

What's the Point If We're All Going to Die? Pessimism, Moderation, and the Reality of the Past

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Abstract

Pessimists sometimes declare that death makes everything we do pointless or meaningless. In this essay, I consider the motivations for this worry about our collective mortality. I then examine some common responses to this worry that emphasize moderating our standards or changing our goals. Given some limitations of the “moderating our standards” response, I suggest that Viktor Frankl’s view about the permanence of the past offers a different and perhaps better way of responding to the worry that death renders our lives meaningless. After outlining his view, its implications, and the view of time it assumes, I consider and respond to some possible objections to Frankl’s view. If Frankl is right, death cannot make life meaningless or pointless because meaning is attained within life, and when we die our completed lives endure as part of the past.

“Having been is also a kind of being, and perhaps the surest kind.”

– Viktor E. Frankl¹

Pessimists sometimes declare that death—both personal death and our collective mortality as a species—makes everything we do pointless or meaningless. This seems to many others like an overreaction. However, given that much of what we care about presupposes the continuation of human life, maybe the pessimists have a point. In this essay, I consider the motivations for this worry about our collective mortality from the perspective of, broadly speaking, secular or naturalist worldviews. I then examine some common responses to this worry that emphasize moderating our standards or changing our goals in ways that insulate them from death. Given some limitations of the “moderating our standards” response, I suggest that Viktor Frankl’s view about the permanence of the past offers a different and perhaps better way of responding to the worry that death renders our lives meaningless. After outlining his view, its implications, and

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¹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006): 82.

the view of time it assumes, I anticipate and respond to some possible objections to Frankl's view. If Frankl is right, death cannot make life meaningless or pointless because meaning is attained within life, and when we die our completed lives endure as part of the past.

“What’s the Point of Doing Anything If We’re All Going to Die?”

This question may strike some readers as juvenile, and indeed, it was posed to me by a young person—my daughter when she was twelve years old. However, she is far from the first to ask, and she is in notable company. Reflecting on our collective mortality drove Leo Tolstoy, in middle age, to the brink of suicide. His faith in the point of living was restored by a religious conversion.² Others, like Bertrand Russell and Albert Camus, vigorously reject religious consolations, but seek to put on a brave face while confronting the ultimate impermanence of our lives, our species, and our planet.³ They seek to affirm the dignity of human life without illusions about our eventual annihilation. But if we are all going to die, what is the point of the brave face?

Of course, when the question is posed in this way, it is more of a rhetorical exclamation than an open question: if we're all going to die, then there's no point in doing anything! The idea may quickly devolve into wholesale value skepticism that ignores all the mundane and everyday ways in which many actions have obvious, if limited, points. As Nagel has argued, the point of many things we do is rooted in the present or near future, and if it is true that nothing we do now will matter in millions of years, it is not clear why that should matter to us now.⁴

Nevertheless, there is *something* bothersome in the question as to what our collective mortality means for the meaningfulness of our own lives. Samuel Scheffler amplifies this question by imagining scenarios in which the extinction of human life or the entire planet are known and on the near horizon: the planet will be destroyed thirty days after the natural end of one's own (long) life (*the Doomsday scenario*), or in a different twist, mass infertility ensures that our children's generation will be the final generation of human beings (*the Infertility scenario*).⁵ These scenarios bring our collective mortality near enough to our

² Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Dover, 2005/1882).

³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1993/1942); Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957): 104-116.

⁴ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵ Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

lives that it is likely to interfere with and frustrate many of our current projects, so it is no wonder that at least some of the things we care about would seem to become pointless if we learned that the Doomsday or Infertility scenario were real. Scheffler posits that many people would feel that their lives had become pointless.

Several commentators have argued that *many* things would continue to have a point in these scenarios because their significance does not depend on the existence of future humans (or future life in general): caring for each other in our final days or years, making art for one another to appreciate, and dying with dignity—working toward a “good end” to the story of *homo sapiens*.⁶ These responses concede that what would remain meaningful would *change* since many future-oriented projects would no longer make sense. However, if some things continue to have a point even in the Doomsday and Infertility scenarios, then the existential dread expressed by my daughter and Tolstoy seems to have been answered, since their concerns don’t even presuppose that our extinction is so near at hand.

The Endurance Dependence Thesis

One might insist, nevertheless, that there is some “ultimate meaning,” or enduring significance, that our lives cannot possess because the extinction of life and the planet will erase *everything*—all will be as naught.⁷ Sometimes concerns about ultimate meaning are about the existence or absence of a divine purpose to our lives or the whole universe. I will not directly consider the issue of having or lacking a divine purpose. However, one feature of worldviews that characterize our lives and universe as part of some greater divine reality is that there is something that *endures* even if we do not. On some such views the divine reality is such that *we* endure after death in some form—either in an afterlife, a memory in the mind of God, or so forth.

Such lines of thought involve not only the existence of a divine reality but also the thesis that meaning—or ultimate meaning—depends on something’s *enduring*. We can then notice that the pessimistic reaction to personal and collective mortality appears to depend on the following form of argument:

⁶ For responses that develop this kind of response, see especially Susan Wolf’s commentary in Scheffler (2016) and Jens Johansson, “The Importance of a Good Ending: Some Reflections on Samuel Scheffler’s ‘Death and the Afterlife’,” *The Journal of Ethics* 19, no. 2 (2015): 185-195.

