The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy's "Primary" Question

Abstract: Even if the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is coherent, the fact remains that it is vague. Its vagueness largely centers on the use of the term "meaning." The most prevalent strategy for addressing this vagueness is to discard the word "meaning" and reformulate the question entirely into questions such as, "What is the purpose of life?" or "What makes life valuable?" among others. I think this approach has some philosophical merit but does not account for the intuitions and sub-questions driving the original question as plausibly as does an interpretation that I call the *narrative interpretation*. I will argue that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" should be understood as the request for a narrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings.

I. Introduction

The question, "What is the meaning of life?" is arguably the most important that can be asked, but a substantial problem remains: what does the question mean? Unfortunately, it is vague, and much of this vagueness surrounds the word "meaning." A few strategies exist for addressing this vagueness. One option is to retain the word "meaning" and secure a usage for it that applies to non-linguistic phenomena, given that in asking the question, we are not asking for the *semantic* meaning of the word "life."[1] Another is to discard the word "meaning" and reformulate the question entirely. This is the most common approach, whereby the question is morphed into a cluster of other questions, such as, "What is the purpose of life?" or "What makes life valuable?" among others. Following R. W. Hepburn, I will term this approach the *amalgam thesis*.

[1] For example, we can speak of the meaning of a gesture or of a transaction. In these instances, we would be referring to "the point or purpose or end of a act or set of acts." R. W. Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 262. Additionally, the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" is plausibly employed in contexts involving natural signs, or what Fred Dretske has referred to as "indication" or "indicator meaning." *Explaining Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 54ff. One flouts no semantic norms in saying that the presence of radiant leaves *means* that winter is on its way or that the presence of rain clouds *means* rain is coming.

In this paper I take the road less traveled and adopt the first approach, arguing that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" should be interpreted as the request for a narrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings. I will call this the *narrative interpretation*. First, I will briefly introduce and explain the main interpretive rival to the narrative interpretation—the amalgam thesis. Second, I will note hints of the narrative interpretation in the literature, and show how they need to be augmented given that no author, to my knowledge, provides a detailed analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions of what constitutes the narrative interpretation or something similar. Third, I will explain and nuance the narrative interpretation. Fourth, I will note some significant philosophical advantages of this interpretation over the amalgam thesis. Finally, I will offer a brief word on the philosophical pay-off of my interpretation within the context of the longstanding dialectic between naturalism and theism.

II. Interpreting the Question: The Amalgam Thesis

It is hard to deny that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" suffers from some measure of vagueness. Of the two options noted in the introduction for addressing this vagueness, the most common is the amalgam thesis. Roughly, the amalgam thesis entails that the original question, framed in terms of *meaning*, is a largely ill-conceived place-holder for a cluster of related requests. R. W. Hepburn notes:

> According to the interpretations being now worked out, questions about the meaning of life are, very often, conceptually obscure and confused. They are amalgams of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither. A life is not a statement, and cannot therefore have linguistic contexts.[2]

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

Hepburn is not alone in this claim. In his recent popular level book on the topic of life's meaning, Julian Baggini also affirms the amalgam thesis:

> The problem is that it [the meaning of life question] is vague, general and unclear. It is not so much a single question but a place-holder for a whole set of questions: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Is it enough just to be happy? Is my life serving some greater purpose? Are we here to help others or just ourselves?[3]

Finally, like Hepburn and Baggini, Thaddeus Metz notes the salience of the amalgam thesis in the contemporary discussion: ". . . the field has found it difficult to reduce this question to a single basic idea. For instance, I have argued that this question is associated with a variety of closely related but not entirely overlapping questions . . . which exhibit family resemblances."[4]

One way of understanding the amalgam thesis is to view it as making the question of life's meaning little more than a disjunctive question: *"'What is the purpose of life'? or 'What makes life valuable'? or 'What makes life worthwhile'? or x?"* On amalgam thesis premises, then, in asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" we ought to see ourselves as asking *either* a question about purpose or value or worth or something else.[5] There is something right about this. Indeed, when you ask both non-philosophers and philosophers what they take the question to mean, you will likely hear it explicated in

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

[4] Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007): 211. Metz's additional work on the topic of life's meaning can be found in "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (April 2001): 137-53; "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 781-814; and "Critical Notice: Baier and Cottingham on the Meaning of Life," *Disputatio* 19 (2005): 251-64.

[5] The primary problem with this though is that these questions are more explicitly about purpose and value and worth rather than the meaning of life. Indeed, though the meaning of life is partly about these constructs, it is conceptually distinct as I will argue. I will address this concern further in the section of this paper titled: "**The Superiority of the Narrative Interpretation Over the Amalgam Thesis**."

terms value, worth, significance, or, most likely, purpose.[6] Due to the dominance of the amalgam thesis as an interpretive strategy and its arguable philosophical merit, most contemporary philosophical treatments of the question consider it in one of its reformulated versions like, "What makes life valuable?" "What makes life significant?" "What is the purpose of life?" "Does *my* life achieve some good purpose?" or "What makes life worth living?" among others.[7] So, there exist at least two interpretive levels for understanding the question of life's meaning on the amalgam thesis, one tracking something like the question's formal properties, the other tracking the subsequent questions' material content. In other words, the amalgam thesis posits that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is really just a disjunctive question (formal property) within which questions about purpose, value, worth, and significance (material property) are implicitly embedded.

