

# Do Good Lives Make Good Stories?<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

I used to live in a city where LIVE A GREAT STORY kept appearing on abandoned buildings. It turned out to be the handiwork of an Instagram influencer-slash-entrepreneur, but it speaks to something many of us have probably felt: that our lives can be understood as stories, with characters and plots and themes. If I live a great story, maybe something with compelling adventures or a sense of purpose, I'll have had a good life.

If we turn this sense into something more philosophically rigorous, we get the view I'll call *narrativism*.<sup>2</sup> On this view, a significant part of how we evaluate well-being is in terms of how well our lives hang together as narratives. Do the events of my life display the right kinds of connections? Are my choices thematically consistent? Are the things I do organized into one or more cohesive narrative arcs? If I can answer "yes" to these questions, my life is, other things being equal, better than if the answers are "no." (We'll get more precise about what exactly narrativism is a little later on.)

But some of the claims narrativists make aren't easy to square with the diversity of good lives, especially the more humdrum ones. A story about someone who does amateur pottery for a while, then drops it, then maybe picks it back up again, but never gets very good at it, just isn't an enjoyable narrative. There's no tension about whether he'll be good enough, no climax when he reaches his goal, no denouement as he enjoys his success. Like so many hobbies, this is just a gradual series of ebbs and flows, without anything significant being produced or achieved. Yet this hobby may be a tremendous source of value for the person who has it. In many cases, living well forecloses the possibility of living a great story.

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<sup>2</sup> Philosophical narrativists recognize that that not all great stories make for lives high in well-being (Hamlet, for example)—the best interpretation of their view, as we'll see, is that certain elements of good stories make for good lives. Some might still want to claim that good stories make for *meaningful* lives; that won't be my focus here.

When we dig more into narrativism, we'll see why, in its strong forms, it is stultifying and constraining. Prioritizing living a great story makes it harder to balance and change pursuits, pushes us toward one-dimensionality, and can't make sense of the diversity of good lives. But some ways of softening key narrativist claims mean that the view can't tell us very much about how to live a good life that we can't find in other theories of well-being. This doesn't mean that narrativism is completely false. Narrativists run into trouble insofar as they take their view to be a view about the overall, high-level structure all lives should have—it's a mistake to see LIVE A GREAT STORY as a universal organizing principle for our lives. Even so, there are smaller-scale ways we can incorporate narrativist insights into our lives. Many of us are not best off living great stories, but some of us might be, and the rest of us can learn a few things from narrativism.

## 2. What narrativism is (and what it is not)

Here's the basic conception of narrativism we'll work with:

*Narrativism about well-being:* The narrative structure of a person's life plays a major role in determining their well-being over time.

When I say “narrative structure,” I mean the objective relations between the events of our lives: how these events are actually connected to one another. (How we make sense of these events is the subject of a slightly different thesis, psychological narrativism—more on this soon.) As we'll see, narrativists place significant weight on this narrative structure—it's not the only prudential good, and it may not even be the primary one, but it matters a lot for determining how well our lives go. Over the next four sections, we'll dig into exactly what relations between events are supposed to build the narrative structure of a life.

Before that, think about why we might find narrativism to be a *prima facie* plausible view about how to live. Start with a jumping-off point for many narrativists:

*Shape of a Life:* It is better to live a life with an uphill trajectory (from hardship and deprivation to success and satisfaction) than a life with the reverse downhill trajectory, even if the two lives contain equal sums of momentary well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Intuitively, it's prudentially better to have a life that starts in poverty and deprivation and ends in happiness and comfort, rather than to be born into luxury and end up friendless and miserable. Some people have argued that life trajectories matter on their own—that it's just intrinsically better to have an uphill than a downhill life (Glasgow 669-671)—but narrativists claim that the best explanation of Shape of a

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<sup>3</sup> For some discussions of Shape of a Life, see Brown, Bruckner, Campbell, Clark, Dorsey, Glasgow, Kauppinen (2012), Velleman (1991), and Vitrano.

Life is not the trajectory itself. A lazy slacker’s life of unearned good fortune may have the same upward trajectory as a life of goods earned through hard work, but the former life seems worse than the latter (Dorsey 315-322; Kauppinen 2012, 348-350). Something else has to be doing the work—and that something, narrativists say, is the narrative relations between life events. The hard worker’s life is a good story, the story of strivings leading to success, and the lazy slacker’s good fortune is not.

This general sentiment that the overall structure of a life matters is shared by multiple forms of narrativism; before we get deeper into assessing narrativism about well-being, we should separate out a few other kinds of narrativism. The first is *narrativism about personal identity*. This is the view that in order to maintain personal identity over time, we need to maintain psychological continuity in the form of a “mental autobiography” (DeGrazia 80-81)—which may be, variously, required for agency (Rudd 2007, 62); necessary for us to see ourselves as persons (Schechtman 162); what connects our mental states to our sense of ourselves (Schroer and Schroer 457); or necessary for basic moral capacities (MacIntyre 202-210). Some people hold narrativism about well-being jointly with narrativism about personal identity (MacIntyre 218-219)—you might think that if having a threshold level of narrative identity is required just to be a person, having *more* continuity or *better* continuity is what you need to live well. Still, there’s no reason what makes someone persist over time has to be the same thing that helps her to live well. We’ll leave personal identity aside to focus on well-being, although we’ll draw on arguments made by critics of narrativism about personal identity at a couple critical junctures.

We’ll also leave aside views that occupy intermediate positions between narrativism about personal identity and narrativism about well-being—these include Fischer’s (1999, 2005, 2009) claims that narrative is connected to free action and so to moral responsibility, Davenport’s argument that narrative is required for acting autonomously (which he connects to narrativism about personal identity), and Hinchman’s view that acting intentionally means acting out a narrative. None of these kinds of narrativism are primarily about well-being, and so, in the interest of space, I’ll leave them aside. Still, we should note that each may have implications for well-being, since maintaining identity over time, acting freely, and acting intentionally are plausibly preconditions for living well. People interested in these views may want to consider whether the criticisms of narrativism I will make apply to these views (and to their connections to well-being).

