What Good Is Commitment?*

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That human beings make commitments of various sorts might seem so obviously a good thing that the question “What good is commitment?” might be thought to ask merely after the kind or kinds of good that commitment affords. To that question, one might respond that commitment is good in a variety of ways. Promises and contracts, two prominent types of commitment, have obvious utility as social coordination devices. The affirmation of one’s commitment to another or to bringing about some feature of her welfare promotes trust, something that has both social and moral value. Even personal commitments, such as a commitment to learning or to doing one’s job well, may enhance both the moral good of trust and the social goods of reliance and coordinated planning. Many commitments are good because they are morally required, strongly morally recommended, or constitutive of good moral character—for example, commitment to one’s children’s education or to acting with integrity. Finally, the social world is often so arranged as to quasi-force locking in one’s future via making commitments even when one would not otherwise have chosen to so firmly commit one’s future: others may be unwilling to embark on joint ventures with us on the basis of anything less than a promissory or contractual commitment, and the penalties for a change of plans may be sufficiently steep as to make lack of commitment to a plan unwise, as is the case when costly airline tickets are nonrefundable. In short, commitment has social, moral, and prudential value.

In asking, “What good is commitment?” I do not aim to deny that commitment can be good in these ways. My interest is in a particular range of commitments that are often thought to be good because they

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contribute to a life’s being well lived. The commitments I have in mind are ones whose objects are candidates for inclusion in a life plan, or that give shape to a life, or define an identity, or answer the question of what one’s life is about. Intuitively, sexual, ethnic, and religious identities, place of geographic residence, avocations and careers, and friendships and intimate relationships would count as such candidates. I will later call these substantive commitments to distinguish them from, among other things, normative commitments to particular values and practical principles and guidance commitments (e.g., to looking before one leaps or to making decisions only in a cool hour). The commitments that give shape to a life are typically long-term commitments, but they are not necessarily so. Substantive commitments might include acquiring skills that can be learned fairly quickly (e.g., the basics of ballroom dancing) as well as time-limited activities, such as a three-year stint of military service. By contrast, a long-term commitment to making one’s bed every day or riding the number 30 bus to work would not likely, absent some story about their place within more significant projects, count as commitments to what gives a shape or a plan to a life.

Deeply embedded in popular cultural portrayals of admirable lives and in the kinds of life advice we offer to young as well as older adults is the idea that making commitments of the sort I’ve just described is a good thing for the individual herself. The idea here is that a life whose plan is provisional and thus whose shape is not just revisable in extremis but readily open to revision and frequent change is not as good a life for its protagonist as a life whose contours have been fixed by commitment. Children who lack the experience and knowledge to make commitments, young adults who need to prepare for adulthood by experimenting with options, and elderly adults who live within a shortened time frame are exempt from advice to commit. But adults who fail to commit open themselves to criticism and pity; they are “unable to settle down,” “aimless,” “undisciplined,” “lazy,” or “immature.”

Here, the good of commitment is not just its social utility, moral value, or instrumental value under particular social arrangements (like that of nonrefundable airline tickets). The good of commitment consists in the quality of life it enables. Such a life might variously be described as healthy, mature, meaningful, or conducive to success or satisfaction.

Much philosophical literature implicitly shares the cultural assumption that a committed life is a better-lived life. The limits of the will are set by one’s love-based commitments. One’s deep identity is defined by one’s fundamental commitments to projects and relationships. Flourishing, meaningful lives are ones committed to worthy projects. The life plans that figure prominently in Rawlsian-inspired political theory are typically described as having either the force of reason or the force of cultural attachment so firmly behind them as to suggest
that what is valued is not the capacity to frame sequences of provisional life plans but to commit oneself to a life plan that, though revisable, typically resists revision.

Setting aside considerations connected to the fact that we live our lives among other people—that is, setting aside considerations of the social utility and moral value of commitment and the rationality of making particular commitments given particular social arrangements—what is the normative justification for recommending that people shape their lives around commitments? Why think that, for their own sakes, individuals should commit?

In aiming to trouble this normative assumption, I do not intend to argue for the severely skeptical conclusion that lives go worse in virtue of being shaped around commitments and that commitment is thus a bad thing. I do intend to argue for the modestly skeptical conclusion that shaping one’s life around some set of commitments is not obviously a better strategy for making one’s life go well than not doing so, and this is true quite apart from the worthiness or unworthiness of the particular objects of commitment. Shaping one’s life around commitments is thus better regarded as an optional style for managing one’s diachronic existence.

I begin in the first section by examining the terrain of commitment. What are the distinctive features of commitment? Sections II and III are devoted to critiquing the principal philosophical defenses of the value of committing one’s life. In the last section, I try to construct an explanation for what makes shaping one’s life around commitments attractive to many persons if not universally so.

I. COMMITMENT

Commitment is a species of intention. Within that species, it may be philosophically useful to distinguish significant subspecies of commitment: promise, contract, resolution, vow, attitudinal commitment, and the kind of life-shaping commitment that is the subject of the present

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1. In “The Idea of a Life Plan,” Charles Larmore argues that lives are not properly regarded as the subject of a plan, and lives do arguably go worse when so seen (Social Philosophy and Policy 16 [1999]: 96–112). The life plans he has in mind are the sort that I think are implicitly assumed in much liberal political theory, namely, plans to which we are committed. So one might read this essay as spelling out an argument for the severely skeptical conclusion.

2. The modest skepticism involves two claims: first, that commitment isn’t universally necessary for making one’s life go well; second, that while for those with a particular style of managing their future, commitment is a good strategy for making their life go well, for others it is a poor strategy.
inquiry. Two subspecies of commitment have gotten the most philosophical attention: the kind of commitment to future performance constitutive of promising and contracting and the kind of commitment grounded in identity-defining feelings of love or categorical desire that I will call attitudinal commitments. Very shortly, I will be setting aside promises, contracts, and resolutions, since the normative pressure to commit that interests me is the pressure to commit in ways that contribute to having something like a life plan or ongoing identity. Attitudinal commitments, however, will figure prominently in the later discussion, since some, though not all, life-shaping commitments are grounded in identity-defining feelings.

One initially plausible way of sorting the various subspecies of commitment, and one that tracks the contrast between promise-based commitments and attitudinal commitments (though I will suggest reasons for not sorting commitments this way), is to see commitment as taking two basic forms: active and passive. Active commitments are ones that one takes on by making a decision to commit and often by using a commitment convention—promising to others, contracting, pledging, enlisting, volunteering, signing up for, officially adopting, promising oneself, or making a resolution. Active commitments, if kept, bring about a connection to a particular kind of future.

Passive commitments, by contrast, are ones that one finds oneself with and that, independently of deliberative decision making and subsequent employment of commitment conventions, already connect one to a particular kind of future. Unlike active commitments, passive commitments are not voluntaristic. The avowing of a passive commitment does not, as Stanley van Hooft observes, bring about a new state of affairs but expresses a prior “inchoate commitment which we find ourselves with and which it would be constitutive of our integrity to acknowledge.”

Though intuitively attractive, this mapping of commitment does not clearly capture two kinds of commitment. On the one hand, if one takes passive commitments to be nonvoluntaristic in the strong sense that one in no way controls either the having of them or their persis-

3. I don’t mean to suggest that these subspecies are distinguished from one another along some single dimension (vows might differ from the other subspecies in the degree to which they lock down the future), nor that these subspecies do not sometimes overlap in various ways (so we might say that some promises are vows). So the metaphor of “subspecies” should not be taken too strictly.