III. The Narrative Interpretation: Hints in the Literature

There are only hints of a proposal akin to the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life question in the current philosophical literature. This is telling, as it indicates that some philosophers working on the topic are minimally aware that the desire for global or all-inclusive explanation or narrative through which to view and live life

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

[7] Thaddeus Metz stipulates several conditions that a theory must meet, in the form of questions it must address, in order to be a theory about the meaning of life, ". . .what should an agent strive for besides obtaining happiness and fulfilling obligations? Which aspects of a human life are worthy of great esteem or admiration? In what respect should a rational being connect with value beyond the animal self? And, from Charles Taylor (1989, chap. 1), the following could be added: which goods command our awe? How many an individual identify with something incomparably higher? What is worthy of our love and allegiance?" "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," 802-03. Karl Britton parses the question as follows, "The question (What is the meaning of life?) is put in many different ways. What is the meaning *of it all*? What is the meaning of *everything*? What is it all in aid of? Why is there anything at all and why just what there is and not something quite different?" *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, 1-2. Cf. Milton K. Munitz, *Does Life Have a Meaning?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 14-19.

partly motivates the question. However, such proposals have been given little to no sustained attention in the contemporary discussion. While most philosophers discussing the issue situate their arguments within the dialectical parameters of the amalgam thesis, there is some precedent for my narrative proposal in the meaning of life literature as seen in the following suggestions.

For example, Garrett Thomson thinks that one might interpret the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as follows:

> The idea to be examined now is that *to know the meaning of life is to know a true metaphysical narrative about the human life in general that somehow makes sense of our lives*. . . . In this sense, the meaning of life is a worldview or metaphysical view that shows the significance of our lives [emphasis added].[8]

Thomson's interpretive suggestion shares strong affinities to the narrative interpretation I propose in this paper. However, his narrative-like proposal receives only a seven page chapter in his book, *On the Meaning of Life*, and this discussion centers exclusively on the thought of Heidegger. Furthermore, he does not narrow the scope of this "true metaphysical narrative" as I do in this paper. I will argue that such narrowing is crucial in order for the resulting narrative to be *about* the meaning of life as opposed to about some other topic.

In addition to Thomson, John Cottingham, most well-known for his work in early modern philosophy and especially Descartes, hints at the narrative approach in the opening of his book, *On the Meaning of Life*:

> What are we really asking when we ask about the meaning of life? Partly, it seems, we are asking about *our relationship with the rest of the universe* – who we are and how we came to be here. . . . The religious answer – one of several responses to the problem of life's meaning to be examined in the pages that

[8] Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (South Melbourne, Australia: Thomson, 2003), 132-33.

> follow – aims to *locate our lives in a context* that will provide them with significance and value [emphasis added].[9]

Like Thomson's, Cottingham's proposal shares close affinities with my own, as he connects the human desire for significance and value to a larger narrative or context that will ground these desiderata. Whereas the current popular interpretations of the question often focus exclusively on such human desires, Cottingham introduces the construct of a deeper context through which to secure them, and associates this larger context with the meaning of life. While similar to my proposal, Cottingham does not draw from narrative theory in order to explain what such an interpretation involves.

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

> . . . when we ask, "What is the meaning of all things?" we are not asking a senseless question. In this case, of course, we have not witnessed the whole play, we have only an idea in outline of what went before and what will come after that small part of history which we witness. . . . with the words, "What is the meaning of it all?" we are trying to find the order in the drama of Time.[10]

Noteworthy, is Wisdom's use of narrative concepts in order to frame questions about life's meaning. In this short, four page excerpt, originally found in his *Paradox and Discovery*, Wisdom does not, however, explicate precisely what it means for the meaning of life to be about finding the order in the drama of Time. Again, there are some salient similarities between my proposal and Wisdom's, but my interpretation moves beyond his in terms of specificity. I agree that finding the meaning of life may be partly connected

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

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

with discovering the "order in the drama of Time," but one will have to be clearer about precisely what this means.

Finally, Julian Young in his recent book, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, offers the closest account to the narrative interpretation that I have uncovered in the meaning of life literature. In the introduction to his book, Young notes that talk of "the meaning of life" is noticeably absent from most of Western history primarily because people believed they were already in possession of *something* that made asking the question superfluous. This something Young calls the "true world," which is another aspect of reality over and above the temporality and physicality of the material world, and often identified with God, the transcendent, or the spiritual.[11] Of this true world, he notes:

> Since journeys have a beginning, a middle and an end, a true-world account of the proper course of our lives is a kind of story, a narrative. And since true-world narratives (that, for example, of Christianity) are global rather than individual, since they narrate not just your life or mine, but rather all lives at all times and places, they are, as I shall call them, 'grand' narratives.[12]

In the remainder of the book, Young examines various true-world narratives followed by a consideration of responses to the threat of nihilism that ensued once such narratives lost some or even much of their traction in the modern Western world. Whereas Young makes notions like transcendence a requirement on a true world narrative, I do not. My interpretation merely requires a narrative that narrates across some existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions to which I will focus

[11] Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1. I think Young's sharp distinction between material existence on the one hand, and the transcendent, spiritual realm on the other fails to understand central Christian doctrines (which are part of a putative "true world narrative") in the realms of creation, anthropology, and especially soteriology and eschatology.

[12] Ibid.

more detailed attention later in the paper. But Young is certainly correct in his implied claim that many people will be existentially and even rationally satisfied only with a certain kind of narrative, one that has "religious" elements at its core. The trajectory of his discussion, however, is not so much with the nature of a meaning of life narrative and how the concepts of narrative and the meaning of life connect, as it is with the rise and fall of such narratives that once made asking the question of life's meaning unnecessary.

