On the Separateness of Individuals, Compensation, and Aggregation Within Lives

Chapters two and three dealt with aggregation and problems about trade-offs between lives. In this chapter, and the next, I will argue that similar issues arise regarding aggregation and trade-offs within lives. Intrapersonal problems about aggregation have been less widely recognized than their interpersonal counterparts, and they are perhaps of less practical significance. However, they raise similar theoretical questions that are deeply problematic.

In this chapter, I begin by commenting on two related factors that have obscured the fact that there are problems about aggregation within lives: the separateness of individuals, and the possibility of compensation within a life, but not between lives. I then consider various reasons to reject an additive aggregationist approach for measuring the goodness of an individual life. The considerations presented here will help illuminate chapter five, where problems about trade-offs within lives are discussed.

4.1 On the Separateness of Individuals: Sidgwick, Rawls, and Nozick

In Book III of The Methods of Ethics,1 Henry Sidgwick provides the basis of an ingenious argument for utilitarianism. Sidgwick begins with a “rational intuition” about Prudence, or Rational Self-Love, which he describes as an “equal and impartial concern for all parts of our conscious life.”2 Of this intuition he writes:

We might express it concisely by saying ‘that Hereafter as such is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now.’… All that the principle affirms is that the mere difference of priority and posteriority in time is not a reasonable ground for having more regard to the consciousness of one moment than to that of another. The form in which it practically presents
itself to most men is ‘that a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good’ (allowing for differences of certainty)…. the principle … is equally applicable to any … interpretation of ‘one’s own good,’ in which good is conceived as a mathematical whole, of which the integrant parts are realized in different parts or moments of a lifetime.3

Sidgwick next adds a “rational intuition” about “Universal Good.” He claims that:

We have formed the notion of Universal Good by comparison and integration of the goods of all individual human—or sentient—existences. And here again, just as in the former case, by considering the relation of the integrant parts to the whole and to each other, I obtain the self-evident principle that the good of any one individual is of no more importance from the point of view … of the Universe, than the good of any other…. And it is evident to me that as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally … not merely at a particular part of it.4

Sidgwick concludes:

From these two rational intuitions we may deduce … the maxim of Benevolence in an abstract form: viz. that each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him.5

This argument provides the basis for classical utilitarianism only given certain assumptions. One assumption is that when Rational Self-Love, or as most people would now call it, rational self-interest, conceives “‘one’s own good”’ as a “mathematical whole, of which the integrant parts are realized in different parts or
moments of a lifetime,” it is conceiving an individual’s good as comprised of the amounts of good contained in the different moments of the individual’s life added together. Moreover, the view “‘that a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good’” has to be interpreted as a special instance of the general claim that rational self-interest is concerned with the individual’s life going as well as possible, and that this involves the life having as much good as possible. That is, rational self-interest must be understood as an optimizing view that involves additive maximization, according to which rationality aims at the best achievable life, where this is the one with the greatest sum total of good contained within the different moments of that life.

Similarly, then, Sidgwick believes that the Universal Good is comprised of the good of each sentient individual, added together, where the best outcome will be the one with the greatest sum total of individual goods. Correspondingly, since Sidgwick believes that rational beings are “bound to aim at good generally, [and] … not merely at a particular part of it,” rational beings must be utilitarians, and act so as to maximize the good.

Now, strictly speaking, most of the logical work of the argument is done by the second premise. But the first premise “softens up” the reader so as to make the second premise seem more plausible. Intuitively, Sidgwick is reasoning as follows. Rationality requires that I be impartial between the different moments of my life. So, I should be willing to accept less in one moment, so as to receive even more in another, as that will make my life go better, overall. Likewise, in accordance with “the self-evident principle that the good of any one individual is of no more importance … than the good of any other,” rationality requires that I be impartial between lives. Correspondingly, Sidgwick
suggests, I should be willing to promote less in one life, so as to promote even more in another, as that will make the outcome, or “Universal Good,” go better, overall.

Rawls recognizes this basis for classical utilitarianism. He suggests that on utilitarianism “the principle of choice for an association of men is interpreted as an extension of the principle of choice for one man.” He then observes that “the striking feature of the utilitarian view of justice is that it does not matter, except indirectly, how [the] sum of satisfactions is distributed among individuals, any more than it matters, except indirectly, how one man distributes his satisfactions over time. The correct distribution in either case is that which yields the maximum fulfillment.”

Rawls’s response to utilitarianism, and the Sidgwickian line underlying it, is both famous and, to most non-utilitarians, crushing: “Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between individuals.”

Interestingly, Rawls does not challenge Sidgwick’s characterization of the demands of rational self-interest. He allows that perhaps it is rational in my own case to pursue trade-offs between the different moments of my life so as to maximize the total amount of good that I experience over the course of my life. But he denies that in pursuing the good of society—Sidgwick’s Universal Good—we should similarly permit or require trade-offs between different people so as to maximize the total amount of good in society. Rawls recognizes the striking difference between someone choosing for herself, to have less at one moment, so that she might have even more at other moments over the course of her life, and someone imposing a loss on someone else, so that other persons might have more, collectively. Setting aside important questions about autonomy and rights that arise in comparing these cases, it appears that in the former case, the one who loses is also the gainer, she is the beneficiary of the loss. Thus, in the
former case there isn’t really a loser, just a winner. In the latter case, the one who loses really is a loser. Her situation has helped promote the greater good, but all the benefits of her loss accrue to others. In essence, her welfare has been sacrificed for the greater good.

Robert Nozick echoes these themes. He writes,

Individually, we each sometimes choose to undergo some pain or sacrifice for a greater benefit or to avoid a greater harm: we go to the dentist to avoid worse suffering later; we do some unpleasant work for its results…. In each case, some cost is borne for the sake of the greater overall good. Why not, similarly, hold that some persons have to bear some costs that benefit other persons more, for the sake of the overall social good? But there is no social entity with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. There are only … different individual people, with their own individual lives. Using one of these people for the benefit of others, uses him and benefits the others. Nothing more. What happens is that something is done to him for the sake of others…. To use a person in this way does not sufficiently respect and take account of the fact that he is a separate person,[9] that his is the only life he has. He does not get some overbalancing good from his sacrifice….10

Nozick employs such claims in defense of his notion of moral side constraints, and in particular his view that there is “a libertarian side constraint that prohibits aggression against another.”11 Moreover, as indicated in chapter one, I believe that such considerations underlie the deep skepticism many feel about assessing the goodness or badness of outcomes per se. But even among those who reject Nozick’s libertarian side-constraints, who believe that some outcomes are better or worse than others, and who
accept that some trade-offs between people are desirable, most find the Rawls-Nozick line about the separateness of individuals compelling against the simple additive approach of classical utilitarianism.

