



The View from everywhere: temporal self-experience and the Good Life

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Abstract

It is a common thought that our experience of self in time plays a crucial role in living a good human life. This idea is seen both in views that say we must think of our lives as temporally extended wholes to live well and those that say living well requires living in the moment. These opposing views share the assumption that a person's interests must be identified with either a temporally extended or temporally local perspective. David Velleman has argued that both perspectives are necessary parts of human experience, and each has its own independent interests. I agree with Velleman that our experience is inherently multi-perspectival but argue that there are more than two relevant perspectives and reject the claim that these perspectives have independent interests. Expanding his metaphor of narrative, I describe the way in which these perspectives continuously influence and affect one another, and suggest that living well can be understood in terms of skillful management of the perspectives that make up this complex form of temporal self-experience.

Keywords Personal identity · Narrative · Good life · Velleman · Temporality · Perspective

It is a common thought that our experience of ourselves in time plays a crucial role in living a good human life. This idea is expressed, for instance, by those who believe that living a good life requires us to experience ourselves as diachronically extended, focusing on the whole of our lives in determining how best to act (call this the “whole-life” approach). It is also expressed by those who hold that life is best lived in the moment and that we should endeavor to put the past and future out of play as much as we can, focusing only on the now (call this the “live-for-today” approach). While these two approaches are diametrically opposed in their advice on how to live well, they share two important assumptions: first, that humans can and do take two distinct temporal perspectives on their lives (that of the present and that of their life as a whole) and, second, that living well requires subordination of one

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of these perspectives to the other. In his influential paper “Well-Being and Time”, David Velleman denies the second of these assumptions. The temporally extended and temporally local perspectives are, he says, independent and necessary elements of human experience, each with its own interests. We cannot and should not choose one as representing the true interests of the person but must instead recognize the legitimacy of both.

While I think Velleman is right that both temporal perspectives are inherent features of human selves, I reject his claim that they are entirely independent and question the implication that there are *only* two relevant temporal perspectives within a life. I thus offer an alternative way of thinking about the good life for a person in terms of the interplay among multiple temporal perspectives. Section 1 provides a brief overview of the dispute between the whole-life and live-for-today approaches and lays out the central argument of “Well-Being and Time”. Section 2 uses Velleman’s central metaphor of narrative to challenge both the idea that human temporal perspective is binary and the claim of strong independence among our temporal perspectives found in his arguments. Section 3 develops these challenges, outlining a more complex and multi-dimensional picture of human temporal self-experience and its relation to the good life.

1 Two perspectives

Both the whole-life and live-for-today approaches have appeared in multiple forms throughout human history, and there is important heterogeneity within each approach. Here we need only the broad outlines of each. The whole-life approach tends to take one of two basic forms. One focuses on prudential reasoning and the capacity of humans to step back from the pulls of the moment to consider the consequences of following these impulses for the overall well-being of their lives as wholes. This allows us to forgo smaller pleasures now in favor of larger pleasures later, or to defer the satisfaction of immediate desire to obtain greater satisfaction overall. On this version, the whole-life approach takes the form of a theory of rational self-interest. The person is identified with the temporally extended being, and the interests of the person with the interests of the whole. Taking the temporally extended perspective and maximizing the well-being of the whole, allows us to live our best lives.

Another important version of this approach focuses on the way in which the ability to step back from our momentary impulses and think about what we want for our lives overall makes possible the complex plans, projects, commitments, and interpersonal relationships that give human lives depth and meaning (for examples see (Korsgaard 1989) (Wilkes 1997)). It argues that the activities and relationships we value most, those which give life its richness, require time. To undertake them, or even to conceive their possibility, we must thus understand ourselves as persisting beings, and coordinate our actions over a temporally extended span. The person is again identified with the temporally extended entity since these plans and projects belong to the extended self.

The live-for-today approach, by contrast, focuses on the way in which identification with the temporally extended perspective can be stifling and constrictive. By focusing on what has happened in the past or will happen in the future, we fail to be present in our lives as they are occurring. Instead of stopping to smell the roses, we are preoccupied with where we are going and where we have been. We can, moreover, become slaves to our plans and projects, losing perspective on whether we still believe in them, or they are any lon-

ger bringing us joy. As Galen Strawson, a proponent of the life-for-today approach puts it, “[t]ruly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound.”(2004, p. 449) The same general sentiment can be found many places. It is part of many traditions of Asian thought, as well as their popularized forms. It is present in works of Existentialism, and in slogans ranging from “*carpe diem*” to the recent “YOLO” (you only live once). This approach is often connected to the claim that the deep unity of a person over time is illusory, and that identification of the subject, and so of the subject’s interests, with temporally local experience leads to the best life. (In addition to Strawson see, e.g., (Parfit 1984))

Velleman argues that neither of these approaches can provide a full account of human well-being. His argument turns on showing that well-being in a life cannot be reduced to the sum of well-being at its moment and that momentary well-being cannot be calculated as a fraction of the well-being of the life of which it is a part. The dispute between whole-life and live-for-today theorists arises because there are two independent sets of interests that make up a human life and a legitimate and distinct calculation of well-being connected with each.