⁷ Rivka Weinberg, “Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have It, We Can’t Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad,” *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1, no. 1, article 4 (2021); doi: 10.35995/jci01010004. Cf. David Benatar, *The Human Predicament* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

1. Something has meaning only if it endures.
2. Human life does not endure; we're *all* going to die.
3. Therefore, human life does not have meaning.

Call premise 1 the *Endurance Dependence Thesis (EDT)*, stated in basic form. More refined versions of EDT might replace “meaning” with “ultimate meaning” or specify the duration required for different levels or degrees of meaningfulness, as well as what exactly it means to “endure.” Does enduring require personal survival, or is leaving “traces” sufficient?⁸ Whichever way one proceeds, the main feature of the EDT is that enduring is a necessary condition for meaning. One way to interpret this is that something (or someone) can have meaning for *as long as* it endures, but once it ceases to exist, so does its meaningfulness. This seems to capture the thought that death negates the meaningfulness of our lives.

The now common philosophical shift to examining the relationships, activities, and projects that confer meaning *in* life may not really address the oppressive dread that some feel when they contemplate our collective mortality—whether it is to be in thirty days or three billion years. One might suggest that if human finitude distresses someone to the point of thwarting their motivation to live, then that is a matter for therapy rather than philosophy: Tolstoy was depressed, and that *caused* his pessimism and despair.⁹ If he were not depressed, he would see (or feel) that the meaning obtainable *in* life is worthwhile and not thwarted by personal or collective mortality. The EDT allows for some degrees of meaning. However, this line of thought runs the risk of psychologizing what may seem like a philosophical problem. If Tolstoy’s insights about the meaning-annihilating force of death are correct, then depression and despair might seem like a reasonable response. But we would need to formulate a stronger version of the EDT in order to capture fully Tolstoy’s position.

The pessimist might argue that the secular literature on meaning in life is more or less engaged in a wholesale changing of the subject, a deflection, that tells us not to worry (at least not too much) about our collective mortality because there

⁸ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 582ff.

⁹ See Joseph Hayes, Cindy L.P. Ward, and Ian McGregor, “Why Bother? Death, Failure, and Fatalistic Withdrawal from Life,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110, no. 1 (2016): 96-115. Tolstoy later regards his period of despair as a product of deep dissatisfaction with his life and social position: he repeatedly refers to himself and other members of his elite social class as “parasites” on the working class.

is good stuff *in* life. *Terror management theory*, a framework that psychologists have employed to study and understand how “mortality salience” affects human cognition and motivation might describe the shift to meaning in life as one of many terror management strategies. However, this body of research also reveals that death anxiety can lead us to behave in less than rational ways in seeking to defend and affirm the meaningfulness of our lives.¹⁰ Paradoxically for the philosopher of death, mortality salience may impair analytical reasoning.¹¹ Pessimists might suggest that the “meaning in life” optimists are simply ignoring the ultimate futility of all human projects, a coping strategy well-explained by terror management theory.

Some who despair over our collective mortality seem to worry that this is what makes our predicament so dreadful: everything that is good in life will be destroyed, and there is no otherworldly consolation or compensation for this on a secular worldview.¹²

However, there are at least three different ways one might respond to this pessimistic line of thought. The first is to question the conceptual coherence of this notion of “ultimate meaning” on the grounds that “meaning” is not a feature or value that can be ultimate (or absolute), or that there is not some genuinely different category of meaning here. “Ultimate” might just be a fancy word (a term of art) for the highest degree of meaning attainable *within* the worldview in which one is developing a theory of meaningfulness. On a naturalist view, one might stipulate that attaining the most meaning in life possible just *is* to attain ultimate meaning. However, if we contrast that with what seems like a higher degree of (or longer enduring) meaning available on a supernaturalist worldview, then one might conclude that some kind of meaning is still missing in principle: the ultimate meaning that is *attainable* on the naturalist view is less than the ultimate meaning that is *conceivable* (on other views). In response, the naturalist might question whether such fanciful possibilities (by naturalism’s standards) reflect *genuine* deficiencies in meaning. I will not pursue this approach further here, though it overlaps somewhat with the second response to EDT.

¹⁰ For an overview of terror management theory, see Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

¹¹ Bastien Trémolière, Wim De Neys, and Jean-François Bonnefon, “The Grim Reasoner: Analytical Reasoning Under Mortality Salience,” *Thinking & Reasoning* 20, no. 3 (2014): 333-351.

¹² Joshua Seachris also suggests this point—that there may be something inherently unsatisfactory about the “ending” of the naturalistic “narrative” of life. See Seachris, “Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending,” *Religious Studies* 47 (2011): 141-163.

