

## Why the Shape of a Life Matters

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It is not unusual, I think, for someone to want to improve her life. On the face of it, this is different from wanting some particular thing or experience. Your life, as a whole, could be better. Not just better morally speaking, but a better life *for you*. But what would that amount to? For most philosophers, the answer seems obvious. Improvement means simply having *more* good things in your life, whether what is good for you is pleasure, desire-fulfilment, or maybe rational activity. How well you do over the course of a life, its *global* prudential value, is a function of how well you do at the various individual moments that make it up, its *local* prudential value.

Others, however, deny this. From Brentano to David Velleman, a minority tradition in ethics has argued that it is not just to sum total of good things in life that matters to how well a life goes, but also the *shape* of that life. The intuition that these philosophers share is that keeping other things constant, it is better to live an improving life than a deteriorating one. But why is this, and what is improvement in the first place? Velleman talks suggestively about narrative significance, but does not articulate any criteria for it, or explain why it matters to well-being. My thesis is that it is the *meaningfulness* of a life that explains why its prudential value is not reducible to a sum of local goods. A life that is good for you is not just full of good things but it also has a point or direction. Because it moves ahead in a particular way, it is such as to merit pride on your part and inspire others. The appropriateness of such feelings is just what meaningfulness in the relevant sense consists in, I argue. What *makes* a life meaningful is the shape of the path that it takes. Here I draw on narratological theories and Susan Wolf's work to outline a conception of meaningfulness that I call the Dynamic

Fitting Fulfilment view. According to it, what makes a chapter of a life (roughly, a particular configuration of projects and relationships) meaningful is that its plot approximates the ideal of testing one's essential human capacities in a successful, wholehearted pursuit of truly valuable goals with the support of others. For a life as a whole to be ideally meaningful is for such chapters to build on one another to give the whole a progressive shape. This account both explicates the relevant sense of improvement and explains why it contributes to the prudential value of a life.

### **The Shape of a Life**

It is hedonists, both in philosophy and psychology, who have been the most explicit in claiming that the value of a life is a function of how well it goes at particular moments. (No doubt this is because unlike other good things, pleasures and pains have an unambiguous temporal duration.) As Fred Feldman puts the claim:

The intrinsic value of a life is equal to the sum of the intrinsic values of the minimal episodes of intrinsic attitudinal pleasure and pain contained in the life. (Feldman 2004, 129)

An experience's contribution to global value of a life thus depends only on its intrinsic quality, not on events with which it is connected or other experiences related to it. As another hedonist, Daniel Kahneman, argues, "the contribution of an element to the global utility of the sequence is independent of the elements that preceded and followed it" (Kahneman 2000).

The plausibility of this hangs on the idea that insofar as "*all* the effects of the order of events are already incorporated into moment-utilities, separability can be assumed for these moment-utilities" (ibid.). Incorporation into moment-utilities means that, for example, anticipation of future events or regret about the past is included among the factors constituting present moment-utility.

Many people, however, share the intuition that there is something wrong with this picture. David Velleman and many others like Franz Brentano, Noah Lemos, and Michael Slote believe that *order matters*. As Brentano puts it,

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. (quoted in Chisholm 1986, 71)

Brentano terms this the principle of *bonum progressionis* or *malum regressus*. If the shape of a life is such that things improve for the individual, it is better for her than if things get worse, even if it contains the same amount of goods. Velleman accounts for this in terms of two mutually irreducible dimensions of prudential value, synchronic and diachronic, both of which contribute to the individual's well-being. The latter consists in second-order goods to do with the "temporal distribution of benefits" (Velleman 2000, 71). If this is true, a person's well-being over a period of time is *not* just a function of momentary benefits, but depends also on their trajectory. So say that in Life 1, the agent-relative utility of period A is -4 and that of subsequent period B is +8, and in Life 2, the agent-relative utility of A is +8 and that of B -4. On the simplest version of the shape of a life view, Life 1 is better than Life 2 in virtue of the temporal distribution of benefits within it.

But why should it matter when good things happen in a life? While Brentano is content to appeal to intuition, Velleman suggests that this is because of the "narrative significance of the events with which they are associated" (Velleman 2000, 72). This calls for clarification. Suppose first that the high utility over period B in Life 1 is the result of a mere fluke:

*Life 1: Sheer Luck*

I kick around aimlessly, until by chance I find a million dollars erroneously left in the open trunk of my car by a drug dealer who gets shot by the police a moment later, and have the time of my life, paying off my debts and sampling the world's art treasures escorted by my posse.

If narrative significance matters, then it is possible for a life to be even better if the same temporal distribution of quantitatively identical benefits and harms results from, say, hard work, as in the following:

*Life 3: Hard Work*

I receive a million dollars as an award for my hard work on the narrative and meaningfulness and have the time of my life, paying off my debts and sampling the world's art treasures escorted by my posse.