A final alternative narrativism really is a thesis about well-being. But where the narrativist thesis we’re focused on is a view about how our lives are, objectively, organized, *psychological narrativism about well-being* is a view about the stories we narrate to ourselves: this view holds (roughly speaking) that we are better off if we can tell ourselves stories about our lives that make sense to us. These stories need not be objectively true, although Rosati argues that they have to have some resemblance to the facts in order to be beneficial for us (48); This kind of narrativism is popular with

some psychologists, who claim that developing a personal myth has therapeutic value (McAdams), and with some philosophers, who say that telling ourselves stories about ourselves can support goods such as a healthy sense of self-worth (Rosati 45). Still, even some defenders of psychological narrativism about well-being concede that self-narration isn't an especially weighty prudential good (de Bres 26).<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the merits of psychological narrative, we'll mostly set it aside too. The problems we'll be concerned with here arise from claims narrativists make about how lives should, objectively, be organized—the same tensions don't arise from claims about how we should see our lives (especially if this is, as de Bres has it, a relatively less weighty prudential good).<sup>5</sup> Psychological narrativism about well-being is better thought of as one possible way to increase the prudential value of one's life than as a view about how to assess that value.

This brings us back to where we were a minute ago—to considering how the objective relations between the events of a life help to determine well-being. Which narrative relations narrativists have in mind vary, and this makes it impossible to identify a single unified view of narrativism. Still, there's a lot of overlap in the ways narrativists talk about the relations between life events. Here, we'll focus on cohesion, thematic consistency, narrative arc, and the importance of narrative—and we'll see how each can, if we take it too seriously, conflict with living well.

### 3. Cohesion

Most literary narratives are built of causally connected series of events, and narrativists think that things work the same in good lives: the more the events of a life are causally connected, rather than disjointed, the more cohesive (and better, other things being equal) that life is.

Velleman contrasts two bad marriages.<sup>6</sup> Couple A struggles, works through their problems, and winds up with a strong and happy marriage. Couple B struggles

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<sup>4</sup> De Bres criticizes standard narrativism about well-being for its fixation on what she calls the “bloodless” causal relations between the events of a life (8)—although *Shape of a Life* shows us that the conjecture that causal relations matter for well-being has considerable intuitive power. For more on various forms of psychological narrativism about well-being, see Rosati, de Bres, and Feldman (131-141). Strawson has prominently argued that this view fails to capture the variety of healthy psychologies, including his own; for some psychological-narrativist responses to Strawson's view, see Rudd (2007, 69-70) and MacKenzie and Poltera.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Vitrano makes an objection to standard (non-psychological) narrativism about well-being that's different from those we'll consider here: that there's no one objectively correct set of narrative relations among the events of a life (572-573). If this is true, then assessing our lives along narrativist lines might not just be inadvisable but outright impossible.

<sup>6</sup> Velleman words the original case slightly differently—one couple facing a choice rather than two different couples (1991, 55).

and divorces, and both ex-spouses wind up in strong and happy marriages with other people. A and B experience equal amounts of pleasure and pain. While Couple A builds their happy marriage on the foundation of their past struggles, Velleman specifies that Couple B’s first marriage is a “dead loss”: they bring no lessons from their first marriage into their later marriages. Couple A is supposed to be better off than Couple B because the events of Couple A’s lives are more cohesive: “a dead-end relationship blots the story of one’s life in a way that marital problems don’t if they lead to eventual happiness” (Velleman 1991, 55).<sup>7</sup>

Non-narrativists could explain this case away: Couple A learns from their mistakes, Couple B doesn’t, and the wisdom Couple A gets adds prudential value to their lives, whether or not it fits into a narrative. But narrativists insist that it really is the narrative cohesion itself, and not only some other value, that makes the difference. Kauppinen writes, “It may be rational for someone who has invested twelve years of her life in studying philosophy to prefer a job as a philosopher even over a somewhat more satisfying (and in all other respects equally good) life as a lifeguard, *just because* those past twelve years would otherwise be wasted” (2012, 376, emphasis his). Here, there are no clear past mistakes to regret, and (unlike in Velleman’s case) the two possible lives aren’t hedonically equal. Even in such a case, Kauppinen thinks, we have reason to prefer the more over the less cohesive life.<sup>8</sup>

But cohesion is only appropriate for some pursuits. It can sometimes be best for us to engage in our pursuits in a less cohesive way—or even to just plain quit. Consider

*Sasha:* Sasha has maintained a longstanding interest in Albania. He spends a lot of time reading and watching documentaries about Albania. Gradually, over the course of several years, his interest in Albania wanes. When Sasha wins a free trip to anywhere, and has to decide where he wants to go, he realizes he just isn’t interested in Albania anymore; he’d rather go to Argentina.

What’s the point of having a casual interest if you can’t have it casually, engaging with it just out of pure curiosity, not for any particular end? When our curiosity about something is sated, it’s perfectly fine for us to decide that something else is more deserving of our attention. People often wax and wane in their commitments to their hobbies: when a person decides she wants to become fluent in Mandarin before she dies, she might start out enthusiastically, then put it aside to focus on her

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<sup>7</sup> The claim that Couple A’s marriage leads directly to their happiness, and Couple B’s does not, rests on the assumption that it’s possible for one life to be more cohesive than another. You might be skeptical (as a referee was) that it’s possible to compare two lives’ causal cohesion in this way; in that case, the problem only gets thornier for Velleman. We’ll return to this question of causal connection briefly at the end of the paper.

<sup>8</sup> See also Velleman (2009, 201-202).

career, then pick it up again in retirement. Even if we grant that many ground projects, like marriage, require consistent commitment, we can see that many other pursuits do not—and that in fact part of the appeal of more casual pursuits is that you get to discover something spontaneously, do it as long as you enjoy it, and quit when you want to try something new, whatever that does to your life story.

I especially want to emphasize the part about quitting. In many cases, it's not a mistake for us to quit a pursuit, *even if it's a pursuit we still enjoy or benefit from*. Sasha might not be tired of learning about Albania, but given that he has limited time to learn, and that there are all sorts of interesting things in the world, he might decide to switch to Argentina anyway. When leisure is all that's at stake, past investment doesn't give rise to a prudential requirement to keep a commitment to something you're no longer interested in. That doesn't mean switching pursuits every time you get bored. Sometimes pushing through pays off in the long run—it could make sense to stay a philosopher rather than become a lifeguard if you think you're about to bounce back from a temporary low point. But only sometimes—all of us have limited time, and it's not irrational to happily abandon pursuits we enjoy in order to gain the novelty and surprise of trying something new.

