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EXHAUSTING LIFE

(This essay was written in 2010, and revised slightly thereafter. It is forthcoming in *The Journal of Ethics*.)

For most of us, at most points in life, dying would be against our interests. Hence it is tempting to look for some way to ensure that death will not harm us after all—a way to escape mortal harm.

In theory, at least, we might achieve a certain sort of invulnerability right at the end of life. Suppose that under favorable circumstances we can live a certain number of years, say 125, but no longer, and also that we can make life as a whole better and better over time. Under these assumptions we might hope to disarm death by spending 125 years making life as good as it can be. If we were lucky enough to accomplish that, afterwards we would be immune to mortal harm. Especially for those who are closer to the beginning of life than to the end, however, this strategy leaves much to be desired. It is like devouring an entire banquet so as to eliminate the danger of someone stealing it from us. Like a feast, a good life is safely ours after it is over, but then safety comes too late to be of any use to us. To be of practical value, we need protection from mortal harm much earlier in life.

However, perhaps we can do better by exploiting the idea of perfecting life while we are still relatively young. Maybe by the time we reach middle age, if we really got busy, we could make life as good as it can be. This is impossible if we can better life right up to the end of our days: on that assumption, living the best life will take all the time we can get. But maybe there is an upper boundary to how good a whole life can be made, and that limit can be reached well before we grow old. If we managed to perfect life—to attain that upper boundary—it stands to reason that, subsequently, death would be disarmed. (Or rather death would be disarmed if it involved nothing intrinsically bad for us, such as pain, as I will assume in this essay.)

So perfecting life straightaway may appear to be a good way to overcome the danger of mortal harm. Ancient hedonists and Stoics thought it was. But it isn't. While there are ways to disarm death before we are elderly, perfecting life is not one of them. (As for the others, they are best avoided.) Or so I will argue. I will start by clarifying how I assess the value of life, and what it is for something to be in (or against) our interests.

Life's Value

In assessing the value of life, I will draw upon the distinction between what is intrinsically and extrinsically good for us. As I will understand the former, something is intrinsically good for us just if it is good for us for its own sake. Similarly for intrinsic evils, which are things that are bad for us in themselves. Anything that is good for us, but not intrinsically, is extrinsically good for us. For example, pleasure seems to be intrinsically good for us, and pain intrinsically bad for us. Aspirin is extrinsically good for us.

Some things bring us intrinsic goods as well as intrinsic evils, or forestall these, all at once or over time. In assessing such things, it is important to ask whether they are *overall* good for us: good for us all things considered. For such assessments we can apply *comparativism*. According to comparativism, something is overall good (bad) for a person just if it makes that person's life better (worse) than it would otherwise have been. For example, slicing off a perfectly healthy ear would be overall bad for me (even though it might have benefitted Van Gogh in some mysterious way). Life without my ear would be worse than life with my ear.

Comparativism directs us to assess an event (such as an ear removal) by comparing how well life goes for us, partly as a result of that event, to how well life would have gone had the event not occurred. We are to compare how well life goes for us in the actual world, where the event occurs, to how well it goes in the nearest possible world in which the event fails to occur. In turn, how well life goes, our welfare level, is assessed in terms of the intrinsic goods and evils we possess in a world, assuming we are capable of having any. Intrinsic goods boost our welfare level in a world; intrinsic evils bring it down. If the former outweigh the latter, we are well off in that world: our welfare level in that world is positive. If the latter outweigh the former, we have a negative welfare level there.

Comparativism takes no stance on which things are intrinsically good. It presupposes that we have identified these independently, and that intrinsic goods and evils can be meaningfully quantified and compared. It says that a welfare level at a time in a world will be the sum of the goods and evils we possess at that time in that world, and a lifetime welfare level in a world is the sum of the goods and evils we possess in that world over an entire life. Comparativism draws upon the notion of a lifetime welfare level in order to define the overall value of an event. An event's overall value for us equals the first of these welfare levels minus the second: it equals our lifetime welfare level in the world where the event occurred, minus our lifetime welfare level in the closest world in which the event does not occur. If an event's overall value for us is positive, that event is good for us. An event's value will be positive as long as our lifetime welfare level in the world in which the event took place is greater than our lifetime welfare level in the closest world in which that event does not happen. (For further clarification and objections, see Luper 2009, 2010.)

Comparativism is also neutral concerning the controversy over whether all goods are local. (Here and in what follows 'good,' used as a substantive, refers to something that is intrinsically good for us.) A good is *local* if and only if we can have it during a relatively brief period of time and, other things being equal, having it boosts our lifetime welfare level. It may be that not all goods are things we have at relatively brief times during life. Some may be features of lengthy segments of life. Quite possibly there are *global* goods, which are intrinsically good features of lives as wholes (compare the distinction between global and local desires in Parfit 1984, p. 150, and the distinction between synchronic versus diachronic goods in Velleman 1991). According to comparativism, events might benefit (harm) us by giving us local or global goods (evils) we otherwise would not have had, or by precluding our having local or global evils (goods) we otherwise would have had.

It might prove difficult to compare some global goods with each other or with different sorts of local goods (from which the former may derive). The incommensurability of some goods implies that some questions about harm, involving trade-offs between incommensurable goods, have no answers. This is no objection to comparativism. (If type-A goods and type-B goods are wholly incommensurable, there may be no answer to a question like, Which benefits us more: losing lots of A but gaining lots of B, or losing lots of B but gaining lots of A? But there might well be answers to many other questions, such as: Are we benefited by something that brings us more A or B than we otherwise would have had?) There are also limits to the precision with which goods can be quantified and compared. For example, it is good for us to boost our amount of pleasure, even though it will mean also boosting our amount of suffering, if the former is great enough and the latter small enough. Yet it is probably not possible to specify precisely when this trade-off is in our interests. Assume that we can quantify pleasure and pain in terms of the intensity and duration of each; it is surely reasonable to deny that an episode of pleasure of such

and such intensity over some period of time exactly offsets an episode of pain of the same intensity and duration. To offset a quantity of suffering, it takes a greater quantity of pleasure—that much anyone who is well acquainted with each will concede to Epicurus. But we cannot specify exactly what the exchange rate should be. Here again there will be questions without answers.

