First steps in an axiology of goals

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the relationship between human wellbeing and long-term goals and projects. Though it is by no means universal, many accept the claim that wellbeing is composed, at least in part, of the fulfillment of a person's long-term projects or goals. However, if we accept such a view, a number of puzzling questions arise. My main task in this paper is to answer two such questions. First: how much are such projects worth against more minor, short-term goods? Second: how much are such projects worth against themselves—in particular, how much do long-term projects matter for the worse-off in comparison to such projects for those who are better-off?

Keywords: goals, projects, axiology, lexical priority, wellbeing, well-being

1. Introduction

The Penguin paperback edition of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* includes this biography of its author, John Buchan:

> John Buchan was born in Perth in 1875. His father was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland; and in 1876 the family moved to Fife, where John walked six miles a day to school. Later they moved to Glasgow and, when he went to Glasgow University, he published articles in periodicals. When at Brasenose College, Oxford, he published five books and many articles, and won several awards, including the Newdigate Prize for poetry. His career was diverse and successful, and despite ill health, he was a barrister and Member of Parliament, in addition to being a writer, soldier and publisher. He married, and had four children. He was created Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield in 1935 and became the Governor-General of Canada, until his death in 1940.
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> His first success as an author came with *Prester John* in 1910, and he went on to write a series of adventure thrillers, or 'shockers' as he called them, all characterized by their authentically rendered backgrounds, romantic characters, their atmosphere of expectancy and world-wide conspiracies, and the author's own enthusiasm. His main heroes were Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and four other books, Dickson McCunn, the Glaswegian provision merchant with the soul of a romantic, and Edward Leithen, eminent lawyer. Buchan also established a reputation as an historical biographer with such works as *Montrose*, *Oliver Cromwell* and *Augustus*.[1]

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[1] John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004 [1915]), Author's Biography.

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I am tempted on reading this biography to declare that, at least in terms of prudential value, John Buchan lived the best life of anyone I've ever heard of. Maybe that's too strong, but he's surely toward the top of the list. A few things immediately strike me, assuming that this biography is faithfully rendered. Most importantly, Buchan was incredibly successful. But he wasn't *merely* successful. He was successful in a number of widely varying pursuits throughout his life. Not only was he an accomplished novelist, biographer, and poet, he was also a startlingly successful politician, serving in Parliament, eventually taking the position of Governor-General of Canada. Of course, many politicians are also (or claim to be) writers, but Buchan's writing went beyond the normal subject-matter of politicos. Not only was he a historian, he was also the author of books that are meant, primarily, for fun and distraction: "shockers", or romantic thrillers told with distinctive panache. And through this endeavor he had perhaps his most lasting influence: *The Thirty-Nine Steps* has been filmed countless times, including once by Alfred Hitchcock, and has even been the subject-matter of a successful stage spoof, currently (as of this writing) playing off-Broadway.

In reflecting on a life like this, one is not tempted to judge it of high quality because it contained large amounts of pleasure. (Indeed, Buchan's biography gives us very little information about his mental states, save for what can be implied from the fact that Buchan was never of robust health.[2]) In addition, we don't make this judgment because he had a bunch of satisfied desires, though he surely did. Rather, it was a good life because the long-term features of his life, his goals and projects, were successful—projects that apparently meant a very great deal to him. These long-term projects, *being* a historian, novelist, politician, etc., and their quality, seem to be the most important determinant of our assessment of his life. Though his mental states, desires satisfied, etc., surely play some role, their role is comparatively minor. These projects seem to tell the story of his life, and do so in a way that cast his life as a rousing success.

The above thoughts are, though by no means universal, popular. Many accept the claim that wellbeing is composed, at least in part, of the fulfillment of a person's long-term projects or goals.[3] Indeed, looking at Buchan, this seems a plausible position. However, even if we accept this view, a number of puzzling questions arise. Surely, many have noted, such projects cannot be all there is to welfare.[4] (I say more about what I mean by 'welfare' in section two.) Though his ill-health did not affect the extent to which his life was a great success, it certainly would have been better for Buchan had he not been so sick so often. We live better lives when we eat delicious rather than non-delicious meals, see exciting rather than dull psychological thrillers, and steal tender kisses from our beloved. None of these things are rightly called projects, goals, or long-term interests in a way relevant to our discussion here. But if 'smaller' welfare goods contribute to welfare we are naturally led to wonder which of these goods is more important in terms of their relative welfare value. How much more? To what extent can they be traded-off against one another?

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[2] Indeed, his health was an occasional hinderance to him. See, for instance, Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavelier* (Jaffrey, NY: Godine, 1995), 145.

[3] See, for instance, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 411; T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 3; Simon Keller, "Welfare and the Achievement of Goals" in *Philosophical Studies* 121 (2004); Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), ch. 12; Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), app. I; David Velleman, "Well-being and Time" in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Douglas Portmore, "Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice" in the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3 (2007); Dale Dorsey, "Headaches, Lives, and Value" in *Utilitas* 21 (2010).

[4] Keller, 35.

My main task in this paper is to work out, in some detail, a number of individual problems for the view that the successful achievement of goals and projects forms the primary element of human welfare. First: how much are such projects worth compared to comparatively minor, short-term goods? Second: how much are such projects worth *against themselves*—in particular, how much do long-term projects matter for the worse-off in comparison to such projects for those who are better-off? Along the way, however, the view itself must be characterized in more detail. In particular, very few who support such a view have offered any precise characterization of the distinction between projects, goals, and long-term interests on the one hand, and other sorts of welfare goods on the other. Of course, this is no criticism: the distinction is tricky. But because many hold that such goals are of very significant importance, it would be nice to have at least a vague sense of what they are.[5]

A note before I proceed. The discussion in this paper is intended to be broadly exploratory. I seek only to propose some plausible answers to the above questions, and to grapple with the natural challenges that arise in offering any more-or-less precise account of the relative axiology of long-term projects and other welfare goods. Though I believe that there are very good reasons to adopt the approach I offer here, I leave open the possibility of alternatives. I hope, simply, that this paper shows that answering the questions at hand is possible, even if my particular answer is not to everyone's taste.

2. Projects and satisfactions

Call a life-structuring activity, goal, or achievement a 'global project.' For instance, being a politician or writer of romantic thrillers are global projects, as are being a philosopher, climbing Mount Everest, being a cultivator of fine gardens, or a meditative monk. Some projects take the form of *goals*, a particular achievement someone works for over the course of a life. Consider, for instance, the global project of summiting K2, toward which a given individual may work for an extended period. The success of this particular global project is not determined by the content of one's day-to-day activities, but rather on success in achieving this particular goal. Call these 'goal-like' projects. On the other hand, some projects are 'state-like'. For instance, one might value the global project of 'being a philosopher'. In this case, there is no identifiable goal that forms the success condition of this project. Rather, the success conditions appear simply to be *maintaining* the state of being a philosopher, doing, on a day-to-day basis, what philosophers do.

