

IN SEARCH OF THE UNIVERSE'S NARRATIVE: THEISM, NATURALISM, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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I. Introduction: The Human Propensity for Explanation, Context, and Narrative

We humans have deep-seated proclivities for explanation, context, and narrative.¹ At some point in our existence, usually as young children, most of us reach a level of consciousness accompanied by a strong desire to explain and know. The child's explanatory pursuits are only a microcosm of the more general human propensity to desire explanation of the multifaceted nature of the reality in which we find ourselves and of which we are a part. Indeed, fundamental human pursuits and institutions, especially religion, philosophy, and science, are strongly correlated with the human desire to make sense of the world. In addition, yet surely related to our inherent desire to seek explanation and knowledge of the world, is a desire to fit localized facts and phenomena into larger explanatory contexts. Such contexts serve a hermeneutical function as something through which we interpret and appraise something else.²

Most of us desire, in addition to contextualizing the various facts we encounter in life, to situate our very lives within a larger context. This occurs at a number of levels. Scientifically, we desire to know how we are situated biologically to other forms of life on this planet. Genealogically, we want to know who our great-grandparents were. Ethically, we seek a context to account for what we ought to do and refrain from doing. And, religiously, we pursue a context to explain our feelings of absolute dependence, awe

¹ Although explanation, context, and narrative can be conceptually distinguished, I will use the terms interchangeably in this paper.

² The relationship of the larger context to its parts is a deep hermeneutical question, the full elucidation of which falls outside the scope of this paper. Weighing in on this debate though is not necessary for my more general appropriation of the idea of context as an interpretive framework through which to fit the various existentially important parts of life.

at the brute fact that anything exists at all, why there is such a thing as pain and suffering, and other core existential longings that seem unfulfilled through these other larger contexts. We are each part of the totality of what *Is*, and we want to know how and where we and those aspects of our lives of greatest existential import “fit” into the larger picture.

The human desire for explanation and context tracks our deep propensity for narrative. Humans and narrative are strongly correlated. Where you find one, you will almost certainly find the other. We read narratives, we listen to them, we compose them, and we tell them.³ Indeed, the use of narrative to describe, interpret, and enjoy reality is a mark of the human, as narrative is a product of our rational, self-reflective, and creative capacities, capacities that other forms of biological life on this planet likely do not share. Of this quality unique to humans, H. Porter Abbott remarks:

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.⁴

There can be little doubt that we invoke narrative in order to make sense of the world in which we inhabit, and, in some sense, this is an “essential” mark of what it means to be human. This claim is compatible with the two dominant metaphysical accounts of reality in the West that I consider in this paper, naturalism and theism, in its Christian

³ The category of narrative is not monolithic, as there are distinct narrative genres, including the novel, the epic poem, the short story, the saga, the tragedy, the comedy, the ballad, the western, and so on.

⁴ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1, 2-3.

instantiation.⁵ On naturalism, the human capacity for narrative might be said to be genetically hardwired into our brains much like language seems to be.⁶ On the other hand, Christian theism might also maintain that narrative propensities are hardwired into us, as this is not logically inconsistent with the work of deity, but that the ultimate reason for our narrative capacities resides in God and not some *purely* naturalistic fact. A case can even be made on Christian premises that our narrative capacities are part of the *imago dei*, whereby we dimly yet truly reflect aspects of our divine maker.⁷

In addition to our human propensity for explanation, context, and narrative, we are prone to ask a deep question, “What is the meaning of life?,” a question that has been variously categorized as an indication that one suffers from psychological infirmity,⁸ or as irredeemably incoherent by many analytic philosophers for a substantial part of the twentieth century.⁹ The latter is at least part of the reason why the meaning of life has received so little attention by contemporary analytic philosophers.¹⁰ I think this is unfortunate and unwarranted, and here want to fuse the notions of narrative and the

⁵ It has become somewhat of a canonical distinction in contemporary philosophy of religion to distinguish between *restricted theism* (an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent deity without further elucidation of other doctrines) and *expanded theism* (restricted theism + other doctrines). On this taxonomy, Christian theism is a species of expanded theism.

⁶ For example, see Kay Young and Jeffrey Shaver, “The Neurology of Narrative,” *Substance* 94/95 (March 2001): 72-84.

⁷ The Christian theistic premises from which this claim can be argued are noteworthy. Foremost, God himself is said to have authored a narrative by inspiring finite agents to record salient portions of His redemptive history and plan in the form of the Old and New Testaments.

⁸ So, for example, Freud claims, “The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick. . . . By asking this question one is merely admitting to a store of unsatisfied libido to which something else must have happened, a kind of fermentation leading to sadness and depression.” *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, trans. R. J. and T. Stern, ed. E. L. Freud (New York, 1960), 436.

⁹ A. J. Ayer, in “The Claims of Philosophy, remarks, “And who is to answer these supremely important questions if not the philosopher? The reply to this is that there is no true answer to these questions . . .” in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 224. A case can also be made that Wittgenstein holds a similar view. See his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2005), 6.4312-7.

¹⁰ This fact is changing though. For an overview of the state of the current discussion on the meaning of life among contemporary analytic philosophers, see Thaddeus Metz, “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,” *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 781-814, and his “New Developments in the Meaning of Life,” *Philosophy Compass* 2/2 (2007): 196-217.

meaning of life, and consider how they might be related. Perhaps when we inquire into the meaning of life—whether it has one and what it could possibly be—we are in pursuit of something like a grand narrative of reality that brings coherence to the various components of existence.¹¹ Of course, there are competing narratives of reality. In the West, two of the most prominent are naturalism and Christian theism. Using the concept of narrative somewhat loosely, I will adopt the following claim—*metaphysical systems like naturalism and Christian theism function as narratives of reality*. Considered as such, there exist radical differences between naturalism—*roughly, the view that the physical world as defined by science is all that exists*,¹² and Christian theism—*roughly, that belief system anchored in sacred Scripture and embodied in the Apostle’s Creed as understood through Nicene Orthodoxy*¹³ in terms of what each has to offer on the question of life’s meaning.

