder of your life. Instead, my account delivers—and I take this to be a virtue of the account—partial, relatively near-term, and preliminary decisions about what one ought to do next.

Nevertheless, conceiving of your life as a whole up to this point (rather than as a static series of events) and up through the next several steps is part and parcel of the model of practical reasoning I endorse. The output of the model is partial, near term and preliminary and the process of coming to that output involves conceiving of your life so far as a whole, but you should not try and paint the picture of the whole rest of your life.

In going through this process you can imagine some futures that will be highly intelligible in and of themselves. You can ignore your past, starting anew with a blank slate, and carry out a highly intelligible, undulating future that makes great sense of itself, weaving rich and parsimonious connections among itself. But other futures will be intelligible in and of themselves and in light of your past. These other futures will reap the intelligibility potential of what has already happened. These are the superior ones on my account. Why? Because they are more intelligible. They enhance the value of your (current) past by bringing them together in a more intelligible whole.

What if a highly intelligible future that forgets its past has more intelligibility than a moderately intelligible future that moderately incorporates the past? The answer here is that I just don’t think we can see that well into the future. Life changes, sometimes drastically and instantaneously—a major accident—and sometimes drastically but over stretches of time—a deteriorating body. The world presents us with a myriad of options small and large at nearly every step. In light of all this uncertainty, I believe you’re better off—more likely to create more intelligibility—if you instead focus on reaping the
potential of your past, if you let your past guide you. At least, in that case, you know you’ll get some intelligibility out of it.

Take myself as an example. Before graduate school I was a public accountant and before that a double-major in business and philosophy with an M.B.A. Now, at the end of my Ph.D., I could ask myself, what ought I to do? If we think as we did in Ch. 1, with respect only to the very general action-guiding advice stemming from theories of morality, *eudaimonia*, and prudence, the options will be as daunting as they were when I was sixteen.

“Yes, I could do philosophy, or I could do business, but why not go off and try and be an artist, or musician—I’ve always loved these things after all—or maybe off to the mountains to live off the grid, or perhaps I should go after the simpler, less mental life of carpentry, waiting tables, or maybe just secretarial work. I could even go into the military. Why not? All of these things have a certain appeal for me.” I could add to this list. And any agent could do the same. Once again, all of these lives would be perfectly moral, perfectly healthy, could be described as desirous—nothing obviously wrong or bad or inadvisable with *any* of them along *any* of the given lines in ethics.

But look at them. Most of them are crazy we might say, wildly far afield. But without a theory such as mine we will have little to say as to why they are so. We have the strong gut sense that doing these alternatives is “wrong,” not morally but in the sense of being “inadvisable” or “not for you” or just “not the right path,” but we can’t find the reasons for these feelings. Even prudence, which of all things seemed like it would pare back the options, doesn’t.
But my theory does. Obviously, clearly, I should either go with philosophy or business, or perhaps some admixture of the two, either now or perhaps several years in the future. Academic administration might make sense. Being an ethics officer in industry would also make sense. Just being a philosophy professor who is better than many at committee work would be another. Or going whole-hog back to business, but perhaps reading philosophy or other academic disciplines at night and occasionally speaking with his business friends about his strange philosophical past. All of these make good quality sense.

As we saw in the previous chapter, no reasonable concept of cause by itself is going to help guide agents since far too many futures are going to be adequately causally related to my past. However, certain instances of causal explanation are going to be richer, more parsimonious because a greater set of diverse things are going to be brought to bear on your life moving forward. The INUS condition and the folk-attributive concepts would both work nicely.

What we are saying is not that a bare minimum INUS or folk-attributive instance of cause is what makes a storied life, but that a multi-pronged application of the INUS condition or folk-attributive concept does. In a storied life more aspects of your individual history (your desires, plans, knowledges, abilities—see Section II below) are all having causal influence on your future, in either of these senses.² Put another way you should pick the one that will allow more parts of (the relevant aspects of) your history to have causal influence. In other words, mere causal unity isn't rich enough but a storied causal arrangement will be.

² It seems that the other concepts of cause mentioned in the previous chapter aren’t as hospitable to my view as these.
It’s not clear, without more information, which of the above very specific things makes the most sense for me (business or philosophy). But we have, straight away, ruled out a vast number of options. And thus ruling out the vast majority of options, is the challenge raised by Ch. 1. That challenge is now discharged.

And the fact that there isn’t more direction about which of these very specific things I ought to do is a virtue of the account. Choosing among these specific options is where freedom and creativity emerge in my account. So there is not too much freedom, as there was in Ch. 1, nor is there too little. There is not too much direction, nor is there too little.

And now we have reasons why those wild options, which we couldn’t say why were wild in Ch. 1 even though they felt that way, are wild. They represent narrative ruptures with respect to the agent’s past. Trying to bring these wild options under an explanation that weaves them together with the agent’s past would make for a strained, uneasy—less parsimonious uneconomical—narrative.

In short we assess the degree of intelligibility with respect to the norms of intelligibility adumbrated in the previous chapter: parsimony, economy, and accuracy. By staying with business or philosophy I will allow those previous events to be a stronger part of the unfolding narrative-ethical unity of my life. In so doing they will be enhanced in value—the compensation phenomenon from Ch. 3—in virtue of deepening the intelligibility of the whole.

Thus, ultimately what is “progressing” in a progressive unity is the degree of intelligibility of the story of your life. What's progressing is the strength of the quality of
that story, understood as the degree of its richness, the extent to which it unifies a
diversity of elements through parsimony, economy and accuracy.

When we opened this project with the introduction it was hard to see how *quality of explanation*, or degree of intelligibility, could favor one type of unity over another. But through the arguments of the previous chapter we can see that now. Some future lives do make for better stories, given a personal history.

We saw that progressive shapes are the most intelligible types of unity with respect to these norms, and the shape itself suggests certain action-guiding rules of thumb.

First of all, you should complete things already begun. You should *see things through*. For example, if you are writing a book or an essay, you should finish it. If you are pursuing a degree, you should get it done. If you are wondering whether a relationship is right for you, you should give your heart to it and really see if it is. If you are wondering whether a certain career, a certain position with that career, or a certain organization is the best fit, you should give your all to it and find out.

Of course, sometimes our projects fail. Sometimes, as we saw at the end of Ch. 3, and again in Ch. 5, it just doesn’t work out. Other times, there are catastrophic setbacks that make completion impossible.

When this happens, the guidance is to learn from these failures, to carry them forward in a new light. Let us say you gave your heart to that relationship and it disintegrated. Let us say it disintegrated as a result of both parties refusing to adjust their differing visions for how the relationship, and the joint future, should go. You had one
set of priorities, he another and neither would budge a reordering or even a reweighting of those priorities.

You learn from this in one of two ways. Either, next time you pick a mate who has a similar vision, the same set of values and priorities, or you become flexible (or a good bit of both). The key is that, in doing these, you make what was otherwise a wasted part of your life (insofar as narrative-ethical intelligibility is concerned) a profitable one.

One implication of this is that I view favorably those who, having overcome a certain type of difficulty—a poor early childhood education, for example—decide to help others in similar situations. We often respect those who make such choices but we at the same time are careful not to make those choices a requirement. We don’t want to condemn those who have suffered an injustice to a life of re-confronting it. Neither do I, and my theory doesn’t require this.

Yet we often struggle to find the reasons why people who do make this choice are to be commended, to say what good they have those who work in these fields without the trauma don’t. And my theory does provide these reasons. It comes out and says yes these people are doing a good thing, here is why. Their current activities enhance the value of their past suffering in virtue of being a narrative of overcoming.

The bodhisattva of Buddhism would be the perfect ideal of this. The bodhisattva is one who, having achieved Enlightenment, having moved into the psychic space of perfect, invulnerable inner peace and tranquility—surely the greatest prudential good—chooses to return, and to stay, in the messy real world until every sentient being is Enlightened. In so doing, she reaps incredible intelligibility potential.
One question that arises is: when should I stop? When is it true that it “just didn’t work out?” I think there are three boundaries. The first two are morality and prudence. You shouldn’t pursue the completion of your projects at the expense of your moral obligations. Nor should you do so at the expense of your own physical or mental health. So, if you’re running up against these—Velleman’s A.B.D.—then you should quit and learn from it. In these cases, pursuing completion is not pursuing a progressive shape, but a repetitious one. When you stay when growth is no longer apparent, you are no longer growing.

The third boundary is when change carries more intelligibility potential than completion. There are times when change, even large structural changes, are called for on my account. This is important, because it means that we are not objectionably tied down to our pasts. Our pasts are opportunities, not burdens. We shall address this question later (Section IV).

II. Personal History

Our idea builds in a controversial claim, the claim that one’s personal history is an appropriate basis for the storied shape, the appropriate material, or content, out of which the storied shape should emerge. So, in the first half of this section I say why personal history is, in general, a permissible action-guiding basis.

