# Conservatism about Prudential Value

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**Abstract:** This paper lays out *Conservatism about Prudential Value*, which is the view that we have a moral reason to conserve certain existing ingredients of our well-being—such as loving relationships and important personal projects—even when a superior replacement is available. The first part examines the ground, scope, content, and strength of our reasons to conserve. The second part shows that this view can elucidate a number of puzzling issues, such as how to balance exploration and commitment at different stages of life, whether the reluctance to start new projects and relationships in old age is justified, when it is permissible to move on from a loss, and why an improving life seems better than a deteriorating one.

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## 1. Introduction

During his early years in Paris, Pablo Picasso suffered from discouragement, hunger, and the piercing cold of continental winters. While many paintings survive from this 'Blue Period', the artist is believed to have burned several others, desperate to keep his hands warm as he worked on new pieces in his unheated apartment on Boulevard Voltaire. Suppose that these rumours are accurate and that one night Picasso burned his masterful *Absinthe Drinker (1901)* to create another painting that, let's assume, was even more valuable.

Situations like this have a curious feature. The loss of the *Absinthe Drinker* strikes us as worthy of regret, even though it is replaced by another painting that is no less valuable. Moreover, it seems that Picasso had a distinctive reason not to destroy the *Absinthe Drinker* and that this reason was stronger than the reason to create another beautiful painting.

These kinds of considerations motivate a more general thesis about value. According to *Conservatism about Value*, we have a distinctive moral reason to conserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things, such as architectural wonders, important traditions, and beautiful paintings. At the minimum, this means that we should not destroy them even when they could be replaced by similar things of equal or even greater value. By contrast, we have no moral reason to preserve merely instrumentally valuable things, such as a generic $10 bill, when another $10 bill would replace it.

Proponents of this view include Samuel Scheffler (2007; 2013; 2018), G. A. Cohen (2012), Jacob Nebel (2015; 2022), and Johann Frick (2017). These authors disagree about the precise range of things we have a reason to preserve and the ground of this concern. Still, one aspect that their discussions have in common is the almost exclusive focus on things which are valuable simpliciter, at the expense of those which are valuable for particular people. My aim in this paper is to fill this gap by offering a theory of *Conservatism about Prudential Value*.

In the first part, I provide an initial motivation and a theoretical foundation for this view. In Section 2, I present two examples of prudential goods—loving relationships and important personal projects which culminate in achievements—that we seem to have a moral reason to preserve even when they could be replaced by something at least as valuable. In Section 3, I examine what explains the presence of conservative reasons, how strong these reasons are, which things we have reasons to conserve, what exactly we have reasons to do, and to whom these reasons apply.

In the second part, I offer further support for Conservatism about Prudential Value by showing that it elucidates several puzzling questions and sentiments concerning how we should direct our lives. These include: how to balance exploration and commitment at different stages of life (§4), whether the reluctance to start new projects and relationships in older age is justified (§5), when it is permissible to move on from a loss (§6), and why an improving life seems better than a deteriorating one (§8).

My discussion of these issues has two striking upshots. On the practical side, it implies that we cannot start a new life whenever we please. Our existing loving relationships and important personal projects warrant a certain kind of loyalty, in virtue of which we have reasons to conserve them. On the theoretical side, it gives us an insight into the normative status of relationships and projects. We should be concerned with the survival and flourishing of these things above and beyond the contribution that they make to our well-being, and some of our reasons to preserve them are moral and agent-neutral, just like our reasons to preserve the Grand Canyon or the *Mona Lisa*.

A few clarificatory remarks before we begin in earnest. First, the presented arguments assume an *objective list theory of well-being* that recognises multiple ingredients of well-being. These include not just pleasant experiences but also loving relationships and personal projects culminating in achievements, among other things.

Second, Conservatism about Prudential Value is meant to be understood as a component of Conservatism about Value. The latter view says that we have a distinctive moral reason to preserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things. The former points out that these things include loving relationships and important personal projects.

Third, a word on methodology. This paper does not offer anything like a formal proof of Conservatism about Prudential Value. In value theory, and at a certain level of generality, a careful discussion of cases and an application of the method of reflective equilibrium are sometimes the best resources we have. In this spirit, I start with two examples of prudential goods we have a reason to preserve even when a replacement is available. The remainder of my case for this view rests in showing that it provides a compelling answer to a number of ethical puzzles.

## 2. Two examples

To motivate Conservatism about Value, its proponents often reach for cases in which a non-instrumentally valuable thing is replaced by another thing of the same kind which is equally or more valuable, and yet the entire transaction leaves considerable moral residue. Picasso's tragic decision to set one of his masterful paintings aflame to finish another piece is a case in point. Other standard examples include historical artefacts, cultures, institutions, and great works of architecture. What has been neglected, however, is that there are analogous scenarios involving things which are prudentially valuable rather than valuable simpliciter.

To begin with, consider the case of Jim Brown, a former fullback for the Cleveland Browns. In 1966, Brown shocked the football world by announcing his retirement from the sport at the young age of 29. His decision was not motivated by an injury or a decline in performance. In fact, he had just won the NFL Most Valuable Player award for the third time in nine years and was on track to receive further accolades. Instead, Brown left football to pursue a different career, acting, where he also enjoyed great success. He became arguably the first Black action star, appearing in over 50 movies and TV shows, including many blockbusters.

If you are like most football fans, Brown's story evokes in you the attitude of *evaluative ambivalence*. On the one hand, there is plenty to cheer for: his postfootball life was oriented towards a worthy personal goal and rich in achievements. On the other hand, Brown's decision seems, in one respect, regrettable. Crucially, this is not just because he missed out on athletic accomplishments that lay ahead of him but also because of what he had left behind. He quit a career that was a non-instrumentally valuable personal project that he gave up much for and that still had plenty to give back to him.

