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Human Extinction, Narrative Ending, and Meaning of Life

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Abstract

Some people think that the inevitability of human extinction renders life meaningless. Joshua Seachris has argued that naturalism can be conceptualized as a meta-narrative and that it narrates across important questions of human life, including what is the meaning of life and how life will end. How a narrative ends is important, Seachris argues. In the absence of God, and with knowledge that human extinction is a certainty, is there any way that humanity could be meaningful and have a good ending? I will distinguish between two conceptions of how humanity could be meaningful: the traditional view and an alternative view, which I will outline. I will argue that this alternative view provides a plausible explanation for how humanity could become meaningful. I will also argue that coming to terms with our mortality and other limitations would add meaning to human life and provide humanity with a good ending.

1. Introduction

Of all the species that have ever existed, an estimated 99.9% of them are now extinct.[1] Humanity will also someday cease to exist. Some theists have argued that human life is meaningless without God and personal immortality. Humanity would be on a "purposeless rush toward oblivion," William Lane Craig writes.[2]

Joshua Seachris attempts to explain why some people reach this bleak conclusion. He begins by arguing that entire metaphysical systems, including naturalism, can be conceptualized as narratives or meta-narratives.[3] A narrative consists of a story (an event or sequence of events) and narrative discourse (the representation of those events).[4] A meta-narrative (e.g., Christian theism) is a global story that encompasses and explains smaller stories.

Jean-François Lyotard famously defined "postmodern" as "incredulity

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1 Raup (1991), p. 4.
2 Craig (2000), p. 45.
3 Seachris (2011), p. 142.
4 For more discussion, see Abbott (2002) and Ryan (2007).

toward metanarratives."[5] The meta-narratives are in crisis and losing their functions, heroes, and great goals, he indicated.

Despite this skepticism from Lyotard and others, Seachris maintains that there are meta-narratives, including Christian theism and naturalism. He claims that naturalism narrates across important existential questions of human life, including how life began, what is the meaning of life, and how life will end.[6] How a narrative ends is important, Seachris argues. As support for this claim, he quotes J. David Velleman who writes: "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."[7]

Seachris contends that the "last word" on the naturalistic meta-narrative is death and complete dissolution.[8] This explains, he argues, why many people "have difficulty shaking conclusions of cosmic futility and meaninglessness . . . ."[9] By "complete dissolution," Seachris means that when humanity ends "it will be as if none of this ever happened," in the sense that what did happen was not meaningful.[10]

Throughout history, many people have become distressed in thinking about human extinction, including individuals who do not conceive of naturalism narratively. Therefore, it is important to respond to the concerns discussed by Seachris, even if one has doubts that naturalism is a meta-narrative. In this paper, I will assume that naturalism is a meta-narrative.

I will be addressing the following two questions. First, in the absence of God, and with knowledge that human extinction is a certainty, is there any way that human life in general could be meaningful? Second, is there any way that humanity could have a good ending?[11]

I will first provide a brief overview of "meaning in life" and "meaning of life." In section three, I will discuss three different senses of "ending." In section four, I will attempt to make some progress in clarifying the obscure question "What is the meaning of life?" I will do so by distinguishing between two ways

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[5] Lyotard (1984), p. xxiv.
[6] Seachris (2011, p. 160, n. 7) indicates that naturalism is a meta-narrative only in a "loose and non-paradigmatic sense." See also Seachris (2009).
[7] Velleman (2003), p. 19.
[8] Seachris (2011), pp. 146, 156.
[9] Ibid., p. 146.
[10] Ibid., p.156.
[11] For discussion of the question of whether it matters when humanity will go extinct, see Leslie (1996), Lenman (2002), Scheffler (2013), and Kauppinen (2014).

of thinking about how humanity could be meaningful. With the traditional view, a meaning of life is thought to be something bestowed on humanity, *as a group*, by a deity. This view raises many difficult questions, as I will explain, and is doubtful. There is, however, an alternative way that humanity could become meaningful. By engaging with inherently valuable and natural goods, it adds meaning to our individual lives which, in turn, adds meaning to humanity from the "bottom-up." As more individual lives become meaningful, there is a corresponding increase in the meaning of human life. I will argue that this latter view provides a plausible explanation for how humanity could become meaningful.

The things that we create, and the knowledge we attain, will someday vanish. For this reason, some theists and pessimists argue that life is ultimately meaningless. As I will seek to demonstrate in section five, it is unnecessary for our works to last forever. In the sixth section, I will explain "narrative closure" and will argue that coming to terms with our mortality and other limitations would provide the naturalistic meta-narrative with this type of closure.