In both cases, these projects—in Buchan's case the goal-like project of becoming the Governor-General of Canada, the state-like project of being a writer of romantic thrillers, etc.— seem quite clearly to form a different sort of good than other goods, such as the momentary pleasure I might obtain from a delicious lollypop, or the desire I might satisfy by having a drink of water. For lack of a better term, call goods that do not rise to the level of global projects 'satisfactions'. (I should note immediately here that different substantive theories of wellbeing will offer different accounts of the nature of satisfactions. I shan't commit to any particular interpretation.) I might believe, for instance, that having a lollypop right now is good for me. Having a lollypop is not a global project, but rather a *satisfaction*. In addition, I might have a goal to finish reading John LeCarré's *A Perfect Spy*. Though this might be a valued goal, it does not seem to count as a global project in the way that global projects broadly define the success or failure of our lives.

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[5] This is not to say that there have been no such attempts. Raz, for instance, claims that genuine projects are those that are based on recognizable "social forms". See Raz, 310. See also Keller, 32-33.

The distinction between projects and satisfactions is intuitive, but slippery. Indeed, it seems a fool's errand to attempt to provide a precise account of the distinction between global projects and satisfactions, and I will not attempt to do so here. I doubt very much that a sharp distinction is possible; whether, in a given case, X is a global project or a satisfaction will require substantive investigation on the basis of our considered judgments. However, I do hope to provide clarification of this distinction sufficient for my purposes, although I leave open the possibility that further, perhaps better, accounts could be provided.

As noted above, projects can be goal-like or state-like. What, then, unifies these projects of very different structure? I think there are three jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for project-hood. First:

> *Narrative Unification*: global projects help to structure, and to narratively unify, a person's life.

To put this point in Vellemanian terms (to be explored below), a global project is a primary element in an individual's *life story*, it forms part of a greater, macro-level narrative of a person's life. This is clear from the case of John Buchan. Buchan's projects helped to tell the story of his life: he was not just a writer, but a writer of thrillers, biographies, and historical texts; he was a politician, and a successful one at that. In any story of Buchan's life, these projects will loom large: these activities provide a coherent narrative unity to discrete activities across diverse times of his life.

Not all features of a person's life story are global projects. With this in mind, consider the second requirement:

> *Actions and Decisions*: global projects are determined, at least in part, by a person's actions and decisions, and narratively unify these actions and decisions.

Actions and Decisions helps to distinguish global projects from other things that might satisfy Narrative Unification, but that do not count, intuitively anyway, as global projects. For instance, a person's life story could be narratively unified by saying that this person is a *victim of kidnapping*. But being such a victim is not a project, given that this project is not determined by a person's actions and decisions. Finally:

> *Global*: global projects narratively unify a person's whole life, or a segment of her life of significant temporal duration.

Though a person might "be a philosopher" for a day, to properly describe one's status as a philosopher as a global project requires it to be the case that this project structures one's life and explains one's activities, etc., for a substantial section of one's life.

Some embellishment is in order. Take Narrative Unification. For a person to maintain a global project, it is not enough that some particular 'story' of his or her life could be told. Rather, their lives must be narratively integrated. To see this requirement, consider the difference between two lives. The first person, Roger, spends long periods on college campuses, teaching courses and doing research, engaging with colleagues and traveling to conferences. The second person, Janet, does not act in a way that could be unified by a single project. Janet may attend school briefly, drop out, take employment for short periods of time, spend time as a drifter, but establish a permanent home for at least some extended periods, etc. Though her life might be rife with satisfactions, it does not maintain a global project. Of course, a story *could* be trivially told of Janet's life. Such a story would simply consist of a list of her activities. But without a unifying thread, her life maintains no global projects.

One might ask further questions about what it means for a life to be narratively unified. Though I will not be able to provide any precise account of this generally intuitive idea, it

seems to me that two points are worth noting. First, narrative unification requires *common explanation* of a substantial part of the events and activities in a life. For instance, Roger spends lots of time on college campuses, teaches courses, and goes to conferences. These activities permit of a common explanation: Roger is an academic. Second, narrative unification provides the events and activities of a life with a shared meaning. Again adapting a Vellemanian thought to be explored in more detail later, it seems to me that a life is narratively unified if the *meaning* of particular events (or at least a substantial amount throughout a life) cannot be properly understood in isolation. A narratively unified life will treat each moment or event of a particular life as not simply atomistic, but as having a meaning that is shaped by events prior and subsequent to the moment or event itself. For instance, imagine that Roger gives an academic talk at Big State University. This activity, for Roger, has a certain meaning: it is a natural part of an academic career, and, depending on his past research activities, may even be a highlight. The meaning of this event, in terms of his life, is necessarily shaped by the longer-term project in which he is engaged: being an academic. However, we could imagine another person, Sally, who gives precisely the same sort of talk at Big State University. But if we imagine that she is a politician, rather than an academic, the meaning of this event will be quite different. This event will be an oddity, something unusual, perhaps an honorific feature of her political career. The global project of being a politician will help to explain this event, but will also provide this event a meaning distinct from the meaning of a similar event in Roger's life.[6]

Take, now, Actions and Decisions. Global projects are those broad elements of our lives that help to narratively unify our *actions* and *decisions*, in particular. This feature of global projects helps to rule out certain things that may narratively unify a person's life, but that do not, intuitively at least, constitute global projects. Take a person who, from birth until death, is hooked up to a machine such that her brain is manipulated by electrodes for the purposes of eliciting certain pleasurable reactions. We might narratively integrate this person's life by saying that she is hooked up to an experience machine. Indeed, this will be a *central* part of this person's life story. But though this may be a narratively integrated life story, it is not integrated by means of a particular project. This person's life is wholly passive, and hence does not count as maintaining a global project.[7] Furthermore, if a person is born a Native American, and spends virtually all of his life on a reservation, one can rightly say that a large section of his life is narratively integrated by the fact that he is a Native American. Indeed, it is quite right to say that the fact that this person is a Native American will surely help to explain, and provide a shared meaning to, many of the actions and decisions he takes. But it would seem strange to say that "being a Native American" is a project in the sense I mean: whether this person is a Native American or not is not the *product* of any actions or decisions on this person's part.

Finally, Global is an important element in the account of global projects: this element differentiates those merely momentary goals (such as to pour myself another cup of coffee), and those goals that form the major element of human welfare (at least according to the view under consideration here). However, Global should be understood to require *long-term* narrative integration of one's actions and decisions, not *long-term* and *constant* narrative integration of one's actions and decisions. To be engaged in the project of "being a philosopher" or "summiting K2", one needn't be engaged in those characteristic activities at

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[6] See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 3rd. ed., 2007), ch. 15.