My purposes in this paper are twofold. First, in view of the oft-repeated charge of

¹¹ On this count, the narrative interpretation I closely align with the meaning of life question shares family resemblances to *Weltanschauung* or worldview. Freud states, “‘*Weltanschauung*’ is, I am afraid, a specifically German concept, the translation of which into foreign languages might well raise difficulties. . . . In my opinion, then, a *Weltanschauung* is an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which, accordingly, leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place.” Lecture XXXV, “The Question of *Weltanschauung*,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 783. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 253, 225, 141-142, 247-248. (These are references, not to pages, but to numbered paragraphs in the work.)

¹² For exposition and defense of naturalism in contexts broadly relating to the meaning of life, see Richard Carrier, *Sense & Goodness Without God: A Defense of Metaphysical Naturalism* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005), Thomas W. Clark, *Encountering Naturalism: A Worldview and Its Uses* (Somerville, MA: Center for Naturalism, 2007), Michael Martin, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), and Erik Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹³ To be sure, embodied versions of Christian theism (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, Baptists, etc.) move beyond the early creeds (e.g., Reformed expressions of Christian theism that further adhere to, say, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*), and yet there is a doctrinal core, even if somewhat minimal, that is largely shared by all. For discussions of the meaning of life from a broadly Christian theistic persuasion, see John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), William Lane Craig, “The Absurdity of Life Without God,” in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, 40-56, and Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

incoherence, I will demonstrate the coherence of the question, “What is the meaning of life?” and propose a plausible interpretation of its central request as the request for *a narrative of reality that is both rationally and existentially satisfying*.¹⁴ Second, I will briefly compare naturalism and Christian theism in terms of what each of these metaphysical systems considered as a narrative has to offer on central issues which I think relate to the meaning of life question. Although I note what I consider to be naturalism’s inferiority to Christian theism in a few places on this count, this paper is primarily exploratory and seeks to expose the salient differences between these two narratives on fundamental issues that appear to be closely related to the meaning of life.

II. Asking and Interpreting, “What is the Meaning of Life?”

Why do so many of us at one time or another ask the question, “What is the meaning of life?” Are we sane and rational to do so, or do we need to visit the local psychiatrist or perhaps head over to Blockbuster, rent Monte Python’s discussion of the issue, and be content that we have given the question all the respect it deserves? What is man’s hang-up with such a seemingly vexing and impenetrable question? I submit, given who we are as rational, emotional, and self-conscious beings who find ourselves in a marvelous, bewildering, staggering, and often pain-inducing universe, that the question is quite natural and entirely rational. Indeed it is born out of experiences that compose the human predicament. For example, the question might surface out of an experience akin to Tolstoy’s *arrest of life* where one begins to wonder how such day to day activities like work, raising a family, and recreating have any sort of significance as such things appear

¹⁴ Among others, Jean-Paul Sartre and Alan M. Dershowitz argue that it is a mistake to apply the construct of narrative, in any robust sense, to life. See Sartre’s *Nausea* (New York: New Directions, 2007), and Dershowitz’s “Life is Not a Dramatic Narrative,” in *Law’s Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, ed. Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 99-105.

to lack the ability to ground themselves as meaningful¹⁵ and will not last because death looms on the horizon for each of us.¹⁶ It might arise as one is in the throws of pain and suffering, wondering whether any sense can be made of such events, if human misery will ever cease without the annihilation of the person, and if wrongs will ever be definitively righted. Or, one may entertain the question as she reflects upon the colossal fact of being, and why anything exists at all rather than just absolutely nothing.¹⁷ There can be little doubt that the question of life's meaning is naturally generated in a variety of contexts, but is it coherent?

Coherence is a necessary condition for a question (or any proposition) to be meaningful. But coherence is not a property that all questions possess. "What object is larger than the largest of all objects?" and "What caused the first cause?" are examples of incoherent questions. Is the question, "What is the meaning of life?" like one of those? A number of analytic philosophers of the last century thought so. The charge of incoherence is largely misguided though. To be sure, the question suffers from some measure of ambiguity, but this is not a sufficient condition for incoherence. If one is asking for the *semantic* meaning of life rather than of "life," then the accusation of incoherence is plausible. We rightly ask for the meanings of semantic constructions, but surely not of things like physical entities or life in general. However, as philosophers R. W. Hepburn and Kai Nielsen have noted, the locution "What is the meaning of x ?" itself has multiple

¹⁵ For a proposal defending something akin to this claim see Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 588-619.

¹⁶ For Tolstoy's profound autobiographical account of his experience, as well as additional reflection on topics broadly related to life's meaning, see "A Confession" and other essays in *Leo Tolstoy: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Charles E. Moore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

¹⁷ Presumably, it is a logical possibility that the universe never have existed. This striking logical possibility reveals the universe's *contingency*. It is partly this contingency, both ours and the universe's, that motivates the question of life's meaning.

meanings, some of them residing outside of linguistic contexts.¹⁸ Indeed, asking the meaning of x need not be the request for a definition or description at all. For example, one might employ the formula, “What is the meaning of x ?” when puzzled by another’s non-linguistic behavior, say, a smile or a piercing gaze.

The formula is also used in contexts involving natural signs, and how, for instance, clouds *mean* rain or red leaves *mean* winter approaches. Another largely non-linguistic, and admittedly looser, use of “meaning” is found in contexts where we seek an explanation for some fact or phenomenon we encounter of which we want to know *why* it is as it is. Here, we might naturally ask, “What is the *meaning* of that?” If a suitable home can be found for the way “meaning” is used in the question “What is the meaning of life?” in or nearby one of these (or another) non-linguistic contexts, then the question is demonstrably coherent. I think just such a home can be secured. I will return to this point in a moment.