Of course, most narrativists accept that narrative is only one ingredient in well-being. If Sasha comes to actively detest reading about Albania, then perhaps it makes sense for him to switch to learning about Argentina. But there are limits to narrativists' willingness to recommend switching, even in circumstances like these. Remember that Kauppinen thinks it may be rational for someone to continue as a philosopher because she's invested twelve years of her life, even if she would find being a lifeguard somewhat more satisfying (and equally good in all other ways) (2012, 376). In other words, narrative is supposed to be weighty enough to beat out other prudential goods. Yet we have seen the opposite, that pulling back on or quitting a pursuit can be good for us even when we still enjoy it. Cohesion is valuable for us when it helps us obtain other prudential goods, like success or pleasure—but it's a mistake to suggest, as narrativists sometimes do, that cohesion itself is the good.

This all leads to an obvious narrativist objection. The pursuits I've given as counterexamples to the narrativist emphasis on cohesion are things we generally see as small beer: interests and hobbies, but not ground projects. A narrativist could easily retort that it's totally fine for us to have variable commitment to *some* of our pursuits, or even to quit them, as long as we ensure cohesion in the pursuits that really matter. The advice to wax and wane in your commitment to your pursuits could even support this point: we sometimes have to put the B plots on the back burner so the A plot can develop.

So far, we don't have resources for responding to this, yet it raises two points that we'll see cause trouble for narrativism later on. If the narrativist objection succeeds here, first, can narrativism assess the prudential value of our lives as a whole, rather than just the prudential value of our main projects? And second, can

narrativism correctly assess lives which don't revolve around one or more central projects? As we go along, we'll see that these questions become harder for narrativists to give satisfactory answers to.

#### 4. Thematic consistency

Narratives are cohesive, but so are recipes. One element that marks stories out from other cohesive lists of events is the presence of themes: love, revenge, courage, hunger. We see this in narrativism as well. Your life isn't just a list of things you do; it also exemplifies certain values. The more that these values recur across the course of a life, the more thematically consistent that life is. Some narrativists think that lives may be characterized by a single theme—MacIntyre claims that Thomas Becket's life “clearly” fits the genre of tragedy (213). Others say the theme changes over time—Kauppinen thinks lives often fit the “narrative mode” of Adventure early on and of Service later in life (2021, 103-105); we start out with big plans to achieve goals, and later on our focus is less on charting new territory and more on living out the values we've already committed to.

A desire for thematic consistency may guide the choices we make about how to live. Anderson gives us the case of a couple who work for many years to establish a distinctive family restaurant in their town. When a big franchise operation approaches them with an offer to buy them out, Anderson writes, “A concern for the narrative unity of their lives, for what meaning their present choices make of their past actions, could rationally motivate them to turn down the offer” (34-35). A life where this couple uses the fortune they make from selling out to buy a villa on Lake Como would be a cohesive life—their past work would be the cause of their present wealth. But selling out is less thematically unified, because the couple has abandoned the theme of the little guys standing up against the big chains. If you want to know whether your life is a good story, merely being able to chart the connections between events isn't enough; theme matters too. The values that characterize part of your life story should echo across other parts.

At first, this might seem sensible: our lives show our commitments to certain values and priorities, and it's bad for us to abandon them willy-nilly. Nevertheless, trouble lurks when we use thematic consistency to guide our choices: sticking to a set of themes doesn't have to push us into living a one-dimensional life, but it can if we're not careful. Consider a set of decisions about how much thematic consistency to strive for:

*Michael:* Michael just graduated from college and started a job as a middle-school science teacher. Now he has to figure out how he's going to spend the rest of his time. He wants to help out in his community, and he's deciding between tutoring high-schoolers or working at the soup kitchen. He wants to do more than just watch TV in the evenings, and he's deciding between reading up on bioethics or getting into graphic novels. He wants to

meet new people, and he’s deciding between joining a chemistry-themed meetup group or trying out adult kickball.

Consider the values Michael has already shown he’s committed to: the scientific method, caring for children. If he decides to tutor, he’s more likely—not guaranteed, but more likely—to be able to use this hobby to build a coherent life. He’ll learn things from tutoring that he can use in his job, like finding out that high-school students tend to struggle with a particular concept they didn’t learn well enough in middle school. He’s more likely to be changed by his experiences in ways that contribute to the overall arc of his life; having closer one-on-one relationships with the students he’s tutoring can help him to remember what it’s like to be a student. So if Michael’s goal is to build a life whose pursuits fit the values that matter to him, he should probably choose to tutor rather than work at the soup kitchen.

In isolation, this isn’t a problem. The trouble is that the same thing is true for each of these individual choices. Building a more thematically consistent life always means choosing the option that more closely resembles his teaching project—at least, given what he knows at the time. He’s more likely to learn relevant information by reading bioethics than by reading graphic novels; he’s more likely to develop friendships which connect to his teaching project if he joins the chemistry meetup group than if he joins the kickball team. Choosing prospectively based on thematic consistency doesn’t mean affirmatively deciding to live a one-dimensional life—but it pushes him in that direction.

That means losing out on the prudential goods of a more diverse life. Michael will miss out on the friendships he could have had with the workers at the soup kitchen, who have different experiences and concerns than his fellow teachers do. He’ll miss out on the surprise and delight of discovering a new graphic novel. He’ll miss out on the resilience he could have gotten from being bad at kickball, resilience he could have used to relate to his students struggling with a new concept. Too much thematic consistency can close us off from other critically valuable goods.<sup>9</sup>

Once again, narrativists have avenues of response. First, they might point out that we can’t always know in advance which pursuits will connect to our lives’ themes. One of Michael’s kickball teammates might turn out to be a science teacher at the school across town, and they discover they can be better teachers when they work together on their lesson planning. Michael could justify choosing kickball instead of the meetup group on the assumption that kickball will make some contribution to his narrative arc, even if he doesn’t know precisely what that contribution will be yet.

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<sup>9</sup> Gingerich writes of the common phenomenon “in which people want to escape from being precisely who they are. This is the appeal of costume parties, the anonymity of the city, and travel to places where nobody knows you” (n.d., 15).



Yet someone who overinstrumentalizes his hobby tends to get less out of it; if Michael audits each possible kickball team so he can decide which one to join on the basis of which will contribute more to his career, it will be harder for him to just enjoy his time on the team. We often make connections between seemingly disparate pursuits serendipitously, only after we do them for their own sakes for a while. We're bound for trouble if we start out on a hobby with a clear picture of how we expect it to contribute to the narrative.

