



# Permanent Value

**ABSTRACT:** *Temporal nihilism is the view that our lives will not matter after we die. According to the standard interpretation, this is because our lives will not make a permanent difference. Many who consider the view thus reject it by denying that our lives need to have an eternal impact. However, in this essay, I develop a different formulation of temporal nihilism revolving around the persistence of personal value itself. According to this more powerful conception of nihilism, we do not have personal value after death, so our past life no longer has well-being after we die. The standard objections to the standard interpretation do not apply to this more nihilistic nihilism. I offer a new response according to which personal value persists after death because the person continues to exist.*

**KEYWORDS:** nihilism, well-being, time, death, abstracta

The concern that our life does not matter has many strands. In this essay, I consider just one: Does our life have value for us after we die? According to the temporal nihilist, the answer is *no*. There is no *permanent* personal significance of what we do while alive. After death, it will be, for us, as if we had never lived at all.

Temporal nihilism is different from other strands of nihilism. It is not the concern, discussed by Thomas Nagel (1979: 12), that human beings are unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Even if we were cosmically important while alive, the temporal nihilist denies that our life we be important *for us* after death. Temporal nihilism is also not the concern, discussed by Robert Nozick (1981: 587–88), with whether our lives have a higher ‘plan’ or ‘purpose’. Even if there were such a plan or purpose, the temporal nihilist denies that fulfilling such plans while alive continues to matter *for us* after death. Temporal nihilism is also not concerned with whether there is ‘meaning in life’ in the form a special sort of prudential good, as discussed by Susan Wolf (2010, 1997), Thaddeus Metz (2013: chs. 8, 12), John Kekes (2000), David Wiggins (1976), and Richard Taylor (1970: ch. 18). Even if we acquired such meaning while alive, the temporal nihilist thinks, it vanishes upon death.

According to the standard interpretation, temporal nihilism is the view that our lives do not permanently matter because they do not make a permanent impact upon the world. The standard response is that something can be valuable without making a permanent difference. While this may be so, it does not undermine a stronger version of temporal nihilism, which holds that personal value *itself* is not

I thank Larry Temkin for his feedback on a much earlier version of this essay. I also thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for several suggestions that lead to significant improvements, especially the inclusion of discussion of the *value from valuing* condition, the Sick Toddler case, and the consideration in the final section of the various proposals other than my preferred view.

permanent. After death, nothing is valuable for us—permanent difference or not. In this essay, I argue against this form of temporal nihilism. Things can be valuable for us even when we are dead because we still exist after death.

In what follows, I first discuss the standard interpretation of temporal nihilism. I then suggest that relationalism about personal value offers resources to develop a stronger version. I next use these resources to formulate an argument for this stronger version. I argue that we can reject this form of temporal nihilism if we hold that personal value can permanently persist after death. I then argue that, in fact, personal value can permanently persist after death. I canvass several conceptions of the subject of well-being that purport to underwrite this permanence, and, in the spirit of philosophical exploration, I suggest that we should hold that people exist after death as abstract objects.

A note on terminology: At issue in this essay is *personal* value, so all references to *value* pick out value for someone. And for stylistic variation, I interchange talk of the value of someone's *life*—where this means the value of someone's life for *them*—with talk of that person's *well-being*, whereby I mean their *lifetime* well-being.

## 1. Temporal Argument for Nihilism

The standard conception of temporal nihilism takes it to be the concern that all we do while alive will eventually turn to ash and dust. As Nagel puts the worry, 'It is often remarked that nothing we do now will matter in a million years' (1979: 11). Nozick portrays concern thus: 'it shouldn't *ever* be as if you had never existed at all. . . . A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world' (1981: 582). Leo Tolstoy confesses his own fears: 'Is there any meaning in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitable death that awaits me? . . . Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come. . . and nothing will remain other than the stench and the worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist' (1987: ch. 4).

On this conception, temporal nihilism is the view that our life does not matter because at some point it will no longer have any effect on the world. Meghan Sullivan (2018: 169) formulates this conception in terms of the *permanence principle*: 'The meaningfulness of an activity at a time depends upon it making a permanent difference in the world'. Sullivan uses the permanence principle to construct the *temporal argument for nihilism*:

- (1) The meaningfulness of an activity at a time depends upon it making a permanent difference in the world [. . .].
- (2) Nothing we can do will make a permanent difference in the world.
- (C) Therefore, nothing we can do has meaning now. (2018: 169)

Given the eventual heat death of the universe, premise 2 seems fairly secure. So to reject this argument, one must reject premise 1 by rejecting the permanence principle.

There are good reasons to reject the permanence principle. Sullivan rejects it because she holds that something can have meaning due to relations to what happened in the past (2018: 180). Nagel denies that mattering now depends on

matter later (1979: 11). Nozick doubts that permanence in itself can endow something with value (1981: 585). The lesson is that something can have personal value at a certain time without having eternal effects.

