Life, the Universe, and Connectedness

I. Introduction

The cosmic perspective has sometimes been called the 'view *sub specie aeternitatis*' or 'point of view of the universe.' This perspective is best understood as our capacity—however limited—to imagine and reflect on the universe as a whole, especially with attention to the vastness of the universe in space and time, what things or values are ultimately real, or the contingency of it or our emergence from it (Seachris, 2013; Hanson, 2020; Kügler, 2021). The cosmic perspective is associated with concerns about whether life is absurd, whether we have any significance in the universe, how the universe seems indifferent to us, and how small and helpless we ultimately are.

There's been some recent work towards systemizing some of these concerns. Joshua Seachris (2019), for example, analyzes talk of the meaning of life in terms of a cluster of three more basic concepts (intelligibility, purpose, and significance). For clarity, I'll use Seachris' understanding of meaning throughout this paper, although the truth of my argument won't hang on it. Even if this analysis succeeds, though, I am doubtful that all of our concerns related to the cosmic perspective can be reduced to concerns about the intelligibility, purpose, or significance of life. Take, for example, Bertrand Russell's statement, "Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way…" (1903). Similarly, consider this passage from Pascal,

> When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me (1670/2008).

Guy Kahane (2014) takes both of these statements to indicate that, when contemplating "the vastness of the universe we inhabit, our humdrum location, and our inevitable future doom… human life can seem utterly insignificant." While this describes part of Russell and Pascal's concerns, it doesn't do so exhaustively. Russell is also clearly disturbed about how we're all going to die and the ultimately small extent to which we can control our fates, mentioning how everyone is "condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness…" (1903). Pascal, moreover, seems to have a concern that has often been overlooked in the literature: a sense of disconnection from his life when viewing it from the cosmic perspective. Note in particular his fear when considering himself in the context of "spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me" (1670/2008).

Pascal's concerns are not uncommon. As I'll argue, many discussions of issues related to the cosmic perspective—including those about life's meaning—are interwoven with concerns about whether a sense of disconnection from our lives is warranted by that perspective. Connectedness concerns seem at least as important to most of us as concerns about, say, life's purpose, our cosmic significance, or the universe's indifference. Indeed, we might care about such issues, in part, because they are interwoven with how warranted a loss of one's sense of connectedness with one's life might be from the cosmic perspective. There is, I suspect, a rich interrelationship between all of these issues. But before I begin my discussion, I should first clarify what exactly I have in mind when I talk about 'connectedness to one's life.'

II. What Is Connectedness to One's Life?

The sort of thing that I take connectedness to be is a particular evaluative and affective,

motivational, or salience-related psychological state (or set of states).[1] As such, it's a phenomenon closely related to emotion, if not counting as an emotion itself. Connectedness most centrally involves attitudes, affects, or judgments related to familiarity, engagement, identification, and feeling at home. Having a strong sense of connection to nature, for example, involves identification with the natural world (Pritchard et al., 2020; Perrin and Benassi, 2009), taking it to be important and relevant to one's self-concept. Likewise, insofar as someone feels familiar with her old friends, in the absence of defeaters, she will feel connected to them. On the opposite end of the spectrum is disconnectedness, involving unfamiliarity, disengagement, alienation, and feeling out of place.

We should now look specifically at the sense of connectedness to one's life. This feeling has a much more diffuse object than, say, connectedness to one's work or social group. The particular sense of 'life' that I have in mind is the sequence of experiences and events that one goes through between birth and death. Thus, one's surroundings, such as one's home, workplace, and loved ones, can also be a part of one's life, since these things can all be central components of the events we go through (compare Kagan, 1994). Having a sense of connectedness to one's life need not entail having a sense of connection to every aspect of one's life, every experience and event. Feeling connected to one's life, more or less, just entails that one feels connected to most of the salient aspects of one's life.[2] I should finally note that sometimes talk about one's life is really just talk about a part of one's life. Accusing you of ruining my life can simply mean that the present and future parts of my life are ruined

[1] In giving this psychological account, I have aimed towards a more broad and disjunctive definition in order to accommodate a number of different theories of emotions and emotion-like states. See, for example, Prinz (2004), Tomkins (2008), Russell (2003), Helm (2009), and de Sousa (1987).
[2] I take salience to be a psychological phenomena, and as such something that needn't entail anything about objective value or importance. Those who prefer to may replace saliency with some other criterion.

and not that the past parts of my life have been retroactively ruined.

In summary, connectedness to one's life minimally involves a sense of familiarity, engagement, identification, or being at home with regard to the sufficiently salient experiences and events that one goes through between birth and death (or some more limited and particular range of time between birth and death). Disconnectedness from one's life minimally involves a sense of unfamiliarity, disengagement, alienation, and being out of place with regard to those same experiences and events.

My conception of connectedness to one's life has some overlap with Susan Wolf's well-known concept of meaningfulness in life. As Wolf (2010) writes, "a person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or as I earlier put it, if she loves something– as opposed to being bored by or alienated from most or all that she does." It's true that the emotions involved in meaningfulness can increase and partially constitute one's sense of connectedness to one's life. In fact, I take Wolf to largely recognize the importance of connectedness concerns when approaching issues related to meaningfulness. However, the phenomena of meaningfulness in life and connectedness to life are distinct in a couple of important ways.