Many philosophers and non-philosophers alike naturally interpret the question, “What is the meaning of life?” as asking something like what makes life valuable, what makes life worthwhile, what makes life significant, or what is life’s purpose. So, for example, if the question is interpreted in terms of value, the dialectic between naturalists and theists will track discussions of whether objective value can be secured apart from a transcendent standard of value or what the nature of that standard must be. Or, if the question is interpreted in terms of purpose, the dialectic will track discussions of whether some divinely imposed purpose is necessary for meaning or whether humanly-imposed purpose is sufficient. I think there is something right and helpful in framing the question

¹⁸ See R. W. Hepburn, “Questions about the Meaning of Life,” 262, and Kai Nielsen, “Linguistic Philosophy and ‘The Meaning of Life,’” 234, in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*.

in these ways. However, I think each of them misses a very important characteristic of the original question—its *global* nature. These formulations address only *localized* components and sub-questions of the original. To be sure, these localized sub-questions may be what some take themselves to be asking at times when inquiring, “What is the meaning of life?” For example, when asked what the question means, many will respond by saying something like, “What is the purpose of life?” or “What makes my life valuable?” However, there are other variations that are offered, as well as specific circumstances that compel us to ask the question. None of the popular extant interpretations of the original, considered singularly, captures the global nature of its precursor where more than just a search for value, purpose, and significance likely motivates the question.

It seems to me that in asking the question of life’s meaning there is a motive more basic and comprehensive than our desire to discover what makes life valuable, what makes life significant, or whether our lives have a purpose. While all of these are certainly motivating desires that prompt the question, I think they should be seen as layers of a more foundational motive, which is *the desire for an explanation or narrative of the world that sufficiently addresses those areas of greatest existential import to rational, emotional, and self-reflective creatures such as us*. The contexts from which this question emerges are numerous. We ask it because, at least for a season, we are in the dark on matters we consider to have immense existential import. Some of these matters are primarily questions in need of informational elucidation. Others are facts about the human condition. Perhaps more accurately, we have questions about the facts of the human condition that stand in need of elucidation.

We are frail. We are small compared to the vast cosmos we inhabit. Our lives are fleeting. We stand in awe at the beauty around us. We sometimes teeter on the brink of despair when faced with the suffering and evil around and *within* us. And we want to *make sense of all this*. This means, of course, that we want to know what makes life valuable, what makes life significant, what gives life purpose, and what makes life worth living. But we also want to know why something exists at all rather than just nothing, and how to make sense of pain and suffering. However, responses to any one of these sub-questions *without responses to the others* would be an unsatisfactory answer to the question of life's meaning on the narrative interpretation. Indeed, it seems difficult to imagine that one of the localized questions can even be answered sufficiently without the addition of conceptual and explanatory layers. For example, in attempting to elucidate the purpose(s) of life on the purpose-interpretation of life's meaning, explanation will be sought as to where or from whom such purpose ultimately derives. The further one ventures into this project, the richer and more complex the explanatory framework will become, and consequently the more plausible the narrative-interpretation becomes. It is the fullest explanatory, contextual, or narrative framework, then, that I think largely tracks what is being requested in asking, "What is the meaning of life?"

In light of this, there is a better interpretation of "What is the meaning of life?" that accounts for the richness of experience driving the foundational motivation for the original question while also retaining those elements captured *only jointly* in reformulations of the original in terms of value, worth, significance, and purpose. This interpretation also secures a place for considerations that surely factor into the original question, but seem to have little or no place in the reformulated versions dominating the

current philosophical discussion. Here, one thinks of the metaphysical question of why there is something rather than nothing or the primarily but not purely existential question of whether there is any definitive and satisfactory remedy for pain and suffering. Surely these considerations come to bear on the meaning of life. However, they are largely ignored in extant interpretations and discussions of life's meaning. I think all of these elements though can be captured nicely on a narrative understanding of the question. Indeed, I think the question more naturally resides in the realm of the human desire for explanation, context, and narrative in order to make sense of life and its various components. To be sure, issues of value and purpose will occupy a central role within the narrative, but they are not most foundational to understanding what is being asked in "What is the meaning of life?"

Again, it is important to note that the formula, "What is the meaning of x ?" need not be a request for a strictly linguistic fact, like a word's meaning or a description of its usage. Indeed, "meaning" has multiple connotations, and one of them is instructive here. I submit that asking "What is the meaning of life?" is analogous to a question asked in the following scenario. Consider the case of a father who has left his two young children to play while he finishes some chores around the house. After a few minutes, he hears screaming and yelling. A fight 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* for the phenomena he is observing—his children fighting. Put differently, he seeks a *context* through which to understand what it is he observes and by which to act accordingly, for he is in the dark on all the details leading to

this moment. This context will likely include, among other things, information about how the fight started. He will need access to such information if he is to make fuller sense out of the facts before him. Those additional facts will serve as the larger context from which a *narrative* might be constructed that brings a sense of order to the individual components. And so in asking the meaning of the situation he finds, he is in search of the *story* of his children's fight, a story more robust than a mere description of kicking and scratching.

