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THE STORY OF A LIFE*

By Connie S. Rosati

Mercilessly he saw his life as it must appear to another. Dispassionately, reasonably, he contemplated the failure that his life must appear to be. He had wanted friendship and the closeness of friendship that might hold him in the race of mankind; he had had two friends, one of whom had died senselessly before he was known, the other of whom had now withdrawn so distantly into the ranks of the living that . . . He had wanted the singleness and the still connective passion of marriage; he had had that, too, and he had not known what to do with it, and it had died. He had wanted love; and he had had love, and had relinquished it, had let it go into the chaos of potentiality [. . .] And he had wanted to be a teacher, and he had become one; yet he knew, he had always known, that for most of his life he had been an indifferent one. He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity that was entire; he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion of triviality. He had conceived wisdom, and at the end of the long years he had found ignorance. And what else? he thought. What else?

What did you expect? he asked himself.

* * *

A kind of joy came upon him, as if borne in on a summer breeze. He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure—as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of

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> what his life had been. . . . There was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been.
>
> John Williams, *Stoner*[1]

What are we to make of the conflicting lines of thought that drifted through the mind of William Stoner, as he sat upon the daybed in his small study, just moments before he died of the cancer that had spread through his body? Stoner's reflections offer two takes on his life, and a reflective reader cannot help but feel that, in some sense, both of them are true, that Stoner's life both was and was not a failure, that he both was and was not to be pitied. One thing I think Stoner's reflections ought to make evident is that there is more than one story of a life, and by that I mean more than one true recounting of a life. But more on this later.

It is now something of a commonplace that we think about our lives in story form. According to a recent article in the *New York Times,* psychological research into the personal narratives we tell supports the idea that we are natural storytellers.[2] "The human brain," the article reports, "has a natural affinity for narrative construction," and this affinity apparently informs our efforts at self-understanding and influences our efforts at self-governance; we naturally construct personal narratives that both frame how we see ourselves and guide how we conduct ourselves.[3] Such psychological research, if sound, would seem to lend at least some support to philosophical research that appeals to narrative to shed light on the nature of our self-understanding and self-governance.[4] Psychologists and philosophers alike have been interested in the explanatory import of our being natural storytellers—and in particular, of our being storytellers

[1] John Williams, *Stoner* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1965), 274–75 and 277, respectively.

[2] See Benedict Carey, "This is Your Life (and How You Tell It)," *The New York Times,* May 22, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/22/health/psychology/22narr.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. See also J. David Velleman, "From Self Psychology to Moral Philosophy," in *Self to Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 224–52.

[3] See Carey, "This is Your Life (and How You Tell It)": "Researchers have found that the human brain has a natural affinity for narrative construction. People tend to remember facts more accurately if they encounter them in a story rather than in a list . . . and they rate legal arguments as more convincing when built into narrative tales rather than on legal precedents." See also Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 54, no. 1 (1987): 11–32.

[4] It would, that is to say, suggest that what many philosophers have thought about agency, the self, and autonomy, and so forth is actually realized in human beings, and thus, for example, that our concept of agency is not of barely possible agents. For enlightening discussion of the bearing in this way of empirical psychology on the philosophy of action, see Velleman, "From Self Psychology to Moral Philosophy."

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with respect to our own lives. But they have also been intrigued by the possible normative implications of our "narrative nature."[5]

From an explanatory standpoint, psychologists have sought to understand how the fact of our being storytellers—and storytellers with particular authorial bents—might help to explain how different individuals experience their lives. Normatively, and from the standpoint of clinical practice, they have been concerned to exploit what they learn in order to help people become the sorts of storytellers who tend sincerely to report leading more satisfying lives. Philosophers have explored the idea of the self as storyteller, autobiographer, or narrator in their efforts to understand the nature of the self and how selves like us can function autonomously and constitute ourselves as unified agents.[6] They have also appealed to the notion of narrative in attempting to answer certain fundamental questions about value, in particular, questions about the nature of personal good.[7]

The intuitive attraction of the latter appeals should be clear. Our interest in the nature of personal good is an interest in the good of creatures like us, creatures capable not only of pains and pleasures, desires and aversions, but of self-understanding, self-shaping, and self-governance.

[5] Of course, some would question the psychological findings. They would deny that they think about themselves or their lives in narrative terms, that they are "authorial agents," that they taken any concern with how their lives cohere considered as a whole. They would insist that the only self of which they are aware and in which they take any interest is the self they are now, and that their only concern with respect to their own lives is for the here and now. See Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio (new series)* 17, no. 4 (2004): 428–52. Strawson makes claims about himself along these lines. I have had other philosophers, in conversation, similarly deny that they think about their own lives in narrative terms. Those who would question the psychological findings might also question philosophical appeals to narrative, and so question the picture of the agent as author, of her life as her autobiographical output, and of a valuable life for her as one that has any particular relation to narrative. See, again, Strawson, whose challenges to narrativity have a bearing on at least some of the uses to which philosophers have attempted to put the notion of narrative.

[6] See, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Daniel Dennett, "The Reality of Selves," in *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 412–30, and "The Self as the Center of Narrative Gravity," in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives,* ed. Frank S. Kessel, Pamela M. Cole, and Dale L. Johnson (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1992), 103–15; Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Nicholas Humphrey and Daniel Dennett, "Speaking for Ourselves," in Daniel C. Dennett, *Brainchildren: Essays on Designing Minds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 31–55; and Velleman, "The Self as Narrator," in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays,* ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 56–76. See also Peter Goldie, *The Emotions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), for an appeal to narrative structure to understand the nature of the emotions. Alasdair MacIntyre may have been the first contemporary philosopher to claim, as he puts it, that man is "essentially a story-telling animal." See MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 216.

[7] See, e.g., MacIntyre, "After Virtue" and J. David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," reprinted in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), from *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48–77. I prefer the expression "personal good" to terms like "welfare" and "well-being" because it captures our interest in the good of persons or beings with the capacity for autonomy. See Connie S. Rosati, "Personal Good," in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, *Metaethics After Moore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107–32, 108–9. In what follows, though, I use these expressions interchangeably.

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Suppose that we *are* natural storytellers. And suppose that autonomous agency is partly constituted by the operation of motives and capacities that enable a person to understand herself and direct her life, at least in part, through the stories she constructs and enacts.[8] Then assuming that our good as autonomous agents must be suited to what we are like, it would seem there must be some connection between our narrative nature and our ability to lead lives that are good for us.[9]

My interest herein lies with the relationship between narrative and personal good, and more precisely, with the idea that narrative in some way contributes to a person's good. Let's call the thesis that narrative contributes to a person's good or enhances the welfare value of her life the "narrativity thesis."[10] Philosophers have, of course, taken more than one view about how narrative might enhance personal good, and their accounts have typically yielded important insights. As I shall argue, however, they leave unexplained how narrative might make a *distinctive* contribution to personal good.

Still, I am inclined to accept the narrativity thesis, at least properly understood. For it seems to me to capture something deeply important not only about how we live our lives but about how we are able to live *with* our lives, and thereby, about how we are able to flourish. So after exploring certain limitations of extant views, I shall offer a hypothesis about how the narrativity thesis might be true. According to this hypothesis, if narrative makes a distinctive contribution to personal good, it is not because our lives have distinctively narrative features or structures, and it is certainly not because our lives *are* narratives. Rather, it is because we can, and often do, *recount* our lives as narratives. It is this recounting—this storytelling *about* ourselves *to* ourselves—that distinctively contributes to our good.

I. The Narrative Structure of a Life

Those philosophers who have advanced something like the narrativity thesis seem to treat narrative as a feature a person's life has because of the relationships between events in or temporal segments of her life. It is, they suggest, the ordering or arrangement of these events or parts that enhances welfare, though they differ as to how precisely this enhancement is realized.

[8] Perhaps the most developed version of this picture of agency can be found in Velleman, "The Self as Narrator," but earlier versions of it appear in MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[9] Although some appeals to narrative to account for personal good may pre-date the psychological research, insofar as that research is sound, the appeals become further explicable. If there is a connection between our narrative nature and personal good, then there is likely also a connection between both and our achievement of lives that are meaningful and that realize perfectionist and aesthetic values.

[10] What I call the "narrativity thesis" should not be confused with a thesis of the same name criticized in Strawson, "Against Narrativity."

