Old Age and the Preference for the Future

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> It is a sad scene, the last – the last act of life – to see beauty and eloquence, sense, mouldering away in pain and agony under terrible diseases, and hastening to the grave with sundry kinds of death – to witness the barren silence of him who charmed us with his exuberant fancy and gaiety never to be exhausted – to gaze upon wrinkles and yellowness and incurvations where we remember beautiful forms and smiles and smoothness and the blush of health and the bloom of desire, to see – but here I recollect I am not in the pulpit, so I stop.
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> Rev. Sydney Smith, letter to Lady Holland[1]

1 The Preference for the Future

As one enters and progresses through old age, one experiences various unwelcome changes. One suffers declines in most physical abilities as well as in certain cognitive capacities; one becomes physically less attractive – or, perhaps, more unattractive; one's friends and loved ones succumb with increasing frequency to illness and death, leaving one submerged in grief and loneliness; and the familiar world one has known continues to recede into a past that few remember. Perhaps worst of all, the goods of life that remain in prospect are few, and rapidly become ever fewer.

This is particularly distressing because we are strongly disposed to want the goods of life to be in the future and the ills to be consigned to the past. Derek Parfit calls this feature of our psychology 'the bias towards the future'. I will refer to it as the 'preference for the future', as Parfit's pejorative label begs the question against the rationality of these asymmetrical attitudes to the future and the past.[2]

Just as it is a cause of grief to us when, in old age, life's goods are disproportionately in the past, so it should be a cause of relief that life's ills are also largely in the past. Yet, even though we are in general more concerned to avoid grave ills, such as suffering, than to enjoy correspondingly significant goods, the thought in old age that most of our ills are behind us provides little solace. This is because, even though in old age the ratio of good to ill tends to diminish, we still expect the goods to outweigh the ills and thus prefer, given that they are inseparable, to have both in the future rather than in the past.

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[1] Quoted in Hesketh Pearson, *The Smith of Smiths* (London: The Folio Society, 1977), p. 291.

[2] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 reprint), p. 160. On p. 177, Parfit says that his claim in section 67 that the bias towards the future is bad for us 'does not beg the question about the rationality of this bias'. That is true; it could be bad for us to act on an attitude that is rational. What does begs the question is the description of the attitude as a 'bias'.

Parfit illustrates the preference for the future by noting how our reflecting on certain goods and ills makes us feel. 'Looking forward to a pleasure is', he writes, 'in general, more pleasant than looking back upon it. And in the case of pains the difference is even greater.'[3] Our attitudes to the timing of goods and ills are, however, deeper than this, as Parfit himself reveals in an ingenious thought experiment.

> *Amnesia*
> You are in hospital for a procedure that requires no surgical incision but is nevertheless excruciatingly painful because it cannot be performed with anesthesia. To avoid aftereffects such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, patients scheduled to have this operation are, on entering the hospital, given a drug that induces amnesia, so that at no point during their time in hospital are they able to remember anything that has happened to them while they have been there. You therefore have to ask the nurse whether you have had your procedure. She replies that you are either the patient who had a ten-hour procedure yesterday or the one who will have a one-hour procedure later today. While she goes to check, you consider what you hope she will discover.[4]

As Parfit observes, you will naturally hope that you had much greater suffering yesterday rather than having to undergo lesser suffering today. What this shows is that it is not just that anticipating pain is itself more painful than recollecting pain; it is also that we *prefer* to have had ten times more pain, and fervently *hope* that we had that much more pain, because of the pain's temporal location: in the past.

Parfit argues that the preference for the future is bad for us. For this reason, he contends, 'we ought not to be biased towards the future' but ought instead to be 'temporally neutral'. If we were temporally neutral, 'looking backward … could be equally cheering' as looking forward, 'or in the case of pains equally distressing'.[5] If we were this way, Parfit comments, 'we should then greatly gain in our attitude to ageing and death. As our life passes, we should have less and less to look forward to, but more and more to look backward to.'[6]

As I noted, however, our attitudes to time are not just matters of how pleasant or painful it is for us to contemplate past or likely future goods and ills. They can also, as the Amnesia case shows, be intense preferences, hopes, or fears about whether goods or ills have been in our past or will be in our future. One might wonder, therefore, whether it could be rational, or psychologically possible, to be indifferent in old age to the fact that the great majority of the

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p 165. My statement of the case differs from Parfit's in that it eliminates ways in which you might infer that you are the patient who had the procedure yesterday. In Parfit's statement, for example, the drug that induces amnesia is administered when one has the procedure, so that the patient in his example, who has no memory of ten hours yesterday, should be able to infer that he is the patient who had the longer procedure during that period.