[7] One might, quite accurately, say that "hooking one's self into an experience machine" is a goal-like project, insofar as this is a goal one might work toward, and that might narratively unify one's activities and decisions over the long term.

every moment during which they are valued. One can be a philosopher and spend a day or two reading LeCarré. That which is required to engage in any particular project will surely vary with the content of the project. However, we wouldn't say of a particular activity or goal that it is a global project if it doesn't provide a sufficient level of narrative integration in the long term. Consider, for instance, a state-like project of being a "Christmas churchgoer". This project consists of attending church once per year, on December 25th. Though this might narratively unify some of a person's activities and decisions in the long-term, it does not provide sufficient narrative unification: this state does not rise to the level of a global project. I take that to be the correct answer. This being said, the requirements of sufficient unification from project to project will likely vary substantially. Hence I shan't be able to offer any precise account of 'sufficient' narrative unification. Whether a particular project satisfies this constraint will require case-by-case inquiry.

Two further features of the achievement of global projects should be noted here. I have not included *knowing* that one is engaged in a project, or explicitly *deciding* to engage in a project, in the necessary and sufficient conditions for project-hood. But this is the correct answer. One can engage in a global project without ever fully knowing or deciding to do so. For instance, it might be that through a simple accident, and without ever planning on doing so, a person has maintained a successful career as an accountant. This project is still narratively unifying of this person's actions and decisions, despite the fact that *being a successful accountant* was never itself the product of deliberation on his part, nor, perhaps, was it even known to him. We can live according to global projects in spite of our ignorance of so doing, or explicit decision to do so. In this way, my account of a global project differs slightly from Keller's. Keller writes:

> When we think of someone as having a goal, we think of her as *pursuing* it—as to some extent organizing her life, or intending to organize her life, around that goal. The extent to which something is a goal, or to which it is a strong goal, is in part a matter of the extent to which its bearer organizes her life around its pursuit. What's important here is that your taking on a goal involves taking an attitude towards *your* activities and *your* life (even if your reasons for forming that goal are entirely selfless).[8]

I do think, as noted here, that global projects are 'organizers'—they organize and narratively unify the activities and decisions in our lives. But they can play this role without being the object of any conscious decision or active intention on the part of the person involved. Sometimes we may just 'fall into' global projects.[9] I see no reason to say that a person engages a global project only when this global project itself, rather than the actions and decisions that make up this project, is a product of explicit deliberation or decision-making. Borrowing an idea upon which I shall expand later, such projects can still provide our lives with valuable, self-directed *meaning*.

This rough-and-ready account of the distinction between global projects and satisfactions is likely subject to counterexamples. Furthermore, my account of such projects uses *extremely* vague language ("significant temporal duration", "somewhere along the line", and the like). A more thorough examination is surely required to account for the extent to which goal-like and state-like projects are global projects rather than satisfactions. It is likely that whatever account

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[8] Keller, 32-33.

[9] Along the same lines, I do not regard such global projects as necessarily requiring any significant "self-sacrifice" on the part of the agent. In this way, my view differs from Portmore's. See Portmore, "Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice", op. cit.

is specified will include a substantial amount of grey area; whether a particular activity is best described as a global project or a satisfaction will require substantive, and sometimes difficult, judgments.

3. Global Projects and theories of welfare

The broad thesis under consideration here, briefly touched on in the introduction to this paper, is that the successful maintenance, or achievement, of global projects forms a distinct and important element in human welfare. But, one might ask, what sort of a theory of welfare is this? Does this thesis require us to adopt an *objective* theory? And if so, what kind? How broadly ecumenical is this position?

Consider, first, the common distinction between *subjective* and *objective* theories of welfare: a theory of welfare is *subjective* if and only if a necessary condition of the intrinsic value of X for A is A's *intrinsic valuing* (perhaps under certain idealized or counterfactual conditions) of X. Conversely, a view is *objective* if and only if X can be intrinsically valuable for A even though A does not intrinsically value X. Subjective theories do, but objective theories do not, place a necessary condition on all welfare goods for A: A must value all such goods.[10] L. W. Sumner puts the point in the following way. For Sumner, "a theory is subjective if it treats my having a favourable attitude toward something as a necessary condition of the thing being beneficial for me. It need not also treat it as a sufficient condition, and most subjective theories will not do so." By contrast, "[o]n an objective theory… something can be (directly and immediately) good for me though I do not regard it favourably, and my life can be going well despite my failing to have any positive attitude toward it."[11] As Sumner notes, the distinction between subjective and objective theories of welfare is "mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive."[12]

With this distinction in mind, there are three important points to be made. First, given the taxonomy I identify here, there is a wide range of both subjective and objective theories of wellbeing. Not all will accept the claim that global projects form a crucial element of human welfare. For instance, a pure desire-satisfaction view would not be able to support such a claim, insofar as some individuals may not prefer or desire to maintain global projects of any description. Furthermore, some objective views will not accommodate the thesis under consideration. Hedonism, for instance, will claim that all and only pleasure is good for a person. But this straightforwardly denies the welfare value of global projects and their success.

However, the view I explore here is broadly ecumenical. Subjective theories can hold, e.g., that a global project must be valued. A subjective theory is also perfectly licensed to say that valued projects are better for an individual than other sorts of goods, even if this goes beyond an individual's subjective preference-ranking. Insofar as A's valuing of X is merely a necessary condition on X's welfare value for A, a subjective theory can declare that valued projects are better than other goods that may themselves also be valued. Furthermore, objectivist views can clearly support the claim that projects are substantial improvements in a person's life. Though *some* objectivist views cannot support this claim (for instance, hedonism), others can. Take, e.g., the 'objective list' view. The objective list view can hold that the fulfillment of such global projects is a crucial and significant element of any proper objective list. In addition, take 'perfectionism'. Perfectionism—put very roughly—holds that human welfare is best enhanced

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[10] The relevant form of "valuing" is controversial between subjective theories, of course. Some will hold that valuing should be constituted as a desire or preference, others require some sort of cognitivist element. Others hold that the proper form of valuing is counterfactual or idealized. Still others deny this. I abstract from this controversy here.

[11] L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38.