From the preceding examples, it is clear that narrative-like proposals are embryonically present in the meaning of life literature. I have offered four such instances. What is lacking, though, is a sustained interpretive account that answers the following questions: (i) What does it mean for the meaning of life *to be* a narrative (in the *analytic* sense)? (ii) Related, what does a meaning of life narrative need to narrate? (iii) Related, what conditions need to be met in order for some narrative *x* to be *the* meaning of life narrative? (iv) How and why does the narrative interpretation most plausibly account for the original linguistic formulation of the question? (i.e., "What is the meaning of life?") (v) How and why does the narrative interpretation best account for the cluster of intuitions and sub-questions from which the original formulation arises? and (vi) How might we assess the situation of there being multiple competing meaning of life narratives? No discussion that I have found provides a sustained and substantive discussion of these questions, organized around a single interpretive construct.

IV. The Meaning of Life as Narrative

We humans want to explain things. Part of this explanatory project includes placing the states of affairs we encounter, questions accompanying these states of affairs, and our very lives, within a larger explanatory context. We are driven to search for the

widest or deepest context in order to secure a vantage point from which to assess and live life. Inquiring into the meaning of life is closely connected to this pursuit.

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

> We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives. And we start doing so almost from the moment we begin putting words together. As soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is a good chance we are engaged in narrative discourse. . . . Given the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as *the* distinctive human trait. . . . The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a "deep structure," a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar (according to some linguists) is something we are born with.[13]

We should expect, then, that our often narratively infused way of participating in the world connects with our deep desire to know *what it all means*. In the rest of this section, I will attempt to elucidate this connection. It will be helpful first to briefly introduce those aspects of narrative theory that are relevant to my thesis. I will not engage in the literary debate over the precise necessary and sufficient conditions of narrative. Rather, I am

[13] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1, 3. For work on the claim that narrativity is genetically hard-wired into our brains as a "deep structure," see Kay Young and Jeffrey Shaver, "The Neurology of Narrative," *Substance* 94/95 (March 2001): 72-84.

selecting conceptual resources from narrative theory in order to apply them to the question of life's meaning.

IV.a. Borrowing from Narrative Theory

Narrative theorists have found it exceedingly difficult to agree on a precise set of necessary and sufficient conditions distinguishing narrative from other forms of discourse. In spite of this, there has been something of a "narrative turn in the humanities" as well as in law and science among other disciplines.[14] This narrative turn has invited uses of the concept that many fear will result in it losing its meaning. To some, the so-called "narrative turn" signals, among other things, that narrative is a fluid concept, such that explanations or theories can be called narratives, or at least narrative-like. Interestingly, the narrative theorist, Peter Brooks, thinks that narrative's growing ubiquity across academic disciplines signals a deep propensity in human beings:

> While I think the term has been trivialized through overuse, I believe the overuse responds to a recognition that narrative is one of the principal ways we organize our experience of the world – a part of our cognitive tool kit that was long neglected by psychologists and philosophers.[15]

The widespread employment of narrative, much of which drifts outside the conceptual parameters of narrative *proper*, invites a distinction between *paradigmatic* and *non-paradigmatic* uses of narrative.

That narrative can be thought of both paradigmatically and non-paradigmatically is a product of the fact that the category exhibits *gradience*. Referencing the work of

---

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

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

cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Eleanor Rosch,[16] David Herman notes that some of the categories with which we understand the world are gradient.[17] That is, they are *more-or-less* as opposed to *either-or*. There will be paradigm cases of a given category along with cases that do not clearly fit into the category. Certain categories can exhibit *membership gradience*. So, for example, a Wren is more paradigmatically an example of a member of the category of birds, whereas an Ostrich is less so, even though it still belongs to the category in some sense. *Category gradience* is an additional kind of gradience. Take, for instance, the categories "heavy rock" and "light rock": where precisely is the line of demarcation between these categories? The fact is simply that such a line cannot be drawn. Narrative is a kind of discourse to which these gradient distinctions apply. Therefore, a given instance of discourse can be more or less a central instance of the category of narrative, and less central instances will have elements that allow them to be partially merged into other categories of discourse (e.g., lists, descriptions, arguments, etc.). On other non-paradigmatic uses, "narrative" might be dissolved into "experience," "interpretation," "explanation," or even "content."[18] A non-paradigmatic employment of narrative allows, for example, a text on evolution or the Big Bang to count as narrative, as well as other forms of discourse.

My thesis may be consistent with a paradigmatic use of narrative, but it is not critical that I establish this. A non-paradigmatic use where narrative tracks *explanation* is likely sufficient, but with the caveat that this explanation is framed and understood with

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

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

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

the help of a few important narrative concepts. I employ certain aspects of narrative theory, as well as the very concept itself, for two reasons: (i) employing the concept of narrative to the question of the very meaning of life is both natural and plausible, *a la* Abbott, Brooks, and others, given that our project of making sense of the world (in various spheres) is largely carried out narratively, and (ii) there are aspects of narrative theory apropos to discussions of the meaning of life, two of which are the distinction between a narrative's *constituent* and *supplementary* elements and the evaluative significance of narrative ending for broadly normative appraisals of narratives as a whole. I will consider them in that order.

