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THEISM, NATURALISM, AND NARRATIVE: A LINGUISTIC AND METAPHYSICAL PROPOSAL ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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To my wife, Sarah, my dearest earthly companion
on the road of life.

To my beloved sons, William and Owen, who have reminded me that great joy can accompany great responsibility.

And to my parents, Lonnie and Loma, whose guidance over the years has been and continues to be of great profit.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of two distinct yet related projects on the meaning of life. Part I centers on the challenge of understanding what the, admittedly, vague question, "What is the meaning of life?" is asking. This I call the *linguistic project*. After assessing the oft-repeated charge of incoherence, surveying extant interpretations of the question, and discussing other significant dialectical issues in Chapter One, I argue in Chapters Two through Four that the question should be understood as the request for a narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to human beings. I call this the *narrative* interpretation, and propose it as a rival interpretive strategy to what I call, following R. W. Hepburn, the *amalgam thesis*. The amalgam thesis is the most common interpretive approach whereby the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is largely seen as a place-holder for a whole set of questions, such as, "Why are we here?" "What is the purpose of life?" and "What makes life worthwhile?" among others. On the amalgam thesis, the question is viewed as little more than a *disjunctive* question. In contrast, the narrative interpretation views the question as making a singular request. However, it is a request, the answer to which captures all of the intuitions and sub-questions thought to be relevant to the meaning of life under a single unifying construct (i.e., a narrative). After a detailed discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions of the narrative interpretation, I enlist the concept of *Weltanschauung* in order to lend further philosophical plausibility to this interpretation. Finally, I consider several philosophical advantages it enjoys over the amalgam thesis.

In Part II (Chapters Five through Seven), I enlist my narrative interpretation in order to compare the two dominant metaphysical narratives in the West, namely,

naturalism and theism, in its Christian instantiation. This I call the *metaphysical project*. These chapters are largely *comparative* rather than *evaluative*. Chapter Five primarily functions as a prolegomena for Part II where I (i) discuss important definitional matters surrounding naturalism and theism, (ii) consider how the concept of narrative maps onto entire metaphysical systems like naturalism and theism, and (iii) address Sartrian-type objections to life being anything like a dramatic narrative. In Chapter Six, I compare naturalistic and theistic constituent narrative elements on two of five narrative fronts that a narrative must narrate across in order to qualify as what I call a *candidate* meaning of life narrative (i.e., satisfies the right *formal* conditions). These two related fronts involve explanations of (i) Why the universe exists, and even the stronger, why anything exists at all, and (ii) what purpose(s) there is in life, if any. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I discuss the concept of *narrative ending*, and how it relates to the meaning of life. Here, I consider (i) the rationale behind why it is that the ending of a narrative is so important to broadly normative appraisals of the narrative as a whole, (ii) the respective "endings" of the naturalistic and theistic meaning of life narratives, (iii) how the evaluative significance of narrative ending provides a powerful way to frame perennial meaning of life discussions of death and futility within the more general territory of life's meaning, and (iv) how the evaluative significance of narrative ending sheds light on the relevance of incorporating eschatological considerations into the projects of theodicy and defense.

INTRODUCTION

Analytic Philosophy and the Meaning of Life

The story has been told of Bertrand Russell once being in the back of a cab. As Russell was perhaps the most famous philosopher of his day, the driver of the cab likely saw this as an opportunity to get Russell's thoughts on the perceived quintessential topic of philosophy, the meaning of life. So, he asked him, "What's it all about?" Probably to the driver's shock, his famous occupant had no answer.[1] If one is familiar with twentieth century analytic philosophy, Russell's silence speaks volumes. Much more than a good story, the cab driver's encounter with Russell highlights two salient, yet conflicting realities that surround the question, "What is the meaning of life?"

First, those who have allegedly devoted their lives to this very question (i.e., professional philosophers) generally either ignore it or, more seriously, are suspicious that it is incoherent and meaningless, much like the question, "What does the color red taste like?"[2] With respect to the first trend, Karl Britton notes:

> Men and women want to read philosophy because they think it will help them to understand the meaning of life: and many philosophers confess that this is what first led them to study philosophy. On the whole, however, the question

[1] As cited in Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1.

[2] For example, see, among others, A. J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 224; Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, p. 1; Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke, p. 113; R. W. Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke, p. 262; and Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): p. 801.

> of the meaning of life does not loom large in the teaching or writing of professional philosophers nowadays . . .[3]

The extremely brief entry on the meaning of life in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*[4] and the complete lack of an entry in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*[5] are telling indicators of this tendency, although a substantive entry is available in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* online.[6] There is some evidence, though, that the trend of neglect is slowing, perhaps even reversing in light of recent work on the topic, including, among others, books by Julian Baggini, Terry Eagleton, and John Cottingham, as well as numerous journal articles and a recent special issue of *The Monist* devoted exclusively to the topic.[7] As for the trend of semantic suspicion, it is now generally recognized that the question, though vague, probably avoids the charge of outright incoherence.[8]

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[3] Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 1.

[4] Alan Lacey, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[5] Robert Audi, ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[6] Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2007 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2007/entries/life-meaning/>. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy also has a substantial entry on the meaning of life written by Susan Wolf.

[7] See Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*; John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003) and *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007): pp. 196-217, and an entire issue devoted to the topic in *Philosophical Papers* 34:3 (2005). The special issue of *The Monist* appeared in January 2010.

[8] I think another reason for the question's neglect in analytic philosophy has been the esoteric, enigmatic connotations often attached to the question. The story of how such connotations originated need not concern us here. Unfortunately, I think analytic philosophers have *uncritically* accepted these connotations, and this capitulation to such unnecessary and unjustified associations has exercised considerable influence in the widespread neglect and even contempt for the question within analytic philosophy.

The second reality highlighted in the cab driver's encounter with Russell is that most people consider the question, "What is the meaning of life?" to be among the most important that can be asked, if not *the* most important. This, of course, creates a *prima facie* impasse. The preeminent question of human existence appears to be one that many philosophers thing is rationally sub-par, or at least less deserving of our philosophical energies than a consideration of, for example, how consciousness arises from matter or whether discussions of epistemic luck and control hold the key to understanding the necessary and sufficient conditions of propositional knowledge.[9] Unfortunately, then, this existentially motivated request born out of deep yearnings of the human heart, may meet disappointment if one turns to philosophers to illumine the question. Alasdair Macintyre laments that such large-scale and existentially important questions receive so little attention by professional philosophers:

> Yet, while Hume turned away from philosophical questions about the ends of life to the diversions of dining and backgammon, there has developed since a kind of philosophy that sometimes functions for those who engage in it just as dining and backgammon did for Hume. It reduces all questions to technical or semitechnical questions and it has the effect of making the serious and systematic asking of questions about the ends of life, rather than the asking of second-order philosophical questions about those first-order questions, appear if not cold, at least strain'd and ridiculous.[10]

Macintyre's claim is perceptive, and the point he makes is relevant to discussions of the meaning of life. Indeed, at least some of what is done by philosophers operating under

[9] I do not intend here to de-value what I consider to be profound philosophical questions in the philosophy of mind and epistemology.

[10] Alasdair Macintyre, "The ends of life, the ends of philosophical writing," in his *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 131-32.

the rubric of *analytic* philosophy has made inquiry into the meaning of life look "strain'ed and ridiculous."[11]

While the trend of neglect is unfortunate and the trend of suspicion is likely misguided, the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is undeniably characterized by significant *vagueness*, such that both trends are partly understandable. Indeed, one cannot plausibly deny that this vagueness makes the question difficult to understand. Philosophically, the question seems unmanageable to many. It is surely not a question about the semantic meaning of the word "life," but what then is it a question about? Is it a question about purpose? Is it a question about value? Is it a question about significance? Most philosophers currently writing on the topic think it is somehow a question about all of these and other topics, but only insofar as it is viewed as a long *disjunctive* question or an *amalgam* of related yet distinct requests about purpose, value, worth, significance, death, and futility, among others. Furthermore, it is a question that takes us into normative territory while remaining distinct from *purely* ethical requests about rightness and wrongness. Beyond this, there is little consensus. It is in these still philosophically murky, yet clearing waters that I propose the central theses of this dissertation.

This dissertation consists of two distinct yet related projects on the meaning of life. The first project (*The Linguistic Project*) consists in attempting to understand what the, admittedly, vague question, "What is the meaning of life?" means. It seems to me that the question's inherent vagueness has caused philosophers too quickly to view the

[11] Of course, neither the trend of neglect nor the charge of incoherence is quite as severe as Freud's assertion that "The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick . . . By asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression." Letters to Marie Bonaparte of 13 August 1937; in Letters of *Sigmund Freud*, trans. T. and J. Stern (New York: Basic Books, 1960). Interestingly, Freud also reportedly said on multiple occasions that he "heartily abhorred philosophy." Letter of Siegfried Bernfeld to Ernest Jones, June 19, 1951 (Jones Archives).

original question ("What is the meaning of life?") as nothing more than an amalgam or to re-formulate the question in terms of *purpose* or *value*, for example. While such projects have philosophical merit, they do not satisfy two desiderata that, I think, any interpretation of the question should satisfy: (i) the original formulation of the question is interpreted *without* morphing it into another question(s),[12] and (ii) the interpretation is able to unify the questions enumerated by the amalgam thesis under a single concept, thus making them more explicitly *about* the meaning of life as opposed to, for example, value or purpose only. In this dissertation, I introduce and defend an interpretation of the question that, among other merits, better satisfies these interpretive desiderata. I call this the *narrative interpretation*. Roughly, this interpretation considers the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as requesting, at its core, *a narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to rational, emotional, and self-reflective creatures such as us*.

Chapters One and Two are primarily prolegomena. In Chapter One I assess the charge of incoherence against the question of life's meaning, survey extant interpretations of the question, and discuss additional significant dialectical issues. In Chapters Two through Four I explain and defend my own narrative interpretation of the question. Chapter Two serves to set the context for the remainder of the Linguistic Project, as I introduce material in order to facilitate my interpretation. In Chapter Three I develop the narrative interpretation in detail, presenting the necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes the meaning of life on my interpretation. Finally, in Chapter Four I lend

[12] I take (i) to be a desideratum of any interpretation of the question largely because I think the use of "meaning" is not primarily an indicator of confusion, but a legitimate marker (arguably vague) of what it is people seek when inquiring into the meaning of life. That which is being sought is not reducible to a question about purpose or value or worth *alone*.

further philosophical plausibility to my interpretation through a discussion of worldview. Here, I also note specific advantages of the narrative interpretation over the amalgam thesis.

In the second part (*The Metaphysical Project*) I enlist my narrative interpretation in order to compare the two dominant metaphysical narratives in the West, namely, naturalism and theism. These chapters will be largely *comparative* rather than *evaluative*. Chapter Five functions primarily as a prolegomenon for Part II where I discuss important definitional matters surrounding naturalism and theism, consider how the concept of narrative maps onto entire metaphysical systems like naturalism and theism, and address Sartrian-type objections to life being anything like a dramatic narrative. In Chapter Six I compare the naturalistic and theistic meaning of life narratives on two of five narrative fronts that a narrative must narrate across in order to qualify as what I call a *candidate* meaning of life narrative (i.e., satisfies the right *formal* conditions). These two related fronts involve explanations of (i) Why the universe exists, and even the stronger, why anything exists at all, and (ii) what purpose(s) there is in life, if any. Finally, in Chapter Seven I discuss the concept of *narrative ending*, and how it relates to the meaning of life. Here, I consider the rationale behind why it is that the ending of a narrative is so important to broadly normative appraisals of the narrative as a whole. I discuss the respective "endings" of the naturalistic and theistic meaning of life narratives. And, finally, I show how the evaluative significance of narrative ending provides a powerful way to frame the perennial meaning of life discussions of death, futility, and the problem of evil within the more general territory of life's meaning.

My narrative interpretation exhibits considerable merit on the following three philosophical fronts, the first two broadly linguistic and the third, metaphysical. First, if successful, it demonstrates that the question, “What is the meaning of life?” is both meaningful and coherent. Second, it will provide a plausible competing interpretive strategy to the amalgam thesis, and one that, I think, is superior. And, third, it offers an additional paradigm through which the ongoing dialectic between naturalism and theism can be assessed. In the end, one will likely never fully succeed in trimming away all the vagueness inherent in the question, “What is the meaning of life?” Despite this concession, I think my narrative interpretation addresses this vagueness better than any other interpretive proposals thus far.

PART I

The Linguist Project

Men and women want to read philosophy because they think it will help them to understand the meaning of life: and many philosophers confess that this is what first led them to study philosophy. On the whole, however, the question of the meaning of life does not loom large in the teaching or writing of professional philosophers nowadays . . .

~Karl Britton (1969, p. 1)

Not all important-sounding questions make sense. For a fair part of the twentieth century it was common in much of the Anglophone world to dismiss many of the traditional grand questions of philosophy as pseudo-questions. People who felt perplexed by the ancient puzzle of the meaning of life were firmly reminded that meaning was a notion properly confined to the arena of language: words or sentences or propositions could be said to have meaning, but not objects or events in the world, like the lives of trees, or lobsters, or humans. So the very idea that philosophy could inquire into the meaning of life was taken as a sign of conceptual confusion.

~John Cottingham (2003, pp. 1-2)

CHAPTER ONE

Questioning the Question: Its Coherence, Extant Interpretations, and Other Significant Dialectical Issues

1.1 The Charge of Incoherence

While the analytic philosophical landscape has changed significantly over the last half century, making it again possible to discuss with philosophical integrity topics in, for example, philosophical theology, there appears to be a subtle positivist hangover that has made attempts to self-consciously discuss the meaning of life within the tradition suspect. Perhaps the positivist strongholds are more stubborn in this area. Thaddeus Metz does well to remind us that, "It is worth remembering that it used to be common to believe that statements about life's meaning are not well-formed propositions."[1] A necessary condition for a proposition to be "well-formed" is that it is coherent rather than nonsensical. An oft-repeated criticism of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" has been that it lacks coherence. Even though this criticism is no longer considered warranted by philosophers working on the question, it will be helpful to begin by addressing it.

Coherence is a necessary condition to be met in order for a question to be meaningful. But coherence is not a property that all questions possess. "What object is larger than the largest of all objects?" and "What caused the first cause?" are examples of incoherent questions. Of course, considered *qua* grammar they are fine. Furthermore, there is no hint of incoherence in any of the individual concepts employed like *object*,

[1] Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): p. 801.

larger, *largest*, *cause*, and *first*. The problem, however, is that something has gone awry in how the concepts are related in the request. That is to say, the semantic meaning of some of the terms will not allow them to be coherently placed in the grammatical relationships in which they are situated with the other terms. Once one grasps the semantic content of the question, the request becomes impossible to fulfill given what is asked. For example, since the largest of all objects is, by definition, the largest, there can be no object that is larger. To ask what is larger is absurd. Similarly, given that the first cause is, by definition, the first cause, no prior cause can precede it.[2] Coherence, then, is at least a necessary condition for a question to be meaningful.

Accordingly, the first step in addressing the question, "What is the meaning of life?" should be to assess its coherence. This is especially crucial given the status it has been assigned by noted philosophers within the analytic philosophical tradition.[3] For example, A. J. Ayer states in response to the claim that it falls within the province of the philosopher to make clear the meaning of life, "And who is to answer these supremely important questions if not the philosopher? The reply to this is that there is no true answer to these questions; and since this is so it is no use expecting even the philosopher to

[2] Strictly speaking, the sentence uttered is meaningful in the sense that it has *semantic* meaning, and yet the speech-act fails (i.e., in this case, is *meaningless*) in the wider sense of not being able to get off the ground because of what the sentence uttered means. I am using "meaningful" and "meaningless" in this wider, more-inclusive sense.

[3] There is a danger in referring to *the* analytic philosophical *tradition*, for it is certainly not monolithic nor is it easy to define. Dean Zimmerman notes that the term "analytic" when used in philosophical contexts in the early twentieth century did not primarily mean *linguistic analysis* but, in the case of Russell, to "his belief that *facts* could be understood by analyzing their constituents . . ." (pp. 7-8). Furthermore, these facts were taken by Russell and G. E. Moore to be *parts* of the world and not sentences (p. 8). In light of the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy, Zimmerman says, "One thing that should be pointed out right away is that the word "analytic" in "analytic philosophy" means very little—at least, when used broadly, with "Continental" as the contrasting term." Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds. *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 7.

provide one."[4] For Ayer, the question's coherence hinges on whether the request is for a proposition or rather some sort of rule by which to live.[5] If the question is understood to require a true or false proposition as an answer, then it is meaningless according to Ayer, because no such proposition can be given. However, if it is asking for a rule to live by, the question is coherent and meaningful.[6] The reason the question is meaningless on the first interpretation follows from Ayer's verifiability principle of meaning.[7] On this principle, in order for a statement to be meaningful it must be either a tautology (thus including all analytic propositions) or capable of being verified. Statements, therefore, that do not meet this standard do not qualify as propositions. Every proposition, in order to be meaningful, must be either necessarily true, in the case of analytic propositions, or, in the case of non-analytic propositions, possibly true. However, no proposition that meets these verifiability standards can be given in response to the request, "What is the meaning of life?"

Along with Ayer, but for different reasons, one seems to find Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, at least cryptically, casting suspicion on the meaningfulness of the question about life's meaning, "When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The *riddle* does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it

[4] A. J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy," in *The Meaning of Life,* ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 224.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Thus, Ayer allows for a multiplicity of meanings according to which people can lead meaningful lives in so far as they find rules and maxims to live by that are *meaningful to them*.

[7] See *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 152; first published in 1936).

is also possible to answer it" (6.5).[8] It is plausible to take Wittgenstein here as referring to what he calls the "the problem of life" (6.521) or "the sense of life" (6.521) in later aphorisms. I take these locutions to be rough markers for "the meaning of life." For Wittgenstein, there is no answer to questions about the sense of life or the meaning of life. Such answers, offered in terms of propositions with truth values, do not exist, and therefore neither does a meaningful question. One can neither ask a meaningful question nor give a meaningful answer on the topic of life's meaning. Where does this leave us on the matter? Wittgenstein closes the *Tractatus* with this thought, a proposition he identifies in the preface to his work as the *Tractatus's* primary claim, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (7).[9]

Although for different reasons, Ayer and the early Wittgenstein likely spoke for a substantial percentage of twentieth century analytic philosophers in their criticisms of the question and its coherence. Whereas the linguistically and logically untrained view it as no different from questions like, "When did the Battle of the Bulge take place?" or "What is the name of the sixteenth U.S. president?" many analytic philosophers were suspicious that it is much more like, "What color is philosophy?" or the legendry Oxford examination pseudo-question, "Is this a good question?" One can also see parallels between the rejection of the meaning of life question as coherent and the rejection of other metaphysical and religious claims as coherent by early and mid-twentieth century philosophers in the logical positivist tradition. Within this movement it was seen as intellectually obligatory to reject propositions like "God exists" on the grounds that they

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 88.

[9] Ibid., p. 89. Cf. 3, "The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."

lack cognitive content, partly because there is some measure of suspicion that we cannot even know what the term "God" means.[10] Similarly, one might wonder what it could possibly mean to inquire after life's meaning. Here, it is not the inquiry into the meaning of the concept or term "life" that is troublesome, but rather, the request for the meaning of the phenomenon of life itself or perhaps *human* life.[11] According to many, it makes no sense to ask this question of the phenomenon of life or human life or the space-time universe. Meaning applies to semantic constructions, not to objects, events, states of affairs, or existence itself; or, if it does, it does so only very loosely.

There exists an additional parallel between the charge of incoherence leveled against the meaning of life question and non-cognitivist views in meta-ethics like emotivism. Emotivism is a non-cognitivist meta-ethical view whereby moral utterances like, *"It is wrong to murder"* are not propositions with truth content, but are only markers for some emotive urge like, "Yikes, I hate murder." They are simply moral *sentiments* that lack a factual meaning.[12] Those disparaging of the question of life's meaning within the analytic tradition often saw it as little more than a wrong-headed way of formulating a raw emotional response to the sheer magnitude and mystery of Existence. This response is properly contained in phrases like "Wow!" "Amazing!" and "How wonderful and awful!" but not in the form of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" This question

[10] One reason "God" may lack cognitive content, it was argued, is because the very concept is incoherent. One way in which it was said to be incoherent follows from disharmony among the traditional theistic attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness.

[11] Use of the term "life" is another problem for the question. Is one referencing human life, life as a whole, the lives of individual persons, or something else of which "life" is just a loose and possibly ill-chosen marker?

[12] See A. J. Ayer, "Critique of Ethics and Theology," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 30-31.

is only a misguided marker for a mental event that is all together different from a question capable of an answer in the form of a true or false proposition. Kurt Baier, in his Inaugural Lecture delivered at the Canberra University College, 1957, affirms this:

> . . . whether or not we ought to have or are justified in having a mystical feeling or a feeling of awe when contemplating the universe, having such a feeling is not the same as asking a meaningful question, although having it may well *incline us* to utter certain forms of words. Our question "Why is there anything at all?" [or, analogously, "What is the meaning of life?"] may be no more than the expression of our feeling of awe or mystification, and not a meaningful question at all.[13]

Baier's largely non-cognitivist view treats the question of life's meaning as expressing some non-propositional mental state, for example, awe, and should not be viewed as the request for a proposition with a truth content. This is not unlike non-cognitivist views in meta-ethics, and such views have had their place in the meaning of life discussion.

I think the charges of incoherence along with the standard ways of reducing the question to something wholly different in kind as in the case of the non-cognitivist move in early analytic philosophy are largely, but not wholly, misguided. One probably ought to concede that the question, in its popular form, suffers from some measure of vagueness. For example, does it ask for the meaning of life, where *life* is the cluster of phenomena that populate and compose existence, or some other question? If the former, what does it mean to ask for the meaning of entities like people and trees, or events like water boiling or death? And if one is asking *why* things are as they are, which is a common interpretation of the question, is one asking empirical, scientific questions about *efficient* causality, or rather teleologically-driven questions about *final* causality? It will take effort to sort through this, but I think that the question's fundamental philosophical integrity can be upheld. Indeed, despite its salient vagueness, I think the charge of

[13] Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke, p. 113.

incoherence proceeds too quickly from vagueness to the verdict of irredeemable incoherence.

1.2 Assessing the Charge of Incoherence: Non-Linguistic Uses of "Meaning"

The question's vagueness and accompanying criticisms of its coherence are largely functions of its incorporation of the term "meaning." "Meaning" has multiple meanings, and at least some of the more prominent ones mitigate its usefulness in the context of trying to formulate the intuitions driving the question of *life's* meaning. R. W. Hepburn alludes to such a situation:

> According to the interpretations being now worked out, questions about the meaning of life are, very often, conceptually obscure and confused. They are amalgams of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither. A life is not a statement, and cannot therefore have linguistic contexts.[14]

Indeed, if one is asking for the *semantic* meaning of life rather than "life," then the accusation of incoherence is plausible. We rightly ask for the meanings of *semantic* constructions, but surely not of things like physical entities, events, or life in general. The problem then is that "meaning" is a term which appears to most naturally find its home within linguistic contexts. However, life itself does not appear to be such a context. Kai Nielson summarizes the dilemma:

> Part of the trouble centers around puzzles about the use of the word "meaning" in "What is the meaning of life?" . . . the mark (token) "meaning" in "What is the meaning of life?" has a very different use than it has in "What is the meaning of 'obscurantist'?" "What is the meaning of 'table'?" "What is the meaning of 'good'?" "What is the meaning of 'science'?" and "What is the meaning of 'meaning'?" In these other cases we are asking about the meaning or use of the word or words, and we are requesting either a definition of the word or an elucidation or description of the word's use. But in asking: "What is the meaning

[14] R. W. Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke, p. 262.

> of life?" we are not asking—or at least this is not our central perplexity—about "What is the meaning of 'life'?[15]

While asking the meaning of "life," would be entirely coherent, it is certainly not the request encapsulated in "What is the meaning of life?" When asking, "What is the meaning of life?" we are not asking the same question as when we ask, for instance, "What is the meaning of "courage." In the latter instance we desire the word's definition or possibly a description of its usage. However, in the former case, we are not asking for the meaning of a word or a sentence or anything really linguistic at all. That is to say, in asking the question, most of us are not asking for any sort of definition of "life" or a description of this term's usage. But then, what are we asking? This is where the problem lies.

The problem is soluble though, given that asking what something *means* need not be a request for a definition or description. There are additional non-linguistic contexts in which the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" makes perfect sense. Some of them even share family resemblances to the question of life's meaning. Hepburn notes, "But admittedly we do use the word "meaning" outside linguistic contexts. We speak of the meaning of a gesture, of a transaction, of a disposition of troops . . ."[16] In these contexts, he thinks we are referencing "the point or purpose or end of an act or set of acts,"[17] in invoking the concept of meaning. This, then, is at least one non-linguistic context in which "meaning" functions quite naturally. I will return to a non-linguistic context that shares commonalities with the way "meaning" is used in the question of life's meaning

[15] Kai Nielson, "Linguistic Philosophy and 'The Meaning of Life'," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 234.

[16] Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," p. 262.

[17] Ibid.

shortly. But first it will be helpful to mention a few other non-linguistic usages for "meaning," even though they are not synonymous to its usage in "What is the meaning of life?" This is important in order to keep the following fact salient, as it is germane to this discussion: *the word "meaning" is naturally and plausibly applied to non-linguistic phenomena*.

We often use the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" when we are puzzled by, say, someone's non-linguistic behavior. For example, perhaps a friend *makes a face* at us, and we are not sure what such a face signifies. In this situation, we may ask her, "What did you mean by looking at me that way?" In asking such a question we are trying to ascertain the relevant intentions responsible for producing the configuration of the facial muscles, or, in other words, what the face is supposed to signify.[18] In such instances, when asking for the meaning of the face, we are in search of something else over and above the physical facial configuration, but that perhaps supervenes upon it, to which we seek an answer of the following form, "This particular configuration of facial muscles means [*intentionally* signifies] *x*."

The locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" is also plausibly employed in contexts involving natural signs, or what Fred Dretske has referred to as "indication" or "indicator meaning."[19] Roughly, a natural sign is one whose presence is causally or nomically correlated with the presence of a second event or state of affairs, a state of affairs whose occurrence is not the result of any sort of intentional agency. If one finds the language of

[18] By introducing *intentions* into the causal process eventuating in the facial configuration, I do not mean to beg any questions against those who think an exhaustively physicalist and mechanistic account fully explicates the causal processes terminating in some facial muscle configuration *x*. One may reduce *intentions* to a wholly physical process if they desire, though I do not find this reduction project plausible.

[19] See his *Explaining Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 54 ff. Dretske himself credits H. P. Grice for this sense of meaning. Grice's seminal discussion can be found in his "Meaning," *The Philosophical Review* 66 (July 1957): pp. 377-88.

causality or some sort of nomic category to be too strong in referring to this relationship, one might take a Humean approach and explain natural signs in terms of regular association or constant conjunction. Regardless of how one understands the relationship between the sign and a second state of affairs to which it "points," nature is full of such signs. The changing color of the leaves is a sign that winter is coming. The presence of a certain type of cloud is a sign that rain is imminent. Such signs may be spoken of in terms of meaning. For example, we can plausibly say that the presence of radiant leaves *means* that winter is on its way or that the presence of rain clouds *means* rain is coming. In this context, when we use "meaning," we note simply that one thing signifies [non-intentionally] another thing's presence or near-presence.

Another way in which the formula, "What is the meaning of *x*?" may be used is in contexts where we want to know what, for example, an author or poet or playwright *meant* by her book, poem, or production. We may have read all the words or listened to all the lines from beginning to end and yet are puzzled, and so ask what the whole thing *means*. Here, we want to grasp the character or significance of the work that, for whatever reason, still eludes our understanding. We desire a unifying construct, theme(s), or something of this nature that brings coherence and intelligibility to the constituent parts. Of course, those very parts contribute to this *ordering principle*, and so the danger of hermeneutical circularity looms here. What we are inquiring after when we ask, "What is the meaning of this book or play?" is something in the neighborhood of the overarching plan, purpose, or significance of the work. We want to know how best to

understand and interpret the parts, and, consequently, what those parts, considered in their entirety, are communicating.[20]

A final way in which the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" functions in a non-linguistic context is especially relevant for my central thesis in Part I of this dissertation. It is this usage that comes closest to how the locution ought to be interpreted when one asks, "What is the meaning of life?" I will save fuller development of it for Chapters Two and Three, and so will only briefly mention it here. We quite naturally and legitimately, even if loosely, invoke the formula, "What is the meaning of *x*?" in situations where *x* is some fact, event, or phenomenon we encounter and of which we want to know, in the words of N. T. Wright, the fact's or event's or phenomenon's ". . . implication in the wider world within which this notion [or fact, event, or phenomenon] makes the sense it makes."[21] This "wider world" Wright considers to be a worldview or something similar.

Wright's comment resides within his discussion of how one comes to understand the *Easter Event* (that is, the putative bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazerath). For example, a well-educated Roman soldier who comes to learn of the event may *contextualize* it, and therefore "fix" its meaning, through the myth of *Nero redivivus*, the idea that Nero had come back to life in order to return to Rome in all his glory.[22] The event *means* something different for him than for, say, Saul of Tarsus. The wider

[20] I will not enter the complex hermeneutical discussion of where meaning resides in the process of interpreting texts or any discourse for that matter. Doing so is not germane to the immediate claims and aims of this dissertation.

[21] N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Vol. 3, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 719.

[22] Ibid., p. 720.

worldview framework or narrative (or even simply a more localized narrative which is, itself, part of a larger worldview narrative) will play a heavy hermeneutical role, then, in "discovering"[23] what any given fact, event, or phenomenon *means*. Determining this meaning will be a product of asking and answering questions like:

> What larger narrative(s) does the sentence [intended to refer to a fact, event, or phenomenon] belong in? What worldviews do such narratives embody and reinforce? What are the universes of discourse within which this sentence, and the event it refers to, settle down and make themselves at home – and which, at the same time, they challenge and reshape from within?[24]

Wright's discussion of this usage of "meaning" is instructive and is how I think the word should be seen as functioning in the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" when such question is asked about the meaning of life. I will build on this claim in detail in Chapter Three.

1.3 Interpreting the Question: The Amalgam Thesis

It seems hard to deny that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" suffers from some measure of vagueness. There exist a couple of options for addressing this vagueness short of the outright charge of incoherence that was common for a substantial portion of the twentieth century in analytic philosophy. One option is to retain the use of "meaning" and secure a usage that applies to non-linguistic phenomena, given that in asking the question, we are not asking for the *semantic* meaning of the word "life." This strategy is especially concerned with finding a natural interpretation of the question through a plausible employment of the term "meaning." While not the most common strategy for interpreting the question in the contemporary discussion, my interpretation of

[23] Some may think the stronger term, "determine" is better than "discover." I do not wish to enter the complex debate about the hermeneutical properties of a worldview.

[24] N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 720.

the question is an example of this approach. The interpretive strategy currently prevalent, though, involves discarding the word "meaning" and reformulating the question entirely. On this approach, the question is morphed into a cluster of other supposedly less vague questions, even if no less difficult to answer, like, "What is the purpose of life?" or "What makes life valuable?" among others.

Following precedent in the literature, especially R. W. Hepburn, I will term this approach for addressing the vagueness in the question the *amalgam thesis*. Roughly, the amalgam thesis says that the original question, framed in terms of meaning, is a largely ill-conceived place-holder for a cluster of related requests, and thus, not really a single question at all. Consider again R. W. Hepburn's claim:

> According to the interpretations being now worked out, questions about the meaning of life are, very often, conceptually obscure and confused. They are amalgams of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither. A life is not a statement, and cannot therefore have linguistic contexts.[25]

In his recent book on the topic, Julian Baggini presents something similar to the amalgam thesis:

> The problem is that it [the meaning of life question] is vague, general and unclear. It is not so much a single question but a place-holder for a whole set of questions: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Is it enough just to be happy? Is my life serving some greater purpose? Are we here to help others or just ourselves?[26]

Like Hepburn and Baggini, Thaddeus Metz posits something in the neighborhood of the amalgam thesis, ". . . the field has found it difficult to reduce this question to a single basic idea. For instance, I have argued that this question is associated with a variety of

[25] R. W. Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," p. 262.

[26] Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 1.

closely related but not entirely overlapping questions . . . which exhibit family resemblances."[27]

One way of understanding the amalgam thesis is to view it as making the question of life's meaning little more than a disjunctive question, *"'What is the purpose of life'? or 'What makes life valuable'? or 'What makes life worthwhile'? or x?"* On amalgam thesis premises, then, in asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" we ought to see ourselves as asking *either* a question about purpose or value or worth or something else.[28] There is something right about this. Indeed, when you ask both non-philosophers and philosophers what they take the question to mean, you will likely hear it explicated in terms value, worth, significance, or purpose.[29] Due to the dominance of the amalgam thesis as an interpretive strategy and its arguable philosophical merit, most contemporary philosophical treatments of the question consider it in one of its reformulated versions like, "What makes life valuable?" "What makes life significant?" "What is the purpose of life?" "Does *my* life achieve some good purpose?" or "What makes life worth living?" among others.[30] So, there exist at least two interpretive levels of the question on the

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[27] Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007): p. 211. Metz's work relating to this claim can be found in "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (April 2001): pp. 137-53; "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," pp. 781-814; and "Critical Notice: Baier and Cottingham on the Meaning of Life," *Disputatio* 19 (2005): pp. 251-64.

[28] The primary problem with this though is that these questions are about purpose and value and worth rather than the meaning of life. I will address this concern further at the end of Chapter Four.

[29] My informal and unscientific polling of colleagues, family, and friends both from within and from without the philosophical discipline has confirmed this empirically.

[30] Thaddeus Metz stipulates several conditions, in the form of questions it must address, that a theory must meet in order to be a theory about the meaning of life: "what should an agent strive for besides obtaining happiness and fulfilling obligations? Which aspects of a human life are worthy of great esteem or admiration? In what respect should a rational being connect with value beyond the animal self? And, from Charles Taylor (1989, chap. 1), the following could be added: which goods command our awe? How many an individual identify with something incomparably higher? What is worthy of our love and allegiance?" "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," pp. 802-03. Karl Britton parses the question as follows, "The question (What is the meaning of life?) is put in many different ways. What is the meaning *of it all*? What

amalgam thesis, one tracking something like the question's formal properties, the other tracking the subsequent questions' material content. In other words, the amalgam thesis posits that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is really just a disjunctive question (formal property) whereby questions about purpose, value, worth, and significance are asked (material property). In the next section, I will briefly summarize the dialectical situation characterizing two of the more prominent questions thought to be asked in asking, "What is the meaning of life?"

1.4 Extant Interpretations

As noted, working within the amalgam thesis paradigm entails that the original request in terms of meaning is viewed as irredeemably vague, and this vagueness is remedied by morphing the question into one that is more intelligible and yet continues to capture at least one, from among a broader cluster, of the human experiences, intuitions, and sub-questions that generated the original in the first place. One of the upshots of this is that against the general trends of neglect and logical suspicion in mid-twentieth century analytic philosophy, there is presently a renewed interest in the question of life's meaning in the contemporary analytic philosophical world.[31] As a result of the amalgam thesis's current influence, though, the contemporary dialectic between naturalists and theists on the topic broadly operates within these interpretative parameters.[32] It will be helpful,

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is the meaning of *everything*? What is it all in aid of? Why is there anything at all and why just what there is and not something quite different?" *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, pp. 1-2. Cf. Milton K. Munitz, *Does Life Have a Meaning?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), pp. 14-19.

[31] For a summary of contemporary treatments of the meaning of life, the state of the debate, and a helpful bibliography on recent work, see Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," pp. 196-217. Also see Metz, "The Meaning of Life", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2007 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2007/entries/life-meaning/>.

[32] Metz chooses, as the most fundamental way of distinguishing views of life's meaning, to frame the options in terms of supernaturalism, subjective naturalism, and objective naturalism. Essentially, I am

then, to briefly survey the general features and dialectical entailments of these interpretations. I will leave more detailed analysis of, especially, meaning and purpose to the second part of the dissertation. Such discussion will fit naturally within what I have called the *Metaphysical Project*. However, for taxonomic purposes, a brief word is in order here. I will discuss the "meaning as purpose" view in greater detail than the "meaning as value" view, as a substantial portion of the contemporary dialectic is observable in this context. I will consider meaning and value only in those ways in which the discussion moves beyond the context of purpose.

1.4.1 Meaning and Purpose

Ask someone what she thinks the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is asking and it is not uncommon to be told that it is asking something like, "What is the purpose of life?"[33] or perhaps "For what purpose(s) should I aim in life?" In fact, the former is probably the most common interpretation of the question. Michael Martin notes that ". . . when a person asks, "What is the meaning of life?" he or she might be asking what the purpose or purposes of life is . . ."[34] Garrett Thomson affirms this, "The debate about whether life has a meaning usually centers on the question whether it has some point or purpose. 'Does life have a meaning?' is usually understood as 'Does it have a point?' where 'point' means 'goal' or 'purpose.'[35] Finally, R. W. Hepburn claims that there exists ". . . an equation between meaningfulness and purposiveness. For a life to be

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covering the same ground, but have chosen to bring these three options under the distinction between purpose and value interpretations of the question.

[33] Here, I think "life" functions in some cases as a marker for something like *the life that self-conscious creatures possess*, and in other cases for the more general idea of reality or existence in its totality.

[34] Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 186.

[35] Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Wadsworth, 2003), p. 47.

meaningful, it must be purposeful: or—to make life meaningful is to pursue valuable ends."[36] Indeed, there is overwhelming precedent for interpreting the question in terms of purpose.

On this interpretation, the question is analogous to encountering a cylindrical object with sharpened graphite at one end and a piece of rubber on the other, and asking, "What is the meaning of this physical object?" While the use of "meaning" in this context is admittedly loose, a natural way to interpret this request is as the request for the *purpose(s)* of the object. We are often given to such inquiries when we encounter artifacts. We suspect, and reasonably so, that agency and intentionality are part of their causal origins, and these features of the causal history of the artifact strongly suggest that it has a function. Consequently, when inquiring into the purpose of the object we have come to call a "pencil" in the English-speaking world, one is inquiring into its function. This, then, is a teleological question. In Aristotelian terms, we would say that one desires to know the final cause of the object, in this case, being to write.[37]

When asking the question of life's meaning, just as when asking the question of the pencil's meaning, it is often the case that one is asking what purpose or purposes life may have. While the question is rarely clarified so as either to ask whether life *in general* has a purpose or simply whether *my* life and *her* life and *his* life have a purpose, I think it is safe to say that many take an answer to the former to also be an answer to the latter. This need not be so, however, for it is entirely possible to think that different lives have

[36] Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," p. 262.

[37] Of course, one might also be inquiring into the efficient or material causes of the pencil (probably not the formal though), but this is doubtful. Requests for efficient and material causation do not track the question's use of "meaning" as naturally as final causation.

different purposes. However, placement of the definite article before "meaning" strongly suggests that the question is motivated by the assumption that life, or yours and my life, has only a singe purpose.[38] Indeed, the way the question is asked implies that a meaningful life is linked to finding and adopting this singular, overarching purpose.[39] This assumption is challenged by many.[40] And so there is no single way to understand precisely what is being asked even when the question has been reformulated in terms of purpose.

Furthermore, one can distinguish between a descriptive purpose claim and a prescriptive purpose claim. The former category would include certain ends for which we act in virtue of the kinds of creatures we are. So, perhaps one might refer to a purpose of life as being to reproduce. The latter category asks the normative question of what ends we *ought* to pursue. Here, it is claimed that our aspirations, goals, and activities ought to be directed toward the accomplishment of certain ends if we are to lead satisfying lives. Seeking the purpose of life is largely pursued within the prescriptive purpose context. In other words, around what end or ends should I order my desires and labors in this life in order to lead a fulfilling existence? And so the question of life's meaning is saturated with prescriptive assumptions and not merely descriptive ones.

At this point, I have introduced additional conceptual baggage into the discussion. Notions like a satisfying life and fulfilling existence cannot be divorced from discussions of the meaning of life. This question has a profoundly *existential* component to it. We

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[38] R. A. Sharpe, "In Praise of the Meaningless Life," *Philosophy Now* 25 (Summer 1999): p. 15.

[39] J. J. C. Smart, "Meaning and Purpose," *Philosophy Now* 24 (Summer 1999): p. 16.

[40] For example, see Julian Baggini, *What's It All About?*; R. A. Sharpe, "In Praise of the Meaningless Life;" J. J. C. Smart, "Meaning and Purpose;" and A. J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy."

seek a purpose or purposes that quiet an inner storm and satiate a gut-level thirst to live for something larger than ourselves, although the notion of "larger than self" itself suffers from some measure of vagueness. It may be that dispelling every last bit of vagueness in the issue of life's meaning is not possible. This should not trouble us too greatly, for vagueness is a lurking reality in many other philosophical domains. The basic idea though, is that a purpose is sought that is of such a nature that one is satisfied and settled in structuring one's life around this purpose. On the issue of what counts as a good or worthwhile or valuable purpose and whether that purpose(s) is extrinsic and discovered or intrinsic and created, there exists a divergence of viewpoints.[41]

These different views largely track the naturalist/supernaturalist divide, although there is disagreement among naturalists on what conditions must be met in order for something to count as a valuable or worthwhile or good purpose. Some naturalists, I will call them *subjectivists*, think that within certain parameters,[42] whatever an agent deems is a worthwhile purpose is, necessarily, a worthwhile purpose. Others, whom I will call *objectivists*, think that there exist objective criteria—certain natural, mind-independent facts—by which some purposes are worthwhile and others are not.[43] I will further elucidate this in Chapter Six. For now it is sufficient to note that the two most common ways to understand the origin and nature of purpose as it relates to this discussion are: (i)

[41] It is not clear that these two broad categories are actually mutually exclusive. For example, it is certainly possible that a purpose for mankind that is divinely given is also intrinsic to his nature as *homo sapien*. Here, then, I use "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" as markers for something like *purpose ultimately originating from a source outside of human beings* (extrinsic) and *purpose ultimately originating from within human beings and strongly linked to the exercise of their wills* (intrinsic).

[42] This is an important caveat, for even most subjective naturalists would not endorse the extreme position that dedication of oneself to, for example, torturing innocent children for fun counts as a valuable purpose, even though some objective naturalists and supernaturalists may think a *reductio* looms and that the subjectivist's position ultimately leads to such an undesirable conclusion.

[43] I borrow the terms "subjectivist" and "objectivist" from Thaddeus Metz's work on the meaning of life.

divinely imposed and (ii) self imposed.[44] This taxonomy is limited though. The word "imposition" in the first context is fuel to those who charge the divine purpose view as an assault on the dignity of man. I acknowledge this danger, and will have more to say about it in Chapter Six. Conceding the limitations of this taxonomy, it remains a beneficial and largely accurate way of distinguishing the general philosophical options within the meaning-as-purpose context.

1.4.2 Meaning and Value

Discussing meaning in terms of purpose in life and meaning in terms of value are largely inseparable. In asking, "What is the purpose of life?" it is assumed that *valuable* purposes are those worth pursuing and which contribute to a meaningful life. In asking, "What makes life valuable?" it is presupposed that, in order to lead a meaningful life, one will have as her *purpose*, in a sense, the pursuit of these valuable ends. And so, formulating the question either in terms of purpose or value appear to be different perspectives on a question that is asking something very similar in both instances. Additionally, it can be seen that the notion of a *worthwhile* life is closely linked with purpose and value, and therefore meaning in life. A worthwhile life is likely one that, on balance, is more valuable than not, where a valuable life might be plausibly explicated in terms of relationship with that which is valuable or pursuit of valuable ends. Working out what this means is part of the task that analytic philosophers working in the field have set

[44] There is a third option, the Aristotelian one. It is an interesting alternative to (i) and (ii), but which occupies little space in the current philosophical discussions. Briefly, Aristotle argued that everything in nature aims toward some end. This end need not terminate in an extrinsic cause such as intelligence or god. Nature itself functions as an end in some sense. He argued that teleological explanations, in order to be complete and satisfying, must terminate in an end which itself is intrinsically valuable and not merely instrumentally valuable. Again, this ultimate end is neither self-imposed nor divinely imposed but is, in a sense, *naturally* imposed. In the case of man, Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* that *eudaimonia* (commonly translated as happiness although there are complex translation issues at play here) is the final end under which man's purposive activities are subsumed.

for themselves. But Metz is surely right in noting that "theories of life's meaning [in terms of worth, value, purpose, significance, etc.] are united in virtue of family resemblances."[45]

The dialectic between theism and naturalism on the question of purpose is similar in the context of value. Although, whereas the central issue in the context of purpose in life is between divinely imposed purpose and self imposed purpose, the central issue in the realm of value and meaning is whether theistic premises are necessary *and sufficient* for value in life or whether naturalism has the conceptual resources sufficient to secure the right kinds of value for a meaningful life in a world devoid of finite and infinite spiritual realities. There does exist, however, an important in-house debate among naturalists about whether the kinds of value sufficient for a meaningful life are purely preferential (subjectivist) or whether they are natural, mind-independent facts about the world around which we ought to orient our lives (objectivist).

1.5 Futility, Death, and the Absurd

In charting the vague boundaries that delimit the conceptual territory occupied by the meaning of life, one must not neglect a discussion of death and futility. Indeed, considerations of death and futility are salient in some of the most enduring works recognized by all as in some way addressing the meaning of life.[46] Most people intuitively think that death and futility belong centrally to discussions about the meaning of life, even if one cannot explicitly fit the concepts into the reformulated requests

[45] Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," p. 802.

[46] For example, one finds such considerations in Tolstoy, Camus, and *Qohelet* in Ecclesiastes, if one is inclined to think Ecclesiastes is, in some sense, about the meaning of life.

comprising the amalgam thesis.[47] In terms of the amalgam thesis, however, one can implicitly find discussions of futility in a reformulated request such as, "Is life worthwhile?" or "Is life worth living?" I will save a more sustained discussion of death and futility for Chapter Seven; however, it will be helpful here to provide a brief overview of the cluster of issues that are important in this context.

Interestingly, recognition of futility's connection to life's meaning predates the contemporary discussion by centuries.[48] Intuitively, futility appears to be antithetical to a meaningful existence, but why? What is the essence of futility, and why does its presence threaten a meaningful life? Furthermore, must the pervasiveness of futility cross some threshold in order to threaten meaning? Here, we must also distinguish "cosmic" futility from futility within more localized contexts. Cosmic futility refers to the perceived futility of life if all conscious life and the universe itself cease to exist, or in the case of the universe, become permanently and irredeemably hostile to life at some point in the future. A more localized futility might be that type associated with seeking to fulfill some short-term goal that is, in principle, unrealizable. Can negative implications for a meaningful life be derived from how it is all going to end on naturalism? Are conclusions of cosmic futility even plausible given Thomas Nagel's philosophical work on standpoints? Finally, is some futility that is said to threaten meaning in life the product of unrealistic goal-setting and standards on what counts as worthwhile? All these questions are important ones in discussions of futility in meaning of life contexts. It is necessary to further note that just as in discussions of meaning in terms of purpose and meaning in

[47] An example, though, might be: "How can my life be valuable given that I will die?"

[48] One example is likely the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, although some Old Testament exegetes are quick to warn that a reading of Ecclesiastes through the paradigm of modern existentialism is largely anachronistic.

terms of value, naturalistic and theistic views divide rather clearly in discussions of futility.

I turn now to the plight of Sisyphus, the paradigmatic case of futility in the west. Sisyphus and the futility pictured so vividly in his case are no strangers to the meaning of life discussion. But what is the essence of futility, and why is its presence supposed to threaten a meaningful life? We certainly see it in the case of Sisyphus, but can we uncover the conditions signifying its presence? I will first consider the case of Sisyphus followed by a discussion of futility more generally.

The futility in Sisyphus' plight appears to be a product of at least two related features of his situation. First, his task seems pointless; he accomplishes nothing. If one takes finally reaching the top and having the stone stay as the goal, Sisyphus never realizes this goal. Of course, his task does have a point in the sense that the gods have endowed it with a point, namely, to do what he is doing as punishment. But this does not rescue the scenario from futility. The punishment is punishment precisely because the task assigned is utterly futile. Indeed, the *point* of the task is to be unmistakably and irredeemably futile. Second, Sisyphus' plight is characterized by endless repetition. Here, it is not repetition *qua* repetition that produces futility,[49] but that a task that is almost but never finished must be repeated forever. These two features function jointly to produce the futility. If Sisyphus' struggles eventually terminated in the rock staying, the charge of futility would not be as plausible. Additionally, if Sisyphus endlessly rolled stones in

[49] Some, following Bernard Williams, think that repetition itself is a sufficient condition for agents in unending states of affairs coming to be primarily dominated by the condition of boredom. While not the same as futility, there is a connection. For Williams' essay see, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. by John Martin Fischer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 73-92.

order to create some sort of lasting and eternally growing artifact of immense beauty, the charge of futility would not be as plausible.[50] Although in this last case one might be suspicious that futility has not been circumvented, because Sisyphus would never finish the artifact.

In more general discussions of futility, there appear to be two prominent ways in which something can be said to be futile, both of which relate to meaning of life discussions. The first is uncontroversial and clearly a case of futility. The second is controversial, and is what substantially threatens a meaningful life according to some. Probably the most common connotation that futility carries is the idea of striving to accomplish an impossible goal. This sense shares similarities with the Sisyphus case. Here, there is a tension between *effort* and *end*, such that no matter how much energy is exerted to attain the goal, it will prove ineffectual. The effort is futile. The one engaged in the effort will not nor cannot accomplish what she sets out to do. Trying to build a skyscraper with one's bare hands or attempting to jump over the moon would be futile endeavors for us. Accomplishing these tasks is physically impossible, even though not logically, and any effort to attain them will result in a state of affairs dominated by futility. For those who closely link the meaning of life with the attainment of purposes, one's meaning in life then will be directly correlated with whether or not those purposes are, in principle, attainable.[51] To the extent that they are not, the presence of futility will become a more prominent feature of one's life. Hence, on this view, futility and meaning

[50] Richard Taylor defends this claim in *Good and Evil: A New Direction*, Chapter 18 (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 258-59.

[51] There is the additional issue of whether one's aims are *actually* attained and not simply attainable *in principle*, so that a further condition on a meaningful life may be that one's purposes *have to be attained*. At minimum, though, to avoid futility, one must aim for attainable ends.

are negatively correlated such that as futility increases, meaningfulness decreases. This is why our intuition is to say, in at least one sense, that Sisyphus' life is meaningless.[52]

But there is a different and more controversial sense in which futility enters the meaning of life discussion. A powerful intuition is shared by many whereby futility is strongly negatively correlated with what I will call "staying power." This is largely where death enters the discussion, although futility can be present in the absence of death. Indeed, the plight of Sisyphus demonstrates that a certain kind of post-mortem survival is sufficient to bring about a futile state of affairs.[53] The rough idea is that futility is a dominant feature of states of affairs where agents and their accomplishments and achievements *do not last*. I use "staying power" then in reference to humans as well as their activities and the products of their creative energies. There is a widespread and deep-seated intuition that if neither we nor the products of our human energies last, then our lives are fundamentally futile. Part of the reason this intuition grips so many is that we often associate significance with things that last a long time. This is readily seen in a slogan such as, "Diamonds are forever." There are at least two forms of this intuition. The weak form only requires that we and what we do, or at least relevant parts of what we do, live on in some less than absolute sense into the distant future (e.g., genetic traces through progeny, aesthetic traces through creative pursuits, moral and social traces through family, friends, and culture, etc.). The strong form, however, requires that we and relevant aspects of our lives continue forever. At minimum, this requires that we

[52] Although, in another sense, his life is meaningful in that it participates in a meaningful framework of gods, purposes, etc. There are multiple vantage points from which to talk about the meaning of life.