Comparativism gives us the resources we need to clarify when dying is against our interests, and why. Putting aside complications arising from global goods (discussed later), if you die today, but your welfare level from now on would have been positive had you survived, then the overall value for you of dying today would be negative. Dying would be bad for you, in that you would have enjoyed a substantially greater lifetime welfare level had your existence continued. If, by contrast, your future welfare level would have been negative had you lived, then the overall value of dying would be positive. Your death would be good for you since it makes your lifetime welfare level higher than it otherwise would have been. Death is good, then, only for the unfortunate few who will fare badly if they live on at all.

The Comparativist Case Against Disarming Death

By appealing to comparativism, it is possible to offer a compelling case against disarming death at any point in life, especially early on. Comparativism implies that dying at some time is harmless to us just if living from then on would be fruitless in the sense that it would not boost the overall value of life. To disarm death, then, we must see to it that living on will indeed be fruitless. Yet it seems wholly imprudent to act in any way that leaves us with a fruitless existence. It seems to make life's overall value less than it otherwise would have been. Unless the appearances are misleading, disarming death is a bad idea. It is like bulldozing one's house to ensure that no one can harm us by burning it down. Spelled out more explicitly, the comparativist case against disarming death is this:

1. Comparativism is true.
2. If comparativism is true, death is disarmed at some time if and only if living from then on is fruitless (it would not add to life's overall value).
3. So death is disarmed at some time if and only if living from then on is fruitless.
4. It is against our interests to act in a way that leaves subsequent life fruitless.
5. So it is against our interests to act in a way that disarms death.

Given comparativism, this argument stands or falls with its fourth premise. But this premise is easily supported. Whether it is true depends on how life gains its value.

Some terminology will help. Let us say that a good is *cumulative* if and only if it is a local good that boosts the value of life as a whole more and more the longer we have it (other things being equal). For example, having it for ten minutes is better than having it for five minutes, and if we have it for ten minutes, lose it a while, and later reacquire it for ten more, the value of having it for the entire twenty minutes is greater than the value of having it for ten minutes. (Of course, we need not accumulate goods the way we accrue grey hairs or gold coins. We begin with a few Krugerrands; if we prosper, we have a larger and larger hoard at later times. We might instead collect goods the way we gather glimpses of the setting sun. The glimpses are creatures of the moment; they are present to us only one at a time. We accrue memories of each glimpse in the way we gather gold, but we gain more and more glimpses only in the sense that they are all part of the life we live. We can accumulate goods in the same sense.) By contrast, a good is *persistent* if and only if it is a local good that we can have—by retaining it or reacquiring it or both—for an indefinitely great total period of time. Pleasure would be an example of a

cumulative, persistent good. Contrast pain, which is a cumulative, persistent *evil*. So if pleasure were the only good (and pain the only evil), the value of my life would increase incrementally the longer I spent time painlessly and pleasantly.

If there are goods, such as pleasure, that are cumulative and persistent, then it is possible to increase the overall value of life incrementally for an indefinitely long period of time. It follows that disarming death by deliberately making further life fruitless is an unattractive option indeed, as the comparativist argument avers. Disarming forces us to cultivate a condition I will call *athedonia*.

The term ‘athedonia’ is usually applied when speaking of people who cannot be happy, but I will say that we are in this condition during a period of time just if we are unable to fare well during that time, either because we are unable to have any local goods or because what local goods we do have will be outweighed by evils such as suffering.

It is possible to end up athedonic even if we do not strive to. When we are infirm, our evils tend to swamp our goods; at such times, our welfare level tends to be quite low. If we live long enough, our health will decline precipitously, and it is likely that after some point, during any life that remains to us, the bad will outweigh the good. We will find ourselves afflicted with the second form of athedonia, in which any local goods we have are swamped in evils (for a contrary view, see the puzzling claim, made in Nagel 1970, p. 62, and endorsed in Schumacher 2010, pp. 205-6, that “life is worth living even when the bad elements of experience are plentiful and the good ones too meager to outweigh the bad ones on their own. The additional positive weight is supplied by experience itself, rather than by any of its contents”). Long life might subject us to the first form of athedonia as well. If we grow very old we might come to be incapable of having any local goods whatever, perhaps due to the loss of certain requisite capacities.

Thus athedonia might occur naturally in those who reach old age only to fall victim to dementia or the onset of infirmity and morbidity. But of course we need not wait passively to become athedonic. We could inflict it upon ourselves right away, say by injuring ourselves so grievously that our remaining days would be lived with unrelenting pain, or by destroying the capacities we must have if we are to enjoy the goods which life usually makes possible.

If life’s value may be incrementally increased indefinitely, disarming death requires subjecting ourselves to athedonia. No sane person would undertake to disarm death this way! Disarming death *this* way would be self-defeating; the cure would be worse than the disease.

The Perfectionist Rejoinder

Although forceful, the foregoing argument against disarming death is open to challenge. It rests on an assumption, viz., premise 4, which says that it is imprudent to act in any way that leaves us with a fruitless existence. By challenging this claim, it might be possible to show that those who end up with fruitless lives need not have acted imprudently.

Suppose that, well before we perish, we can perfect life: we can make life as a whole as good as it can be. It may be that by perfecting life we *unavoidably* exhaust it: we inevitably end up at a point after which remaining alive would be fruitless. Clearly enough, it is not imprudent to perfect life. Presumably, it is best to do so as soon as we can, so as to avoid the possibility that a mishap will prevent us from succeeding later. It would be in our interests to perfect life even if, as a result, the last segment of life *were* fruitless, even athedonic. Since exhausting life disarms death, it would not be self-defeating to disarm death as the consequence of living as well as possible. Spelled out, the perfectionist rejoinder to the comparativist case is this:

1. It is in our interests to perfect life as soon as we can.
2. We can perfect life well before we die.
3. So it is in our interests to perfect life well before we die.
4. Once perfected, life is fruitless.
5. Death is disarmed at some time if and only if living from then on is fruitless.
6. So it is in our interests to perfect life well before we die, and thereafter life is fruitless and death disarmed.