Narrativists might also argue that not all thematic inconsistency is good for us. True enough; it would probably be bad for Michael to take on two contradictory pursuits, such as teaching middle-school science during the day and promoting climate-change denialism at night. At the same time, a little friction between pursuits can be productive for us; if all of Michael's pursuits exemplify the themes of helping and teaching others, it might be good for him to take up an interest that's purely self-centered. A life with one unifying theme is likely to lack important goods (diversity, novelty, resilience); a life with a few frictionless, fully complementary themes may have these goods in somewhat greater measure; a life where a person learns and benefits from the friction is the surest route to possessing these goods in a robust way.

This brings us to our final narrativist response: narrativists generally accept that narrative is only one prudential good among many. If in this case aiming for thematic consistency requires Michael to give up resilience or novelty, a narrativist might conclude that this justifies Michael's living a less thematically consistent life. The problem is that we have to make choices about how to live based on limited information about the future. Michael doesn't know how he'll grow and change from reading graphic novels—all he knows when he's deciding what kind of reading habit he wants to have is that graphic novels are less likely to give him a coherent life, less likely to build on what he's already committed to. Retrospectively, most narrativists might well agree that given the goods Michael was able to access through reading graphic novels, that would have been the right choice for him to make—but when we're making choices prospectively we don't have that kind of information, and choosing based on how we expect the future to make sense of the past can lead us astray. Narrativists can, in theory, accept the value of doing something for its own sake, without any expectation of coherence at the outset, and then seeing how (if at all) it links up with our other pursuits—it's just not clear how readily they can accommodate it in practice.

## **5. Narrative arc**

Good stories aren't just masses of themes and connected events—they become intelligible to us as stories when these elements are organized into one or more narrative arcs. For narrativists, the same thing holds true for well-being.

Kauppinen, for example, argues that lives structured around putting effort into the pursuit of challenging goals can be particularly meaningful, and so

prudentially better for us (2012, 346; see also Dorsey 312-313). This builds on the first two aspects of narrativism we discussed. A life structured around putting effort into achieving a challenging goal has causal connections—a person’s effort causes the achievement of their goal—but it has more than just that. It has thematic consistency—whether the goal is scientific or literary achievement—but it has more than just that. The events and themes of this life are organized in a particular way: into a story with an arc, from the decision to pursue a goal, to the challenges inherent in striving for it, to the actual achievement of that goal, to the pleasure of having gotten it done. A good life story emerges when a life’s events and themes are organized into one or more arcs, with resolution at the end of each arc—goals achieved or sacrifices redeemed (Portmore 13; Velleman 1991, 55). Indeed, “...the most obvious way your story can go badly for you, other things being equal, is if you fail to reach your goal” (Kauppinen 2015, 204).

An interest in the creation or preservation of a narrative arc can explain, justify, and guide some of our choices (Rudd 2007, 61; Velleman 2003, 5). Velleman writes, “By middle age, one finds oneself composing the climax to a particular story—a story that is now determinate enough to be spoiled...given one’s actual beginnings, there may now only be a few good ways of going on” (1991, 58). By middle age, we’ve begun a narrative arc; we’ve established certain goals and themes, and they constrain the choices we should make from here on out. Velleman even ties the idea of a good death to narrative arc: “a person may rationally be willing to die even though he can look forward to a few more good weeks or months,” if an earlier death is the better ending to the story of his life (1991, 62). Concern for the integrity of one’s narrative arc might make it so that it is better, in some cases, to have a shorter, more narratively cohesive life than a longer, more disjointed one.<sup>10</sup>

Once cohesion and theme combine into narrative arcs, good lives have really started to resemble good stories. And while narrativists don’t always couch their views in explicitly literary terms—indeed, some of them resist this (Brännmark 2006, 67-70)—the arcs they hold up as good ones often look a lot like the stories we find in books and movies.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes their claims are overtly literary: Velleman refers to the “dramatic” relations among the events of a life (1991, 49); Kauppinen thinks it may be prudentially valuable for us to see ourselves as the “protagonists” of our

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<sup>10</sup> This intuition isn’t Velleman’s alone; see bioethicist Ezekiel Emanuel’s claim that he doesn’t want to live past 75 (and see McMahan 175-176). On the other hand, Vitrano points out that this would guide our end-of-life choices in some troubling ways (574), and see also Fischer (2005, 386-387).

<sup>11</sup> Non-narrativists criticize narrativists for this—see Bradley’s contention (156) that judgments about narrative and the shape of a life are aesthetic, rather than prudential, and Kauppinen’s (2015, 213) response. We’ve already seen that narrativists don’t think all great stories make good lives; we’ll discuss the limits of the parallels between life and literature further in section 7.

stories (2012, 358), and he also gestures toward the idea of the “plot” of a life (2012, 358).

And yet seeing our lives as having particular plots with distinct arcs could push us toward some choices which are bad for us. Like Michael the middle-school teacher, Tasha faces a choice:

*Tasha:* Tasha’s happy working at a consulting firm when her coworker Lenny invites her to join a bowling league. She’s pretty terrible at first, but she works hard to improve her form, and over time she develops a real knack for it; eventually, she becomes the strongest bowler on her team. A bowling coach spots her at the league championship and asks if she’s considered turning pro; he thinks she has a real shot. If she decides not to turn pro, she’ll miss out on the success, fame, and fortune she could have had. But if she decides to turn pro, she’ll miss out on things too—her old bowling teammates and the lack of pressure to do well. Tasha relishes competition, but, at the same time, she’s nervous about her tendency to get overcompetitive. Plus, all that time on the road means leaving her consulting job, friends, and hobbies behind.

Given the arc she’s begun, it’s hard to see how narrativism wouldn’t advise Tasha to go pro. Going pro gives Tasha’s life a cohesive chain of events: her hard work and improvement at bowling lays the groundwork for the coach’s invitation and her later success. Her life would have thematic consistency: the values of competition and hard work that her amateur bowling displays would only be strengthened by going pro. These events and themes would form a clear narrative arc: hard work and commitment to bowling pay off with fame and fortune.

I don’t intend to present this case as if there’s an obvious answer as to what Tasha should do; I truly don’t think there is. The problem isn’t that narrativism gives the wrong answer but that it has given us a misleading accounting of the goods on both sides of the decision. Amateurism offers goods of its own: it can remind us to be contented with our own imperfections (Calhoun 145-169), free up time for us to do other things, and remind us of the value and rarity of genuine excellence. Deciding to go pro could justify all the hard work Tasha’s put into learning to bowl, but it could also suck the fun out of bowling. Deciding *not* to go pro could mean letting herself be content with the choices she’s made, while still having enough expertise to appreciate the skills of the pro bowlers she watches on TV. While the goods accessible through staying amateur are valuable, none of them give her a clear narrative arc. Making her bowling story better could be worse for her as a person, since she loses out on contact with the things besides bowling that make life worth living. Again, none of these goods shows us that Tasha *certainly* shouldn’t turn pro, only that the answer is not an unambiguous “yes.”