Yet even with history made in general palatable, we will need to know more about which aspects of your personal history are relevant, which aspects are the nodes out of which the rich narrative emerges. There are far too many events in your personal history for the general idea that one should make a storied shape out of her history to be
actionable. So in the second half of this section I provide a method for focusing, interpreting, or framing your history.

In short, even supposing the previous chapter to have convinced you that we should model our lives on the progressive shape, you would still be right to ask, “yes, but progress with respect to what?” This section answers that question.

What is good guidance? I am asking after norms of action-guidance, after the qualities or properties of prescriptions that make them high quality guides as guides. This is not a question of any action’s goodness or rightness. Instead, this is a question of how effectively a prescription can be followed.

So we are reflecting here not on the content, but on the form of the guidance. Consider the qualities of the advice given by someone who guided you well, a mentor, adviser, or teacher. If his or her advice was extremely specific, if she or he told you exactly what to do in precise detail, that wouldn’t seem right. There should be, it seems, at least some room for specification on the part of the seeker. On the other hand, if the advice was not specific at all, if your mentor for example just spoke in wise-sounding platitudes (“be good to yourself,” “live a life of your own making,” etc.), that wouldn’t seem right either. Good guidance neither over- nor under-determines the course of action. So, one norm of action-guidance is that it should be appropriately specific. This norm been the main concern of this book. That history, together with storied unity, is specific enough has already been suggested, and a larger example will make it even more vivid later on.

But a second norm is that the prescription has to be relevant to you. Its recommendations must in some sense “link up” with your actions and environment. The
action or direction suggested needs to be feasible, something you could actually do. You could imagine someone coming up with a directive at just the right degree of specificity that had no relationship to you and your situation. This, also, would be poor guidance. Yet, there is a balance here too. The proposal does not have to be perfectly relevant. Indeed, many times good guidance is somewhat aspirational, leads you to new levels of development or actualization. In this way, it may be somewhat irrelevant to your current state. So a second norm of action guidance seems to be appropriate relevance.

Thirdly, whatever the advice, it shouldn’t change too easily. It should not tell you one thing now, another thing tomorrow, and still a third the next day. One cannot easily follow a spinning compass needle. Nor, on the other hand, should the advice be immovable. Good guidance has an aspect of malleability to it, is open-ended or subject to change. It’s fluid but only to a certain extent. So, a third norm of action guidance seems to be appropriate stability.

These are three really interesting and I think really promising norms of action guidance. Any prescription, to be a good at guiding action (whatever the goodness or rightness of the action prescribed), must have an appropriate degree of specificity, an appropriate degree of relevance, and an appropriate degree of stability.

The traditional considerations of ethics—all of those canvassed in Ch. 1—do a bad job fulfilling one or more of these norms. That’s why there is incompleteness. My claim is that history discharges these norms with excellence, and that all of the others do not. ³

³ In Ch. 1 I drew primarily on specificity, but without really calling it a norm of action-guidance. I didn’t so much diagnose incompleteness as I did emphasize it.
We can put the traditional considerations into two classes. The distinction is between considerations that are universal, or near-universal, *in form only* and those that are universal, or near-universal, *in form and content*. The first, which include the more subject-centered considerations of desire and pleasure, lack adequate stability. The second, which are more *inter-subjective* and include theories of *eudaimonia* and deontological side constraints, lack adequate specificity.

This distinction sounds more subtle than it is. Desire—the prescription to “do what you want”—is of the first type, universal in form only. I may want to live in the mountains and you may want to live in the city. In one way, you and I are guided the same. We are both doing what we want—the consideration is universal *in form*. However, in another way, we are guided very differently. After all, you are going to one place and I another—the consideration is non-universal, or particular, in content. These considerations “reach in” to a given agent and guide actions that are, plausibly, good *for you* in particular. Whether that specific action is good for me, or anyone else, is not implied.

Contrast desire with, say, the prescription to “maintain a healthy body.” This prescription is (near) universal in content as well as form. Part of maintaining a healthy body is eating right. And eating right can be specified for (nearly) all. It’s called the food pyramid. And it is has just the right degree of specificity it seems to me. It doesn’t tell you to eat bananas and not apples, but it does tell you to eat five to ten fruits and vegetables per day. And it gives this same prescription to nearly all. Of course there are differences—there is a food pyramid for adults, one for children, one for infants, one for
our elders, and your doctor may prescribe a diet which trumps. But these are differences at the margins.

The prescription to eat well is (plausibly and roughly) universal in both form and content. You and I are doing the same thing insofar as we are both eating well. And we are doing the same thing insofar as we are both eating ten fruits and vegetables.

There is nothing about desire itself which could provide universality of content. It’s consistent with the desire paradigm that you and I ought to do, not marginally, but radically different things. And this may be true of both of us without any defect in the structure of our wanting. There are no reasons of desire to want to live in the mountains rather than the city. By contrast, there are reasons of health to eat ten fruits and vegetables rather than two.

The second type of consideration—the food pyramid type—do not “reach in” to a given agent so much as “reach out” to the whole moral community. They guide actions that are, plausibly, good for all. In this case, whether the specific action is good for me, or anyone is, is implied. In sum, there is a perceptible difference of degree between the two sets of considerations. The less particular, more objective considerations are more universal in content. I will call the first type individualistic rather than subjective, since even the more “objective” considerations draw on features of our subjectivity, the features that we share. The difference is in whether a consideration draws on a feature of subjectivity that is distinctive of an individual or of a community of individuals. I will call the second type non-individualistic.4

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4 This distinction cuts across morality and prudence; thus, you can mix and match. Let us call theories which invoke the considerations that “reach in” to a given individualistic since their contents are distinctive of individuals. We will call the other set non-individualistic. You can have an individualistic theory of morality, such as Utilitarianism, that picks up a universal feature whose
Individualistic considerations, such as desire, lack adequate stability. I once wanted a tattoo. I thought carefully, still wanted it and wanted it strongly—it was of a few words carrying meaning for most of my identities. I followed some good advice to wait for one year. I still wanted it strongly. Then I waited six more months simply because the recuperation was a minor headache I didn’t then care to tolerate. One more month passed, and the desire left. I came to believe it was more important to build the words’ meaning into my character, not my skin.

Here was a desire, stable and strong for eighteen months, desiccated. The problem is not that what you want differs radically from what I want, but that what I want differs radically from what I want. That’s not good guidance.

Another example. Sometimes I like (desire or take pleasure in) philosophy, sometimes I don’t, and higher-order likes, putting aside the infinite regress problem, are higher-order precisely because more non-individual (more objective or universal), and a fortiori more vague. Desire, pleasure, identity or self-conception, and personal autonomy or authenticity—all of the standard individualistic considerations on offer in normative ethics—can too easily over time jump back and forth between endorsing, renouncing, ignoring, and re-endorsing the same project. Not all tokens of the standard individualistic features are this fickle of course, but many are, and all tokens of the standard types can be.

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5 See my critique of second-order or corrective theories of desire and pleasure in Ch. 1.
Our tattoo example is actually an example of a rare and commendable type of desire. Insofar as desires go, being strong and stable for many months is rare. Most desires are far more fickle than this. Yet, even stable desires are instable. They are with us, they seem like they won’t go away, and then they vanish. We can’t easily live by these knowing this. I’m not saying we shouldn’t live by these because doing so is immoral, because to be a follower of desire is to be a servant of the flesh, or any such thing. I am ruling them out for merely practical reasons—they are bad leaders, not because of what they tell us to do but because they change their mind too much. They point this way and then that, and even when they’re strong they can’t be trusted to stay around.

The instability of individualistic considerations—I am referring to them all here—seems to be due to their residence in the agent’s highly internal personal reflections about her individuality. Who I am, what I want, what I take pleasure in, what my goals are, which things express “me”—thoughts about these must be important for some purposes, but they are not high quality guides. Such thoughts can skip, double-back, and crisscross; they are often inconsistent. The fact that paying too much attention to them makes for analysis paralysis is evidence of their flitting nature.

Normative ethics needs to get close to the agent in order to know what is good for him but not so close that it is prey to his vicissitudes.

Non-individualistic considerations are stable, since they rely on shared features, but lack specificity. As I showed in Ch. 1 deontology and objective lists do and must leave much undetermined on pain of absurdity (“you must never utter falsehoods, not even to the Nazi at the door,” or “everybody ought to be a philosopher”). When they
aren't reduced to absurdity these theories provide debatable but vague conceptions of what is good full stop (morally or prudently), or good for all, good for you no matter who you are, what you desire, what gives you pleasure, no matter your goals, dreams, or character.⁶ These theories try to say something beyond the merely formal as to what is good for all. In order to do this they distance themselves from the agent. However, it is precisely in distancing themselves that they lose adequate specificity.⁷

With this distinction in mind, I can formulate my claim on behalf of history. Your personal history—by which I mean what actually happened therein—is, in the words of Southey, “just right,” neither too close nor too far from the agent. I believe history has what individualistic considerations offer—specificity—and what non-individualistic considerations offer—stability. And that is the needle we need to thread to solve incompleteness.