[5] Ibid., pages 177 and 174.

[6] Ibid., p. 175.

goods in one's life are in the past rather than in the future. Could one hope to have great suffering later today rather than having had greater suffering yesterday? I will not address these issues. It may be that, even if it would be better for us to be temporally neutral, the preference for the future is ineradicable. It may even be that this attitude to time – which, for obvious reasons, is favoured by natural selection – is neither rational not irrational but is rather a brute or primitive feature of our psychology. Asking whether the preference for the future is rational may be like asking whether it is rational to have desires.

Rather than considering whether the preference for the future is rational or irrational, good or bad for us, or eliminable or ineliminable, I will inquire about its *scope*. As Parfit rightly observes, what he calls the bias towards the future 'applies most clearly to events that are in themselves pleasant or painful.'[7] There are, however, many experiences that can be good for us without necessarily being pleasant and many that can be bad for us without being painful; and the preference for the future seems to apply quite broadly to all such experiential goods and ills.[8] But, assuming that there are dimensions of well-being, or ways in which our lives can go well or badly for us, that are not essentially experiential, it is possible that there are goods and ills to which the preference for the future does not apply, or does not apply to the extent to which it applies to experiential goods and ills. This is, indeed, acknowledged by Parfit, who writes that 'this attitude does not apply to events that give us either pride or shame: events that either gild or stain our picture of our lives.'[9]

This is an important insight, though overstated. Most of us, I think, would in general prefer that sources of shame in our lives be in the past, if only for instrumental reasons – for example, so that we could express appropriate remorse and demonstrate that we have reformed. We prefer a pattern of reform to one of degeneration. Similarly, as I will try to show, the preference for the future also applies to objects of pride, though to a lesser degree. But what is important for the evaluation of old age is that the preference for the future is indeed weaker in its application to certain non-experiential goods, perhaps particularly those in which we can justifiably experience pride, than it is in its application to purely experiential goods.

2 The Good of Achievement

One good that has a non-experiential dimension is achievement. I will assume here that achievement is objectively good – that is, that it is good for people if their lives contain significant achievement and that their lives go better for them, if other things are equal, the more they achieve. This is true, I believe, even if the process leading to achievement fails to enhance the experiential dimension of their well-being and even if they never know of their successful achievement. Achievement is, in other words, an objective, intrinsic, and non-experiential good. There are other goods of this type. They are often forms of action that are virtuous and admirable, such as caring devotedly for a loved one,

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[7] *Reasons and Persons*, p. 160.

[8] For a defence of an experientialist account of well-being in which pleasure is understood as a comparatively minor element of well-being, see Richard Kraut, *The Quality of Life: Aristotle Revised* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[9] *Reasons and Persons*, p. 160.

but that we are reluctant to describe as achievements, in part because they are not normally objects of ambition. In the remainder of this chapter I will concentrate the discussion on achievement, but taking it as a representative of this broader class of non-experiential goods.

Usually achievement and the efforts leading to it are good for people both experientially and instrumentally as well as non-experientially. Significant achievement is seldom, if ever, accidental. It is preceded by purposeful activity intended to achieve a goal. And purposeful action is an important element of experiential well-being. One psychologist who has devoted his career to the study of happiness writes that 'happiness is *experiences of pleasure and purpose over time*.'[10] This, I believe, is too simple, for there are non-experiential dimensions of well-being, one of which is successful achievement.[11] But the psychological literature and our own experience both confirm that absorption in an activity directed towards a goal one believes to be worth pursuing is a source of profound satisfaction.[12] (This is echoed in the familiar 'paradox of hedonism', which is that happiness cannot be successfully pursued directly, but is instead a side effect of immersion in some other activity pursued for its own sake.) The achievement of the goal can, moreover, be not only gratifying in itself but also instrumental in securing other goods. These claims are well summarized by Bertrand Russell:

> The satisfaction to be derived from success in a great constructive enterprise is one of the most massive that life has to offer … [Those who successfully pursue worthy goals] do work which is itself delightful; while they are doing it, it secures them the respect of those whose respect is worth having… They have also the most solid reasons for thinking well of themselves.[13]

Achievement as an objective, non-experiential good – that is, considered apart from the experiential goods involved in its pursuit and realization – is less subject to the preference for the future than experiential goods are. It may therefore have special significance for us in old age. In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill wrote of his father, James Mill, that 'his principal satisfaction, after he knew his end was near, seemed to be the thought of what he had done to make the world better than he had found it; and his chief regret in not living longer, that he had not had time to do more.'[14] This contrasts with the ability to look back on a life of unproductive, even if intense, pleasures. As Thackery observes,

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[10] Paul Dolan, *Happiness by Design: Finding Pleasure and Purpose in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 3. Italics in the original.