For the distribution of benefits and harms in these lives to be quantitatively identical, we must assume, of course, that pride for my success etc. are included within the period utility of B – perhaps that the contribution of a sense of success in Life 3 and that of joy for serendipity in Life 1 are equal. For simplicity, I talk about synchronic benefits and harms in broadly hedonistic terms here.<sup>1</sup>

Assuming Hard Work is intuitively better for me than Sheer Luck, narrative significance can make independent contribution to the value of a life for the individual. An event does not make your life better just by causing pleasure, but also by moving your story ahead. Thus, it seems that Velleman's picture, an individual's well-being over time is influenced by three separate things, only one of which is the sum of experienced utilities: the amount of momentary well-being, the narrative significance of events related to them, and the temporal distribution of momentary well-being.<sup>2</sup> But why stop here? Does the *temporal distribution* of benefits really do any work? Velleman does seem to be committed to it – after all, he defines diachronic value as a “second-order good”, “a valuable state of affairs consisting in some fact about other goods” (Velleman 2000, 69). The other goods here are

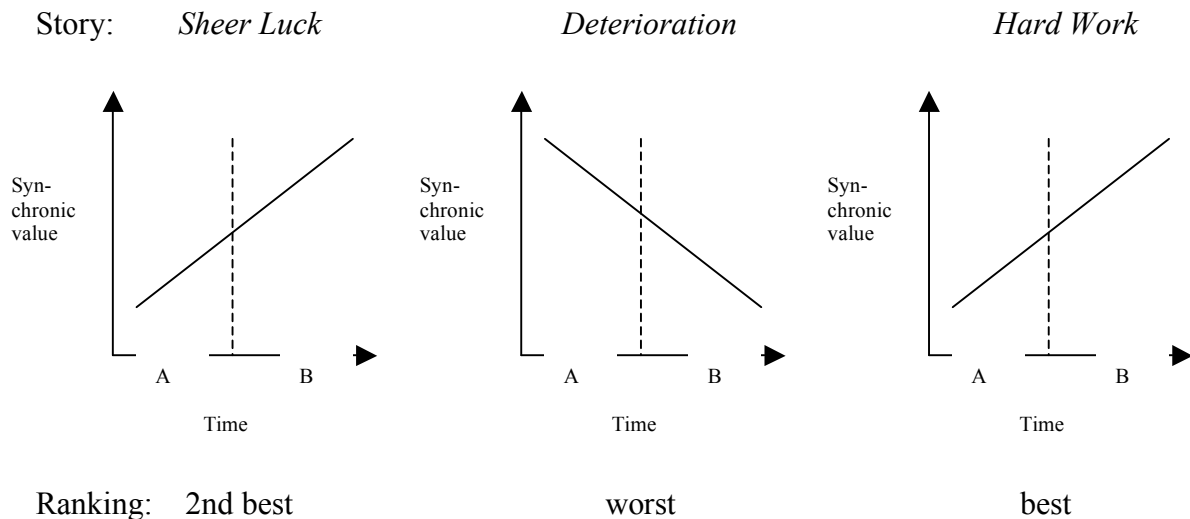
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<sup>1</sup> To make the case against synchronic perfectionists, for example, we would need two cases with equal amounts of, say, rational activity, but different narrative structure.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example the following passage: “How the value of one's life is affected by a period of failure combined with a period of success, for example, cannot be computed merely from the *timing of these periods* and the *amounts of well-being* they contain. Their impact on the value of one's life depends as well on the *narrative relations* among the successes and failures involved. (Velleman 2000, 72, all emphases mine)

momentary benefits. What, then, is the fact about these goods that grounds the second-order value? It cannot be narrative significance, since that is a property of *events*, not the value associated with them. If the temporal distribution matters, it must be for some other reason.

The picture we have so far is in effect the following:



On Velleman's view, as I've reconstructed it, total well-being is highest in Hard Work in virtue of the relationship between events (effort leading to success) *and* the temporal ordering of (average) utilities at A and B (the "second-order good"). But it seems that the latter condition is redundant. For consider Life 4 with a similar temporal distribution of benefits as Deterioration, but a different narrative structure:

*Life 4: Noble Failure*

You've been running a hospital for the poor in Africa, deriving a certain amount (+8, naturally) of personal utility from it, but one day it's overrun by government troops on a rampage, leaving it and you in a state of disarray (at the cost of -4 for you personally).