History has specificity because it is highly particular to a given agent. It is as individual as any individualistic consideration. However, unlike the other individualistic considerations, history is not only stable but permanent.⁸ It is also causally and thereby explanatorily prior: history is a (though of course not the only) source for who you think

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⁶ All goods that are good full stop, if you believe in such goods, are good for you in some sense. The question is only whether there are things that are good for you, bad for me, and neither good nor bad full stop.

⁷ It can be argued that desire et. al. also lack not just stability but specificity. Many times we want vague things, are indifferent, don’t know what we want, or are in denial about what we want. This can be true of trivial desires: “Which movie do you want to see?” “I don’t know, a comedy sounds nice.” “What about this new action flick?” “Sure, why not.” It can also be true of life-affecting desires: “Do I really want a career in philosophy, recognizing that it might require a decade of study and a half-decade of adjunct positions, all with the strong possibility of failure?” “Golly, when you put it that way….” As not all desires are fickle, so not all desires are this vague. Sometimes I know I want a comedy and sometimes I know which career I want. But this tendency to be strong and clear in some moments, and weak and vague in others is part of what makes following desire a crazy-making endeavor. It would almost be more respectable if it stayed weak and vague. At least then we could figure out a way to work with it.

⁸ Earlier I said that a good prescription shouldn’t be too stable, i.e. permanent or immovable. But the claim here is that the action-guiding basis is permanent, not that the action-guidance is permanent. We will see that the guidance prescribed by history is not permanent, but is instead appropriately stable, even though history itself is permanent.
you are, what you want, and what brings you pleasure. But these are no source for your history. It is thus most relevant. In short, history is surprisingly compelling as an action-guiding basis.

But how exactly does it guide? How exactly does the process of mining our history with the storied shape in mind work. Which of all the parts of my history does the storied shape supervene on? What are the nodes upon which my unfolding narrative-ethical unity rides? We now move on to the important second half of this section. We shall need a method for analyzing, focusing, or interpreting it. Which parts of our stable, individualized history should be taken up?

The above critique suggests some things. We need to get close to the agent, but not so close as to sway and buck with the machinations of his mind. We need to be at some distance from the agent, but not so far that we lose touch with his individualism.

The full program requires an involved analysis of your history and current circumstance. You want to find the story-line of your individual life so far, recognizing that you will not be planning the entire remainder of your life. This can still sound daunting. But the great variety of items that can and should be folded in is actually an advantage. The more data points, the more nodes in the narrative, the more likely we will be able to see the progressive shape. Remember we looked to your personal history because it was not only stable but highly unique to you. So, the nodes you should be looking for are the ones that make your life, your story, a unique one.

To find these you can look to a large variety of aspects of your self as found in your history. Such things would include (there could be more here) one’s:
• moral character;
• abilities;
• personal values;
• knowledge;
• self-concept;
• practical identities;
• second-order desires (goals, plans, and dreams); and
• first-order desires and pleasures.

By your moral character, I mean the degree of your tendency to do the right thing by the lights of morality, which we are taking for granted and can think of, for purposes of argument, as what Shelly Kagan calls “conventional morality.” In short, don’t harm people unnecessarily, don’t steal from them, give them respect and consideration, be courteous, be kind, recognize that they have a worldview of their own and that that grants them certain spheres of non-interference, etc.

Your abilities can be more or less specific. You might be good calculus, at mathematics, or perhaps at analytical thinking in general. You can have a great forehand volley, be an excellent tennis player, or be a particularly athletic. This varying specificity is not a problem—the level of specificity at which a given abilities should be described will be dictated by the best—most parsimonious, economical and accurate—interpretation of your past. If you have played this sport, that sport, and the other, and been good at all of them, then we shall describe you as a good athlete. If you have always and only played tennis and you’re great at every movement on the court, and you’ve tried other sports to no avail, then we shall describe you as a good tennis player. If you’ve tried tennis and you’re really quite terrible except for the fact that you can volley from the right side of your body as well as John McEnroe.

By “personal values” I mean the unique ways in which you specify general positive moral obligations. Think of Kant’s injunction to be beneficent. You must be
beneficent but it’s left up to you to decide when and how to give. One might give cash to beggars, another his time to a non-profit organization, another might take in foster children, another may lend his financial expertise free of charge to his siblings. All of these folks are discharging their obligation to be beneficent, but each is doing so in his own unique way. So I would say each has his own set of “personal values” which we describe in the terms in which those values are actualized. So the one has the personal value of alleviating on-the-street homelessness through one-to-one contact, another that of institutional justice in (say) a libertarian society, the third that of protecting the innocent, the fourth that of the importance of family.

Like abilities, your knowledge can be more or less specific. The point is that I believe that what you know, what you have learned, is one of the guideposts.

The rest of the items in the list have been discussed at length in previous chapters. The thing to see here is that they, too, are a part, but only a part of what makes up who you are, of what gives rise to your developing, unique ethical personality.

So goals, desires, plans, pleasures, self-concept and practical identities can re-enter here, but so can other things: your accomplishments or achievements, knowledge-base, abilities, etc. Traditional subjective features can re-enter here but no one of them, nor any other aspect, is to be considered foundation or necessarily dominant. We are looking not at a present-moment, static snapshot of you, but at the diachronic, dynamic unfolding of your life.

What you think about yourself will still be relevant, but not the central node as it with Velleman. Who I think I am is indeed part of who I am but not the whole of it.
Velleman is so far inside the agent’s head that what makes sense may make sense for barely a moment in time.

I am not looking centrally or “in the first instance” at the agent’s representation of herself—but to her life itself. When Velleman says he is after folk-psychological intelligibility such intelligibility is spelled out as an “understanding that traces the action to its causes in the motives, traits, and other dispositions of the character. If the actor’s behavior cannot be attributed to causes within the character in this sense, then it will not be ‘in character,’…” (HWGA, 14). Without more said, you might think that my proposal to work with your history is close to the same thing. I might not be giving it a folk-psychological gloss but I am still working with “traits and other dispositions” of the individual.

However, when going into detail about which aspect of an individual make up the “character” at Vellman’s nexus we see the dominance of self-concept and with it all of the flawed normative results discussed in this and previous chapters. Consider this crucial footnote:

In the character-based arts…creating a believable character requires endowing him with a relatively small set of clearly recognizable characteristics. … I think that when we speak of a real person as acting ‘in character’ or ‘out of character,’ we are in fact comparing his behavior to just such a simplistic stereotype, representing a few of his most marked characteristics. We mean that he his acting ‘to type’ or ‘against type.’ But in the discussion that follows [the rest of the book], I will use the term ‘character’ to denote, in the first instance, a person’s self-concept, which is far more complex and subtle than a stereotype. I think of the self-concept as including a representation of his standing traits, his personal history, and the occurrent thoughts and feelings that he has at the present time. In my sense of the phrase, then, ‘acting in character’ will mean, not ‘acting to type,’ but rather acting in accordance with everything that the agent knows or thinks about himself” (HWGA, footnote 6, 13-14).
He is looking at the individual’s representation of her history, at the individual’s occurrent thoughts and feelings, at everything the agent knows or thinks about herself. at her “complex and subtle” self-concept. No doubt one’s self-concept is complex and subtle; it’s also inconsistent and often confused.

The key difference between this list and Velleman’s idea is that while Velleman is looking centrally to who the agent thinks she is, as to how she is representing herself to herself, I am looking at how the agent ought to represent herself, at how the events, not her interpretation of them, should figure in the narrative. Another key difference is that history on my account is primary not one of the facets around which a self-concept revolves. Instead, I invert things. Self-concept is one of the facets around which one’s evolving narrative revolves.

So, what is developing or progressing, when I say that, after graduation I should do business or philosophy or some admixture but not art, carpentry or farming, is probably some combination of many of these aspects. Probably I like philosophy and business, am relatively good at them (at least with respect to someone who has never done them), they have probably helped me specify certain personal values (honesty in transactions perhaps) and maybe even developed certain aspects of my moral character. The point is that the reason I do these things is not because I am following my desire or the edicts of virtue ethics or my self-concept, but because, in looking to all of these things I shall live a more intelligible live in virtue of developing my overall story-line. I shall create a great many interconnections between my future and my past giving rise to a rich storied shape, unifying a great measure of diversity. I will have a better chance at having my very own $E = mc^2$ personal story to tell.
Some futures are going to allow more parts of your history to have more causal influence than others. These types of futures allow for the storied shape. Staying in philosophy or business or doing something related is storied because it allows more aspects of my history to be causally brought to bear: I'll be using my various knowledge bases, developing my various specific abilities, satisfying various desires, etc. This is in contrast to going to become a painter where very few of these past things will be brought to bear causally.

