

## **The untenability of future-sensitive synchronic well-being**

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### **Abstract**

It is often thought that the sequence of good and bad times in a person's life (the "shape" of her life) affects how good her life is on the whole. But this seems to spell trouble for aggregationism—the view that the goodness of an extended period in a life can be understood as the aggregate goodness of its parts—simply because aggregation takes no account of temporal order. In a paper just published, Dale Dorsey has argued that it is possible to reconcile aggregationism with the claim that the shape of a life affects its value. The key to the reconciliation is future-sensitive synchronic well-being—a conception of well-being according to which a person's present well-being may depend, in part, on future events. I argue that this conception of well-being is independently problematic and manifests additional problems when it is invoked in an attempt to reconcile aggregationism with the significance of a life's shape.

### **I. Well-being at a time and well-being over time**

In an influential paper, David Velleman has drawn a distinction between synchronic and diachronic well-being.<sup>1</sup> A person's level of synchronic well-being has to do with how well she is faring at a moment (at an instant or over a few minutes or, maybe, hours), and her diachronic well-being is her well-being over an extended period of time (over the course of days, years, or even a lifetime).

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<sup>1</sup> Velleman (2000).

According to Velleman, these are supposed to be distinct *kinds* of well-being. A principal reason for positing this difference in kind is the seemingly incomplete overlap of the sorts of factors that affect each of the two. Synchronic well-being, one might think, depends only on facts available within a synchronic perspective—paradigmatically, representations and feelings realized at the moment in question. Diachronic well-being depends on, among other things, certain kinds of relations that obtain among the discrete, temporally separated events that affect synchronic well-being. For instance, it is commonly assumed that a long period of steadily increasing synchronic well-being is preferable to a symmetrical period of steadily decreasing synchronic well-being.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, also relevant to diachronic well-being are various more complicated sorts of narrative structures that may encompass disjoint periods in the life of an individual. Since diachronic well-being depends on factors that do not affect synchronic well-being and are not captured by aggregating levels of synchronic well-being, we have some reason to accept that these are two different kinds of value. And, even if we hesitate to think there are two distinct kinds of value here, we still have pressure to conclude that a person's diachronic well-being over a period is not the same as her aggregate synchronic well-being during that period.<sup>3</sup>

But there are several ways to resist this conclusion. One is simply to deny that diachronic structures have any effect on diachronic well-being; only synchronic structures do. Then it is possible to hold that the same factors affect both synchronic and diachronic well-being, making it

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2 Michael Slote (1983) is a famous proponent of this sort of claim. It is a consequence of *pure time preference*—the claim that the value of goods depends on when (relative to a life span) they take place.

3 Besides Velleman (2000), prominent opponents of aggregationism include Slote (1983), Stocker (1990), Bigelow, Campbell, and Partridge (1990), Kagan (1992), and Brännmark (2001).

much more plausible that the latter is an aggregate of the former.<sup>4</sup> Another way is to accept that diachronic relations do affect diachronic well-being, but claim that they also affect synchronic well-being. This alternative way of coordinating the two sorts of well-being is the strategy proposed in a recent article by Dale Dorsey (2015). As Dorsey puts it, “the narrative relations borne by individual, temporally discrete events help determine not only the contribution of these events to diachronic welfare but also the contribution of these events to synchronic welfare” (2015, 325).<sup>5</sup> Since, according to this sort of view, the diachronic factors affect synchronic, not just diachronic, well-being, an aggregationist conception of the relationship between the two may be workable after all.<sup>6</sup> But, of course, this picture requires a conception of synchronic well-being according to which present well-being is affected by events that take place at other times.

I will say that synchronic well-being is *diachronically sensitive* if a person’s synchronic well-being at a time may be affected by events at other times. There are two mutually compatible kinds of diachronic sensitivity: past-sensitivity and future-sensitivity. If synchronic well-being is *past-sensitive* then it can be affected by events that have already taken place. Compare two scenarios. In one, I have long yearned to visit Svalbard, and then I travel there and enjoy my stay. In another, I have never had a strong opinion about Svalbard, and then I travel there and equally enjoy my stay.