2. Meaning in Life and Meaning of Life

During the last two decades, philosophers have made progress in explaining what gives meaning to the life of an *individual* human being. Most of the recent theories of meaning support objective naturalism – the belief that one accrues meaning in one's life by engaging with inherently valuable and entirely natural, mind-independent goods. Susan Wolf[12] contends that actively and lovingly engaging in projects of worth is what gives meaning to one's life. According to this subjective-objective hybrid theory, "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."[13]

Thaddeus Metz[14] disputes that subjective attraction is necessary for a person to accrue meaning. With his "fundamentality theory," he argues that one's life will accrue more meaning, the more that one contours one's rational self, in a substantial way, toward fundamental conditions of human existence. "Fundamental conditions," Metz indicates, are those conditions that are

[12] Wolf (1997) and (2010).
[13] Wolf (1997), p. 211.
[14] Metz (2013), pp. 183-184. Metz' fundamentality theory has generated considerable discussion. See, for example, Morioka (2015a), where Morioka and other critics of the theory outline their concerns and Metz responds.

responsible for many other conditions in a given domain. For example, in regards to how moral achievement can give meaning to one's life, Metz indicates that "freeing people from discrimination and tyranny and providing them urgent medical assistance are forms of positively orienting one's rationality toward conditions of a characteristic human being's life that are responsible for much else about her life . . . ."[15] These conditions would include, for example, the ability of the person to continue to make autonomous decisions.

In their theories about "meaning in life," Wolf and Metz do not seek to address questions about meaning of life. "Meaning of life" is undoubtedly one of the best known, but most obscure phrases in the English language. There has been a longstanding skepticism towards this phrase. For example, in 1947, A. J. Ayer indicated that we know what it is for a person to have a purpose, "But how can life in general be said to have any meaning?"[16] Philosophers have been reluctant to engage with this topic, which is unfortunate. Many people want to know not just whether their own life can be meaningful, but whether they are a part of something larger than themselves that is or could be meaningful. The types of questions that interest them include "What is the meaning of life?" and "Why do we exist?"

People who seek answers to these questions tend to view life from the perspective of *sub specie aeternitatis.* From this broad, external perspective, they wonder how life originated. In addition, because they see that humanity will end, they wonder whether our efforts will add up to anything of significance. From this vantage point, they also see that some of the desires that many people have, such as the desire for personal immortality, are unattainable. Consequently, they may wonder whether their efforts are ultimately futile.

A few philosophers, including Seachris, have sought to address the questions about meaning of life from a theistic perspective.[17] However, many people no longer believe in the existence of God. Therefore, it is important to begin to explore these larger questions about meaning of life from the perspective of naturalism. Before I do so, it will be useful to discuss three different conceptions of "ending," as explained by Seachris, and to challenge one of his claims.

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[15] Metz (2013), p. 227.
[16] Ayer (2000), p. 224.
[17] For a discussion of recent works on the meaning of life, see Mawson (2013).

3. “Ending” and its Three Meanings

Seachris indicates that there can be ending as *termination*, ending as *telos*, and ending as *closure*.[18] Statements such as “the race has finished” connote the first sense of ending. The second sense of ending reflects the notion of final causality or purpose. Closure, the third sense of ending, occurs when there is a resolution to the primary conflicts of the narrative.[19]

Seachris indicates that an example of telos is “the end of creation is to glorify God.”[20] Although the Christian meta-narrative is unending, it does provide closure to life “under the sun,” Seachris argues. Pain and sorrow are permanently eradicated in the new heavens and new earth.[21] Thus, Seachris contends that the Christian meta-narrative provides telos and closure. In contrast, he suggests that the naturalistic meta-narrative terminates in death and dissolution without providing telos or closure.[22]

A principal reason that an ending is important, Seachris asserts, is because knowing how the narrative will end has a retroactive power insofar as it encroaches in our lives *today* and impacts how we *currently* appraise our lives. Knowing that we face a bad ending can make our lives less joyful than they would have been if a bad ending were not looming on the horizon, Seachris argues. He uses the example discussed below as support for this argument.

Seachris asks that you imagine that you are currently dating someone and that this relationship will end badly in the future. He argues that if you *know in advance* that your relationship will end badly the “joy experienced will be mitigated by knowledge of the coming dissolution.”[23] I agree with Seachris that the couple in this example would likely experience a reduced amount of joy. However, this example is not analogous to our having knowledge that humanity will go extinct. Although we know humanity will end, *we do not know* that humanity will end badly. Humanity could end in a good way, as I will explain in this paper.