Rawls, of course, was developing a theory of social justice; his goal was to determine the correct principles and institutions of a just society. Nozick was likewise concerned with the principles that would govern a just society, though his views about moral side constraints also have direct implications about the moral obligations of individuals. Neither Rawls, nor Nozick, was principally concerned with developing theories of the goodness of outcomes. Still, I believe that most people who find Rawls’s and Nozick’s claims about the separateness of individuals compelling, also believe that this is relevant to the assessment of outcomes. In particular, once doubts about additive aggregation across lives have been raised, there is ample room for considerations of distribution to enter into the assessment of outcomes, so that what matters is not merely how much good obtains, but how that good is distributed. In this context, the appeal of the chapter 2’s Second Standard View of chapter two, and chapter 3’s Minimize Great Additional Burdens and Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits Views may be unsurprising. Given the separateness of individuals, it is natural to suppose that of course one should prefer tiny burdens for many rather than huge burdens for one, or a huge benefit for one rather than tiny benefits for many, because the burdens or benefits of the many don’t add up across lives in the way they would need to to outweigh the significant impact on the single individual life that the huge benefit or burden would have. Thus, the anti-additive aggregationist principles discussed so far may seem like natural extensions of the familiar and widely accepted point about the separateness of individuals.
For many, Rawls’s and Nozick’s point about the separateness of individuals—which has obvious Kantian roots—has crystallized the importance of anti-additive aggregationist principles in assessing the goodness of outcomes. Unfortunately, however, I believe that their focus on the separateness of individuals, together with the fact that they left the Sidgwickian conception of rational self-interest largely unchallenged, helped obscure both the basis and scope of anti-additive aggregationist principles. In fact, I believe that the Second Standard View and the Minimize Great Additional Burdens and Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits Views are not simply extensions of the familiar point about the separateness of individuals, and do not rely on that point for their plausibility. Specifically, I believe that analogs of such views are also relevant for assessing the goodness of individual lives, so that they apply within, as well as between, lives. If this is right, then we should reject Sidgwick’s conception of rational self-interest that many, including both Rawls and Nozick, seem willing to grant. The view here needn’t involve rejecting the optimizing element of Sidgwick’s conception, according to which one aims at the best achievable human life (though one might want to reject such a view on independent grounds); rather it involves rejecting the additive assumption according to which the best life is the one with the greatest sum total of goods spread throughout the life. In section 4.3, I shall offer various examples and considerations in support of this position. But first, it will be useful to distinguish the issue of compensation from the issue of moral balancing.

4.2 Compensation versus Moral Balancing

In part three of Reasons and Persons, Derek Parfit claims that advocates of the point about the separateness of persons often conflate the issue of compensation with the issue of moral balancing. I think he is right. When Nozick points out
that when someone is used for the benefit of others “He does not get some overbalancing good from his sacrifice,”¹⁶ this is undeniable as a point about compensation. The one who is burdened is not compensated by the fact that others may benefit even more than he has been burdened by his “sacrifice.” But, as Parfit rightly notes, despite the rhetorical tone of Nozick’s remarks, this fact about compensation doesn’t settle the question of whether the moral balance of benefits versus burdens is sufficient to make the outcome better, or possibly even to warrant “sacrificing” the one for the others.

Consider diagram 4.1.

![Diagram 4.1](image)

Suppose that in A, R and S each have 100 units of welfare, and that one can provide someone with a benefit that would increase the quality of her life by 30 units, but only if one also imposed a burden on someone that would decrease the quality of her life by 20 units. B and C represent two alternative ways one might distribute the benefit and burden. In B, both the benefit and burden go to the same person, R, so the net result is a benefit to her of 10 units. In C, the benefit is given to R, but the burden is given to S. We might say that, in B, R has been amply compensated for the burdens imposed on her—that is, more than fully compensated—while, in C, S has not been compensated for the burdens
imposed on her. What, if anything, is the moral relevance of these facts about compensation?

It is, I think, unclear. Compensation might be relevant to our assessment of both the outcomes’ desirability and the moral permissibility of bringing them about. But it is only relevant to these assessments, it doesn’t determine them. Moreover, it is obscure to what extent compensation itself is relevant, as opposed to various related notions with which it may often be associated, or conflated.

Consider first the issue of desirability, which is our main concern here. We may think that B is more desirable than A, despite the burden of 20 imposed on R, because R was amply compensated with a benefit of 30. However, the fact that B involves a case of ample compensation is, seemingly, incidental to the judgment that B is more desirable than A. Presumably, we might make the same judgment regarding R’s desirability even if R hadn’t been burdened at all, and had merely been benefited by 10. But, of course, in that case, there wouldn’t be an issue of compensation underlying our judgment about the relative desirability of B and A.

Many people’s judgment about the relative desirability of B and A would be based on their acceptance of a kind of pareto, or person-affecting, principle like John Broome’s principle of personal good. On this view, for any two outcomes involving the same people, if one outcome is at least as good as the other for everyone involved, then it is at least as good all things considered, and if one outcome is better than the other for some of the people and at least as good for everyone else, then it is better all things considered. On this view, the role of compensation may be as follows. Compensation is not itself intrinsically, or non-instrumentally valuable, for there is nothing to be said, relating to the fact of compensation itself, for preferring a state involving burdens with
compensating benefits to a state lacking those burdens with the same, or greater, overall net benefits. However, in situations where someone has been inappropriately burdened, it is better for benefits to accrue to that person so that they are compensated for their burden, than for such benefits to go to another, no more deserving, person. Moreover, for a large class of cases, the nature and extent of compensation will determine whether the principle of personal good can be appealed to in order to rank two outcomes, and if so what that ranking will be. Thus, the principle of personal good can be invoked for ranking outcomes in all cases where burdens are fully or amply compensated for by benefits accruing to the same people, and also in all cases where some people bear burdens that are not fully compensated and everyone else is unaffected. On the other hand, the principle of personal good will be silent in any case where some people receive net burdens while others receive net benefits.

Although many people are attracted by principles like the principle of personal good, as we will see in chapter n, there are reasons to doubt it. For example, if we had reason to believe that R and S were equally deserving, and that in fact both deserved to be at level 100, we might think that A was better than B, because it was better regarding absolute justice, as well as equality, or comparative justice. More generally, we might think that our judgment regarding A and B wouldn’t so much depend on whether B involved R’s being fully compensated for a burden of 20 by a benefit of 30 but, rather, on how A and B compared in terms of all the ideals we deem relevant for assessing outcomes giving each ideal its due weight. Relevant ideals might include utility, equality, priority, maximin, perfection, freedom, comparative justice, and absolute justice.
Consider next the relative desirability of A and C. Relative to A, in C, R is benefited and S is burdened. Nozick is surely right that S’s burden isn’t compensated by R’s benefits. But, as Parfit recognizes, this doesn’t settle the question of whether there could be a moral balancing of the benefits and burdens so as to yield a ranking of the relative desirability of A and C. Although C involves an uncompensated burden on S, which counts in favor of A’s being more desirable than C, C also involves an unmitigated benefit to R, which presumably counts in favor of C’s being more desirable than A. Moreover, our judgment regarding A and C’s desirability won’t just turn on whether there are unmitigated benefits or uncompensated burdens, or on whether the benefits are greater or less than the burdens, but on the net effect that the distribution of benefits and burdens has on all of the ideals that are relevant to the assessment of outcomes. Thus, we might favor C insofar as C was better regarding perfection, but A insofar as A was better regarding maximin. Likewise, we might favor A insofar as A was better regarding absolute or comparative justice, as it would be if R and S both deserved to be at level 100; yet we might favor C insofar as C was better regarding absolute or comparative justice, as it would be if R deserved to be at level 130, and S deserved to be at level 80. In sum, in assessing the relative desirability of two outcomes, the overall balancing of benefits and burdens must take account of much more than the brute fact of whether some people bear burdens that are not fully compensated. It must take account of the total impact that the benefits and burdens have on all of the ideals relevant to assessing the desirability of outcomes. As noted above, these might include utility, equality, priority, maximin, perfection, freedom, comparative justice, and absolute justice.