According to some plausible views of well-being, like some varieties of desire satisfactionism, my

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4 This may not be as implausible as it might sound at first. Securing aggregationism by denying that narrative relations among events have any direct effect on diachronic (or synchronic) well-being does not rule out significant indirect effects. Relationships among events can affect how we experience those events and thereby affect our well-being. Rosati (2013) suggests that how we construe the narrative relations among events in our lives can profoundly impact how we experience these events and how they affect our well-being.

5 Like most philosophers writing about these subject, Dorsey uses ‘welfare’ and ‘well-being’ interchangeably. I too consider the two terms interchangeable, though I prefer the term ‘well-being’.

6 Dorsey does not attempt to make a positive case for aggregationism. He just means to argue that acknowledging the importance of life’s shape does not rule it out.

synchronic well-being at various times during my trip is higher in the first scenario than in the second—precisely because of my prior desire to be doing what I am doing. To take another sort of case, we might think that happiness that follows a period of sadness is somehow a greater benefit, hence yielding greater well-being, than equal happiness that was preceded by more happiness.

If synchronic well-being is *future-sensitive*, then how well I am faring in the present may depend on what happens at some point down the road. Suppose that I presently desire to catch up with an old friend from college. Consider two possible futures for me. In one, I am able to meet my friend next summer for a warm reunion. In the other, she and I never get around to it. One might hold that I am faring better now if my actual future is the one that includes the reunion. This is what we might say according to an alternative variety of desire satisfactionism, one that says that future satisfaction of my present desires makes me better off in the present.<sup>7</sup> According to such a view, well-being is future-sensitive. Future-sensitivity might also be part of a view that ties synchronic well-being to happiness. Perhaps one might hold that a period of happiness that precedes a precipitous decline is worse in terms of synchronic well-being than a period of similar happiness that precedes more happiness.

Future-sensitivity is my primary concern. I think it is quite problematic to hold, as Dorsey does, that synchronic well-being is future-sensitive.<sup>8</sup> In the next three sections I make a case against a future-sensitive conception of synchronic well-being. In Section II, I offer some intuitive considerations that tell against future-sensitivity in general. In Section III, I show why it is problematic to use future-sensitivity to secure aggregationism while preserving intuitions about the

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7 Dorsey (2013) advances this sort of desire satisfactionist view.

8 See Brännmark (2001) and Sarch (2013) for other views according to which synchronic well-being is future-sensitive.

significance of the shape of a life. Section IV shows how, according to the most natural ways of implementing it (including Dorsey's own view), future-sensitivity introduces unacceptable complexity into our evaluations of well-being.

## II. The judgment problem: Our ordinary thought and talk about well-being

The first problem is that future-sensitivity in synchronic well-being seems to jibe poorly with our ordinary judgments and statements about how we are faring. A person may be very nervous today about something that will be resolved tomorrow, and this nervousness might ruin her day (i.e., drag down her level of synchronic well-being throughout the day). Whether tomorrow brings tragedy or relief, today is still not good for the person, or so I am inclined to think. Furthermore it seems to me that just how poorly she is faring today is not affected by tomorrow's outcome. If tomorrow will bring relief, perhaps we will say that today's anxiety was worth it, or that she was better for having gone through it, or perhaps even that it somehow made her life more complete. But it seems very odd to say that tomorrow's good news somehow makes *today*—the anxiety-ridden day—not so bad for her *right now*.

Furthermore, it requires an uncharitable interpretation of our everyday discourse about how, in the moment, one is faring. “How are you?” and “How are you doing?” are common questions we ask one another. Sometimes we answer with only a perfunctory “Fine.” But other times—more often with some people than with others—a person offers a sincere assessment. So, suppose a person reports, “I'm not doing so well today.” How are we to interpret this statement? Taking it at face value—which is, I think, the way we would ordinarily take it—the person is providing a

description of her present state. Furthermore, we assume that she is probably<sup>9</sup> in a position to know what she is talking about.