Theists and pessimists have many concerns with naturalism. They are

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[18] Seachris (2011), p. 148.
[19] For an introduction to the concept of narrative closure, see Abbott (2002), pp. 54-57 and Carroll (2007), pp. 1-15.
[20] Seachris (2011), p. 148.
[21] Ibid., p. 150.
[22] Ibid., pp. 146, 149, 155-156.
[23] Ibid., p. 146.

concerned that life originated by chance[24] and that life is meaningless and is not significant.[25] They are concerned that "we know so little about the vast universe we inhabit,"[26] as Seachris indicates, and that there is suffering and injustice. They are also concerned that human beings die and that our works will not last. In summary, they are concerned, as Seachris indicates, that there is a "discrepancy between our deepest desires and the nature of the naturalistic world which seems to ultimately prevent these desires from being realized."[27]

The conflicts that pervade the naturalistic meta-narrative reflect our attempt to come to terms with our finitude, other limitations, and the imperfections of ourselves, and the world in which we exist.[28] When people had faith in God, we could appeal to God to help us resolve these conflicts by, for example, fulfilling our desires for justice and unending life. But with the death of God (to paraphrase Nietzsche[29]), we alone are faced with resolving these conflicts. Many of our "deepest desires" will continue to be unrealizable in this universe. Fortunately, however, there is another way of resolving these conflicts to attain narrative closure, as will be explained in section six.

Seachris argues that narrative closure provides a "settled stance" from which one can appraise human life.[30] Thus, we can imagine that we are at the end of the narrative and assess whether human beings were able to resolve the conflicts that pervaded the narrative. Does telos also provide a settled stance? Telos can be divided into the following three phases: *goal adoption*, *striving*, and *achievement*. The first two phases of telos do not provide a settled stance from which one can evaluate whether human life is meaningful. However, achievement - the last phase of telos - does provide a settled stance. Thus, from the end-of-narrative perspective, we can assess whether human beings accomplished anything remarkable during the history of humankind. In summary, narrative closure and achievement provide two settled stances from which to appraise human life.

Philosophers have recognized that achievements are an important source of

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[24] For a response, see Trisel (2012b) and Metz (2013), pp. 83-84.
[25] In response to this latter concern, Kahane (2014) argues that humanity would be of great cosmic significance if there is no sentient life elsewhere in the universe.
[26] Ibid., p. 149.
[27] Ibid., p. 154.
[28] See also Tabensky (2009), p. 53. Although Tabensky does not appear to conceive of naturalism as a meta-narrative, he indicates that life is largely about coming to terms with our finitude and flaws.
[29] Nietzsche (1974), pp. 181, 279-280.
[30] Seachris (2011), p. 149.

meaning in our individual lives.[31] What is an achievement? Do our individual achievements also give meaning to humanity? In the next section, I will address these questions.

4. Meaning of Life From the "Bottom-Up"

Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela, and Charles Darwin are some of the individuals mentioned by Metz[32] as examples of meaningful lives. There is something all of these individuals had in common: They made great achievements. I am not suggesting that achievements are the only thing that gives meaning to our lives. There is, however, a strong connection between achievements and meaning.

What is an achievement? An achievement, Gwen Bradford[33] argues, is a process with a certain structure that culminates in a product. Washing one's car is an achievement, but it is not the type of achievement that would add meaning to one's life. Bradford seeks to explain the underlying features of great achievements. One feature of great achievements is that they are *difficult* to make.[34] To be counted as an achievement, not only must the process cause the product, the process must be non-accidental.[35] Thus, great achievements do not happen by accident. They involve the exercise of rationality by agents.

Bradford contends that there are individual and group achievements. A group is a collection of individuals, which raises metaphysical questions about the relation between individuals and the group. There is a large body of literature debating two questions about groups. First, can groups hold rights? Second, can groups be collectively responsible and blameworthy for harm that has occurred? For example, one question that has been debated is whether the people of Germany are collectively responsible for the Holocaust.[36] Some philosophers are skeptical that groups can have rights and be collectively responsible. For instance, Jan Narveson indicates that only individuals can "literally engage in reasoning and deliberation . . . "[37] and be bearers of responsibility.[38]

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[31] See James (2005), pp. 429-442, Kauppinen (2012), pp. 345-377, and Bradford (2015).
[32] Metz (2013), p. 2.
[33] Bradford (2015), p. 11.
[34] James (2005), pp. 437-440 and Bradford (2015), pp. 12, 26-63.
[35] Bradford (2015), pp. 14-17, 64-82.
[36] See Rescher (1998), p. 51 and Narveson (2002), p. 188.
[37] Narveson, (1991), p. 334.
[38] Narveson (2002), p. 179.