While the permanence principle is indeed false, it does not capture the most forceful strand of temporal nihilism. Look again at Tolstoy's confession. He certainly expresses something like the permanence principle when he laments that all his deeds will 'be forgotten and will no longer exist'. But he also hints at a different concern when he asks, 'Is there any meaning in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitable death that awaits me?' Tolstoy seems to think that his life has meaning *while* he is alive but *will not* after death. Tolstoy's concern suggests a different conception of temporal nihilism.

## 2. Persisting Value

The strongest version of temporal nihilism is the view that personal value does not persist after death. In order to explain this means, I first show what it means for value to persist. Below, I show how to use the persistence of value to formulate an argument for this stronger version. From here on, I use *temporal nihilism* to pick out this conception.

In taking personal value to persist, temporal nihilists take personal value to be a relation not just to persons but also to times. In this respect, they are in good company. Consider relationalist views about well-being. These hold that the value of something can change over time due to relations across time (McMahan 2002: 165–84; Dorsey 2013, 2018). This is *not* the view that 'shape of a life' matters (for this view, see Slote 1983; Kamm 2003: 222–23; Glasgow 2013). Rather, it holds that the value of something that obtains at a certain time can depend on what goes on at other times, and hence can differ across time.

As an example, I offer, Surgeon, a modification of a case by Jeff McMahan (2002: 177):

Surgeon. A brilliant but desperately poor student, Studey, toils to put themselves through medical school. These are years of unremitting hardship and spartan asceticism. At the end, Studey

Option A: goes on to a successful career in medicine

Option B: has a nervous breakdown and flunks out.

McMahan's original case involves the medical student dying, but the point about retroactive changes is not specific to death, so I have modified the case accordingly.

Option A appears to change retroactively the personal value of Studey's past life for the better in that it redeems the years of toil. Option B appears to make those years even worse, because it makes them pointless. On either option, even though the toil is in the past, its value for Studey changes. Thus, because it depends on relations between things across time, personal value can vary across time, which means that personal value is relative to persons at times.

Given relationalism—or any other view that aggregates momentary into overall well-being over time (Frugé 2021)—we must distinguish between the time the valuable thing obtains from the times that it is valuable for someone. And we must also distinguish *acquiring* value from *retaining* value. *Acquiring* value occurs when someone *first accrues* value at some time  $t$  from something that obtains at some time  $t^*$ . *Retaining* value occurs whenever the value of something *persists* over time. Value can be accrued at time  $t$  but persist through time  $t'$ , or not persist by time  $t^*$ . Given a relationalist view, value can be retained to varying degrees and valences—and might not even be retained at all.

An analogy with money will help illustrate value retention. Consider that dollar bills are the substrates of monetary value, where monetary value as such is distinct from the physical dollar bill that bears it. We can imagine that someone deposits money into their lifetime savings by inserting bills into an ATM, and that their lifetime savings is the pure monetary value they have—their total buying and spending power as of some time. After putting the bills into the machine, this person loses them, but they retain the bills' monetary value in the sense that their savings has increased and stays at that new amount for some period of time afterward. If the person checks on the account a month later, then, unless they have spent some of it or deposited anything else, the amount will be the same, even though the actual bills are long gone. This person's *lifetime* savings, then, is the total monetary value they have *retained* from the bills deposited into the ATM. But they do not necessarily *retain* this value forever. If the person spends some of the savings, or if there is inflation, or if the bank goes defunct, then the person has less—perhaps *no*—lifetime savings.

Similar to how lifetime savings requires *saving* monetary value and not merely *depositing* it, overall well-being as of a certain time is how much value someone has *retained* as of that time, not merely *acquired*. And similar to how someone can retain the monetary value of the bills as non-monetary substrates, a person can retain the personal value of non-normative substrates after these substrates are gone. Thus, a person does not retain fleeting pleasures or pains, satisfied or thwarted desires, or the particular event of achieving a goal. Those are gone as soon as the moments in which they occur have passed. However, a person can *retain the value* of these substrates. Indeed, in order for the person to have overall well-being as of a certain time and not merely a sequence of states of momentary well-being, then the person must have retained, as of that time, the *personal value itself* of some of the substrates from which they acquired value in the past. Much like how a person can have lifetime savings even once the bills used to deposit monetary value are gone, a person can retain personal value and thus have overall well-being even after the nonnormative substrates are gone.

The stronger form of temporal nihilism, then, holds that all personal value for someone must occur at some time or other—well-being is always relative to a time. And this version of temporal nihilism also upholds relationalism, which allows value to be increased, reduced, or *completely lost*. This more nihilistic nihilism holds that personal value is related to the person such that relative to times after death they do not possess any value from anything—including value from what happened during their past life.

I am inclined to endorse relationalism, and I am even more inclined to hold that all personal value must occur at some time or other. Thus, I grant the temporal nihilist both assumptions. However, as I lay out below, there is another way of rejecting temporal nihilism.