4. I take the terms, though not the precise meanings she gives them, from Nancy Schauben (“Integrity, Commitment and the Concept of a Person,” American Philosophical Quarterly 35 [1996]: 119–29). Schauben limits active commitments to commitments to other persons that make use of conventions such as the convention of promising.

tence—they are simply, and without choice, what one finds one’s life bound up with—passive commitments do not look much like commitments at all.

They are simply deep psychological attractions. Being moved on the basis of such involuntary psychological attractions to pursue a project, maintain a relationship, care for the well-being of some entity, and the like is not yet to be committed. On the contrary, such passive “commitments” function in our psychological economy as alternatives to commitment. The stability of carings over time does the same work of commitment insofar as it locks in one’s future. Thus if one can rely on the stability—in the sense of both endurance and unwavering motivational strength—of one’s carings, there is no functional purpose to also making a commitment. One need not, for example, make a commitment to preparing for a marathon or to being a patient person or to maintaining a relationship if one is already so strongly and stably disposed toward these things that there is no risk that, over the course of time, temptations, the cooling of love, boredom, loss of self-control, the emergence of competing carings, and the like might dislodge marathon preparation, patience, or maintenance of a relationship from one’s future. By contrast, commitments safeguard one’s future against psychological vicissitudes. (I will turn to just how they safeguard the future in a moment.) The contrast between active and passive commitments, in this case, seems to capture not two different kinds of commitment but rather two kinds of motivation for connecting oneself to a particular future: voluntary, reasons-based motivation and motivation originating entirely from involuntary psychological attractions.

On the other hand, if one takes passive commitments to be non-voluntaristic in the weaker sense that one has, without being aware of it, decided to take on a commitment for reasons that are articulable if not articulated and in a way that safeguards one’s future against psychological vicissitudes, then passive commitments are commitments but not of a clearly different kind. Decision making simply occurs at varying levels of self-conscious awareness.

All genuine commitments are active in the sense that they are made, not merely discovered as facts about one’s psychology, and they persist through being sustained, not through being persistently suffered. Some commitments surely are grounded in wholehearted, stable carings. They are grounded in caring not by being caused by carings; rather, one

reason for making a commitment is present and expected future psychological investment in the very things to which one commits. Indeed, we expect people to make some major life decisions on the basis of their wholehearted, stable carings—choice of a partner, for example, or of career. But caring is not the only reason for committing oneself, and the other reasons that there are may trump carings in one’s deliberation about what to commit to. So, for example, young adults are often advised to consult their hearts in committing to a career path but also to be realistic about their chances of success, economically practical, and mindful of the other things they might want to do and have in life.

Thus commitments are active, in part, because they are authored. They are also active because it is up to us to sustain a commitment, rather than continued commitment being a matter of psychological fortune. Constitutive of any commitment is a stance of being prepared to sustain the commitment. That is, a commitment is both an intention to engage with something (a person, relationship, goal, activity, identity, etc.) and a preparedness to see to it that that intention to engage persists.7 Seeing to the persistence of an intention comes in degrees. One may be prepared to do more or less to sustain one’s intention to engage. We measure depth of commitment by what a person is prepared to do or to resist in order to see to it that the intention to engage persists. Someone prepared to do very little to see to it that her intention to engage persists has made only a shallow commitment or a “commitment” more accurately described as a mere-intention or a provisional plan.8 So we might say that a student who gave up her biology major because she wasn’t getting As in all of her classes wasn’t committed to majoring in biology. Were she committed, she would take steps to see to it that her disappointing grades did not deter her from proceeding with her biology major.

Being prepared to see to it that one’s intention to engage persists means, first, being prepared to take steps to revive one’s motivation to

7. Mike Martin emphasizes this connection between commitment and seeing to the persistence of one’s commitment (“Love’s Constancy,” Philosophy 68 [1993]: 63–77, 65).

The term ‘preparedness’ is admittedly vague. It is tempting to say instead that one intends to see to it that one’s intention to engage persists. But what kind of intention is this? A mere-intention is too weak to capture what is involved in a commitment, and positing a commitment to see to it that one’s intention to engage persists would make the definition circular. I take it that if one is genuinely prepared, some set of counterfactuals about what one would do under circumstances of new information or temptation are true.

8. I will say more about the distinction between mere-intentions, provisional plans, and commitments in Sec. II. My aim, both here and in Sec. II, is not to set up criteria for definitively determining which intentions count as mere-intentions, which count as provisional plans, and which count as commitments. I’m not convinced that one could do so. Here I only want to roughly outline features that we would want to examine more closely in determining whether someone is committed at all, and if so, how committed.
carry through on the commitment should one’s interest fade. Harry Frankfurt’s description of the way that carings entail a commitment to sustain the caring itself applies generally to commitments: “When a person cares about something . . . he is willingly committed to his desire. . . . He is therefore prepared to intervene, should that be necessary, in order to ensure that it continues. If the desire tends to fade or to falter, he is disposed to refresh it and to reinforce whatever degree of influence he wishes it to exert upon his attitudes and upon his behavior.”9 Committed but burned-out teachers, for example, are disposed to try to rekindle their interest in teaching and in their students rather than quit. Committed partners are disposed to spice things up when boredom sets in rather than part ways. The motivation to follow through on simple promissory commitments is often sustained simply by reminding oneself, “I promised.” And in many cases, reminding oneself both of one’s original reasons for making a commitment as well as of new reasons acquired over time may renew the motivational basis of one’s commitment.10

Seeing to the persistence of one’s commitment also involves refraining from putting oneself in the way of temptation, refraining from cultivating activities, attitudes, and ways of life that are incompatible with sustaining one’s commitment, repressing commitment-threatening emotions and desires, and resisting the live option of reconsidering the reasons for having the commitment. That is, commitment entails readiness to engage in a set of refusals.

That commitments involve a high degree of resistance to reconsideration distinguishes being committed from both merely intending and having a provisional plan.11 Mere-intentions, provisional plans, and commitments all bind the future self insofar as they involve taking reconsideration off the table unless there is some deliberation-relevant change—for example, a change in one’s situation, the acquisition of information one wasn’t aware of before, or a change in one’s values or

11. I don’t mean to say that commitments aren’t intentions. They are. The contrast here is between commitment intentions, provisional plans, and mere-intentions. I also don’t mean to suggest that one can’t be committed to a plan. But one can have a plan that one is perfectly willing to give up should a better one be suggested. People often say things like, “That’s my plan, though I’m not wedded to it” (as opposed to “That’s my plan and I’m sticking to it!”).
I take it that what distinguishes commitments from mere-intentions as well as from provisional plans is that commitments are intentions to follow through on X despite or in the face of developments that would, in the absence of commitment, make it rational to reconsider one’s mere-intentions or provisional plans.

This feature is especially obvious if one considers quite long-term commitments. People who make long-term commitments often can reasonably predict that in the future they will have relevantly different desires and values, the circumstances of action will have changed, they will have substantially more and better information, and they may be better practical reasoners. The paradigm case of this is marital commitment. Reasonably observant first-time marriers and, even more so, second- and third-time marriers typically know that the circumstances of deliberation will change perhaps dramatically over time, and the marriage vow itself reminds spouses of the main changes that the marriage vow commits a person to disregarding—for better or worse, in sickness or in health, for richer or poorer.