In contrast to the above two questions about groups, there has been very little discussion about group achievements. Can a group make an achievement? If so, is the group achievement equal to the sum of the achievements from the individual members of the group or is the group achievement something "over and above" the individual contributions? In addressing the question of how to apportion the value of a group achievement among the individuals in the group, Nicholas Rescher advocates for the latter view.[39] He argues that the "collaboration synergy of people working together is something superior to the mere compilation of their separate achievements."[40]

A magnificent achievement occurred in 1969 when astronauts were rocketed to space and then, a few days later, triumphantly stepped foot on the moon. *Who* made this achievement? Was this an achievement *only by the individuals* who worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) or was this also an achievement by NASA? Those who doubt the ontological status[41] of groups will deny that NASA made an achievement. Other scholars will acknowledge that NASA made an achievement but will disagree about how to explain this achievement. *Methodological holists* will maintain that this achievement is greater than the sum of the individual achievements by the astronauts and engineers, but proponents of *methodological individualism* will deny this. They will seek to explain this achievement solely in terms of the individual achievements of the astronauts and engineers.[42]

The holism-individualism debate is relevant to, and can help clarify, the question about whether humanity is something that can be meaningful. Humanity is a collection of individuals. It is a *group* – one that was formed through biological processes.

Philosophers have approached the obscure question "What is the meaning of life?" in two primary ways. First, they have sought to distinguish between different meanings of "meaning."[43] Second, following Kurt Baier,[44] they have distinguished between the life of an individual person and human life in general, and then have argued that an individual's life can be meaningful, even if life in

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[39] See Bradford (2015), p. 174 for an additional example.
[40] Rescher (1998), p. 57.
[41] For a discussion of the ontological status of groups, see Sheehy (2006). He advocates a realist view about groups, arguing that they are material particulars and count as objects in the social world.
[42] For an in-depth discussion of the individualism-holism debate, see Zahle and Collin (2014).
[43] See, for example, Nozick (1981), pp. 574-575.
[44] Baier (2000), pp. 101- 132.

general is not meaningful or the question about meaning of life is nonsensical. Although this approach has resulted in progress in explaining what gives meaning to a person's life, it has left the questions about meaning of life unaddressed from the perspective of naturalism.

I will take a different approach to the question about meaning of life. I will seek to clarify what is meant by "humanity." Humanity can be conceived in two different ways. First, humanity can be thought of as a singular group, where the focus is on the *group, as a whole*, rather than the individual members of the group. Alternatively, humanity can be conceived as the *individual members* that comprise the group. These two different ways of thinking about humanity give rise to the following two different accounts of how humanity could be meaningful:

> *Meaning of Life - Holism*: A meaning of life is a meaning possessed or accrued by humanity, *as a group*, and is *irreducible* to the meaning that the members of humanity might accrue in their individual lives.
>
> *Meaning of Life - Individualism*: A meaning of life is a meaning accrued by humanity, *through the actions of its individual members*, rather than through humanity, as a group, and is equal to the sum of the meaning in the lives of the individual members of humanity.

Holism about meaning of life is unclear and generates many difficult questions, including: If meaning is possessed by the group, rather than earned, how did the group come to possess the meaning? Was the meaning bestowed on the group from a supernatural or other entity? Alternatively, is this a meaning that the group is born with? If the meaning is not possessed by the group, but is something that the group can accrue, how does the group do this? Can humanity, as a whole, think, act, or have collective intentions? If not, then it becomes difficult to see how humanity, as a group, can accrue meaning. If humanity can somehow accrue meaning, how does this holistic meaning accrued by the group relate to the meaning in our individual lives that we can achieve?