We encounter a similar pattern of intuitions in the context of loving relationships. Consider the following fictional case. Ann is in a loving relationship with Beth. One day, during a tough run workout at the golden-surfaced track of the historic Edwards Stadium in Berkeley, she meets Sally, who happens to be very similar to Beth in all respects except one. Like Ann, Sally is a dedicated runner, so the pair could enjoy some of their training together and support each other during races, which would bring them even closer. After some deliberation, Ann ends her relationship with Beth and enters one with Sally.

Here, too, we witness evaluative ambivalence. In one respect, Ann's decision seems wise. Any reasonable theory of well-being will recognise that relationships are among the key ingredients of the good life and that they can be better or worse. From the case description, it is clear that the new bond is better for Ann, though perhaps only slightly so. But there is also something troubling about Ann's decision. That old relationship was valuable in itself and would have continued to be so, for all we know. Thus, Ann's choice leaves us with considerable normative residue.

I think that this normative residue suggests that we have a distinctive reason to conserve loving relationships and important personal projects even when a replacement is readily available. Crucially, this reason is not conceptually tied to anyone's interests. After all, Jim Brown had a reason to preserve his football career, and Ann had a reason to preserve her previous relationship even though the new engagements would be equally good or even better for them. Thus, the reason in question seems to be of moral—rather than prudential—variety. This is precisely what Conservatism about Prudential Value seeks to capture.

Some readers might object to the preceding argument. They might concede that, all-things-considered, Jim Brown and Ann should have preserved their original engagements but deny that we need to appeal to Conservatism about Prudential Value to explain this intuition. As numerous authors have emphasised, what ties you to a particular person are not just their generic qualities, such as wit, beauty, or intelligence, but also your *shared history*: for example, that you shared many good experiences, endured suffering together, or jointly raised a child.[1] One might therefore suggest that starting a new relationship with Sally would be overall worse for Ann than continuing the old one with Beth because the former lacks that shared history. Likewise, one might argue that what ties you to a particular project is the history of your prior involvement, and thus it was overall worse for Jim Brown to start an acting career than to continue his athletic career.

These remarks are important because they remind us about the features that make our attachments valuable. But I think that the objection does not carry the day. While it is true that a new relationship or project would *initially* lack the relevant historical qualities and thus be less valuable, there is no principled obstacle to these new engagements *eventually* acquiring such attributes, and thus becoming equally or even more valuable. So let's just explicitly assume that the new engagements would be more valuable. When we do so, the intuition that Ann and Jim Brown each had a distinctive reason to preserve their original engagements perseveres. And, since we have stipulated that it was in their personal interest to do otherwise, this reason must be a moral reason. This lends support to Conservatism about Prudential Value.

## 3. Theoretical foundations

Having presented the initial motivation for Conservatism about Prudential Value, I now want to explain the ground, character, strength, scope, and content of our conservative reasons.

First, can we ground our moral reasons to conserve prudential goods in more fundamental normative truths? Here is one attractive line of thought. Things which are non-instrumentally valuable command a certain kind of response from members of the moral community. This may involve holding specific attitudes or taking certain actions: respecting, protecting, conserving, savouring, etc. These considerations can give rise to moral reasons. For example, as Cohen (2012) argues, we seem to have a moral reason to preserve the impersonally valuable traditions of Oxford's All Souls College and Michelangelo's *Slaves* when and because this is a fitting response to their value.

The examples featuring Jim Brown and Ann suggest that loving relationships and important personal projects also have this profile: we have a moral

[1] See Kolodny (2003) and Hurka (2016) for this kind of view. Strictly speaking, both of these authors are concerned with what gives us reasons for love rather than with what makes a relationship valuable, but their remarks seem to extend to the latter setting as well.

reason to conserve them when and because this is a fitting response to their value.[2] Crucially, one can have a conservative reason to preserve a loving relationship or an important personal project even if it's not in their interest to do so. In this respect, a conservative reason to preserve a loving relationship is like a conservative reason to preserve something valuable simpliciter, like the Grand Canyon.

Second, conservative reasons to preserve prudential goods have an *agent-neutral* character. In the case of the Grand Canyon, everyone has a reason to preserve it, not just you and me. Likewise, it is not just me who has a conservative reason not to destroy my loving relationship but also you, a third party, if it is within your power to do so.

The picture that emerges from these considerations is thus reminiscent of the Moorean view about why we should promote people's well-being. Donald Regan (2004, p. 204) characterises it as follows:

> On this approach, any agent's fundamental obligation is to bring about the existence of as much good as possible. The 'good' asserted here is an agent-neutral good, not tied conceptually to any person's interests. But in fact the most important goods are certain kinds of events and experiences that occur within individual lives. Therefore, an important part of promoting the good turns out to be promoting certain events and experiences in individual lives.

Of course, Conservatism about Prudential Value is not concerned with bringing about the existence of loving relationships and important personal projects, but rather with preserving these things. Still, it likewise postulates no profound normative distinction between what is good for particular people and what is good simpliciter. We have a conservative reason to preserve certain non-instrumentally valuable things, some of which happen to occur in people's lives. Therefore, an important part of preserving non-instrumentally valuable things turns out to be preserving prudential goods.

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[2] In a recent paper, Nebel (2022) distinguishes between three ways of grounding conservative reasons: (i) in fitting response or, as he calls it, respect, (ii) in valuing attitudes, as proposed by Scheffler (2007; 2013; 2018), and (iii) in the concern for the good of the valuable things, as suggested by Nebel himself. Each of these accounts could in principle support Conservatism about Prudential Value, but it is helpful to adopt a specific one in this paper.