In short, to be committed, one must be prepared to weather circumstantial and informational changes that would provide sufficient reason to alter mere-intentions and provisional plans. Just how committed one is depends on how much one is prepared to weather. At the far end are vows which, in paradigm cases of traditional marriage vows and religious vows, require being prepared to weather virtually any possible circumstantial, epistemic, or attitudinal and value changes.

That commitments consist, in part, in a refusal to alter one’s original choice under the same conditions that would make it reasonable to revise mere-intentions or provisional plans does not entail that commitments depend on either deliberate blindness to reasons or irrationally discounting their force. Some people do, of course, see to it that their commitments persist by using various irrational mechanisms of not noticing, not thinking about, repression, wishful thinking, and underestimating. But the committed may also be fully aware of the range and gravity of unanticipated problems that now beset their course yet rationally refuse to change course even though it would be irrational for a mere-intender or provisional planner to refuse to change course under the same conditions. How could that be? First, that there are (or may be) unanticipated problems of gravity G in pursing an aim of value V often underdetermines how one should regard those problems—in

12. Just as framing an intention, adopting a provisional plan, or making a commitment may be done consciously or nonconsciously, so taking reconsideration off the table is sometimes a reflective, conscious decision, and sometimes it is an unreflective, nonconscious response to one’s articulate but not articulated reasons for intending, provisionally planning, or committing.
particular, whether one should regard them as weighing against one’s original intention or as problems to be dealt with. To commit is to adopt a different policy toward unanticipated problems from the policy one would have adopted had one instead provisionally planned or merely intended. In particular, it is to adopt the policy of regarding a greater quantity and greater severity of unanticipated problems as to be dealt with by working to surmount them rather than as triggering reconsideration. In short, the rationality of staying the course in the face of unanticipated problems is not simply a function of how highly one values or strongly desires a particular end. It is also a function of the problem-handling policy one has adopted.

Second, what makes it reasonable to stay the course in the face of the same factors—say, boredom—that would make it reasonable for a mere-intender or provisional planner to reconsider is the fact that whether or not there are sufficient reasons in favor of pursuing an aim is partly up to us. Commitment involves being prepared to seek new motivations and new reasons for sustaining one’s commitment when old ones fail. Again, marriage commitment is a paradigm case. The reasons of romantic love that might originally have grounded a marital commitment are highly unlikely to be available decades later. What will likely be available are a quite different set of reasons, and whether we become the kind of person who has those reasons or not will be at least partially up to us. In short, mere-intenders rationally stay the course when they have sufficient reasons on hand for doing so; the committed reasonably stay the course on the basis of reasons they intend to generate (and intend to generate in part by staying the course).

Seeing to the persistence of one’s commitment by finding new reasons that support one’s commitment is one of a variety of positive forms that seeing-to can take. Seeing-to in some cases is a matter of positive planning and active efforts to reorganize habitual patterns of action and habitual priorities. Consider, for example, the resolution to stop smoking or to lose weight.13 Although seeing to the persistence of one’s resolve in part means finding ways to tie one’s hands—for example, removing temptations from one’s home or setting oneself up for shaming if one backslides—seeing to the persistence of one’s resolve may also be more a matter of “setting one’s mind” to something, where this amounts to intensified planning, as a resolution to lose weight might involve buying dieting books, setting up an exercise schedule, joining a health club, and keeping a record of caloric intake. Setting up occasions to revisit one’s reasons for having a particular commitment—

13. I take resolutions to be a subspecies of commitment distinguished by the fact that they are made in order to overcome some internal obstacle to doing or becoming what one wishes to do or become.
what Vanya Kovach and John Fitzpatrick call “recapitulative” processes—is another, often socially conventionalized, method of seeing to the persistence of a commitment. Celebrations of weddings and other anniversaries, renewals of vows, Independence Day celebrations, religious and work retreats, and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings typically serve this function.

In sum, commitments are authored rather than passively suffered; they are a species of intention but differ from mere-intentions insofar as they involve a strong resistance to reconsideration; and they involve a preparedness to see to it that one’s intention to engage persists.

II. WHAT GOOD IS COMMITMENT? THE PRAGMATIC ARGUMENT

One might approach the question “What good is commitment?” purely pragmatically. Is commitment necessary for setting and achieving aims? It would seem so. First, people typically find themselves attracted to a plurality of options for what to do with their lives. Many of those attractive options involve time-extended activities, such as pursuing a veterinary medicine degree or a PhD in philosophy, making one’s home in Maine or Mexico, or adopting children or seizing as many opportunities for travel as one can. Human lives are mortal and resources and energy finite. In addition, some valued options will not be available later in life if passed up now. This is especially evident where the option requires physical abilities that one might expect to have earlier but not later in life. That we desire many things and that our lives are limited in the ways just mentioned constitute what Connie Rosati has called “the circumstances of the good.” Under these conditions, if we hope to have any of our desires for temporally distant or temporally extended options satisfied, we must make up our minds which valuable options to pursue. Thus, finitude of time, resources, energy, and availability of options forces a choice between life options. We must commit. Or so it seems.

Second, one might note that the very nature of some aims also puts pressure on us to make up our minds whether we intend to commit to the aim or not. And this is true even in the absence of competing desires to do other things. Where aims can be achieved only by taking a series of temporally ordered and coordinated steps over a period of time—

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as, say, getting a college degree or renovating a kitchen requires—we will not be able to achieve the aim in the future unless we commit now to pursuing the aim, a commitment on the basis of which it will then make sense to formulate and execute a complex, temporally extended plan for achieving the aim.16 Getting some of the things we want out of life requires planning and the execution of that plan over time. Rational planning, however, depends on a prior commitment to the plan’s aim.

Putting both pragmatic considerations together—the need to decide between competing aims and the need to form and execute a plan for achieving aims—we might conclude that if we are going to do anything at all with our lives other than live from moment to moment, we will need to make some commitments.17 And so commitment is a pragmatically good thing.18


18. This pragmatic argument for the value of commitment, however, offers only a limited defense of commitment, since not all of the commitments that people make and find meaningful and desirable to make are made under these conditions. Consider identity commitments—for example, to being a Red Sox fan, a Christian, or a New Yorker. Identities are primarily a matter of self-conception, attitudes, values, and beliefs. To make an identity commitment is to adopt a self-conception which one resists revising. Although identities are often expressed in activities that take up one’s time, resources, and energy, they need not be. One can identify as a Jew or a Christian in the absence of religious practice or identify as a New Yorker while living in Iowa. Adoption of a revision-resistant identity thus isn’t necessitated by the circumstances of the good. There may, of course, be significant tensions between the sorts of self-conceptions attached to different identities, for example, being Catholic and being gay, but those tensions do not eliminate the possibility of simultaneous adoption of conflicting identities that would require making up one’s mind which identity one is going to have if one is going to have any identity at all. In part, this is possible because people can hold conflicting beliefs, can interpret the requirements of apparently conflicting identities in ways that make them compatible, or can refuse to choose which to value more (as one can insist on rooting for both teams that one is a committed fan of when they happen to be in competition). People do sometimes commit not just to identities but to those identities playing a determining role in the shape of one’s life—as, for example, a committed New Yorker might refuse to live anywhere but New York or a committed Catholic might attend daily Mass. In this case, the circumstances of the good might then preclude giving other identities a similar life-shaping role. But the value of taking on identity commitments in this life-shaping way in the first place is not itself explained by the facts of limited time and resources.