[11] Jeff McMahan, review of Richard Kraut, *The Quality of Life*, Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews [https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-quality-of-life-aristotle-revised/]

[12] See, for example, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

[13] Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 214-15.

[14] J.M. Robson, et al., eds., *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill I: Autobiography and Literary Essays* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 211.

'recollections of the best-ordained banquets will scarcely cheer sick epicures.'[15] But, as I noted earlier, what matters most here is not how looking back on an important achievement may make us *feel*. A more significant issue is whether one might look back on one's achievements in a way that parallels the way one looks forward to pleasure, or other experiential goods.

3 The Significance of Past Achievement

Those who in old age have significant achievements in their past are often admired and envied by young people who aspire to realize great achievements in their own lives. These old people are secure in the possession of something that the ambitious young people want, but that only a relatively small proportion of them will ever have. Some of these young people might prefer to have a life that contains significant achievement rather than a life that would be longer and would contain more experiential goods but would lack significant achievement.

Suppose, for example, that a young scientist, having just completed her doctoral work, reasonably believes that there is a high probability of her being able to do important work in science, yielding significant achievements, if she devotes much of her life to her research. The necessary work would, however, unavoidably involve exposure to toxic chemicals and radiation, so that there is an equally high probability that her achievements will cost her several years of good life. To sharpen the example, suppose that it is reasonable for her to believe that, if she consistently devotes herself to her research, there is a high probability that she will achieve important results in science, though only shortly before the end of her life, which will come roughly three years sooner than it would if she were to pursue less promising but safer and equally enjoyable research instead. She understands, therefore, that the achievement would likely cost her several years of pleasant life and that she would be unlikely to have long to savour her achievement or the fame that it would be likely to bring. Even so, she might well judge that the achievement would compensate her for the loss of a longer life with more good experiences but without achievement.

This judgement would, however, be compatible with the preference for the future. Both the achievement and the additional years of enjoyable life would be in the distant future. Her judgement might therefore indicate only that she now values great achievement in the future more than she values several further years of good experiences in the equally distant future. It might indicate nothing about her attitudes to time.

To test for these, we might inquire whether it is plausible to suppose that, having chosen to pursue great achievement, this scientist would, near the end of her life, be glad that she chose as she did even though, had she chosen differently, she would be able to continue to live for several more years. But this test may be unreliable if her achievement is one that has important, beneficial consequences for others and would not have been brought about by anyone else had she not pursued it. For in that case it might be difficult, even for her, to separate her gladness for the beneficiaries of her achievement from her gladness or regret for her own sake.

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[15] William Thackery, *Vanity Fair* (Garden City, NJ: Garden City Publishing, 1937), p. 257.

The best test for our intuitions is a variant of Parfit's Amnesia case.[16]

> *The Amnesiac Scientist*
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> The scientist, having finally realized her great achievement but nearing the end of her life, is in hospital for palliative treatment of the illness caused by her earlier exposure to chemicals and radiation in the course of her research. One of the effects of her condition is temporary but total amnesia. Although the beliefs and values that have guided her life are intact, she can, at the moment, remember nothing of her previous life. She asks the nurse who she is, but the nurse is uncertain which of two amnesiac patients she is. One of them, the nurse explains, is a prominent scientist who has recently achieved a great advance in scientific understanding but is terminally ill and will certainly die within a month. The other is a wholly undistinguished scientist in the same field who gave priority to frivolous pleasures over the serious pursuit of science and who is also terminally ill, but is confidently expected to live comfortably and pleasantly for another few years.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, given the values that informed the scientist's earlier decision to pursue achievement at the cost of a shorter life, she would now hope that the nurse brings her the news that she is the scientist with a great achievement in her recent past. We can appreciate, in other words, how she might prefer to have a great achievement in her past than to have more experiential good in her future.