There is an important sense in which the meaning of life is analogous to the father walking in on his children's fight. We encounter phenomena and realities over the course of our existence for which we seek an explanation or larger context. In this sense, the constituents of the universe with which we are readily familiar are akin to the "fight" 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 during our conscious existence, our experiences and observations as well as questions motivated by deep human longings for value, purpose, and significance. We need a context to interpret the parts of existence. Of course, some of what we observe and experience, more than others, compels us to ask the question, "What is the *meaning* of life?" What is the explanation, context, or narrative that ties it all together?¹⁹ Like the father, we lack important parts of the story, at least for a season. There are informational gaps in our understanding of the universe we inhabit, and we desire to fill them. Some of these gaps carry greater existential weight than others. For example, seeking to fill in the gap created by the reality of pain and suffering

¹⁹ In this sense, there is some correlation between viewing the meaning of life in terms of the desire for a deep explanation or narrative of the universe and its various components and what physicists have come to call "theories of everything." Mathematical scientist John D. Barrow notes that the "modern urge for completeness [*theory of everything*] had developed hand-in-hand with the desire for a *unified* picture of the world." *New Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

possesses much more gravity than seeking to fill in that created by the migratory patterns of birds, although the latter may not be entirely irrelevant to the search for the meaning of life, when that meaning is understood according to the narrative approach. The grand narrative will explain both.

This is a bit misleading though. I do not think we should strongly identify this grand narrative, consisting of a *complete elucidation* of all facts, with the meaning of life, even though it is in a sense on the narrative interpretation of the question. A sufficient answer to the question need only provide a narrative that crosses some explanatory threshold of information about life, and especially in those areas of greatest existential import to humans. Where this threshold roughly lies is something to explore. I do not, however, think this is a problem for the narrative interpretation, the core of which is the desire for a satisfactory context by which to understand our lives. And it is not just any narrative we desire. We long for a rationally (where *rationally* is a marker for something we think is true) and existentially (addresses core features of the human predicament) satisfying narrative. We desire a certain type of metaphysical story, but not all stories of reality are created equal.

III. Naturalistic vs. Christian Theistic Narratives²⁰

Framing the question, “What is the meaning of life?” in terms of the search for a grand narrative of reality that crosses a certain explanatory and contextual threshold in terms of the number of existentially weighty questions that it answers brings with it noteworthy implications. For example, emphasis on narratives may hint that a cosmic

²⁰ Of course, there is likely not a single naturalistic narrative nor is there a single Christian theistic narrative. However, there are certain central elements that are generally features of any narrative residing in one of these broad categories. For example, all naturalistic narratives are devoid of finite and infinite spiritual realities, whereas Christian theistic narratives are not.

author, perhaps the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is needed in order for the question to be sufficiently answered. It also warrants a distinction between what I call “Robust Meanings of Life” and “Non-Robust Meanings of Life,” and formulating the question in terms of the search for a cosmic narrative seems to presuppose a robust meaning. Furthermore, the robust/non-robust distinction crystallizes the very different answers to the question available for naturalistic (non-robust) and Christian theistic (robust) narratives. And while many naturalists will charge me with begging the question, asserting that their narrative can secure robust meaning in life, it seems clear that narrative elements most of us think necessary for genuine meaning are notably absent from purely naturalistic stories of reality devoid of finite and infinite spiritual realities.

III.A. Robust Meaning of Life (Christian Theistic Narrative)

A robust meaning of life requires a fuller conception of what is necessary to make life meaningful than its non-robust cousin, and therefore, more elements are needed for a view of what makes a meaningful life to qualify as robust. What might some of those elements be? First, a robust meaning of life appears to require something over and above the constituent parts of the universe to give such parts meaning. In terms of my proposed understanding of the question, the robust conception presupposes a grand narrative into which individual components coherently fit. It is much larger than any number of local narratives (even though they exist) that might be told of particular constituents. It is the grand unifying story of what reality is about *in its totality*. For example, the cosmic narrative not only tells the story of individual deaths, but why death itself is part of the universe. Of course, a completely naturalistic cosmic narrative also fulfills this condition. In principle, a comprehensive naturalistic narrative can be given of the history of the

universe and its various constituent parts. The presence of a narrative *simpliciter*, then, is not sufficient. Here, it is important to note that those in search of the meaning of life are generally not satisfied by a completely naturalistic story. Most of us, perhaps all of us deep down in the quiet, brutally honest moments of our hearts, have an aversion to the thought that those things touching our lives that possess so much existential gravity, things like joy, sorrow, birth, and death, are really only highly complex configurations of some basic physical stuff that is not the product of mind and intentionality, but of chance and necessity. We are deeply disturbed at the prospect that the constituents of the universe, including us, came *from* nothing *by* nothing and will, if the best science of the day is accurate, come to an end at some future time.²¹ We seek something more. Perhaps we even need something more.

A second element of a robust meaning of life in terms of narrative is the demand for an author. Humans do not meet the authorial requirements for reality's ultimate

²¹ If we and the universe cease to exist at some future point, there seems to be a tension between [i] the profundity and gravity of those parts of our lives that existentially grip us to the core and [ii] the eventual state of affairs where none of this matters any longer precisely because none of it even exists. This tension is nicely captured and addressed in the Old Testament wisdom literature book of Ecclesiastes. Conceding certain complex exegetical issues in the book's interpretation, we can plausibly observe the above tension in the first part of chapter one, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (1:1-4). The contrast so vividly portrayed in the text between the radical transitoriness of man and his accomplishments, and the *seeming* unending machinery of nature which outlasts and pulverizes them highlights the tension. The one called "Teacher" or "Preacher" in the English text seems to adopt a conclusion of futility from the jointly held premises of man's finitude and nature's *relative* eternity (hyperbolically in comparison to the life span of man). From the vantage point of the endless, unconscious cogs of nature, the toils of man upon the earth seem to be pointless and futile, as they bring him no ultimate advantage over nature. His labors do not appear to substantively alter the workings of the universe at a fundamental level. Hence, the words with which the Teacher opens are, "Vanity of vanities . . ." (1:2a). And whether or not Ecclesiastes' overarching goal is to demonstrate the vanity and futility of life apart from the reality of God (debated among exegetes), the above scenario painted by the Teacher is an apt description of life on a purely naturalistic hypothesis. But Ecclesiastes does not end with the conclusions of cosmic futility and meaninglessness, for just when we are tempted to think that nothing we do on this earth matters or is of lasting significance, the epilogue invades the scene, "The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14). For arguments against drawing the conclusion of futility from a naturalistic view of death, see Brooke Alan Trisel, "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts," *The Philosophical Forum* 35 (Fall 2004): 371-91.