Some commitment to others also falls outside the scope of this pragmatic argument. Some commitments to others do involve taking on a temporally extended relationship that requires investment of time, energy, and resources in a way that makes those commitments subject to the conditions of the good. People must make up their minds, for example, whether to have children or to lead a peripatetic life. However, some commitments to others are primarily a matter of inner attitude, particularly attitudes of love and...
But is it really *commitment* that is necessary? That conclusion, I want to suggest, depends on making one of two dubious assumptions: (1) that framing intentions for our future always involves committing ourselves or (2) that the only (reliable) way of settling the future sufficiently to undertake temporally extended activities or to achieve temporally remote aims is by making commitments.

Consider the first assumption: It might seem that in framing any kind of intention one is necessarily making a commitment, since all intentions involve the present agent coming to a decision about what to do in the future. That decision settles the deliberative question about what to do, in the sense that the agent does not continue deliberating once the intention is framed and does not reopen deliberation except under a limited array of conditions.\(^\text{19}\) Intentions thus have, to use Michael Bratman’s term, “inertia”; again in his words, they “resist reconsideration.”\(^\text{20}\) By taking the issue of what to do at a later point in time off the deliberative table, intentions have the apparent effect of committing the agent to future performance.

As long as intentions are contrasted with either mere wishes (where an agent settles on a goal but fails or refuses to adopt and execute a plan for reaching it) or the absence of intentions for one’s future, all intentions seem aptly described as commitments to future performance. But these are not the only contrasts we need to make in describing agents’ relation to their future actions, and it is unhelpful to that end to collapse the different species of intention: mere-intention, provisional plan, and commitment. Nor does ordinary language support that collapse. We do say things like, “I had intended to do X,” and then add, “but I’m not committed to doing so.”

To see the difference between mere-intentions and commitments, consider the different modalities in which one might, in the morning, plan to take a bike ride in the afternoon. Between framing the intention and executing the plan, something may come up—say, a friend calls with an attractive invitation to see a movie that is only showing in the afternoon. If the plan to bike were framed under the modality “mere-intention,” this newly presented and attractive option to see a movie instead is just the sort of new information that makes redeliberation about one’s afternoon plans reasonable. Why stick to a plan crafted in

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 17.
ignorance of all the attractive options for the afternoon? By contrast, if the plan to bike is framed under the modality “commitment,” learning of a new attractive option for the afternoon does not automatically make redeliberation reasonable; depending on the depth of the commitment, the movie option may be excluded from the range of new information that could even raise the question “Shall I reconsider?”

We get a more helpful taxonomy of decisions that settle the future by noticing that the degree to which different intentions settle the question of future performance is scalar. At one end are mere-intentions, which set a sufficiently weak barrier to reconsideration that they are not well described as resisting reconsideration. Indeed, a mere-intention—say, a mere-intention to see a movie on Friday—can settle the question of future performance without there being any resistance to reconsideration. Typically, having settled what to do Friday evening, one simply stops deliberating and doesn’t look for new information that might reopen the question of what to do on Friday. Mere-intentions have inertia because one doesn’t bother to look for possibly more attractive options or potential problems with carrying through. But of course, something may come up to change one’s mind—someone points out a terrible review of the movie, or one receives a party invitation for Friday. Much of the inertia of mere-intentions depends on nothing in fact coming up, not on resistance to redeliberation.

Although in deciding to do X in the mode of merely intending one does not adopt an attitude of resistance to redeliberation, reasons to resist reconsideration may emerge after, and as a result of, settling on a plan. Intending to go to a movie on Friday, one buys a non-refundable ticket, hires a babysitter, and agrees to meet up with friends at the theater. Changing one’s mind at this point means wasting an investment and letting others down. But notice that it is not the intention—the fact of having made up one’s mind—that erects the barrier to reconsideration but the fact that one has executed enough of the plan to go to the movies to make reconsideration now not worth it. Had something only come up earlier, one might have happily reconsidered.

Because that degree is scalar, there will inevitably be some arbitrariness or indefiniteness in sorting out distinct species of intentions, as I plan to do, on the basis of differences in the degree to which they settle the future.

This is not to say that mere-intentions do not set up some barrier to reconsideration. Even if I just merely intend to go to the movies on Friday, that mere-intention will place some range of factors off-limits for triggering reconsideration, and in that sense even mere-intentions involve a “resistance” to reconsideration. However, since mere-intentions, provisional plans, and commitments settle the future to different degrees, I think it’s more helpful to use the description “resisting reconsideration” to pick out the especially high threshold for triggering reconsideration that is characteristic of commitments and not mere-intentions.
By contrast, to intend in the mode of being committed is to erect a strong barrier to reconsideration via the sole fact of having made up one’s mind. As I suggested earlier, to be committed is to resist reconsidering despite new information or change of desire that, had one merely intended but not committed to doing X, would have been reason to redeliberate. The committed moviegoer, for example, goes ahead and hires the babysitter and buys the ticket even though she realizes, after having decided to go, that she is going to be exhausted on Friday.

The pragmatic argument—that, given the circumstances of the good and the fact that achieving aims typically depends on executing complex, temporally extended plans, one must make up one’s mind which among desirable options to pursue—at most shows that one must frame some intentions that settle the future to some degree. It is not, by itself, a reason to think that commitment is necessary.

But, you might think, surely there will be a great deal of wasted effort, time, and resources in a life that remains open to a change of plan should something else come up. A student who merely intends or provisionally plans to major in X may find, as time passes, new reasons to major in Y, and then in Z. A person who merely intends or provisionally plans to pursue a relationship with A unless something else comes up may find herself dropping A for B, and later B for C. More important, a life that remains as open to plan revision as mere-intentions and provisional plans allow will not settle the future sufficiently for time-extended activities to be (reliably) completed or temporally remote aims to be (reliably) achieved. Commitment is needed.

But this concern that there will be a great deal of wasted time, effort, and resources and that temporally extended and remote aims won’t be realized absent commitment gets much of its force from what we are invited to imagine a life without commitment to be like. The uncommitted person will flit from one thing to the next, starting projects only to drop them in midstream, hopping from one relationship to another, never seeing any plan to completion. That image, however, blurs the distinction between merely intending and having no intentions at all and ignores the option of provisional planning. Merely intending and provisional planning settle the future unless something comes up. Real-life choice contexts are often quite stable, so that the considerations available for deliberative decision making persist over time as the only available considerations. That is, often nothing comes up. One can stick with a plan or a relationship for a very long time simply because no problems or more attractive options emerge over time. In addition, it’s important to keep in mind that the sunk costs and prospective costs created once one has partially executed a plan or spent time conducting a relationship create reasons for resisting reconsideration even when one is not committed to the plan’s aim or to the relationship.
Finally, in those cases where agents confront new options and face no significant costs to changing course, it’s unclear why changing course, even changing course frequently, should be regarded as a waste of time, energy, and resources to be avoided rather than as a wise seizure of the opportunity for trading up; nor is it obviously more pragmatically rational to adopt the committed’s policy toward even large problems, treating them as problems to be dealt with, than to adopt the mere-intenders or the provisional planner’s lower thresholds for taking problems as reconsideration triggers rather than as problems to be dealt with. Whether merely intending, provisional planning, or commitment is the best strategy would seem to depend on what one’s present and anticipated future options are.

III. WHAT GOOD IS COMMITMENT? THE BETTER-LIFE ARGUMENT

A central defect of the pragmatic argument is precisely that it defends commitment on purely pragmatic grounds. On that view, we are, in essence, forced to commit by the realities of human life (namely, that we can’t do everything and that getting the things we want takes time and planning). One might think, however, that commitment is necessary for a well-lived life and, in particular, for a life that is meaningful to the protagonist of that life. Thus there is something to be said for the value of commitment quite apart from the empirical realities that might seem to necessitate commitment.