Return to Nozick’s claim that when someone is used for the benefit of others “He does not get some overbalancing good from his sacrifice.” As noted above, this claim
can be interpreted as a claim about compensation, to the effect that someone who is burdened so that others may benefit is not, herself, compensated by those benefits. So interpreted, Nozick’s claim is a linguistic truth that is uncontroversial, but also trivial.

Suppose one interprets Nozick’s claim more strongly. Suppose one interprets it to imply that any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable than any alternative where she does not. Shortly, I will argue that such a view is implausible, and should be rejected. But first, I want to consider whether such a view is even consistent. Doing this will introduce a set of issues that is of great importance, and that we will need to examine further in chapter n.

The view that any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable than any alternative where she does not implies both that transforming A into C in diagram 4.1, would produce a less desirable outcome (since it would involve imposing uncompensated benefits on S), and that transforming C into A would produce a less desirable outcome (since it would involve imposing uncompensated benefits on R)! It may appear, then, that the view in question is inconsistent, implying that A is both more, and less, desirable than C. However, this appearance may be deceiving, and needs to be explored carefully.

The view in question is a kind of person-affecting view that compares outcomes not merely in terms of how the people in each outcome fare in absolute terms, or relative to the other members of that outcome, but in terms of the relations that obtain between the different outcomes, and in particular, in terms of how, if at all, the different outcomes’ members have been affected for better or worse by the manner in which their outcome has come about. Given this,
suppose that one begins in a situation like A, and transforms it into one like C. In that case, the view implies that C is less desirable than A, because there are people who would bear uncompensated burdens in bringing about C, namely the S group. But notice, this is not inconsistent with the claim that if one begins in a situation like C, and transforms it into one like A, one would be producing a less desirable outcome. The crucial point is that the situation like A is a distinct, and relevantly different, outcome in the two alternatives, and similarly for the situation like C.

On the view in question, then, there are really two pairs of alternatives; there is the pair involving A and C, where A gets transformed into C, and there is the pair A’ and C’, which look like the pair A and C, but where C’ gets transformed into A’. In the one pair of alternatives, A and C, the S group bears uncompensated burdens and the R group does not, in the other pair of alternatives, A’ and C’, the R group bears uncompensated burdens and the S group does not. This explains the distinct orderings of the two pairs of alternatives on the view in question. So, as we have seen, on such a view, the rankings of two alternatives depends not on the abstract features of those alternatives—such as what levels groups are at—but on the detailed relations between those alternatives; specifically, on whether one outcome was transformed into the other, and if so, how the particular people in the two outcomes were affected, for better or worse, by the transformation.

The preceding is interesting and important. But is it enough to vindicate the view in question of the charge of inconsistency? This isn’t clear. Suppose that one is a parent of two healthy children, and one must choose between two future outcomes. If one does x, the resulting outcome, D, will impose an uncompensated burden on one child Ann, causing her to become severely handicapped, while another child, Mary, flourishes. If
one doesn’t do x, the resulting outcome, E, will impose an uncompensated burden on Mary, causing her to become severely handicapped, while Ann will flourish. On the view in question, D is less desirable than E, since there is someone, namely Ann, who bears an uncompensated burden in D but not E, but by the same token E is less desirable than D, since there is someone, namely Mary, who bears an uncompensated burden in E but not D. Thus, it appears that the view in question is inconsistent after all, implying both that D is less desirable than E, and that E is less desirable than D.

On reflection, then, I believe the view in question is inconsistent. But even if I am mistaken about this, I think it should be rejected as deeply implausible.

Here is one implication of the view. Take any large set of alternatives involving billions of the same people. Let them vary as greatly as one likes along all of the dimensions one normally regards as relevant to ranking outcomes, utility, equality, maximin, perfection, etc., consistent with the following: for each alternative let it be true that there is one person for whom that alternative is uniquely best. Now choose any one of the set of alternatives randomly. On the view in question, no matter which of the alternatives is chosen, it would be undesirable to transform that alternative into any of the other possible alternatives, since, by hypothesis, such a transformation would impose an uncompensated burden on at least one person, namely, the one for whom the initial randomly chosen alternative happens to be best. Surely, this implication is unacceptable.

Here is a concrete example. Suppose that one person was extremely well off at level 10,000, and a million people barely had lives worth living at level 1. Suppose further that the people’s levels were purely determined by luck, and that, in fact, the fortunate one only deserved to be at level 100, while the unfortunate million each deserved to be at level 20,000. Finally, suppose that the situation was transformed into
one where the one person received an uncompensated burden of one, lowering him to level 9,999, while the others received benefits of 19,999, raising them to level 20,000. On the view under discussion, according to which any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable than any alternative where she does not, the second outcome would be less desirable than the first. But this is absurd. The second outcome would be vastly superior than the first in terms of utility, maximin, absolute justice, comparative justice, and priority, and depending on the details of the case might even be vastly better in terms of perfection and freedom. Surely, our concern about uncompensated burdens doesn’t “trump” or have lexical priority over our concern about every other ideal combined!

The preceding example may be too strong for my purposes. After all, even Nozickians can deny that the strictures against uncompensated burdens are absolute. Correspondingly, advocates of the interpretation in question might appeal to the usual “catastrophe” clause in order to handle such a case, arguing that if a million people could have their lives vastly improved, at a very slight cost to one, then even they can grant that such a change would produce a more desirable outcome. But I contend that the view is implausible even where catastrophes are not the issue. Suppose that among two equally deserving people, pure luck has determined that one is at level 1000, and the other at level 500, though both deserve to be at level 900. Suppose also that by burdening the better off person and benefiting the worse off person, one could transform the outcome into one where both were at level 900. The resulting outcome would be better regarding utility, equality, maximin, priority, and absolute justice, and the case might be such that it was not worse, or even better, regarding freedom and perfection. Here, there is no issue of invoking a catastrophe clause, yet it seems clear that the second outcome would be
more desirable than the first. I conclude that one should reject the view that any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable than any alternative where she does not.