To be sure, it is much more common for a person to have a conservative reason to engage in a particular way with their own relationships and projects than with other people's. But that's just because people are generally in a privileged position to influence the trajectory of their own engagements. Only you can cultivate your relationships and projects, and you have more opportunities to destroy or damage them than I do. Moreover, I might have a stronger overall reason not to ruin my relationship than you do because of the special duties that I owe to my loved one in virtue of being in a loving relationship with them.

Third, conservative reasons are merely *pro tanto* reasons. If a new loving relationship or important personal project would be vastly more valuable (and not just slightly so), then taking it up at the expense of an existing one would plausibly be what you all-things-considered ought to do. After all, the prospective prudential value of the potential replacement also confers reasons on us, and these reasons might prove to be stronger.

Fourth, let's take a moment to consider which prudential goods we have a conservative reason to preserve. In the literature on well-being, it is common to distinguish between hedonic and non-hedonic goods. Hedonic goods include simple sensory pleasures like the feeling of a warm shower on your skin and more sophisticated experiences like enjoying a beautiful painting. Non-hedonic goods include loving relationships and personal projects culminating in achievements, among other things. Accordingly, one might suggest that we have no conservative reason to preserve hedonic goods and that we have a moral reason to preserve non-hedonic goods. After all, there appears to be no reason to be concerned whether the pleasant experience of a warm shower on one's skin continues or whether it is supplanted by another pleasant experience, as long the replacement is at least as good. By contrast, as we have seen, there does seem to be a reason to be concerned with the preservation of loving relationships and important personal projects.

However, this partition does not do the relevant explanatory work, and its extension is only roughly correct. Take the issue of explanation first. To determine whether a particular object warrants preservation, we must investigate its nature. I think that what's distinctive about hedonic goods, and what confers their special value on them, is that they are essentially *transient*. They come and go. In virtue of this feature, resisting replacement is generally not warranted. By contrast, many non-hedonic goods are *enduring* or *historical*, for lack of a better term. That is, their special value depends on the fact that they stand in specific relations to our past and persist through time. In virtue of this, non-hedonic goods typically warrant preservation in the face of replacement. Thus, I believe that it is the distinction between transient and enduring objects that has explanatory significance, not the distinction between hedonic and non-hedonic goods.

What about the extension of the partition between hedonic and non-hedonic goods? I think that when we reflect on the full range of possible relationships and personal projects, it becomes apparent that we do not always have a reason to preserve them. For one thing, some valuable engagements have a natural conclusion point. For example, it's futile to continue pursuing the goal of being the first person to run a four-minute mile if that has already been done, be it by you or someone else. Likewise, it is perfectly fine to let go of that summer romance when leaves start to change their colours. This contrasts with most careers and committed relationships, which do not typically feature an apparent finish line. For another, only our important personal projects warrant conservation. Minor and tentative engagements, such as half-learned languages and half-begun papers, do not call for continuation in the same way that careers and other life-defining projects do.

Fifth, let's now consider the content of conservative reasons. There are two ways in which Conservatism about Prudential Value is more nuanced in this respect than it may initially seem.

The first issue is that we rarely have a conservative reason to preserve a valuable object 'as is'. To see that, note that any loving relationship has many features, and only some of them are *value-conferring*. Plausibly, these are the only features we have a reason to preserve. The petty arguments you have with your spouse, like the one about what gift to get your mutual friend for their birthday or the envy you sometimes feel about each other's accomplishments, seem to take away from that relationship's value and preserving them is not something required of you.

Moreover, it can sometimes be appropriate to allow for or make changes to the value-conferring features of a valuable object. For example, you might settle on a more modest goal time for your next race. Allowing such developments to occur is not equivalent to abandoning an existing engagement. After all, like cultures and languages, relationships and projects can naturally evolve over time, so to stop this process would threaten their survival.[3] Other changes, especially to the value-conferring features, can destroy valuable engagements altogether or turn them into

[3] For an insightful discussion of cultural change and its desirability, see Scheffler (2007).

something different. For example, when love between two people is replaced by hate, they are no longer in a valuable relationship.[4]

The second issue is that what we have a conservative reason to do sometimes goes beyond merely ensuring that certain ingredients of our well-being *continue to exist*. This is so in two related ways.

For one thing, when someone lets an extraordinarily valuable relationship deteriorate so much that it survives at a level that is just barely good, their behaviour clearly falls short of being fitting. This suggests that preserving valuable things *in a flourishing state* is important.[5] And whether that is achieved depends, at least partly, on how valuable the surviving thing is relative to how valuable it was.

Moreover, it is essential to *cultivate* loving relationships and personal projects. Someone who last ran years ago can hardly call themself a runner. And someone who hasn't come up with any jokes or performed in a long time can't call themself a comedian. Whatever engagement you take on, you have to keep earning the title.

This concludes my characterisation of the key features of Conservatism about Value. To summarise, on this view, we have a pro tanto moral reason to conserve certain prudential goods when and because this is a fitting response to their value. These goods include a range of enduring goods, such as loving relationships and important personal projects. We have a reason to preserve these things even when a superior replacement is available, but we rarely have a reason to preserve them 'as is' or merely to ensure that they continue to exist.

There is, of course, more to say about these features of Conservatism about Prudential Value. Relationships and projects come in many types, and we may want to know precisely what conservative efforts are called for in each case. We will make some progress on these matters in the remainder of the paper, as we investigate a set of puzzles concerning directing one's life in youth, adulthood, and older age; moving on from a loss; and the significance of a life's shape.

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[4] Of course, there will also be cases in which it is not obvious whether a valuable engagement has been destroyed, or merely significantly altered. For instance, suppose that Andreas and Heidi are initially romantic partners, but later choose to relate to each other merely as co-parents and friends. It's contentious whether their original bond has been severed altogether. To determine that in any given case, we need to examine the relevant persistence conditions.

[5] Frick (2017) makes a similar observation about our reasons to ensure humanity's survival.

