

Meaning, Purpose, and Narrative

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Abstract

According to many philosophers, “the meaning of life” refers to our *cosmic purpose*, the activity that we were created by God or a purposive universe to perform. If there is no God or teleology, there is no such thing as the meaning of life. But this need not be the last word on the matter. In this paper, I ask what the benefits provided by a cosmic purpose are, and go on to argue that thinking of our lives in a particular way—in terms of *a unified life narrative*—can supply us with many of those benefits. We might lose little if there is no such thing as the meaning of life, since there is still something that can provide much of what is valuable about it.

1 Meaning as cosmic purpose

Many people are attracted to the idea that their lives have *a cosmic purpose*, some task that they were created to perform. Those who are religious or spiritual sometimes talk about what they were “put on earth” by God or the Universe to do, or the way of life that they have been “called” to. Even many who are not so inclined will say similar things, although they leave it vague who or what put them on earth or called them. Consider the words of Betty Bruhn, a volunteer in the special care nursery of a children’s hospital: “I’m blessed: I found my purpose in this world. Not everybody finds their purpose. Not everybody comes to work and is joyful about it. I love coming here. This is what I was meant to do, as long as I can do it.”¹

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¹Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, “Better Angels: ‘This is what I was meant to do,’” April 25, 2018, video, 2:26, <https://youtu.be/R2R5diwjVmQ>.

These ideas clearly hold sway over many people, regardless of what we might think of them. Some philosophers have even suggested that a collective form of cosmic purpose, the task that humanity as a whole was created to perform, is the core of what is meant by the perennial expression “the meaning of life.”² As Susan Wolf writes,

Though there may well be many things going on when people ask, “What is the meaning of life?”, the most central among them seems to be a search to find a purpose or a point to human existence.³

Thaddeus Metz writes,

When it comes to the lives of human persons, there is a common distinction drawn in the field between the meaning “of” life in general and the meaning “in” a particular life. The former is roughly about whether there is a point to the existence of the human race as a species, or, more carefully, human persons as a natural kind.⁴

And Stewart Goetz and Joshua Seachris write,

One of the things that we want to understand about our human predicament is whether we have a purpose(s) and, if so, what its nature is. In fact, many people, when asked what the question of life’s meaning means, will respond that it is a question about life’s purpose.⁵

And at an individual level, someone could express a belief in the cosmic purpose of *her* life by speaking of “the meaning of *my* life.” One could easily imagine, for

²This isn’t to say that cosmic purpose is the only thing that people have in mind when they talk about “meaning” in the context of human lives. The expression “meaning *in* life,” for example, seems to pick out something that doesn’t require God or teleology to exist. (See, for example, Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton University Press, 2002); Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013).) I’ll return to this more mundane sense of “meaning” toward the end of the paper. Nor am I using the term “cosmic purpose” to mean what David Benatar calls “cosmic meaning,” something’s mattering from the cosmic perspective (*Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 3). The two notions are related—one way our lives could have cosmic meaning is through completing the task that things that do matter cosmically, like God or the Cosmos itself, assigned to us—but distinct.

³“The Meaning of Lives,” in *Exploring the Meaning of Life*, ed. Joshua Seachris (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 305.

⁴*God, Soul, and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5.

⁵*What Is This Thing Called the Meaning of Life?* (Routledge, 2020), 7.

example, Bruhn's saying that she's discovered that the meaning of her life is to care for children in need of care.

Of course, given that a cosmic purpose is a task that we were created by God or the Universe (understood as a purposive entity) to perform, there are no such purposes if, as many believe, there is no God or teleology. This is why many philosophers take the question of the meaning of life to make a false presupposition. As Galen Strawson writes, "[The question] always makes my mind go blank. Then a negative answer comes. Life is what it is and it has no meaning, any more than a randomly selected volume of air has meaning."⁶ And if this were the last word on the matter, we might as well sum up things with the trite existentialist phrase, "There's no objective purpose to life; the only purpose is the one that you assign to it."

In this paper, however, I want to ask why the idea of a cosmic purpose is appealing in the first place. This raises the possibility that, even after the death of God or teleology, something else could serve as a substitute for cosmic purposes, providing many of the benefits that their existence was supposed to provide. I'll go on to argue that thinking of one's life in terms of a *unified narrative*—organized in terms of some overarching theme—can provide many of these benefits. This does not mean that having a unified life narrative restores the kind of meaning lost with the loss of a cosmic purpose; it does not show that the meaning of life exists after all. Rather, it shows that perhaps we should not mind if it turns out that there is no such thing as the meaning of life, since there is something else that provides what makes it valuable.

2 The appeals of cosmic purpose

I'll begin by saying more about cosmic purposes. Again, a cosmic purpose is some activity that one was created by God or the Universe to perform. (Someone may have been created by less powerful beings for certain purposes, but that does not secure a *cosmic* purpose. The fact that someone's parents had him for a specific purpose—say, to serve as the heir to the throne—would not mean that he has any cosmic purpose to fulfill.) Cosmic purposes can be individual, the activity that some individual was created to perform, or collective, the activity that humanity as a whole was created to perform. They can be specific or general: someone's cosmic purpose might be to lead her country to victory in war, or simply to love God and other humans. There might be multiple cosmic pur-

⁶"Narrativity and Meaning in Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, ed. Iddo Landau (Oxford University Press, 2022), 74.

poses: perhaps humanity in general was created to glorify and enjoy God, but I in particular was created for some more specific purpose. Throughout the paper, I'll consider cosmic purposes that are both individual and specific, since these better capture ordinary talk about "what I was put on earth to do."⁷

I want to highlight two features of cosmic purposes. The first is that they have, or are taken to have, normative relevance. If someone thinks that God or the Universe created him to perform a particular task, he likely thinks that he has (perhaps overwhelmingly) strong reason to perform that task. The second is that they have explanatory power. The fact that an entity of enormous power created someone for a specific purpose explains certain facts about that person, like why he exists, why he has certain abilities (those that are prerequisites for his fulfilling that purpose), and why his life has gone in a certain direction (toward the fulfillment of that purpose). Consider the case of someone who believes that he was put on earth by God to be a painter and to create works of art that glorify God. By the lights of this person, that God created him to be a painter explains his existence, more local facts (like his artistic ability), as well as important events within his life (like his interest in drawing as a child, his decision to become a painter professionally, and his eventual success as a painter).

These two dimensions of a cosmic purpose—the backward-looking, explanatory dimension and the forward-looking, normative one—allow it to provide two goods: *understanding of one's life* and *a sense of direction in life*.

Understanding

Let me discuss understanding first. To many of us, certain facts about our lives—that we have certain distinctive traits or talents, that we ended up married to a particular person or in a particular line of work, or that we exist at all—seem striking, calling out for explanation. And consider the fact that, in the absence of cosmic purposes, these facts typically have only explanations that are unsatisfying to some degree. The explanations of these facts tend to be shallow, highly probabilistic, or ungraspable at an intuitive level.

Take someone's decision to become a professional philosopher. In retrospect, she might think of it as one of the most important decisions that she has ever made, which determined not only her career, but also where she lives, whom she interacts with everyday, and, to a large degree, how she thinks of herself. Suppose

⁷Of course, the idea that people might *know* what their cosmic purpose is raises perennial questions about the knowability of God's intentions, which this paper will not address. All I am trying to do is to examine, given that people often believe they know what their cosmic purpose is, why these beliefs are attractive.

that she made this decision because she had a childhood interest in philosophical questions, had encouraging professors in her undergraduate philosophy classes, and had enough talent to gain admission to a competitive PhD program. On one hand, this is a perfectly good explanation for her career decision; after all, it's the standard kind of explanation that people offer for these decisions. On the other hand, there are ways in which the explanation fails to be completely satisfying. First, it is not particularly deep: the explanantia are contingent facts that are themselves in need of explanation. Why did the subject have a childhood interest in philosophical questions, as opposed to the more concrete interests that children usually have? Why did she end up with encouraging, as opposed to indifferent, professors? Why did she have as much talent in philosophy as she turned out to have? Perhaps the subject has no explanation for these facts. Second, the explanation is highly probabilistic: the probability with which the explanantia entail the explanandum is fairly low. After all, most people with an interest in philosophy, talent in it, and encouraging mentors don't make a career out of it. A *complete* explanation of that decision, one that renders it necessary rather than only likely, would cite many more facts, many of which the subject herself is unaware of.