One might interpret Nozick’s view as a claim about duties, rights, or obligations. Since I am primarily concerned about the goodness of outcomes, and issues of desirability, I shan’t labor all of the various interpretations of this kind that might be offered. Still, a few observations are in order. First, one might hold the strong view that one had a duty or obligation to never impose an uncompensated burden on someone—except, perhaps, to avoid a catastrophe (henceforth, this clause will be omitted but assumed)—unless the burden were a deserved punishment for a morally culpable action. Violations of this duty or obligation would be wrong. Analogously, one might hold that it was always a violation of someone’s right, and therefore impermissible and wrong, to impose an uncompensated burden on someone, unless the burden were a deserved punishment for a morally culpable action. Such views may seem slightly more plausible than the previously discussed views about the desirability of outcomes, but I believe they are still deeply implausible. At least, I believe they are deeply implausible if we assume, as I do throughout this discussion, that the burden imposed is non-violent, meaning that it involves something like a transfer of resources, or a reduction in opportunities, rather than violations of the right to be free from physical or psychological aggression.

In the second case described above, I not only believe that the outcome produced by imposing a burden of 100 on the person at level 1000 and bestowing a benefit of 400 on the person at level 500 would clearly be more desirable than the initial outcome, I believe that it need not be wrong, or impermissible, to produce such an outcome in the manner described. Correspondingly, I’m inclined to believe that the person who deserves
to be level 900, but in fact is lucky to be at level 1000, doesn’t have a right to be at level 1000, and that there needn’t be any rights violation if one imposes on him an uncompensated burden of 100. However, even if he has a right not to be so burdened, I believe that it is only a weak, prima facie, or defeasible right that is outweighed in this case by all the countervailing considerations that favor producing the more desirable outcome.

A more plausible interpretation of Nozick’s view might hold that it would be wrong to impose an uncompensated burden on anyone who has earned the right to be at or above the level they are at. But even this seems to me dubious. Setting aside the many qualifications that would have to be made to adequately handle cases where any choices we made would impose uncompensated burdens on some--where different numbers of people, different initial levels, and different levels of burden all might factor in our decision—I believe that even non-consequentialists must regard uncompensated burdens that leave people worse off than they deserve to be as but one factor among many relevant to the permissibility of actions. And it is not plausible to think that that particular factor trumps, or should be given lexical priority, over all others.

So, consider a variation of our earlier example. Suppose that the person at level 1000 deserves to be at that level. We might then say that he has a right to be at that level, and that one violates that right if one imposes an uncompensated burden on him. Still, suppose that someone else has also earned the right to be at level 1000, or perhaps even more, but due to bad luck is at level 500. Would it be wrong to benefit such a person by 400 at the cost of an uncompensated (non-violent) burden of 100 to the better off person? I think not. Even if burdening the one person would be violating his right to be at level 1000, I think such a right is a relatively weak, prima facie, or defeasible right that would
be outweighed by the many competing considerations that obtain in this case. Nozick, of course, might not agree. And he would not be alone. But I believe many, including most non-consequentialists, would.

I conclude that the view that any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable than any alternative where she does not, should be rejected. It is deeply implausible, and probably inconsistent. However, I am inclined to accept another, weaker, claim; namely that any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable in one respect than any alternative where she does not. The weaker claim may seem too obvious to warrant mentioning, but as we will see later, in examining person-affecting principles more carefully, it is important, and controversial.

This section may be summed up as follows. Parfit is right that compensation is distinct from moral balancing. While in some cases compensation is relevant to the desirability of outcomes involving different distributions of benefits and burdens, facts about compensation itself don’t determine the desirability of such outcomes. Rather, what matters is the net effect that the distribution of benefits and burdens has on all of the factors and ideals relevant to assessing outcomes. Thus, while in some cases compensation makes the difference between the desirability and undesirability of distributions of benefits and burdens; in other cases it does not, as distributions of benefits and burdens will be desirable, or undesirable, whether or not they befall the same, or different people, and hence whether or not they involve compensation. Moreover, importantly, in some cases distributions of burdens and benefits will be more desirable if they do not involve compensation than if they do. This might be so if the outcomes involving uncompensated burdens were sufficiently better than the outcomes
involving compensated burdens regarding such ideals as freedom, perfection, maximin, absolute justice, and equality or comparative justice.

4.3 Compensation, Prudential Balancing, and Additivity

As noted above, Rawls and Nozick appeal to the separateness of individuals to challenge Sidgwick’s argument for the utilitarian conclusion that the best outcome is the one with the greatest sum total of individual goods. But they don’t challenge his assumption that the best achievable life is the one with the greatest sum total of good contained within the different moments of that life. This may be because compensation is possible within lives, but not between lives, and they assume that additive aggregation stands and falls with the possibility of compensation. But this, I believe, is a great mistake. As we have seen, moral balancing across lives is possible, even if compensation is not, and it is the full set of relevant ideals for assessing the goodness of outcomes, rather than the mere lack of possible compensation, that determines when, and why, additive aggregation should be accepted, or rejected, in assessing outcomes. Likewise, the prudential balancing of different moments of a life will turn on the full set of relevant ideals for assessing the goodness of a life, and the correct method of combining the relevant ideals so as to aggregate across the moments of a life is not simply determined by the fact that compensation within a life is possible. Specifically, while the possibility of compensation may permit an additive approach, and may make such an approach seem more plausible within lives than between lives, it neither entails nor requires such a position. Indeed, as we shall see, notwithstanding their differences regarding the possibility of compensation, aggregation within lives parallels aggregation across lives, in that there may be many circumstances where the “correct” prudential balancing of different moments of a life involves rejecting additive aggregation.
If the preceding is right, we should reject the conception of individual self-interest advanced by Sidgwick (what he called Prudence, or Rational Self-Love) and left unchallenged by Rawls and Nozick. This, by itself, is not surprising. However, as we will see in the next chapter, it has surprising, and important, implications, as doing so raises troubling issues similar to those advanced in chapters two and three.