First, commitments, especially long-term commitments, seem necessary for a life well lived because they are the basis for a life’s having a chosen as opposed to a merely accidental coherence, unity, and stability over time. One makes one’s life a coherent whole by having projects, relationships, identities, and ways of life to which one is deeply committed and which one is unwilling to abandon even in the face of many or serious obstacles or the temptations of attractive alternatives. The committed person’s life has an integrity—in the sense of a crafted integration of its temporal parts—that the uncommitted person’s life lacks. His life as a whole adds up to something, and his life trajectory has a narrative unity in virtue of that life being centered around enduring commitments.

When a life has diachronic unity and coherence, the person is able to say what he and his life are about. Making and sustaining long-term commitments that are highly resistant to reconsideration is the primary mechanism for such self-definition. What makes one a single identifiable agent over time is precisely the fact that one has willingly bound one’s life to a set of projects, relationships, social identities, geographical locations, and so on. Absent such long-term commitments, one cannot say either what one’s life is about or what defines one’s ongoing identity.
A life is made better precisely by having a unified trajectory and by expressing a clearly defined, stable identity.

Among the better-life arguments, I find this one the least persuasive. Commitment is not the only vehicle for securing narrative unity and integrity. A life can easily have narrative unity, and the temporal parts can easily be well integrated, quite apart from that life being guided by one or more long-term commitments. Indeed, lives marked by many changes of careers, relationships, ways of life, and social identities can have a high degree of narrative unity and integrity. What matters is that the protagonist has some account (a narrative or set of principled reasons) that makes intelligible how she, as the author of her life, got from point A to point B to point C. Agents’ lives are unified and integrated not by the fact of being centered around some single choice or set of choices that persists across time but by the unifying and integrating activities of agents themselves who make intelligible decisions about if, when, and why to alter their life trajectories.

Of course, a person whose life trajectory is not governed by some long-term commitments will not, at the end, be able to identify what her life as a whole was about and who she has been by pointing to some identity-defining project, relationship, social identity, or way of life that persistently dominated her life. And that may seem a strike against an uncommitted life. However, that a person cannot point to the object of a long-term commitment as constituting what her life was about or who she is hardly leaves her with nothing to say. Her life may have been one of overcoming adversity, seeing the light, making the most of every new opportunity, or experiencing as much as she could of what life had to offer. These kinds of whole-life accounts do not depend on making long-term commitments, and indeed some are possible only because the person does not lock up her life trajectory by making long-term commitments.

Even if the narrative unity of a life doesn’t depend on making commitments, one might still think that a life devoid of commitments will lack a different kind of unity, namely, the kind of unity of agency that depends on having a normative (rather than narrative) identity.

23. As Christine Korsgaard observes of personal identity, “Authorial psychological connectedness is consistent with drastic changes, provided those changes are the result of actions by the person herself or reactions for which she is responsible” ("Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 18 [1989]: 101–32, 123). The same point applies to narrative unity and integrity.

24. Margaret Walker argues that philosophical attachments to a life’s having a life plan, being driven by categorical desires, or fitting the form of a quest may say more about the historical and social location of the philosopher and philosophical audience than about any necessary quality of good lives (*Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]).
Someone who does not make any commitments, even relatively simple commitments to some time-extended projects, relationships, social identities, and the like, will appear not to have made up her mind what she really values. Having no commitments that unify her agency across time, she will not have anything convincing to say to others about what she cares about and about who she is as an agent—that is, as someone who chooses and acts on the basis of what she values. Thus having an identifiable normative identity appears to go hand in hand with making commitments.

On closer scrutiny, this particular defense of commitment, however compelling at first glance, just isn’t going to get us where we want. That is because it is really an argument for the agentic importance of making normative commitments. Unified agency is a matter of making up one’s mind what one values and what one’s evaluative priorities are so that one can establish for oneself practical principles and their rank ordering, action on which will count as leading one’s life rather than having a life happen to one. That unified agency depends on making normative commitments is, I think, quite right.

Nothing, however, follows from this about the necessity of making substantive commitments, namely, commitments to particular projects, relationships, social identities, ways of life, and so on. And that is because unified agency depends only on the fact of having made up one’s mind what one’s guiding practical principles will be, not on those principles having any particular content. Some practical principles not only are consistent with failure to make substantive commitments but are likely to require not doing so. As Christine Korsgaard notes, ‘To act on whatever desire is strongest at the moment’ is a practical principle. 25 Someone who deliberately chooses courses of action because she values, above all, satisfying her immediate, strongest desire is surely leading a life and differs from the person who, not having made up his mind what he wants, is caused to act by whatever desire is strongest at the moment. ‘To act on whatever desire is strongest at the moment’ will rationally entail not making substantive commitments. There are plenty of other practical principles that are similarly at odds with substantive commitment, ones that are less far-fetched as examples of what might guide real-life agents’ choices about how to lead their lives. Persons with very low self-esteem, persons who have been severely traumatized, persons with deep psychological needs to be socially accepted, to name just a

few personality types, might adopt principles like ‘To do whatever will make me feel good about myself’, ‘To do whatever will secure my safety’, or ‘To do whatever will make people like me’. It may be that, for example, securing one’s safety is best done by making some substantive commitments—for example, committedly developing self-defense skills or entering a committed relationship with someone who makes one feel emotionally or physically safe. The point, however, is that practical principles like the ones just mentioned do not entail making some substantive commitments. Individuals who place sufficiently high priority on adventure or novelty might even adopt the normative principle ‘To make no substantive commitments’ (either at all or in a particular domain, as a Don Juan might commit himself to making no commitments to any intimate relationships). Thus unified agency will not necessarily manifest itself in the making of time-extended commitments to some projects, persons, ways of life, or social identities.

Imagining the sorts of normative commitments that would not naturally issue in making at least some substantive commitments is, however, instructive. Lives devoted to the pursuit of safety, gratification of the strongest present desire, social acceptance, or sheer novelty seem shallow. These are not the sorts of normative commitments whose pursuit is likely to contribute to a meaningful life. Normative commitments that issue in substantive commitments to projects, persons, ways of life, or identities seem necessary if what we end up doing with our lives is to be meaningful. So perhaps substantive commitment is instead a good because it makes a life more meaningful than it otherwise would have been or at least increases the odds that one will lead a more meaningful life.

In his more recent work, Frankfurt argues that this is so.26 In his view, there is a kind of love, or caring, that is “volitionally necessitating” in the sense that we cannot avoid giving the objects of caring priority in our normative commitments and therefore cannot act against the objects of what we care about without feeling that we have done the unthinkable and betrayed ourselves. Such deep carings are, in his view, what make life meaningful: “The function of love is not to make people good. Its function is just to make their lives meaningful, and thus to help make their lives in that way good for them to live.”27 And, he says, “The fact that we cannot help loving, and that we therefore cannot help being guided by the interests of what we love, helps to ensure that we neither flounder aimlessly nor hold ourselves back from definitive ad-

26. Although Frankfurt has long argued for the significance of caring to human lives, his claims about the dependence of meaningfulness on care—and care of a particular sort—are especially strong in Taking Ourselves Seriously.
27. Ibid., 99.
herence to a meaningful practical course." And again, "By providing us with final ends, which we value for their own sakes and to which our commitment is not merely voluntary, love saves us both from being inconclusively arbitrary and from squandering our lives in vacuous activity that is fundamentally pointless because, having no definite goal, it aims at nothing that we really want. Love makes it possible, in other words, for us to engage wholeheartedly in activity that is meaningful."