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Perhaps most famously, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that a good life for the person living it is a life with "narrative unity."[11] The narrative unity of a life presumably arises from the manner in which its parts are connected, from the holding of what David Velleman has called "narrative relations" among temporal segments of a life, and so among actions and events within that life.[12] If the narrative unity of a life is to be understood in terms of the holding of narrative relations among its parts, then the claim that a good life for the person living it is a life with narrative unity can best be understood as the claim, roughly, that the holding of narrative relations among parts of a life—or more precisely, the holding of narrative relations of the relevant sort—contributes in some distinctive way to a life's prudential or welfare value.[13] When the relevant narrative relations hold among the parts of a life, this enhances an individual's personal good considered as a whole, making her life a better life for her than it would otherwise have been.

The narrativity thesis, thus understood, offers an answer to a problem about how temporal segments of a life, with their sundry pains and pleasures, aims and activities, doings and undoings, hang together to determine the overall value of that life for the person living it.[14] The problem concerns the relationship between "momentary welfare" and

[11] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* e.g., 218–19.

[12] See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time." See also Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). From here on, I will mostly talk in terms of parts of a life. The kind of unity we are after cannot be a matter of temporal segments of a life themselves standing in certain relations, but of the relations among actions, undertakings, and so on that occur at different times in a life.

[13] I will, for about the first half of this essay, continue to talk in terms of narrative relations holding among parts of a life or between events in a life. But as I explain later, strictly speaking, narrative relations do not hold between events themselves but between those events as represented in a narrative.

[14] The idea that a good life must have form goes back a long way, with philosophers predictably differing in their ideas about the requisite form or shape that makes a life good, or better, for the person living it. William Frankena locates the idea in Plato, Whitehead and others. See W. K. Frankena, *Ethics,* 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 92. For attempts to understand the shape of a good life specifically in terms of narrative, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue;* Taylor, *Sources of the Self;* T. D. J. Chappell, *Understanding Human Goods: A Theory of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1998); Velleman, "Well-Being and Time"; McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing;* Johan Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," *Philosophical Papers* 32 (2003): 321–43; and Peter Goldie, "One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective," *Philosophical Papers* 3 (2003): 301–19. Velleman addresses the views of Michael Slote, who explores what Fred Feldman has dubbed the "shape of a life phenomenon" in Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Feldman offers a response to the "shape of a life phenomenon," insofar as it figures as an objection to hedonism, in Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 6. According to Feldman, Franz Brentano was also alert to the basic phenomenon. He cites Roderick M. Chisholm, *Brentano and Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 71, quoting Brentano. See also Noah Lemos, *Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 39. For varying criticisms of appeals to narrative in understanding a life, see Louis O. Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," *New Literary History* 1 (1970): 557–58; Strawson, "Against Narrativity," and Jean Paul Sartre, *Le Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938; 1996).

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"whole life welfare"—between the good for us *at particular moments in our lives* and the good for us *of our lives.*[15] Consider the various assessments we make of how a life is going for the person living it. We can talk meaningfully about a person's life going well at a particular moment. We can also talk meaningfully about a person's life going well over extended periods of time or over the course of an entire lifetime. The problem is that a person's life can go well at many particular moments, it seems, while apparently falling short when considered as a whole.[16] She might be engaged, at many moments, in activities she enjoys, for example, while failing ever to realize the principal aims the pursuit of which led her to engage in those activities. This suggests that a good life for a person must be a matter of something more than having many good moments.

In this regard, a good life for a person—for a creature with the capacity for autonomous agency—appears to differ critically from a good life for a nonhuman animal.[17] A good life for (most) nonhuman animals might simply be a life made up of good moments, a life, say, with many moments of pleasure and few moments of pain. So long as a nonhuman animal lives a life in which it can engage freely in its instinctual behaviors, in which it remains largely free of crippling or painful disease and can meet its basic needs, it might flourish as fully as any member of its species can.[18] In the case of persons, however, a good life seemingly involves more than a person's having many good moments or having many particular things that may be good for her; and it involves more precisely

[15] See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time." That problem can be posed without presupposing any particular view about the nature of personal good or welfare. Of course, what one counts as an acceptable solution to the problem, and whether one thinks the problem genuine at all, will depend on one's preferred theory of personal good or welfare. At the same time, what theory one prefers may be altered by reflection on the (apparent) problem; one might come to reject any theory that fails to treat the problem as genuine or that offers what seems too superficial a solution. But see Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," 326, comparing his position with that of Velleman, and denying that "there are such things as self-contained momentary instances of well-being." As a consequences of this difference, Brännmark and Velleman part company on the question of whether there can be retroactive welfare effects.

[16] Obviously a life can also go well considered as a whole, while falling short at many particular moments.

[17] See also Velleman, "Well-Being and Time"; and see Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," 322 ("we lead lives, and the lives we lead form narratively structured wholes in a way that the lives of animals do not").

[18] Some of these ideas about the good of animals figure in Peter Singer's seminal work on animal rights. See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975). Of course, the claims in the text are contingent. A fuller understanding of the lives of different species of animal might well lead us to understand the good of at least some animals as far more complex. For more recent discussion, see David DeGrazia, *Taking Animals Seriously: Mental Life and Moral Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing,* 196–97. But see Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 81–84, arguing that the welfare even of lower animals is not additive, and see n. 5, observing more generally that lives without any real narrative structure, such as those of people who are "maintained, from birth to death, in a state of semiconsciousness and inactivity" might be ones in which the welfare value of the life is determined by its momentary welfare value.

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because of the peculiar capacities of persons. Persons have capacities for reason, memory, and imagination, that (most) nonhuman animals evidently lack. Persons have the capacity to reflect on themselves and their lives. Moreover, they have the capacity to be moved not only by what they may desire but by their determinations about what is worth desiring; and so they have the capacity to decide, in light of these determinations, what sort of person to be and what sort of life to lead. The ordinary exercise of these sundry capacities has the result that persons not only attend to their lives from moment to moment; they also take up a view of their lives as a whole, reflecting on themselves and their existence over time. In so doing, they also take, so to speak, a "larger view" of themselves and their lives.[19]

These facts about the nature of persons surely affect what makes for a good life for a person. A good life for a person arguably depends not only on what occurs within her life—on what she chooses, pursues, and achieves, on what is done for or against her, on what happens to her—but on how these sundry elements are integrated. What matters, we might say, is the *shape* of the life. But what sort of shape makes a difference to the value of a life for the person living it? What relation among parts of a life must obtain in order to give it the requisite shape, so that we can truthfully say of a person that she had not merely many good moments, that she attained not merely many things that were good for her, but that she lived a good or flourishing *life*?[20] The distinctive answer provided by the narrativity thesis is that the requisite relation that must obtain among parts is the narrative relation, the requisite shape of a life is the shape of a narrative unity.

In attempting to understand the narrativity thesis, we need to be careful not to conflate the different kinds of normative assessment that might be made of a life. First, we must be careful not to conflate assessments of personal good and assessments of meaningfulness. Distinct normative appraisals seem to be involved in assessing a life as good for the person living it and assessing that same life as meaningful. We can imagine lives that are, intuitively, meaningful, though not particularly good for the persons living them, and lives that are good for the persons living them,

[19] For related ideas, see Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 78–79: ". . . a person himself has both a synchronic and a diachronic identity. The perspectives from which synchronic interests are assessed, unlike the financial perspective, are not optional points of view that a person may or may not adopt from time to time. They are perspectives that a person necessarily inhabits as he proceeds through life, perspectives that are partly definitive of who he is. An essential and significant feature of persons is that they are creatures who naturally live their lives from the successive viewpoints of individual moments, as well as from a comprehensive, diachronic point of view."

[20] See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time" and Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," for different, though not unrelated, ways of explicating the problem. The problem of how parts of a life must be related in order for a life as a whole to be good for the person living it, and more generally, of how the relations among parts of a life affect the welfare value of that life, has been thought by some to bear on related questions about when it is better or worse to die. See McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing*, chap. 2.

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though not particularly meaningful.[21] Many of us seem to live lives of the latter sort. A life of the former sort was lived, for example, by Ryan White, the adolescent who died young of AIDS-related illnesses after enduring physical pain and social ostracism, but who helped to educate a frightened public about HIV/AIDS.

