A Good Death

DALE DORSEY
University of Kansas

Largely in response to Epicurus' famous challenge, philosophers have been quite imaginative in coming up with ways in which death is bad. Most often, death is described as an instrumental bad. Given that I would have obtained additional welfare benefits had I not died when I did, my death causes me to miss out on intrinsic goods I might otherwise have obtained. In this article, however, I argue that the standard account (and its corollaries) misses an important feature of the dis/value of death. I argue that some deaths can be good – intrinsically good – for the person who dies.

Philosophical discussions of the value or disvalue of death are typically pretty grim. Largely in response to Epicurus' famous challenge, we've been quite imaginative in coming up with ways in which death is *bad*. Most often, death is described as an instrumental bad. Given that I would have obtained additional welfare benefits had I not died when I did, my death causes me to miss out on intrinsic goods I might otherwise have obtained.[1] The 'deprivation' account is not the only account of death's badness, however. Frances Kamm suggests that death is not only bad because of the goods we might otherwise have obtained, but also because of the goods we *have*, such as wonderful relationships, valued careers, etc., that death *robs us* of.[2] Put these views together, and you get the rugged prairie wisdom expressed in the following terms by Clint Eastwood: 'It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got, and all he's ever gonna have.'[3]

But this glum picture of death sometimes masks the ways in which death can be good. Most obviously, death can be an *instrumental* good. If the remainder of your life is not worth living, it may be, on balance, good for you to die earlier rather than later. Indeed, this principle is more or less implied by the standard account of death's badness. If what I am deprived of are bads, such as intense suffering or failure, death renders my life better, rather than worse.

In addition, some substantive accounts of well-being entail that deaths can be bearers of intrinsic value. In particular, it may be that our

[1] Thomas Nagel, 'Death', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979); Steven Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge, 2009); Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper* (Oxford, 1993); Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford, 2009).

[2] Frances Kamm, *Morality, Mortality*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1993), ch. 1.

[3] David Webb Peoples, *Unforgiven*.

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valuing attitudes can impart intrinsic value to particular objects and events, say. If that's right, I might take a pro-attitude towards dying in a particular way or at a particular time for its own sake, making it the case that dying in this way is of intrinsic value for me (even if it is also instrumentally disvaluable). On this view (call it the 'that's the way s/he wanted to go' principle), the intrinsic value of a death for a person just is derivative of the general evaluative authority of that person's valuing attitudes; death here is no different than, say, developing a particular career, maintaining a set of valued relationships, or more generally of living in accordance with a valued life plan.

I accept all this. But in this article, I'd like to go further. I argue that death can be not only intrinsically good for the person who dies, but the intrinsic value of deaths can go *beyond* that which could be explained by dying in the way one wants to go. A death can be good for the person who dies, or so I argue, when that death is *unified with* and hence *part of* the projects of their lives. In the next section, I present two plausible cases of this phenomenon, and in the remainder I offer and defend a more general explanation of the value of the deaths there presented.

I. TWO GOOD DEATHS

Consider, first:

> *Steve Irwin*: Steve Irwin was a famous and beloved naturalist and conservationist, who spent much of his professional life performing dangerous stunts involving crocodiles and other wildlife. He was killed by a stingray barb that pierced his heart during a risky dive in an attempt to film an undersea documentary.

Steve Irwin, 'The Crocodile Hunter' as he was more popularly known, died in a way that most people would find horrific, possibly even Irwin himself. But when reflecting on Irwin's death, there is surely some feeling that it is, for lack of a more precise idea, 'right' or 'fitting' for him to have died this way. More strongly, though I think no less intuitively, being killed by a wild animal seems to be a good way for a person like Irwin, who spent his life engaging with such animals in dangerous circumstances, to die.

A second case is taken from American folklore. According to legend, John Henry was a railroad worker and 'steel driver' – his specialty was wielding a heavy hammer at high speed, driving steel spikes into mountain rock for the purposes of tunnel excavation. For the rest of his story, here are a few choice stanzas of 'The Ballad of John Henry':

The captain said to John Henry
'Gonna bring that steam drill 'round

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Gonna bring that steam drill out on the job
Gonna whop that steel on down, Lord, Lord
Gonna whop that steel on down'

John Henry told his captain
'A man ain't nothing but a man
But before I let your steam drill beat me down
I'd die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord
I'd die with a hammer in my hand'

Now the man that invented the steam drill
Thought he was mighty fine
But John Henry made fifteen feet
The steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord
The steam drill only made nine

John Henry hammered in the mountains
His hammer was striking fire
But he worked so hard, he broke his poor heart
He laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord
He laid down his hammer and he died.

As with any folk legend it's hard to separate the fact from the fiction,[4] and it's hard even to separate the canonical fiction from the embellishment of any particular telling. But it appears to be a settled matter – at least of the fiction – that John Henry was a proud labourer, an expert at what he did, and was committed to showing that the strength of a man could be more effective than a machine, the 'steam drill' against which he was battling. Of course, he showed this – he beat the steam drill. But in so doing, he collapsed out of exhaustion and died of heart failure. My intuition: this was a good death.

Indeed, these deaths are not only good but seem to me to be *intrinsically* good.[5] I accept this as a bare first-order intuition – a result of the cases as presented. But one way to bring out further this judgement is to compare the deaths of Irwin and Henry to more

[4] Most historians agree that there was, in fact, an African-American man named John Henry who did, in fact, battle a steam drill, succumbing in its aftermath. The questions that remain largely concern the location of the battle (sites in West Virginia and Alabama seem most likely) and John Henry's origin (was he a prisoner who worked on the railroad as part of a chain gang, or a former, freed slave?).

[5] Some may disagree and instead claim that it is not the deaths considered here that are intrinsically good, but rather the events surrounding said deaths (including, e.g., Henry's triumph over the steam drill). This is an important objection, which I discuss in more detail in section III.3.