If that seems reasonable, then we have an example in which the preference for the future is not overriding. That preference may, of course, still apply to some degree. Suppose that earlier, at the beginning of her career, she would have been willing to accept the loss of *five* years of additional life if that had been a necessary cost of her great achievement. But now, in the hospital, if she were told by the nurse that the prominent scientist had only a month to live while the undistinguished scientist could expect to live for five more years, she might well prefer to have five years of experientially rewarding life rather than to have a great achievement in her past. If so, that would reveal a preference for the future. But if she would prefer to learn from the nurse that she is the prominent scientist with only a month to live rather than an undistinguished scientist with *two* years to live, this would show that, in her case, the preference for the future is not absolute but is instead a matter of degree. She can reasonably prefer a greater good of a non-experiential kind in the past to a lesser total of experiential goods in the future.

That these speculations about the scientist's preferences are not unrealistic is shown by there being some expressions by actual people of a preference for past achievement over years of future life. The writer Harold Brodkey, for example, wrote shortly before his death from AIDS at the age of 65 that 'I like

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[16] An earlier version of this example, along with some similar discussion, is in my essay, 'The Lucretian Argument', in R. Feldman, K. McDaniel, J.R. Raibley, and M.J. Zimmerman, eds., *The Good, the Right, Life and Death: Essays in Honor of Fred Feldman* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006): 213-26, section 5.

what I've written, the stories and two novels. If I had to give up what I've written in order to be clear of this disease, I wouldn't do it."[17]

There are, of course, reasons for preferring to have one's achievements in the future rather than in the past. One of these emerges when we consider the types of achievement with peaks that tend to occur early in people's lives. The most obvious of these is athletic achievement, but there are also some types of intellectual achievement – for example, in mathematics – that require forms of intelligence that reach their zenith in early adulthood and then gradually decline.[18]

Suppose, for example, that an athlete, beginning in childhood, trains intensively for many years and finally, in his early thirties, breaks a world record in his particular sport. He has, at that point, almost certainly reached his peak. He will not break the record he has set and, if his sport is a competitive one, it will not be many years before he has to retire from competitive play. When that time comes, he will still be a young man, but his athletic achievements will be behind him and, because he has devoted all his time to his sport, he will be unlikely to be fitted for significant achievement in any other domain of activity. It may be dispiriting for him to know that, at this comparatively early age, the remainder of his life is likely to follow a descending trajectory.[19]

If a person knows that his most important achievements are in the past, this may diminish his motivation to pursue new goals that, even if achieved, will matter much less than what he has already accomplished. But if he is uninspired to pursue lesser goals, he may come to lack any strong sense of purpose in life, which is likely to result in a substantial diminishment of his experiential well-being.

But even apart from such instrumental considerations, we tend to believe that an ascending pattern of good in a life is better than a descending pattern – hence my earlier comment that we prefer a pattern of reform to one of degeneration. This applies to the good of achievement. We can imagine two lives with overall equally great achievements. In one, the greatest achievements occur early and the person then accomplishes less and less over the remainder of her life. In the other, the achievements are modest at the beginning but become progressively more impressive and significant, with the greatest achievement coming near the end. To many of us, the second seems the better life, if other things are equal, for it has the better *pattern* of achievement.[20]

It may seem that the preference for an ascending pattern of good in a life is just a manifestation of the preference for the future, since at any time during one's life, even at a point of early achievement, one wants the sequence of goods, including achievements, to be ascending simply because one cares more about

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[17] Harold Brodkey, *This Wild Darkness* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), p. 176.

[18] Richard Posner, *Aging and Old Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), chapter 7.

[19] Compare Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 140.

[20] For a defence of the view that, in general, a pattern of improvement in life is better than a pattern of decline, see J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48-77.

the future than about the past. But even though the preference for an ascending pattern tends to coincide with and thus reinforces the preference for the future, it is nevertheless distinct. This is shown by the fact that, if one were surveying one's life from a point near its end, so that all of one's achievements were in the past, one would still prefer an ascending to a descending pattern even with a fixed total level of achievement. We could devise a variant of the Amnesia case to elicit this preference.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that even Parfit, despite his defence of temporal neutrality, may have been subject to the preference for the future in his attitudes to his own achievements. As he gradually progressed into old age, he was working on the three volumes of *On What Matters*. During that time, he would be disappointed, and hurt, if anyone whose judgement he respected expressed the view that his later work was in any way less good than his earlier book, *Reasons and Persons*. There are, however, alternative possible explanations of his attitudes. One is that he wanted his life as a whole to follow a continuously ascending trajectory. Another is that he wanted his later work to be better than the earlier because only if that were the case would he be able, while he was doing that later work, to attain the greatest level of achievement possible over the course of his life.