Of course, there might be an important connection between good lives and meaningful lives. The conditions that make for a good life and the conditions that make for a meaningful life could be the same, for example, even though *being good for* someone and *being meaningful* are distinct properties a life might have. Or a life's being meaningful might be a necessary condition of its being good for the person living it, perhaps because meaningfulness affects the welfare value of anything else that might contribute to or detract from a person's good.[22] Or as Susan Wolf has argued, perhaps a good life has two aspects, happiness *and* meaningfulness.[23]

In order to determine the relationship between meaningfulness and personal good, we would require an account of what it is for a life to be meaningful, and so of what we are assessing when we assess meaningfulness. For the reasons already given, I shall assume that assessments of personal good and meaningfulness are distinct. But nothing in what follows depends on any particular view about the relationship between personal good and meaningfulness; and the hypothesis that I shall ultimately offer about the narrativity thesis allows for a number of ways in which meaningfulness could be related to or partly constitutive of personal good.

Second, we should not confuse assessments of personal good with assessments of the intrinsic value realized in a life.[24] As traditionally understood, the concept of the good, or intrinsic value, is the concept of those items, usually, states of affairs, that have value simply in virtue of their intrinsic properties. In contrast, the concept of personal good—of what is *good for* a person—is the concept of a certain kind of relational value.[25] Something, X, is good for a person, P, when X stands in a certain relation of fit or suitability to P.[26] Although it may be good that people get what is good

[21] Velleman makes the same point I have just made in the text, emphasizing that when he says that the place of a particular event in a person's life story alters its meaning and in this way contributes to her life's value, he does not mean to "equate a valuable life with a meaningful one." See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 63, n. 18.

[22] See, e.g., Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," 337, for something like the latter view.

[23] See Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 14: 207–22, and *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[24] I explain how *being good* and *being good for a person* are distinct properties in Connie S. Rosati, "Objectivism and Relational Good," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25 (2008): 314–49.

[25] See ibid.

[26] I do not mean this as an analysis of personal good. For the beginnings of an analysis of what is it for something to be good for a person, see Rosati, "Personal Good." As far as

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for them, *being good for* a person is a distinct property from *being good.* The word "good" as it figures in the expression "good for a person" does not express the property *good;* it does not express intrinsic value. Rather, it figures as a part of the expression "good for" which expresses the relevant relation of fit.[27] Because the term "good" in the expression "good for a person" does not express intrinsic value, it is, conceptually, an open question whether only those things that are also intrinsically good can be good for a particular person. Undoubtedly, a great deal of what tends to be good for us would appear on a standard list of intrinsic or objective goods, and this fact will be important to assessing extant appeals to narrative to understand personal good. But it does not follow that assessments of personal good *just are* assessments of the amount of intrinsic value that has been realized in a person's life.

II. The Narrativity Thesis

The narrativity thesis, then, concerns a particular kind of normative assessment, namely, assessment of welfare value or personal good. And as it figures in extant appeals to narrative, the thesis appears to be understood in a way that combines at least three central claims:

> *Claim 1: Relationalism.* The welfare value of a person's life depends not solely on events in it or parts or components of it at a time—it depends not only on momentary welfare—but also on the *shape* of that life, that is to say, on the value-affecting relations among its parts over time.
>
> *Claim 2: Narrativity.* The welfare value of a person's life depends, in part, on the specifically narrative relations among its parts over time; that is to say, the relevant value-affecting relations are *narrative* relations.

I am aware, the first person to articulate explicitly the idea that goodness for a person is a kind of relational value involving a fit between a person and various activities, undertakings, and so on, is Peter Railton. See Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163–207 and "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–31. But the basic idea goes back at least as far as John Stuart Mill, where it underlies his argument in favor of freedom for individuals to engage in "experiments in living." See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 54. See also J. David Velleman, "A Right of Self-Termination?" *Ethics* 109 (1999): 606–20, and "Well-Being and Time." For more recent adoption of the view that good-for value is relational value involving suitability for an individual, see Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For related discussion, see also Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "Analysing Personal Value," *Journal of Ethics* 11, no. 1 (2007): 405–35.

[27] As I understand it, the normativity of personal good—the reason-giving force of facts about what is good for a person—derives from the value of the person. See Rosati, "Personal Good" and "Objectivism and Relational Good." See also Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Velleman, "A Right of Self-Termination"; and Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

> *Claim 3: Irreducibility.* The holding of narrative relations among parts of a life affects the welfare value of a life in a way that is not reducible to the contribution any other factor makes to the value of a person's life.

When I refer to "events in" or "parts of" a life, I mean to be referring to a person's activities, undertakings, relationships, and so on. These can be engaged in at a moment, and so can benefit a person at that moment, but they can also be engaged in over time, and in fact, they characteristically unfold over time. I talk in terms of components or parts because the narrative relations Claim 2 refers to will not hold simply among different times in an agent's life but within and among her activities, undertakings, relationships, and so on as they stand, and as she stands in relation to them, at different times. Perhaps more precisely, they will hold among events involving her activities, undertakings, relationships, and so on, over time. It is, I believe, a necessary condition on a person's life being good for her that her central activities, undertakings, and interpersonal connections be good for her. The problem that we considered earlier tells us that it is not enough for these to be good for her at discrete moments; rather, the shape of a person's life matters as well. Claim 2 tells us more precisely that it is not enough because specifically narrative relations among parts of or events in a life also contribute to personal good.

Claim 3 helps to make clear that, according to the narrativity thesis, narrative relations among the parts of a life or events in a life make a distinctive or independent contribution to welfare. Now perhaps some of those who have appealed to narrative never considered themselves to be doing anything more than expressing certain familiar ideas in an alternative but, as they might see it, especially illuminating way; perhaps some will deny that they ever meant for talk about narrative unity or narrative relations to provide anything more than a helpful metaphor. But I take it that the narrativity thesis would be far less interesting if talk about narrative relations and narrative unity turned out to be just a metaphorical way of talking about aspects of personal good that are better expressed—more precisely and informatively expressed—in other terms. Claim 3, in effect, acknowledges that the narrativity thesis offers an important insight into the nature of personal good only insofar as narrativity itself contributes to the value of a life.

Those who have appealed to narrative have made a plausible case for Claim 1. David Velleman has provided particularly compelling examples in support of the claim that the welfare value of a life depends in part on its shape, or as he puts it, on the order of events.[28]

> Consider two different lives you might live. One life begins in the depths but takes an upward trend: a childhood of deprivation, a

[28] See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time."

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> 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. Your retirement is as blessed in one life as your childhood is in the other; your nonage is as blighted in one life as your dotage is in the other.[29]

Employing examples like this one, Velleman argues not simply that the order of events in a life affects its welfare value, so that lives with equal momentary welfare value might differ in their overall welfare values, but that "well-being isn't additive."[30] There is a *diachronic* dimension to a person's good that is distinct from momentary welfare; and the diachronic welfare value of a life, or temporal segments of that life, is something akin to an organic unity, in that its value is not a mere sum of the value of moments within it.[31]

Some philosophers would, of course, reject not only the claim that the shape of a life, and in particular, the holding of narrative relations, affects its welfare value, but also the claim that the welfare value of a life is not additive. Those sympathetic to hedonism, for example, might maintain that if narrative relations affect the overall value of a life, they do so only because and insofar as they contribute to the balance of a life's pains and pleasures.[32] Theoretically, a shapeless life might achieve a balance of pleasure over pain equal to or greater than the balance of pleasure over

[29] Ibid., 58.

[30] Ibid. And see John Bigelow, John Campbell, and Robert Pargetter, "Death and Well-Being," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1990): 119–40; Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning"; Chappell, *Understanding Human Goods.* Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life,* chap. 6, also cites C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation,* (1946; New York: Open Court, 2007), 503, as endorsing the general anti-additivity idea, quoting a passage from Lewis that mirrors G. E. Moore's basic claim about value and organic unities. See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica,* ed. T. Baldwin (1903; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), sect. 18. Moore himself, of course, was not writing about welfare value or the value of lives but, rather, about the nonadditivity of intrinsic value.

[31] Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 69. Velleman notes at 69, n. 29, that Michael Stocker has observed that "the value of a life is what Moore would have called an 'organic whole.' " See Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 300–302, and 323. But Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," 324, suggests that even a holistic view of the value of lives that treated them as something like organic unities might still allow that the value of lives is additive. Discussing Moore's picture, he remarks, "Moore's view is that the value of the parts are the same as they would be in any other context, it is just that certain combinations of things give rise to additional values that must be included when we compute the sums that we are interested in. Moore thus preserves the stability of value that is needed for a substantive form of additivity." In my view, the ideas that the value of lives is holistic, that it is in the nature of an organic unity, and that it is nonadditive are in fact distinct.

[32] Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life,* chap. 6.

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pain achieved in a "shapely" life, a life in which the requisite narrative relations hold among the parts.

