

Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending

Abstract: Death and futility are among a cluster of themes that closely track discussions of life's meaning. Moreover, futility is thought to supervene on naturalistic metanarratives because of *how* they will end. While the *nature* of naturalistic metanarrative endings is part of the explanation for concluding that such metanarratives are cosmically or deeply futile, this explanation is truncated. I argue that the reason the nature of the ending is thought to be normatively important is first anchored in the fact that narrative ending *qua* ending is thought to be normatively important. Indeed, I think futility is often thought to characterize naturalistic metanarratives because a narrative's ending 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.

Introduction

Death and futility are among a cluster of themes that closely track discussions of life's meaning.¹ 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,² 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.³

¹ Others include origins, purpose, value, pain and suffering, and how life is going to end.

² 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.

³ There have been, however, notable attempts that seek to add conceptual detail to the common pre-philosophic intuition held by many that death, as construed on naturalism, entails deep futility. Here, one thinks especially of Ronald Dworkin's *model of impact* whereby the limiting horizon of mortality undercuts the possibility of making a deep and lasting impact in the universe, and thus brings a systemic futility to life

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*.⁴ 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 not possible,⁵ 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,⁶ or, more often, (ii) argue that the requirement of post-mortem

(a model he ultimately rejects in favor of the *model of challenge*), *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 253-54. Robert Nozick has also attempted to provide further conceptual detail as to why mortality, as construed on naturalism, is thought to share such a strong correlation with futility. He notes that, on one interpretation of the concept of a meaningful life, securing a meaningful life is a function of transcending important limits, and failure to transcend the limit of mortality brings with it the threatening presence of futility. *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 594-600. I will interact further with Dworkin's model of impact in the section of this paper titled: "**The Evaluative Priority of Narrative Ending and Competing Accounts of the Relationship between Death and Perceived Futility.**"

⁴ SPI is nicely captured in the slogan, *diamonds are forever*.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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

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.⁷

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:

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), 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), 148.

⁷ This is the position of Brooke Allen Trisel in “Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts,” *The Philosophical Forum*, 35 (Fall 2004), 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), 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 applied to human life. Most contemporary philosophical naturalists would recognize themselves as optimistic, in the sense the term is used in this context.

- (1) Entire metaphysical systems (e.g., naturalism, Christian theism) can be thought of as narratives or metanarratives,⁸ 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 assessments of narratives as a whole*. Hence, while judging the naturalistic metanarrative

⁸ From here on, I will use the term “metanarrative” and not “narrative” to describe entire metaphysical systems like naturalism and Christian theism. Interestingly, the metanarratives of some metaphysical systems, like Christian theism for example, will possess a narrative in the paradigmatic sense of the term “narrative,” largely in virtue of such religious traditions’ connection with religious texts which themselves contain an overarching *redemptive story* of the cosmos. In contrast, the metanarratives of other metaphysical systems, like naturalism for example, will be narratives only in some loose and non-paradigmatic sense. For a discussion of the classification of narrative and non-narrative discourse, see Marie-Laure Ryan, “Toward a Definition of Narrative,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22-35. Because naturalistic metanarratives fail to be paradigmatic instances of narrative, they are likely subject to Sartrean objections against life being anything like a dramatic narrative. For Sartre’s objection to viewing life as a narrative, see his *Nausea*, Trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964). For a contemporary exposition of the Sartrean objection, see Alan M. 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), 99-105. Metanarratives, or “grand narratives” as they have been called, are “. . . second-order narratives which seek to narratively articulate and legitimate some concrete first-order practices or narratives.” J. M. Bernstein, “Grand Narratives,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 102. New Testament Scholar, N. T. Wright, adds that such narratives are “. . . normative: that is, they claim to make sense of the whole of reality.” *The New Testament and the People of God*, Vol. 1, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 41. I will not defend the concept of metanarrative against various postmodern criticisms, though I do not share postmodernity’s “. . . incredulity toward metanarratives.” Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), xxiv.

