

Causation and the Narrative Meaning of Life

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Abstract

This paper argues that causation is the core of the narrative meaning of life. In the first part, I show that the narrative meaning of life does not stop at narrative identity and includes causal relations beyond personal agency. In the second part, I employ Aristotle's definition of plot in the *Poetics* as the compass for the narrative meaning of life. I show that all requirements of a plot pertain to causal relations. In the third part, I discuss the value of narrative causal relations. Here I challenge the instrumentalist accounts that deny any intrinsic value to narrative causal relations and see them as instrumental to other sorts of meaning (e.g., the ethical). I finally defend the ontological value of narrative causation, which inheres in the structure of causal relations.

The search for the meaning of life entails questions about life's cosmic significance, the realization of objective values or the satisfaction of desires, and the shape of life stories. The first two types of questions received extensive treatment in the scholarship, whereas the third has come into the foreground only recently (Seachris, Velleman, Fischer, De Bres, Brännmark, Rosati). Although the conception of narrative goes back to Aristotle, clarity is still needed about what is the narrative meaning of life. This paper argues that causation is the core of the narrative meaning of life. I offer a dispositionalist account of narrative causation, in which causation is a manifestation of powers intrinsic to a cause. In the first part, I show that the narrative meaning of life does not stop at narrative identity and includes causal relations beyond personal agency. In the dispositionalist account of narrative causation, both cause and effect matter, not only the effect of an event on our lives. In the second part, I employ Aristotle's definition of plot in the *Poetics* as the compass for the narrative meaning of life. I show that all requirements of a plot pertain to causal relations. In the third part, I discuss the value of narrative causal relations. Here I challenge the instrumentalist accounts that deny any intrinsic value to narrative causal relations and see them as instrumental to other sorts of meaning (e.g., the ethical). I finally defend the ontological value of narrative causation, which inheres in the structure of causal relations.

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1. Causation and narrative meaning

Narrative meaning has its place within the quest for the meaning of life. Psychological and anthropological studies have revealed that a vast majority of people recount their lives in narrative terms.¹ Fields such as psychotherapy or law frequently employ narrative. Some scholars like Galen Strawson² have denied the ubiquity of narrative in human lives, arguing that many people do not see their lives in narrative terms. Furthermore, not only are we not narrative but neither should we be. The normative claim that a meaningful life must contain narrative meaning is wrong in Strawson's eyes. I will not discuss the psychological and the normative thesis about narrative or address the objections against them. I will assume both theses: that we are thinking in narrative terms and that a meaningful life needs narrative meaning. My focus will be on the nature of the narrative meaning of life. This focus will also circumvent the problem of whole-life or part-life narrative meaning. Whether our entire life is a complete story with an overarching narrative meaning or just a cluster of smaller stories that do not compose a total narrative³ will not be addressed here.

The narrative is the unfolding of events and states of affairs around a unified subject (one or more persons), exhibiting a complex structure in which events relate to each other. Narrative meaning is the significance of this development in terms of (1) internal structure and (2) value. There are cases of events happening to a subject without constituting a narrative: "Today Helen woke up at 7, took breakfast, and then went to the University." In terms of structure, these events have a temporal order. However, the events do not connect through strong relations. Taking breakfast does not directly depend on her waking up, although she could not have breakfast without waking up. In terms of value, this development does not indicate any event or action that might load Helen's life with added value. If the three events are habitual, they might yield value as a pattern reflecting an existential or moral order. However, to obtain narrative

¹ Dan P. McAdams and Erika Manczak, "Personality and the Life Story", in M. Mikulincer and P.R. Shaver (ed.), *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 4: *Personality Processes and Individual Differences* (American Psychological Association, 2015) 425-446.

² Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity", in *Real Materialism: and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ For an overview of the part-life/whole-life debate, see Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 37-58.

meaning, we need further conditions that strengthen the internal structure of the development of events and increase their value. There must be a relation between events, and their significance must make a difference in our lives. Causal relations meet both conditions: causation is the cement that unites events and state of affairs, and the element that generates new value through change. In the second condition, causation constitutes value bearers like achievements or divine interventions, as we will see in the last section.

The narrative meaning of life includes the issue of narrative identity, but it is more than that. In narrative identity, what matters is personal identity not external factors like natural events, social events, or personal relations. The latter are merely a sort of medium in which identity takes shape. In the case of narrative meaning in life, the external factors take front seat. When reading a person's autobiography, the historical details of her situation are of tantamount importance, and the persons who partake in her life are not just figures of accompaniment. For instance, Viktor Frankl starts his memoir *Recollections* with his mother's depiction: her family genealogy, her kindness, her piety, and her sense of humor.⁴

If we consider this impact in terms of causation, we see that not only the effect matters, as in the narrative identity, but also the cause. The causal process in its integrity constitutes narrative meaning in life. The nature and efficacy of the cause have a share in the narrative meaning. The equal weight of cause and effect is also visible in some uses of the term "meaning" in everyday language. As Robert Nozick observes, we often use "meaning" to signify an external causal relationship.⁵ In this use, we either indicate the cause and then the effect, or we start from the effect and then go back to the cause. In the first case, if we say, "The refusal to free prisoners means war", the refusal to free prisoners is the cause of war. In the second case, if we say "Smoke means fire", the smoke is the effect of fire. In both cases, "meaning" brings up both cause and effect. A dispositionalist account of causation can best handle this issue because it explains causation through the powers that enable a cause to produce a particular effect. The properties of the cause are crucial here.

Nevertheless, even if they accept narrative's causal nature, some scholars still circumscribe the narrative meaning of life to personal agency. In John Martin

⁴ Viktor Frankl, *Recollections: An Autobiography*, transl. Joseph Fabry and Judith Fabry (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2000) 19.

⁵ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 574.

Fischer's view, the narrative meaning of life is a function of our self-expression, akin to artistic creativity. Fischer admits that causal relationships between life events constitute the structure of a narrative. But it is our free-will which endows them with meaning. Meaning has less to do with the intrinsic properties of causes and effects and more with the agent's interpretation.⁶ Fischer distinguishes between narrative explanation, which unveils the structural relationships between life events, and narrative evaluation, which endows these relationships with meaning. Narrative meaning is, ultimately, the self-expression of the agent who writes a sentence in her life narrative every time she acts, or she interprets her past in accord with her purposes. Fischer does not offer a full-blown account of the relation between acting and interpreting. He rejects total control over the unfolding story of the universe, attributed to metaphysical megalomania. But his dismissal of the inherent properties of causes and effects to the benefit of meaning-giving self-expression seems to rob the life narrative of its integrity. Narrative meaning emerges from the inherent qualities of the causes and effects experienced by the narrating agent, not only from her subjective perspective.

Another view that confines narrative meaning to the personal agency is MacIntyre's teleology of virtue. In this view, life narrative is shaped by the causal relationships between our intentions and actions. The narrative of life is a teleological order of the personal agency. It unfolds through various intentions that are causally related to each other and embedded in a historical and social setting: "In doing this, in determining what causal efficacy the agent's intentions had in one or more directions, and how his short-term intentions succeeded or failed to be constitutive of long-term intentions, we ourselves write a further part of these histories."⁷ Unlike Fischer, MacIntyre thinks that the nature of the cause and its efficacy matter. But he limits causal relationships to the subject's intentions, disregarding causes that pertain to non-subjective entities or events.

Most people account for their life beyond their agency, even if they value social relations or external events in different degrees. The exceptions to this general inclination are somewhat pathological. Psychological studies have indeed

⁶ John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2009) 152. Similarly, J. David Velleman thinks that the order of narrative lies not in how things happen but how things feel. See J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation", in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 112, No.1, 2003, 19; Gregory Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 64, No. 3, 2006, 309-316.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 208.

revealed that life stories centered exclusively on personal agency might indicate narcissism.⁸ Narrative meaning includes, on the contrary, elements that are outside a protagonist's control.