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humdrum alternatives. Imagine that instead of being killed by a stingray attack, Irwin died at the very same time of a congenital heart malfunction. The instrumental value of this death is identical, or so we can simply presume. This death took away from Irwin exactly the same things he had, and exactly the same things he was 'gonna have'. But does this entail that neither death is preferable for Irwin? Surely not. The better life for Irwin is the one in which he dies of a stingray attack, rather than (at the very same time) a garden variety heart attack. But, because this cannot seem to be accounted for strictly in terms of the instrumental value or disvalue of this death, it would appear that a natural explanation[6] is that the death in question maintains intrinsic value, value in itself, for Irwin.

This verdict, of course, could be accommodated by the 'that's the way he wanted to go' principle – if, that is, Irwin or Henry in fact valued dying in this manner. But, pursuant to this, we needn't assume that either Irwin or John Henry *wanted* to die or *valued* dying in the manner in which they did to impart value to their deaths. Put more precisely: I continue to judge their deaths to be of intrinsic value for them even if we assume that they were simply indifferent to the manner of their deaths. (Of course, Henry declared that 'I'd die with a hammer in my hand' before allowing the steam drill to beat him; but this just means that he prefers dying to being beaten, not that he prefers dying in this way to not dying at all. He could perhaps have regarded both states of affairs as disvaluable, or perhaps might simply have been indifferent between methods of death.)

II. EXPLAINING DEATH'S VALUE

So far I've noted a number of considered judgements about the intrinsic value of some deaths. But so far these are merely considered judgements; intuitive reactions to the cases as I've described them. What sort of principles about value could possibly explain them? To this question, the remainder of the article is dedicated.

II.1. Projects

To begin my account of the intrinsic value of Irwin and Henry's deaths, consider the notion of a *project*. I use this term broadly: a project in my sense just is a *valued* long-term shape or structure of a person's

[6] Of course, not the *only* explanation. One possibility is that this death might have *contributory* value – it might itself lack intrinsic value but might contribute to the intrinsic value of some other feature of Irwin's life. As I'll explore below, I'm not particularly critical of this alternative, but argue instead for the 'intrinsic' interpretation.

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life, activities, goals, achievements, and so on.[7] For instance, to be a philosopher is a project of mine: being a philosopher shapes the long-term structure of my life, and it's a shape I value. Different people live according to very different projects, of course. Someone might have the project of being a professional tennis player or a 'steel-drivin' man', to be a loving wife and mother or a powerful financial executive, to climb Mount Everest or to win the NBA Championship. And so forth. As I note here, I use the term broadly. To be a project does not require someone to deliberate consciously on the basis of said project and adopt the project as a first-personal life plan, say. Someone could potentially live according to a project without even knowing it (so long as the shape his or her life took was substantially valued). Of course, this might stretch the ordinary meaning of the term 'project'; if this bothers you, you're free to adopt some other term (perhaps 'project+' might be a good substitute).

Whatever one chooses to call the things I'm referring to as projects, however, given my understanding of them, the following principle is plausible:

> *Projects are Good*: there are some projects such that maintaining them renders one's life better than it would otherwise have been.

According to *Projects are Good*, living in accordance with at least some projects improves the quality of one's life. This is a widely ecumenical thesis about the personal good. Similar views have been advanced by Gwen Bradford,[8] Thomas Hurka,[9] Douglas Portmore,[10] T. M. Scanlon,[11] and Simon Keller.[12] Furthermore, this view is plausible, at least in many cases. Surely it's the case that if I value a particular way my life will have gone (e.g. value being a philosopher) then it's likely that I'm better-off if I actually live in that way. *Projects are Good* is a modest principle. It doesn't say that *every* project improves a person's life. For instance, it may be that my project of incessant

[7] You'll notice that I insist that projects, to be valuable, must be valued. While I find this constraint eminently plausible, it is not everyone's cup of tea. Indeed, the argument to come does not depend on even this level of subjectivism; one could simply substitute the word 'valuable' for 'valued' if one believes that there are some valuable projects that need not be valued by the person in question. I'll continue to use the latter word for the purposes of exposition, however.

[8] Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford, 2015).

[9] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford, 1993), esp. chs. 8-9.

[10] Douglas Portmore, 'Welfare, Achievement, and Self-Sacrifice', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 3 (2007).

[11] T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), ch. 3.

[12] Simon Keller, 'Welfare and the Achievement of Goals', *Philosophical Studies* 121 (2004), pp. 27–41.

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grass-blade counting doesn't do much to make me better-off. It could be that to make a person better-off, the shape and/or structure of one's life successfully maintained must be independently valuable rather than merely valued. Furthermore, *Projects are Good* is modest in a further way: it doesn't say specifically that projects *themselves* are of intrinsic value. It could be, as far as *Projects are Good* is concerned, that the value imparted to a life by the achievement of some project or other is strictly instrumental. (I'll discuss this particular point in more detail directly.) With its modesty in mind, I think we should accept *Projects are Good*.

However, it would also do to say more about how projects work. As noted above, for P to be a project it is not sufficient that P is valued by the person in question. This would fail to distinguish my project from, say, my cup of *café au lait* an hour hence. A project (as I use the term) characterizes the long-term structure of one's life, activities, goals, and so on – ties together, or *unifies*, a temporally extended set of discrete events, activities, plans, etc. For instance, one only maintains the project of being a world-class tennis player if this project – being a world-class tennis player – in fact unifies a number of significant events throughout one's life, i.e. taking up tennis, entering and winning one's first tournament, competing at a national and international level, and so forth. Individually, these events could be present in any person's life. But one only maintains a *project* if these events are or can be unified across the duration of a person's life *by* this very project. Unlike other goals, projects unify, tie together, or 'bring under one heading', the events of a person's life (or, at least, a sizeable chunk of them). Thus to say that some particular event e is *part* of a person's project is, in my sense, to say that e is unified *via* the project itself to a significant number of other events $\{f, g, h, \ldots\}$ that occur throughout the course of a life. (I will use the phrase 'e is part of project P' and 'e is unified by project P' interchangeably here.)