Many objections can be raised to a simple additive approach for aggregating the different moments of a life. Most of these are familiar, and can be stated briefly. Consider a scale of well-being where someone with an average quality of life is at level 50, someone with an extremely high quality of life is at level 100, and someone whose life is barely worth living is at level 1. Now suppose one could live 50 years at level 100, or 100 years at level 50. On a simple additive approach to measuring the goodness of lives these two lives would be exactly equally as good; both would contain a total of 5000 units of well-being. But it is dubious that these two lives are equally good. Perhaps, as long as one is living a “sufficiently” long life, where, let us suppose, 50 years counts as such, quality counts more than duration, so that for any given total of well-being to be experienced, it is more important that the years one lives be at a higher level, than that one merely lives longer at a lower level. Or perhaps, as long as one is living a “sufficiently” high quality life, where, let us suppose, level 50 counts as such, duration counts more than quality, so that for any given total of well-being to be experienced, it is more important that one lives a longer life at a lower level than a shorter life at a higher one. Either of these views, or more context specific variations of them, might be correct. In either case, this would undermine a simple additive approach to aggregating the different moments of a life.
Or consider two different ways that one’s life might sum to a total 50000 units of goodness over the course of a 50 year life. In one, which I’ll call the drab life, one would consistently experience a mildly pleasurable existence, of approximately three units of good per day, such that one was equally well-off throughout one’s life, and totaled 1000 units of well-being per year. In a second, which I’ll call the wildly fluctuating life, one’s life would be filled with many highs, but also many lows. During the highs, one would experience great achievements and rich relationships, and would be as well off as is humanly possible, but the lows would involve great setbacks, pain, and suffering, so much so that during those periods one’s life would well below the level at which life ceases to be worth living. The positive periods might total well into the thousands of units of goodness per day, but the negative moments would likewise total to a large number of units of badness, or negative units of goodness, as it were, and would cancel out all but 50000 units of goodness. On a simple additive approach to measuring the goodness of lives, these two lives would be equally good. But that seems deeply implausible. Depending on how the details of the case are fleshed out, I can imagine significant arguments for regarding the second alternative as much better, and also significant arguments for regarding it as much worse, but what I don’t find plausible is the additive approach’s claim that as long as there is the same sum total of goodness minus badness in the two lives, they would be exactly equally as good. The differences between the two lives are extremely significant, and their impact on the overall quality of the lives is not to be captured by simply adding up the goodness and badness within each life day by day, or moment by moment.

Here is another way to put the point. As indicated, depending on the details of the case, I think it likely that one of the two lives would be much better than the other.
Correspondingly, I don’t believe that a slight increase or decrease in the total benefits or burdens in the two lives would affect their relative rankings. In other words, I don’t believe that it would make a difference to the ranking of the two lives whether for two days out of 50 years the drab life had reached level four, so that the sum total of goodness in that life was actually 50,002, or whether for two days out of 50 years the drab life had only reached level two, so that the sum total of goodness in that life was actually only 49,998. Likewise, I don’t believe that it would make a difference to the ranking of the two lives whether for two days out of 50 years the wildly fluctuating life had reached level 2076, rather than 2074, so that the sum total of goodness in that life was actually 50,002, or whether for two days out of 50 years the wildly fluctuating life had “only” reached level 2072, rather than 2074, so that the sum total of goodness in that life was actually only 49,998. It seems to me clear that the differences between the two lives are so stark, and so significant, that a mere difference of a couple of extra units of good or bad during two days of a fifty year lifespan couldn’t possibly alter the relative ranking of the two lives.19 If the drab life would be better than the wildly fluctuating one in the case where the sum total of goodness happened to be 50002, it would be better if its sum total happened to be 49998. Similarly, if the drab life would be worse than the wildly fluctuating one in the case where the sum total of goodness happened to be 49998, it would be worse if its sum total happened to be 50002. Likewise, for the wildly fluctuating life.

There are many factors that seem relevant to the overall goodness of a life, besides merely the sum total of goodness or badness that obtains within that life. One such factor might be referred to as the “pattern,” “direction,” or “shape” of a life. To illustrate this, consider two different scenarios one’s life might take. In the first, one’s
life starts out poorly, and steadily improves, so that at the end of one’s life one is very well off. For simplicity, let’s just divide the life into five twenty-year segments, and say that as the life progresses one’s levels would be 10, 30, 50, 70, and 90, respectively. In the second scenario, the pattern is reversed. The life starts out very well off and steadily worsens, so that the life ends poorly. Specifically, as the life progresses one’s levels would be 90, 70, 50, 30, and 10, respectively. On the simple additive approach, the two lives are equally good, and if, in fact, the second life ended at level 12 instead of level 10, then that life would be better than the first all things considered. I know of no one who would actually choose a life plan for themselves, or a loved one, in accordance with this position.

To be sure, here, as elsewhere, advocates of the additive approach can argue that we are being misled by our intuitions in such cases. They might claim that to be at level 10 after one has experienced the highs of level 90 is actually much worse than to be at level 10 with nothing better to compare it to. Similarly, they might note that one will appreciate being at level 90 a lot more if one has previously been at level 10, than if one has never known what it is like to be poorly off. Correspondingly, it is suggested that while people are told that in the first and second lives people’s levels are, respectively, 10, 30, 50, 70 and 90, and 90, 70, 50, 30, and 10, in fact they are intuitively reacting as if the levels are really something like 10, 35, 60, 80, and 100, and 90, 65, 40, 20, and 5, respectively. And, of course, the argument concludes, if we are thinking about the lives that way, we will regard the first as much better than the second, since it will have a much greater sum of well-being.

I don’t deny that there are kernels of psychological truth underlying such a position. But ultimately it amounts to the view that people’s judgments about such
alternatives are either unreflective, or that even on reflection people can’t accurately assess the alternatives presented. I find such a view both deprecating and dubious. When I think about such cases, I don’t have to think that the people are dwelling on the past, anticipating the future, or otherwise experiencing the present through the prism of past and future. I can, instead, consider someone who basically lives life as it comes, appreciating where he currently is at in life, whether good or ill, simply for what it is. When I do this, I can imagine people’s lives actually unfolding in the way described above. One life starts off poorly, and ends very well. The other starts out very well, and ends poorly. But both lives have the same total amount of good and bad occurring within them. Thinking about these alternatives as clearly and carefully as I can, I stand by my earlier claims. It seems evident that the former life is much better than the latter. While each life has the same total amount of well-being spread amongst its moments, each life has a pattern or direction that crucially matters.

The claim that the shape of a life can matter, resonates with a basic insight common to the thinking of certain holists, gestalt psychologists, and advocates of organic unity; namely, that sometimes the whole can be greater or less than the sum of its parts. While this insight is notoriously difficult to pin down, it seems neither mystifying nor implausible if it is “merely” understood as the rejection of an additive aggregationist approach to understanding the goodness of certain “wholes.” On reflection, it seems clear that this insight applies within lives as well as between lives.

In sum, of two lives with the same total amount of goodness and badness, as measured additively moment by moment, one of which began poorly, steadily improved, and ended well, and the other of which began well, steadily declined, and ended poorly, the first seems much better than the second. It is the life I would wish for myself, and
anyone I cared about. Moreover, I am confident that most people, even after careful deliberation, would agree.

Next, let me suggest that analogues of the two “new” anti-additive principles of aggregation introduced in chapter two apply within lives as well as between lives. I’ll begin with an example that illustrates the appeal of an analogue of the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View, and follow it with one illustrating the appeal of an analogue of the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View.

