

Aggregating Personal Value

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Abstract

A person possesses value from various components of wellbeing, but they also have overall wellbeing from various instances of value taken together. Most ethicists assume that there is an objectively unique way that wellbeing from components aggregates into overall wellbeing. However, I argue that aggregation is subjective and varies depending on what sort of aggregation a person values. I end with some implications for the significance of death.

A person gets value from various occurrences. They receive good from things like pleasurable experiences and worthwhile achievements, and they receive bad from things like painful experiences and disappointing failures. But they also receive an overall amount of value from various instances of value taken together. Someone's childhood is good or bad overall depending on how the good and bad of what happened to them combine. And their entire life has a certain amount of wellbeing from all the good and bad they ever receive. Even a given moment has an overall value for them due to the aggregation of distinct pockets of good and bad occurring right then. Thus, not only does a person possess **partial wellbeing** from components of wellbeing, but they also possess **aggregate wellbeing** from collections of instances of partial wellbeing.

In discussions of aggregate wellbeing, the manner of aggregation has usually been taken to be objective and unique. In this paper, however, I argue that aggregation is subjective. The way

partial wellbeing combines into aggregate wellbeing depends on what sort of aggregation someone values. Such a subjectivist view about aggregation has been neglected, even among subjectivists. However, the core motivations for subjectivism about partial wellbeing can be extended to subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing. Though they must indeed be *extended*. Subjectivism about partial wellbeing doesn't entail subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing, so the task of this paper is to offer a defense of **aggregation subjectivism**.

In Section 1, I distinguish subjectivism about partial wellbeing from subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing. In Section 2, I clarify what it is to value a manner of aggregation. In Section 3, I argue for aggregation subjectivism. In Section 4, I defend aggregation subjectivism from objections. In Section 5, I draw some conclusions for the significance of death.

1. Aggregation

In this section, I distinguish subjectivism about partial wellbeing from subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing.

1.i Partial Wellbeing

The debate over whether partial wellbeing is **subjective** or **objective** is a debate over whether something's being valuable for someone depends on their valuing attitudes. Subjectivists say: Yes. Objectivists say: No. However, we must distinguish between two ways welfare might

depend on someone's attitudes. Attitudes might serve as *what* is valuable for someone, and attitudes might account for *why* something is valuable for them. To clarify, the **components** of wellbeing are the items that make a person's life better or worse, and the **connections** are what make them components of wellbeing in the sense of linking those items to a person's welfare.¹ Pleasure may be a component of wellbeing insofar as it's good for someone, but whatever makes pleasure good for them is the connection. Failure may be a component of wellbeing insofar as it's bad for someone, but the connection is whatever makes failure bad for them. Hence, we must distinguish subjectivism when it comes to the *what* – components – from subjectivism when it comes to the *why* – connections.

Component subjectivism about partial wellbeing holds that the items that are valuable for someone must include their valuing attitudes. An example would be a desire theory that holds that what's good or bad for a person is a desire that is satisfied or thwarted. By contrast, **component objectivism about partial wellbeing** denies that valuing attitudes must be part of what's valuable. A component objectivist view might hold that achievements are good for someone, where achievements themselves needn't contain any valuing attitudes.

Connection subjectivism about partial wellbeing holds that a person must value something for it to be valuable for them, whereas **connection objectivism about partial wellbeing** denies this. Connection subjectivism, by itself, doesn't impose any requirements on

¹ This distinction has affinities with both the enumeration versus explanation distinction (Crisp 2006: 102; Fletcher 2013: 206; Woodard 2013: 790-792) and the sources versus nature distinction (Sumner 1996: 16-17). My own approach appeals to metaphysical grounding (Frugé 2022a).

components of wellbeing beyond their being the object of a valuing attitude. If someone values achievement, where achievements needn't include valuing attitudes, then component objectivism is true of them. If someone only values desires that are satisfied or thwarted, then component subjectivism is true of them. Subjectivism about connections thus opens the door to variability in which components are valuable for people, since it turns on the contingencies of what the person values – where here and throughout the relevant kind of valuing is what the subject *genuinely* as opposed to *superficially* non-instrumentally values for their own sake.² I take connection subjectivism and component objectivism to be the most plausible form of subjectivism about partial wellbeing (Frugé 2022a). I also hold that aggregation subjectivism takes a similar shape.

1.ii Aggregate Wellbeing

Up to now, ethicists haven't discussed whether overall wellbeing is subjective or objective. Most of those who write about aggregation implicitly presume objectivism, since they are primarily concerned to argue that there is a certain manner of aggregation.

Simple **additivist** views hold that the overall wellbeing during some stretch of time is simply the sum of the partial wellbeing of all the components contained in that time (Feldman 2004; Bradley 2009). By contrast, **anti-additivist** views hold that the distribution of goods and bads matters. Michael Slote (1983), for instance, holds that goods and bads that occur in the 'prime of life' are weighted more heavily than those that do not. In one passage, Friedrich

² For discussion of how to think about 'genuine' valuing, see David Sobel (2009) and Dale Dorsey (2017a).

Nietzsche (1879/1969) proposes that the overall quality of a life is simply the highest amount of partial wellbeing gained at any point.³ A less extreme proposal is due to Larry Temkin (2012: 113-115), who claims that it's sometimes better for bads to be dispersed across a greater length of time than concentrated in a shorter span, and sometimes better for goods to be concentrated in a shorter span than dispersed across a greater. Emphasizing another aspect of the shape of value, Frances Kamm (2003) and Joshua Glasgow (2013) hold that any decline – any movement from a greater momentary wellbeing to a lower momentary wellbeing – reduces the overall combined value of what forms that trajectory. John Broome (2004: 220), however, suggests that evenness in the quality of life may be important. Against both additivism and anti-additivism, **anti-aggregation** views deny there is any aggregate wellbeing at all. In this vein, David Velleman (1991/2015: 160-161) denies that partial wellbeing ever aggregates into overall wellbeing. Instead, he treats wellbeing over time as an irreducibly distinct form of wellbeing constituted by narrative arcs across life. In my idiom, he would treat wellbeing across time as just a rather large chunk of partial wellbeing.