The softest spot in this argument is premise 2, which says that life can be perfected expeditiously—i.e., well before we die. We might call this claim the *perfectionist thesis*. Let us see if we can identify some assumptions given which the perfectionist thesis would be true.

Localist Case

To simplify the discussion, for the time being I will simply assume that all goods are local; later I will consider other possibilities. Call this claim *localism*. Earlier I contrasted local goods with global goods, but localism implies that global goods are not real; at best, those things that seem to be global goods can be analyzed into local goods.

Now, at first blush, making life as good as it can be consists in giving ourselves as much as possible of each good, G, there is. But it is easy to confuse this achievement with others.

Contrast the following:

Synchronic maxing: having as much G *at* a time (or during a stretch of time) as possible;

Diachronic rationing: having (at least some) G over as extensive a period of time as is possible; and

Maxing (simpliciter): having as much G as it is possible to have, however G is distributed *over* time.

For example, suppose that pleasure is good. It is conceivable that synchronically maxing pleasure would be crippling—that it would reduce, perhaps drastically, how much pleasure we are subsequently able to have. Taking some drug like cocaine for the first time might trigger an explosion of pleasure that bursts forth like fireworks but that ends just as quickly, altering our physiology in the process, so that later we can no longer experience joy. In that case maxing pleasure synchronically conflicts with maxing pleasure (simpliciter) and with rationing pleasure as well. Rationing and maxing pleasure may also conflict. I will assume that, with respect to each good G, perfecting life consists in maxing G (not rationing or synchronically maxing G). (It might not be possible for a given individual to have as much G as another person can have, and neither may be able to have as much G as is humanly possible. In what follows, I will understand maxing G relatively: for subject S to max G is for S to have as much G *as it is possible for S to have*. It follows that two people may have maxed all the goods there are, in that sense making their lives as good as they can be, even though the one person's life is better than the other's.)

Further complications immediately arise. If we max one good, we may be unable to max another, either because there are so many goods that we cannot have them all, or because having some goods precludes having others at the same time (e.g., we cannot enjoy solitude and companionship simultaneously). Perfecting life might require scheduling and trade-offs among goods. The details could be complicated and messy. Nevertheless, to make the case for the perfectionist thesis as simple as possible, I will assume that, as a package, all local goods can be maxed well before we die.

On the basis of the assumptions I have laid out, the perfectionist thesis may be defended as follows:

- 2a. The only goods are local.
- 2b. As a package, all local goods can be maxed well before we die.
- 2c. If the only goods are local, and as a package all local goods can be maxed well before we die, then life can be perfected expeditiously.
- 2. So life may be perfected expeditiously (the perfectionist thesis).

Call this the *localist case* for the perfectionist thesis. Is it plausible?

In my view, this argument is weak, if only because the second premise, which says that all local goods may be maxed well before we die, is dubious. (I will discuss the first premise later.) I have already noted some of the complications that arise. But even if we assume that all goods are *harmonious*, so that maxing no good interferes with maxing any other, that goods are *few*, so that we can get around to attaining them all, and even that each good is *synchronically limited*, so that it is feasible to have as much of it as is possible at a time, overwhelming problems remain.

Consider that goods which are persistent and cumulative cannot be maxed expeditiously; if such goods exist, we cannot hope to perfect life well before it is over. No matter how good we have made life, we can, in theory, make it incrementally better, until our time runs out. For example, at least in theory we can make life better and better by adding pleasant days, so we never reach a point where we spend our days fruitlessly, having already perfected life.

Can we defend 2b if we assume that there just *aren't* any persistent goods, or if we assume that there are no *cumulative* persistent goods? If the only goods were nonpersistent, then the total period of time each good can be possessed would be limited; if noncumulative, having them longer does not benefit us.

Consider the first possibility. There might be various reasons why a particular good is not persistent. Given human physiology, it might be inevitable that we will lose the capacities necessary for having those things that are intrinsically good. For example, we might be so constructed that, in time, perhaps due to dementia, we will lose the abilities we need to sustain friendships, such as the capacity to recognize others. Or we might be so constituted that eventually we will lose the capacity to experience pleasure, perhaps because the body can no longer readily synthesize or properly transfer dopamine. There may also be goods that are nonpersistent *by their very nature*. As an illustration, suppose it were intrinsically good for us at a time that, at that time, we marry for the first time. (This would not imply that the *condition* of marriage itself—remaining married—is intrinsically good. Nor would it imply that it is good for us to later remarry.) Marrying for the first time would be a nonpersistent good whose temporal limit is reached as soon as it is acquired: we could get no more of it by living a thousand years or by enhancing our biology.

However, the biological limitations just mentioned would not make it feasible to max a good expeditiously, as such limitations typically would be reached very late in life. As for the suggestion that all goods are nonpersistent by their very nature, there simply isn't any reason to suppose it is true. Note, too, that if all goods are nonpersistent (and can be maxed early in life), perfecting life would afflict us with *athedonia*, since it leaves us unable to make the remainder of life good at all.

So is *athedonia* the price we must pay for perfecting life? Perhaps not. We could instead try to defend 2b on the grounds that there are no *cumulative* persistent goods, leaving open the

possibility that there are persistent goods that are not cumulative. On this assumption, it may be possible for us to perfect (and thus deplete) life *without* becoming athedonic.

Recall that a good is not cumulative if having it for a longer period of time is no better than having it for a shorter interval. If the only goods are noncumulative, acquiring them exhausts life. If we can acquire them relatively quickly, then we will exhaust life relatively quickly. Now, even if the only goods are noncumulative, acquiring them might leave us athedonic. A good is, so to speak, *vacuously* noncumulative if we can have it at one time and never again (if marrying for the first time were a good, it would be vacuously noncumulative). If all goods were vacuously noncumulative, acquiring them all would leave us athedonic. But suppose that some noncumulative goods were *persistent*. These would be things that remain good for us indefinitely, even though the value of having them does not increase with time. Retaining such goods would not prevent our lives from being fruitless, but it *would* forestall athedonia. So we could perfect life, yet still live well! If we can stave off athedonia with persistent goods, exhausting life, and disarming death, seems like a good idea. Although continued life is fruitless, we remain well off, and although continued life is good, dying is no longer bad for us!