A second response involves denying the EDT on the grounds that it imposes an unreasonable condition on meaningfulness. Against the EDT, one might claim that present meaningfulness is sufficient for life to be meaningful: our lives *are* meaningful now (if they meet certain conditions) and that is enough! In broad terms, this approach involves arguing that the pessimist's standards for real or ultimate meaning are too high. If we require features like immortality, being remembered forever, or leaving indefinitely existing traces as a necessary condition for life to be (ultimately) meaningful, then the standard itself guarantees failure. But the problem is not with life but with the standard. We should adopt more moderate standards, or at least not feel bad that our lives cannot measure up to an impossible standard. I will consider some representative examples of this sort of response in the next section.

A third response accepts EDT but challenges interpretations of what it means to “endure” that are exclusively forward-looking. We often think about things enduring into the future (persisting as natural objects or organisms), but perhaps we should also consider the way in which things may endure as determinate parts of the past. This approach is hinted at in the epigraph above from Viktor Frankl: “having been is also a kind of being, and perhaps the surest kind.” A meaningful thing obtained or achieved becomes a fact about reality, and facts are immaterial and thus can endure the utter destruction of physical reality. Of course, in keeping with the angsty remark of Woody Allen that he wants to live on in his apartment and not merely in the hearts of his countrymen, some may find the idea of “living on” as a set of determinate facts a rather hollow way of rescuing our lives from oblivion. Nevertheless, Frankl's outlook on this issue has not, to my knowledge, received much if any attention in the philosophical literature on death and meaning in life. Given the limitations of the second approach, I think it is worth considering the merits of Frankl's outlook, which I will do at some length after a brief examination of the merits of moderating our standards.

Responding to EDT, Part 1: Moderating Our Standards

The schematic argument above which introduced EDT is somewhat ambiguous. On one (weak) reading, it suggests that death *ends* the meaningfulness of a life; there's no possibility of adding meaning to your life once you're dead. However, pessimists like Tolstoy in his period of crisis have in mind a stronger point: that death *negates* any meaning attained in life, cancels it out. Death is not simply the end of a life; it *erases* that life.

At the level of personal mortality, we can notice that this stronger claim simply isn't true. The dead "live on" in various ways: in the memories of others, in the traces they leave behind, and sometimes they (or, their corpses) continue to "live"—as in the practices of the Torajan people—with their family members.¹³ Of course, many of these forms of "symbolic immortality" depend on what Scheffler calls the "afterlife"—the continuation of the human communities in which we (at least some of us) continue to have some influence after we die. If the meaningfulness of our individual lives depends on the continuation of the community, then collective mortality dooms us all eventually. But does this mean that the meaningfulness of the lives led by all the members of all human communities has *ended* (such that no further meaning can be added to what has transpired), or is the meaningfulness of it all *negated*, erased, such that it was *all* for naught, all futile?

Brooke Alan Trisel argues that the worry that death renders life futile reflects an "unrealistic" standard for meaningfulness. He points out that while some of our goals may depend upon the continued existence of humans after our own death (such as writing books for posterity, leaving a legacy for our family or culture), many of our goals and efforts do not depend on the future in this way: "people do accomplish many of their goals: they graduate college, they get married, they pursue various careers, they write books, they travel, and so on."¹⁴ For Trisel, living meaningfully is a matter of achieving goals. Thus, as long as our goals are realistic, we can avoid futility. If one wants to be remembered for an eternity, one's desire is almost certain to be frustrated (barring a supernatural realm of remembrance), but this is, according to Trisel, an unrealistic goal. This seems perfectly sensible. If one's goal is not to die, and one is a naturalist, then the situation looks bad. The most meaningful thing to do here might be to revise one's aims, to strive for things that are obtainable within life, and seek to align one's desires with one's metaphysical outlook.¹⁵

Kieran Setiya urges us to pay attention to the *atelic* aspects of activities that are often goal-oriented—to see the meaningfulness of engaging, for example, in an intellectual or artistic *process*, and not to locate all of the meaning in the final

¹³ Caitlyn Doughty, *From Here to Eternity* (Norton, 2017).

¹⁴ Brooke Alan Trisel, "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts," *The Philosophical Forum* 35, no. 3 (2004): 376.

¹⁵ For other recommendations of moderated standards, see the end of Albert Camus' *The Rebel* (Vintage, 1991) and Odo Marquard, "On the Dietetics of the Expectation of Meaning," *In Defense of the Accidental*, translated by Robert M. Wallace (Oxford University Press, 1991): 29-49.

product.¹⁶ He also notes that some things which appear to be important sources of meaning, such as spending time with loved ones (i.e. relationships), are atelic in that we achieve the goal simply by engaging in the activity. The end is internal to the activity or project. Obviously, death means we can no longer engage in atelic activities, but if the meaning is in doing them, then death, in a sense, comes too late to destroy the meaning. One might propose that *leading a life* is itself to be understood in this atelic sense, thereby removing some of the sting of the fact that, in one sense of the term, the “end” of every life is death. Such a view flatly rejects the EDT: meaningfulness is not a matter of how long one endures, but of how one lives for as long as one is alive.