2. Plot and dispositional causation in Aristotle

Aristotle's definition of the plot in *Poetics* best captures this inclusiveness of narrative meaning. For Aristotle, causation is the core of a plot's unity and qualitative changes that push a protagonist's life in a new direction. He focuses primarily on the plot of tragedies but mentions that the epic plot has a similar structure. The plot is the organization of events. It is an imitation of actions and life, not of persons, because it has to do with the quest for happiness. Happiness, he says, is an activity, not a quality: "The point is action, not character; it is their moral status that gives people the character they have, but it is their actions that make them happy or unhappy."⁹ While the *Nicomachean Ethics* sees happiness mainly in terms of a stable character expressed in virtuous actions, the *Poetics* makes room for events outside an agent's control, impacting his happiness.¹⁰ Here, the structure of events takes precedence over character. This structure has several characteristics: completeness, magnitude, unity, determinate structure, and universality. These characteristics concern relations between events and the significance of these relations for the protagonist's happiness. All of them, I believe, boil down to causation.

Before discussing them, we should first clarify what causation is for Aristotle. He considers causation to be the engine of change (*metabolé*). Causation responds, indeed, to the question of why something is the way it is, why it came to be, why it changed, or why it ceased to be.¹¹ Causation is a relation of dependence: B depends on A for its change. This dependence is not mere regularity, nor the object of natural laws, nor a counterfactual condition verified in possible worlds. Aristotle understands causation as deeply entrenched in the fabric of things. He attributes causation to the powers (*dunamai*) that things have to cause certain

⁸ Dan McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford University Press, 2013) 69.

⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 1450a, 24.

¹⁰ See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Silvia Carli, "The Love Affair between Philosophy and Poetry: Aristotle's *Poetics* and Narrative Identity", in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 53, Issue 2, 2015, 151-177.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Physics* 194b, transl. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 2008) 39.

effects. Such powers are not magical forces but pertain simply to the intrinsic properties of things. For instance, through its property of being hot, fire can warm up a room. Hotness disposes fire to cause the warming of the room. This kind of view is nowadays called dispositionalism. The concept of power (or disposition) rests on a distinction Aristotle makes between potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*entelecheia*). A block of stone has the potential to become a statue; this potential is actualized by the sculptor when he models the stone into a particular form. Causation is thus a process of the actualization of potentialities.¹² The likelihood of this actualization brings Aristotle to a distinction between necessary causes, which always obtain their effect, probable causes that usually (most of the time) obtain their effect, and chance, namely causes that only extremely rarely obtain their effect. The latter two are contingent.¹³ In his definition of the plot, Aristotle employs mainly necessity and probability.

Aristotle's dispositionalism differs from other accounts developed after him in its appeal to the intrinsic properties and the powers of things.¹⁴ The Humean account based on regularity and the counterfactual account based on possible worlds tackle causation "from outside", without considering what brings a thing to cause something. They establish a connection between cause and effect from an external perspective. For instance, to determine whether A is a cause of B, a counterfactualist would inquire if B could exist or happen without A in another possible world. But this hypothetical scenario cannot provide a full explanation about why A causes B. In the case of narrative causation, neither the Humean nor the counterfactual account have adequate tools to capture the relations between life events. First, Humean regularity obtains little signification. The mere connection between events yields insufficient life significance. I can observe that the birth of my child has changed my life, but that is not enough. I would still need to grasp the properties of the birth event and the characteristics of its effect on me. Second, counterfactualists seem to go a bit further than Humeans in that they establish a stronger connection between causes and effects. We often wonder how our life would have been if something had not happened, if we had made a

¹² See also Thomas M. Tuozzo, "Aristotle and the Discovery of Efficient Causation", in Tad M. Schmaltz (ed.), *Efficient Causation: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2014) 29.