But how does someone who thinks synchronic well-being is future-sensitive interpret the a person's report of her present well-being? Since, on this view, the level of present well-being is not settled by what has happened so far, the statement has to be taken as expressing a forecast. But it is an unusual sort of forecast, since it is a forecast of her present state, or maybe better, a forecast of what *will have been* her present state. The forecast is unusual also because it is expressed categorically, with no indication of the degree of certainty or of the contingencies on which its truth depends. Unless such qualifications are somehow implicit in what she says, or unless it is a special case in which she knows plenty about all the future facts on which her present well-being will have depended, she seems to be making an assertion stronger than that to which she is epistemically entitled. If well-being is future-sensitive, it will be a striking fact, in need of explanation, that we tend to let these unwarranted statements slide without any challenge or skepticism.

Thus, because it makes a person's present level of well-being indeterminate given just past and present facts, a future-sensitive conception of synchronic well-being requires us to reinterpret some parts of our everyday thinking and conversation in unnatural ways. Call this the *judgment problem*.

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9 I do not mean to close the possibility that she may not be in a position to know everything that is relevant. What appears to her to be her good fortune may be a lie or an elaborate ruse. Her friends may be using her, and her partner may be cheating on her. If she is misinformed about significant present facts, then she may not after all be a reliable assessor of her present well-being, or at least I do not want to rule this out. (Regarding whether a person's present well-being can be affected by facts about which she is not in a position to know, I am leaving open a possibility rejected by Kagan 1994).

### III. The distortion problem: How to think about the shape of a life

Recall that one of the attractions of diachronic sensitivity is the possibility of reconciling the natural assumption that aggregation characterizes the relationship between synchronic and diachronic well-being with the intuitive judgments to the effect that arrangement of synchronic well-being in a life, specifically how it increases or decreases over time, can affect the overall quality of a life. That is, as Dorsey would put it, we may accept that the arrangement of the valuable parts of a life—the *shape* of a life—matters, without thereby ruling out aggregationism. Again, this reconciliation requires capturing the significance of diachronic relations in the synchronic well-being of particular moments. If a future-sensitive conception of well-being could save aggregationism in this way, it might justify accepting future-sensitivity, even at the cost of some revision of our ordinary understanding of well-being. But I will argue that future-sensitivity cannot accomplish this. We cannot invoke future-sensitivity to secure aggregationism while validating judgments about the significance of a life's shape without also transfiguring the very features of lives we were supposed to be explaining.

Imagine a case in which the shape of a person's life seems evaluatively significant. First, consider a person whose life has a negative trajectory; suppose her level of synchronic well-being is relatively high during youth, somewhat middling during her middle age, and low during her later years. Compare this to a person whose *levels* of well-being are the same but come in the reverse order, so that her level of synchronic well-being follows a steady upward trajectory over the course of her life. I think that most of us, in comparing these two, will judge that the life with the upward slope is better. However, the difference between an upward slope and a downward slope, since they are symmetrical, is the sort of broad, macro-level feature that cannot be accounted for in

aggregate synchronic well-being—at least insofar as synchronic well-being does not reflect diachronic factors. But if synchronic well-being is future-sensitive, it *can* reflect diachronic features. If synchronic well-being is future-sensitive, then it may be that the good times early in the downward-sloping life count for less than the good times late in the upward-sloping life. And, so, aggregation may, after all, yield a result that matches our intuitive judgment: that the upward-sloping life is better. Thus, it seems, with future-sensitivity we might preserve aggregationism.