Even though there are the foregoing reasons for wanting our achievements to be in the future rather than in the past, there are also reasons for preferring them to be in the past. One such reason is compatible with the preference for the future. Many people care greatly about fame and even posthumous fame – or would if they thought fame were possible for them. They would like to be widely known and admired, and favourably remembered after they die. Suppose for the sake of argument that these common desires are rational, and that fame and even posthumous fame are good for a person. In that case, one could explain the preference for having achievement in the past in prospective terms. Only if one has achievement in the past could one have the benefits of fame now and in the immediate future.

This consideration thus weakens the intuitive challenge that cases such as that of the Amnesiac Scientist pose to the application of the preference for the future to the good of achievement. But it does not undermine that challenge. The amnesiac scientist knows that if she is the patient with great scientific achievements in her past, she will have little time to enjoy the benefits of her fame. It seems unlikely, moreover, that in her present condition she would be motivated by thoughts of posthumous fame. If she prefers to learn that she is the patient with great achievement in her past, that can be sufficiently explained by her wanting to be the scientist who has succeeded in what she chose to devote her life to, even at the cost of having less to look forward to. To some extent, moreover, posthumous fame may be desired because it provides confirmation of the importance of one's achievements.

Even though the desire for fame provides a prospective reason for wanting to have achievements in the past, there are other reasons for wanting achievements to be in the past that seem to conflict with the preference for the future. These reasons are largely instrumental, and thus contingent, but are important nonetheless. One is epistemic – and obvious: if an achievement is in the past, one can normally be certain that one's life contains a significant good; whereas if an achievement is only a prospect, one cannot be confident that one's

life will ever contain this significant good. (This is true of fame as well. Having significant achievement in the past offers a higher probability of fame in the future than an uncertain prospect of achievement in the future does.) Sometimes, of course, there is uncertainty about whether what one has done in fact constitutes a significant achievement at all. It may turn out to have been mistaken, trivial, or pernicious. On rare occasions, one has to wait a considerable period for verification. For example, predictions implied by the theory of relativity when Einstein presented it in 1905 were not confirmed until the Hafele-Keating experiment was performed in 1971, thereby conclusively verifying the theory.

But when, as with most significant achievements, one can be certain that one has accomplished a substantial and worthy goal, one then has the great good of knowing that, at least in one important respect, one's life has been well lived. One is then entitled to some measure of satisfaction and pride; and one can experience some relief from the pressure one may feel to ensure that one's life is not wasted. This may in turn give one licence to indulge oneself in other activities that were previously excluded by the imperative to pursue one's goal, thus enabling oneself to enjoy other dimensions of well-being, perhaps including the experiential benefits of fame, however modest.

As Mill wrote of his father, the knowledge that one has achieved something significant, perhaps making the world better than it would have been in one's absence, can help one to reconcile oneself to the approach of death – a view expressed more poetically by Friedrich Hölderlin, who wrote that, 'if what is holy to me, the poem that rests in my heart, succeeds – then welcome, silent world of shadows!'[21] If, moreover, significant achievement can provide consolation in the face of death, it can also provide solace in old age. Solace is, of course, an experiential good; but it derives in this case from the assurance that one's life contains a fundamental, objective, non-experiential good.

4 Atemporal Goods, Lives as Wholes, and the Hierarchy of Achievement

But when this good is in the past, why should it be even partially exempt from the preference for the future? To most of us, as Parfit observed, it simply does not matter that we have experienced some physical pleasure in the past, except insofar as that may have some bearing on our present or future life. Why should the good of achievement be any different? Part of the explanation may be that experiential goods, such as pleasure, are ephemeral and good for us only while they occur, but not at other times. Although they contribute to our overall lifetime well-being, they do so in an additive way.

Achievement and many other non-experiential goods seem, by contrast, to be good for us in a way that might be described as atemporal. An achievement is not good only at the time it is completed, or even only during the period when it is being pursued and completed. It too affects the value of a life as a whole but not simply additively. The non-experiential good of achievement does not contribute to lifetime well-being by enhancing the goodness of some temporal part of a life; rather, to extends Parfit's metaphor, it gilds the life as a whole, imparting a lustre to all its phases, including old age. (This is an extension of

[21] 'To the Fates' [https://allpoetry.com/To-The-Fates]

Parfit's metaphor because the gilding is not of our pictures of our lives, or not just of our pictures of our lives, but of our lives themselves.)