The overall picture of what emerges here is that the guidance or advice is to do what you have had contact with, to pursue the things given to you by your situation, to do what you are good at, what you know, and what is familiar.

When we reconsider our character from Ch. 1, the one facing the kaleidoscope of options as to how he could live, or even what he could do next, we can see how much the idea of pursuing storied living narrows his options. We have taken strong steps forward in addressing the problem of incompleteness. We have discriminated among a host of options, zeroing our agent in on just a handful.

III. A Central Example

Earlier I mentioned some rules of thumb. Following the rules of thumb will be good bets in terms of storied living. Odds are, if you follow them, you will for the most part live a storied life.

However, as with any rules of thumb, they have exceptions. The real justification is not the rule of thumb itself but the ground of the rule. So, what you really really ought
to do according to my theory is that which makes for the best narrative moving forward where by “narrative” here we have in mind storied unity and by “best” we have in mind my conception of intelligibility.

So what I want to do now is give you at least one full story of storied living. In any given case what one ought to do can only be determined by analyzing the agent in his particular situation, together with his particular history. A full analysis is as rich as the storied unity that emerges as its product. You have to tell the story of your life. It is not a causal story of this happened then that happened, what Arthur Danto calls a “low-level biography.”⁹ Instead, you do your best to inspire the future child at your knee in order to find the nodes of growth and development that make up your unique personality. And doing this is a rather involved process. Thus, this example is very long. It is a central case of the way I see intelligibility guiding action through pursuing the storied unity begun in your history.

I am going to use my own life again, returning to the question of what I ought to do in light of my background. In my own life, I have found the considerations on offer in normative ethics to be poor guides. I am the type of person who lacks clarity as to what he wants or wants many conflicting things, and who is good at many things but not especially great at any one. So desire and talent are not things I trust to guide me, though the suspicion is not out of any Kantian strength of character. I in general, had, and have, to find other reasons for my decisions.

⁹ Danto, State of the Art, 216.
So my life is good fodder for my theory. This example features the choice I have made to pursue philosophy as a career.\(^\text{10}\) As I see it, this larger choice was constituted by three smaller ones, which I will call “decisions,” junctures in the path of my professional life: my decision to double major in philosophy as an undergraduate, to pursue graduate studies in the discipline, and then to stay in the discipline post-Ph.D.

The example is focused on the career side of life but career, work, and projects are not everything. There is the second sphere of the personal, relationships, self-improvement and the like. And storied living can be applied here, though the example doesn’t feature it (it’s personal enough as it is). As Freud said, there is work and there is love and these things seem to be able to be carried out simultaneously. The example only focuses on one sphere. I leave it to the reader to apply it to the personal side of life.

I see my one larger choice ("philosophy is my career") arising or revealing itself in this multi-step way. This way of looking at choice resonates with the spirit of this book, with the way I think we ought to think about how we ought to live. At each juncture philosophy makes more and more sense in that continuing with it makes for stronger narrative unity, narrative unity of the progressive sort, for a stronger story in my sense. As the sense that philosophy is the “right” thing grows, so does the degree of parsimony, economy and accuracy of the storied unity featuring it.

\(^{10}\) The example is mostly authentic, mostly true to the reasons I actually employed. I say “mostly” because a few liberties are taken at points. Desire probably figured more prominently in my actual history—I just plain like philosophy more than the below suggests. However, the extent to which the example is authentic is irrelevant. I am rationalizing what I take to be the best normative framework for living beyond morality and prudence. So, the example, while mostly autobiographical, is not autobiography at all, but an extended instance of the model of practical reasoning for which I am arguing. As a novelist who draws on his own life for inspiration for a novel which itself is not an autobiography but nevertheless captures important truths so this philosopher is drawing on his own life for inspiration for a philosophy which itself is not an autobiography but nevertheless captures important truths.
Contrast this way of thinking about choice with the typical philosophical approach, the wholehearted act of will at a point in time based upon who I think I am, or what I think I want. I believe we see partially and that we make decisions partially, preliminary or conditional decisions often in the spirit of experimentation and always informed by our past, by what we have had contact with. As we proceed in life, the previously experimental can harden, becoming a tack point in our evolving ethical narrative. We can redirect perhaps in a different direction but always through a new tack point which references the old. One’s life never, rightly in my view, changes on a dime (though one can seem to change on a dime and still be living well by my lights—see Section IV for more).

The image of agency that emerges is as of a novelist. Before a novelist begins to write, the options are daunting, limited only by imagination. It is both frightening and exciting. This is analogous to being young, and helps explain the angst of youth.

Once she starts to write, the options begin to narrow. For example, the novelist develops a character. What that character subsequently does is limited by how that character has been described. Character is but only one aspect that flexibly limits the options. Plot, theme, and setting also play a role. I mention character only as one among many limits, not the cornerstone of all limits.

But looking closely at just character now one can see how what has been written puts limits on what can come next. The protagonist can’t do something that is too far out of character, without further explaining or filling in the gaps. This combination of flexibility and limitation is just the right mix it seems to me. True to life, and the right amount of specificity—not too permissive, not too restrictive.
The difference between writing and living is that you can go back and rewrite the novel’s history but you can’t go back and re-live your personal history. However, this difference is not as large as it seems. Even with a novel, rewriting becomes more difficult the more of the novel that has been written. Change enough “history” and you undermine the foundation for whatever later change is currently under consideration. Change more history and you’re writing a different book.

Instead, I imagine (having never written a novel) that novelists tweak both ends when they want to make a change. They step back, look again at the relevant prior moments, measure the earlier against the later, and pursue a kind of reflective equilibrium which always but suggests in a partial way the next steps. Then, once you have completed those next steps you can look again, with whatever new vision comes with the revision and repeat the process. This is also how I envision the model for practical reasoning that I am arguing for.

Perhaps some novelists come to the table with a blueprint for their entire novel, and yes, perhaps some agents come with one for their entire life. But it seems right to say that this blueprint approach to living is naïve. And this seems further reason to favor our approach, and to break with typical philosophical approach. The basic outlook on action guidance in moral philosophy strikes me as naïve.

As you write a novel, there emerges what we might call “narrative pressure.” What has been written begins to create direction. And, if you have multiple layers to the novel, there can be points where it all comes together—it is clear, and happily so, that you ought to go this way and that, in so doing, you will bring all of those layers together.
in a rich, satisfying next move. Sometimes this happens in life too, and it is a happy time, free of doubt.

Narrative pressure can be a relief or a burden (and sometimes amped up versions of these—a salve or a panic). It is a relief, especially at the beginning, insofar as it means you have begun to chart a path, to pare back the daunting set of options. You have something that is tangible, graspable, tractable. You are not groping in complete darkness anymore. You experience less paralysis of analysis. The young person who, after a period questioning, has finally decided on a career proclaims “and it is the career of my dreams!”

This is analogous to one’s 20’s, 30’s, and 40’s. You’ve chosen a path: a career, a certain type of family or personal life, you have certain leisure activities, and you’re going about it all. You are deepening what you have chosen to do and it’s relatively clear what should come next—no more angst of youth.

However, the same thing that produces relief can create a burden later: fewer options. The damnable thing about writing and living is: you have to go down a path before you can judge it. “What if this new path is not the path I ought to take?” is the question that can flood the engine of both a novelist and an agent.

In addition, you often have little idea how long this new path will be. The smallest fingernail scratch of the surface—something begun in a half-joking manner as nothing but a footnote—can end up tunneling itself into a full blown essay. In life, a part-time job begun almost on a whim can grow into a new career.

The third burden of narrative pressure is this. I imagine that, sometimes—especially toward the end—you can end up with a situation where the narrative is all but
demanding you go this way given what has been written when this way is not the overall way you, as the novelist, feel it should go. The individual nodes of transition, looked at in themselves, all make sense, but the overall big picture of the thing has lost its way. It just isn’t striking the chord you want it to strike. This situation is analogous to the mid-life crisis.

In short, I am arguing that the many joys and pains of living are the joys and pains of writing, multiplied. They are multiplied because what is at stake in our case is not writing the wrong novel, but living the wrong life.

**Decision 1: Major in Philosophy**

I received my bachelor’s degree from Spring Hill College, a Jesuit liberal arts college where everybody spent their first two years fulfilling core requirements. This suited me because I had no clear idea of what sort of career I wanted, I would be good at, or would otherwise authentically represent me. However, my uncertainty was not conscious at the time I made the decision. It wasn’t so much repressed, as suppressed. It was a difficult fact that didn’t need to be confronted yet. I only had to decide what college to attend and I wasn’t smart or self-aware enough at the time to have the fact of my uncertainty be a factor in my decision. In other words I didn’t choose a liberal arts college because the liberal arts “prepare you for everything,” as they say even though, of course, they do.