First, connectedness to one's life is a purely psychological phenomenon. But Wolf's conception of meaningfulness in life requires that some of one's activities have value that is "independent of and has its source outside of oneself." Consequently, Wolf thinks that meaningfulness occupies a special place in our normative reasoning and motivation, distinct from both moral and self-interested reasons as traditionally conceived. Wolf might say that my hobby of making dioramas, no matter how engaging I find it, doesn't count as meaningful since (let's assume) the activity is only valuable because I find it fun. However, I might still be

very connected with this hobby insofar as I find it engaging and familiar, identify with it, and feel at home making dioramas. Making dioramas will count as a salient part of my life, one that I feel connected to, without any of this entailing that this hobby is meaningful.[3]

Moreover, Wolf's conception of meaningfulness involves engagement but not necessarily other aspects of connectedness, such as familiarity or feeling at home.[4] A traveler moving to a new place might find her daily life exciting, engaging, and gripping. Insofar as she does, she will feel connected to her life there. I take connectedness to be a scalar phenomenon, and perhaps sometimes engagement alone might make it appropriate enough to say that one feels connected to one's life. However, this should not lead us to think that connectedness in general can be reduced to engagement. Consider the ways in which our traveler may not feel fully connected to her life abroad yet, being in such an unfamiliar place and far from home. Indeed, she might have traveled for this very purpose, as this can be exciting and foster personal growth. Disconnectedness from one's life needn't always be a bad thing, as I'll discuss later.

Generally speaking, connectedness is categorically different from any account of meaning that includes an objective component, and one does not seem to suffice for the other. Consider the following two cases:

A life with meaning but not connection

Marvin is a great composer, whose work has inspired and brought joy to millions of people. Some people have even written to Marvin that his music brought them back

[3] I might often feel even more connected to activities that I take to be objectively meaningful (see section IV). But notice that this depends on my beliefs rather than the actual meaningfulness of the activities.
[4] It is possible that a subjectivist account of meaning could be based upon connectedness. However, I am unaware of any account of meaning, including any subjectivist account, that does do this. Moreover, as the above diorama-making case shows, an account that takes feelings of connectedness to suffice for meaning will render unintuitive results.

from the brink of suicide. Marvin, however, has never felt at home in the world. Even his loved ones seem unfamiliar to him, and he does not feel a sense of identification with his own music.

A life with connection but no meaning

Arthur loves counting blades of grass. Since he inherited his father's wealth, Arthur is free to spend every day doing just that. Arthur considers himself a grass-counting aficionado, and feels a sense of familiarity and being at home while counting blades of grass.

These cases, at the very least, show the intuitive difference between connectedness and meaning. Of course, Wolf would say that Marvin's life doesn't feature meaningfulness insofar as he isn't engaged by his own activities. But even if we took Wolf's account of meaningfulness to be an account of meaning, the fact that Wolf emphasizes objective value in her account nevertheless rules out the possibility of conceptually identifying connectedness and meaningfulness. This is in addition to the other aforementioned differences between my concept and Wolf's.

Admittedly, it is possible that a purely subjectivist account of meaning could be based upon connectedness. However, I am unaware of any account of meaning, including any subjectivist account, that does do this. And any account that takes feelings of connectedness to suffice for meaning will render unintuitive results (like characterizing Arthur's life as meaningful and Marvin's life as meaningless). Meanwhile, objectivist accounts of meaning, as noted, clearly do not risk overlap with the emotional (or emotion-like) phenomenon of connectedness and will likely align with our commonsense intuitions about the above cases. With our basic understanding of connectedness to life set in place, let's now turn to whether

such concerns can be more or less rationally fitting to one's circumstances.

III. Connectedness to One's Life and Rationality

In this discussion, I assume a view of emotions as being evaluative in some sense.[5] Fear, for example, can be understood as prototypically involving an evaluation of something as dangerous. These evaluations, in turn, can often be regarded as more or less fitting to what they are evaluations of. Being afraid of a rabbit is (typically) a less fitting evaluative attitude than is being afraid of a bear. Some feelings, however, are less characterizable in terms of rational fittingness (or being rationally warranted) than others.[6] We might wonder, then, whether a feeling of (dis)connection to one's life can be fitting or unfitting in rational terms.

Feelings of (dis)connection can clearly be rationally fitting in some contexts. If one discovered that her spouse had only married her to get closer to her sister, a sudden feeling of disconnection from him seems fitting. After all, it would be fitting to respond to this discovery with a diminished feeling of familiarity with him, a major loss of feeling at home with him, and a loss of identification with him. Such a discovery would also warrant a sudden sense of disconnectedness from one's life, by means of a reorientation towards many of one's important memories, plans, habits, and even one's sense of self. Take, for another example, *The Truman Show* (1998), where the protagonist slowly discovers that his whole life has been, unbeknownst to him, spent on a television set made to look exactly like a town, with his everyday life being broadcast to the world as a reality television show. Similarly, in *The*

[5] This view is most commonly associated with cognitivist theories of emotion (e.g., Müller, 2017; Helm, 2009; Nussbaum, 2001; Solomon, 1976). However, as Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2023) argue, some noncognativist theories of emotions can also accommodate the view that emotions are evaluative.
[6] For convenience, I'll use the words 'fitting' and 'warranted' interchangeably, as any distinction between the concepts is not relevant to my argument.