You tried your best and did what there was to be done, but, inevitably in the present conditions, you failed. Is it necessarily the case that your total well-being during the period comprising A and B is lower in Life 4 than, say, in Life 1? Could not Noble Failure be better

for you than Sheer Luck? It seems that it could. Remember that the sum total of momentary benefits is the same; what is different is the narrative structure (which favours, for as yet unexplained reasons, Noble Failure) and the temporal ordering of benefits (which, if it plays any role, favours Sheer Luck). Here, it seems, we should intuitively go with the better story rather than with the good following the bad.

What these considerations highlight is that there are in fact two rival conceptions of what makes for the shape of a life. First, there is what we may call the *hedonic shape* of a life, the temporal distribution of good and bad experiences within it. When Feldman responds to the Shape of a Life objection to hedonism, it is clear from his examples that it is the hedonic shape that he has in mind (Feldman 2004; note the talk about ‘hedonic trajectory’ on p. 131), and the same goes for Kahneman and his colleagues. But as the above cases suggest, it is not really the *hedonic* shape that makes the difference, but the *narrative shape*. That is, it’s not that the first life gets better rather than worse (in terms of momentary benefit) that makes the person better off but the underlying narrative. Even the difference between Sheer Luck and Deterioration isn’t really due to the fact that utility decreases over time in the latter, but the difference in their underlying stories (whatever they exactly are.)

This leaves us with a number of questions. Why does narrative shape matter? What sort of life story is good for the protagonist? These are the questions I will try to answer in the following. What I want to say is that Noble Failure can be a better life for you than Sheer Luck because it can be more *meaningful*, and meaningfulness is a function of the plot of your life.

## The Concept and Conceptions of Meaningfulness

I will take it for granted here that other things being equal, living a more meaningful life is better for you than living a less meaningful one – that is, meaningfulness is a constituent of well-being. In the next section, I will defend a particular conception of what makes a life meaningful. But before that, it is good to stop and ask what we are saying of a life when we say it is meaningful – that is, what the *concept* as opposed to a conception of meaningfulness is in the context of talking about lives. The general outline of the issue is clear: a meaningful life is one that has a purpose, a point, a direction. It has a kind of depth, as opposed to shallowness. But can we spell it out any further? Clearly, life doesn't have a meaning like words or signs do. Rather, when people are concerned about meaningfulness, they worry about whether anything is really worthwhile. Perhaps controversially, I believe this concern can be unpacked a little further by thinking about what we mean when we say that an object or a place is meaningful for us. A monetarily worthless brooch inherited from a grandmother is meaningful for us, we say, when it is such as to give rise to affectively charged memories and emotions. It's not indifferent to us. In the same vein, we say that a fling is meaningless, even if it is pleasurable, if it does not engage our emotions.

Following these clues, I want to say that someone's life is meaningful in the relevant sense when certain emotions and attitudes are not out of place. Emotions and attitudes that are thus conceptually linked to meaningfulness seem to include pride, joy, a kind of hope, self-confidence, and self-esteem on the part of the agent, and admiration and inspiration on the part of others. For short, I will talk about *feelings of fulfilment and admiration*. This view of meaningfulness fits common intuitions well. Think about someone whose life is paradigmatically meaningful, say Martin Luther King. Would it not have been appropriate for him at the end of his life to feel a kind of pride for the path he had taken and what it had led

to, whether or not he actually did feel it? Would it not be proper for anyone to be inspired by his story, whether or not they actually are? I wager that the same goes for anyone whose life we think as meaningful. By contrast, meaninglessness goes together with the absence or inappropriateness of such reactions. This is manifest, for example, in the lines of Robert Frost's poem describing the sad existence of a dying ranch hand: "And nothing to look backward to with pride/And nothing to look forward to with hope"<sup>3</sup>. If there is no room for such emotions in the hired hand's life, there is nothing much at stake in his going on living. If human life in general is meaningless, we're all in that predicament, whether we think so or not – feelings of fulfilment and admiration are never *merited*.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, *makes* a life meaningful, such as to merit feelings of fulfilment and admiration? Answers to this question are *conceptions* of meaningfulness. One traditional conception appeals to serving a larger purpose, such as carrying out one's part in God's great plan. My account of the concept of meaningfulness makes it readily intelligible why this is a response to the question. For Abraham's life to be meaningful just is for feelings of fulfilment and admiration to be appropriate reactions to it. It makes sense to think that if he furthers God's plan for the world through his actions, they indeed are appropriate. His life has a purpose as a part of a greater purpose. The obvious problem with such hyperexternalist accounts of meaningfulness is that they depend entirely on there being such a larger purpose. If there is no God, or if She doesn't have a plan for each of us, everything is pointless. (Moreover, if God's purpose isn't good by some independent criterion, how could working for Her make pride appropriate?)

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, 'The Death of the Hired Man', online at <http://www.bartleby.com/118/3.html>.