So, when I say a liberal arts college “suited me” I don’t mean that it was a decision flowing from self-understanding, an assessment of what I wanted or didn’t want
or what would be good for me based on that assessment. I just mean it was good for me, given the fact of my suppressed uncertainty.

What conscious thoughts, then, drove the decision? They were far simpler: I was looking for a school with a decent enough academic reputation where I could also play collegiate tennis. I was not good enough to play Division I athletics and my other live option was the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The difference was stark: a large, public, research university, or a small, private liberal arts college. Had I or anybody in my immediate or extended family suspected the academic career for me, U.N.C. might have made more sense. But because nobody did, my college made sense. Academia was not a career on any of our minds for any of us. So, a decent academic reputation was good enough, and I could play tennis there. So that’s where I went.11

Already, the analytical framework begins to emerge. I more or less bumbled into Spring Hill College in part because academia was what I call “unthinkable” at the time. By “unthinkable” I don’t mean that it’s unimaginable or even that one doesn’t, in fact, imagine or think about it some way though one certainly does so less if she does it at all. Instead, when I describe an option as “unthinkable,” I mean it is not a live option, for whatever reason, in one’s deliberation about what she ought to do.

The way in which we go with what is familiar, or with what is thinkable, with what are the basic or live options in our heads, is perfectly acceptable on my account. More than this, it is often precisely what we should do on my account. I took what I had done—good academics and tennis—and continued it on into my college choice. That

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11 I remember standing outside the school’s chapel during my visit and trying to will some sort of acceptably strong feeling—desire, directive, assurance—that one or the other was the right school for me. I didn’t care which; I just wanted to be sure. Nothing came.
allowed me to deepen the importance of my earlier activities because it allowed them to become part of a larger and now more diverse unified narrative moving forward.

The way I would reify this into a framework of practical reasoning is this. From the point of view at the time I had to make my college decision, going to Spring Hill made the most sense. This is because it brought forward the two signal things from my teenage years—good academics and tennis. Because it was at a new level of difficulty, it brought them forward in a way that also deepened them.

Upon finishing the core requirements, I had to major. “Do what you are good at” was not productive advice for me: I received the highest mark in every class I had taken and I wasn’t wise enough to assess myself. My father was an accountant and my mother had become convinced, in light of the post-undergraduate activities of my four older siblings, that career-ready majors were the best choice. All four of them attended well-regarded universities but the first pair chose more exploratory concentrations and post-undergraduate lifestyles, and the second more career-oriented concentrations and post-undergraduate lifestyles. I wanted to have it both ways—to be secure and to explore—so I double majored in accounting and philosophy.

Now, why accounting and not some other career-ready concentration? Simply put, I hadn’t had significant contact with anything in the sciences or mathematics by this point. I was in a liberal arts college where they weren’t emphasized. Only five of the eighteen required core courses were outside of the humanities, and two of those had to be social sciences. Moreover, I tested out of the one mathematics requirement. All told then, I took only two courses outside of the humanities and social sciences, and even these were far from centrally science.
My having had no significant contact with the sciences was not out of distaste but out of simply happening not to have contact them. The core didn’t require them and took two years to complete. Moreover, I wasn’t at a liberal arts college because it was a liberal arts college. I didn’t choose a place where the sciences are not emphasized because I didn’t enjoy science. I chose a liberal arts college so I could *play tennis*. I had taken as many courses in mathematics as language arts in high school and very well might have become interested in them.

Actually the truth here goes a bit deeper. In high school, my mathematics courses and teachers were far less challenging than my humanities ones. Literature, history, and government were opened up to me in a way algebra, trigonometry and calculus were not. Their being opened up to me had nothing to do with my innate abilities or talents, but simply with the uncontrollable happenstance that our math curriculum was weak compared with the humanities. Because I had the humanities opened up to me I was perhaps drawn to them more so in college. But again, the reason I was so drawn had nothing to do with an assessment of what I wanted, etc. The reason had to do with what I had more substantial contact with. *Afterward*, we might say, I come to want or desire the humanities but this is only because that desire was formed by my activities, by what I had had contact with.

So, as with the liberal arts decision, the sciences weren’t off the radar for any reasons stemming from desire or self-knowledge. They were simply *off the radar*. They were not in the field of my thinking about what I ought to do at this point, unknown as far as the purview of my practical reasoning was concerned. “Science” was in the position
that “academia” was in when I chose my college. The question of whether I ought to do them, at these points, simply did not arise. They were unthinkable.

Because the sciences were not then thinkable I decided on accounting as my “career-ready” major. Why this? Well, first of all, my father was an accountant and strongly though implicitly recommended it. For example, he often said that accountants could talk finance, marketing and strategy while these others couldn’t easily talk accounting. Accounting was a foundational business art (I believe he was correct about that). Secondly, my college offered a joint five-year B.S.-M.B.A. program with an emphasis in accounting. This was a very easy thing to sign up for after I decided on accounting as a major, and the fact that it was so easy to do—stay one more year, get an M.B.A., have a career waiting—was part of why I signed up for it. Not much to lose, a lot to gain.

The other major, philosophy, was for me, best I understood myself at the time. By saying philosophy was “for me,” it sounds as if it was a calling, or otherwise a choice based on authentic or autonomous desire. But this was not at all the case. As with my choice of a liberal arts college, and my “choice” to not do science, my choice of philosophy also had little to do with desire or self-knowledge. After finishing the core, I still didn’t know what I liked. Instead, all that happened was this: the passage of time and the need to specialize forced my uncertainty from suppression to consciousness. What drove me was only the thought, “what if I don’t enjoy business or accounting?” I thought I might enjoy it, but I also thought I might not. All I knew it terms of desire was that I didn’t know whether I would enjoy accounting. My fear was of becoming trapped in something I disliked. My adding the philosophy major was not an expression of a
deep, authentic yearning for philosophy, but an effort to have more than one option. I didn’t come to love philosophy until much later, more than halfway through my graduate studies.12

I took three upper-division courses in the humanities, one in literature, history, and philosophy. I enjoyed each of them equally, but the philosophy professor recruited me. Since all I knew was that I wanted something other than business, this was enough to convince me. She didn’t even sell the discipline, she simply helped me see that I could double-major, simply made a double-major in philosophy thinkable. I didn't even really know about double majoring. Philosophy represented not being tied down to one option, but it could have easily been history or literature. So, philosophy was “for me,” in the sense that what I wanted most was not to be trapped. I couldn’t major in four things, the philosophy professor recruited me, so I chose philosophy. The target of my desire, if that’s what it should be called, was far more abstract than “I want philosophy,” not because it was in the negative but because it lacked specificity. In short, desire did not get me to philosophy itself, it only got me to “not only business.”

12This is one of two reasons I hold in low esteem the common advice that one ought to pursue graduate school in philosophy only if she can imagine nothing else making her happy. Some people develop their loves. The notion that we should pursue the career of our dreams—as though there is but one and only one out there that will satisfy us—strikes me now as a deceptive, childish and an injurious myth analogous to that of soul-mates in romantic relationships. The choice is not between passionate ardor from start to finish and cold, detached, calculated willing. This false dichotomy keeps people—most of whom are a diverse and wonderful mix of influences that could be perfectly happy with a variety of folks and a variety of careers—unhappy in both love and work. Of course, desire and taste have a role, but that role only loosely sets the stage. There are some people whose personalities match with mine more compatibly and the same goes for careers. But the lion’s share of the love and attachment that is lasting, important and satisfying comes from commitment, which includes the decision to both stay and work with that person or career, developing and growing what you can with what you have. The second reason I hate this advice is that philosophy at the graduate level develops highly valuable thinking and communication skills that can be fruitfully applied and handsomely rewarded in a variety of fields, including business, law, public service, and the non-profit sector. It can be perfectly prudent and laudable of someone to pursue graduate school in philosophy instrumentally. It would be great for them and good for the society. The way those who proffer this stupid advice speak of philosophy, one wants to criticize them on grounds of integrity for encouraging rigorous argument and clarity of thinking and writing, for if they didn’t, then there truly would be only intrinsic value to the discipline and those in it could finally rest assured that all of their comrades are only the purest of lovers.
Now, why literature, history and philosophy, and not social science, religion, and journalism? “Ah, it is because you are becoming a lover of the humanities.” Perhaps, though not because I loved them but simply because the facts of my life stacked up in that way.

I reached my next decision point upon graduation. I was valedictorian and a double-major student-athlete M.B.A: well-rounded, capable, energetic, and still clueless as to what I ought to do. Graduate school in philosophy was still not yet thinkable. Remember, nobody in my family ever thought of getting a Ph.D. And the philosophy professor who recruited me never mentioned anything about graduate school—I was an M.B.A. student after all. So, as I approached graduation, the possibilities seemed both limitless and univocal. While I had double-majored in an effort to expand the options, before me was only business, or—I couldn’t articulate another option.