Fred Feldman has offered a three-pronged reply specifically to the "anti-additivity" argument in defense of the view he calls "attitudinal hedonism."[33] First, if a person *cares* about the different life trajectories her life might take in Velleman's example, then additional pains and pleasures must figure in the calculation, and the lives are not equal in their momentary welfare value after all. Second, if the person does *not* care, then assuming the Uphill and Downhill lives are indeed equal in their momentary welfare value, no basis exists for thinking that the Uphill life is better (there is, after all, "nothing in it" for the agent). The order of events may affect the value of a life, but only by altering its momentary and so its additive value, and those who are inclined to prefer the Uphill life must in fact be imagining that additional pleasures would attend the uphill trajectory or that additional pains would attend the downhill path. Finally, it is open to the attitudinal hedonist, according to Feldman, to accommodate the preference for the Uphill life by moving to "Desert Adjusted Intrinsic Attitudinal Hedonism," according to which some enjoyments, such as the enjoyment taken in contemplation of an uphill trajectory, are more *pleasure-worthy* than other enjoyments, such as the pleasure taken in a "frosty beer and salty peanuts," and so they contribute more to the value of a life.[34]

I want to set the issue of additivity aside.[35] The question of additivity concerns whether the value of a life can be determined, in principle, by summing up the value of its parts and relations, or by decomposing its value into the value of its parts and relations, and that seems distinct from the question of what it takes for a life to "add up." As far as I can tell, the issue of whether the welfare value of a life is additive and the issue of whether narrative relations contribute distinctively to the value of a life are separable, and my interest lies with the latter issue.

As I have said, I think that a plausible case has been made for Claim 1. The greatest need for elucidation and support is with respect to Claims 2

[33] Ibid.

[34] This last suggestion, I believe, raises rather serious theoretical difficulties, because the modification of adjusting for desert does not seem to be motivated from within hedonism itself and does not flow from the intuition that explains the attraction of hedonism, namely, that there must be "something in it" for the agent if an experience is to contribute to her welfare. Feldman otherwise attempts to explain away the preference for the Uphill life, even when the momentary value of the lives is equal, on the grounds that it must illicitly suppose that the Uphill life in fact contains more pleasure, or must confuse the pleasure the observer takes in contemplating the Uphill versus Downhill paths—its *extrinsic or "inherent value"*—for the greater *intrinsic welfare value* of the Uphill life itself, or must confuse the possibly greater value for the world of the excellence or beauty of the Uphill life for the life's greater welfare value.

[35] I am doubtful about efforts to settle either way the question of whether the value of a life is additive, whether one treats additivity as requiring that units can be added up in determining the value of a life or merely as requiring that when a life has finally been lived, its value can be decomposed into the value of discrete parts. See Velleman (2000) for arguments against additivity by either composition or decomposition.

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and 3. So we need to consider two questions. First, just what might be meant by "narrative relations" between events? And second, how might narrative relations, and so narrative, contribute to the welfare value of a life?

III. What is Narrative?

A great deal has been written, both by literary theorists and philosophers, about the nature of narrative.[36] We still lack a fully satisfying analysis, but it will be sufficient for present purposes to attend to common ideas about narrative in order to get a fix on narrative relations and their possible bearing on the welfare value of a life.

To begin with, though, we should remember that a narrative is a representation and not to be confused with the life of which it is a representation.[37] An agent's life is not itself a narrative, even if it is "narratable," that is to say, even if the sequence of events that a life comprises can be represented as a narrative.

It is difficult to say precisely what makes a representation a *narrative* rather than a mere list of events in rough chronological order. A narrative represents events in a particular manner, highlighting connections so as to explain, or yield an understanding of, events. But the sort of understanding provided by narrative presumably differs from that provided by the representation of events or data in, say, a scientific report.[38] A narrative no doubt depends on underlying causal connections, but narrative representation and explanation surely involve more than representation and explanation of causal connections.[39]

Peter Goldie has suggested three features of what he calls "successful narratives," and in particular, of successful "person-narratives," or nar-

[36] See, e.g., Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, ed., *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Frank K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative" and *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Paul John Eakin, ed., *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) and *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, eds., *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1–25.

[37] Peter Goldie, "One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective," *Philosophical Papers* 3 (2003): 301–19.

[38] See Velleman, "Narrative Explanation."

[39] For excellent discussion of causal connection and a variety of other issues about the nature of narrative, see ibid. As Velleman observes, some narratives may depend critically on connections between events that are not to be understood as causal.

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ratives about persons.[40] First, a successful person-narrative has what he calls *coherence:* in contrast to a mere list of events, it displays *causal connections* among events. In addition, though, it renders that series of events *meaningful* by enabling an audience "to understand how the actions of those persons who are internal to the narrative could have made sense to them at the time."[41] Finally, a successful person-narrative has *emotional import,* revealing "the narrator's external evaluation of, and emotional response to, what happened."[42] Charles Griswold's depiction of narrative stresses the additional fact that a narrative involves the perspective of the narrator, "a point of view implicit or explicit in the telling. A narrative is normally a unifying—and in that way meaning making—discursive enterprise."[43] The constructing of a narrative involves unifying events in a way that assigns meaning to them and so, as he puts it, is a way of "meaning making."[44]

These features are not unrelated, of course; all three certainly bear on the intelligibility of a sequence of events in a life. Consider a first-person narrative with the agent herself as audience. In making a sequence of events in a life intelligible to herself, for example, an agent must have some rough understanding not only of how those events might have occurred, but of how her own actions made sense at the time and in her circumstances, and this will in part involve her assessment, cognitive and emotional, of the significance of events and her role in them in terms of her aims or purposes or values.

Drawing on the foregoing observations, we might now say, if still too crudely, that a narrative relation is a *meaning-affecting* relation. Two events, E1 and E2, stand in a narrative relation to one another if the occurrence of E2 can plausibly be seen as affecting the meaning or significance of E1, either alone or together with other events. To affect the meaning or significance of another event, I suggest, is to constrain the evaluations one can truthfully make about the event, as well as the range of appropriate emotional responses one can have to that event.

At least two additional points about narrative merit attention. First, a narrative need not (and, practically speaking, could not) aim at a complete recounting of events, but its incompleteness need not render it less truthful or informative or revealing. Insofar as a narrative represents

[40] Goldie, "One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective."

[41] Ibid., 305.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

[44] The notion of meaning or significance invoked in characterizing narrative should not be confused with the notion of meaningfulness involved in our assessments of lives as meaningful or not. Although a variety of views exists as to what makes a life meaningful, common talk often appeals to ideas such as living a life with a bigger purpose, connecting to something larger than oneself, having a positive and lasting impact on the world, and so on. The notion of meaning considered here concerns intelligibility.

events in a way that not only brings out important causal connections but relations of meaning or significance, a narrative will emphasize what seems salient, important, significant, at least as seen from a perspective or point of view. It does not follow, of course, that just any narrative can offer a faithful recounting of a life. As Griswold explains it, a narrative (at least one that purports to be biographical or autobiographical) "characterizes what is happening or happened; in so doing it reshapes it, or remembers it, or re-imagines it, but does not thereby fabricate it out of thin air."[45]

Finally, Griswold has observed that "The idea of narrative helps to explain just how the past can nonetheless change without pretense to undoing it, or ignoring, rationalizing, or forgetting it. One may adopt a different *perspective* on it, attach a different meaning to it, respond to it in a different way, adapting it to one's evolving life 'story' . . ."[46] Of course, narrative cannot explain how the past can actually change, but I take it that Griswold does not mean his point to be taken literally. As I would express it, what the idea of narrative does is enable us to understand how the past can be *managed,* as well as how the future can be directed, and as I will explain later, it is this fact about narrative that bears importantly on how the holding of narrative relations can affect the welfare value of a life.

The foregoing depiction of narrative and narrative relations stresses features related to what proponents of the narrativity thesis have had to say about how narrative relations affect the value of a life. Velleman has argued that the reason well-being is not additive and that the welfare value of an extended period depends on the narrative relations among events in that period is that later events "alter the meaning of earlier events, thereby altering their contribution to the value of one's life."[47] According to Velleman, the place of an event "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," and "the event's meaning is what determines it's contribution to the value of one's life."[48]

> A particular success can be either a windfall or a well-earned reward, depending on the amount of effort that preceded it; the expenditure of a particular effort can be either a good investment or a waste, depending on the degree of success that ensues. Retrospective significance—that which is gained from subsequent events—is often responsible for the discrepancy between total momentary well-being and lifetime value. For when subsequent developments alter

[45] Griswold, *Forgiveness,* 99.
[46] Ibid., 100.
[47] Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 58.
[48] Ibid., 63.