Of course, if determinism is true, there will always be a deep and complete explanation of the facts of one's life. Given the precise initial microphysical conditions of the universe and the laws of nature, everything that happens in the universe is necessary, including the events in someone's life. So on a deductive-nomological view of explanation, all the contents of someone's life (including a decision to pursue philosophy as a career) are completely explained by the laws of nature and the initial conditions of the universe. But such an explanation is not one that we can intuitively grasp: the explanantia are too diffuse, and the way in which they entail the explanandum is too complex.

The fact that many of the important facts about our lives admit only of explanations that are shallow, incomplete, or ungraspable means that there is a possible degree of *understanding* about important parts of our lives that we simply lack. What is it to understand something? According to one popular account, it is a matter of seeing how the object of understanding coheres with other pieces of information that the subject has: we understand something in virtue of grasping connections between that thing and other things we know, situating that object in our body of knowledge. As Jonathan Kvanvig writes, "Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational

items are pieced together by the subject in question.”⁸

Given this account, one way I can come to understand a fact is by grasping a causal explanation of it, where the explanantia are other pieces of information that I already have. Now, note that depth and completeness are desiderata of explanations: all else equal, an explanation that is deeper or more complete than another is better than the other. And being able to grasp the explanation is a condition on explanatory understanding. So the fact that, for many of the important facts about our lives, we have only explanations that are shallow, highly incomplete, or ungraspable means that such explanations do not provide us with much understanding about those features of our lives.

In contrast, consider how things are if there are cosmic purposes. As I mentioned, cosmic purposes have explanatory power: they explain facts about our existence, our traits or talents, and the general shape of our lives. And compared to the mundane explanations of these facts, explanations in terms of cosmic purposes have several advantages. First, they are explanatorily deep: they bottom out not in facts that are themselves highly contingent, but in facts about the intentions of God or purposes of the Universe. Second, they are more complete, that is, they entail the explanandum with a much higher degree of probability: given how things were set up, one might imagine that people are ineluctably drawn toward fulfilling their purpose. And although the microphysical explanation has these features, as we noted, we cannot grasp it. In contrast, we can grasp the cosmic-purpose explanation, since its ingredients are ones that we are familiar with, like the intentions of a purposive being. This is true even if, as many religious traditions emphasize, we do not understand how God or the Universe operates; even if the details of the explanation are beyond our ken, we can at least see how it would go in principle. The existence of an explanation with these features means that, if there are cosmic purposes, then we can understand important facts about our lives much more than we could if there are not. If we believe that we were created for a particular purpose, our lives make sense to us to a degree that they do not if we lack such a belief.

A sense of direction

Second, a cosmic purpose can also provide *a sense of direction*, or attraction to a single possible way to live.

I want to start at a seemingly unrelated place. Studies in economics and psychology have shown that, while some choice is better than none, too much

⁸*The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192.

choice can be a bad thing, a phenomenon known as *choice overload* or *overchoice*.⁹ There are several disadvantages of having too many choices. First, it can induce *anxiety*: we can find it uncomfortable having to decide among too many options. Even when the decision is trivial, like choosing which entrée to order from the menu, which film to watch on Netflix, or which project to work on today, the availability of too many choices can still cause mild unease. At a larger level, it can be unsettling having to choose which career to pursue, where to live, or whether to get married to someone. One consequence of this is that we may simply be driven to *indecision*, or unwillingness to decide at all. In a well-known study, customers at a supermarket were presented with a display booth that offered either a small number or large number of jams. Of the customers who were presented with a small number of jams, about 30% bought one of the jams; in contrast, of the customers who were presented with the much larger spread, only 3% bought one of the jams. The presence of more choices made it much less likely that the subjects would pick any of them.

Furthermore, even once we have decided, we might find ourselves *unable to commit* to our decision, always wondering how things would have been if we had decided otherwise, in particular if the decision is revocable. In the case of choosing a partner, for example, the thought that we could have married someone else and ended up even happier can sap our devotion to our actual marriage. Finally, this rumination on the counterfactual tends to make us *less happy* with our decision. In another study, subjects were asked to pick a chocolate to sample from either a small selection or a large selection; on average, the subjects reported being more satisfied with the chocolate they picked if they had been presented with the small selection than if they had been presented with the large selection.

I want to note that what matters here is not the mere knowledge that there are many options. After all, even the subjects who were presented with the smaller jam selection presumably knew that there were many more for sale elsewhere in the supermarket. (The study was conducted at a supermarket known for having

⁹The classic paper on this topic is Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper, “When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000): 995–1006. The studies that I refer to in this section are drawn from this paper. For a popular exposition, see Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice* (Harper Perennial, 2004). For other papers on the topic, see Barry Schwartz, “Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom,” *The American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 79–88; Alexander Chernev, “When More Is Less and Less Is More,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 30 (2003): 170–183; Benjamin Scheibehenne et al., “Can There Ever Be Too Many Options? A Meta-Analytic Review of Choice Overload,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37 (2010): 409–425.

a large selection of goods; the experimenters note that it sold over 300 varieties of jam on its shelves.) Rather, what creates the disadvantages is having too many options be *salient*, capturing our attention and decision-making resources. Even if someone knows, at a purely intellectual level, that she is faced with dozens of options, she won't experience choice overload so long as most of them are not salient to her.

Why should too much choice have these bad consequences? There are at least three reasons. One reason is that many people employ a *maximizing* rather than *satisficing* approach when making decisions, especially if those decisions are important: that is, many of us want to make the best decision, rather than one that is merely good enough.¹⁰ Obviously, the more options there are, the less likely that any particular decision will be the best one: if I'm accepted to 10 universities instead of just three, the chance that I'll pick the university that will give me the best overall experience is much smaller. Second, and related to this, many people want to avoid responsibility for making the wrong decision; given that many people tend to be maximizers rather than satisficers, "wrong" in this context means any decision that is less than optimal. If I am accountable for the mistakes that I make, and if the chance of making a mistake rises with the number of choices, then the chance that I am accountable for a mistake rises with the number of choices. Finally, in evaluating how happy they are with their decision, people are sensitive not just to the benefit resulting from the decision, but also to the *difference* in benefit between that decision and other possible decisions; that is, people take the opportunity cost of a decision into account when determining how happy they are with it. If I receive only one tenure-track offer from a good department, then there is a large gap between how well-off accepting that offer and not accepting it leaves me. In contrast, if I receive five tenure-track offers from good departments, the difference between accepting the best offer and accepting the next best offer is much smaller. In the former case, I feel incredibly happy that I was offered a job in department A, since the alternative would have been to leave academia altogether. In the latter case, I might feel less happy even if I was offered a job in a better department, A+, since the alternative would have been a job at A, or another comparable department.

Obviously, the existence of too little choice can also be bad. Having few or no options in important decisions can be suffocating for many people. And we need *some* choice in order to exercise our autonomy, our ability to live our lives

¹⁰See Barry Schwartz et al., "Maximizing versus Satisficing: Happiness Is a Matter of Choice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83 (2002): 1178–1197.

as we see fit. But this is consistent with the possibility that being at the other extreme is also bad. Now, this is not to deny that many people relish having many options: for them, choosing among many different options is exhilarating rather than anxiety-provoking. But for most people, there is a happy medium between too little choice and too much.