A narrative's *constituent elements* are those that cannot be altered without also altering the identity of the narrative.[19] *Supplementary narrative elements*, on the other hand, are not necessary to the narrative being what it is.[20] What is it about constituent elements, as opposed to supplementary elements, that confers upon them their central role in a narrative, thus making it *the* narrative it is? The answer lies in their moral, aesthetic, emotional, and hermeneutical priority. Of constituent elements, H. Porter Abbott notes, "Naturally, a great deal of the energy, moral significance and revelatory power of a story are released during its constituent events."[21] So, for example, in *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean's act of robbing his gracious hosts at the beginning of the narrative and

[19] These narrative elements are analogues to essential properties as contrasted with accidental properties.

[20] Like accidental properties, supplementary elements can be lost without the narrative becoming a *different* narrative. Many narrative theorists, then, have simply stipulated that certain components of the narrative are essential to it being the narrative it is, whereas others are not. This, of course, begs the question against those with super-essentialist proclivities. I think, however, that the constituent/supplementary distinction is intuitively plausible, and my modest employment of the distinction does not require entering this debate. Furthermore, both super-essentialism and vagueness (a problem noted earlier) are complex philosophical issues in their own right, and to require the constituent/supplementary distinction to first have to come to terms with these issues seems unwarranted, especially on the issue of vagueness, as it lurks in more philosophical corners than this one.

[21] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 21.

subsequent "pardon" are constituent events that possess great revelatory power in the unfolding of the narrative. That he stole *silverware*, while revelatory, does not possess the literary profundity that the fact *that he stole* does. His act of stealing and subsequent pardon centrally factor into the thematic currents of revenge, forgiveness, and redemption that infuse the narrative. That he stole silverware does not.

A second important idea from narrative theory here is that the *ending* of a narrative, or the presence of *closure*, is especially important to broadly normative appraisals of the narrative *as a whole*.[22] A narrative's ending frequently possesses a proleptic power over the *entire* narrative. Indeed, it is thought that the way a narrative ends is often the most salient motivator in eliciting a wide range of *broadly normative* human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole. For, as J. David Velleman notes:

> *. . . the conclusory emotion in a narrative cadence embodies not just how the audience feels about the ending; it embodies how the audience feels, at the ending, about the whole story.* Having passed through emotional ups and downs of the story, as one event succeeded another, the audience comes to rest in a stable attitude about the series of events in its entirety [emphasis added].[23]

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

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

[23] J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review*, 112 (January 2003), 19.

grief felt at a tragic ending is the final word, and expect that one's emotional stance toward any specific event within the narrative will not now be affected, *in some sense*, by the ending of the narrative. The ending relevantly frames the entire story.

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

IV.b. A Non-Linguistic Referent for the Locution, "What is the meaning of x?"

It is quite plausible to think of the question, "What is the meaning of *x*?" as the request for something very much like a narrative. We quite naturally and legitimately, even if loosely, invoke the above request in situations where *x* is some fact, event, or phenomenon we encounter and about which we want to know, in the words of N. T. Wright, the fact's or event's or phenomenon's ". . . implication in the wider world within which this notion [or fact, event, or phenomenon] makes the sense it makes."[24] This "wider world" Wright considers to be a worldview or metanarrative or some similar concept.

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

Wright's claim resides within his discussion of how one comes to understand the *Easter Event* (that is, the putative bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazerath). For example, a well-educated Roman soldier who comes to learn of the event may *contextualize* it, and therefore "fix" its meaning, through the myth of *Nero redivivus*, the idea that Nero had come back to life in order to return to Rome in all his glory.[25] The event *means* something different for him than for, say, Saul of Tarsus. The wider worldview framework or metanarrative (or even simply a more localized narrative which is, itself, part of a larger worldview framework or metanarrative) will play a significant hermeneutical role, then, in 'discovering'[26] what any given fact, event, or phenomenon *means*. Discovering this meaning will be a product of asking and answering questions like, "What larger narrative(s) does the sentence [intended to refer to a fact, event, or phenomenon] belong in? What worldviews do such narratives embody and reinforce? What are the universes of discourse within which this sentence, and the event it refers to, settle down and make themselves at home – and which, at the same time, they challenge and reshape from within?"[27] Wright's discussion of this usage of "meaning" is instructive and is primarily how I think the word should be understood as functioning in the locution, "What is the meaning of *x*?" when such question is asked about the meaning of life.

IV.c. The Narrative Interpretation: An Analogy

The question, "What is the meaning of life?" is analogous to the question asked in the following scenario. Consider the case of a father who has left his two young children

[25] Ibid., 720.

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

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

to play while he finishes some chores around the house. After a few minutes he hears screaming and yelling: a scuffle has broken out. He heads to the playroom and finds his children kicking and scratching each other. He raises his voice and demands, "What is the *meaning* of this?" What does the father request in asking this question? The short answer is that he desires an *explanation* as an interpretive framework through which to view the event he is observing—his children scuffling. This explanation will likely include, among other things, information about how the scuffle started. He will need access to such information if he is to make fuller sense out of the facts before him. From these additional details, a *narrative* can be constructed, helping him to understand the scuffle he has witnessed. So in asking for the *meaning* of the situation, he is in search of the *story* of his children's scuffle, indeed an accurate story more robust than a mere description of kicking and scratching. Importantly, the accurate story *is* the *meaning* the father seeks. While it is natural to ask for the meaning of stories in other contexts, in this case the meaning the father seeks is just the story itself.[28]