In defense of their view, a narrativist could say that Tasha actually has two story arcs, with two different goals: her bowling story and her consulting story. If

she decides not to turn pro, her bowling story isn't as good as it could have been, but her consulting story will be a better story (she'll have more time to devote to being the best consultant she can be). Tasha can permissibly choose whichever story she wants to invest in.

The thing is, though, that Tasha's choice doesn't have to be based on which story she wants to improve. We can see this if we tweak the case so Tasha can have it all. If she can work it out so she keeps her consulting job and only competes in pro tournaments on the weekends, is she prudentially required to see both stories through to completion? This life has two narrative arcs rather than one, and it might be a reasonable life for her to choose—but it can't be prudentially required. Doubling down on narrative arc means Tasha is still giving up the goods of amateurism, goods narrativism doesn't capture but that are goods all the same.<sup>12</sup> Tasha might want a quieter life, a life where she doesn't achieve her promise in bowling, and that's a reasonable choice for her to make. Sometimes it's okay for our sacrifices to stay unredeemed.

Even if Tasha sticks with the amateur league, bowling might still count as a goal-directed activity if it is what Kauppinen calls a “reflexive” pursuit—that is, a pursuit whose aim is realized throughout the pursuit's duration, rather than at the end (2021, 103-104). Tasha's aim is simply to have fun with her teammates, and she realizes that aim by bowling—in this sense, it does count as an arc of goal achievement, even if she doesn't achieve as much as she possibly could have.

At this point, it's helpful to borrow from the debate about one of the other narrativist theses I mentioned early on, narrativism about personal identity (remember, this is the view that narrative relations are required for a person to maintain their identity over time). Christman argues that narrativism about personal identity faces a dilemma: it's either implausible or otiose (697). Either the view sets such strong conditions for personal identity that hardly anyone's life actually clears that bar—or narrativism boils down to standard causal explanation, and we don't need any of the grandiose architecture that proponents of narrativism have cooked up.

The same dilemma applies here. If we understand the idea of a “goal” in the standard sense—something that you aspire to obtain or achieve—then bowling just for fun isn't a goal, and so it's implausible to cast Tasha's amateur bowling and similar pursuits in terms of goal-oriented narrative arcs. If we expand “goals” to include the fun you had along the way, then narrative is otiose; goal achievement doesn't add anything to our understanding of well-being that we didn't already get more directly from a theory like hedonism. For the narrative arc of goal achievement to make a unique contribution to our well-being, we have to conceive of goals in

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Levy, who thinks we can only get “superlative meaning” from projects requiring sustained effort, concentration, and striving, not from easy pleasures or simple joys (187). See also Kauppinen (2012, 364).

the normal, more restricted sense; this excludes Tasha’s amateur bowling from counting as a goal-directed narrative arc.

This is not to deny that mastery of a pursuit can be good for us. Kauppinen is totally right that setting yourself a challenge, and achieving it, can be a valuable prudential good. There’s no reason to deny, either, that Tasha’s going pro would give her life at least one narrative arc. The question is whether we need narrativism in order to account for the prudential value of this. Most of the value of a success arc seems to come from other sources than the arc itself. The virtues of commitment and determination that a person needs to succeed are good for them both within and outside of this particular arc; any theory you like has some explanation for the value of success (because it fulfills your desires, because it perfects a human excellence, and so on).<sup>13</sup> Yet seeing narrative arc as good on its own can lead us astray, as when Sasha feels pressured to stick with Albania even if he’d rather learn about Argentina.

On the other hand, it may be true that narrative is important in some circumstances and for some people. If Tasha is the kind of person who will always be bothered by the challenge she didn’t take on, if this will eat away at her until she’s not able to focus on her job and her friendships, then seeing the bowling story to its conclusion may be best for her. Yet acknowledging that some people have reasons to value narrative arcs doesn’t show us that pursuits in general, or lives as a whole, are better when narratively structured. That brings us to the final aspect of narrativism. How important for our well-being do narrativists really think narrative is?

## **6. The importance of narrative**

Once life stories take on the literary qualities of fiction, it’s a short step from there to seeing a life as a single, unified narrative. We’ve already seen Anderson head in this direction (“a concern for...narrative unity” [35]). MacIntyre is even more explicit:

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask “What is the good for me?” is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion... The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest (218-219).

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<sup>13</sup> Bradford considers, but ultimately rejects, the idea that the narrative structure of an achievement increases the effort required to achieve it (and so increases its value) (43-46).

Brännmark opts for a milder version of narrative unity: “The lives we lead form narratively structured wholes in a way that the lives of animals do not” (2003, 322), such that “when we ask the question about whether a specific life is a good one it is a question that we cannot answer without understanding how that life is woven together as a whole in this sense” (2003, 333). While Brännmark recognizes that not all goods we experience are tied into the narrative of our lives (2003, 335), and he doesn’t think we should be leading our lives with narrative in the foreground (2003, 341-342), nevertheless the life narrative “is the background against which our options, and the features which characterize them, get their meaning, and thus in the end get their value or, perhaps better, their importance for the goodness of our lives as wholes” (2003, 342).

But narrative unity is controversial even among narrativists. Kauppinen rejects the idea that lives need to or even should have one goal (2015, 207; 2012) although he still signs on for a kind of narrative unity—the idea, which we’ve already encountered, that whether or not a person’s goals build on one another makes their life broadly progressive, regressive, or stagnant in its structure (2015, 207; 204). Although Velleman’s claims about the narrative arcs constraining middle age and good deaths might lead us to think that he has a narratively unified conception of a life, elsewhere he rejects this idea (2006, 222; 2009, 204). Likewise, Fischer thinks the best metaphor may be a book of short stories rather than a monograph (2005, 398).

In spite of this disagreement, narrativists do generally agree that narratives carry significant prudential weight. When we were talking about Anderson’s couple with the family restaurant, we saw that a concern for thematic consistency could make it rational for them to turn down significant wealth. We saw Velleman claim that the integrity of a life story might make it reasonable for someone to prefer a shorter to a longer life. We’ve already heard from MacIntyre that “...the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest” (218-219). Dorsey sums things up, although tentatively: “The goals, achievements, and—more broadly—narratives that shape our lives as a whole are important determinants of their quality. Indeed...I’m tempted to claim that the most significant element of the quality of a life is its narrative structure” (330).<sup>14</sup>

This is where the questions I raised at the end of section 3, in the discussion of cohesion, really start to bite. When we were looking at how cohesive our lives ought to be, I argued that we do not have to display consistent commitment to many hobbies, goals, or interests. There, we said that a narrativist might insist that what really matters for our lives—our projects—should be cohesive. We could see a parallel response popping up to the downsides of the other aspects of narrativism.