Suppose one is faced with a choice of living one of two lives. In the first, one will get to live at the exceptionally high level of 91 for 100 years, in the second, one will get to live at the slightly higher exceptionally high level of 93 for 99 years, but the cost of doing so is a year of exceptionally bad pain and suffering, where one’s life is much lower than the level at which life ceases to be worth living, at a level of –90. As constructed, the simple additive approach would claim that the second life is better, since there would be 9117 total units of good spread throughout the moments of one’s life (here, the additive approach involves subtracting the total amount of bad from the total amount of good), as opposed to 9100. But I reject this ranking as deeply implausible, and I believe that most people would strongly agree with me.

Here, it seems clear that reasoning similar to that underlying the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View applies. Specifically, in this case, where additional burdens are to be disbursed amongst the different periods of a life, it is preferable for a given total burden to be dispersed amongst many periods of that life, so that the additional burden the person has to bear at any given time is “relatively small,” than for a smaller total burden to fall on just one period, or just a few periods, of the life, such that the additional burden the person has to bear during that period, or those few periods, is substantial.
Note, I don’t need to claim that such reasoning will always be plausible. There are different cases, and perhaps in some cases one might plausibly reject the reasoning in question. But in cases like the example noted, anti-additive reasoning of the sort underlying the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View seems both applicable and compelling. Though the total amount of burden imposed is greater in the first life above than the second, 198 units of burden rather than 181, in the first life the burden is spread out so that no period is significantly affected adversely, while in the second the burden all falls on one period, with disastrous consequences for that period. Surely, it is better to live a life all of which is at an exceptionally high level, than to live a life that is slightly better most of the time, but includes a full year of terrible pain and suffering, during which time one’s life is not worth living.

Next, consider a choice between living a life at the exceptionally high level of 92 for 100 years, or living a life at the slightly less exceptionally high level of 91 for 99 years in order to reach the truly blissful level of 170 for one year. On the simple additive approach, the first life is better, since there would be 9200 total units of good spread throughout one’s life, as opposed to 9179. But once again I reject this ranking, and I believe most others would as well. The life that includes a year of bliss seems clearly superior to its alternative. Here, as elsewhere, what matters is not merely the sum total of good within the life, but the way the good is distributed.

In this case, reasoning similar to that underlying the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View seems applicable. Specifically, in this case, where additional benefits are to be disbursed amongst the different periods of a life, it is preferable for a given total benefit to be consolidated in just one period, such that the positive impact on that period is substantial, than for a larger total benefit to be disbursed amongst many
periods of that life, so that the additional benefit to any single period of the life is "relatively small." Once again, I am not claiming that such reasoning will always seem plausible for all cases. But it does seem compelling in cases like the one in question.

Finally, let us consider an analogue of Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion, but for a single life. Paraphrasing Parfit, it might be put as follows:

The Single Life Repugnant Conclusion: for any possible life, no matter how long or how high the quality of that life might be, there must be some much longer imaginable life whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though each period of that life would be barely worth living.

Interestingly, a version of the Single Life Repugnant Conclusion was first discussed by J.M.E. McTaggart, many years before Parfit presented his own Repugnant Conclusion. But McTaggart denies that the repugnancy “in this case would be right.”

Though lengthy, McTaggart’s discussion is brilliant, and worth presenting in detail. He writes the following:

… the values of states in time vary, caeteris paribus, with the time they occupy.

From this principle it follows that any value, which has only a finite intensity, and which only lasts a finite time, may be surpassed by a value of much less intensity which lasts for a longer time. Take a life which in respect of knowledge, virtue, love, pleasure, and intensity of consciousness, was unmixedly good, and possessed any finite degree of goodness you choose. Suppose this life prolonged -- for a million years if you like -- without its value in any way diminishing. Take a second life which had very little consciousness, and had a very little excess of pleasure over pain, and which was incapable of virtue or love. The value in each hour of its existence, though very small, would be good and not
bad. And there would be some finite period of time in which its value would be
greater than that of the first life, and another period in which it would be a million
times greater.[note omitted]

This conclusion would, I believe, be repugnant to certain moralists. But .... I can see no reason for supposing that repugnance in this case would be right. So far as I can see, it rests on a conviction that quality is something which is inherently and immeasurably more important than quantity. And this seems to me neither self-evident nor capable of demonstration.

Nor is there any reason to doubt our conclusion because it is highly probable that many people, if offered the million years of brilliant life, followed by annihilation or by a state whose value should be neither good nor evil, but zero, would prefer it to any length of an oyster-like life which had a slight excess of good. For it must be remembered that men's choice in such cases is very much affected by their imagination. Now it is much easier to imagine the difference between the two sorts of life which we have considered, than it is to imagine the difference between an enormously long time and another time which is enormously longer. And, again, we are generally affected more than is reasonable by the present or the near future in comparison with the far future. And a change which will only happen after the end of a million years is in a very far future. 21

Here, McTaggart clearly recognizes the intuitively repugnant implications that additive aggregation can have for lives of sufficient length, perceptively sees much of what is at stake in the matter, and offers several sophisticated explanations for why we should not trust our intuitions about such cases. However, while McTaggart’s remarks are deeply insightful, ultimately I find his deflationary account of our intuitions about such cases unconvincing. Let me next suggest why.

28
Consider first his contention that it is “much easier to imagine the difference between the two sorts of life which we have considered, than it is to imagine the difference between an enormously long time and another time which is enormously longer.” I readily grant that we may have no clear intuitive grasp on numbers as large as a million, and so it might be argued that our intuitions about such cases don’t accurately reflect the difference between a million years, and some indefinitely much longer period of time. But though true, it isn’t evident how much weight this observation bears.

First, it isn’t as if we would have any trouble choosing between a million years in heaven or hell, and some indefinitely much longer period of time in heaven or hell. We would clearly, and rightly, prefer the longer time in heaven, and the million years in hell. Here, our judgment readily guides us to “correct” for our intuitive shortcomings. But in the choice between the brilliant life and the oyster-like life our judgment doesn’t similarly lead us to “correct” for our intuitive shortcomings; rather, for some of us at least, it leads us to reject additive aggregation and trust our intuitions about such cases.

Second, it isn’t as if we can pretend to have an accurate intuitive grasp of the real difference between the brilliant life and the oyster-like life. Rather, we just have the firm conviction that the quality of the former life would be much much higher than that of the latter. Similarly, we can have the firm conviction that the indefinitely long life would be much much longer than the life of a million years. Moreover, while our judgment might lead us to think that the size of the gap in quality between the different lives must, for finite beings, be naturally limited, the gap in number of years could be as large as one likes, so our judgment naturally leads us to recognize that the difference in duration between the two lives might be many many times greater in magnitude than the difference in their quality. Yet even as our judgment recognizes this truth, it doesn’t
cause us—or at least not me, anyway—to revise our judgment about which life would be better. Rather, it causes us to question the additive aggregationist approach for comparing such alternatives, thereby confirming our intuitions, rather than dismissing them as distorting.