Asking, "What is the *meaning* of life?" is analogous to the father asking, "What is the *meaning* of this [scuffle]?" Over the course of our existence, we encounter phenomena that give rise to questions for which we seek an explanation or larger context or *narrative*. In this sense, the existentially relevant constituents of the universe with which we are readily familiar and toward which we direct our existentially focused gaze are akin to the scuffle the father witnessed. And like the father's desire to make sense of what he observes, we too seek to make sense of what we encounter in the world and those

[28] Because of my loose employment of narrative, I sometimes interchange "story" and "narrative." Technically, stories are distinct from narratives in that the latter are what *represent* the former. In this case, narratives could *mis*-represent the stories they narrate. If one were to press me here, I might simply say that the meaning of life is a *story* rather than a narrative.

accompanying questions motivated by deep human longings for, among others, value, purpose, and significance. We need a framework through which to interpret the existentially weighty aspects of existence. Like the father, we lack important parts of the story, at least for a season, and we desire to fill the existentially relevant informational gaps in our understanding of the universe we inhabit.

IV.d. Nuancing the Narrative Interpretation

This analogy, while helpful, generates additional questions. Therefore, it is necessary to further nuance what I mean by the "meaning of life" narrative. The "meaning of life" narrative is *not* to be identified with a complete elucidation of all facts, just as the narrative the father seeks need not, for example, include a precise and exhaustive chronological sequence of events leading up to the scuffle. Rather, the narrative need only cross some explanatory threshold consisting of those areas of greatest existential import to humans. So, there are two sorts of narrative here: (i) Life Narrative$_C$ (where 'C' stands for complete) and (ii) Life Narrative$_{ER}$ (where 'ER' stands for existentially relevant). The first narrates every fact of the world, whereas the second only narrates across some existentially relevant threshold in relation to human beings, those who ask the question in the first place. The meaning of life should not be identified with Life Narrative$_C$, but rather with Life Narrative$_{ER}$. There are certain facts that we possess (which elicit accompanying questions) imbedded within what would be captured in Life Narrative$_C$ that we, given our existentially involved human gaze, consider of special importance and in need of further elucidation. A narrative that narrates across these elements constitutes a meaning of life narrative.

The claim that Life Narrative$_{ER}$ is what is being sought in inquiring into the meaning of life is supported by the constituent/supplementary elements distinction in narrative theory. Of Life Narrative$_{C}$, we consider some components to have greater existential weight than others. Notice that I am emphasizing the *importance* function of constituent elements rather than their *identity* function. So, for example, we would not be inclined to count the fact that I awoke at 7:25 a.m. Central Standard Time on July 25, 2009, as a constituent element of Life Narrative$_{C}$, *in terms of existential importance*, because it would not seem to fundamentally alter the narrative *in an existentially relevant way* if I awoke at 7:26 instead of 7:25.[29] Similarly, the father in the above analogy would not be interested in the precise velocities of his children's kicks and punches, as they are irrelevant to the kind of *meaning* he seeks. Other narrative elements, though, carry more gravity than my time of waking. Here, compare theistic and naturalistic narratives. On naturalism, claims like there is no supernatural realm and that death renders us forever out of consciousness appear to be constitutive elements of the naturalistic narrative. Conversely, traditional theistic claims like mind and intentionality ultimately preceding matter ontologically, divine purpose in creation, some form of redemptive plan, and postmortem survival are constitutive elements in these narratives, functioning centrally like their constitutive counterparts in naturalistic narratives.

When referring to the meaning of life as a narrative, then, we ought to think in terms of securing the *constituent elements* (qua existential relevance) of Life Narrative$_{C}$ as opposed to the entire narrative. These constituent elements will track Life Narrative$_{ER}$, in view of a constituent element's importance function rather than its identity function.

[29] Unless, of course, by waking up at 7:26 a series of events is set in motion that culminates in something of great existential importance. In this case, though, my time of waking becomes only *instrumentally* important and in relation to something constitutive of the narrative, but not important *qua* time of waking.

This emphasis shifts them into an additional narrative context, that of Life Narrative$_{ER}$. This move admittedly requires employment of the constituent/supplementary narrative elements distinction loosely, for, by definition, every element of Life Narrative$_{C}$ will be constitutive precisely because this narrative is the comprehensive narrative of reality. This, of course, requires the omission of *no* element. However, we humans select certain elements as important because of our existentially involved perspective in which we direct attention to features of existence I will elucidate below. Therefore, Life Narrative$_{ER}$ becomes a narrative subset of Life Narrative$_{C}$ that narrates across the existentially relevant constituent elements of the latter narrative.

Another layer of conceptual detail needs to be added here to the discussion of Life Narrative$_{ER}$. One must further distinguish between two kinds of constituent elements: (i) Existentially Relevant Constituent Elements$_{P}$ (where "P" stands for *possessed*), and (ii) Existentially Relevant Constituent Elements$_{S}$ (where "S" stands for *sought*).[30] If we identify the meaning of life with a narrative of life that crosses some existentially relevant threshold, then merely possessing Constituent Elements$_{P}$ could not constitute the meaning of life, even though, in this case, we are in possession of existentially relevant elements of Life Narrative$_{ER}$. The reason is that these are the very narrative elements for which we are seeking a deeper context or narrative explanation. These are the existentially relevant portions of Life Narrative$_{ER}$ that we already possess, and the question of life's meaning is asked precisely because we think these elements stand in need of elucidation. So, Constituent Elements$_{S}$ are the narrative elements we seek, and