There are a number of potential questions one might have about the relevant unification relation here: what does it mean for a project to unify events? What sort of unification are we talking about? And so forth. Though the argument of this article doesn't hinge on any of the answers I'm about to give, I'll simply note that the sort of unification I prefer is *narrative* unification. On this view, a person maintains a project P if that person's life contains a substantial set of events E such that the events in E are narratively related to each other *by* P. Put less formally, a person, on my view, maintains a project to the extent that the *story of his or her life* is one that he or she *values*. However, in the spirit of ecumenicalism, I'm happy to allow the reader to fill in his or her preferred account of the method by which projects unify the events in an individual's life. Nothing, as I say, will hinge on this.

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II.2. Projects, events, and intrinsic value

Next question: what bears the intrinsic value imparted to a life by the successful maintenance of projects? Here my view becomes less ecumenical. Consider, for instance, the possibility that the value of projects is purely instrumental; instrumental to, say, valuable mental states or the satisfaction of desires. The bearer of intrinsic value, then, would be these goods to which the achievement of a project is instrumental. However, I think this account is lacklustre. Imagine, for instance, two people who have an equivalent balance of good/bad mental states throughout their lives; the first, however, maintains a valued *project*, the latter does not. I think there is good reason to believe that the first person lives a better life. Not only did she obtain the same degree of, e.g., happiness or pleasure, but she also lived a life the story of which she valued. Furthermore, the proposal according to which projects have value only as instrumental to the satisfaction of our pro-attitudes (such as desires) seems to be inherently unstable. After all, to be a project is for the story of one's life to be *valued* – and if the object of one's pro-attitudes is intrinsically good, why not also the valued story of a life?

Given these reflections, one might be tempted to suggest that projects *themselves* bear intrinsic value. When someone successfully lives according to a project, in other words, this fact itself is an intrinsic prudential benefit. Note that there are plusses and minuses to this account,[13] and so I'll remain neutral on this proposal here. However, whether one accepts the claim that projects of themselves bear prudential value, the following thesis also seems correct:

> *Projects Improve Events*: that an event E in the life of a person A is part of (unified by) a valuable project P is an intrinsic good-making feature of E for A.

According to *Projects Improve Events*, the intrinsic value of a project isn't just located in the project itself, but also redounds to the events that make up such projects.

[13] The most significant minus is the suggestion that, because projects are necessarily temporally extended, the value of projects does not accrue at any one particular time; if this is correct, it would appear that a plausible claim about evaluative benefits, i.e. that all welfare is temporally located, must be denied. In addition, one must also deny the (again plausible) claim that the welfare value of a whole life is an additive function of the welfare value of individual times in that life. The most significant plus is the ability to accommodate a Moorean claim about intrinsic value (explored below), viz. that all intrinsic value supervenes on intrinsic properties. I'm not going to explore the plausibility of any of these theses here, and will simply leave open the suggestion that the benefit of projects is borne, in part, by the projects themselves.

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Here's an argument for *Projects Improve Events*. Imagine a fully dedicated professional poker player. This person has spent years of her life building up the skill and tenacity to play poker at the highest levels – reading other players, understanding the mathematical principles, knowing when to hold 'em, fold 'em, and so on. She has entered many tournaments, starting small (regionally), finally working up to the world championships. She puts her dedication and talent to good use, and wins.

Compare this person to someone who happens, on a complete whim, to enter the poker world championships. He's never played poker in any serious way before, but as a mere result of blind luck happens to draw the cards necessary, over and over, to win. Surely, it seems to me, we would say of both people that winning the poker world championships is a good thing, a prudential benefit (we can assume that it was valued by both, perhaps valued *equivalently* by both; we can also assume that it was of equivalent instrumental benefit for both). But we would surely not say that this *particular event* was of equivalent value for both people. Surely, or so it seems to me, winning the poker world championships was a far more significant prudential benefit for the *first* person. The lesson of this case is that the value of a particular life's event is influenced by the extent to which this event is unified by a valuable project this person maintains.[14] To put this in more precise axiological terms, the value of a particular life's event is in part determined by the *relations* (including project-determining relations) between this event and other events.[15] The intrinsic value of a particular event in a person's life is enhanced by the fact that this event

[14] Someone might dispute this explanation on the following grounds. The first person's win is better than the second person's not because of the relevant relation to the first person's other life events, but instead because (as stipulated) the first person puts her *rational capacities* to use in winning. Perfectionists, for instance, will hold that the exercise of her capacities in this way is an intrinsic good-making feature of this event for her that is perhaps absent from the second person's win-by-blind-luck. And while I'm not interested in rejecting perfectionism here (I have done so elsewhere, see Dale Dorsey, 'Three Arguments for Perfectionism', *Noûs* 44 (2010), pp. 59–79), it seems to me that we can abstract from this feature and still retain the significance of this event for the first person. Imagine, for instance, that the first person decides to 'let go' of her training and just be guided by pure instinct and luck. I deny that in this case the championship win would be no better for her than for the second person.

[15] Most famously, this view is advocated by David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time', in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 56–84. See also Dale Dorsey, 'The Significance of a Life's Shape', *Ethics* 125 (2015), pp. 303–30. One note of contrast: Thomas Hurka (*Perfectionism*, pp. 121-8) claims that *unity* is an important feature of a life, but his point is somewhat different from the above. For Hurka, particular projects are more valuable when they unify more rather than fewer distinct events throughout a person's life. While I agree with the broad outline of this proposal, *Projects Improve Events* is a different claim, viz. that the unification relations can render the *events themselves* better for a person.

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bears particular relations, viz. the relation of unification by a project with other events in his or her life. And *this* is how – at least in part – projects are good: they are good not just by being intrinsically valuable in and of themselves (if in fact they are), but also by imparting value to individual events *via* the good-making relations (which constitute said project) these events bear.