### 3. Impermanent Value Argument

Given relationalism about value, temporal nihilism is a natural position to hold. Relationalism makes value difficult to retain, even while one is alive. Value must be sustained by connections of the right sort over time, and those connections are fragile and always in flux. Thus, the temporal nihilist has the resources to claim that personal value does not persist after death, because, quite generally, things can easily lose their value for someone over time.

Relationalism leads to what we can call the *worldly fragility* of personal value. Consider the Surgeon case again. Studey is pursuing the goal of becoming a surgeon, but the success or failure of this kind of important project is highly dependent on events that occur across time. Some events would lead to Studey having an amazing career in surgery, others to being a surgeon in distressing circumstances. Still others would make Studey become a family practitioner, instead, or even leave the medical field entirely. While such intense efforts make worldly fragility salient, the point is not confined to them. Assuming that our well-being is connected to our cares and concerns that reach out beyond ourselves, then personal value will be affected by how well the world cooperates—and the world can cooperate differently at different times.

In addition, relationalism leads to the *attitudinal fragility* of personal value. This is the fragility due to the changes in a person's valuing attitudes. Consider the following scenario, Rollercoaster, adapted from Richard Brandt (1979: 249):

Rollercoaster. At age five, Rodey forms a goal to ride a rollercoaster on their fiftieth birthday. Reaching fifty, Rodey no longer has any intrinsic desire to ride a coaster, but Rodey stumbles upon a diary entry from their younger self about the goal to ride one. Out of a mild desire to appease that younger self, the older Rodey rides a coaster. But by reaching age seventy, Rodey has completely forgotten about these earlier desires and has lost any interest to ride one.

Brandt uses this sort of case to argue that we should pay no attention to our past desires—and, presumably, would also say the same for past projects. Dale Dorsey (2013: 162) rejects this verdict and holds that one can benefit one's past self by satisfying this desire. Dorsey is right, it seems to me, that Brandt's claim is too strong. But the temporal nihilist can accept Dorsey's claim that someone can benefit their *past* self—in the sense of giving them something that is good for them relative to *that* time in the past—while denying that it has value for their current self relative to *that* time in the present.

In the Rollercoaster case, it seems that when Rodey is a quinquagenarian riding the coaster is mildly good for them, but by the time Rodey is a septuagenarian it is

completely neutral for them. From the perspective of Rodey's lifetime well-being at the age of seventy, it might as well be that they had never ridden the coaster at all. Thus, it seems that something that once had personal value for someone can lose that value over time because of changing attitudes. A person may shift their goals, cares, or concerns such that what they once treated as good for them may become bad or neutral, and what they once treated as bad for them may become good or neutral. Not only is the world outside our heads constantly in flux, but our valuing attitudes are also in flux.

Temporal nihilism naturally develops out of this point about attitudinal fragility. Given the above considerations, it might seem that a necessary condition for retaining personal value at some time is that it supports or thwarts a care or concern held at that time. Thus, the nihilist upholds *value from having attitudes*:

Value from having attitudes. If a person  $s$  possesses value at time  $t$  from some  $x$  that attains at time  $t^*$ , then  $x$  furthers or frustrates some valuing attitude that  $s$  has at  $t$ .

(Where the degree and valence of value corresponds to the level of furtherance or frustration of either a positive care or a negative concern.)

Given relationalism and a connection between personal value and our valuing attitudes, then it is natural to think that whether we have value at some time from something depends on how it fits within our cares and concerns we have at that time.

Yet, insofar as someone can only have an attitude while they are alive, then *value from having attitudes* entails that we can have personal value only while we are alive. Thus, the temporal nihilist upholds the condition *alive at that time*:

Alive at that time. If a person  $s$  possesses value at time  $t$  from some  $x$  that attains at time  $t^*$ , then  $s$  is alive at  $t$ .

Value is fragile, then, because it depends on the person being alive, and, as mortals, our lives are fragile.

In addition to such normative considerations, there are more general metaphysical motivations for *alive at that time*. For one thing, it is entailed by *serious presentism*—the view that if something has a property at a time, then it exists at that time. But a temporal nihilist who endorses *alive at that time* need not be a serious presentist. The temporal nihilist might think that, in many cases, an object can have properties at times that it does not exist, but that when it comes to well-being, a subject must exist—say, because personal value needs to be underwritten by the attitudes of the subject. Thus, I think the temporal nihilist as such should focus on more targeted considerations connecting personal value to being alive.

I have developed an argument from attitudinal fragility to *alive at that time*. But *alive at that time* straightforwardly entails the *impermanence principle*:

Impermanence principle. If a person is dead at time  $t$ , then no  $x$  that attains at time  $t^*$  is personally valuable for them at  $t$ .

The principle is ultimately motivated by the simple thought that once we are dead, we are no longer around to have any value. There is no *us* for which anything can be good or bad. Thus, it captures the strand of the nihilistic worry that death annihilates all value from one's life. Relative to times you are not alive, nothing has value for you—including what happened while you were alive. As of times after death, as far as personal value goes, it is as if you had never existed at all.