An accounting job found me. I did no big job search. A friend of a mentor of mine was the Human Resources Director of the Pacific Region of a Big Four public accounting firm. I had no idea of my friend’s connection and he contacted the director on my behalf. I didn’t even ask him to do so. He just did it, and this despite his thinking I should be a teacher. I sent the H.R. director my resume and a recruiter called me within twenty-four hours. Within the week, they flew me to Orange Country California. In the airport on my return trip, they offered me the job. Having no other thinkable option about what I ought to do, I accepted.
Decision 2: Graduate School in Philosophy

One of the last undergraduate philosophy courses I took was taught by an adjunct—I don’t even remember the topic—and he asked me what graduate schools in philosophy I was applying to. He was assuming I was applying. But I was not even considering it. It just wasn’t thinkable, even after he asked. But he did plant a seed.

The option became live for me halfway through my one and only year as an accountant. A friend of mine, a poet who I admired and who was far more exploratory than my oldest two siblings, encouraged me to seriously consider philosophy. This, together with being seriously unhappy, convinced me to change.

You might think that my unhappiness was due to an unappreciated authentic distaste for accounting. At the time, that is precisely what I would have said. But I now know the unhappiness had more to do with my internals than my externals since it continued into the early stages of graduate school, which was supposed the more authentic choice. It’s actually fascinating, strange and I believe true to life: had I not been unhappy I probably would not have changed and I earnestly believe I would have been no less happy than I am today. I didn’t love accounting, but neither did I hate it and I had appreciation at the time neither for the idea that some loves are cultivated as opposed to found, nor that one's duties and roles change. All I could see and feel was what I was doing now, and I made my decisions based on the youthful assumptions that how it was now is how it will continue to be, and how much I liked it now was how much I would continue to like it.

However, now that I have, for these rather accidental reasons, studied philosophy, chosen this path, I would be more unhappy if I changed back to accounting. Or at least if
I changed back at the wrong time, which is any time before the “seeds of [this] revolution have worked themselves out.”

The only thing I knew was that I was very unhappy, and that I very much wanted to be happy. I thought the right job would cure me. Not being sure what that was I signed up for the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. This is an organization similar to AmeriCorps where young, idealistic college graduates get placed at non-profit organizations for low pay. I had heard in my Christian upbringing and at my Jesuit undergraduate that helping others was the way to true happiness. So I decided to give that a full try.

My affinity for social work turned out similar: I didn’t love it, didn’t hate it. It was during this year that graduate school in philosophy became fully thinkable. I knew being a graduate student would surely be different than being an undergraduate and, besides that, I was thinking in terms of career, of being a college professor. Whether I would enjoy that I had little idea about. In short, I was still more groping for answers than living with direction. I was still in the mode of guess-and-check living: “Maybe X is what I ought to do. Hm. Tried it, not quite right. Maybe Y. Tried it, not quite right. Well, let’s try Z.” Since I had tried business and now social work, philosophy was really the only option left from my perspective. It was the only thing in my history that could be brought forward and tried. There was nothing left—my personal values (do justice, help others) didn’t pan out, my business background didn’t pan out. All I had was that “at least one more” option that I had developed as my second major.
Decision 3: Stay in Philosophy

About halfway through my graduate studies their excitement wore away. I seriously worried whether I would be satisfied in the career. Teaching was more stressful than I thought it would be (which is different than saying I didn’t like it). And, while I loved the writing, I began to worry that my capabilities and work ethic would not allow me, given the job market, the kind of position and paycheck that I wanted. I like to be at the best places, but it was not unreasonable for me by this time to think that I probably wouldn’t get to be there, at least not for long time.

Combine this diminution of the desire- and prudence-based considerations on the side of academia with the amplification of them on the side of a post-Ph.D. business career, and you have the recipe for another decision. Business had financial security on its side, which I had come to crave after more than five years of graduate school poverty. In addition, I now believed I could make as moral a contribution through business as I could through philosophy. I used to disagree—it was hard to see how business could outweigh the importance of contributing, even in an all-but insignificant way, to the development of fundamental human ideas. But by now I knew that business afforded opportunities for training which I could exploit later on in serve of an organization, for-profit or non-, that was promoting justice. Business would also allow me to work on teams in a substantive way and would provide a more structured environment, both of which I enjoy very much. What remained on the side of philosophy was my love of writing, of academic discussion, and of the creative arts. In short, desire, self-knowledge, self-concept, were all indeterminate.
I could do business, I could do philosophy, each was good in a different way—all the considerations of moral importance, desire and prudence had roughly evened out. I “simply chose” philosophy. I decided to stay in philosophy.

This is meant to be an example of how one can use the concept of story, incorporate his or her personal history, and produce an action-guiding result of appropriate specificity on grounds of enhanced intelligibility. As with any life, this example is messy in the details. There is mention of tennis, chemistry, a poet friend, unhappiness, accounting as a foundational business art, and more besides.

As we did briefly in Section I the first step is to see how the personal history of this person up to the present rules out a wide array of the outlying options that, from the perspective of Ch. 1, would be perfectly permissible. Perhaps storied living cannot tell this person whether he should do business or accounting. But it says that he should do business or philosophy, or perhaps some admixture of the two, as possibilities emerge.

Moreover, there is no way that going off and being a painter, or a carpenter, a military man, or a freewheeling vagabond can be easily brought together with this history in a rich, parsimonious narrative moving forward. Doing so would be a very clear narrative rupture, making extremely difficult a unified explanation.

“He was going back and forth between business and philosophy, looked like he had pretty much settled on philosophy.”

“And then he went off to become a painter.”

He certainly could. He certainly could start that journey. Nothing morally or prudently wrong with it. But he shouldn’t. He shouldn’t because it doesn’t make sense.
It doesn’t make sense along colloquial lines—it’s what we often say of people who make wild decisions, that they “don’t make sense”—and it doesn’t make sense along the lines of my theory.

This is a point that deserves to be smashed home. This story with the painter ending, given all that has come before it, is so excruciatingly weak in terms of narrative unity and richness as to be laughable. We might relish it, in some childish manner, as a surprise “gotcha” ending. But a good story, on the grounds adumbrated in the previous chapter, it is not.

It’s fashionable to think that interpretation is up for grabs, or that narratives can be spun in any way one likes. They’re just too flexible or too malleable, goes the thought. But these wild options score very weak on any account of narrative other than the perfectly-thinned out philosophical accounts that are designed to say yes to everything. Take any idea that you have of what makes a good story, take the long example I put up above, put an ending on it that says “and then he became a painter,” and see if your result fulfills your norms.

If I told you that I liked painting would that change things? If I told you that one day in the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago I had something resembling a spiritual experience looking at the dancing shadows of some wire spun in repeated spheres like a roller coaster and seriously wondered, though only for a few minutes, whether I shouldn’t be an artist? That that happened and then I continued with graduate school in philosophy?

No, it would not change the result. There is not enough investment of this person’s knowledge, ability, moral character, personal values, identities and desires in
that direction. Doing so would still be a narrative rupture though of course not an utter and complete rupture.

Now, my theory could allow me to become an artist eventually, depending on how things unfolded. If I followed up the seeds planted by that spiritual experience, perhaps studying more philosophy of art and less ethics, and then started getting involved in the art world, and writing more and more about art. And then, maybe one day I’m interviewing an artist and I have the opportunity to try my hand at something and it turns out I’m astonishingly good for someone with zero experience and I follow that up with a hobby of making sculptures…. Then, at some point along the lines, breaking with business and philosophy properly and going into art could make great sense. But all of those stepping stones would have to be there in order to transform things.

This is where my theory becomes open-ended—the right amount of open-ended, in a way that I hold to be a great virtue of my account. It allows for change, but it’s change within limits. My theory allows for, even sometimes encourages transformations, large structural changes in one’s story. This is an important part of the theory because, by this time, you may be worrying not that I've provided enough specificity in guidance, but that I've provided too much, that my theory unacceptably ties us to our history. However, before I discuss transformation I want to address a few objections that might be burning at this point.

*Objection:* This model of practical reasoning is servile, responding to circumstance rather than giving one’s self one’s own direction. From the decision to go to Spring Hill
College to the Big Four job to staying in philosophy, this is someone who just does what his circumstance calls him to do without any significant personal autonomy.