## 4. Exploration and commitment

In the remainder of the paper, I want to offer further support for Conservatism about Prudential Value by showing that it elucidates several old and new puzzles about how we should direct our lives.

The first issue that I will examine is a novel puzzle about the balance between exploration and commitment at different stages of life.

Start with *youth*. Conservatism about Prudential Value might appear to generate a dilemma at this stage of life. On the one hand, if you take on a valuable engagement at a younger age, this choice seems to carry special significance into the future. A budding cellist, for example, appears to be under considerable normative pressure to move forward with her musical education, even if she wishes to turn to boxing instead. Similarly, one appears to have a weighty moral reason to cultivate that first relationship for as long as possible, even when further, more valuable romantic opportunities arise. This may strike us as objectionably constraining.

On the other hand, although we could escape the force of conservative reasons by abstaining from relationships and important personal projects, that would greatly impoverish our lives. After all, these goods are widely recognised as some of the most significant contributors to our well-being.

Thus, younger people appear to face the unfortunate choice between putting on conservative shackles and missing out on some of the best things in life. We can refer to this predicament as *the Dilemma of Youth*.

This problem admits several possible responses. Let's start with two that target the first horn of the dilemma. One option is to deny outright that the youthful pursuits in question count as genuine, non-instrumentally valuable projects and relationships. If they don't, they do not fall under the scope of Conservatism about Prudential Value, and engaging in them does not constrain our future choices at all. Call this *the No Value Solution.*

However, this solution comes at a high cost. Although it does not compel us to abstain from valuable engagements in youth, it does imply that this part of our life is significantly impoverished anyway, which is difficult to square with our intuitions.

The second response to the Dilemma of Youth is subtler. It concedes that our adolescent engagements are non-instrumentally valuable and instead postulates that this part of life is covered by a grace period. That is, conservative reasons do not apply in youth, and we can take on relationships and projects without the fear of having to keep them up once new opportunities arise. Call this *the Grace Period Solution*.

The Grace Period Solution may seem attractive, but on reflection, I think that it proves too much. While not all youthful engagements warrant conservation, some certainly do. It would be regrettable, for example, for the teenage Saul Kripke to abandon a proof in modal logic a couple of steps away from completion, and not only because he would thereby miss out on a major achievement. More mundanely, perhaps, many of us have been fortunate enough to be at a young age in a loving relationship characterised by a mutual valuing of that bond, emotional vulnerability, and intuitive understanding of the reasons this connection generates.[6] These kinds of youthful engagements seem to warrant conservation.

In light of these unsuccessful attempts to tackle the Dilemma of Youth, let's ask not if the premises of the argument comprising the dilemma's first horn are true but whether the advertised conclusion follows from them. That is, is it true that the implications that Conservatism about Prudential Value has in this context are objectionably demanding?

To address this question, I want to begin by noting that what's distinctive about youth is that we are still learning a lot. For one thing, we are yet to fully appreciate what's out there: what possible engagements the world can offer us, how valuable they are, how much effort and time they require, and so on. But there is also an important self-knowledge component. We must cast our net widely and explore different possibilities to figure out what we are good at, what brings us joy, and how much we can fit in a day, a year, or a lifetime. As we collect more information, we put ourselves in a better position to decide which engagements to take up in adulthood.

In axiological terms, this means that cycling through many projects and relationships at this stage of life has extraordinary instrumental value for us. Once we take this value into account and acknowledge that the prudential reasons it confers on us will often outweigh the moral reasons to preserve our initial relationships and projects, the implications that Conservatism about Prudential Value has for this stage of life no longer appear to be objectionably demanding. We can call this *the Learning Phase Solution*.

Turn now to *adulthood* and *older age*. The preceding insights also apply to these stages of life. By the time we transition into adulthood, the benefits associated with

[6] For this way of thinking about the nature of love, see Kolodny (2003).

learning about ourselves and the external world start to diminish rapidly—at least if things go well in one's youth and one successfully engages in multiple relationships and projects, which admittedly is not always the case. In contrast, the moral reasons to preserve existing engagements retain their weight. As a result, the conservative grip tightens around us at this stage of life. This accounts for our pre-theoretic intuitions about this matter: we tend to accept that our adult engagements place significant and binding demands on our future conduct, unlike those pursued in our youth.

Thus characterised, our decisions concerning which relationships and projects to take on, and whether to preserve them or move on, are reminiscent of *the optimal stopping problem* familiar from mathematics. Brian Christian and Tom Griffiths (2016) illustrate this problem as follows:

> You interview the applicants in random order, one at a time. You can decide to offer the job to an applicant at any point and they are guaranteed to accept, terminating the search. But if you pass over an applicant, deciding not to hire them, they are gone forever.

The question, naturally, is when to stop and commit to hiring a candidate. As it turns out, there is a unique solution to this problem. You set a predetermined fraction of the candidate pool—37%, to be precise—for the 'look' phase, in which you learn about your options and categorically do not choose anyone. After that point, you enter the 'leap' phase, during which you commit to the first option that is superior to all you have already encountered. This strategy maximises the probability of selecting the best candidate. Call this *the 37% Rule*.[7]

Of course, the optimal stopping problem makes several structural assumptions which may or may not be replicated in real life (for example: if you pass over a candidate, they are gone forever). But the general lesson remains useful for our purposes. As we go about our lives, we need to spend a considerable amount of time exploring different loving relationships and personal projects, or else we run a high risk of never discovering the engagements which would be most valuable for us. But it is not permissible for us to keep up this approach for too long because the prudential reasons associated with the instrumental benefits of exploration quickly diminish, and the moral reasons to preserve existing engagements retain their

[7] See Christian and Griffiths (2016), Ch. 1, for an accessible explanation of this result.

weight. So, there will come the point when the balance of reasons favours conserving an existing engagement over replacing it.