One of the advantages of this particular defense of commitment is that it puts at center stage a kind of commitment that is often taken to be paradigmatic. These are the attitudinal commitments that I mentioned at the outset of this essay.

Attitudinal commitments are grounded in the emotions and desires of the agent, particularly in feelings of love, of relatively intense caring, of being called-to, and what Bernard Williams has called "categorical desires," namely, desires that answer for the agent the question of why go on in life at all. Such attitudes are the basis of one's being, in Susan Wolf's terms, "actively engaged" with particular projects or relationships in one's life. They explain why one experiences particular projects or relationships as deeply satisfying and personally fulfilling. Paradigm cases of attitudinal commitments are marital commitments, commitments to one's children, and religious commitments.

Attitudinal commitments differ from other sorts of commitments—for example, promissory commitments and resolutions—in the source of the commitment in one's identity-defining loves and desires and the typical absence of conflicting motivations. To be attitudinally committed to some aim, for example, is to be disposed to act on that commitment unstintingly and ungrudgingly—dispositions that are not constitutive of either promissory commitments or, even less so, resolutions. Being grounded in deep features of the self, attitudinal commitments typically have longevity and are uniquely suited to answer the questions "Who am I?" and "What makes my life meaningful?" The pursuit of what has intrinsic value may make one's life objectively meaningful—the sort of life that third parties would regard as well spent—but it is caring that makes a life subjectively meaningful in the sense of being satisfying and self-expressive.

While agreeing that a meaningful life depends on one's caring

28. Ibid., 66.
29. Ibid., 90.
about at least some of the projects, relationships, identities, and ways of life with which one occupies one’s time, one might nevertheless doubt that commitments based on those carings—that is, attitudinal commitments—are essential to a subjectively meaningful life. For Frankfurt, attitudinal commitments come to seem critical to a meaningful life only because he assumes that all meaning-supplying carings are volitionally necessitating. Having the highest priority among one’s normative commitments, they will naturally issue in substantive commitments expressive of what matters most within one’s normative outlook. However, that all meaning-supplying carings have this kind of practical priority seems false.32 Caring is a scalar phenomenon. Once one attends to the full spectrum of carings, from very deep, intense, “volitionally necessitating” carings to normatively minor carings for things that one finds satisfying and self-expressive but not emotionally indispensable, it ceases to be obvious that leading a meaningful life depends on making attitudinal commitments.

What is necessary for a meaningful life is that one’s life allows space for the pursuit of what one cares about in the ordinary sense of ‘caring’, which does not presuppose that what one cares about is volitionally necessitating. A person’s life might allow plenty of opportunity to scuba dive, do volunteer work, spend time with friends, and take sign-language classes, all things she finds satisfying and personally expressive, without her being committed to having any of these in her life, let alone feeling volitionally necessitated to incorporate them. At the end of the day she might well say that she led a meaningful life even though she could imagine her life having been occupied in other ways, had opportunities been different or had she chosen differently, that also would have constituted a meaningful life.

Of course, one might feel that a life where there is one or a few ruling passions—and thus a life suited for attitudinal commitments—will be a more meaningful life than one where there is a plurality of carings that occupy lower rungs among one’s normative priorities, to none of which one is committed. It is true that the former person will find more meaning in the object of her ruling passion than the latter will in any of the objects of her cares. But the meaningfulness of a life is a function of both how much one cares about particular relationships, activities, and the like as well as how much time one has the good fortune to spend with those things. It will depend on empirical circumstances whether the cultivation of a ruling passion and the making of an attitudinal commitment is a better or worse strategy for increasing the

32. Michael E. Bratman expresses skepticism that there are any volitionally necessitating carings in his ‘A Thoughtful and Reasonable Stability,” in Frankfurt, Taking Ourselves Seriously, 77–90.
meaningfulness of one’s life as a whole. A person who has many varied and easily pursued objects of lesser care may end her life having spent more of its days and hours in meaningful activities than her more single-minded, passionate counterpart.

There are, however, other reasons for thinking that commitment is essential to leading a meaningful life, ones that don’t depend on valorizing depth of care. The meaningfulness of a life may be judged by reference to the degree of subjective satisfaction and self-expressiveness that the contents of that life afford. It may also be judged by reference to the degree of objective or intersubjective value that the contents of that life bear. The objectively valuable life occupations that make a life meaningful in this latter sense are typically time extended by their nature—pursuit of a career, involvement in a relationship, service to a charitable organization, development of a valuable skill, acquisition of or contribution to knowledge of some important subject, and the like. Such time-extended activities are objectively valuable, when they are, because they make a positive contribution to others’ lives, because they afford the agent access to what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “internal goods,” such as the good of intimacy within relationships, or because they enable the development of humanly valuable intellectual, physical, relational, and emotional capacities. Lives not spent in objectively valuable pursuits, no matter how subjectively satisfying they may be, may, from this external perspective, appear wasted. Given the time-extended nature of the pursuits that make a life objectively meaningful, commitment might well be thought a necessary condition to leading a meaningful life since, absent commitment, the person will not stick to these pursuits long enough to realize anything of objective value. Indeed, paradigm examples of objectively valuable lives are typically also highly committed lives.

But recall, first, that making a commitment is not to be contrasted with having no intentions whatsoever. Commitments are to be contrasted with provisional plans and mere-intentions; all three involve making decisions that settle the future to some degree by establishing thresholds for what new information or change of desire will be sufficient to trigger reconsideration, and thus thresholds beyond which problems are not problems to be dealt with but reasons for reconsideration. If one uses

33. It’s worth bearing in mind that deep carings are not a matter of voluntary choice, even if we can sometimes contribute to their cultivation. Not everyone will be so fortunately situated that life presents them with suitable objects of ruling passions. No star-crossed loves or gripping vocations and avocations present themselves. It seems odd to regard such lives as necessarily devoid of meaning.

34. See Wolf, “Happiness and Meaning,” and “Meanings of Lives.”

'commitment' loosely to refer indiscriminately to decisions that close the future to some degree or another, then it is certainly true that developing one’s talents, acquiring knowledge, and the like require commitment in that loose sense. One could not learn ballroom dancing without at least framing a mere-intention to take classes. Using ‘commitment’ in this loose way, however, obscures the scalar nature of closing the future. The question at issue is whether it is unquestionably better to develop one’s talents, acquire knowledge, make social contributions, and pursue enriching social interactions via commitments rather than provisional plans or mere-intentions.

My claim is that it is not. It is true that someone who forms a mere-intention or provisional plan to, say, learn Spanish or help out with a political campaign is less likely to learn as much Spanish or help a campaign in as many ways or for as long a time as the committed person will. But, again, it’s important not to exaggerate the temporal instability of these intentions. Decision-making contexts are often highly stable over time so that reconsideration is never triggered, and a wide variety of factors other than a decision to foreclose future reconsideration keep people in time-extended activities once initiated, including the need to stave off boredom, economic necessity, the absence of attractive alternatives, social pressures, a lack of imagination, psychological needs, and habit, to mention only a few. Where those circumstantial stabilizing factors are absent, mere-intenders and provisional planners will change course more frequently than the committed will. It does not follow from this that they do less to develop their talents or contribute to the social good even if they do less to develop a particular talent or contribute to the social good in a particular way. As I argued earlier, normative commitments, including a commitment to develop one’s talents or to contribute to the social good, do not entail substantive commitments to this or that activity. The individual who merely intends to help by fostering kittens may reconsider and change course after the first experience with the high mortality rate of kittens, and the provisional planner may change course only after her house becomes infested with fleas, while the committed person whose policy is to treat these problems as to be dealt with stays the course. A normative commitment to contributing to the social good would require that the mere-intender and the provisional planner in this case select some other avenue of social contribution. It may, of course, be better for the welfare of others that there are committed persons. My aim has only been to argue that it is not clearly better for the individual that she make her life meaningful via the mechanism of commitment rather than via mere-intentions or provisional plans.