[30] Hereafter, I will use the shorter "Constituent Elements$_{P}$" and "Constituent Elements$_{S}$" for "Existentially Relevant Constituent Elements$_{P}$" and "Existentially Relevant Constituent Elements$_{S}$" respectively. It was important to initially highlight that I am referring to "existentially relevant" constituent elements in light of the fact that, technically, all elements in Life Narrative$_{C}$ are constituent. As noted, though, I am emphasizing certain elements as constituent elements in terms of their existential relevance.

the ones that should primarily be identified with the meaning of life narrative. They compose the deepest context from which to view the other constituent elements of life, Constituent Elements$_P$. We need them in order to understand the ones we already have, which, for a season at least, we do not understand, but that we desperately think we need to understand in order to satisfactorily navigate through life.

The narrative identified with the meaning of life, then, will track Constituent Elements$_S$. These narrative elements directly address the cluster of existentially relevant facts and accompanying questions that most often surface in the context of discussions over the meaning of life. What might some of these be? In other words, how much does the meaning of life narrative, Life Narrative$_{ER}$, need to narrate in order to be *the meaning of life narrative* and not some other narrative? To answer this question, we must first populate the category of Constituent Elements$_P$. Once this is done, we will *ipso facto* know what stands in need of narration and thus have in hand the *formal* properties of the meaning of life narrative (i.e., "That narrative which *narrates* across *x*, *y*, and *z* elements composing Constituent Elements$_P$."), Constituent Elements$_S$, even if not the narrative's material content.

I propose the following as more or less composing Constituent Elements$_P$:

[1] *Fact*—something exists, we [humans] exist, and I exist / *Question*—Why does anything or we or I exist at all?

[2] *Question*—Does life have any purpose(s), and if so, what is its nature and source?

[3] *Fact*—we are often passionately engaged in life pursuits and projects that we deem, pre-philosophically, to be valuable and worthwhile / *Question*—Does the worth and value of these pursuits and projects need *grounding* in something else, and if so, what?

[4] *Fact*—pain and suffering are part of the universe / *Question*—Why?[31]

[5] *Question*—How does it all end? Is death final? Is there an eschatological remedy to the ills of this world?

[1] – [5] constitute the cluster of considerations that track discussions of life's meaning, even though reasonable debate will exist about the details. Admittedly, there is a sense in which, for example, considerations [2] and [3] perhaps link more directly to the topic, but surely the question of life's meaning has not thereby been exhausted in discussions where only [2] and/or [3] are considered. [1], which is related especially to [2] but not conceptually identical, is also often connected to questions of life's meaning.[32] I am happy to concede that [1], [2], and [3] are more closely aligned with the meaning of life question than [4] or [5]. This may or may not be true. However, [4] and [5] loom large, especially when death is connected to futility and one considers the threat this may bring to securing a meaningful existence.

So, considerations [1] – [5] constitute more or less Constituent Elements$_P$. They are constituent elements *of life* because they are the existentially salient parts of existence, *as recognized by humans*, with which we are in immediate and undeniable contact, the parts that motivate us to inquire into life's meaning. They are that which stands in need of elucidation, of narration. Therefore, when we ask about life's meaning, we should view ourselves as seeking the elements that narrate across the ones we already possess. Those that fulfill this function, I have termed Constituent Elements$_S$. These elements constitute the meaning of life *proper*, which is narration across the cluster of

[31] I have in mind here, roughly, the problem of evil, not only in its philosophical instantiation, but also its profoundly emotional and existential dimensions.

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

phenomena and questions constituting Constituent Elements$_P$. The connection between these two kinds of constituent elements is that Constituent Elements$_S$ provide context, framework, and answers to the cluster of facts and accompanying questions constituting Constituent Elements$_P$. The narrative consisting of them is the narrative of life's meaning precisely because it addresses and answers the cluster of issues and questions arising in contexts that initially motivate the question.[33]

Having in hand the formal properties of the meaning of life narrative invites questions and requires one final important distinction. It is the distinction between what I call *Candidate Meaning of life Narratives* and *The Meaning of Life*. Any narrative that meets the formal condition (i.e., it narrates across the right stuff) qualifies as a candidate meaning of life narrative. Candidate meaning of life narratives cannot be narratives about how many shoes have been made in the history of the world, how many books have been read, or how many persons have had blonde hair. For that matter, such a narrative cannot even be *merely* the narrative explaining why pain and suffering are features of the world, although this lands closer to the formal mark. Rather, it must consist of the proper constituent elements, Constituent Elements$_S$, and narrate across the relevant existential threshold created by the cluster of phenomena and accompanying questions constituting

[33] My interpretation of what the question, "What is the meaning of life?" asks is especially close to the concept of a *metanarrative*, perhaps even identical. Indeed, a metanarrative, or something very similar, is what we should view ourselves as seeking when asking the question. Metanarratives or grand narratives have been defined as, ". . . 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. They are comprehensive in scope, and are, in the words of New Testament Scholar, N. T. Wright, ". . . *normative*: that is, they claim to make sense of the whole of reality." *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 41. Such grand stories provide the narrative lens through which we view everything else. And these metanarratives are primarily concerned with the cluster of issues I linked to the meaning of life earlier—origins, purpose, value, evil, pain, and suffering, and ending.

the human condition, and generally associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with the meaning of life.