[53] This is why theists claim that never-ending post-mortem existence may be necessary for a meaningful life, but not sufficient.

somehow "survive" the biological demise of our physical bodies,[54] and that there remains a continuity of personal identity across the threshold of death.

In light of the strong form of the futility intuition, C. S. Lewis, in his essay *De Futilitate*, notes three options available in response to the prospect of definitive death for humanity and the universe: (i) take the intuition seriously and adopt a pessimist viewpoint (e.g., Schopenhauer, Camus, and possibly Bertrand Russell), (ii) accept the naturalist position on death but reject the intuition (e.g., Michael Martin, Erik Weilenberg, and Owen Flanagan), or (iii) take the intuition seriously, reject the naturalist position, and opt for theism (e.g., Ecclesiastes, Tolstoy, William Lane Craig, or perhaps a non-theistic religious viewpoint).[55] I will explain these options in greater detail in Chapter Five.

As in other philosophical contexts, there exists a profound clash of intuitions when it comes to the cosmic futility thesis, and counter-examples are enlisted to show that there are valuable and worthwhile pursuits in life *even if* it all will come to naught at some point in the finite future. While the cosmic futility intuition is strong, putative counter-examples can be produced that seem to weaken or even undermine this intuition. Interestingly, the counter-examples may result in one finding herself with two competing and seemingly irreconcilable intuitions: (i) that of cosmic futility, and (ii) that of the

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[54] Despite its dualist overtones, this claim is meant to be consistent with extant views on the ontology of the human person, even versions of physicalism that claim human persons *just are* their bodies. While a physicalist ontology of the human person may make it more difficult to think of how one could survive the demise of her body, and *ipso facto* her, there are physicalists who think this is possible. For example, see essays in Kevin Corcoran, ed. *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Peter Van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine*.

[55] C. S. Lewis, "*De Futilitate*" in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 59.

value and worth of projects that will come to naught in the grand scheme of things. Here, Thomas Nagel's work on standpoints is beneficial in sorting through the issue, as he thinks there is something correct in the pervasive human intuitions of cosmic futility and absurdity.

In "The Absurd," [56] Nagel defines an *absurd* situation as one that "includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality."[57] Examples of such absurdity would include a national leader who declares a war is over two years after this has already been officially decreed, or trying to fill a vehicle with gas when it has just been done. These are examples of absurdity because there is a significant lack of fit between what one is trying to accomplish and the actual state of affairs which he is in that militates against the agent's intentions. Nagel argues that, for some, life as a whole exhibits the characteristic of absurdity in that many have pretensions or aspirations about a meaningful life that are fundamentally at odds with the nature of the universe on the naturalistic paradigm. Specifically, Nagel thinks the condition of absurdity supervenes upon "the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."[58] Essentially, there exists a clash of viewpoints, both of which rational, self-reflective creatures such as ourselves can adopt. The first is a *near*, subjectively involved standpoint from which our activities are significant and meaningful to us as we actively participate in them. The second is a *distant*, objectively detached standpoint from

[56] Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *The Meaning of Life,* ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). This essay was originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1971). Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Chapter 11 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[57] Ibid., p. 178.

[58] Ibid.

which everything we do appears insignificant and meaningless.[59] Indeed, humans, unlike other sentient creatures, are able to view our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*. Nagel's conclusion is that we should adopt a position of irony, as opposed to either heroism (possibly Russell) or pessimism (Schopenhauer), towards this incongruity of standpoints.[60] I think a rough analog of Nagel's analysis of absurdity and how it threatens a meaningful life can be imported into discussions of cosmic futility.

Most of us, when engaged in life's activities like child-rearing, attaining some goal, or enjoying some aesthetically pleasing activity, find these things to be significant, worthwhile, and meaningful. Much like Tolstoy, however, many of us at various times in life step back from a near and engaged viewpoint, and reflect upon these endeavors from a more distant perspective. This distant viewpoint consists of a future state of affairs in which we, all other sentient life, and the universe itself are no longer here.[61] It is the deepest context from which to view our lives and the world. Adopting this latter viewpoint leads many to think that the earthly endeavors that populate our lives are not, in the deepest sense, significant, worthwhile, or meaningful, because reality, in the deepest sense, is indifferent to our joys, triumphs, struggles, and sorrows. Both we and the universe are on a course ending in non-existence,[62] and this seems to make our lives ultimately futile. At one and the same time many of us share the intuition that saving a

[59] This ability is partially what separates humans from other sentient life, and additionally makes the meaning of life *our* question. Presumably, crickets do not ask why they chirp, reproduce, and get smashed on the back porch, or more generally, why they even exist in the first place. We are distinct from crickets in this respect.

[60] Nagel, "The Absurd," pp. 184-85.

[61] Although there is a logical worry here that if the universe is all that exists and it no longer exists that "this" cannot be called a state of affairs, for it would be nothing.

[62] Or, in the case of the universe, an irreversiblely *used-up*, hostile-to-life, state of affairs would obtain.

child stranded on railroad tracks is valuable even if the universe ceases to exist in a few weeks after the rescue, and yet the coming oblivion of everything makes the sense of futility hard to shake. Taking Nagel's advice in the context of absurdity, the remedy to this situation is simply an ironic resignation that this is just the way it is given the uses to which we put our rational and self-reflective capacities and the way the world actually is on naturalism.

In contrast to Nagel, the theist might argue that God remedies the cosmic sense of futility that follows from this situation by changing the situation itself. Our response need not be irony, for the nature of the distant viewpoint is radically altered on theism. Given theistic premises, the distant viewpoint includes more details than our deaths and the death of the universe. It also includes a supernatural intentionality through which the world exists. It includes an infinite being who is perfect in every way. On the theistic view, it is argued that there is no "lack of fit" between the near viewpoint and the distant viewpoint precisely because the distant viewpoint includes a personal, supernatural being who grounds the significance, worth, and meaning of human endeavors in the here and now. Indeed, the distant viewpoint includes a *viewer who is interested*. The tension does not appear to arise on theism. Notice here that it is not simply that living on indefinitely secures the worth of our endeavors now even though this may be a necessary condition. Rather, it is the existence of the theistic God that does so. Of course, here, all the standard worries about whether God can ground meaning come to the fore. But there is an additional worry, one which Nagel himself raises.

Remember, the absurdity of life arises according to Nagel in that we can adopt a deeper vantage point from which to view our endeavors. From this deeper perspective,

these activities that consume us on this earth seem arbitrary and without ultimate justification for why they, and not some others, are important to us or even why any are important at all. The tension between the two standpoints makes life absurd, argues Nagel. The theist can argue that this tension evaporates when God becomes part of that wider perspective. But Nagel has a response. He argues that the very same questions can be raised of the *God-perspective* that are raised of the near human-perspective on naturalism. "What makes doubt inescapable with regard to the limited aims of individual life also makes it inescapable with regard to any larger purpose that encourages the sense that life is meaningful. Once the fundamental doubt has begun, it cannot be laid to rest."[63] Nagel's point is that one might shift what was the near, involved viewpoint in the first scenario to include God, and then adopt the distant, deep, and detached viewpoint from which to ask what ultimately justifies what God does, why what He does is important, and so on. Settling this impasse will center on a discussion of whether the regress of asking for justification from wider and wider vantage points is plausibly terminated in the necessary being posited by theism.[64]

I want to close this section by noting a few points on the topic of *endings*. I will take up the issue more substantively in Chapter Seven, but it is important to say a bit about it in the context of futility. I have already discussed some of the driving reasons why many adopt the conclusion of cosmic futility as a characteristic feature of life in a naturalistic universe. But there is another idea that seems to play an important role, but which has received little or no explicit attention in the literature on life's meaning. It is common to think that the way a state of affairs, but especially a narrative, ends is perhaps

[63] Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 180.

[64] I will discuss related issues in Chapter Six.

that which is most evalautively significant for our broadly normative appraisals of the state of affairs or narrative *as a whole*. That is to say, our emotional reaction, aesthetic response, and/or moral evaluation of a narrative is largely a function of how it ends.

It is plausible, even if only loosely in the case of naturalism, to view the history of the cosmos as a cosmic narrative complete with beginning, things-in-between, and ending. There is a strong tendency, whether reasonable or not, to take the ending of the universe's narrative to be extremely important to our appraisal of the in-between states of affairs. Consequently, given the naturalistic ending where death has the final word, many judge the middle states of affairs to be predominantly and irredeemably futile. Of course, that conclusion can be challenged as I have noted, but the important idea here is the human propensity to give endings some sort of normative priority for how we evaluate the entire story. If something like this is true, it is no mystery why discussions of death and futility so closely track discussions of the meaning of life.

1.6 Summary

My primary aim in this chapter has been to set the context for the remainder of the dissertation by discussing the coherence, interpretation, and important dialectical issues surrounding the question, "What is the meaning of life?" Despite the oft-repeated charge of incoherence, the question is demonstrably coherent even though it suffers from some measure of vagueness. This vagueness is evidenced by the multiplicity of interpretations of what the question is asking. The most common approach in the current literature, what I have called the *amalgam thesis*, views the question as little more than a disjunctive question consisting of a cluster of distinct yet related requests about purpose, value, and worth among others. In addition, issues involving death, futility, and absurdity closely

track discussions of life's meaning. Any plausible interpretation of what the question is asking will have to find a natural home for this cluster of topics. In Chapter Two, I consider some important topics that will facilitate the explanation and defense of my narrative interpretation in Chapters Three and Four.

CHAPTER TWO

The Narrative Interpretation: Prolegomena

2.1 Introduction

There is, no doubt, something correct in extant philosophical interpretations of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" Requests like, "What is life's purpose?" "What makes life valuable?" or "Is life worthwhile and not irredeemably futile?" are often considered rough synonyms for the original, and hint at intuitions and sub-questions out of which it is motivated. This is partly due to the fact, as noted in §1.3 of Chapter One, that the question is plausibly viewed as an amalgam of distinct, yet interrelated questions about purpose, value, worth, and significance, among others. In current philosophical discussions of life's meaning, the dialectic between theists and naturalists as well as subjectivist and objectivist naturalists is most often framed within interpretive parameters set by the amalgam thesis.

Though the amalgam thesis is not without philosophical merit, I will begin construction of a framework in this chapter for a competing interpretation of the meaning of life question, one that more fully captures and addresses, *under a single unifying construct*, the multiplicity of prior questions and intuitions with which it is associated and from which it is generated.[1] Additionally, my proposed interpretation allows for the

[1] This is largely in opposition to Metz, who claims that ". . . there is no single idea that unifies all the diverse views that have been deemed to be about the meaning of life . . ." "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): p. 802. Of course, my interpretation breaks so substantially from the existing interpretive parameters such that his claim does not entirely relate. I agree with him, if he means that neither purpose nor value nor significance nor worth acts as a single idea that can unify all the proposals

original formulation, explicated in the admittedly vague terms *meaning* and *life*, to be retained without needing to be reformulated. The reformulated questions in terms of purpose, value, significance, and worth require substantial linguistic revision of the original question, and are, individually, too limited in scope to capture the all-encompassing nature of the original question. For that matter, even considered jointly, they fail to capture this feature of the question that I take to be indispensable to understanding it—*the desire for global or all-inclusive explanation*, where by "global" I largely mean an explanation that addresses *all* the existentially important aspects of life and not just one or a few. I will explain and defend this claim more fully later; for now it is worth noting that if this feature of the question (its global or all-inclusive or comprehensive scope) is lost, a central aspect of the question is lost. None of the reformulated meaning of life questions most often being discussed by philosophers sufficiently captures this element, and the amalgam thesis only partially accounts for it.

There is an interpretation of the meaning of life question though that accounts for everything the reformulated versions address (jointly) and more. Additionally, it has the advantage over the amalgam thesis of (i) rendering the question intelligible in its *original* linguistic form, (ii) extracting everything generally deemed relevant to the meaning of life from the question in its *original* linguistic form, rather than having to morph it into several other distinct questions which are then only combined *disjunctively*, and related (iii) making questions and discussion about, for example, purpose and value in this context *about* the meaning of life and not only about purpose and value. I consider these to be significant philosophical advantages. I propose, then, that the question should be

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that have been offered as being that in which the meaning of life consists. My proposal is not like one of these at all.

understood as the request for a global explanation or narrative of the world through which we can situate and make sense of our lives as well as those phenomena of existence we deem of greatest existential import.[2] In the remainder of the dissertation, I will call this approach the *narrative interpretation*.

My aim in this chapter is to discuss a cluster of topics necessary for the subsequent presentation of the narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" I begin by noting that my proposal is largely prescriptive. That is, I am proposing how I think the question *ought* to be interpreted. However, I think any prescriptive interpretation must take into account descriptive realities of, for example, how people do, in fact, interpret the question along with the intuitions driving it. I think my interpretation accounts for this empirical data more adequately than current reformulations and the amalgam thesis. Second, I argue that a way of asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" that is often taken as making an identical request ("What constitutes a meaningful life?" or "What makes a life meaningful?") actually carries subtly different connotations, and this difference substantially affects how one interprets the meaning of the request itself. I note that my interpretive proposal follows most naturally when the request is retained in its original linguistic form ("What is the meaning of life?"). Finally, I will discuss the concept of narrative as a mode of discourse, and how I am employing this concept in my interpretation of the question of life's meaning.

[2] I will most often speak of what we seek in asking, "What is the meaning of life?" in terms of *narrative*, although our search for a deep explanatory framework or a comprehensive context through which to understand and live our lives is roughly synonymous to how I am modestly employing the concept of "narrative."

2.2 Descriptive Issues, Prescriptive Issues, and a Philosophically Sufficient Interpretation

When discussing the question, "What is the meaning of life?" we should distinguish between two distinct yet related issues. First, there is the empirical issue of how some sample of the population, in fact, interprets the question. Second, there is a separate issue of how the question *ought* to be interpreted. This is the philosophically reflective approach where one has conceded the vagueness inherent in the question's standard linguistic form, and where the question is either reformulated in a way that is philosophically respectable and yet continues to capture central intuitions and motivations which initially prompt the question, or a plausible interpretation is offered of the question in its original linguistic form.

I take it that any philosophical proposal for what the question means will need to address both descriptive and prescriptive considerations. That is, it should sufficiently account for the range of pre-philosophic intuitions and sub-questions that motivate the question of life's meaning in the first place. It must do its best to harmonize with them. But it must not stop here. Additionally, the requirement of conceptual clarity and coherence stands as a condition to be met by any proposal deemed plausible. Of central concern is the original question's vagueness. This must be addressed, and may require revising or amending the common-sense, lay usage. It may not though.

In this dissertation, I am not primarily concerned with the empirical issue of how the question is, in fact, interpreted. Thus, I would not be content *merely* with the results of a survey. My main goal is to propose a philosophically plausible interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" How ought we interpret the request is the issue with which I am concerned. However, as noted, I consider it a desideratum of any

philosophically plausible interpretation of the question's meaning that it be able to sufficiently square its interpretive contours with the intuitions and sub-questions from which the question of life's meaning is generated. That is to say, it will have to account for those descriptive elements that we find giving rise to the question as well as what people, in fact, take themselves to mean in asking it. In this sense, I *am* interested in how people, as a matter of fact, interpret the request. But I want to move beyond this, proposing what I take to be a superior interpretation to those currently under philosophical consideration. So, my proposal is not one merely about what people generally understand the question to be asking. That is a surveyor's task. It is, rather, a proposal that attempts to interpret the question's central request in a way that brings philosophical respectability to the question in its original linguistic form *and* harmonizes with the intuitions and sub-questions from which the question is generated, intuitions and sub-questions, however, that people generally leave unarticulated or fail to understand for one reason or another.

2.3 The Meaning of Life vs. A Meaningful Life

Philosophers often criticize lay considerations of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" because of a perceived uncritical interaction with the question in its standard linguistic form, one that is vague. However, criticism can be directed at philosophers themselves who, once philosophical paradigms and certain dialectical parameters have gained momentum, fail to move outside of those boundaries and consider afresh some philosophical question from a different, and perhaps more fruitful

perspective.[3] Furthermore, many philosophers working on the topic may be guilty of conflating two questions that seem *prima facie* synonymous, but which in fact are, in important ways, conceptually distinct. I think this has happened with the questions, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" However, the locution *the meaning of life* is simply not reducible to a discussion about what makes a life meaningful.

After providing evidence of this conflation, I will argue that though the questions are relevantly similar, they are actually conceptually distinct requests. Along with showing this, my goal in this section is to both fill in the context out of which my interpretive claim gains further plausibility and also to add a layer of nuance to a philosophical discussion that is in relative infancy and in need of philosophical maturation.[4] More precision is needed if the philosophical discussion of life's meaning is going to continue to proceed forward.

2.3.1 Conflating "What is the Meaning of Life?" and "What Makes a Life Meaningful?"

Prima facie, there may appear to be little difference between the following questions: (a) "What is the meaning of life?" and (b) "What makes a life meaningful?"[5] There is evidence to indicate that the following disjunction is true. Philosophers working on the topic often either assume that (a) and (b) are roughly synonymous, or at least that (b) is the more relevant and answerable question. I will call the first disjunct the

[3] For example, one thinks here of Gettier's historic challenge to the reigning tripartite analysis of the conditions under which propositional knowledge obtains, an analysis largely unchallenged for two thousand years.

[4] In a sense, the discussion of life's meaning is ancient. I here reference its infancy against the contextual backdrop of contemporary analytic philosophy.

[5] Unless otherwise indicated, I use "question" to mean what is asked by a speaker in the performance of a speech-act.

"conflation thesis" (CT), and the second disjunt the "relevance thesis" (RT). The second disjunct, (b), is most often in the background framing the discussion in the current philosophical considerations of the question of life's meaning. Whether the evidence favors CT or RT as the *modus operandi* of philosophers working on the topic, each, in its own way, results in a deficient or truncated account of the territory subsumed under the meaning of life.

Something in the neighborhood of both CT and RT is observable in the work of Thaddeus Metz, who has published widely on the topic of life's meaning. For example, in two noteworthy articles that survey the contemporary philosophical dialectic on the meaning of life, he frames his discussion in the introductions of those pieces with the second question. In the 2002 survey article in *Ethics*, he begins by asking, "What, if anything, *makes a life meaningful*?" [emphasis added].[6] In a subsequent 2007 survey article in *Philosophy Compass*, he begins in nearly the same fashion, "In this article I survey philosophical literature on the topic of what, if anything, *makes a person's life meaningful*" [emphasis added].[7] Interestingly, though, the respective titles of these pieces are, "Recent Work on *the Meaning of Life*," and "New Developments in *the Meaning of Life*" [emphases added]. It is telling that in the respective titles of these works, the standard locution, *the meaning of life*, is used. What are we to make of this? Are *the meaning of life* and *a meaningful life* synonymous concepts? Is CT a case of unnecessary philosophical nit-picking? Both questions should be answered in the negative.

[6] Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 781.

[7] Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007): 196.

More evidence of a less explicit nature from Metz's work is available in support of CT. For example, in his introduction to a special issue of *Philosophical Topics* in 2005, he notes that the issue is devoted to the topic of "meaning in life," which, in this context *is* synonymous with the locution *a meaningful life*. However, he then proceeds to use the phrase ". . . accounts of life's meaning."[8] Again, in his 2001 article, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, he enlists the following quote by John Updike on the meaning of life, "Well, my goodness, "What is the meaning of life?" you ask. What is the meaning of "meaning" in your question? And whose life? A worm's?"[9] He proceeds to talk of ". . . the question of life's meaning . . ." in the first paragraph of the article[10] But the immediate concern of the paper is *a meaningful life*. Importantly, Updike's bewilderment in the quote is the kind of bewilderment that attaches to the original linguistic formulation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" bewilderment that is not generally attached to the question, "What make a life meaningful?" The *bewilderment-response* is actually highly instructive, tracking important differences between the two requests. This response often accompanies the first question, but not the second. Metz and other philosophers who seemingly conflate the two requests, whether implicitly or explicitly, are failing to draw boundary markers where they are needed within the vast, often confusing territory of life's meaning.

Now this all may seem like conceptual hair-splitting but this is precisely what is needed in order to more clearly chart the vague conceptual boundaries of the meaning of

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[8] Thaddeus Metz, "Introduction," *Philosophical Papers* 34 (November 2005): 311.

[9] Thaddeus Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quartely* 38 (April 2001): 137.

[10] Ibid.

life. One cannot simply assume that the two questions, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" are making synonymous requests. And, conflating the two leads to further implausible consequences. For example, when one looks at the dialectic that has unfolded on the topic of life's meaning, the kinds of questions and issues discussed generally fit within the context of the second request. Metz nicely summarizes the kinds of questions salient in this context, "What ought one most strive for besides achieving happiness and satisfying moral requirements? How can one do something worth [sic] of great esteem or admiration? What is particularly worthy of love and devotion?"[11] He notes that these questions are generally answered within one of three broad metaphysical and normative paradigms: (i) supernaturalism, (ii) objectivist naturalism, and (iii) subjectivist naturalism. One of the shortcomings of this approach, however, is the implausible implication that questions and concerns clearly related to the meaning of life end up falling outside the dialectical parameters of the discussion on life's meaning. Here, one thinks of questions like: Why does the universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the deep explanation, context, or narrative from which to understand life? Why are we here? What is *it* all about? How is it all going to end? Any understanding of the meaning of life question that provides no conceptual room for such requests is deficient.

Enlisting the amalgam thesis, it is plausible to view the original and most basic formulation of the question (i.e., "What is the meaning of life?") as the request in which a cluster of other distinct yet related requests are imbedded. Accordingly, the question, "What makes a life meaningful?" is one of a number of questions that fall within the broad territory of life's meaning. The problem is that the discussion over life's meaning

[11] Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," 211.

has generally unfolded within a dialectical paradigm that largely views the most basic question as, “What makes a life meaningful?” But this already assumes too much; namely, that “What makes a life meaningful?” is synonymous to “What is the meaning of life?” The latter question, however, has important connotations that are in the neighborhood of life’s meaning *and* that are not captured on the formulation, “What makes a life meaningful?” “What is the meaning of life?” is a broader, more global, and more general request than “What makes a life meaningful?

2.3.2 Against Synonymy

Though *the meaning of life* and *a meaningful life* are often taken to be synonymous, they possess importantly different connotations. Conflating them, then, has detrimental philosophical implications for how the ensuing discussions over life’s meaning are framed. How one first interprets and then answers the question about life’s meaning is importantly linked to how one asks it. The current ‘canonical’ discussions of life’s meaning where questions and considerations of value, worth, and purpose, among others, are those at the fore reside more naturally in contexts where the question, “What makes a life meaningful?” saliently frames the discussion. Unfortunately, such discussions leave out other important meaning of life questions and issues, those that are salient only on the *original* linguistic formulation of the meaning of life question, “What is the meaning of life?” Neither can the two questions be conflated, nor should the question of a meaningful life be considered the most relevant aspect of the original request. Though distinguishing between the two questions may seem *prima facie* suspect or *ad hoc*, there are two important considerations that support this distinction. Both of these considerations largely center on the notion of *scope*. The first is much broader in

scope than the second, an attribute that explains, among other things, the *bewilderment-response* that attaches to the first question, but not the second.

First, the question, "What makes a life meaningful?" is more clearly a normative question whereby one seeks insight about how one *ought* to structure her life in order to secure a meaningful existence (e.g., in terms of ends pursued). In Metz's terms, she is concerned with questions like: "What ought one most strive for besides achieving happiness and satisfying moral requirements? How can one do something worth [sic] of great esteem or admiration? What is particularly worthy of love and devotion?"[12] Here, then, "meaningful" carries salient normative connotations, although the concept extends beyond the realm of normative *ethical* considerations. For example, many philosophers think we are inclined to judge a life that strives and attains for some ideal of moral perfection, but which for the person living it is fundamentally and pervasively unhappy as lacking meaningfulness.[13] In this case meaningfulness will require a *happiness-component*, though being irreducible to happiness alone. Most people's intuitions militate against a happy serial killer leading a meaningful life. So, meaningfulness is a normative category that includes more than the ethical but not less, adding perhaps the aesthetic and other dimensions, while being reducible to none of these considered individually.

On the other hand, the question, "What is the meaning of life?" does not carry with it the same normative connotations as, "What makes a life meaningful?" at least not in the same sense. Part of the reason for this is that it is more general or, perhaps more vague. It does encompass normative territory, but it is not exhausted by the normative.

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[12] Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," 211.

[13] Though, historically, a philosopher like Plato would dispute that this is possible, as the pursuit of moral virtue and happiness are more intimately connected. There are debates of course about the precise claim Plato is making about the connection of virtue and happiness.

Within the interpretive parameters of the amalgam thesis, some of the supposed sub-questions imbedded within the original request, "What is the meaning of life?" are normative, but not all. Pre-theoretically at least, the question, "What is the meaning of life?" seems to be, very often, about seeking a deep explanation or context or narrative for the entire global state of affairs (on pain of contradiction),[14] especially the subset of this state of affairs that is part and parcel of the *human predicament*, those toward which we focus our existentially involved gaze. Though normative considerations and questions will be addressed by this deep explanation, context, or narrative, it is simply an explanation, context, or narrative that is being sought, and explanation *qua* explanation is not itself normative.

Second, and perhaps more relevant, the question, "What makes a life meaningful?" is a question about *human* life, and not about everything that exists in the universe, or in the rather crude, yet instructive, way that the question is often formulated, " . . . about all of *this*" where "this" picks out *everything*, at least everything in the spatio-temporal universe. However, as a matter of fact, the question of life's meaning is often motivated out of more global and all-inclusive intuitions. These global intuitions are nicely captured in what should be viewed as a probable synonym of the question, "What is the meaning of life?"—*What is it all [life, the universe, finite existence] about?* Here, we are not simply asking a question about human life, but about everything in the observable universe. To be sure, many think the global question and the local question

[14] For example, from what outside vantage point can one observe all-that-is *sub specie aeternitatis*? One may make a distinction between the spatio-temporal universe and the supernatural realm if one is a theist, claiming that, literally, the God's-eye-perspective brings this deep context from which it all makes sense. This, too, faces criticism. Whether such criticism is surmountable is another issue. The work of Thomas Nagel on standpoints is helpful here. See his *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

about ourselves are related, such that an answer to the former will elucidate questions about our own lives *as humans*. As Karl Britton notes:

> One of the very odd things about 'the meaning of life' is that people commonly do not make a sharp distinction between a question about everything and a question about *themselves*. For the ordinary reflective person will go on: What is it all for? Why am I here? What is the point of it all? (And I suspect this often means: What is the point of it all for me?) It not only is a matter of wonder that there is this universe, but also that it contains *me* . . .[15]

But these concerns are conceptually distinct. When phrased as, "What makes a life meaningful?" the question of life's meaning is only about one particular aspect of the totality of observable existence—human life, yours and mine. Furthermore, its scope is further delimited to a particular aspect of human existence, the normative dimension of human existence. The problem is that this question fails to sufficiently capture those inescapably global intuitions from which the original question is asked, and which are captured in the formulation, "What is the meaning of life?"

To be sure, wondering what gives life purpose, what makes life valuable, or what makes life and the projects of life significant, *within the horizon of human interests and concerns*, is often part of the motivational history for asking the grand question, "What is the meaning of life?" However, none of the reformulated questions, and *ipso facto* the question, "What makes a life meaningful?" individually captures a distinguishing property of the original question, its *global* or *all-inclusive* nature. In investigating the concept of *a meaningful life*, one has not thereby exhausted the broad territory of life's meaning. The terms "global" and "all-inclusive" are meant to capture the following sense: *an existentially-infused perspective on the totality of human existence*. Considerations of *a meaningful life* only center on more *localized* intuitions and sub-

[15] Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 2-3.

questions from which the original question is perhaps generated. None of them, considered singularly, captures the all-inclusive nature of their vague precursor where more (but not less) than merely the search for purpose, value, or significance motivates the question.[16]

In his book, *Does Life Have a Meaning?*, Milton Munitz helpfully notes that the question of life's meaning is motivated by intuitions of ". . . relative depth or total scope."[17] This observation is perceptive. Indeed, in asking the question of life's meaning there is a motive often more basic, comprehensive, and all-inclusive than our desire to discover how to secure a meaningful existence. Wondering how to secure a meaningful existence is surely a deep and basic motivating desire which partially prompts the question, but it is likely a secondary layer of a more foundational motive—*the desire for a deep explanation, context, or narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to rational, emotional, and self-reflective creatures such as us*.[18] This more basic desire, the desire for a particular kind of explanation of a particular sweeping scope, is evidenced by considering the multiplicity of contexts from which the question of life's meaning emerges. Three such contexts are what can be called (1) *Tolstoyan moments:* arrests of life where one anxiously questions the value and worth

[16] It is important to keep in mind that I am not disputing the *descriptive* claim that many do, in fact, interpret the question as "What is the purpose of life?" or "What makes life valuable?" I am arguing that there is actually a more appropriate way, philosophically, to view the question through a deeper analysis of its causal and motivational origins. Once one understands my analysis, I think it will become plausible not only why these common interpretations are used so readily, but additionally why my interpretation can still find a home for them while also doing a better job of accounting for intuitions and question-producing contexts unaddressed by the reformulated versions.

[17] Milton K. Munitz, *Does Life Have A Meaning?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 29.

[18] By "rational, emotional, and self-reflective" creatures I simply mean human beings. Also, the way in which I have framed this does not militate against those who do not or perhaps even cannot ask the question from leading meaningful lives. Remember that I introduced an important distinction between the questions *What is the meaning of life?* and *What makes a life meaningful?* in §2.3 of Chapter Two.

of life pursuits that, pre-theoretically are deemed valuable and worthwhile, especially in light of the impending reality of death (2) *Metaphysical wonder:* the salience and profundity of the fact that anything exists at all impinges itself at the fore of our consciousness, and (3) *Pain and suffering:* attempting to make sense of this ugly reality. These contexts and the questions that surface in each are multi-faceted such that no one question (e.g., "What is the purpose(s) of life?" or "What makes life worthwhile?" among others), *except for the question*, "What is the meaning of life?" captures all of them or unifies them in a single pass.

We must not, however, think that the two questions are unrelated simply because, as is being argued, they can be conceptually distinguished and carry their own nuanced connotations. Britton is correct to note that ". . . people commonly do not make a sharp distinction between a question about everything and a question about *themselves*."[19] And while the distinction he refers to here is slightly different from the one emphasized in this section, it does show that the question has both global and local dimensions, dimensions that, at once, are both related and distinct. A substantial part of the reason for this follows from what Yuval Lurie calls, "The Psychological Context of the Question." We often ask the question, not simply out of philosophical perplexity, but in the midst of psychologically weighty moments in life (e.g., suffering, questioning the value of a dominant feature of one's life, etc.). The question is motivated in concrete *human* contexts, and so even though we might often be searching for some overarching explanation or context or narrative from which to view and around which to order our life, we think that this explanation, context, or narrative will speak to *our* needs (psychological, existential, rational, ethical, etc.) in virtue of our being a part of this

[19] Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, p. 2.

narrative with its particular elements, some of which are decidedly normative and will have normative implications for our lives.

2.3.3 The Definite Article

That some philosophers confuse the two questions is evidenced in the criticism surrounding the use of the definite article in *the* meaning of life. Contemporary philosophers discussing the question have been quick to criticize the use of the definite article in the question's most common and basic formulation, "What is *the* meaning of life?" For as Lurie notes, "The formulation of the question implies that there is but one meaning [of life], which is the sole meaning of all life and all lives." But, it is often argued, this assumption should be rejected.[20] Likewise, and especially if the original formulation is interpreted in terms of securing a meaningful existence, the use of the definite article is implausibly narrow. But this only follows if the two requests are synonymous. If we are in the context of *a meaningful life*, then surely there are many aspects of a meaningful life including relationships and valuable pursuits that can be person or context-relative, unless of course one is a skeptic or nihilist in this context. However, if these two formulations carry their own unique connotations, the first should not be viewed as making the same request as the second. Furthermore, the use of the definite article is appropriate within the context of the first request, though it is probably not within the context of the second request. The philosophical merits of the criticism are context-relative, and the fact that it is leveled at the question "What is *the* meaning of life?" is revelatory that contexts that should be seen as conceptually distinct have been conflated.

[20] For example, see R. A. Sharpe, "In Praise of the Meaningless Life," *Philosophy Now* 25 (Summer 1999): p. 15; and J. J. C. Smart, "Meaning and Purpose," *Philosophy Now* 24 (Summer 1999): p. 16.

2.4 On Employing the Category of Narrative

In the next chapter I will employ the category of narrative, selecting conceptual resources from narrative theory in order to unpack and argue for my narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question. This requires me, then, to briefly discuss the salient features of narrative for my interpretation. Unfortunately, it seems as if the only consistency among narrative theorists is the lack of agreement upon precisely what distinguishes narrative from other modes of discourse. This, however, should not cast suspicion on my modest use of narrative in this dissertation.

Narrative theorists have found it exceedingly difficult to agree on a precise set of necessary and sufficient conditions distinguishing narrative from other forms of discourse. In spite of this impasse, there has been something of a "narrative turn in the humanities" as well as in law and science among other disciplines.[21] This narrative turn has invited usages of the concept that many fear will result in it losing its meaning. To some, the so-called narrative turn signals that narrative is a fluid concept, such that explanations or theories can be called narratives, or at least narrative-like. Interestingly, narrative theorist Peter Brooks thinks that narrative's growing ubiquity across academic disciplines tracks a deep propensity in human beings, "While I think the term has been trivialized through overuse, I believe the overuse responds to a recognition that narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world – a part of our

[21] See, for example, Ursula W. Goodenough, "The Religious Dimensions of the Biological Narrative," *Zygon* 29 (December 1994): pp. 603-18 (Science); Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz, eds. *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), (Law); and Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds. *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), (Theology).

cognitive tool kit that was long neglected by psychologists and philosophers."[22] So, although the concept of narrative is often stretched in ways that theorists consider illegitimate, its broad employment in a variety of explanatory contexts is likely a natural function of deep human proclivities.

One can think of territory delimited by narrative discourse in terms of two poles or in terms of concentric circles. At one pole or in the innermost circles reside representations that qualify as narrative in the strict or literal sense, and at the other pole or in the larger circles are representations that are only loosely or metaphorically defined instances of narrative. There are points along the continuum or within the region of concentric circles where the representation or discourse under consideration will be more towards the paradigmatic pole or the middle circles, and other points where it is more toward the non-paradigmatic pole or outside circles. David Herman offers a reason for this. Referencing the work of cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Eleanor Rosch,[23] he notes that some of the categories with which we understand the world are gradient.[24] That is, they are *more-or-less* as opposed to *either-or*. There will be paradigm cases of a given category along with cases that do not clearly fit into the category. Certain categories can exhibit *membership gradience*. So, for example, a Wren is more paradigmatically an example of a member of the category of birds, whereas an Ostrich is less so, even though it still belongs to the category in some sense. *Category gradience* is an additional kind of

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[22] Quoted in Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 22.

[23] See George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Presss, 1987); and Eleanor Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," in Bas Aarts, David Denison, Evelien Keizer, and Gergana Popova, eds., *Fuzzy Grammar: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 91-108.

[24] David Herman, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, p. 8.

gradience. Take for instance the categories "heavy rock" and "light rock"—where precisely is the line of demarcation between these categories? The fact is simply that such a line cannot be drawn. Like other discussions, vagueness is inherent here. Narrative is a kind of discourse to which these gradient distinctions apply. Therefore, a given instance of discourse can be more or less a central instance of the category of narrative, and less central instances will have elements that allow them to be partially merged into other categories of discourse (e.g., lists, descriptions, arguments, etc.). *The Brothers Karamazov* is a central or paradigmatic instance of the category of narrative, whereas a transcript from *The CBS Evening News* resides at the periphery of the category if at all.

This idea of gradience indicates that narrative can be employed literally (strictly) or metaphorically (loosely)—or, paradigmatically vs. non-paradigmatically. It is for the literal use that narrative theorists have attempted to define necessary and sufficient conditions.[25] On metaphorical uses, "narrative" might be dissolved into "experience," "interpretation," "explanation," "representation," or even "content."[26] A metaphorical employment allows, for example, a text on evolution or the Big Bang to count as narrative, as well as other forms of discourse. In light of the fluidity of narrative and my use of narrative, it is necessary to say more about what distinguishes paradigm cases of narrative from non-paradigm cases. It remains to be seen whether my interpretation of the meaning of life question as narrative is a paradigmatic instance of narrative or whether it is simply metaphorical. Interestingly, the answer to this question will be a function of the fact that whether some particular meaning of life narrative is paradigm case of narrative

[25] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," p. 22.

[26] Ibid.

is worldview-relative. For example, theistic meaning of life narratives are more paradigmatically so than naturalistic ones.[27] I will take up this discussion in Chapter Five. However, a more detailed discussion now of what constitutes a paradigmatic narrative will serve a fruitful purpose in this later discussion.

The ensuing proposal for what constitutes narrative is borrowed from Marie-Laure Ryan's "fuzzy-set"[28] definition of narrative in her essay, "Toward a Definition of Narrative." She proposes that narrativity is a function of how well some representation *x* satisfies eight conditions of narrativity. These eight conditions are subsumed under two broad dimensions: (i) Semantic and (ii) formal and pragmatic. The semantic dimension consists of *spatial*, *temporal*, and *mental* dimensions. Representations satisfying more of these conditions are prototypical or paradigmatic examples of narrative, whereas those satisfying fewer conditions are only marginally narrative. I have provided a detailed summation of the eight conditions below.

Spatial Dimension (Semantic)

(1) Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.

Temporal Dimension (Semantic)

(2) This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.

(3) The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.

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[27] This is not meant to beg any questions against naturalism though. Naturalism still has a *candidate* meaning of life narrative to offer, even if only in the loose or metaphorical sense. For those naturalists who think naturalism offers a meaning of life in the literal narrative sense, they will have to answer the criticisms of Sartre and Derschowitz who emphatically say that life is not a dramatic narrative. I will discuss the *Sartrian Objection* in Chapter Five.

[28] Roughly, fuzzy-sets are characterized by elements who exhibit degrees of membership. That is, such sets are not assessed in bivalent terms according to a bivalent condition where a member either belongs or does not belong to the set. They exhibit both membership and category gradience.

Mental Dimension (Semantic)

> (4) Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.
>
> (5) Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.

Formal and Pragmatic Dimension

> (6) The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.
>
> (7) The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld.
>
> (8) The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience.[29]

Ryan notes that each of the above conditions militates against certain kinds of representation from being the "macro-structure" of a story. She thinks (1) eliminates representations of abstract entities and entire classes of concrete objects, (2) eliminates static descriptions, (3) eliminates enumerations of repetitive events, (4) eliminates one-of-a-kind scenarios involving only natural forces and non-intelligent participants (e.g., weather reports), (5) (together with 3) eliminates representations consisting exclusively of mental events (e.g., interior monologue fiction), (6) eliminates lists of causally unconnected events such as chronicles and diaries, (7) eliminates recipes, and (8) eliminates bad stories.[30]

The above eight conditions offer a guide when asking whether some representation qualifies as narrative, or, where on the continuum of narrativity it falls. Of course, one may dispute Ryan's taxonomy of conditions, but it remains useful even if we

[29] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," p. 29.

[30] Ibid., pp. 29-30. Ryan admits that condition (8) is controversial, and is herself skeptical that it is a condition that needs to be met.

might argue about some of the points here and there. The important idea is that a given representation will satisfy certain conditions such that it *more* or *less* belongs to the category of narrative. For example, Ryan notes that some will consider satisfaction of conditions (1) through (3) sufficient to classify a representation as a narrative, and therefore view a text about evolution or the Big Bang as a narrative. Others, however, might think that (4) and (5) are essential, insisting that narrative be about *human experience*. Still others might think a chronicle qualifies as narrative, while others will object and take (6) as necessary. Finally, some will insist on (8), where others might think that a pointless string of utterances or a dull account of events can still exhibit basic narrative structure.[31]

Ryan's fuzzy-set definition is relevant for my central thesis in this dissertation; namely, that the meaning of life is a narrative. It is not clear how many of the above narrative conditions the meaning of life narrative will satisfy, and thus it remains to be seen where it falls on the continuum of narrativity. Interestingly, what Jean-François Lyotard has called *grand narratives* or *metanarratives*,[32] only qualify as narrative in a loose or metaphorical sense on the above definition, since they neither concern individuals (at least directly) nor create a concrete world.[33] This is important given that my interpretation of the question of life's meaning closely tracks the concept of a

[31] One thinks here, for example, of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* This raises deep questions though of whether representations intended to be *anti*-narrative or at least *anti*-dramatic narrative can themselves be narrative.

[32] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1985).

[33] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," p. 30. I disagree with Ryan, and think that some metanarratives can be narratives literally and robustly, especially many religious metanarratives.

metanarrative.[34] The more conceptual fingers that the meaning of life narrative has extending into other forms of representation, the less philosophically plausible and more *ad hoc* my employment of the category of narrative may be.

For now, I will simply note that I think my general thesis is consistent with either a paradigmatic or non-paradigmatic employment of the concept of narrative, as long as I can properly motivate the concept of narrative's fruitfulness in this context. My thesis is not undermined should we find that the meaning of life narrative turns out to exhibit significant membership gradience, whereby it overlaps into other categories of discourse such as non-narrative explanation. Interestingly, though, the degree of membership gradience that some *candidate*[35] meaning of life narrative exhibits is a function of *which* candidate narrative is under consideration. That is to say, the naturalistic meaning of life narrative will exhibit greater membership gradience than will the theistic meaning of life narrative.[36] I will discuss this implication in greater detail in Chapter Five, noting how it naturally intersects with assumptions generally present when the question of life's meaning is asked.

2.5 Summary

Having addressed these matters of prolegomena, I am now ready to provide a fuller motivation for and subsequent exposition of the narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" One aim of this chapter has been to bring a greater measure of nuance to the discussion of the meaning of life. The primary area in

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[34] See Chapter Three for a fuller discussion of this point.

[35] I have not yet defined the concept of a *candidate* narrative, and do not do so until Chapter Three. For now it will suffice to note that a candidate meaning of life narrative is a narrative with the right *formal* properties, regardless of its material content.

[36] Cf. footnote 27.

which I noted this is when considering the two distinct yet related questions: *What is the meaning of life?* and *What makes a life meaningful?* The other aim was to briefly introduce the category of narrative in a way relevant to my central thesis in the Linguistic Project of this dissertation. In Chapter Three, I will highlight further conceptual resources from narrative theory that are necessary in order to develop my narrative interpretation.

CHAPTER THREE[1]

The Meaning of Life as Narrative

3.1 Introduction

Having discussed preliminary issues relevant to my interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" in Chapter Two, I am now in a position to develop the *narrative interpretation* of the meaning of life question. According to the narrative interpretation, the meaning of life question is best understood as *the request for a narrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings*. In this chapter I provide a detailed exposition of this claim.

I begin by motivating the narrative interpretation, noting human propensities and pursuits that are closely akin to central theses of the narrative interpretation. Second, I briefly survey proposals in the meaning of life literature that mention something similar to my narrative interpretation, but which fall significantly short of fully explicating this interpretive approach. That such embryonic proposals exist is important, as it demonstrates that others have considered similar interpretive strategies, while not having developed them in any detail. Third, I note my reasons for employing the category of narrative and why I borrow from narrative theory in order to frame my interpretation. Fourth, I employ an analogy in which there is a request for the *meaning* of something

[1] A significant portion of this chapter has been published under the title, "The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy's 'Primary' Question," *Philo* 12 (Spring-Summer 2009): 5-23.

where the use of the word "meaning" largely connotes what the word "meaning" connotes in the question, "What is the *meaning* of life?" Fifth, I utilize the fruits of the discussion in the previous two sections in order to develop and nuance my narrative interpretation. Here, I provide a detailed account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question. I conclude by exploring the close conceptual link between my narrative interpretation and the concept of a *metanarrative*.

3.2 The Human Propensity for Explanation, Context, and Narrative

We humans want to explain things. At some point in our biological existence most of us reach a level of consciousness accompanied by a strong desire to acquire knowledge. Young children become uniquely adept at asking, "Why?" The child's explanatory pursuits are a microcosm of the more general human propensity to desire explanation of the multifaceted nature of the universe of which we are a part. Indeed, the most fundamental human pursuits and institutions, especially religion, philosophy, and science are strongly correlated with the human desire to make sense of the world. While each has its own motivations, assumptions, and methodological parameters, all three seem to share more or less in this human propensity—the desire to explain, know, and live well.[2] Asking, "What is the meaning of life?" is closely connected to these desires.

The theoretical pursuit of some scientists is relevant here. Interestingly, there is some correlation between viewing the meaning of life in terms of the desire for a deep

[2] Of course, the human desire for explanation does not exhaust these pursuits. For example, the human propensity to worship, along with accompanying feelings of absolute dependence upon something larger than us, is as essential to many religions as is the desire to explain. Furthermore, at least in philosophy as classically conceived, the desire to live the good life is as much a driving motivation for philosophical inquiry as is the desire to explain. Such desires cannot be divorced. Living the good life likely presupposes having some measure of knowledge of what the good life is.

and sweeping explanation of the universe and its various components and what physicists have come to call "theories of everything." Roughly, a theory of everything is defined as ". . . a single all-embracing picture of all the laws of Nature from which the inevitability of all things seen must follow with unimpeachable logic. With possession of this cosmic Rosetta Stone, we could read the book of Nature in all tenses: we could understand all that was, is, and is to come."[3] Mathematical scientist John D. Barrow makes a strong connection between the motivations for the newly invigorated scientific pursuit of such a theory and similar pursuits among philosophers and theologians in the past. He identifies the question, "How, when, and why did the Universe come into being?" as an explanatory pursuit in which all disciplines have shared at various times.[4] Of course, the disanalogies between a scientific theory of everything and the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life that I propose and defend are real. Such scientific theories are not meant to *directly* encompass elements of reality with strong links, for example, to rationality and intentionality.[5] That is to say, there tends to be a reduction to mathematical explanation in such theories, whereas on the narrative proposal for life's meaning, no such reduction occurs, at least not in this precise sense. And yet, the pursuit of such theories illustrates the inherent human propensity to seek deep, perhaps ultimate explanation of the world we inhabit. This human inclination is worth highlighting. In the following passage, Barrow notes the relationship between modern theories of everything and their mythical ancestors:

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[3] John D. Barrow, *New Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1-2.

[4] Ibid., p. 1.

[5] Ibid., p. 2.

> This modern urge for completeness had developed hand-in-hand with the desire for a *unified* picture of the world. Where the ancients were content to create many minor deities, each of whom had a hand in explaining the origins of particular things, but might often be in conflict with one another, the legacy of the great monotheistic religions is the expectation of a single over-arching explanation for the Universe. The unity of the Universe is a deep-rooted expectation. A description of the Universe that was not unified in its mode of description, but fragmented into pieces, would invite our minds to look for a further principle which related them to a single source. Again, we notice that this motivation is essentially religious. There is no logical reason why the Universe should not contain surds or arbitrary elements that do not relate to the rest.[6]

In addition, yet surely related to our inherent desire to seek explanation of the world is a desire to fit localized facts and phenomena into wider explanatory contexts. Such contexts serve a hermeneutical function as something through which we interpret and appraise something else.[7] In a sense, contexts function as more robust, deeper, or wider frameworks that aid us in explaining individual features or localized clusters of features we find in the world. For example, scientific theories can plausibly be viewed as larger contexts through which to interpret empirical data. And although they are, in principle, revisable and falsifiable by that same empirical data, they serve as a framework through which to understand empirical phenomena encountered in the natural world. Empirical data alone, considered singularly without any explanatory link to other information, tell us far less about the world than is generally thought to be satisfactory.[8]

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[6] Ibid., p. 8.

[7] The relationship of the context to its parts is a deep and complex hermeneutical question, the full elucidation of which falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Weighing in on this debate is not necessary for my more general appropriation of the idea of context as an interpretive construct through which to fit existentially relevant parts of life.

[8] In making these comments, I intend to remain neutral on the various views of the relationship between scientific theories and the actual space-time universe. I neither presuppose realism nor instrumentalism among others. Even an instrumentalist view of scientific theories continues to function as a way of "understanding the world" and, as such, a wider explanatory context, even though the instrumentalist does not consider scientific theories to accurately divulge what is going on in the deep structure of mind-independent reality.

Most of us desire, in addition to contextualizing the multifaceted facts we encounter, to situate our very lives within a wider context. This occurs on a number of levels. Scientifically, we desire to know how we are related biologically to other forms of life on this planet. Genealogically, we want to know who our great-grandparents were. Ethically, we seek a context to account for what we ought to do and refrain from doing. And, religiously, we pursue a context to explain our feelings of absolute dependence, awe at the brute fact that anything exists at all, why there is such a thing as pain and suffering, and other core existential longings that appear largely unaddressed through these other wider contexts.[9] On this characterization of religion, a full-blown naturalistic narrative probably functions quasi-religiously. We are each part of the totality of what *Is*, and we want to know how and where we and those aspects of our lives of greatest existential import "fit" into the larger picture. Here, religion, philosophy, and science might, in fact, all submit part of the very deepest or widest context we seek in order to assess and live life. Asking, "What is the meaning of life?" then, is additionally strongly connected to requesting an explanatory context. Indeed, commensurate with the global intuitions driving the question,[10] it is probably akin to asking for the widest or deepest possible context from which to view and live our lives.

This uniquely human desire for global explanation and contextualization is likely connected to our deep propensity for the employment of narrative as a primary strategy

[9] Of course, there is a sense in which this begs the question given that many naturalists think that a scientific worldview does sufficiently account for the reality of pain and suffering. On naturalistic premises, pain and suffering are simply unfortunate (as deemed so by creatures that have developed the necessary level of consciousness to view states of affairs as unfortunate) byproducts of a physical world like ours. Historically, however, providing a framework through which to interpret "evil" *in existentially satisfying ways* has been the province of religion.

[10] I will have more to say about these *global* intuitions from which the question arises in §4.2 of Chapter Four.

for making sense of the world. The use of narrative to describe, interpret, and enjoy reality is a unique mark of the human mind, as narrative is a product of our rational, self-reflective, and creative capacities.[11] We should expect, then, that our often narratively-infused way of participating in the world connects with our deep desire to know *what it all means*. H. Porter Abbott notes the pervasiveness of narrative to the human mind:

> We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives. And we start doing so almost from the moment we begin putting words together. As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse. . . . Given the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as *the* distinctive human trait. . . . The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a "deep structure," a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with.[12]

Peter Brooks agrees, remarking that ". . . narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world – a part of our cognitive tool kit that was long neglected by psychologists and philosophers."[13] There can be little doubt that we invoke narrative in order to make sense of the world in which we inhabit, and, in some sense, this is an "essential" mark of what it means to be human.[14]

This claim is compatible with the two dominant metaphysical accounts of reality in the West that I consider in Part II of this dissertation, naturalism and theism, largely in

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[11] For example, see H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1, 2-3.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Quoted in Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," p. 22.