To show that whole-life well-being does not reduce to momentary well-being, Velleman asks us to consider two lives with the same absolute sum of pleasure or desire fulfilment but different trajectories. One involves a rocky start followed by hard work, which leads to success and satisfaction. The other starts with privilege and success but goes steadily downhill, ending in deprivation and disappointment. We are, Velleman says, likely to judge the first life to be better than the second. Since by hypothesis there is no difference in the sum of momentary well-being, the difference in welfare value between the two lives cannot rest on such a difference, but relies rather on facts about their shape, or trajectory, characteristics that apply to the life as a whole. The value of a *life* he thus says, is a “strongly irreducible” second order property.(1991, p. 58) It depends upon the “overall order or structure of events – on what might be called their narrative or dramatic relations.”(1991, p. 49).

This analysis is mostly an argument against a simple rational self-interest theory that advocates seeking a good life by maximizing the sum of well-being in the moments of that life. It may thus seem to be an argument in favor of the second broad category of whole-life approaches described above, which emphasizes the role of diachronically extended plans and projects in a good life. A view in which the value of a life inheres in its narrative shape is a version of this kind of view, and so Velleman’s account of the goodness of a *life* does fall into this category. Velleman insists further, however, that the goodness of a life (as a whole) does not tell us everything about the welfare of the person whose life it is.

If we are asking about human welfare and how it is to be maximized, Velleman says, the whole-life perspective is not the only relevant one. There is also the perspective of the moment, and “a person’s well-being at each moment is defined from the perspective of that moment...”(1991, p. 63) The well-being of the moment is no more a mere abstraction from diachronic welfare than diachronic well-being is a simple sum of momentary well-being. It is, he says, an “essential and significant feature of persons” that they are “creatures who naturally live their lives from the successive viewpoints of individual moments, as well as from a comprehensive, diachronic point of view.”(1991, p. 67) These are distinct perspectives, each of whose well-being must be calculated independently, and the quality of experience from each perspective is part of an individual’s welfare.

Velleman’s case for the momentary perspective as a legitimate viewpoint from which to calculate well-being begins with the observation that we can calculate welfare relative to a

particular context in a way that restricts the context within which the calculation is undertaken. The first part of the paper shows how the well-being of a moment cannot simply be added to that of other moments to determine the well-being of a life because in the context of an entire life the significance of the moment, and so the amount of well-being it contributes, can be altered by the narrative shape of the life as a whole. Here he emphasizes that the fact that although the significance and quality of a momentary experience may be revised when considered within the context of a life, this does not alter what was experienced at the moment. My well-being *right now* does not change because of what happens later, only its contributions to my life story. Momentary well-being is thus not determinable as a fraction of the goodness of a life but must be understood within the context of the moment.

This might initially seem to lend support to the whole-life approach by implying that a full picture of someone's welfare requires the temporally extended perspective; that it is a mistake to pursue optimal well-being at a moment, independent of the role that what happens at that moment will play later. This is basically the whole-life approach. Velleman denies this, however. The momentary perspective is, he says, despite its short duration, the perspective of an experiencing subject who can care about its own well-being. There is something that it is like for the person at a moment; the momentary subject can be better or worse off, and what happened before or will happen hence does not change the quality for the momentary subject now. For this reason, Velleman says, a person's synchronic interests strike him "as having an independent claim that is not necessarily overridden by that of his diachronic interests." This is because "a person himself has both a synchronic and a diachronic identity", and so the "evaluations of a single moment in someone's life needn't be less authoritative than those which are relative to the perspective of his life as a whole." (1991, pp. 66–67).

Well-being, for Velleman, is always relative to a perspective, and the momentary self is legitimately understood as the perspective of a subject. "By virtue of being who you are," Velleman says, "you unavoidably occupy successive momentary viewpoints as well as a diachronic one; and just as what's good from the latter view-point is good for you as protagonist of an ongoing life, so what's good from the former viewpoints is good for you as subject of successive moments within a state" (1991, pp. 67–68) Because of this "the value something has for someone in the restricted context of a single moment in his life is a value that genuinely accrues to him as the subject of that moment, even if interactions with events at other times result in its delivering a different value to him in his capacity as the protagonist of an entire life." (1991, p. 68).