Lying behind these disagreements is the shared assumption that there is some unique aggregation function that holds for all subjects. Thus, if losses in themselves lower overall value, then they do so for everyone in the same way. Or if overall wellbeing is simply the sum of partial wellbeing, then it's simply the sum for everyone. Even anti-aggregation views hold that the form of aggregation is objectively unique in that it's objectively the case that wellbeing never

³ Thomas Hurka (1993: 75-76) suggests that this is plausibly not something Nietzsche fully endorsed. He was more clearly concerned with *interpersonal* aggregation prioritizing the highest peaked *lives*.

aggregates into overall wellbeing for anyone. By contrast to such objectivist views, I want to explore a subjectivist account of aggregation. Does whether and how wellbeing aggregates depend on and thereby vary with whether and how the subject values aggregation?

Ultimately, I argue that it does, but, before that, it's worth clarifying what sort of dependence is at issue. As with partial wellbeing, there's a distinction between the *what* and the *why*. For aggregation, the *what* is the distribution of partial value, and the *why* is what puts a particular aggregation function in place.⁴ Subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing, then, is best construed as a claim about *why* aggregation occurs. It holds that aggregation is put in place via the subject's attitudes. This contrasts with objectivist views about what puts aggregation in place, such as that it's brutally additive or brutally sensitive to declines, or whatever.

Conceptually speaking, a view could take different stances about the *what* and the *why* of aggregation. Many subjectivists about partial wellbeing are objectivists about aggregate wellbeing.⁵ Consider the view that the only thing that contributes to wellbeing is satisfied or thwarted desires that the person values having, where it's simply a brute truth that this value is added up to make overall wellbeing. One could also be an objectivist about partial wellbeing and

⁴ More carefully, I'm inclined to think that there is a nested dependence structure here. There are the instances of value that are the inputs to aggregate wellbeing, and there is the connection in the form of an aggregation operation. And there is a further connection that makes it so that this aggregation operation plays that connecting role. So what is aggregated are the instances of value, why they are aggregated that way is that a certain aggregation function is operative, and why that aggregation function is operative is because the subject values it. In terms of metaphysical grounding, an attitude valuing a manner of aggregation grounds that a certain aggregation operation grounds that certain distributions of value produces certain amounts of aggregate value. The second why question of what puts the aggregation function in place is what is at issue in this paper.

⁵ Chris Heathwood, in his comments on this paper at the Rocky Mountains Ethics Congress 2022, took the stance that partial wellbeing is given by desires but that aggregation is objectively additive. He also defends, without necessarily fully endorsing, such a view in Heathwood (2005: 489).

consistently hold that aggregation is subjective. Take the view that it's just a brute normative truth that achievement is the only good and failure is the only bad, but how such value gets aggregated turns on what sort of aggregation most pleases the person. Wacky, yes. Incoherent, no. Objectivism and subjectivism about aggregation are distinct from their counterpart positions about partial wellbeing. Thus, the task of this paper is to develop and defend aggregation subjectivism as a separate position.

In particular, I defend what can be called **connection subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing**:

Connection Subjectivism about Aggregate Wellbeing: Necessarily, partial wellbeing is aggregated in a certain way because the person values that way of aggregation.

Just as connection subjectivism about partial wellbeing involves valuing certain components of wellbeing, connection subjectivism about aggregation involves valuing a way of aggregating partial wellbeing. Thus, someone may value partial wellbeing as simply summing up to make their overall wellbeing, while someone else may find losses to be bad in themselves, and yet another takes losses to be even worse. **Connection objectivism about aggregate wellbeing** denies such a role to aggregative attitudes. Against the implicit acceptance of this view, I defend connection subjectivism about aggregation – from here on just called ‘aggregation subjectivism’.

2. Valuing Aggregation

Aggregating wellbeing is combining the value of various components of partial wellbeing, where those components may or may not occur at different times. Yet what is it to value a particular way of combining value from various components? In this section, I distinguish between attitudes of valuing components of wellbeing and **aggregative attitudes** of valuing a manner of aggregation.

Consider someone who had a troubled childhood so attempts to diminish its significance by caring deeply about making continual improvement. As stated, this is ambiguous between two ways of prioritizing progress.

The first is for the person to simply value components in a manner that makes them receive more value later than they did earlier. They may devalue the things that happened to them in their childhood in contrast to what happens to them now. Perhaps they come to care less about ‘childish’ things, such as birthday parties, and instead care more about ‘mature’ things like intellectual achievements. Alternately, they may come to value their deprived past as being ‘redeemed’ via a positive narrative arc that moves from suffering to success. In both cases, the valuing attitude is directed at components of partial wellbeing – either at events of childhood and adulthood or at a narrative arc across time.

The second is for the person to value a certain distribution of value itself. Perhaps they value an upward trajectory of wellbeing. They may look back on their life and think, “Look how far I’ve come. Isn’t it great that things are getting better and better?” And they might think this

not simply because they receive more rather than less good *now*, but that they receive more good *now* than they received back *then* – because their life now is better than it was before.