narrative even though, as rational agents, we certainly craft narratives and even though we are in the process of constructing an empirical narrative of the world. The grand-narrative that tracks a robust meaning of life requires a transcendent or *super*-natural source supplying such a narrative, and thereby infusing life with the meaning we seek. Just as Dostoevsky and Hugo are needed to supply the narratives of their stories, so too, the argument goes, is an author, transcendent yet immanent, needed to supply the all-encompassing narrative that brings intelligibility, value, and purpose to the world and to rational creatures capable and apparently driven to seek such things. We want to know, for example, why we die, and here most of us are asking more than the biological question. On one interpretation of the *why*-question, we know we die because hearts stop pumping and brains cease to process. This is not the *why*-question being asked in this context though. We want to know whether and how value and purpose can be secured in the face of death. For such questions as these to be answered, it looks as though we are going to need an author who knows considerably more about the story of the universe than we do precisely because it is his story.

Questions surrounding the *why* of evil, pain, and death lead us to another central element of a robust meaning of life, the hope of definitive resolution to such maladies. It is important to note that this consideration is related to, yet distinct from, the traditional philosophical problem of evil—that is, how evil and the theistic God, said to be an omniscient being, can coexist.²² In the present context, the standard philosophical

²² The dilemma is most notably summarized by Hume's famous dictum in the mouth of Philo, a fictional character in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 108-109. For various philosophical considerations of the traditional problem of evil, see the contemporary anthologies, Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams, eds. *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), and Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. *The Evidential Argument from Evil*

discussion is tabled, and the eventual defeat of evil is demanded by every fiber of our being. It is the cry of the prophet Habakkuk, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear? Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness?” (Habakkuk 1:2a, 3a). It is the afflicted Job who despairs, “Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why is light given to him who suffers, and life to the bitter of soul, who long for death, but there is none, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures . . . ?” (Job 3:11, 20-21). More importantly though, it is the afflicted Job who *hopes*, “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).²³ Evil, pain, suffering, and death in this context are considered existentially and eschatologically rather than theoretically and with a view to their origin and reason for being present in our world in the first place. The narrative required by a robust meaning of life will address this existential and eschatological need for the maladies of this world to be ultimately defeated.

The stories we read and tell, the good ones at least, generally have conflict, sometimes much pain and suffering, but also definitive resolution or, perhaps better, redemption. We shudder at those that do not. The horror genre is one example. This is telling, for it indicates that we have deep yearnings *for things to be set aright*. We are simultaneously unsettled, shocked, outraged, and broken when evil definitively triumphs

(Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996). For discussions of the traditional problem of evil that seek to be self-consciously biblical, and which also elaborate more on the existential and eschatological dimensions of the problem, see Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: An Analytical Look at the Problem of Pain* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 1994), D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), and N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

²³ In this context, hope in God is not divorced from his wrath. Indeed, our hope for definitive resolution to evil is ultimately hope in a holy and righteous God whose eventual and final triumph over evil is partly the product of his wrath, but of course, also his love and goodness. His attributes cannot be divorced from one another.

over good in the stories we encounter. We have a compelling and inherent longing for satisfactory resolution where “satisfactory” at least means that wrongs are righted, restitution is made, pain turned to joy, and so on. As creatures with inescapable moral proclivities, we yearn for a state of affairs that will bring to fruition our deepest cravings for justice, peace, and abiding joy, even though many of us never realize *we* are part of the problem that stands in need of a radical solution. A robust view of the meaning of life, therefore, requires an eschatological component, given that such cravings are most certainly not fulfilled within our lifetimes.²⁴ The little girl brutally beaten, raped, and murdered did not see this state of affairs in her life on this earth, nor do countless others whose final moments are ones of utter horror and seeming irredeemable hopelessness.

We do not want any story to end without definitive resolution, much less the story of the universe in which we live and move and have our being. If an entirely naturalistic story is the true narrative of the cosmos though, then the only resolution to the ugly realities of pain and death is the annihilation of conscious subjects who will no longer experience such ills. Of course, the naturalist will simply affirm that this is just the way the universe is at its most fundamental level. It is indifferent, and we must acquiesce to this unavoidable fact. But despite the apparent stoicism of many naturalists and their unwillingness to call death, for example, “evil” and in need of some sort of remedy sought in a robust meaning of life, most people are profoundly troubled by such phenomena in the universe. We would like it very much if there is some final chapter where at least two elements are jointly present: [i] evil, pain, and death are gone for good,

²⁴ For an historically noteworthy philosophical discussion of the practical and existential demand for an afterlife where the requirement of perfect justice is satisfied, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Andrews Reath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). It is worth noting that something in the neighborhood of this demand is also present in Ecclesiastes.

and [ii] we still exist to see this reality. We, like Mr. Beaver in Lewis' classic tale, long for all to be put to rights. His recitation of an old Narnian rhyme poignantly captures such longing:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*²⁵

Mr. Beaver has spoken of the hope to which we cling as we search for the grand narrative of the universe that, like our best stories, offers a definitive response to those elements of reality that make tears stream down our cheeks and cry out with Habakkuk, "How long O Lord?" It is not sufficient to most when the naturalist informs us that the story of the universe on this matter is, fundamentally, that certain configurations of matter have become organized in such a way so as to give rise to conscious, self-reflective life, and that other configurations (e.g., tornadoes, tsunamis, rapists, etc.) cause in our configurations of matter a certain highly unpleasant psychological state that we experience as anguish—*end of story*. And it certainly does not make most of us feel any better about the whole situation by being reminded by these same folks that, in the end, the configurations of matter that are *you* and *me* will enter into some different and less organized state such that *we* cease to exist, never again having to experience pain or anything for that matter. This is certainly *a story* of the universe, but I doubt it is an ending to the narrative that most of us seek when asking for the meaning of life. We long for something more, something on the scale of John's apocalyptic vision on the island of Patmos:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 85.

passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea. . . . and He [God] will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away (Rev. 21:1-4, *NASB*).