This is a deep and important result, but its implications for living well are unclear. Velleman emphasizes that his analysis does not involve a defense or attack on any particular account of time preferences (1991, p. 68), and so does not deliver any immediate position on the dispute between the whole-life and live-for-today approaches. What he defends is only the position that it is characteristic of humans to have two distinct perspectives from which value can be assessed and that these can be in conflict. This leaves us with a puzzling question about what this looks like in both theory and practice. Velleman's argument for the autonomy of the two sets of interests invokes the idea that human persons have two identities and that at any moment there are two subjects of experience, the momentary self and the diachronic self, both of which are somehow me, and with both of whom I am to identify. It is not entirely clear how "I" can be *both* the momentary self and the diachronically extended

one, and even less clear how this dual identification is to be employed in deciding what to do.

In some respects, this is not a problem for Velleman. His subject is how we are to calculate the objective welfare in a person's life, and he makes no direct claim about what stance an individual should take in her own deliberations about how to live. Nonetheless, if he is correct in saying that human persons are made up of distinct subjects with legitimate and independent concerns for their well-being, this should have some effect on the principles of choice involved in attempts to live a good life. These effects are worth considering. Doing so will result in challenges to the strong independence of the two temporal perspectives claimed by Velleman¹.

2 Narrative and the moment

The problem before us is to explain how two distinct temporal first-person perspectives can be experienced by a single person. Velleman's emphasis on the role of the narrative shape of a life in evaluating diachronic well-being is helpful in finding such an explanation. The idea that our lives are narrative in structure has been an important part of the philosophical discussion of personal identity, where different proponents of the view have understood this claim in a wide variety of different ways.² In previous work I have developed a narrative approach and defended it against objections raised by Strawson and connected to his live-for-today approach (e.g., (1996), (2007), (2020)). Here I wish to emphasize particular features of the broader narrative approach I have taken, focusing on specific similarities with literary narratives. I begin with the idea that engaging a narrative as a narrative requires occupying multiple first-person perspectives at once. Peter Goldie (2012) offers a masterful account of how this occurs in both literature and life. To engage a piece of literature, he explains, is necessarily to entertain multiple points of view, simultaneously appreciating their distinctness and their interactions. In reading a novel, for instance, it is necessary to occupy the perspectives of different characters (some of whom know things that others do not), of the narrator (who may or may not be reliable), and of the author, all of which together create the reader's experience of the novel.

In narrative self-understanding, as in literary narrative Goldie says, there is a distinction between the point of view of the character and the point of view of the narrator even though

¹ There have been several important challenges to Velleman's claims about the temporal structure of our experience and its implications for wellbeing. To give a few examples, Bramble (2018) argues that there is only lifetime well-being. He not only denies the existence of momentary well-being, as I will also in the next section, but more generally the existence of a coherent notion of well-being for any period of time shorter than a life. Kauppinen (2020) argues that we need to think of the self as temporally extended in a way that complicates the idea of momentary well-being and argues in the direction of a more nuanced version of the second kind of whole-life approach described above. Dorsey argues directly that Velleman's observations about the importance of the shape of a life can be made compatible with the claim that diachronic welfare can be determined by summing synchronic welfare if we simply recognize that "the contribution to synchronic welfare of temporally discrete events or other goods in a life can be affected by the relations these temporally discrete goods and bads bear to other events, and so forth." (Dorsey, 2015, p. 326) Although the view I will offer overlaps in some ways with each of these accounts, it is markedly distinct from all of them, coming at the questions from a different direction. Unfortunately, space does not permit a discussion of points of overlap and difference.

² For a survey of the many forms this claim has taken see (Schechtman, 2011).

they are both, in some sense, the same person. “Someone who is internal to a narrative, having a role as a ‘character’ in the narrative, can also be external to it, having also the role of external narrator,” he says, “this is the case in autobiographical narratives, and also in autobiographical memories which are narrative in form.”(2012, p. 26) As an example, he imagines someone relating a story of a meeting: “I was humiliated in a meeting the other day, left feeling deeply embarrassed. But I now realize the way I was treated was inappropriate and unfair, and I am angry and resentful.”(2012, p. 38) To have this kind of memory, I need simultaneously to take the perspective of myself in the meeting, feeling the humiliation of the moment, and also to experience the anger I feel from now, where the interaction looks different. It is the juxtaposition of these perspectives that gives the memory the particular experiential character it has. James Wood also sees the multiple perspectives found in literature as a fundamental feature of our lives and of our self-experience. He speaks about the simultaneous “omniscience and partiality” he finds in literature and in life, describing this sometimes in terms of temporality. The novel, he says, is “constantly moving between secular and religious modes,” in its secular mode “it expands the instances of our lives into scenes and details, it strives to run these instances at a rhythm close to real time”. The novel’s eternal or religious mode “reminds us that life is bounded by death”(2013, p. 7) A life is made up of moments. The instances of the present are real, and live, and experienced as they happen, but they are experienced within the context of a life that someday will end.