People can have both sorts of attitudes simultaneously. Someone may regret their deprived childhood, and so both devalue the sorts of things of which they were deprived while also valuing the inclining quality of their life as such. A test to tell whether a particular attitude is directed toward components or toward aggregation is to modify the attitude and see whether any partial wellbeing changes – in which case it's an attitude valuing components – or whether all partial wellbeing stays the same but the overall wellbeing changes – in which case it's an attitude valuing a manner of aggregation. If someone goes from only valuing pleasure to only valuing achievement, then their overall wellbeing will change, but that is due to changes in partial wellbeing: achievements now become valuable, and pleasures become valueless. If someone goes from valuing merely adding up good and bad to valuing an inclining quality of life, then their overall wellbeing will likely change, but no amount of partial wellbeing will change. The difference is between caring about having certain *components* of value that may bring about a certain arrangement of value to caring about having a certain kind of *arrangement of value* itself.

In the case of someone who devalues their childhood, we can use this test to see whether they devalue the components of their earlier wellbeing or they minimize the importance of the value that occurred to them. Say that a change in attitude would make their life go worse overall. This may be because they continue to accept that their childhood is quite bad and have come to think that it doesn't help that its badness forms the beginning of an upward movement in the

quality of their life. If so, then their original attitude is aggregative – perhaps they have switched from valuing inclines to holding a more additive view. Instead, they may come to think that their childhood has even greater bads than they thought before – perhaps their later successes make their earlier deprivations seem even harsher in comparison. In this case, their attitude is directed toward what did or didn't happen to them in childhood and not toward a manner of aggregation.

In explicitly distinguishing these different sorts of attitudes I may have given the false impression that I take them to always be explicitly distinguished in people's psychologies, or that they otherwise require heavy-duty conceptual machinery. But I don't. In everyday life, people have a complex mix evaluative attitudes about their own life, where the aggregative and component aspects are bound up together. This means that aggregative attitudes are quite ordinary, even if not cleanly separated from attitudes valuing components. A person with a deprived childhood might both come to think the deprivations are even worse as well as come to care about having inclining quality. At a more basic level, most of us care that our life go *well*, where this thought isn't about any particular components of wellbeing. Rather, it's just that we want the overall quality of our life be positive. This is an aggregative attitude. We want all the good and bad things that happen to us to build toward a good life, which is an attitude toward the value of all the value of what happens to us. This doesn't require any explicit belief or sophisticated conceptualizing, but rather an evaluative approach to the value of one's life. Therefore, in much of our valuing about our lives, we care about its aggregate quality.

3. Aggregation Subjectivism

Flatfootedly, my overall argument is that if you're a subjectivist about partial wellbeing, then because aggregate wellbeing is distinct from partial wellbeing, then you should also be a subjectivist about aggregate wellbeing. But more can be said, so in this section I say more. I present three arguments for aggregation subjectivism. The first brings out the naturalistic credentials of aggregation subjectivism. The second revolves around the thought that aggregation must resonate with the person. The third invokes variability in aggregation across different subjects of wellbeing.

2.i Naturalism

A major reason to uphold some sort of subjectivism about value is that it offers a *naturalistic* account of normativity. Naturalism is not merely a constraint on the *what* of value but also on the *why*. Views that countenance only natural items for the *what* are still not naturalistic if they posit non-natural items for the *why*. Subjectivism is attractive, then, because valuing attitudes serve as natural parts of the world that account for why there's value.

For partial wellbeing, *what* is good or bad for someone is what affects the quality of their life, whereas *why* it's good or bad is what makes it the case that those things affect the quality of their life. Even if all the components of wellbeing are naturalistic, a view still violates naturalism if the why explanation posits something non-natural. An account of partial wellbeing that states that it's a normative law that pleasure and pain are the only components of welfare isn't

naturalistic, even though all the components are natural, because the account of how they come to be components of wellbeing goes via a non-natural law. Even an account that claims it's simply brute that pleasure and pain ground welfare isn't naturalistic, since it posits ungrounded dependence facts involving normative properties.⁶ Only if such dependence facts are themselves grounded in something natural do we have a fully naturalistic account. An attractive feature of connection subjectivist views of partial wellbeing, then, is that they are naturalistic in that the *why* explanation goes via valuing attitudes, which are natural parts of the world.

For aggregate wellbeing, the *what* is the collection of instances of good and bad, and the *why* is what puts the operative aggregation function in place. Given naturalism, the *why* explanation can only involve natural elements of the world. For partial wellbeing, this explanation goes via valuing attitudes. But since aggregate wellbeing is distinct from partial wellbeing, there must be some further *why* explanation beyond that for components of welfare. I hold that the *why* of aggregation also comes in the form of attitudes, but distinct aggregative attitudes of valuing a manner of aggregation. Insofar as naturalism poses a constraint on normative theorizing, then it's attractive to posit connection subjectivism about aggregate wellbeing as this explanation, just as it's attractive to posit connection subjectivism about partial wellbeing.

⁶ More controversially, I also hold that identity views that claim things like *being pleasurable for = being good for* are not naturalistic either. Identity is not directional and so the normative property on the right is not explained by the natural property on the left, hence normativity is not explained in natural terms. Given such an identity claim, there's no more basis for saying *being good for* is natural as for saying that *being pleasurable for* is irreducibly normative. It is, after all, identical to a normative property.