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> the meaning of an event, they can alter its contribution to the value of one's life. . . .[49]

We find related lines of thought in the work of a number of other philosophers, though they do not always clearly observe the distinction I earlier assumed between the welfare value of a life and the meaningfulness of a life. For example, Jeff McMahan writes that "the order of events makes a life better by making it more meaningful."[50] According to Johann Brännmark, two kinds of narrative meaning in particular are "relevant to how events affect the quality of our lives," what he calls "contrastive meaning," which arises from the way in which an event is situated relative to others, and "purposive meaning," which concerns the way in which some of the things we do have a purpose or point that infuses other things we do with meaning.[51]

IV. A Skeptical Challenge

The narrativity thesis, understood in the foregoing way, expresses some critical insights about personal good. The shape of a person's life does seem to matter to her welfare, though this idea will require refinement. And events in a life surely can, in some sense, stand in meaning-affecting relations to one another, though this point, too, will require refinement. But how exactly do narrative relations affect the welfare value of a life? More precisely, how is it that by affecting the *meaning* of events in a life, narrative relations affect the *welfare value* of the life *itself*?

This is the question that will chiefly occupy me in the remainder of this essay. The underlying puzzle can be expressed as a skeptical challenge, according to which the holding of narrative relations among parts of a life contributes nothing distinctive to the welfare value of that life.[52] The challenge might be formulated in at least two ways. First, although *being good for a person* and *being good* are distinct properties, as observed earlier,

[49] But, he says, "they cannot retroactively change the impact that it had on one's well-being at the time." See Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 68. Velleman concludes that the value of a life is what he calls a "strongly irreducible second-order good," where a second-order good is "a valuable state of affairs consisting in some fact about other goods" and its irreducibility requires that it "possess value over and above that of its component first-order goods . . ." (69–70).

[50] McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing*, 178, and, more generally, 175–80.

[51] Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," 337. In discussing the importance of narrative meaning to the value of our lives, Brännmark rejects Wolf's position of "regarding meaning and happiness simply as two components of the human good." He insists that "Once we truly grant importance to such matters it does . . . seem more reasonable to understand meaning as something more pervasive, as something that modifies, or at least is potentially able to modify, the value contributed to our good by most of the things that make up our lives" (337).

[52] For skeptical worries different from the one I shall consider, see Brännmark's brief discussion in "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," 321–22.

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a life that is good for a person usually includes at its core at least some putatively objective goods, with those goods standing in the good-for relation to that person. It includes some of what Stephen Darwall has called "valuing activities"—parenting, involvement with the arts, pursuit of knowledge, athletic engagement, and other forms of development of personal excellences. We know that engagement with a variety of goods takes time; indeed, it often occurs over quite an extended period of time. Moreover, many goods can be achieved only through the activity of agents themselves and so by agents acting with a certain constancy of purpose and effort over time. No wonder, then, that the value of a life is not a matter merely of the value of momentary engagement in activities, undertakings, or relationships. But narrative relations do no independent work in understanding the welfare value of a life. To be sure, we can say, for example, that a person's current success as a pianist "means" that her earlier years of study paid off. But the appeal to later events as conferring "meaning" captures nothing not already captured by appealing to the achievement of objectively valuable things over time, the successful engagement in valuing activities; and it is the latter achievement or success that determines the welfare value of her life.

A second way of expressing the problem appeals more explicitly to an alternative picture of the shape of a good life. John Rawls maintains that a good life for a person consists in the (approximate) realization of a rational life plan.[53] A person's life plan will, as Rawls envisions it, involve certain central, though revisable, aims rooted in an agent's reflective desires, with details of the plan—various subplans—filled in over time, and at the appropriate times, and in ways that are sensitive to an agent's circumstances, including her options and available resources. A plan is, on Rawls's picture, roughly a temporal and pragmatic ordering of rational desires. Failure to succeed in one's plan can amount to failure to succeed in one's principal aims and so failure to satisfy one's central rational desires. We can say, for example, that the fact that a person has a successful medical practice "means" that her earlier investments of time and effort paid off. But the appeal to "meaning," to narrative relations, captures nothing not already captured by appeal to successful realization, at least in part, of a rational plan of life. Again, the notion of narrative relations, the appeal to how later events affect the "significance" of earlier events appears to make no independent contribution to the welfare value of a life.[54]

[53] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), sects. 63–64.

[54] Perhaps those who have emphasized the importance of narrativity, or the holding of narrative relations among events in or parts of a life, merely meant to call attention to the fact that the value of our lives requires the presence of goods the attainment of which requires sustained and successful effort over time. Or perhaps they meant their talk merely to be another way of expressing the need for the sort of structure in a life that others would express by talking in terms of a rational life plan. I assume, however, that if this were all they meant to say, they would have made that clear. But see Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47–51, who

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Undoubtedly, events in a life provide the materials from which a narrative can be constructed, and we can sensibly describe subsequent events as altering the meaning of earlier events, within the context of the narrative. From the standpoint of value, however, all the work appears to be done by value-relevant facts about a person's life, facts about her success or failure relative to aims, ends, desires, plans, or goods. It seems clear enough how, given earlier events, subsequent events might alter the value of one's life. Earlier events were events of pursuing central desires, setting out to achieve a good, taking steps to fulfill a plan of life. Later events determined whether one successfully pursued one's desires, achieved something of genuine value, effectively implemented one's plan. A life in which a person satisfies her most central reflective desires, attains genuine goods, succeeds in her rational aims, seems, ceteris paribus, a better life for her than one in which she does not.[55] We can tell the story of a life, but the welfare value that accrues to a life through a sequence of narratively related events is simply *recounted* in the narrative.[56]

Any attempt to address the foregoing skeptical challenge, and to flesh out the narrativity thesis more fully, must bear in mind, of course, that a life that makes for a good story is not necessarily a good life for the person living it. On the contrary, many lives that make for excellent stories are lives none of us would rationally want to live—at least not insofar as our concern lies with our good rather than, say, our fame or notoriety. As the character of Henry II laments, in *The Lion in Winter*, "My life, when it is written, will read better than it lived."[57] And lives that would read better than they lived are certainly lives in which narrative relations hold among events. We cannot adequately explain, then, the way that narrativity contributes to the welfare value of a life merely by appealing to the holding of narrative relations, or even to the idea that the order of events changes the meaning or significance of events. Rather, we would have to explain how the order of events alters their significance in the *right sort* of way; and to return to our skeptical challenge, we would have to explain how the right sort of way is not reducible to the achieve-

discusses the idea of our having a narrative understanding of our lives in relation to our need, as agents, to have an orientation toward the good. And see Chappell, *Understanding Human Goods*, 156: the narrative conception of the good "is a conception of the human goods that says that they are necessarily experienced within a rational plan of life." Brännmark suggests that there may be different versions of the narrative approach and that Chappell's characterization is not "built into the very notion of such an approach." See Brännmark, "Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning," n. 12.

[55] What is more, whatever account we might give of the meaningfulness of lives, such a life would, ceteris paribus, also likely be a more meaningful life.

[56] A proponent of the narrativity thesis might contend that either way of understanding the skeptical challenge in fact presupposes or rests on the holding of narrative relations among parts of a life. But any such response can be effective only if we first have a plausible explanation of how narrative relations make a distinctive contribution to the value of a life for the person living it.

[57] James Goldman, *The Lion in Winter* (New York: Penguin, 1964). Thanks to Michael Moore for calling my attention to this passage.

ment of value or the fulfillment of desire or the successful realization of some part of a rational life plan.[58]

There are yet further complications. When we consider our lives, we survey events, as they have occurred or as we imagine they might occur in the future; these events provide the materials for the making of narratives. We cannot interpret events in just any way we like, but without either ignoring or whitewashing the facts, it seems we can make different things of them. It is open to us to interpret and reinterpret events, to tell differing stories, stories which accentuate or minimize, play up or down, various happenings, stories which differ in their emphases, and so in their emotional and evaluative import. There seems to be no single way to understand events in a life, and so no single way in which the order of events may alter their significance. Given the leeway that exists in the crafting of a faithful narrative, how do we get to something that can affect the welfare value of a life?

Narratives can, in any case, be constructed from different perspectives. We outsiders can look at the events in someone's life and tell a story about her life; and we can tell more than one such story. We as agents can survey the events in our own lives—take up a view of ourselves and our existence over time—and tell stories about our own lives; and we can each tell more than one such story. There are, in short, first-person and third-person narratives about a life, and there is first- versus third-person satisfaction in a story. So narrative and narrative relations as they might appear from *which* point of view bear on the value of a life for the person living it?