¹³ Aristotle, *Physics*, 196b10, 44.

¹⁴ Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum discuss in detail the advantages of dispositionalism over other accounts of causation in their book *Getting Causes from Powers* (Oxford University Press, 2011). They challenge, though, the application of dispositionalism to necessity and chance in *What Tends to Be: The Philosophy of Dispositional Modality* (Routledge, 2018) 22-23.

different decision, or if we had not met our soul mates. Nevertheless, this kind of counterfactual reasoning is more an exercise of imagination that involves regret, projection, etc. It does not fully assess the impact that an event had on our life. Narrative entails a robust display of the characteristics of this impact including the properties of causes and effects involved in it.

Aristotle's definition of the plot untangles the complex manner in which events impact a person's life. First, a plot is a whole unified by a beginning, a middle, and an end. This quality is not merely a temporal order; it concerns how the beginning, middle, and end relate to other events and with each other. Aristotle uses here the causal terms of necessity and probability. A beginning is a sort of originating event. It does not necessarily follow from any other event but stands as the origin of subsequent events, which happen naturally after it, through an intelligible, causal connection. The end occurs necessarily or usually (with probability) after another event but is not followed by anything else. The middle follows causally from preceding events and then it produces its own effect(s). In other words: the beginning is what causes without being caused, the middle is what causes after being caused, and the end is caused without further causing. The causation that makes up this characteristic and the other four entails two types of causes: necessary and probable. Stephen Halliwell indicates that these are Aristotle's criteria of "what makes 'natural' sense within human lives."¹⁵ As we will see later, chance can be part of a plot, too, on one condition.

One could object to applying this tripartite structure to the narrative meaning of life. There are phenomena in our lives, so the objection goes, in which it is not easy to pinpoint the beginning, middle, and end.¹⁶ For instance, in a friendship, it is sometimes difficult to point to the exact moment when it started: is it the day when we first met that person, or the day we first organized something together, or the moment in which we confessed to each other our life's secrets? Nonetheless, it is possible to differentiate between the part of one's life when this friendship did not exist and the part in which this friendship has developed. Our gratitude to our friends often rests on the difference they made in our lives compared to the time before the friendship started. The awareness of a beginning is expressed in the famous line from the movie *Casablanca*, when Rick tells Captain Louis:

¹⁵ Stephen Halliwell, Footnote 71 to Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 57. See also Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part" in Aristotle's *Poetics*", in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

“Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

The current accounts of the narrative meaning of life especially emphasize the end. Joshua Seachris considers the end of the story as the most important moment in the sequence.¹⁷ He shows that the end has a proleptic power because it frames the entire story. The way our lives end qualifies the preceding parts of our lives and guides the normative appraisal of life narrative as a whole. Similarly, F.M. Kamm thinks that a progressive narrative structure is better than a decline, even if the overall amount of goods and bads is the same in both structures.¹⁸ How a life ends is more important than how it begins, and it is better to have a good end (and a bad beginning) than having a good beginning (and a bad end).

Second, a plot must have an adequate magnitude. It must be sufficiently long to convey a significant life change or reversal of fortune (*metabasis*) from good to bad fortune or from bad to good fortune. This change must be the outcome of a sequence of events related to each other through necessity or probability. The plot’s aesthetic value emerges from a combination of its internal order and structure with the intensity of life changes. In this sense, magnitude is the crucial characteristic that gathers the causal configuration of the plot and the ethical and existential significance of narrated events. This condition is important for the narrative meaning of life because it postulates the selection of causal relations based on their significance in our lives. I will discuss this selectivity in part 3.