<sup>4</sup> I am not here interested in the general or cosmological question about meaning of life, but only personal meaningfulness. If a particular person's life is meaningless, feelings of fulfilment and admiration are unwarranted in her case. If she does have those emotional reactions, we might say that her life *seems* meaningful to her – it seems to her that her life has a point or purpose, even if she never thinks of it in those terms. But if the emotions of fulfilment are out of place in her case, her life *is* not meaningful, or at least not as meaningful as it seems to her. Meaning in life, then, has a normative dimension. It is something about which we might be mistaken.

The traditional recoil is to go subjectivist instead, and insist that meaning is something each individual herself can give to her life. On Richard Taylor's well-known voluntarist version, our lives are meaningful when our heart is in what we do, for whatever reason. He goes as far as to suggest that the life of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological character, who was condemned to roll a rock up the hill until it rolled down and then begin again, would be meaningful if only the Gods were merciful enough to make him want to roll the rock! But of course, the voluntarist view is far too permissive, once we remember to disambiguate the notion of a life being meaningful *for* someone.<sup>5</sup> It may be that the Willing Sisyphus *finds* his life meaningful, but in truth it is the same old pointless drudgery.

The most promising available account of what makes a life meaningful is developed in Susan Wolf's recent work. To get at what makes lives meaningful, Wolf introduces a number of characters whose lives *lack* meaning in a variety of ways. First, there is The Blob, who "spends day after day, or night after night, in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies" (Wolf 2003 MS, 6). Such a life of hazy passivity and lack of achievement certainly seems to lack purpose and depth. But of course, as Wolf notes, mere activity as such does not make for a meaningful life. David Wiggins's now classic example of the pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs may serve as an example of a life that lacks meaning because it is Useless. This is also the predicament of Sisyphus rolling the rock. The problem with Useless characters is that the dominant activities of their lives are "pointless, useless, or empty" (Wolf 2003 MS, 7). They do not involve or produce anything that is of real value.

Wolf argues that though meaning cannot be created by mere act of the will, it does require a subjective element as well. Activity that serves valuable ends is no guarantee of meaning as such. For there is also The Alienated Housewife, who does the laundry, keeps the

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Kraut 2007 on 'good for'...

house clean, and takes care of the children in a myriad of ways, but whose heart just isn't in it. She "does not identify with what she is doing – she does not embrace her roles as wife, mother, and homemaker as expressive of who she is and wants to be." (ibid.) There's a sense in which her life is not meaningful for her, even if it is not without purpose.<sup>6</sup> Finally, and perhaps most controversially, even an otherwise meaningful life can turn out to be less so if the projects and relationships that are central to its meaning lead to *failure*. Imagine a scientist who spends twenty years on a research project, only to discover that a mistake early on means there is no hope of reaching the goal she has aimed for. There is a sense in which all that time and effort has been wasted. Even if the life, or that part of life, is not thereby rendered entirely meaningless, it is still less meaningful than it would be, had it been even a partial success.

If *The Blob*, *Useless*, *The Alienated Housewife*, and *Failure* show us what sorts of things are lacking in a meaningless life, a meaningful life will be one in which those things are present. There is activity rather than passivity, objective value rather than mere subjective investment, loving engagement rather than alienation, and success in central projects rather than failure. As Wolf summarizes these results, "a meaningful life is one that is actively and at least somewhat successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of positive value." As she puts it elsewhere, in a meaningful life *subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*. In her 2007 Tanner lectures, she calls this the Fitting Fulfilment view of meaningfulness (Wolf forthcoming). The Fitting Fulfilment view seems to do the best job of capturing our intuitions about meaningfulness, and it is hard to argue that meaningfulness in this sense isn't a component of well-being.

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<sup>6</sup> I am more sanguine than Wolf about the possibility of having a meaningful life without realizing it. Subjective attraction need not weigh as much as objective attractiveness, even if alienation undermines meaningfulness. As I see it, one can be non-alienated from one's activities without seeing their attraction or value.

## The Dynamic Fitting Fulfilment Conception of Meaningfulness

The problem with Wolf's account is that even though it gets much right about meaningfulness, it doesn't get *life* quite right. It is silent on how meaningfulness builds over time, focusing only on activities at a time. Here a passing remark by Alasdair MacIntyre is apt. He notes that when someone complains that her life is meaningless, "she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement toward a climax or a *telos*." (MacIntyre 1981, 202) A meaningless life is one that is not going anywhere, and with bad enough luck, also one where one has not arrived anywhere. Understanding the concept of meaningfulness in terms of the appropriateness of feelings of fulfilment and admiration buttresses this case. It should not be controversial that these are *narrative emotions* – they are clearly tied to goal-seeking, success, effort, and ability, as well as bringing about something valuable. For example, though pride in general is a broad notion that allows for many sources (such being proud of what one's countrymen did a hundred years ago), there is also a recognizable kind of pride, call it *agential pride*, that one cannot feel unless one sees oneself as the protagonist of a particular kind of story, in which one has successfully overcome a challenge in the pursuit of a valuable goal. Such an emotion is not merited, of course, unless one has actually done so – unless the story is a true one. This links meaningfulness and narrative together. In this section, I will outline what might well be called the Dynamic Fitting Fulfilment view of meaningfulness to indicate that it owes much to Wolf's pioneering work.