Therefore, the best version of temporal nihilism denies the permanence principle. In its place, it accepts the impermanence principle. Abstracting away from *meaning* as a particular sort of value, the general claim behind the permanence principle is that something can have personal value only if it makes a permanent impact. In terms of the framework I have developed, this amounts to a *permanence principle about personal value*:

Permanence principle about personal value. A person has value at *t* from some *x* that obtains at *t*\* only if *x* makes a permanent difference in the world.

For the reasons that Sullivan, Nagel, and Nozick provide, I suggest that we should reject this principle. Something can come to have value for someone even without having an eternal impact. However, these reasons have no bite for the temporal nihilist who rejects the permanence principle but accepts *alive at that time* and so accepts the impermanence principle.

Sullivan's objection to the permanence principle is that meaning can come from things in the past. But the temporal nihilist can accept that personal value can depend on what happens in the past. Consider the Surgeon case. The temporal nihilist can agree that in option A that while living it up as a surgeon, Studey has value due to what happened in the past. But the nihilist claims that Studey does not retain that value after death.

Nagel's objection to the permanence principle is that something can matter at a certain time without its mattering later. But the temporal nihilist agrees. The problem is precisely that someone's life will not matter for them later! The condition *alive at that time* and the resulting impermanence principle allow that something can have value for someone until the time of death. Therefore, the temporal nihilist thinks that things matter for someone while the person is alive, but they do not matter after death.

Nozick's objection is that permanence in and of itself does not give something value. Again, the temporal nihilist can agree. They can hold that something can come to have personal value despite being fleeting. But they think that *value itself* is fleeting. They hold that the personal value of everything—whether it be finite or eternal—vanishes after death.

However, the impermanence principle can be turned into the *impermanence value argument* for temporal nihilism:

- (1) Alive at that time: If something is valuable for us at a time, then we are alive at that time.

- (2) Impermanence principle: Hence, when we are dead, nothing will be valuable for us then.
- (C) Therefore, given that we will die, nothing has permanent value for us, and, more generally, we will not permanently have well-being.

*Alive at that time* entails the impermanence principle, so premise 1 entails premise 2. And premise 2 entails the conclusion. Thus, all the action surrounds *alive at that time*. Given that the standard objections to the standard formulation of temporal nihilism do not touch it, we have to look elsewhere if we want to reject this view.

#### 4. Rejecting the Argument

How can we reject the impermanence principle that nothing is personally valuable for us after death? To do so we must reject the condition that entails it:

Alive at that time. If a person  $s$  possesses value at time  $t$  from some  $x$  that attains at time  $t^*$ , then  $s$  is alive at  $t$ .

We should replace *alive at that time* with a weaker condition that requires only that someone be alive at some point in the history of the universe in order to have personal value at all later times. Call this condition *alive at some time*:

Alive at some time. If a person  $s$  possesses value at time  $t$  from some  $x$  that attains at time  $t^*$ , then  $s$  is alive at  $t'$ , where either  $t'$  is  $t$  or  $t'$  is later than  $t$ .<sup>1</sup>

The condition *alive at some time* does not entail the impermanence principle. Given *alive at some time*—and not *alive at that time*—then being dead does not prevent someone from having personal value at that time. Hence, *alive at some time* allows for someone to have personal value after they die, including retaining well-being from their past life. In fact, it allows them to retain that value for the rest of eternity.

Therefore, in order to reject temporal nihilism we need to replace *alive at that time* with *alive at some time*—at least in conjunction with a sufficient condition that entails some personal value is permanent. But we should not simply deny *alive at that time* in order to avoid temporal nihilism. That would be intolerably ad hoc. Therefore, we should motivate the weaker condition through independent argumentation, and we should substantiate it with a positive theory of the subject of well-being. In the next two sections I take up these tasks in turn.

<sup>1</sup> Notice that the condition restricts the relevant times of possession to after the person comes to be alive. If one thinks that a person can have personal value before they first come to be alive, then one can drop this restriction. Doing so might help with theorizing about the procreation asymmetry and the nonidentity problem, but that topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

## 5. Value after Death

I offer two clusters of arguments for *alive at some time*. The first revolves around the normative significance of permanent death, the second revolves around that of temporary death. I discuss the first collection of arguments in more detail elsewhere (Frugé 2021), so let me just briefly sketch them before working through the second collection in more detail.

One argument is that *alive at some time* is supported by our attitudes toward the dead. Simply put: we treat the dead as retaining the value of their past life. After someone who lived a terrible life dies, we think it is still a tragedy for them that their life went so poorly. After someone who lived a wonderful life dies, we think it is still fortunate for them that their life went so well. Our attitudes suggest a commitment to something like *alive at some time*. Perhaps we are radically mistaken in this regard, but insofar as our normative attitudes are at least a bit of a guide to normative truth, then they support *alive at some time*.

A second argument is that insofar as there are final posthumous harms and benefits, and harms and benefits accrue value at the time they occur, then a person must be able to accrue personal value at times they are dead. And given that someone can acquire value after death, then they should also be able to retain it. Of course, this is not a knockdown argument. Some deny that there are final posthumous harms or benefits (Bradley 2011: 61), and others hold that the value is accrued prior to death (Pitcher 1984; Luper 2007). But the straightforward interpretation of the data gives reason to deny *alive at that time* and uphold *alive at some time*.