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”),⁹ 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).¹⁰ 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. In an earlier work, I defend 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*.¹¹ The relevant “elements and accompanying questions” in need of narration largely revolve around origins, purpose, value, pain and suffering, and how life is going to end. The narrative interpretation, though, has rivals.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Bibliographic information omitted for review.

The most common current interpretation views the question, “What is the meaning of life?” as a place-holder or “. . . amalgam [sic] of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither.”¹² Such questions generally include those about purpose, significance, and value among others. In these cases, meaning in life then centers on ordering one’s life around valuable ends, or being subjectively attracted to objective attractiveness, or realizing one’s strongest desires, among others.¹³

Space does not allow for a re-articulation of the narrative interpretation and defense of its philosophic merits over rival theories of meaning. As such, 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

¹² R. W. Hepburn, “Questions about the Meaning of Life,” in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 262. Thaddeus Metz has done much helpful work on this and related issues. See his, “New Developments in the Meaning of Life,” *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007): 196-217; “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,” *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 781-814; and “The Concept of a Meaningful Life,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (April 2001): 137-53; and “Critical Notice: Baier and Cottingham on the Meaning of Life,” *Disputatio* 19 (2005): 251-64.

¹³ But these other theories about what constitutes life’s meaning reveal an assumption that many philosophers working on the topic seem to have largely left unquestioned. The assumption is that the following questions are synonymous: “What is the meaning of life?” and “What makes a life meaningful?” If such assumption is implicitly made, and I think it is, then theories about life’s meaning tend to fit more naturally within the context of the second question. But this second question possesses different connotations than the first. There are at least two differences between these questions that are important and which need to be discussed if philosophers are to make further progress on the topic of life’s meaning. First, the question, “What makes a life meaningful?” is more obviously a value-laden question in which one seeks to know what one *ought* to order her life around so as to make it meaningful. Conversely, “What is the meaning of life?” seems to be, very often, more about seeking a deep explanation or narrative for why we or anything for that matter exists. Second, the question, “What makes a life meaningful?” is a question about *human* life, and not everything that exists in the universe, or the universe itself. However, as a matter of fact, general questions about life’s meaning are often motivated out of more global and all-inclusive intuitions. These global intuitions are nicely captured in what I consider to be an equally vague 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. So, the global intuitions out of which the question, “What is the meaning of life?” is often motivated fit more naturally in the context of the question, “What is the meaning of life?” as opposed to “What makes a life meaningful?”

largely co-extensive with the meaning of life.¹⁴ 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. For the purposes of this paper it is sufficient to accept the following conditional: if “the meaning of life” is best understood as a metanarrative in the analytic sense, or if narrative is one helpful way among others for addressing central meaning of life issues in the synthetic sense, then either way a compelling reason exists for why the way life ends—both human life and the universe itself—has been thought to be so relevant to broadly normative appraisals of life as a whole. As I have already developed and defended the first disjunct of the antecedent in an earlier work,¹⁵ I will here turn my attention to the consequent.

Whether or not conclusions that life is in fact cosmically futile have philosophical merit is not my concern in this paper. Rather, I am focusing on answering the question of why futility is often thought to saliently characterize naturalistic metanarratives 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

¹⁴ I owe the analytic/synthetic distinction introduced in this context to the helpful suggestion of an anonymous reviewer.

¹⁵ Bibliographic information omitted for review.

moral levels towards the narrative as a whole *in virtue of it being the ending*.¹⁶ I will first explain the rationale behind the evaluative significance of narrative ending for broadly normative appraisals of narratives as a whole. Second, I will clarify three important senses of ending, noting which is required for my argument to succeed. Third, 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*. Fourth, 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.

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,¹⁷ 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,

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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), 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), 44-46.

emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole. This claim is 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.¹⁸

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].¹⁹

¹⁸ Though, theistic endings will have to contend with, among other criticisms, that of Bernard Williams mentioned in endnote 7.