The *individualistic* account of meaning of life is clearer and more plausible than holism. With this "bottom-up" explanation of how humanity could be meaningful, individual human beings think, act, and are bearers of meaning. Individual human beings accrue meaning in their lives by engaging with

inherently valuable goods. If meaning is something that can be aggregated in a person's life, and then compared in a standardized way across individuals, it seems plausible that one can aggregate the meaning among all individuals to determine the extent to which humanity is meaningful. The following comments from Irving Singer exemplify thinking about meaning of life in an individualistic way. He indicated: "We therefore need to examine the conditions under which human beings, and other organisms, make life meaningful. To the extent that life becomes meaningful in this accumulative way, its total meaning is increased."[45] He continues: "we may possibly assert that the cosmos acquires greater meaning only to the extent that it includes a totality of lives that become increasingly meaningful."[46]

As indicated, "humanity" can be conceived as a singular group or as the individual members that comprise the group. Most people, I suspect, tend to think of "humanity" in the holistic sense – as a singular group. Because "humanity" and the "human species" have these two meanings, this can lead us astray in our reasoning when we think about whether humanity can be meaningful. We ask ourselves, for example, what, if anything, would make humanity meaningful. When we think of humanity in the holistic way, it becomes difficult to conceive of an answer to this question. For example, as noted earlier, Ayer was dismissive of the topic of meaning of life because he could not envision how life, in general, could be meaningful.

Humanity is a collection of human beings. Thus, instead of using the ambiguous word "humanity," we could also use the phrase "all human beings" or just "human beings." When we think about the phrase "human beings," it prompts us to think of humanity, not as a singular group, but as the individual members that comprise the group. Thus, this phrase avoids the ambiguity of "humanity." If we then ask ourselves the question "what, if anything, would make the lives of human beings meaningful?" the question is no longer unclear and we can then begin to see possible ways in which the question could be given an answer.

It is often assumed that the questions about meaning in life are distinct from questions about meaning of life.[47] With the holistic account of meaning of life,

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[45] Singer (1996), p. 42.
[46] Ibid., p. 44. I would put it differently and say that "human life acquires greater meaning as our individual lives become more meaningful." See also his comments on pp. 117-118.
[47] See, for example, May (2015), pp. 1-2, 24.

these questions would perhaps be distinct (under some scenarios). However, from the perspective of individualism, the questions about meaning in life are directly related to the questions about meaning of life. Indeed, from this perspective, *objectivist theories of meaning in life can be thought of as a proposed explanation not only for how an individual person can accrue meaning in his or her life, but also for how humanity can become meaningful*. In the remainder of the paper, when I use the terms "humanity" or "meaning of life," I will be thinking of them in the individualistic sense.

One might object to the individualistic account of meaning of life by denying that the individual meaning in our lives can be *aggregated*. Most philosophers writing about meaning in life believe that meaning comes in degrees. Metz,[48] for example, contends that pleasure and meaning can be aggregated in a person's life and then compared to the lives of other people. As an example of such a comparison, he writes: "For all I know, my life is, so far, more pleasurable than Emily Dickinson's was, but less meaningful than Albert Einstein's."[49]

Peter Baumann[50] contends that there is too much indeterminacy for one to make precise interpersonal comparisons of meaning. In response, Metz acknowledges that it would be difficult in practice to rank individuals and make exact interpersonal comparisons. However, he argues that in principle it would be possible to compare the meaning among individuals. In the context of his fundamentality theory, one could, for example, assess the degree to which a person exercised his or her intelligence. In addition, one could assess how much the person's intelligence was positively oriented toward fundamental conditions of human life and how useful the person's actions were.[51] If Metz is correct that meaning can be aggregated and compared interpersonally, then there does not seem to be a reason why we cannot aggregate the meaning among all human beings to determine the extent to which human life is meaningful.

If there are no objective values, as subjectivists believe, then this would undermine the individualistic account of meaning of life that I have outlined. With subjective theories of meaning, what makes one's life meaningful depends solely on a subject fulfilling his or her propositional attitudes, such as desires or

[48] Metz (2013), p. 63.
[49] Ibid., p. 63.
[50] Baumann (2015).
[51] Metz (2015), p. 246.

goals. Because some people have lofty goals and other people have easy to reach goals, it would be difficult to make useful comparisons among different populations.

Masahiro Morioka, in reply to Metz, denies that meaning can be compared among individuals.[52] He proposes a self-evaluation of meaning that he calls "the heart of meaning in life." Morioka contends that the only person who can answer the question "does my life like this have any meaning at all?" is the person who asks the question.[53] In my early writings, I expressed doubt about objective values.[54] However, in recent years, I have been persuaded by the arguments of objectivists. I believe that a person could be mistaken about whether his or her life has meaning in it. For example, a person might be unaware of the positive impact that he or she has had on the lives of other people. If this person were to conclude that his or her life has no meaning at all, then this judgement seems to be mistaken.