I will begin with a look at the notion of a life narrative and its components. Insofar as a 'narrative' is a story that is told by someone, it is potentially misleading to say that life has a narrative structure – a life is lived rather than told, as critics of narrative views of personal identity like to point out. But since I am not talking about personal identity, I am happy to

defend a more modest claim: life has an *essentially narratable* structure. We can tell true stories about lives, and employ narratological concepts to analyze certain features of our lives. That is, even before any storytelling, lives have a *plot* or (more unambiguously) a *fabula*, a sequence of connected events of which many *stories* or narratives could be told, by oneself or another.<sup>7</sup> When I talk about ‘narrative structure’, I refer (somewhat inaccurately) to the properties of the strictly chronological sequence at the level of the lived plot or fabula – the path that a life takes – rather than to any of the multitude of stories that could be told of a life.

The fundamental reason why life has a narratable structure is that as agents, human beings set goals for themselves in response to changes in their circumstances or themselves, and then take means to bring about the realization of those goals. Action is essentially *teleological*, directed toward a goal and undertaken for a reason. These familiar facts about action entail that actions, unlike other events, are essentially narratable. That is, every action could have at least a *minimal narrative*, a particular kind of representation.<sup>8</sup> A narrative representation necessarily has a temporal aspect. In this it differs from a description (like “Lisa’s shoes were red, shiny, and expensive”) or an argument (“William’s parents had died, so he was an orphan”), though both often feature as elements of a story. A narrative also differs from a chronicle, which is a mere listing of temporally distinct events (“In 1043, Vikings landed in York. In 1055, Redbeard was elected king.”). A minimal narrative thus consists of a presentation of a sequence of events that stand in some non-logical connection to each other. E. M. Forster’s famous example is “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” (Forster 1927/1956, 86). In this case, the connection between the events is explanatory and more specifically causal: the suggestion is that the king’s death caused grief for the queen, and the grief then caused her death. Notably, the suggested connection isn’t brutally

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<sup>7</sup> As Mieke Bal puts it, a fabula is “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (Bal 1985, 5). A story, in her terms, is the fabula presented in a certain way – from certain perspective(s), with a certain temporal ordering, rhythm, description of characters, and so on.

<sup>8</sup> In the following, I’m drawing especially on Prince 1983 and Bal 1985.

causal, however; the king's death makes it *intelligible* why the queen grieved, given that grief is a characteristic response to losing something dear. Now, the teleological character of action guarantees that some such intelligible connection obtains between the reasons, motives, and bodily movements involved – if John intentionally opens the door, say, he does it because of something temporally distinct, and perhaps achieves something else by doing it.

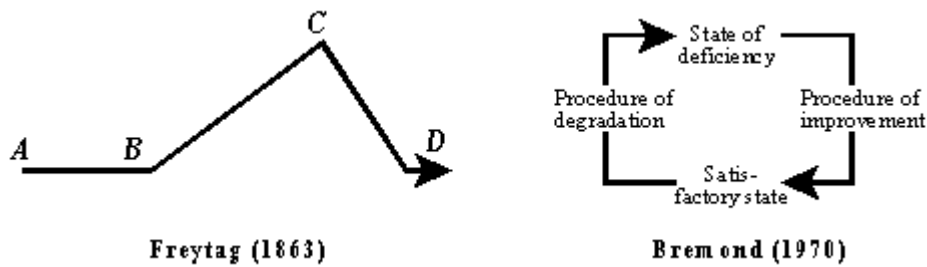
Isolated actions are rare, however, since we don't generally live our lives moment to moment. Let us use the term 'project' for a sequence of actions aiming at a goal at some significant temporal distance and involving a variety of plans and subplans. Undertaking a project involves a commitment of time and effort, so insofar as we're rational, we won't do it unless we regard the goal as worth it and our chances of reaching it satisfactory. It is a fact of life that getting valuable things generally takes time and planning, so we're constantly undertaking one project or another. Given that the goal is something valuable and we take some trouble to reach it, both success and failure can be expected to have emotional significance for us. Further, the outcome may exceed achieving or failing to achieve the original goal. Carrying out the project may change not just the world but the agent herself – it may lead to new knowledge and skills, and sometimes new preferences, including a different view about the value of the goal.