I offer it as a virtue of my account that it allows us to react as well as act. So much of our lives is reactive—where we were born, to whom we were born, what sort of family, of education, of moral code—in short, we are very much a product of the natural lottery. It is now accepted that a theory of personal autonomy will have to accept and deal with the fact that we are products of what happens to us and thus that our self itself is rather heteronomous, in the original Enlightenment sense of that word, i.e. shot through with external influences. Many things that were once considered servile have to now be considered autonomous, if, as Christman argues, we want to keep autonomy at the base of our basic rights.¹³

In addition, consider that your history is a source for your self-concept, your desires, even your pleasures. My theory works with the causal origins of your self. So, in a way I'm working with the more authentic consideration, with the least heteronomous aspect of our necessarily heteronomous selves.

If you ignore history then you manifest a false autonomy. All of these factors have made you who you are. But here you are now, as you are, and you make a decision with only a more or less random thought as to who you are your mind. You declare you are autonomous but it is a false-conscious autonomy. I think, when we steam ourselves up into a rash decision of personal autonomy like this, we’re really just lurching, and thereby setting ourselves up either for disconnection or repetition.

¹³ See my discussion of personal autonomy in Ch. 1.
Objection: Isn’t staying with philosophy really just prudence in disguise? You are not doing sciences is a result of the prudent realization that one needs to specialize in something to get the most out of it. So, given where you were at and given the many parts of your upbringing that were out your control, not doing science really made good prudential sense. To do sciences would have set you back in an important way. It was the right thing to do, but not for any narrative reasons, simply because to do something as different as science would have cost you too much in terms of well-being given the finite nature of living time.

My first response is to say that if time wasn’t limited, my theory would give the same answer, but prudence would still would be thrown into doubt or give a different answer. But the truth is that the same thing could me said of my theory. If time were unlimited then maybe I should have done science even though I had no exposure and then brought everything all together when I was 150 years old in a science-philosophy combination.

But this, as I mentioned briefly in Section I, would be to think of my theory in the wrong manner. It’s not to be thought of as a kind of “intelligibility theory of prudence,” when intelligibility is thought of as a distinct good that can be maximized, minimized, equalized, etc., as something that can be quantitated, scaled, and contrasted with other scenarios with their buckets of the utilis and weighed up. It is precisely these traps that I’ve created my theory in part to avoid, because those strategies are recipes for incompleteness.

My theory is meant to provide good guidance, not another calculus. People need traction as to where they ought to go, and your history provides that traction. When we
start adding up the utils, agents get lost in the calculations. It becomes bewildering. Instead, I’m just asking you to continue the story.

Of course, don’t do so if you’re history is traumatic, or is one where your rights were violated, or your personal freedoms stifled. I would never say the young woman raised in a sexist household should pursue the ideal of womanhood implanted in her youth because that will enhance those events’ degree of intelligibility by bringing it all together in a storied whole.

Living a storied life may only be done once the boundaries of morality and prudence have been satisfied. So if you were raised in a sexist household, or a culture that limited your freedom and creativity, or if you’re working for an abusive boss, I’m not saying to stay with that story. First things first. Get out.

Then, look at your personal history. One option is to take the trauma forward in a non-traumatic way. But there are other options. In fact, I’d recommend you look beyond the trauma to the unique aspects of your life that were present despite the trauma or the stifling environment. Look at how those things peaked through the mess. And now that you’re free of the difficult situation, look at the options before you that allow those to develop.

The real objection to my emphasis on history is not that I will trap people in abusive or rights-violating situations, but that I will trap them in their history, even if it be non-abusive and perfectly healthy. This objection goes something like this:

“Your theory basically says to keep on keepin’ on, yes to expand and develop but to expand and develop in the way you are already headed. I grant that this narrows the options, and I grant that it’s not being objectionably servile, but I’m just wondering: what
about change and creativity? It’s not that change will make you better off with respect to well-being or prudence but it’s just that sometimes change seems called for, or at least something that should be available to us. Change is often the spice and joy of living. What about those stories of transformation you mentioned can be instances of storied living, the exhilarating story of a life with spiritual experience. These, too, are rich and ethically uplifting. How do they fit in your theory?”

IV. Transformation

Return to the image of writing a novel. The process of narrowing the options does not have to proceed linearly. One certainly can write a novel with a metronomic pulse. However, one can also write a novel where people or themes transform. Yet, in writing a story of transformation, one must handle it with care. Even if the moment of change itself seems abrupt, its seeds must have been already sown in some manner. Otherwise it’s not transformation at all, but random redirection. My theory allows for large structural changes—which I’ll call transformations—if those changes have their seeds in one’s personal history. It prohibits other large structural changes—what I’ll call radical breaks. These are the major changes of direction that have no basis in history—they really are more or less random.

It is an analytic truth that transformation be connected to the past, and I don’t just mean as the contrast class. The connection to the past must be more than merely that against which a transformation is judged as such. If the past is merely the contrast class then everything can possibly change. But everything cannot change, for we talk of the one who transforms. One of the fruits of my theory is that it creates norms of
transformation. It explains when transformation makes sense. This is in contrast to the self-concept approach to action, which can only identify when something is a transformation.

In Vince Gilligan’s critically acclaimed and wildly popular five-season television series Breaking Bad, Bryan Cranston plays Walter White. White is a high school chemistry teacher and traditional family man with a strong if inauthentic sense of duty who “breaks bad” by cooking and selling methamphetamine, eventually becoming a kingpin. There are two central thematic questions of the show. What are White’s motivations for this change? And are these motivations and his subsequent activities truly bad? If you’ve seen the show you know how well Gilligan muddies the moral waters.

White is suffering from terminal cancer, so the drug dealing is initially only temporary. He is responsible for a middle-class family on the verge of financial ruin, and too proud to ask for financial assistance. Secondly, he has extraordinary abilities as a chemist and his cooking meth finally allows him to manifest these. However evil you think the activity of meth cooking, its practice is clearly a virtuous display of White’s, in the ancient sense of “virtue.” Finally, before he ever became a school teacher, White’s graduate school friends had cut him out of an eventual billion-dollar business that relied at its core on one of White’s ideas. This resentment is brought to the audience’s attention only lightly throughout most of the six seasons. Yet, in the very final episode of the final season as White’s game has finally run its course and he is clearly going to die, his last act as outlaw is to blackmail these old pals, securing the financial security for his family that drugs never could. One wonders whether all of the other more obvious motivations
for his descent were but excuses hiding this real agenda. The point is, even as White breaks from bad to worse by consistently manipulating his less intelligent partner (a 20-something former student), by psychologically imprisoning his wife who can’t bear the family ruin that exposure would cause, by moving from killing evil people to letting innocents die, the audience never quite sees him as an evil man.

If you don’t see the moral waters as muddy, then simply bracket the moral questions. What we have, so I’ll argue, is a case of a progressive, intelligibility-enhancing trajectory that is transformative. White transforms. First, his externals transform. He goes from financially-stressed ennui as a teacher and emasculated husband, to become a wealthy, social renegade—a one-man meth Mafia. Excepting his 20-something high school drop-out for a partner who White controls and uses with sociopathic precision, White outsources every job he can’t do himself. He shuns any form of dependency. In one of his most ruthless moments he stands smug, proud, and poolside in his same middle-class home, counting the seconds on his watch as a hired hit team of Aryan Nazis murders ten imprisoned former “employees”—potential rats. He had demanded that all murders take place in a span of ninety seconds in order to minimize risk. For White, watching the seconds on his watch while ten murders take place under his control though without his actual doing—is like watching the seconds on his watch while a chemical compound precipitates, also under his control though without his actual doing. He has harnessed the powers of both nature and thug life to his command. It is his most god-like moment, to my mind.

But it’s not just his externals that change. White’s becomes different on the inside. It’s not just that he goes from a duty-bound if inauthentic moral innocent to moral
suspect. His desires change, his goals and dreams change. Instead of aiming to avoid financial ruin he starts aiming at, and indeed approximates, world-repute as meth users in Europe hear of, demand and eventually taste White’s blue meth. He becomes an empire builder.

In addition, his self-concept is revolutionized. While his “practical identity” as a family man is never eclipsed, his practical identity as a teacher vanishes in the first episode, even while White is still in the classroom.

But it’s not even these changed aspects of self-concept, desire and life plan that are the richest. It’s his view of his own capacity—his capacity as a chemist, yes, but also his capacity as an agent per se. He discovers power within himself. I’m not so much talking about the power over others that he amasses as he rises in the drug trade. What he discovers is that he has the power to act, and to do so of his own accord. He finds that he can call things as he sees them and make headway in enforcing his own will. He goes from seeing himself as powerless to powerful before his external power increases. When he first breaks bad nothing is different on the outside, but everything is immediately different on the inside.