In addition to occurring in decisions like which jam to buy, whom to marry, or which job to accept, overchoice also occurs in the existential decision about, at the most basic level, what kind of life to live. After all, many of us face an incredible amount of freedom in deciding how to live our lives, and, for most of us, there is no way of living it that stands out as obviously the best. Some ways may turn out to be more rewarding or make better use of our talents, but, in the end, many of those possible decisions about how to live will be on a par with one another. Suppose someone entertains the possibility of following his passion, and of doing something useful to society, and of living a settled life of ordinary happiness. He might think that whichever he chooses, it will not be an obviously better choice than any of the other options.

Such a decision gives rise to all the problems of overchoice in more mundane contexts. First, the decision about how ultimately to live my life can give rise to a great deal of anxiety and indecision. Like Buridan's ass, we may even find ourselves paralyzed, unable to choose among equally appealing options.¹¹ Second, we may find ourselves unable to commit to our decision once we've made it, being unable to proceed wholeheartedly with the course we've chosen, constantly

¹¹Consider, for example, the following passage in Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar* (Heinemann, 1963), in which the young protagonist contemplates the possibilities for her future:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

entertaining thoughts of how things could have been. And finally, we might be less happy with our lives, aware of the possibility that they could be even better if we had chosen otherwise.

How do we address the problems caused by having too much choice? Given that overchoice exists because too many options are salient, taking up part of our attention, one solution to it would be to find a way of making a particular option salient at the expense of others, directing our attention to that option and away from rivals. If one jam is placed in a position of prominence over the others, then it will similarly occupy a position of prominence in our attention and deliberation, and we will be more likely to choose it, even though we clearly still know about the other options. If the parents of a student went to a particular university, then that university might occupy more of the attention of the student when he is deciding which university to attend, and he might be more inclined to choose it. When something causes us to direct our attention to one option to the exclusion (or near exclusion) of others, I'll say that it has a *blinkering effect*, in the way that blinkers on a horse prevent it from being distracted by side roads. In the existential decision of how to live, something that succeeds in blinkering us would provide a sense of direction in life, an orientation that propels us toward one possible way to live over others.

There are two separate ways that something could have a blinkering effect on us. The first is by *answering* the question of what to choose in a clear and convincing way. A normative belief can blinker us in this way: if I believe that I am doing something morally wrong in not carrying on the family legacy of attending some university, then that will prevent me from entertaining other possibilities as seriously. The belief does so by telling me that one particular option is best. But what has a blinkering effect on us need not have any normative relevance; the fact that a jam is placed on a pedestal does not necessarily indicate higher quality, and the fact that someone's parents went to some university does not mean that attending that university will be better for her than attending another. So another way that something could blinker us is through *preempting* the question of how to choose, simply directing our attention to one option exclusively before the question becomes live. Even if I do not believe that I would be doing anything wrong in attending another university, the fact that my parents went to some university might direct my attention to that option in a way that causes me effectively to make up my mind before I seriously deliberate on my options.

Believing that my life has some cosmic purpose would blinker me in the first way, privileging one particular way to live and making it alone salient: all other

possibilities drop out of contention once I see (or think I see) that there is a single correct way of living my life. A belief about my cosmic purpose does this by being normative: if I think that God or the Universe put me on earth in order to do some task, then I take myself to have more reason to do that task than to live my life in any other way. And taking myself to have most reason to live in some particular way tends to elevate the option of living in that way in my field of attention. For this reason, such a belief can solve the problems caused by the existence of too much choice about how fundamentally to live. If someone thinks that he was put on earth for a specific purpose, then the question of how to live his life is settled. He need not face anxiety or indecision about what to do. Once he has embarked on this life path, he is not tempted to think about other paths he could have chosen. Driven by a sense of destiny, he is insulated from the discouragement of hardship or failure; knowing that there is a “why,” he can bear any “how.” As a result, he can proceed with seriousness of purpose and wholeness of heart.

By providing a sense of direction, cosmic purposes can also provide a third good, *connection to value*. Consider that people sometimes express a nagging suspicion that nothing they’ve done matters, that they haven’t left a mark on the world, or that things would be no different if they didn’t exist. These complaints are about being disconnected from sources of value, about not having contributed to any valuable goal or performed any valuable activity. This connection is something that most people have a need for. Take the common desire to contribute to “something larger.” As Wolf writes, what “larger” here means is not larger in physical size, but having value independently from us: in wanting to contribute to “something larger,” we want to engage in a project that is objectively valuable.¹² In a similar vein, Robert Nozick writes, “For a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself.”¹³ A life disconnected from sources of value is one that we experience as meaningless.

Believing we have a cosmic purpose can help us connect to value. Of course, one way it can do this is through not the *content* of the purpose, but its *source*: in fulfilling our cosmic purpose, whatever that is, we are helping to carry out the intentions of God or the Universe. We are playing a role, however small, in

¹²*Meaning in Life*, 18–9.

¹³*Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 594. A reviewer has pointed out that part of what is tragic about the imagined predicament of Plath’s protagonist is not just that she fails to make a choice about which life to live, but also that, in doing so, she fails to live her life in any of the valuable ways that she envisions.

the plan for creation. But a belief about our cosmic purpose also lets us connect to valuable things in another way. Consider the cosmic purposes that people often take themselves to have, like bringing joy to others' lives, creating art, or preserving a cultural tradition. These are independently valuable endeavors that these people engage in partly because they believe that it is their cosmic purpose to do so. Believing that our cosmic purpose is to perform some valuable task, then, helps us contribute value by guiding us toward performing that task. If I believe that I was put on earth to take care of people, or be a film composer, or carry on the tradition of making pasta by hand, then I am more likely to do these things, and so to create or exhibit value, than I otherwise would.

It's true that beliefs about cosmic purpose aren't necessary for connection with value; even without believing they have a cosmic purpose, many people manage to live valuable lives. (After all, people still become nurses even if they don't think that they were put on earth to care for others.) But consider that living a life that engages with a valuable project to a high degree is often difficult: doing something valuable often requires a good deal of effort, confidence in oneself, and perseverance to pull off. In the absence of a belief about one's cosmic purpose, it's easy to be tempted by other, less valuable, ways to live; as I mentioned, even if I make an initial decision to pursue something valuable, there might be nothing binding me to that decision. Believing that your cosmic purpose is to engage in a valuable project can give you not just the initial motivation to undertake the project, but also the confidence and determination to stick to and succeed in it. In this way, believing that we have a cosmic purpose often helps us live in more valuable ways than we otherwise would. By believing that we have a cosmic purpose to perform, we are more likely to leave a positive mark on the world.

3 Life narratives

The existence of a cosmic purpose, then, provides both understanding of one's life and a sense of direction in life; and by providing direction, it can also help us connect to value. Of course, there might be other important reasons why having a cosmic purpose is appealing. And there are reasons why the existence of cosmic purposes might strike some as highly *unappealing*. Perhaps the existence of an objective purpose would deprive me of a kind of autonomy, the ability to interpret myself as I wish. In the language of the Existentialists, it would deprive us of our status as "beings for themselves," self-interpreting beings, and consign us to that of "beings in themselves," those whose quality is judged by

some objective, unchosen standard. Nonetheless, to the extent that people are attracted to the idea of a cosmic purpose, its provision of understanding and direction are two of the main sources of that attraction.

Given that these are part of the reason that people are attracted to the idea of a cosmic purpose, it is worth asking whether something mundane could provide these goods. After all, many deny the existence of any kind of cosmic purpose, since they deny the existence of God or a purposive Universe. If they are correct, then cosmic purposes cannot provide genuine understanding, since the explanation of events in our lives in terms of them will simply use false explanantia. Of course, a *belief* that one was put on Earth to perform some task can still provide practical direction, even if false; but if it is false, then we cannot fully endorse it as a solution to the problem of too much choice about how to live one's life.