It is at the level of a project that the notion of a *plot* begins to apply, and with it the notion of a narrative trajectory or arc. There are, of course, many kinds of plot, but on a sufficiently abstract level of description, we find a non-accidental convergence among narratological models of basic plot structure common to folk tales, classical tragedies, many novels, and Hollywood movies.<sup>9</sup> An episode begins with a state of equilibrium. Then something happens that upsets the balance, and the protagonist has to do something to resolve the conflict. Undertaking this effort amounts to what is called rising action, which culminates

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<sup>9</sup> Insert refs...

in a climax, a decisive turn. This is followed by a denouement, reduction of tension and return to a state of equilibrium, or, if things go badly, a decisive failure.<sup>10</sup> In a plot that consists of several episodes, the end-state is the beginning of a new cycle. Bremond's graphical model of the narrative trajectory of folk tales summarizes this cyclical aspect nicely (from Jahn 2005)<sup>11</sup>:



As Aristotle emphasizes when he talks about tragedy being “an imitation (*mimesis*), not of men, but of action and of life”<sup>12</sup>, such a plot structure non-coincidentally corresponds to the structure of temporally extended human action. The following table sets out some of the parallels between a narrative and an episode that could be narrated:

	Beginning	Middle	End
<i>Narrative phase</i>	exposition, conflict	rising action	denouement/catastrophe
<i>Component of temporally extended action</i>	belief that p is the case, preference for not-p, belief that $\phi$ -ing is the best means for bringing about not-p, plan to $\phi$	$\Phi$ -ing/trying to $\phi$ , revising and refining plan in the face of obstacles and new information, forming sub-plans	success/failure – p or not-p, possibly new knowledge/preferences/skills, possibly unintended consequences

In this sense of episode, life as a whole has an episodic plot – that is, it consists of a large number of projects and pursuits that are rarely if ever directed at one overarching goal. These

<sup>10</sup> As Aristotle summarizes this basic arc in his *Poetics*: “Every tragedy falls into two parts – Complication and Unraveling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication; the rest is the Unraveling. By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune.”

<sup>11</sup> We should bear in mind that this really is a model of plot trajectory, not necessarily of its narrative representation. It is very common that the structure of the narration and the structure of the narrated don't match.

<sup>12</sup> *Poetics* ??.

projects are typically overlapping. On a given day, we pursue a number of longer-term goals – writing a paper, maintaining a relationship, learning violin, and so on. Some of these projects are more central than others, perhaps to the extent of defining who we are. At a given time, the projects that one is engaged in form a particular configuration, which may remain essentially the same for a long time – consider attending grad school, being a tenure-track professor, and so on. The same sort of aims and activities are central to one for the period. Typically, the relationships and the environment that form the background for the activities also remains the same. In such a case, I will talk about a *chapter* of a life.

### *From Narrative to Meaningfulness*

To articulate the narrative structure of an ideally meaningful life that could serve as a standard for assessing actual lives, I will begin with the simplest possible case and work toward a scenario closer to a full human life. So, let us first focus on a single episode and a single agent. What would have to be the case for life during that episode to be meaningful for the agent? Now, an episode typically begins when the agent perceives a negative change. Things could go wrong at this point already. Perhaps the agent's belief is false, or the preference mistaken. She sets out on a wild goose chase that turns out to be utterly pointless. Conversely, for the episode to be meaningful, the goal she sets for herself must be something that is truly worth bringing about, and something it is possible for her to bring about. Further, if the goal is set from without, by some other agent or institution, and the agent doesn't wholeheartedly embrace it, the project won't be as meaningful for her.

The next step in the plot sequence is 'rising action', carrying out the plan. At this point, I believe we should let loose our perfectionist intuitions. There's no pride or self-esteem to be had for doing something that is trivial for us, something that requires no special skill or effort. It is not a bad thing for us to cruise through *some* tasks, but those will not be

the ones that give meaning to our lives. For something to be an *accomplishment*, reaching it must require the exercise of our capacities, the fuller the more meaningful.<sup>13</sup> The need to push oneself means risk of failure is always in the picture, as are associated emotions. It is just not certain whether the goals will be achieved. Moreover, meaningful action itself is not a matter of carrying out pre-programmed steps. Often plans are incomplete, or the project simply faces unexpected obstacles, requiring intelligent re-evaluation of the situation.