[14] Note that at this point I am using "narrative" very generally to make the following points: (i) as a unique mark of human beings, and (ii) that humans *inhabit* the world narratively in that we make sense of events in our lives, our lives themselves, as well as the world as a whole *narratively*. I have not yet nuanced how I am using the term "narrative" in regard to the meaning of life. My present goal is simply to highlight that, at a deep level, we are narrative creatures, and that this fact lends plausibility to the further claim that we should understand the meaning of life in narrative terms.

its Christian instantiation. On naturalism, the human capacity for narrative might be said to be genetically hardwired into our brains much like language seems to be.[15] On the other hand, Christian theism might also maintain that narrative propensities are hardwired into us, as this is not logically inconsistent with the work of deity. Theists, though, will posit a personal God as ultimately responsible for our narrative capacities and propensities. A case can even be made on Christian theistic premises that our narrative capacities are part of the *imago dei*, whereby we dimly yet truly reflect aspects of our divine maker.[16] The important claim in this section is that the search for explanation or context and the category of narrative are probably broadly interrelated. While not all explanations and theoretical contexts qualify as narrative in a robust sense, the kind of deep, comprehensive, and sweeping explanation or context that, I will argue, we seek in asking, "What is the meaning of life?" has a distinctly narrative quality, and, on certain worldviews, may itself be a narrative in the paradigmatic sense.[17]

My thesis may be consistent with a paradigmatic use of narrative, but it is not critical that I establish this. A non-paradigmatic use where narrative tracks *explanation* is likely sufficient, but with the caveat that certain issues germane to discussions of paradigmatic instances of narrative end up being quite relevant in the meaning of life

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[15] For example, see Kay Young and Jeffrey Shaver, "The Neurology of Narrative," *Substance* 94/95 (March 2001): pp. 72-84.

[16] The Christian theistic premises from which this claim can be argued are noteworthy. Foremost, God himself is said to have produced a narrative of His redemptive history as narrated in the Old and New Testaments. It has generally been the task of biblical theology to trace the unfolding of this unified yet diverse redemptive story. For a substantive discussions of biblical theology in general and the historical-redemptive narrative of Scripture specifically, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).

[17] Among others, Jean-Paul Sartre and Alan M. Dershowitz dispute claims like this. See Sartre's *Nausea* (New York: New Directions, 2007), and Dershowitz's "Life is Not a Dramatic Narrative," in *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 99-105. I will interact with their arguments in §5.4 – 5.6 of Chapter Five.

context, and especially for my narrative interpretation. My main motivation for importing the concept of narrative into discussions of the meaning of life is largely twofold: (i) it is both natural and plausible, *a la* Abbot, Brooks, and others, given that our project of making sense of the world (in various spheres) is often carried out narratively, and (ii) that at least one aspect of narrative theory is explicitly and deeply apropos to discussions of the meaning of life—the evaluative significance of narrative ending for broadly normative appraisals of narratives as a whole.

Though I will not in this chapter develop in any detail this intriguing idea that narrative ending links closely with the meaning of life, it is worth making some brief comments here.[18] It is widely thought that the *ending* of a narrative, or the presence of *closure*, is especially important to broadly normative appraisals of the narrative *as a whole*.[19] A narrative's ending frequently possesses a proleptic power over the *entire* narrative. Indeed, it is thought that the way a narrative ends is often the most salient motivator in eliciting a wide range of *broadly normative* human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole. For, as J. David Velleman notes:

> *. . . the conclusory emotion in a narrative cadence embodies not just how the audience feels about the ending; it embodies how the audience feels, at the ending, about the whole story*. Having passed through emotional ups and downs of the story, as one event succeeded another, the audience comes to rest in a stable attitude about the series of events in its entirety [emphasis added].[20]

[18] See Chapter Seven for a fuller discussion of this issue.

[19] Ending and closure of course are conceptually distinct ideas. A narrative can end without closure. Perhaps it ends in a way that is unsatisfying, and thus the sense of closure we seek fails to obtain.

[20] J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112 (January 2003): p. 19.

This is no small point, and it seems largely correct. The ending marks the "last word," after which nothing else can be said, either by way of remedying problems or destroying felicities that have come about within the narrative. If the last word is that hope is finally and irreversibly dashed, then grief will probably be salient at the end; if the last word is that ambitions have been realized, then triumph will probably be salient at the end. Perhaps more importantly, one cannot backtrack into a narrative, for example, where the grief felt at a tragic ending is the final word, and expect that one's emotional stance toward any specific event within the narrative will not now be affected, *in some sense*, by the ending of the narrative. The ending relevantly frames the entire story.

Interestingly, this point, if plausible, provides a powerful account for why discussions of ending, death, and futility nearly always accompany considerations of the meaning of life. If the meaning of life is a narrative, a central thesis of this dissertation, then it is clear why we consider how life ends, both our own and the universe's (speaking metaphorically of course), to be so important to whether life is meaningful or meaningless. Notice that I am not engaging the question of whether or not conclusions of futility derived from a putative "bad" ending to life's narrative are themselves rational and warranted, but am only providing a rationale or framework for why it is that such conclusions are often thought to follow from the nature of life's *ending* as it is construed on naturalism.

3.3 The Narrative Interpretation: Hints in the Literature

There are only hints of a proposal akin to the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question in the current philosophical literature. This is telling, as it indicates that some philosophers working on the topic are minimally aware that the desire

for global or all-inclusive explanation or narrative through which to view and live life partly motivates the question. However, such proposals have been given little to no sustained attention in the contemporary discussion. While most philosophers discussing the issue situate their arguments within the dialectical parameters I noted in Chapter One, there is some precedent for my proposal in the meaning of life literature as seen in the following suggestions.

For example, Garrett Thomson thinks that one might interpret the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as follows, "The idea to be examined now is that *to know the meaning of life is to know a true metaphysical narrative about the human life in general that somehow makes sense of our lives*. . . . In this sense, the meaning of life is a worldview or metaphysical view that shows the significance of our lives" [emphasis added].[21] Thomson's interpretive suggestion shares strong affinities to the narrative interpretation I propose in this dissertation. However, his narrative-like proposal receives only a seven page chapter in his book, *On the Meaning of Life*, and this discussion centers exclusively on the thought of Heidegger. Furthermore, he does not narrow the scope of this "true metaphysical narrative" as I will in this chapter. I will argue that such narrowing is crucial in order for the resulting narrative to be *about* the meaning of life as opposed to about some other topic.

In addition to Thomson, John Cottingham, most well-known for his work in early modern philosophy and especially Descartes, hints at the narrative approach in the opening of his book, *On the Meaning of Life*. "What are we really asking when we ask about the meaning of life? Partly, it seems, we are asking about *our relationship with the*

[21] Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Wadsworth, 2003), pp. 132-33.

rest of the universe – who we are and how we came to be here. . . . The religious answer – one of several responses to the problem of life's meaning to be examined in the pages that follow – aims to *locate our lives in a context* that will provide them with significance and value" [emphasis added].[22] Like Thomson's, Cottingham's proposal shares close affinities with my own, as he connects the human desire for significance and value to a larger narrative or context that will ground these desiderata. Whereas the current popular interpretations of the question focus exclusively on such human desires, Cottingham introduces the construct of a deeper context through which to secure them, and associates this larger context with the meaning of life. While similar to my proposal, Cottingham does not draw from narrative theory in order to explain what such an interpretation involves. Additionally, much of his discussion appears to fall under the question, "What makes a life meaningful?" and not "What is the meaning of life?"[23]

Third, in a short piece titled, "The Meanings of the Questions of Life," John Wisdom notes:

> . . . when we ask, "What is the meaning of all things?" we are not asking a senseless question. In this case, of course, we have not witnessed the whole play, we have only an idea in outline of what went before and what will come after that small part of history which we witness. . . . with the words, "What is the meaning of it all?" we are trying to find the order in the drama of Time.[24]

Noteworthy, is Wisdom's use of literary concepts in order to frame questions about life's meaning. In this short, four page excerpt originally found in his *Paradox and Discovery*, Wisdom does not, however, explicate precisely what it means for the meaning

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[22] John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 2, 9.

[23] See Chapter Two, §2.3.

[24] John Wisdom, "The Meanings of the Questions of Life," in *The Meaning of Life,* ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 259.

of life to be about finding the order in the drama of Time. Again, there are some salient similarities between my proposal and Wisdom's, but my interpretation moves beyond his in terms of specificity. I agree that finding the meaning of life may be partly connected with discovering the "order in the drama of Time," but one will have to be clearer about precisely what this means.

Finally, Julian Young in his recent book, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, offers the closest account to the narrative interpretation that I have uncovered in the meaning of life literature. In the introduction to his book, Young notes that talk of "the meaning of life" is noticeably absent from most of Western history primarily because people believed they were already in possession of *something* that made asking the question existentially superfluous. This something Young calls the "true world," which is another aspect of reality over and above the temporality and physicality of the material world, and often identified with God, the transcendent, or the spiritual.[25] Of this true world, he notes:

> Since journeys have a beginning, a middle and an end, a true-world account of the proper course of our lives is a kind of story, a narrative. And since true-world narratives (that, for example, of Christianity) are global rather than individual, since they narrate not just your life or mine, but rather all lives at all times and places, they are, as I shall call them, 'grand' narratives.[26]

In the remainder of the book, Young examines various true-world narratives followed by a consideration of responses to the threat of nihilism that ensued once such narratives lost some or even much of their traction in the modern world. Whereas Young makes notions

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[25] Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 1. I think Young's sharp distinction between matter and physical existence on the one hand, and the transcendent, spiritual realm on the other fails to understand Christian doctrines like creation, anthropology, and especially soteriology and eschatology.

[26] Ibid.

like transcendence a requirement on a true world narrative, I do not. My interpretation merely requires a narrative that narrates across some existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions to which I will focus more detailed attention in the rest of this chapter. But Young is certainly correct in his implied claim that many people will be existentially and even rationally satisfied only with a certain kind of narrative, one that has "religious" elements at its core. I will consider this and related issues in Chapter Five.[27] What Young does not offer, though, is a detailed account of the properties of true-world narratives that make them narratives so closely linked with the meaning of life. In other words, he does not discuss in detail the more general question of why any narrative might be a narrative about the meaning of life as opposed to something else.

From the preceding examples, it is clear that narrative-like proposals are present in the meaning of life literature. I have offered four such instances. What is lacking, though, is a sustained interpretive account that answers the following questions: (i) What does it mean for the meaning of life *to be* a narrative? (ii) Related, what does a meaning of life narrative need to narrate? (iii) Related, what conditions need to be met in order for some narrative *x* to be *the* meaning of life narrative? (iv) How and why does the narrative interpretation most plausibly account for the original linguistic formulation of the question? (v) How and why does the narrative interpretation best account for the cluster of intuitions and sub-questions from which the original formulation arises? and (vi) How might we assess the situation of there being multiple competing meaning of life

[27] I will also discuss the issue of whether viewing the meaning of life narrative as paradigmatically narrative or non-paradigmatically narrative is worldview specific. For example, a naturalist who seeks to posit a meaning of life narrative which is a paradigmatic instance of a narrative (and not simply an employment of the concept that means little more than *explanation*) will have to address the challenges of Sartre and Derschowitz.

narratives? No discussion that I have found provides a sustained and substantive discussion of these questions, organized around a single interpretive paradigm.

3.4 The Narrative Interpretation: An Analogy

Having argued in Chapter One that the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" can be applied naturally to non-linguistic phenomena, I will now offer an example that is particularly relevant to the narrative interpretation. Asking, "What is the meaning of life?" should be understood, at its core, as *the request for a narrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings*. On this interpretation, this request is both more basic and more general than our desire to discover what makes life valuable, what makes life worthwhile, or whether our lives have a purpose. These, no doubt, are motivating desires in asking the question, but I think they should be viewed as subsequent layers added to a more foundational motivation for asking, "What is the meaning of life?"

The question, "What is the meaning of life?" is analogous to the question asked in the following scenario. Consider the case of a father who has left his two young children to play while he finishes some chores around the house. After a few minutes he hears screaming and yelling: a scuffle has broken out. He heads to the playroom and finds his children kicking and scratching each other. He raises his voice and demands, "What is the *meaning* of this?" What does the father request in asking this question? The short answer is that he desires an *explanation* as an interpretive framework through which to view the event he is observing—his children scuffling. This explanation will likely include, among other components, information about how the scuffle started. He will need access to such information if he is to make fuller sense out of the facts before him. From these

additional details, a *narrative* can be constructed, helping him to understand the scuffle he has witnessed.[28] So, in asking for the *meaning* of the situation, he is in search of the narrative of his children's scuffle, indeed an accurate narrative more robust than a mere description of kicking and scratching. Importantly, the accurate narrative *is* the *meaning* the father seeks. While it is natural to ask for the meaning *of narratives* in other contexts, in this case the meaning the father seeks is just the narrative itself.

Asking, "What is the meaning of life?" is analogous to the father asking, "What is the meaning of this [scuffle]?" Over the course of our existence, we encounter phenomena that give rise to questions for which we seek an explanation or larger context or *narrative*. In this sense, the existentially relevant constituents of the universe with which we are readily familiar and toward which we direct our existentially focused gaze are akin to the scuffle the father witnessed. And like the father's desire to make sense of what he observes, we too seek to make sense of what we encounter in the world and those accompanying questions motivated by deep human longings for, among others, value, purpose, and significance. We need a framework through which to interpret the existentially weighty aspects of existence. Like the father, we lack important parts of the story, at least for a season, and we desire to fill the existentially relevant informational gaps in our understanding of the universe we inhabit.

3.5 Nuancing the Narrative Interpretation

If the meaning of life just is a narrative, analogously to the meaning the father sought in the above example just being a narrative, then what kind of narrative is it? In

[28] This narrative may be a narrative in a paradigmatic or non-paradigmatic sense. The father, at minimum, desires an accurate explanation. It is not a stretch to think that the ensuing explanation may be a *narrative* explanation.

other words, what is *it* that stands in need of narration when it comes to the meaning of life? A "meaning of life" narrative will be unique given *what* it narrates. It will be a different kind of narrative than, say, a narrative about the migratory patterns of birds or one about the celestial history of the Milky Way galaxy. The latter narratives narrate features and accompanying questions of reality that are not directly relevant to the meaning of life question. Conversely, for any narrative to count as a meaning of life narrative, it must cross some relevant explanatory threshold consisting of those areas of greatest existential import to humans, the ones who ask the question of life's meaning in the first place.

So what are these existentially salient elements and accompanying questions of life that stand in need of narration, and which distinguish a meaning of life narrative from other kinds of narrative? I will call the elements and accompanying questions that give a meaning of life narrative its unique shape, ER_Q (shorthand for existentially relevant life elements and accompanying questions). Furthermore, I will call a narrative that is sought through which to contextualize ER_Q, an ER_N (shorthand for existentially relevant narrative). An ER_N constitutes a deep, ultimate narrative context from which to view the other existentially relevant elements and accompanying questions of life, ER_Q. We need ER_N in order to make sense of the cluster of concerns embedded within ER_Q.

The narrative identified with the meaning of life, then, will track ER_N. This narrative will contain narrative elements that directly address the cluster of existentially relevant facts and accompanying questions that most often surface in the context of discussions over the meaning of life. What might some of these be? In other words, how much does the meaning of life narrative need to narrate in order to be *the meaning of life*

narrative and not some other narrative? To answer this question, we must first populate the category of ER_Q. Once this is done, we will *ipso facto* know what stands in need of narration and thus have in hand the *formal* properties of the meaning of life narrative (i.e., "That narrative which *narrates* across *x*, *y*, and *z* elements composing ER_Q."), ER_N, even if not the narrative's material content.

3.5.1 Finding the Meaning of Life Narrative: The Formal Condition

So, the first condition to be met in order for a narrative to be *a* meaning of life narrative is merely formal. It has to narrate across the right *stuff*, and that stuff consists of the existentially weighty phenomena, events, and accompanying questions that populate human existence. Such features of human existence were aptly highlighted by Vatican II as part of the common human condition:

> What is man? *What is the meaning and purpose of human life?* What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgment? What reward follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend? [emphasis added].[29]

Vatican II here roughly captures what I mean by ER_Q. Such elements compose the existentially salient and undeniable aspects of existence as recognized by the kinds of creatures that inquire into life's meaning—humans. They are the cluster of phenomena that prompt in us probing questions, the answers to which we take to be especially relevant for leading life in a rationally and existentially satisfying way. When inquiring

[29] Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975), p. 738. Notice that Vatican II includes the question of life's meaning and purpose as a member within a larger cluster of questions found to be common to the human condition. On the interpretation I am proposing, the question of life's meaning is a question whose answer is somehow a function of answers to this cluster of questions that Vatican II notes. One way this is possible, the way I adopt, is to make life's meaning a narrative.

into the meaning of life, I submit that we ought to view ourselves as seeking a narrative that narrates across this cluster of phenomena and accompanying questions.

With the statement from Vatican II as a backdrop, I propose the following as more or less composing ER_Q:

> [1] *Fact*—something exists, we [humans] exist, and I exist / *Question*—Why does anything or we or I exist at all?
>
> [2] *Question*—Does life have any purpose(s), and if so, what is its nature and source?
>
> [3] *Fact*—we are often passionately engaged in life pursuits and projects that we deem valuable and worthwhile / *Question*—Does the worth and value of these pursuits and projects need *grounding* in something else, and if so, what?
>
> [4] *Fact*—pain and suffering are part of the universe / *Question*—Why?[30]
>
> [5] *Question*—How does it all end? Is death final? Is there an eschatological remedy to the ills of this world?

[1] – [5] constitute the cluster of considerations that track discussions of life's meaning, even though reasonable debate will exist about the details. Admittedly, there is a sense in which, for example, considerations [2] and [3] perhaps link more directly to the topic, but surely the question of life's meaning has not thereby been exhausted in discussions where only [2] and/or [3] are considered. [1], which is related especially to [2] but not conceptually identical, is also often connected to questions of life's meaning.[31] I am happy to concede that [1], [2], and [3] are more closely aligned with the meaning of life question than [4] or [5]. This may or may not be true. However, [4] and [5] loom large,

[30] I have in mind here, roughly, the problem of evil, especially in its philosophical instantiation, but also to an extent its emotional and existential dimension.

[31] Some even consider [1], or something nearby, to constitute the essence of the question of life's meaning, especially if the question is one about final causation and not simply efficient causation. For example, see Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 2.

especially when death is connected to futility and one considers the threat this may bring to securing a valuable and worthwhile existence. Also, given that a narrative's ending has been thought to take evaluative priority in broadly normative appraisals of the narrative as a whole, it becomes especially clear why death and futility are never far removed from discussions of life's meaning. Considerations of death and futility fit naturally, then, within the narrative interpretation.

So, considerations [1] – [5] constitute more or less ER_Q. Their status is a function of their being the existentially salient parts of existence, *as recognized by humans*, with which we are in immediate and undeniable contact, the parts that motivate us to inquire into life's meaning. They are that which stands in need of elucidation, of narration. Therefore, when we ask about life's meaning, we should view ourselves as seeking the narrative elements that narrate across the concerns and questions embedded within ER_Q. That which fulfills this function is ER_N. ER_N constitutes the meaning of life *proper*, as it provides the context or framework through which to makes sense of ER_Q. ER_N is the meaning of life precisely because it brings the contextualizing narrative framework through which to understand and answer the cluster of issues and questions arising within the contexts that initially motivate the question of life's meaning.

Why should we think that the elements I have chosen to populate the category of ER_Q are the right ones? There are at least three considerations that lend plausibility to this choice. First, it has significant intuitive and empirical appeal. Most would recognize this cluster of issues as relating to the question of life's meaning. Moreover, we know that contexts manifesting one or more of these considerations are also generally contexts where questions of life's meaning are prevalent. Even if [1] – [5] do not quite capture all

of the territory related to life's meaning, they are surely in the neighborhood. Second, the choice harmonizes with the issues identified with the meaning of life in the current philosophical discussion of the topic. In the literature, one will find discussions at some point on each of these topics.

Finally, these considerations significantly overlap with the central web of "concerns" for which worldviews are constructed to address. This is relevant given my employment of the concept of worldview in Chapter Four. In Chapter Four, I argue that the concept of a worldview and the narrative interpretation of life's meaning amount to much the same thing.[32] Briefly, though, here it is important to introduce the cluster of concerns that constitute that with which a worldview is enlisted to address. The Anglican Bishop of Durham and New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, notes four distinct functions of a worldview that are relevant to my discussion:

> First, . . . worldviews provide the *stories* through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark. . . . Second, from these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic *questions* that determine human existence: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution? . . . Third, the stories that express the worldview, and the answers which it provides to the questions of identity, environment, evil and eschatology, are expressed . . . in cultural *symbols*. . . . Fourth, worldviews include a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world.[33]

Wright's analysis of worldview is pertinent in more ways than one. His connection of narrative to worldview is interesting in itself. Indeed, he refers to worldviews as stories

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[32] Despite this near identity, however, I opt for the category of narrative primarily for reasons of expediency. Two important reasons are (i) the category of narrative more intuitively tracks the phenomena of life because life has a dynamic element that worldview does not seem to capture as nicely as does narrative, and (ii) an issue that relates to life's meaning is how *it all* will end, and the notion of ending resides more naturally within narrative contexts. There is no reason, in principle, though, that a worldview cannot capture these elements. It just does not seem to do so as naturally or intuitively as narrative does.

[33] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Vol. 1, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 123-24.

that narrate answers to the basic existential questions of human existence. I take this to be nearly identical to my interpretive proposal in this dissertation, although Wright never links these worldview stories explicitly to the meaning of life as I am proposing.

Second, and related, Wright's analysis of the function of worldviews largely tracks what I take to be the function of the meaning of life narrative. Such worldviews or narratives provide answers to important existentially motivated questions, and these narratives additionally motivate behavior and action. With respect to ER_N, it is important to note that ER_N possesses both an epistemic function as well as a function relating to *praxis*. This is not unlike a worldview. That is to say, the meaning of life is not merely about answers to questions on an intellectual level. We take these answers provided by the meaning of life narrative to have implications for how we lead our lives, or at least ought to lead them. For example, the putative facts of a candidate meaning of life narrative that provide the context and answers to questions about value and purpose will likely motivate us to courses of behavior and action commensurate with this portion of the narrative.[34]

While there may be a few additional elements constituting the category of ER_Q that stand in need of narration via the meaning of life narrative, I take it that those I have provided will be generally recognized as landing on or near the mark. Perhaps it is not as important that we get near the mark as it is that we recognize that there is an existentially relevant mark of which the meaning of life narrative needs to narrate across. That mark is the threshold of phenomenon and accompanying questions out of which the question of life's meaning is birthed. That the narrative needs to cross this threshold and precisely

[34] This distinction, partly but not fully, tracks the distinction between *the meaning of life* and what *makes a life meaningful*.

where it lies are two different matters. Having said this, I think we can be reasonably confident that we know roughly where that threshold is. Considerations [1] – [5] above provide a good start.

The preceding discussion needs to be further nuanced in at least one way. Given the boundaries of the category of ER_Q, one might think that the meaning of life narrative is minimal in terms of its content, perhaps too minimal to sufficiently ground *praxis*. This is the wrong conclusion to draw. To be sure, the narrative will be limited in *scope* (to those five issues plus possibly a few others), but limitation of scope does not indicate a lack of complexity or depth. One reason for this is that the meaning of life narrative, in order to sufficiently narrate across [1] – [5], will include numerous narrative elements that function in a larger framework, a framework where the individual elements are connected to each other in a coherent and intelligible way.[35] That is to say, what it takes to sufficiently narrate across these elements might be quite extensive in terms of *relevant* narrative content. For example, Christian theism's narration across ER_Q [4] (*Fact*—pain and suffering are part of the universe / *Question*—Why?) will involve numerous narrative elements likely including, among others, something about pre-lapsarian divine knowledge and decrees, the fall, the tracing of redemptive history culminating in the incarnation, the suffering of God himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the unfolding and eschatological culmination of God's kingdom. Given this, it might even be plausible, on the Christian theistic narrative, to view the entirety of Scripture as *the* meaning of life, at least if one thinks it will take all of the content of Scripture to

[35] The complexity of the narrative elements may be worldview specific. For example, the naturalistic narrative may have a simpler answer than Christian theism for one of the constituent elements. My use of "simpler" is not to be confused with Ockham's razor-like considerations. Here, I merely refer to narrative complexity.

adequately narrate across the category of ER_Q. While certainly interesting, that need not be defended here. What is important for my purposes is that the meaning of life narrative needs to narrate across these elements, and that this process may involve considerable narrative complexity and depth.

And so a narrative that narrates across ER_Q satisfies the first condition to be met by the meaning of life narrative. In narrating across these elements consisting both of existentially salient phenomena and accompanying questions, it becomes a *candidate* meaning of life narrative in virtue of its formal properties. It is a narrative *composing* the meaning of life as opposed to some other kind of narrative. With this in mind, a candidate meaning of life narrative can be defined as follows ($CdML_N$):

> ($CdML_N$) = A candidate meaning of life narrative is one that narrates across some existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions largely captured by the category of ER_Q by adding ER_N, the contextual narrative framework through which ER_Q is understood and appraised.

There will, of course, be multiple narratives that meet the conditions of this definition, certainly more than the two I consider in this dissertation. Additionally, there will be various degrees of overlap between elements in different ER_N's. For example, a narrative with a deistic deity will likely share certain elements with a narrative positing a theistic deity.[36] Of importance for my discussion, though, is that both naturalism and Christian theism possess candidate meaning of life narratives. Admittedly, the category of narrative is a more natural fit for Christian theism than naturalism, but the latter, in principle, possesses the conceptual resources to offer a narrative that narrates across ER_Q, and

[36] Furthermore, there will even be multiple meaning of life narratives within, for example, Christian theism, although they will all share some important central elements. Perhaps it is better to say that the meaning of life narratives embedded within these instantiations of Christian theism are largely similar, whereas the larger theological narratives possess different elements. For example, compare Reformed theology to Arminian theology. Precisely how divergent these narratives are is a question I cannot answer here.

therefore offers a meaning of life narrative. Of any candidate meaning of life narrative, however, a second condition must be met, the truth condition. Only the candidate meaning of life narrative that is true can be *the* meaning of life.

3.5.2 Finding the Meaning of Life Narrative: The Material Condition

My interpretation, tracking the original question's employment of the definite article,[37] presupposes that there can be only one narrative that is *the* meaning of life.[38] *The* meaning of life narrative will have the correct formal properties, as delineated above, and material content that corresponds with reality. This should not be too controversial if we remember the case of the father. In order for the narrative the father sought to appropriately link to his request, it had to be *about* his children's scuffle (the right formal properties), and it had to be true (the right material content). If it fails to meet these conditions, it cannot be *the meaning* he sought.

Garrett Thomson remarks, with relatively little further consideration of the claim, that ". . . to know the meaning of life is to know a *true* metaphysical narrative about the human life in general that somehow makes sense of our lives . . ." [emphasis added].[39] Thomson's proposal is more or less what I have advocated, although it lacks the nuance and specificity of my interpretation. I agree, though, with Thomson's claim that the candidate narrative must be true to finally qualify as *the* meaning of life. A narrative that

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[37] Use of the definite article has prompted the off-repeated criticism that the question begs the question against there being multiple ways to secure a meaningful existence. One problem with this criticism though is that it *reduces* the question, "What is the meaning of life? to "What makes a life meaningful?"

[38] Note that I am not arguing that this prohibits a person from leading a *meaningful* life, in some sense, if she is not in contact with *the* meaning of life narrative. This is partly because I think one can and should distinguish between two conceptually distinct yet related questions: (i) "What is the meaning of life?" and (ii) "What makes a life meaningful?" Sorting through the connection between these is another philosophical project though, though I do address this issue briefly in Chapter Two (§2.3).

[39] Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life*, pp. 132-33.

narrates across the appropriate elements of life, while relevant and deserving of candidate meaning of life narrative status, will nonetheless fail to be *the* meaning of life if it is false.[40]

It is not uncommon in the philosophical literature to find criticisms of the formulation, "What is *the* meaning of life?" as begging the question because of its use of the definite article.[41] It is argued that inclusion of the definite article presupposes that there is only a single meaning of life, and it is widely thought that this cannot be right. This criticism is perhaps accentuated when philosophers interpret the question in terms of value and purpose, as it then forces us to concede that there is only a single value or purpose in life, again, a conclusion that many find unnecessarily narrow and perhaps even an assault on human dignity. I submit, however, that this criticism reveals an equally questionable assumption on the part of those who advance it, namely, that to ask, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" involve identical requests. I argued in Chapter Two (§2.3) that, while sharing some conceptual territory, these questions should be viewed as largely making distinct requests. I do concede that the above criticism has force *if* it is employed within the context of the second question and not the first. Indeed, there certainly seems to be more than one way in which a life can be meaningful, as there are likely a rich variety of pursuits, activities, relationships, etc. that contribute to a meaningful life. But nothing for which I argue in this dissertation militates against this eminently plausible claim.

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[40] The rather basic way in which I employ the concept of narrative allows for truth conditions to be applied to it in the same way they are applied to individual propositions with truth values embedded within a larger set of propositions. In this context, I am not concerned with concepts like metaphorical truth, even though this, for example, would constitute part of the *larger* Christian theistic meta-narrative of reality.

[41] For example, see R. A. Sharpe, "In Praise of the Meaningless Life," *Philosophy Now* 25 (Summer 1999): p. 15; and J. J. C. Smart, "Meaning and Purpose," *Philosophy Now* 24 (Summer 1999): p. 16.

In light of this distinction, the narrative interpretation is meant to be an interpretation of the first question. It relates directly to this request and only indirectly to the second. As such, it is both natural and plausible to see ER_N as either being true or false. There is only one narrative that can be *the* meaning of life in this sense. False candidate narratives are simply not the meaning of life. The fact that the narrative interpretation proposes a concept that has a truth value fits nicely with the use of the definite article in the original and common formulation of the question. And I think we should work to understand the question on its own linguistic terms, exhausting our interpretive options before reformulating the question. Part of this task is taking the use of the definite article, along with the use of "meaning," seriously. On my interpretation, the use of the definite article functions quite naturally. We are searching for *the true* narrative that narrates across the cluster of issues related to our common human predicament as the above document from Vatican II notes. No doubt there likely exist multiple narratives that narrate across the issues associated with this predicament, but we are in search of the one that corresponds to the way the world really is. A narrative that does not meet this condition may be a candidate meaning of life narrative, it may even be compatible with leading a meaningful life at some level and with some success, but it cannot be *the* meaning of life on the narrative interpretation.

For a narrative, then, to finally qualify as *the* meaning of life requires that it meet both the formal and material conditions. By combining these two requirements, I now offer the following definition of *the meaning of life* ($ThML_N$):

> ($ThML_N$) = the meaning of life is the *true* narrative that narrates across some existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions largely captured by the category of ER_Q by adding ER_N, the contextual narrative framework through which ER_Q is understood and appraised.

3.6 Metanarratives and the Narrative Interpretation

My interpretation of what the question, "What is the meaning of life?" asks is especially close to the concept of a *metanarrative*, perhaps even identical. Indeed, a metanarrative, or something very similar, is what we should view ourselves as seeking when asking the question.[42] Importantly, my interpretation provides the resources for explaining precisely *how* metanarratives relate to the meaning of life. There is little doubt that, somehow, metanarratives are relevant to the meaning of life (because, for example, these sorts of narrative often narrate what the purpose(s) of life is and what makes life valuable, if anything does), but my interpretation of the question makes the connection more explicit. It is not simply that metanarratives *contain* an answer to a question that, in some way, relates to the question of life's meaning; on my interpretation, a metanarrative *just is* a candidate meaning of life narrative, with one metanarrative actually *being the meaning of life*. A brief word about the nature of metanarratives will be helpful.

Metanarratives or grand narratives are ". . . second-order narratives which seek to narratively articulate and legitimate some concrete first-order practices or narratives."[43] They narrate how we are to understand the world and how we ought to live in the world of which we are a part. They are comprehensive in scope, and are, in the words of N. T. Wright, ". . . *normative*: that is, they claim to make sense of the whole of reality."[44] Such grand stories provide the narrative lens through which we view everything else. And

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[42] Indeed, in the remainder of the dissertation I will use the terms "meaning of life narrative" and "metanarrative" interchangeably.

[43] J. M. Bernstein, "Grand Narratives," in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 102.

[44] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 41.

these metanarratives are primarily concerned with the cluster of issues I linked to the meaning of life earlier in this chapter—origins, purpose, value, evil, pain, and suffering, and ending. The narratives constructed to address this cluster of existentially relevant issues will provide the overarching framework through which we seek to orient our lives. There are multiple metanarratives, just as there are multiple candidate meaning of life narratives.[45]

Few will doubt that metanarratives are closely tied in some way to the meaning of life. From that perspective, then, a mere connection between the two adds nothing new to the meaning of life discussion. My thesis does, however, break new philosophical ground given the way in which I delineate the connection between the meaning of life and a metanarrative. The connection between the two is not merely that a metanarrative contains somewhere within its narrative elements an element(s) that addresses a question or issue that, in some way, links to the meaning of life. Rather, I am arguing that metanarratives *just are* candidate meaning of life narratives, and that each should be seen

[45] I do not share postmodernity's (one must be careful about making postmodernity monolithic for it certainly is not, and its proponents will strongly resist this assertion) suspicion of metanarratives. Two related theses of *many* (but perhaps not all, although it may be all) postmodernists are those of relativism and anti-realism. Everyone has a take on ultimate reality, and each take is equally valid, according to postmodernity, largely because truth is *constructed*. But metanarratives are generally construed as making truth claims about what is ultimately real. Furthermore, metanarratives are generally construed as *public truth*. They are stories of the whole world and claim to be stories about the way things *actually are*. And, these grand stories contain many mutually exclusive narrative elements. Postmodernity, in general, is suspicious of these stories for this reason, along with the claim that such grand stories lead to pretensions of superiority giving rise to oppression and violence. As for the latter claim, I think certain metanarratives have built in narrative elements which are fundamentally at odds with a "use" of the narrative that terminates in oppression and violence. But I am not so much concerned with this issue here. I am more concerned with the metaphysical issues. The primary problem with postmodernity's metaphysical suspicions of metanarratives (not their ethical suspicions) is that everyone, at least with some claims, is probably a realist at some point, even the postmodernist. The postmodernist says that everyone's take on ultimate reality is relative, but it seems as though *that claim (that everyone's take on reality is relative)* is itself relative, given the relativist thesis. But the assumption is that the relativist thesis itself *is an accurate description of the way the world is*. Even the postmodernist has a metanarrative with at least some elements claiming to describe the way things actually are.

as a putative instance of *the* meaning of life, even if, in the end, only one candidate metanarrative is, in fact, *the* meaning of life.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" should be interpreted as the request for a narrative that narrates across those features of life of greatest existential import to human beings. I began by motivating my interpretation through a look at the human propensities that correlate with and lend plausibility to the narrative interpretation. Next, I presented hints of my proposal in the philosophical literature on the meaning of life, demonstrating precedent for the narrative interpretation, but also noting relevant ways in which my interpretation extends well beyond existing proposals. I then borrowed from narrative theory in order to frame my narrative interpretation. In the balance of the chapter, I explained in detail the narrative interpretation of the question as well as the connection between my interpretation and the concept of a metanarrative. In Chapter Four, I introduce ideas that lend further philosophical plausibility to my interpretation, and offer reasons for favoring the narrative interpretation over the amalgam thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Philosophical Plausibility of the Narrative Interpretation

4.1 Introduction

In Chapters Two and Three I introduced and developed the narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" After discussing important prolegomena in Chapter Two, I offered a detailed account of the necessary and sufficient conditions of the narrative interpretation. In this chapter, I have two primary aims: (i) to further motivate the narrative interpretation and argue for its general philosophical plausibility, and (ii) to demonstrate its superiority over the amalgam thesis. First, I will consider the *global* nature of the meaning of life question, arguing that the narrative interpretation nicely captures this global, all-inclusive property. Second, I will employ the concept of worldview to bring additional depth to my narrative approach. There are striking similarities between the concept of worldview and the narrative interpretation of life's meaning. Indeed, I think the two concepts are nearly identical, but I choose the category of narrative for reasons of expediency that I will explain. Third, I will note several contexts out of which the question of life's meaning is often asked. The fact that it is asked within a multiplicity of life-contexts is hermeneutically relevant in assessing the request being made, and lends further philosophical credibility to my interpretation of the question. Finally, I will bring my interpretation into dialogue with the amalgam thesis, arguing for the superiority of my own interpretation on several counts.

4.2 The Question's Global Nature

Interpretations that consider the question, "What is the meaning of life?" to be making a request about purpose or value or significance are not entirely inaccurate, they are just truncated. To be sure, wondering what gives life purpose, what makes life valuable, or what makes life and the projects of life significant is often part of the motivational history for asking the grand question, "What is the meaning of life?" However, none of these reformulated questions, *individually*, captures a distinguishing property of the original question, its *global* or *all-inclusive* nature. I use "global" and "all-inclusive" here to mean something like *an existentially-infused perspective on the totality of human existence*.[1] These reformulations of the original center on more *localized* intuitions and sub-questions from which, I argue, the original is generated. None of them, considered singularly, captures the all-inclusive nature of their vague precursor where more (but not less) than merely the search for purpose, value, or significance likely motivates the question.[2]

In his book, *Does Life Have a Meaning?*, Milton Munitz notes that the question of life's meaning is motivated by intuitions of ". . . relative depth or total scope."[3] This observation is perceptive. It seems to me that in asking the question of life's meaning there is a motive often more basic, comprehensive, and all-inclusive than our desire to

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[1] This definition is meant to track my discussion of ER_Q and ER_N in Chapter Three (§3.5). "Existentially relevant" signals that the perspective is not so much concerned with, for example, how many blades of grass have ever existed or how many objects have been red.

[2] It is important to keep in mind that I am not disputing the *descriptive* claim that many do, in fact, interpret the question as "What is the purpose of life?" or "What makes life valuable?" I am arguing that there is actually a more appropriate way, philosophically, to view the question through a deeper analysis of its causal and motivational origins. Once one understands my analysis, I think it will become plausible not only why these common interpretations are used so readily, but additionally why my interpretation can still find a home for them while also doing a better job of accounting for intuitions and question-producing contexts unaddressed by the reformulated versions.

[3] Milton K. Munitz, *Does Life Have A Meaning?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 29.

discover whether our lives have a purpose(s) or what makes life valuable. The latter are surely deep and basic motivating desires which prompt the question, but they should be seen as layers of a more foundational motive, a motive encapsulated within the narrative interpretation—*the desire for a narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to rational, emotional, and self-reflective creatures such as us*.[4] This more basic desire, the desire for a particular kind of narrative that satisfies specific formal and material conditions, is evidenced by considering the multiplicity of contexts from which the question of life's meaning emerges. We ask it because, at least for a season, we are in the dark on issues we consider to have immense existential import. And these issues are multi-faceted such that no one question (e.g., "What is the purpose(s) of life?"), *except for the question*, "What is the meaning of life?" captures all of them in a single pass.

We are frail. We are small compared to the vast cosmos we inhabit. Our lives are fleeting. We stand in awe at the beauty around us. We sometimes teeter on the brink of despair when faced with the suffering and evil around and within us. And we want to *make sense of all this*. This means, of course, that we want to know what makes life valuable, what makes life significant, what gives life purpose, and what makes life worth living if anything. But we also want to know why something exists at all rather than just nothing and how to make sense of pain and suffering. Surely, all of these questions come to bear on the meaning of life, not just one or a few. Therefore, a response to any one of these sub-questions *without responses to the others* is unsatisfactory, given that we will

[4] By "rational, emotional, and self-reflective" creatures I simply mean human beings. Also, the way in which I have framed this does not militate against those who do not or perhaps even cannot ask the question from leading meaningful lives. Remember that I introduced an important distinction between the questions *What is the meaning of life?* and *What makes a life meaningful?* In Chapter Two (§2.3).

not have made sense of all that is deemed relevant to the meaning of life. Furthermore, one may not even be able to answer an individual, localized question associated with the meaning of life without the addition of numerous conceptual and explanatory layers provided by answers to other questions also associated with the meaning of life. For example, in attempting to elucidate the purpose(s) of life on the purpose-interpretation of life's meaning, explanation will be sought as to where or from whom such purpose ultimately derives. The further one ventures into this project, the richer and more complex the explanatory framework will become, and consequently the more plausible the narrative-interpretation of life's meaning becomes. The meaning of life narrative, on the narrative interpretation, is that which provides the deepest existentially relevant explanatory narrative framework through which to answer this existentially relevant cluster of questions. This narrative framework is what ultimately tracks what is being requested in asking, "What is the meaning of life?"[5]

This claim is further strengthened by considering the original question's use of the term "life." Unfortunately, this linguistic choice is an additional factor (in addition to the question's use of the word "meaning") contributing to the question's vagueness. For example, does "life" in this context refer to an individual human life, to human life in general, or to all biological life? As a matter of fact, I think it is sometimes the case that "life" is being used in one of these ways. For example, someone might be asking the question of her own life, and what *its* meaning is. With others, one may wonder what the meaning is of human life in general. However, I think the term, often, is a marker for something much more general and basic than either a single human's life, human life in

[5] This deep explanatory narrative framework, however, must be understood in light of the distinctions introduced in Chapter Three (§3.5) between ER_Q and ER_N.

general, or even all biological life. To be sure, it is vague and perhaps ill-chosen when used in the following way, but I think more often than not the term "life" is a marker for everything that exists in the observable universe, including the universe itself. This claim is partially motivated by noting that a plausible substitute for the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is "What is the meaning of *all this*?" where "all this" refers to everything we see as we look around at the multifaceted world around us. We want to know why things are as they are. We desire a rationale or explanation in order to understand the world around us and our place in it. This is a global, all-inclusive, and comprehensive request, not simply a local request for what makes life valuable or what gives life purpose. Yuval Lurie notes this salient feature of the question as it is asked by Leo Tolstoy:

> . . . it is worth noting that it [the question, "What is the meaning of life?"] refers to the meaning of life itself, rather than the meaning of anything that happens in life or during the course of life. The broadly inclusive scope of the question, regarding both what the term "life" and the term "meaning" denote, is very different from the way we usually talk about the meaning of things or about the meaning of the lives of various people.[6]

This harmonizes well with those global, all-inclusive intuitions that are present when the question is asked even if such intuitions are sometimes only latent, and despite the fact that the resulting question, "What is the meaning of life?" takes semantic shape through an admittedly vague linguistic expression of a profound existential question.

It is important to note that though I appeal to the global, all-inclusive nature of the question of life's meaning in order to motivate and lend plausibility to my narrative interpretation, the narrative interpretation is subtly different from interpreting the

[6] Yuval Lurie, *Tracking the Meaning of Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), pp. 22-23.

question of life's meaning as *What is the meaning of all this?* This is a question likely requesting the meaning of existence, and may be asking something similar to, "Why is there something rather than absolutely nothing?" A question such as this nicely captures the global or all-inclusive nature of the meaning of life question, but the narrative interpretation does not require this connotation to be attached to "global." I emphasize the *global* nature of the question simply for the purpose of showing that the question is likely driven by a more general concern than merely a concern about purpose, value, or significance *alone*. The narrative interpretation is able to account for this all-inclusive aspect of the question, whereas reformulations that interpret the question as one about purpose or value alone cannot. For that matter, the amalgam thesis cannot account for this all-inclusive property of the question as well as the narrative interpretation. I will argue in more detail for this claim at the end of this chapter.

4.3 The Question and Weltanschauung

There are striking similarities between my narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" and the concept of *Weltanschauung* (worldview).[7] In fact, the two are near synonyms, although for reasons of expediency noted later I favor referring to a certain kind of narrative of the world instead of worldview in interpreting the question of life's meaning. Nonetheless, a more detailed look at worldview will shed important light and bring further plausibility to the narrative interpretation. A case can be made that worldviews are what provide answers to the meaning of life question. This is because the meaning of life centers around issues we consider to be of ultimate concern,

[7] There are conceptual difficulties with *Weltanschauung* and how best to interpret it as well as how best to translate it into English. My use of the concept does not require entering this discussion. I am here only noting the broad similarities between my proposal and the notion of worldview.

and as it has been noted, "Wherever we find the ultimate concerns of human beings, we find worldviews."[8] Munitz is again instructive in this context. After noting the more localized contexts in which the question is often asked, he states:

> . . . they [people] may say that what they are looking for [when asking the question of life's meaning] is an account of the "big picture" with whose aid they would be able to see not only their own individual personal lives, but the lives of everybody else, indeed of everything of a finite or limited sort, human or not. . . . The expression of such a concern involves, at bottom, the appeal to a "worldview" or "world picture." This undertakes to give a description of the most inclusive setting within which human life is situated, a statement of the most fundamental beliefs and commitments on which a person may fall back in giving his account of "the world," "reality," "existence," or "being."[9]

Although Munitz does not explicitly state that this "big picture" intuition is most fundamental in driving the question, "What is the meaning of life?" I think it should be given interpretive priority. Something in the neighborhood of this "big picture" is what we seek in asking the question. Given that worldviews plausibly fulfill the role of comprehensive explanation or ultimate framework, which is similar, perhaps nearly identical, to the function of the meaning of life narrative, I will briefly consider some of a worldview's more common formal properties. To do so, I will use the concept of worldview as defined by Wilhelm Dilthey and Sigmund Freud, as well as Wittgenstein's "world picture" (*Weltbild*).

4.3.1 Defining "Worldview"

The nineteenth century German philosopher and historian, Wilhelm Dilthey, considered a worldview to be a comprehensive reflection, and the attending concepts needed to do so, on the ultimate sense of our existence. In Rudolf A. Makkreel's entry on

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[8] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Vol. 1. Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 122.

[9] Munitz, *Does Life Have a Meaning?*, p. 30.

Dilthey in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, worldview is defined as that which ". . . constitutes an overall perspective on life that sums up what we know about the world, how we evaluate it emotionally, and how we respond to it volitionally."[10] On Dilthey's definition, then, a worldview has a cognitive/rational dimension, an affective dimension, and a dimension marked by *praxis*. Importantly, all of these dimensions are interconnected, though the precise nature of this relationship will be a complex causal matrix, the detailed characterization of which will be difficult.

Roughly a contemporary of Dilthey, the Austrian Sigmund Freud offers his thoughts on the nature of worldview:

> "*Weltanschauung*" is, I am afraid, a specifically German concept, the translation of which into foreign languages might well raise difficulties. . . . In my opinion, then, a *Weltanschauung* is an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place.[11]

In contrast to Dilthey, Freud's own analysis of worldview here is largely one-dimensional, focusing solely on the cognitive/rational dimension. In this definition, a worldview is a comprehensive hypothesis that provides a framework for interpreting the cluster of existentially relevant phenomena and accompanying questions that human beings ask.[12] If one pays careful attention to the entirety of Freud's lecture, "The Question of *Weltanschauung*," though, it is clear that far from denying the affective and practical dimensions of a worldview, he understands that the religious worldview at least,

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[10] Rudolf A. Makkreel, "Dilthey, Wilhelm," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 236.

[11] Sigmund Freud, Lecture XXXV, "The Question of *Weltanschauung*," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 783.

[12] I intend my phrase "cluster of existentially relevant phenomenon and accompanying questions" to be a synonym for Freud's "everything that interests us."

was "crafted" to aid humans, *emotionally*, in making it through life without succumbing to despair. Though Freud thought such religious worldviews to be little more than grandiose illusions built upon wishful thinking, he certainly viewed worldviews, religious ones at least, as having an affective dimension as well as a dimension that guided how one lived life.[13] Indeed, of *Weltanschauung*, Freud notes, ". . . the possession of a *Weltanschauung* of this kind is among the ideal wishes of human beings."[14] The possession of a worldview was much more than a nice intellectual attainment according to Freud; it was something of profound existential importance around which people interpret and structure their very existence.

An idea akin to the concept of worldview as proposed by Dilthey and Freud can be found in various of Wittgenstein's reflections in *On Certainty*,[15] even though the philosophical parameters in which his comments occur are different from those in this dissertation. In this posthumously published book (based on written notes penned near the end of his life), Wittgenstein devotes considerable time to what he calls a "world picture" (*Weltbild*). A world picture is a *groundless* set of central beliefs that compose a rather fixed framework through which one understands the world.[16] Against the skeptic, Wittgenstein maintains that we are not really in a position to doubt this groundless set of central beliefs. However, against the anti-skeptic, he notes that it is impossible to refute

[13] So, for example, Freud states, "If we are to give an account of the grandiose nature of religion, we must bear in mind what it undertakes to do for human beings. It gives them information about the origin and coming into existence of the universe, it assures them of its protection and of ultimate happiness in the ups and downs of life and it directs their thoughts and actions by precepts which it lays down with its whole authority. Thus it fulfills three functions." "The Question of *Weltanschauung*," pp. 785-786.

[14] Ibid., p. 783.

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969).

[16] Ibid., pp. 91-105, 141-42, 225, 239-42, 247-48, 253, 262, 336, 608-12.

skepticism by pointing to absolutely certain propositions. The "certainty" of the propositions composing the central epistemic web of a world picture is merely a function of their indispensable, normative role in a language game.[17] Indeed, part of this "world picture" is the very methodological program itself for justifying beliefs. As such, the world picture consists of beliefs, principles, and distinctions that serve as grounds for other beliefs. Given the strong hermeneutical function that a world picture plays, macro-level change to the world picture cannot be effected by incompatible information, because any information encountered will be filtered through the already existing world picture. As such, change can only come through what Wittgenstein calls "persuasion," (as opposed to refutation) an idea akin to conversion whereby one's entire outlook encapsulated in the world picture is altered in a gestalt-like paradigm shift. The important point in this context is that Dilthey's and Freud's *Weltanschauung* and Wittgenstein's *Weltbild* share relevant similarities with, and therefore shed important light on, the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question.

4.3.2 Relevant Features of Worldview that Intersect with the Narrative Interpretation

Three related features can be extracted from the above proposals on the nature of a worldview or world picture that connect to the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question. First, worldviews function as the deepest, most comprehensive context, framework, or perspective from which to understand, evaluate, and live life. They are "big pictures," "overall perspectives," an "overriding hypothesis," or a "set of central beliefs" through which the various phenomena of life are hermeneutically filtered. Of

[17] Wittgenstein variously speaks of this world picture or language game as a "scaffolding," "an unused siding," or "a river bed" through which the thought of our language game flows. Ibid. I am not interested here in entering a philosophical discussion on the merits of Wittgenstein's proposal. I am simply noting the similarities between a world picture and my narrative interpretation.

course, these terms are not entirely synonymous. For example, Munitz's "big picture" is not altogether like Wittgenstein's "set of central beliefs," as the former is more comprehensive, but there is still a general thread both of universality and interpretive priority that is salient in them all. As Lurie notes, a worldview or world picture ". . . purports to reveal the nature of human life and its *place within* the existential scheme of things" [emphasis added].[18]

Second, a worldview includes a cognitive/rational explanatory dimension.[19] It satisfies our desire to know the world of which we are a part. All four of the conceptions of worldview above capture this element to various degrees. A worldview is closely linked with *giving a big picture account of the world* (Munitz), *summing up what we know about the world in an overall perspective* (Dilthey), *an overriding hypothesis that leaves no question unanswered* (Freud), or *a framework for understanding the world* (Wittgenstein). I think these are all ways of stating the most fundamental motivation driving the meaning of life question.[20] They each depict, again, and to various degrees,

[18] Yuval Lurie, *Tracking the Meaning of Life*, p. 46.