Two notes about the intrinsic value of events given their relation to an individual's overall projects. First, the value of such events is not created equal. My 'good philosopher' project might unify the event of my ordering a copy of *On What Matters* on Amazon. But this event is not particularly significant in that regard, and hence will not be particularly intrinsically valuable given its bearing of the relevant unification relation. However, some events will be more significant: obtaining my PhD, getting that first article published, and so forth. Thus the intrinsic value maintained by particular events given their unification by valuable projects is variable depending on their significance for that very project. Second, and significantly, despite the fact that the contribution of a project to the value of a life depends on that project being valued, it need not be the case that a particular event is valued for that event to be part of the relevant project, and hence intrinsically valuable given *Projects Improve Events*. Let's say, for instance, that I deeply value being a world-class poker player. But I'm indifferent to participation in some international tournament or other. However, the fact that participation in this tournament is unified by a project renders this activity possessive of intrinsic good-making relations *on those grounds*. Indeed, this seems to me the right answer. Even if I'm indifferent to the event itself, the fact that my participation in said tournament was related in the right way to the *overall* project seems to me to render that event of greater value than it would have been had that event not been part of a project, all else equal. Of course, it could be that I highly disvalue participating in this tournament, to do so would cause me great pain, and so forth. Given all these factors, it may be said that the overall value (intrinsic and instrumental) of participating in this tournament would be negative. But it would still retain at least *pro tanto* intrinsic value, given the fact that it is or would be unified by a long-term project that I value highly.

Projects Improve Events might be challenged on (at least) two grounds. (Three additional objections are discussed in section III.) First, imagine that a person values the project of 'being a tennis player'. But imagine also that this person doesn't value playing matches, doesn't value practising; doesn't value any of the things that tennis players do *qua* tennis player. Would we really say that any of these events are genuinely valuable for this person? Would we say that playing a tennis match is *itself* intrinsically valuable? Surely not! The explanation of

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this, then, must be that the events themselves are not intrinsically valuable given their participation in a project (if projects add value to lives it must simply be because the projects *themselves* bear intrinsic value), but simply because they're valued, in so far as they are. However, I think this objection rests on a confusion. In particular, we need to be very careful here about whether or not the person in question *genuinely* values being a tennis player. There is reason for doubt. If, say, I take a pro-attitude towards being a connoisseur of tenth-century paintings, but disvalue the experience of looking at such paintings, collecting them, discussing them, and so forth, there's immediate reason to question whether I actually *value* being such a connoisseur. As I have argued elsewhere,[16] we typically do not assign states of valuing or disvaluing to people simply because they take some pro- or anti-attitude towards something or other. The present case provides a good illustration. To value being a tennis player is in part to value what tennis players *qua* tennis players *do* – at least some of the time. And hence if the person in question fails to value anything that tennis players do, we should say that this person, despite her pro-attitude towards being a tennis player, does not truly *value* being a tennis player. And if this is right, there should be no barrier to saying that the events that make up this project are intrinsically valuable in so far as the project that unifies them is *genuinely* valued.

Second, it may be claimed that *Projects Improve Events* cannot account for the extent to which properly unified events are actually welfare *setbacks*. Imagine, for instance, one's project of being a talented NFL quarterback. One event that is unified by this project is playing in, but *losing*, the Super Bowl. But surely it can't be the case that losing the Super Bowl is intrinsically valuable! After all, it's one of the most momentous setbacks in this person's life. If *Projects Improve Events* is true, it would appear that we could not accommodate the sense in which a person can suffer setbacks to their welfare if that setback is relevantly unified by their life's project.

But this objection is mistaken. Depending on the person in question, losing the Super Bowl might well be a welfare setback. The first possibility is that this loss makes it the case that the person in question fails to maintain a project in the relevant sense. If, for instance, our NFL quarterback strongly disvalues *merely* being a good quarterback, and instead values *only* the project of being a *Super Bowl winning* quarterback, then it would appear that his loss of the Super Bowl makes it the case that he did not, in fact, maintain a project as I understand

[16] Dale Dorsey, 'Subjectivism without Desire', *The Philosophical Review* 121 (2012), pp. 407–42; Dale Dorsey, 'Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism', *Noûs* (forthcoming).

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it here. Given *Projects are Good*, this would be a tremendous welfare setback. However, let's say this isn't the case. Let's say that even if he loses the Super Bowl, he still values being a talented NFL quarterback. In this case, or so it would appear, I'm committed to claiming that the Super Bowl maintained the relevant intrinsic good-making features. However, this is not as implausible as it may seem, in so far as my account can continue to retain the sense in which this event is a setback. Note that *Projects Improve Events* simply holds that the fact that a particular event is part of a project is a good-making feature of that event – it *improves* events. But good-making and bad-making features can coexist in the same event. Despite maintaining the intrinsic good-making feature of being unified by a valuable project, losing the Super Bowl surely maintains a number of intrinsic bad-making features. This includes, surely, being *dis*valued by the person in question, being a failure rather than a success, and so on. In addition, it has a number of *instrumentally* disvaluable features. Not only is it instrumentally disvaluable in the sort of humdrum way any Super Bowl loss is (i.e. no endorsement deals, no video game contracts, no music videos, etc.), it is also instrumentally disvaluable in so far as it rendered the project according to which this person lived *less valuable* (though, perhaps, still of positive value). And hence we have a clear sense in which this event, though it was unified by a valuable project, is clearly a setback and is harmful to his well-being: it maintained a number of intrinsic bad-making features, and rendered the project according to which he lived overall of less value despite maintaining the relevant intrinsic good-making features. Nothing in my account, therefore, entails that I cannot capture the sense in which some events – despite being *part* of valuable projects – are setbacks, and hence are typically harmful to the welfare of those who suffer them.

II.3. Explaining good deaths

With *Projects Improve Events* defended, I'm ready to put together a general explanation of the intrinsically valuable deaths of Irwin and Henry. The events of their deaths are certainly unified with the projects they undertook, projects we can (for the sake of argument here) assume that they valued. And hence these deaths bear the relevant relations that render project-constituting events intrinsically valuable given their unification by said project. Of course, this by itself would be to explain the intrinsic value of such deaths. But the explanation of these deaths' intrinsic value would be surely incomplete if it wasn't noted that these events are surely especially *significant* in comparison to other events in that project. Surely a person's *death*, in so far as it is part of a person's project, is (or at least can be) comparatively significant. To put this in narrative terms, in telling the story of Irwin's

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life *qua* adventurous wildlife enthusiast, no one would leave out the fact that he was killed in the way he was, just as no one leaves out the fact that John Henry died as a result of overexertion in his epic battle with the steam drill.