In this section, I will argue that having a *unified narrative* of one's life, an organizing principle that structures its events into a whole that one can grasp at once, can provide both understanding and direction (and through direction, connection to value). This isn't meant, in the first place, as a piece of practical advice: my main point isn't that, because having a unified life narrative provides these goods, we should adopt one. My main goal is to show that something else can supply what makes a cosmic purpose—and hence the existence of the meaning of life—valuable, so that we should not regret the absence of such purposes if it turns out that they do not exist. In fact, I don't think that the suggestion to adopt a unified life narrative *is* unequivocally good advice. First, it may not be entirely practicable, since, as we will see, whether someone has a particular life narrative is not directly under her control. Next, it ignores the considerable downsides to having a unified life narrative, which I will examine at the end of the section. And finally, some people simply may not need either understanding of their lives at a deep level or a sense of practical direction; for them, there might be little point in adopting a unified life narrative. At the same time, I also think that we have a degree of indirect control over our adoption of a life narrative, and that the benefits of having a unified life narrative typically outweigh the costs. So I'm inclined to agree that those who have an unmet need for understanding and a sense of direction should try to adopt a unified life narrative.

But before discussing all of this, let me first spell out the general idea of a narrative. By "narrative," I mean roughly an account of some sequence of events that lends the entire sequence coherence and intelligibility. Jerome Bruner, for example, writes that "a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events... [whose] meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the se-

quence as a whole”;¹⁴ David Velleman glosses “narrative” as a “particular way of organizing events into an intelligible whole”;¹⁵ and Peter Goldie defines “narrative” as “a representation of . . . events which is shaped, organized, and coloured, presenting those events . . . from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure—coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import—to what is related.”¹⁶ Creating a narrative of a sequence of events might require picking some subset of events to focus on, finding some structure that those events have, and making that structure salient. So a bare sequence of historical events might consist of those leading up to World War I. A narrative of those events might be that there was a growing sense of nationalism among the Serbian subjects of the Austro–Hungarian empire, which led to the assassination of the Austrian crown prince; given the complex web of alliances that had been forming among the European great powers, this led to a series of declarations of war that constituted the start of the war.

What is it for someone to adopt a narrative of a particular series of events, or think of those events in terms of that narrative? On my view, it is not a matter of reflective belief; it is not, for example, to believe that certain connections hold between the constituent events, or to believe that a particular theme best encapsulates the events. Someone can still be in the grip of a particular narrative even if she reflectively rejects it. Rather, it is a matter of having one’s attention oriented in certain directions: toward a particular subset of events, connections between those events, and overall themes or patterns. Since adopting a narrative consists in these orientations of one’s attention, which are not the output of any controllable process, whether someone adopts a particular narrative of a series of events is not directly under her control, although I’ll argue later that it is indirectly under her control to an extent.

I want to narrow my focus in two ways. First, I’ll restrict my attention to a particular kind of narrative, which I’ll call a *unified* narrative. By this, I mean a narrative that can be described in terms of a central theme or organizing principle, which subsumes the entire series of events that it represents; the narrative represents those events as being *about* the central theme.¹⁷ So a mere narrative of the history of the United States might simply lay out the important historical

¹⁴*Acts of Meaning* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 43–4.

¹⁵“Narrative Explanation,” *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), 1.

¹⁶*The Mess Inside* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁷Cf. Tilmann Habermas and Susan Bluck’s notion of “thematic coherence,” in “Getting a Life: The Emergence of the Life Story in Adolescence,” *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (2000): 748–769.

events and make salient the connections between them, without any attempt at bringing those events under some unifying theme. In contrast, a unified narrative of American history, as told by a political progressive, might be that although the country was founded on the ideals of equality and justice, it has never fully lived up to these ideals; its history has been a gradual struggle of realizing them. In having such a narrative, we see American history in terms of a single theme, as being about the struggle of realizing those ideals.

Second, I'll look specifically at what I'll call a *life* narrative, that of the life of a single person. Again, these narratives can contain greater or lesser degrees of unification. An disunified narrative of a life might include many of its important events, organized in such a way as to make the relations between them clear: having childhood interests that lead to fields of study and then careers, meeting a future spouse while in school, getting married, having children, juggling the demands of a career and family life, cultivating side interests, retiring, and so on. Such a narrative has various themes: it depicts the life of its subject as about not just his career, but also his family, his hobbies, and so on. In contrast, unified life narratives are organized around a central theme, which the entire life of the subject can be described as "being about."¹⁸ In the case of an autobiographical narrative, one of the life of the person who adopts it, that theme will typically be based on the facts about the subject that he takes to be the most striking.

Consider the following examples of life narratives. First, a child discovers that she has an intense interest and talent in mathematics. Although her parents disapprove of her interest, she persists, finding a mentor in a leading mathematician of the day. She faces numerous setbacks, but eventually becomes a great mathematician. Next, a boy grows up in a deprived rural community, surrounded by a culture of poverty and dysfunction. Through the guidance of a tough but loving grandmother, he is able to leave his hometown, attending college and eventually law school. Finally, a professional basketball player has his career cut short by an injury. Forced to work menial jobs, he manages to overcome the stutter he has had since childhood and becomes an inspiring speaker. He finally returns to professional basketball as a spokesperson for his former team.¹⁹

¹⁸Of course, there might be multiple correct descriptions of the theme of a unified life narrative that differ in generality: someone's life narrative could be described equally well as one of achieving greatness, as one of achieving greatness *through developing one's talents*, as one of achieving greatness through developing one's *artistic* talents, and so on.

¹⁹The first narrative is based on the life of the French mathematician Sophie Germain; the second is drawn from the early life of J. D. Vance, as described in his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (Harper Press, 2016); the third is taken from the life of Chicago Bulls player Bob Love, as described in

These narratives are unified, in my sense. Each presents the life of the subject as being about a single theme: realizing one's potential, transcending one's roots, or redeeming oneself.

The notion of a unified life narrative is meant to be more stringent than the kinds of narrative that, according to some philosophers, figure in autobiographical thinking. Although his thoughts on the matter are hard to pin down, Galen Strawson seems to think that thinking of oneself diachronically is all that is required for having a narrative of the self, although he argues that not everything thinks of himself in such terms.²⁰ And Marya Schechtman has argued that a condition on identity across time is being able to incorporate one's past experiences into a narrative, which is a matter of having a conception of oneself that is rich and coherent enough for one to think of oneself as a well-defined character.²¹ The narratives that these philosophers have in mind need not be thematically unified: so long as I think of myself as existing across time, or as possessing enough stable commitments to make my personality coherent, the events of my life need not be too closely-knit. I need not be able to think of my life in terms of a single theme, and there might be loose ends. In contrast, a unified life narrative will exhibit a much higher degree of overall coherence; even if everyone thinks of her own life in terms of some kind of life narrative, not everyone thinks of it in terms of a unified life narrative.

I want to distinguish between two kinds of unified narratives. The first is what I will call *full* unified narratives, which, beyond possessing thematic unity, also provide a sense of *closure*: of things having been settled, or of issues raised by the earlier events having been responded to by the end. In the life narrative of the basketball player forced into untimely retirement by injury, his return to basketball as a spokesperson for his former team gives the narrative closure, bringing things to resolution. In virtue of what do some narratives provide closure? Here, philosophers differ. According to Noël Carroll, it is a matter of the narrative's answering questions that it poses. Earlier events in the narrative naturally suggest certain questions ("Will he be pulled into his family's life of crime?", "Will she stay with her husband or try to make it on her own?"), to which the later events provide answers.²² In contrast, David Velleman has argued that narratives provide closure through their containing what he calls an *emotional cadence*: earlier events must elicit certain anticipatory emotions, which find closure in the

Dan McAdams, *The Redemptive Self* (Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 3.

²⁰"Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 27 (2004): 428–452.