But notice what just happened. The account of the case required what amounts to a redescription of the case itself. The task was to explain the divergence of our evaluations of two lives in which the levels of synchronic well-being are the same but come in reverse temporal order. But then the crucial move was to *deny* that the levels of synchronic well-being are the same in the two lives. If diachronic factors are reflected in synchronic well-being in a way that adjusts the synchronic well-being levels to make the respective totals differ between the two lives, then the two lives were not symmetrical in the way required to generate the puzzle in the first place. Since it has to do with how future-sensitivity effectively bends the curve of a person's well-being level over time, call this the *distortion problem*.

To see just how problematic the distortion problem is, it is worth stepping back for a moment. We are examining the resources future-sensitivity might offer for accounting for the significance of the shape of a life. In Dorsey's paper, the phenomenon in question is formulated as the *Shape of Life Hypothesis*.

*Shape of a Life Hypothesis* (SLH): The temporal sequence of good and bad times in a life can be a valuable feature of that life as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

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10 (2015, 305)

SLH is not a hypothesis in the standard sense of a claim that we aim to confirm or refute. For Dorsey, that we make judgments that align with SLH is a datum in need of explanation. We find widespread agreement about a class of evaluative judgments that are well-summarized by SLH. Specifically, we tend to think that lives that improve as they go along are, all else equal, better than lives in which the person becomes worse and worse off. What is the best explanation for the apparent fact that we go in for these sorts of judgments? Dorsey aims to sharpen and enrich our thinking about well-being through a thorough investigation of this question. So far, so good.

But on Dorsey's view of synchronic well-being—indeed on any view that offers the possibility of preserving aggregationism by positing a future-sensitive conception of synchronic well-being—SLH itself manifests a peculiar sort of confusion. In particular, the “sequence of good and bad times” was not like we imagined. If synchronic well-being is future-sensitive in the way required to preserve aggregationism, some of the seemingly good times were not so good after all, and some of what seemed to be bad times were not so bad. This makes it quite hard even to understand the claim expressed by SLH. Thus, a future-sensitive conception of synchronic well-being would require not just a reinterpretation of our everyday judgments and statements (as I argued before), it would require a revision of our evaluative thinking so significant that it renders obscure the phenomena that were a principal motivation for it.

One might worry here that I am reading too much into SLH. One might think that Dorsey is using “good and bad times” here to get at something other than the conception of past- and future-sensitive synchronic well-being that he later develops and defends. But he clarifies that this is not so: “[W]hen using the phrase ‘good times’, I simply refer to times during which one is net benefited by particular welfare goods; times at which one has a high level of *synchronic* welfare”

(2015, 305). This is precisely the understanding of “good and bad times” that generates the problem I just described. Here is what I think is clear about SLH: For SLH to capture something important about what makes our lives go well, we have to be thinking of the good and bad times as distinguished in a way that does not already depend on their relations to subsequent times. For Dorsey, this would mean characterizing the goodness and badness in terms of something other than synchronic well-being. Perhaps he could countenance an additional, distinct kind of goodness for a person at a time that could play this role. This sort of response deserves some consideration, and I will return to it at the end of this paper in Section V.

#### IV. The instability problem: Future-sensitivity and diachronic narrative relations

If, as I have argued, a future-sensitive conception of synchronic well-being does not provide a satisfactory interpretation of our thinking about the significance of the shape of a life, this is an additional cost to future-sensitivity. But the distortion problem is not a problem with future-sensitivity *per se*; it is a problem with how well future-sensitivity works with another commitment, viz., aggregationism, we may have regarding well-being. In contrast, the problem I want to consider now is the result of the attempt to account for the value of diachronic features of a life within future-sensitive synchronic well-being.