The view that leading a meaningful life depends on commitment gets much of its persuasive force, I believe, from the assumption that
meaningful lives are about something, something that underwrites a single narrative story, that is the object of a ruling passion, and that makes long stretches of one’s life or one’s life as a whole objectively valuable. If lives can have meaning without being about something, then meaningful lives need not include pursuits that are so very time extended as to virtually necessitate commitment.

In his essay on well-being and time, David Velleman argues that, given that persons have both a synchronic and a diachronic identity, they are the sorts of beings who care both how their lives are going at a particular moment in time relative to alternative possibilities as well as how their lives as a whole are going relative to alternative possibilities. It is thus a mistake to think that there is a single answer to questions about a person’s well-being. How one answers the question “Did X contribute to my well-being?” depends on whether one is taking a more temporally local or more temporally global perspective. From a temporally local perspective, a romantic evening out with a new love interest may contribute positively to one’s well-being even though, from a temporally more global perspective that locates the romantic evening within the course of what proves to be a disastrous affair, the romantic evening may have a quite different value. In Velleman’s view, the more global perspective on well-being does not trump the more local one. As he says, “The value something has for someone in a restricted context of a single moment in his life is a value that genuinely accrues to him as the subject of that moment, even if interactions with events at other times result in its delivering a different value to him in his capacity as the protagonist of an entire life. The good that something does you now is not just the phantom of a restricted method of accounting; it’s an autonomous mode of value.”

A similar point about the irreducible difference between synchronic and diachronic perspectives applies to questions about whether what one is doing with one’s life is objectively meaningful. Observing that one’s life has been occupied with one or more time-extended pursuits that are objectively valuable answers the question of whether one’s life is meaningful from a more temporally global, diachronic perspective. One’s life has been about something, and that something was worthwhile. Accepting only references to relationships, careers, avocations, and the like as answering the question “Is her life meaningful?” ignores the temporally local question “Is what she’s doing now meaningful?”

37. Velleman uses the terminology “momentary” well-being and “lifetime” well-being rather than “local” and “global” (ibid.).
38. Ibid., 80.
And in this case, the temporally global perspective doesn’t just ignore the local perspective but quite often requires that one ignore it. Consider the average life of a philosopher. While participating in academic philosophy may make one’s life as a whole more meaningful than some other alternative possibilities (by making some positive contributions to others’ lives, developing some humanly valuable capacities, and providing access to goods internal to doing philosophy), an enormous amount of one’s more temporally local activities will have been spent doing things that are not high in objective value (grading a hundred exams answering the same question, tracking down footnotes, completing bureaucratic paperwork, evaluating hundreds of job applications, to name just some). The average intimate relationship is similarly dominated, at the local level, not with high-quality moments of intimacy but with vastly more mundane interactions that may be trivial, boring, or irritating. The difference in temporal perspective on the meaningfulness of one’s life explains, I think, why one may feel that one’s daily life is largely meaningless even while, and indeed in virtue of, pursuing time-extended activities that make one’s life as a whole (or longish stretches of it) meaningful. It also may explain why retirement, a moment in time where one typically gets done making something meaningful of one’s life, is also anticipated as a time where one can now do meaningful things.

In short, if the answer to “What makes life meaningful?” is “Doing something of objective value,” there will be at least two different strategies for putting meaning in life. One may opt for a temporally global strategy, aiming to make one’s life about something that is objectively valuable, and to do so by making commitments. Or one may opt for a temporally local strategy, aiming to pack one’s hours and days with objectively meaningful pursuits and interactions, and to do so by not making the sorts of time-extended commitments that promise to reduce the options for local meaning. For the reasons given earlier, such a life need not be devoid of contributions to the social good, enriching personal interactions, the development of skills, and the acquisition of knowledge even if one is not committed to making one’s life about such things.

IV. THE ATTRACTION OF COMMITMENT

None of my arguments so far were meant to suggest that commitment is a bad thing. My aim was to trouble the normative assumption that it is better for agents to shape their lives around some set of commitments than not to do so, by providing reasons to be skeptical that commitment is either pragmatically required or a necessary condition for a well-lived life.

Suppose there are no compelling reasons why persons ought, for their own sakes, to lead lives that include commitments. There might
nevertheless be reasons why a life that includes commitments is an attractive life and thus why people would be drawn to committing their futures rather than to simply making more readily revisable plans. Attitudinal commitment, I will suggest, is attractive to those whose normative style includes prizing things. Commitment in general, I will suggest, is attractive to those who have a familiarity-seeking style of managing their futures. In both cases, I think there are reasons to expect these styles to be widespread even if they are not universal.39

Normative Style

It is one thing to think that something is valuable, even of utmost value, and another thing to prize it. Prizing is a normative attitude toward what one takes to be not only valuable but also special in a way that cannot be fully accounted for by showing what makes the thing, person, or activity valuable. Kantian prizing of the humanity in persons is perhaps like this. Whatever valuable-making qualities or capacities of persons we point to invite us to assign a price (perhaps a very high price) to humanity so that the prizing of humanity as special in a way beyond price may seem to outrun the available reasons. Or consider prizing (that is, regarding as special) Beanie Babies or the Red Sox. While grounded in some specifiable, value-conferring features of Beanie Babies and the Red Sox that Beanie Baby collectors and Red Sox fans might be quick to point out, the prizing outruns the bases for valuing. Though prizing involves a personal attitude, to prize is not to see oneself as willfully making up some special additional value. It is rather to appreciate or to see something in the prized object that makes it potentially prizable by others (though perhaps only by a very special sort of other, as in the saying “Only a mother could love . . .”), even if one cannot point to prize-making features in the way one can to valuable-making features and thus cannot communicate why it is prizeworthy. To love a particular person or animal, for example, is to see one’s love as both grounded in some valuable features and as responsive to a specialness

39. I here adopt a strategy employed by Galen Strawson in “Against Narrativity” (in The Self? ed. Galen Strawson [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005], 63–86). Strawson there argues that rather than thinking that most lives are, and that all lives ought to be, experienced as a narrative, we are better off thinking of there being different temporal styles; figuring one’s life as a narrative has appeal for those whose temporal style is nonepisodic. Similarly, I want to suggest that rather than thinking that most lives are, and that all lives ought to be, organized around commitment, we are better off thinking that there are different normative and temporal styles, some of which make commitment attractive while others do not.
that is not fully explained by appeal to what are, after all, repeatable (and thus not special-making) valuable features.40

Prizing, then, has two features: (1) a value judgment about the prized object (or person, activity, way of life, identity, etc.) that is based on intersubjectively available reasons for assigning that particular value and (2) a personal attitude of regarding the object as special and worthy of behavioral and attitudinal responses that treat it as special. These two features of prizing give prizers reasons to think that others may also prize what they do (e.g., a Red Sox fan expects to find other fans, or a lover isn’t surprised that her beloved has other admirers) but also to recognize that the resources for persuading others to prize what they do are highly limited.