Third, while the Single Life Repugnant Conclusion may seem especially repugnant in the case McTaggart imagines, where we are to forsake a million years of flourishing for an indefinitely long period of oyster-like life, I believe that most people would make the same judgment if the choice were between a mere 100 years and an indefinitely long period of oyster-like life. Consider seriously the difference between the two lives. The first would involve 100 years as rich and rewarding as any human life that has ever been lived, filled with great achievements of the highest order, deep and lasting loves, rewarding friendships, and so on. The second would involve eons of a life barely worth living; such a life would be utterly devoid of the achievements and relationships that contribute to human flourishing, and contain only the lowest and mildest of conscious pleasure. Surely, most people would choose the former life for themselves, or a loved one. But in this case one can hardly explain away the choice as resulting from our inability to “imagine the difference between an enormously long time and another time which is enormously longer.” We certainly can imagine that the difference between 100 years and many eons might be of such a magnitude, that in a sense the total amount of utility would be greater in the longer oyster-like life than in the shorter flourishing life. But what we cannot believe, on reflection, is that the goodness of the different lives is a simple additive function of the total amount of utility in those lives. While there would be more utility in the oyster-like life with each passing year, we don’t believe that the
different oyster-like pleasures spread out over many eons add up in the way they would need to to make the oyster-like life better than the flourishing life.

The truth is that we don’t believe there would be a significant difference between the goodness of an oyster-like life that lasted 100 years, or a 1000 years, or 10,000 years. And these are numbers that we certainly can, I believe, intuitively grasp. Moreover, importantly, we don’t see the difference between such lives as on a trajectory that, over time, would eventually amount to a great difference. Correspondingly, we judge that there wouldn’t be a significant difference between the goodness of an oyster-like life that lasted 100 years, and one that lasted a million years, or many eons. I suggest, then, that our view about such cases rests not on our intuitive inability to grasp large numbers, as McTaggart suggests, but on our reflective judgment that merely adding more years to an oyster-like life does not significantly increase the goodness, or desirability, of such a life.

To be sure, advocates of additive aggregation may continue to insist that our intuitions about such cases are not to be trusted, even for cases involving intuitively graspable numbers. So, for example, they might insist that the difference between oyster-like lives of 100, 1000, and 10,000 years is on a trajectory, that would, eventually amount to a great difference, but that the slope of the trajectory is so slight that we don’t intuitively notice it, or perceive its long term implications. But though it is possible such a view is correct, it has the air of an untestable article of faith that advocates of additive aggregation are compelled to invoke to explain away our intuitions, and I doubt that many will find it sufficiently compelling to alter their judgments about such cases.

Consider next McTaggart’s suggestion that our intuitions about such cases are not to be trusted because “we are generally affected more than is reasonable by the present or the near future in comparison with the far future. And a change which will only happen
after the end of a million years is in a very far future.” McTaggart is certainly right in his observation, but I seriously doubt that our “bias” towards the near accounts for our attitude about such cases. Suppose, for example, people were offered the following choice. In each of two outcomes, people would, starting today, live eons and eons, followed by annihilation. In the first outcome, they would live oyster-like lives the entire time. In the second outcome, they would spend virtually the whole time in “a state whose value [w]ould be neither good nor evil, but zero,” perhaps in a state of suspended animation, but in their final 100 years they would live as rich and rewarding a life as is humanly possible. Confronted with such a choice, I have no doubt that most people would clearly prefer the latter, for themselves or a loved one. But if this is right, then the explanation of that choice would have nothing to do with our bias towards the present, or near, which in this case would favor the first outcome over the second, since by hypothesis the first outcome would be better for us in the present, and for eons to come.

I submit, then, that McTaggart’s attempt to explain away the preference most people would have for an extended flourishing life over a much longer oyster-like life in terms of our imaginative limitations regarding differences between large numbers and our bias towards the present and near is unconvincing. However, as should be evident, I believe he is very close to on target when he suggests that the repugnance “certain moralists” would feel about his view “rests on a conviction that quality is something which is inherently and immeasurably more important than quantity.”22 But the view is not simply that quality is always “inherently and immeasurably more important” than number or duration. There are plenty of instances where McTaggart’s opponents would permit, and even insist, on certain trade-offs between quality and number or duration. Rather, what his opponents believe—which surely includes almost everyone, as
McTaggart himself recognizes—is that when the differences in quality are sufficiently large, as they are between the richest possible human life and an oyster-like life, then as long as the higher quality life persists for a “sufficient” period of time, it would be better, or more valuable, than any duration of the lower quality life. Of course, as McTaggart rightly observes, this view is neither “self-evident” nor capable of “demonstration.” But despite the rhetorical flourish with which McTaggart made that observation, his opponents needn’t think otherwise. Neither self-evidence nor demonstrability is necessary for truth, much less for reasonable belief or acceptance.

Comparing a flourishing human life of 100 years with an indefinitely long oyster-like life, we seem to have another example of what Jim Griffin described as “discontinuity between values” where “enough of A outranks any amount of B.” 23 As Griffin put it in the passage previously cited in chapter two, such cases involve “the suspension of addition; ... we have a positive value that, no matter how often a certain amount is added to itself, cannot become greater than another positive value, and cannot, not because with piling up we get diminishing value or even disvalue ... but because they are the sort of value that, even remaining constant, cannot add up to some other value (p. 85).” 24

Together the preceding considerations suggest a position analogous to chapter two’s Second Standard View. It might be put as follows.

The Third Standard View—Even within Lives, Trade-offs between Quality and Duration Are Sometimes Undesirable Even When Vast Differences in Duration Are at Stake: if the differences in the quality of benefits is “sufficiently” large, it would be preferable for someone to receive the larger benefit, as long as it persisted for a “sufficiently” long duration, than for that person to receive the smaller benefit for any period of finite duration.

As discussed in chapter two, most people regard Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion as genuinely repugnant. Correspondingly, most people accept the
kind of anti-additive aggregationist position reflected in chapter two’s Second Standard View. Similarly, as McTaggart recognized, most people would regard the Single Life Repugnant Conclusion as genuinely repugnant. Correspondingly, I submit, most people accept the kind of anti-additive aggregationist position reflected in the Third Standard View. On reflection, then, the overall goodness of a life is not just an additive function of the goodness of each moment of that life, considered separately from the others. Thus, a simple additive aggregationist approach is dubious within lives as well as between lives.

4.4 Summary of Chapter Four

In this chapter, I noted that Rawls’s and Nozick’s emphasis on the separateness of individuals helped illuminate the inadequacy of classical utilitarianism and, more particularly, of a simple additive aggregationist approach for assessing the value of outcomes. However, I suggested that their discussions may have also obscured the source and scope of anti-additive aggregationist principles, such as those discussed in chapters two and three, by conveying the impression that such principles ultimately rested on the foundation of the separateness of individuals. More particularly, I suggested that Rawls’s and Nozick’s emphasis on the significance of the separateness of individuals, combined with their failure to significantly challenge the Sidgwickian conception of rational self-interest, lent implicit support to the view that additive aggregation is appropriate within lives, despite its being inappropriate between lives.