Third, the plot needs unity and a determinate structure. Although a circumscribed protagonist (one or several characters) is necessary for a plot, the protagonist does not ensure unity. The reason is that a large number of events happen to a person, but not all of them constitute unity. Similarly, a protagonist performs many actions, but they do not sum up into a single action. For instance, in the *Odyssey*, Homer excluded events that lacked causal connections, like Odysseus’ wounding on Parnassus or his feigned madness. Thus, the unity of the plot emerges from causal connections. The absence of causal relations undermines the narrative meaning. “There is a great difference between something happening after certain events and happening because of those events.”¹⁹ Causal connections also specify the plot so that if one removes and relocates a part of the connection, the overall meaning suffers. The plot has a determinate structure

¹⁷ Joshua Seachris, “The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy’s “Primary” Question”, in *Philo*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 2009, 5-23.

¹⁸ F.M. Kamm, “Rescuing Ivan Illych: How We Live and How We Die”, in *Ethics*, Vol. 113, No.2, 2003, 222. I thank one anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to Kamm’s account.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a20, 29.

given by order of cause and effect. If the cause is removed, the effect becomes unintelligible. We would not be able to fully understand all the properties of the effect and its origin. If the effect is removed, the cause becomes insignificant because it would have no impact on the protagonist's life.

Finally, the plot needs universality. Aristotle understands the universality of narrative as intelligibility granted by necessity or probability.²⁰ Chance does not contribute to universality because it can be hardly known.²¹ Its contingency remains confined to particular, singular events that do not yield any universality (for instance, to unexpectedly find a treasure while digging to plant a tree is not a type of activity one can prepare for and in which one can exercise her virtue). The universality also entails a *telos* of the sequence of events. For this reason, chance might be accepted in a plot only insofar as it reveals a purpose. Aristotle explains this requirement by associating necessity and probability with the sentiments evoked by tragedy, namely astonishment, pity, and fear. These sentiments only arise when a reversal of fortune comes about through a consequential chain of events oriented towards a purpose: "Tragedy is an imitation not just of complete action, but of events that evoke pity and fear. These effects occur above all when things come about unexpectedly but at the same time consequentially. This will produce greater astonishment than if they come about spontaneously or by chance – for even chance events are found more astonishing when they seemed to have happened for a purpose."²² Aristotle gives the example of Mity's murderer, who was killed by Mity's statue (erected after his death) falling randomly on him. The purpose at stake here is not the agent's goal, but rather the *telos* of his life. This *telos* is partially out of his control, although his random death is a punishment for his killing.

The narrative meaning of life raises a similar requirement of teleological recognition. This recognition crosses paths with other types of meaning: cosmic significance in terms of God's purpose for us and ethical meaning in terms of the quest for happiness and virtuous action. One can recognize in her life's story glimpses of the divine Providence or the consequential realization of personal aspirations. Dispositionalism helps in this case because it embeds teleology in the particular configuration of events. What these causes are, how they cause, what are their effects - all of this matters. They are not just disposable milestones

²⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a35, 28.

²¹ Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part", 204.

²² Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a, 29.

towards a telos.

We started from the presupposition that the Aristotelian plot's causal order is the same as the order in which we recount our life stories in everyday life. Aristotle is a realist both in an aesthetic and a metaphysical sense. He sees tragedy's plot as an imitation of actions and the causal relations embedded in the narrative order as real relations. Narrative causation is not a literary trope. The narrator does not impose upon reality a type of structure that does not exist in real life. The narrative meaning of life mirrors thus the narrative meaning in Aristotle's plot.