Finally, Susan Wolf offers the most pointed, no-nonsense reply to the ill feeling that pessimists express when contemplating our cosmic insignificance, which is in part a function of our individual and collective impermanence. Wolf acknowledges, “The pessimists are right about the futility of trying to make ourselves important” in this cosmic sense.¹⁷ Her advice: “Get Over It.” Perhaps this is a pithy way of summarizing Trisel’s point and asserting that from a naturalistic perspective, the only meaning we can realistically hope to attain is meaning *in* life.

However, if Wolf’s rejoinder encapsulates Trisel’s recommendation that we adopt realistic (or humbler) standards, then it may seem we have made no progress against the pessimist. The pessimist may very well accept—as Benatar does—that “terrestrial” meaning in life is the only meaning we can attain but insist, as Rivka Weinberg does, that this is an objectively *sad* fact about our meager little lives.¹⁸ Nevertheless, their concession that there is *some* meaning obtainable in life constitutes progress over Tolstoy’s despair that death renders *all* of our efforts futile. It is not clear just *how* sad Weinberg takes our mortality (or cosmic insignificance, etc.) to be.¹⁹ However, even if it is an objectively sad fact that our lives lack some kinds or degrees of meaning, that does not entail the stronger pessimistic claim that death negates whatever meaningfulness we can attain in life.

In a response to Scheffler’s Doomsday scenario, Wolf re-visits the feeling of pointlessness and disappointment in the face of our collective mortality and

¹⁶ Kieran Setiya, *Midlife* (Princeton University Press, 2017): 133ff.

¹⁷ Susan Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives,” in *The Variety of Value* (Oxford University Press, 2014): 104.

¹⁸ See Note 7.

¹⁹ Cf. Nelson Cowan, “Life is Pointless—Good Point...And How Do You Feel About That?” *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2, no. 1, article 13; doi: 10.35995/jci02010013.

speculates that questions like, “Why should I do my homework since the universe will ultimately disappear?” may be “unanswerable.”²⁰ If what matters is what is permanent or will endure, then nothing matters. Her “get over it” response, as well as Trisel and Setiya’s suggestions, urge us to get over the desire for permanence. Given our human situation, this seems like reasonable therapeutic advice, but pessimists may continue to insist that this is simply a *coping mechanism* for those who cannot stomach the depressing truth that our lives are *really, ultimately* meaningless, given a standard of meaning that we can specify but never attain. Providing a philosophical argument against this pessimistic line of thought might be unanswerable, as Wolf surmises; however, it may be possible, as I noted earlier, to demonstrate that the pessimist’s standard of meaning is incoherent. Nevertheless, instead of pursuing that approach, I suggest we consider a different response to the pessimist’s argument that shifts away from the sensible (but possibly question-begging) advice that we should adopt realistic standards and goals.

Responding to EDT, Part 2: Becoming Part of the Past

So far, I have focused on responses to EDT that *reject* it in order to overturn the pessimist’s argument that death renders human life meaningless. However, another way to undermine the argument is to grant EDT but deny the second premise that human life does not endure. This route is obviously open to those who defend the existence of an afterlife in which we are in some way eternally preserved. A naturalist could perhaps make some similar suggestion that we “live on” in the various effects that our lives send rippling into the future or in the elements that once were part of our own bodies, though such impersonal “survival” does not seem to have interested Tolstoy and would not even count as enduring or survival on many views. Furthermore, such views seem vulnerable to cosmic concerns about entropy and the heat death of the universe. We can only endure for as long as *everything* endures.

However, this talk of enduring is nearly always future-oriented: to endure and to live “on” is to continue into the future, so to speak. Viktor Frankl’s remark, presented at the beginning of this essay, challenges this future-biased way of thinking about what it means to endure: “Having been is also a form of being, and perhaps the surest kind.” According to Frankl, the past endures simply in virtue

²⁰ The example comes from young character Alvy Singer in Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall*. Wolf, “The Significance of Doomsday,” in Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 126.

of being past and thereby determinate. That is, once something is done, it remains eternally true that it has been done: it becomes a real and permanent part of the past. This outlook—if it is coherent—offers a way of responding to the pessimist by granting EDT while rejecting the claim that human life does not endure.

1. Frankl on the Reality of the Past

Frankl expresses the idea that the past is real and endures in several of his writings, including the 1984 Postscript to *Man's Search for Meaning*:

For as soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so once and for all. We have rescued it into the past wherein it has been safely delivered and deposited. In the past, nothing is irretrievably lost, but rather, on the contrary, everything is irrevocably stored and treasured. To be sure, people tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.²¹

Some may worry that Frankl's figurative language (the "granaries of the past") is charming but metaphysically suspect. However, the basic position can be stated without the flowery language: when we act, we bring into existence states of affairs that then become part of the determinate and real past. There they endure forever.

As in the views discussed in the previous section, Frankl stresses that meaning can be achieved or secured within life. He then adds the idea that such meaning is indeed *secure* in the past. If we have lived meaningfully—"with courage and dignity" or however else we see fit characterize meaning *in* life—then it will always be true that we did so. What is true of the past cannot be destroyed—by death or anything else.

In a 1966 essay, "Time and Responsibility," Frankl extends this line of thought to the whole person:

What happens, finally, when all the sand has run through the neck of the

²¹ Op cit., 150.

hourglass and the upper part has become empty? When time has run out on us and our own existence has run to its final point—death?