The simultaneity of distinct perspectives that occurs in the experience of narrative and of life, on this picture, is not the mysterious juxtaposition of two distinct subjects of experience occupying a single consciousness. It is the structure of the experience itself, the way in which the “omniscient” and “local” perspectives affect and depend upon one another. Of particular significance here is the fact that we experience the present moment as part of an ongoing story. When we read a novel for the first time, we are not yet aware of the significance that particular events will have by the novel’s end, but we do know that whatever is happening is part of *this* narrative. We provisionally understand its significance in terms of what has happened so far and anticipate that its significance may change over time. The way we experience it on first reading may be different from the way we interpret it later, but the nature of the initial experience is already affected by what has come before, and by the fact that, because of the dual perspective described by Velleman, the events we encounter are experienced as a part of something bigger. Similarly, in a life the present is not experienced as a contextless moment, but as a time in an ongoing life. In this sense its character is not independent of the diachronic perspective in ways which (I will argue) matter for the question of temporality and the good life.

To see the nature and significance of this effect, it is helpful to consider Velleman’s discussion of creatures who have only a momentary perspective. At the end of “Well-Being and Time”, he compares the calculations concerning the welfare of a person with those concerning the welfare of a cow, which presumably cannot take a diachronic perspective on itself. Because of this inability to take a whole-life view, he says, there is no welfare pertaining to extended periods in the life of a cow and so “we should conclude that a cow can fare well or ill only at particular moments.” (1991, p. 70). This means that the totality of a cow’s life can have no value for the cow in the way that the totality of the life of a human can for the human.”(1991, p. 71) This presumably also implies that the moments of a cow’s life are markedly different from the moments of a human person’s life. Concern with the totality of one’s life is not something that occurs only when we “step back” and reflect on our life

trajectories. It is baked into the momentary experience of everyday life. Regret for the past, fear or excitement about the future, and awareness of the finitude of life are ongoing background conditions against which we experience the present, and in this way the perspective of the whole life is part of what gives the temporally local experience of human persons its character.

Velleman often refers to well-being in the present as “momentary well-being”. Presumably he does not mean this literally. A “moment” is not a duration that allows for any robust form of well-being. It is not clear that a desire could be experienced at a moment, let alone fulfilled or frustrated. The interests of “now” are typically things like binge-watching a favorite show, enjoying a third cocktail, or missing a strategically important business meeting to walk in the woods on a splendid summer day. When we focus on these interests we are not talking about the interests (or subject) of a moment, but of a considerably longer duration. While it may well be the case that the simple rational self-interest theories against which Velleman is arguing refer to the well-being of person time-slices or the equivalent,³ the actual conflicts we experience are between “the present”, which can be of different durations, and life as a whole.

This is something Velleman explicitly recognizes. He begins “Time and Well-Being” by noting that a “person can fare well either over an extended period or at a particular moment”, pointing out that “we speak of [a person] as having a good day, a good year, or a good life...” (1991, p. 48) Presumably, none of these periods can be reduced to a sum of the well-being of the moments that makes it up on Velleman’s account, but reference to periods other than a life are absent from subsequent discussion. It is not clear, therefore, whether he believes a day, or a week, has a narrative trajectory of its own, and if not what we are to say about well-being over those intervals. Moreover, each of these intervals can count as “the present” relative to others with respect to the conflict between present and longer-term interests. I might have something I wish to accomplish today, but right now feel like reading my murder mystery instead of getting to the task at hand. I might have plans for this week that would require me to accomplish something particular today but also wish to spend the day walking in the woods. The vacation I want to take now might make this month infinitely more tolerable but make the narrative trajectory of my college years worse.

Once we recognize that the period we are contrasting with the whole life must be of long enough duration for a notion of well-being to apply, the suggestion that the context of calculating its interests can be screened off entirely from other elements of the life with which it might interact becomes questionable. We can, of course, designate the endpoints of a temporal interval and make a calculation of someone’s well-being in terms of quanta of pain or pleasure or desires fulfilled or unfulfilled over that interval. This assessment might, as Velleman suggests, be all there is to say about a cow’s well-being in the present, and present well-being might be all there is for cows.⁴ For humans, however, even though current levels of pain and pleasure, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are undoubtedly part of her well-being at the time, they are not the whole of it, or at least the relevant kinds of pains and pleasures, fulfillments and discontents, are going to be more complicated in ways that necessarily make reference to the fact that they are part of an ongoing life. The context of the life in which the present occurs cannot be screened off entirely, without stripping away

³ Although, as I mention in footnote 1, there are by now several more complex views on offer.