[19] While I do not take any specific, rigorously articulated position on the relationship between a worldview and its individual elements, a few thoughts are warranted. First, if a worldview just is a comprehensive web of beliefs with some of those beliefs of greater and more central epistemic significance, is there any sense in talking of it as being something over and above those beliefs? Second, I think it is best to see the interaction of peripheral and central beliefs as being fluid, such that core parts of a worldview can be revised if enough relevant beliefs are revised which warrant the revision of a core worldview belief. Third, while I think Wittgenstein perhaps goes too far, there seems to be something correct in his thoughts on the hermeneutical function of a worldview (world picture for him). A worldview does serve a hermeneutical function in some sense, but I do not think it fully *determines* how additional information will be assessed within the worldview. As such, I agree with the, no doubt, controversial claim that there are *brute* facts. And, I think this is compatible with additionally claiming that a worldview does possess a hermeneutical function that is a large part of the story of how we understand the world around us.

[20] Of course, none of the reformulated questions in terms of value, purpose, or significance among others sufficiently capture this aspect.

the human pursuit of a deep explanation, framework, or narrative of the world that addresses our core areas of existential concern.

Finally, a worldview highlights the *existentially relevant* elements of life. While one might think of a complete worldview as that which literally explains *everything*, we generally do not require such detail of worldviews in order to consider them as sufficient maps of reality.[21] A worldview can still function in its intended capacity even though it has not provided a *complete* elucidation of all the facts that can be known. What is important, however, is that a worldview elucidates those aspects of reality that *we, as humans, deem or find important, especially to how we understand, appraise, and live our lives*. This is what I mean by "existential," though I am fully aware that it has other connotations historically.

It is Freud's definition of worldview that appears to come closest to my narrative proposal for how to understand the question of life's meaning. Recalling his definition, he states that a worldview ". . . is an intellectual construction which *solves all the problems of our existence* uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which *everything that interests us* finds its fixed place" [emphasis added].[22] While a complete worldview in the sense of a comprehensive elucidation of all facts could be identified with the narrative meaning of life, echoing my conclusions in Chapter Three, I do not think the narrative interpretation should be viewed this way. Rather, the worldview or narrative sought in securing the meaning of life need only cross some threshold of information about those things that

[21] Recall here my discussion in Chapter Three (§3.5).

[22] Sigmund Freud, Lecture XXXV, "The Question of *Weltanschauung*," p. 783.

"interest us" in Freud's words.[23] Again, we are in pursuit of an *existentially relevant narrative* (an ER_N) which addresses those existentially weighty parts of existence with which we are readily familiar, not just any old narrative.

Whereas I have chosen to distinguish three salient features of a worldview, Yuval Lurie notes only two, even though they largely track what I have said here. His discussion is relevant, though. He claims that a sophisticated worldview contains two primary elements, and these are aimed at solving "the Riddle of Life," a phrase in the semantic neighborhood of "the Meaning of Life." One of these elements is primarily metaphysical or ontological; the other he says is ethical. I prefer the broader category, *normative*. A worldview's metaphysical aspect functions in a descriptive capacity, explaining the nature of the world and life. Its ethical or more broadly normative aspect instructs us how we ought to live in light of the material content found in a worldview's metaphysical theses. This is similar, but not identical, to the taxonomy I have given whereby the rational, explanatory dimension of a worldview is brought to bear on those aspects of life that are of greatest existential import. Many of these fall within or reside nearby a broadly normative category (What makes life valuable? What ends ought I to pursue in life? Is there any definitive solution to pain and suffering? etc.).

I think there is a deep urge within human beings that compels us to think that a worldview or narrative of reality should meet both the metaphysical and normative conditions, and *that these two dimensions of a worldview cohere*.[24] We take the pursuit of

[23] Cf. footnote 12.

[24] This latter condition is precisely why some theists and *broad* naturalists think that strict naturalists *cannot* secure a home for normative properties in their ontology. That is to say, it is thought that a strongly reductionist ontology will not allow normative properties, as well as consciousness and mental states, to be part of the deep ontological structure of reality. For a recent critical discussion of naturalism in general, see Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing

truth very seriously. Many consider pursuing truth to be an intrinsically valuable activity. But we also consider other inherent and core human longings to be serious as well, such that a narrative of reality should be explanatorily robust enough to sufficiently account for these other dimensions of life. Indeed, most hope that our most central desires, those that are profoundly and deeply engrained within us, are, in principle, capable of being satisfied. But naturalists and theists will disagree here. Freud, while disagreeing that such conditions must be met by a worldview, recognizes that as a matter of fact people generally require it to, "Believing in it [*Weltanschauung*] one can feel secure in life, one can know what to strive for, and how one can deal most expediently with one's emotions and interests."[25]

It is precisely here where Freud notes that a traditional religious worldview provides kinds of explanation (false in Freud's view, however) that a fully scientific one fails to provide. "Science can be no match for it [religious worldview] when it soothes the fear that men feel in the dangers and vicissitudes of life, when it assures them of a happy ending and offers them comfort in happiness."[26] Much of what compels us to seek and formulate worldviews, then, requires elements only a religious worldview can provide. The problem though is that a purely empirical, naturalistic worldview is thought to be true by many in the contemporary world, and further, it does not possess many of the elements found in a religious worldview, at least in their more "robust" forms as found in

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Company, 2008). For a critical discussion of strongly reductive forms of naturalism by philosophers who generally consider themselves non-reductive naturalists or are sympathetic to this variety of naturalism, see Mario de Caro and David Macarthur, eds., *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[25] Sigmund Freud, Lecture XXXV, "The Question of *Weltanschauung*," pp. 783-84.

[26] Ibid., p. 786.

religious contexts. As Freud states, “It is true that science can teach us how to avoid certain dangers and that there are some sufferings which it can successfully combat; it would be most unjust to deny that it is a powerful helper to men; but there are many situations in which it must leave a man to his suffering and can only advise him to submit to it.”[27] Regardless of the debate between religious and non-religious worldviews, the point to be made is that worldviews generally have both descriptive and normative dimensions, even if those dimensions are explicated differently in various worldviews.

In further considering the concept of worldview and how it links to the meaning of life, it will be helpful to consider a worldview metaphorically as a map. This idea captures something very important to the concept of a worldview and also picks out a driving intuition that relates to the meaning of life question. Part of the human preoccupation with the meaning of life centers around the desire to successfully *navigate* through life. Therefore, the map analogy is apt, for as Freud has noted, worldviews generally do not serve a merely cognitive, rational function, they also help one navigate through life without, among other things, succumbing to definitive and final despair. Put differently, they provide a cognitive means by which to *get somewhere,* where “get somewhere” is a rough marker for successfully navigating the road of life in a humanly flourishing way.

The idea that an overall picture or comprehensive view of something is generally accompanied by ease of navigation is very intuitive. For example, most of us have experienced the frustration and confusion that often results from attempting to navigate around a substantially sized city prior to knowing the roads and overall layout of the city. But as we begin to internalize a map of that city, which essentially amounts to having a

[27] Ibid.

comprehensive mental picture or God's eye view of where everything is located, we can navigate more easily through the city. This occurs in countless other contexts, whether it is plumbing or auto-repair. And the more comprehensive and accurate our mental picture becomes of the domain under consideration, the more facility and success we have in navigating through particular situations that require this "map." In the case of a worldview, something analogous seems to be the case. A worldview brings with it the necessary information to ease our navigation through life. On one level, having knowledge about Newton's Laws aids us in understanding that we "ought" to get out of the way of oncoming cars *if* we want to avoid bodily injury. On another level, having knowledge of how happiness is secured and sustained contributes to our facility in doing our part (conceding the pesky problem of luck) to make this a reality in our lives. Just like a comprehensive and accurate *engine-view* will aid you in changing your sparkplugs and belts, so too will a comprehensive and accurate worldview aid you in living life.[28]

4.3.3 Tightening the Conceptual Link Between Worldview and the Narrative Intrpretation

The above discussion of a worldview and its functions is apropos to the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question. The narrative interpretation I have proposed of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is not substantively different, conceptually, from a worldview. Indeed, they both function as something akin to a map, aiding us as we navigate through life, and especially through the cluster of life-features that we deem to be especially important (i.e., ER_Q). We seek a worldview or narrative that secures a coherent place for these existentially important elements, situating them

[28] This claim is controversial, and is partly built upon the more foundational claim that *reality* is "stubborn" in that we will have to cooperate with reality and what *it gives us* and not vice-versa when it comes to living life.

within a deeper explanatory context. Despite this similarity, though, I have adopted the category of narrative largely, but not solely, for reasons of expediency. Narrative is accompanied by ideas that seem more intuitively connected with the meaning of life. First, narrative possesses *dynamic* connotations that track the phenomenon of life better than does a worldview, which seems more *static* in nature. Narratives are characterized by a temporal flow of events, with conflict and resolution. Life itself is like this. We tend to think of worldviews, however, as static explanatory frameworks that propositionally account for reality. Again, narratives of reality, especially if "narrative" is being used in a loose or metaphorical sense,[29] can function identically to worldviews on this count, but we tend to think of narratives dynamically and not statically. In terms of utility, then, the concept of narrative is perhaps more intuitively applicable to life itself.

Second, I think a component of life's narrative, not just individual narratives but more generally the universe's narrative, that concerns us greatly is the way it will all end. Is death a definitive loss of all consciousness and identity? Will the universe itself come to final oblivion? Is postmortem survival part of life's narrative? Will there be a new heavens and new earth? These questions are central motivators for the question of life's meaning as can be clearly seen by the prevalence of considerations of death and futility in the literature, and while answers to them will have a place in most worldviews, the concept of *ending* functions more naturally within the context of narrative. So, the dynamic aspect of life together with preoccupation with how it will all end makes the category of narrative a better fit for interpreting the question, "What is the meaning of life?" in the way I am in this dissertation. However, the category of worldview along with

[29] For a discussion of the definition of "narrative," see Chapter Two (§2.4).

many of the capacities in which it functions, substantially tracks what I refer to as an ER_N. As such, the fact that worldviews address the cluster of issues broadly related to the meaning of life lends plausibility to my narrative interpretation given its profound similarities to worldview.[30]

Thus far I have connected the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life and the concept of worldview by simply noting that they share similar features and functions. Some have argued though that worldviews themselves are metanarratives of the world. Regardless of whether, in Jean-François Lyotard's words, "*Postmodernism* may be defined as incredulity towards metanarratives," [31] historically such narratives have provided the deep theoretical and existential framework in which truth claims and *praxis* have been meaningfully grounded. In addition, such narratives themselves *embody* a worldview, such that the two cannot be separated. One need not look hard in order to find those who explicate the concept of a worldview using the category of narrative. A primary reason for the connection follows from the fact that, as I noted in Chapter Three, humans are inescapably *narrative-creating* creatures. It only makes sense, then, that we would "construct" metanarratives in order to aid us in making sense of and living life.

[30] Julian Young's claim in the introduction to *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* is also relevant here. He claims that, in the West, prior to the Enlightenment and the gaining momentum of empirical-mechanistic-naturalistic causal explanations, theistic worldviews were in place *and* that few ever asked about the meaning of life. He claims this was simply because folks thought they knew what it was, and this knowledge was directly tied to the religious worldview in place. However, as such worldviews begin to diminish, people because to probe into the meaning of life with greater anxiety and vigor (pp.1-2). Young's claim strengthens my interpretation, in that it further connects the meaning of life to the possession of a narrative or worldview of some sort.

[31] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xxiv.

In his substantive work on the nature of worldview, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, David K. Naugle posits a close relationship between worldview and narrative. He states:

> . . . a worldview might best be understood as a *semiotic phenomenon*. Since people are the kinds of creatures who make and manage signs, especially in the form of words spoken or written, and since most if not all aspects of human thought and culture are semiotically constituted, it seems plausible to include the notion of *Weltanschauung* in this category and construe it as a system of signs generating a symbolic world. In particular I . . . [a]lso propose that a worldview as a semiotic structure consists primarily of a network of *narrative signs* that offers an interpretation of reality and establishes an overarching framework for life. Since people are storytelling creatures who define themselves and the cosmos in a narrative fashion, the content of a worldview seems best associated with this most relevant activity of human nature. Finally, I . . . [p]ropose that a worldview as a semiotic system of world-interpreting stories also provides a foundation or governing platform upon or by which people think, interpret, and know.[32]

For Naugle, then, a worldview can be understood largely on three interconnected levels. First, it is a *semiotic* construction in which humans create meaningful signs. Second, these meaningful signs are structured narratively;[33] this narrative structure motivated primarily out of the fact that we are narrative-creating beings. And, third, the resulting narrative provides the deepest framework through which to interpret and live life in a meaningful way.

Naugle's thoughts on the nature and function of worldviews are echoed by N. T. Wright:

> . . . [w]orldviews provide the *stories* through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark. . . . [f]rom these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic *questions* that determine human existence: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution? All

[32] David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 291.

[33] N. T. Wright notes that the symbols and praxis of a worldview are anchored in a "controlling story," a story that invests them with wider significance. *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 124-25.

> cultures cherish deep-rooted beliefs which can in principle be called up to answer these questions. All cultures (that is) have a sense of identity, of environment, of a problem with the way the world is, and of a way forward—a redemptive eschatology, to be more precise—which will, or may, lead out of that problem.[34]

Like Naugle, Wright sees a close link between narrative and worldview. Accordingly, worldviews "provide" interpretive stories and, even stronger, themselves are said to be expressed in and through these stories that provide a narrative framework through which to understand and assess the "basic" questions of human existence. In a sense, narrative is a way of imposing order on what may be described, pre-narratively, as chaos, where "chaos" signifies disjointed and fragmented states of affairs with no real connecting thread weaving them together into a coherent and understandable "product." It is this narrative activity that the narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" highlights as constituting the search for an answer to the question of life's meaning.

If worldviews just are metanarratives with unique, well-defined formal properties, then my thesis is compatible with claiming that we are seeking a worldview when we ask, "What is the meaning of life?" This finding is relevant for the plausibility of my interpretation, given the profound similarities between the concept of a worldview and the narrative interpretation. Reflection upon the nature and function of a worldview is not the only consideration that lends plausibility to the narrative interpretation though. A closer look at those situations and circumstances out of which the question of life's meaning is often birthed reveals that what we seek in asking the question is more comprehensive than an answer *merely* to a question about purpose or value or significance alone.

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[34] Ibid., p. 123.

4.4 A Further Look at the Contextual and Motivational Origins of the Question

Questions about the meaning of life naturally emerge in certain existentially salient circumstances and situations of life. These contexts are, by and large, co-extensive with the cluster of issues and questions that I identified as ER_Q. Recall that ER_Q consists of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions around which we seek to build a narrative. These elements, then, function as the *pre-philosophic* impetus for asking the question of life's meaning. I note the pre-philosophical status of this impetus due to the fact that without any philosophical reflection whatsoever, the elements composing ER_Q are *considered to be* of profound existential importance, in a sense, by definition. It might be said that we *pick them out* and *baptize* them as the existentially relevant aspects of life. It is relevant, then, that there is more than one situation, circumstance, or life context out of which the question of life's meaning arises.

In Chapter Three, I argued that asking, "What is the meaning of life?" is analogous to a father walking in on his children's scuffle and demanding, "What is the meaning of this?" Here, the father is in search of an explanation, context, or narrative in order to make sense of what he has observed. He has seen very little, and lacks sufficient information required to understand the situation and subsequently appraise it. This fuller narrative he seeks will determine, among other things, his normative evaluation of the situation. Life itself is like this; we encounter all sorts of phenomena of which we want to know, "What is the meaning of this?" which is only a step or so removed from the more global question, "What is the meaning of *life*?" The former questions lead to the latter insofar as we think that it will take an existentially relevant all-inclusive narrative in which to situate the cluster of life phenomena and events that prompt meaning-questions.

It is telling that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" does not emerge *solely* in contexts where we begin to question what makes life valuable, what makes life worthwhile, or what the purpose of life is. Importantly, there exist other question-producing contexts. For example, Milton Munitz notes that preoccupation with the question of life's meaning often accompanies critical times in the life of an individual, periods where suffering and death are salient, and in the midst of secularization and the loss of a spiritual paradigm.[35] While correct in this assessment, Munitz has not exhausted the range of contexts in which the meaning of life question surfaces.

When one begins to see the variety of contexts in which the question of life's meaning is birthed, a relevant question to ask is, why? Is it simply because the question is an amalgam of diverse, yet related questions? Or is something more at work here? I think the latter reason is the case. Our explanatory, contextual, and narrative propensities "kick in" at certain existentially relevant portions of life, baptized as such in quasi-Kripkean fashion, prompting us to inquire into life's meaning. These moments cause us to want to know what it is all about. They possess special existential import that prompts in us an insatiable desire to know how everything fits together and how we and the events of our lives find a home within that larger framework. Importantly, I do not think we should understand the question as making fundamentally different requests in these different contexts. I submit that it should be interpreted as the request for a narrative that sufficiently addresses the feature of reality under consideration as well as all others (that is, all others constituting ER_Q, and thereby can be said to be the meaning of life *in general*), even though, at any time, one's existential gaze may be directed on a localized portion of the narrative.

[35] Munitz, *Does Life Have a Meaning?*, pp. 19-29.

§2.2 of Chapter Two ("Descriptive Issues, Prescriptive Issues, and a Philosophically Sufficient Interpretation") is relevant here. In that section I noted that desiderata for any philosophically plausible interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" should include: (i) that it sufficiently harmonize with the pre-philosophic intuitions from which the question is generated along with what people, in fact, take themselves to be asking, and (ii) that it meet the analytic philosophical requirements of clarity and coherence. In this section I will consider descriptive features of the question (i.e., from what contexts it naturally emerges), and then draw certain prescriptive conclusions that move beyond this data.

Descriptively, individuals ask the question in a number of different life-contexts; I think this is instructive and should factor substantively into a proposal for how we *ought* to interpret the question, namely, in terms of a narrative of life that will encompass each of these contexts in which the question is asked. This interpretation is not only philosophically plausible, but I think even those who have interpreted the question differently would recognize this as a natural construal that ends up addressing the cluster of issues associated with the meaning of life in a compelling way.

Three salient contexts that prompt questions about life's meaning are what I call (i) Tolstoyan moments, (ii) times of metaphysical wonder at the fact of being, and (iii) considerations of evil, pain, and suffering.[36] I think it is telling that the question of life's meaning is linked to a diverse range of generating or motivating life situations. This shows a deficiency in extant interpretations that address only singular contexts, making

[36] These three contexts actually encompass the five elements constituting ER_Q. This is so because (i) questions about value, worth, and purpose all populate Tolstoyan Moments contexts, as does death, and (ii) questions about how it all will end populate both Tolstoyan Moment contexts as well as contexts involving evil, pain, and suffering.

the question entirely coextensive with that context (e.g., purpose, value, or worth). I think the question's inherent vagueness actually demonstrates that it should not be viewed as entirely coextensive with considerations unique to any one context in which it is asked. That is to say, interpreting the question in terms of purpose, for example, addresses part of what the question of life's meaning is all about, but not all of it. Of course, the amalgam thesis is proposed to address this. However, the amalgam thesis suffers from what I view as the disadvantage of not being able to sufficiently account for the global, all-inclusive nature of the question under a single, unifying construct. Indeed, I think the question's vagueness, a vagueness that partly motivates the amalgam thesis, actually lends greater philosophical plausibility to the narrative interpretation. The narrative interpretation nicely accounts for the empirical reality of the question's multiple connotations and contextual origins, as it secures a home for the concerns of each context within a wider explanatory framework.

4.4.1 Tolstoyan Moments

One of the most historically indelible discussions of the meaning of life comes from the nineteenth century Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy. A man of great attainment, known for such literary classics as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy underwent a deep existential crisis in mid-life in which he vigorously questioned the meaning of life. Given its historical noteworthiness, I will quote a large excerpt from Tolstoy's profound autobiographical account of his struggle for meaning.

> So I lived, but then something strange began to happen to me. I began to experience moments of perplexity where life "froze," as though I did not know what to do or how to live, and I felt lost and became dejected. But this passed, and I went on living as before. Then these moments of perplexity began to reoccur more and more frequently, and invariably took the same form. When they came, the same questions kept coming to my mind: "Why? What is it for? What does it

> lead to?" . . . While thinking about the management of my household and estate, which greatly preoccupied me at that time, the question would suddenly occur: "Well, you have five thousands [sic] acres of land, and three hundred horses—What then? So what?" I was absolutely muddled up inside, and did not know what to think. When thinking about how best to educate my children, I would ask myself: "What for?" Or when thinking about how best to promote the welfare of the peasants, I would suddenly say to myself: "But what does it matter to me?" And when I thought about the fame that all my literary works would bring to me, I would say to myself: "Very well, I will become famous. So what? What then?" . . . My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, a question lying in the soul of every person. It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: "What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my life? What is life for?" Differently expressed, the question is: "Why should I live, why hope for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: "Does my life have any meaning that death cannot destroy?"[37]

During the season of his crisis, Tolstoy was clearly asking more than a single question. He was making multiple, yet related requests about *his* life and life *in general* which seem to center on two broad issues: (i) securing a meaningful "grounding" for life and the projects of life, and (ii) shuddering at the seeming threat that death poses for a meaningful life. As for (i), Tolstoy has come to a place where he begins to question why it is he pursues those activities he does, and whether and how these activities and pursuits are meaningful. Pre-philosophically, he has always viewed them as valuable and meaningful, but now, in his *arrest of life* moment, he questions whether, why, and how they are meaningful. He is seeking a grounding or justification for their value or meaning. With respect to (ii), he harbors the thought that death somehow brings with it a veto power, the ability to negate the seeming value and meaningfulness of those activities that populate human life, thus rendering them and life itself irredeemably futile.[38]

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[37] Leo Tolstoy, "A Confession" in *Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 46-48, 51.

[38] A case can be made that one finds a similar intuition in play in various parts of Ecclesiastes.

It is as if Tolstoy's self-reflective capacities became more fully alive during his *arrest of life* moment. Presumably, he stepped back from his active engagement in life and began to critically reflect upon living. Activities and pursuits that he previously thought valuable all of a sudden seem to be anchored *to nothing*, and yet Tolstoy believes some deeper anchor is needed in order for them to be valuable or meaningful.[39] This is no small point. Human beings can take the Nagelian viewpoint, and this makes us different from other species of animal. This means we can and often do ask *why*-questions about our lives and the activities that fill them as reflective spectators, and so view life *sub specie aeternitatis*. Some of us may only casually and periodically ask these questions; others, like Tolstoy, may become paralyzed by them, entering into a genuine existential crisis. Tolstoy sought a deeper explanation in order to make sense of those activities and aspects of life that are generally deemed important, among them, work, family, and accomplishment. It was not enough for him simply to engage in these activities and pursuits; he needed to know why and for what purpose he ought to continue in them, and perhaps, too, why he should value them. Is there some deeper reason or rationale that can ground them as meaningful?

A second salient feature of a Tolstoyan moment is the idea that the reality of death looming on the horizon for each of us carries with it a significant, perhaps insurmountable, threat to a meaningful life. Tolstoy seemed to think that death, viewed as the final and definitive cessation of human consciousness, carried with it the power to render life's activities meaningless, a thought certainly shared by many others. At least one reason why this is thought to be so is that a construal of death as the final and

[39] Thomas Nagel's discussion of the notion of absurdity, as well as the view from nowhere, is particularly relevant here.

definitive cessation of consciousness somehow renders the activities that populate conscious existence *futile*. I will leave further discussion of this common claim to the last chapter of this dissertation. For now it is sufficient to note that considerations of death are salient moments in which the question of life's meaning is asked.

And so a Tolstoyan moment is a rough marker for either (i) contexts where we take a predominantly self-reflective, spectator-dominated stance toward activities in life in which we are usually fully engaged without that reflective, evaluative component, or (ii) contexts where the reality of death becomes salient for one reason or another. With respect to (i), we consider something we have, up to this time, taken for granted, only to now ask why we do it, why it is important, and whether and how it is meaningful. That is to say, we seek a deeper and more foundational footing for things like familial relationships, work, accomplishments, recreation, and so on. In a Tolstoyan moment we feel the need to secure and anchor these things down by connecting them to something deeper, something more foundational, something that can secure their value and meaning. As for (ii), many find death to be a threat to meaning. This is often largely assumed, or if reasons are given they are generally tied to the notion of futility and how it is supposed to follow from a certain conception of death, a naturalistic conception where death *has the final word* so to speak.[40]

4.4.2 Metaphysical Wonder

Asking the question of life's meaning is not confined to Tolstoyan moments. It is also closely linked to situations where, for whatever reason, the salience and profundity of existence itself is at the fore of our minds. For me, autobiographically speaking, these moments can emerge in seemingly trivial circumstances, for example, watching cars

[40] I will spend considerable time on this claim in Chapter Seven.

drive down the highway. They can also come from more profound situations, like watching a beautiful sunset. In these moments, we may be compelled to ask a progressing series of *why*-questions like, "Why are there cars driving down the road?" "Why are there even cars at all?" "Why are there people who drive cars?" "Why am I here asking this question?" "Why does anything exist at all?" "What is the meaning of life?" In these situations we come to reflect on the universe's and our own radical contingency, the fact that our existence is not metaphysically necessary.[41] As we reflect upon this staggering reality, we desire a reason or rational or account for why we and the universe do in fact exist when we might not have.

Of course, some philosophers take this progression of questions to be an only slightly more sophisticated, but nonetheless, equally nonsensical explanatory pursuit as that of the child whose *why*-questions about, for example, objects eventually terminate with the request, "What is larger than the largest of all objects?" This is an absurd question, but so too, it is argued, is a question about why anything exists at all. While I think this challenge can be plausibly answered,[42] my primary concern in this context is simply to demonstrate that this is one circumstance in which the question of life's meaning often arises.

What I have here identified as only one of a number of question-producing contexts has been advanced by others as the primary context in which the question of life's meaning is generated and out of which the question is most naturally understood.

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[41] I concede that for some naturalists the universe, or at least the most basic state of affairs from which the universe arises, is metaphysically necessary. For a defense of the claim that the universe, or at least something (though not necessarily personal), *had to* exist, see Bede Rundle, *Why There is Something Rather than Nothing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

[42] I briefly address this in Chapter Six (§6.2.1.2).

Karl Britton notes that such questions can be asked with two different scopes in mind: *personal* and *global*. Despite the differences in scope, both questions center on the *why* of existence. Furthermore, we often proceed straight from the personal question to the global one or vice-versa. Britton remarks:

> One of the very odd things about 'the meaning of life' is that people commonly do not make a sharp distinction between a question about everything and a question about *themselves*. For the ordinary reflective person will go on: What is it all for? Why am I here? What is the point of it all? (And I suspect this often means: What is the point of it all for me?) It not only is a matter of wonder that there is this universe, but also that it contains *me*: Why am *I* here? And, of course, this connects with the question: What am I? And since there is this universe and it includes me, what was the point of including me? Is it possible to discover in such reflections what is the point of it all for me? There seem to be two questions, one about the universe and one about me. *Question One:* Why does the universe exist? Why does something exist rather than nothing? Why the things we actually discover and not other possible things? *Question Two:* Why do I exist? Do I exist for some purpose, and, if so, how am I to discover it?[43]

What Britton here identifies as synonyms of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" I take to be contexts where the question is generated. We are the kinds of creatures who desire to know why anything exists. Answering this question is a large component in figuring out the meaning of life. But it is not all of it. We still want to know what makes life valuable, what the purpose(s) of life is, and how to make sense out of pain and suffering. Plumbing the meaning of life is not solely a product of addressing the metaphysical question of why we and the universe even exist at all. This is just one of the myriad of contexts in which the question is asked. Of course, on the narrative interpretation I am proposing, the narrative will provide a framework in which to situate all of these question-producing contexts.

[43] Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 2-3.

4.4.3 Pain and Suffering

Finally, the experience and contemplation of evil, pain, and suffering is a prominent motivating context for asking, "What is the meaning of life?" I think there are at least three primary features to the problem of evil relevant here: (i) the intellectual, theoretical, or philosophical problem, (ii) the existential problem, and (iii) the eschatological "problem." Likely, considerations of all three come to bear upon the issue of life's meaning. The first aspect of the problem, the intellectual, I largely identify with the dialectic in Western philosophical history centered on whether evil is compatible with the existence of an omnicompetent God.[44] One thinks here of Hume's famous dictum in the mouth of Philo, a fictional character in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, "*Epicurus's* old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"[45] The narrative associated with the meaning of life will have something to say about this, even if one takes, for example, a skeptical theistic approach, claiming that agnosticism, in part, about God's purposes in allowing certain instances of pain and suffering is a salient element of the meaning of life narrative.[46]

The second aspect of the problem of evil, what I call the "existential" feature, is the human experience of evil as creatures capable of *feeling* pain and suffering

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[44] By "omni*competent*" I mean the classical theistic conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.

[45] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 108-109.

[46] This is important, and highlights the fact that a narrative can possess a narrative element that narrates that *we do not know*. That is to say, the narrative can possess *negative* narrative claims in addition to *positive* narrative claims. They are still elements of the narrative and narrate part of the world, even if they merely inform us of a cognitive limitation.

physically, and perhaps more importantly, *psychologically*. While this cannot be divorced from the intellectual problem centering on philosophical explanation and the compatibility of theistic propositions, it is distinct, and, as Alvin Plantinga has remarked, the one *suffering* is in as much need of pastoral counseling as she is in need of informational elucidation, even though the latter certainly has relevance for the former.[47] One thinks here of the despairing cry of the afflicted Job, "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? . . . Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures . . .?" (Job 3:11, 20-21).[48] Again, life's narrative will speak to this aspect of the problem of evil, as it does the philosophical aspect.

Finally, there is a future-oriented side to the problem of evil in that many individuals *hope* for a future state of affairs where they exist and evil, pain, and suffering are eradicated forever. Within this context, every fiber of our being demands the eventual defeat of evil. With the prophet Habakkuk, we cry, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? . . . Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?" (Habakkuk 1:2a, 3a). I think all three dimensions of the problem of evil are quite relevant to the issue of life's meaning such that all will need to be addressed in any account of life's meaning. They are certainly salient contexts in which questions about life meaning come to the fore.

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[47] See Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 69.

[48] Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural citations will be from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

4.4.4 The Contextual and Motivational Origins of the Question: Conclusions

I want to draw two important conclusions from the preceding discussion of these question-producing contexts. First, I think this lends evidence to my claim that global and all-inclusive intuitions are a large part of the question's motivational history. That is to say, the meaning of life question is not one asked only in a particular context or about a singular feature of life. And even if individuals cannot give a philosophically rigorous account for why they are asking this question in a multiplicity of contexts, I think philosophers need to offer an interpretation that harmonizes with the fact that people do ask it in a variety of circumstances. My second conclusion follows from this.

In each of these contexts part of what we desire is an explanatory framework in which to answer the question that we are posing. We might want to know what grounds the meaning or value of our raising a family. Perhaps we want to know why we exist. Or, when it comes to pain and suffering, we might want sufficient explanations for the three aspects of the problem of evil, even if the explanation has, for example, strong undercurrents of skeptical theism. Hence, when we combine these question-producing contexts and ask why it is that the question of life's meaning is often asked in each of them, we should see ourselves in asking the question as searching for a narrative of reality that provides a deep framework for understanding and assessing these existentially relevant portions of existence. They are the salient parts of life, the parts that cause us to ponder existence, the parts that make us feel the immensity of reality, the parts that make us recognize our own finitude and mortality, and the parts that strike us as profound. We want the rest of the narrative that brings some sense to these elements and rationally and

existentially glues them all together.[49] We are familiar with some elements, and we are in search of others we think will shed light on the ones with which we are already in contact but around which remain gripping and weighty questions concerning how to understand them.

When we consider these contextual origins of the question of life's meaning we see that the kind of narrative I am here proposing as how we ought to interpret the question serves this function. Not only is the pursuit of such a narrative a natural and plausible way of understanding the request, "What is the meaning of *x*?" it serves as a single, unifying construct that addresses the cluster of issues associated with the meaning of life. This stands in contrast to the amalgam thesis, which largely argues that fundamentally different questions are being asked in different contexts. And while I do not dispute that this is sometimes the case, I do not think it sufficiently accounts for certain unarticulated intuitions highlighting the global and all-inclusive nature of the question. The narrative interpretation nicely accounts for these intuitions. I will now turn to a more detailed comparison of the narrative interpretation with the amalgam thesis.

4.5 The Philosophical Advantages of the Narrative Interpretation over Extant Interpretations and the Amalgam Thesis

Philosophers have too quickly moved from the property of vagueness characterizing the question to the *re-formulation project* embodied by the amalgam thesis. The range of interpretations that retain the original linguistic formulation of the request for life's meaning have not been exhausted. We should work diligently to try and secure an interpretation that does justice to the *language* of the question, even though that language is admittedly vague. The narrative interpretation that I have developed in the

[49] Of course, pessimists like Schopenhauer and Camus think this desire is ultimately folly. For that matter, so does Thomas Nagel.

last three chapters is one such interpretive option. While some who ask the question of life's meaning may not, initially, identify a narrative as what they are seeking, once the narrative interpretation is explained, I think individuals will recognize something natural and compelling about the interpretation. Most prominently, they will see that it secures everything we generally seek when inquiring into life's meaning under one unifying construct, the construct of a narrative of the world that crosses some existentially relevant threshold in terms of its specificity in accounting for the universe and our place within it.

In §1.3 of Chapter One ("Interpreting the Question: The Amalgam Thesis") I noted that many philosophers currently writing on the topic of the meaning of life operate within the parameters defined by the amalgam thesis, considering the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as largely ill-conceived and little more than a placeholder for a cluster of related requests.[50] This cluster of requests consists of questions like, "What is the purpose(s) of life?" "What makes life valuable?" or "Is life ultimately worthwhile or is it irredeemably futile?" On the amalgam approach, seemingly little effort is made to interpret the original question on its own linguistic terms, as the question is quickly morphed into what is taken to be another more manageable form. It has been recognized, though, that none of these interpretations *individually* captures everything to be captured about the meaning of life. The meaning of life is not merely about purpose or value or worth or significance alone. This observation has led Thaddeus Metz to note that, ". . . [t]here is no single idea that unifies all the diverse views that have been deemed to be

[50] So, for example, "They [meaning of life questions] are amalgams of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither." R. W. Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," p. 262. ". . . the field has found it difficult to reduce this question to a single basic idea. . . . this question is associated with a variety of closely related but not entirely overlapping questions . . .," Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007): p. 211. "The problem is that it ["What's it all about?" or "What is the meaning of life?"] is vague, general, and unclear. It is not so much a single question but a place-holder for a whole set of questions . . .," Julian Baggini, *What's It All About?, Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 1.

about the meaning of life . . ."[51] The amalgam thesis cannot account for what unifies the cluster of considerations surrounding the meaning of life, even though it provides a generally plausible account of the question's vagueness.

To be sure, the amalgam thesis has philosophical merit. It accounts for a salient fact, namely, that the question *is* variously interpreted in terms of purpose, value, worth, significance, etc. In addition, it explains the vagueness present in the original question, even if only through linguistic reformulation. However, I think those who hold something like the amalgam thesis have surrendered too quickly. Indeed, the amalgam thesis implies that there is no philosophically respectable interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" that interprets it on its own linguistic terms while also capturing the questions highlighted in each of the reformulated versions. It seems to me that this is mistaken. I have proposed a narrative interpretation that secures the following desiderata: (i) the original formulation of the question is interpreted *without* morphing it into another question(s),[52] and (ii) the interpretation is able to unify the questions enumerated by the amalgam thesis under a single concept, thus making them more explicitly *about* the meaning of life as opposed to, for example, value or purpose only. Related to its failure to satisfy these desiderata, the amalgam thesis suffers in three important areas.

First, the amalgam thesis fails to interpret the question on its own linguistic terms. Contrary to what the amalgam thesis implies, use of the term "meaning" need not signal irredeemable confusion. In fact, it tracks a natural employment of the term that highlights

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[51] Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): p. 802.

[52] I take (i) to be a desideratum of any interpretation of the question largely because I think the use of "meaning" is not primarily an indicator of confusion, but a legitimate marker (arguably vague) of what it is people seek when inquiring into the meaning of life. That which is being sought is not reducible to a question about purpose or value or worth *alone*.

the cluster of issues connected with the meaning of life. The question in its original form, then, is not ill-conceived as some have claimed. The reason people consistently employ "meaning" is because it connotes what people seek in asking the question, namely, a narrative that narrates across an existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena and accompanying questions, much like the narrative the father sought. It seems to me that an interpretation which retains the original question while making its request philosophically plausible is better, *ceteris paribus*, than those that do not. The narrative interpretation meets this condition, and provides a plausible reason for why so many people initially employ this form of the question as opposed to some reworked formulation. The problem with the reformulation project is that salient intuitions and sub-questions latent in the original fail to be captured by any one reformulation. The narrative interpretation nicely secures a place for all of this under a single, unifying interpretation.

Second, there is something *global* or *all-inclusive* about the question of life's meaning for which the amalgam thesis fails to adequately account. Indeed, sometimes it is meant to be a question about everything. At minimum, however, it should be seen as a question whose scope is broader than simply about purpose or value or worth considered individually. To be sure, the reformulated questions posited by the amalgam thesis are existentially weighty and closely aligned with the meaning of life, but individually, they are only local and mere subsets of the meaning of life question. Milton Munitz correctly notes that the question of life's meaning is motivated by intuitions of ". . . relative depth or total scope."[53] None of the reformulated questions in terms of value or purpose captures this sweeping nature of the original question. In fact, the amalgam thesis would

[53] Milton K. Munitz, *Does Life Have A Meaning?*, p. 29.

have us understand the question, "What is the meaning life?" as little more than the disjunctive question, *"'What is the purpose of life'? or 'What makes life valuable'? or 'What makes life worthwhile'? or x?"* The primary problem with this, though, is that these questions are about purpose and value and worth rather than about the meaning of life. We ought to look for ways to make them more directly about the meaning of life. The narrative interpretation functions in this capacity to *unify* all of them under a single interpretive construct, making each about some aspect of the meaning of life. This interpretation offers an explanatorily powerful, semantically faithful, and logically coherent way of understanding the question on its own terms that addresses everything centrally and peripherally related to the topic of life's meaning under a single unifying construct that is then identified as *the* meaning of life.

Third, the amalgam thesis makes room for death and futility in the meaning of life context only indirectly via conversations surrounding the potential threat death poses for leading a valuable or worthwhile life. I do not think this is misguided, only truncated. Indeed, I think there is a deeper reason why issues of death and futility are often part and parcel of discussions about the meaning of life, and this reason fits naturally and compellingly within the narrative interpretation. The general point is that the *ending* of a narrative is especially important to various kinds of broadly normative appraisals of the narrative *as a whole*. This is why a "bad" ending might ruin a narrative for us. Given that the ending of a narrative is often thought to have such power, how our lives end along with how the universe itself ends seems especially important to whether we appraise the antecedent portions of the meaning of life narrative as valuable and worthwhile or irredeemably futile. Therefore, our emotional, aesthetic, and moral evaluations of

candidate meaning of life narratives will be closely intertwined with their endings. On the narrative interpretation, then, it becomes especially clear why death has been thought to be so relevant to the meaning of life.

4.6 Summary

My aim in this chapter has been to further motivate and strengthen the plausibility of the narrative interpretation of life's meaning. This consisted of four broadly related tasks: (i) noting the question's global or all-inclusive aspect, (ii) demonstrating the link between the concept of worldview and the narrative interpretation and why this is relevant, (iii) discussing the situations, circumstances, and life-contexts out of which the question of life's meaning is birthed, and (iv) more narrowly, to show the philosophical advantages of the narrative interpretation over extant interpretations and the amalgam thesis. I concluded by briefly noting philosophical pay-offs that accompany the narrative interpretations.

PART II

The Metaphysical Project

It would be wonderful to find in the laws of nature a plan prepared by a concerned creator in which human beings played some special role. I find sadness in doubting that we will. There are some among my scientific colleagues who say that the contemplation of nature gives them all the spiritual satisfaction that others have found in a belief in an interested God. Some of them may even feel that way. I do not.

~Steven Weinberg (1992, p. 256)

And so, I profess my Faith. For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty, and my ability to apprehend it, serves as the ultimate meaning and the ultimate value. The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification, no Creator, no superordinate meaning of meaning, no purpose other than that the continuation continue until the sun collapses or the final meteor collides. I confess a credo of continuation.

~Ursula Goodenough (2000, p. 171)

. . . you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

~Augustine of Hippo (1998, p. 3)

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.

~Blaise Pascal (1994, p. 45)

CHAPTER FIVE

Theism, Naturalism, and the Meaning of Life Narrative

5.1 Shifting Contexts: From the Linguistic Project to the Metaphysical Project

In Chapters One through Four, my aims were broadly linguistic and interpretive. Here I introduced, developed, and defended an interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" whereby the question is viewed as *the request for a narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to rational, emotional, and self-reflective creatures such as us*. I nuanced this general interpretation with more precise definitions; these I called $CdML_N$ (Candidate Meaning of Life Narrative) and $ThML_N$ (The Meaning of Life). $CdML_N$ picks out narratives with the correct formal properties, whereas $ThML_N$ additionally requires the correct material content, thus picking out the unique narrative that is *the* meaning of life. There will be numerous *candidate* meaning of life narratives satisfying the formal condition; there will be one and only one narrative that satisfies the formal *and* material conditions.

The remaining chapters (Chapters Five through Seven) will be largely metaphysical in orientation. The 'Metaphysical Project' of these chapters will substantially overlap into philosophical territory subsumed under metaphysics and philosophy of religion, as discussions of reductionism, teleology, ultimate explanation, God, evil, and eschatology, among others, will occupy a prominent place. In these chapters, I will introduce and compare theistic and naturalistic narratives on the category of ER_N, highlighting key points of divergence. This portion of the dissertation will be

largely exploratory, and even though my proclivities will become clear as to which narrative I think is most satisfying intellectually and existentially, I will not engage in sustained argumentation for any particular conclusion. My aims primarily are to show how my interpretation can be utilized in order to compare and contrast relevant narrative elements of the meaning of life from the two dominant metaphysical narratives in the West, namely, theism and naturalism. In turn, there is then a compelling reason to see how discussions largely carried out on different philosophical fronts (e.g., metaphysics and philosophy of religion) are equally, and perhaps more importantly, discussions about the meaning of life.

The material in this chapter functions as prolegomena for Chapters Six and Seven. Here, I discuss foundational issues for the Metaphysical Project. I begin by discussing important definitional considerations surrounding naturalism and theism. I compare *strict* and *broad* naturalism, and note that, for example, where one sides on the debate over ontological reduction will have *normative* implications in the realms of purpose and value, realms that directly link to the meaning of life. Next, I introduce a distinction between *restricted* and *expanded* theism, followed by a presentation of the central contours of a version of expanded theism—Christian expanded theism. After providing brief taxonomies of the naturalistic and theistic positions I will later compare, I consider how well the concept of narrative is able to map onto entire metaphysical systems like naturalism and Christian expanded theism. I note the natural fit between Christian expanded theism and the category of narrative, as instantiations of classical theism are embodied in *stories*. Finally, I discuss Sartrian-type criticisms against life being anything like a dramatic narrative, and argue that such criticisms do not undermine the narrative

interpretation because (i) the narrative interpretation is compatible with *reducing* some candidate meaning of life narratives to *explanations* of a certain scope, and (ii) these criticisms, essentially, are simply objections against traditional instantiations of classical theism.[1]

5.2 Defining Naturalism

In a recent book on the topic, naturalism has been defined as the view that, ". . . *everything that exists is a part of nature and that there is no reality beyond or outside nature*."[2] Yet, like most "isms," naturalism is far from monolithic. Beyond the common credo that *super*-natural entities have no place in a completed ontology, there is much divergence within the naturalist camp. As Barry Stroud writes, agreement upon what constitutes the *naturalist* philosophical view is hard to find even among self-avowed naturalists:

> "Naturalism" seems to me . . . rather like "World Peace." Almost everyone swears allegiance to it, and is willing to march under its banner. But disputes can still break out about what it is appropriate or acceptable to do in the name of that slogan. And like world peace, once you start specifying concretely exactly what it involves and how to achieve it, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach and to sustain a consistent and exclusive "naturalism." There is pressure on the one hand to include more and more within your conception of "nature," so it loses its definiteness and restrictiveness. Or, if the conception is kept fixed and restrictive, there is pressure on the other hand to distort or even to deny the very phenomena that a naturalistic study—and especially a naturalistic study of human beings—is supposed to explain.[3]

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[1] That is to say, if a traditional instantiation of theism like Jewish, Christian, or Islamic theism is true, then life is very much like a dramatic narrative, where the author, God, is purposefully guiding life to a point of eschatological culmination. The Sartrian objection has merit if metaphysical naturalism is true. This, however, does not undermine my thesis, given that "narrative" can be employed metaphorically in the case of the candidate naturalistic meaning of life *narrative*.

[2] Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), p. 6.

[3] Barry Stroud, "The Charm of Naturalism," in *Naturalism in Question*, ed. De Caro, Mario and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 22.

Stroud's point is relevant to my interpretation of the meaning of life question. There will be more than one candidate naturalistic meaning of life narrative given that naturalistic narratives will differ in some of their ER_N. Of course, each and every naturalistic narrative will have the denial of God and other supernatural entities as a constituent narrative element. The similarities, however, will run out.

The divergence within naturalism, then, is worth tracing, for the way in which one explicates naturalism has important implications for candidate naturalistic meaning of life narratives. For example, strong reductive forms of naturalism will have different narrative elements than non-reductive forms of naturalism; the latter allow for irreducible mental properties, normative properties, and teleological explanations of events in the deep structure of reality, the former do not. In addition, some naturalistic narratives will have as an element that one cannot be mistaken about what is valuable (subjectivists) because there is no truth of the matter, whereas other naturalistic narratives will have as an element the claim that one ought to order her life around intrinsically valuable states of affairs and ends that are objective features of reality (objectivists). It will be helpful, then, to briefly define and discuss the general contours of these two approaches to naturalism. There are other intramural debates among naturalists besides the debate on the ontological front. I will also consider divergence among naturalists on what I call the *existential front* (pessimistic vs. optimistic naturalism) later in this chapter, and the *normative front* (subjectivist vs. objectivist naturalism) in Chapter Six, as such discussions fit more naturally in other contexts.

5.2.1 Strict Naturalism

Strict or "scientific" naturalism is a construal of naturalism that centers on two important themes: (i) *Ontological:* the commitment to an exclusively scientific conception of nature, and (ii) *Methodological:* the reconception of the traditional relation between philosophy and science according to which philosophical inquiry is conceived as continuous with science.[4] Within these broad themes, Mario de Caro and David Macarthur define three specific varieties (though not mutually exclusive given that scientific naturalism is often viewed comprehensively to include all three) of scientific naturalism: *ontological scientific naturalism*, *methodological (or epistemological) scientific naturalism*, and *semantic scientific naturalism*. Ontological scientific naturalism maintains that the *only* genuine entities that exist are those posited by acceptable scientific explanations.[5] Methodological or epistemological scientific naturalism maintains that genuine knowledge is secured *only* through the empirical methods of *a posteriori* inquiry as embodied in the natural sciences.[6] Finally, semantic scientific naturalism maintains that the *only* genuine concepts we have are those that are either (i) employed by the natural sciences or (ii) capable of reinterpretation through scientifically respectable concepts.[7] So, scientific naturalism has three dimensions, ontological, methodological or epistemological, and semantic. In addition, many naturalists add a

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[4] Mario de Caro and David Macarthur, "Introduction," in *Naturalism in Question*, p. 3. More simply, one could state the first two theses as follows: (1) *Ontological:* everything that exists is a part of nature, and (ii) *Methodological:* something is a part of nature if and only if it is describable and explainable in an ideal, complete science or, more specifically, a completed physics.

[5] Ibid., p. 7.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

causal-closure thesis, whereby nature is conceived of ". . . as a causally closed spatiotemporal structure governed by efficient causal laws—where causes are thought of, paradigmatically, as mind-independent bringers-about of change or difference."[8]

The above theses correlate closely with another defining feature of strict or scientific naturalism: strong ontological reduction. Reductionism, roughly, says that for some entity *x* that is reducible to *y*, *x* still exists, but that *x* is no longer thought be what some theory *s* says it is, but is actually *reducible* to being *y*. So, for example, scientists used to believe that when a body grows hot, the increase in temperature was due to it receiving heat, and heat was understood as a subtle, weightless, invisible fluid known as caloric. Today, however, scientists believe that there is no such thing as caloric; instead, heat has been *reduced* to the vibration of molecules. Note that heat was not *eliminated* (a stronger ontological claim), but only that what heat was first thought to be, *x (caloric)*, has been reduced to being *y (vibration of molecules)*. Under the rubric of this general reductionism, one can identify two specific versions: (i) *strong ontological reduction* (SOR) and (ii) *weak ontological reduction* (WOR). It is important to note that (i) is more closely aligned with strict naturalism, whereas (ii) is more closely aligned with broad or liberal naturalism. Indeed, weak ontological reduction is likely consistent with a broad naturalist who thinks, for example, that consciousness and normative properties are both irreducible and part of the fundamental ontology of the world, even if they are *causally* dependent upon physical states of affairs and properties. I will discuss WOR in the next section on broad naturalism.

The strong ontological reduction (SOR) thesis may be defined as follows:

(SOR) = strong ontological reduction occurs when some entity, state of

[8] Ibid., p. 10.

> affairs, or event *x* is reduced to some entity, state of affairs, or event *y* in a way that entails that *x* is identical to *y*.

Strongly reducing an entity, state of affairs, or event *x* to an entity, state of affairs, or event *y* entails that, what are thought to be, two putatively distinct entities are actually one and the same entity. For example, in the case of strongly reducing the mental state and accompanying phenomenal experience one has while observing a beautiful sunset, the mental state and phenomenal experience are said to be *identical* to a certain configuration of neural firing in the brain and central nervous system. The mental state and phenomenal experience *just is* or is *nothing more than* whatever it is that is going on electrochemically in the physical brain and central nervous system.

Strict, scientific naturalism, and the accompanying tendency towards strong ontological reduction, at least with respect to persons, has been aptly depicted by Francis Crick in his *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul:*

> The Astonishing Hypothesis is that "You," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of identity and free will, are in fact *no more than* the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice may have phrased it: "You're nothing but a pack of neurons." This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can be truly called astonishing [emphasis added].[9]

For Crick and other strict naturalists, ultimate reality is reducible to matter in motion, and the postulation of mental, normative, and, more absurdly, spiritual properties and entities is, at best, superfluous. An exhaustive account of reality can be given at the level of physical, scientific descriptions.[10]

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[9] Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Scribner, 1994), p. 3.