Why must there be some further explanation of aggregate wellbeing that appeals to something about the subject? Why doesn't aggregate value just automatically follow from partial value? The reason is that it's one thing to receive good or bad from various value bearers, and it's another for those various chunks of good and bad to combine into overall value. A way to see this is that aggregate value often involves the *cancellation* of partial value (Frugé forthcoming). Say that you drink some coffee and it's tasty but so hot that you burn your tongue. And say that you get +7 good from taking pleasure in its tastiness but -5 from the pain of the burn. Here the -5 *cancels* some of the +7 to form a lower amount of overall value. Hence, we can't simply treat aggregate value as some sort of quasi-mereological sum of partial value, as if the event of drinking the coffee produces 12 total units of combined positive/negative value analogously to how mixing 7 ounces of milk with 5 ounces of coffee produces a 12 ounce beverage. Instead, different instances of partial value come together to form a new type of aggregate value.

Since overall and partial wellbeing are distinct kinds of value, then a naturalist subjectivist needs to posit a distinct type of attitude underwriting the creation of aggregate value – at least if there's no plausible story about how non-aggregative valuing attitudes work together to form it. While I can't canvass every conceivable way to try to capture subjectivism about aggregation using non-aggregative attitudes, it doesn't seem like a promising avenue. The manner in which the -5 cancels some of the +7 doesn't seem to be contained in either attitude alone of positively valuing the tastiness or negatively valuing the painfulness. Rather, there needs to be some further attitude directed toward how the -5 bad combines with the +7 good. Therefore, I claim that

insofar as someone is a naturalist then they should hold that aggregate wellbeing is created via a distinctive sort of aggregative attitude.

2.ii Resonance

A central motivation for subjectivism about wellbeing comes from **resonance**, the constraint that personal value must *fit* with the person and cannot *alienate* them (Raiton 1986/2003: 47). Most of the discussion of resonance specifies it as a constraint on partial value – specifically, that the partial value of something must correspond to how a person values it (Rosati 1996: 299; 2006; Dorsey 2017b). However, the basic thought that value must correspond to valuing applies equally well to aggregate wellbeing. **Resonance about aggregation**, then, is the constraint that how partial wellbeing is aggregated must be tied to a form of aggregation that the person values.

The basic thought behind resonance is that value for someone can't be something that they fail to care about. But this basic thought applies both to the value of what's valuable as well as to the value of a collection of instances of value. Just as what's good or bad for someone must correspond to something that they care about, so too must how goods or bads coalesce correspond to some manner of aggregation that they value. The *way* partial wellbeing aggregates must be a *way* the creature cares about. Value should not simply add up, if someone cares most about continual improvement in the quality of their life. Overall value should not prioritize peak quality, if someone cares most about maximizing the value in their life at each time. Aggregation

should not be a complicated function, if the creature can only take simple concerns toward the shape of the value in their life. And if a creature can't care in any way about the value of different portions of value taken together, then they can't have overall wellbeing at all. If the aggregate quality of various chunks of value doesn't matter *to* them, then it can't matter *for* them. Even if each component of wellbeing is something they care about, how that value aggregates must resonate as well – they can't be alienated from how that value combines to form an overall amount of value for them.

If resonance about aggregation holds, then this suggests subjectivism about aggregation. While resonance doesn't *entail* subjectivism – since it's only the necessary condition that value corresponds to attitudes – subjectivism explains resonance – since it posits a necessary and sufficient condition for value in terms of attitudes. If valuing attitudes are what create aggregate wellbeing, then aggregate wellbeing must thereby resonate with the person.

2.iii Variability

There is variability in aggregation that tracks differences in valuing attitudes. Different manners of aggregation hold differently for different people and different creatures. And this is explained by aggregation subjectivism, given that different subjects value aggregation differently.

For those who have oriented their lives around avoiding loss, then declines in momentary wellbeing may in themselves lower overall value. For others who have oriented their lives around maximizing the good over the whole time they're alive, then it may be that such good is simply

added up. Subjectivism about aggregation accounts for this variation: different people care about different manners of aggregation, and so different manners of aggregation hold for different people. Given subjectivism about aggregation, variation in attitudes toward various shapes of value induces variation in the importance of various shapes of value. But this is precisely the right result. The best type of life is not one size fits all. It turns on the character of the person whose life it is.

There is even more variation once non-human animals are taken into account. Ultimately this is an empirical issue, but it seems that many animals take a quite simple temporal perspective on their life, and some even lack any temporal perspective at all. From my fieldwork in my living room, I conjecture that my cat has a rudimentary temporal perspective. He probably can't come to care about a specific shape of value in his life over time, but he still has an orientation toward the overall quality of his life. He can delay gratification, at least a bit, in that he will wait for me to finish eating before trying to eat my scraps – perhaps he's learned that I give him the remaining food less often if he tries to eat it before I'm done. Thus, he chooses to wait while hungry in order to later receive the benefit of better food, as opposed to eating his worse dry food now. But delaying gratification involves a sort of aggregative attitude in that it requires submitting to a current bad in order to receive a later good on the basis that this results in more *overall* value. Yet I don't think my cat cares about having a certain *shape* of value in his life over time. He doesn't, say, prefer to have the value from treats more heavily distributed later in his life than earlier. If this is right, then he has an aggregative attitude but not one that is temporally complex, so his

aggregation function may simply be an additive one, whereas more sophisticated valuers may have more complex aggregation functions. Subjectivism accommodates this. A creature who values a more complex shape of value thereby has a different manner of aggregation than one who values a less complex shape, or no particular shape at all.