V. The Life of William Stoner

I have considered a number of problems for the narrativity thesis, and yet I think that proponents of narrativity point us toward something deeply important when they stress the shape of a life, the interplay among life events, the resulting shifts in meaning. I want to begin, at last, to consider what that might be. In order to do so, I will need to return to where I began, with the strangely equivocal case of William Stoner.

Stoner was, of course, a fictional character; even so, his was a life that reads better than it would have lived. Indeed, his life was perhaps every academic's nightmare. And yet partly because his life invites the conflicting reactions noted at the outset, it may prove especially instructive. If narrative or narrative relations in some way enhance the value of a life for the person living it—if they contribute to a life's value in a way that is not

[58] Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 66, maintains that "desire fulfillment per se is not what's valuable; what's valuable is living out a story of efforts rewarded rather than efforts wasted. Insofar as fulfillment of one's past desires is valuable, I am inclined to say, its value depends on that of life stories in which desires are eventually fulfilled."

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reducible to the achievement of objective values, or the satisfaction of reflective desires, or the fulfillment of a rational life plan—then presumably that enhancement might occur even in a life that has not gone so well by these other measures.

We learn, in the opening pages of John Williams's wonderful novel, that Stoner began his studies at the University of Missouri when he was nineteen, that he continued on there to earn his doctorate, that he subsequently spent his entire academic life at the university, that he never rose above the rank of assistant professor, and that "few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses."[59]

Stoner was born an only child to a poor, uneducated farmer and his wife in rural Missouri. Family life was silent, lonely, and focused on the hard labor involved in eking out a subsistence from the soil.[60] When he graduated from high school, Stoner's father learned from a county agent about the College of Agriculture at the University of Missouri. It was decided that Stoner would go, with the expectation that he would return and share what he had learned about how they might better run the farm. Having done well in his first year classes, Stoner struggled in his second year with the mandatory required survey of English literature. In the course of trying to deal with his intimidating instructor, Arthur Sloane, in the course of long nights spent laboring to understand the assigned works, Stoner got hooked. In the final year of his undergraduate studies, now an English major, Sloane asked Stoner to stop by his office. After commenting on Stoner's academic record, Sloane offered that Stoner might continue on to graduate school, explaining that he could support himself by teaching as he worked on his doctorate. Stoner, never having considered such a possibility for himself, asked Sloane what he meant, and Sloane explained to Stoner what he had not yet understood: he was going to be a teacher. When Stoner heard himself ask, haltingly, how Sloane could tell, how he could be sure, Sloane replied, "It's love, Mr. Stoner . . . You are in love. It's as simple as that."[61]

Stoner's love of literature turned out to be the only steady love in his life. Not long after completing his Ph.D. and becoming an instructor at the university, he met a young, skittish woman named Edith at a party and pursued her doggedly. Their eventual marriage turned out to be a failure, as Stoner realized within a few months of the wedding. Over the remainder of his life, he found himself on ever-shifting ground as his wife alternated between emotional highs and sometimes debilitating lows,

[59] Williams, *Stoner,* 3–4. The novel commences with the fact of Stoner's death, and Williams's description of how that fact registered in his world hints at much of what we will come to learn about Stoner's life: "Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers."

[60] Ibid., 4.

[61] Ibid., 20.

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between occasional public affection and continuous private disregard and hostility. The loving bond he shared with their sole child, Grace, was ultimately torn apart by Edith, whose animosity toward him and whose narcissism and inability to understand her own daughter led her to so control Grace's activities and social life that Grace became pregnant in order to escape the family home.

Stoner had managed to publish his dissertation as a book, which received a satisfactory if tepid reception. But his enthusiastic work on a second book became a casualty of his circumstances. One problem was his wife's machinations, as she eventually evicted him from his home study, in which he had spent many happy hours with Grace, to the sun porch, a small space within which she further displaced him and disrupted his efforts by using it as a dumping ground to store assorted clutter. One consolation during this period came from Stoner's discovery that he might be capable of being a good teacher, and he poured his heart into his teaching with some success. But life grew worse again as a result of a disagreement with a colleague over a graduate student whom his colleague deemed brilliant but who Stoner failed in a seminar and then exposed as an imposter during oral exams. The colleague, who subsequently became departmental chair, ensured that the graduate student would continue his studies, while consigning Stoner to teaching introductory classes at such odd and scattered hours of the day that he eventually gave up on his writing project altogether. At forty-two years old, he briefly found a genuine and deep romantic love with a graduate student many years his junior named Katherine. Their relationship came to a halt when his chair made the discovery, and Stoner was pressed by his friend, who was by then a university administrator, to put an end to it. The remainder of his life was mostly consumed with a deadening teaching schedule until he won a skirmish toward the end of his twenty-year altercation with his chair, and for a few years, was able to resume teaching the courses in which he had earlier enjoyed some success as a teacher. After resisting efforts to force his retirement, Stoner retired voluntarily in advance of impending exploratory surgery to determine the extent of his cancer. He died many weeks later after enduring a great deal of pain.

What might we say about Stoner's life? He did experience some things that were good for him—his vocation, his relationship with Katherine, and at least for some years, his bond with his daughter. At the worst of times, Stoner's love of literature never truly waned. And yet his life was surely deficient; it was sorry, sad, in some ways maddening. Whatever the momentary well-being he experienced over the course of his life, whether we consider his life in terms of achievement of objective values, in terms of satisfaction of reflectively set ends, in terms of fulfillment of a rational life plan, or purely in terms of pleasure and contentment, Stoner's life fails to add up. And Stoner himself admits as much—at least, he admits that this is how his life "must appear to another."

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Yet Stoner in the end apparently rejects the external perspective on his life, and Williams drops important clues as to why. As Williams describes the dawning of that period in which Stoner had determined that he might be capable of being a good teacher, Stoner "suspected that he was beginning, ten years late, to discover who he was; and the figure he saw was both more and less than he once imagined it to be. He felt himself at last beginning to be a teacher, which was simply a man to whom his book is true, to whom is given a dignity of art that has little to do with his foolishness or weakness or inadequacy as a man."[62] When Stoner had stood his ground against his colleague, he had exhibited the integrity of his love of literature in refusing to pass the colleague's acolyte on his oral exams, although doing so would have made his own life easier. In this, he remained true not only to himself but to the one unflagging love of his life. He could have run off with Katherine, but he remained, and precisely out of a kind of fidelity. Speaking with Katherine the last time he saw her, he explained, "it isn't Edith or even Grace, or the certainty of losing Grace, that keeps me here; it isn't the scandal or the hurt to you or me; it isn't the hardship we would have to go through, or even the loss of love we might have to face. It's simply the destruction of ourselves, of what we do."[63]

VI. Storytelling and Personal Good

I haven't yet said what these pieces of the story are clues to—that will come shortly. I first want to suggest a different approach to thinking about narrativity and personal good. If we are to see how narrative relations can, by affecting meaning, make a distinctive difference to the welfare value of a life, we need to step back from talk about the holding of narrative relations between events and from talk about *the* story of a life.

Insofar as narrative or narrative relations can distinctively enhance the value of a life for the person living it, it is not by adding a distinct substantive value of their own; narrative relations have no value of their own. And it is not quite by altering the meaning of events and so the contribution those events make to the value of a life, at least not directly. Narrative relations, I have suggested, constrain truthful evaluations, but arguably what settles the value of a sequence of events, or so the skeptical challenge seems to show us, is whether objective values have been achieved, plans realized, rational desires satisfied. And so it also is not by enhancing the value of a life for the person living it in the manner of an organic unity. On the latter picture, it would still remain to be explained just which narrative relations are "welfare-enhancers" and precisely how they distinctively enhance welfare value.

[62] Ibid., 113.
[63] Ibid., 215.

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To see how narrative might distinctively enhance our good, we need to focus not on the supposed narrative structure of our lives or on narrative relations that hold among events in a life but, rather, on the effects of *recounting to ourselves* stories about our lives, and so on the effects of how we depict events and relations among events in our lives. My hypothesis is, in short, that insofar as narrative can enhance our welfare, it is through our storytelling. And this is precisely what we should expect if we are, indeed, natural storytellers.