In a sense, there can be “no more death, no more crying, and no more pain” in an entirely naturalistic narrative, but *we will not be there* to experience it, and I think we long to *experience* a state where such things will be forever absent and we will be forever present with the One responsible for the glorious culmination and transformation eventuating in the new heavens and new earth.²⁶ We long to witness this eschatological unfolding and then live in this magnificent reality. We, like the little child in her dark and ominous bedroom being comforted by a loving parent, want to know that it is okay to go to sleep because everything will be alright. A robust meaning of life requires this. Christian theism has it, naturalism does not.²⁷ Sociologist Peter Berger explains the existential implications if naturalism is the true narrative of our world in the following

²⁶ For a recent contribution to this topic, see N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

²⁷ The naturalist will object that this *everything's okay in the end* condition is nothing more than wishful thinking, and therefore should not be considered a desideratum of the universal narrative. For example, we do not think that a person's strong desire or wish that unicorns exist counts as a good reason to believe such creatures do in fact exist. Wishing something to be the case and its actually being the case probably are not that highly correlated. And so, why should we think that the kind of defeat of evil, pain, and death required by a robust meaning of life is plausible simply because many or even most humans have strong desires for this? I think the theist has a couple of responses to this objection. First, the analogy between [i] *hope that unicorns exist* and [ii] *hope for everything to be okay in the end* are not analogous in a relevant way required by the criticism. The latter functions in a larger metaphysical view of reality, the rationality of which, is not solely tied to this issue. Christian theism has many other components that can be given independent rational justification. This is not the case with the existence of unicorns. They do not function in an already plausible view of the world, the parts of which can be given reasonable justification. The justification for the unicorns existence in this case *just is* hope in their existence. Second, perhaps *hope for everything to be okay in the end* is a natural desire. Just as our natural desire for water entails the actual existence of water (even if we do not find it and die), perhaps so too does our deep-seated desire for a felicitous ending of the universe's narrative entail the future reality of this state of affairs. This second consideration is speculative, but potentially quite fruitful and worthy of further thought. For an analogous argument from desire based on joy, see C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), and his *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 136-37. For critical reflection upon this and other Lewisian arguments, see Erik J. Wielenberg, *God and the Reach of Reason: C. S. Lewis, David Hume, and Bertrand Russell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

scenario where a mother comforts her terrified child by saying “Everything’s all right,” after the child wakes up alone in the darkness from a nightmare:

If reality is coextensive with the “natural” reality that our empirical reason can grasp, then the experience *is* an illusion and the role that embodies it *is* a lie. For then it is perfectly obvious that everything is *not* in order, is *not* all right. The world that the child is being told to trust is the same world in which he will eventually die. If there is no other world, then the ultimate truth about this one is that eventually it will kill the child as it will kill his mother. This would not, to be sure, detract from the real presence of love and its very real comforts; it would even give this love a quality of tragic heroism. Nevertheless, the final truth would be not love but terror, not light but darkness. The nightmare of chaos, not the transitory safety of order, would be the final reality of the human situation. For, in the end, we must all find ourselves in darkness, alone with the night that will swallow us up. The face of reassuring love, bending over our terror, will then be nothing except an image of merciful illusion.²⁸

When the search for life’s meaning is identified with the search for a narrative of reality that is both rationally and existentially satisfying, it becomes clearer why this last condition to be met in order for robust meaning to be secured is so important to us.

Taking the narrative interpretation seriously means that the *ending* of the narrative becomes a salient, perhaps even the most salient component in appraising the narrative as a whole.²⁹ That is to say, the ending functions to unify and organize the narrative. It is “an event, or the description of an event [with] the power to organize its antecedents . . .”³⁰ And just as important, our emotional reaction or aesthetic response or moral evaluation of a narrative is largely a function of how it ends. This is likely part of the reason why conclusions of futility, despair, and meaninglessness are often derived from the naturalistic ending where we and the universe ultimately succumb to lasting death.

²⁸ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 56.

²⁹ Of course, there is much debate on the nature of endings, closure, and whether narratives even need closure, or a certain type of closure. I will not enter this discussion here, nor am I qualified to do so in more technical literary discussions. I think there is something significant about endings, and the concept of ending is fruitful in this context without further consideration of all the nuances attending the discussion.

³⁰ J. David Velleman, “Narrative Explanation,” *The Philosophical Review* 112 (January 2003), 11.

But in a narrative that secures a robust meaning of life, something an *exclusively* scientific narrative cannot accomplish, the final chapter is not one in which death wins the day. Rather, it is a chapter where hope comes to fruition. Of this hope, John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, write:

Its basis is neither wishful fantasy nor calculated prediction. Instead, its basis is trust in the everlasting faithfulness of the living and eternal God. This is the only reality that can be set against the reality of the scientific predictions of catastrophe. Theology does not deny these predictions, but it transcends them. Christian hope is not a consoling fantasy that somehow death is an illusion. Death is real, but death is not ultimate. Only God is ultimate. The Christian hope is death and resurrection, not merely spiritual survival.³¹

III.B. Non-Robust Meaning of Life (Naturalistic Narratives)

Whereas a robust meaning of life is fuller, richer, and demands more in order for life to be meaningful, non-robust meanings are much more modest in their proposals as to what makes life, or more appropriately on this view, *a life*, meaningful. Generally, non-robust conceptions of the meaning of life are closely aligned with naturalism. A very basic characteristic of such views is the rejection of understanding the question regarding life's meaning as one requiring a grand narrative of reality that is populated by finite and infinite spiritual realities. Related, naturalists claim that a meaningful life need not participate in some sort of cosmic narrative given from without in addition to a localized narrative of which the person is a part and *she herself creates*.