In death everything becomes inflexible; nothing can be changed any more. The person has nothing left, has no more influence over his body and his psyche. He has completely lost his psychophysical ego, What remains is the self, the spiritual self. Man no longer has an ego, he ‘has’ nothing left, he only ‘is’—his self.²²

In other words, death brings about the *completion* of a person’s life in the sense that it is the point at which the meaning of that life is fixed. At death, we “become” fully the sum of what we have been in our life—for better or worse! Frankl suggests that his outlook implies two “paradoxes.” The first is:

that man’s own past is his true future. The dying man has no future, only a past. But the dead ‘is’ his past. He has no life, he is his life. That it is his past life does not matter; we know that the past is the safest form of existence—it cannot be taken away.²³

Death is the moment at which we shift from *having a life* in which we are able to realize various possibilities, thereby making real the ones we act upon, to *being* the life that we have led. We only conclude this process of becoming at the moment of death. This point expresses the second “paradox”:

man does not become reality at his birth but at his death, for his self is not something that ‘is’ but something that is becoming—and has been completed only at the moment of his death.²⁴

The paradoxical notion is that we do not become fully “real” until we have died, although in a quite ordinary sense, we no longer exist (are no longer alive) when we are dead: how can I be “real” or “exist” if I am dead? Of course, these seeming paradoxes, as well as Frankl’s conception of becoming and the past, may trade on ambiguity or equivocation with respect to notions like “real” and “exist.” Clearly,

²² Viktor Frankl, “Time and Responsibility” in *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, edited by Alexander Batthyány (Marquette University Press, 2010): 174-5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

the sense in which we become “real” at the moment of death is not to be confused with being alive in the biological sense. His remark that “man’s own past is his true future” suggests that our completed lives continue to exist as part of reality—the completed past—and exist as such indefinitely into the future. This, as it seems to me, is simply another way of saying that the past is *eternally* real. Death, rather than being the great destroyer of meaning, is the moment at which whatever meaning our lives possessed in life *becomes* a determinate part of this eternal reality.

Frankl anticipates one sort of objection to this outlook, which is that the past is only real, and that meaning only endures, if someone continues to remember it. He writes:

it is irrelevant whether anyone remembers or not; just as it is irrelevant whether we look at something or think about something, that it still exists and is with us. For it exists regardless of whether we look at it or think about it...the totality of our life, which we have lived to completion and death, remains outside the grave, and outside the grave it remains. And it remains not although, but because it has slipped into the past and has been preserved there. Even what we have forgotten, what has escaped from our consciousness, remains preserved in the past; it cannot be eliminated, it ‘is’ and remains part of the world.²⁵

Although some may find this conception of the past mysterious, it seems no less mysterious than the idea that there are facts about the past that we do not know and perhaps cannot know because anything that we could recognize as evidence for these facts is no longer available. Nevertheless, whatever happened really did happen. That some future people, or some alien race, or the black hole into which our solar system will collapse may not be able to *recognize* the facts that characterize the meaningfulness of our lives does not *remove* or *erase* that meaning if those facts and the enduring past that grounds them are mind-independent features of reality. It may be important for us to remember the past for our own sakes, but the past, on Frankl’s view, does not need us to remember or verify it in order for it to be real.

²⁵ Ibid., 173.

2. Existential Implications

As an existential psychiatrist, Frankl aims to provide a framework that reveals the possibility of leading a meaningful life despite the suffering that living involves. Above, I noted that on his view the past “preserves” us *for better or worse*. Like other existentialists, Frankl seeks to impress on us a sense of responsibility: we define ourselves through our attitudes and choices, how we wrestle with the situations into which we are thrown. Given Frankl’s view of the past, it is true that the meaningless, stupid, and terrible things we do are stored in the “granaries of the past,” too. This may be an unnerving thought; one might worry that the past preserves too much (everything), and perhaps more than we would like it to preserve. However, the problem of meaning contained in these worries is not a problem that is posed by death; it is a problem about how we make use of possibilities and respond to the circumstances of our lives.

Frankl offers an “imperative” of action to capture his notion of responsibility and the permanence of the past: “Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrong the first time as you are about to act now.”²⁶ This seems to be a twist—a second coming, so to speak—of Nietzsche’s myth of eternal return: to imagine that our life and all our choices will be repeated infinitely. However, Frankl is not only reiterating the idea that what we do becomes eternally true. His imperative also suggests the idea of a “second chance” at meaning: we cannot change the past, but we can do something different (and more or less meaningful) *now*, which will then become part of the unchanging past.²⁷ In other words, regardless of how we have failed or suffered in the past, it remains possible to add something more, and something more meaningful, for as long as we are alive. Although we cannot change the past, we can add something better to it.

3. Ontological Considerations: The Growing Block Theory of Time

Frankl’s insistence on the reality of the past and the indeterminate status of the future resembles *the growing block theory of time* (GBT) and related views according to which there is an ontological asymmetry between the past and the future.²⁸ GBT holds that the past and present are real, and that the future is not.