⁴ I actually think these claims require more investigation, but grant them for the sake of argument.

much of what constitutes human well-being at a time, and the kind of temporally local experience and interests humans have do, in fact, make reference to such a context.

This is not to say, of course, that the details of each moment of a life directly affect the character of each other moment. Many details of our lives may be, in some sense, out of play in our current experience just as an earlier subplot may be out of play when we focus on major plot developments while reading a novel. I have argued elsewhere (Schechtman 2020), however, that human experience is framed overall by an understanding that one is living a single, finite life, and the claim is that the background awareness of this general fact affects the character of our experience even when we are very much immersed in the present (i.e., some relatively short interval of time). This is the force of the idea that “being in the present” is a qualitatively different experience for humans than it is for cows because its phenomenology includes awareness of suspending or backgrounding the extended view rather than the simple absence of such a perspective. An example of this effect can be found in Velleman’s account of why we tend to see events that occur later in life as bearing more significance than those that occur earlier. (1991, pp. 57–8) His suggestion is that we tend to give more weight to setbacks or triumphs that occur later in life because at that point more of our life story is already fixed and so there is less opportunity for the immediate implications of what happens then to be altered or reversed by what comes later. Events that occur later in a life therefore tend to tell us more about what kind of life it will be overall than those that occur earlier. To the extent that we do experience late-life failures and successes more acutely than those earlier in life for this reason, however, their late-life status and what it implies is integrated into the quality of experience at the “moment”. In feeling the disappointment so acutely now I am, implicitly or explicitly, recognizing this setback as one occurring late in my life, and so as one I am unlikely to be able to undo. The intensity of my temporally local interest in succeeding (compared to that at earlier times) depends upon my contextualizing it to the life stage I am in and the significance of that fact for my whole life. The two cannot be completely disentangled.

There may be some relatively rare instances where this background awareness of living an ongoing, finite life is fully absent, under the influence of certain psychoactive drugs, for instance, or during meditation or in a sensory-deprivation tank.⁵ I have no issue with allowing this. What I wish to emphasize, however, is that the character of such experiences is different from the kind of “living in the present” we are talking about when we decide to take a dream vacation even if it will cause financial difficulties later, or to explore a relationship

⁵ I am extremely grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need not to overstate the dependence of every temporally local experience on the perspective of the whole life, and for helping me see the need to clarify the claim I am making here. What I want to say is influencing our temporally local experience, at least of most of the time, is not everything that has transpired in our lives or is expected to, but rather a more general awareness of living a life, which provides context for present experience. It may clarify to briefly discuss two examples the referee offers as cases in which positive experiences are not connected to this larger perspective. The examples are drug experiences and “idle pursuits such as playing games when one knows one should be working.” I see the former as potentially a genuine example of the broader perspective being absent. The latter, however, is not. Knowing that one should be working is a connection to the broader perspective and, ultimately, to the background awareness that there is only so much time in life and it is being spent now playing games instead of doing something else. Playing games may be absolutely the right choice to make in terms of pursuing a good life, and background awareness of the broader perspective need not interfere with enjoyment of such pursuits. Indeed, part of the pleasure of playing games is often that one is doing it *instead of* working; it is a respite. Similarly, part of the pleasure of a vacation is that it is a hiatus from routine. This is all perfectly consistent with seeing it as part of one’s ongoing life; in fact it can only have this character if it does include that perspective.

that may well lead to heartache. To the extent that part of the value and pleasure of being in the now is that it allows us to step outside of the demands of longer-term goals and commitments, it involves recognizing ourselves, at least implicitly, as beings that have such goals and commitments, which we are allowing ourselves to suspend.

The metaphor of perspective is useful here. One way of changing perspective is through a shift in attention or focus. In looking at a forest scene, I might focus on one flower, or a patch of sunlight, letting the rest of the scene blur into background, or I might take in the scene as a whole. In reading a novel, I might concentrate on the beauty of a particular passage, or I may be swept away by the plot and keep my focus at the level of unfolding events. And in living my life I might immerse myself in the joys or worries of the present or think about my life as whole and how it is progressing. Either way, the attention I am paying is being paid right now. When I “step back” to think about my whole life I do not actually step outside of time. Whether the temporal whole or the temporally local is foregrounded, both are present in my overall experience. The intelligibility and character of “now” is understood differently because of this background awareness just as a paragraph from a novel would be experienced quite differently if given completely out of context than it would be in the course of reading the novel in which it is included. We can, moreover, “step back” to different distances with different effects, meaning that there are not just two, but many perspectives at work, implicitly, or explicitly, shaping our experience.