Unfortunately, this second strategy for defending 2b is no more successful than the first. It is quite clear that some goods, such as pleasure, are both persistent and cumulative. And it is not possible to stave off athedonia with noncumulative persistent goods since there is no such thing. Ancient hedonists might have thought that pleasure qualifies, and Stoics might have thought that virtue qualifies, but they were mistaken, as I will argue later. (Some might find it tempting to say that certain intrinsically good features of lives as wholes directly benefit us over the course of life, in the way of persistent goods, yet are not cumulative; in the next section I will suggest that this temptation should be resisted.)

Let's recap. In support of the perfectionist thesis (premise 2 of the perfectionist rejoinder), we considered the localist case:

- 2a. The only goods are local.
- 2b. As a package, all local goods can be maxed well before we die.
- 2c. If the only goods are local, and as a package all local goods can be maxed well before we die, then life can be perfected expeditiously.
2. So life may be perfected expeditiously (the perfectionist thesis).

Faced with the dubiousness of 2b, we considered choosing between the assumption that no persistent goods exist, which would imply that perfecting life will leave us athedonic, and the alternative assumption that no *cumulative* persistent goods exist. The latter, together with the assumption that there *are* some noncumulative persistent goods, would position us to argue that a perfected life need not be athedonic, as athedonia could be staved off with noncumulative persistent goods. However, both ways of defending 2b fail. Both can be challenged on the grounds that some goods, such as pleasure, are both persistent and cumulative. As for the case for the claim that we can perfect life without falling into athedonia, it fails too, since noncumulative persistent goods do not exist.

Globalist Case

I have been assuming that all goods are local. Given localism, we can perfect life well before we perish, thereby exhausting life, if we can max all of the existing local goods expeditiously. The latter, in turn, rests on the proposition that there *aren't* any goods that are both persistent and

cumulative, which is dubious indeed, since pleasure seems to qualify. So the localist case for the perfectionist thesis fails, and the perfectionist rejoinder collapses.

It would seem that if *any* goods are local goods, then pleasure is, and the perfectionist thesis fails. But perhaps we can defend the perfectionist thesis if we deny the existence of local goods altogether. In this section I will explore a way to support that denial; namely, by accepting *globalism*, the view that only global goods exist—i.e., the only things that are intrinsically good for us are global goods.

By itself, globalism does not position us to infer that we can perfect life expeditiously. To reach that conclusion we might assume that, as a package, all global goods can be readily maxed. On the basis of this assumption we may argue as follows:

- 2a. The only goods are global.
 - 2b. As a package, all global goods can be maxed well before we die.
 - 2c. If the only goods are global, and as a package all global goods can be maxed well before we die, then life can be perfected expeditiously.
2. So life may be perfected expeditiously (the perfectionist thesis).

Call this the *globalist case* for the perfectionist thesis. In this section I will suggest a defense of the globalist case that seems worth taking seriously. In support of 2a I will argue that there is only one global good and no other goods. I will support 2b on the grounds that this lone good can be attained expeditiously.

What features of life, if any, are global goods? Perhaps the most widely discussed candidate is narrative unity (McIntyre 1981, chapter 15; Taylor 1989; Velleman 1991; Strawson 2004). The thought is roughly that it is good that one's life constitute a coherent whole, in the way that a good story does, which requires that the various stages of one's life be interrelated, like episodes in an ongoing tale. Two other candidates are steady improvement and constancy (these, or something very like them—namely “rising expectations” and “continuity”—are mentioned as features of good life plans in Rawls 1971 section 64. Compare Slote 1982.) The former requires that one's life improve steadily over time; by contrast, the latter requires that it lacks sharp qualitative peaks and valleys.

If narrative unity is indeed intrinsically good, it might be tempting to classify it, and other global goods, as noncumulative persistent goods. Global goods may appear to be persistent since they are features of entire lives, and they can appear to be noncumulative since they do not make a life increasingly valuable as time goes on. For example, presumably *continued* unity does not add to the value of life; if, after unifying life prior to some time, the question arises as to whether we should live on, the prospect of *continued* unity will not tip the balance in favor of remaining alive. This is so, at least, assuming that our resulting life will be no *more* unified than if cut short. We might live on so that we can *add* to the unity of life as a whole, but *retaining* its unity does nothing to relieve the pointlessness of further life. However, the temptation to see global goods as noncumulative and persistent should be resisted. Small segments of life do not admit of narrative unity, so it is not a local good at all, and since it is not a local good, it is not a persistent good—it is not a good we retain *over* time. The same goes for other global goods. Consider, too, that if we prefer to accrue a good in the future rather than the past, as Parfit predicted we will, presumably we regard it as a local good. Clearly, however, the bias makes no sense as concerns valued features of lives as wholes, or things that we value only because of their effect on the shape of our lives as wholes.

Narrative unity might be entirely unrelated to the quantity or distribution of local goods over a life. People might have lower and lower well-being over time, or no particular pattern of

welfare at all over time, as measured in terms of local goods and evils, even though their lives retain substantial narrative unity. This may not be true of other desirable features of a life. For example, steady improvement and constancy might be understood as *derivative* goods—goods that are a function of the quantity or distribution of local goods within a life. If there are goods like this, then there must be local goods as well, and globalism is false.

However, I am inclined to think that steady improvement and constancy just aren't goods, and that any appearance to the contrary can be explained away by noting that each seems to play a role in something that really *is* good. By this strategy—explaining away counterexamples—it might even be possible to establish that there is really only *one* global good, which itself is not a function of local goods.

One option is to say that narrative unity is the sole good, while steady improvement and constancy only appear to be goods because most unified lives are constant or improve steadily. But I would make a different suggestion, since I doubt that narrative unity is intrinsically good.