[12] Sumner, 39. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for requesting this to be made more clear.

by the development and exercise of rational, or other particularly human, capacities.[13] But given that many such goals will require long-term planning and rational activity, perfectionism will stress their relative axiological importance.[14]

A second point is worth making here. Different theories of wellbeing, objective and subjective, may very well restrict the range of global projects the success of which improves lives. For instance, I might strongly value being a life-long counter of grass.[15] But it might very well be that this long-term activity, no matter how substantially it structures my life story or explains my actions in the long term, does not count as the right *sort* of project.[16] This project may not maintain sufficient preference-independent value for it to count as a genuinely valuable project. Furthermore, imagine a person organizes his life around the principle of pleasure maximization. In other words, this person is a hedonist in the 18th century sense, a 'libertine'.[17] However, for this person, the project of being such a hedonist has no intrinsic value in itself: this person does not value the project of being such a hedonist for its own sake, only for the effects it has in generating pleasure. A subjective theory of wellbeing may well declare that this project is, for this person, not valuable in itself, insofar as this person values it only instrumentally rather than intrinsically. Alternatively, an objective theory of wellbeing might declare that being this sort of hedonist is itself of preference-independent value, and though this person values the project only instrumentally, it is still a valuable project, sufficient to be a legitimate intrinsic good in itself.

Whether any particular project is valuable is thus a matter of controversy between alternative substantive theories of welfare. I will not adjudicate between rival, substantive, accounts of the value of such projects. In speaking of the value of projects, then, I refer simply to that *subset* of all global projects that the *true theory of wellbeing* declares valuable. Call these 'V-projects'.[18] V-projects might be all and only those global projects that are valued by the person in question, or it may include projects that are simply those that possess sufficient preference-independent value, leaving aside whether any given individual prefers or values them. I leave this vexed debate to the side, as it will not affect my discussion here.

A third point is also worth making. To see the issue at hand, consider that some satisfactions are 'bigger' welfare improvements than others. Seeing a hilarious comedy is a bigger welfare improvement than seeing a mildly amusing one. But like satisfactions, some improvements in V-projects are of greater magnitude than others. Take a simple example. Assume that neither Jon, John, nor Johnny maintain any V-projects. Assume that one could render Jon a writer, John a writer and politician, and Johnny a writer, politician, and family man. (Assume that each of these is a V-project.) In each case, the magnitude of the improvement granted to each individual is distinct. Johnny is provided a V-project improvement of greater magnitude than John or Jon, etc.

So far so good. But though this point may seem straightforward, it is impossible to provide a theory of 'magnitude' that is fully ecumenical between objective and subjective theories of the

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[13] Cf. David Brink, "The Significance of Desire" in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, v. 3, ed. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Dale Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism" in *Noûs* 44 (2010).

[14] Consider, for instance, J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, III.4.

[15] See, for instance, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 432-33.

[16] Incidentally, insofar as subjectivist views accept that valuing is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for value, one can be a subjectivist and also hold that projects with intuitively valueless content do not improve lives in the same way as other valuable projects.

[17] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I address this case.

[18] Worth noting also is that different theories of welfare will define welfare-relevant satisfactions very differently. I leave this vexed issue aside here.

good. For instance, one might be tempted to suggest that the more projects one achieves, the greater the magnitude of one's project improvement and the better-off one is strictly in terms of projects. But a simple numerical index is surely incorrect. Assume, for the moment, that a subjectivist background theory is true. Assume also that Johnny prefers a life of project X only to a life of projects Y and Z. If so, and if we accept a subjectivist background theory, it seems right to say that Johnny is better-off achieving fewer rather than more projects. Take now an objective view. It might be that, together, projects X and Y have positive, but negligible, preference-independent value, while Z has substantial preference-independent value. This view might plausibly say that a move from X and Y to simply Z is an improvement; to grant Z rather than X and Y is an improvement of greater magnitude in terms of one's V-projects.

Given the different ways that objective and subjective theories of welfare will measure the magnitude of individual project-improvements, and the extent to which individuals are better-off than others in terms of V-projects, I will refer generically to 'project-improvements', and project-improvements *of greater and lesser magnitude* as determined by the *true theory of welfare*. Whether project-improvements and their magnitude will be measured by a person's preferences, by the preference-independent value of V-projects, or by some combination of the two, will be a topic determined by the truth background theory of welfare, and as such will be left aside here.

4. Shape and meaning

An account of the relative worth of V-projects and satisfactions is difficult in part because the go-to source for axiological comparisons, i.e., *preferences*, seem to be rather unhelpful in this regard. For instance, imagine a variation on the case of John Buchan:

> *Johnny Buchan*: Johnny Buchan is a relatively sickly individual, but has the talent to become a successful writer of romantic thrillers. However, to regain the strength he requires to be such a writer, Johnny must see the doctor, and undergo a short, but painful, treatment. Imagine that, for Johnny, becoming a successful writer would be a V-project. But imagine also that Johnny prefers (perhaps under whatever relevant counterfactual or idealized conditions) not to have the treatment.

I think we would regard Johnny's preference in this case as imprudent. Though he may prefer the life in which he avoids having a short painful treatment to the life in which he is a successful writer, this preference is mistaken. He is better-off (and by "better-off" I mean *intrinsically better-off*) in becoming a successful writer even if he prefers to avoid the treatment.

Johnny's case shows that we cannot rely on the preferences of individuals to identify the relative or comparative worth of goals in relation to other sorts of welfare goods. Johnny is certainly made better-off by the avoidance of a short, but painful, medical treatment. But avoiding treatment is not as good as becoming a successful novelist. One might think that this conclusion requires me to adjudicate in favor of an objective approach to welfare. But, as I have so far noted, this is not so. Both subjective and objective theories can accept the claim that the welfare value of projects is significant and, in fact, overrides an individual's preferences (as in Johnny's case). Subjectivism does not say that the comparative value of goods like being a successful novelist or the enjoyment of a lollypop must be set by Johnny's preference structure. It says only that whatever improves Johnny's life must be valued by him—as, we may assume, it is so valued. Subjectivist views are thus free to determine how much valued goods of different characteristics improve Johnny's life.

But if preferences do not offer the right account of the relationship between V-projects and satisfactions, what does? Given their importance, at least in the cases considered in this paper, one possibility immediately arises:

> *Lexical*: Though both are intrinsically valuable, V-projects lexically dominate satisfactions.[19]

Lexical domination comes in different shapes and sizes, and will be explored in more detail below. But for now, the basic idea is that it never makes anyone better-off to trade a project-improvement, or potential project-improvement, for a finite sum of satisfactions.

Before I argue for Lexical in more detail, it is worth dispatching one source of skepticism immediately. Many have rejected the possibility of lexical priority relations at all.[20] Insofar as I argue against such skepticism elsewhere,[21] I shan't discuss it in any detail here, except to say the following. When we are confronted with a pluralist axiology of the sort confronted by those who would accept the axiological importance of projects or goals as well as 'satisfactions', we have a choice about how to weigh various goods. The only sensible method of testing any particular weighting is by its conformity to our considered judgments, and the strength of its rationale. I take these topics now, and in turn.