It is in this sense that we hold multiple perspectives at once, and it is for this reason that I reject the claim of strong independence between the perspective of the present and the whole-life perspective urged by Velleman. My suggested approach does not presuppose a different subject for each perspective, so while our experience is multi-perspectival, it is not the experience of many subjects. What remains is to consider what this implies about the good life.

3 Time and the Good Life

Reflection on Velleman’s observations and my challenges to them suggests an alternative framework for thinking about temporal perspective and the good life. I conclude with a preliminary sketch of this alternative. The dispute between the whole-life and live-for-today approaches is in some sense about the unit whose goodness should be pursued in seeking a good life; is it that of the present self or of the whole life? Velleman suggests both are units whose well-being is pertinent to the welfare of a human person but does not tell us anything about how to pursue well-being given that fact. He would, as I understand him, see this question as misposed. There are two, incommensurate, perspectives from which the question of welfare can be asked and no more comprehensive perspective from which to raise the broader question.

My challenges to Velleman’s binary opposition between a “momentary” self and a whole life, together with my argument that different perspectives are not as fully distinct as he suggests, implies a way of thinking about a more comprehensive unit whose welfare can be evaluated and sought, and so a way of thinking about the good life for human persons that does not fracture in the way Velleman suggests, nor require us to choose one perspective for our focus as the traditional approaches do. This alternative rests on a distinction between what I will call the “entirety” of someone’s life and, following Velleman’s usage, someone’s

“whole” life. To see this distinction, we can return to Velleman’s invocation of narrative in connection with our evaluation of whole lives. In some ways, my arguments of the previous section suggest that the picture of narrative employed is oversimplified, at least for the purposes it is meant to serve. The “narrative structure” of a life as Velleman describes it amounts to something like the plot of a life story. In thinking about the evaluation of something as complex as a human life, however, a more robust understanding of narrative structure is called for.

It will be helpful to discuss what this means in the context of aesthetic evaluation before applying the lessons this provides to the case of human life. Consider a novel. There is a straightforward sense in which the “whole” novel is the plot from start to finish. If I am to give a precis of the whole novel, that is what I would summarize, rather than a chapter or passage. There is another sense, however, in which it is misleading to say that all there is to *Moby Dick* or *War and Peace* is the plot. If we are evaluating these novels as aesthetic objects, a plot summary, no matter how detailed, is not going to give us what we need. We will want also to look at the prose, zeroing in on particular passages that are especially salient or brilliant, at the characters and the way they develop, at the structure of individual chapters, and how they inform, enrich and resonate with one another, and we will want to understand themes that are exhibited not just by the plot, but also in individual sentences or descriptions or characters, and mutually reinforced by all these elements.

A novel is a multi-dimensional object. The different dimensions can be distinguished and may have different kinds of virtues that can pull in different directions. A brilliant piece of prose might ruin the flow or coherence of a plot; while confused plotting might diminish the luster of a passage. To understand or evaluate a novel, we are ultimately interested not only in the quality of these individual dimensions, but in the ways they inform and interact with one another. This means that critics need to look at the novel from multiple perspectives, involving different scales. When we do this, the alternating perspectives will interpenetrate one another. It is a commonplace that a great work of art is one to which one can keep returning and each time find something new. One reason for this is that each engagement, from whatever perspective, enriches whatever perspective we take when we revisit it. Having pondered the overall structure of the plot one can appreciate in a new way how an individual passage contains intimations of the whole. Having spent time unpacking an especially rich paragraph the significance of the overall plot is better understood. Each perspective, once taken, adds something to the others so that what emerges goes beyond any particular perspective, even that of the “whole”, which is itself only one of the many perspectives we can take on a work. In the aesthetic realm, what I am calling the “entirety” of the work is the mutually interacting set of perspectives and the experience of a complex unity to which they give rise.

In a good work of art, the different elements and perspectives support and illuminate each other, producing an experience of a unified work with aesthetic coherence or cohesion. In a bad work, they may be diffuse and unconnected, or undermine and confuse each other. Either way, there is an experience of the entirety, in which they remain distinct but interdependent, and which is not reducible to any single perspective or even the collection of them all. Because we take multiple temporal perspectives on our lives and because they inform and influence each other, we can distinguish between a “whole” life and the “entirety” of a life along the lines of that between a “whole” novel and the entirety of the novel as an aesthetic object. The experience of the entirety of a life is found in what emerges from the

multiple temporal perspectives we inhabit as they inform and alter one another. Evaluating a life, like evaluating an aesthetic object, will thus involve considering it from multiple perspectives, not just once or in succession, but regularly shifting back and forth, foregrounding the view from different temporal standpoints at different times in ways that make each somewhat different for having experienced the others.⁶