Matrix (1999), the hero discovers that his life has been spent inside of an experience machine that merely simulates the real world. Both characters react with a rationally warranted sense of disconnection from their lives. In these cases, their lives were other than what they had seemed to be when they had felt connected to them.

The above cases all involve the discovery that one's beliefs and attitudes about one's life are inaccurate. But such disconnection, perhaps more commonly, can simply involve a reassessment of the value or significance of parts of one's life. Just as some information could prompt a descriptive reappraisal of the world, as in the above science-fiction examples, so might it prompt an evaluative reappraisal. Consider a gourmet butcher learning more about factory farms and converting to veganism. This change in his ethical views will prompt a new evaluative outlook on some extremely familiar and central parts of his life (at least until he can alter these things): his profession, workplace, and the ostensible contribution to society he makes.

Often, such feelings of disconnectedness from one's life are partial and might highlight ways in which one's current life doesn't align with one's values. In the novella *Something to Do with Paying Attention* (Wallace, 2022), the narrator is suddenly seized by a sense of disconnection from his aimless way of life:

> Anyhow, I was sitting there…and watching the soap opera…and at the end of every commercial break, the…network announcer's voice would say, 'You're watching As the World Turns,' which he seemed, on this particular day, to say more and more pointedly each time…until I was suddenly struck by the bare reality of the statement…the announcer was actually saying over and over what I was literally doing…I was aware only of the concrete impact of the announcer's statement, and the dawning realization

> that all of the directionless drifting and laziness and being a 'wastoid' which so many of us in that era pretended to have raised to a nihilistic art form, and believed was cool and funny…was, in reality, not funny, not one bit funny, but rather frightening, in fact, or sad…

In this scene, the narrator's behavior strikes him in a new, defamiliarized way, as he looks upon his current life with a sense of alienation from it and suddenly feels disconnected from his slacker identity and subculture.

A final reason for which one might feel disconnected from one's life involves the perceived salience of certain facts. This typically alters one's sense of familiarity with some parts of one's life. For example, an Icelandic person may have always been aware that her customs were particular to her culture, but moving to China might create a sense of defamiliarization with these customs just because their cultural particularity becomes more salient. These sorts of cognitive reappraisals are also important for understanding the cosmic view's influence on our sense of connectedness to our lives.

IV. Value, Rationality, and the Cosmic View

On the face of things, it shouldn't be too surprising that a sense of disconnection from one's life could be warranted from the cosmic perspective.[7] The cosmic perspective (the view *sub specie aeternitatis*) is markedly different from the personal perspective (the view *sub specie humanitatis*). The contrast between our sense of connectedness to our lives from the first person

[7] As Kahane (2014) also notes, there is a scene in Douglas Adams' *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* that ingeniously captures this phenomenon. Adams imagines a device called the Total Perspective Vortex, which was first developed to give people a perspective of themselves from the "whole infinity of creation and [oneself] in relation to it" (1980), but this device is soon thereafter adapted to be a torture device.

perspective and disconnection from our lives from the cosmic perspective is at the heart of Thomas Nagel's conception of 'the absurd'. As he writes,

> Think of how an ordinary individual sweats over his appearance, his health, his sex life, his emotional honesty, his social utility, his self-knowledge, the quality of his ties with family, colleagues, and friends, how well he does his job, whether he understands the world and what is going on in it. Leading a human life is a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern. This fact is so obvious that it is hard to find it extraordinary and important…Yet humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis*—and the view is at once sobering and comical.

Nagel takes this sense of disconnection to be warranted because, from the cosmic view, we see that we lack a legitimate foundation for the norms that guide our lives, "our choices and…claims to rationality," because the "whole chain of justification" ultimately "rests on responses and habits that…we should not know how to defend without circularity" (1971).

Nagel's argument can be interpreted in a couple of ways. He might be saying that taking the cosmic perspective leads to skepticism about foundational or ultimate reasons, and awareness of this skepticism contributes (when contrasted against our personal perspectives) to the sense of the absurd (compare Weinberg, 2021: 5). This is because it takes us away from the everyday reasons present to our personal, human perspectives. This is the more usual takeaway from Nagel, but it has the unfortunate effect of alienating those who would endorse

foundationalism about reasons. A volunteer for Doctors Without Borders could claim that her ultimate reason for volunteering is to help end needless suffering. Nagel might point out that skepticism is warranted about whether she really has an ultimate reason since her stated reason still stands in need of justification. But it is plausible enough that ending needless suffering is the sort of reason that simply doesn't need further justification (compare Huemer, 2022: 75). Those who find Nagel's skepticism to be implausible, therefore, might not find this version of his argument to be convincing.