5. Confronting the Perceived Threat to Meaningfulness

Some philosophers contend that the fleeting nature of life is a threat to the meaning in our lives. In an interesting thought experiment, Samuel Scheffler asks you to suppose that you will have a normal life span, but that the earth will be destroyed from an asteroid strike 30 days after you die. "How would this knowledge affect your attitudes during the remainder of your life?" he asks.[55] He argues that "if we lost confidence in the existence of the afterlife [by which he means future generations], then many of the things that now matter to us would come to matter to us less, in the sense that we would see less reason to engage with them . . . and would be less convinced of their value or worth."[56]

In response to Scheffler's claim, Antti Kauppinen considers the question of whether the value of many of our projects depends on the infinite continuation of humanity. Kauppinen introduces the notion of a "meaning horizon,"[57] which is the idea that there is a point at which the existence of future generations no

[52] Morioka (2015b).
[53] Ibid., p. 55.
[54] Trisel (2002) and (2004), pp. 378-379.
[55] Scheffler (2013), p. 18.
[56] Ibid., p. 51. For follow-up discussion, see the commentary by other philosophers in Scheffler (2013) and Kauppinen (2014).
[57] Kauppinen (2014), p. 3.

longer affects the significance of our present activities. For example, for one's current activity to have worth, one might need humanity to survive for 100 years. However, outside of this meaning horizon, the worth of this activity may no longer depend on humanity surviving beyond this point. Thus, Kauppinen concludes that humanity does not need to flourish forever for *our lives* to flourish.

Scheffler does not argue that humanity must persist *forever* for our lives to be meaningful, but some theists and pessimists have made this argument. As I argued in earlier papers, these individuals use unreasonable standards to judge whether our lives are meaningful.[58] Along these same lines, Iddo Landau delinks standards from perspectives and argues that we need not adopt an overly demanding standard when viewing life from an external perspective.[59] By adopting a less demanding standard, one's life can be meaningful even when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Because some people have the desire for our lives and works to last forever, the above three approaches are unlikely to persuade them that our lives can be "truly" or "ultimately" meaningful. In this section, I will seek to alleviate the threat of meaninglessness using a new approach. It will be useful for us to step back and ask ourselves the following question. Is it important that our works last *forever*? If there is no need for our works to last forever, as I will argue, then it is inappropriate to include the condition of everlastingness as part of a standard for judging whether our lives are meaningful.

Many of us seek to make a lasting contribution, but a contribution *to what*, we should ask. Some people pursue their work to better the lives of non-human animals. However, the majority of us pursue our work to better our own lives and the lives of other human beings. Thus, the astronomer, for example, seeks to make a lasting contribution to human beings' understanding of the universe. Because we pursue our work *for the benefit of human beings*, it is unnecessary for our works to last forever. After humanity goes extinct, our works are no longer needed. They would have served their purpose.

Ronald Dworkin outlines two contrasting models of value – the *model of impact* and the *model of challenge*.[60] The model of impact holds that the value of a life consists in its consequences for the rest of the world. By having an

[58] Trisel (2002) and (2004).
[59] Landau (2011). For follow-up discussion to this article, see Seachris (2013) and Landau (2014).
[60] Dworkin (2000), pp. 251-253. The model of challenge will not be discussed here.

impact on the "world," it is clear that Dworkin means having an impact on human beings.[61]

Seachris indicates that if we take the model of impact as the primary metric for how to measure the good life, then "futility looms . . . 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 . . . ."[62] Is this correct? Suppose that humanity will exist for another 100,000 years. If a scientist discovers a cure for cancer within the next year, but then immediately loses this research, this would be tragic. It would be tragic because people would continue to suffer from cancer for 100,000 years, assuming that no one else subsequently discovers a cure for cancer. But it would not be tragic if the research of this scientist is lost at the time humanity goes extinct. The research by the scientist made a great impact, in terms of improving the lives of human beings, for as long as it was needed. Thus, by clarifying the purpose for which the scientist pursues his or her work (i.e., to benefit humanity), it then becomes clear that there is no need for the research to last forever.