But how exactly might our storytelling about ourselves to ourselves enhance our welfare? It can do so, I conjecture, by operating to instantiate the very relational value we refer to in talk about what is good for a person. An agent's life can be made better for her not only by what goods she attains, what ends she successfully pursues, or how far she goes in effectively fulfilling her plan of life; and so it can be made better for her not simply by the relations among events in her life. It can also be made better by her relation *to herself* and *to her life.* It is perhaps easiest to see this by considering the negative case. Insofar as a person feels alienated from herself and her life, insofar as she feels powerless or lost or not in control of her own life, her life goes less well for her than it otherwise would. Improving her relation to herself and her life enhances her welfare—it makes her life better for her—and this improvement, I am suggesting, is what her storytelling can help to achieve. But what counts as an improvement? What relation does she need to stand in to herself and her life for there to be an enhancement of her welfare? What relation does her storytelling need to support or bring her into with herself and her life, if it is to enhance her welfare? The answer, as I will explain in a moment, is that it must bring her into the *good-for relation* with herself and her life. Where narrative does its distinctive work, I want to suggest, where it distinctively enhances the welfare value of a life, is in the way that constructing and adopting stories about our lives can help us to effect or sustain a certain relationship to our lives and to ourselves as "author/protagonist." And this is an effect narrative can have even when our lives fall short by most ordinary measures.

Return to Stoner. Given the materials provided by the events in his life, it was open to Stoner to recount his life truthfully in a number of ways, with different emphases, different evaluative and emotional imports. He offers up one of these stories in considering how his life must look from the outside. He can see this story, though as we have seen, he ultimately rejects it. He does not reject it, however, as false. He does not deny that his life exhibits precisely the failures that another would see and for which another might pity him. Rather, he deems that story "mean," "unworthy of what his life had been."

We never see Stoner tell the story he has evidently adopted of his life, and Williams does show him entertaining along the way thoughts of his failures. Yet, as I have said, there are different stories available to him.

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And we can imagine how these stories might go. Here is one. Stoner wanted to have friends and though one friend had died in the war, he had managed to maintain another friendship, if not an intimate one, through the entire course of his adult life. He had summoned the courage to marry the woman he had come to love, and he had honored his commitment as best he could, in the face of her coldness. He had had a loving relationship with his daughter, and though his wife had put an end to their closeness, he had done the best that he knew how to do, and he never abandoned her. He had wanted and experienced romantic love, and he had relinquished it, not out of fear, but out of his understanding of who he was and of the central organizing activity of his life. He had wanted to be a teacher, and he had become one, and after many years of indifference, and while his circumstances permitted, he had finally, if only for a short period, enjoyed some measure of success in his teaching. He had not accomplished what he had hoped to in his research, he had not achieved a purity or integrity that was entire or the fullness of wisdom, and yet he had remained true to his central love, the one that had launched him on the path to a place so distant from that remote spot in which his life had begun.

So was Stoner just a loser, a maddeningly passive man, or a man who failed yet did the best he could and who, in his own imperfect manner, remained true to his commitments, even though doing so diminished his own happiness? Stoner, in effect, or so it seems to this reader, decides he is the latter sort of man. Stoner, in effect, rejects self-reproach and the story of himself as a pitiable failure, adopting instead a kinder perspective on the person he has been and the life he has lived.

By, in effect, adopting something like the story I have invented for him, Stoner does not change his past; rather, as I would put it, he *manages* his past.[64] I mean in no way to claim, then, that in adopting the latter perspective, Stoner in any way undoes or offsets his failures. What we should say about Stoner's life would seem to be clear in light of our skeptical challenge. Stoner managed to achieve, to a small degree, some genuine goods in his life, but he failed to achieve others, and the ones he failed to achieve, or to hang onto, were among those most important to personal good. Stoner succeeded partially in living out a rational plan of life, but he was forced or led to abandon critical parts of it. Even if Stoner did the best he could in his circumstances, that does not require us to accept the false conclusion that he had a good life. Acknowledging that his life contained elements that were genuinely good for him, acknowledging his partial success in pursuit of a rational plan of life, does not force us to the conclusion that his life added up.

[64] Why do I keep saying "in effect"? Because I think we need to be careful not to exaggerate either how consciously or how deliberately we engage in storytelling about our lives. And it may be that some of us engage in little storytelling if any.

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But my hypothesis is not, in any case, that his story contributes to his welfare by making his life add up. Rather, it contributes to his good by helping him to effect or maintain, at least in some measure, a certain relationship to himself and his life. I have argued elsewhere that something is good for a person when she stands in a relation of "fit" or "suitability" to that thing, and that this relation has certain characteristic features.[65] First, when a person is so related to a thing—an activity, an undertaking, another being—her engagement with that thing tends to support her sense of her own worth or value, which is not to be confused with those feelings of self-esteem that arise from her accomplishments or her manifestation of excellences. Second, it tends to be enlivening rather than enervating. Third, it tends to provide an important component of her identity and a sense of direction in life and so to contribute to her self-understanding. And finally, it provides a source of internal motivation. *Being good for a person,* I have claimed, just is being productive of these features.

We can stand in the good-for relation to a great many things, though there are limits, of course, to what can be good for each of us as individuals. I am now suggesting that among the things we can stand in the good-for relation to is our selves and our lives. My hypothesis is that our storytelling affects our good by helping us, as we take up a view of ourselves and our lives, to see ourselves and our lives in a way that supports our sense of our own worth, that stimulates us to move forward, that helps to secure our sense of who we are and a sense of direction, and that moves us forward as a matter of our own volition—under our own steam, so to speak. It operates to bring about, maintain, or restore a sense of ourselves as controlling authority over our selves and our lives.

Over the course of his life, though we see Stoner's frustration, and at times, his suffering, we never see Stoner overcome or brought down by the ways in which his life repeatedly and painfully falls short. He places his love of literature and his role as a teacher at the center of his life story, and a teacher, he has explained is "a man to whom his book is true, to whom is given a dignity of art that has little to do with his foolishness or weakness or inadequacy as a man." He tells a story that preserves a sense of his worth and of his authority with respect to his life, in part, by making his own failings nearly irrelevant. At the end of his life, Stoner is indeed merciless in surveying his failures, and yet what overwhelms him is not a sense of inadequacy or loss but a sense of himself, of knowing *in a way that amounts to an affirmation* of who and what he had been.

My hypothesis about what our storytelling does in affecting our good is of a piece with the way in which we must work to bring ourselves into the good-for relation with many of those things that come to be a

[65] See Rosati, "Personal Good."

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part of our good.[66] Partly through our efforts, our choices, training, and action, our adjustments of our attitudes and expectations, we work to bring ourselves into a relationship—a fit—with what come to be our central vocations and avocations. Through our efforts, we bring ourselves into and sustain the interpersonal connections that come to be our central human loves. I am suggesting that it is, in part—though only in part—through our storytelling that we secure a relatively ongoing relation of fit to our lives and to ourselves as the author/protagonist of those lives. I say only in part, because, of course, the way that we secure a fit with ourselves and our lives is, in the first instance, by doing what it takes to provide the materials from which attractive stories can be constructed; and we do that by imagining our futures and enacting what we imagine, and in the course of doing so, making things a part of our good.

If the hypothesis I have been offering is on the right track, we can see why our storytelling would be especially important in the face of failure, while contributing to our welfare across the range of more or less successful lives we might find ourselves living. When we have experienced relative success in securing our good—when we have embarked on careers we find stimulating and in which we can find some real success, when our principal relationships are healthy, when we are able to pursue our aims effectively—we will almost automatically thereby have secured a fit with ourselves and our lives; we will have a sense of ourselves as controlling authority over ourselves and our lives. It is when our lives fall short, when our careers are marred by failure or misfit, when we are without healthy interpersonal relationships, when we are ineffective in pursuing our aims, that effort may be needed to prevent ourselves from becoming alienated or disconnected from ourselves and our lives, or to restore a connection when disconnect has occurred.

The picture I am suggesting about the place of narrative finds support in ordinary experience. Consider how we respond to a friend who has suffered a setback and now tells a tale focused on his failure and shortcomings, who is caught in a cycle of negativity and self-castigation. We empathize, of course; we let him tell his tale. But what we also often attempt to do is to help him begin to tell a different story. In so doing, we do not try to talk him into ignoring the truth about what has happened and what he has done. Rather, we try to help him to see the truth in a different way. At least in this sense, as Bruner suggests, "a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold."[67] When a person is suffering, is unhappy or despairing, a good part of what he often needs is to learn how, honestly, to tell a different story about his life. We urge on our friend a reinterpretation, a retelling.