[10] Barry Stroud has noted that many take naturalism to entail strict naturalism, "Naturalism is widely understood to imply that no evaluative states of affairs or properties are part of the world of nature. On that assumption, either evaluative thoughts and beliefs take as their "objects" something that is not to be found

5.2.2 Broad Naturalism

Broad or liberal naturalists,[11] no less than strict naturalists affirm an ontological view of the world devoid of finite and infinite spiritual beings (i.e., God, angels, etc.). Apart from this, though, there is substantial disagreement about what should be included in a fundamental ontology of what is real. For the broad naturalist, things like consciousness and normative properties, among others, are *fully natural* and yet are not *fully reducible* to physics or chemistry. For that matter, they *cannot*, in principle, be the proper objects of study, even for some future, completed, and exhaustive physics. Consciousness and normative properties, while fully natural are *not the kinds of things* that can be exhaustively accounted for by physics and chemistry. Generally, broad naturalists desire to fit consciousness, value, and teleology within a purely naturalistic ontology *without reducing* these things to something more basic and purely physical. Indeed, they acknowledge the reality of consciousness and normative properties, both non-moral normative properties (e.g., the goodness of truth and beauty) and moral normative properties (e.g., the goodness of benevolence and patience).[12]

Broad naturalists reject strong forms of reductionism, while holding a metaphysical view that is consistent with a weaker form of reductionism than SOR. In contrast to SOR, weak ontological reduction (WOR) does not require identity relations, and is consistent with both ontological emergence and ontological supervenience. The weak ontological reduction thesis (WOR) may be defined as follows:

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in the natural world at all, or their contents are equivalent to something that *is* true in that world, so they are not really evaluative." "The Charm of Naturalism," p. 30.

[11] I use the term "liberal" in accordance with the introduction of the term in *Naturalism in Question* to define a loosely-connected cluster of emerging viewpoints within the naturalist camp (p. 1).

[12] Goetz and Taliaferro, *Naturalism*, p. 71.

(WOR) = weak ontological reduction occurs when some entity, state of affairs, or event *x* is reduced to some entity, state of affairs, or event *y* in that *x* is said to be *caused by* or *explained by* or *dependent* on *y*.

Again, WOR is a much weaker metaphysical thesis than SOR. To see the difference, consider the following case. *Wetness* may be said to be weakly reducible to the molecular structure of a group of water molecules in that this structure is what causes and explains wetness. In an instance of SOR, the wetness of the group of H_2O molecules would be considered identical to or nothing more than the molecular structure of this group of molecules. In an instance of WOR, on the other hand, the wetness of the group of molecules might be said to be *supervenient* on or *emergent* from that molecular structure. That is to say, the property of wetness is different from, *even if causally dependent upon*, the physical molecular structure of the group of water molecules.

As noted, WOR is consistent with both *emergence* and *supervenience*. Roughly, emergence is the metaphysical thesis that complex systems or states of affairs can give rise to emergent properties (or substances), and that these emergent properties (or substances) are not directly traceable (metaphysical intraceability, not epistemic intraceability) to the system's components,[13] but rather to the *interaction* of the system's components. In the case of emergent properties, *the whole really is greater than the parts*. Emergentism, though, is still consistent with a naturalistic ontology, given that emergent properties are still *dependent* upon physical properties and a matrix of complex physical interactions in physical systems and states of affairs.

[13] I refer here to *metaphysical intraceability* and not *epistemic intraceability*. The former is a stronger concept. Emergentism requires the stronger metaphysical intraceability thesis, given that one could envision a situation where some property, in fact, is metaphysically traceable even though it is not epistemically traceable. Metaphysical intraceability entails epistemic intraceability, but epistemic intraceability does not entail metaphysical intraceability.

Contentions and aims of broad naturalism as well as WOR are also consistent with various supervenience theses. Supervenience picks out a kind of dependency relationship between that which supervenes, and the supervenient base upon which it supervenes. While there are *weak* and *strong* versions of the supervenience thesis, a single, general definition will suffice in this context. I will call it (SV):

> (SV) = A set of properties *A* is said to supervene on a set of properties *B*, if and only if any two objects *x* and *y* which share all properties in *B* (are "*B*-indiscernible") must also share all properties in *A* (are "*A*-indiscernible").

SV means that *A*-properties supervene on *B*-properties if being *B*-indiscernible entails being *A*-indiscernible. Put simply, if two things differ in their supervenient properties, then they must differ in their supervenient base. Here is an example. If mental states (e.g., being in pain) supervene on physical or brain states (or central nervous system states), then any two persons who are physically (brain stately) indistinguishable must also be mentally indistinguishable.[14] Note, however, that SV (the way I have defined it) means that the supervenience relationship is not *symmetrical*. That is to say, even if being the same physically entails being the same mentally, two persons can be the same mentally yet different physically. This is in line with the common view that mental properties are thought to be *multiply realizable* in divergent supervenient bases (e.g., human brain, Martian brain, etc.).

Considerations of emergence and supervenience are important, as they demonstrate that metaphysical strategies employed by broad naturalists to account for reality allow one to hold that higher level properties and phenomena like consciousness and normative properties depend, ultimately, upon physics without being committed to

[14] Again, I am referring to metaphysical indistinguishability and not epistemological indistinguishability. It is a variation of the same distinction introduced in footnote 13.

the view that one can study those higher level phenomena simply by doing physics. Moreover, this will likely have implications for one's conclusions on whether a meaningful life can be secured in a naturalistic world, or, at minimum, what one thinks *grounds* a meaningful life. Is a meaningful life grounded in properties or features of existence that objectively obtain or is it grounded subjectively in fiat creations of the human will based solely in what an agent desires? Furthermore, if ideas like libertarian freedom or some strong version of freedom and a substantial, enduring self are nothing more than phenomenal illusions, can one even secure a meaningful existence? Depending upon one's ontological commitments and one's view of the reductionism project, these questions will likely be answered differently, and different options will be available to strict and broad naturalists.

It is not just theists who criticize the strong reductionism of strict naturalism. Thomas Nagel summarizes his pessimistic thoughts on the project of strict naturalism:

> The reductionist project usually tries to reclaim some of the originally excluded aspects of the world, by analyzing them in physical—that is, behavioral or neurophysiological—terms; but it denies reality to what cannot be so reduced. I believe the project is doomed—that conscious experience, thought, value, and so forth are not illusions, even though they cannot be identified with physical facts."[15]

The debate over what naturalism entails, especially in terms of the metaphysical content of the naturalistic worldview is important for my project in this dissertation as the stage is being set for a comparison of naturalistic and theistic candidate meaning of life

[15] From Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," *The New Republic* (October 23, 2006) as quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), pp. 91-92. Interestingly, Nagel has also said, "I am talking of . . . the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true. . . . It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God: I don't want the universe to be like that. . . . I am curious whether there is anyone who is genuinely indifferent as to whether there is a God—anyone who, whatever his actual belief about the matter, doesn't particularly want *either one of the answers to be correct*." *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 130.

narratives. Given the divergence within the naturalist camp, there is no single naturalistic candidate meaning of life narrative. What is important, though, is that certain key differences in candidate naturalistic meaning of life narratives will partially track the distinction between strict and broad conceptions of naturalism.

5.3 Restricted Theism vs. Expanded Theism

Up to this point in the dissertation, I have spoken of theism in general. By "theism," I refer to the view that an omnicompetent (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent) personal God exists who is both transcendent and immanent, and who is responsible for the universe, where such responsibility is thought to entail God's *creation* of the universe. "Theism," or classical theism, is generally taken to be shorthand for *monotheism*. It is the view of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Leibniz, Edwards, and many others, both historically and in the contemporary world, and has a rich and venerable pedigree. These theologian-philosophers or philosopher-theologians affirmed more, doctrinally, than simply the existence of an omnicompetent God, but they *at least* affirmed this.

Significant philosophical debates in the philosophy of religion, where discussions of the merits or demerits of theism are at the fore, have generally focused on a generic sort of theism that abstracts certain metaphysical theses about the nature of God from their historical-religious contexts. Relevantly, back in the mid-1980's, William Rowe introduced an important distinction into discussions of the evidential problem of evil between *restricted theism* and *expanded theism*. He states:

> Let's call *standard theism* any view which holds that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, omnigood being who created the world. Letting 'O' abbreviate 'an omnipotent, omniscient, omnigood being', standard theism is any view which holds that O exists. Within standard theism, we can distinguish *restricted* theism

> and *expanded* theism. Expanded theism is the view that O exists, conjoined with certain other significant religious claims, claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like. (Orthodox Christian theism is a version of expanded theism.) Restricted theism is the view that O exists, unaccompanied by other, independent religious claims.[16]

Whether this distinction is able to advance philosophical discussions of the problem of evil past the long-standing dialectical impasse between theists and non-theists is unclear. More importantly for my aims is the general claim that theists ought to avail themselves of all relevant theological resources in their worldview, whether that be in the context of the problem of evil or the meaning of life. Christian, Jewish, and Islamic instantiations of theism posit much more, theologically, than the minimalist affirmation of the existence of an omnicompetent deity, and these additional theological commitments will have relevance to certain philosophical issues.

Within the context of the problem of evil, Marilyn McCord Adams has noted her own concern of the perceived failure to move beyond general discussions of the compossibility of God and evil *only* with the resources provided by a generic theism:

> My own nutshell answer [to the question of why discussions on the problem of evil had stalled] is that the debate was carried on at too high a level of abstraction. By agreeing to a focus on what William Rowe came to label "restricted standard theism," both sides avoided responsibility to a particular tradition; neither took care—whether in arguments for the incompossibility of God and evils, or in their rebuttals—to construe the value-premisses and attribute-analyses as that tradition does; neither felt any pressure to explore its distinctive resources or to admit its peculiar liabilities. In fact, Christian theism embraces a richer store of valuables than secular value-theories recognize, while some versions of Christianity countenance worse evils as well.[17]

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[16] William Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," in *The Problem of Evil*, eds. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 161. This article originally appeared in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 16 (1984): pp. 95-100.

[17] Marily McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 3.

By and large, I agree with Adams's assessment. For this reason, among others,[18] I will approach those remaining portions of my discussion of the meaning of life where theism is relevant from the viewpoint of a specific instantiation of theism—Christian theism.[19] I am fully aware that there are other deeply historically rooted versions of theism; however, I will operate within the specific theistic parameters with which I am familiar and of which I am a part. No less than with the problem of evil, a theistic discussion of the meaning of life that fails to appropriate resources from a rich and robust theologico-historical narrative will likely be truncated and impoverished.

5.3.1 Christian Expanded Theism: Broad Contours

Moving from generic, minimalistic theism to Christian theism, although it more tightly circumscribes the conceptual territory, still leaves one with a staggering range of theological options. One need only be casually acquainted with Church history and historical theology to know that there is no consensus on numerous doctrinal affirmations of Christian theism. The diversity within Christian theism is often highlighted, though, without appreciating the significant doctrinal agreement among Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. One way of defining Christian theism, then, is to isolate the core of agreement between these different groups.[20] Indeed, one will find substantial agreement, especially centering on the creedal affirmations encapsulated in

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[18] An additional reason is that a restricted, bare-bones theism does not provide a sufficient number of narrative or explanatory elements to answer all of the questions associated with the meaning of life.

[19] There will be a few places, however, where theism in general will suffice.

[20] Although, even here there will be debate. Some groups that find themselves *outside* of "orthodox" Christian belief and practice as defined by, for example, the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds, will think that I have already defined Christian theism too narrowly. There is really no way to avoid this. The line of demarcation must be drawn somewhere, and that will likely always exclude some views. Furthermore, this dissertation is not an apologetic for any particular instantiation of Christian expanded theism. I select a version with which I am familiar, and explore the kind of candidate meaning of life narrative that *it* offers.

Nicene Orthodoxy and as expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, among Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley, and many others.[21] Defining Christian theism, then, may involve saying that one means by "Christian theism," what these theologians meant by "Christian theism" in the core theological affirmations that unite them. Sorting through their similarities and differences, though, is too cumbersome and unnecessary for my aims in the dissertation.

Probably the most helpful way of explicating Christian theism at the service of my goals in this dissertation, and as inclusively as possible given my own theological commitments, is to trace the broad contours of the *narrative* to which nearly all Christian theists assent, even if only in some broad sense. It is the narrative built around the themes of *creation-fall-redemption-consummation* (CFRC). No doubt, Christian theists within diverse theological traditions will disagree over precisely how these themes of CFRC are understood and what they entail, but there will be general agreement on the broad contours. For example, most Christian theists will affirm (i) that God exists as a personal, transcendent agent,[22] (ii) that this being is causally responsible, ultimately, for the existence of the universe, (iii) that there is some sort of "problem" in the universe requiring remedy, (iv) that God has enacted a plan to remedy this problem, and (v) that this plan will eventually culminate in a good and blessed ending. Recognizing that not all who label themselves as *Christian theists* will be comfortable with (i) through (v), I will simply stipulate that this how I intend to employ *Christian theism* in this dissertation. I

[21] Of course, one will also find disagreement among these theologians on the nature of epistemic and religious authority within the context of debates over the relationship of Scripture and tradition, the doctrine of justification, and ecclesiology, among others.

[22] Those within the process theology tradition, for example, will already disagree. But again, my aim is not nor can it be to provide a definition that allows each and every view that someone thinks should fall under the rubric of Christian theism to be represented.

have been as inclusive as possible, but exclusion, at some level, is unavoidable whenever one advances positive theses about the nature of reality. In §5.5 ("Christian Theism and the Category of Narrative") I will provide a fuller relevant presentation of CFRC along with the narrative built around these themes.

5.4 Candidate Meaning of Life Narratives and Narrative Category Gradience

In Chapter Two, following David Herman, I noted that the category of narrative exhibits *gradience*.[23] Therefore, a given instance of discourse can be more or less a central instance of the category of narrative, and less central instances will have elements that allow them to be merged into other categories of discourse (e.g., explanations, descriptions, lists, etc.). That the category of narrative is characterized by gradience invites both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic uses of the category. On non-paradigmatic uses, "narrative" might be dissolved into "experience," "interpretation," "explanation," "representation," or even "content."[24] A non-paradigmatic employment allows, for example, a text on evolution or the Big Bang to count as narrative, as well as other forms of discourse. An example of a narrative in the paradigmatic sense would be Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or, possibly, my grandfather narrating his involvement in the Battle of the Bulge or the Battle of Hürtgen forest in World War II.

My narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is consistent with both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic employments of the category of narrative. Recall the analogy I introduced in §3.5 of Chapter Three ("The Narrative Interpretation: An Analogy") of the father walking in on his children's scuffle and

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[23] David Herman, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 8.

[24] Ibid.

demanding, “What is the *meaning* of this?” The resulting answer to the father’s request may be a narrative paradigmatically or it might be an explanation that fails to bear all the marks of a paradigmatic case of narrative. It is plausible to think, though, that the ensuing answer offered by the children will bear many distinct marks of a narrative, thus pushing it closer to an instance of a paradigmatic narrative. Once the children say, “Well, this is how it started,” there is no reason to think that what follows will not be a *story* in the robust sense, even though the ensuing instance of discourse could also be viewed as an explanation that fails to fully qualify as a narrative. It is not really that important for my purposes that we resolve this issue.

Whether or not a *candidate* meaning of life “narrative” is a narrative paradigmatically or only in a loose sense is a question, the answer to which is worldview specific. For example, a naturalistic candidate meaning of life narrative will likely lack elements needed to qualify it as a paradigmatic narrative, whereas Christian theistic candidate meaning of life narratives will be examples of paradigmatic narratives. This does not mean that naturalism lacks a putative answer to the question, “What is the meaning of life?” as it provides an *explanation* across all those elements of ER_Q of which I argued a candidate meaning of life narrative needs to narrate. Even if naturalism cannot produce a narrative that is an instance of narrative discourse paradigmatically, this remains an important claim that separates my interpretation of the question, “What is the meaning of life?” from others. The reason for this is that the meaning of life *explanation* provided by naturalism, even if not a full-blown narrative, is different and more comprehensive than an answer to any one of the cluster of questions associated with the

meaning of life. That is to say, it is not the *same* explanation as the explanation of what the purpose of life is or what makes life valuable.

The lesson here is that certain candidate meaning of life narratives will be narratives in the full sense, while others will not. Therefore, Sartrian-type criticisms against viewing our lives as participating in some larger dramatic narrative are not directly relevant to my thesis. Neither the linguistic project nor the metaphysical project of this dissertation requires a candidate meaning of life narrative to be a narrative in a robust sense. An important point here is that Sartrian objections against life being anything like a dramatic narrative are themselves worldview specific. If naturalism is true, I would argue that Sartre and others are correct. However, if theism, or some other religious narrative of reality is true then Sartrian objections have little merit. I will consider the Sartrian objection in more detail later in this chapter.

So, the narrative interpretation is not undermined by the fact that some candidate meaning of life narratives do not qualify as paradigmatic narratives. The fact that some do and others do not is instructive, though, and reveals important assumptions and dynamics surrounding the meaning of life question that I will discuss at the end of this chapter. This divergence is entirely consistent with the narrative interpretation which posits that in asking the question of life's meaning, we should view ourselves as searching for a narrative, paradigmatically or non-paradigmatically construed, that crosses the explanatory threshold constituted by ER_Q. The ensuing instance of discourse may be little more than the conjunctive explanation consisting of individual answers to the questions emerging from the category of ER_Q.[25] This conjunctive explanation would

[25] This conjunctive explanation view would accurately describe a candidate naturalistic meaning of life narrative. Although, one should not take the presence of this mere conjunctive explanation to entail that an

be *the meaning of life*. On the other hand, the ensuing instance of discourse may be, robustly, a narrative in the paradigmatic sense, with the presence of appropriate bridges (e.g., temporal, causal, teleological) between each answer to a question embedded in the category of ER_Q. In the next two sections, I will discuss relevant implications for whether a candidate meaning of life narrative is so in a paradigmatic or non-paradigmatic sense that follow from whether it is naturalism or Christian theism that is under consideration.

A candidate meaning of life narrative's status as a narrative is undoubtedly fluid, and a given candidate narrative will reside somewhere on a narrative continuum between paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic uses, or among concentric circles with paradigmatic instances of narrative in the center and less paradigmatic instances radiating outward. That a candidate meaning of life narrative is a fluid concept is partly a function of (i) that such candidate narratives are essentially what Jean-François Lyotard, and others, have called *metanarratives*, and (ii) that metanarratives are themselves fluid constructions not always instantiating a narrative in the paradigmatic and robust sense.

As noted in §3.6 of Chapter Three ("Metanarratives and the Narrative Interpretation"), metanarratives or grand narratives are ". . . second-order narratives which seek to narratively articulate and legitimate some concrete first-order practices or narratives."[26] They are overarching "stories" about *where* and *who* we are, among other things.[27] A metanarrative is largely defined by its *scope*; it has grand, universal

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answer to one question revolving around an element in ER_Q is entirely unrelated to another answer. This will not be the case, even on the naturalistic meaning of life narrative which is a narrative only in a metaphorical sense.

[26] J. M. Bernstein, "Grand Narratives," in *Paul Ricouer: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 102.

[27] Ibid., p. 103.

pretensions. What kind of universe do we live in? Is it the product of a personal, intentional being? Is there an irreducible teleological element to the rationale of existence? What is our place in the universe that does exist? What kind of creatures are we? Are we merely electro-chemical machines, where all semblances of genuine, irreducibly teleological difference-making agency and personal identity are nothing more than phenomenal illusions? Are we electro-chemical agents who, while giving rise to higher-order, non-reducible properties like consciousness, nonetheless, will cease to exist upon the irreversible biological demise of our electro-chemical parts? These and other basic questions are what metanarratives "narrate." Some of them do so with a story that is more paradigmatically an instance of narrative, where the "story" narrated by other metanarratives is less story-like. The Christian theistic metanarrative will be more story-like, whereas a naturalistic metanarrative will be less story-like and more *explanation-like*. It is to this issue that I now turn.

5.5 Christian Theism and the Category of Narrative

The category of narrative bears a prominent relationship to Christian expanded theism. This close connection largely follows from the character and shape of Scripture itself, an historical-theological-literary *document* that many Christian theists consider to be, in some sense, an instance of divine revelation.[28] Scripture instantiates a *theo-drama*,

[28] I use and highlight "document," as opposed to "narrative" or "story," to call attention to the fact that Scripture consists of a diverse series of discourse types that compose the whole. This fact, of course, leads to much debate about issues of thematic and theological unity, and whether there can even be said to be unity among the books composing the so-called "canon." These debates themselves cannot be divorced from more foundational metaphysical, epistemological, and theological discussions surrounding the authority of Scripture, specifically, whether the books composing Scripture ultimately are *theopnuestos* (breathed out by God) or *solely* the product of man. Note well, though, that the claim that Scripture ultimately originates in the Divine intention and comes to fruition through a God-ordained process does not rule out a relevant and important place for the creative activities of man. To reject the human element of Scripture is little more than *biblical doscetism*, paralleling views whereby it was thought that the second person of the trinity did not really "take" a human body to himself in the incarnation.

a drama where CFRC, or some story closely akin, is narrated. However, the presence of a theo-drama in and around Scripture, does not entail that *sola narratione,* as a biblical-theological view, is sufficient to capture the varieties of discourse found from Genesis to Revelation. One can affirm, though, the central place of the narrative that permeates Scripture without being committed to the stronger claim that Scripture *just is* a narrative and nothing more. Narrative is only one among many biblical genres and theological-literary types including, among others, poetry, legal documentation, letters, parables, wisdom, law, prophecy, songs, prayers, moral instruction, propositional doctrinal reflection and so on.

Despite the diversity of literary genre-types, narrative functions centrally within the canon of Scripture,[29] and takes relevant priority *in some sense*. Emphasizing the narrative quality of Scripture has rich historic ancestry, as one can find relevant discussions in Irenaeus, Augustine, and Aquinas. More recently the redemptive-historical approach to Scripture rooted in Calvin and given sustained and rigorous treatment in the work of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos, has been influential within Reformed theology.[30] In contemporary mainstream theology, paralleling the narrative turn in other academic disciplines, discussions of narrative are at the fore; this is evidenced in the

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[29] This claim is neutral with respect to the debate between Protestant Christian theists on one side and Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian theists on the other regarding the *material content* of the canon of Scripture.

[30] See, for example, Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, and Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. H. DeJongst; rev. R. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1988), and *The Coming Kingdom*, trans. H. DeJongst (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962).

work of, among others, Craig Bartholomew, Gabriel Fackre, Stanley Hauerwas, Gerard Loughlin, George Stroup, and N. T. Wright.[31]

The sense in which narrative takes priority over, or *is more fundamental to*, other literary genres in Scripture has been nicely articulated by several biblical scholars. Sidney Greidanus notes, "Of all the biblical genres of literature, narrative may be described as the central, foundational, and all-encompassing genre of the Bible. The prominence of the narrative genre in the Bible is related to the Bible's central message that God acts in *history*. No other genre can express that message as well as narrative."[32] Michael Williams makes a similar point, "It [Scripture] is a *storied* revelation. This fact suggests that the unifying, insight-producing feature that gives the Bible its coherence as revelation is the story it tells. Indeed, the Bible as a whole is best understood as a story or drama" [emphasis added].[33] According to Williams, it is the deep redemptive narrative pervading Scripture that provides the unifying construct for the literary, thematic, and theological diversity of the Bible, "But what holds all of it [various elements of Scripture] together; what makes it a unified revelation is the storyline, what theologians often call the drama of redemption. The nonnarrative pieces fit into and make sense only within

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[31] Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology from an Evangelical Perspective," in *Faith and Narrative*, ed. Keith Yandell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 188-201; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Stanley Hauerwas and L. G. Jones, eds. *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989); Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*. Vol. 1. Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

[32] Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 188.

[33] Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005), x.

their appropriate contexts in the biblical storyline."[34] James Barr makes much the same point as Williams:

> . . . in my conception all of the Bible counts as 'story.' A people's story is not necessarily purely narrative: materials of many kinds may be slotted into a narrative structure, and this is done in the Hebrew Bible. Thus legal materials are inserted and appear, almost entirely, as part of the Moses story. In this case they are incorporated into the narrative. Others are more loosely attached: songs and hymns of the temple and of individuals, mostly collected in the Book of Psalms but some slotted into the narratives as in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. It does not matter much what weight we place on the 'Solomonic' authorship of Wisdom books: whether because they came from Solomon, or because they were general lore of Israel, they are part of the story also.
>
> In the New Testament, the letters of great leaders and an apocalyptic book like Revelation form part of the story, along with the more strictly narrative writings. Thus in general, although not all parts of the Bible are narrative, the narrative character of the story elements provide a better framework into which the non-narrative parts may be fitted than any framework based on the non-narrative parts into which the story elements could be fitted.[35]

In accord with Greidanus, Williams, Barr, and numerous others, Scripture can be compellingly viewed as instantiating a "sprawling, capacious story"[36] through which all of the other non-narrative modes of discourse found in Scripture find their literary, thematic, and theological place.

Scripture, then, provides the narrative raw materials for the construction of a grand metanarrative, the kind of which postmodernism is incredulous according to Jean-

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[34] Ibid.

[35] James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 356.

[36] Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 5, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), p. 161.

François Lyotard.[37] Postmodernity may be suspicious of metanarratives, but historically such narratives have provided the deep theoretical and existential framework in which truth claims and *praxis* have been meaningfully grounded. Interestingly, the philosopher Julian Young has argued that there is a striking correlation between the disintegration or, at minimum, diminution of supernatural or religious metanarratives and the rise of anxiety-laden searching for the meaning of life. He states, "For most of our Western history we have not talked about the meaning of life. This is because we used to be quite certain that we knew what it was."[38] He proceeds to note that the meaning of life was secured through what he calls a "true-world narrative:"

> Since journeys have a beginning, a middle and an end, a true-world account of the proper course of our lives is a kind of story, a narrative. And since true-world narratives (that, for example, of Christianity) are global rather than individual, since they narrate not just your life or mine, but rather all lives at all times and places, they are, as I shall call them, 'grand' narratives.[39]

However, Young remarks that such all-encompassing narratives, due to the rise of experimental science fueled partly by Cartesian and Kantian philosophy, lost much of their traction in the modern world. With this diminution of grand religious metanarratives in the West, people began to question the meaning of life more vigorously, primarily because constitutive narrative elements that closely linked to the meaning of life had supposedly lost intellectual plausibility in a world where science was supplanting

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[37] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 10. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), xxiv.

[38] Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

[39] Ibid.

teleological-theological explanations with mechanistic-naturalistic ones.[40] Of course, the diminution of *religious* metanarratives did not mean the loss of metanarratives *simpliciter*, as various naturalistic metanarratives were birthed.[41] Interestingly though, and apropos to my concerns here, is that teleological-theological explanations are the kinds of explanations that can merge naturally into narratives in a paradigmatic and robust sense, whereas naturalistic explanations cannot, and the resulting "narratives" built around such explanations will count as narratives only in a non-paradigmatic, minimalist sense.

Whether one is skeptical of metanarratives or not, the text around which Christian expanded theism is largely built clearly offers one.[42] Those operating broadly within the Reformed theological paradigm view this metanarrative emerging from Scripture as centering around the unfolding themes I previously introduced of *creation-fall-*

[40] Rollo May makes a similar point. Although he speaks of *myth*, the concept functions in much the same way as *metanarrative*. "A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. . . . Myths are like the beams in a house . . . they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it. . . . We in the twentieth century are in a [s]ituation of "aching hearts" and "repining." Our myths no longer serve their function of making sense of existence, the citizens of our day are left without direction or purpose in life, and people are at a loss to control their anxiety and excessive guilt feeling." *The Cry for Myth* (New York: Norton, 1991), pp. 15-16. Christian theists may not be comfortable with labeling the historical-redemptive narrative as *myth* for good reason, but this narrative functions similarly to Rollo's myth.

[41] And, despite postmodernity's suspicion of all metanarratives as catalysts of oppression and the like, it is not at all clear that any view can escape making ultimate assertions about the way the world actually is. For example, a postmodernist who might claim that all knowledge claims are conditioned social constructions *and therefore* cannot correspond with the way the world actually is, has himself asserted a proposition that he takes to reflect the way the world actually is. The question, then, is not so much whether we indwell some grand metanarrative, but *which one* we indwell.

[42] For that matter, naturalism, no less than various instantiations of classical theism, offers its own metanarrative complete with a naturalistic account of origins, a naturalistic account of *humanly created purpose*, a naturalistic account of what makes life valuable, a naturalistic account of why pain and suffering are features of the universe, and a naturalistic account of how it will all end, both for individuals and the universe in general.

redemption-consummation (CFRC).[43] Even a brief look at these themes reveals a narrative whose focus links naturally and powerfully to the cluster of concerns (ER_Q) I introduced in Chapter Three, and around which the meaning of life narrative is built. Indeed, CFRC contains both ER_Q and ER_N, the contextual narrative framework through which ER_Q are understood and appraised. More strongly, it is not simply that the narrative built around CFRC *contains* a narrative framework through which to understand ER_Q, it actually *centers* on this cluster of concerns. Within the biblical-theological narrative centering on CFRC, one will find explanations of (i) origins, (ii) purpose, (iii) value, (iv) pain, suffering, and evil, and (v) ending.

Additionally, the narrative centering on CFRC, and providing explanations of (i) through (v), is a narrative in a paradigmatic and robust sense. Indeed, the explanations of each (i) through (v) will exhibit, among others, *causal*, *spatial*, *temporal*, and *teleological* continuity between them, as each is imbedded within the same larger narrative. In this larger narrative, there exists an overarching progression moving from (i) – beginning or origins to (v) – narrative ending in a way that is meant to resolve a fundamental problem introduced into the narrative. The explanations are each *narratively* related to each other and occupy significant places in the narrative as a whole. The primary reason for this continuity among the explanations of (i) through (v) on the Christian theistic meaning of life narrative follows from the Christian theistic ontological claim that a divine purposive agent exists who created the world, who is working in the world to solve the chief

[43] I will move fluidly between the concepts of CFRC and the *historical-redemptive narrative of Scripture*. Technically, however, the historical-redemptive narrative of Scripture is the narrative that narrates these themes. Also, Christian theists outside the Reformed theological paradigm assent to CFRC.

"problem," and who is *guiding* states of affairs toward a felicitous end.[44] In terms of a paradigmatic employment of narrative this is important, as it provides a *teleological* reason (as opposed to *merely* an efficient causal reason) for why we exist, it notes a problem that needs to be solved and has been solved by this same purposive agent, it highlights the remedy to this problem enacted by this purposive agent, and it shows, even if only in outline form, how it is that this portion of the story (post-lapsarian, yet pre-eschatological consummation) is going to come to a felicitous ending through the direction of this purposive agent. It is this *story* that is being told in the Christian theistic narrative centering around the themes of creation-fall-redemption-consummation, and it is a narrative in the paradigmatic and robust sense.

5.6 Naturalism and the Category of Narrative

Not all metanarratives or candidate meaning of life narratives will qualify as narratives in a paradigmatic sense. This, however, need not stop us from using the label "narrative" to describe them. In Chapter Two, I noted that narrative can be broadly construed such that many different modes of representation can qualify as narrative, even if only loosely. I also noted that the concept of a metanarrative is fluid to allow for grand "narratives" of reality that are either robustly or non-robustly narrative. Candidate naturalistic meaning of life narratives will fall into the latter category. Surely, though, a naturalistic candidate meaning of life narrative will have a "story" to tell, the kind of story metanarratives narrate, beginning with the Big Bang, ending with the "death" of the

[44] I call attention to "guiding" given that this has implications for debates over God's omniscience and providence. Guidance can be construed on a continuum from *comprehensive* to *minimalistic*. Different theological paradigms fall at different places on the continuum; some holding a comprehensive view of God's providential control, whereas others hold a much less comprehensive view. However, Christian theists of all theological persuasions will affirm God's *guidance* in some sense, even though substantial disagreement exists over the details.

universe, and filling in the details in between about why we exist, what makes life valuable, and how we can secure a worthwhile existence, if we can, in light of the hardships of life. While this may not be a narrative in the strict sense that a Christian theistic candidate meaning of life narrative is, it is sufficient to count as an answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as it provides an overarching framework through which to answer the cluster of questions associated with the meaning of life. My narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" does not require a candidate meaning of life narrative to be a narrative in a paradigmatic and robust sense. Some candidate meaning of life narratives will be narratives paradigmatically while others will not.

In her insightful article, "Toward a definition of narrative," Marie-Laure Ryan tells a story that is relevant here. She explains that after delivering a lecture in which she presented her definition of narrativity, she asked the audience whether the following text adapted from Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe,* in which he "recounts" the first moments of our universe's history, counts as narrative:

> The universe started out as cold and essentially infinite in spatial extent. Then an instability kicked in, driving every point in the universe to rush rapidly away from every other. This caused space to become increasingly curved and resulted in a dramatic increase of temperature and energy density. After some time, a millimeter-sized three-dimensional region within this vast expanse created a superhot and dense patch. The expansion of this patch can account for the whole of the universe with which we are now familiar.[45]

Ryan notes that, initially, most in the audience did not think that the piece of text from Greene counted as narrative. However, a few days later she received a phone call from a

[45] Adapted from Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 362, and quoted in Marie-Laure Ryan, "Toward a definition of narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 31-2.

man who had changed his mind, now inclined to call the above example a narrative. Ryan uses this account to illustrate that the boundaries between narrative and non-narrative are, in the end, fuzzy. This observation, no less, will apply to candidate meaning of life narratives. The naturalistic metanarrative will be a "story" that may be little more than a *conjunctive* explanation consisting of the individual explanations of each of the members of the class of ER_Q.[46] This observation does not, however, mean that naturalism fails to produce a metanarrative, or at least a narrative in which to imbed its unique way of accounting for *all of* reality (i.e., empirical science). As Georgetown theologian John Haught notes:

> . . . the naturalistic dismissal of the cognitive (as distinct from emotive) function of story, a denial that undergirds much contemporary academic life, is itself borne aloft on the wings of a firmly established cultural narrative of its own. It is empowered by the myth that trustworthy consciousness came into the world only with the birth of objectifying scientific method during the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries. It is a story laced with abundant accounts of heroic explorers and their own struggles toward the light. All over the world initiates to objectifying consciousness imbibe the myth of science's ascent and its exalted ethic of knowledge. Nothing provides clearer evidence of the inescapability of story than the modern attempt to escape it.[47]

Quite separate from Haught's claim, highlighting the notion of category gradience that characterizes narrative neutralizes the Sartrian objection against there even being any naturalistic candidate meaning of life narratives, an objection to which I will now briefly turn.

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[46] Again, viewing a candidate meaning of life narrative as a *conjunctive* explanations does not undermine the narrative interpretation, however. Of importance is that the *conjunctive* explanation *is* the meaning of life, and this is different from any one explanation to *individual* questions about purpose, value, or worth.

[47] John Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 47.

5.6.1 The Naturalistic Meaning of Life Narrative and Sartrian Objections

In *La Nausée*, through the musings of the character Antoine Roquentin, the French existentialist atheist, Jean-Paul Sartre, argues that life is nothing like a dramatic narrative. Dramatic narratives are infused with teleology, order, and meaningful connection among narrative elements, where narrative elements are purposefully linked, often at the service of some final end. Life, says Sartre, is nothing like this, even though humans are pre-disposed to think it is. In fitting life into dramatic narrative form, we do nothing more than impose, retrospectively, an *ad hoc*, illusory meaningful order onto events which do not inherently possess such order. Life itself, then, is not like humanly-authored stories. There is no teleological progression in life *from the outside* as it were. A mixture of randomness and necessity (stemming from natural laws) is what characterizes life. Therefore, life cannot be referred to as a *dramatic narrative*. This I will call the *Sartrian objection*. In this brief section, I want to further present the objection through a short piece by Alan Dershowitz, and explain why the objection is not an objection to my narrative interpretation but only an objection to a naturalist who thinks her candidate meaning of life narrative is a paradigmatic, robust instance of narrative.

Alan Dershowitz, in his intriguing essay, "Life is Not a Dramatic Narrative,"[48] forcefully presents and defends the Sartrian objection. He begins his piece with a fictional account that invokes the advice of Anton Chekhov, the great nineteenth-century Russian short-story writer, to the writer, S. S. Schovkin, "If in the first chapter you say that a gun hung on the wall, in the second or third chapter it must without fail be discharged."[49] The

[48] Alan Dershowitz, "Life is Not a Dramatic Narrative," in *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, eds. Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 99-105.

[49] Chekhov as quoted in Dershowitz, "Life is Not a Dramatic Narrative," p. 100.

point of this illustration is to call attention to the fact that, in dramatic narratives, there is a meaningful, teleological connection between the various elements of the narrative. These elements each mean something, as they are connected meaningfully to a larger, purposeful literary creation. In a dramatic narrative, then, there are no *meaningless* elements.

Many think this same principle applies to life; that the multifaceted elements of life, her joys, sorrows, and tribulations, are all connected in some grand dramatic narrative. They are thought to all *mean* something in that each is part of a purposeful whole. Dershowitz observes that ". . . many literary, biblical, and even constitutional scholars live by a rule of teleology that has little resonance in real life—namely, that every event, character, and word has a purpose."[50] But, he argues, life is precisely *not* like this:

> But life does not imitate art. Life is not a purpose narrative that follows Chekhov's canon. Events are often simply meaningless, irrelevant to what comes next; events can be out of sequence, random, purely accidental, without purpose. If our universe and its inhabitants are governed by rules of chaos, randomness, and purposelessness, then many of the stories—if they can even be called stories—will often lack meaning. Human beings always try to impose order and meaning on random chaos, both to understand and to control the forces that determine their destiny. This desperate attempt to derive purpose from purposelessness will often distort reality, as, indeed, Chekhov's canon does.[51]

Despite, as Dershowitz notes, our propensity to apply Chekhov's canon in courts of law and to life itself, doing so, he argues, is replete with errors. He observes that often, in courts of law, there is a tendency to craft a narrative where facts thought to be relevant to the guilt of person *x* are *coherently* infused into a dramatic narrative, but where,

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

probabilistically, those facts provide no compelling reasons, by themselves, to establish a conclusion of guilt. This might work if events in life always follow Chekhov's canon; the problem, however, is that they often do not. In dramatic narratives, there is a teleological progression from one event to another. But life does not always fit this and other patterns found in dramatic narratives. Real life is ". . . filled with coincidences, randomness, and illogic . . ."[52] Imposing a dramatic narrative form onto some subset of events often grossly distorts reality, and yet we are prone to do so.

Arranging elements in life into dramatic narrative form is likely one of many heuristic strategies or schemas that we humans use to make sense out of our lives and the world, and with which we navigate through life without becoming paralyzingly entangled in the complexity of things. The problem is that heuristics and schemas, while sometimes helpful, can be misleading.[53] Given our propensity to interpret events through dramatic narrative form (i.e., Chekhov's canon), we are accustomed to viewing all elements in a subset of events as being teleologically and meaningfully related to one another. However, that such events are so related is not always the case. Empirically, we know that if a man murders his wife, then abuse is likely part of the past story. However, if a man abuses his wife, then it is *not* likely that the remainder of the story will include murder.[54] The conditional does not run both ways, even though in dramatic narratives, and unfortunately oftentimes in courts of law, our dramatic narrative proclivities are exploited in such a way that this truth may be lost.

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[52] Ibid., p. 103.

[53] Applications of heuristics can also cause us to *misperceive*. For example, in one study subjects are asked to describe the offices of professors and graduate students. Nearly all of the participants claimed there were books in the office when in fact there were none. This misperception largely follows from a heuristic or scheme that *informs* us that teachers' offices are filled with books.

[54] Even though the *abuser* may be more likely to murder his wife than the *non-abuser*.

I think Dershowitz is correct in his discussion of how the Chekhovian canon is often misapplied to various subsets of events in life. He goes on to argue that no less than in the context of the courtroom, applications of the canon to life itself are equally suspect. If the ontological thesis of metaphysical naturalism is true, whether broadly or narrowly construed (but especially narrowly construed as by strong reductive forms of naturalism), I agree with both Sartre and Dershowitz that life simply cannot be anything like a dramatic narrative. The events of life that occur are only a mixture of chance and necessity; there is no over-arching teleological order to the grand scheme of things. One could, of course (on broad, non-reductive forms of naturalism), construe human intentional agency, even in a naturalistic world, to allow for one's *individual* life to form a kind of humanly constructed dramatic narrative where one is working towards self-perceived meaningful ends. However, this is a different claim from the stronger claim that there is some grand purpose infused into life *from without*. That is the claim to which Sartre and Dershowitz so strongly object, and I think their objection is correct *if the central ontological theses of metaphysical naturalism are true*.

Their objection, though, does not undermine the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question. First, given that the concept of narrative is construed less than paradigmatically in the case of candidate naturalistic meaning of life narratives, the interpretation does *not* require that a candidate naturalistic meaning of life narrative be a *dramatic* narrative in the paradigmatic and robust sense. The Sartrian objection would undermine my interpretation only if my interpretation required a candidate meaning of life narrative to be so robustly. And second, the objection is largely just an objection to theism. Both Sartre and Dershowitz cannot see how this universe is purposeful, and so

able to be construed in dramatic narrative fashion. If the theistic God does not exist, then my intuitions are with them, and life is not a dramatic narrative.

However, if the theistic God exists, and more specifically, this God is as expanded Christian theism claims, then life is probably very much like a dramatic narrative. The Sartrian objection probably works if naturalism is true and life really is nothing more than "one damn thing after another."[55] On the other hand, it is deeply suspect if naturalism is false and something like Christian expanded theism is true. If naturalism is true, then our *projection* of plot and story unified by an imagined ending is just that, a projection, but, if Christian theism is true, then, as Paul Fiddes notes, the

> . . . emplotment of history has not been understood by Christians as a mere *projection* of a concord fiction [introducing plot, story, and the unification of an ending on the mere successiveness of history], but as the *discovery* of relations between events which have been plotted by the divine Logos into a scheme of promise and fulfillment, and which are sustained in their coherence by the presence of the Logos. History is regarded as God's story, and when the story has been revealed to us through the Bible, we can make sense of history.[56]

But, on the other hand, if the true "story" of the world is one in which the theses of naturalism obtain, Sartre is probably correct, and those who desire to live in a story in a robust sense, are trying to situate their lives in ". . . the *kairos* of farce rather than [in] the *chronos* of reality . . ."[57] As Fiddes notes, we are prone perhaps even "programmed" to ". . . project concord-fictions onto the scene of our personal history and world history. To

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[55] Though, it is important to note that naturalism is likely not a necessary condition for the success of the Sartrian objection. One could conceive of other metanarratives or worldviews that would likely preclude life as a whole being a dramatic narrative.

[56] Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 9.

[57] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 51. *Kairos* is distinguished from *chronos* in that the former is nothing more than (i) the "tick-tock" of the clock, (ii) the successive moments of history, or (iii) just one damn thing after another, whereas the latter refers to ". . . points of time filled with the significance of being part of a larger fulfillment." Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p. 9.

make sense of the mere successiveness of history ('just one damn thing after another') we give it a plot, a story, which is unified by its ending."[58] Let me be clear about what I am claiming here. I am not arguing that naturalism is false and Christian theism is true, *and therefore* that the Sartrian objection fails. Rather, I am arguing for the following conditional: *if Christian theism is true, or some other metanarrative for that matter with the right metaphysical resources is true, then the Sartrian objection likely fails*.[59]

I want to close Chapter Five by discussing two important issues relevant to the question of life's meaning: (i) how religious assumptions often factor heavily into asking the question of life's meaning, and (ii) how *leading a meaningful life* connects to my narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" With respect to (i), I will argue that religious assumptions are very often salient in the very asking of the question, and discuss how these assumptions reveal similarities and differences among and between theists, pessimistic naturalists, and optimistic naturalists. With respect to (ii), given that the questions, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" are importantly related, even if distinct, any interpretation must be able to explain how a meaningful existence can be secured, if it can be secured at all. I will provide an account of this, working within the parameters set by the narrative interpretation.

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[58] Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p. 9.

[59] And, if one continues to press a Sartrian objection against a Christian theistic metanarrative, arguing that the metanarrative is meaningless, we have then moved back into our question of the relationship between "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" The further objection falls under the second question, and therefore is not an objection to my claims in this section about life being very much like a dramatic narrative if Christian theism is true.

5.7 The Meaning of Life and Religious Assumptions

A compelling case can be made that many who ask, "What is the meaning of life?" do so out of religious intuitions and assumptions. That is to say, they already have in mind the kind of answer that is required in order for the question to be answered sufficiently, and that answer is either overtly *religious*, or has ostensibly religious elements in it. Now I have argued, in previous chapters, that naturalism can produce a candidate meaning of life narrative precisely because it can narrate across the existentially relevant threshold of life events, phenomena, and accompanying questions (ER_Q) that any narrative must narrate across in order to be a candidate meaning of life narrative as opposed to some other kind of narrative (e.g., a narrative about the migratory patterns of birds). However, this discussion becomes more complicated when we shift focus to the question, "What makes a life meaningful?"

I have argued that, while conceptually distinct, a robust consideration of life's meaning will need to address both questions ("What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?"), as they are related (see §2.3 of Chapter Two, "The Meaning of Life vs. A Meaningful Life"). Considering one without also considering the other will cause one to neglect at least some of the common intuitions and sub-questions from which the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is generated, one being, "Is (or can) my life be meaningful?" Any philosophically sufficient discussion, then, must address both. In light of this, it is interesting to observe that many, perhaps most, individuals at least partly analyze what I have called *the* meaning of life in terms of what they think is required to live a meaningful life. More specifically, there exists a widespread assumption that only elements found in some sort of religious metanarrative will make a

meaningful life within reach. Thus, in asking what the meaning of life is, people are often looking for an answer(s) that looks suspiciously religious in nature. Albert Einstein once said that "to know an answer to the question "What is the meaning of human life?" means to be religious."[60]

In seeking the meaning of life, many are often in pursuit of something that requires transcendent intentionality and teleology above and beyond the material world that nonetheless comes to bear within the material world. This is revealed, for example, in re-formulations of the question where people ask, "What is the purpose of life?" Formulating the question in such a way, often presupposes that the universe and human life is given purpose from a source outside the universe (or at least an intelligent source originating outside of human intentionality), and this purpose is discovered rather than created by human desires and intentionality. Those who ask the question about life's meaning are often operating with conceptual baggage from worldviews rooted in the ancient world, worldviews where transcendence, deity, and non-natural teleology grounded in "other-worldly" intentionality occupy prominent roles.

Among others,[61] Julian Young has noted that inquiring into the meaning of life is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. He notes:

> For most of our Western history we have not talked about the meaning of life. This is because we used to be quite certain that we knew what it was. We were certain about it because we thought we knew that over and above this world of doubtful virtue and happiness is another world: a world Nietzsche calls (somewhat ironically) the 'true world' or, alternatively expressed, 'God'.[62]

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[60] Albert Einstein, *Mein Weltbild* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1934), trans. S. Bargmann, *Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein* (New York: Crown), p. 11.

[61] For example, see chapter five, "A Modern Question" in Yuval Lurie's *Tracking the Meaning of Life*, and chapter one, "Looking for the blueprint" in Julian Baggini's *What's It All About?*

[62] Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, p. 1.

Prior to the modern period, life was positioned within the context of some such true-world narrative, of which Young states:

> Since journeys have a beginning, a middle and an end, a true-world account of the proper course of our lives is a kind of story, a narrative. And since true-world narratives (that, for example, of Christianity) are global rather than individual, since they narrate not just your life or mine, but rather all lives at all times and places, they are, as I shall call them, 'grand' narratives.[63]

Living within the interpretive confines of a grand "religious" metanarrative, individuals possessed the relevant narrative elements, ER_N, to bring sufficient intelligibility to ER_Q that were also viewed as existentially satisfying. I submit that people generally did not ask about the meaning of life in the pre-modern world precisely because the cluster of sub-questions and intuitions motivating the question in modern contexts were addressed and satisfied within some grand religious metanarrative or other. These metanarratives had recourse to concepts of transcendence, deity, non-natural teleology, heaven, and the like.

In the western world, with the shift away from authority (e.g., tradition, Scripture, etc.) as epistemologically foundational to unaided reason and science, the increasing triumph of mechanistic theories in science, and the accompanying death of God, grand religious metanarratives populated with the concepts prevalent in the pre-modern world began to lose rational respectability in the minds of many as guides to the nature of reality. Correlated with these shifts is the growing ubiquity of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" although it is perhaps impossible to pinpoint the genesis of this trend. It is a question that began to surface as the grand metanarratives by which people interpreted and lived life lost some of their rational and existential traction in Western

[63] Ibid.

culture. And asking, "What is the meaning of life?" presupposes more than mere rational curiosity, since people started asking it as the global stories in which life itself was interpreted and grounded became rationally suspect. As Terry Eagleton notes:

> If you are forced to inquire on a large scale into the meaning of existence, it is a fair bet that things have come unstuck. . . .Meaning-of-life queries, when launched on a grand scale, tend to arise at times when taken-for-granted roles, beliefs, and conventions are plunged into crisis. . . .To ask about the meaning of human existence as such, however, suggests that we may have collectively lost our way, however we happen to be faring as individuals.[64]

There appears, then, to be a close connection between the relative dethronement of religious metanarratives and the rise and anxiety-laden urgency of questions about life's meaning.

For my purposes here, it is important to note that there is an interesting tension revealed in this correlation. It appears safe to say that modernity, and the accompanying view of metaphysical naturalism, is a large motivator in the modern saliency of the question of life's meaning, and yet the question is largely asked with assumptions and intuitions at odds with modernist and naturalists views of the world. The modern world increasingly dominated by metaphysical naturalism has no place for Young's "true-world stories" or religious metanarratives, and yet those who inquire into the meaning of life find it very difficult to escape the assumptions of the metanarratives that used to make asking the question of life's meaning "unnecessary." At least one reason for this is, as John Cottingham notes, "Religious faith does not form an isolated corner of our conceptual map that can be torn off without affecting the main picture; instead (to change the metaphor) it lies at the centre of a vast web of beliefs and attitudes and feelings that

[64] Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, pp. 31-34.

are all subtly interconnected."[65] Even in a world where increasing *critical* reflection is directed toward religious systems and their doctrines, our ways of thinking about and referring to reality are still profoundly shaped by assumptions imbedded deeply within our religious heritages. And despite the objections and argument of naturalists who think a meaningful life can be secured in the absence of grand *religious* narratives, many think only religious elements can secure a robustly meaningful existence.[66]

If this last claim is accurate, then perhaps when many ask the question, "What is the meaning of life?" this request is as much an expression of bewilderment as it is a genuine question to which one seeks an answer. That is to say, it gives voice to the perceived absurdity of securing a meaningful existence in a world devoid of finite and infinite spiritual realities. In the modern world, people feel the tension of operating, at some level, within divergent metanarratives (e.g., naturalism and theism), and perhaps while feeling the weight of what naturalism means for religious metanarratives, continue to ask the question, "What is the meaning of life?" out of intuitions and assumptions that require the same kind of answer as before, one that is incompatible with the metaphysical theses of naturalism. It is as if people cannot quite believe the naturalistic metanarrative, and so, out of the religious intuitions and assumptions that naturalism largely rejects, continue to look for a religious answer.