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<sup>14</sup> We should recognize, too, that these features can all come in degrees; a life can be more or less cohesive and so on (Clark 374).

Maybe Michael's project of teaching middle-schoolers should be thematically consistent, but other parts of his life can be more thematically disjointed; maybe once Tasha's decided bowling will always just be a hobby for her, it doesn't matter that it won't ever have a solid narrative arc. I raised two questions about this narrativist response: First, can narrativism assess the prudential value of our lives as a whole, rather than just the prudential value of our main projects? And second, can narrativism correctly assess lives which don't revolve around one or more central projects?

I'm absolutely not denying that many people do see their projects as having narrative structure or that seeing things this way can be good for us (as when psychological narrativists say self-narration can have therapeutic benefits). Instead, we should recognize that having a life built around a narratively structured project is very good for some people—and very bad for others. Consider:

*Andy:* Andy works on the docks from the time he's young, starting as a stevedore and moving on up. Over time, he becomes involved in union politics, eventually becoming the president of his local. As president, he develops a reputation for candor and incorruptibility; he also develops an independent interest in the history of the labor movement, which helps him become a savvy political strategist. He marries the president of the city's teachers' union, and together they work together to negotiate a new, fairer contract with the city. Because of this success, he's eventually elected president of the national longshoremen's union, and he uses this position to advocate for a new workers'-rights bill, which passes Congress just before he retires. Andy spends his retirement contentedly reflecting on his hard work and enjoying spending time with his grandchildren.

Andy has lived a good life, and it bears all the hallmarks of narrative structure: cohesion, thematic consistency, narrative arc, even narrative unity. But it's far from the only good way to live. Move on to

*Becca:* Becca is a tailor. She likes tailoring, and she's good at her job, but what she's really passionate about is making the most of her time outside work. Becca and her husband have a loving, mutually supportive marriage—it's not perfect, but it's consistently pretty happy. She tends to gravitate to creative pursuits, such as dancing and drawing, and she tries out lots of different creative arts over the years—she likes learning about how to express her creative side in lots of different ways. Her most longstanding pursuit outside work is magic, but she really only does it for fun—she'll put on a magic show for her nephews' birthday parties, but that's about the only time she performs in public. Over the years, Becca passes up several opportunities to expand her business. She does this without regret, because

she knows that spending more time on her job would make it harder for her to live the life she wants outside work.

Becca’s life has some elements of narrative structure—some thematic consistency, in that her hobbies outside work share some skills and values with her main project, and some cohesion, in her consistent commitment to her husband and to magic. Yet her life lacks the strong narrative elements Andy’s has. Her career doesn’t have much of a narrative arc—she’s a fine enough tailor, but she decides not to try to get better when she could. Nor does she steadily increase her proficiency at magic. Other hobbies come and go without adding up to anything big in particular.

Think, too, about

*Crystal:* In Crystal’s view, the main point of life is to try everything once. Over the years, she has a number of jobs, from social worker to barista to car salesperson. She’s talented enough at all of them, and she appreciates the distinctive skills she learns at each (appreciating others’ lives and struggles, knowing how to roast coffee perfectly, honing her powers of persuasion), but she doesn’t want to be tied down to just one career. Crystal has a few consistent hobbies; she always has a cat or two at home, and she loves to pick out a tune on her banjo. She watches documentaries about all sorts of things: astronomy for a while, then philosophy, then art history. She’s dedicated to each pursuit for as long as she does it; she thinks it’s important to throw herself into all that life has to offer. Early in her life, Crystal decided marriage and kids weren’t for her; she’s a dedicated serial monogamist, entering a variety of short- and long-term relationships over the years. These relationships have their ups and downs, as all relationships do, but Crystal is generally happy in them.

Crystal’s life has the loosest narrative structure of the three. She doesn’t have a single project, neither at work nor in her personal life. While some hobbies, like cats and banjo, are relatively consistent, these hobbies don’t have arcs, and her interests shift widely over time. Her life is very low on thematic consistency and cohesion, but higher on diversity.

Whose life is best, Andy’s, Becca’s, or Crystal’s? I don’t mean which of them *you’d* want to be, obviously; all of us probably find ourselves thinking we would personally gravitate toward one or the other of these lives. I mean whose life is best *for the person who lives it*? If narrativism has its way, there’s a particular kind of structure lives ought to have, and we can evaluate the prudential goodness of a life in part by how lives fit or deviate from that structure. And yet Andy, Becca, and Crystal show us that good lives are structured in all sorts of ways.<sup>15</sup> Andy might find Becca’s life

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<sup>15</sup> Although Velleman’s earlier work makes the narrativist claims we’ve discussed above, he makes a version of this point in later work (although with a slightly different conception of narrative in mind) (2009, 204).



unproductive—why would she pass up the opportunity to get better at what she does? Crystal would chafe at the structure and planning that goes into Andy’s life, and Becca would want the steadiness that Crystal’s more experimental life lacks.

The point is not that we should be subjectivists about prudential value or that there are no standards at all for what constitutes a good life. Andy, Becca, and Crystal all have some goods in common: concern for others, commitments, devotion to things outside themselves, personal relationships, work-life balance, happiness. Instead, the point is that that people structure those goods in many different ways, and narrativism unduly constrains which lives count as good ones. Narrativism would have us hold that Andy’s life is not just better than Becca’s or Crystal’s but *clearly* better than the other two, such that Becca and Crystal should want to trade theirs in for something more like Andy’s. This is too restrictive.

In defending the claim that Andy’s life is best, a narrativist might start by picking on Crystal. Doesn’t her life lack certain values—deep commitments, constancy, long-term relationships—that are essential to living the best kind of life? And if so, then maybe Becca’s life is better than Crystal’s, but still mediocre on all these counts—and then Andy winds up with the best life, and narrativism is in position to explain why this is.