Lexical can be motivated by considering the following case. Assume that Jane wishes to become a successful musician, a project of great welfare value. We might be tempted to ask ourselves what might *compensate*, in terms of Jane's life quality, for her failure to achieve such a project. In other words, and more pointedly, could it be the case that Jane's failure to be a successful musician could be compensated by *some* amount of satisfactions, rather than V-projects? I submit that the answer to this question is no. Suppose Jane has the opportunity to become a successful writer, but could instead simply pursue momentary cheap thrills that are in no way narratively unified. Of course, any halfway plausible theory of welfare will hold that the achievement of pleasure (even if it's a simple cheap thrill) is a welfare benefit. But, plausibly, there is *no amount* of the cheap thrills that it would compensate her *to the same degree* as becoming a successful writer, especially when we consider that otherwise Jane would achieve no V-projects whatever.

It is one thing to elicit a considered judgment in favor of Lexical, but quite another to provide Lexical with a reasonable rationale. However, I think an important rationale can be provided, and it is derived from the status of V-projects as narrative unifiers. A person who maintains a V-project lives a life whose activities and decisions have a common, shared, *meaning*. This meaning needn't be explicitly chosen, or indeed even recognized by the person in question. Nevertheless, maintaining such V-projects shows that a given person's actions and decisions share a common meaning, and the meaning that is shared among one's actions and decisions is of great importance to the quality of one's life.

To see this in more detail, consider an insight of David Velleman. Velleman argues that wellbeing is not *additive*; in other words, the overall welfare value of two lives can differ even though these lives contain equal amounts of momentary wellbeing. Velleman's evidence for this claim is that the *shape* of a life (i.e., whether welfare benefits befall you at earlier or later times) is itself important to wellbeing. Velleman writes:

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[19] I argue for a thesis very much like Lexical in "Headaches, Lives, and Value". As I note in the next section, I now believe that this claim is far too strong.

[20] See, for instance, Alistair Norcross, "Comparing Harms: Headaches and Human Lives" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26 (1997), 138-9; Gustaf Arrhenius, "Superiority in Value" in *Philosophical Studies* 123 (2005), 109; John Broome, "Weighing Lives" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58-9.

[21] See "Headaches, Lives, and Value", op. cit.

Consider two different lives that you might live. One life begins in the depths but takes an upward trend: a childhood of deprivation, a troubled youth, struggles and setbacks in early adulthood, followed finally by success and satisfaction in middle age and a peaceful retirement. Another life begins at the heights but slides downhill: a blissful childhood and youth, precocious triumphs and rewards in early adulthood, followed by a midlife strewn with disasters that lead to misery in old age. Surely, we can imagine two such lives as containing equal sums of momentary well-being… Yet even if we were to map each moment in one life onto a moment of equal well-being in the other, we would not have shown these lives to be equally good.[22]

Velleman contends that the former life is better than the latter, despite the fact that the sum-total of momentary benefits are identical in each case. Part of the explanation, according to Velleman, is the shape of one's life: the fact that an upward-sloping life is better, in itself, than a downward-sloping life.

I think there is much in what Velleman claims. But we should be careful to avoid the claim that the *shape* of a life makes a *per se* difference to wellbeing.[23] For instance, imagine a person who lives, from birth until death, in an experience machine. This experience machine, however, has imperfect software, so at an early age the person experiences pain as well as pleasure. Gradually (say, once per year), the experience machine software is updated, so that later in this person's life she experiences much more pleasure than earlier in life. This life is surely no better than the life of a person whose experience machine works perfectly in the beginning, and then slowly deteriorates, assuming that the amount of pleasure in both cases is identical. If this is correct, Velleman's intuition should be explained in a way other than referring to the mere shape of a life; the *per se* shape of a life does not, apparently, have the ability to alter the quality of one's life in all cases.

But Velleman quite rightly notes that later successes redeem earlier failures not because the shape of a life is *per se* valuable, but because there is an important *relationship* between the later successes and the prior failures:

Why would a person care about the placement of momentary goods on the curve that maps his changing welfare? The answer, I believe, is that an event's place in the story of one's life lends it a meaning that isn't entirely determined by its impact on one's well-being at the time. A particular electoral victory, providing a particular boost to one's current welfare, can mean either that one's early frustrations were finally over or that one's subsequent failures were not yet foreshadowed, that one enjoyed either fleeting good luck or lasting success—all depending on its placement in the trend of one's well-being. And the event's meaning is what determines its contribution to the value of one's life.[24]

According to Velleman, the *meaning* of particular goods can be affected by events prior to, and after, the achievement of a particular good itself. But later success can affect the meaning of earlier failures (and vice versa) only if these successes and failures concern, in some sense, a narratively unified long-term structure of a given person's life and activities.[25] The meaning of

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[22] Velleman, 58.

[23] Velleman, as I note below, avoids this claim. Frances Kamm, however, endorses it. See Frances Kamm, "Rescuing Ivan Ilych: How We Live and How We Die" in *Ethics* 113 (2003), 223.

[24] Velleman, 63.

[25] Compare Velleman, 63-64.

earlier events is affected by later events when these events concern the unified activities, goals, and projects in which one is engaged, and which one values. Hence the best account of the 'meaning' of these particular momentary wellbeing achievements is not in terms of their place in an overall trend but rather in terms of their being activities that contribute to the achievement of a successful or unsuccessful project or goal. If one has early electoral success, but a long downfall, it would appear that this early success, though perhaps pleasurable, was not a step along the way to success in the project of being a successful politician. In this way, the later events of one's life affect the 'meaning of' prior events—not because they indicate a *per se* welfare-relevant trend, but because they help to determine whether one's life and agency can be unified by a V-project. It seems to me, then, we best capture Velleman's insight about the 'meaning' of particular momentary achievements not by insisting that the shape of a life is *per se* important, but rather by claiming that the central element of wellbeing is the achievement and maintenance of V-projects rather than momentary satisfactions.

The importance of such projects in providing for a life's 'meaning' is famously stressed by Bernard Williams: "A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give a meaning to his life."[26] Williams confines much of his discussion to so-called "ground" projects, projects that allow us to see our lives as having any point at all.[27] But V-projects needn't be of such overwhelming significance to a person to "give a meaning to his life". Long-term projects that help to narratively unify our actions and decisions provide a meaningful structure to our lives as a whole, not just from the outside (though that itself is significant) but also from the inside (even if they are not ground projects, in Williams' sense).[28] Global projects will typically loom large in any understanding of the 'meaning' of a life and its activities, even if these projects are not "ground" projects in Williams' sense. That global projects take the lead in providing this sort of meaning or understanding of one's life should be no surprise given what's come before. Global projects are narrative unifiers. As noted above, to narratively unify a set of activities or events in one's life is to provide them with a meaning in relation to that which does the narrative unification. Thus *to be* a global project, this project must provide a shared meaning to a large subset of one's life and the activities and events of one's life.