²¹*The Constitution of Selves* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

²²"Narrative Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 1–15.

emotions elicited by the later events.²³ Earlier events in the narrative might elicit emotions of hope, yearning, or anger, which are met with emotions of satisfaction or frustration elicited by later events. So the story of a regicide's being killed by the statue of the king whom he murdered provides closure, since the first event evokes indignation, to which the second event responds by eliciting gratification. I won't take a stand here on which account of closure is correct, since the different accounts typically agree on which narratives provide closure.

Of course, many of us don't have full narratives of our lives; most of us don't think of the main action of our lives as already having ended, or have a vision of the future definite enough to include the events that will close our life narratives. Some of us do: someone, for example, might have a narrative of his life that includes future events that he (perhaps wrongly) expects. Even if I am only a struggling writer now, I might have a narrative of my life in which I eventually surmount the odds and become a bestselling author.²⁴ But people often only have *partial* life narratives, ones in which closure has not been reached yet; for many of us, whatever gives our life narratives closure lies in the open future. These partial life narratives are consistent with several possible full life narratives: a partial life narrative of someone following his dream to become an accomplished philosopher is consistent with the full life narrative of following that dream and succeeding, but also with the full life narrative of following that dream and realizing that he doesn't have what it takes, or with the full life narrative of having his ambitions undone by alcoholism.

It is a commonplace that people have life narratives, that they tell themselves stories about the overall shape of their own lives, whether or not these stories are unified. They figure into an overall *self-concept*, or the collection of features in terms of which one thinks of oneself.²⁵ Commonly accepted examples of such features are personality traits, gender, race, and social roles. But the story of one's life that one has forms an important diachronic component of one's overall self-

²³"Narrative Explanation." This is distorting Velleman's views a bit: Velleman actually takes the presence of an emotional cadence to be a condition on narrative, rather than on a narrative's providing closure. But his sense of "narrative" is stronger than mine, since he takes the provision of closure to be a condition on narrative.

²⁴Consider the notion of *personal fables*, or full life stories that older children often invent for themselves: a child might have a life narrative on which he becomes a famous baseball player, or a Nobel Prize winner, or the president. See David Elkind, *Children and Adolescents* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

²⁵See Roy Baumeister, "The Self," in *Advanced Social Psychology: The State of the Science*, eds. Eli Finkel and Roy Baumeister (Oxford University Press, 2010), 139–175.

concept.²⁶ Just as someone might think of himself as intelligent or clumsy, a father or philosopher, he can also think of his life in particular narrative terms: as the development of one's potential, or as the struggle to live authentically, or as a Greek tragedy. And just as other parts of one's self-concept need not be things that one accepts at a conscious level—being clumsy or unlikeable can be part of my identity without my consciously endorsing my identification with these traits—one can possess a life narrative without affirming it reflectively. Rather, having the life narrative is a matter of tending to focus on certain events (through memory or anticipation), connections, and patterns.

The fact that adopting a particular life narrative is not a matter of reflective endorsement means that we do not have direct control over whether or not we have a particular life narrative, or which life narrative we have. At the same time, we have a degree of indirect control over our life narratives. We can expose ourselves to similar narratives, reading a novel or watching a movie in which the protagonist's life is portrayed along certain lines; we can consciously compose a particular life narrative, hoping that the process of doing so will lodge that narrative into the subconscious; we can find a different interpretation of important events from our past; we can silence or encourage internal monologues about our lives when we notice them. All of these are techniques for promoting the adoption of a particular narrative, although there is no guarantee that they will succeed. So although whether or not we think about our lives in terms of a particular narrative is not directly up to us, we still have a large degree of indirect influence over our life narratives.

Now that I have introduced the notion of a unified life narrative—an account of one's life that organizes it around a single theme—we can see how it provides the goods of understanding and direction provided by having a cosmic purpose.

Narratives and understanding

We've seen that a cosmic purpose provides understanding by helping to *explain*, in a satisfactory way, important facts about our lives: why we exist, why we have certain traits, and why our lives have gone a certain way. If there are cosmic purposes, they provide a level of explanatory understanding that we typically cannot access through non-cosmic explanations. I'll argue that a unified life narrative provides understanding, although in a different way.²⁷

²⁶See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (Norton, 1963); Dan McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story* (Dorsey Press, 1985).

²⁷A similar point is made by Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," and Helena de Bres, "Narrative and Meaning in Life," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15 (2018): 545–571.

As I mentioned, understanding consists in grasping connections that make the object of understanding cohere with other pieces of knowledge. In the case of causal explanations, we understand the explanandum in grasping the causal connections between it and explanantia that we know. But explanatory understanding is not the only form of understanding. Another way of understanding an object, which I'll call *understanding through subsumption*, is through assimilating it to or subsuming it under what is already known. In that way, we situate the object of understanding within the familiar. Take some examples. One way to understand a work of art is to see that work as an example of some familiar type of artwork: so we gain understanding of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* by seeing it as a symphony with soloists. We gain a kind of understanding of a concept from an unfamiliar philosophical tradition by assimilating it to a familiar concept, as when we see Confucian ethics as a form of virtue ethics. We can understand puzzling behavior from someone by seeing it as a case of a long-standing pattern: Why did my friend suddenly quit the job that he's wanted for so long? Well, he's always exhibited a pattern of self-destructive behavior. And we can understand someone better by seeing that person as an instance of a familiar character type: as a yuppie, or a normie, or a creative type. Such labels might encode clusters of correlated features, which help us make inferences about other features that the object has: seeing Confucian ethics as a form of virtue ethics leads us to infer that it has a theory of the development of the virtues; seeing someone as a yuppie leads us to infer that she has certain life goals, social attitudes, and tastes. Of course, we shouldn't overestimate how much we can understand something through subsumption; nothing is perfectly alike anything else, and no one is a complete stereotype. But noticing connections of similarity or instantiation between some unfamiliar thing and what is already familiar helps us understand that thing.²⁸

²⁸One might object that what I have called understanding through subsumption is explanatory. Velleman, for example, takes exactly the fitting of some sequence of events into a familiar pattern—an example of what I have called understanding through subsumption—to constitute a form of explanation (“Narrative Explanation”). And the idea that we explain phenomena by finding some general description that accounts for those phenomena and others is the animating idea behind *unificationism* as a theory of scientific explanation. (See Philip Kitcher, “Explanatory Unification and the Causal Structure of the World,” in *Scientific Explanation*, eds. Philip Kitcher and Wesley Salmon (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 410–505.) I won't try to settle the issue of whether subsuming the specific under the general counts as a form of explanation here. My point is just that life narratives, in doing this, provide a kind of understanding that is different from that provided by ordinary causal explanations, regardless of whether what provides the former kind of understanding deserves to be called a kind of “explanation.” Those who think

Similarly, because a unified narrative has a particular theme that is familiar to the person who has that narrative, having a unified life narrative provides the subject with understanding of the events of his life by allowing him to place those events under that theme. In the absence of a life narrative, the events of my life are too multitudinous for me to be able to grasp at once. Although those events are connected through relations of cause and effect, the structure in which the events are embedded is too complex for me to grasp. In contrast, by having a unified narrative of my life, I grasp it under a particular theme, which gives me understanding through subsumption: I understand my life as one of achieving my potential, or one of trying to live authentically, or one of promise undone by deep character flaws. The life narrative provides what psychologists call *integration*.²⁹

Related to this is the ability of a life narrative to let us understand our current situation. Consider the fact that narratives have stages: in a narrative of realizing one's potential, someone first discovers that she has talent in some field, then struggles to develop that talent to its fullest, and finally succeeds. If I think of my life in terms of a narrative, I understand my current situation ("where I am in life") by seeing it as an instance of a stage of that narrative. In this way, having a life narrative lets us contextualize our present by seeing it as an example of something more general, giving us understanding of it through another kind of subsumption.