Finally, the action results either success or failure relative to the aim. Either the valuable state of affairs is brought about or it isn't. As we saw, Wolf argues that failure in central projects can render someone's life less meaningful. There is something to this, but reaching the goal is not always as important. In some cases, merely having done one's best is a state of affairs that it is valuable to bring about. And as I've noted, the outcome of the project is not just changes in the world, but often also changes in the agent. Failure to reach the goal, or the goal turning out not to have been worth it, can be redeemed from the perspective of meaningfulness if the action leads to a desirable change in the agent, especially if it couldn't have been reached any other way.

In short, an episode involving only the protagonist and the natural world contributes most to the meaningfulness of her life if the goal is autonomously chosen, valuable and proportionate to the agent's capacities, the action involves full use of the relevant capacities, and the process leads to reaching the goal and positive changes in the agent. To talk about the meaningfulness of real lives, this account needs to be extended both *socially*, to cover the role of other agents and relationships, and *temporally*, to cover the fact that life consists of a large number of potentially overlapping projects.

So, first, other agents come into the picture in some way. Here, again, we can see a non-coincidental correspondence to narratological categories. The semiotician A. J. Greimas

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<sup>13</sup> This is why accomplishment is a relative notion – what is an accomplishment for one may be a cakewalk for another.

proposed that we can abstract six different functional categories of ‘actants’ into which all characters in a narrative fall – subject, object, sender, receiver, helper and opponent (Greimas 1970, xx).<sup>14</sup> In lived stories, too, another person may motivate one to undertake a project (Greimas’s sender), and someone else may share in the fruits of the labour (receiver). Perhaps more importantly, during the action, others may either further the pursuit (helper) or hinder it (opponent). From the perspective of meaningfulness, having ‘helpers’, people who work toward the same goal and may, depending on the case, share the goal, is both valuable itself and instrumentally useful for success. It contributes to meaningfulness as such along perfectionist lines, because having others working with you or supporting you allows you to exercise your social and emotional capacities.<sup>15</sup> And naturally, it makes success more likely.

Someone might object at this point that the account diminishes the importance of relationships to meaningfulness.<sup>16</sup> Aren’t love and friendship what give meaning to our lives according to our ordinary conception? Yet they can’t be construed as ‘projects’ without doing violence to all the notions involved. So what place does my account have for love? Well, to begin with, a relationship as such simply isn’t a story. The pursuit of a relationship is, as well as an effort to repair one. A loving relationship is something very valuable, and gives a point to many other activities that subserve it. (Love itself can, perhaps, confer value to something that otherwise lacks it.) It can thus be a crucial part of the *background* of a lived story. Without such a background, the path that one’s life takes would be less meaningful. So the Dynamic Fitting Fulfilment view does give personal relationships an important role in the meaningfulness of lives, even if it is an indirect one.

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<sup>14</sup> Greimas drew on Vladimir Propp’s famous study of Russian folktales. It may be worth noting that on Greimas’s model, one character can play several actantial roles, and there can be more than one character playing a single role. Moreover, in a literary narrative, actants need not be *agents* as such – a snowstorm or a recalcitrant desire can play the actantial role of an opponent.

<sup>15</sup> See Kraut 2007, ??.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Wolf raised this issue when we discussed an early version of my account.

Finally, the issue of the meaningfulness of an entire life requires us to look at the relationships among life's episodes and chapters. It could be that the episodes and chapters, though meaningful in themselves, are radically disconnected.<sup>17</sup> Or it could be that essentially the same episodes, the same tasks and activities in the same environment and calling on the same skills repeat themselves over and over again. In both of these cases, one might legitimately wonder if one's life has a whole has a direction or a point. Sense of pride and fulfilment could well be justly diminished by the realization that even success doesn't lead anywhere new. To some extent, even successful efforts that do not bear fruit for the future are wasted. Radically episodic or repetitive lives would be, at least, less than ideally meaningful. One way to capture this sense of lack would be to say that in an ideally meaningful life, all activities are subsumed under one valuable, overarching goal. (Something of this sort may be at play in MacIntyre's remarks.) But common sense and perfectionist intuitions militate against such monomania. Life could, it seems, be *too* unified, too single-minded. Such a life would not allow for the full use of our various capacities – sacrificing everything to the pursuit of the White Whale, whatever it may be, rules out cultivating friendships or nurturing children.

A more modest sort of unity *does* seem preferable to disunity, however. What I have in mind is the idea that life's episodes and chapters can *build on* each other. This can happen in a variety of ways. In the simplest case, one achievement paves the way for another by making the pursuit of new goals possible, as when finishing a dissertation leads to getting a job. More interestingly, we can *learn* from past episodes. The time will not have been wasted in any sense when it prepares us for future challenges. This is how even grand failures can contribute to meaningfulness.<sup>18</sup> Building on the past gives life a kind of progressive narrative

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<sup>17</sup> Galen Strawson famously claims that is the case with his life.