Following Parfit, I next suggested that some who have stressed the importance of the separateness of individuals have conflated the issue of compensation with the issue of moral balancing. Like Parfit, I believe that while
the separateness of individuals makes it true that compensation is only possible within lives—so that benefits to one cannot ever be compensation for another’s burdens—this fact is only relevant to whether the moral balance of benefits and burdens is desirable, it doesn’t settle that question. In particular, I argued that in assessing the relative desirability of two outcomes, one must take account of much more than the brute fact of whether anyone in the different outcomes suffers uncompensated burdens. One must, per force, take account of the total impact that the benefits and burdens have on all of the ideals relevant to assessing the desirability of outcomes, including, perhaps, utility, equality, priority, maximin, perfection, freedom, comparative justice, and absolute justice. Similarly, I argued, while the possibility of compensation allows trade-offs between benefits and burdens within a life, there can be many factors relevant to assessing the overall goodness or desirability of a life, besides merely the sum total of the benefits and burdens in that life. Correspondingly, in assessing the desirability of a life one must take account of the total impact that the distribution of benefits and burdens has on all of the relevant factors for assessing lives, and not simply add up the benefits and burdens.

In discussing the issue of compensation, I assessed the view that any outcome where one person bears uncompensated burdens is, ipso facto, less desirable than any alternative where she does not. Though few, if any, actually advocate this position, it is an example of a kind of position—a person-affecting principle—that many are attracted to, and our consideration of it helped lay the foundation for our discussion of other person-affecting principles that we will return to in later chapters. Regarding the position itself, I argued that it is
inconsistent and, in any event, deeply implausible. All things considered, there are undoubtedly some cases where one outcome would be more desirable than another, even though it involved some people bearing uncompensated burdens, while the less desirable one did not.

Finally, and most importantly, I presented a number of examples that directly challenge a simple additive aggregationist approach for assessing the goodness of individual lives. This is the approach underlying Sidgwick’s conception of individual self-interest, according to which the best life is the one with the greatest sum total of goods spread throughout the life, where the value of each moment can be determined separately from the others.

As noted, facts about personal identity and the separateness of individuals allow for compensation, and therefore license certain trade-offs of benefits for burdens, within lives, that would not be permissible between lives. Nevertheless, I argued that within lives, as well as between lives, what matters is not just how much total good obtains, but how that good is distributed. For example, I suggested that a consistently drab life would have a significantly different value than a wildly fluctuating life, even of the sum total of benefits minus burdens was the same in the two lives. Similarly, I suggested that the overall goodness of a life might be affected by its shape, pattern, or direction, beyond the ways in which these might alter the total sum of the life’s goodness. So, for example, I suggested that a life of steady improvement, that started out poorly and ended well, could be better than a life of steady decline, that started well and ended poorly, even if the sum total of goodness in the two lives were the same, as measured moment by moment. In addition, I argued that a consistently high
quality life would be better than one that was only somewhat better most of the time, but included a year of exceptionally bad pain and suffering, even if the total sum of goodness minus badness was slightly higher in the second life. And similarly, I argued that a consistently high quality of life would be worse than one that was only somewhat worse most of the time, but truly blissful for a full year, even if the sum total of goodness was slightly higher in the first life. Finally, I constructed an analogue of Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion, for the case of a single life, and contended that just as most people regard the Repugnant Conclusion as genuinely repugnant, so, too, most people would regard the Single Life Repugnant Conclusion as genuinely repugnant. For example, most people would regard a flourishing human life enduring for a 100 years as more desirable than an oyster-like life of indefinite duration, even if they admitted that in a sense there would be a greater total sum of goodness spread throughout the latter life than the former one. I argued that in holding such a view, most people judge that the goodness that obtains in each moment of an oyster-like life doesn’t add up in the way it would need to to make such a life more desirable, overall, than a flourishing human life of significant duration. Interestingly, the first person to present a version of the Single Life Repugnant Conclusion, McTaggart, recognized that most people would regard it as repugnant, but denied that such a view would be correct. But while McTaggart offered interesting and sophisticated considerations for dismissing our intuitions about the case, I found his considerations unpersuasive, and argued that they should be rejected.

Together, this chapter’s arguments suggest that we should reject Sidwick’s conception of individual self-interest. More specifically, they suggest that most
people would accept that anti-additive aggregationist principles of the sort presented in chapters two and three also apply within lives, as well as between lives. Thus, we saw that even for ranking alternatives regarding a single life, in some cases the reasoning underlying the Minimize Great Additional Burdens View applied, in some cases the reasoning underlying the Consolidate Substantial Additional Benefits View applied, and in some cases reasoning analogous to the Second Standard View, which I called the Third Standard View, applied.

Unfortunately, because of the role played by the notions of compensation and the separateness of individuals in contemporary thought, the inadequacy of additive aggregation for assessing lives has not, perhaps, been as widely recognized as it has for assessing outcomes. Nevertheless, I suspect that most people, on reflection, will regard this chapter’s results as unsurprising. But, “unsurprising” or not, such results are highly controversial. As we will see in the next chapter, combined with other positions that most people accept, they lead to deep worries similar to those raised in chapters two and three. But this time, the worries concern trade-offs within a life, as opposed to trade-offs between lives.

2 The Method of Ethics, p. 124 note 1.

3 Ibid., p. 381.

4 Ibid., p.382.

5 Ibid.


7 Ibid., p. 26.

8 Ibid., p. 27.

9 At this point Nozick has a note, 5, citing Rawls on the separateness of persons; specifically, sections 5, 6, and 30 of A Theory of Justice.


11 Ibid., p. 33.

12 Add relevant cite to Kant, no trade-offs view, treating people as a means to an end, etc., and possibly note their own explicit acknowledgments to Kant.…..?

13 It is possible that Rawls and Nozick merely grant Sidgwick his conception of rational self-interest “for the sake of argument.” Still, I think it is fair to claim that Sidgwick was expressing the conception of individual self-interest that has dominated western thought since Plato. A notable recent challenge to this conception is presented by Derek Parfit in part two of Reasons and Persons.

14 Cite to Slote and others.

15 See especially pp. 336-339.


17 Include appropriate cite.


19 I am not claiming here that no two lives that differ starkly in certain respects could be equally good, all things considered. Rather, my view is that for the particular lives in question the difference between them is stark in ways that have significant implications for their overall goodness, such that it is implausible to believe they might, in fact, be equally good, or even almost equally good.

20 cite
Adjust cite using the following. Include acknowledgment to Thomas Hurka, for calling these wonderful passages to my attention. Happy to send you the McTaggart quote, just because it's so great. And it's just easiest for me to type it into this e-mail. The reference is to J.M.E. McTaggart, The Nature of Existence, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), vol.2, pp. 452-453. (The main passage is sections 869-870 of Book VII, Ch. 67, "The Total Value in the Universe." I begin with the end of the last sentence of sec. 868:

Cite, p.