However, among Aristotle's requirements for a plot, the exclusion of chance seems to be most problematic for life's narrative meaning. There are serendipitous events that radically transform our lives. Most of us, when telling life stories, also highlight such accidental events that happen by chance. The role of chance in Aristotle's poetics and ethics is still open to debate. Martha Nussbaum claims that luck (*tuche*) plays a significant role in Aristotle, more than we are inclined to assess based on our knowledge of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Other scholars, however, think that she uses "luck" in a broader sense than Aristotle, to include all external interferences not intended by the agent.²³ It would be helpful in this sense to differentiate between *tuche* (chance) and *eutuchia* (good fortune, with its opposite *dustuchia* or *atuchia*, misfortune). Stephen Halliwell warns that the two terms do not fully overlap. Aristotle sometimes speaks of *eutuchia* as the sphere of things of which chance (*tuche*) is a cause, but in other cases, he also indicates that there are goods of *eutuchia*, which are not caused by *tuche*, but by nature or human agency.²⁴

To sum up, Aristotle places causation at the core of the narrative. Following Aristotle, we define the narrative meaning of life based on causal relations of different sorts: necessity, probability, and chance. The causal relations ground all requirements for the narrative order: (1) the framework beginning-middle-end; (2) the plot's magnitude. (3) the unity and determinate structure; and (4) the universality. Each requirement comes with its characteristics added to causation: (1) the temporal order; (2) the intensity of life changes; (3) the arrangements of distinct causal processes among each other; and (4) the purposive pattern.

²³ Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part" in Aristotle's *Poetics*", 217.

²⁴ Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 205.

Narrative meaning includes, thus, besides causation, also these characteristics, which are added to causation and configure narrative patterns.

Causation itself is nevertheless not sufficient, as it also needs to carry value and significance for one's life. Narrative meaning emerges from significant life changes, which Aristotle names reversals of fortune (*metabasis*). In tragedy, change is always for the worse, but it does not need to be so in all narratives. The question that arises here regards the relation between causation and value. Is causation instrumental to value? I'll address this issue in the next part.

3. Narrative causation and value

The narrative meaning of life arises from causal relations between life events and their value and significance in our lives. The problem is whether the need for added value commits us to instrumentalism about causation. I will argue that, although the ethical and cosmic significance is necessary for causation to yield full narrative meaning in life, there is also a sense in which causation has intrinsic value in our life.

A thought experiment of T.J. Mawson aptly shows the need for added value. Mawson takes the story of Sisyphus to illustrate the role of causal relations in the issue of life's meaning. He contends that the meaninglessness of Sisyphus' life also comes from the lack of causal consequences.²⁵ Gods have punished Sisyphus to carry a rock up a hill. Every time he reaches the top of the hill, the rock falls back, and Sisyphus must go back down and roll it up again. His ordeal will never end because there will be no final moment when the rock remains on top, and Sisyphus finishes his task. In Mawson's view, the cancellation of his works' effects is partly the reason we see Sisyphus' life as meaningless. But this is not the only reason. To demonstrate that a further condition is necessary, Mawson imagines an immortal person called Andy, who has the same situation as Sisyphus, except that the rock he is carrying does not fall and he manages to build up a pile of rocks which grows *ad infinitum*. Andy has more causal consequences than Sisyphus, since the rock he carries remains at the top. But would we judge his life as significant? Although we would prefer Andy's situation over Sisyphus', we would still not evaluate his life as deeply meaningful. Would we like to spend our entire life building a pile of rocks on top of a mountain? The issue here is that,

²⁵ T.J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make our Lives More Meaningful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 62.

although we have cause and effect, the effect has a low value. What matters, in the end, is this value.

Mawson admits that causal relations yield meaning in life, distinct from other meaning types such as the ethical one. The existence of several sorts of meaning supports Mawson's amalgam polyvalent account of life's meaning, which proposes that there are several meanings of life. However, he sees this meaning as somehow inferior or less deep than the ethical meaning of achievement. Although desirable, it is not desired for its own sake, but as instrumental to the other types of meaning: "...having causal consequence is primarily valued by us not for its own sake. It is valued only as a necessary condition of something that we value for its own sake, having causal consequence in bringing about something significant and positively evaluable."²⁶