<sup>18</sup> Velleman's example of a failed first marriage is pertinent here. If it teaches something that makes a second marriage more successful, it turns out to have been "an edifying misfortune", which is "not just offset but

shape without any single overall goal or a ‘life plan’. Life moves ahead – it has a direction, and its activities have a point beyond the value of the goals they themselves embody.

What would a meaningful life look like on the Dynamic Fitting Fulfilment view?

Well, a paradigmatically meaningful episode might be successfully leading a raid to liberate a prominent scientist from the hands of the Nazis. A paradigmatically meaningful chapter might be the war years spent planning and executing such raids. A paradigmatically meaningful life might involve, among other things, a youth spent learning useful skills at school and college and playing games that call for intelligence and physical effort, young adulthood spent in the Commandos, a distinguished career in diplomacy using the skills and understanding acquired during wartime to make significant contributions to peace-making, and an old age spent making up for the costs of career by relaxing with grandchildren and passing on some of the lessons learned. Would not such a life have meaning, point, and purpose? Would not such a life be a fit object of pride, joy, fulfilment, self-esteem, and admiration? Would it not be a mistake to feel that one’s life was meaningless? Would it not be a good life to live?

## **Conclusion**

Let me recap the argument of this paper. I have assumed that meaningfulness is an aspect of well-being.<sup>19</sup> For a life to be meaningful is for feelings of fulfilment and admiration to be appropriate toward it. These are narrative emotions that find their place in the context of successful pursuit of valuable goals, especially when one’s projects build on one another over time and one grows as a person as a result. We are now in a position to see how the Dynamic Fitting Fulfilment View explains a variety of intuitions about prudential value. It explains

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redeemed, by being given a meaningful place in one’s progress through life” (Velleman 2000, 65). Dan McAdams (2006) has argued that stories of redemption are particularly prevalent in American culture.

<sup>19</sup> Wolf is equivocal on this, and I wouldn’t want to deny that one may have to compromise between, say, happiness and meaningfulness. Nevertheless, other things being equal, surely you’re better off having a meaningful rather than a meaningless life.

why and when achieving goals is good for one independently of its instrumental value.<sup>20</sup> That is because it is part of what makes narrative emotions appropriate and thereby adds to the life's meaningfulness. Crucially, it explains why and in what sense the shape of a life matters to well-being over and above the sum of the good things within it. I will finish with a closer look at this.

An event's objective narrative significance is the role that it plays in the narrative trajectory of a project or life. It can be an initial push or inspiration, a tentative step, a surprising challenge, an encounter with a helper or with an opponent, the forming of an alliance, a lucky break, a diversion, the turning point after which the outcome is a given, the sweet moment of success, the bitter disappointment, the dawning of a lesson learned, receiving a just reward, or any number of other roles that can be only understood in terms of their function in a plot. Given that some projects are more central than others, the impact of a narratively significant event on meaningfulness and well-being varies. Now, narrative significance is a relational property. Nothing is a turning point or a lucky break as such. Though we can retrospectively allocate narrative significance to individual events, it supervenes on the plot structure of the entire episode or life.<sup>21</sup> That is why it is fundamentally resistant to any additive conception of prudential value. If you take an event's 'moment utility' for you in isolation from other events, you will miss out on its narrative significance, and thereby its contribution to your life's meaningfulness. We can move from the whole to the parts, but not the other way around.

Finally, we now have a fuller explanation for why Hard Work is better than Sheer Luck. It involves the use of one's essentially human capacities to successfully bring about a

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<sup>20</sup> See Keller 2004 and Portmore 2006 for these intuitions.

<sup>21</sup> Since narrative significance of an event can change even after one's death, the meaningfulness of a life may be influenced when one is no longer around. This is why we should be wary of calling any man happy even after his death. What if Martin Luther King's campaigns eventually turn out to have led to catastrophic consequences for African-Americans? Shall we think of his life as have been as meaningful, or to have been as good for him as we now do?

valuable goal, which makes meaningfulness-constituting narrative emotions appropriate. This is missing in Sheer Luck, even if the pleasures and delights involved are equally prudentially valuable considered in abstraction of their context. Noble Failure, too, is a more meaningful life, even if its ultimate failure means that much of the effort will turn out to have been partially wasted. How well your life goes thus isn't determined either by the sum of momentary benefits or their temporal distribution, but in part by the plot it turns out to have. This has important consequences for what we have prudential reason to do, since such reasons derive from what is good for us. I will finish with one implication that shows, I think, the novelty of this approach well. The Dynamic Fitting Fulfilment View tells you that when you make major life choices, you have a reason choose the option that makes your story most inspiring even if it means some personal hardship and promises little pleasure – for your own good. If this is true, we need to rethink a lot of what currently passes for practical rationality.

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