Finally, if someone has a *full* unified life narrative of her life, one that includes the (perhaps unrealized) events that close the narrative, this ability is magnified by the fact that she can think of her current situation in relation to the end of the narrative. So if I think of my life as a rags-to-riches story, I might interpret my current hardship as the struggle before the eventual success; if I think of it as one of transcending one's roots, I might view my admission to law school as the confirmation that I've escaped my humble origins; if I think of my life as a Greek tragedy, I might view my professional downfall as the catastrophe brought on by my inability to get along. If we have full life narratives, we can understand where we are in life in terms of our progress toward the ends of the narratives; that end provides a reference point to think about our current position in our lives.

As a piece of evidence for this claim, disorientation can result from a sense that one has outlived the end of one's life narrative, or that one simply no longer

that it does are free to substitute "causally explain" for "explain" in my subsequent denials that narratives explain the events in our lives.

²⁹Habermas and Bluck, "Getting a Life."

has a life narrative. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes,

When someone complains—as do some of those who attempt or commit suicide—that his or her life is meaningless, he or she is often and perhaps characteristically complaining that the narrative of their life has become unintelligible to them, that it lacks any point, any movement toward a climax or *telos*.³⁰

The athlete who has peaked, the novelist whose *magnum opus* was written decades ago, the stay-at-home parent whose children have all grown up: these are people whose life narratives have already been completed, for whom the rest of life is anticlimax. Or consider someone forced to abandon the life narrative he had held for so long, like a young philosopher forced by a dismal job market to leave the profession. Part of what is depressing about this situation is not that he will no longer have a good life—after all, he can find another perfectly good career—but that he can no longer understand his life in terms of the old narrative. He might have thought of his life as one of pursuing his passion for philosophy; now that that route has been closed, he no longer knows what his life is *about*. The feeling of disorientation such people might experience is one of lacking a living narrative, and lacking some end to conceive of their current state in reference to.

Having a unified life narrative, then, provides various kinds of understanding through subsumption: we subsume the important events of our life under a familiar kind of narrative, see our present in terms of some stage in that narrative, and (if our life narrative is a full one) think of the present in relation to the end promised by the narrative. I want to reiterate that, unlike the case of cosmic purposes, none of this amounts to having an *explanation* of the striking facts about one's life. In having the kind of understanding that narratives provide, we do not thereby have a satisfying explanation for why we exist, or entered the line of work that we entered, or ended up with the person we ended up with. But seeing how the events of our lives fit into more general patterns lessens the demand for an explanation. When our lives already make sense to us in virtue of their instantiating familiar life patterns, the need for understanding of an explanatory kind becomes less urgent.

Narratives and direction

Beyond making my life intelligible, having a unified narrative of my life can also provide a sense of direction.

³⁰*After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 217.

Recall the earlier discussion of direction: Many of us are faced with countless possibilities for how to spend our lives. In the absence of some way to limit the number of choices that we consider, this can create anxiety, indecision, an inability to commit, and regret. A belief about our cosmic purpose has a blinkering effect on us, making one possibility about how to live our lives the focus of our attention, so that other options are no longer salient. By doing so, it provides a sense of direction, propelling us toward one possible life in particular. And because these ways to live are often quite valuable, believing we have a cosmic purpose often helps us connect to sources of value.

I mentioned that something can blinker us, providing a sense of direction amid a glut of possible ways to live, in one of two ways: either by convincingly *answering* the question of how to live, or by *preempting* that question in the first place. Beliefs about cosmic purposes do the former: the fact that God or the Universe put me on earth to do something gives me strong reason to do it. To the extent that we focus our attention on what we think we have clearly the most reason to do, the possibility of living in accordance with our cosmic purpose becomes the only salient possibility. In this section, I'll argue that having a unified life narrative blinkers us in the latter way.

Why is this? First, there are not many series of events that can be incorporated into a particular unified narrative. Recall that a unified narrative is highly structured: it depicts the events contained as following a single organizing theme. Given this constraint, only certain later events will fit in a given unified life narrative. So suppose that someone has already adopted a unified life narrative of pursuing his deepest impulse, to paint, its being an open question whether that pursuit yields success or failure. Any decision to put aside painting and devote himself to his job as a stockbroker, as Gauguin might have done, is not compatible with that narrative.³¹ Once someone has settled on a narrative of pursuing his artistic impulse, the only series of events compatible with that narrative are one where he follows that impulse and succeeds, and one where he follows that impulse and fails.³²

³¹The example, of course, is from Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20–39.

³²It's true that a thin life narrative, the only description of whose theme is something fairly general, might be compatible with many possible life trajectories. A life narrative that is simply one of achieving greatness (through whichever means I end up achieving it) is compatible with many possible series of events. But people typically have richer narratives: people who envision achieving greatness usually envision a particular way in which they achieve it—as an athlete, scientist, politician, and so on. And even in the case of a thin unified narrative, there is still a

Of course, people's lives go in all kinds of ways that they do not envision, and it is perfectly possible that, toward the end of someone's life, he reinterprets the events of his life through a different narrative. An older, counterfactual, Gauguin who never left for Tahiti might think of his life not as having been about the pursuit of his artistic impulse, but as having been about the sacrifice of his passion to fulfill his personal obligations, or the struggle to maintain a marriage to someone from whom he grew increasingly estranged, or simply the constant battle to overcome the hardships that life threw his way. What is important, however, is that all of these full narratives are not simply continuations of the partial narrative that the young Gauguin had, but transformations of it; they all involve abandoning the narrative of pursuing his artistic impulse. Again, there are not many series of events that are compatible with a particular unified narrative.

Next, I want to argue that people are disposed, often in an unreflective way, to live their lives in conformity with the life narratives they have. In other words, we tend to act so as to make our life narratives true. (This is an instance of the more general observation that people tend to act in accordance with their overall self-concept, even if they do not reflectively avow parts of that self-concept.) If I think of my life in terms of achieving my potential, then I will be inclined to develop my talents to their fullest, choosing to a career in which they are used and cultivated; if I think of my life as one of redeeming myself after failure, I will be inclined to look for ways to make a comeback. In this vein, MacIntyre claims (somewhat dramatically) that "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"³³ Hence for someone who lacks a coherent life narrative, "the point of doing any one thing rather than another at crucial junctures in their lives seems to such a person to have been lost."³⁴

As a piece of evidence for this claim, consider the fact that people often respond with "I just always thought I would" (or something similar) to questions about why they made an important decision the way that they did. "What made you decide to be a psychiatrist?" "I just always thought I would do something that helps people." "What made you decide to have a second child?" "I just always thought that I would have two kids." What this reveals, in my mind, is that events like becoming a psychiatrist or having two children figure in the life narratives that people construct, and that they often make decisions in ways that

good deal that the narrative rules out: a narrative on which I achieve greatness rules out any life trajectory on which I settle for anything less.

³³*After Virtue*, 216.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 217.

conform to those narratives: I became a psychiatrist because I had a life narrative in which I would follow my passion of helping people deal with their problems; I had two children because I had a life narrative in which I would live the prototypical middle-class life.

Or consider the fact that people sometimes take an important discovery about their makeup or background to have obvious practical relevance. This is true even if that discovery does not fit neatly in any piece of practical reasoning, in the way that learning that one is genetically disposed to have musical talent—suppose you find out you have perfect pitch—would make the prospect of a career in music more likely. As one example, take the plot of the 2015 film *Creed*. The film's protagonist, Adonis Johnson, has a day job in finance, but also has a side interest in boxing, at which he is very skilled. He learns that he is an illegitimate child of Apollo Creed, a legendary deceased boxer; as a result of this discovery, he eventually quits his day job and decides to become a professional boxer.