²⁶ Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “Postscript 1984,” 150.

²⁷ For narrativists about meaning, this point may be especially important, since it captures the idea that even if there are bad (or boring or meaningless) parts in one’s life story, we have a chance to take the story in a different, perhaps redemptive, direction. For any naturalist, the story will always have to end, and cannot end in an ongoing “happily ever after” fashion.

²⁸ Storrs McCall’s branching (or shrinking) future view also seems to be in basic agreement with

C.D. Broad characterizes the view in this way:

Nothing has happened to the present by becoming past except that fresh slices of existence have been added to the total history of the world. The past is thus as real as the present...the essence of a present event is, not that it preceded future events, but that there is quite literally *nothing* to which it has the relation of precedence.²⁹

The future is the “edge” of becoming. Although Broad appears to have abandoned the view in later work—especially the idea that the past is “as real” as the present—several philosophers have revived and defended GBT in recent years.³⁰

GBT opposes both *presentism* and *eternalism*.³¹ Presentists hold that only the present is real: the past *was* real but is no more. Traces of the past may remain in the present. The future *will become* real when it is present. Eternalists hold that *all* times are real and that the distinction between past, present, and future corresponds to our (illusory) experience of time rather than an ontological difference.

GBT captures something that may be appealing about presentism—the future isn’t real; it hasn’t happened yet, and it may be *open*—as well as something appealing about eternalism: the past is real; forgetting or burying it cannot change what *really* happened. Of course, GBT also then inherits what each of those views finds objectionable in the other.

Critics of GBT allege that it fails to distinguish past and present: the past *happened* and that is true, but to say that it still “exists” makes it sound like past

Frankl’s view of time. See McCall, *The Consistency of Arithmetic and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2014). On McCall’s view the future “exists” as a branched set of possibilities; as one possibility is actualized (and becomes present) the other possible branches “drop off.” The differences between McCall’s view and those of various advocates of GBT are not especially important here. Roughly, McCall seems willing to talk of the reality of future possibilities in a manner that is absent, for example, from Broad’s 1925 articulation of GBT. For Broad, there is no sense in which the future exists: “when an event becomes, it *comes into existence*, and it was not anything at all until it had become” (68). An obvious question is whether being a possible event is *not* a way—if only thinly—of being “something.”

²⁹ C.D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (Kegan Paul, 1923): 66. A similar idea is expressed in ancient thought by Seneca in “On the Shortness of Life.”

³⁰ See for example, Michael Tooley, *Time, Tense, and Causation* (Oxford University Press, 1997), Fabrice Correa and Sven Rosenkranz, *Nothing to Come* (Springer, 2018), and R.A. Briggs and G.A. Forbes, “The future, and what might have been,” *Philosophical Studies* 176 (2019): 505-532.

³¹ For further discussion, see Kristie Miller, “Presentism, Eternalism, and the Growing Block,” in Heather Dyke and Adrian Bardon, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Time* (Blackwell, 2013): 345-364.

events are still somehow happening today.³² But Caesar is not still crossing the Rubicon and dinosaurs are not still walking the earth. They are *gone*. Presentists can agree (with GBT and eternalism) that there are truths about the past, so it may seem unclear what GBT aims to gain by emphasizing the “realness” of the past. However, advocates of GBT argue that truths about past events are fixed by those events, so the past must continue to exist to serve this truth-grounding function. Things *happened* in the past, but to have happened *is* to be real.³³

However, if the past must be real to ground truths about the past, then GBT’s conception of the indeterminate future seems questionable. We make statements now about the future, and according to the law of the excluded middle, statements must be true or false. What makes them true or false would be some future state of affairs. Thus, the future must already exist (as the past must continue to exist, on this way of thinking) to ground the truth value of statements about the future. Defenders of GBT respond that the law of the excluded middle does not apply to statements about future contingents, which are *indeterminate*. The laws of two-valued logic apply to timeless and settled truths (what is past or present) only. One possible future will *become* true, but that hasn’t happened yet.

The attractiveness of GBT may be tied to whether one accepts determinism or indeterminism. Some defenders of GBT, such as Tooley, contend that GBT is compatible with determinism—even a deterministic future is not *real* until it occurs.³⁴ However, GBT’s *appeal* may depend on the existence of an open future. Frankl’s existentialist conception of human freedom assumes indeterminism, though a determinist can agree that our actions “create” truths even if those actions are determined. The past endures for eternalists, too, and its traces (often) endure for presentists. Nevertheless, the specifics of Frankl’s claims about time seem most aligned with GBT’s commitment to an ontological asymmetry between past and future.³⁵

³² See David Braddon-Mitchell, “How do we know it is now now?” *Analysis* 64, no. 3 (2004): 199-203.

³³ See Peter Forrest, “The real but dead past: a reply to Braddon-Mitchell,” *Analysis* 64, no. 4 (2004): 358-362

³⁴ Tooley, 26-7.