A third argument is that people must retain value after death in order for the harm or benefit of death to really matter all that much. To see this, consider *deprivationism* (Nagel 1979: ch. 1; Feldman 1991; Bradley 2009), which holds that death harms or benefits the one who dies insofar as it deprives them of goods or bads. But if someone's life only has value so long as they are alive, then this holds true of their counterfactual life as well. Thus, someone is deprived of goods and bads at most only during those times that they would have been alive. After that time, when they are actually and also counterfactually dead, both their actual and counterfactual lives have no value whatsoever, and so their death would no longer constitute a deprivation. Next consider *willhavehadism* (Kamm 2020: ch. 1), which holds that death is bad in proportion to how much lifetime well-being someone has by the time they die. But if people do not retain personal value when they die, then at the time of their death their life would have no overall well-being whatsoever. Hence, there would be nothing to which the badness of death could be proportional.

The second cluster of arguments revolves around temporary death, which is death followed by a return to life. One such case is Anima's Temporary Death:

Anima's Temporary Death. A person, Anima, actively pursues a lifelong effort of saving as many species from going extinct as they can. Unfortunately, due to an accident on an expedition, Anima's nervous system shuts down. Fortunately, within minutes, Anima is put into a

cryogenically frozen state of suspended animation. A thousand years later, Anima is thawed and resuscitated. Anima is a minor but polarizing celebrity—while alive and while frozen. Both before and after the accident, many people have thwarted Anima's efforts by intentionally making species go extinct.

It seems that when people make a species go extinct, Anima is harmed, even though frozen with a dead nervous system. Yet Anima is not alive at those times. If so, then it seems that *alive at that time* is false.

As with the case of posthumous harm, someone might hold that Anima is harmed prior to dying, but the following consideration puts pressure on that suggestion. After being resuscitated, Anima continues to be harmed when people undermine *then* Anima's efforts to save species. And it seems odd to think that Anima is harmed *before* and *after* being dead but not *while* dead, given that the thwarting continued throughout that whole thousand-year period. And even setting the issue of the timing of harm aside, it seems wrong to think that same thwarting, regardless of when the harm occurs, goes from being bad for Anima before the accident to being neutral for them while they are in suspended animation and back to bad again after they are resuscitated. The most straightforward thing to say is simply that it is bad for Anima at all those times, and, hence, Anima has well-being at all those times. If so, we need to uphold *alive at some time*, not *alive at that time*.

Another worry might be that even though dead while in suspended animation, Anima still has the capacity for life. If so, the temporal nihilist might hold *alive at that time* should be revised to involve this more permissive notion. To respond this worry, I suggest simply considering cases of *resurrection*, where the person has no capacity for life for a period of time and then comes back to life. What one takes resurrection to amount to depends on one's theory of personal identity. Below, I offer cases for the view that the person is a body or brain and the view that a person is a continuous psychological process. The argument should generalize beyond these particular views.

The first case is Bodily Resurrection. Assume that a person is a body or brain. Then, their body and brain can be resurrected:

Bodily Resurrection. Anima's body is disintegrated and the atoms scatter across the universe. A thousand years later those exact same atoms are put into the exact same arrangement as they were in just before Anima is disintegrated.

Or assume that someone is a continuous stream of causally connected psychological states (see Parfit 1984: 199–200). Then, the person's psychology can be resurrected:

Psychological Resurrection. A Teletransporter destroys a person's brain and body, but after a thousand years transmits all of their psychological states to a new body on Mars. Anima enters the Teletransporter, and their body and psychology are transmitted, without duplication.

The two cases can be combined as follows:

Psychological and Bodily Resurrection. A Recombiner separates all the atoms in someone's body, ending their psychological stream. But a thousand years later, it rearranges those same atoms into the exact same arrangement—reconstituting their body and psychological stream with all the psychological states they had prior to being destroyed. Anima enters the Recombiner.

In each of these cases, Anima is destroyed and reconstituted later. During the intervening thousand years, however, Anima has no capacity for life at all.

Say that Anima enters the Recombiner. For the same reasons as before, it seems that Anima is harmed when people destroy a species, even during those times that Anima's particles are scattered. And for the same reasons as before, it seems that Anima retains the value of their past life during those times their atoms are scattered. If so, then *alive at that time*—even on the revised version appealing to the capacity for life—is wrong.

Now say that right before Anima is to be reconstituted the Recombiner breaks and Anima is never resurrected. This does not seem to make any difference as to whether Anima is harmed when people destroy a species or to whether Anima retains well-being from their past life. If so, then the fact that someone comes back to life is not crucial for retaining value after death. Thus, even given *permanent* death, it seems that a person can have well-being during those times they are not alive. Therefore, *alive at some time* should be upheld.