5.7.1 Religious Assumptions, Pessimistic Naturalism, and Optimistic Naturalism

A look at the religious assumptions often lurking in asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" provides a helpful way of comparing three views on whether it is

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[65] John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 13.

[66] This is a salient part of the story of why certain atheists have adopted conclusions of *meaninglessness* in light of the so-called death of God. Camus is an example.

possible for one to secure a meaningful life: the religious view (of which theism is one example), the pessimistic naturalist view, and the optimistic naturalist view.[67] These distinctions are not on the level of ontology, rather they are *existential* and relate to what needs to be the case (or what is *perceived* as needing to be the case) in order for one to have a meaningful life.[68] It is important to note that even naturalists who inquire about life's meaning *may* operate on religious assumptions. It will be helpful, then, to briefly delineate three basic options on the question, "How is a meaningful life possible?"[69]

Roughly, the religious view maintains that God's existence along with "appropriately relating" to God is both necessary and sufficient in order for a meaningful life to be secured, although different accounts can be given as to the nature of this relationship. Among countless others, historic representatives of the religious view in the Near-Eastern ancient world and the West are Qoheleth, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Edwards, Pascal, and Tolstoy. The religious position can be plausibly viewed as possessing three distinct yet related dimensions. Metaphysically, it is argued that God's existence is necessary in order to ground a meaningful life because, for example, things necessary for securing a meaningful existence like objective value are only plausibly grounded in God. John Cottingham sums up this dimension of the religious view, ". . . the idea is that God is the source of genuine value, and that orienting ourselves towards that

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[67] I have already compared different views within the naturalist camp on what I called the *ontological front*. Here, I compared *strict* and *broad* naturalism.

[68] Others invoke their own vocabulary for what I have called "pessimistic" and "optimistic" naturalism. For example, John F. Haught refers to the positions as "sunny" and "sober" naturalism. *Is Nature Enough?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10.

[69] There are other options, though. For example, some might believe that God exists, but that his existence is not necessary for one to lead a meaningful life, or that one need not believe in his existence to lead a meaningful life. One may also think that God exists, but that his existence is not sufficient to lead a meaningful life, or that believing in his existence is not sufficient to leading a meaningful life.

source bestows meaning on our human existence and enables us to find true contentment."[70] In addition to the metaphysical dimension, the religious view generally requires that one be both epistemically and relationally related to the God who exists in some meaningful sense. I will leave further discussion of these claims to the next section of this chapter, as they fit naturally within that context.

Interestingly, the pessimistic naturalist view is grounded in the same assumption as the religious view, namely, that God must exist in order for life to be meaningful. The pessimist parts ways with the religious believer, though, by maintaining that God does not exist. On one reading of the text,[71] Qoheleth, the dominant voice in Ecclesiastes, has been viewed as a provisional pessimist, and his voice is joined by many others including Schopenhauer, Camus, and *possibly* Bertrand Russell.[72] Schopenhauer's powerful presentation of what I will call *the march toward nothingness thesis* in his classic, "On the Vanity of Existence," aptly illustrates the pessimistic view:

> That human life must be some kind of mistake is sufficiently proved by the simple observation that man is a compound of needs which are hard to satisfy; that their satisfaction achieves nothing but a painless condition in which he is only given over to boredom; and that boredom is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of

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[70] John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 37.

[71] It is a reading that I, for exegetical and theological reasons, do not adopt.

[72] For example, see his "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), "Amid such a world [a world devoid of the supernatural], if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins . . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only in the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built" (p. 107).

> existence. . . . Whenever we are not involved in one or other of these things [e.g., intellectual activity, sensual pleasure, etc.] but directed back to existence itself we are overtaken by its worthlessness and vanity . . .[73]

If the observable world filled with pain, suffering, and an existence that inevitably marches toward death is all there is, then pessimistic naturalists think it is impossible to secure a meaningful existence. While no naturalist in any robust sense, John Hick sides with the pessimists in thinking that naturalism, ". . . is very bad news for humanity as a whole."[74]

Like the pessimistic naturalist view, the optimistic naturalist view finds no place for God in its ontology; however, ironically, like the religious view posits that a meaningful life is within reach of human beings. In the contemporary literature, one will find discussions and defenses of optimistic naturalism by Ursula Goodenough, Michael Martin, and Erik J. Wielenberg, among many others.[75] These naturalists see no tension in thinking that a meaningful life can be secured in a world devoid of finite and infinite spiritual realities.[76] In his reflective essay, "Religion and Respect," Simon Blackburn expresses the optimistic naturalist position:

> But there is another option for meaning . . . which is to look only within life itself. This is the immanent option. It is content with the everyday. There is sufficient

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[73] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence," in *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 53-54.

[74] John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 1999), p. 22.

[75] See Ursula Goodenough, "Emergent Religious Principles," in *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 166-74; Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*; and Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[76] Optimistic naturalism is closely related to *secular humanism*. Secular humanists desire to define their view based upon *what they affirm* (i.e., humanity, human potential, human creativity, human progress, human flourishing, etc.) rather than *what they deny* (i.e., the existence of a supernatural realm beyond the spatio-temporal universe or other religious views that posit the existence of some non-human intentionality).

> meaning for human beings in the human world—the world of familiar, and even humdrum, doings and experiences. In the immanent option, the smile of the baby, the grace of the dancer, the sound of voices, the movement of a lover, give meaning to life. For some, it is activity and achievement: gaining the summit of the mountain, crossing the finish line first, finding the cure, or writing the poem. These things last only their short time, but that does not deny them meaning. A smile does not need to go on forever in order to mean what it does. There is nothing beyond or apart from the processes of life. Furthermore, there is no one goal to which all these processes tend, but we can find something precious, value and meaning, in the processes themselves. There is no such thing as *the* meaning of life, but there can be many meanings within a life.[77]

An optimistic naturalist like Blackburn sees no problem in thinking that a meaningful life can be secured in an *entirely* naturalistic world. Nothing additional, whether that is of the transcendent sort, or some non-human source of intentionality within the universe itself, is needed to ground those things in life that we, pre-theoretically, find to be meaningful. To desire more is unnecessary.

So, with the issue of God's existence as the point of departure, the religious view, the pessimistic naturalist view, and the optimistic naturalist view are three different positions on whether or not life can be meaningful. Both naturalist positions, of course, have no place for God in their ontology, but optimists see this as no real threat to a meaningful life, whereas pessimists do. The religious position, like the optimistic naturalist position, thinks a meaningful life is within reach, but like the pessimist position, thinks God's existence is necessary in order to secure a meaningful life.[78] In the

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[77] Simon Blackburn, "Religion and Respect," in *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise M. Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 190. Notice that Blackburn seems to merge the two questions, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" I have argued that the two questions, while certainly related, can and should be distinguished.

[78] It is important to note here that there will be more nuanced variations of the three discussed in this section. For example, if one introduces the distinction between *subjectivist* and *objectivist* naturalists, it is conceivable that a naturalist could be an objectivist about value (i.e., intrinsic value exists independently of human desires and intentionality) but still believe that life is meaningless because the existence of objective value may not be sufficient to secure a meaningful life. Additionally, it is conceivable that there are naturalists who are subjectivists about value (i.e., human desires and intentionality *create* value) but are not

next section, I will explore what it would mean to lead a meaningful life given my narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?"

5.8 Candidate Meaning of Life Narratives and Leading a Meaningful Life

As I have already noted, my discussion of the meaning of life largely centers on the question, "What is the meaning of life?" I argued in §2.3 of Chapter Two ("The Meaning of Life vs. A Meaningful Life") that this question is conceptually distinct though related to the question, "What makes a life meaningful?" While these questions are distinct, any interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" that does not also address concerns of how to secure a meaningful existence is flawed, given that the two questions are not generally divorced in practice. Those who ask the question, "What is the meaning of life?" are certainly preoccupied with whether and how their life is meaningful. I think a desiderata of any interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" will be that the interpretation is able to account for this *distinct yet related* quality of these two questions. Given my narrative interpretation, there is a way to secure answers to the second question, but in a way that is contingent upon first answering, at least partially, the first.[79] The claim I want to explore is that one can secure a meaningful existence by *appropriately linking* oneself to the true meaning of life narrative. Of course, for pessimistic naturalists, no meaningful link will exist, because an

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pessimists, thinking that humanly created value is sufficient for a meaningful life. These are conceivable positions, but the first is probably not that prevalent.

[79] Of course, only those of an optimistic naturalist persuasion (or secular humanists) or the religious persuasion will enter the discussion about how to secure a meaningful life. The skeptic or pessimist does not think life is meaningful, and therefore, will think there is nowhere one can look to secure a meaningful existence. Although, even the pessimist's denial of a meaningful existence *is* largely a function of the pessimist's metaphysical beliefs about how the world really is. In this sense, the pessimist *does* possess a candidate meaning of life narrative, but he or she simply believes the metaphysical theses of this "narrative" do not allow for a meaningful life. That is to say, the answer to the first question ("What is the meaning of life?") does not allow for a favorable answer to the second question ("What makes a life meaningful?" or "How does one secure a meaningful existence?").

atheistic ontology, according to them, will not allow a meaningful existence. My discussion, then, is one that only those with some form of religious view or optimistic naturalist view can have. Interestingly, the nature of this *appropriate link* will itself be partly relative to the candidate meaning of life narrative that happens to be true. Furthermore, on some level, both the Christian theistic and naturalistic candidate meaning of life narratives will allow for varying levels of meaningful existence, even if one is not fully linked to the true meaning of life narrative.

A primary reason why answering the first question ("What is the meaning of life?") takes priority over the second ("What makes life meaningful?") and why it provides an answer to how to best secure a meaningful life is that ER_N is closely aligned with the cluster of issues that are generally associated with leading a *meaningful* life, issues like ordering one's life around worthwhile purposes, being appropriately related to valuable states of affairs, making sense of and coping with pain and suffering, and coming to terms with death's inevitable approach. Securing a meaningful existence, then, will involve linking one's life to the meaning of life narrative. But this brings with it a natural question—*What is the nature of the link between the meaning of life narrative and leading a meaningful life?* Roughly, I think there are two distinct yet related levels of linkage worth considering: *awareness* and *appropriation*.[80] The first is largely epistemic,

[80] The picture is actually more complicated. It probably involves at least three levels: (i) awareness, (ii) assent, and (iii) appropriation. For example, one can be aware of a candidate meaning of life narrative without assenting to its truth. Furthermore, one could, in some sense, appropriate elements of a meaning of life narrative without satisfying either condition (i) or (ii). Discussing only (i) and (ii) will be sufficient for my purposes in this section, especially if one views a robust notion of *appropriation* as subsuming *assent*. Indeed, Christian theists think something akin to this occurs all the time in the world, as those who do not assent to the truth of the Christian narrative still lead meaningful lives, on some level, even if not in the most robust sense given certain elements of the Christian narrative.

the second is more a matter of *praxis*.[81] These two levels partly follow from a consideration of the following question—*What level of epistemic contact with the meaning of life narrative is needed in order to lead a meaningful life?* I will briefly discuss these levels of linkage in reverse order.[82]

On one level, it seems as though one could lead a meaningful life, to some extent, even if one's knowledge of the true candidate meaning of life narrative is incomplete or in some way faulty. One way in which this is possible is through what we might call *existential luck*, a close cousin to moral and epistemic luck. For example, with respect to aligning one's life with valuable states of affairs, one may in fact appropriate that which the meaning of life narrative reveals as valuable without knowing that it is valuable, as a matter of luck. In this sense, the individual who finds herself in this fortuitous situation will enjoy a meaningful life in some measure. For example, if viewing and appreciating great works of aesthetic beauty, *qua* viewing and appreciating, is valuable and contributes to a meaningful existence, then, in doing so, one can experience meaning regardless of whether or not one *knows* that this experience is valuable and meaningful.

The same claim applies to purpose. One can imagine scenarios where someone, largely as a matter of luck, pursues worthwhile purposes and therefore has a life characterized by some measure of meaningfulness. However, despite this relative meaningfulness, intuitions cause us to be skeptical that such a life is as meaningful as it

[81] I use "praxis" in a minimalist sense of the term.

[82] Note that this discussion occurs within the context of candidate meaning of life narratives where value is seen to be mind-independent. On a *subjectivist* naturalistic candidate meaning of life narrative, one need not worry about whether one is *in contact* with what the narrative says is valuable or worthwhile, because such things are *created* by one's own desires. Of course, there is the meta-question of whether one needs to be *in contact* with the narrative element that explains that value is entirely subjective. That is to say, does being aware of the subjectivist element in the narrative bring with it any meaning over and above participating in the valuable states of affairs one has created?

could be. For example, consider the cases of persons *A* and *B*. Let us say that, as a matter of fact, striving to be a person who cultivates the virtue of charity is an intrinsically valuable and worthwhile pursuit around which to partially order one's life. Now imagine that both *A* and *B* endeavor to cultivate charity, but that *A* does so *knowing* that this is a valuable purpose whereas *B* does not. The knowledge that what one is doing constitutes a valuable worthwhile aim, and therefore brings with it meaningfulness, would seem to confer greater meaning on the subject, at least *subjectively* construed, than would a state of affairs where one engages in the meaningful activity but does not *view it as valuable*. Furthermore, if one views the pursuit of truth as an objectively valuable aim, then adding *knowing that the aim to which one strives is valuable* to the *act of aiming for it* will likely confer greater *objective* meaningfulness to the person's life in that instance.

Mere *appropriation*,[83] then, of certain elements constituting the meaning of life narrative without knowing the story *in which these elements fit*, probably mitigates the level of meaningfulness one can attain. In this case, epistemic deficiency with respect to one's level of understanding of the meaning of life narrative carries with it negative consequences for meaningfulness.[84] *Doing* alone, if it is the right kind of doing, may bring with it "units" of meaningfulness. The claim here, though, is that *doing* plus *knowing* probably brings more meaningfulness.

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[83] Unless, of course, one robustly defines "appropriation" to include *assent*.

[84] This discussion of existential luck, however, is partially narrative relative. For example, a subjectivist naturalist who thinks value and purpose, and therefore a meaningful life, are entirely or largely person relative will not enter this discussion, for the narrative meaning of life is primarily something each individual creates. To what extent a person needs to know *this* (that value, purpose, and therefore meaning are person relative) is a different issue. I am inclined to think that one does not need to be in epistemic contact with the subjectivist naturalist narrative, or at least not as closely as, for example, one would need to be on objectivist naturalist and Christian theistic narratives.

My claim that *knowing that one is appropriately related* to, for example, intrinsically valuable states of affairs bring with it more "units" of meaning than merely *being* appropriately related to such states of affairs has an analog in epistemology first articulated by Plato. The claim is akin to the widespread view that knowledge is superior to mere true belief even though in the latter case one is in "contact" with the truth. As Plato would say, this mitigated "contact" permits mere true belief to "fly away," and so there is something more valuable about full-blown knowledge, although it is not at all clear how best to understand the so-called "value problem."[85] Just as knowledge is seen as more valuable than mere true belief, so too is knowing that what one is doing is meaningful more meaningful than just doing it.[86] Perhaps knowing the truth about the meaning of life narrative, or some element therein, brings with it *units of meaningfulness* that mere appropriation of those elements within the narrative cannot secure alone in the absence of the requisite awareness. I am inclined to think that *knowing* the meaning of life narrative itself is partly constitutive of leading a meaningful life.[87]

My dual claims thus far in this section have been (i) that a meaningful life is secured by being appropriately related to the true meaning of life narrative, and (ii) that one need not be fully epistemically linked to the true meaning of life narrative in order to

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[85] See *Meno* 96d-100b in John M. Cooper, ed. *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). The translation of *Meno* in Cooper's work is provided by G. M. A. Grube.

[86] Notice that the comparison is not between (i) knowing that what one is doing is meaningful and (ii) merely happening to have, by chance, a true belief that what one is doing is meaningful, but between (i) knowing that what one is doing is meaningful and (iii) having no belief about the matter of whether or not what one is doing is meaningful.

[87] There is probably an additional dimension of the *benefits of knowing* worth noting here. The more complete one's knowledge of what brings with it units of meaningfulness, the more facility, *ceteris parabus*, one will have in securing a meaningful existence. Here, I am not referring to any intrinsic meaningfulness that may come with *knowing*, but with the *instrumental* value that accompanies knowing what states of affairs are meaningful so that one can secure them. Conceding the pesky problem of "luck," it seems generally true that if one is aware of valuable states worth pursuing, one will be in a better position of securing them and therefore enhancing the meaningfulness of one's life.

live, in some degree, a meaningful life. With respect to (i), if the true meaning of life narrative narrates that, for example, aims *x*, *y*, and *z* are intrinsically valuable, then positive meaning can be secured in life by ordering one's life around them. With respect to (ii), the level of meaningfulness in one's life will probably reside on a continuum, and one need not be in full epistemic contact with the true meaning of life narrative in order to experience some measure of meaningfulness in life. If this is the case, then leading a meaningful life, at some level, will not require knowing the meaning of life narrative down to every jot and tittle. This claim is compatible with numerous candidate meaning of life narratives. For example, if a subjectivist thesis about value is part of the true candidate meaning of life narrative, it may not significantly matter if one is in contact with truth in order to lead a meaningful life, since value and meaning are entirely subjective qualities. Or, if, *ex hypothesi*, the Christian theistic candidate meaning of life narrative is true, even one who does not believe the narrative will secure a meaningful life, in some sense, in virtue of Christian doctrines like, among others, (i) the *imago dei*, and (ii) and the notion of *common grace* through which God's grace extends to all of creation and is manifest in culture and individual lives whereby people are in contact with states of affairs that are intrinsically valuable.

My claim that leading a meaningful life can be secured, at various levels, in the presence of epistemic deficiencies with respect to the meaning of life narrative, is compatible with both naturalistic and Christian theistic candidate meaning of life narratives. That is to say, each is consistent with a person being in *metaphysical* contact with some meaning-producing states of affairs while lacking *epistemic* contact, either partially or entirely. This should be the case, for even in instances where one is in

epistemic contact with the meaning of life narrative at some level, it is extremely implausible to think that one will have a "God's eye view" of all the elements in their narrative fullness. Certainly, leading a meaningful life cannot be contingent on possessing a God's eye view of the meaning of life narrative.[88]

5.9 Summary

I began this chapter by discussing definitional issues surrounding both naturalism and theism. I introduced the distinction between *strict* and *broad* naturalism, and noted implications this has for the meaning of life. I then discussed the distinction between *restricted* theism and *expanded* theism, noting that my employment of theism will largely occur within the context of a particular instantiation of expanded theism—Christian expanded theism. Next, I outlined the broad contours of a version of Christian expanded theism. Following this, I discussed how the candidate meaning of life narratives of both naturalism and Christian expanded theism fit within the category of narrative, arguing that the Christian metanarrative is, paradigmatically, a narrative, while the naturalist metanarrative is probably not. I then explained the Sartrian objection against life being a dramatic narrative, and argued that it does not undermine my narrative interpretation. I concluded with a discussion of important religious assumptions often latent in asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" and provided a brief account for how *leading a meaningful life* relates to the narrative interpretation.

[88] There is an interesting point worth considering here. Both Christian theism and naturalism seem to entail that their respective candidate meaning of life narratives will be relatively unknown until a certain point in history. The Christian theist will probably have to concede that only until very recently on the historical timeline have large portions of the world's population had access to the meaning of life given the historical-geographical reality that God's putative revelation has not, until very recently, been widely accessible to the entire world. On the other hand, if naturalism is true, then knowing the meaning of life will be largely connected with the advancement of science and philosophical speculation on the good life. Until individuals become privy to these advancements, they too, will not be in contact with the meaning of life.

CHAPTER SIX

Purpose and Origins in the Theistic and Naturalistic Candidate Meaning of Life Narratives

6.1 Introduction

Having discussed how the concept of narrative comes to bear on Christian theism and naturalism in Chapter Five, I will now compare these two grand metaphysical "narratives" on two of the first three elements of ER_Q (existentially relevant life elements and accompanying questions) that any candidate meaning of life narrative must include in order to be the kind of narrative it is—explanations of (i) Why the universe exists, and even the stronger, why anything exists at all, and (ii) what purpose(s) there is in life, if any.[1] I will not compare the narratives on the issue of value specifically, given that considerations of origins and purpose are more often connected to discussions of life's meaning, and because discussions of value naturally dovetail with discussions of purpose (e.g., *What aims, purposes, or goal-directed behavior are valuable ones to pursue, and thus, contribute to a meaningful life?*).

Remember that ER_N constitutes a deep, ultimate narrative context from which to view the other existentially relevant elements and accompanying questions of life, ER_Q. Given that the fourth and fifth elements of ER_Q (#4 = evil, pain, and suffering and accompanying questions, and #5 = questions on how life (individual as well as the universe itself) will end) are related and link up naturally and compellingly with the

[1] These "narrative" consisting of these explanations may be little more than a *conjunction* of explanations (on naturalism), or it may be a narrative in a robust sense (on, for example, Christian theism).

perennial meaning of life topics of death and futility, I will devote substantial space in Chapter Seven to these elements, but especially the last. Chapters Six and Seven will be largely *comparative* and not *evaluative*. I am more interested in highlighting the differences between the naturalistic and Christian theistic candidate meaning of life narratives than I am in attempting to show one's rational and existential superiority over the other. At places, however, I will allude to what I consider to be the advantages of Christian theism over naturalism. What follows will largely be a dialogue between naturalism and theism on issues broadly related to the topic of purpose.

6.2 Meaning and Purpose

While the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is often interpreted as asking, "What is the purpose(s) of life?" I am treating issues and questions surrounding purpose as circumscribed elements within a larger narrative, a narrative that is, itself, the meaning of life. Asking, "What is the purpose of life?" is a question that closely relates to "What is the meaning of life?" but it is not the same question on my interpretation. However, questions relating to purpose are important sub-questions to which any candidate meaning of life narrative must provide the framework for answers. We have a deep and natural longing to order our lives around a purpose(s). Importantly, the origin and nature of such a purpose will differ dramatically among candidate theistic and naturalistic meaning of life narratives. I propose that the best point of departure for comparing the two narratives on this issue is by comparing (i) divinely imposed purpose and (ii) self imposed purpose.[2] At the risk of incurring unnecessary criticism, I retain the word

[2] There is a third option, the Aristotelian one. It is an interesting alternative to (i) and (ii), but which occupies little space in the current philosophical discussions on the meaning of life. Briefly, Aristotle argued that everything in nature aims toward some end. This end need not terminate (originate) in an extrinsic cause such as intelligence or god. Nature itself functions as an end in some sense. He argued that

"imposition" despite the possible foothold it gives to the charge that the divinely imposed purpose view undermines the dignity of man. I acknowledge this danger, and will have more to say about it later. The following discussion of divinely imposed purpose and humanly imposed purpose will expand to include other discussions that, together, capture the important territory in this context relating to the meaning of life.

6.2.1 Divinely Imposed Purpose

In *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Erik Wielenberg provides a straightforward account of what the divinely imposed purpose view involves, ". . . for a human life to have meaning is for it to have *a purpose that is assigned by a supernatural being*" [emphasis added].[3] Entailed by this view is the conclusion that life has no overarching, meaning conferring purpose in the absence of a supernatural being. William Lane Craig represents this position, "So if God does not exist, that means that man and the universe exist to no purpose—since the end of everything is death—*and that they came to be for no purpose, since they are only blind products of chance*. In short, life is utterly without reason" [emphasis added].[4] He adds, "Without God the universe is the result of a cosmic accident, a chance explosion. There is no reason for which it exists."[5]

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teleological explanations, in order to be complete and satisfying, must terminate in an end which itself is intrinsically valuable and not merely instrumentally valuable. Again, this ultimate end is neither self-imposed nor divinely imposed but is, in a sense, *naturally* imposed. In the case of man, Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* that *eudaimonia* (commonly translated as happiness although there are complex exegetical issue at play here) is the final end under which man's purposive activities are subsumed.

[3] Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 14.

[4] William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 45-46.

[5] Ibid., p. 45.

The intuitive idea behind the divinely imposed purpose view is clearly seen when it is contrasted with the "conditions" from which the universe and self-reflective life arise on a naturalistic paradigm. On purely naturalistic theses, neither the universe nor any rational life capable of asking the question about life's purpose are the result, either directly or indirectly, of the purposeful creative activity of transcendent intelligent agency. Rather, their causal history terminates backwards in a non-intelligent, non-personal, non-purposive first event or irreducibly primitive state of affairs that is itself non-rational. Clearly, on this view, there neither is nor can be a purpose imposed from without onto the world and rational life within that world. Mind, intentionality, and the introduction of purpose into the natural order are ultimately the products of matter. Conversely, on the supernaturalist view, matter and finite minds complete with intentionality and their own purposes, are ultimately, though not necessarily proximately, the product of an infinite purposive mind.

On the divine imposition view, then, the purpose of life and individual lives is ultimately found in the divine intentions. God, as creator, created for a purpose(s), and it is to him that individuals must look in order to find the purpose of life. Here, however, there are two distinct ways to refer to purpose in relation to God's intentions. First, one can speak of God's purposes *in creating*. At least on traditional Christian theistic models, his purposes in creating have been explicated in terms of his "desire" to share his love with a created order and/or his "desire" to manifest the glory of his nature to a created order.[6] Second, but related, one can refer to God's purposes *for us*. Here, answering the

[6] There are numerous theological debates on these matters. One such debate is whether a "desire" to create on God's part commits the theist to potential lurking problems for the traditional doctrine of aseity. The tension is real, even if ultimately soluble, for traditional theists hold firmly to both the doctrine of creation

question concerning our purpose is linked to the story one tells about God's purposes in creating. So, for example, our purpose may be to love God or to glorify God or both. However, a clarification is warranted.

The supernaturalist who posits divinely imposed purpose onto life is not committed to the view that loving or glorifying God precludes a full and robust range of options for *expressing* these purposes. For example, certain traditional theists who posit that glorifying God and enjoying him forever is the chief purpose for human beings also note that this purpose is instantiated in different ways in a multiplicity of contexts.[7] Furthermore, it is entirely compatible with other purposes. While there is certainly a hierarchical relationship such that glorifying and enjoying God is to be the foundational purpose grounding all others, the others do exist and are legitimate purposes. An over-arching purpose does not rule out subsidiary purposes.

A standard objection to the divine imposition view of purpose is that it robs humans of their freedom and dignity. For example, our moral proclivities cause us to think that parents who planned their children's lives and imposed their own purposes on them would undermine the dignity of their children as free creatures who have a right to say how their lives unfold in terms of their own chosen purposes. Julian Baggini voices this objection in strong terms:

> If we found that our sole purpose was to serve God then we might think that was a worse fate than to have no predetermined purpose at all. Is it better to be slaves with a role in the universe or to be free people left to create a role for ourselves? . . . what could seem more unlikely than that the supreme being would feel the need to create human beings, with all their complexity, and with all the suffering and

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ex nihilo and to God's self-sufficiency and independence. Jonathan Edwards's "The End for Which God Created the World," remains a *locus classicus* on the topic.

[7] So says the Reformed confession *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

> toil that human life entails, solely so that it can have creatures to serve it? This is an image of God as an egotistical tyrant, determined to use its power to surround itself with acolytes and have praise heaped upon it.[8]

Setting aside the issue of Baggini's suspect choice of language in framing the objection (i.e., "serve," "slaves," "tyrant,") which likely clouds the issue, he has captured the essence of this objection.

Supernaturalists have a couple of responses to this charge. First, with respect to the above analogy, theists who hold that purpose is, in some sense, divinely imposed, will call attention to the fact that in the case of the parents and children, our intuition is not to charge the parents with tyranny and the like for "imposing" on their children certain ideas of what constitutes worthy purposes that *ought to be* followed. In this case, parents are claiming that following path *x* ought to be pursued because it is good and right. The "imposition" in this case is not *forcing* the children to do what the parents think the child ought to do, but suggesting that *if* the child wants to flourish and thrive, she will pursue this course.

For example, we would commend the parents for teaching (and strongly suggesting to) their children that one ought to aim to love others, treat them fairly, try hard, etc. However, the "imposition" of these *higher-order* purposes (through teaching and strongly commending) does not rule out a range of other purposes from which their children are free to choose; for example, what vocation to pursue, whom to marry, or what sorts of hobbies to enjoy. Within each of these freely chosen contexts, though, the child should embrace the higher-order purposes of which her parents spoke. Just as we do not fault the parents for commending these higher-order purposes, we also do not fault

[8] Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy & the Meaning Of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 17.

them for "imposing" the stipulation that their children ought not to pursue a destructive life. Such a life is not good for them; it is not conducive to human flourishing. Similarly, theists posit that a being like God, with a perfect nature and attributes like, for example, omniscience at his disposal, is in a position to wisely bestow good purposes on the lives of his creatures. However, the imposition of these foundational good purposes in no way mitigates good additional purposes originating in the agency of the creature. Furthermore, theists link fulfillment of the divine purposes with the well-being of created moral and rational agents, which leads to the second theistic response to the charge.

Classical theists posit that God does have purpose(s) for his creation. Of these purposes, one might say that some basic blueprint for how one is to live life and under what ultimate end one is to structure life resides with the creator. Against the charge that it is tyrannical for God to impose or require that this blueprint is followed, an additional response by theists may be to argue that, far from being the egotistical whims of the deity, the imposition of purposes originating in the divine nature and implemented through the divine will is actually what is best and most fulfilling for creatures who owe their existence to this same being. For example, there is ample precedent in Christian theology where the two notions (divinely imposed purpose and human satisfaction) are fused. Question one of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What is the chief end of man?" to which the response is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."[9] While such views are typically associated with reformed Calvinistic theology, one will find similar affirmations in, for example, Roman Catholic theology. The

[9] Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. III, "The Evangelical Protestant Creeds" (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 676. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* was prepared by the Westminster Assembly in 1647, and is used by many Reformed groups to this day to teach the content of the Christian religion from the Reformed theological perspective.

Catechism of the Catholic Church resounds just as loudly on this issue as do the Westminster standards:[10]

> Scripture and Tradition never cease to teach and celebrate this fundamental truth: "The world was made for the glory of God." St. Bonaventure explains that God created all things "not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and communicate it," for God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness: "Creatures came into existence when the key of love opened his hand..." The glory of God consists in the realization of this manifestation and communication of his goodness, for which the world was created. God made us "to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace," for "the glory of God is man fully alive; moreover man's life is the vision of God: if God's revelation through creation has already obtained life for all the beings that dwell on earth, how much more will the Word's manifestation of the Father obtain life for those who see God." The ultimate purpose of creation is that God "who is the creator of all things may at last become 'all in all,' thus simultaneously assuring his own glory and our beatitude."[11]

On a view like those affirmed in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it is not only possible that rational and moral agents in God's creation can formulate their own purposes within the bounds of God's most foundational purpose for them, but theists who adopt this or any other foundational purpose originating in God can argue that fulfilling God's purposes is the very thing that brings existential satisfaction. Furthermore, the theist can argue that the creature, in fulfilling God's purpose for her, is thereby *functioning* properly according to her design. Perhaps this does not get to the heart of the charge against divinely imposed purpose though. The new indictment may then be that God *qua* imposer of purpose on his creatures is tyrannical in the sense that he fashioned them such that for them to experience existential satisfaction requires that they live life *his way*. Why not give them

[10] The Westminster Standards refer collectively to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Westminster Larger Catechism, the Directory of Public Worship, and the Form of Church Government.

[11] #293-294, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

complete autonomy and then respect that endowment by not imposing external purposes on their lives?

To the traditional theist, this response seems inadequate for the following reason. The God of classical theism is metaphysically necessary and perfect. Consequently, it is likely that he has the best idea of what are good purposes for his creatures, and indeed, what sorts of pursuits in life will prove most existentially satisfying to them. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine how something other than loving and ordering one's life around such a being could supplant this as a fundamental purpose in life, given what this being is thought to be like. Theists reason that foundational pursuits that lead away from recognizing, loving, and ordering one's life, in some measure, around the reality of this necessary and perfect being are flawed. This is especially noteworthy when discussion centers on other attributes that are posited of the theistic God like beauty and goodness. Admitting that our most foundational purpose, though not to the exclusion of others at a different level, is wrapped up in something like the Reformers' motto *coram deo* (before the face of God) is, according to classical theists, no more an assault on the dignity of man than it is to require that human dignity in any other context presupposes that clearly inferior human purposes (e.g., desiring to rob a bank, murder) are of the same status as clearly superior ones (e.g., seeking to alleviate world hunger, poverty, etc.). If God is as classical theism states in terms of his nature and character, then for him not to prescribe that his creatures order their lives around him would be unloving, for he is infinite love, beauty, etc. He ordains what is in accordance with the truth, and therefore what is best for his creatures. For God not to reveal his will in this area, given classical theistic premises, would be akin to him telling a lie, affirming that it is not important

what foundational ends the human creature chooses for herself in life. It is far from clear, then, that God providing a plan for human flourishing is tyrannical. As Michael Levine notes, "God's purpose is not some selfish end of God. To fulfill God's purpose is at one and the same time to fulfill one's own purposes and goals – to become what it is that is most valuable to become."[12]

This response by the theist to the charge that divinely imposed purpose assaults the dignity of man also functions as a response to an interesting dilemma that external imposition of purpose views seem to face. The dilemma demonstrates that the imposition of purpose *qua* external imposition is not a sufficient condition for securing purpose *that is recognized as satisfactory* by those agents on whom it is imposed. In Mary Shelley's classic tale, we encounter a creature tormented by questions: "My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them."[13] Eventually he did solve them. Unfortunately, this did not cure his existential angst. He found his creator's journal:

> You, doubtless, recollect these papers. Here they are. Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine indelible. . . . I exclaimed in agony. 'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust?'[14]

[12] Michael Levine, "What Does Death Have to Do with the Meaning of Life?" *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): p. 461.

[13] Mary W. Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993), p. 134.

[14] Ibid., p. 136.

Presumably, in reading the journal, Frankenstein's monster ascertained some of his creator's reasons for giving him life. Even so, this did not bring purpose and meaning, recognized as existentially satisfying, into *his* life.

One way of responding to this situation that is available to those who advocate that fundamental purpose is externally imposed is to note that even though Dr. Frankenstein had reasons and purposes *in creating*, these purposes failed to be existentially sufficient for his creation, a creation which developed the capacity to rationally inquire into these purposes. The creature discovered his creator's purposes in creating him, but found them woefully wanting. They certainly did not give him a reason from without for wanting to live. Does a similar situation obtain on the divinely imposed purpose view? These are deep waters. In a sense, there are individuals who assert from their first-person perspective and experience that they are not existentially satisfied with purpose(s) being "assigned" to them externally, perhaps by God. On that level, the situation would be similar to that of Frankenstein's monster. However, in another sense, advocates of divinely imposed purpose might respond by saying that not only is this person not functioning properly, she actually misses out on the greatest existential satisfaction possible by rejecting the purpose assigned to her. In other words, the problem is not with the divinely imposed purpose, it is with her. Her perspective misses very important truths about the way the world operates.[15] Furthermore, classical theists resist the analogy between Dr. Frankenstein and God. Frankenstein "played a game" for which

[15] If her primary complaint is that she does not like the way the world operates, the first three quarters of this section offer some possible options open to the divinely imposed purpose view in response to this criticism.

he was ill-equipped. The same cannot be said for God, according to classical theists. A God who is ill-equipped is no longer the God of classical theism.

6.2.1.1 Divinely Imposed Purpose: Euthyphro Revisited

While most naturalistic objections to the theistic proposal that a meaningful life is largely a function of fulfilling some divinely imposed purpose(s) center on how this assaults the dignity of man, another avenue is available to the naturalist. Theists arguing for this view are additionally committed to the claim that God's imposed purposes are the kinds of purposes that make for a meaningful life, meaning they are valuable, good, etc. But why are these divinely ordained purposes valuable, good, or worth pursuing? It is here where a Euthyphro-type dilemma lurks. Indeed, a formally equivalent argument to the Euthyphro dilemma, the inspiration for which is found in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, in divine-command theory contexts can be offered against the divinely imposed purpose view of life's meaning.[16] However, there are actually two ways a Euthyphro problem can be constructed here. In the first case, one might identify divinely imposed purpose(s) with divine command(s) such that something similar to the following propositions is true:

> [DP_1] The purpose of your life is *x* (where *x* is commanded by God as a moral imperative around which humans *ought* to orient their lives).

On this rendering, divinely imposed purpose is faced with Euthyphro's dilemma simply in virtue of its status as a divine command. The proponent of divinely imposed purpose, then, seems committed to either (i) the existence of a standard of goodness and value outside of God to which he conforms his imposed purposes (commands), or (ii) some

[16] In its most basic statement, the dilemma is drawn from a proposition like the following: *Does God command something because it is right, or is something right because God commands it?* The dilemma's advocate thinks the theist is committed to this dilemma, where each horn is equally problematic for the theist given other premises within the theists' theological and philosophical framework (i.e., divine aseity, divine necessity, etc.).

form of theological voluntarism, whereby there is nothing good or valuable about the purposes (commands) God imposes (gives) *antecedent* of His commanding them, given that the theist is unlikely to concede their antecedent value or goodness. Consequently, discussion of the dilemma within this context will be nearly identical to discussions of the dilemma within the standard divine command theory context.

On another rendering, the connection between the Euthyphro dilemma in the context of divine command theory and in the context of divinely imposed purpose is looser and yet *formally* identical. In this case, theists are committed to the claim that divinely imposed purpose must be good or valuable, and its goodness or value is either because God has imposed it, in which case it seems to be arbitrary, or because it is itself an intrinsically valuable or good purpose, in which case it seems as though there is some standard for good and valuable purposes outside of God to which He is subject. The following proposition is subtly different from DP_1:

> [DP_2] The purpose of your life is *x* (where *x*'s relationship to the divine commands is not specified)

What makes this case different from the first, though? In this scenario, we are not so much concerned with whether divinely imposed purpose *just is* another divine command as we are with what makes this purpose(s) good and valuable. Is it so simply because it is *God's* intended purpose for us, or are God's intentions in line with something antecedently (of him) good and valuable? It is a difference in perspective. Again, neither of the options *apparently* available is likely to appeal to the theist, and so she is confronted with something at least formally equivalent to Euthyphro's famous dilemma in ethical discussions of divine command theory. The plausibility of the theist's reply to these Euthyphro dilemmas in the meaning of life context will track the plausibility of the

replies on behalf of divine command theory in general. And while there is a sense among many contemporary philosophers that divine command theories are seriously flawed, there exist formidable versions of the theory of which it is not at all clear that conclusive refutation has been offered.[17]

6.2.1.2 What About God's Purpose and Meaning?

An additional criticism raised against views of life's meaning that posit God as necessary and sufficient to ground purpose and meaning in life, is that the very same questions raised in relation to the universe and the finite creatures who populate it, seemingly can be raised about *God's* own purpose and meaning. When we ask about the meaning of life, we are very often asking a large-scale question about existence. We want to know the purpose or meaning of the universe around us as well as of our own lives. Generally, we take these questions to be inseparable such that an answer to the first will likely elucidate the latter. Often, the assumption is that life's purpose and meaning are somehow derived from God. That is to say, his existence, in some sense, secures meaning for everything else that exists. But what about God's meaning? Can the same question be asked about Him?

On this matter, Paul Edwards distinguishes between what he calls the "theological why" and the "super-ultimate why," both of which are considered *cosmic* why-questions.[18] The theological-why is best identified in that one asking such a question

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[17] For example, see Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Philip L. Quinn, "Obligation, Divine Commands, and Abraham's Dilemma," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (March 2002): pp. 459-66. For a recent discussion of this and other central issues in religious morality, see William J. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

[18] Paul Edwards, "Why," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vols. 7 & 8 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 298-99.

would be satisfied with a theological answer given the answer's plausibility in its own right. That is to say, the person asking this question will likely think the problem of purpose and meaning has been sufficiently addressed in obtaining a theological answer, whereby God grounds and secures such things. But some think an even deeper why question can be asked. A person asking this potentially deeper "why" will feel that the answer given to the theological-why is inadequate and has not really answered the question of the meaning of existence because it has not given an account of why it is that *this particular* God and not another, and *this particular* set of God-purposes and not some others obtain. They seek a deeper rationale for existence *simpliciter*, and not simply the universe's existence or human existence or your and my existence.[19] In the words of Heidegger, the one whose cosmic-why question ends with God has not pushed his inquiry "to the very end."[20] Assuming the coherence of the super-ultimate why, a critic of the theistic hypothesis in this context might seek to create a tension for the theist—the theist posits the ultimate grounding for meaning and purpose in God, but then what is the ultimate rationale for this God and not another? In other words, in asking why *anything* exists at all, one must include God in the *anything*.

In response to this, the theist might argue that continuing to request a deeper context through which to understand some phenomenon or entity or state of affairs leads to an infinite regress, and that it is plausible to terminate the regress with God, given traditional theistic postulates about His nature *that the universe does not share*, even

[19] Some argue that the very concept of the super-ultimate why question is incoherent. A case can be made that Wittgenstein falls in this group. Cf. *Tractatus*, 6.432-7.

[20] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 7.

though he is one of those entities that *exists*. The most salient property of God relevant in this discussion is God's necessary existence, roughly the idea that it is impossible for him not to exist or that he exists in every possible world. God's necessary existence is inseparable from his aseity and eternality, and these attributes force *why* questioning to stop with God. In fact, one can argue that in addition to explanatory and teleological considerations terminating in God, so too, do cosmological and ethical considerations.

Theists are often criticized for positing God as an *arbitrary* terminus to such questions. Naturalists often think the universe itself provides a sufficient terminus. The issue, then, is whether there is something about the nature of life in the universe and the universe itself (perhaps something like contingency or a similar notion) that prompts *legitimate* "why" questions for which naturalism does not have the conceptual resources to sufficiently address. And if the theist posits a necessary being to answer them, it seems as though the criticism is not successful which demands a further why question for that being's cause, the ethical status of his commands, or his purposes in existing. Within the context of the dialectic between naturalism and classical theism, then, there are two options. Either the universe or the ultimate non-agential state of affairs from which it arose is the ultimate brute fact, or the necessary personal being responsible for the universe is the ultimate brute fact. Whatever the real brute fact ends up being, no further why questions can be asked if one wishes to avoid incoherence.

The nature of this dialectic is seen in how theists and naturalists might respond to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" as well as to each others' answers. The theist thinks the question, at one level at least, is answerable. He responds by affirming the existence of a necessary being who is the ultimate and most basic

ground of all that exists which is distinct from him. He needs no ground of existence outside himself, for he is necessary. Consequently, according to the theist, to ask the further question of why this being exists rather than just nothing demonstrates a failure to grasp the nature of a necessary being. So, on theistic premises, there is a sense in which the question is answerable and a sense in which it is not. God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing, but one cannot coherently ask the further question of why God himself exists.

The naturalist response tracks the theistic response, at least formally. He too might think the question is incoherent on one level precisely because the universe (or some non-agential, basic state of affairs), for him, occupies the same "explanatory" and ontological role as God in the theistic framework. The naturalist might simply claim that the universe or the most basic state of affairs from which it arises is necessary. To ask the further question of why it exists, then, is incoherent. It just does. The theist, however, thinks the fingerprints of necessity are not found in the universe or any non-agential most basic state of affairs from which the universe is said to have arisen, and that one only finds a forensic match only in the God of traditional theism. Commenting on this question and the dividing line between science and metaphysics on the possibility of an answer, Étienne Gilson remarks:

> Why is there something rather than nothing? Here again, I fully understand a scientist who refuses to ask it. He is welcome to tell me that the question does not make sense. Scientifically speaking, it does not. Metaphysically speaking, however, it does. Science can account for many things in the world; it may some day account for all that which the world of phenomena actually is. But why anything at all is, or exists, science knows not, precisely because it cannot even ask the question. To this supreme question, the only conceivable answer is that each and every particular existential energy, each and every particular existing thing, depends for its existence up a pure Act of existence. In order to be the ultimate answer to all existential problems, this supreme cause has to be

> absolute existence. Being absolute, such a cause is self-sufficient; if it creates, its creative act must be free. Since it creates not only being but order, it must be something which at least eminently contains the only principle of order known to us in experience, namely, thought. Now an absolute, self-subsisting, and knowing cause is not an It but a He.[21]

6.2.2 Self Imposed Purpose[22]

It is commonly assumed that in the absence of any divinely imposed purpose on human existence that life is without purpose and therefore without meaning. This assumption is challenged by many naturalists though.[23] A widely accepted candidate naturalistic meaning of life narrative has something to say about purpose in world devoid of purpose originating outside finite human intentionality. According to such a narrative, if purposes originate in the intentionality of rational creatures, then finite agents can manufacture their own purpose(s) in life, and this is sufficient for the judgment that their lives have purpose and therefore meaning. Certainly, naturalists concede that with the "death" of God comes the loss of a species of purpose, but this variety is not required for a life full of existentially satisfying purpose and meaning. To those who think naturalists are committed to a purposeless and meaningless life, Kurt Baier offers the following assessment, "These people mistakenly conclude that there can be no purpose *in* life because there is no purpose *of* life; that *men* cannot themselves adopt and achieve

[21] Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 138-40. For a naturalistic discussion of why there is something rather than nothing, see Bede Rundle, *Why There is Something Rather than Nothing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

[22] I am using "self-imposed purpose" as a contrasting position to divinely imposed purpose. I identify this as a naturalistic option, even though it is logically possible that there exists a state of affairs where God exists but a divinely imposed purpose fails to obtain.

[23] Some naturalists of a pessimist bent however, do concede that in the absence of God life really is purposeless in a sense that also entails meaningless.

purposes because *man*, unlike a robot or a watch dog, is not a creature with a purpose."[24] Baier's claim is that one commits a *non sequitur* in concluding that a lack of externally imposed purpose onto life entails a lack of internally generated purpose as rational creatures lead their lives. The latter does not follow from the former, and this internally generated purpose is sufficient for a purposeful and meaningful life.

Michael Martin distinguishes talk of purpose into two categories, *cosmic* and *terrestrial*, a distinction that largely tracks the difference between the divine imposition view and the self imposition view.[25] Cosmic purpose is that purpose which is part of a larger cosmic plan not ultimately originating with man, whereas terrestrial purpose has no such relationship to a larger plan at the cosmic level.[26] Naturalism entails the rejection of cosmic purpose, but not terrestrial purpose. As such, provided that a given terrestrial purpose meets certain conditions, it can be considered a purpose that contributes to a meaningful existence. On this view, talk of a single purpose for human life is unwarranted and unnecessary, for there exist numerous purposes that can contribute to a meaningful life.

Naturalists who advocate something like the self-imposition view challenge the assumption that divinely imposed purpose or predetermined purpose that is "introduced at the design stage"[27] is more real or substantial or significant than the sort of purpose

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[24] Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 120

[25] Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), pp. 188-91.

[26] Although, terrestrial purposes can transcend individuals and perhaps even come to include all of humanity. However, this is not sufficient to qualify as cosmic purpose, neither on Martin's taxonomy nor on any supernaturalist view.

[27] Baggini, *What's It All About?*, p. 12.

that humans themselves can manufacture. Daniel Dennett summarizes this challenge rhetorically, "Why should our purposes have to be inherited from on high? (I call that the trickle-down theory of importance – everything important has to get its importance from something else that is even more important.) Why can't we invent our own purposes?"[28] And so naturalists think it is entirely plausible to secure a purposeful and meaningful existence in an atheistic universe precisely because meaningful purposes can have as their originating and sustaining conditions the minds and intentions of human beings.

6.2.2.1 Subjectivism, Objectivism, and Self-Imposed Purpose

A dividing line exists, however, among naturalist views that posit the sufficiency of self-imposed purpose for a meaningful life between *subjectivist* and *objectivist* views. Subjectivist views maintain that what counts as a worthwhile purpose is relative to an individual's unique desires and goals, whatever they might be.[29] Objectivist views, on the other hand, posit that the worth or value of purposes is a natural, mind-independent fact that lacks variance.[30] On strong versions of subjectivism (which few hold without some measure of qualification), a meaningful life can be secured if one sets for himself the purpose of counting and recounting the blades of grass in his front lawn, and he finds this task personally satisfying. Such a purpose would not produce a meaningful life on objectivism, whereas pursuing ideals like justice on earth and alleviating as much preventable pain as possible likely would. There is more to be said here, given that discussions of purpose are closely intertwined with discussions of value. Subjectivist and

[28] Quoted in Baggini, *What's It All About?*, p. 14.

[29] Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2007): p. 203.

[30] Ibid.

objectivist naturalists agree that *valuable* purposes should be pursued if one seeks to lead a meaningful life, but disagree on the *source* of that value.

So, even though naturalists are *generally* unified in their rejection of the view that theistic premises are necessary and sufficient in order to secure valuable, worthwhile purposes around which to order a meaningful life, they disagree about what "gets the job done" in a purely natural world.[31] The disparity between subjectivist naturalism and objectivist naturalism is nicely captured in a thought experiment developed by Richard Taylor involving the mythical figure Sisyphus.[32] Recall that Sisyphus was damned to a dreadful punishment by the gods for offering divine secrets to mortals. He was condemned to roll a rock to the top of a hill, and when he finally reached his goal the rock would tumble back down. Sisyphus would follow it to the bottom, and again roll it to the top. The absurdity and meaninglessness of the situation is that Sisyphus was to repeat this task forever. Apparently the gods thought that there is no more dreadful punishment and misery than futile and hopeless labor that never accomplishes anything and is never finished.

After introducing the myth, Taylor has us imagine a scenario where the gods implant an impulse in Sisyphus to desire to do what he will be doing forever.[33] This new Sisyphus gets precisely what he wants, a stone to ceaselessly roll up a hill. The external circumstances in which Sisyphus find himself do not change. Something internal, Sisyphus' perspective on his states of affairs, is the only aspect of the situation that

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[31] I say "generally" because some naturalists hold that (i) theistic premises are necessary to secure value and meaning, (ii) God does not exist, and therefore (iii) there is no value and meaning in life. Skeptics about the whole project of finding and securing a meaningful existence and nihilists would fit here.

[32] See Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil: A New Direction*, Chapter 18 (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 256-68.

[33] Ibid., pp. 259-60.

exhibits discontinuity from the original scenario. The original scenario was, intuitively, meaningless. But does Sisyphus new found love of ceaseless rock-rolling endow the situation with meaning? In terms of value, if the original situation was said to lack value, does Sisyphus's changed inner perspective confer value on it? Subjectivist and objectivist naturalist views are split in response to this question.

The subjectivist intuition is that Sisyphus' endless rock-rolling is valuable in virtue of the fact that he now *views it as* valuable. His desire is in line with his task, and this makes his situation one that is valuable and meaningful, precisely because it is valuable *to him*. The objectivist, on the other hand, thinks there is something wrong with Sisyphus's desire itself. His desire is incompatible with what ought to be desired in virtue of its connection to some mind-independent, objective value. Indeed, according to the objectivist, the value of some state of affairs or end is not primarily the function of whether an agent *deems* it to be valuable. There are more and less valuable states of affairs, and their value resides in a mind-independent fact about the world. In the case of Sisyphus, the objectivist argues that ceaseless rock rolling in the manner in which Sisyphus performs it is not valuable, even though one, like the "reconfigured" Sisyphus, may derive great pleasure, satisfaction, and even putative meaning from this.