Fortunately, there is an alternative interpretation available. Nagel might simply be saying that many of our desires, habits, and choices are rationally underdetermined, and that the cosmic perspective, by separating us from our personal perspectives, makes us aware of this. To warrant an evaluative reappraisal of our lives, the cosmic view needn't have any connection to nihilism since it needn't threaten values that we take to be objective. I may not suppose that there is a fact in the world corresponding to my attitude that my dream last night was interesting or that I ought to visit Japan.[8] Even if such attitudes respond to objective values, such as aesthetic ones, the reasons to act that might emerge from these sorts of attitudes are clearly agent-relative. For example, the reasonableness of the desire that it be myself who visits Japan, as opposed to my neighbor (who would get as much out of it), depends on that desire being my own. But the cosmic view will necessarily (and perhaps analytically) not involve a privileging of any particular agent-relative reasons.[9] Thus, it is not that taking on the

[8] Indeed, many of our evaluative attitudes, like the sports teams we support, contain partisan rankings that are transparent even to ourselves. This may include, to some extent, our rankings of values themselves (Tiffany, 2007; Baker, 2017).

[9] It is worth asking whether moral saints would experience a similar sense of alienation from their lives from the cosmic perspective, or whether their robust concern for moral patients would more easily accommodate such an impartial perspective.

cosmic view robs one of any reasons to act. To borrow a phrase from Nagel, "the problem is not that values seem to disappear" from such a perspective, "but that there are too many of them, coming from every life and drowning out those that arise from our own" (1986: 147).[10]

In either case, if the cosmic view did evoke some such response, it would indeed warrant a sense of disconnectedness from our lives. Many parts of our lives are guided by habits and goals that are already set in place. This grounds the familiar patterns of our behaviors and evaluative dispositions. To adopt the cosmic perspective is partially constituted by a disconnection from the personal reasons that guide our lives and outlooks. The resulting awareness, however dim, of the full landscape of reasons we might have to act is tied to an awareness of our own forms of life as contingent and idiosyncratic. To see the idiosyncratic qualities of our lives is to lose our sense of familiarity, of being at home with regard to our lives. While the things that make any of us feel at home are indeed contingent on our history and the kind of beings we are, the very feeling of being at home is partially constituted by our unconsciousness of these very contingencies and idiosyncrasies (Jacobson, 2009: 372).

Peter Kügler (2021), however, has recently argued for the "benefits of the non-existence of objective values and of meaning *sub specie aeternitatis*." Among other reasons, Kügler (2021) thinks that this is because nihilism about objective values "paves the way for a richer notion of subjective meaning…[and] can motivate us to live in the present moment," engaging in more autotelic activities.[11] I take it that if Kügler is correct, this might undermine my point that nihilism or an awareness of the rational underdetermination of our usual motives would (at least rationally) warrant a sense of disconnectedness to our lives.

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[10] See also Vargas (2020).

[11] Autotelic activities, such as dancing and playing music or games, are activities where the goal is just the doing of the activity itself, rather than there being some goal external to the activity.

I can't fully address Kügler's arguments here. Still, I would like to say a few words as to why his points do not seem correct or at least don't undermine my argument that belief in nihilism or the rational underdetermination of our ways of life legitimately threatens our sense of connectedness to our lives. Kügler conceives of subjective meaning as depending "on whether your life appears to be valuable" (2021). But the appearance of value is normally taken by us as evidence that our lives just are valuable (compare Huemer, 2005). If one were to learn that one's life, or its salient parts, in fact did not have value, it is difficult to see how the appearance of its value could remain, at least while one is attending to this fact. Perhaps this would work like many optical illusions do, with our perceptions staying the same even after our explicit beliefs about the images change. Similarly, even if I learned that I was a brain in a vat, it would still appear to me that the objects of my perception are real, external objects. But as we have seen from our earlier considerations of science-fiction examples like *The Matrix,* the fact that the world would still appear to be real would not suffice to ward off a (warranted) sense of disconnectedness from what I had taken to be the real world. Similarly, to ward off a sense of disconnectedness, it would not likely suffice for the salient elements of my life to merely appear to have value despite (my attendance to) the fact that they do not have value. Thus, it does not seem likely that one could retain as strong a sense of connection to one's life based on the fact that it appears valuable, even while one knows that it is not actually valuable.

Similarly, we likely engage in autotelic activities and are engaged by them because either (i) we regard them as actually valuable activities (as with creating art or meditating) or (ii) as with games, because they provide us with a break from what C. Thi Nguyen (2020) calls

the more overwhelming "thicket of values" that makes up our usual lives.[12] Regarding the first possibility, my reply above still applies. As for the second, this certainly shouldn't imply that we would be better off without that thicket of values, any more than enjoying a rest from exercise implies that we're better off always resting.