The case of Anima's Temporary Death suggests that we retain value at least at *some times* after death. However, this is cold comfort if those times eventually fade away. Thus, in order to reject temporal nihilism, the condition *alive at some time*, which *allows* but does not *require* permanent personal value, needs to be conjoined with a *sufficient* condition for *permanent* personal value.

To work up to this sufficient condition, I return to the motivation for temporal nihilism. The nihilist holds *value from having attitudes*: If a person *s* possesses value at time *t* from some *x* that attains at a time *t\**, then *x* furthers or frustrates some valuing attitude that *s* has at *t*. By *has*, the nihilist means *possesses as a mental state*. That is why this condition, as I discuss above, entails *alive at that time*: If a person *s* possesses value at time *t* from some *x* that attains at a time *t\**, then *s* is alive at *t*.

I agree with the temporal nihilist that personal value flows from the cares and concerns of the person, but the mistake of the temporal nihilist is to think that having personal value at a time requires *actively having* the relevant valuing attitude at that time. Instead, personal value at a time only requires that someone have a valuing attitude that *they have not abandoned* by that time.

I cannot hope to give a precise characterization of *abandoned* here. But what I mean is something like the following: the person has not pursued another project as a replacement, or forsworn their earlier attitude, or completely lost any interest. Abandoning involves some sort of minimal disavowal, and not simply, say, forgetfulness or distraction. The point is that this minimal sense of *having as not*

*having abandoned* goes with what someone *really* values. Endorsing an attitude and not later forswearing it goes with that attitude reflecting what one's genuine cares and concerns.

This suggests a necessary and sufficient condition on having personal value at a time that turns on having a valuing attitude in this minimal sense. I call this condition *value from valuing*:

Value from valuing. A person *s* possesses value at time *t* from some *x* that attains at time *t*\* if and only if *x* furthers or frustrates some valuing attitude that *s* has at or before *t*, and *s* has not abandoned this attitude at or before *t*.

(Where the degree and valence of value corresponds to the level of furtherance or frustration of a positive care or negative concern.) In this formulation, I have set aside the complication of abandoning and then taking up an attitude again, but it could easily be fixed by just taking the most recent iteration of the care or concern.

Despite this fix, *value from valuing*—as with all proposed substantive necessary and sufficient conditions of philosophically interesting concepts—is likely prone to counterexamples. But the important point here is just that it is on the right track. It gets the right results about my earlier cases. First, it captures the Rollercoaster case. At fifty, Rodey has not completely abandoned the desire to ride the rollercoaster, and that is why it is good for Rodey. But at seventy, Rodey no longer endorses this attitude, and that is why it is neutral for Rodey. Second, it captures the case of Anima's Temporary Death. While frozen, Anima has not abandoned the effort to prevent species from going extinct, even if Anima cannot *actively* pursue it while frozen. Moreover, *value from valuing* gets the right result for another temporary death case, Sick Toddler:

Sick Toddler. Toddy, is so ill that the parents put the toddler in suspended animation until a cure can be found. While the child is frozen, the parents buy Toddy basketball gear and invest in a college fund. Later, Toddy is successfully revived and healed, and Toddy goes on to form the goal of being a college basketball player, eventually achieving this dream. But several years after college, Toddy comes to detest everything about basketball, including the fact that their parents inculcated the dream of basketball while Toddy was helplessly frozen.

It would seem that as of the period while in college, Toddy benefited from their parents' investment in basketball gear and college fund. *Value from valuing* handles this. As of the period in college, Toddy is engaged in the effort of being a collegiate player. It also seems that Toddy did not benefit from those very same investments while in suspended animation. *Value from valuing* handles this as well. During the time of suspended animation, Toddy has not formed the goal of playing basketball in college. Additionally, it seems that in the years after college those investments were bad for Toddy. *Value from valuing* captures this too. Toddy comes to hate the basketball life.

Thus, I suggest that something like *value from valuing* is true. This provides the resources to reject temporal nihilism. Its necessary condition side entails *alive at some time*, given that pursuing a care or concern at some time requires being alive at that time. Its sufficient condition side entails that value can be *permanent*, as long as a person has formed some cares or concerns and has not abandoned them all before death. In the relevant sense of *abandon*, a person does not abandon their cares or concerns at death. No longer having the mental states of valuing attitudes due to death is not forswearing them.

## 6. Well-Being of the Person

Given that we can have permanent value after death, the question arises as to how we can make sense of this. In particular, we must address the problem of the subject: How can a person have value after death if they do not exist? In this respect, many uphold the *termination thesis*:

Termination thesis. At times after death, the person does not exist (see Nagel 1979: 1; Sumner 1976: 153; Silverstein 1980: 100; Rosenbaum 1986: 120; Luper 1987: 270).

But if we are to avoid the impermanence principle by rejecting *alive at that time*, then we must reject this thesis. While *alive at that time* treats the subject of well-being as a *living* person, *alive at some time* treats the subject of well-being as an *existing* person, where a person can exist without being alive.