Two questions. First: how is it possible that a person's death could be part of a project? After all, we ordinarily think of projects as constituted by things that happen during a person's life. But how could Irwin maintain a project at death? Answer: I think we're interpreting the notion of a project artificially if we reject the claim that only events that occur during life could be part of a person's project. Imagine, for instance, that an architect worked his entire life to construct a magnificent cathedral, but dies before it is completed. In finishing its construction, it would certainly be sensible to hold that its completion is *part of* the project of this architect's life – indeed, an extremely significant part.[17] And hence, I think, deaths are no different. Deaths can be unified by the relevant project-constituting relations to the activities and events of a person's life, and in so doing be sensibly deemed part of a person's project.

Second, and more specifically: how do we know that the deaths of Steve Irwin and John Henry were unified by their projects? Presuming, in the case of Irwin, that his project was something like 'adventurous wildlife enthusiast', how do we know that his death bears the relevant relations? Of course, how we come to know the relevant relations certainly will depend on just what those relations are (whether they're narrative relations or some other unifying relations). But speaking quite generally, I think we can be confident that Irwin's death is unified with the project of his life given our typical reaction to his death. When thinking about Irwin's death, it is tempting to believe it 'fitting' of the life he led, fitting of the activities, etc., he seemed to care most deeply about. This fact, in and of itself, seems the best kind of evidence that his death was, in fact, unified by his life's project. Of course, there may be a grey area when it comes to identifying which events are, and aren't, properly unified by a given project. But it seems entirely appropriate to

[17] Question: does this entail that the conclusion of this project is intrinsically good for the architect? And if the answer is 'yes', as it would appear I must admit, doesn't this entail a bizarre claim, viz. that the architect has a high welfare level after death? Response: I accept the claim that the completion of this building is intrinsically good for the architect, for all the reasons I have so far been bringing out. However, to say that this entails that the architect has a high level of well-being after death mistakes the events that make someone better-off, and the temporal location of the benefits conveyed by those events. I have so far said nothing about the latter issue here, and would prefer to remain as broadly uncommitted as I can be. For my money, the best view is to hold that the benefit for the architect in this case occurs during those times at which the architect is working on, or living according to, his project. But I won't defend this here.

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say that Irwin and Henry's deaths are unified by their relevant projects with other major events that made up their lives.

Notice that if my account is correct, the deaths of Irwin and Henry, and others, are intrinsically valuable even if it is *not* the case that they died in the way they wanted to go. Their deaths are intrinsically valuable for them because they are unified by, part of, projects to which their lives were dedicated. Just as it may still be intrinsically valuable for me to participate in a particular tournament to which I'm indifferent given that I value the project of which this tournament is part, it can be intrinsically valuable for me to die in a particular way, because to die in just this way is *part* of a life's story that I value (even if that part *itself* is not valued). It is not the fact that Irwin and Henry value – or would have valued – their actual deaths that explains, or at least explains the entirety, of the value of their deaths. Rather, it is the fact that these particular deaths maintain an essential unity with, are part and parcel of, the projects of their lives.

II.4. What my view isn't

A few notes about what I'm *not* saying, or at least not saying *here*. First, my proposal is not that deaths that are intrinsically valuable are necessarily beneficial overall; that is, render a life all-things-considered better than had the death not occurred. After all, it could be that such deaths, despite being intrinsically valuable, deprived those who died of substantial goods, goods that far outweigh death's goodness. Take, for instance:

> *Amelia Earhart*: Amelia Earhart was a pioneer of aviation and an iconic figure in women's advancement. In 1937, she attempted the first flight to circumnavigate the globe along an equatorial route. After having successfully flown from Oakland, CA eastward to Lae, Papua New Guinea, Earhart veered off course in the third-to-last, and by far longest, leg of her journey. Though the location and precise cause of her death are indeterminate, the most likely scenario is that she ran out of fuel and crashed, some 400 miles off course in the South Pacific.

Earhart's death has all the earmarks of a fitting death given the project according to which she lived. Her life was dedicated to adventurous air travel and hence it is surely the case that to have died during the longest and most gruelling leg of perhaps the longest and most gruelling aviator's journey there ever was is an important part of the story of her life *qua* pioneering aviator. And so in this sense her death is intrinsically valuable; it is fitting of the projects she cared most about. However, Earhart's death also meant a tremendous failure: failure to circumnavigate the globe, failure to complete her difficult

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flight from Lae to Howland Island, and surely failure to complete any of the additional major aviation achievements she had contemplated. While her death maintained *pro tanto* intrinsic value, it was also surely instrumentally bad, perhaps overwhelmingly so. And hence, just as I suggested, this proposal is perfectly compatible with the *overall* badness of her death.

In addition, I am not arguing that the fact that a particular death was unified by or fitting of a project means that all such deaths in and of themselves will on balance maintain positive intrinsic value. Recall that intrinsically good-making and intrinsically bad-making properties can coexist in one event, and hence it is possible for a death to be intrinsically bad despite possession of the intrinsic good-making properties I identify: Irwin, for instance, could have very strongly *dis*valued dying in that way, or at that time, and so forth. And if his disvaluing attitude was strong enough, it may be that the intrinsic bad-making properties outweigh the good-making ones. Indeed, this can be seen in Earhart's case. Not only did her death lead to a number of failures, but (plausibly) her death *constituted* such a failure, as it may have been an important goal or achievement *not to die* during her journey. In this case, the intrinsically good-making properties of her death are balanced against the intrinsically bad-making properties.