Indeed, if something like the 37% Rule turned out to be the optimal approach to navigating valuable engagements in our lives, that would dovetail with our intuitions. For it would mean that a typical person expecting to live for 80 years should, ideally, spend roughly the first 30 years of their life exploring their options, after which point it's best to commit.

## 5. New engagements at the end of life

The second puzzling issue that I want to investigate through the lens of Conservatism about Prudential Value concerns older age. In particular, the elderly are often reluctant to engage in new loving relationships and important personal projects, and in doing so they seem to needlessly deprive themselves of things that greatly enrich our lives.[8]

While Conservatism about Prudential Value is mainly concerned with our existing attachments, I believe that it can also help vindicate this forward-looking attitude. To see that, note that older age is often marked by cognitive and physical decline, which may make it impossible for a person to maintain a valuable relationship or important personal project in a flourishing state. And, intuitively, we have a reason not to take on new commitments when we are aware that this is likely to happen.

The reason in question seems to be an instance of what Johann Frick (2020) calls *standard-regarding reasons,* which, he argues, govern our reproductive choices:

> I claim that any outcome in which I create a new person S is subject to a moral standard (that of S's well-being), which is grounded in the existence of S, a being with moral status. This moral standard is satisfied if S has a life that is worth living, and failed if she has a life that is not worth living. … If I am unable to give S a life that is worth living, I have a standard-regarding reason not to create S. (p. 73)

[8] To be sure, this attitude is also common among those who are not old in the conventional sense, but instead find themselves at the end of life because of a terminal illness. For the sake of simplicity, however, I focus here on the seniors.

Loving relationships and important personal projects also seem to be subject to moral standards. These moral standards are satisfied when our valuable attachments are maintained in a flourishing state and not satisfied when they are neglected or destroyed. Thus, like bringing a child into this world while knowing that you will not be able to provide for it, taking on a new valuable engagement with the awareness that you will not be able to cultivate it is something you have a reason against.

A notable corollary of this is that we should take special care to secure for the later stages of life certain background conditions (health, wealth, etc.) essential to maintaining loving relationships and personal projects. If we fail to make such provisions, we may not only neglect the things which already contribute to our well-being, but also find ourselves unable to take on new valuable engagements.

Having said that, it is important to understand that Conservatism about Prudential Value does not imply that we should be completely passive and austere in older age. First, as noted earlier, conservative reasons are pro tanto reasons. Even at this stage of life, it seems possible to enter a loving relationship or start a project which would make a temporary contribution to our well-being so significant that it ought to be pursued even in the face of impending decline. Similarly, we may sometimes have overall reason to hold on to our existing attachments, even if we cannot maintain them for much longer.

Second, as we have also discovered, not all relationships and projects must be preserved indefinitely or for a very long time. Many attachments have a natural conclusion point: a summer romance, perhaps, or a project that will take a few months rather than a few years to complete. Conservative standards are easier to satisfy in such cases. Thus, strikingly, seniors have no excuse for not engaging in fleeting relationships and projects.

## 6. Moving on from a loss

The third puzzling issue that I want to address concerns loss and when it is appropriate to move on.

Suppose that, after many years of marriage, your spouse dies unexpectedly. While this relationship has come to an end, many people share the sentiment that you should abstain from entering a new loving relationship, at least for some time. Arguably, our important personal projects are similar: you have a moral reason to refrain from taking on a new engagement immediately after the one you are currently pursuing shatters, as when a person aiming to become the first to run a four-minute mile is beaten to this accomplishment.

These kinds of attitudes also extend to certain things which are valuable simpliciter, such as architectural marvels. Consider the example of the 18$^{th}$-century Saxon Palace in downtown Warsaw, a former royal residence, which was destroyed by German troops in retaliation for the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Close to eight decades later, this space remains unutilised, and many citizens argue that it should never be, even if it could be replaced with a new structure which would be architecturally as impressive as the original and serve as an equally good reminder of the horrors of war.

What's common to these three cases is that something that was once non-instrumentally valuable but no longer exists continues to call for a certain kind of response from members of the moral community. In particular, it calls for preservation—though not so much of the valuable thing itself, but rather of the space it used to occupy in our lives. This suggests that the scope of Conservatism about Prudential Value is even broader than we might have assumed: we seem to have a moral reason to conserve not only certain *existing* valuable engagements but also some *past* valuable engagements that have ended prematurely.

That said, it is important to recognise that not all attachments have this profile. Suppose that you start a new friendship after the circumstances of life put an end to a previous one. Or imagine that a woodworking accident puts an end to your favourite pastime, climbing, and you fill the gap by taking up running. In both cases, a valuable engagement comes to an end through no fault of your own, and yet moving on does not strike us as disloyal or otherwise morally objectionable.

I think that we can explain this difference in the normative status of our valuable attachments by pointing to their disparate characters. Typically, romantic relationships and life-defining projects are *exclusive* in nature. This means that a new romantic relationship or a new life-defining project is bound to, at least partly, take the place of the old engagement. By contrast, friendships and many lesser personal projects are *inclusive*, in the sense that they can be reconciled with each other.

This distinction between exclusive and inclusive engagements is especially natural in the synchronic context. For example, entering a new romantic relationship while the old one is still going and pursuing both at the same time often seems objectionable, whereas having multiple friends does not. Likewise, orienting your life towards a Hollywood career while still playing football at the highest level—as

Jim Brown did—seems troubling in a way that combining passions for recreational climbing and running does not.

But I think that the same distinction also plays an important role in the diachronic context. In particular, when an attachment is exclusive and comes to an end prematurely, it calls for the preservation of the space that it used to occupy in our lives, and we have a conservative reason not to move on. The cases with which this section started are of this kind. On the other hand, when an inclusive engagement is terminated, we are free to press on with our lives and seek out new relationships and projects.