Variability also includes whether a creature even has aggregate wellbeing. Most adult humans have lifetime wellbeing, but perhaps not beetles. Even if their life fares well or poorly at various moments in their life, it may be that their life as a whole doesn't have any overall quality. If so, then this would be explained by beetles not having any normative orientation toward the value in their life over time. Their limited aggregative attitudes correspond to their limited aggregate wellbeing. Some creatures may not even have *momentary* wellbeing in the sense of the overall quality of various goods and bads that happen at the same time. Perhaps lobsters care about pleasures or pains in various parts of their body but lack the mental capacity to even cohere those distinct pockets of value into the overall wellbeing of a given moment. Unlike my cat, they may not have any sense of their life over time, and unlike a beetle they may not have any sense of their whole life even at a given time. Thus, there are facts about how much partial wellbeing occurs in the life of a lobster, but it never aggregates together to form overall wellbeing. Subjectivism about aggregation has an explanation for this: some subjects of wellbeing do not care – and may not even be able to care – about the aggregate value of certain collections of instances of good and bad, and hence they don't have any aggregate value from those instances.

Given subjectivism about aggregation, some creatures with partial wellbeing may not have aggregate wellbeing.

Many will balk at this suggestion. But it seems the right result. If a creature does not or cannot care about their life overall, then there is no value to that shape. As I've said, this sort of caring needn't involve any sort of explicit representation or conceptualization but can instead be – and often is – a more minimal valenced orientation. Thus, if a creature has no aggregative attitudes, then this would mean they would not have any orientation toward overall value – they would not be disposed in any way toward collections of instances of good as collectives, as opposed to individual instances of good separately. But then it seems that they don't have overall wellbeing. Their life, instead, would consist of separate chunks of value that never combine into anything larger. If a creature cannot care in *some way* about the overall value of their life, then there is no overall value.⁷

This doesn't mean that if a creature fails to have overall wellbeing at some time then they will never have overall wellbeing later. Perhaps lobsters never do. But human infants may initially lack the cognitive capacity for overall wellbeing but develop it as they mature, and so come to have overall wellbeing later. Given that they do come to have aggregative attitudes, then these attitudes will make the partial wellbeing that they received earlier – during the time that they lacked overall wellbeing – come to contribute to their overall wellbeing as of that later time. This means that we can still have non-instrumental altruistic concern about the overall quality of their

⁷ So my view can accommodate Velleman's (1991/2015: 169-170) insight that some subjects don't have lifetime wellbeing without the implausible further claim that there is no aggregate wellbeing at all.

life even before they come to have overall wellbeing, given that we project that they will have overall wellbeing that takes into account the value of what happened to them earlier. But it also means that if the infant dies before ever coming to develop such attitudes, then at most we can make counterfactual claims about what their overall wellbeing would have been like had they not died.⁸

Such variability in aggregation suggests aggregation subjectivism. Insofar the manner of aggregation depends on aggregative attitudes, and those attitudes can vary, then aggregation can vary. While subjectivism thus explains variability, variability doesn't *entail* subjectivism. It's conceptually possible for an objectivist view to capture some types of variability in aggregation. If it's an objective truth that aggregation varies across different species, then aggregation would be objective but variable.⁹ However, objectivist views can't capture variation that goes with varying attitudes. If two humans can have different aggregation functions, as I've suggested, because they value different manners of aggregation, then we must uphold subjectivism about aggregation. Only subjectivism can capture the full extent of variability.

Perhaps a more amicable opponent would want to offer the following friendly amendment.¹⁰ Additivism about overall wellbeing is the default aggregation procedure, but if a creature comes to have an aggregative attitude then this can change the mode of aggregation from the additive default to what they value instead. This is a subdued form of subjectivism that

⁸ Thanks to Matthew Liao for raising an objection that led to the discussion in this paragraph.

⁹ Thanks to Jonathan Schaffer for pressing this objection on behalf of the objectivist.

¹⁰ Thanks to Ted Sider and Chris Heathwood for independently suggesting this.

would avoid the implication that some creatures with partial wellbeing don't have aggregate wellbeing.

Yet I must be hostile to this friendly amendment – though not to the friendly person who offered it! First, it would form an ad hoc theory. There would be an objective additive connection in the default case, but a subjective connection when the subject has an aggregative attitude. It would be better to have a unified kind of connection throughout, offering a unified explanation of aggregation. Moreover, the connection subjectivism I propose would in fact treat additivism as more or less the default in the sense that a creature with an aggregative attitude but without any more specific orientation toward the shape of value over time, like my cat, would produce an additive manner of aggregation.

4. Objectivist Objections

Thus far I have been playing offense by offering considerations that support aggregation subjectivism. But, as has started to come out, there are serious objections to the view. So I now turn to playing defense by responding to what I take to be the most informative worries.

Perhaps the strongest objection is that people can change their attitudes over time.¹¹ Someone may go from valuing mere summation to valuing inclines, and back again. What should we say is such a person's aggregation function, especially at times after their death when

¹¹ Thanks to Selim Berker, Jason Raibley, Joshua Schechter, and an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

they don't have any aggregative attitudes at all? Yet this problem isn't specific to subjectivism about aggregation. If anything, it's more salient when it comes to subjectivism about partial wellbeing since people change their minds all the time about what's valuable for them. In both cases, I think that the subjectivist can accommodate changing attitudes (Frugé manuscript). The basic idea is that there's a function from someone's pattern of valuing attitudes over time to what's valuable for them as of a certain time, where the contribution of various attitudes is determined by their development over time as well as their difference from the present attitude. In terms of aggregation, the pattern of aggregative attitudes up to a point in time creates the operative manner of aggregation as of that time, where past attitudes are filtered through the evaluative lens of the present. The subject needn't have a valuing attitude about this function – that way lies regress. But it's nevertheless put in place by their valuing attitudes in that in valuing anything as good or bad for them they implicitly take an orientation toward themselves as a subject able to have wellbeing. Likewise, in valuing a particular manner of aggregation, they implicitly take themselves to capable of having aggregate wellbeing at all. For most adult humans, this is a temporally unrestricted orientation toward themselves as a subject of wellbeing as such, and not a more sophisticated orientation toward their life under a temporal restriction. This normative stance creates an artifactual structure in which past valuing plays a role in determining what's valuable for them now – though it's a normative stance they always have in the present, hence the contribution of past attitudes is shaped by present valuing. Nevertheless, past valuing

helps to create value facts that persist after those attitudes are gone – even after *all* attitudes creating them are gone, as when the subject dies.