Of course, a non-robust meaning of life does not reject the notion of a type of grand narrative in terms of a comprehensive story to be told of the universe. Indeed, naturalists have a narrative of the universe of which humans are constituent parts, the

³¹ John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, "Science and Theology on the End of the World and the Ends of God," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 12. For a theological and literary treatment of eschatology, see Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

empirical narrative being told by science. And, in principle, this narrative may one day be complete in the form of a unifying theory of everything, *at least everything natural*. In this case, science would be able to tell us why, in one sense, things are as they are. But certainly most who ask the question “What is the meaning of life?” are not interested in answers to the *why*-questions science addresses, at least not on this occasion. Questions of this nature are not seeking an answer offered by a future exhaustive scientific account of reality which merely *describes* all of the physical facts of the universe. They invoke another species of *why*-questions, ultimate *why*-questions.³² These sorts of questions fall beyond the territory of science given the methodological constraints with which it operates. Indeed, it is hard to see how science, no matter how sweeping its development and comprehensive its explanatory conquests, can ever address ultimate *why*-questions.³³

As John Cottingham notes:

If we were to achieve a complete and unified theory of the universe (fulfilling the grand philosophical-cum-scientific vision that links Descartes and Hume, Newton and Einstein, right down to present-day cosmologists such as Hawking), such a theory would subsume all observable phenomena in the universe under the fewest and most comprehensive laws or principles; but as to *why* these principles obtain, this would have to remain, in Hume’s graphic phrase, ‘totally shut up from human curiosity and inquiry’.³⁴

Of course, it is within this *descriptive* empirical narrative that naturalists claim a home must be found for a meaningful life. To go beyond scientific *why*-questions is to enter the realm of the nonsensical, and the ultimate sorts of *why*-questions that most people ask,

³² For a discussion of ultimate or cosmic *why*-questions, see Paul Edwards, “Why,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vols. 7 & 8 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), 298-99.

³³ For those with tendencies toward *scientism*, ultimate *why*-questions are, in principle, not answerable because science can say nothing about them, as they fall outside its reach. However, this demonstrates that those in the grips of scientism have neglected to carefully scrutinize their own philosophical and methodology assumptions that, ironically, *cannot be justified by the scientific method*. It is unreasonable to reject ultimate *why*-questions as nonsensical and unanswerable merely because *science* cannot answer them.

³⁴ John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, 6-7.

packaged in teleological and normative language groping for transcendent value and purpose, have ventured into this territory according to naturalists.

This leads to a second related element composing non-robust meanings of life, the rejection of a narrative provided for the universe *from without*. Hence, non-robust views of meaning do not presuppose a cosmic author and do not require the ultimate source of meaning in life in general and individual's lives to be anchored in the intentionality, purpose, and nature of a transcendent narrator. There need be no intentionality beyond that possessed by humans in order for our lives to have meaning. All that is necessary is for rational human agents to impose their own meaning or significance upon those activities and pursuits in which they engage. Keeping the narrative analogy alive, we might say that the advocate of a non-robust meaning of life crafts and lives out a sort of *mini-narrative* within the parameters established by the empirical narrative being told by science. He is its determiner, and because it is meaningful to him, he has answered the question "What is the meaning of life?" largely because the question's most accurate form according to non-robust meanings of life is something akin to "How can *I make* my life meaningful?" Life is filled with many such pursuits that we find meaningful. We engage in pleasant activities, and these are significant to us. Why ask for more? As such, finding meaning in life on the non-robust view neither presupposes nor requires many of the features found in the robust conception.

Just as the Christian theistic narrative has an ending, even though it is an ending that itself never ends,³⁵ so too does the naturalistic narrative. And if endings are central components to our final emotional, aesthetic, and moral appraisals of narratives, the final

³⁵ Cf. footnotes 29 & 38. More accurately, the portion of the Christian theistic narrative characterized partly by sin and death will end, followed by a new chapter that does not end.

state of affairs in the naturalistic story is telling. Naturalists must be honest about the only kind of home in which meaning can be found in an exclusively empirical narrative of the universe. We find such candor in Bertrand Russell:

Amid such a world [a world devoid of the supernatural], if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins . . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only in the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.³⁶

C. S. Lewis, in "The Weight of Glory," echoes the atheist Russell's thoughts, ". . . even if all the happiness they [naturalist "prophets"] promised could come to man on earth, yet still each generation would lose it by death, including the last generation of all, and the whole story would be nothing, not even a story, for ever and ever."³⁷

IV. Samuel Beckett vs. The Apostle's Creed

Understanding the question "What is the meaning of life?" in terms of narrative as well as the distinction between robust and non-robust meanings of life presupposed in this interpretation is profoundly illustrated in a consideration of one of Samuel Beckett's strangest plays, *Breath*. In this enigmatic little play by a man well known for his absurdist approach, the curtain opens on the stage, a stage littered with rubbish. A cry followed by someone slowly inhaling and then exhaling is heard. After half a minute, the curtain

³⁶ Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 107. It should be noted that many naturalists writing on the meaning of life disagree with Russell's pessimistic tone in this essay.