Currently out of favor, the subjectivist naturalistic option introduced and defined above, entails that (i) if one values memorizing the names in the phonebooks of the five largest U.S. cities, and (ii) one is reasonably successful in realizing this self-determined valuable end, then (iii) this person has secured a meaningful existence. (iii) follows from (i) and (ii) on subjectivist premises because value and, hence, a meaningful life is solely a matter of individual preference.

Objectivists are uncomfortable with what subjectivism seems to entail. For example, in response to Harry Frankfurt's (who is difficult to categorize as a full-blown subjectivist) claim that, "Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved,"[34] Susan Wolf responds that a meaningful life cannot be solely a function of caring or loving deeply *qua* caring and loving, for then loving people and *loving to torture* them would both be constitutive of a meaningful life. Intuitively though, we think that loving others as opposed to loving to torture them is the more valuable and meaningful thing to do. As such, Wolf proposes that a meaningful life is constituted by loving *what is worth loving*. Wolf, speaking for many other naturalists, maintains that there exist fully natural, mind-independent standards "governing" those things one ought to love or care about.[35]

6.2.2.2 Objectivist Naturalism and Self-Imposed Purpose: A Dilemma?

The objectivist naturalist who thinks that one ought to order her life around objectively valuable, mind-independent purpose(s) in order to secure a meaningful existence seems to be faced with a similar objection as the theist who posits that a person must order her life around divinely "imposed" purposes. In the latter case, an oft-repeated criticism is that such a view diminishes or destroys human dignity and autonomy. It is argued that the creature must be allowed to choose her purpose(s), and if not, she is deprived of her dignity. But is not the objectivist naturalist faced with a formally equivalent problem, even if the details are different?

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[34] Harry Frankfurt, "Reply to Susan Wolf," in *The Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*. Eds. S. Buss and L. Overton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 250.

[35] See her latest book, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

If, as the objectivist naturalist claims, we must conform our aims with objective, mind-independent valuable purposes in order to lead a meaningful life, then we do not really get to decide what we can pursue if we want to lead a meaningful life. To be sure, one gets to decide whether or not to pursue the objectively valuable ends, but the same can be said for the theist. Similar to the perceived dilemma in the theistic scenario, it seems as though those who want to align their lives with objectively valuable purposes, on objective naturalist premises, will have *ipso facto* limited human autonomy. In other words, they will not get to create, by human fiat, and choose valuable purposes. This largely remains outside of one's control on objective naturalist premises. On such premises, one must first *discover* objectively valuable ends, and then order her life around such ends. In the end, whether one is a theist or a naturalist where objective value is part of one's fundamental ontology, certain normative properties will, so to speak, be outside of the agent's hands to create. Even on objectivist naturalism, then, an account of dignity will have to be harmonized with this claim that, *prima facie*, appears to diminish autonomy.[36]

6.2.3 Purpose and the Discovery of Origins

Questions about purpose naturally link to questions about origins. This is part of the reason why issues surrounding *origins* are thought to be so relevant to the issue of life's meaning. Indeed, questions that can be plausibly substituted for, "What is the meaning of life?" in many contexts are, for example, "From whence did I come?" or "Why am I here?" This is not surprising, as there exists a common assumption that in

[36] For many, the lack of absolute autonomy is no problem, as voiced in the following rhetorical question, "Why is the preservation of *absolute* human autonomy needed for human dignity, and why is this claim assumed to be a reasonable normative Archimedean point by which all other normative and ethical questions are answered about how we ought to order and live our lives?"

discovering from where it is that one ultimately comes, one will be in a good position to also discover her purpose or reason for existing. The *prima facie* plausibility of this assumption is evidenced in numerous examples where in discovering the origins of an item, we think we can learn its purpose. For example, discovering the origins of an automobile, can-opener, or toothbrush seems to bring with it information about the function these items are to serve. However, such a discovery only does so because of an additional assumption that in discovering something's origin, we will also discover the intentionality through which it is assigned a function or purpose. This assumption highlights an important ambiguity in the question, "Why am I here?"

The ambiguity in this and other *why* questions is addressed in the distinction between *efficient* and *final* causality, two of Aristotle's four species of causation. Roughly, efficient causes are prior conditions, entities, or events from which the thing in question arises. For example, the efficient cause of a billiard ball moving would be its being struck by a cue, or perhaps the agent who initiates the causal sequence. Final causes are purposes or ends (*telos*) *for which* something is done. In the above example, the final cause of the billiard ball moving is likely the aim of getting it into one of the six pockets on the pool table. When asking, "Why are we here?" or "Why am I here?" it is conceptually possible then that one is asking the question either on efficient causal assumptions or final causal assumptions or both. In reality though, a case can be made that nearly all who ask the question, pre-philosophically at least, ask it with final causation intuitions at the fore. Theirs is, as Paul Edwards identifies, an "ultimate or cosmic" use of "why" as found in questions like, "Why do we exist?" "Why does the

world exist?" or "Why is there something rather than nothing?"[37] It is not the kind of *why* question that science can answer in its empirical explorations and descriptive narratives of efficient causal processes in nature.[38]

When asking, "Why am I here?" most people strongly link the possible state of affairs of finding out about their origins with additionally discovering their purpose for existing. Here, talk of origins is not in reference to the immediate origins of a person (i.e., his parents), but to the origins of all those like us (i.e., humans) and indeed the very universe itself, with the assumption that there exists something like a teleological blueprint, perhaps provided by our and the universe's designer that can be secured in discovering information about our origins.[39] For those with such assumptions, the purpose needed to make life meaningful is something to be discovered and which originates externally apart from our own intentionality, rather than something we can create internally.

Those who advocate self-imposed meaning reject this assumption though, as it is replete with teleological implications and seems to strongly presuppose transcendent intentionality behind the cosmos and life.[40] Given the strong ties between the self imposed purpose view and naturalism, advocates of this view think no such purposive blueprint, anchored in God's intentionality, exists for the ends around which human life

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[37] Paul Edwards, "Why," p. 296.

[38] Cf. John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 4-7.

[39] Among other things, this shows that, as a matter of fact, questions about the meaning of life quite often are religiously motivated, even if many contemporary philosophers think sufficient non-religious considerations can provide for a meaningful life.

[40] Of course, logically, the option remains on the table of there being a purpose originating independent of human intentionality but somehow within the universe to which we can align our lives. Three possible avenues for this are (i) Aristotelianism, (ii) Perhaps some Eastern forms of religion, and (iii) possibly, to some degree, process versions of theism.

is to be ordered. Consequently, an inquiry into the universe's and humanity's origins will, in principle, yield nothing but an efficient causal story detailing the ultimate prior conditions from which sentient life emerged. These prior conditions culminating in the kind of sentient life capable of asking question's about the meaning of life were not intentionally ordered, and, in a sense, their *product* is quite improbable, according to the late paleontologist, Stephen J. Gould:

> We [humans] are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available. . . . We may yearn for a "higher" answer—but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers for ourselves . . .[41]

Such is the human predicament regarding our purpose or lack thereof if naturalism is true. For advocates of self imposed meaning, however, it is no real cause to worry that life has no purpose, for the creation of that purpose is up to us (at least in the case of subjectivist naturalists). The universe is filled with intentionality and purpose—ours and that which we choose to create. We are the authors of life's blueprint(s), in one sense, and we will not find any other by turning our gaze to life's ultimate origins. In the case of objectivist naturalists, even though objective, mind-independent purpose exists, we need not, nor can we, look to some originating intentionality that has endowed life with purpose.

As with the distinction between divinely and self imposed meaning, the assumptions from which one asks the question, "Why are we here?" generally tracks the distinction between supernaturalism and naturalism. One who asks the question with

[41] From David Friend and the editors of *Life, The Meaning of Life: Reflections in Words and Pictures on Why We Are Here* (London: Little, Brown, 1991), p. 33.

teleological intuitions at the fore is likely searching for an answer that requires some form of supernaturalism. He is in search of a pre-ordained purpose for his life that is thought to issue from a source outside of himself, likely the same source responsible for the existence of the universe. Conversely, one operating under naturalist assumptions either does not ask the question in this way at all, or if she does, thinks the only answers she will find are efficient causal ones. It is within this universe, which at its most basic level is mechanistic and non-teleological, that internally originating purposes must be created and lived out according to the naturalist.

Out of these assumptions and motivations, one discovers hints of why the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is so strongly connected with the meaning of life. To be sure, this is a metaphysical question that is the product of a profound sense of awe at the staggering reality of existence, and why anything exists at all. But it is more than this. It is existential in the sense that we ask it in an effort to make sense of the world and, particularly, how we fit into this larger conception of existence as a whole. In answering it, we think we will not only receive rational satisfaction, but that we will receive a deeper existential and emotional satisfaction in discovering why we are here. And until we do so, there is a measure of restlessness and lack of peace. We think that in discovering the answer to why anything exists rather than just nothing, we will discover a purpose or reason for *our* existence. Again, teleological assumptions are salient in the very asking of the question. Furthermore, even though the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is global whereas the question, "Why am I here?" is local, many think an answer to the former will elucidate the latter. In all this, we see that, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is another of those questions

among many that are part of the larger family of questions associated with the meaning of life.

6.3 Summary

In order for a narrative to qualify as a candidate meaning of life narrative, it must possess the correct narrative elements. Of importance, is that it contains a cluster of elements that address a number of salient concerns and questions surrounding purpose. I have briefly sketched some of the more prevalent of these concerns in this chapter. In keeping with my dialectical aims in Part II of the dissertation, I have used theism and naturalism as the grid by which to contextualize the discussion. In Chapter Seven, I will move to a consideration of two more related elements for which any candidate meaning of life narrative must provide an explanatory or narrative framework: pain and suffering and how it is all going to end. I will focus my attention primarily, though, on the topic of ending.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Theism, Naturalism, and The Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending[1]

7.1 Introduction

Understanding the question, "What is the meaning of life?" with the aid of narrative has already proven fruitful in this dissertation. The benefits of the narrative interpretation have not, however, been exhausted; possibly the most noteworthy of them—*how the importance of narrative ending provides a powerful way to frame discussions of death and futility within the more general territory of life's meaning*—has yet to be discussed. My main, though not only, goal in this final chapter will be to show how the concept of narrative ending naturally links to the perennial meaning of life topics of death and futility. It does so primarily by offering a deep rationale for *why* death and futility have so often been thought to be relevant to life's meaning, largely, in virtue of being perceived threats to a robustly meaningful life.

I will argue that futility is often thought to characterize naturalistic candidate meaning of life narratives, or metanarratives,[2] because the way a narrative ends has significant proleptic power to elicit a wide range of broadly normative human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole *in*

[1] I have reworked a significant portion of the content in Chapter Seven into a paper titled, "Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending," which is forthcoming in *Religious Studies*.

[2] Hereafter, I will use the terms "candidate meaning of life narrative" and "metanarrative" interchangeably.

virtue of it being the ending.[3] I will begin by explaining the conceptual and dialectical context in which discussions of death and futility often unfold. Second, I will compare the respective endings of the candidate naturalistic and Christian theistic meaning of life narratives. Third, I will explain the rationale behind the evaluative significance of narrative ending for broadly normative appraisals of narratives as a whole. Fourth, I will clarify three important senses of ending, noting which is required for my argument to succeed. Fifth, I will propose two strategies to explain how my own proposal relates to another plausible account of the perceived connection between death and futility in a strictly naturalist world, an account Ronald Dworkin presents in Chapter Six of his *Sovereign Virtue*.[4] Sixth, I will enlist my conclusions about the evaluative significance of narrative ending in order to frame and bring greater nuance to discussions of death and futility, and why futility is thought to follow from the *nature* of naturalistic metanarrative endings. Finally, I will explore potential implications that the evaluative significance of narrative ending has for the tasks of defense and theodicy. Like Chapter Six, this chapter is not primarily *evaluative* (vis-à-vis the debate between naturalism and Christian theism), but is intended as a way to *frame* discussions of death and futility given resources *only* available from within the narrative interpretation.

[3] A similar claim can be made for any metanarrative. That is, metanarrative *x*'s ending has significant proleptic power to elicit a wide range of *broadly normative* human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards that metanarrative as a whole. The *content* of the broadly normative responses will then be dependent upon *how* metanarrative *x* ends.

[4] Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

7.2 The Connection Between Death, Futility, and The Meaning of Life: The Received Dialectical Context

Death and futility are among a cluster of themes that closely track discussions of life's meaning.[5] Precisely why death and futility bear such a close relationship to the meaning of life has received relatively little sustained articulation beyond the oft-repeated pessimistic claim that *cosmic* or *deep* futility supervenes upon the entirety of human existence,[6] given a naturalistic view of the ultimate fate of life, both human life as well as the universe itself, where entropy, dissolution, and death are thought to have the final word. If we and all the products of our human energies including the immediate building of a family, accomplishments, and the distant traces of progeny will someday cease to exist *forever*, then our lives and our pursuits, indeed, existence in its entirety, are deeply futile, so the argument goes.

Both defenses and attempted rebuttals of the above conditional have broadly unfolded within relatively well-defined dialectical parameters. Those who accept the consequent generally do so, I think, largely by focusing on what can be called the *Staying Power Intuition* (SPI). Roughly, SPI is the idea that, *ceteris paribus*, worthwhile, significant, and meaningful things *last*.[7] Though SPI is vague and subject to counter-examples in various contexts, in terms of human life, SPI requires that we leave some sort of indelible mark on reality (usually articulated in a sense requiring a doctrine of post-mortem survival that itself requires the survival of *the person*), something which is

[5] As already noted earlier in the dissertation, others include origins, purpose, value, pain and suffering, and how life is going to end.

[6] I contrast *cosmic* futility with *local* futility. The latter is futility that supervenes upon a localized state of affairs, for example, a four year old's aim to climb Mt. Everest in a day. The entirety of existence being cosmically futile is consistent with localized aims being worthwhile and attainable.

[7] SPI is nicely captured in the slogan, *diamonds are forever*.

not possible,[8] or at minimum, highly unlikely on naturalism. Those who reject the consequent generally make one of two (or both) moves—(i) appeal to a contrary intuition, what can be called the *Scarcity Intuition* (SI) whereby life is thought to be worthwhile, significant, and meaningful—*and therefore not deeply futile*—precisely because death looms on the horizon, bringing a sense of poignant urgency and specialness to fleeting life,[9] or, more often, (ii) argue that the requirement of post-mortem survival of human beings and the fruits of their labors, extending endlessly into the future, is too strong a condition to be met in order for life to be worthwhile, significant, and meaningful.[10]

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[8] I am, of course, not referring to *logical* impossibility, but *metaphysical* impossibility. Though, it must be admitted that strictly speaking one can imagine scenarios where post-mortem survival is even metaphysically possible within an exclusively naturalist ontology, for example, through successive transfers of consciousness into different material bodies, as an anonymous reviewer reminded me. Nonetheless, post-mortem survival fits much more naturally within a theistic ontology, and attempts to secure it on naturalism are tenuous at best.

[9] Something in the neighborhood of SI is captured on one construal of the popular maxim, *live everyday like it is your last*. Marcus Aurelius may have advocated something like this: "Do not act as if you had ten thousand years to throw away. Death stands at your elbow!" *Meditations*, trans. J. Collier (London: Walter Scott Publishing Co. Ltd., 1805), 52. Although, Aurelius's words may be little more than an affirmation of the fleeting nature of this life, something held by many who also believe in post-mortem survival. For more explicit affirmations of SI, note the words of Victor Frankl, who said, ". . . death itself is what makes life meaningful." *The Doctor and the Soul* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957), p. 73; and those of Karl Popper, "There are those who think that life is valueless because it comes to an end. They fail to see that the opposite argument might also be proposed: that if there were no end to life, life would have no value; that it is, in part, the ever-present danger of losing it which helps bring home to us the value of life." in "How I See Philosophy," *Philosophers on Their Own Work*, eds. A. Mercier and M. Svilar, vol. 3 (Berne and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1977), p. 148.

[10] This is the position of Brooke Allen Trisel in "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts," *The Philosophical Forum*, 35 (Fall 2004): pp. 371-91, along with most contemporary naturalists. Interestingly, there are those who think that not only is post-mortem existence, extending endlessly into the future, not necessary for a worthwhile, meaningful life, but that such a state would actually *threaten* such a life. For example, see Bernard Williams's existential—as opposed to logical or metaphysical—objection to traditional accounts of post-mortem survival in his, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 82-100. Importantly, (ii) additionally highlights the difference between *optimistic* and *pessimistic* naturalists. Pessimistic naturalists, along with most theists, claim that God's existence and post-mortem survival are necessary conditions for a meaningful and worthwhile life. Unlike theists, pessimistic naturalists deny that God exists, and so conclude that life is meaningless and futile. Schopenhauer, Camus, and possibly Bertrand Russell fall into this category. Optimistic naturalists, however, deny that God and post-mortem survival are necessary for a meaningful, worthwhile life. Thus, they would deny a strong version of SPI

Within the dialectical parameters noted above, discussions over the perceived threat of death to living a meaningful life, as death is construed on naturalism, have been fruitful up to a point. In this context, death and futility are thought to link to the meaning of life as a threat to leading a meaningful life. While this analysis may be correct as far as it goes, it is surely a truncated story of their connection. Therefore, considerations of SPI can and should be supplemented in order to bring a more robust account of this relationship. This involves combining three claims which then provide the deeper rationale through which to understand something like SPI. These three claims are as follows:

(1) Entire metaphysical systems (e.g., naturalism, Christian theism) can be thought of as narratives or metanarratives, narrating across the cluster of humanly-deemed existentially relevant 'features' of life (e.g., origins, purpose, value, pain and suffering, and how it is all going to end).

(2) The way a narrative ends *qua* ending, contributes to a wide range of broadly normative human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole.

(3) Per (1) and (2), many have concluded that naturalistic metanarratives are characterized by deep or cosmic futility given the way they end, and the way they end is important for such normative appraisals partly because narrative ending *qua* ending is important to these appraisals.

Note carefully that the reason subsumed under (1) – (3) is importantly different from the reason anchored *exclusively* in a principle such as SPI where futility is thought to follow from the naturalistic metanarrative ending given naturalistic premises about the *nature* of that ending. In the case of (1) – (3), the reason is even more theoretically and practically fundamental—*that narrative ending* qua *ending is salient in our broadly normative*

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applied to human life. Most contemporary philosophical naturalists would recognize themselves as optimistic, in the sense the term is used in this context. I discussed optimistic and pessimistic naturalism in greater detail in Chapter Five.

assessments of narratives as a whole. Hence, while judging the naturalistic metanarrative to be irredeemably futile is, no doubt, made partly on the basis of the *nature* of its ending (what can be called a "second-order futility-conclusion"),[11] an important reason that the nature of the ending possesses such normative weight is that it is already anchored in the fact that narrative ending *qua* ending is thought to be normatively important (a first-order conclusion about endings in general).[12] Put simply, second-order futility-conclusions, or second-order non-futility-conclusions for that matter, would lose much of their force if something like first-order conclusions about the evaluative significance of narrative ending *qua* ending were not already in place.

Of course, introducing the concept of *narrative* ending presupposes an intelligible framework in which it sufficiently links up to the question of life's meaning in general and to death and futility specifically. It will only work if narrative, as a concept, appropriately relates to the meaning of life in a coherent way. I defended this view in Part I of the dissertation, positing an *analytic* relationship between the question, "What is the meaning of life?" and the concept of a narrative, whereby the question is interpreted as the request for *a metanarrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings*. Space does not allow for a re-articulation of the narrative interpretation, and its *analytic* proposal for how to understand the request, "What is the meaning of life?" However, it is worth noting that

[11] The judgment might also be based upon other considerations, like whether or not one thinks objective value can be secured in an exclusively naturalistic ontology. The debate over the ontology of value, even within the naturalist camp, reveals that there is not just one naturalistic metanarrative, even though there will be some continuity across all naturalistic metanarratives in virtue of shared theses about the nature of reality.

[12] Regardless of whether or not the endings of narratives *should* possess such influence over our broadly normative assessments of narratives as a whole (or whether or not narrative theorists and philosophers have given this literary-anthropological phenomenon enough attention), they in fact do.

the *analytic* claim is not needed in order for my thesis in this chapter to be plausible. Indeed, one can introduce a weaker, *synthetic* relationship between the meaning of life and narrative in that narrative is one, among other concepts, that importantly links to issues that are largely co-extensive with the meaning of life. Here, narrative occurs alongside other theories and concepts that aid us in addressing the cluster of questions and concerns found in the meaning of life context, even if none, individually, covers all of the conceptual territory.

Whether or not conclusions that life is in fact cosmically futile have philosophical merit is not my concern in this chapter. Rather, I am focusing on answering the question of why futility is often thought to saliently characterize naturalistic candidate meaning of life narratives in a way that moves beyond the received dialectical parameters. I am primarily interested in what I term above, a "first-order conclusion about endings in general," which follows from the perceived normative significance of narrative ending *qua* ending. On this more fundamental level, I will argue that futility is often thought to characterize naturalistic metanarratives because the way a narrative ends has significant proleptic power to elicit a wide range of broadly normative human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole *in virtue of it being the ending*.

7.3 The Ending on the Naturalistic Narrative[13]

There are several dimensions to ending in an exclusively naturalistic world that are apropos to a discussion of life's meaning. The best way to unpack the naturalistic candidate meaning of life narrative ending will be through a consideration of each of

[13] Naturalists of all persuasions, whether reductive, non-reductive, subjectivist, or objectivist, will agree on the characteristics of death as delineated in this section.

these distinct dimensions. With the concept of death at the fore, one can refer to three relevant deaths: (i) the deaths of individual humans, (ii) the "death" of the earth, and (iii) the "death" of the universe. But there are other important aspects to these dimensions of naturalistic narrative endings (both penultimate and ultimate) that are important in the context of meaning of life discussions, two of which are the *fact* that, *ex hypothesi*, (iv) the local endings of dying humans and our "dying" earth, and the global ending of the universe are definitive and irreversible, resulting in the dissolution of self-aware, first-person consciousness (in the case of humans) and complete and irreversible entropy (in the case of the universe),[14] and (v) the final ending of the universe is one that is neither previsioned nor planned, and, in that sense, is not brought about (either weakly construed or strongly construed depending upon the notion of divine agency in view) by intelligent, purposeful direction. I will briefly consider what *death* means in the first three dimensions, and will address the fourth dimension within the respective discussion of each *species* of death. I will close the section by considering the fifth dimension.

With respect to the deaths of individual human beings, one can distinguish *dying*, *death*, and *being dead*. As John Martin Fischer has noted, "Dying is a process. Being dead is a condition or state. Death intervenes between dying and being dead; it takes place at the end of dying and the beginning of being dead."[15] Parsing the conceptual and metaphysical relations between dying, death, and being dead is not important here; all three are part of the phenomenon of death, and it is the *ending* that death brings that is

[14] I will not consider some of the more exotic claims of certain scientists that lack mainstream acceptance like, for example, those of Frank Tipler in *The Physics of Immortality* (New York: Macmillan, 1994). It is worth mentioning, however, that there are a few who think some semblance of immortality is at least *possible* within a naturalist worldview.

[15] John Martin Fischer, "Introduction: Death, Metaphysics, and Morality," in *The Metaphysics of Death*, pp. 3-4.

relevant. On the naturalistic narrative it is the fact that dying ushers in the irreversible state or condition of being dead that is important.

On the naturalistic narrative, death is solely a biological event, an event which, in principle, can be understood entirely naturalistically. Importantly, there is no spiritual explanatory layer that contributes to an accurate and exhaustive understanding of this phenomenon, even if many claim there is a spiritual dimension to death and view death, at least partly, spiritually. Tabling discussions about *when* death occurs and the complexities of securing a criterion of death (whether the traditional *heart-lung death* criterion or the *brain-death* criterion),[16] death is associated with the biological demise of the human organism, bringing with it the dissolution of that entity. These biological and scientific considerations, though important in some contexts, are not most important for the meaning of life. What is important about human death for the meaning of life is that, on naturalistic premises, the loss of self-reflective, first-person consciousness in death is definitive and irreversible. Our person is dissolved, never again to experience anything if naturalism is true. It is not important to explain what death is, rather it is important to discuss what state of affairs death *brings about* for the one who undergoes death. What is relevant here is that this biological demise is final and irreversible. The loss of conscious life is a *permanent* loss, even if, upon that loss, the one who previously *was* is no longer around to experience this loss. It is a loss nonetheless.

[16] While these two criterions can be further nuanced, the general idea is that death occurs when there is permanent and irreversible cessation of heart and lung functioning (heart-lung death criterion) or death occurs when there is permanent and irreversible cessation of the functioning of either (i) *all* parts of the brain or (ii) the parts that sustain *cognitive* functioning, including consciousness (brain-death criterion). (Fischer, "Introduction," p. 5).

The second relevant "death" is that of the earth and/or the solar system of which the earth is a part, which would bring with it the deaths of all human beings, if the former death occurred before the latter deaths.[17] There are certainly realistic, possible states of affairs that could bring this about, some of them of entirely naturalistic causes, some of them, to varying degrees, products of human activity. Scientific research abounds with earth-ending scenarios, many of them initially catalogued by Isaac Asimov in his well-known book, *A Choice of Catastrophes*.[18] Such earth-ending disasters include possible devastating asteroid and comet impacts, the eventual death of our sun due to the processes involved in stellar evolution, the formation of a black hole due to the "collisional coalescence" of two neutron stars in our own galaxy within 1,500 to 3,000 light years of earth,[19] or widespread cancer and genetic mutations arising from an invisible collapse of a massive star within ". . . a few tens of light years from earth."[20] As with the deaths of human beings, any of the above catastrophes would cause the "death" of the earth as we know it, and the resulting condition would be permanent.

The final relevant death is that of the universe. William R. Stoeger notes that ". . . from all that we know about the evolution and dynamics of the observable universe, and

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[17] Although, the plausibility of such earth-ending disasters is low during the projected life of *homosapiens*, occurring ". . . on time-scales of the order of more than 50 million years, much longer than the time-scales on which our species may significantly evolve or disappear . . ." William R. Stoeger, S.J., "Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), p. 21. Furthermore, given enough scientific progress, one can imagine scenarios where some segment of the human population is able to leave the earth and colonize somewhere else prior to the earth's destruction.

[18] Isaac Asimov, *A Choice of Catastrophes: The Disasters That Threaten Our World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

[19] See Robert Zimmerman, "When Neutron Stars Collide," *Astronomy* 25, no. 4 (April 1997): pp. 52-55.

[20] All of these catastrophic scenarios are from William R. Stoeger, "Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe," pp. 21-26.

about the laws of nature that govern it . . .” that the “. . . universe as a life-generating ensemble . . .” will die.[21] It “. . . will eventually evanesce or possibly collapse in a fiery final conflagration (the big crunch).”[22] It is important to note that the *final* naturalistic ending—the universe’s final state—is not thought to be a final event *followed by absolutely nothing* (like the endings of literary narratives), but will be a certain *final state of affairs* characterizing the space-time universe we now inhabit. Importantly though, this final state of affairs is such that it will no longer permit life of any sort, especially not *human life*. On naturalism, the universe is inevitably moving towards (but in a non-agent directed way of course) this ultimate, non-life permitting, irreversible state. It is an ending owing nothing to anything but non-intelligent natural processes proceeding towards “death” according to natural law. In the words of C. S. Lewis, the naturalistic *story* of our universe:

> . . . is going to end in NOTHING [maybe not literally, though]. The astronomers hold out no hope that this planet is going to be permanently inhabitable. The physicists hold out no hope that organic life is going to be a permanent possibility in any part of the material universe. Not only this earth, but the whole show, all the suns of space, are to run down. Nature is a sinking ship. . . . Nature does not, in the long run, favour life. If Nature is all that exists – in other words, if there is no God and no life of some quite different sort somewhere outside Nature – then all stories will end in the same way: in a universe from which all life is banished without possibility of return. It will have been an accidental flicker, and there will be no one even to remember it.[23]

Lewis’ words indirectly highlight the fifth relevant dimension of the naturalistic ending, namely, that none of these levels of death in an entirely naturalistic world is part of a narrative that is, in some sense, previsioned, planned and/or brought about (either

[21] Ibid., p. 27.

[22] Ibid.

[23] C. S. Lewis, “On Living in an Atomic Age,” in *Present Concerns* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986), p. 74.

weakly construed or strongly construed depending upon the notion of divine agency in view) under the watchful eye of intelligent, purposeful direction. Death is simply a biological fact that occurs in a universe such as ours. There is no one with any interest in it, except for those of us with self-reflective capacities. As Bertrand Russell famously said:

> Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness . . .[24]

This reality, on naturalistic premises, is hard to swallow for many; that something with so much existential gravity like death, a reality that powerfully evokes deeply seated human expressions of emotion, creative reflection, and hope for something more, finally and irreversibly silences these and other human energies. So, death, on naturalism, is a final "state of affairs" from which *we* will never recover, quite literally, because there will no longer be a *you* and *me*. In John Updike's wonderful short story, "Pigeon Feathers," David, the existentially sensitive and troubled young character, has a profound "vision" of naturalism's conception of death and what it entails:

> Without warning, David was visited by an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you were drawn while the white faces recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt in your face. There you will be forever, in an upright position, blind and silent, and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called. As strata of rock shift, your fingers elongate, and your teeth are distended sideways in a great underground grimace indistinguishable from a strip of chalk. And the earth tumbles on, and the sun expires, and unfaltering darkness reigns where once there were stars.[25]

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[24] Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," pp. 115-16.

[25] John Updike, "Pigeon Feathers," in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 123-24.

The Christian theistic meaning of life narrative, though in substantial agreement with naturalism on certain levels of explanation of death, substantially departs from the naturalistic narrative at other places. It is to a discussion of death in the Christian theistic narrative that I now turn.

7.4 The Ending on the Christian Theistic Narrative

The *ending*, or at least certain penultimate *endings*, of the Christian theistic meaning of life narrative are ones that are similar to those of naturalism. For example, on the Christian theistic narrative under consideration in this dissertation, death *is* a biological event (*dying* is actually the event, whereas *death* is the intervening "point" between the process of *dying* and the state of *being dead*), although it is more. Christian theism does not, at every explanatory level,[26] offer competing explanations about death to those of naturalism; it only adds explanatory layers in order to provide what Christian theists consider to be a *full* explanation of what death involves. In addition, the ultimate ending of the Christian theistic metanarrative is probably consistent with the additional *metaphorical* deaths of the earth and the universe itself, although it is not clear on Christian theistic premises whether the ending of the present portion of the metanarrative (i.e, post-lapsarian, pre-consummation history) will involve one or another universe-ending scenario as hypothesized by current cosmology.[27]

Though important, I will not consider this in any detail here. Nor will I discuss everything relevant to a robust theological and philosophical consideration of Christian

[26] Naturalists, of course, would deny that some of these explanatory levels actually exist.

[27] The Christian theism with which I am working in this dissertation presupposes that there will be a new heavens and earth, and that the old heavens and earth is in the process of being redeemed. There will be both continuity and discontinuity between the old and the new. How and by means of what this will take place is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The redemption of the old is not inconsistent with a "death" or running down of the present space-time universe in which we live.

eschatology.[28] I do, however, want to briefly discuss three relevant aspects of the Christian theistic meaning of life narrative ending in this context: (i) death is largely *unnatural* and something that needs to be *defeated*,[29] (ii) the defeat of death is part of the wider redemptive work of God, imbedded within an intentionally, teleologically driven narrative, whereby all of creation is in the process of being redeemed (and will be *finally* redeemed), and (iii) death does not bring with it the lasting extinction of the human person. Again, note that this section is not evaluative. I am not concerned here with arguing for the rational merits of the Christian theistic narrative on any of these narrative fronts I will discuss; what follows is a minimalistic exposition of various features of the Christian metanarrative directly relevant to my purposes in this chapter.

While there are, historically, strands within Christian theology that view death largely as a natural implication of human materiality and finitude,[30] I am here operating within theological parameters whereby death is viewed as fundamentally unnatural, ultimately a devastating consequence of a moral and relational breach in the relationship between the sovereign Creator and those creatures made in the *imago dei*.[31] In the Christian theistic narrative under consideration, this sovereign established a covenant with the first human persons (and, in the theological context of the federal theology

[28] For example, any comprehensive theological-philosophical discussion of Christian eschatology should address, among others, religious pluralism and Divine judgment. Here, substantive treatment of views like (i) universalism, (ii) inclusivism, (iii) escapist views of hell, (iv) views where suffering and separation in hell are followed by *inevitable* redemption, and (v) exclusivism will be necessary. I cannot enter such discussions in this dissertation, though I am aware of the nuances of this debate.

[29] This is largely because death, along with its biological dimension, includes moral, spiritual, and relational dimensions within the Christian theistic metanarrative.

[30] For example, Pelagians, Socinians, and theological rationalists held variations of this view.

[31] There has been widespread opinion in the history of the Church over what constitutes the image of God. Some have located it in human rationality, or the freedom of the will, or in humanity's dominion over creation, or in distinctly moral qualities like love and justice, among others.

within which I am situating these issues, *ipso facto*, with the entire human race), whereby the ". . . indefectibility of holiness and blessedness. . . ." was promised and conditioned upon obedience to God's command (cf. Gen. 2:15-17).[32] On the other hand, the consequences for violating this original covenant arrangement were no less than death itself. This death, following human disobedience to God's command, had at least a twofold nature: (i) immediate loss of communion with God, and therefore separation from the ultimate source of life and blessedness, which resulted in spiritual death,[33] and (ii) the inevitable eventual biological demise of the human person, in which humanity was doomed to return to dust (cf. Gen. 3:19).

Importantly, within this particular Christian theistic metanarrative, the breach upon which human death is occasioned is also the occasion for the entire cosmos being subjected to a state of futility. The Hebrew word that powerfully captures this state is *hebel* (lit. "breath, breeze, vapor"), which possesses strong connotations of fleeting temporality, insubstantiality, vanity, meaninglessness, and futility in various contexts.[34] Interestingly, the teacher in Ecclesiastes, *Qohelet*, begins his careful reflection on life "under the sun" with this striking pronouncement, "[*h^{a}bēl h^{a}bālîm*], says the Preacher [Teacher], [*h^{a}bēl h^{a}bālîm*]! All is *hebel*" (Ecc. 1:2).[35] The Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Roman Church, extends this theme, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not

[32] William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd Ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2003), p. 537.

[33] Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 226.

[34] For a helpful discussion of this word, see Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 61-65.

[35] Here, *Qohelet* forms the superlative to signify the extent of the vanity and futility in the cosmos considered from a certain perspective.

willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption . . .” (Rom. 8:19-21a). Those very ideas, then, that cause human beings to entertain the conclusion, even if only tentatively or provisionally, that life is utterly meaningless are those same constructs that, *partially*, characterize the *fallen* world in which we live according to Christian theism. If they have the last word in the world’s narrative, then perhaps life really is futile and meaningless.

Not only do human beings wonder if there is more and long for more in this world saliently characterized by *hebel*, even the creation itself is said to anticipate deliverance from the death, decay, and provisional futility to which it has been subjected following the moral and relational breach by creatures created in the *imago dei*. Importantly, the futility spoken of in Ecclesiastes and Romans is compatible with hope, hope grounded in God’s redemptive economy. God’s wider redemptive work is a robust *project* by which remedy is being brought to the entire cosmos, and which will eventuate in a new heavens and new earth, themselves physical (as opposed to immaterial) and yet incorruptible.

Death, then, is not something inherently and naturally built into the fabric of a cosmos where explanations are exhausted naturalistically. It is a narrative element introduced because of the wrongful exercise of the human will in opposition to the authority and stipulations of the Creator. In the Christian theistic metanarrative, it is a great evil that stands in need of defeat, as it threatens both the meaningfulness of human life, as well as the power and grace of God to redeem people despite their rebellion.[36] This leads to the second relevant aspect of the ending of the Christian theistic meaning of life narrative.

[36] The first threat is *genuine*; the second only *hypothetical*.

On Christian theism, death is addressed by the wider redemptive work of God, imbedded within an intentionally, teleologically driven narrative, whereby all of creation is in the process of being redeemed (and will be *finally* redeemed). Death, in the Christian metanarrative, is not simply some subjectively lamentable isolated element that has no relationship to the rest of the narrative. In fact, death, in its connection to creaturely rebellion, its threat to deep human meaning and felicity, and the eventual defeat of it and its effects, is central to the Christian theistic meaning of life narrative. As such, a central existential concern of large numbers of human beings (i.e., can a meaningful life be secured in the face of death), is a vital concern of the Christian theistic metanarrative, though in a theologically multi-layered way. This probably should not surprise us, as those engaged in the phenomenology of religion identify distinguishing marks of religion as, among others, attempts to contextualize the universal (or near universal) human phenomenological experience of guilt and fear of death.[37]

It was noted earlier that the Fall brought with it, not only human death, but decay and provisional futility to the entire cosmos, and therefore a state of affairs where the desired human experience of deep meaning, significance, and robust felicity are genuinely threatened. This theme begins in the third chapter of Genesis, is given profound commentary in the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes, is echoed by the Apostle Paul in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome, and is finally terminated in John's Apocolyptic vision on the island of Patmos. God's wider redemptive work is, on one level, very much concerned with remedying this perceived problem.

[37] See, for example, Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death: An Existential Phenomenology of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

In the Christian theistic metanarrative, the focal point of God's redemptive activity in the world is the person and work of Christ, in which the futility inherent within fallen creation is addressed in a multifaceted way. In the person of Christ, traditional Christian theology understands that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, took upon himself human flesh in the incarnation event to dwell with his people (lit. "tabernacled," which is a semantic-theological point with great historical-redemptive significance). In a real sense, then, God himself enters into this world characterized by *hebel* to provide the definitive remedy.[38] The God-man identifies with the plight of humanity. He enters the narrative and fulfills the demands of God's law. He suffers and dies by means of the Roman crucifixion, taking upon himself the sins of the world, and, in so doing, also the full wrath of God.[39] Then, after being in the grave, the God-man is *physically* resurrected on the third day;[40] this resurrection's significance being rich and multi-layered. Christ's resurrection is referred to in Scripture as the firstfruits (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20), as a sign and guarantee of, among other coming realities, the final salvation and resurrection of human

[38] This Christian theistic claim is also a central and powerful element in a Christian theodicy. It may not provide an answer to *why* God allowed evil to occur in the first place, but it does show that God *gets his hands dirty* so to speak. He identifies with the plight of sufferers, by suffering himself (note that I am not here affirming *patripassionism*). The charges of capriciousness, carelessness, and lack of love, in light of the pain and suffering in the world, against God are made much less credible by this, and other Christological doctrines.

[39] The atonement of Christ is certainly a multi-dimensional event. No one theory, considered singularly, likely does justice to its full meaning. There has been much speculation, historically, about how best to view the atonement; for example, What did it accomplish? What was its primary aim? What does it say about God? With respect to views stressing the *substitionary* and *propitiary* nature of Christ's atonement, some contemporary biblical scholars and theologians see such views as involving God the Father in something akin to *divine child abuse*. My truncated discussion here does not require me to enter this debate.

[40] First century Jews would have understood resurrection to be nothing less than the resurrection of *the body*. Some amorphous immortality of the soul doctrine would have been entirely foreign to the first-century Jew. Anything less than physical embodied resurrection, was emphatically *not* resurrection. For the most substantive scholarly discussion of this and other issues surrounding the resurrection, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Vol. 3. Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

beings, the *transformation* of a creation that groans in futility,[41] and the eventual definitive triumph of truth, goodness, and beauty over evil.

The God-man, on the cross, was, among others, a substitutionary atonement, a propitiation for God's righteous justice and wrath, a *Christus Victor* over the destructive powers at work within our fallen world, and the divine guarantee that God cares about the world and desires a felicitous ending to creation's narrative as much as we do.[42] In the Christian narrative, Christ's resurrection functions, not only as the metaphysical blueprint for our own, but also as an event which transforms the desires for resurrection and a blessed ending from mere wishful thinking into robust hope, as hope, in contrast to wishful thinking, is rational to the extent that it is legitimately grounded (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-58).[43] As philosopher Paul K. Moser notes, "My hope is grounded in a good reason; my wish is not."[44]

Finally, on the Christian theistic metanarrative, death does not usher in the final and irreversible extinction of the human person. This is not because the *soul*, on Christian theism, is inherently immortal in virtue of special intrinsic properties it has, but due

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[41] "Transformation" is probably a more theologically accurate descriptor of the process eventuating in the new heavens and earth than terms that emphasize discontinuity over continuity. As John Polkinghorne writes, ". . . the new creation is not due to God's wiping the cosmic slate clean and starting again. Instead, what is brought about is the divine redemptive transformation of the old creation. The new is not a second creation *ex nihilo*, but it is a resurrected world created *ex vetere*. Involved in its coming to be must be both continuity and discontinuity, just the Lord's risen body bears the scares of the passion but is also transmuted and glorified." "Eschatology: Some Questions and Some Insights from Science," in *The End of the World and Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, p. 30.

[42] Cf. footnote 39.

[43] For an interesting recent *phenomenological* discussion of hope within the Christian theistic tradition, see James K. A. Smith, "Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation," in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition Amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, eds. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 200-27.

[44] Paul K. Moser, "Divine Hiddenness, Death, and Meaning," in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, eds. Paul Copan and Chad Meister (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 215-27.

solely to the grace and power of God who is both willing and able to resurrect the human person.[45] Conscious, self-aware existence continues for human persons after biological death. The grave is not the end on the Christian theistic meaning of life narrative. The death of the human person and the *deaths* of the earth and the universe, if they occur, are only penultimate on the Christian narrative; they are part of a larger narrative where the ending of this "chapter" in the history of reality is *an ending that itself never ends*.[46]

And so the Trinity's (Father-Son-Holy Spirit) wider redemptive economy includes personal (individual persons), corporate (the Church), and cosmological (the entire space-time continuum) dimensions, whereby indefectible *shalom* comes to infuse the *ending that itself never ends*. Redemption, as robustly construed on Christian theism, is not about spiritual escape from this world or from the necessarily limited condition of corporal existence, but is about peace, justice, reconciliation, and restoration being brought to all aspects of the cosmos to the glory of God. Christ's *bodily* resurrection is the definitive event that grounds hope in this coming eschatological reality involving real, material beings and creation itself. In the words of N. T. Wright:

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[45] Note that the Christian theistic concept of resurrection may *underdetermine* any specific ontology of the human person. For that matter, biblical anthropology in general may underdetermine any specific ontology of the human person. However, strong forms of Platonic and Cartesian dualism not only appear at odds with current empirical findings from neuroscience, they do not appear consistent with an exegetically rigorous biblical anthropology whereby the psycho-physical unity of the human person is stressed. For further discussion of these and related issues see, for example, John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000); Kevin Corcoran, *Rethinking Human Nature: A Christian Materialist Alternative to the Soul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), Kevin Corcoran, ed. *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons*; Joel B. Greene, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Nancy Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Peter Van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds., *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). The relationship between philosophy, science, and biblical exegesis is itself a very complex hermeneutical issue.

[46] The claim that there is *an ending that itself never ends* creates some *prima facie* difficulties that would need to be addressed in a fuller evaluation and defense of this thesis. I reflect further on this issue in §7.7 "The Concept of Narrative Ending."

> The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won . . . If Easter means Jesus Christ is only raised in a spiritual sense—[then] it is only about me, and finding a new dimension in my personal spiritual life. But if Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world—news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts. Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things—and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all. Take away Easter and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring problems of the material world. Take it away and Freud was probably right to say Christianity is wish-fulfillment. Take it away and Nietzsche probably was right to say it was for wimps.[47]

This final blessed and beatific state, anchored in and resulting, in a real sense, from Christ's resurrection is, as the prophet Isaiah depicts, something of a return to the Garden of Eden, where deep harmony between humanity, creation, and God comes again to fruition, and where, among others, disease, hatred, racial violence, injustice, and death are abolished forever (cf. Isa. 11:1-9). Here, there will be no slaves, criminals, rape, tornadoes, or tearful mourners in despair. This true and ultimate Sabbath rest, pre-figured in the creational narrative itself and pre-enacted in the life of Israel, will have arrived, as God "descends" to be with his people forever:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21:1-4).[48]

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[47] N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 65-66.

[48] That God Himself, in final fullness, will dwell with his people is the final coming to fruition of what we might call *the tabernacle principle*, in which God, at various times and in various ways, is said to *dwell with his people*.

The afflicted Job, the paradigmatic sufferer, and whose story is often the entry point into discussions of theodicy, "hoped" in the eschaton, where ultimate justice and vindication would come to permanently characterize reality, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God . . ." (Job 19:25-26).[49]

7.5 Discontinuities Between the Naturalistic and Christian Theistic Narratives

The discontinuities that are relevant to the meaning of life between the naturalistic ending(s) and the Christian theistic ending(s) are threefold. First, on naturalism, death is entirely natural, a consequence of natural law and the fact that we are, in some sense, material creatures. Despite death's *naturalness* on naturalism, many have found its lurking presence to be profoundly lamentable for a wide variety of reasons. Conversely, death is both unnatural and something in need of defeat on Christian theism. Second, death is neither previsioned nor central on the naturalistic narrative, whereas death is both previsioned and centrally located within the Christian theistic narrative. On Christian theism, there are compelling narrative reasons why death is viewed so negatively, both objectively and subjectively. In a real sense, the narrative is primarily concerned with addressing and remedying the cause, reality, and effects of death. Regardless of whether death is considered objectively and/or subjectively bad on naturalism, it is not the case that the entire narrative, in some sense, is oriented around it. Finally, saving some remote naturalistic scenario, death is final and irreversible on naturalism, whereas, on Christian theism, death does not bring with it the permanent cessation of personal, self-aware conscious existence.

[49] There are complex exegetical issues surrounding reading a robust eschatological hope back into Job in this passage.

A final discontinuity worth noting here is that something most human beings consider to be necessary to leading a meaningful life, deep loving relationship with other persons, has no lasting place in the naturalistic metanarrative.[50] On Christian theism, love, grounded in an ultimate loving being, has a lasting place in reality, whereas on naturalism it ". . . is a momentary accident scudding atop a reality indifferent to it—a reality that will soon reach up and submerge it."[51] On Christian theism, however, love is more fundamental to the ontological structure of the world, *given that reality, at its deepest level, includes the intentions, dispositions, etc. of a person—i.e., God and those capacities of mind that make love possible*. That something as profound as love has no lasting place given naturalism is probably a large reason why death is often considered to be so terrifying and objectionable; not simply because death brings with it our ending. It is what the ending *brings*, namely, severance from all love, deep and meaningful relational connection, and intimacy that is what elicits such negative reactions toward death. Conversely, this is also why continued, endless post-mortem existence *qua* continued existence is not thought to be a sufficient condition for a meaningful life, even if necessary. Indeed, one can imagine profoundly undesirable states of affairs where a person continues to exist forever in a way that is meaningless. But continued post-mortem existence, on Christian theism, posits no such scenario. Within this narrative, there is a *fecundity of love* that is ". . . new every morning" (Lam. 3:23).[52]

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[50] Love can only endure if *lovers* endure.

[51] Brad Seeman, "Death and the Place of Love: Motivating a Question in the Philosophy of Religion," unpublished manuscript. I owe the trajectory of this paragraph to Brad's thoughts in his paper.

[52] The locution *new every morning*, in context, refers to the Lord's compassion and mercy, but the principle can be plausibly extended to the inexhaustibility of the Divine nature and blessings.

In contrast, on naturalism, love and all of its traces will eventually succumb to a dying universe. Sociologist Peter Berger explains the existential implications if naturalism is the true narrative of our world in the following scenario where a mother comforts her terrified child by saying "Everything's all right," after the child wakes up alone in the darkness from a nightmare:

> If reality is coextensive with the "natural" reality that our empirical reason can grasp, then the experience *is* an illusion and the role that embodies it *is* a lie. For then it is perfectly obvious that everything is *not* in order, is *not* all right. The world that the child is being told to trust is the same world in which he will eventually die. If there is no other world, then the ultimate truth about this one is that eventually it will kill the child as it will kill his mother. This would not, to be sure, detract from the real presence of love and its very real comforts; it would even give this love a quality of tragic heroism. Nevertheless, the final truth would be not love but terror, not light but darkness. The nightmare of chaos, not the transitory safety of order, would be the final reality of the human situation. For, in the end, we must all find ourselves in darkness, alone with the night that will swallow us up. The face of reassuring love, bending over our terror, will then be nothing except an image of merciful illusion.[53]

7.6 The Rationale Behind the Evaluative Significance of Narrative Ending

The way a narrative ends is important. Various claims have been made in support of this,[54] though I will discuss only one that is especially relevant in the immediate context. It is the claim that the way a narrative ends, in virtue of it being *the end*, has great power to elicit a wide range of broadly normative human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole. This claim is

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[53] Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 56.

[54] For example, with respect to defining narrative ending, it has been proposed that a narrative's ending is largely constituted by "scratching" or resolving an emotional "itch" initially instantiated by the narrative's beginning and variously perpetuated throughout the narrative. See, J. David Velleman's article, "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review*, 112 (January 2003): pp. 18-20. This "scratching" is organizational and unifying, for example, like the "tock" of a clock; the *tock*, of the clock's *tick-tock*, is the fictionalized ending we bestow on the sequence, thus conferring upon the space between *tick* and *tock* "duration and meaning." In this way, the interval between *tick* and *tock* becomes something more than the interval between *tock* and *tick*; it is transformed from mere successive *chronos* to pregnant *kairos*. See, Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 44-46.

important given the close connection that discussions of futility have had with the meaning of life. Conclusions of such discussions, especially those of cosmic futility, are largely connected with theses about how it is all going to end, including human life and the universe as a whole. And, it is reasonable to think that conclusions of futility are broadly normative conclusions. Furthermore, it has often been thought that naturalistic metanarrative endings threaten the entire narrative with cosmic futility and meaninglessness, whereas theistic endings are generally thought to not pose such a threat.[55]

Why should one think that a narrative's ending has such 'retroactive' or proleptic power? Furthermore, why can, for example, the *final* emotional state instantiated in a reader subsume or overshadow the cluster of varying emotional states instantiated throughout the narrative? And what gives this final state evaluative salience out of which we then adopt a settled stance toward the narrative as a whole; why is the future privileged over the present? For, as J. David Velleman notes:

> What's more, the emotion that resolves a narrative cadence tends to subsume the emotions that preceded it: the triumph felt at a happy ending is the triumph of ambitions realized and anxieties allayed; the grief felt at a tragic ending is the grief of hopes dashed or loves denied. *Hence the conclusory emotion in a narrative cadence embodies not just how the audience feels about the ending; it embodies how the audience feels, at the ending, about the whole story.* Having passed through emotional ups and downs of the story, as one event succeeded another, the audience comes to rest in a stable attitude about the series of events in its entirety [emphasis added].[56]

This is no small point, and it seems largely correct. The ending marks the 'last word', after which nothing else can be said, either by way of remedying problems or destroying

[55] Though, theistic endings will have to contend with, among other criticisms, that of Bernard Williams mentioned in footnote 10.