However, I don't claim that all valuing subjects create such a temporally extended structure. For most adult humans, their default orientation is temporally unrestricted, and any restriction to a specific time is a constraint appended to this initially open posture so, perhaps, not what they 'genuinely' value. But the temporal horizon of beetles might be innately confined to the present. If so, then value for them is given only by what they value now, and they would also have no wellbeing over time – though their momentary horizon might include all of what happens to them in the present so they would still have aggregate momentary wellbeing. My cat, though, seems to have a horizon that stretches over time and thereby has an aggregation function extending into the past. Do they have a function coalescing their attitudes over time into what's valuable for them in the present? Maybe, but maybe their concerns are innately fixed and so don't change anyway. Or maybe while they have a temporally expansive orientation, they lack an orientation toward change over time, and perhaps this is needed to induce a function that coalesces changing attitudes. I don't know...at this point in time. These are avenues for the program of temporally extended subjectivism to explore.¹²

¹² Another question to explore: Could there be a horizon that is neither completely open nor confined to the present? This would consist in the subject being genuinely oriented toward, say, only the past five minutes or past five years. My suspicion is that this would be quite a complex cognitive state – more nuanced than a binary open or closed temporal orientation, since it would require the ability to think about other times and yet confine the normative boundary to a subset of them. So this would not be a way, I presume, that a human could genuinely orient themselves. But if some creature were to have such a bounded orientation, and if this fell out of their genuine valuations, then only those attitudes falling within the horizon would be determinative of value for them, so only changes within that interval would be relevant. Their aggregative attitudes within that horizon would also then

Another worry is that aggregation subjectivism is absurd: Doesn't it entail that if someone takes a bunch of partial bads to be good for them overall, then they have positive aggregate wellbeing from those bads?¹³ I don't think it does. The subjectivist can hold that only some valuing attitudes create value and these aren't among them. There are subjectivistically acceptable constraints on which attitudes determine value. Consider a similar attitude in terms of partial value: valuing partial bad as good. Someone with such an attitude is a *partial-wellbeing-masochist* in that they take what's bad for them to be good for them. I claim that even in subjectivist terms this attitude doesn't produce partial good from partial bad. This is because the attitude is motivationally in tension with itself. A partial bad is tied to aversion while a partial good is tied to attraction, so the attitude tells the subject to be attracted and averse to one and the same thing due to one and the same non-evaluative features of the object. There is thus a practical inconsistency in the attitude even taken by itself. While motivational tensions can arise across separate attitudes in that different features of a single component can be targeted by different attitudes that push in different directions, I submit that a single attitude cannot underwrite value if it incoherently guides the subject in light of one and the same non-evaluative features of one and the same thing. Compare: Congress could not successfully enact a law, regardless of what

produce an aggregation function that only takes in past value that also falls in that horizon, since the concerns of those attitudes would be confined to its borders – else those attitudes would entail a more expansive orientation. For such a creature, they would have no lifetime wellbeing, but they would still have aggregate wellbeing over time – perhaps of the past five years or even just the past five minutes. Yet perhaps such an orientation, though possible to hold, is ineligible to create value. There might be some practical tension in recognizing parts of one's life but then ruling them out from contributing to one's most expansive aggregate wellbeing. If so, then, perhaps, try as they might to constrict it, they in fact have overall *lifetime* wellbeing.

¹³ Thanks to Travis Timmerman and Anthony Kelley for this worry.

they write in the statute, that requires pedestrians to illegally jaywalk. Even taking this law in isolation, there is no unified legality imposed on the behavior of jaywalking. It legally requires pedestrians to do something they are legally required not to do.

The above objection concerns a different yet relevantly similar attitude: taking instances of partial bad to be good overall. Someone with such an attitude is an *aggregate-value-masochist* in that they take what's bad for them to on aggregate be good for them. This masochist faces a practical inconsistency similar to the one that afflicts their compatriot. Partial bad is tied to aversion, and aggregate good, like partial good, is tied to attraction. So an aggregative attitude taking instances of bad to be good tells the subject to be attracted and averse to the same collection of bads. There is thus a practical inconsistency in the attitude even taken by itself, and so, I claim, it cannot underwrite aggregate value. Compare: Congress could not successfully enact a law that legally required ambulators to at all times break five pedestrian laws. As with the previous attempted law, this would not successfully enact any unified legality on pedestrian behavior. When it comes to the masochistic aggregative valuing attitude, it treats the same non-evaluative features that ground the various components' individual partial badness as also collectively grounding their aggregate goodness, but then the aggregative attitude tells the subject to be attracted and averse to one and the same non-evaluative features of one and the same collection of things. Such internally practically inconsistent attitudes don't create value because they don't have a unified valence that can mold the world into having value corresponding to

that valence. Of course, this is far from a full-blown theory. But I think it's gives enough to think that there is a subjectivist response to the objection.