The importance of global projects in providing for a life's 'meaning' shouldn't be oversold. Global projects are not the only things that can narratively unify a life or large sections of a life. After all, in certain cases the events of a life may be narratively unified by things that, e.g., are not determined by a person's actions or decisions, such as a person's born-into nationality or race. However, the meaning provided by global projects, stressed by Velleman and Williams, is central in an important way. Because global projects are at least in part constituted by a person's actions and decisions, they provide for a life's *self-directed* meaning.[29] A global project of mine captures the meaning of my life and activities that *I*, and my actions, help to shape. A

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[26] Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality" in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 12. See also "A Critique of Utilitarianism" in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), sec. 5.

[27] Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality", 10. Williams, in his critique of utilitarianism, refers to these ground projects as "commitments": "projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about," (Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism", op. cit., 116).

[28] Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality", 12.

[29] Again, this self-directed meaning needn't be explicitly decided upon: it need only be a result of my own actions and decisions.

nationality or race into which one is born does not.[30] And this, it seems to me, is of tremendous significance for the quality of any life. When I achieve a V-project, I can look at my life as having a meaning that I help to shape. Without such a project, if my life has any narrative unity at all, it is a unity not shaped by my own actions, decisions, plans, or desires, or is a self-directed meaning that is ultimately valueless.[31]

Whether Velleman or Williams would agree with my gloss on their insights is beyond my purview here. However, their reflections ring true, and support Lexical. The narrative unity provided by a global project allows us to understand the self-directed meaning and point of a life and that life's events. Given this, I find it very difficult to believe that a life without a valuable, self-directed meaning or 'organizing principle' could be better than one with such meaning.

5. Why Lexical fails

While the foregoing is plausible, and reveals the substantial importance of V-projects when it comes to the quality of lives, Lexical should not be accepted in its current form. After all, though it seems plausible to say that the evaluative importance of V-projects is derived in large measure from their ability to provide a long-term, self-directed meaning to one's life and activities, not all project-improvements entail the difference between living a life of valuable (as identified by the true theory of wellbeing) self-directed meaning and failing to do so. There is a distinction between maintaining a life with the sort of narrative unity and meaning provided by the achievement of V-projects, and *improving* a life that *already* maintains such a shared meaning. Lexical holds that any improvement, however small, in terms of V-projects trumps any improvement, however large, in terms of satisfactions. But this is plausible *only for individuals whose lives lack the meaning provided by V-projects*. It is not plausible insofar as one *already* maintains a life of self-directed meaning. At least as far as my considered judgments are concerned, the greater one's accumulation of V-projects, the greater the possibility that one could improve one's life *more* by pursuing satisfactions (in sufficient amount) rather than improvements among V-projects. Take John Buchan. It seems right to say that no amount of satisfactions might have made up for the failure of *all* his V-Projects. But though, once a writer, becoming a successful politician substantially improved his welfare, it seems sensible to say

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[30] Though, of course, I may undertake any number of meaningful global projects in reaction to facts of my nationality or race. For instance, I might have as a global project becoming a member of a new nationality; or advancing the outlook for members of my race, especially if I am a member of an oppressed racial minority.

[31] One objection should be mentioned here. I have so far claimed that objective and subjective theories of welfare could accommodate the view I discuss here. But one might think that relying on the self-directed meaning provided by a global project bars an objective theory from accommodating Lexical. After all, objective theories will not require that a given individual value whatever project they are engaged in for that project to count as a V-project. If so, on an objective view, a particular project X might be good for a person P even if P doesn't recognize, value, seek, or see a point to, the meaning of her life provided by X. Recall, for instance, the libertine discussed in Section 3. It could be that the libertine sees his hedonism as a mere instrument, but that an objective view will declare this project of *per se* value. If that's correct, or so it would seem, this sort of self-directed meaning cannot be relied upon by objective theories in defending Lexical. However, I think this objection is mistaken. A project can provide a self-directed meaning to a life and life's activities even if the person in question does not recognize it or value it. But if that's right, and *if* an objective theory of welfare is true (which entails that projects can be declared valuable simply on the basis of preference-independent value), we shouldn't insist that whatever *meaning* provided by these projects must be valued or even recognized by the person whose projects they are. If an objective theory is correct, the self-directed meaning of a person's life can be crucial to the quality of that person's life even if that person does not recognize or value the meaning imparted by a V-project. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer.

that there is *some* amount of satisfactions that would have traded-off against this additional V-Project.

So Lexical is too coarse. To refine it, call the V-project that provides one's life *any* shape and meaning at all a 'primary project'.[32] It seems right to say that satisfactions themselves cannot be fungible against primary projects. After all, the distinction between a life that maintains a primary project and a life that does not is the difference between a life that maintains any valuable self-directed meaning at all, and one that fails to do so. If so, the following claim seems plausible:

> *Primary Projects*: Primary projects lexically dominate satisfactions.

However, if we assume, say, that someone could either become a successful politician or reject this in favor of substantial satisfactions, it seems less plausible to say that no amount of the latter could outweigh the former if we also assume that they have *already* maintained the life of a successful writer. If that's right, we should accept:

> *Non-Primary Projects*: Non-primary projects do not lexically dominate satisfactions.

Primary Projects and Non-Primary Projects seem sensitive to the importance of a life of *some* valuable, self-directed meaning. In addition, they are sensitive to the claim that, the greater one's achievement of V-projects, the less important this form of shared meaning becomes to the quality of one's life. However, a problem looms. As we shall see in the next section, these principles are in tension.

6. Accommodation

Along with Primary Projects and Non-Primary Projects, a third principle seems plausible.

> *Interpersonal Project Fungibility*: Primary projects do not lexically dominate non-primary projects.

To put Interpersonal Project Fungibility more precisely, one might say that there is some magnitude n of project-improvement for any person A (nA), such that nA is better than a primary project for another person, B. This claim seems hard to deny. It seems right to say that for any person A, who is *slightly* better-off in terms of project achievement than any other person B, for any magnitude project improvement m for B (mB), there is some nA such that nA>mB. If this is correct, by the transitivity of 'better-than', no V-project improvements lexically dominate any others. If so, this implies Interpersonal Project Fungibility.

If we accept these three axiological principles, plausible as they are, a serious problem looms. The easiest way to see this is to consider potential *inter*personal, rather than *intra*personal, welfare distributions. Take two people, Gus and Lee. Assume that Gus maintains no V-projects. Assume also that Lee maintains some V-projects. If Gus's primary project lexically dominates Gus's satisfactions (given Primary Projects), and some magnitude n of project-improvement for Lee is better than Gus's achievement of a primary project (given Interpersonal Project Fungibility), this would appear to commit us to saying that Lee's projects are *also* lexically dominant on Gus's satisfactions. After all, if some amount (m) of Gus's satisfactions are better than a project-improvement of magnitude n for Lee (i.e., if Non-Primary

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[32] An anonymous reviewer notes that nearly all will maintain the global project of "staying alive", and hence the lexical dominance of primary projects for all living individuals is, in essence, a moot point. But recall that V-projects must be declared, by a sensible theory of welfare, to be intrinsically valuable. Few, if any, such theories will declare mere *life* as intrinsically valuable. Indeed, even the most raw form of subjectivism will seem to avoid this claim, insofar as few will desire to stay alive simply for the sake of staying alive.