The principal practical expression of prizing something, of one’s regarding it as special, is commitment—commitment to living one’s life as an X, to collecting X, to taking care of X, to striving to achieve X, and so on. Attitudinal commitment, then, will be an attractive feature of life for those whose normative style includes prizing. Prizers might predictably find their lives diminished by the absence of suitable objects of prizing and of attitudinal commitments and find themselves moved to seek out new objects for prizing, to cultivate prizing attitudes, and thus to create the basis for new attitudinal commitments. (Personal ads looking for that special someone often provide good examples of prizers at work.)

Prizing does not seem to me to be a basic capacity of any evaluator but rather an optional extra—a normative style. One can imagine persons who are excellent evaluators and practical reasoners but who are unable to prize anything. One can even more readily imagine persons who differ in the degree to which they have or exercise this normative style, some being chary prizers, others promiscuous prizers. To describe prizing as a normative style is to underscore not only that it is optional in a being with evaluative capacities but also that it is an approach to valuing that may or may not find suitable objects.

That prizing is a pervasive normative style is not a brute fact about persons. Prizers can be made, not just born. Contemporary capitalist culture encourages people to be prizers through the marketing and advertising of objects to be prized (e.g., Beanie Babies), the resources for enacting one’s prizing (biking equipment, red roses and diamonds, stamp-collecting albums), and paraphernalia for announcing one’s prizing (message-laden wall plaques, throw pillows, and T-shirts and “I

love — bumper stickers). The culture of authenticity encourages people to find jobs, relationships, and avocations that can be prized as truly self-expressive. Various religions, political rhetoric, and sometimes the law encourage people to be prizers of families. Activist groups encourage us to be prizers of the environment, fetal life, and peace. As cultural participants we learn to be prizers and to cultivate this normative style in ourselves.

What makes us prizers who find making attitudinal commitments attractive may be more than our culture. Prizing both connects us to others through activities of shared prizing and distinguishes us as individuals through our distinctive patterns of prizing. To the extent that we are evolutionarily designed to be both social beings and beings who have needs to be recognized as individuals, there may be an evolutionary basis, in addition to a cultural one, for this normative style that explains the pervasive attraction of prizing and its attendant, attitudinal commitment.

Temporal Style

Not all commitments are attitudinal commitments having their source either in what I’ve called prizings or in what Frankfurt calls volitionally necessitating carings. What all commitments do have in common is that they lock up the future in a way that mere-intentions and provisional plans do not. What could be attractive about that? If social arrangements don’t require commitment as the precondition for getting or doing what one wants or being in a relationship with whom one wants—that is, if commitment isn’t quasi-forced—prudential rationality would seem to favor more provisional plans that are intended to remain in place only until something else comes up and that are compatible with putting oneself in the way of temptation, keeping a lookout for information that would occasion redeliberation, not trying to resuscitate flagging interest, and the like. Why not live life with an eye to opportunities for trading up that are good enough to outweigh the sunk and prospective costs of abandoning a plan already under way? Why tie oneself to a future more strongly than these cost considerations already do?

I said at the beginning that the attraction to commitment might be a function of a particular style of managing one’s diachronic existence. It is time to talk about time. What I want to suggest is that the attraction of locking up one’s future lies in the way that doing so enables persons to take up residence in time in much the way that settling geographically enables one to take up residence in space. For some this will be attractive, for others not.

Humans conduct their lives in space and through time, and they fill their lives, both spatially and temporally, with other persons, animals, material objects, green and built environments, activities, interactions,
rituals, sounds, smells, and so on. One knows where one is in space not by being familiar with the contents of a particular “point” in space—say, a hotel room—but by knowing what spaces surround one’s location, for example, where within a city the hotel is located, or where hotel corridors or roads go, or where a city is located in relation to its surrounding geography. Knowing where one is in space is also a matter of knowing how to navigate one’s space, because one knows the tracks through space that will get one from here to the there one wants to go to. One also knows where one is in space by knowing what the surrounding spaces contain. I am not just here, in my home, but in a place within whose surrounding geography I can locate the grocery and movie theater, friends, parks, highway noise, and roosting bats. The more extensive one’s knowledge of the surrounding spatial horizon and the richer one’s knowledge of the contents of that horizon, the more one might be said to know where one is and to not be lost.

Similarly, one knows where one is in time, not by knowing (or not just by knowing) what hour or day it is or the temporal horizon of future days and times but, more important, by knowing the contents of that temporal horizon. To know the day of the week is to know very little about one’s place in time. To know what will fill that day and those to come, where one will live, what places one will go, with whom one will interact, what deadlines will come due, what activities will engage one’s time, what one will smell and how the weather will feel at various distances on the temporal horizon is to know where one is in time and to not be lost.

Knowing one’s place in time is also a matter of knowing how to navigate from the present to the future, including what events beyond one’s control will need to happen and what actions within one’s control one will need to take to get from the present here to the future there. Mere-intentions, provisional plans, and commitments are ways of laying down tracks through time in much the way that selecting routine travel routes is a way of laying down tracks in space. And just as tracks through space determine not only how one gets from point A to point B but also the contents of one’s spatial experience—what landmarks one will pass, whether one will see wild turkeys or smell hamburgers grilling on the way—so agential tracks through time determine more than what one will be doing. They determine the contents of one’s temporal

41. J. David Velleman has argued that humans have an impulse to know what they are doing, and thus they have an incentive to make and carry through on intentions (in “From Self Psychology to Moral Psychology” and “The Centered Self,” in his Self to Self: Selected Essays [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 224–83). “I can avoid puzzlement by first framing an idea of the creature’s [i.e., one’s own] next action and then enacting that idea,” he writes (261). I think the cognitive needs are larger than this. It’s not just puzzlement about what one is doing but also puzzlement about one’s entire
experience across and at different moments of time. A policy of going home for Thanksgiving enables me to know both what I will be intentionally doing—taking a plane, eating dinner, talking with family—and what richer context I will find myself in that includes others’ conversations and activities, the smell of turkey, furniture familiar from childhood, and so on. Knowing both what I will do and the richer context of action, I can imaginatively inhabit the future (with pleasure or anxiety), and even if not imagined beforehand, the future, when it arrives, will be unsurprising.

People, it seems to me, have different spatial and temporal dispositions. Some like open horizons, not knowing what comes next, opportunities for explorations, and novelty. Others prefer more closed horizons, knowing where they are in space and time and finding what comes next familiar and unsurprising. If this is so, one might expect to find some more attracted to provisional planning and others to commitment. One can, of course, use commitment to render the future familiar to varying degrees—shorter- versus longer-term commitments, fewer versus more commitments, commitments to one-off goals versus commitments to repetitions (e.g., annual Thanksgivings with family or daily exercise), commitments to identities and to ongoing relationships, and commitments to achieving the unlikely or to persons who are unreliable versus commitments to goals that are easily achieved and to trustworthy persons.

In short, the attraction to commitment may reflect only one style of managing the geography of one’s future—a style that involves taking up permanent residences in time and making the future one’s home. For creatures who share with their animal kin a sense of comfort in returning to the familiar and a disposition to adopt habitual routines that reduce surprises, one might expect commitment to be widely attractive. But as creatures who also share with their animal kin a vulnerability to boredom and a curiosity about the new, one might also expect that attraction to have its limits.

surroundings—the richer context in which doings take place—that creatures like us typically want to avoid.