Helena De Bres and Connie Rosati defend similar views. In De Bres' account of meaning in life, causal narrative relations have some value, which she pins down to two primary goods of story-telling: the good of understanding and the good of community. The good of understanding has practical value regarding human action in the world around us. Understanding causal connections between events helps us to better plan and act. Second, it has subjective value as it fulfills our desire to make sense of the world and gives us pleasure and fulfillment. Third, it has epistemic value because it reaches a cognitive achievement. The good of community regards story sharing and common patterns. We like to tell stories about our lives to others because it gives us a sense of solidarity. In our stories, we employ patterns common to our narrative and other people's narratives, thus giving us a sense of belonging and common experience. However, De Bres believes that these values are only instrumental to the narrative's main value, which has to do with depth, purpose, and superlative value. Thus she evaluates causal relations not through themselves but through the benefits that story-telling brings to a person. Ultimately, causal relations have no value in themselves but are only abstract entities. As such, their role in life's meaningfulness is purely instrumental: "In this case, and others like it, I find it counter-intuitive that the mere existence of the relation – the bare fact that these two life parts are causally connected – suffices to confer meaning on the life. Intuitively, this is because meaningfulness is a form of value, and causal relations, in contrast to projects, relationships and experiences, are abstract, bloodless entities. They may connect

²⁶ T.J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life*, 63.

events that are rich in value, but they aren't the kinds of things that have value in themselves."²⁷

For Connie Rosati, too, the intelligibility granted by causal relations serves a higher goal, namely the feeling of being in charge of one's own life. In this sense, narrative contribution to life's meaningfulness does not reside primarily in the narrative structure of life events but the recounting of narratives. This recounting enhances one's self-awareness, confidence in her worth, and trust in planning for the future and moving forward in life. Narrative meaning in life "operates to bring about, maintain, or restore a sense of ourselves as controlling authority over our selves and our lives."²⁸ This kind of self-awareness does not exhaust all the requirements for a meaningful life. Rosati distinguishes between the meaning or significance of narrative, which concerns intelligibility, and the meaningfulness of life, commonly identified with features such as having a life purpose, connecting to something larger than oneself, and positively impacting the world.²⁹ The sense of control over one's life seems to be the intermediary link between this kind of meaningfulness and narrative intelligibility. Thus Rosati concludes that narrative causal relations do not yield value for themselves but only as they make possible the recounting of our lives.³⁰

Rosati's and De Bres' recountist accounts capture the importance of understanding for the narrative meaning of life. Whether we can recount the story (or stories) of our lives is important for our well-being and future projects. Nonetheless, our story can only matter to us only insofar as it provides a specific pattern and adequately answers the *Why* question. Not every story contributes to well-being but only the true one. Delusional stories can be harmful. Second, life stories do not retreat into the background once we reach well-being by understanding them. Memories are proof of this permanence. We remember life stories time and again. In the remembering process, the focus remains on the narrative structure. Narrative causation seems to yield more than instrumental value.

Robert Nozick offers a more balanced account of meaning and causation. For him, causal meaning is a distinct type of meaning that contributes to the overall

²⁷ Helena De Bres, "Narrative and Meaning in Life", in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, Vol.15, 2018, 552.

²⁸ Connie S. Rosati, "The Story of a Life", in *Social Philosophy & Policy*, Volume 30, Issue 1-2, January 2013, 45.

²⁹ Connie S. Rosati, "The Story of a Life", 34.

³⁰ Connie S. Rosati, "The Story of a Life", 42-43.

meaningfulness of life. He distinguishes between eight modes of meaning in human life, which he retrieves in the everyday linguistic use of the term “meaning”: 1) external causal relationship; 2) external referential or semantic relation; 3) intention or purpose; 4) lesson; 5) personal significance; 6) objective meaningfulness; 7) intrinsic meaningfulness; 8) the total resultant meaning (the sum of 1-7).³¹ Causal meaning lies at the bottom of this classification, culminating with the total resultant meaning identified with the divine Unlimited. It is hard to say whether Nozick sees this type of meaning as somehow inferior to others, as Mawson, De Bres, and Rosati do. However, although he admits the need for ethical or cosmic value to qualify causal relations fully, he seems to maintain the independent value of causal meaning. In his classification, the causal meaning is the elementary structure upon which all other meanings develop.