Projects is true) and a project-improvement of magnitude n for Lee is better than Gus's primary projects (given Interpersonal Project Fungibility), then, by the transitivity of 'better-than', m Gus's satisfactions must also be better than Gus's primary project, in violation of Primary Projects. If we wish to maintain the transitivity of 'better-than', it would appear that these three plausible axiological principles are mutually incompatible.

However, I think we can show that they are, in fact, compatible and in so doing come up with a reasonably plausible account of the relative weight of project-improvements for the better- and worse-off. The key is to be found in a crucial distinction in forms of lexical dominance. Consider the distinction between the following two principles:

> *Total Lexical Dominance*: X totally lexically dominates Y if and only if any amount of X, no matter how small, is non-fungible against any amount of Y, no matter how large.

> *Mitigated Lexical Dominance*: X mitigatedly lexically dominates Y if and only if there is some amount n such that nX is non-fungible against any amount of Y, no matter how large.[33]

Mitigated lexical dominance can allow that there is some number m ($m<n$) of X that is fungible against some finite amount of Y. Total lexical dominance cannot allow any trade-offs between any amount of the dominated and dominating good.[34] If this is correct, we might explore an alternative to Lexical:

> *Mitigated Lexical*: V-projects mitigatedly lexically dominate satisfactions.

If we accept Mitigated Lexical, we can accommodate Primary Projects, Non-Primary Projects, and Interpersonal Project Fungibility. Here's how. We should expect that, as a person gets better-off, the fungibility of potential project-improvements against satisfactions increases. Plausibly, as Buchan gets better-off, his project-improvements become *more* fungible against satisfactions. I think the right way to express this idea is to say that as a person, A, gets better-off, n—the magnitude project-improvement that would be non-fungible against satisfactions— increases. As A gets worse-off, n decreases. This claim might be expressed as:

> *More Fungible*: As a person gets better-off in terms of V-projects, project-improvements for this person of increasing magnitude are fungible against satisfactions.

However, if we accept this claim, we can accept that primary projects are wholly non-fungible against satisfactions (Primary Projects), and also hold that Lee's valued project is fungible against satisfactions (Non-Primary Projects). For Gus, and for people who are slightly better-off than Gus, we should expect that even a minute project-improvement will be non-fungible against satisfactions, i.e., $n<1$. Hence primary projects are non-fungible against satisfactions. But as one gets better-off in terms of V-projects, the magnitude of one's project-improvements required to render these project-improvements non-fungible against satisfactions (n) must increase. If so, we can accept that Lee's V-projects (magnitude $<n$) are fungible against satisfactions. Given that Gus's primary project is not fungible against satisfactions, but Lee's valued project improvements of a sub-n magnitude *are* fungible against satisfactions, it must also be that a primary project for Gus is worth *more* than the achievement of a valued project-

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[33] Mitigated lexical dominance is reminiscent of the "discontinuity" principle discussed by James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 85-89, whereas total lexical dominance is reminiscent of Griffin's "trumping" relation.

[34] The following argument was inspired by a claim of Gustaf Arrhenius. See Arrhenius, 107-8.

improvement of magnitude n for Lee; otherwise (given the transitivity of 'better-than') satisfactions are fungible against Gus's primary projects. If satisfactions are fungible only against sub-n project-improvements for Lee, and Gus's primary project is worth more than n project-improvements for Lee, we can accept Primary Projects. Satisfactions are fungible against Lee's project-improvements of a sub-n magnitude, but Gus's primary project can be outweighed only by a greater-than-n magnitude of valued project-improvements for Lee. If this is correct, Gus's primary project is non-fungible against satisfactions, but is fungible against Lee's projects.

This principle allows us to keep the three axiological principles we were interested in: the lexical dominance of primary projects over satisfactions, the fungibility of satisfactions against non-primary projects (up to a certain threshold magnitude n), and the fungibility of primary projects against non-primary projects. Insofar as Primary Projects, Non-Primary Projects, and Interpersonal Project Fungibility are plausible, there is reason to take very seriously the suggestion that V-projects mitigatedly lexically dominate satisfactions.

7. An interpersonal value function

The mitigated lexical dominance of V-projects in comparison to satisfactions is significant in part because it provides a reasonably clear account of the relative axiological importance of V-projects against satisfactions. However, it is significant for a further reason. Mitigated Lexical along with More Fungible imply a relatively natural, and independently plausible, method of determining the relative worth of project-improvements of a fixed magnitude for individuals who are better- and worse-off. To see why, consider the following. Mitigated Lexical implies that for any level of welfare, there is a magnitude project-improvement n such that a less significant project-improvement is fungible against satisfactions, but an equivalent or more significant project improvement is not. But More Fungible implies that a person gets better-off in terms of V-projects, the magnitude project-improvement that is no longer fungible against satisfactions increases: it takes a bigger and bigger magnitude project-improvement to be non-fungible against satisfactions the better-off one becomes in terms of V-projects. In other words, n increases with increasing levels of V-project achievement. But if that is correct, for a primary project to be lexically dominant on satisfactions, *and also* unrestrictedly fungible against non-primary projects, it must be that primary projects are at least of equivalent intrinsic value to project-improvements of magnitude n, at whatever level of V-project achievement. As a person gets better-off in terms of V-projects, a project-improvement of a fixed magnitude becomes less and less valuable in comparison to a primary project. But if this is correct, this seems to imply a more general claim. For any level of welfare, a project-improvement of magnitude m will be more evaluatively significant than a project-improvement of magnitude m for a person slightly better-off in comparison to a fixed point: a primary project.

If that is correct, the following principle emerges:

> *Prioritarianesque*: Project-improvements of magnitude m for the better-off are worth less than project-improvements of magnitude m for the worse-off.

Prioritarianesque is implied by the relationship between V-projects and satisfactions, but is plausible to boot. It seems right to say that each additional V-project makes a less significant marginal contribution to a person's welfare than the previous V-project. John Buchan's life was improved to a very substantial degree by becoming, say, a writer. And though he was even

better-off for having been a politician as well, his life did not improve *as much* as it did when he first became a writer, first maintained a life of valuable, self-directed meaning.[35]

Of course, Prioritarianesque is underspecified unless a precise value curve, illustrating the overall comparative weight of project-improvements, is articulated. What principled reason is there to believe that this curve should be defined by $\frac{1}{x}$, say, as opposed to $\frac{1}{2x}$ or $\frac{1}{2^x}$? The precise shape of the value curve will likely require substantial work and consultation with our considered judgments, and will likely result in a substantial degree of vagueness.