Kügler also contends that a lack of objective values would "make death seem less bad," since when considering death from the cosmic view, "it presents itself as the natural end of a biological episode that has no objective value" (2021). Admittedly, this may be a pyrrhic victory over death, similar to diminishing my fear of death by eliminating the valuable things from my life (e.g., divorcing my wife and destroying my projects). Still, for reasons that I will cover in the sixth section, the cosmic view can indeed make our death easier to handle insofar as it diminishes our sense of our own individual deaths' importance. Note, however, that both Kügler's contention and my own imply that the cosmic view makes death more tolerable insofar as it disconnects us from our lives.

V. Connectedness to One's Life and in a Vast, Indifferent Universe

Unlike considerations related to normative reasons and value, Nagel takes some of the concerns associated with the cosmic view, such the universe's size, to be irrelevant to life's absurdity. As he writes,

> What we say to convey the absurdity of our lives often has to do with space or time: we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any

[12] As mentioned in section II, I can feel quite connected to hobbies that are not objectively meaningful. But this shouldn't be taken to imply that I can therefore feel connected to a life that I take to be objectively meaningless.

> minute. But of course none of these evident facts can be what makes life absurd, if it is absurd. For suppose we lived forever; would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity? And if our lives are absurd given our present size, why would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because the universe was smaller)?

Nagel is right here, as most philosophers seem to agree (e.g., Kahane, 2014; Russell, 1959). Nonetheless, there is a sense in which reminders of our smallness on the cosmic scale might warrant a sense of disconnection from our lives.

For those of us who are fortunate to enjoy physical safety in our everyday lives, thinking about our smallness on the cosmic scale reminds us of our vulnerability to the contingencies of geological and astrophysical forces (such as supervolcanoes, asteroids and black holes), against which we are totally helpless. Viewing our lifespans in the context of the lifespans of mountains, stars, and galaxies, moreover, makes our lives seem almost inconceivably brief.

These considerations can highlight a fragility and contingency of our lives that is foreign to everyday experience, as well as undermining our sense of homely comfort in our more immediate surroundings. In this sense, some amount of disconnection from our lives is warranted, at least for the duration of our adoption of the cosmic perspective. This is closely related to what Tom Cochrane (2013: 130) calls "the sense of self-negation" we get when perceiving awe-inspiring things, which is a sense of

> how physically insignificant, or utterly contingent we are in comparison to the object…to see something as big or powerful is at the same moment to feel small and vulnerable. Even when looking at the landscape from the top of the mountain, one may feel reduced by the magnitude of the earth. It is the feeling that comes from

> confronting something inhuman, uncompromising, hostile or just profoundly indifferent. And this can be grasped in a single perceptual experience that startles or overwhelms the spectator, or it can emerge more slowly in contemplation.

The inclusion of indifference here is particularly interesting. The universe's indifference is often treated as a problem that is most closely related to life having significance. David Benatar, for example, suggests that "people have in mind when they are concerned about human cosmic insignificance…that the universe (including our own planet and its powerful natural forces) is indifferent to us" (2017). But Cochrane's above reflections suggest that the indifference of the universe emerges no less as a physical concern.

This is why Brooke Trisel's (2019) reply to Benatar's (2017) concerns about the universe's indifference is not fully satisfying. Benatar (2017) laments that we are "ephemeral beings on a tiny planet in…a cosmos that is coldly indifferent to the insignificant specks that we are."[13] Responding to Benatar, Brooke Trisel (2019), evokes facts about how the universe provides us with order and life-sustaining resources to prompt a feeling of being at home in the universe, despite its indifference. As she writes, "Our living quarters, where we eat and sleep, are indifferent to us and this does not concern us at all" (Trisel, 2019). Trisel's reply is sensitive to connectedness concerns as distinct from concerns related to intelligibility, purpose, or significance. She implies that the indifference of our surroundings cannot in themselves warrant a sense of disconnection from them. Insofar as our surroundings constitute an important part of our lives, this fact would diminish the extent to which the cosmic view warrants a sense of disconnection from our lives.

But Trisel overlooks the physical sense in which our homes are not indifferent to us.

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[13] Lao Tzu similarly observed, "Heaven and Earth are impartial / They see the ten thousand things as [sacrificial] straw dogs" (400BC/1999).

Our homes are, by design, directly responsive to us (e.g., light switches, faucets, temperature dials) and attuned to our needs. And while the universe provides us with life-sustaining resources, it also provides us with every bad and threatening situation we encounter. As William James (1896/1956) put it, "Every phenomenon that we would praise exists cheek by jowl with some contrary phenomenon that cancels all its religious effect upon the mind. Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership." This is (hopefully) not true of our homes.[14] All of these factors contribute reasons for a feeling of disconnection from our lives when viewing them from the cosmic perspective.

Indeed, the cosmic perspective might be required to achieve this effect. When we consider our homes in a more broad sense, our towns or cities, we consider a place filled with people like us, signs directing and warning us, stores filled with things we might want, and so on. Zooming out further, we consider our countries, filled with similar towns as well as familiar natural landscapes in which we could still hope to find shelter and sustenance in a pinch. But considering the universe as a whole, while we might find it beautiful, we are confronted with a place that overwhelmingly consists in environments impossible to survive in: extreme temperatures, acidic atmospheres, crushing pressures, barren moonscapes, and total voids.