³⁵ Eternalists could make a similar argument as Frankl’s about the enduring nature of the past. For example, see Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Prometheus, 1995), p. 231. Presentists may also argue that the past is always preserved in the present, though will have to respond in their own way to the pessimist’s worry that *all* will cease to be at some point, thereby destroying all prior meaning. Perhaps if something must always exist, there will always be a present in which the traces of the past are somehow preserved. Insofar as I am interested in how Frankl’s ideas about the past serve as a response to the pessimistic argument, their compatibility with other views

4. Objections to Frankl's Real Past as a Response to the Pessimist

Suppose we grant GBT to Frankl or develop the point about an enduring past from a different perspective on the metaphysics of time. Even if we are satisfied with some notion of an enduring past, there remain other questions about whether this counts as a compelling response to the pessimist's argument that death undermines the meaningfulness of life. Here I anticipate some objections and suggest some replies.

First, recall that Frankl rejects the idea that a past life or accomplishment continues to be meaningful only if it is remembered. Even if that response is reasonable, I can imagine the following further objections:

A. Frankl's ideas are not compatible with naturalism:

A naturalist might balk at some of Frankl's language ("the spiritual self") and with the idea that the past is "real" regardless of what evidence it leaves behind. Frankl's past is itself "supernatural."

Response:

If this is supernaturalism, it is at least considerably different than various theistic versions of supernaturalism.³⁶ Perhaps it would be better to think of it as a species of *non-naturalism* to avoid confusion. I leave it to others to consider how we ought to classify the facts that we create through our choices and actions. However, note that the picture Frankl presents does not seem to require anything supernatural in the more ordinary sense of that term.

B. Frankl's ontological consolation is hollow and involves changing the subject:

Recall Woody Allen's quip that he wants to live on in his apartment rather than in the hearts of his countrymen. Even if the past is "real," we will still be a *dead* part of it. Frankl's claim that we only become fully real or complete at the moment of death is mere wordplay: to be dead is no longer to exist! It may be true that I lived a meaningful life (if I did), but I am not identical to the facts about my life. Facts may endure, but people do

about the nature of time is an advantage. My thanks to a colleague and an anonymous reviewer for both raising this issue, and to the latter for reminding me about Singer's remarks.

³⁶ See Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Part II.

not. Thus, Frankl's argument does not, according to this objection, provide a legitimate refutation of the pessimist's premise that human life does not endure. What endures on his view is something else.

Response:

It is true that Frankl's argument involves a shift in thinking about what it means to endure, since literal immortality is off the table. However, one might attempt a *tu quoque* reply: if Frankl's argument is hollow, then so is the pessimist's argument, since it implies that nothing, except perhaps timeless mathematical and logical truths (or a God) can be meaningful, since they are the only things that can endure in a manner that is immune to death. Even if that were an interesting way to think about what can have ("ultimate") meaning, it would also be true that the facts we create in our lives—having become part of the enduring past—would then have that kind of abiding meaning, too.

One might suggest that Frankl's point is that although our *lives* do not endure, we are able to create facts—or truths—that endure. The problem with the pessimist's argument would then be that it ignores that our transient lives can give rise to something else that meets the condition of the EDT, and *that* makes human life meaningful even though it does not itself endure (biologically).³⁷ However, this line of thought still assumes the EDT, since the meaningfulness of our transient lives is anchored in creating something enduring. Furthermore, recall Frankl's "paradoxical" remark that one's "life" is only complete at the moment of death. The facts we create through the course of our lives are not something separate from our lives; they are the totality of our lives. That our lives become, on Frankl's view, fixed truths is a powerful idea but perhaps also an upsetting one, as the next potential objection recognizes.

C. The "real past" preserves too much: all the misery and anti-meaning, too:

Section 2 above anticipates this worry. If the past is real and endures, then all the terrible things we do or suffer, all the time we wasted, and all the relatively meaningless lives are also preserved "safely" in the past. Given all the terrors and disappointments of human history, the past is a

³⁷ This idea was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

horror show. At a personal level, that the past endures means that one cannot erase past traumas or wrongs that may be difficult to bear; adopting Frankl's view about the permanence of the past might make such adversities even more unbearable.³⁸

Response:

As above, Frankl needn't deny any of this, at least up to a point. Importantly, worries about the quantity of past misery and meaninglessness is a somewhat different issue regarding the pessimistic view that the quality of life, on balance, is bad. Sparring here with the pessimist over the proper accounting of the overall quality of life would take us too far afield, since it involves questions about how to tally the meaningfulness of life as a whole.

On Frankl's view, our lives will continue to have whatever meaning (or lack thereof) that they attained while we lived. While there isn't much we can do about bad luck that cuts short our lives and interrupts some of the meaningful projects or relationships in which we might be engaged, for Frankl, meaning is created through what we make of whatever life we have. Even if life is not as bad as the pessimists allege, life is often difficult, and we have limited time, which we squander at our own peril. One of life's difficulties is finding ways of coming to terms with the traumas or misdeeds in our own past; for Frankl, doing so can constitute a meaningful achievement. Frankl describes his own view as "tragic optimism," because he recognizes that, on the one hand, we must all confront the "tragic triad" of pain, guilt, and death.³⁹ On the other hand, his optimism is that there are meaningful ways of confronting and responding to each of these. People are not always able to do so—that is undeniable—and even some who do may have done (or suffered) terrible things that may seem to outweigh any later achievements. What is "preserved" in the past, as a metaphysical matter, is not something we can pick and choose, but how best to *respond* to the past is, for Frankl, an open question. In some cases, it may be important to resolve to "never forget"—for the sake of our own dignity or honesty or in remembrance of those who were not as lucky as us. In other cases, it may be better to try to forgive and forget and to train our attention on meaningful possibilities that remain. And so on.