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

> (CdML$_N$) = A candidate meaning of life narrative (a Life Narrative$_{ER}$) is one that narrates across some existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions largely captured by the category of Existentially Relevant Constituent Elements$_P$ by adding Existentially Relevant Constituent Elements$_S$, the contextual narrative framework through which Constituent Elements$_P$ are understood and appraised.

There will, of course, be multiple narratives that meet the conditions of this definition. Of any candidate meaning of life narrative, however, a second condition must be met, a truth condition. Only the candidate meaning of life narrative that is true can be *the* meaning of life.

My interpretation, tracking the original question's employment of the definite article,[34] presupposes that there can be only one narrative that is *the* meaning of life.[35]

---

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

[35] Note that I am not arguing that this prohibits a person from leading a *meaningful* life, in some sense, if she is not in contact with *the* meaning of life narrative. This is partly because I think one can and should distinguish between two conceptually distinct yet related questions: (i) "What is the meaning of life?" and (ii) "What makes a life meaningful?" Sorting through the connection between these is another philosophical project though. Here, I will simply note that 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 meaning of life narrative will have the correct formal properties, as delineated above, and material content that corresponds with reality. This should not be too controversial if we remember the case of the father. In order for the narrative the father sought to appropriately link to his request, it had to be *about* his children's scuffle (the right formal properties), and it had to be true (the right material content). If it fails to meet these conditions, it cannot be *the meaning* he sought.

Garrett Thomson remarks, with relatively little further consideration of the claim, that ". . . to know the meaning of life is to know a *true* metaphysical narrative about the human life in general that somehow makes sense of our lives . . ." [emphasis added].[36] Thomson's proposal is more or less what I have advocated, although it lacks the nuance and specificity of my interpretation. I agree, though, with Thomson's claim that the candidate narrative must be true to finally qualify as *the* meaning of life. A narrative that narrates across the appropriate elements of life, while relevant and deserving of candidate meaning of life narrative status, will nonetheless fail to be *the* meaning of life if it is false.

It is not uncommon in the philosophical literature to find criticisms of the formulation, "What is *the* meaning of life?" as begging the question because of its use of

---

the 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?"

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

the definite article.[37] It is argued that inclusion of the definite article presupposes that there is only a single meaning of life, and it is widely thought that this cannot be right. This criticism is perhaps accentuated when philosophers interpret the question in terms of value and purpose, as it then forces us to concede that there is only a single value or purpose in life, again, a conclusion that many find unnecessarily narrow and perhaps even an assault on human dignity. I submit, however, that this criticism reveals an equally questionable assumption on the part of those who advance it; namely, that to ask, "What is the meaning of life?" and "What makes a life meaningful?" involve synonymous requests. This assumption is suspect. The two questions obviously share much conceptual territory, but a case can be made that they carry differing connotations.[38] The above criticism has force *if* it is employed within the context of the second question, but not the first. Indeed, there certainly seems to be more than one way in which a life can be meaningful, as there are likely a rich variety of pursuits, activities, relationships, etc. that contribute to a meaningful life. But nothing for which I argue in this paper contradicts this eminently plausible claim.

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

> ($ThML_N$) = the meaning of life is the true narrative (Life $Narrative_{ER}$) that narrates across some existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena, events, and accompanying questions largely captured by the category of Existentially Relevant Constituent $Elements_P$ by adding Existentially Relevant Constituent $Elements_S$, the contextual narrative framework through which Constituent

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

[38] Cf. footnote 35.

Elements$_P$ are understood and appraised, *and where such elements (Constituent Elements$_S$) correspond to reality*.

One final point is worth noting here. On my interpretation of the question of life's meaning, an *analytic* relationship exists between the concept of narrative and that of the meaning of life. Though such relationship may seem *prima facie* implausible, I have provided significant argumentation that this kind of relationship is not only plausible but very natural. However, insofar as something like the amalgam thesis is also a plausible way of understanding the request imbedded in the question, understanding the question of life's meaning with the aid of narrative is compatible with affirming the amalgam thesis. One can do so by securing a place for narrative in relation to life's meaning that involves positing a *synthetic* rather than analytic relationship between the two concepts. Whether the relationship of narrative to life's meaning is construed analytically or synthetically, narrative belongs in discussions of the meaning of life.

V. The Superiority of the Narrative Interpretation Over the Amalgam Thesis

As noted earlier, many philosophers currently writing on the topic of the meaning of life operate within the broad parameters defined by the amalgam thesis, considering the question, "What is the meaning of life?" as largely ill-conceived and little more than a placeholder for a cluster of related requests. The amalgam thesis has philosophical merit. It accounts for a salient fact, namely, that the question *is* variously interpreted in terms of purpose, value, worth, significance, etc. In addition, it explains the vagueness present in the original question, even if only through linguistic reformulation. However, I think those who hold something like the amalgam thesis have surrendered too quickly. Indeed, the amalgam thesis implies that there is no philosophically respectable interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" that interprets it on its own linguistic terms

while also capturing the questions highlighted in each of the reformulated versions. It seems to me that this is mistaken. I have proposed a narrative interpretation that secures the following desiderata: (i) the original formulation of the question is interpreted *without* morphing it into another question(s),[39] and (ii) the interpretation is able to unify the questions enumerated by the amalgam thesis under a single concept, thus making them more explicitly *about* the meaning of life as opposed to, for example, value or purpose only. Related to its failure to satisfy these desiderata, the amalgam thesis suffers in three important areas.