But we shouldn’t give up on Crystal too quickly. First, it’s not clear that the less structured life she lives *is* lacking in these deep goods; we can see this in Crystal’s devotion to her cats; in her sustained interest in learning things of all kinds by watching documentaries; and in the idiosyncratic but still genuine relationships she has. Second, even if a narrativist wants to insist that there are goods that can *only* be had through narratively cohesive lives (and I’m willing to grant that this is true in at least a few cases), there are other goods, really valuable ones, that are all-but-impossible to get in neatly organized lives. Andy’s life is missing adventure, novelty, and spontaneity—these are important too.<sup>16</sup>

This point, that good lives can be structured in many different ways, ties together the other problems we’ve seen with narrativism. We don’t *have to* have variable commitment to our interests; some people remain fiercely committed to their interests throughout their lives. But we can reasonably wax and wane in our commitment, even quit the things we like, and in fact this can be good for us, since it helps us balance our pursuits and enjoy what we do. It’s okay to take our hobbies seriously, but it’s also okay to stay amateur at them—especially since amateurism brings with it its own distinctive benefits, even though these don’t fit neatly into a life narrative. Variety in our pursuits can feed back into and strengthen the narrative arc of our lives, but it doesn’t have to, and it’s good for us even when it doesn’t—and if we try to choose pursuits based on how they’ll contribute to the narrative, we may find we get less out of them.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Gingerich’s (2022; n.d.) work on the value of spontaneity.

As we saw in the previous section, it's true that many pursuits, particularly projects, do have some kind of narrative structure (particularly if we embrace Kauppinen's idea of reflexive pursuits); organized, goal-oriented pursuits can be good for us in ways that other pursuits are not. Still, reinvention, spontaneity, and amateurism sometimes characterize life projects too. Imposing a single goal on a career that doesn't really have one, like Crystal's time as a social worker, will either be otiose ("the goal of being a good social worker"), or it will pressure us to make choices that are prudentially bad for us. If it seems significantly prudentially valuable to me to achieve my goals, then I might choose a career where I know I can succeed, but that I don't enjoy, rather than a career I'm passionate about but where goal achievement is less certain. Or I might define my expectations for my career down, so that I can ensure that I achieve my goals. Or I might not branch out as much in my career as I would have, because that would make my narrative arc less clear.

Finally, the fact that life projects are often what we organize our other pursuits around doesn't by itself mean that they're the most prudentially weighty things we do. We have to be careful to distinguish what we plan our lives around from what matters most to us—often the two go together, but they don't have to, especially for someone whose life is limited by cultural, political, or economic constraints. In the final analysis, Saturday afternoons spent on amateur woodworking could matter more to a person than her productive but uninspiring career did. If we limit narrativism to only assessing narratively structured pursuits, we miss out on assessing the prudential value of significant chunks of how we organize our lives; if we accept that good lives are not necessarily always structured around one or more central projects, then there are some lives narrativism is ill-equipped to assess.

## **7. What should narrativists do now?**

Lives like Crystal's don't make good stories. In place of cohesion, they have variable commitment; in place of thematic consistency, variety; in place of narrative arc, amateurism. And yet they can be such good lives. Still, before we completely give up on narrativism, we should think through how narrativists might adapt or maintain their views.

First, they might change their views about what constitutes a great story. Narrativists could relax their ideas about what it is for the events of a life to be causally connected, so that hobbies are connected to projects in virtue of (for example) belonging to the same person. Tasha's life as professional consultant and amateur bowler lacks the tight causal connections, well-defined themes, and single quest it would have if she turned pro. But aren't her choices connected to some degree? After all, she does accept Lenny's invitation to join the bowling league because of their past as work friends. Doesn't her life display, if not a few well-defined themes, then more, and more diffuse, themes—career competence but also friendship, commitment to bowling, and so on?

We're back once again to Christman's implausible-or-otiose dilemma. Relax the distinctive ideas of narrativism too much, and narrativists wind up pushed onto the otiose horn. After all, everything we do can be causally connected to some previous choice we made.<sup>17</sup> If we relax what counts as causal connection among the events of a life, then Velleman can't maintain that Couple A's one marriage is better (for specifically narrativist reasons) than Couple B's three. All the later marriages are connected, in some sense, to the choices the couples made earlier on. That strips narrativism of some of its power to guide people's choices or assess their lives: Michael the middle-school teacher could decide to have a highly thematically consistent life (teaching, tutoring, bioethics, the chemistry meetup group) or a highly thematically diverse life (teaching, the soup kitchen, graphic novels, adult kickball), and, as long as he can tell some kind of story about his choices, his life gets high narrativist marks. But since most of us can tell some story about how we got where we are and where we want to go, this doesn't do much for our understanding of well-being—most of how we assess the prudential value of lives would then rest on other grounds, like how happy Michael's pursuits make him or whether he's flourishing in them (Fischer 2005, 386-387).

Notice that this horn of the dilemma has greater pull on narrativists the more ardently they try to maintain the parallels between life narratives and literary fiction.<sup>18</sup> After all, literary fiction covers a wide swath of genres and styles. Some works are highly narratively unified: *David Copperfield* has a clear narrative arc, side plots feed back into the main chronicle of David's adventures, and there are consistent themes. Others are much less tidy: *Ulysses* is full of characters who drift in and out, some themes are pervasive but others are fleeting, and key plot points are left unresolved by the end. All sorts of great works of narrative fiction—from Flaubert to Ellison to Cervantes to Woolf to Laxness to Morrison—are more like Dickens, or more like Joyce, or doing something else entirely. Literary narratives are so diverse that they're not really able to offer guidance about what a life narrative should look like.<sup>19</sup>

Second, narrativists could go the opposite way: maintain a more stringent characterization of narrativism (and so reduce the parallels between life and

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<sup>17</sup> We saw this come up in our initial discussion of Velleman in section 3—there, I said that I find it intuitively plausible that we *can* identify direct and more indirect causal chains in a person's life; if you don't, then that brings you straight to this issue.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to a referee for inviting me to talk about this. It's also notable, as this referee pointed out, that (some) of the most plot-driven and narratively tidy works of fiction are those not normally classified as great literature—crime thrillers, romance novels, etc..

<sup>19</sup> To their credit, some narrativists recognize this (see, for example, Brännmark's list of disanalogies between life and literature) (2006, 67-70). A referee pointed out that one of the entries on this list—literature is supposed to entertain, but this isn't the purpose of life—is especially important; we should do our best not to conflate the aesthetic qualities of literary narratives with the prudential qualities of lives.

literature) but reject some or all of the conclusions I've argued for. Maybe Sasha *shouldn't* stop watching documentaries about Albania; maybe Michael *should* take up tutoring high-schoolers; maybe Tasha *should definitely* go pro; maybe Becca and Crystal *should* mold their lives after Andy's. Now we're on the other horn of Christman's dilemma—narrativism is implausible. Feeling prudentially pressured to continue things we're enjoying for the sake of bringing a narrative arc to a satisfying conclusion sucks some of the pleasure out of our pursuits. Seeking out new pursuits because adopting them makes us better at an existing pursuit instrumentalizes them, pushing us toward (frequently unappealing and inadvisable) one-dimensional lives.