The problem arises for Dorsey specifically because of how his theory of well-being accounts for the value of narrative features of a life. Dorsey largely agrees with Velleman that narrative relations among temporally separated events can affect well-being.<sup>11</sup> Where they differ is with regard to how and when these narrative relations are valuable (or disvaluable) for the person in

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<sup>11</sup> See especially (2015, 325-327).

whose life they occur. Whereas Velleman holds that this value attaches to stretches of a person's life (i.e, the stretches that encompass the events in the narratives), Dorsey thinks the value attaches to the life at the specific moments when the narrative relations are partially realized. In other words, Velleman holds that narrative features affect only diachronic well-being, while Dorsey holds that these features affect synchronic well-being (and affect diachronic well-being only derivatively). Accounting for narrative features Dorsey's way requires synchronic well-being to be diachronically sensitive, and more specifically, according to Dorsey's view, future-sensitive. In short, the reason Dorsey's view runs into trouble is that a person's synchronic well-being may itself play a role in important narratives, and this possibility entails an inordinate complexity in the temporal structure of well-being.

To see the new problem, first note that, sometimes, a rise or fall in a person's level of synchronic well-being constitutes an important narrative relation between events. According to Dorsey's view of synchronic well-being, the the value of these diachronic narrative relations will be reflected in a person's synchronic well-being at the various moments at which the relations are realized. So, here is the problem: Narrative relations affect levels of synchronic well-being, and levels of well-being partially constitute narrative relations. We have, roughly this: Narrative affects well-being, which affects narrative, which affects well-being, which affects narrative, and so on. Maybe this recursion would somehow bottom out or reach some other kind of fixed point, and so maybe it would not entail some deep indeterminacy of synchronic well-being levels.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, it

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12 If there were indeterminacy here, it would be a much deeper sort than that associated with the judgment problem. The indeterminacy relevant to the judgment problem is indeterminacy *in light of present facts*, and it is due to present well-being depending on the future. With the instability problem the indeterminacy (if there is any) is not relativized to a limited set of facts; it would not be eliminated by settling the future facts. That is because it is due to the mutual dependence of one sort of evaluation on another.

would be quite incredible to hold that well-being has this sort of structure. Call this the *instability problem*.<sup>13</sup>

For a model of the problem, we can look to one of Dorsey's focal examples: the life of O. J. Simpson.<sup>14</sup> Simpson had great success as a collegiate and professional football player, followed by a series of fairly public disasters including the murder of his ex-wife, for which many people blamed Simpson himself, and convictions and imprisonment for robbery and kidnapping. Relatively early in his life, Simpson seemed to be very faring very well. One valuable event that happened early in his life was winning the Heisman Trophy (college football's highest individual honor). According to Dorsey's view, Simpson's apparently negative trajectory after that point is a symptom, a sign, of the undesirable narrative that comprises many of the events in Simpson's life. And Dorsey holds that the events and their unfortunate narrative are reflected in Simpson's levels of synchronic well-being at the various moments of his life. This is how Dorsey explains it:

The shape of a life continues to maintain the relevant signatory significance even if the relations borne by the relevant events can help to determine their synchronic value. For instance, consider a typically valuable event in a life, such as winning the Heisman Trophy. This event, surely important for synchronic well-being, could be a stepping stone, or merely a teaser: early success followed by a disastrous and shameful downfall. If it is a stepping stone to future success, one might say that the synchronic value of this event is greater than the synchronic value of an identical event which is just a teaser. For O.J. Simpson, his Heisman

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13 The distortion problem can be understood as a symptom of the weird structure for well-being that constitutes the instability problem. Although the two problems ultimately have the same source (which is unsurprising since they both arise from positing a particular kind of future-sensitivity in synchronic well-being), their respective complaints differ. The distortion problem is specifically about the difficulty in making sense of the idea of shape of a life in terms of the life's distribution of synchronic well-being. The instability problem is about the objectionably complicated temporal structure of evaluations of synchronic well-being.