The most plausible candidate for the sole global good, in my view, is the overall successfulness of a life. This is the feature one's life has when it conforms to one's life plan—one's plan for how one's life is to go, the shape it is to take. Successfulness is related to, but not identical with narrative unity, as achieving one's life plan will unify one's life to some extent. Moreover, success often, but not always, will result in a life that features constancy or steady improvement—or at least appears to. For example, we might make steady progress towards the completion of our life plan, which can serve as a regular source of satisfaction. Perhaps any other apparent global good can be explained away in a similar fashion, leaving only one global good in place: overall successfulness.

To give globalism legs, however, we must also support the position that only global goods exist. We need to contend that there aren't any local goods. So positioned, we could offer the following account (compare the Success Theory in Parfit 1984, p. 150):

Success globalism: The one and only thing that is intrinsically good for a subject is that his life be overall successful; i.e., that he achieve his life plan; the one and only thing that is intrinsically bad for him is that his life be an overall failure; i.e., that he fail in his attempt to achieve his life plan.

If local goods do not exist, presumably all of the things that might *appear* to be local goods are actually *extrinsic* goods. Hence to defend success globalism, we might argue that putatively local goods are things that are good only insofar as they help us to achieve our life plan. For example, spending time pleasantly is good only insofar as it helps us to make a success of life. If pleasant time spent gambling on horses is not part of the plan, then it will not benefit us.

Obviously this strategy will make it necessary to rework the usual way we understand well-being. Given that there *aren't* any local goods, we cannot make sense of living well during a relatively brief period of time in terms of the accumulation of goods during that interval. The best we can do is to say that we live well during a period of time insofar as our activities contribute, in one way or another, to our life plan, and hence to the goodness of life as a whole. For some, perhaps this story might suffice, but accepting it will call for some mental gymnastics. Earlier, recall, the term 'athedonia' was defined as the condition we are in when we are unable to have any local goods or what local goods we do have are outweighed by evils. Globalism implies that we spend each and every day of our existence in a condition of athedonia. It is hard to accept that a person whose condition is athedonic is nevertheless doing well while she makes her life as a whole better.

Can we make life overall successful before we die? So it would seem. We can set ourselves a life plan which we can achieve well within our allotted days. Assuming that this plan is the only yardstick by which to judge the overall successfulness of life, and we accomplish it fully, life will be an overall success. Assuming that overall success is the sole good, then life remains good after we complete the plan, no matter what our remaining days are like.

So if success globalism is defensible, we may offer the following version of the globalist case for the perfectionist thesis:

- 2a. The one and only good is the overall successfulness of one's life (success globalism).
- 2b. One's life can be made overall successful relatively early on.
- 2c. If overall successfulness is the one and only good, and life can be made overall successful relatively early on, then life can be perfected expeditiously.
2. So life can be perfected expeditiously (the perfectionist thesis).

Success Globalism

Can we defend success globalism? I think we can come close. It seems to me that, as success globalism implies, the overall success of life is good for us, which is something that can be supported on the basis of a view of welfare which I have defended elsewhere. Let the term *achievement desire* refer to any desire to accomplish something; if an achievement desire is essential to (or if it plays a substantial role in) our life plan, let us say that it is an *essential* achievement desire. Assume, too, that the object of any desire can be expressed as a proposition, which we can symbolize with the letter *p*. Elsewhere (Luper 2009, 2011) I have defended the following view:

Strategic Preferentialism: for any subject *S*, it is intrinsically good for *S* at a (or over a period of) time that, at that time, *S* desires *p*, *S*'s desire for *p* is an achievement desire that is essential to *S*'s life plan, and *p* is true; it is intrinsically bad for *S* at a (or over a period of) time that, at that time, *S* desires *p*, *S*'s desire for *p* is an achievement desire that is essential to *S*'s life plan, and *p* is false. The larger the role *S*'s desire plays in *S*'s life plan, the better (worse) it is for *S* that *p* is true (false).

Strategic preferentialism implies that succeeding with a life plan is intrinsically good. This is a bit different from the claim that success is a good-making feature of life as a whole, but it seems reasonable for a proponent of strategic preferentialism to accept the latter. Both success globalism and strategic preferentialism suggest that a successful life is indeed intrinsically good for us.

However, success globalism also implies that the overall success of life is the *sole* good. Here it and strategic preferentialism part ways. According to the latter, not only is it good for us to achieve an entire life plan, it is also good for us to succeed at the individual aims that are components of our plan. This claim about component aims is plausible if, as I assume, the aims do not stand to the whole as means to ends but rather as parts to whole. They are, so to speak, good parts of a good whole, much as individual episodes of pleasure that compose a lengthier episode of pleasure are good. Suppose, for example, that my plan is to marry and raise kids and to make a contribution to philosophy, among other things; the overall successfulness of my plan is good for me, but so is each of these essential components of my plan. Moreover, these component achievements are *local* goods—as, again, is suggested by strategic preferentialism. Apparently, then, the successfulness of life as a whole is not the sole good.

One might also charge that individual achievements are cumulative goods, so the more we achieve the better life is. That would be a problem if it were not consistent with the possibility of perfecting life expeditiously—if no matter what we've accomplished, it is better to accomplish more. However, it might be possible to meet this charge. We might say that achievements are valuable only insofar as they are called for by one's life plan, so that accomplishing ten things is not better than accomplishing five if those five are the only ones planned.

Before we give up on the perfectionist thesis, perhaps one more strategy is worth considering. We might acknowledge that both local and global goods exist, and appeal directly to a restricted version of strategic preferentialism:

Exclusive Strategic Preferentialism: for any subject S, the one *and only* thing that is intrinsically good for S at a (or over some period of) time is that, at that time, S desires *p*, S's desire for *p* is an achievement desire that is essential to S's life plan, and *p* is true; the one *and only* thing that it is intrinsically bad for S at a (or over some period of) time is that, at that time, S desires *p*, S's desire for *p* is an achievement desire that is essential to S's life plan, and *p* is false. The larger the role S's desire plays in S's life plan, the better (worse) it is for S that *p* is true (false).