¹⁹ J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," 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. 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.²⁰ 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

²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

²¹ 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.”²² 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

²² Christiaan Moster, “Theodicy and Eschatology,” in *Theodicy and Eschatology*, eds. Bruce Barber and David Neville (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2005), 106.

uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close.”²³

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 elsewhere noted that certain metanarratives, naturalistic ones for example, are more like conjunctive explanations as opposed to full-blown narratives in the paradigmatic sense.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.

²³ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 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.

²⁴ Bibliographic information omitted for review.

²⁵ 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.

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 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.

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.²⁶

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

²⁶ John Martin Fischer, “Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative,” *Philosophical Papers* 34 (November 2005): 379-403.

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.

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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*

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ J. David Velleman, “Narrative Explanation,” 18-22.

though not an ending in an absolute sense. Ending as closure, then, is *contextual* rather than *absolute*.

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.²⁹

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).³⁰ The life that people are worried is

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ 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,

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 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

all Scriptural citations will be from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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.

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.³¹ 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?³²

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

³¹ Cf. endnote 3.

³² Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 246.

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.

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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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

³³ 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*.

³⁴ Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 251.

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.

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.³⁵ 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

³⁵ Cf. endnote 5.

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 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.

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.³⁶

This is largely why the case of Sisyphus has been the paradigmatic example of futility in the West. On the canonical version of the story,³⁷ 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 this 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.³⁸

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 this 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

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ 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), 256-68.

³⁸ Futility, 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.

exerting the same effort in order to accomplish the task in, say, eight months is probably not futile.³⁹ But, since futility comes in degrees, researching, writing, and submitting this 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.⁴⁰ 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.

³⁹ 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 this paper for publication in eight months, but it would be futile for my twenty-two month old son, William, to do so.

⁴⁰ 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).

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.

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.⁴¹ In what can be called the *Weak Futility Conclusion* (WFC), it is thought that if the final state of affairs of the

⁴¹ 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), 51-4, and Leo Tolstoy, "A Confession," in *Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 46-59.

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.⁴² In the words of C. S. Lewis, critics of SFC and WFC might contend 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.”⁴³ 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

⁴² 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 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.

⁴³ C. S. Lewis, “*De Futilitate*,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 59.

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.⁴⁴ Analogously, when 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.⁴⁵

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

⁴⁴ 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, 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.

⁴⁵ This phrase is a bit misleading for there will literally be *no one* to take up this point of reference.

may have been significant and felt for a season, when feelers and recognizers, or possibly inventors, 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, 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,⁴⁶ 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

⁴⁶ 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.

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 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 alleviate 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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ William Lane Craig, "The Absurdity of Life Without God," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 42.

⁴⁸ 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.

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].⁴⁹

The kinds of cosmic futility conclusions that Trisel criticizes are largely built around what Erik J. Wielenberg refers to as *final outcome arguments*.⁵⁰ 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?⁵¹ In the words of Thomas Nagel, “. . . it does not matter now that in a million years nothing we do now will matter.”⁵² 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

⁴⁹ Brook Allen Trisel, “Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts,” 384.

⁵⁰ Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 16-31.

⁵¹ 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), 140.

⁵² Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 11.

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.

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. 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.⁵³ 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;⁵⁴ by

⁵³ There is obviously significant overlap between the philosophic and eschatological dimensions of the problem of evil.

⁵⁴ 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, *rationality*, is

“eschatological,” I mean future-oriented questions about whether pain, suffering, and evil will be, in some robust sense, redeemed and defeated.

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.

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.

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).⁵⁵

Conclusion

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

⁵⁵ Ancient mirrors in the Graeco-Roman world were made from polished metal; thus one's reflection was considerably more "dim" than with modern mirrors.

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 grandest achievements, our most profound loving relationships, and our very lives themselves will eventually “be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ 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), 107.