So far, the question of what makes a good novel, or life, has been discussed from the point of view of a critic, evaluating a completed life or work or art in its entirety. This is the point of view to which Velleman's analysis is addressed. It is important to remember, however, that a good novel is not just one that rewards critical evaluation. Good novels should also be good to read. It is in this context that the role of temporality, is perhaps seen most clearly. It is a common characteristic of many of the best novels that we are simultaneously anxious to see how things turn out ("I couldn't put it down") and wish that the process of their unfolding would never end. These two desires, although they pull in opposite directions, are usually connected. We care about how things turn out because we are invested in the characters and their vicissitudes. If we are not interested in the people and events depicted as we read along, we will not be in a hurry to get to the end but are more likely to just stop reading.

We do not, however read a novel, at least not a good one, only to find out what happens in the end. If that is all we are after, we can read the online summary or skip to the end. If we do that, we will miss most of the substance of the novel and probably undermine most of our reasons for caring about what happens. It is our engagement with the characters and events which, through the way we are drawn into the details of individual passages and chapters, makes us so anxious to know how things turn out in the first place. It is equally true, however, that the individual passages and events get their urgency and significance from the fact that they are part of an unfolding plot, even if the full details of that plot are not yet known to us as readers. In a good novel, the experience of reading through it in time is rewarding and continues to be so after we finish the novel and can appreciate the entirety more fully. A good novel stays with you when it is finished not just because you now know the whole story, but because of the words, events, and characters that make it up. The entirety of a novel, in my sense of the term, cannot be grasped all at once. It emerges only by experiencing the complicated ways in which individual passages and plot, appreciated on their own, all inform and support one another. This does not need to be explicitly thought or articulated, as a critic would; it is simply there in the inherent tension between omniscience and partiality (or the eternal and secular modes of a novel) Wood describes. This is not, however, a tension that undermines the integrity of the novel. To the contrary, this tension is a constitutive part of the novel in its entirety.

It is not difficult to find analogues of these phenomena in life (although there are, of course, important disanalogies). The simultaneous desire for time to speed up, so that we can see how things turn out, and slow down, so that what is happening never ends, is common. We want our children to grown up, but also to stay young; for a holiday to come, but also for the time of anticipation to stretch out; to receive a degree and start a career, but for

⁶ The spirit of my proposal here, and the picture of the good life it generates, is very much in the spirit of the picture of the good life proposed in Valarie Tiberius' wonderful work on related questions of perspective, e.g., (2005) I do not have space to give this work its due, nor to discuss the points of overlap and divergence of our positions. For here I just note that Tiberius discusses practical perspectives rather than temporal ones, and while she might allow that perspectives influence one another this is not a main focus of her work.

school days never to end. The tension between the eternal and secular modes is, in this way, present in our lives as well as in the novel. In a good life, as in a good novel, the different perspectives inform and enrich one another in a way that gives them greater depth and significance at every time scale, yielding a life worth living.

Because we are not like cows as Velleman describes them, the kind of tension between omniscience and partiality described above is an inherent feature of our existence. Living a good life, I am suggesting, involves managing this tension well. Of course, this will look somewhat different in a life than in a novel, and I have no explicit account to give of exactly what it does look like (any more than there is a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a good novel). It may help, however, to think about an example. Consider a common attitude (at least among those who enjoy their days at university) of both wanting school to be over so that the next phase of life can begin, but also wanting not to leave these days behind. Focusing too much on the desire to move on puts us in danger of failing to truly appreciate and experience these years as they are happening. Focusing too much on the school years will leave one unprepared for the inevitable transitions, not just in the sense that we have not planned what comes next, but also in that it provides no way to hold on to these years by integrating them into a broader whole and so disconnects us from them more thoroughly than is necessary.

The kinds of interpenetration between shifting temporal perspectives described in the last section shows a way in which these tensions, though never fully resolved, may nevertheless be part of a harmonious entirety. The recognition that my university days are preparing me for adult life can give them a significance that goes beyond what they contain outside of the immediate context, one that is not only experienced later when plans come to fruition, or only when I reflect, but is a regular and persistent feature of the local experience I wish to continue. This interpenetration, at its best, can provide encouragement and support for the periods where studies seem like a slog, while simultaneously reminding us that this period is limited (perhaps, with prospective nostalgia, making me fond of the slog itself, not as a means of getting somewhere else, but as part of the school years I will one day miss). This may allow me to enjoy and appreciate these moments all the more, even as I look anxiously to the future.