Why do these discoveries seem to have practical relevance? As I mentioned, a unified narrative that someone has of his own life typically revolves around the facts about himself that he finds the most striking. Making a striking discovery about oneself can suggest a unified life narrative whose theme involves the fact that was discovered. And given the constraint of thematic unity imposed on a unified narrative, only certain trajectories of future events can feature in the narrative. In the case of *Creed*, Johnson's discovery that he is the son of Creed, to whom he owes his talent in boxing, naturally suggests a unified narrative of his life in which he tries to live up to his father's legacy. Any rival way of living (say, keeping his day job in finance, while boxing only as a hobby) would not have produced a sequence of events that fit into any unified narrative suggested by the discovery. To the extent that discoveries of this magnitude naturally suggest certain life narratives, that we treat such discoveries as having practical relevance is evidence that we are disposed to act in conformity with the life narratives that we have.

Of course, this is a fictional example, and one might object that, as such, it does not have much relevance for real life. But we find this kind of decision-making intelligible: we understand Johnson's decision in psychological terms, and not just as a device to advance the plot. This is evidence that it follows a pattern that the thinking of real people follows, at least some of the time. If people are disposed to make decisions in conformity with their life narratives, and if only a small number of possible trajectories can constitute the continuation of a unified life narrative, then to the extent that someone has a unified life

narrative, it highly constrains her decision-making, inclining her toward one of a small number of options when she faces life-defining decisions. To the extent that I think of my life in terms of achieving my potential, that restricts the career paths I will be inclined toward to those that significantly involve the cultivation of my talents. To the extent that I think of it in terms of transcending my roots, I will naturally avoid what reminds me of my origins. To the extent that I think of it as a hero's journey, I will naturally be motivated to seek experiences that challenge me, making me shun the familiar and comfortable.

All of this is to say that, like believing that one has a cosmic purpose, having a unified life narrative can have a blinkering effect, making a small number of possible ways to live salient at the cost of all others. By doing so, it provides a sense of direction, although in a different way. In contrast to a belief about my cosmic purpose, a life narrative typically guides not by being normative: what makes me conform to my life narrative usually isn't any belief that I have reason to do so. Rather, the narrative simply orients my thinking so that certain ways of living my life seem natural. The narrative does not so much *answer* the question of how to live as it *prevents* that question from arising.

This isn't to deny that narratives can have normative relevance. An attachment to a life narrative can give someone reason to follow that narrative, in the same way that attachments to other things can be sources of reasons. If we *identify* with the life narrative that we have, in Harry Frankfurt's sense of reflectively endorsing it, we might thereby have reason to live in accordance with it.³⁵ Consider also Christine Korsgaard's claim that our reasons arise from our practical identities, or descriptions of ourselves that we value.³⁶ Just as other practical identities that I have, like being a parent or a professor, generate reasons, so can my practical identity as someone whose life follows a particular narrative. If I value a description of my life as one of living up to my father's legacy, then that gives me reason to live up to that legacy. My point is just that there is a distinctive way in which our life narratives usually guide us that bypasses the normativity they can have.

Still, one might wonder how satisfying adopting a unified life narrative is as a solution to the problem of overchoice about how to live. One might think, for example, that it simply pushes the problem back a step: we have simply swapped a glut of possible ways to live for a glut of possible life narratives. To return

³⁵See, for example, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11–25.

³⁶See *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100–2.

to an earlier example, if Gauguin had genuinely faced a problem of overchoice in possible ways to live, he probably would not have been attracted to a single unified life narrative to the exclusion of all others. If I am in indecision about how to spend my life, why adopt a narrative of pursuing my artistic impulse, rather than one that centers around my family, or anything else? Given that the number of possible life narratives that I could adopt is practically limitless, one might wonder how introducing the idea of a life narrative is supposed to help with the problem at all.

First, as we've discussed, whether someone has a particular life narrative is not under his direct control; I cannot choose to have a particular life narrative in the same way that I might choose a profession. Most of the time, we simply find ourselves in the grip of an account of our lives without having consciously affirmed it. Perhaps Gauguin was simply gripped by the thought of dedicating his life to his urge to paint, just as Johnson was gripped by the idea of living up to his father's legacy. So it is misleading to claim that we could even experience *overchoice* in possible life narratives, since it is not a matter of direct choice at all which narratives one adopts.

And second, unlike possible ways to live, possible unified life narratives are much more constrained. As I've mentioned, a unified life narrative is typically based on the facts about the subject that he takes to be the most striking; in the case of Gauguin, what he considers to be the most striking about himself may be his impulse to paint and his talent at painting. Given this fact, and given that a unified life narrative is one whose events can be subsumed under a single theme, the only unified life narratives that will occur to me are ones that are thematically related to some striking fact about me. If my deepest impulse is to paint, and I am talented at painting, then there is no unified life narrative in which, despite these things, I decide to keep my day job and relegate painting to a mere hobby. If I do so, then looking back at my life, my passion for painting, what I take to be most striking about myself, will appear as a loose thread rather than as an integral fiber of my life story. Given that there are far fewer possible unified life narratives that are compatible with the events of my life so far than possible ways to live, the claim that adopting a unified life narrative frees us from a surfeit of choices does not simply trade one form of overchoice for another.

Just like beliefs about our cosmic purpose, then, having a unified life narrative can help us settle on a possible way to live. And just like the former, the latter can also help us live lives that involve substantial connection to what is valuable. Consider some common themes of life narratives: growing as a person, entering into loving relationships, redeeming oneself, leaving a legacy. These themes are

complex activities that often require doing something valuable or just are valuable in their own right. Because life narratives guide us toward possible lives that are consistent with them, through having a unified life narrative, we are guided toward lives in which we perform the activity that constitutes the theme of that narrative, and hence toward doing something valuable. Now, it's true that there are also negative life narratives: people can think of their lives as ones of wasted potential or contamination in addition to ones of realized potential or redemption. But given the indirect control we have over our life narratives, even if we are in the grips of a negative life narrative, we can often get ourselves to adopt a more positive one.³⁷

Of course, people often lead lives of growth, communion, redemption, and legacy even if they don't have a unified life narrative. But as I noted in the discussion of cosmic purposes, it is often hard to live a highly valuable life: doing so requires not just the attraction toward a valuable life path in the first place, but also faith in oneself and the resolve to continue down that path through hardship. It's true that having a life narrative of doing something valuable doesn't guarantee that the person will do that thing. But a life narrative, beyond directing us toward a valuable life trajectory, can also give us the confidence and determination to stay on it. Recall that part of having a narrative is having a tendency to anticipate certain events, particularly if I have a full life narrative: if I have a life narrative of reaching my potential as a philosopher, I might anticipate that the next seminar that I teach will be better than the last one, or that there will be an upward trend in the quality of my writing. This tendency can provide *confidence* by having us anticipate success and not fixate on the possibility of failure. Next, as I mentioned, it can be disorienting or depressing to realize that our lives have departed from the narratives of them that we have had. What this means is that if our life narrative is one on which we undertake certain projects, the psychological cost of abandoning those projects is higher: what we lose with the loss of the projects is part of our identity. Realizing that the costs are so high can give me the *determination* to stick with those projects. If leaving academia means having to give up my life narrative of pursuing my passion for philosophy, then I am more determined to stay, despite the abysmal job market, than I otherwise would be. If the life narratives we have adopted are ones in which we grow as people, find belonging through relationships with others, redeem ourselves, or

³⁷See, for example, Jonathan Adler, "Living Into the Story: Agency and Coherence in a Longitudinal Study of Narrative Identity Development and Mental Health over the Course of Psychotherapy," *Personality Processes and Individual Differences* 102 (2012): 367–389.

leave a legacy, we are more likely to do these things than we would be in the absence of such narratives; we are more likely to contribute value to the world than we otherwise would be.

The costs of narrative

So far in this section, I've argued that having a unified life narrative can provide two of the main goods that a cosmic purpose would provide: understanding of our lives and a sense of practical direction. Of course, these are not the only benefits that such a narrative provides; as many have argued, perhaps having a good life narrative itself makes that life better.³⁸ But before concluding, I want to examine the downsides of having a unified life narrative. The fact that there are significant downsides means that any normative conclusion of the discussion—for example, that we should try to adopt a unified life narrative—must be heavily qualified. Nonetheless, I'll also cite some empirical evidence that having a unified life narrative is typically a good thing.