In response, one might argue that people create their works not just to create something of *instrumental* value to humanity or non-human animals, but also to create something of *intrinsic* value. Thus, one might concede that it does not matter whether something of instrumental value lasts forever, but then argue that it does matter how long something of intrinsic value endures. In reflecting on whether it matters how long humanity will persist, James Lenman considers the idea that human beings and our works have intrinsic value and that, if true, this might provide grounds for arguing that humanity should continue to exist for as long as possible. But after considering this argument, he rejects it. He writes: "It may be intrinsically good that great works of music or literature should exist. But it is by no means obvious that these works contribute more value by being *longer*."[63] Thus, one who believes that our lives are ultimately meaningless unless our works last forever will need to explain how these works contribute more value by lasting longer.

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[61] See also Singer (1995), pp. 230-231. By improving the "world," he means improving the lives of human beings and non-human animals.
[62] Seachris (2011), p. 151.
[63] Lenman (2002), p. 255, emphasis in original.

6. Preventing Futility and Attaining Narrative Closure

In section four, I argued that humanity could become meaningful through the actions of its *individual members.* By engaging, in a passionate way, with inherently valuable and natural goods, it adds meaning to our individual lives, which, in turn, adds meaning to humanity. In this section, I will explain narrative closure and will argue that providing closure to the naturalistic meta-narrative would also enhance the meaning of life.

What is narrative closure? Is closure necessary for a good ending? Noël Carroll distinguishes narrative closure from other types of closure. A logical argument or the finale of a symphony can provide closure, but these types of closure differ from narrative closure, Carroll[64] argues. Narrative closure provides a sense that the central questions posed by the narrative have been "wrapped up" and that the ending is occurring not too soon or too late, but at just the right time. Some types of narrative do not provide closure, as Seachris acknowledges.[65] For example, as Carroll[66] points out, soap operas and narrative histories of nations have large and expanding middle sections, but they lack closure.

Narrative closure is an ambiguous notion, as Kathy Behrendt[67] indicates. Behrendt, in the context of discussing whether closure affects the meaning in a person's life, points out that scholars have conceived of narrative closure in two different ways – what she refers to as "weak" and "strong" closure.[68] Weak closure is thought of as having a meaning-enhancing role in which the end of one's life can elevate one's entire life story. With strong closure, the "last chapter" is viewed as the key to unifying the events into a meaningful whole. By transforming a life from lost opportunities into one with meaning, the "end can provide meaning that the life would otherwise lack altogether . . . ."[69] Thus, attaining strong closure is thought of as having a sort of retroactive power to give meaning to a person's life. In what follows, I will be conceiving of closure in the "weak" sense as I explain how attaining this type of closure can enhance the meaning of humanity.

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[64] Carroll (2007), pp. 1-2.
[65] Seachris (2011), p. 149.
[66] Carroll (2007), p. 2.
[67] Behrendt (2014), p. 336.
[68] Ibid., pp. 336-338.
[69] Ibid., p. 336.

As you recall, Seachris suggests that the naturalistic meta-narrative lacks closure. There is a discrepancy, he contends, between our "deepest desires" and what is attainable in the universe. These deepest desires include, for example, the desire for personal immortality and for our works to endure. It is this discrepancy, he argues, that explains why some people think that our efforts are ultimately futile.

Supernaturalist theories of meaning reflect the desire for perfection, as Metz has convincingly argued.[70] Stewart Goetz explicitly asserts that the meaning of human life is to achieve "perfect happiness," which is "the unending experience of nothing but pleasure . . . ."[71] If these "deepest desires," which Seachris discusses, were unattainable and *ineradicable*, then many of our efforts would be ultimately futile. However, we are not stuck with these desires for perfection. These desires are not inborn. They are acquired and nothing is forcing us to retain these desires. Letting go of these unattainable desires would prevent this so-called "cosmic futility" and provide narrative closure.[72]

In earlier articles, I proposed the preceding approach as a way to prevent one's efforts from being futile.[73] In response, Seachris argues that because human beings assign significance to narrative endings, this will likely make it difficult for many people to adopt this approach.[74] That it is "difficult" to relinquish these unattainable desires should not deter us from doing so. It is also difficult to forgive someone who has wronged us. Despite being difficult, many people come to realize that forgiving someone has many benefits including that it helps relieve anger, resentment, and anguish. As with forgiving, accepting the limitations of our existence is difficult, but it is a path to freeing ourselves from anguish and for attaining narrative closure.