It might be objected that while the cosmic view may warrant a sense of disconnection from the wider universe beyond our homes, it is not clear why it would warrant a sense of disconnection from our own lives. After all, such contemplation will not make our own lives seem hostile, vast, or indifferent. My point, however, is that contemplation of our lives from

[14] When this is, sadly, true of our homes, it is indeed something that concerns us and makes connectedness more difficult.

the cosmic perspective brings features of our lives that we usually ignore to the forefront: namely, the extent to which our lives are fragile, contingent, and at the mercy of larger forces. Analogously, as mentioned earlier, the person who discovers that her spouse only married her to get closer to her sister will not just feel disconnected from her spouse but from her own life as well: her memories, sense of home, and so on.

Granted, many of us—especially the less fortunate— are well-aware of the fragility of human life. We remain aware of our vulnerability on an everyday level regarding things like disease, crime, and war. These are risks that we can mitigate to some degree. Even when facing the threat of war, one can take up arms or try to flee. However, we are vulnerable in certain ways that we have no control over. This lack of control is doubtlessly a large reason why we don't think of such vulnerabilities in our everyday lives; what would be the use? Only in rare moments, such as when adopting the cosmic view, will we become conscious of such vulnerabilities.[15] There is also something uniquely dwarfing about the sorts of threats we face on a cosmic scale. For this reason, it makes sense that one would experience a unique sense of fragility when considering the cosmic perspective. Under the cosmic view, a sense of disconnectedness from our lives is warranted insofar as it undermines a specific sense of safety that characterizes the "routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity" of everyday life, exchanging it, at least a little, for a sense of being "a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos" (Becker, 1973). This insecurity can warrant a felt loss of familiarity and being at home with regard to our lives.

Our sense of being at home also comes with a sense of fitting into a larger whole, with the world around us reflecting the shapes of our lives—especially understood in terms of

[15] The literary genre 'cosmic horror, 'characterized by writers like H. P. Lovecraft, is specifically aimed at evoking a sense of sensitivity to such vulnerabilities.

meaning *qua* intelligibility (compare Seachris, 2019; Behrendt 2018: 22-3; Hankiss 2000). Just as our homes are filled with physically responsive systems meant to accommodate our comfort and survival, so are they decorated with familiar objects and art that we identify with. The wider cosmos, however, does not reflect our lives in this way. This is another way in which it is indifferent, and indifferent in such a way that undermines our sense of home. Our concerns about our cosmic smallness show that, when it comes to the cosmic view, we care about more than just the intelligibility, purpose, or significance of our lives. We want to be able to feel connected to our lives even when regarding them from the cosmic view. And while the concern about connectedness is distinct, we can also see significant ways in which it is interwoven with concerns about life's meaning. Our sense of connectedness to our lives from the cosmic perspective is likely diminished insofar as we struggle to feel at home in the universe overall. We may have to settle for feeling at home in our own corner of the cosmos, regarding our lives *sub specie humanitatis.*

VI. Connectedness to One's Life and Cosmic Significance

Guy Kahane (2014) suggests that an awareness of the vastness of the universe can rationally diminish our sense of significance.[16] The vastness of the universe might simply make it statistically less likely that we are significant, since the more things of significance there are out there, such as intelligent life, the less significant we are. The implication that the possession of significance is a zero-sum game might be surprising. Kahane thinks of significance as contextually determined rather than determined just by intrinsic value, since understanding significance "as mere value fails to meet the requirement that to be [significant]

[16] See also: Rivera et al. (2019).

is at a minimum to be worthy of people's attention" (2022: 411). As Kahane explains, "What attention and concern is merited by something is a function not only of its own value, but also of what else of value is in view. The intrinsic value of something cannot be changed by its surrounding. But its significance can" (2014: 750).

It might be objected that attention-worthiness is not a reliable marker of significance or a plausible necessary condition for it. For one thing, it will always turn out that our own lives merit our attention, given that we are embodied creatures with practical interests. But the relevant sort of attention-worthiness is not meriting attention from a practical point of view. Rather, it is the meriting of attention from a more disinterested, objective point of view.

Granted, it's possible that objective attention-worthiness isn't the best possible way to cash out our notion of significance. Perhaps some other term or concept is a better fit. Whatever the case may be, objective attention-worthiness is certainly something we care about. Imagine, for example, that I am a novelist worrying about the prospect that an advanced artificial intelligence could write a greater novel than I ever could. It is not the intrinsic value of my work that is under threat here. Rather, it is the significance of my work, in Kahane's sense, that is under threat.

Let's return now to how the cosmic view might undermine our sense of significance. I take our sense of our lives' significance to be an implicit, unconscious attitude most of the time rather than a rational judgment. David Foster Wallace (2009) captures this sort of attitude well when he notes, "Here is just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of. Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence….It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth." The cosmic view, as a

step back from the first personal perspective, helps us to gain a more realistic appraisal of our own lives' significance.