In the first episode, setting out upon his first cook he has the following exchange with his new partner and former student. White has just taken the last several hundred dollars out of his credit union savings account in order to purchase a RV—his partner’s idea for safe, mobile cooking. He walks out of the bank and hands the money to his partner, Jesse, who has setup the purchase. Before leaving, Jesse inquires as to White’s motives:

**Jesse:** Man, some straight like you, giant stick up his ass, all of a sudden at age, what, 60, he's just gonna break bad?
Walter: I'm 50.
Jesse: It's weird is all, okay? It doesn't compute. Listen, if you've gone crazy or something I mean, if you've gone crazy or depressed, I'm just saying that's something I need to know about. Okay? I mean, that affects me.
Walter: I am awake.\textsuperscript{14}

It is this self-caused self-empowerment—presented in the very first episode and acted out for the entire five seasons—this refreshing and exhilarating internal awakening that allows the audience to love White until the very end if only by a thread (or at least this powerless, emasculated A.B.D. audience of one).

To Jesse, White's decision seems not to make sense. Jesse is operating, but only halfway, with the model of practical reasoning I endorse. White's decision seems to be a crazy because it seems to be a large narrative rupture with his personal history. But there is more to my story than just these stories.

Cases of transformation such as White’s—if we imagine away the moral questions—are permitted and sometimes encouraged by my account. White’s future from the point of breaking bad onward strongly enhances the intelligibility of his life by allowing for a rich narrative—a unified diversity—connecting his past to his future. The injustice he felt he suffered at the hands of his best friends is avenged. His behavior not only stops his family’s emasculation of him, it puts him in charge of them. His abilities as a chemist go from under-utilized and under-appreciated to a blossoming state of international repute and admiration (albeit among drug dealers, drug users, and drug enforcement agencies).

In addition, he doubles-up so to speak. White rounds out several developmental patterns that had begun in his history: his abilities as a chemist, his ennui and

emasculating, and his friends’ betrayal. He not only develops his abilities as a chemist but *through them* enhances the intelligibility of other aspects of his past.

Think about a great novel. A great novel creates several different themes along different lines. Some themes are developed along character lines. Others are developed along plot lines. In a long novel these strands can develop independently for long stretches. But what makes the novel great is in how it returns to bring these strands together into a whole. We are struck when “it all comes together.” The reason we are struck, I suggest, is that the novel creates a strong degree of intelligibility, its strength a product of the degree of diversity brought under a unity.

Transformation very much has the potential to achieve this “all coming together.” In some ways, it seems even more intelligible. Since it brings it all together through change there is an additional diversity unified. But I wouldn’t want to make any rule here, that transformation is more intelligible than progress. Transformation's seeds have to be sown before it ought to be undertaken. “Yes, but once those seeds are sown and seen, then transformation is better than progress.” I’m just not so sure. Continuing along can also unify a high degree of diversity. Once again, we shouldn’t try and see this precisely into the future. Instead, we should look at our past, and at our present options, and make as highly an intelligible judgment as we can. White’s case is here to show that transformation is possible by the lights of my theory.

As mentioned before neither Velleman nor Korsgaard can handle cases of transformation. On their account White’s transformation is *unintelligible*. They can certainly say *that* a radical change has happened. The things that are their concern are precisely what has changed so much—how he thinks of himself, what his desires are,
what his goals are, etc. But without more, his is simply the story of two completely
different lives, with a completely different set of reason-giving norms. From the
perspective of ethics, he’s two different persons.

But he’s not two different persons, and I don’t just mean that he has the same
personal identity. I mean: from the perspective of ethics he’s not two different persons,
two different ethical subjects. He’s one subject transformed. Simply saying that it’s two
lives or that he’s two different people only does justice to one half of the concept of
transformation. Of course there is a sense in which he’s completely different. That’s part
of what it means to transform. But there is also the sense in which he is the same. If
there isn’t some element of continuity then it wouldn’t be transformation at all. In
short, transformation, to be transformation, requires both radical change and continuity.
The self-concept approach, including both Velleman and Korsgaard, only shows that
there is a radical change.

But I can account for the continuity half of transformation, as has already been
shown.

“Ah,” you might say, “so there is bound to be a case of transformation that
outstrips your resources as well.” Not really. Take away all elements of continuity of a
given case of transformation and you no longer have a transformation, you really do just
have two fully different things. This would be a Walter White who didn’t go on to cook
meth, using his abilities as a chemist, but just went off to become dealer, left his family,

15 Again, we must keep separate from this discussion all thoughts about personal identity. One’s personal
identity can transform too. But personal identity is not here at issue. There is still psychological
continuity between the events of White’s life. What’s at issue is the transformation of ethical identity if
you will (since Korsgaard has commandeered what could have been the debate’s neutral term:
“practical identity.”)
cared nothing about his friends’ earlier injustice. He just vanished from his own life and started another.\(^{16}\)

But now, I believe, we no longer have the things that we found ethically exhilarating and so we no longer have the sort of thing we want to rule in and account for. Now we really do have something that makes no sense, is unintelligible, on any reasonable score. So, if intelligibility is a reason to do something, you shouldn’t do this kind of “transformation.” In this scenario there is no rich connection between the past and the future. And it is just for that reason, I believe, that it \textit{isn’t} ethically inspiring and isn’t intelligible. I wouldn’t call it a transformation. I’d call it a \textit{radical break}.

And radical breaks aren’t the “joy and spice of living” kinds of changes that we want to include. Radical breaks are the crazy ones, the ones that, when people do them, we even \textit{say} that they’re rather crazy to have adopted them. And I’m perfectly happy to rule these out.

\section*{V. Two Final Thoughts}

You might be left with a few worries about my account and there seem to me two good ones to discuss. However first note the qualifications inherent in my view that prevent caricature: I don’t offer a theory that winnows the options to one or two, nor do I preclude change or creativity, and I prohibit continuities that wrong both others and self.

Now the two good worries. The first emphasizes cases where there is tension between history and the standard considerations worrying there will be too many times

\footnote{In later seasons as White moves from drug dealer to drug kingpin and the authorities begin to find his trail, he is presented with the chance to escape his life. His lawyer, a criminal himself, has connections with people who can provide White a completely new identity. This option looms in these later seasons as his “way out” should the authorities get too close. By taking this way out he really would break with his past. It's instructive that he never takes it.}
when my theory guides at the expense of strong contrary desires, for example. The second argues for the importance of not being guided beyond non-individualistic considerations. It finds the specificity which I offer heavy-handed, for lack of a better word (we can’t call it immoral after all). Let’s take each in turn.

Since I agree the good is partially constituted by pleasure and desire satisfaction, I agree there can be genuine tensions between history and the standards, but I believe they are fewer and lesser than you think. This is because of the standards’ instability and the circumscription of everything within non-individualistic theories of morality and prudence. Do you hate the work, or the manipulative or controlling boss or coworkers or organizational structure? If the dislike is strong, lengthy, and unexplained by non-individualism, then but only then can a reasonable tradeoff favor interrupting the narrative. Moreover, the agent still loses the goods of intelligibility and leads a worse life to that extent. (You should never stay in an abusive situation but instead find a similar but non-abusive one or do different but still continuous things while observing for the vicissitude of desire).

The second objection comes from a libertarian or existentialist spirit and it is best said informally: “Tell me to be moral and prudent, fine; but tell me what projects I should be doing? No. Don’t guide me anymore. I want to do whatever I want, or maybe just whatever pops into my mind (because I know you hate desire). What’s it to you? I favor no more limits and I don’t have to explain why. Moreover, I don’t think it is okay for you to shake whatever ‘ought finger’ you’re developing here when I choose to be an engineer after writing a book. I feel, and should be given, no normative hangover just because I live a variegated life. Ethics shouldn’t reach this far into my life. It tells you
the side constraints, it tells you what the objectively bad life is, and it leaves the rest up to you. As it should. That’s the excitement of living. Yes, it’s fickle. Yes, it’s unstable. Yes, it’s uncertain and confusing. That’s the beauty of it. Jump in! Try, fail, do one thing, then another, do a lot of things, or just one if that appeals (I won’t shake my finger at you); find love, change loves, renounce love, regain love. Live. Live as who you are, without bad faith: a human being, all of whom have little knowledge of what they’re doing, why, and where they are going. All we try to do is stay safe and secure and have some fun along the way.”

I like this objection. I also have little to say beyond what is said and like it partly for that reason. The disagreement seems to me fundamental, a matter of orientation or basic attitude or approach to life and living. I see a lot of options and worry. He sees a lot and revels.

I like it when we find this kind of disagreement, when we reach an argumentative impasse due to a difference of orientation, a difference that shades all of your prior deductive points, when we locate the paradigm itself. It is a type of bedrock, and I believe contemplation sometimes the appropriate response. In those cases, if there is something to do, it’s no longer argument and analysis, but synthesis. We must proceed to a new level of thought. But that is another (continuous) project.

Nevertheless there is one difference I can pinpoint. Worry in the face of many options can be rooted in a concern for excellence, for locating the excellent life for me. I know I cannot live all of the lives because of the time required to live any one life of substance. I believe some options will permit my excellence and some preclude it, but I don’t know which. Hence, I need guidance, on pain of missing an excellent life.
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