A third worry is that my view is overintellectualized in positing aggregative attitudes. Almost no one, the objection goes, has thought about aggregate wellbeing, let alone which manner of aggregate wellbeing they want for themselves. Therefore, my view posits an implausible amount of psychological structure.¹⁴ In response, I deny the charge and hold that it itself relies on an overly intellectualized view of valuing. As I discussed in Section 2, people do generally care about the quality of their life over time. As they plan for the future, they want their life to go well. On their deathbed, they reflect about how it all went. These are aggregative attitudes in that they are thoughts about overall wellbeing. People often have more specific attitudes toward the shape of value in their life as well. For the person who had a rough childhood, they may value improvement by caring that their life gets better as such. This attitude doesn't require any explicit belief or heavy-duty conceptualization. They may never even consciously consider how much they value improvement. Rather, this attitude may play an implicit role. Perhaps it increasingly motivates them to get a collection of goods to a degree out of proportion to the summed magnitude of their good. Or, perhaps, it may dispose them to postpone some good now just so that they can receive the same amount of good later.¹⁵

¹⁴ Thanks to Gwen Bradford for this objection.

¹⁵ I don't think there is any internal practical inconsistency here, since they still are seeking to get the partial good, just a bit later.

Far from being the province of highfalutin philosophers, aggregative attitudes are ubiquitous across the animal kingdom. Consider, again, delayed gratification involving suffering a smaller bad now in order to enjoy a greater good later. Many non-human animals delay gratification: chimps and bonobos (Rosati et al 2007; Stevens et al 2011); parrots, crows, and ravens (Miller et al 2020; Hillemann et al 2014); dogs and wolves (Range et al 2020); and cuttlefish (Schnell et al 2021).¹⁶ Delaying gratification involves an aggregative attitude, since a creature tolerates a bad now for a future good because *overall* the value of the two will be good. Thus, aggregative attitudes are widespread, and needn't involve much cognitive sophistication.

Of course, given the finite and messy nature of our minds, there is indeterminacy in the type of aggregation a creature cares about – which leads to indeterminacy in their overall wellbeing. Even if a creature, for example, values an inclining quality, they may not give a precise weight to this shape. Or someone may care about both inclining quality and maximizing good without specifying how to exactly balance the two. There would then be indeterminacy in the precise aggregation function their attitudes put in place. But such indeterminacy is to be expected on a broadly subjectivist view. Just look at how political laws, also products of human activity, are often indeterminate – what exactly counts as a “well-regulated militia”? And, even more to the point, consider partial wellbeing. It's usually indeterminate exactly how much someone values a

¹⁶ These studies focus on forgoing a smaller good now for a greater good later. So they may not be testing an aggregative attitude *per se*, since it could be that the animal is simply taking a later good to be better than an earlier good – though maybe even such comparisons require a sense of good overall. To more directly test for an aggregative attitude, a study would have to see if an animal is willing to suffer a smaller bad in order to receive a greater good.

particular item as good for them. Do they value it as +5 or +6, as +5.1 or +5.11? Indeterminacy in value comes with indeterminacy in valuing.

A final objection attempts to accommodate the insights of subjectivism about aggregation without its additional widgets by holding that value from aggregative attitudes is just more partial wellbeing. On this proposal, aggregative attitudes don't create aggregate value but do contribute to the person's aggregate wellbeing by underwriting further bits of partial value. Compare Fred Feldman's (2004: ch. 6) defense an additivist view of aggregation against considerations that suggest that the shape of life is important in itself. His move is to treat instances of pleasure or pain taken in the shape of one's life as just further instances of good and bad that get added up alongside all others. For Feldman, instead of a certain narrative arc, say, giving someone additional value beyond the goods and bads that make up the arc, pleasure taken in that arc is good in the same way as taking pleasure in eating ice cream is good, and they are both simply added up alongside every other bit of value.

An objectivist about aggregation may try to make an analogous maneuver when it comes to aggregation subjectivism.¹⁷ The suggestion would be that valuing a certain shape of value doesn't constrain the manner of aggregation but instead gives rise to additional partial wellbeing, where aggregation itself is always a simple summation. The partial wellbeing derived from valuing the shape of value in one's life is then simply summed together with other instances of partial wellbeing. Any verdict about overall wellbeing that an aggregation subjectivist would

¹⁷ Thanks to Ted Sider and Chris Heathwood for independently raising this objection.

make can be mimicked by this alternative approach given appropriate amounts of partial value from valuing certain manners of aggregation. Say that someone values an inclining quality of life. The subjectivist about aggregation would say that this makes their aggregation function sensitive to inclining quality. The objectivist about aggregation using this alternative approach would instead say that inclining stretches of life give the person extra partial good because they value it. In this way, inclines give a boost to the overall value of their life, but only because it gives more partial wellbeing. This extra partial wellbeing is just added up alongside all other bits of partial wellbeing.

However, there are three issues with this maneuver. First, there are many cases where it wouldn't plausibly render the same verdicts as aggregation subjectivism. It's true that for any verdict that the aggregation subjectivist would make about the overall quality of someone's life there is *some* otherwise identically shaped life such that adding *some* aggregative attitudes of appropriate strengths construed as providing partial wellbeing would lead to the same verdict about overall value. But it's not plausible that this would always be the *same* life with the *same* corresponding aggregative attitudes. Consider someone who deeply values inclining quality, where their life is almost entirely on the up and up. Then, their overall wellbeing should get an enormous boost. But this aggregative attitude is just one valuing attitude, and the person has a host of other valuing attitudes toward all the various components of their wellbeing. The strength to which they value inclining quality needn't be stronger or even as strong as many of these other attitudes. If construed as providing partial wellbeing this person's actual aggregative attitudes

wouldn't be intense enough to make for the same overall wellbeing as would be the case if those attitudes instead determined the aggregation function. To put it more crudely, say that in a particular case the aggregation subjectivist thinks that someone's valuing inclining quality makes their inclining life have +105000 value overall, whereas if they had just valued aggregation in a summative way it would have received only +100000 value. It would be incredible to think that taken as providing just more partial wellbeing their attitude of valuing inclining quality would add +5000 good by itself – an additional whopping 5% value overall. After all, it's just one attitude among others they have about partial wellbeing, on par with those directed toward eating ice cream, and having a career, and so on. Certainly, construed as providing partial wellbeing, adding enough aggregative attitudes of enough strength would provide enough partial value to make for an extra +5 good in the additive sum. But it wouldn't be the *same* life with the *same* attitudes.