On this view, how well off we are over a period of time, or over a lifetime, is a matter of how successful we are during that time. If we also assume that things that are intrinsically good for us always benefit us during or over some stretch of time (which is not to imply that the same is true of extrinsic goods), we will conclude that success is the only good. We might then defend the perfectionist thesis as follows:

- 2a. Achieving one's life plan and its components are the only things that are good for one.
 - 2b. One can achieve one's life plan and its components relatively early on.
 - 2c. If achieving one's life plan and its components are the only things that are good for one, and one can achieve one's life plan and its components relatively early on, then life can be perfected expeditiously.
2. So life can be perfected expeditiously.

This is the strongest defense of the perfectionist thesis I can muster. Given exclusive strategic preferentialism, it is indeed prudent to disarm death by perfecting life. And the exclusive form of strategic preferentialism does have some attractive features; chief among these is the fact that it would allow us to evaluate putative goods against the yardstick of our life plan. Moreover, this way of understanding the good implies that our interests are almost wholly malleable; as existentialists might also say, we determine what is good for us when we choose our plan. However, in the final analysis we must reject the exclusive form of strategic preferentialism, unless we are willing to concede that nothing we exclude from our plan is intrinsically good for us.

And yet it would be wonderful to disarm death! That was the thought with which this essay began. Should we be tempted to go along with exclusive strategic preferentialism *because* of the power it gives us to deflect mortal harm? No. Dwelling on the downside of disarming death eliminates any such temptation. Recall that global goods are not persistent. It is one thing for life as a whole to *be good* no matter what we do in the aftermath of success, and another for us to *live well* during that time. Exclusive strategic preferentialists must say that, in the aftermath of success, clinging to life will be pointless. Living on will lack even instrumental value, as success is already attained.

No one really wants to arrive at the point where life is exhausted. It seems that, in addition to how good life is as a whole, we care about how well off we are *now*, and *from now on*. (Compare Williams 1981. And here is a related contrast: it is one thing to ask what sort of life we prefer to have, and another to ask where in life we prefer to *be*: the life many of us want is a healthy life that extends to a ripe old age, but no younger person wants to be a centenarian *now*.) Caring how well off we are now is consistent with the assumption that it is in our interests to perfect life as soon as we can (i.e., with premise 1 of the perfectionist rejoinder). While we care how well off we are now, it is also true that, at every time *t* during life, we will care how well off we will be at *t*. The fact that we *will* have this temporally-relative concern at other times is one reason to care now about how we will fare at other times (and to worry about the distribution of our welfare over life). In order to delay reaching the point at which we no longer fare well, we might be tempted to put off something we must do to make life a complete success. But (*pace* Parfit 1984) improving life as a whole surely takes priority, and if we are in a position to perfect life, it is irrational to procrastinate, assuming that later we may be unable to attain perfection.

What about lingering after reaching the point of exhaustion—stretching out our remaining days as long as possible (this is essentially what Limbo Man does in Kamm 1993, pp. 19 and 49-54)? Is *that* prudent? I would say that it is not. This answer can seem peculiar. Having perfected life, don't we want to hang around and savor our success? Of course. But lingering is a matter of indifference unless our remaining days are *good* for us, say because we spend them pleasantly reminiscing about our achievement. Take that assumption away—as we must on the hypothesis that success, the sole good, has already been achieved—and we gain nothing by living on.

Hedonism and Stoicism

I have argued that we cannot hope to disarm death by perfecting life and that, even if we could, the predicament in which we would then find ourselves is bleak. My conclusions are in sharp contrast to those of ancient hedonists and Stoics. They argued, in effect, that living as well as possible leaves us with a persistently good life in which death is disarmed because life is depleted. They took this view on the grounds that the one and only good is noncumulatively persistent and attainable long before life is over. Since the sole good is readily attained, life is readily perfected; since it is noncumulative, attaining it exhausts life; yet life remains good after it is exhausted since the sole good is persistent. However, their views were confused, as I will now show.

According to Epicurus and his followers the sole good is pleasure. They considered pleasure to be noncumulative, so that, once made 'pleasant,' life as a whole is as good as it can be, and death is innocuous. They also claimed that pleasure is a persistent good which enables us to avoid athedonia, so we can remain 'happy' even after living on is fruitless.

However, a close examination of Epicurus' views about pleasure reveals that he was in a muddle. In some passages, as in the following excerpt from *Letter to Menoecus*, Epicurus seems to suggest that pleasure is merely extrinsically good—good insofar as it helps us to avoid pain, which is intrinsically evil:

We do everything for the sake of being neither in pain nor in terror. . . . For we are in need of pleasure only when we are in pain because of the absence of pleasure, and when we are not in pain, then we no longer need pleasure. (Epicurus 1994, p. 30)

He goes on to suggest that pleasure is the good, but that the pleasure which he equates with the good just *is* the absence of pain:

When we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate, . . . but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul. (Epicurus 1994, pp. 30-1)

Equating pleasure with the absence of pain appears to position hedonists to make the otherwise inexplicable claim that pleasure is a noncumulative good:

Unlimited time and limited time contain equal [amounts of] pleasure. . . . (*Principal Doctrines* 19; Epicurus 1994, p. 33)

If pleasure is no more than the absence of pain, it does not accumulate with time. A pain-free life that lasts for 50 years is not less free of pain than one that lasts 1,000 years. However, in some passages Epicurus appears to say that living on is good for us:

The wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad. . . . He who advises the young man to live well and the old man to die well is simple-minded, not just because of the pleasing aspects of life but because the same kind of practice produces a good life and a good death. (*Letter to Menoeceus*; Epicurus 1994, p. 29)

Even if we must endure the most painful diseases, living on is good for us:

Diseases which last a long time involve feelings of pleasure which exceed feelings of pain. (*Principal Doctrines* 4; Epicurus 1994, p. 32)

If Epicurus means to say that living on is good for us, and not simply that it is *not bad* for us, he must assume, as most of us do, that pleasure is a positive quality, and not that it is the mere absence of suffering. Of course, if pleasure is indeed a positive quality, then it is plausible to say that pleasure is intrinsically good, and also that it is a persistent good, so that, other things being equal, life is good all the while it is pleasant. Yet on this positive account of pleasure it is clear that pleasure is a cumulative good (in effect, Cicero makes this criticism in *De Finibus*).