I believe that these considerations help us resolve a long-standing puzzle concerning loss. Return to the case of your spouse's unexpected death. It seems inappropriate to move on, say, just one day after the death of your loved one, but perhaps it is not inappropriate to do that a year or two later. Moreover, it does not seem permissible to move on to just any relationship that would be good for you; the new relationship must be *good enough*. How can we account for these intuitions?

One potentially helpful idea is that conservative reasons diminish in strength over time and possibly even expire eventually. This kind of suggestion has been made in a closely related context: about reasons for grief. In particular, Krister Bykvist (2009, p. 16) argues that the fittingness of certain sentiments "depends on the 'distance' between oneself and the object", where that includes "personal, modal, and temporal distance".

However, as Berislav Marusic (2018, p. 12) points out, Bykvist's view has implausible implications in cases like the following:

> Suppose that you are in a car accident with your mother. You survive, but your mother does not. However, you spend years in a coma. When you wake up, you are informed that your mother has died. You are not relieved, and have no reason to be relieved, to hear the accident happened ten years ago. The mere passage of time makes no difference to your reasons.

The lesson of this example carries over to the present context. The strength of conservative reasons likewise does not seem to diminish with time.

A better explanation for why the appropriateness of moving on varies with time appeals to a curious feature of our psychology. C. S. Lewis (2001) describes it aptly in his reflections on the death of his wife:

> I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense. It comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone. I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string, then I remember and have to lay the bow down. (p. 47)

As Lewis observes here, even after a relationship ends, it continues to occupy our attention and emotions. In fact, it often makes an even greater claim on our mental life than it used to when the other person was still around. Lewis notes that, too, in the same piece:

> Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. (pp. 9-10)

These features of grief profoundly affect our ability to form and sustain new attachments. For most people, starting a new valuable relationship is impossible when they continue to act as if the other person is still present in their life and continue to think about their loss. In these circumstances, one cannot exhibit the kind of emotional vulnerability that is required for genuine love. We do, eventually, extricate ourselves from this state of mind. But this process takes time. For some people, it is a couple of months; for others, it might be a decade. Only then are we finally able to take on a new valuable engagement.

These considerations alone suffice to explain the first aspect of the puzzle: why moving on from a loss seems more appropriate with the passage of time. But we need to appeal to Conservatism about Prudential Value to explain the second aspect of the puzzle: that the new relationship must be 'good enough', not just 'good'. Since conservative reasons do not expire with time, only sufficiently strong prudential reasons conferred by the prospective value of the new relationship will be able to outweigh them. That's why not just any valuable relationship will do; it must be sufficiently valuable.

## 7. Prudence and morality: an interlude

In the preceding three sections, I have argued that Conservatism about Value can illuminate many otherwise puzzling intuitions and sentiments about starting, preserving, and ending our loving relationships and important personal projects at various stages of life.

This discussion has a curious feature. Antecedently, these puzzles may have appeared to belong squarely in the domain of prudence. After all, they are all concerned with how to pursue, prioritise, and organise *prudential* goods over the course of a life. Accordingly, we might have expected to resolve them entirely within the prudential domain, perhaps by identifying some previously overlooked prudential reasons or by weighing prudential considerations in a novel way.

We have discovered something quite different, however. Our conduct towards our own relationships and projects is constrained, and must be informed, not just by prudential but also by moral reasons. This is so even when other people's interests are not at stake. Indeed, I believe that the issues discussed in the preceding sections are puzzling largely because they involve a previously unacknowledged conflict between our prudential and moral reasons. For example, while we continue to have some prudential reason to explore new relationships and projects even late in life, at that point, we typically have a stronger moral reason to commit to a select few.

Having said that, there is a way to bring all of these issues back into the domain of prudence while retaining the core of the conservative insight that we have a moral reason to preserve our loving relationships and important personal projects.

What we need is something to bridge the gap between what we have moral reasons and prudential reasons to do. One attractive way to do that is to adopt a less restrictive view about what makes our lives go well. As Derek Parfit (2016) points out, certain acts seem in themselves bad for the person who performs them, in the sense that they are in one way bad for them even when they have no further bad effects on their well-being. For example, your life seems to go worse when you deceive other people, coerce them, act unjustly, or break promises. As Parfit puts it:

> Reviewing what we have made of our lives, in which our main projects have failed, we might be consoled by the thought that we have at least done some good, and that we haven't often acted in ways that were seriously wrong. These would be partial achievements, to set against our failures to achieve

> our other aims. On this view, if we are morally bad and act wrongly, these facts would not merely cause our lives to go worse, but would be in themselves ways in which our lives would go worse. (pp. 401-2)

Now, while Parfit's discussion focuses on the moral significance of treating *people* in specific ways, I believe that this is just one instance of a broader issue: the moral significance of responding appropriately to what is non-instrumentally valuable. Just as we fail to respect people when we deceive them, we fail to respond fittingly to the value of relationships and personal projects—and it makes our lives go worse—when we neglect them. We can call this *the Bad Acts Thesis*.

Armed with the Bad Acts Thesis, we can recast the issues discussed earlier as involving conflicts between prudential reasons sourced in different aspects of well-being. To give just one example, in the case of the loss of a spouse, while we have some prudential reason find a new partner soon after, we might have a stronger *prudential* reason to abstain from entering a new relationship grounded in our interest to respond appropriately to the special value of the previous relationship.

The Bad Acts Thesis is bound to strike some people as controversial. For what it's worth, the reader is free to decide for themselves if they are willing to accept it and, thus, which way of hashing out the puzzles discussed in the previous sections they prefer. My principal aim has been to show that Conservatism about Prudential Value can elucidate these puzzles, and that remains true regardless of whether we take this view to give us just moral reasons or also, indirectly, prudential reasons.