[56] J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 112 (January 2003): p. 19.

felicities that have come about within the narrative. If the last word is that hope is finally and irreversibly dashed, then grief will probably be salient at the end; if the last word is that ambitions have been realized, then triumph will probably be salient at the end. Perhaps more importantly, one cannot backtrack into a narrative, for example, where the grief felt at a tragic ending is the final word, and expect that one's emotional stance toward any specific event within the narrative will not now be affected, *in some sense*, by the ending of the narrative. The ending relevantly frames the entire story. This framing falls broadly within the normative sphere, and includes a salient *emotional* component. An example here will bring more clarity to the point.

Consider a case where you are dating someone. In this context, the claim under scrutiny is whether and how the *terminus* of this relationship is important for your appraisals throughout the relationship of those moments and events that compose it, as well as the relationship as a whole.[57] Here, by "*terminus*," I am referring to whether the relationship ends in something like marriage (or some culturally recognized equivalent) or dissolution whereby each party seeks to go his or her separate way. The thought is that how it ends is very important for how you view the relationship as a whole. But in what sense is how it ends very important? Can an undesirable ending nullify the happy times in the relationship, retroactively causing them to be unhappy? This surely cannot be correct. Indeed, it is eminently reasonable to think that even if the relationship ends in dissolution, that the *pre-end* relationship cannot be fully robbed of, for example, the joy, richness, and

[57] Of course, in the real world we are usually not privy to such information, but that is irrelevant to the thought experiment.

vibrancy that once may have characterized it. Regardless of whether these realities cease, they were once present, and they cannot be nullified in this sense.[58]

But what if those in the relationship know *in advance* how the relationship will end? It seems equally plausible to think that this privileged foreknowledge will affect their appraisals *now*, in some sense, of what is presently occurring in the relationship. If the relationship is to end in dissolution, *that fact* will make some difference *right now*; if the relationship is to continue, for example, in marriage, that too will make some difference right now. Each of these endings will limit the evaluative horizon for how the relationship is appraised. Indeed, the relationship will likely mean something different, in some non-trivial way, depending upon how it will end. Furthermore, if those in the relationship want the relationship to end in marriage, then those pre-end joyful moments, while still possibly joyful, will not be as joyful as they could be. The joy experienced will be mitigated by knowledge of the coming dissolution. The joy is tainted. This may not make it cease from being joy (although it might), but surely it becomes less joyful. Once this ending is known, the present can never quite be the same as before. The settled perspective of looking back from the end saliently looms, as the present now somehow relevantly *contains* the future, though not, of course, in any strict metaphysical sense.

I think there is an important truth here. The evaluative priority and indelibility of the final stance one takes toward a narrative as a result of the way the narrative ends provides a powerful reason for the importance of 'apocalyptic' (ending) accounts, whether naturalistic or theistic, for how we appraise life. It is why so many have difficulty shaking conclusions of cosmic futility and meaninglessness on metanarratives

[58] It seems unreasonable to place a condition upon any instance of putative happiness that in order for it to *actually be an instance of happiness* it must satisfy some strong requirement whereby it has to be permanently stable and indefectible happiness forever.

where death has the final word and love is eventually consigned, with lovers, to nothingness forever. This is partly, or largely, why so many have seen the existential (and some would argue rational) need, in order to avoid cosmic futility and retain meaningfulness, of positing an ending where life and love and other deeply held *desiderata* for a flourishing human existence have a lasting place. The general point, though, is that the way life ends is so important to us, because narrative ending itself is important to us. And, if we view life as a whole metanarratively, it becomes clearer why we are so concerned with how it will all end. Neither naturalist nor theist can avoid the evaluative encroachment of the apocalypse into the present moment of their respective metanarratives.

In summary, the evaluative priority attached to narrative ending resides in its being the *last word*, a 'word' that brings with it the finality and indelibility of a settled normative stance towards the narrative as a whole. As Christiaan Moster notes, "The ending is a necessary part of the story, notwithstanding its open-endedness; it is not a dispensable part. It affects proleptically every part of the story; no part can be considered apart from it. . . . Regardless of how unexpected or incongruent the end of a story is, it is decisive for the story's meaning."[59] And, as human beings, we are deeply interested in how the metanarrative we inhabit is going to end. Many are searching for a specific kind of closure; the kind that allays our deepest hurts and satisfies our deepest longings. In the words of H. Porter Abbot, such closure involves ". . . a broad range of expectations and

[59] Christiaan Moster, "Theodicy and Eschatology," in *Theodicy and Eschatology*, eds. Bruce Barber and David Neville (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2005), p. 106.

uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close."[60]

A final important point lingers here; one that adds further plausibility to my use of the term "narrative" to describe whatever it is, conceptually, that metanarratives constructed around the cluster of issues relevant to the meaning of life are. I have already noted earlier in this dissertation that that certain metanarratives, naturalistic ones for example, are more like conjunctive explanations as opposed to full-blown narratives in the paradigmatic sense. But this does not mean that we should think of metanarratives, even naturalistic ones, primarily as explanations as opposed to narratives. The reason follows from a consideration of narrative ending. For example, on naturalistic metanarratives, the way it all ends is often, though by no means always, thought to be relevant to how we view life right now. If this is the case, then it is perhaps better to think of the metanarrative *narratively* and not merely *explanatorily*. Importantly, we do not attach such significance or priority to the endings (or the last portion of the explanation) of non-narrative explanations.[61]

For example, in explaining how it is that water boils, each part of the explanatory account is equally important in order to fully elucidate the physical process; the last component of the explanation is no more or less important than any other part.
But, on one level, this is not the case, for example, on naturalistic metanarratives. From a detached and disinterested perspective where all one is concerned with is *explaining* the

[60] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 53. Whether the desire for such closure in terms of the redemptive-eschatological vision of, say, Christian theism is mere wishful thinking or more akin to a natural desire is an interesting question, but one that I will not discuss in the present context.

[61] I say "non-narrative explanations" because narrative can be thought of as a species of explanation. For a defense of this, see J. David Velleman's article cited earlier.

naturalistic metanarrative, it is true that no component of the explanation is any more important than the others. However, from the human, existentially-interested standpoint, the ending does become relevant, or at least this is where the evidence points. I think this partly shows that it is more natural to think meta-*narratively* about ultimate explanatory accounts of the world and their features and not meta-*explanatorily*. We do not attach any sort of special significance to the endings of non-narrative explanations, whereas we do to explanations that at least partially merge into the category of narrative.

7.7 The Concept of Narrative Ending

My discussion thus far of narrative ending and its evaluative significance for entire narratives invites important questions about what a narrative *ending* is as well as what sense of ending is consistent, if any, with the conjunction of the general claim that narrative ending is normatively important but within metanarratives that posit immortal life as being necessary, though not sufficient, for a meaningful life. Indeed, *prima facie*, it would appear that the Christian theistic metanarrative, for example, fails to allow for the kind of view of the whole from the perspective of the end that is needed in order to appraise life as either futile or meaningful precisely because such a metanarrative *never truly ends*. Though in a slightly different context than that of the concern of this paper, John Martin Fischer notes a similar objection:

> If our lives are narratives [or in the case of my paper—life in general should be viewed metanarratively], or have the distinctive structure of narrative, then they must have endings. On this view, we cannot be immortal (insofar as our lives are narratives or have narrative value), if our lives are indeed narratives. To imagine immortal human life is to imagine human life devoid of an essential or at least very important characteristic: having narrative structure and thus a distinctive dimension of value.
>
> I think that, strictly speaking, this is correct. If a narrative must have an ending, then it is clear that our lives cannot have the sort of meaning that involves

> taking a retrospective perspective on its totality, as it were, and assigning a meaning that reflects the overall arc of the lifestory.[62]

Fischer proceeds to reject the worry by noting that although an immortal life resists final circumscription and appraisal as a whole from some absolute end, its *parts* can be thought of narratively and thus conferred with what he calls "narrative value." I think Fischer's point, though plausible in its own right and helpful here, can be supplemented in light of the slightly different dilemma in the present context: the problem as posed for metanarratives about all of life, and not just narratives about an individual life.

The dilemma can be dissolved in securing a sense of ending from which to appraise life that is also consistent with immortal life. Fortunately, such a sense is available. There are at least three relevant ways of understanding the concept of ending: (i) ending as *termination*, (ii) ending as *telos*, and (iii) ending as *closure*. The first sense of ending is that of something being *finished*. Locutions such as "the race is over" or "I am finished with school" or "it ceased to exist" all capture important connotations of this sense of ending. The second sense of ending tracks the notion of final causality or purpose. Ideas like "the end of this pencil is to write" or "the end of creation is to glorify God" are examples of this sense. Importantly, ending as *telos*, when considered within the historical context, carries additional connotations of the purposeful progression of history towards an intended end, or for that matter, the purposeful progression of the plot within a narrative toward an intended end. Finally, the third sense of ending, ending as closure, refers to a contextually anchored settled stance with respect to a 'problem' or cluster of problems emerging within a given narrative or portion of that narrative.

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[62] John Martin Fischer, "Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative," *Philosophical Papers* 34 (November 2005): pp. 379-403.

These three senses of ending differ conceptually, though they are compatible—e.g., an intended, purposeful end might also be a termination, or it may serve as the occasion for a settled stance toward a problem having emerged in the narrative. Furthermore, when comparing ending as *termination* and ending as *closure*, it is important to note that neither the presence of ending as termination nor the presence of ending as closure is sufficient for the presence of the other. That is to say, a narrative could terminate without closure, and closure could be present without a narrative terminating, at least in one important sense. Works within the horror genre are often examples of narratives that end in the terminating sense, but lack a certain kind of closure or resolution. [63] Conversely, closure can occur, even though the lives of the fictional characters in a narrative often presumably continue, as in *they lived happily ever after*. The post-narrative state (from the perspective of the characters, not the reader) of living happily ever after, though not an ending in the terminating sense, is still a narrative ending, because it brings an end to what J. David Velleman calls the "emotional cadence" that a narrative evokes in its audience.[64] In these cases, ending is never cessation, at least from the characters' perspective. Rather, it is the resolution of a conflict or series of conflicts that have arisen over the course of the narrative, providing the settled stance toward the pre-end (end as closure) portion of the narrative. It is an end *of something* though not an ending in an absolute sense. Ending as closure, then, is *contextual* rather than *absolute*.

[63] Of course, one could plausibly argue that closure *is* present in works of horror in the sense of a settled stance, but that the settled stance itself is one of shuddering or despair.

[64] J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," pp. 18-22.

With this set of distinctions in hand, the following claims can be harmonized: (i) an ending is required in order to appraise life as either futile or meaningful, and (ii) some metanarratives, like that of Christian theism, posit immortal life as necessary for a meaningful life and have no ending. The way out of the impasse involves two related moves. First, adopting the ending as closure sense is sufficient for the necessary appraisal of life. And, second, contextually anchoring such closure to the portion of the metanarrative where questions about futility and life's meaning form at least part of the plot's *problem set* allows for the relevant appraisal from a settled perspective, even though that perspective itself never ends in either the terminating sense or in the closure sense for that matter.[65]

If one posits an immortal life and also seeks to circumscribe all of life, including the immortal life, then one can neither invoke ending as termination nor ending as closure in order to appraise that life given that the life never ends, either in terms of termination or closure. Fischer is correct to note that this is, by definition, not possible. But to see that such ultimate termination or circumscription from some privileged vantage point of *ultimate* closure is not necessary, we must recall the target to which the charge of futility is largely directed. That target is poignantly captured in Qohelet's memorable refrain in Ecclesiastes, "life under the sun" (Ecc. 1:3).[66] The life that people are worried is threatened by futility is the life here and now. We worry that *this* life might be systemically futile, one where, despite all our growth in knowledge, we know so little

[65] Of course, an advocate of a metanarrative that posits eternal life may argue that there is no longer any need of closure for the post-consummation portion of the metanarrative, precisely because the problem set has been remedied. There may be other dilemmas for the immortal life, but perhaps this is not one of them.

[66] This popular refrain occurs at least twenty-nine times in the book of Ecclesiastes. My use of the phrase is exegetically plausible, though scholars of Ecclesiastes debate its precise meaning. Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural citations will be from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

about the vast universe we inhabit. We worry that *this* life, with all its pain, suffering, and hardship might be deeply futile. We worry that the loss of *this* life in death brings with it irredeemable futility. The target, then, of the closure-bringing vantage point is not literally all of life, if all of life also includes indefinite post-mortem existence, it is life *under the sun*, that portion of the metanarrative where the cluster of problems associated with our common human predicament palpably remain.

The settled stance of the end, then, need not be an absolute end, just an end that includes the appropriate horizon from which to appraise that part of life whose features give rise to problems and questions about meaning and futility in the first place. That relevant horizon, in the Christian theistic metanarrative for example, is that of the new heavens and new earth where pain and sorrow are definitively eradicated, and where tears of sadness are wiped away forever. It is the vantage point of indefectible shalom. This is still an end, it is still closure, though it is neither termination nor *absolute* closure. And yet, the Christian theistic metanarrative postulate of an *ending that itself never ends* is coherent precisely because the sense in which it never ends is the *terminating sense* and the sense in which it does end is the *closure sense*, where the closure sense is contextually tied to the post-lapsarian, pre-consummation portion of Christian theism's redemptive-historical narrative. So, although it must be conceded that there can be no ultimate, settled stance from which to appraise the entire Christian theistic metanarrative if that settled stance is meant to also circumscribe indefinite post-mortem enjoyment of the Beatific vision, there *can* be a settled stance from which to appraise the portion of the metanarrative that is itself the salient context for the problems of futility and meaning in the first place. And this kind of settled stance is sufficient to dissolve the *prima facie*

dilemma of needing an end from which to appraise life as either meaningful or futile, but seemingly not having such an end on metanarratives that posit immortal existence.

7.8 The Evaluative Priority of Narrative Ending and Competing Accounts of the Relationship between Death and Perceived Futility

Though most accounts of why deep or cosmic futility is thought to supervene on a naturalistic narrative amount to little more than stating a deeply held intuition, there are some notable exceptions where such intuitions are conceptually augmented. One such exception is Ronald Dworkin's discussion, in Chapter Six of his *Sovereign Virtue,* of the *model of impact* within the general context of searching for a reasonable metric by which the good life can be measured. Part of his entry point into this discussion is to note the oft-repeated dilemma that eventually surfaces within discussions of life's meaning, and which is embodied in the *Staying Power Intuition* (SPI) to which I alluded in the introduction:

> How can it matter what happens in the absurdly tiny space and time of a single human life? Or even in the almost equally tiny episode of all sentient life taken together? The universe is so big and has lasted so long that our best scientists struggle even to give sense to the question of how big it is or how long it has lasted. One day—any second now in the history of time—the sun will explode, and then there may be nothing left that can even wonder about how we lived. How can we reconcile these two ideas: that life is nothing and that how we live is everything?[67]

This problem is acute, at least emotionally. On the one hand, we believe that something's significance depends on proportion, meaning that nothing of infinitesimal size or scope relative to the universe as a whole can be really important. On the other hand, most of us cannot help believing that it is crucially important how we live in spite of our seeming insignificance from the vantage point of a spatially and temporally vast universe, and, furthermore, one that is, if naturalism is true, *entirely unconcerned* about us.

[67] Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 246.

According to Dworkin, one could analyze the prospects for securing a good life through one of two primary models in light of our common human predicament: (i) the model of impact, and, the model he favors, (ii) the model of challenge.[68] I will not discuss the model of challenge, given that I am only concerned with reasonable alternative accounts of explaining the futility that is often thought to supervene on naturalistic metanarratives. Indeed, the model of challenge is partly a response to arguments that invoke death in order to threaten the good life, and is considered immune from such arguments if one finds it plausible as an account of the good life.

The model of impact is a metric of the good life that requires a person to make a positive impact to the objective value in the world in order to secure a good life.[69] According to Dworkin, this model harmonizes with some common value judgments about the nature of the good life. For example, an inventor of a cure for a ravaging disease is thought to secure a good life, at least partly, by her helpful contribution to the world. As such, the model of impact is strongly tied to the positive *consequences* of a life, or activities partly constituting that life. However, the model does not capture what are thought to be other non-consequential features of the good life, for example, mastering a musical instrument simply for the sake of the activity done well. Some features of the good life, then, seem to be intrinsically valuable as ends in themselves, and the model of impact is weak at this point to account for these.

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[68] According to the model of challenge, a good life has the inherent value of an Aristotelian skillful performance, and thus, in contrast with the model of impact, events, achievements, and experiences can have value though they may have no impact beyond the life in which they occur (p. 253). Death cannot nullify their value, significance, and meaningfulness, because such constructs are not functions of *impact* or *continuation* or *consequence*, but rather of the skillfulness of the performance(s) itself. Furthermore, the model of challenge circumvents the objection that nothing humans do in the face of the vast, unconcerned universe matters because it does not anchor value in anything other than life and the activities of life *performed well*.

[69] Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 251.

More relevant in the present context, if one takes the model of impact as the primary metric for measuring the good life, then futility looms threateningly on the horizon, as nothing we do will make an impact in any sort of deep, lasting, or ultimate sense in the universe as posited by naturalism. Even seemingly great impacts, like finding a cure for cancer, end up not mattering from the unconcerned, temporally distant perspective of a universe in ruins. On the model of impact, circumstances act as limitations, the most limiting of them all being a naturalistic understanding of human mortality, one that views mortality as final.[70] So, on this view, the reason futility is thought to supervene on the naturalistic metanarrative follows from this conjunction—we often analyze the good life or a meaningful life in terms of the impact a life makes, but the nature of the universe, on naturalism, undercuts any real possibility for making a deep, lasting, or ultimate impact. It is worth noting also that this model presupposes something like SPI. Dworkin's model of impact, then, is one way of accounting for the perceived connection between futility and mortality specifically, or futility and naturalism in general.

There are two plausible strategies to explain how my own narrative proposal relates to Dworkin's account of the perceived connection between death and futility in a strictly naturalistic world. I am more interested in the second strategy, though the first is worth noting. Like theories of a meaningful life, it is likely that no one model captures every relevant dimension to the perceived connection between futility and mortality precisely because no one model may sufficiently capture what constitutes a meaningful life. If this is the case, then those who worry that a naturalistic conception of death threatens life with futility may *both* hold something like the model of impact as relevant

[70] Cf. footnote 8.

to analyzing the good life, but also think of life narratively, and thereby conclude that the way it all ends is additionally important for deciding whether or not life is futile. Therefore, it seems as though Dworkin's model of impact account and my own narrative account may not be competitors at all. Rather, they are loosely associated constructs through which we seek to understand an already enigmatic concept and the broad normative territory it encompasses, that of a meaningful life.

Second, and more importantly, I think there is a relevant sense in which accounts like Dworkin's or even Robert Nozick's—that a meaningful life is about transcending limits and mortality prohibits this—actually presuppose important elements of my own account regarding the evaluative significance of narrative ending *qua* ending. Remember that the threat of futility enters on Dworkin's model of impact because death in a naturalistic world prevents a positive, deep, and significant impact to objective value in the world. But this raises the question: Why have we allowed death and the ultimate fate of the naturalistic universe to be that which is most salient in our appraisals of whether or not our lives make an impact, are meaningful, and avoid deep or cosmic futility? The answer, I think, resides in the prior normative significance we *already* assign to narrative endings. Indeed, I think the point about narrative endings is more basic, and is likely presupposed in the dilemma for the good life that emerges on Dworkin's model of impact. That is, it is only because we attach such evaluative significance to endings that the worries tied to the model of impact become relevant. Death prevents a significant impact only because some choose to require significant impact, in order to be significant, to be so from the perspective of the settled end. Without the perspective of the settled end already looming large, the worry about impact may not be nearly as bothersome. But we

need a deeper rationale for why the perspective of the settled end itself is important, and that deeper rationale is provided by my own account which appeals to the evaluative significance of narrative ending for broadly normative appraisals of narratives as a whole.

7.9 Metanarrative Ending, Death, and Cosmic Futility

Understanding the relationship between futility and the meaning of life in general and futility and the naturalistic metanarrative specifically is as much about a first-order conclusion regarding the proleptic power of narrative endings in general as it is a second-order futility-conclusion based upon the *nature* of naturalistic metanarrative endings. Indeed, the reason the nature of the naturalistic metanarrative ending is thought to be normatively important for appraising the entire narrative is first anchored in the fact that narrative ending *qua* ending is thought to be normatively important for appraising the entire narrative. Hence, judging naturalistic metanarratives, for example, as cosmically and deeply futile is a function of both first-order and second-order conclusions in this respect. The latter would lose much of their force if the former were absent.

As already noted, it has often been claimed that cosmic or deep futility supervenes on the naturalistic metanarrative, a metanarrative where death has the 'final word'. Reference to cosmic futility, though, presupposes that we know what we are talking about when we refer to *futility*. As such, the concept of futility needs unpacking. Futility supervenes upon states of affairs where two conditions obtain: (i) one aims at some desired end, and (ii) attaining that desired end is impossible for one reason or another.[71] This is largely why the case of Sisyphus has been the paradigmatic example of futility in

[71] Here, *impossible* may refer to either *logical* impossibility (e.g., me writing and not-writing at the same time and in the same sense) or *metaphysical* impossibility (e.g., me bicycling to the North Pole in four minutes and forty-five seconds). Everything that is logically impossible is metaphysically impossible, but not everything that is metaphysically impossible is logically impossible.

the West. On the canonical version of the story,[72] Sisyphus never accomplishes that which he aims to accomplish; namely, ascending with his boulder to the top of the hill. On the above analysis, futility would characterize a state of affairs where I, for example, aimed to research, write, and submit a paper for publication, all in twenty-four hours. There is an extreme discrepancy between an end at which I aim, and the possibility of actually accomplishing that end. My aim, given the way the world is in terms of what it takes to accomplish the above task, is futile; it 'cannot' be done.[73]

If we take the *impossibility of attaining an aim toward which one directs effort* to be a sufficient, but not necessary, condition for the presence of futility, then futility likely comes in degrees. One aim can be more or less futile than another aim. On this analysis, the degree of futility that characterizes a state of affairs will be directly proportional to the *implausibility* (rather than impossibility) of attaining an end toward which one directs effort. For example, even though it is neither logically nor metaphysically impossible that I research, write, and submit a paper for publication in one month, it is highly unlikely. It is so unlikely, that my exerting effort to attain *this end* is more or less futile, though exerting the same effort in order to accomplish the task in, say, eight months is probably not futile. [74] But, since futility comes in degrees, researching, writing, and submitting a

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[72] There have been numerous alterations made to the Sisyphus story in order to test philosophical intuitions about what constitutes a futile state of affairs, and if such conclusions themselves are functions of whether one thinks valuable, worthwhile, and meaningful states of affairs should be construed as such, either subjectively or objectively. For an example of such alterations and subsequent discussion, see Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil: A New Direction* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 256-68.

[73] "Futile," then, can be a noun, picking out some state of affairs, or it can be more of an adjective, characterizing the effort put into trying to accomplish an impossible end—e.g., a *futile* aim.

[74] Whether or not effort directed at some end is futile is context relative. It will include conditions tied to external circumstances as well as conditions tied to the agent himself. For example, it may not be futile for *me* to research, write, and submit a paper for publication in eight months, but it would be futile for my three-year old son, William, to do so.

paper for publication in one month is less futile than my exertion of effort to have these things occur within two weeks, and more futile than my exertion of effort to see them occur within four months.

There is one further dimension of futility that is especially relevant here. The level of angst experienced in response to either *perceived* futility or *genuine* futility will be proportional to (i) the extent to which one is *invested* (emotionally, rationally, relationally, etc.) in attempting to reach some desired end, and (ii) the relative *perceived desirability* of the end at which one is aiming.[75] For example, the level of angst felt in a situation where someone confined to a wheelchair strongly desires to climb Mt. Everest as part of securing a flourishing life will be much greater than someone who desires to mow her lawn (and enjoys mowing her lawn) on a day where uncooperative weather conditions prevent her from doing so. In both cases, it would be futile to undertake the desired activity, but the existential distress felt in response to this futility will be dramatically different. I will call this the Principle of Proportionality (POP):

> The existential angst attached to any putative instance of futility is directly proportional to the level of one's *investment*, broadly construed, in some desired end and the *perceived desirability* of that end.

Something like POP is salient in conclusions of cosmic futility given naturalistic premises, as those adopting such conclusions experience a high level of existential angst. Such conclusions are no doubt influenced by POP, as there is a *prima facie* discrepancy felt by many between the profound human investment in life, the deep-seated desire for that life to continue, and the fact that it will almost certainly not continue on naturalism.

[75] I distinguish between *perceived* and *genuine* futility because one could be wrong about (i) whether or not some goal is attainable/unattainable, or, more subtly and relevantly in this context, (ii) whether some goal or end state of affairs needs to obtain in order to avoid futility (e.g., post-mortem survival extending endlessly into the future).

The futility that often comes into focus in meaning of life discussions is analogous, though not identical to that which emerged in the above analysis. The discrepancy component that produces futility remains the same, but the nature of the discrepancy is subtly different as already seen in my application of POP to futility within the meaning of life context. In the case of the futility that is sometimes thought to characterize life in a naturalistic universe, the discrepancy is not so much between a desired end and the profound lack of ability to attain that end through intentionally guided effort, but rather between a salient feature of the final state of affairs *where, quite literally, nothing matters*, and the current state of affairs *where lots of things seem to matter* (e.g., relationships, personal and cultural achievements, and scientific advancements, among others).

This futility or *perceived* futility can be thought of either strongly or weakly. In what can be called the *Strong Futility Conclusion* (SFC), it is thought that if the final state of affairs of the metanarrative is one in which nothing matters, then nothing *ever* really mattered. SFC does have historical precedent.[76] In what can be called the *Weak Futility Conclusion* (WFC), it is thought that if the final state of affairs of the metanarrative is one in which nothing matters, then the mattering or significance of things currently is in some way mitigated, either minimally or considerably, though probably not completely destroyed. There are those, of course, who reject SFC and probably WFC too.[77] In the words of C. S. Lewis, critics of SFC and WFC might contend

[76] See, for example, possibly *Qohelet* (especially in Ecclesiastes Chapter One, though debate exists about how best to interpret *Qohelet's* pessimistic musings in the book), Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Vanity of Existence," in *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 51-4, and Leo Tolstoy, "A Confession," in *Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 46-59.

[77] See, for example, Brooke Allen Trisel's article, "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts." This paper develops a line of argument that casts suspicion on the intuition that nothing is now valuable or

that ". . . instead of criticizing the universe we may criticize our own feelings about the universe, and try to show that our sense of futility is unreasonable or improper or irrelevant."[78] Regardless of whether or not one finds either SFC or WFC philosophically plausible, the important claim for my purposes is that both SFC and WFC should be viewed as conclusions receiving momentum from a more basic source: the evaluative importance attached to narrative ending *qua* ending.

On the above analysis of futility, one could construe human effort rather broadly to include the wide variety of activities, achievements, and relationships that partly constitute human existence. In this case, the discrepancy upon which futility is often thought to supervene is between the profound human investment and value attached to such effort, and that neither these efforts nor any of their products *will last*. Again, regardless of whether this conclusion of futility is itself a reasonable one, the likely rationale for why it is often adopted (as a second-order futility conclusion) lies partly, if not largely, in the discrepancy between the ending of the naturalistic metanarrative where nothing matters, and the middle of the metanarrative where lots of things seem to matter. In Thomas Nagel's words, this is an "absurdity." When human life and the activities that populate human life are viewed from a distant, detached perspective—*sub specie aeternitatis*—they seem to lose all value, worth, and significance.[79] Analogously, when

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worthwhile if extinction is the final word of the universe, by highlighting a competing intuition in the following thought experiment. Consider the case where (i) your son is on the railroad track about ready to be struck by an oncoming train, and (ii) you just learn that the universe will come to an end in three days. With this knowledge of the universe's imminent demise, would you still find rescuing your son to be a *valuable* aim (and not simply *emotionally* required)? Most think the answer is yes.

[78] C. S. Lewis, "*De Futilitate*," in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 59.

[79] Though, in light of this absurdity, Nagel concludes that we should approach life with a sense of irony as opposed to either tragic heroism (possibly Bertrand Russell) or pessimistic despair (Camus). For Nagel,

those things which seem to matter *now* are viewed from the temporally distant perspective of death, in all its dimensions (both individual and cosmic), they seem to matter very little, if at all, from this final, settled 'point of reference' from which there is no possibility of return.[80]

If the ending of a narrative takes evaluative priority in assessments of the narrative as a whole, then a metanarrative ending where nothing matters seems to cast a threatening shadow, either weakly or strongly, over the parts of the metanarrative where lots of things at least seem to matter. In the same way that knowing a courting relationship will end in dissolution and not marriage will affect, in some sense, how one views the relationship right now, including one's emotional participation and response to the various dimensions of the relationship, so too might the knowledge that death, not life, that non-consciousness, not consciousness, that non-love, not love will be the final word affect the perspective we adopt towards life right now. On the naturalistic metanarrative, nothing we do, nothing we consider valuable or worthwhile or significant, no achievement, no advances in scientific understanding, no progress, and no deep, loving relationships, in any sense, will last as part of the fabric of reality. Their marks may have been significant and felt for a season, when feelers and recognizers, or possibly inventers, of significance are around, but those marks are not indelible as they are, for example, on theistic metanarratives.

The difference, for example, between naturalistic and Christian theistic metanarratives with respect to their final words is the difference between entropy, decay,

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conclusions of cosmic futility are built upon an illicit assumption—that some future state of affairs detached from the first-person human perspective—because humans are no longer around—*matters* for states of affairs involving the first-person human perspective.

[80] This phrase is a bit misleading for there will literally be *no one* to take up this point of reference.

death, and the dissolution of conditions that make love possible on naturalism, and resurrection, recreation, limitless fecundity, and love on Christian theism. Naturalistic metanarratives 'close' with complete dissolution such that it will be as if none of this ever happened. And, from this most remote and distant perspective,[81] none of this matters. It is not significant. It is not meaningful. It was, and it is no more. No one cares. No one is concerned. No one remembers. Whether the final state should be able to hold such veto power over life here and now is not the point; that it does for so many is undeniable, and I have here tried to provide a plausible rationale for why this has so often been the case by grounding second-order futility-conclusions tied to the *nature* of naturalistic metanarrative endings in first-order conclusions about the evaluative priority of narrative ending *qua* ending for normative appraisals of narratives as a whole. We want the features of human existence to matter, and to matter deeply; we want them to make an indelible mark. An ending of complete dissolution does not allow for this.

In the end, whether or not one deems life to be futile on naturalistic premises will be largely a function of which *perspective* one adopts: that of the ending or the more immediate perspective of the present or even that portion of the universe's history that is coextensive with human history, and therefore, a season where those who care about what matters are around to care about it. Of course, given the evaluative priority of narrative ending, it may be difficult to prevent the ending's proleptic encroachment on how we view the here and now. Those who think the ending takes priority for our

[81] Again, there are those who argue that this most remote and distant perspective, itself, does not matter and is not relevant to appraisals of the worth, value, and meaningfulness of what goes on now in the lives of human beings. The only perspective relevant, some argue, for appraisals of the worth, value, and meaningfulness of human pursuits, projects, and relationships is *the human perspective*, and the perspective *from the end* may not be a perspective at all given that *taking a perspective* entails the presence of intentionally directed consciousness. Of course, one might argue that it is relevant that we can take a perspective *now* about a state of affairs when we will no longer be able to take a perspective at all.

evaluations of whether life is characterized by cosmic or deep futility will likely side with theists like William Lane Craig:

> If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? Does it really matter whether he ever existed at all? It might be said that his life was important because it influenced others or affected the course of history. But this only shows a relative significance to his life, not an ultimate significance. . . . Look at it from another perspective: Scientists say that the universe originated in an explosion called the "Big Bang" about 15 billion years ago. Suppose the Big Bang had never occurred. Suppose the universe had never existed. What ultimate difference would it make? The universe is doomed to die anyway. In the end it makes no difference whether the universe ever existed or not. . . . Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. . . . The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviated pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit.[82]

In such claims, Craig's implicit commitment to both SPI and SFC is clear. For human existence to avoid irredeemable futility, it must carry on in some robust sense, a sense requiring, at minimum, post-mortem survival extending endlessly into the future.[83]

Those who are suspicious of Craig's and many others' stringent conditions placed upon a worthwhile, meaningful existence will side with Brook Allen Trisel:

> The higher one's aspirations are, the more likely it is that the efforts associated with bringing about these goals will be considered futile or ineffective. For example, if we seek to have our works last forever, then, at some point, we will probably conclude that our efforts are futile since this goal is unachievable. However, if we have *more realistic* aspirations . . . then we would be much less likely to conclude that our efforts at achieving this goal are futile [emphasis added].[84]

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[82] William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 42.

[83] This, of course, makes post-mortem survival extending endlessly into the future only a necessary condition for a worthwhile, meaningful existence. Christian theists do not affirm this to be a sufficient condition. A robustly construed meaningful existence is built upon numerous doctrines that are woven into the Christian theistic metanarrative, just one of which is post-mortem survival.

[84] Brook Allen Trisel, "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts," p. 384.

The kinds of cosmic futility conclusions that Trisel criticizes are largely built around what Erik J. Wielenberg refers to as *final outcome arguments*.[85] It is thought by critics that such arguments are contingent upon a suspect assumption, namely, *arbitrarily placing an undue amount of importance (perhaps all the importance!) on the final state of affairs to which life leads*. But why place such priority on the future over the present or the past? [86] In the words of Thomas Nagel, ". . . it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter."[87] Of course, there may be good, principled reasons for placing normative priority on the future, but such a case will not be made here.

The important point presently is that even if such criticisms of final outcome arguments have philosophical merit, they run up against our deep narrative proclivities as human beings, proclivities out of which we assign profound normative significance to narrative endings in virtue of them being *endings*. Indeed, the significance we attach to narrative ending will likely make it difficult for many to adopt these "more realistic aspirations" of which Trisel spoke above toward our human efforts in the face of impending and final dissolution from which there is no possibility of return. And this is largely due to the fact that SPI and either SFC or WFC gain momentum through the evaluative significance of narrative ending *qua* ending.

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[85] Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 16-31.

[86] For example, see Paul Edwards, who refers to this as a ". . . curious and totally arbitrary preference of the future to the present." "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 140.

[87] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 11.

7.10 Evil, Eschatology, and Narrative Ending

The evaluative priority of narrative ending in general and the way a narrative ends for broadly normative appraisals of narratives as a whole is not only helpful in providing a richer account for why death and futility so closely track discussions of the meaning of life, but may also add a helpful dimension to considerations of another issue closely linked to the meaning of life—the problem of evil. The ugly reality of pain and suffering, along with accompanying questions on philosophical, existential, and eschatological levels about such suffering, is one of a number of existentially relevant elements and accompanying questions of human existence for which we are seeking a larger narrative through which to understand and appraise such existentially relevant elements of life (Chapter Three). Though the problem of evil is multi-dimensional and most philosophical energy is often directed toward the theoretic-philosophical aspects, those most relevant in the immediate context are the *existential* and *eschatological* dimensions.[88] Roughly, by "existential" I mean especially the first-person, humanly-centered emotive aspects of pain, suffering, and evil—largely, the feelings of angst that characterize the sufferer;[89] by "eschatological," I mean future-oriented questions about whether pain, suffering, and evil will be, in some robust sense, redeemed and defeated.

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[88] There is obviously significant overlap between the philosophic and eschatological dimensions of the problem of evil.

[89] In fact, I think arguments from evil receive significant motivating force, a force contributing to their perceived strength as putative instances of atheology, from the problem of evil's palpable emotional component. Compare such arguments to other atheistic arguments, for example, arguments based upon perceived incoherence among theistic divine attributes. Of course, rationally, one may think such arguments are strong; however, they have not occupied the significant place that the problem of evil has in philosophy of religion. One interpretation of this historical reality is that the problem of evil, *rationally*, is the best atheological argument. Perhaps that is the case, but I suspect that there is more to the story; that the *emotional* dimension to the problem of evil is a salient component of the problem of evil's perceived philosophical merit, a component not shared by other atheological arguments.

Eschatology has occupied a prominent place in discussions of theodicy. Generally, it is thought by theists that, in some sense, the blessed final state is part of a fuller answer to the problem of evil. I think something is right about this approach, although I will not enter discussions of the specifics here. I am more concerned with a general point, which is—if the ending of a narrative takes some sort of evaluative priority for broadly normative appraisals of a narrative as a whole, then a 'good ending' to life's narrative where redemption is robustly and fully accomplished will loom large for how the entire narrative is appraised. If an ending that itself never ends is one where deep and abiding *shalom* reigns for all eternity, then that state affairs is really important for the entire metanarrative, not just then, but also now.

This does not commit one to the utilitarian approach whereby the *eschaton* itself is somehow worth all the horrendous evil that countless millions have experienced in this life. To such a proposal, we, like Ivan Karamazov, might shudder in moral horror at the thought that the torture of even one child is worth a peaceful human destiny for all people. Of course, this might be a subtle misconstrual of what it might mean to say that the *eschaton* "is worth" the pain and suffering saliently populating human history. Neither is such an approach warrant for somehow, retroactively, calling evil "good." That the blessed state is blessed does not retroactively erase all the pain, suffering, and evil of post-lapsarian, pre-consummation history on the Christian theistic metanarrative.

But none of this is the point. The very general and modest claim I am advocating is simply that, given first-order conclusions about the evaluative significance of narrative ending *qua* ending, and second-order conclusions based upon the *nature* of a given ending, some measure of plausibility is brought to the practice of enlisting eschatological

considerations in the projects of defense and theodicy. The final, settled stance toward life's metanarrative from the perspective of eternal blessedness surely makes a difference for how we evaluate the elements of the metanarrative right now. Unfortunately (for philosophers), to try and speculate during the middle of life's metanarrative, if it is of the theistic variety, on how possibly this might look and what kind of difference it might make is probably mitigated by the Pauline statement, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12a).[90]

7.11 Summary

Assessments of naturalistic metanarratives as cosmically and deeply futile, given the way they end, will likely remain prevalent as long as we continue to first attach a significant evaluative function to narrative ending *qua* ending for broadly normative appraisals on emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels of narratives as a whole. I have argued that understanding the connection between futility and naturalistic metanarratives solely in terms of the *nature* of their endings is truncated, and that considerations of the evaluative priority of narrative ending in general add substantially to an understanding of this connection. A robust account of the connection, then, must not only include considerations of the *Staying Power Intuition* and *Strong* and *Weak* versions of the *Futility Conclusion*, but should locate them within an intelligible framework, something I have attempted to accomplish by discussing the evaluative significance of narrative ending in general. As long as our views of the world continue to be powerfully shaped by our deep seated narrative proclivities, a sense of cosmic futility will likely stubbornly persist for those who worry that we might live in a Russelian universe, one in which our

[90] Ancient mirrors in the Graeco-Roman world were made from polished metal; thus one's reflection was considerably more "dim" than with modern mirrors.

grandest achievements, our most profound loving relationships, and our very lives themselves will eventually "be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."[91]

[91] Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 107.

POSTSCRIPT

8.1 The Broader Philosophical Pay-off of the Narrative Interpretation

From the vantage point of the last century of analytic philosophy, any attempt to interpret, with appropriate levels of philosophical clarity and rigor, what the question, "What is the meaning of life?" means may appear both presumptuous and unmanageable. It is my hope that my central thesis in this dissertation—roughly, that the question is best interpreted as *the request for a narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to rational, emotional, and self-reflective creatures such as us*—has, at least partly, shown such suspicions to have only *prima facie* plausibility and not *ultima facie* plausibility. This narrative interpretation is one that, at once, takes seriously our pre-philosophical tendency to view the question as profound and worthy of careful consideration, salvages the question's basic philosophical integrity, and powerfully unifies the cluster of issues thought to be relevant to the meaning of life under one construct—a narrative built around this cluster of issues.

In addition to satisfying the above desiderata, the narrative interpretation provides further philosophical pay-off. Perhaps most importantly, it introduces an additional paradigm to the ongoing dialectic in contemporary analytic philosophy, and especially analytic philosophy of religion, between the various instantiations of naturalism and theism. More often than not, these competing metaphysical accounts of reality line up against one another on specific issues; this seems necessary and fruitful. However, the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question provides a new conceptual lens

through which these competing systems can be compared as full-blown metaphysical narratives in terms of what each offers on the topic of life's meaning. This will involve each system explicating its category of ER_N with a view to the candidate meaning of life narrative that these respective metaphysical systems have to offer. Why might this be significant?

Primarily, it provides further, possibly deeper, motivation for directing our philosophical gaze towards extant problems largely discussed from other philosophical vantage points. So, for example, debates about reductionism will become just as much about the meaning of life as they already are about ontology, and the dialectic between reductive naturalists, non-reductive naturalists, and theists will take on new significance. The question of whether normative properties can be reduced to physical properties then becomes critical as we compare competing meaning of life candidate narratives. This will crystallize differences even within the naturalist camp, pitting non-reductive forms of naturalism against reductive forms. The question of if and how a *meaningful existence* can be secured will be answered differently within the various meaning of life narratives emerging.

Similarly, the problem of evil will be as much about the meaning of life as it is a sub-question within philosophy of religion. No doubt, the presence of evil is one of those existentially relevant facts of existence (ER_Q) for which we seek a narrative in which to contextualize it. Turning our attention to the problem of evil in this way more clearly highlights the multi-faceted dimensions of the problem often only latent or entirely absent in much of the philosophical dialectic. One thinks here of the *eschatological* dimension of theodicy. Indeed, any treatment of the problem of evil from within the Christian

theistic metanarrative cannot neglect eschatology. As the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg notes on the penultimate page of his *Systematic Theology:*

> Only in the light of the eschatological consummation is the verdict justified that in the first creation story the Creator pronounced at the end of the sixth day when he had created the first human pair: 'And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good' (Gen. 1:31). Only in the light of the eschatological consummation may this be said of our world as it is in all its confusion and pain. But those who may say it in spite of the suffering of the world honour and praise God as their Creator. The verdict 'very good' does not apply simply to the world of creation in its state at any given time. It is true, rather, of the whole course of history in which God is present with his creatures in incursions of love that will finally lead it through the hazards and sufferings of finitude to participation in his glory.[1]

Bringing future-oriented considerations of pain and suffering into the philosophical discussion will also naturally link to perennial meaning of life topics like death and futility. Additionally, it will motivate more vigorous research and debate over whether the inherent human desire for a felicitous ending to life's narrative, including, for example, post-mortem survival and enjoyment of the beatific vision, is mere wishful thinking or a cousin to our desire for water, and thus, a truly natural desire that points to a referent capable of fulfilling it. Might some sort of cosmic hope that demands redemption and eschatological fulfillment be an intellectual virtue as well as a theological virtue? Such projects evidence potential philosophical pay-offs if the narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is adopted.

8.2 Areas for Further Research

Although I spent considerable time exploring the necessary and sufficient conditions of what constitutes the *narrative interpretation*, I have been forced to leave much either underdeveloped or unsaid, as such topics would have required me to move

[1] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, trans. Geoffrey Bromily (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 645.

beyond the immediate focus of the dissertation. Here, I want to briefly introduce the contours of relevant and important work left to be done with respect to various claims and ideas introduced and developed in this dissertation. Importantly, some of this will involve interdisciplinary cooperation. I will identify two such areas.

First, in light of the distinction I introduced in Chapter Two between paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic instances of narrative, and how whether a given candidate meaning of life narrative is a paradigmatic instance of narrative is itself worldview-relative (or metanarrative relative), further work should be done in order to understand why it is that, historically, most of the satisfying (at least existentially) meaning of life narratives are those that are *paradigmatic instances of narrative.* That most, if not all, of these meaning of life narratives are *also religious narratives* gives rise to an important question—Are such meaning of life narratives, as opposed to their non-paradigmatic cousins, thought to be more existentially satisfying in virtue of their *explicitly religious perspective on the world* or in virtue of the fact that they are *paradigmatic instances of narrative* or both? In terms of an interdisciplinary approach, the work of cognitive scientists who are informing us that personal identity has a substantial narrative component may be of benefit here. Perhaps our deep human need to construct meaningful narratives in order to contextualize parts of our lives *and our very lives themselves* is genetically hardwired. More specifically, perhaps our existential need to locate our lives and the profound elements that populate human life toward which we direct our existentially interested gaze, in metanarratives that are paradigmatic instances of narrative is genetically hardwired. If something like this is correct, then it may become clearer why questioning the meaning

of life with such intensity and angst is correlated with the rise of a meaning of life narrative that is a non-paradigmatic instance of narrative—i.e., naturalism.

Second, much important work is left regarding the evaluative significance of narrative ending for the meaning of life. I have argued that the broadly normative significance of narrative ending for appraisals of the entire narrative provides a compelling rationale for why discussions of death and futility have been part and parcel of meaning of life discussions, and, specifically, *why the naturalistic ending often has been thought to threaten the entire narrative with meaninglessness*. The evaluative significance of narrative ending not only plausibly frames discussions of death and futility; it provides further motivation for thinking that the question of life's meaning is best thought of as requesting a certain kind of narrative—i.e., that we attach such evaluative significance to *how it is all going to end*, provides evidence that we often and already think of ourselves as characters in a grand metanarrative.

If narrative ending in general is important, then *how* a narrative ends is equally as important. For example, there is a widespread and deep seated hope for a "good" ending to the universe's narrative. Though what constitutes a good ending is partly *metanarrative relative*, "good" ending is often construed, especially on theistic meaning of life narratives, as requiring some form of post-mortem survival in a blessed state of affairs whereby redemption is fully accomplished. An important question surfaces here—Is this widespread, deep seated hope merely wishful thinking with no rational grounding, or rather, akin to a natural desire that points to some mind-independent referent capable of fulfilling it?[2]

[2] There is, of course, a third option which I consider below.

If this desire and other *transcendent passions* are merely instances of wishful thinking, then Camus' concept of the *absurd* comes to the fore, as there exists a profound discrepancy between the intense human desires for happiness and reason to coalesce and the unreasonable silence of the universe about such desire. Camus calls the salient incongruity here, "absurd."[3] In classical terms, Camus' absurd might be thought of as the existentially lamentable fragmentation of *Truth, Goodness,* and *Beauty*. Perhaps the truth might not ultimately be aligned with the beautiful; perhaps that which is beautiful might not ultimately be true.[4]

Prior to his conversion to Christian theism, C. S. Lewis aptly stated the *prima facie* impasse for naturalism that has left naturalists like Camus and others in profound existential befuddlement and angst, "The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest conflict. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism.' Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless."[5] Perhaps the pessimist

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[3] Camus' concept of absurdity is subtly different from Thomas Nagel's. Nagel thinks the absurdity of life derives from the incongruity between two perspectives—the existentially passionate and involved *human* perspective whereby life is lived as being valuable, worthwhile, and significant, and the remote, non-sentient perspective whereby human life and activity are viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. From this remote, disinterested perspective, the things we feel most strongly about as having value and significance, appear arbitrary and wholly contingent. For a comparison of Nagel on Camus on the topic of the absurd, see Jeffrey Gordon, "Nagel or Camus on the Absurd?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (September 1984): pp. 15-28.

[4] Such judgments, of course, are complexly intertwined with the plausibility of systems of value. For example, if the perceived fragmentation of truth, goodness, and beauty on naturalistic premises is thought to weaken the plausibility of naturalism, the naturalist may simply deny that (i) truth is not beautiful on naturalism, or that (ii) the felt need to harmonize truth, goodness, and beauty is an adequate criterion by which to assess the plausibility of metanarratives.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), p. 170. Lewis proceeds to describe his thinking, "I chewed endlessly on the problem: "How can it be so beautiful and also so cruel, wasteful, and futile?" Hence at this time I could have almost said with Santayana, "All that is good is imaginary; all that is real is evil." In one sense nothing less like a "flight from reality" could be conceived. I was so far from wishful thinking that I hardly thought anything true unless it contradicted my wishes" (p. 170).

intuitions at play here in the thought of Lewis, Camus, and many, many others are themselves suspect. Maybe our "requirements" on what is good and beautiful are too high, and these inflated expectations make naturalism look woefully inadequate on existential levels. But maybe they are not. Perhaps they are cloaked pointers to the reality of a stronger connection between *robust* notions of truth, goodness, and beauty, and their ultimate harmony.

One way of assessing the question of whether such desires are instances of mere wishful thinking or something more is simply to engage the debate between naturalists and Christian theists over the rational merits of their respective metanarratives. It is the "debate" between the Athenian philosophers and the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus, between David Hume and Jonathan Edwards, Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston, J. J. C. Smart and John Haldane, and between Michael Tooley and Alvin Plantinga, among many others.[6] If Christian theism, as a complete metaphysical package, is rationally anchored, then one has rational grounds for believing the central theses of Christian eschatology, and *ipso facto* rational grounds for *hoping*.

The above epistemological approach to rationally grounding hope has its place in the philosophical discussion over the widespread and deeply seated *hope for a good ending to life's narrative*, but there may be a more interesting question surrounding the epistemological basis for *rational hope*. Might hope *qua* hope that reality is a place where love, blessedness, and fecundity have the last word, as opposed to the loss of the necessary conditions for such things in death, be in some sense self-justifying? Might our profound longing for robust conceptions of truth, goodness, and beauty to ultimately and

[6] For example, see J. J. C. Smart and J. J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God*, Great Debates in Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

deeply coalesce be, in some sense, self-justifying? In other words, might this species of hope, akin to what the nineteenth century Thomist Josep Pieper termed *fundamental hope*,[7] function centrally or foundationally in the epistemological process of rationally grounding *this* "particular way of *intending the future*."[8] Whether such an enterprise has philosophical merit and what it would involve is too large a question to be considered here, but philosophical and theological precedent exists for the claim, and it is worthy of further consideration.

8.3 Russell and Cab Driver

I close this dissertation where it began—in the back seat of a cab with Bertrand Russell who sat in silence when asked by his driver, "What's it all about?" Russell's lack of response to his inquisitive chauffeur would be viewed by many contemporary analytic philosophers as implicit and legitimate philosophical chastisement for a rationally sub-par request, rather than revelatory of any philosophical shortcomings on Russell's part. Though I have deep respect for the philosophical acumen of Russell, I have to side with the cab driver's bemusement at Russell's pregnant silence. I think his question is, at once, profound, meaningful, and worthy of serious philosophical reflection; and therefore one about which Russell should have had something to say. Where the cab driver's famous occupant was silent, I have tried to say something in developing my narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" If this proposal has merit, it

[7] See Josef Pieper, *Hope and History*, Five Salzburg Lectures, trans. Dr. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

[8] I borrow the description of hope as a "particular way of intending the future" from James K. A. Smith's essay, "Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation," p. 205. Smith identifies five *formal* features of hope, irrespective of the content of a given instance of *hoping*. They are (i) a *hoper* (subject who hopes), (ii) an object hoped for, (iii) an act of hope which is an act of consciousness, (iv) a ground of hope, and (v) expectations of fulfillment (pp. 207-209).

will have brought some measure of philosophical respect to the question of life's meaning. It is my hope that this dissertation moves us in that direction.

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