[66] See ibid.
[67] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 31.

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In searching for a new story for a friend to tell about his life, or for us to tell about our own lives, we are looking not merely for a story we can live with but for a story that enables us to live. To adopt a bit of common jargon, we might say that what we look for are stories that are "empowering." To tell an empowering story is to tell a story that, by effecting the requisite fit, supports or restores our sense of our own control and authority as agents. I conjecture that it is the effects of our storytelling that I have been describing that psychologists try to exploit insofar as they seek to enable us to be happier autobiographers.[68]

Let me briefly clarify certain aspects of my hypothesis and address certain concerns one might have about it. First, I have just appealed to a bit of ordinary experience, and that experience suggests that the story of a person's life need not originate with her. That is, for obvious reasons, just what we should expect. A person may be unable all on her own, as a result of depression, or because she is overwhelmed by grief, self-pity, or self-reproach, or simply because she suffers a failure of imagination, to take any other perspective on her life than the one she now takes. What matters to the welfare-enhancing effect of our narratives is not where they originate, from the first-person or third-person perspective, but whether they can be taken up and internalized by the agent—whether they can become *her* story—so that they operate for her in the way I have described. It is in this sense that the agent's perspective is ultimately authoritative in determining whether a narrative representation of events in her life enhances her good.

Second, in order to operate in the way I have been describing, the stories we tell need not resolve the question of how to feel about our lives or periods in our lives. Sometimes, instead, they may simply enable us to live more comfortably with conflicting feelings; they may provide not so much a resolution as a reconciliation. To speak a bit more precisely, they need not resolve the question of how to feel about our lives, even as they do resolve, at least in certain key respects, how we feel about ourselves in relation to our lives.[69] As a contingent matter, narrative *might* resolve how we feel about our lives, or a period in our lives, but we have, as I have stressed, a choice among narratives. In the case of our personal narratives,

[68] According to the *New York Times* article described earlier, among other findings, psychologists have observed that persons who are able to reinterpret painful episodes with greater compassion fare better. And some of the effects of psychotherapy, when it works, are attributed to the way in which it enables people who feel helpless to alter their self-stories so as to restore a sense of their own power. Assuming that the research on which these claims rest is reliable, the results would appear to square with my hypothesis. But my interest has, of course, been with exploring the philosophical question of how narrative might distinctively affect personal good. A point that I have not addressed in the text is how our storytelling and its effects on our welfare might be affected by the acquisition of new information, and thereby, the possibility of new self-understandings. More should be said on this score, but addressing the point is not critical to understanding the position I advance.

[69] For intriguing discussion of the idea that the peculiar understanding yielded by narrative generally is an understanding of how to feel, see Velleman, "Narrative Explanation."

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we resolve how we feel through our storytelling partly by deciding *which* story to tell—by choosing among narratives. My point is that we can choose well and poorly from the standpoint of personal good.

Third, I have just said that an agent can choose among stories, and so my view has what will strike some as the counterintuitive result that an agent can alter the welfare value of her life simply by selecting among stories about it. I believe that is the correct result, at least suitably understood. As I have tried to make clear, our personal narratives do not affect the value of our lives by undoing our failures. We either have succeeded in our aims or not, fulfilled a rational life plan or not, achieved something of objective value or failed to do so. Insofar as our successes and failures affect the value of our lives for us, our storytelling can affect our welfare only presently and prospectively: presently, by affecting our current condition, and prospectively, by thereby putting us in a better position to alter what we do in the future as we work to make our lives better. Nevertheless, it is a familiar truism that how well our lives go depends not only on what we do and how things turn out but on how we look at them. I believe that my hypothesis appropriately captures this truism.

Fourth, narrative, as my hypothesis treats it, should not be mistaken for rationalization or self-deception. Stoner, as Williams depicts him, and as I have imagined his life story, engages in neither rationalization nor self-deception. There is, I have been insisting, more than one true recounting of a life, more than one genuinely informative and intelligible angle on a life. The relationship between truth and well-being is complex; surely not all rationalization or self-deception is bad for us. Still, as I have said, we can choose our stories well or poorly, just as we can choose among any available options well or poorly. A self-deceived story might be ever so much more satisfying than one faithful to the facts. But if the stories we tell ourselves about our lives ignore or whitewash the facts, we may be unable to sustain them for long (in the absence of mental illness), and so we may fail to achieve any stable benefit from them. And by failing to confront and learn from the facts, we open ourselves up to further disappointment, failure, and disconnect.

Fifth, my claim that a person's storytelling can help her to effect an appropriate fit with herself and her life should not be mistaken for the claim that her storytelling can make her feel better, and certainly not for the claim that it can make her happier. Of course, it *might* make her happier, but my point is precisely about how benefit can occur even when the only truthful stories to tell are unhappy ones. As for making her feel better, I do not wish to deny that a person's adopted story might well have this effect, but insofar as it does, she feels better in just the way that she would whenever she stands in the good-for relation to anything. To chalk up the benefit of our storytelling to its making us feel better is, in my view, both to over simplify what our storytelling can accomplish and to misunderstand the nature of personal good.

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Finally, one might wonder whether my hypothesis gets us any further in showing how narrative and narrative relations might contribute distinctively to the welfare value of a life. After all, many of the stories we tell ourselves in the face of failure, disappointment, or upset are stories of best efforts, mitigating circumstances, and virtues displayed in difficult circumstances; and so some of these, like the stories to which proponents of narrativity call our attention, will be stories in which at least something of value has been achieved, some desire has been satisfied, some end reached. I do not deny that in order to get the benefits of storytelling there must be material from which to construct the story, and this material will no doubt often be provided by features of oneself or one's life that evidence the attainment of *something* of value. My point has been that we need to distinguish between stories about a life and our storytelling, and between the materials that are recounted in a narrative and the recounting, in order to see how narrative might enhance our welfare. Whatever benefit or deficit there may be in our lives in terms of our values, desires, or life plans, there is a benefit distinct from these that can derive from our storytelling itself. My hypothesis thus concerns how narrative might have its own impact on welfare, and it appeals to the operation of our storytelling, to the effects of our making and adopting narratives, effects we should expect that our storytelling can have whether our lives otherwise fare well or fall short.[70]

VII. Conclusion

In the face of full awareness of how his own life has fallen short, Stoner asks, finally, not "how could you have let things go so badly?" or even "what were you thinking?" but "what did you expect?" What do any of us expect? With that question in mind, let me bring my story to a close.

I began with the narrativity thesis and examined a certain way of understanding it. I considered the problems that this way of understanding it aims to address, problems about the relationship between momentary welfare and whole life welfare, about the shape of a life and about what it takes for a life to add up. My own efforts to understand how the narrativity thesis might be true do not directly address these problems, but it may be of some use in efforts to explore them further. I agree that the welfare value of a life, what it takes for a life to add up, is not a matter of the value of its moments, and so the shape of our lives matters. But that may be not because narrative relations among events enhance the value of our lives for us considered just as lives, but because of the way in

[70] These claims are consistent with the possibility that a person's life could be so unfortunate that there is no welfare-enhancing story for her to tell. They are also consistent with the possibility that some people need not tell themselves stories, and so get the benefit of storytelling, perhaps just by living successfully and well.

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which our living lives that we can represent to ourselves in compelling narratives benefits us. Lives in which we have successful relationships, careers, commitments, and pastimes, not merely at a time, but over time, naturally provide the material for compelling narratives. So do lives that develop in ways that can be represented in stories of overcoming hardship, of redeeming past mistakes, of steady improvement, lives, that is, with generally uphill trajectories. Part of the reason for this, of course, is that in living such lives, we actually achieve things of value that benefit us, we actually succeed with respect to what matters to us. But we also get the benefit that comes of being the controlling authority over ourselves and our lives, of being able to make sense of our lives and to represent them to ourselves as a product, ultimately, of our own autonomous efforts.

As best I have been able to understand it, the deep point that underlies the narrativity thesis is a point about this kind of benefit, which is not itself a momentary or isolated benefit but one that pervasively affects the quality of our lives over time. I have suggested how this benefit, this enhancement of our welfare, is one our storytelling can function to effect when, for one reason or another, our lives don't do it on their own. The deep point that underlies the narrativity thesis thus also concerns a certain kind of work an agent must sometimes do to enhance her own welfare. But that is just another way, if an especially critical one, in which we autonomous agents must not only discover but also invent our good.[71]

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[71] The idea that we must invent or build our good is one I have tried to develop in a number of earlier essays. See, e.g., Rosati, "Personal Good."

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