Having said that, there is a significant advantage to accepting the Bad Acts Thesis. If we do that, we can appeal to Conservatism about Prudential Value to resolve a long-standing puzzle concerning the evaluative significance of a life's shape. The next section explains this.

## 8. The significance of a life's shape

After examining youth, adulthood, and older age in isolation, let's now turn to a puzzle about life considered as a whole. To get a grip on this puzzle, consider two ways in which your life might go.

*Improvement*: Your life begins in the depths and has an upward trend: misery in the early years, mixed fortune in the prime of your life, followed by flourishing in older age.

*Deterioration*: Your life begins at the heights and has a downward trend: an early period of flourishing, mixed fortune in the prime of your life, followed by misery in older age.

In describing these cases, I have used vague expressions like 'hardship' and 'flourishing' because the puzzle I am about to describe arises for a wide range of theories of well-being. As noted in the introduction, however, I am assuming an objective list theory of well-being for the sake of concreteness. We should therefore think of an upward trend in *Improvement* as corresponding to an improvement in one or more of the objective goods, and conversely for *Deterioration*.

How do these lives compare? When confronted with this choice, many people have the intuition that the improving life is better. So, for example, if you had to choose one of these lives for your child or a loved one, you should choose the former.[9] But this judgment is puzzling. Notice that these two lives are permutations of each other—in the sense that for every period of flourishing in one life, there is exactly one such period in the other, and so on. This, on one kind of view, strongly suggests that *Improvement* and *Deterioration* are equally good.

My aim in this section is to resolve this puzzle be developing a theoretical rationale for the intuitive judgment that *Improvement* is indeed better. This rationale is rooted in Conservatism about Prudential Value and the Bad Acts Thesis.

To get a grip on this solution, consider the following more specific cases that feature contrasting patterns of temporal well-being.

*Lost Love*: In his youth, Alex has a number of highly fulfilling relationships. Over the years, however, he lets these attachments crumble, and they are replaced by other, more superficial relationships.

[9] This is intuition is recorded in the literature by Slote (1983), Bigelow et al. (1990), Velleman (1991), Kamm (1998; 2003), Portmore (2007), Temkin (2012), Kauppinen (2012), Glasgow (2013), Dorsey (2015), and Hirose (2015).

> *Found Love:* Alex's youthful relationships are relatively superficial, but over the years, they deepen, and he continues to make new, highly meaningful connections.

Let's assume that these two lives are otherwise very similar: for example, Alex does not realise that his relationships are getting worse in the first case, or, if he does, this realization does not cause him any distress. Even with these assumptions, I believe, Found Love is better than Lost Love.

A natural explanation of this judgment draws on Conservatism about Prudential Value. In Lost Love, Alex fails to preserve existing valuable relationships (and they are replaced with others which are also less good), which—according to the Bad Acts Thesis—is in itself bad for him. This is not so in Found Love. Thus, even if Alex's life ultimately contains the same relationships in either case, Lost Love is worse for him than Found Love.

An analogous gloss can be given for the comparison between two lives which differ in terms of when one's greatest achievements occur.

> *Early Breakthrough*: Ada takes up a career in academic philosophy. She writes her most original and insightful article shortly after finishing her graduate studies. Her subsequent publications continue to make valuable contributions, but their quality steadily diminishes over time.

> *Late Breakthrough*: Ada begins her career in academic philosophy with a relatively pedestrian article, but the originality and insight of her work steadily improve over time.

Here, as before, there is something tragic about a situation in which great accomplishments at the start of one's life are not replicated further down the road. I believe that Conservatism about Prudential Value is uniquely positioned to explain this, in the following way. When Ada sets her sights on a career in academic philosophy, she takes on a valuable personal project. Her plan is presumably not to write just one outstanding article, but rather to make significant scholarly contributions throughout her career. As noted earlier, our important personal projects must be preserved in a flourishing state. Ada apparently fails to do that in Early Breakthrough since the quality of her papers deteriorates over time, which is in itself bad for her. By contrast, this is not the case in Late Breakthrough. So, Ada's life is worse in Early Breakthrough than in Late Breakthrough, even if these scenarios ultimately feature the same achievements.

These considerations lead me to propose the following account. *Improvement* is better than *Deterioration* just in case and because these lives differ in terms of whether certain prudential goods, such as loving relationships and important personal projects, have been conserved over time. In cases of *Deterioration*, the extent of the failure to conserve these things is typically greater than in cases of *Improvement*, and such failures are intrinsically bad. So, *Improvement* is typically better than *Decline*. Call this *the Conservative Account*.

Two sets of considerations will help us appreciate the nuance and strength of this solution. First, I would like to stress that although the above examples are stylized, they are not cherry-picked. The same feature—the failure to conserve certain prudential goods—is at least implicit in all key examples discussed in the literature on this topic. For example, Michael Slote (1983), to whom the contemporary debate over the significance of a life's shape can be traced, centres his discussion on the following case that involves contrasting achievement patterns.

> *Political Careers*: "A given man may achieve political power and, once in power, do things of great value, after having been in the political wilderness throughout his earlier career. He may later die while still 'in harness' and fully possessed of his power, at a decent old age. By contrast, another man may have meteoric success in youth, attaining the same office as the first man and also achieving much good; but then lose power, while still young, never to regain it. Without hearing anything more, I think our natural, immediate reaction to these examples would be that the first man was the more fortunate, and this seems to suggest a time preference for goods that come late in life." (pp. 23-4)[10]

I will return to Slote's preferred diagnosis in a moment. For now, let me just note that the Conservative Account offers an alternative explanation of the advertised intuition: the description of the second politician's life suggests that he failed to adequately cultivate his political career, which was in itself bad for him.

[10] Velleman (1991) also discusses this case in his influential article on the topic. So does Dorsey (2015), who supplements it with a similar example involving O. J. Simpson (who started as a successful football player and ended as a convict) and J. O. Nospmis (a fictional character whose life proceeded in the reverse order).