Many people bemoan human limitations, but they fail to recognize that without these limits, there would be no *transcending of limits*, and less opportunity for us to add meaning to life.[75] The moonwalk was meaningful, in

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[70] Metz (2009), pp. 192-194 and (2013), pp. 132-133, 137-138.
[71] Goetz (2012), p. 29.
[72] Buddhists advocate a similar approach for alleviating human suffering and dissatisfaction. They believe that this approach of extinguishing desires can lead to nirvana. Collins (2010, p. 121) argues that nirvana "brings closure to individual lives in a master-text that itself can have no final ending."
[73] Trisel (2002) and (2004).
[74] Seachris (2011), p. 157.
[75] There has recently been some debate, from a secular perspective, about whether evil is sometimes necessary to enable or produce good. Tabensky (2009, p. 58), who is a proponent of this idea, makes a similar point to the one I make when he argues that to overcome an obstacle, it is first necessary to have an obstacle in place.

large part, because it was difficult and involved transcending a limit. If we had been born with the capability to jump to the moon, we could walk on the moon whenever we wanted, but doing so would not be a meaning-enhancing achievement.

To give a second example, if human beings were all-knowing, instead of having limited knowledge, where would that leave scientists who thrive on making discoveries and acquiring knowledge? Albert Einstein, for example, led a meaningful life by making important discoveries. What would his life have been like if there was nothing left to discover?

When we scrutinize our ideals, they frequently turn out to be less ideal than we first imagined. For example, in commenting on the ideal of Heaven, Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang write: "Scientific, philosophical, and theological skepticism has nullified the modern heaven and replaced it with teachings that are minimalist, meager, and dry."[76] The insight that comes from scrutinizing our ideals helps pave the way for being able to relinquish unattainable desires. In recognizing that the ideal falls short of what was promised, it also fosters an appreciation for our imperfect lives.

Bertrand Russell, in the following well-known passage, imagined that humanity would end in the following way:

> [A]ll the labors of the ages . . . are destined to extinction . . . and . . . the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins . . . are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within . . . these truths, only in the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.[77]

In this passage, Russell mentions that human beings made some achievements, but there is no culminating achievement, such as one where we discover how life originated. Such an achievement would further enhance the meaning of life. Even if we imagine that human beings did make such an achievement, Russell's envisioned ending is still missing something important, that of attaining narrative closure. Consequently, the ending is not as meaningful or satisfying as it could be. The conflicts that humanity struggled with from the

[76] McDannell and Lang (1988), p. 352.
[77] Russell (2000), p. 72.

beginning remain unresolved at the end. It is my hope for humanity that our ending will be as follows.

> Human beings overcame many obstacles and persisted for a long time before perishing through no fault of their own. They made many great achievements, including discovering how life originated and formulating a "Theory of Everything." They knew that their works would be lost when humanity became extinct, but this did not matter because these works were created to benefit human beings and they had served their purpose. From the beginning, human beings struggled with their finitude and other limitations, but using their rationality, they eventually came to appreciate and accept these limitations.

Such an ending to humanity is one that would be worthy of pride.[78] The "last word" with this ending is not death and complete dissolution. Rather, the last word is our *acceptance* of our finitude and other limitations. It would be extremely difficult *for any species* to overcome a situation in which they were born into a world in which some of their "deepest desires" were unrealizable. If, as envisioned in the above ending, human beings are able to resolve these challenging conflicts, this also could be thought of as a type of culminating achievement. By learning from our past struggles, and using our rationality to come to terms with our finitude and other limitations, it would provide narrative closure and enhance the meaning of human life.

7. Concluding Remarks

Conceiving of naturalism in a narrative way prompts us to think about what would make for a good ending to humanity, which, in turn, prompts us to think about what matters in life and how we should live our lives in order to achieve a meaningful ending. Although it is inevitable that humanity will end, it is not inevitable that we will end badly. Humanity could end in a good and meaningful way, as I have attempted to demonstrate.

[78] I am not suggesting that this is the only ending that would add meaning to human life. There might be alternative endings that would do the same. Despite whether everyone agrees that a particular ending would be meaningful, it could still be meaningful. Under a pure objective theory of meaning, if something is meaningful, then it is meaningful regardless of what we think or feel about it.

I have assumed, as Seachris has argued, that naturalism is a meta-narrative. If naturalism is not a meta-narrative, then it probably would not make sense to talk about humanity as having a "good" or "bad" ending. Nonetheless, humanity could be meaningful regardless of whether naturalism is a meta-narrative. It is doubtful that there is a "meaning of life," in the sense that humanity was created for a purpose by a deity,[79] but humanity could become meaningful in a different way: from the moral, intellectual, and artistic efforts and achievements of its *individual members.*

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[79] In Trisel (2012a), I argue that divine silence is evidence that human life was not created as a means to fulfilling a purpose of God.

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