Zooming out spatially, we reflect on the billions of other people on Earth with their own projects, talents, and concerns. Further out, we reflect on the estimated two trillion galaxies in the universe (NASA, 2016), each of which may host life surrounding one of its millions of stars. Zooming out temporally, we see how short- lived the impact of our projects will ultimately be and how we will be justifiably forgotten in history. This reappraisal is a rational grounds for a temporary sense of disconnection from our lives. It again involves regarding our lives in a defamiliarized way and, at least for the duration that the cosmic view is adopted, may rationally undermine the extent to which we can identify with our usual evaluative habits and concerns.[17]

VII. Does it Matter?

If I have managed to convince you that connectedness concerns are strongly interwoven with philosophical discussions related to the cosmic view, you might still wonder why this matters. Some philosophers, like Susan Wolf (2010) and Thomas Nagel (1971; 1986), have expressed connectedness-related concerns, albeit in different terms. But for the most part, this issue has been ignored. Maybe the reason that these philosophers didn't directly talk about

[17] As I mentioned in section IV, this might make one's death seem slightly less tragic. Nagel touches on this, writing that while his death is awful from a personal perspective, when conceiving of his death from an objective perspective, "detachment seems natural: the vanishing of this individual from the world is no more remarkable or important than his highly accidental appearance in it" (1986: 229). But even if the significance of one's own death is diminished from this standpoint, one must now attend to a broader problem. As Nagel writes, "if we try to do justice to the fact that death is the ultimate loss for everybody, it isn't clear what the objective standpoint is to do with the thought of this perpetual cataract of catastrophe in which the world comes to an end hundreds of thousands of times a day" (1986: 230).

connectedness and disconnectedness is that their own explicit concerns were more important.

Connectedness concerns as such might not have been explicitly addressed much in analytic discussions regarding the cosmic perspective and meaning of life because this field is extremely young, emerging in the anglophonic philosophical tradition only around the 1980s (see Metz, 2021).[18] The absence of direct reflection on (dis)connectedness may also have seemed secondary to those issues that, as I've been arguing, might warrant this reaction. Analogously, the issue of whether abortion warrants feelings of disapprobation is downstream from the question of whether abortion is wrong. In any case, the lack of attention previously given to this issue alone certainly doesn't warrant a continued lack of attention.

Connectedness to our lives seems important to our psychological welfare. To see how, it might help to look at cases where connectedness to one's life is conspicuously missing. Consider, for example, people suffering from depersonalization and derealization disorder (DPDR).[19] This disorder involves persistent or recurrent perceptual episodes where, among other things, one feels a sense of "detachment with respect to surroundings" or being an "outside observer with respect to one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions" (APA, 2013). This sense of disconnection has been described as a feeling of being "isolated from the world," with oneself and others seeming 'strange' (Cox and Swinson, 2002: 174). One DPDR sufferer describes his mother looking "like a robot, a robot that looked like my mother," and another says, "I even look at my beloved little dog, and I think, what an odd thing" (Pienkos and

[18] Nonetheless, reflections on what reasonable attitudes might be adopted by taking the cosmic view emerge in Western philosophy as early as Marcus Aurelius: "all the sea [is] a drop in the universe; [Mount] Athos a little clod of the universe: all the present time is a point in eternity. All things are little, changeable, perishable." Right after this, he writes that "all things are of one kin" and encourages the reader to frequently reflect upon "the connexion of all things in the universe…For in a manner all things…are friendly to one another" (167/2021).

[19] I was in fact inspired to write this article by my own experiences with the strong DPDR symptoms that accompanied panic disorder (a disorder that I used to suffer from).

Sass, 2022: 59-60). Often, DPDR sufferers also experience a normative disconnection from their lives, i.e. a disconnection from the usual and habitual norms and evaluations usually taken for granted in everyday life. As a result, DPDR sufferers report difficulty "finding worldly objectives…relevant or important" and struggle to "feel the concern or drive to accomplish things in the world," sometimes being "unable to cope with situational demands or respond adequately in social situations" (Pienkos and Sass, 2022).[20]

Such kinds of experiences are captured well by Sartre in *Nausea* (1949). The narrator, for example, describes a terrible feeling of disconnection from his surroundings generally, losing his grasp on "the meaning of things, the ways things are to be used, the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface…When [scents] ran quickly under your nose…you might believe them to be simple and reassuring…But as soon as you held on to them for an instant, this feeling of comfort and security gave way to a deep uneasiness" (1949).[21]

This is not to say that connectedness to one's life is always good and disconnectedness from one's life is always bad. Indeed, the cosmic perspective can be valuable just because it disconnects us from our lives—our petty worries, egocentrism, and limited interests. Carl Sagan popularly captured this sentiment often, such as in his book *Pale Blue Dot* (1994). Next to an image of Earth taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft, Sagan writes, "Look again at that dot. That's

[20] Relatedly, psychedelic usage sometimes gives rise to profound feelings of connectedness (Carhart-Harris et al. 2017; Plesa and Petranker 2023) and at other times gives rise to profound feelings of disconnectedness similar to that of DPDR (Bremler et al., 2023). Indeed, some historians speculate that Sartre's *Nausea,* which we'll discuss presently, was inspired by such a psychedelic experience (Haynes-Curtis 1995).