However, this doesn't mean that death could never be intrinsically valuable on balance, or even overall beneficial. Imagine that Amelia Earhart had not died when she did, but instead made it to Howland Island, only to die of heart failure during the last leg of her journey (from Honolulu to Oakland). Imagine that this would have meant success in her journey from Lae to Howland Island, and also may have meant a few more hours of pleasure (surely intrinsically valuable), and so forth. I deny that her life would have been more valuable under these conditions. Instead, her life was more valuable *given* that the manner of her death was an important, substantial, feature of the project according to which she lived. In this way, an earlier death, a death that robbed her of whatever good she had, a death that deprived her of further goods, nevertheless made her life, overall, more worth living than had she lived on. This is because this death has intrinsic value that is not made up for by the extra day, say, of valuable pleasure she might have achieved, or the victory of making it to her destination the day before.

III. OBJECTIONS

The view I offer here can be summed up quickly in the following terms. Deaths can be intrinsically valuable given that some such

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deaths are unified by valuable projects people maintain throughout their lives. This view, however, is subject to a number of, perhaps innumerable, objections. In addition to those already discussed, I'll address three here, though I make no claim whatsoever to comprehensiveness.

III.1. The James Dean Effect

Ben Bradley argues against a proposal according to which a person's death can be beneficial because it is part of a good *narrative* – a good life story. Now, as I already argued I'm negotiable on just how projects unify the events in a life (i.e. it needn't be narrative unification). But this doesn't matter here; the view I advocate seems to fall within Bradley's target area (as will become clear) even if one rejects the reference to narrative, in particular. (I'll focus on 'narrative' here, just to maintain terminological continuity with Bradley. You're free just to substitute 'project', *salva veritate*.)

To begin, Bradley considers what he calls the 'James Dean' effect:

> Consider the following way things could have gone for James Dean. Instead of dying in a car accident at age 24, he survives several more years. During those years he stars in *Giant 2: Electric Boogaloo*, then quits the movie business to make a living as an Elvis-style nightclub entertainer. He is happy and (to a degree) successful during that period of time, but not as happy or successful as he was in young adulthood. Would this have been a better life for him than his actual, shorter life?[18]

If we accept that a life's narrative can contribute to its value, the answer would appear to be 'no'.[19] Because the alternative narrative is worse, Dean's actual death helps to keep intact its *valuable* narrative. On this view, it seems right to say that Dean's descent into cheeseball movies and casino-lounge mediocrity yields a *worse life story*; Dean's life is better having died sooner rather than later given that the earlier death yields a better life story. Call this the

> *James Dean Effect*: to die earlier rather than later can render one's life overall better in so far as it prevents the story of one's life from downgrading in value.

[18] Bradley, *Well-Being*, p. 157.

[19] David Velleman: 'A person may rationally be willing to die even though he can look forward to a few more good weeks or months . . . The rationality of the patient's attitude depends on whether an earlier or later death would make a better ending to his life story' (Velleman, 'Time', p. 347).

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According to Bradley, the James Dean Effect should be rejected: it (at least potentially) confuses aesthetic judgements with judgements about prudential value:

> I find it strange that so many people are apparently willing to say that Dean's life would not have been better overall with an extra ten good years added on to the end of it. It appears that people are systematically irrational in their judgements in this area. Perhaps we tend to be misled by our aesthetic intuitions; Dean's actual life makes for a better story than the imagined longer life, but this clearly has nothing to do with whether it is a better life *for him*.[20]

As applied to the view I advocate, Bradley's critique is a bit indirect. It focuses not on the proposal that a death can be intrinsically valuable, but rather that death can yield a 'better life story' or a better life 'narrative' than one would have had – death can be instrumentally valuable given that it stops one's narrative from getting worse. But given my reliance on the evaluative importance of such narrative (or other unifying) relations of this kind, it would appear that my view implies the James Dean Effect, and hence this implication requires defence.

However, my view is not subject to the error Bradley seems insistent upon ascribing to those who accept the James Dean Effect.[21] Even *if* we accept that the method by which projects unify a life's events is narrative in character, my view is not a crass narrativity account of the sort that Bradley critiques. First, and less importantly, my view allows that intrinsically good deaths can be bad overall given their instrumental effects (see e.g. *Amelia Earhart*). Second, on my view, the relevance of narrative relations between a life's individual events is only in determining the extent to which particular events in a life are unified by the project of a life. Merely because someone had a 'good life story' – whether this is an aesthetically valuable story or any other sort of value – doesn't (for me) entail that this life maintained a prudential benefit in so doing. Rather, this 'story' must also pass the other tests for prudentially valuable project-hood, including, most significantly, being valued. Bottom line: my view does not insist that in so far as a death yields an aesthetically valuable narrative or an otherwise 'good story' it can be instrumentally valuable. Rather, my view is that deaths can be part of a valued life story (i.e. part of a project), and in so being are rendered of additional intrinsic prudential value. I submit that none of

[20] Bradley, *Well-Being*, pp. 160-1.

[21] For additional defences of views according to which good narratives are of prudential value, see Antti Kauppinen, 'The Narrative Calculus', *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* (forthcoming) and 'Meaningfulness and Time', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2011), pp. 345-77.

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this is particularly odd when it comes to a thesis concerning prudential value.

Bradley is right, though, about one thing. At least in certain cases my view does embrace the James Dean Effect. But this is no defect. Imagine, for instance, that Dean's most valued project was the devil-may-care, risk-taking actor; that he would have considered his life's most important project a failure were it the case that in his later years he had to endure starring in cut-rate movies and scraping by in the lounge circuit. And while he may have taken many pleasures, and so forth, during this extra time, his life's major project would have ended in failure. Though there may be much more to say about the quality of this life, and much more digging to do, I hereby declare it not implausible to say that under such conditions, Dean might have lived a better life – a better life *overall* – than had he lived on for ten more years.