The only way for this response to work, I think, is if the only pursuits that matter for analyzing our well-being have the character of what we normally think of as ground projects (are more central to our lives, are more goal-oriented, aim at success rather than mediocrity). At best narrativism's explanatory power would be diminished, since it could now only tell us about the prudential value of a few of our pursuits. It would either distort or be silent about most of our hobbies, goals, and interests. More crucially, we've already seen that people have lots of different ways of organizing their lives: Andy's family and commitment to the longshoremen's union are what matter the most to him; Becca cares more about her creative pursuits than her job; Crystal has no single thing that matters the most to her, and that's the way she wants her life to be. Given that these pursuits are sometimes a very significant part of people's lives, a theory of well-being that contravenes a wide variety of intuitive judgments about different kinds of lives is missing something important.

Finally, maybe narrativism isn't a very good decision procedure—but it could still be an evaluative criterion for how well a life has gone (Brännmark 2003, 342; de Bres 24; Velleman 2009, 205). It would be bad (artificial, stage-managed, pat), a narrativist could say, to make decisions out of concern for how they add to your life story—but we can still evaluate life stories once they've ended. Yet narrativists do sometimes talk see the view as offering a decision procedure. Remember Anderson's claim that "a concern for the narrative unity of their lives" could lead the couple to refuse to sell the restaurant (34-35). Or think about Velleman's discussion of when it makes sense to end a life—this person too is making a decision (1991, 62). Even if narrativists got rid of the tendency to talk as though we should use narrativism to make decisions about how to live, narrativism makes for a pretty poor evaluative criterion. One of the things we've seen over and over again is that many people are better off living worse stories. The cohesion, continuity, and goal-driven nature of (some) stories are what make them worth reading, but these same characteristics don't necessarily make lives good to live.

## 8. The moral of the narrativist story

Narrativism can't account for the diversity of good lives, at least not without distorting those lives and/or abandoning some key narrativist commitments. Then

again, the initial narrativist thesis was pretty plausible—supported not just by Instagram influencers but also by thought experiments such as *Shape of a Life*.

So I'll close with a few ways to hold on to what's good about narrativism. We can keep some of the things narrativists recognize as valuable, just in a non-narrative guise. Narrativists care about the achievement of goals, but so do achievementists, who claim that the achievement of goals in itself contributes to well-being.<sup>20</sup> Riggle claims that actions can be fitted into our “personal style” when they embody and communicate our ideals (724); an ideal could exemplify a theme in a particular domain without requiring us to have a thematically consistent life overall (729-230). It's good to have values, but we don't need to resort to thematic consistency to explain this—integrity and commitment are virtuous and beneficial even outside a narrative arc. The sequencing of events in our lives matters, but even this can often be explained without narrative. Meeting the love of your life when you're mature enough for a real relationship, rather than when you're young and self-centered, matters because it enables you to experience deeper, more lasting joys, not because it fits into a narrative arc.

We should concede, though, that some goods really *are* narratively structured. Life doesn't have to be a single story neatly fitting into a single genre, as MacIntyre might have it, nor even a book of individually cohesive short stories—but some chains of events do coalesce into stories. Pursuits structured around achievements are paradigmatic examples, since achieving something requires undertaking some process or developing some capacity (Bradford 14). Narratively cohesive pursuits might have a distinctive kind of value (they deliver some of the therapeutic benefits of psychological narrativism or the satisfaction of achievement), but so do narratively discontinuous pursuits (they allow for more amateurism, diversity, and spontaneity)—so we might want a balance of both.<sup>21</sup>

In our discussion of Tasha, we saw reasons to be skeptical that the structure of pursuits, even when those pursuits can be framed as narratives, is generally what gives them their value. Tasha's increasing success at bowling can be fitted into a narrative, but the narrative is not itself what's good for her. We know this because we saw that Tasha seems prudentially permitted to choose to complete the narrative arc of bowling, or to complete her job arc, or to choose a quieter life and leave her sacrifices unredeemed. Even when a pursuit has a narrative form, something else always seems to be lurking to explain why that pursuit is valuable and to guide our choices. Still, people's lives are diverse, and some people may gain tremendous satisfaction from seeing the stories of their lives through to completion—we

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<sup>20</sup> See Keller; see also Portmore. Kauppinen (2015, 209-211) criticizes achievementism, although many of his criticisms come from within a narrativist framework.

<sup>21</sup> Kauppinen argues persuasively that a life of “maximal variety” might not be the best life (2012, 367).

shouldn't rule out that narrative structure is a source of value in its own right for some people sometimes.

We should concede, too, that some lives, not just chains of events within lives, are best if they're highly narratively structured. Even if narrativism is a generally poor decision procedure and evaluative criterion, people are diverse. Lives that score highly by narrativists' lights are relatively organized and unified, and those might be good lives for some people. Narrativism may be a good way for some people (Andy the union president, for example) to evaluate or plan their lives, although they should be aware that they may be missing out on the goods of spontaneity, diversity, and exploration.<sup>22</sup> Narrativism goes wrong only when it is taken to be a general principle about the role of narrative structure in everyone's lives.

This all means that we should reaffirm one of the key insights of both Shape of a Life and narrativism: how a life is organized matters for the well-being of the person who lives it. But just as narrativists criticized the original Shape of a Life hypothesis for being too specific about the trajectory life events should have, so too narrativism is too limited in its view of how life events should be structured. We need some kind of diachronic, holistic evaluation of someone's life in order to arrive at a full judgment about how that life has gone for them, but that evaluation has to be more ecumenical about what kinds of relations count toward well-being.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Perhaps highly narratively structured lives have meaning that more varied lives don't, even when those looser lives are higher in well-being; again, there may be a difference between what gives lives their meaning and what makes them prudentially better or worse.

<sup>23</sup> For more on holism, see Raibley. Brännmark notes that holism need not be narrativist (2003, 323-324), as does Strawson (439-441). Vitrano argues that the failure of narrativism should push us back to hedonism—but we can see now that we have more options than that (575).

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