14 Though I do not know enough about Simpson's life to proffer or even endorse an estimate of Simpson's well-being, I'll follow Dorsey's assessments for the sake of exposition.

victory was, in fact, less *synchronically* valuable *given* what we now know: that it helped to frame his his ever-so-public downfall. (2015, 325-326)

I find it very hard to follow any of this without thinking that Simpson's own declining level of synchronic well-being—the fact that he fared progressively less well over time—is an essential element of the narrative of his “shameful downfall.” Sure, many of the unfortunate events can be characterized without explicit reference to Simpson's well-being at the time, for instance, the murder of his ex-wife, legal defeats, loss of wealth, etc. But, surely, just as important for the narrative are the changes in Simpson's well-being, specifically, how much worse off he was later in his life than at earlier times. To see this, imagine how different the narrative would be if we assumed the contrary, if we assumed that Simpson's well-being remained high throughout his life. Then we would not see the other changes in his life in such a negative light. In short, Simpson's level of synchronic well-being early in his life does as much to frame his public downfall as does any particular event.

We can see the instability problem by asking: on Dorsey's view, exactly how well was Simpson faring at the time he won the Heisman? If we ignored subsequent events, we would likely reach the conclusion that Simpson had a quite high level of well-being at that point. But, on Dorsey's view, we must evaluate that earlier time from the standpoint of subsequent events—including, of course, Simpson's public downfall. Taking the downfall into account entails a reduction in Simpson's Heisman era well-being level, compared to what the level would have been without the downfall. But this requires a reconsideration of Simpson's narrative, because it has turned out that Simpson had *not* such a high early level of well-being to frame his decline. Since

Simpson's decline is not as large, the narrative is not as tragic, and this adjusts upward, to some extent, his level of well-being at the time he won the Heisman. Of course, this also raises again the severity of Simpson's decline, which worsens the narrative and reduces his early well-being, thus reducing again the severity of decline. And so on. Thus, our evaluations of well-being, insofar as they play into important life narratives, manifest a bizarre sort of instability. Given that we had no reason to expect evaluations of well-being to have this sort of structure, this seems to me to be a *reductio* of Dorsey's view.<sup>15</sup>

## V. Another kind of synchronic well-being?

Back at the end of Section III, at the end of my exposition of the distortion problem, I mentioned a possible response on Dorsey's behalf. The idea was that even if synchronic well-being as he is conceiving of it is not satisfactory for characterizing the phenomena associated with SLH, we might well think of the shape of a life in terms of some alternative but related notion. It could be that, though *real* synchronic well-being is future-sensitive, what we are attuned to when we take note of the shape of a person's life is some non-future-sensitive sort of well-being. Perhaps we are attuned to pleasure or happiness, which might be just a symptom or maybe a component of synchronic well-being proper.

A similar sort of response might also be offered for each of the other two problems. Regarding the judgment problem: We might hold that it is not synchronic well-being proper that is the subject matter of our ordinary judgments and conversations about how well a person is faring.

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<sup>15</sup> To make matters worse, note that events at one point are not just related to events at *one* other subsequent point; they potentially stand in significant narrative relations to events at many points. So, imagine several instances of this recursive updating procedure running in parallel.

Rather, it is some thinner notion which, importantly, can be applied in a warranted way without attending to future contingencies. Similarly, with the instability problem: It might be that synchronic well-being proper does depend on narrative relations between present events and future events, but this synchronic well-being is not itself an element of our narratives. Insofar as our narratives take into account how well a person is faring, what is at stake is, again, some thinner notion.

I do not think this sort of response is incoherent, but I do not think it is right either. If we were to accept this response, we would be left with a vanishingly small role for synchronic well-being proper. In fact, it would really not do much for us at all. It is not the subject of our conversations. We do not commonly make judgments about it. It is not the key feature in the theoretically interesting shape of life phenomena. And, worst of all, it is not even involved in the valuable narrative relations that tie together the temporally separated events of our lives. So, it is really hard to see what a future-sensitive conception of synchronic well-being is good for—except for registering diachronic sources of value. But if what we want is a way to register diachronic sources of value, it seems to me more natural to do this with a conception of diachronic well-being—a conception of how well things are going for a person over time, including how good her life as a whole is for her.

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