[21] The particular interest in existentialist philosophy in popular culture is likely partially due to the fact that existential philosophy has taken special interest in issues like alienation, engagement with the world, and nihilism (Aho, 2023), topics directly related to connectedness to one's life. A similar insight is gained by looking at works in popular media that deal with existentialist themes. Don Hertzfeldt's film *The Meaning of Life* (2005), for example, is mostly wordless, showing humanity for only a brief span of time and otherwise focusing on strange and alien forms of life preceding and coming after us.

here. That's home…our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light." The perspective on the Earth that Sagan invites us to take both disconnects us from our lives and helps to connect us to the wider cosmos around us. It does this by calling for our engagement in facts about the cosmos, an increased familiarity with it, and the identification of the cosmos as, in some sense, our home. Indeed, readers who have felt a sense of connectedness when stargazing or contemplating the cosmic perspective may have been experiencing just such a sense of connectedness to the wider universe around them. This sort of connectedness has been noted as corollary to a diminished sense of self in experiences of awe (Chirico and Yaden, 2018: 222; Yaden et al., 2017).

Perhaps consciously acknowledging the importance that such connectedness has to us will help us to engage with the cosmic perspective in more beneficial ways, at least emotionally. As Carl Sagan's writing suggests, for example, disconnectedness from our lives, at least in small, controlled doses, may benefit and enrich us. Bertrand Russell (1935/1972) expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote,

> In our day, it is difficult to imagine a world in which everybody, high and low, educated and uneducated, was preoccupied with comets, and filled with terror whenever one appeared…The cause of the change in our attitude is not merely rationalism, but artificial lighting. In the streets of a modern city the night sky is invisible; in rural districts, we move in cars with bright headlights. We have blotted out the heavens, and only a few scientists remain aware of stars and planets, meteorites and comets. The world of our daily life is more man-made than at any previous epoch. In this there is loss as well as gain: Man, in the security of his dominion, is becoming

> trivial, arrogant, and a little mad. But I do not think a comet would now [help]…a stronger medicine would now be needed.

If reflecting on our smallness in an indifferent universe does disconnect us from our lives, this sensation should sometimes be welcome. If nothing else, the feelings of self-displacement and smallness that these reflections evoke have been widely recognized as important (maybe essential) components of the experience of awe (Arcangeli et al., 2020; Cochrane, 2012: 130; Keltner and Haidt, 2003).

A healthy and regular engagement with such feelings may also make them more tolerable and welcome, just as exposure therapy is known to lead to habituation and feelings of self-efficacy (see APA, 2017).[22] Such engagement will also be likely to make us a little less trivial and arrogant. Many studies suggest a strong correlation between experiences of awe and feelings of connectedness with others and the world outside oneself (e.g., Chirico and Yaden, 2018; Shiota et al., 2007). Paul K. Piff and colleagues suggest that "inductions of awe (relative to various control states) increased ethical decision-making…generosity…and prosocial values…prosocial helping behavior and decreased entitlement" (2015). Plausibly, this is because self-centeredness is a particular trait of the personal perspective and, accordingly, altruism involves a detachment from our personal point of view (compare Nagel, 1986: 171-175). Such experiences also provide opportunities for a sense of respect and

[22] One reviewer has wondered what might happen if we were all properly educated, when growing up, about the ways in which the universe is vast, awesome, and indifferent. Perhaps, given the right sort of exposure to these ideas, people would not experience a sense of disconnection from their lives when viewing them from the cosmic perspective. I do think that we might become less sensitized to these insights about the universe in such a case, and we even might develop a greater sense of familiarity with the wider universe. Nevertheless, there remains an inherent tension between the engaged, 'worm's eye view 'of our ordinary perspectives and the detached, 'bird's eye view 'of the cosmic perspective (compare Nagel 1971). This is, I think, why moments of identification with the wider universe around us seem to involve a sense of self-transcendence and transcendence of ordinary life.

reverence for the universe.

VIII. Conclusion

Concerns related to how connected we ought to feel to our lives are interwoven with, and may even partially motivate, philosophical discussions related to our lives viewed from the cosmic perspective. The cosmic view, often by altering the perceived salience of certain facts, can warrant a sense of disconnectedness. Certain manners in which our ways of live are rationally underdetermined become salient from the cosmic perspective. Reflection upon the vastness and indifference of the universe also threatens the sense of being at home that we usually enjoy in our everyday lives. Finally, the significance of our lives seems diminished in the wider context of the cosmos. Although connectedness concerns are distinct from such issues as that of life's meaning, these issues also enjoy rich conceptual relationships. Further exploration of such relationships is a promising area of future research. Equally promising is the question of how various religious views and practices can foster connectedness or disconnectedness from our lives from the cosmic perspective (compare Garfield 2015; Vainio 2018; Foltz 2023). As I've suggested, the cosmic perspective indeed warrants a sense of disconnection from our lives. But, in healthy doses, this can be a good thing. Detachment from our own egoic perspectives and a temporary sense of disconnection from our own lives might make us wiser and more altruistic. At the very least, the cosmic view seems to offer the opportunity for a certain humility and sense of awe towards the universe.

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