³⁷ C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 32.

closes and the play is over. That is it, a mere thirty-five seconds. Some consider the play to be nothing more than a bad joke. Others, however, view it as a vivid depiction of the relative shortness and futility of life itself, an interpretation consistent with the themes of much of Beckett's work including, among others, *Waiting for Godot*. It is the lack of any explicit narrative framework or stated meaning, apart from that which can be constructed empirically, by Beckett and the unease that this creates for the audience that is instructive here.

Like Beckett's thirty-five second play, we find ourselves in a universe that looks to have had a beginning and will come to an end if what science presently informs us is correct. The curtain has opened, it will someday close, and we find ourselves along with other humans, animals, wars, joy, pain, births, deaths, and much else on the stage of this grand production. Like the audience at Beckett's play, most of us have deep longings to know what the meaning is of our play titled *World History*. Indeed, like Beckett's audience, we might even feel ripped-off if this meaning is not supplied by someone other than us. We do not want to be mere rubbish, an unforeseen, self-conscious product of mindless, non-authorial processes. We seek a comprehensive narrative by which we can make sense out of the world in order to find our place within it and navigate safely through it without definitively succumbing to despair. And given certain features that most of us long for in such a narrative, not the least of which is the desire for ultimate resolution of the story where faith, hope, and love win the day, it appears as though we are searching for a story told by an author above and beyond the universe itself who can guarantee a felicitous ending. We are neither rationally nor existentially satisfied if the only authors who exist are human.

The naturalist informs us that, like Beckett’s play, no overarching narrative—except for the descriptive, empirical story provided by science—of this species exists, and we, like his audience, are left to supply our own mini-narratives to the “rubbish” that is us and our lives populating the stage of the history of the universe. For some, this seems to be sufficient. At least this is what they tell us, although I am skeptical that they are being brutally honest. Life can still have meaning they say, just as Beckett’s play can have meaning, because *we*, you and I, *supply it*. That is the primary difference between robust and non-robust meanings of life, between naturalism and Christian theism. Do we *impose* meaning or do we *receive* meaning? If the narrative proposal about how best to understand the question “What is the meaning of life?” is correct, most of us are in search of a robust meaning of life. We long for this. Indeed, we *need* it to be true. We need redemption. We need a felicitous ending, an ending that itself never ends.³⁸

³⁸ There are possible objections to an ending that never ends and what might be entailed by this in the real world. Some are logical, others are literary. cf. footnotes 29 & 35. The other objections center around problems of postmortem survival. Here there are both metaphysical and existential objections. Metaphysically, the issues surround problems for personal identity as well as the very possibility of postmortem survival. For valuable philosophical and theological contributions to this debate, see John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Kevin Corcoran, ed. *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), and Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, eds. *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). Existentially, some have argued that postmortem survival that continues indefinitely will lead to undesirable states like, say, boredom. For example, see Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *The Metaphysics of Death*, ed. by John Martin Fischer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 73-92. I think cases such as Williams’ can be answered by noting that while indefinite postmortem survival is not a sufficient condition for a desirable state of affairs, it is likely necessary. Interestingly, Christian theism does not require it to be a sufficient condition. Orthodox Christian doctrine has never separated postmortem survival from the reality of the presence of the Trinity. Indeed, postmortem survival is only desirable and meaningful in so far as we behold God in what some have called the “Beatific Vision,” and where God will be with His people throughout eternity. Related, it seems plausible to think that infinite Being (i.e., God) cannot be exhausted, and therefore there is always something new and fresh and limitless in our experience of the immense reality of God in the new heavens and new earth. There are two additional philosophical arguments that weaken Williams-type boredom arguments against endless life after death. First, one might appeal to the compositionality of language whereby an *infinite* number of meaningful semantic constructions can be derived from a finite number of units and grammatical rules (e.g., multiplying conjunctions). Similarly, endless meaningful variety contributing to a rewarding endless existence could be constructed from a finite number of activity *types*. A second argument, then, invokes the *type/token* distinction, whereby a potentially infinite number of *token* activities can be derived from a finite

Thankfully, the basic elements of that robust meaning have been made known to us. There is a God, and he is not silent. Our story titled *World History* is not like Beckett's *Breath* where we are expected to supply the crucial elements in order to infuse life with meaning. To do so is beyond our meager capacities. That is okay though, for humans are not the only narrators who exist. An omniscient author, Christians worship him as "Father-Son-Holy Spirit," has written the ultimate masterpiece of which *Les Misérables*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Lord of the Rings* are only dim shadows.³⁹ To be sure, it includes much mystery, evil, and great pain, but there is more, and those whom the divine author redeems are empowered to live lives of faith, hope, and love in pursuit of this more. The naturalists are wrong. The story required for life to have genuine meaning has been authored, is in the process of being told, and it is not fiction. For centuries now as Christians we have confessed the broad outline of this story with these words:

*[We] believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.*

*[We] believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
And born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died and was buried.*

number of activity *types*. So, for example, most of us really enjoy good movies. Let us say, then, that movies are an activity *type*. We can continue to make more and more movies indefinitely if time allows. Each individual movie is a *token* of the movie *type*. Interestingly, no matter how many movies we have watched, it seems entirely plausible to think that we will always find the next good one to be satisfying, rewarding, and meaningful. Many of us see no dilemma in additionally thinking that we could watch the same movie over and over without every growing tired of it, at least with some gap in between viewings. Something in the neighborhood of this example could be applied, *a fortiori*, to being in the presence of God for all eternity in the new heavens and earth posited by orthodox Christian theism. If we can plausibly imagine never growing tired of movies, how could we grow weary of infinite being and beauty?

³⁹ For biblical-theological work on the unfolding revelation of God and His redemptive plan in Scripture, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), and Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005).

*He descended to the dead.
On the third day He rose again.
He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

*[We] believe in the Holy Spirit,
The Holy, Catholic Church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.*

Amen.