Bradley anticipates a response of this form. He writes:

> One reply available to the narrativist who wishes to claim that James Dean's death was good for him is to argue that it is sometimes not best to choose the best future... But the most plausible of these cases are cases where the person does not want the allegedly good future, but prefers to die instead, like Socrates. When a sane, informed person prefers death to continued life, there is an inclination to think continued survival would not result in a good future for that person. A desire satisfactionist, for example, might conclude from the fact that Socrates preferred to die that the future where he dies is a better future for him than the one where he lives. If so, this is not a case in which someone rationally chooses the worse future after all. In order to be sure that we are testing the appropriate intuition, the narrativist needs a case where the person prefers to live, and her future would be good for her, but the person's death still seems to be good for her. I cannot think of any plausible case like this. In cases in which the person does not prefer to die, and correctly thinks her future would be good for her, it is bizarre to say that her death is good for her, or that she is making a mistake in wanting to continue living.[22]

In so far as my insistence on the overall value of (some) deaths (such as the imagined Dean case above) does not depend on a person's failure to desire to continue living (surely Irwin and Henry, or so we can assume, desired to continue living), Bradley suggests my view lacks intuitive pull.

I disagree with much of what Bradley says here. But the following two points are most relevant. First, even *if* Bradley were correct that the most plausible cases of good deaths are those in which a person prefers to die rather than to live, it is not the case that 'when a sane, informed person prefers death to continued life, there is an inclination to think continued survival would not result in a good future for that person'. Bradley confuses a scalar value judgement (preference) with

[22] Bradley, *Well-Being*, pp. 161-2.

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an absolute judgement (good/bad). I can prefer ϕ to ψ, and yet hold that ψ is of positive value – were I James Dean, I could admit that my life as a lounge singer might be of positive value, but nevertheless prefer to go out in a blaze of glory in accordance with the project I value – to do so would be *better*. But second, I disagree quite strongly that there are no 'plausible' cases in which a person prefers to live but in which death would remain good overall. And the cases have already been given. Imagine that the closest possible world in which the Crocodile Hunter lives on is the one in which he dies in his sleep from a heart attack the night after narrowly escaping the stingray's barb. That extra day would have been mildly enjoyable. In this case, though Irwin may prefer to live that extra day, it remains plausible to say that overall Irwin's life would have been better dying in the manner in which he did. Irwin had a *good death*: a death the value of which value overwhelms the mild enjoyment of an extra day, given its fittingness of the project to which Irwin dedicated his life.

III.2. A metaethical objection

In this section, I discuss an objection that targets *Projects Improve Events*. The intrinsic value of an event, or so the suggestion goes, cannot be explained with specific reference to the relations (such as their being unified by a project) between this event and other events. This objection appeals directly to a famous principle about intrinsic value, viz. that the intrinsic value of something depends solely on its intrinsic properties.[23] This thesis is quite obviously related to Moore's infamous analysis of the nature of intrinsic value, which has been followed by many others.[24] On this view, the intrinsic value of a particular event *must* be determined independently of its relational properties. And if we accept this, *Projects Improve Events* must be false, in so far as relational properties of this kind cannot contribute to the intrinsic value of an event.

There are a number of ways one might respond to an objection to any view on grounds of the supposed dependence of intrinsic value on intrinsic properties. The first is to adopt a suggestion from Korsgaard. One might simply accept the dependence relation between intrinsic value and intrinsic properties, but instead suggest that it is not the *intrinsic value* – value that supervenes on intrinsic properties – of individual events to which one's successful projects contribute, but instead the *final* value: value as an end, value for its own sake, and

[23] Bradley, *Well-Being*, p. 19. See also Moore , 'The Conception of Intrinsic Value', in *Philosophical Studies* (New York, 1922), pp. 253–75.

[24] See Christine Korsgaard, 'Two Distinctions in Goodness', in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, 1997) Pages; Michael Zimmerman, *The Nature of Intrinsic Value* (Lanham, MD, 2001).

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so forth. Instead of interpreting prudential value as intrinsic value for a person, we instead say that a person's life gets better given the presence of events or objects of *final* value. And, after all, isn't it really final value that *matters*? However, I'm against this as a response to the current objection. The above thesis is clearly meant as a constraint on *the sort of value that matters*, and to respond to it by rebranding the value one is discussing strikes me as missing the main point.

Rather, the best response is to take on the posited relation directly. Indeed, I've argued elsewhere that the suggestion that intrinsic value must supervene on intrinsic properties is false; it fails to make sense of the way in which our own pro-attitudes can contribute to the intrinsic value of particular objects and events.[25] But there are two further arguments worth offering at this point. The first appeals to the cases I've already discussed. The intrinsic benefit of Irwin and Henry's deaths simply does not, cannot, supervene on the intrinsic properties these deaths maintain. Their deaths are valuable *only in so far* as they are properly related to the manner in which they lived their lives; in particular, the extent to which their deaths were *fitting* given their projects. If some random person were to have died being killed by a stingray, this death would not be valuable, worth pursuing, would not have been a benefit. The benefit for *Irwin* of this death is explained, crucially, by the fact that his death is situated in a life dedicated to the project of adventurous face-to-face interaction with wild and dangerous animals. And so *if* we accept the considered judgements I have so far attempted to elicit, then we're committing ourselves to the rejection of this dependence relation.[26] One person's proof is my, and I hope my readers', *reductio*.

Second, whether the dependence of intrinsic value on intrinsic properties holds seems to me to await a full consideration of the sorts of judgements we're inclined to make about intrinsic value, including, e.g., the suggestion that its participation in a long-term project can improve the value of particular events in that project. If we're inclined to find this suggestion plausible, this is all the evidence one needs to reject such a dependence relation. To reject *Projects Improve Events* simply on the basis of this relation seems to me frustratingly top-

[25] Dale Dorsey, 'Intrinsic Value and the Supervenience Principle', *Philosophical Studies* 157 (2012), pp. 267–85.

[26] If you're really committed to the dependence of intrinsic value on intrinsic properties, you might instead insist that the state of affairs in which Irwin's death maintains the relevant relational properties is itself the bearer of intrinsic value in this case. (Ben Bradley, 'Is Intrinsic Value Conditional?', *Philosophical Studies* 107 (2002), pp. 23–44.) Though this attempt seems to me somewhat tortured, I suppose it's a way to salvage the view in question, but it seems to me not to tell against my proposal in a way that makes a material difference.