First, contrary to what the amalgam thesis implies, use of the term "meaning" need not signal irredeemable confusion. Quite the contrary, it tracks a perfectly natural employment of the term that highlights the cluster of issues connected with the meaning of life. The question in its original form, then, is not ill-conceived as some have claimed. The reason people consistently employ "meaning" is because it connotes what people seek in asking the question, namely, a narrative that narrates across an existentially relevant threshold of life phenomena and questions, much like the narrative the father sought. An interpretation which retains the original question while making its request philosophically plausible is better, *ceteris paribus*, than those that do not. The narrative interpretation meets this condition, and provides a plausible reason for why so many people initially employ this form of the question as opposed to some reworked formulation. The problem with the reformulation project is that salient intuitions and sub-

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

questions latent in the original fail to be captured by any one reformulation. The narrative interpretation nicely secures a place for all of this under a single, unifying interpretation.

Second, there is something *global* or *all-inclusive* about the question of life's meaning for which the amalgam thesis fails to adequately account. Indeed, sometimes it is meant to be a question about everything. At minimum, however, it should be seen as a question whose scope is broader than simply about purpose or value or worth considered individually. To be sure, the reformulated questions posited by the amalgam thesis are existentially weighty and closely aligned with the meaning of life, but individually, they are only local and mere subsets of the meaning of life question. Milton Munitz correctly notes that the question of life's meaning is motivated by intuitions of ". . . relative depth or total scope."[40] None of the reformulated questions in terms of value or purpose captures this sweeping nature of the original question. In fact, the amalgam thesis would have us understand the question, "What is the meaning life?" as little more than the disjunctive question: *"'What is the purpose of life'? or 'What makes life valuable'? or 'What makes life worthwhile'? or x?"* The primary problem with this, though, is that these questions are about purpose and value and worth rather than about the meaning of life. We ought to look for ways to make them more directly about the meaning of life. The narrative interpretation functions in this capacity to *unify* all of them under a single interpretive construct, making each about some aspect of the meaning of life. This interpretation offers an explanatorily powerful, semantically faithful, and logically coherent way of understanding the question on its own terms that addresses everything

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

centrally and peripherally related to the topic of life's meaning under a single unifying construct that is then identified as *the* meaning of life.

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

VI. The Broader Philosophical Pay-off of the Narrative Interpretation

The narrative interpretation I have sketched brings with it further philosophical pay-off. It adds an additional paradigm to the ongoing dialectic between the various instantiations of naturalism and theism. More often than not, these competing metaphysical accounts of reality line up against one another on specific issues; this seems necessary and fruitful. However, the narrative interpretation of the meaning of life

question provides a new conceptual lens through which these competing systems can be compared as full-blown metaphysical narratives in terms of what each offers on the topic of life's meaning. This will involve each system explicating its category of Constituent Elements$_S$ with a view to the candidate meaning of life narrative that these respective metaphysical systems have to offer. Why is this significant?

Primarily, it provides further and perhaps even deeper motivation for directing our philosophical gaze towards extant problems largely discussed from other philosophical vantage points. So, for example, debates about reductionism will become just as much about the meaning of life as about ontology, and the dialectic between reductive naturalists, non-reductive naturalists, and theists will take on new significance. The question of whether normative properties can be reduced to physical properties then becomes critical as we compare competing meaning of life candidate narratives. This will crystallize differences even within the naturalist camp, pitting non-reductive forms of naturalism against reductive forms.[41]

Similarly the problem of evil will be as much about the meaning of life as it is a sub-question within philosophy of religion. No doubt, the presence of evil is one of those Constituent Elements$_P$ for which we seek a narrative in which to contextualize it. Turning our attention to the problem of evil in this way more clearly highlights the multi-faceted dimensions of the problem often only latent or entirely absent in much of the philosophical dialectic. One thinks here of the *eschatological* dimension of theodicy. Bringing future-oriented considerations of pain and suffering into the philosophical discussion will naturally link to perennial meaning of life topics like death and futility. It

[41] On this topic, see the recent volume edited by Mario de Caro and David Macarthur, *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

will also motivate more vigorous research and debate over whether the inherent human desire for a felicitous ending to life's narrative, including post-mortem survival, is mere wishful thinking or a cousin to our desire for water, and thus, a truly natural desire that points to a referent capable of fulfilling it. Might some sort of cosmic hope that demands redemption and eschatological fulfillment be an intellectual virtue as well as a theological virtue? These and other areas point to potential philosophical pay-offs if the narrative interpretation of the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is adopted.

VII. Summary

I have argued that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" should be interpreted as the request for a narrative that narrates across those elements and accompanying questions of life of greatest existential import to human beings. These existentially important facts and accompanying questions I have called Constituent Elements$_P$, and the narrative that narrates across them is Life Narrative$_{ER}$, which adds Constituent Elements$_S$. The candidate Life Narrative$_{ER}$ consisting of *true* Constituent Elements$_S$ I have called ThML$_N$ or *The Meaning of Life* (narrative). This project has been largely linguistic, which is important given the confusion and subsequent prevalent diminution of the meaning of life question by philosophers for a good part of the twentieth century. I also offered reasons to favor the narrative interpretation over the amalgam thesis. Finally, I noted what I consider to be substantial philosophical payoffs of the narrative interpretation for the ongoing dialectic between naturalism and theism, whereby future discussions can be as much about the meaning of life as about ontology or the philosophy religion.