Yet we cannot merely reject the termination thesis. If we are to have *permanent* personal value, then we must reject the termination thesis in a way that makes the subject of well-being *permanent*. Therefore, we cannot simply reject it, as Fred Feldman (2000) does, on the basis that a person exists after death as a corpse. Corpses eventually go out of existence. And we cannot simply reject it, as Patrick Stokes (2019) does, by taking a person to be a locus of social practices. Social practices eventually end. And we cannot merely take the subject of well-being to be a sequence of events about a person, as Shelly Kagan (1994) does for one dimension of well-being. Such sequences of events eventually terminate.

How, then, are we to make sense of *permanent* existence after death? As I cannot pretend to offer a definitive answer here, I offer what follows in the spirit of philosophical exploration. I sketch several proposals before suggesting that a person exists after death as an abstract object.

### Meinongianism

The traditional form of *Meinongianism* is the view that there are nonexistent objects (Priest 2016), where nonexistent objects can still have properties. Palle Yourgrau (1987) endorses this general picture and holds, in particular, that dead persons are concrete nonexistent objects. While this is not a view on which people *exist* after death, it nevertheless holds that people still *are* even when they are dead. Given that nonexistent objects, on this view, have properties, then this view could

capture permanent personal value by holding that a nonexistent dead person can still have properties of personal value.

My only complaint about such a Meinongian view is that, like many others, I find it hard to wrap my head around the concept of nonexistent objects that nevertheless are. However, for those who can grasp this distinction, this is a worthwhile view to explore.

## Bare Particulars

Niall Connolly (2011) argues that after death persons are *bare particulars* in the sense that they have no intrinsic qualities but are still able to bear relations (see Sider 2006). Connolly suggests that a dead person as bare particular is related to all the former qualities that they instantiated while they were alive (2011: 95). Presumably, bare particulars cannot go out of existence, because they lack any intrinsic properties to be destroyed. So a dead person as bare particular would exist permanently and is related to the well-being they had at earlier times while they were alive.

However, if this is the model of relations, then it will not capture the permanence of personal value. We do not merely want the deceased to bear relations to their *past* well-being but to have well-being *while they are dead* from their past life. Perhaps, though, Connolly's treatment of relations is optional, and so this approach can hold that bare particulars can have well-being after death. But, even so, I have my reservations about the view, because it seems to me that the dead do have some intrinsic properties. Socrates—who I am pretty sure is dead—continues to have the intrinsic property of *being Socrates*. If so, then the deceased are not bare particulars.

## Ersatz Personhood

Taking a cue from the philosophy of modality, another approach would be to find some *ersatz* replacement for the person after death. One option would be to treat deceased persons as fictional entities, on the model of how Gideon Rosen (1990) suggests that we could treat possible worlds as fictions. On this view, we would have a fictional way of talking about the deceased such that, according to the fiction, it is true that people exist after death. However, I am inclined to reject this approach because it would seem to make personal value after death fictional as well. Fictional postmortem value does not undermine temporal nihilism, because we do not literally possess this value. So fictionalism does not avoid the core concern of temporal nihilism.

Another option might be to posit eternal individual essences of persons that exist even after the person themselves dies—as Alvin Plantinga (1978) posits necessary individual essences to underwrite modal truths about individuals. Yet, on this view, it is not literally true that a person exists after death. What exists is the property that uniquely individuates them—but no one instantiates that property after the person dies. But then it is hard to see how a property could have well-being, and, even if it did, how it would constitute the *person's* well-being.

Certainly, there are other ersatz positions one could propose. But it seems they all would have the same trouble that the replacement person is not the person. And we are concerned with personal value for *that* person.

## B-Theories

A different sort of view looks to theories of time. In particular, B-theories hold that all points in spacetime coexist in an atemporal sense, and that objects exist in this same atemporal sense, where they inherit their temporal boundaries by being located at certain points. On this kind of view, a person exists in an atemporal sense, though they are located at points where they are alive. Therefore, it is tenselessly true that a person has a certain level of well-being at those locations, and so it is tenselessly true that the person exists with a specific lifetime well-being. Permanence via atemporality. While Harry Silverstein (1980) does not explicitly endorse this picture, it seems a natural interpretation of his overall commitments.

I do not have any objections to the B-theory as a theory of time, but I do not think it avoids temporal nihilism. As I argued earlier, the temporal nihilist endorses relationalism, which means that personal value is always located at particular times. But the temporal nihilist could endorse the B-theory and simply think that personal value is not located at times after the person's death, even if the person exists in an atemporal sense. That seems like temporal nihilism enough. The worry is about what happens to the value of our life *after death*, not whether there are permanent truths about what the value of our life is like *before death*.

Perhaps, though, the B-theorist has room to argue that this nihilistic worry rests on a confusion due to underestimating the significance of tenseless truths about temporally located value. But I do not see what that confusion would be.