What are the costs to having a unified life narrative? There are several costs that often, although not always, come with having a unified life narrative. First, as I mentioned, not all such narratives direct us toward ways of life that are positive. In the grip of a story of my life on which it is one of success undone, or squandered potential, or being beaten down by the world, the fact that we tend to conform to our life stories means that I will tend to make self-frustrating decisions, continuing to live in failure. Second, again, if the narrative has been completed or no longer applies to the subject's life, then she will experience a sense of disorientation, of not knowing what to do or what her life is about anymore. And third, as some of the Existentialists noted, there is a constant temptation to falsify aspects of our lives for the sake of a coherent life narrative: we find structure where none exists, believing the contingent to have been inevitable, inventing causal connections between unconnected things, or forcing a sense of closure on a dangling sequence of events.³⁹

³⁸See David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991): 48–77; Antti Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2011): 345–377; Connie Rosati, "The Story of a Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30 (2013): 21–50; Dale Dorsey, "The Significance of a Life's Shape," *Ethics* 125 (2015): 303–330. For an extreme version of this view, consider the view that Alexander Nehamas attributes to Nietzsche in his *Life as Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1985), which he labels "aestheticism": that a good life is simply one that makes for a good piece of literature. For recent criticism of this line of thought, see Amy Berg, "Do Good Lives Make Good Stories?" *Philosophical Studies* 180 (2023): 637–659.

³⁹See also Alan Dershowitz, "Life Is Not a Dramatic Narrative," in *Law's Stories*, eds. Peter

I want to focus, however, on a fourth and fifth problem, which necessarily come with having a unified life narrative, and are side-effects of the way in which the narrative provides understanding and direction. Fourth, a unified life narrative represents my life in terms of a single theme, as being about a single thing; as we've seen, this is one way in which it gives me understanding of my life. At the same time, however, having a unified life narrative can be deeply limiting: thinking about one's life in terms of a single theme—as being *about* something particular—leaves out everything that does not belong to that theme. If I think about my life in terms of my pursuit of philosophy, then all the things that do not fit with that theme (my family life, my other interests, and even just memorable experiences that I have had) seem auxiliary to what the narrative considers to be the real action, since the narrative represents these things as other than what my life is about. In having a unified narrative of our lives, we might deprive them of their variety and richness, and lose sight of much of what could give them meaning.

And fifth, a unified life narrative provides direction by having a blinkering effect on us, restricting our attention to the few ways of living that accord with that narrative. As I have mentioned, this can solve the problem of overchoice about how to live, relieving us of anxiety, indecision, and regret. But it has this effect only by having us construe certain options that are actually present as being absent; they are simply shifted outside our field of attention. In the grip of a particular narrative of our lives, it may simply not occur to us that there are often healthier, more fulfilling, or more enjoyable ways to live, and that we can change our lives for the better. Think of a professional gymnast in the grip of a life narrative of reaching her potential as a gymnast, even though her level of dedication is taking a serious toll on her physical and mental wellbeing; or a lawyer with a life narrative of conventional success who now finds her life deeply unfulfilling; or a young philosopher with a life narrative of following his passion for philosophy, who can see no other option besides continually trying to get an academic position in a dismal job market. The life narratives of these subjects might be so entrenched that, at some level, it simply may not occur to them that there are other options, that they can do something other than what they have been doing.

The costs, then, to having a unified life narrative can be significant. While not wanting to downplay the costs, I do want to say a bit to draw the sting away. First, it might simply be impossible to integrate the multifarious facets of anyone's life

Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (Yale University Press, 2008), 99–105.

into a whole that preserves the importance of each facet; there seem to be physical limitations to our ability to hold more than a small and highly selective series of autobiographical facts or events in working memory.⁴⁰ If this is true, then the fact that a unified narrative forces us to leave aside much that is important in our lives might not be a special problem for it. Any way of thinking of our lives as a whole, hence of understanding it, would have the same problem. Second, these are costs that are shared with having a belief about one's cosmic purpose: believing that the reason that I was created is to perform a certain task tends to make me think of my life as revolving around my performing that task, and it tends to prevent me from considering other ways of living seriously. It is unclear that beliefs about cosmic purpose are a better source of understanding and a sense of direction, all things considered, even if cosmic purposes exist.

But besides these responses, there is good reason to think that, on average, having a unified life narrative is a good thing. Consider the evidence from empirical psychology about the relation between *narrative coherence*—the degree to which someone's life narrative has a clear structure and is tightly integrated—and psychological well-being: studies have shown that narrative coherence is negatively correlated with depression, and positively correlated with happiness, satisfaction with life, and personal growth.⁴¹ What this suggests to me is that the benefits of having a unified life narrative usually outweighs the costs.

Conclusion

Let me summarize the paper. According to many philosophers, “the meaning of life” refers to our cosmic purpose, the task that we were created by God or the Universe to perform. I have shown that a major appeal of the idea that we have a cosmic purpose is that it would provide understanding of one's life and a sense of direction, and, through providing direction, also help us live valuable lives. And I have shown that even in the absence of a cosmic purpose, having a unified

⁴⁰See, for example, Nelson Cowan, “The Magical Mystery Four: How Is Working Memory Capacity Limited, and Why?” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 19 (2010): 51–57.

⁴¹Dana Baerger and Dan McAdams, “Life Story Coherence and Its Relation to Psychological Well-Being,” *Narrative Inquiry* 9 (1999): 69–96; Theodore Waters and Robyn Fivush, “Relations Between Narrative Coherence, Identity, and Psychological Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood,” *Journal of Personality* 83 (2015): 441–451; Louise Vandel Poel and Dirk Hermans, “Narrative Coherence and Identity: Associations With Psychological Well-Being and Internalizing Symptoms,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 1–9. For a literature review, see Jonathan Adler, Jennifer Lodi-Smith, Frederick Philippe, and Iliane Houle, “The Incremental Validity of Narrative Identity in Predicting Well-Being: A Review of the Field and Recommendations for the Future,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 20 (2016): 142–175.

life narrative—a thematically unified account of one’s life—can also provide these benefits. It provides understanding through subsumption, allowing us to fit the events of our lives into a recognizable schema; it provides a sense of direction by orienting our attention to possible ways to live that accord with that narrative; and because these ways to live are often valuable ones, it helps us live in valuable ways. If it turns out that there are no cosmic purposes, and so no such thing as the meaning of life, thinking of our own lives in a particular way can still give us much of what was attractive about such a thing.

To conclude, I want to say a bit more about the connection between life narratives and meaning. Although having a life narrative would not mean that there is such a thing as the meaning of one’s life, “meaning” is a protean term, and cosmic purposes are not the only thing that people have in mind when talking about “meaning” in the context of human life. Some have suggested that talk about meaning captures three separate clusters of themes: *significance*, or contribution to value; *intelligibility*, or ability to be understood; and *purposiveness*, or attraction toward goals.⁴² The main benefits that I have claimed for a unified life narrative, understanding and a sense of direction, are things that clearly constitute intelligibility and purposiveness: through having a unified life narrative, we help make sense of our lives, and we propel ourselves into our futures along the contours of that narrative. And because unified life narratives often let us connect to sources of value more easily, they also provide significance: through our having a life narrative that involves engagement with a valuable pursuit, our lives often matter more than they otherwise would. Although life narratives may not provide the kind of meaning that a cosmic purpose constitutes, they can provide the ingredients for a more mundane kind of meaning.

⁴²See Login George and Crystal Park, “Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering: Toward Integration and New Research Questions,” *Review of General Psychology* 20 (2016), 205–220; Goetz and Seachris, *Meaning of Life*, ch. 1; Antti Kauppinen, “The Experience of Meaning,” in *Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life*, 343–355.