However, though I cannot offer a precise answer to this question, the method by which it should be answered is clear. Recall that we should treat satisfactions as restrictedly fungible against V-projects for the very well-off. To maintain the plausible result that primary projects should lexically dominate satisfactions, however, the achievement of a primary project for a single individual must be worth more than a project-improvement of magnitude n for the very well-off, where n is a project-improvement of sufficient magnitude such that satisfactions for the worse-off are not fungible against a project-improvement of this magnitude. But this allows us traction in determining the shape of the prioritarianesque value curve: for any welfare level l, one determines the magnitude n at which project-improvements for those at l are no longer fungible against satisfactions. Once this has been done for all values of l, one has determined a precise prioritarianesque curve: because n increases with increasing l, the value of a single person's achievement of a primary project in comparison to projects at welfare level l will also increase. Hence the variable weight of a project-improvement of magnitude m in comparison to a primary project (i.e., the prioritarianesque value curve) is given, simply, by $\frac{m}{n}$. This is one method to determine the shape of the curve implied by Prioritarianesque, and although it still requires substantial inquiry into our considered judgments, gaining traction is not impossible; the shape of the curve is not mysterious.

8. Unfinished business

So far, I hope to have done two things. First, I hope to have argued in favor of a particular method of weighing project-improvements in comparison to satisfactions: the former mitigatedly lexically dominate the latter. Second, I hope to have offered a value function that allows us to compare project-improvements for the better-off to project-improvements for the

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[35] It is worth comparing Prioritarianesque to the more traditional understanding of its namesake, prioritarianism. According to prioritarianism, marginal benefits for the worse-off are heavily weighted against, but not lexically superior to, marginal benefits for the better-off, and the comparative weight of marginal benefits for the worse-off increases as they are compared to marginal benefits for individuals of increasing welfare. Paul Weirich, in "Utility Tempered with Equality", *Noûs* 17 (1983), 424, describes prioritarianism this way:

> The principle first weights utility gains according to the situations of the individuals to whom they go. The weight of a utility gain decreases as the utility of the recipient's situation increases. More precisely, the weight is inversely proportional to the utility of the recipient's situation. Then the principle says to maximize weighted utility gains. This principle can claim to mediate between utility and equality because, although it gives some weight to every utility gain, it gives more weight to utility gains for those less well-off and so helps them to catch up.

Prioritarianesque implies that the relative weight of primary projects against non-primary project-improvements is, literally, "prioritarianesque": the value of a project-improvement of magnitude m decreases in comparison to primary projects as the welfare of those who stand to achieve such projects increases. Prioritarianesque is not a version of prioritarianism, at least as Weirich understands it. Prioritarianesque says nothing about the comparative interpersonal weight of *equivalent welfare benefits* for the worse-off and better-off. Prioritarianesque claims, instead, that project-improvements of magnitude m are of diminishing *welfare* value as one is better-off in terms of V-projects.

worse-off. However, this axiology has some interesting implications, which I explore in some concluding remarks.

One might think that the relationship between satisfactions and V-projects here is strange, if not incoherent. For any given welfare level *l*, there is some magnitude project-improvement *n* that cannot be traded-off against *any* amount of satisfactions. But how could this be? For instance, let's assume that, at welfare level 10, the magnitude of project improvement that is not fungible against satisfactions is 10. However, let's say that magnitude 9 *is* fungible against satisfactions. But if that's right, there can only be two options when it comes to the value difference between project-improvements of magnitudes 9 and 10. *Either* there is an *infinite* value difference between a project-improvement of 9 and 10 (which seems false given that, as per Prioritarianesque, all project-improvements are interfungible), or satisfactions permit of a value limit. If there is some particular finite value difference between a project-improvement of magnitude 10 for a person at welfare level 10, and a project-improvement of magnitude 9 for a person of welfare level 10, there must be some sort of asymptotic value limit for satisfactions that is set *below* the cardinal value of a project-improvement of magnitude 10 for a person of welfare level 10.

But this itself seems quite implausible.[36] Satisfactions surely include things like pleasure. If so, it would appear that a pleasure of value +10 is of equivalent value to any pleasure of +10, and any set of two pleasures of +10 is of equivalent value to any pleasure +20. But if that's right, additional pleasures (and hence at least a subset of satisfactions) must be linearly aggregative, which, or so it would seem, is incompatible with Prioritarianesque. The latter principle holds that project-improvements are fungible. But if satisfactions can be linearly aggregative, and Mitigated Lexical holds, occasionally project-improvements of different magnitudes will not be fungible.

It seems to me that there is good reason to accept Prioritarianesque, along with the mitigated lexical dominance of V-projects against satisfactions. But one can accept these claims and also reject an asymptotic value limit for satisfactions if one instead rejects cardinal comparisons between satisfactions and V-projects. If my account is correct, we should eschew cardinal comparisons between goods, and rely simply on an ordinal ranking (which would entail the refusal to say *how much* better a certain good X is than another good Y). When comparing states of affairs that involve trade-offs between satisfactions and V-projects, we simply produce a betterness ordering: *this* benefit for a person at *this* level of welfare is better than *that* benefit for a person at *that* level of welfare, and so on. In this way, we can claim that satisfactions, at least among themselves, can be measured on a cardinal scale. But this cardinal scale is incommensurable with the cardinal scale we use to measure the relative value of V-projects. When comparing their betterness, we simply declare that a project-improvement of magnitude 10 for a person at welfare level 10 is better than any amount of satisfactions; a project-improvement of magnitude 9 for a person at welfare level 10 is better than *n* satisfactions, and so on. A lexical priority relation that obtains between X and Y simply entails that it never makes a state of affairs better to trade-off X for Y; X and Y are non-fungible.

Thus my view seems to require the rejection of cardinality. Such a radical measure may seem reason to reject the axiology of goals at which I have gestured here. But that would be the wrong lesson to draw. To suggest that a particular theory of welfare is unsatisfactory because it leads to ordinal rather than cardinal comparisons between welfare goods seems to me to get

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[36] Contrary, e.g., to the proposal of Binmore and Voorhoeve, "Defending Transitivity Against Zeno's Paradox" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31 (2003).

the cart before the horse. Whether or not we should accept a cardinalized axiology seems to me entirely dependent on whether the theory of welfare we accept can support such cardinalization. But I think there are very good welfarist reasons for believing that cardinalization should be rejected. Though that may leave us in a difficult position elsewhere, perhaps that is simply the position in which we find ourselves.

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