Achievement, when it occurs, can affect the meaning and therefore the value of the past, particularly when it is the result of enduring effort. When one invests substantial effort, energy, time, and other personal resources in the pursuit of a goal, whether those investments succeed or fail affects their meaning and significance in one's life. If they result in failure, that can mean that part of one's life was wasted – though it need not mean that, for it could be that one's efforts were noble or heroic and therefore not to be regretted even though they ended in failure. Still, even noble and heroic efforts gild a life more brightly when they succeed, resulting in noble achievement rather than noble failure.

Just as successful achievement enhances the meaning and significance of the efforts by which it was brought about, so those efforts can reciprocally enhance the value or significance of the achievement within the life of the one who, through those efforts, has brought it about. The more time and effort one willingly invests in the determined pursuit of a worthy goal, perhaps including years of arduous training in the relevant field of endeavour, the more the achievement of that goal does to enhance the goodness of one's life as a whole. (When, in the course of a disgraceful lawsuit he brought against John Ruskin in retaliation for a harsh review, James McNeill Whistler was asked sneeringly by the Attorney-General whether he asked 200 guineas for only two days' labour on a painting, he responded with a related and, in this one instance, plausible point: 'No; I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime.'[22] The quality and therefore the value of the painting had been enhanced by the years of effort he had devoted to enabling himself to paint it.)

There are, of course, many types of achievement, some of which do more to enhance the goodness of a life than others. Some achievements benefit no one other than the achiever. Although there may be impersonal value in breaking an athletic record or climbing to the summit of a mountain, the motivation for such achievements is normally self-interested: to be the one who surpasses all others in some way, to do something exceedingly difficult that few others can do, and so on. Other achievements are wholly altruistically motivated – for example, Mamoudou Gassama's rapidly scaling four storeys of a building to save a child dangling from a balcony.[23] (This was a single, spontaneous act, but there are also people who devote their lives to a moral cause without any thought of personal glory – for example, the recently deceased civil rights activist and congressman, John Lewis.[24]) Many other achievements – particularly in the sciences, humanities, and arts – are motivated by a blend of personal ambition and a desire to do something that matters for humanity, such as increasing our understanding of the world or of ourselves and our place in the world.

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[22] Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 398.

[23] *The Guardian*, 28 May 2018.

[24] When, in 1973, I was in my second year at a little liberal arts college in the American South, I invited Lewis to speak there and was his host for a couple of days. Even now I am prone to become tearful when I recall the humility, selflessness, and magnanimity of that exceptionally great man.

There is a hierarchy among these different types of achievement and there are various general criteria for determining where different achievements fit along the scale that measures their worth.[25] First, achievements with effects that are important for others are higher, other things being equal, than those that are not. Second, an achievement does more to enhance the goodness of a person's life the more it was motivated by a concern for matters outside the achiever's own life. Morally motivated achievements are thus higher in the hierarchy than ones that were self-interestedly motivated, if other things are equal. And even an achievement that provides significant benefits for others, such as the manufacture of a product that many people enjoy, contributes less to the goodness of the achiever's life if was motivated by self-interest, for example, by the desire to make money. (Moral goodness, I believe, is a highly important element of a good life for a person, even if it is not a component of well-being, which may be only one dimension, though perhaps the dominant one, of a good life.) Third, achievements that require great effort, persistence, discipline, sacrifice – in short, a high degree of investment – are more valuable than those that require less. Fourth, and relatedly, achievements that require unusual skills and talents and are therefore rare or even unique are higher or more valuable than those that are common, again if other things are equal. Thus, an achievement worthy of recognition by the awarding of a Nobel Prize in Physics contributes more to the goodness of a person's life than, for example, receiving a bonus at work for exemplary performance on the job, even if, improbably, the latter required more effort and personal sacrifice.