I acknowledged earlier that there are important discontinuities between life and literature. Some of these have been noted, but more emerge when we recognize that in living, we do not, as in reading, merely wait to see what happens next; we play a role in determining it. In this respect our role is more like that of author, and if our question is how to *lead* a good life, this is an important role. We do not, however, have the same level of control over events in our lives that authors have over the events in their novels. We cannot determine everything that transpires and, frequently, do just need to wait and find out what life has in store for us. In the context of the novel, an author will need to move back and forth between plans for the book as a whole and the creation of individual passages, chapters, or characters. A plan is needed to get going, but the production of individual passages will almost certainly lead to revision of the plan. Rereading what is written so far will occasion some rewriting or reorganization of what is already written. This is the kind of work that brings the various elements into the kinds of harmonious relations that generate a novel which is good in its entirety.

The analogy is useful but, as previously noted, only gets us so far. Authors of novels can literally strike or rewrite an earlier passage and we cannot do this in the same way in

our lives. The description I just gave of the way in which different temporal perspectives can influence one another does, however, suggest a way in which we can do something relevantly analogous. We can and do revisit and reengage the past via memory and take alternate perspectives via counterfactual thinking and imaginative projection into the future, actively shifting perspectives.⁷ In this way, we employ something like the feedback loop authors use in crafting a novel in our efforts to create a life that is harmonious in its entirety. Understanding this allows this approach, unlike Velleman's to provide insight relevant not only to evaluating a good life, but to endeavoring to live one.

To see how this works, consider not the happy university student described above, but instead a medical student who is faced with the prospect of needing to stay at university during break and study for difficult and boring exams rather than taking an exciting holiday with friends. On Velleman's approach, the interests associated with the perspectives are incommensurate, and there is no global standpoint from which to consider which to pursue. My suggestion is that inhabiting multiple standpoints can provide a means of addressing such conflicts with an eye toward a life that is good in its entirety. The longer-term perspective, for instance, might be recruited to mitigate the frustration and resentment of having to miss the trip. It will still be disappointing, but with a lively evocation of the current moment as not just missing fun for tedious study but as movement on a trajectory toward a desired outcome (something not just known, but experienced in inhabiting the long-term perspective), this student might feel the satisfaction associated with that goal right now, alongside the disappointment, as Lady MacBeth, anticipating her new station in life, feels "now the future in the instant." (Shakespeare 1974, p. 1316)) In this way the interests of the whole life are experienced as interests now, leading to a more harmonious entirety.

There are other possible outcomes, however. It may be that focus on the broader view fails to energize or lighten the present, yielding nothing but a deep despair and gloom that is becoming persistent and difficult to withstand. Such a case might lead the student to reconsider if it is worth it to be a doctor. She might take her current state as evidence that she does not really want to be a doctor at all. Or she might continue to think that ultimately becoming a physician would be rewarding, or that a trajectory leading to such a career is a pleasing one for a life, but nonetheless conclude that suffering depression and misery through most of her young adulthood to get there is such a blight that it would make her life in its entirety better to quit medical school now and find new long-term goals, even if doing so is risky and generates a fair bit of upheaval.

In the first outcome, some tension persists, but it is compatible with a broader harmony between present and longer-term perspective to improve her present experience. In the second, the student discovers not only tension, but disharmony between these perspectives which leads to revision both of what she is doing now and of the interests associated with the longer-term perspective. There are, many other possible outcomes, depending on multitudinous details, which might involve different forms of compromise or reciprocal impact among the perspectives that could make the entire life more harmonious in the relevant sense (e.g., maybe she goes on the vacation while recognizing that it may delay or dampen progression toward long-term goals because a life needs to be good to live as well as to evaluate externally). The general point is that in lives as they are lived, there is not a fixed long-term perspective and an unalterable present which are sharply cut off from one another.

⁷ The extent to which we do this and its importance in our cognitive functioning is a topic that has received a great deal of attention in cognitive neuroscience lately. See, for instance, (De Brigard, 2018)

There are instead multiple interlocking perspectives that constantly inform and modify one another in ways that can, if managed skillfully, establish harmonious relations among them that make life better.

It is not always possible to do this well. Sometimes external events and limitations are so extreme that all we can do is try to make things somewhat better. With luck, however, one can live a life in which one can't wait to get on to the next stage but also wants the current one to go on forever, and about which one can feel satisfaction with respect to the entirety. This form of satisfaction is consistent with a life which ends with more to say and do. Lives do not have to be tied up in a tidy way, or end on a high note, to be satisfying and meaningful human lives. A good life is good to have lived through in the "secular" mode, and meaningful in the "eternal", a possibility allowed by the peculiar temporality of our self-experience.

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