## Permanentism

I have suggested that appeals to traditional Meinongianism, modality, and time that do not seem to help. But there are other resources in the vicinity. Consider *permanentism*—the view that always everything is always something (Williamson 2013: 4). At first, this view might seem to remove the temporal contingency of what exists at a time. But if we allow that it can be temporally contingent whether something is concrete or abstract, then a permanentist can hold that everything exists always—it just need not always be concrete. Similar moves can be made in the modal case about contingently abstract objects (Linsky and Zalta 1994: 445–50; Linsky and Zalta 1996; Williamson 2013: 5–9), though we only need to consider temporal version for the purpose of this essay.

Without making a commitment to permanentism, we can help ourselves to this conception of the temporarily concrete—entities that are concrete at some times and abstract at others. We can hold that *if* someone comes to be alive, then they exist forever after—they just exist as an abstract person after death. Were persons to be temporarily concrete in this way, then we can make sense permanent value. The person continues to exist after death, as abstract, and thereby they remain the subject of well-being.

Therefore, we can avoid temporal nihilism. The nihilist's worry is that after death we will not be *there* for anything to have value for us. It will be as if we had never existed at all. But if we do exist after death, even abstractly, then it will not be as if we had never existed at all. We will, in fact, continue to exist. Of course, we will be abstract, so we will not have any thoughts or feelings, but things will still remain valuable for us, because we will not have abandoned all of our cares and concerns. Even though our deeds will become so much ash and dust, we will retain their value forever.

CHRISTOPHER FRUGÉ 

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

[christopher.frugé@rutgers.edu](mailto:christopher.frugé@rutgers.edu)

## References

- Bradley, Ben. (2009) *Well-Being and Death*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bradley, Ben. (2011) 'Freedom, Narrativity, and Redeeming the Past'. *Social Theory and Practice*, 37, 47–62.
- Brandt, Richard. (1979) *A Theory of the Good and the Right*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Connolly, Nial. (2011) 'How the Dead Live'. *Philosophia*, 39, 83–103.
- Dorsey, Dale. (2013) 'Desire-Satisfaction and Welfare as Temporal'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 16, 151–71.
- Dorsey, Dale. (2018) 'Prudence and Past Selves'. *Philosophical Studies*, 175, 1901–25.
- Feldman, Fred. (1991) 'Some Puzzles about the Evil of Death'. *Philosophical Review*, 100, 205–27.
- Feldman, Fred. (2000) 'The Termination Thesis'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24, 98–115.
- Frugé, Christopher. (2021) 'Value after Death'. Unpublished manuscript, last modified May 20, 2021. Microsoft Word document.
- Glasgow, Joshua. (2013) 'The Shape of a Life and the Value of Gain and Loss'. *Philosophical Studies*, 162, 665–82.
- Kagan, Shelly. (1994) 'Me and My Life'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 94, 309–24.
- Kamm, F. M. (2003) 'Rescuing Ivan Ilych: How We Live and How We Die'. *Ethics*, 113, 202–33.
- Kamm, F. M. (2020) *Almost Over: Aging, Dying, Dead*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kekes, John. (2000) 'The Meaning of Life'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 24, 17–34.
- Linsky, Bernard, and Edward N. Zalta. (1994) 'In Defense of the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic'. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8, 431–58.
- Linsky, Bernard, and Edward N. Zalta. (1996) 'In Defense of the Contingently Non-concrete'. *Philosophical Studies*, 84, 283–94.
- Luper, Steven. (1987) 'Annihilation'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 37, 233–52.
- Luper, Steven. (2007) 'Mortal Harm'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 57, 239–51.
- McMahan, Jeff. (2002) *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2013) *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. (1979) *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nozick, Robert. (1981) *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Parfit, Derek. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pitcher, George. (1984) 'The Misfortunes of the Dead'. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 21, 183–88.
- Plantinga, Alvin. (1978) *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Priest, Graham. (2016) *Towards Non-being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, Gideon. (1990) 'Modal Fictionalism'. *Mind*, 99, 327–54.
- Rosenbaum, Stephen E. (1986) 'How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus'. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 23, 217–25.

- Sider, Theodor. (2006) 'Bare Particulars'. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 20, 387–97.
- Silverstein, Harry S. (1980) 'The Evil of Death'. *Journal of Philosophy*, 77, 401–24.
- Slote, Michael. (1983) 'Goods and Lives'. In Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 9–37.
- Stokes, Patrick. (2019) 'Are There Dead Persons?' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 49, 755–75.
- Sullivan, Meghan. (2018) *Time Biases: A Theory of Rational Planning and Personal Persistence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sumner, L. W. (1976) 'A Matter of Life and Death'. *Noûs*, 10, 145–71.
- Taylor, Richard. (1970) *Good and Evil: A New Direction*. New York: MacMillan.
- Tolstoy, Leo. (1987) *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*. Translated by Jane Kentish. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Wiggins, David. (1976) 'Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life'. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 62, 331–78.
- Williamson, Timothy. (2013) *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, Susan. (1997) 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life'. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14, 207–25.
- Wolf, Susan. (2010) *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Yourgrau, Palle. (1987) 'The Dead'. *Journal of Philosophy*, 84, 84–101.