What this means, as should be obvious in any case, is that the forms of achievement that do most to enhance the goodness of a life as a whole are quite rare. Thus, in thought experiments such as the Amnesiac Scientist, the preference for achievement in the past over further experientially good but unproductive life in the future may be limited to achievements that are comparatively rare. And this of course limits the significance of my claims about the importance of previous achievement to well-being in old age. The less significant one's achievements are, the less likely one is to prefer having them in the past to having more experiential good in the future. All the same, having achievements in the past, even ones that are neither great nor rare, is good for us in the present. Even lesser achievements imbue our lives as wholes with some degree of value of a non-experiential sort, and in old age are also sources of pride, satisfaction, and consolation.

There is another way in which the significance of my arguments about achievement is limited. Achievement as an objective, non-experiential good is, I have suggested, an atemporal good in that it enhances the goodness of a life as a whole. And the goodness of a person's life as a whole is not equivalent to the aggregate or sum of the goods in the life from moment to moment.[26] If there were a sentient being without any psychological connections between itself at one time and itself at any other time – no memories, no desires for the future, no

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[25] For a more extensive discussion of the comparative goodness for people of different forms of achievement, see Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter 5.

[26] For a further defence of this claim, see Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time'.

persisting beliefs – the goodness of its life as a whole might be just the net sum of its pleasures over time. Indeed, such a creature would have no life at all except in the biological sense. It would simply be the location in which a sequence of disconnected experiences would occur.[27] But the lives of persons and animals are unified psychologically over time to varying degrees, and the value of a life as a whole varies with the degree of unification.

Let us, following David Velleman, refer to a person's level of well-being at a particular time, measured by reference to the nature of her state at that time, as her 'momentary well-being'.[28] Next imagine two lives with equivalent aggregate totals of momentary well-being over time. If one of these lives is tightly unified over time by memory and by continuities of character, belief, desire, ambition, value, and so on, while the other is only loosely bound together by these forms of psychological continuity, the first matters more as a whole, and is a better life to have, than the second. My claims about the significance of prior achievement in old age are thus stronger and more compelling in their application to lives as wholes that are more rather than less psychologically unified over time.

Furthermore, the strength of one's reason, at any particular time, to care specially about one's life *as a whole* depends, I believe, on the extent to which one is, at that time, psychologically related to oneself in the past and will be (or will likely be) psychologically related to oneself in the future. Similarly, the extent to which a significant achievement at one time in one's life contributes to one's good at another time depends on the strength of the psychological relations between oneself at the one time and oneself at the other.

These claims, if correct, have special significance for those who suffer cognitive decline in old age. In particular, those who develop severe forms of dementia, especially forms involving substantial loss of memory, may become so weakly psychologically related to themselves as they were earlier when they pursued and achieved important goals that their earlier achievements may have little effect on the extent to which their lives are good during the period of dementia. Imagine, for example, an elderly demented individual who did legendary work in mathematics when she was in her twenties but cannot now remember her work or even do simple addition or subtraction. Her past achievements may have suffused her subsequent life with a special value as long as she remained strongly psychologically related to herself as she was when she did her great work. But as the psychological connections with her earlier self weakened with the progression of her cognitive decline, this special value gradually drained out of her life in the present, leaving it not so much gilded as only faintly illuminated by her earlier achievements. It is, to echo one of Parfit's claims about what matters in a life, almost as if her earlier achievements were the work of a different person.

Dementia is, of course, an abnormality, an illness. In the absence of such pathology, the adoption, pursuit over a lengthy period, and eventual

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[27] For further discussion, see *The Ethics of Killing*, pp. 75-77 and 475-76; and Jeff McMahan, 'Suffering and Moral Status', in Stephen Clarke, Julian Savulescu, and Hazem Zohny, eds., *Rethinking Moral Status* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[28] Ibid.

achievement of some purpose or goal is one of the most important ways in which a life can become unusually highly unified psychologically over time by means of a person's own action. In normal circumstances, therefore, achievement contributes to the goodness of a life in several distinct ways: it constitutes a non-experiential good that enhances the value of the life as a whole, it helps to unify the life as a whole psychologically, thereby making the life as a whole more significant as a locus of value, and it requires forms of action that are normally among the higher forms of experiential good.

5 Conclusion

Insofar as it is rational for us to care about our future well-being, it should matter to us, in advance of old age, to do what we can to ensure that we will have as high a level of well-being as possible when we become old, assuming that we will be sufficiently fortunate to reach that stage of life. If my claims in this chapter are correct, we would be well advised to spend less time pursuing passive pleasures, such as watching television, and more in active pursuit of worthy purposes that may yield achievements that impart meaning and value to our lives, and of which we can be proud.