Equivocating between the two accounts of pleasure—as a positive quality and as the mere absence of suffering—can make it seem that pleasure is a persistent yet noncumulative good. But it is confused to say both that pleasure is an intrinsic good and also that it is equivalent to painlessness; it implies that the absence of suffering is an intrinsic good, when in fact pain is an intrinsic evil and the absence of pain is the *absence of an intrinsic evil*. It makes no sense to count absences of intrinsic evils among the intrinsic goods (nor may we count absences of goods among intrinsic evils). A life that is devoid of suffering (and other evils) may well fail to be bad, but clearly it is not made good by this alone.

Some theorists emphasize that Epicurus valued katastematic (or static) pleasures, not kinetic (or active) pleasures such as joy or relish. This does nothing to rescue him from the difficulty I have pointed out, but it might help to explain why he and some commentators who defend him, such as Rosenbaum 1990, did not notice it: perhaps Epicurus was thinking of active pleasures when he said that pleasure makes it good to live on, but so-called “katastematic” pleasures when he denied that longevity betters life. In any case, on his official view the sole good is “static” pleasure; hence his equivocation is between two ways of understanding *static* pleasures; if they are mere absences, they are not intrinsically good; if they are positive qualities, they are cumulative.

We can reject the ancient hedonists’ case for the claim that we may perfect life expeditiously, as it hinges on the implausible assumptions that pleasure is the one and only good, and it is noncumulative. We can also reject their case for saying that it is possible to live well

even after perfecting life, as it hinges on the implausible claim that pleasure is both persistent and noncumulative.

Although Stoics and hedonists were rivals, both said there is just one good, and that this good is persistent yet noncumulative. As Cicero noted in the course of defending Stoicism against hedonism, “the man who places all good in virtue has it in his power to say that a happy life is made so by the perfection of virtue; for he consistently denies that time can bring any increase to his chief good” (1875, p. 164). While this passage is open to interpretation, it appears to attribute two claims to Stoics: first, (the perfection of) virtue is the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for us; second, a longer good life is no better than a shorter good life, much as remaining blue makes a house no bluer. Of course, these and other claims that are typically attributed to Stoics are not self-explanatory. There are various ways of defending them to consider.

Interpreted as a version of localism, it seems best to understand the Stoic account of goodness this way:

Exclusive condition perfectionism: the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for us at some time is that, at that time, we are virtuous: that is, we have virtue or some sort of excellence or perfection (or we have all of the virtues assuming that there is more than one); and the one and only thing that is intrinsically bad for us at some time is that, at that time, we are vicious.

This interpretation accounts for several claims associated with Stoicism. First, it implies that virtue is the sole good (assuming that all goods benefit us during or over some stretch of time), from which it follows that neither positive nor negative emotional states (such as pleasure) play a direct role in the good life. Second, it suggests that extending a good life does not better it, given that virtue is a noncumulative good. The latter claim will require further discussion, but Stoics would not have quarreled with it, as they denied that “time can bring any increase to [the] chief good.” Finally, on this interpretation, we can make sense of the Stoic claim to invulnerability. Here is Cicero again:

if there is really any such thing as happiness, it ought to be wholly in the power of a wise man to secure it; for, if a happy life can be lost, it cannot be happy. For who can feel confident that a thing will always remain firm and enduring in his case, which is in reality fleeting and perishable? (1875, Book 2, Chapter 27; p. 164)

As exclusive condition perfectionists, Stoics could say that a perfected life (a perfectly virtuous life) will be exhausted despite its persistent goodness, so continuing life does not better it. Our demise ends our virtuousness, but that does not make life overall worse. Life would be worse if we became vicious, but presumably a virtuous person can avoid vice. In any case, death will not make us vicious, so once we are virtuous ceasing to exist is not bad for us. The same goes for other things, say dementia, that deprive us of virtue without making us vicious: these are not bad for us either. The inner citadel is impregnable.

Although it enables us to provide an illuminating way to understand Stoicism, exclusive condition perfectionism is implausible. It says that *virtuousness*—the disposition (or capacity)—is intrinsically good. To adapt Aristotle’s argument, the disposition itself is of no value to someone who sleeps her life away (“possession of virtue seems actually compatible with being asleep, or with lifelong inactivity. . . , but a man who was living so no one would call happy, unless he were maintaining a thesis at all costs” *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b30). It is far more reasonable to say that the *exercise* of a capacity is intrinsically good than it is to say that the

capacity *itself* is intrinsically good. Hence the account would be much stronger if it were restated as follows:

Exclusive exercise perfectionism: the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for us at some time is that, at that time, we act virtuously; and the one and only thing that is intrinsically bad for us at some time is that, at that time, we act viciously.

However, if *acting* virtuously is intrinsically good, it is far from clear that it is not cumulative. Epicurus clung to his view that a pleasant life does not improve over time by equivocating between a negative and positive account of pleasure; in an analogous way, equivocation between a negative and positive understanding of virtue might lend support to the conclusion that a life rich in virtuous deeds is good but does not improve over time. Acting virtuously might be understood positively, as doing (or attempting to do) what is morally appropriate, or perhaps, as virtue theorists might prefer to say, as acting from a good character. Acting virtuously might also be construed negatively, as *not* doing (or attempting to do) what is morally inappropriate (or not acting from a bad character). The negative way of thinking about virtue bolsters the view that a virtuous life does not improve over time, but it undermines the idea that acting virtuously is intrinsically good. By contrast, given the positive way of thinking about virtue, acting virtuously might seem to be a good, yet it might also seem cumulative. As measured by the yardstick of good deeds done or attempted, life may be improved until the very end. (There is more to be said on both sides of this dispute, of course. For example, Stoics might insist that exercising virtue over time only appears to boost the overall value of life. They might say that the very persistence of this good is what accounts for the fact that it appears to be cumulative. They might also point out how difficult it is to quantify the goodness of exercising a capacity such as virtue over time. It seems silly to say, for example, that acting virtuously for some given period of time contributes half as much to the goodness of my life as acting virtuously for twice as long. But critics might reply that it is better to exercise virtue for a rather long period of time, say ten years, than it is to exercise virtue for relatively brief periods of time, say one day, which suggests that it is a cumulative good, even if it cannot be quantified with any precision.)