³⁸ The personal point was urged by an anonymous reviewer.

³⁹ Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 137ff.

D. The value (including the meaning) of the past diminishes over time:

Frankl's view suggests that the meaningfulness of a life is fixed, perhaps by reference to timeless standards such as acting with dignity, courage, creativity, and so forth. However, (1) it is often the case that we judge the meaning of past phases or accomplishments in our lives differently over time. Sometimes we revise our judgments downward: what once was a meaningful accomplishment may later not seem like such a big deal. We may even agree that *at the time*, it was quite meaningful, but that its meaning has diminished with the passing of time. (2) As other things become true of our lives (for better or worse), the relative value of that one meaningful thing becomes less and less of the whole story of our lives. Similarly, after we die, our personal story becomes less and less of the whole story of the meaning of everything. (3) A different way of making the point might be to suggest that the *effects* of our lives diminish over time. The ripples and waves we make settle over time and are then as nothing.

Response:

Of course, our past and present judgments may be inaccurate. Perhaps we overrated the meaningfulness of past achievements (or failures) or are underrating them now. In addition, we may sometimes find a past event or experience to be more meaningful than we took it to be when it occurred. Our current attitudes aren't a decisive guide on such questions. Consider, for example, Parfit's arguments that we tend to be future biased in ways that are bad for us.⁴⁰ One way in which future bias is bad for us is that it leads us to think that the significance of past events is less than the significance of present or future events. Of course, from a practical standpoint, it often makes sense to care about the future in a way that we do not care about the past (especially if we take the future to be open): we can affect what becomes true in a way that we cannot affect what already is true.

Point (2) offers a different account of diminishing meaning. It may be tempting to think that as we add more to our lives, the relative value of any part decreases. That may be true in the sense that it might count for less in an averaged score. If I only do one meaningful thing in my life and then spend the rest of my life like a couch potato, my qualitative score will

⁴⁰ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 8.

decrease the longer I vegetate on the couch. But that is not a point about *time*. That is, time is not the diminishing factor; it's the addition of other life details that are relevant to an overall assessment. The same point is true about the critic's leap from this point about the quality of an individual life to its contribution to the "meaning of everything." One's life being past is not the source of this diminishing significance within the whole. And the point is strange, since it entails that every birth makes one's own life less meaningful. It is less of the whole. Averages do not seem to be the only relevant consideration in tabulating meaningfulness.

The final claim about the diminishment of meaning over time (3) suggests that meaning diminishes as the effects of our lives and deeds dissipate over time. Here we might call to mind the ruins of Ozymandias' kingdom in Shelley's poem or the more homely ruins of forgotten pioneers in various parks: these people may have led meaningful lives, but this can mean little to us except to remind us that we will likely have a similar fate. Few of us leave significant traces that last for millennia. Even that would not be long enough to satisfy some pessimists: the collapse of the galaxy still looms.

Of course, some people do leave significantly lasting traces. If meaning is a matter of continuing effects, then the lives of people like Socrates and Plato have become *more* meaningful over time through their influence on a growing number of people. The past might in this sense sometimes become more meaningful. However, in the case of continuing influence, we should notice that if Socrates and Plato had not led meaningful lives *in their own time*, we wouldn't be admiring and learning from them today. The meaning precedes the memory of it and is not constituted by it. Furthermore, while some lives make meaningful "splashes," others may be committed to leaving and preserving things as they are, as in the outdoor recreation ethic that advises us to "leave no trace" when we go hiking or camping. Where the meaning of an activity is atelic, leaving traces may be entirely beside the point. What matters is only that it was done.

Conclusion

Although Frankl's view about the reality of the past may seem to contradict the earlier, moderating set of responses to the pessimist (insofar as they involve accepting the transience of our lives and efforts), these different responses are

complementary. Frankl urges us to consider our lives under the enduring aspect of truth—the past is past, and yet it *is*. We create and become truths that endure. Trisel, Setiya, and Wolf urge us to be realistic in our expectations and standards, and to consider the meaningfulness of projects that have value in themselves or through our relationships with others. If we look for a point beyond such activities and relationships that justifies them, we may find that there is no *further* point, but that does not mean there is no point. Whereas the pessimist sees death as making everything we do pointless, we may always respond that death makes their pessimism pointless as well.⁴¹

⁴¹ Early versions of this paper were presented at the Kentucky Philosophical Association 2023 Meeting and the Fifth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life. Thanks especially to Beau Branson for suggesting I look further into the philosophy of time to interpret Frankl's view and to audiences at both meetings for helpful questions. Thanks also to Steve Parchment for detailed comments on a draft and to the two anonymous reviewers for this journal.