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down; a determination of the relevant dependence relations should instead await a full consideration of the first-order plausibility of *Projects Improve Events*, and hence shouldn't be used as a method by which to evaluate same. This point is crucial and hence is worth another argument. Imagine that we consult our considered judgements in reflective equilibrium when it comes to the quality of human lives, and we arrive at a particular theory that seems to deliver all the correct verdicts and itself has deep intuitive appeal. But imagine that this theory holds that some intrinsic value can supervene on relational properties. The alternative – that is, a view according to which intrinsic values are determined solely by intrinsic properties – is not as plausible or successful a theory. Should we accept a less plausible first-order theory of well-being or intrinsic value simply on the basis of a pre-commitment to one or the other dependence relation? Absolutely not! If to accept a Moorean view of the concept of intrinsic value requires us to accept a less successful theory of the goodness of lives, even slightly less successful, it must be rejected.

However, let's say that these arguments are no good. Does this affect the extent to which deaths can contribute to the prudential value of a life? No. One could reject *Projects Improve Events* in favour of a different, though obviously related, axiological principle:

> *More Valuable Projects*: One dimension of the value of long-term projects is their capacity to unify more, rather than fewer, events in the course of a person's life.

If *More Valuable Projects* is true, then we can simply accept *Projects are Good*, and claim that it is the long-term project *itself* that has intrinsic value, but that projects become more valuable when they unify additional events in a person's life, *including* his or her death. And hence a death can contribute to the value of a life by improving the value of a project lived during the course of a life. Of course, this principle would not hold that the death *itself* is intrinsically valuable, but instead that death has an important form of *contributory* value: value as an essential part of an intrinsically valuable welfare benefit. Indeed, this seems independently plausible. If projects are themselves bearers of intrinsic value, it would make sense to say that a project around which someone organized her *entire life* makes a bigger difference, if valued, to this person's welfare than one that merely organizes a shorter, or more sporadic, part of her life.[27] And while I think there are good reasons to believe that the dependence of intrinsic value on intrinsic properties is

[27] See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, ch. 9.

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false, and hence death can (on occasion) be intrinsically valuable, I'll accept this proposal as a perfectly good compromise.

III.3. Death and its manner

To see the final objection, take an example.[28] Let's imagine that Amelia Earhart's death didn't come as a result of simply crashing into the South Pacific. Let's instead imagine the *Nikumaroro Scenario*. According to this possibility, after Earhart lost course she was able to make a crash landing at Nikumaroro reef, survived for several days, dying eventually of starvation and exposure. If the *Nikumaroro Scenario* is correct, it would appear that there's nothing special about Earhart's *death*, in particular, that makes her life any better, or that maintains any of the relevant intrinsic good-making properties. Here it's not the *death* but the *crash* that would appear to maintain the relevant intrinsic good-making features. But if this is correct, why say, in the original case, that her death, rather than simply her *crash*, bears intrinsic value? Put this objection bluntly: it may be that I'm confusing the value of a death with the value of the events that caused or surrounded it. This is easiest to see in the case of John Henry: it's not Henry's *death* that's intrinsically valuable (so the objection goes), but rather the fact that he beat the steam drill. The death itself is simply ancillary and does not bear intrinsic value.

But I deny this. It seems particularly implausible in the case of Irwin: it is implausible to believe that merely being attacked by a stingray has sufficient intrinsic value (even if it does have some intrinsic value given its unification) to explain fully the considered judgement that Irwin's death was a good one. Once again, events that make up projects can be of variable significance to that project. Any random stingray attack would not have been as significant for Irwin's project, life story, etc. But his *death by stingray attack* surely was comparatively significant. Leaving this point aside, the view expressed in this objection is also implausible in the case of Henry. While it is certainly true that to beat the steam drill was intrinsically valuable for Henry, the fact that Henry's death was itself a part of this effort, was unified with the victory, adds value to his life. To see this, imagine once again a slightly different case. Imagine that Henry beat the steam drill but doing so didn't kill him. Instead, he died *at the same time*, i.e. after having beaten the steam drill, of food poisoning from some bad eggs he had eaten that day for lunch. Our reaction to, or at least my reaction to, this would be that it is comparatively unfortunate for Henry to die in

[28] Thanks to Kris McDaniel and Christian Coons for very helpfully pressing this objection.

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this way. His death is not unified by, not fitting of, the project of his life. But if this is correct, it cannot be claimed that I am confusing the value of his death for the value of his victory over the steam drill. His victory over the steam drill is certainly good – a prudential benefit. But it's also the case that the fact that he died being the 'steel-drivin' man' he was is intrinsically good for Henry, made his life better than it otherwise would have been.

IV. CONCLUSION

For most people, death is going to be a bad thing; its sting will not be mitigated by any potential intrinsic good-making features. But there are ways to render death not just less bad, but (potentially) intrinsically good. When one's death is part of, unified by, the project of his or her life, this death bears intrinsic good-making features. For some people, this intrinsic good-making feature is enough to render this death intrinsically good *tout court*. And for some of *those* people, the intrinsic goodness of death is enough to outweigh its potential instrumental disvalue.

The conclusion for which I argue here is not intended to supplant or replace any of the standard accounts of the (dis)value of death, discussed in this article's introduction. Rather, I merely intend to contribute to our growing understanding of the influence of death on the value of life. Further pursuant to this, however, if Irwin, Henry and Earhart's deaths bore intrinsic value given that they were fitting of, unified by, the projects they undertook during their lives, this entails that the quality of their lives must crucially include a reference to the prudential influence of such projects. Given the evidence on display here, at least when considering the relative value of deaths, it would appear that this influence is substantial, indeed. And hence it is not just the case that deaths can make our lives better. It's also the case that *reflection* on the value or disvalue of death can teach us what it means to fare well in life, however we die.[29]

ddorsey@ku.edu

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