Perhaps we can identify a stronger version of the Stoic account of goodness by casting it as a form of globalism rather than localism.

One idea is that Stoics accepted a form of *success* globalism. That is, Stoics began with the assumption that the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for a subject is that life be successful; they then adopted the goal of attaining virtue, and, upon achieving virtue, they pronounced life good. But this interpretation cannot be sustained, since Stoics would reject success globalism. People might well set their sights on virtuousness in designing a life plan; conceivably, some might make their life overall successful thereby. But nothing in success globalism requires that we pay special attention to virtue in selecting our life plan; it does not require that we “place all good in virtue,” as Stoicism demands. According to Stoicism, virtue isn’t good *as* an achievement, as a way of making one’s life a success.

Here is a better interpretation of the Stoic account of the good:

Exclusive virtue globalism: the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for a person is that her life as a whole be virtuous; and the one and only thing that is intrinsically bad for a person is that her life as a whole be vicious.

This interpretation seems to account for the main claims Stoics made. Taken as a form of globalism, virtue is a feature of life as a whole, and thus not a local good; this supports the claim that retaining goodness over time does not make a life better. A short virtuous life is no less

virtuous than a long virtuous life. And once again Stoics seem well positioned to claim invulnerability. Given virtue globalism, death is powerless to undermine the goodness of a life; it can end it, of course, but ending a life makes it briefer, not less virtuous.

Yet in the end the case for virtue globalism is weak. To see why, let us update it a bit, and assume that a virtuous life is a morally good life, while a vicious life is a morally bad life. In other words, let us understand Stoic goodness as follows:

Exclusive Moral globalism: the one and only thing that is intrinsically good for a person is that her life as a whole be morally good; and the one and only thing that is intrinsically bad for a person is that her life as a whole be morally bad.

This makes Stoicism a bit more concrete without taking anything appealing from it, as far as I can tell. (It is also a reading that would have appealed to Cicero, I think, given his comment that “to live happily is to live honorably, that is, virtuously [1875, Book 3, Chapter VIII; p. 190; 1988, p. 151].”) Understood this way, Stoicism holds that a good life just *is* the life of a good person, and being a good person is the same thing as being a moral person. On any plausible understanding of a moral person or moral agent, once one is fully moral, one does not become more moral with time. There is a ceiling to the value that we can attain as persons: it is reached when we become fully moral, or, as Stoics put it, it is reached when we become virtuous. If we say that living well is the same thing as being a morally good person (and faring ill consists in being a morally bad person) it is a short step to the position that the good life does not improve with the passage of time. Other Stoic views fall into place as well. For example (as Socrates also thought) suffering is not harmful because it does not make us immoral. (Here is Seneca 1966, p. 120: “That which is evil does harm; that which does harm makes a man worse. But pain and poverty do not make a man worse; therefore, they are not evils.”) The same goes for death. In fact, assuming that moral persons are always in a position to avoid becoming immoral, they are wholly impervious to misfortune, no matter how grim their lives might appear to be: “no evil can happen to a wise man (1875, Book 3, Chapter VIII; p. 190).”

However, it will be difficult to prevent moral (or virtue) globalism from collapsing into exercise (or condition) perfectionism, especially if we attempt to make sense of perfecting life at a relatively early age. The latter, it would seem, must involve beginning to act in a morally appropriate way or at least acquiring the disposition to (try to) act in a morally appropriate way—in other words, becoming virtuous—at some point in life.

Even if we could devise a distinctive globalist interpretation, there is a price to pay. Having denied the existence of local goods, as they would be forced to do as globalists, Stoics could not claim that it is good to live on after one’s life has been perfected. I have already noted that globalists could easily overlook this consequence of their view, because it is tempting to think of global goods as persistent. It is entirely possible that Stoics mistakenly thought that, inasmuch as virtue is a global good, it is persistent.

There is one other objection to consider—an objection faced by all of the interpretations of Stoic goodness which I have considered: it has seemed obvious to a great many theorists that we must distinguish having a good life or faring well, on the one hand, from being a morally good person or acting in a morally proper way, on the other. No doubt, the distinction is not sharp. Perhaps it is intrinsically good for us (hence in our interests) to engage in moral behavior or to live a morally good life (it would not follow that morality is merely instrumentally good or that egoism is correct). Whether or not that is so, it simply isn’t true that a good life just *is* the life of a good person, as anyone will grant who has seen good people fare badly. Morally good people might be burdened with debilitating and agonizing diseases; constant misfortune may

disrupt their plans and leave them loveless and even despised by others. Good people are blameless when these things happen to them, but it is absurd to say that they fare no less well than other, equally good people.

Conclusion

If the sole good were the overall success of life, together with the achievements that entailed, we could, with a bit of luck, reach the upper boundary of life's value by choosing and achieving a feasible life plan. We could perfect life well within a lifespan. After doing so, ceasing to exist would not harm us, as it would take nothing of value from us. However, perishing would take nothing from us because life on the far side of perfection would not be worth living. We cannot expect to make life as a whole as good as it can be, and spend our remaining days living well. Then again, we cannot really expect to perfect life expeditiously either, as success is not the only thing that matters. As the hedonists believed and the Stoics denied, pleasure is a persistent good. *Pace* the hedonists, pleasure is also a cumulative good, probably one among others. So there is no reason to think that life's value has an upper boundary which is easily reached before old age sets in. No matter how good a life is, so far, it will become better with the acquisition or retention of cumulative persistent goods like pleasure. Living on will cease to boost the overall value of life only if we cease to be capable of living well. Yet losing this capacity is a misfortune for us, and destroying it deliberately, so as to disarm death, would be arrant folly.

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