Second, I believe the Conservative Account compares favourably with three popular views offered in the literature: *the Temporal Location Account*, *the Pattern Account,* and *the Narrative Account*. Let's consider these in turn.

According to Slote's (1983) Temporal Location Account, an improving life is better than a deteriorating life because what happens later in life has greater weight in determining the life's overall value. In other words, any given prudential good will contribute more to the goodness of a life if it occurs in one's adulthood or older age rather than youth. That is why an improving life, in which the best things happen late in life, is better than a deteriorating life.

The Pattern Account offers a different take. On this view, the fact that your life features an improvement is itself a source of well-being (and that your life features a deterioration is a source of ill-being), quite independently of any attitudes you might have towards these trends and their impact on your well-being. This view has been endorsed by the likes of Frances Kamm (2003), Larry Temkin (2012), Joshua Glasgow (2013), and Iwao Hirose (2015).

An undeniable attraction of these two views is their simplicity. But it is also the source of their main flaw: they wrongly predict that an improving life is *always* better. Let's take a moment to explain why this is a vice, and not a virtue, of these accounts. To begin with, consider the following case due to Dale Dorsey (2015, p. 319):

> *Hedonic Experiments*: "[C]ompare two different experiments. The first person is hooked up to a pleasure-stimulating computer with software designed to start his life at a neutral level: no pleasure, no pain. Gradually, say, twice a year, the pleasure is increased in a linear fashion. The second is precisely the opposite: the person's machine starts out with quite a lot of pleasure. Gradually, also twice per year, the software decreases the pleasure in a linear fashion, such that both people, over the course of their lives, will generate the same amount of sensory pleasure."

Many people find it implausible that an improving life is better than a deteriorating life in this scenario, and I share that intuition. Moreover, the shape of a life does not seem to matter when it aligns with the character of one's engagements. For example, the life of a philosopher who does their best work later in life does not appear to be automatically better than that of a typical athlete who peaks in their late twenties. The Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account cannot accommodate these intuitions.

By contrast, the Conservative Account gets these cases right because it recognises that what we have a reason to do depends on the nature of the valuable object. As we have seen, hedonic goods are merely to be savoured while they last, so it does not matter whether we experience greater pleasures earlier or later in life. Moreover, an athletic career has an early natural conclusion point marked by an impending decline in physical ability, which makes participation at the elite level impossible, so there is no conservative reason to cultivate it beyond that point.

In addition to demonstrating that the Temporal Location Account and the Pattern Account are inadequate, these examples carry a more general lesson. The original intuition that might have had, that *Improvement* is better than *Deterioration* regardless of what happens in these two lives, turns out to be incorrect. The refined intuition is that an improving life is typically better than a deteriorating life, and this is what we must ultimately explain.

Turn now to the third prominent account offered in the literature: the Narrative Account. It holds that *Improvement* is better than *Deterioration* when and because these lives differ in terms of certain narrative relations between discrete events, such as when one learns from a past misfortune or when an eventual success renders a particular effort a good investment rather than a waste. David Velleman (1991) defends this account, and its variants have been endorsed by Jeff McMahan (2002), Douglas Portmore (2007), Antti Kauppinen (2012), and Dale Dorsey (2015).

The Narrative Account is closer to the truth in that it recognises, first, that an improving life is only typically better than a deteriorating life and, second, that to determine whether it is, we have to look at relations between discrete events in one's life. Still, it appears to be wanting in at least three respects.

First, the Narrative Account cannot accommodate our intuitions in many cases, such as the contrast between Found and Lost Love or between Late and Early Breakthrough. These scenarios do not differ—or at least need not differ—in terms of whether the agent learned from their past mistake or their efforts turned into a success. To be sure, learning from past mistakes and turning struggles into a success do have something in common: for example, they are aggregates of discrete events in a person's life or a course of history. But not all such aggregates of events have evaluative significance. For example, the badness of the pain I experienced when I stubbed my toe yesterday is not cancelled by the fact that I had a delicious kale salad for lunch today. So there must be some further, more specific feature that makes learning from past mistakes and turning struggles into success evaluatively significant. But it is at least unclear from Velleman's discussion what this feature is. This is in stark contrast to the Conservative Account, which identifies a single evaluatively significant feature in all relevant comparisons: whether certain prudential goods have been conserved over time.

Finally, the scenarios used by proponents of the Narrative Account to motivate their view often lend themselves to more natural elucidations via the Conservative Account. For example, Velleman (1991, p. 55) extensively discusses the following case.

> In one life your first ten years of marriage are troubled and end in divorce, but you immediately remarry happily; in another life the troubled years of the first marriage lead to eventual happiness as the relationship matures.

Velleman believes that the second life would be better and claims that this points to the importance of learning from past mistakes. However, when I reflect on this case, the feature that stands out to me is that the first loving (if troubled) relationship has been conserved, whereas the second has been simply abandoned and replaced.

Overall, these considerations lead me to conclude that the Conservative Account provides a better explanation of the significance of a life's shape than the Temporal Location Account, the Pattern Account, and the Narrative Account.

## 9. Concluding remarks

If Conservatism about Prudential Value is true, we cannot start a new life whenever we please. Our existing loving relationships and important personal projects warrant a certain kind of loyalty, in virtue of which we have a moral reason to conserve them.

As we have seen, this view best explains the evaluative ambivalence we witness in cases of replacing loving relationships and important personal projects, and it vindicates a range of our otherwise puzzling intuitions and sentiments. These include: that it is permissible to cycle through many different projects and relationships in youth, but not at later stages of life; that the reluctance to start new engagements at the end of life is often justified; that we should not move on from a loss of a loved one too quickly and to a relationship that is just barely good for us;

and that an improving life is typically better than a deteriorating life even if these lives contain many of the same things.

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