The second problem is that the proposal faces a paradox.¹⁸ Consider someone who values an even life, where they have this attitude at a certain time t and where valuing such a shape is treated as underwriting just more partial wellbeing. Say that after setting aside the value due to valuing evenness this person has a perfectly even amount of value over time through t . But suppose that at t they get a boost of +2 good due to their having the sort of even life they value. This means, though, that their life is no longer perfectly even but slightly inclining, in which case their valuing an even life isn't satisfied and they don't get the +2, which makes their life even

¹⁸ Different than the paradox stemming from desiring to do badly (Feldman 2004: 17). For the idea behind the ensuing argument, I thank Henrik Andersson.

again. But then their valuing attitude is actually satisfied, and they get +2.... There is no stable value to their life at this time. Unlike the earlier puzzle about someone who takes a collection of instances of bad to be good overall, in this case there is no inherent tension in the attitude itself. It's simply valuing an even distribution of goods and bads. Rather, the incoherence comes from the interpretation of the attitude as providing partial wellbeing. If valuing a shape of value is understood as underwriting aggregation and not more partial value, then there is no such paradox. The shape of partial value is not directly affected by aggregative attitudes, and aggregative attitudes are directed toward instances of partial wellbeing and not instances of aggregate wellbeing. So a person with an even life would get a boost upon all the good and bad being aggregated, and the boost would remain since the evenness concerns partial value.

The third issue is that the suggestion falters when it comes to creatures who don't value aggregation. Given aggregation subjectivism, creatures without aggregative attitudes don't have overall wellbeing, even if they have partial wellbeing due to attitudes concerning partial value. Yet according to the proposal, such creatures still have partial wellbeing in that there is always aggregate wellbeing that is a simple summation of partial wellbeing, no matter whether aggregation is valued. Therefore, the views render radically different verdicts about overall wellbeing when it comes to creatures without aggregative attitudes. As I discussed earlier, subjectivism about aggregation has the more plausible verdicts here. Creatures who can't care about their life as a whole don't have value for their life as whole.

5. The End

I've argued that aggregation is subjective in that it whether and how wellbeing aggregates depends on the subject valuing a manner of aggregation. Thus, the manner in which wellbeing aggregates varies across people depending on the shape of value they care about. Such variation is constrained by the kind of aggregation a creature can possibly come to value. Cats, perhaps, might only be able to value adding up all the partial wellbeing in their life. Beetles may not be able to value aggregation over time. Lobsters may not be able to aggregate even within a given moment.

Therefore, the significance of death depends on aggregative attitudes. While perhaps not the full story, death is bad partly to the extent that it deprives the deceased of possible future goods and good partly to the extent that it prevents them from suffering possible future bads (Nagel 1979; Feldman 1991; Bradley 2009). Given aggregation subjectivism, the 'size' of the deprivation turns on aggregative attitudes. For cats, death's deprivation may be a simple additive function of the momentary value of the life they would have lived. For humans, death's deprivation varies with their particular aggregative attitudes. It may be better for a person who prioritizes inclines to die even though each moment of their continued life would be good if it's not increasing or good enough. The contribution to overall value they would get from the marginal goods of their continued life would be outweighed by the lack of incline, since the person places so much importance on continual improvement. For another person, however, it may be better for them to continue to live even given the exact same pattern of continued

momentary wellbeing if they care most about maximizing the overall sum of value in their life as a whole. Therefore, the deprivation of death is not a simple function of the possible partial wellbeing of continued life but also involves the shape of value of that continued life and what shape the person values.

For creatures who do not have any aggregative attitudes at all, death is neither good nor bad for them. For beetles and lobsters, if they cannot care about the shape of value in their lives, then death does not matter for them. Death may indeed deprive them of possible goods or prevent them from suffering possible bads, but there is no overall wellbeing that death keeps them from having. Such creatures can still prosper or suffer – but such suffering and prospering is confined to the present moment. If they feel pain, then that is bad for them in the moment. If they feel pleasure, that is good for them in the moment. But such momentary goods and bads don't add up to anything more and evaporate as soon as the moment is gone. Thus, there is no value that death keeps them from having that would not already disappear on its own.

Personal value is an artifact (Frugé 2022b). Wellbeing is the result of agentially manipulating the world in an evaluative light. Partial wellbeing is the result of shaping the world into components of wellbeing with personal value, while overall wellbeing is the result of combining this partial value into aggregate value. A person must first value components to create partial wellbeing and then value a certain arrangement of value in order to produce overall

wellbeing. Some creatures can complete the first step but not the second. Others can complete both and thereby determine that the shape of value in their lives has value.¹⁹

¹⁹ For their feedback, I would like to thank Henrik Andersson, Selim Berker, Gwen Bradford, Andy Egan, Anthony Kelley, Matthew Liao, Jason Raibley, Ted Sider, Larry Temkin, Travis Timmerman, and Joshua Schechter – and the otherwise unnamed audience members at the Rocky Mountains Ethics Congress 2022 and the 19th Annual Madison Metaethics Workshop. For their detailed feedback, I especially want to thank Jonathan Schaffer, Chris Heathwood, and Jimmy Goodrich.

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