Causal meaning shapes the whole of life, not just parts of it. Nozick classifies three types of causal relations: causal antecedents, causal concomitants, and causal consequents. Causal antecedents precede our life and make it possible: the romantic relationship of our parents, the creative act of God. Causal concomitants are causal relations between events that happen during our lives (including, but not limited to, our intentions and actions). Causal consequences come after we die and regard our lives’ impact upon our family, the society, or even the universe. On this sort of meaning, Nozick argues, every life is meaningful because every life has causal relations. The meaning of life, in this sense, is the sum of all causal relations. This sum is not just a grab bag addition. It rather has an order that Nozick compares with widening circles: “On this reading, every life has (multiple) meaning, and if these causally connected things need not be inferable, a life will mean all of its causal antecedents and consequents and concomitants, and perhaps all of theirs as well, in ever widening circles. The meaning of a life, then, would be the whole causal nexus and flow of events; the causal nexus is meant by the life’s place in it.”³² Nevertheless, causal relations by themselves do not exhaust the meaning of life because they do not capture the relative importance of events for our life. If we remain at this level, everything in the web of events becomes equally important. That, Nozick states, would diminish the relative importance of life events. More is, thus, needed in order to establish the

³¹ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 574. I have analyzed Nozick’s relational notion of meaning in detail in Mirela Oliva, “The Relational Nature of the Meaning of Life in Nozick”, in *Disputatio*, Vol.8, No. 11, 2019.

³² Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 575.

meaning of life. Additional value and significance must discriminate between causal relations. This determines Nozick to move to the other modes of meaning. Nozick's account seems to grant causal meaning an independent role in life's meaning, even though it needs added value. However, he does not discuss the intrinsic value of causal relations, and it is not clear whether he does indeed accept such intrinsic value.

The intrinsic value of narrative causation is visible, I think, in our quest for causal relations even after we reach values that we usually identify with the meaning of life. On the instrumental view, once we reach such values, we should lose our interest in causal connections. But this is not happening, neither in the case of cosmic meaning nor in the case of ethical meaning. First, in the case of cosmic meaning, we could settle the matter by establishing God's existence. For instance, we could employ one of the arguments for the existence of God, or we could have a revelation through a religious experience. However, our conviction or belief that our universe and our life have meaning because a benevolent God has created them does not suffice to grasp meaning fully. We still want to know how God created the universe, what type of causation is involved, why a material effect has ensued from an immaterial cause, and so on. If we experience divine revelation or intervention, we do not merely say: "God showed Himself to me, or He intervened in my life and helped me, or punished me". The details of this experience, including causal relations involved, are equally important. They are part and parcel of the experience's overall meaning. For instance, Augustine's conversion to faith starts with hearing of children singing "Take and read, take and read" while he passes by, without any connection with these children. Hearing this song pushes him to read the Bible, which he was carrying with him. In his eyes, this causal chain that includes an extraordinary coincidence points to divine intervention. His conversion would not entirely make sense without the causal relations involved in the process.

The same goes for ethical meaning. Moral actions do not have meaning only through the value obtained. Recent ethical accounts show that causation is part of the nature of achievements (Gwen Bradford) or responsibility (George Moore).³³ In both cases, to establish that a success is an achievement, or that a person is responsible for harming another person, we need to determine whether and how

³³ Gwen Bradford, *Achievements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 64-82; Michael S. Moore, *Causation and Responsibility: An Essay in Law, Morals and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the person caused the outcome. In Bradford's view, an achievement must satisfy the competent causation condition. The agent must cause the successful outcome and have justified and true beliefs about his actions causing the outcome. If the goal of one person's action obtains independently from her action, we cannot recognize it as her achievement.³⁴ For instance, Joan protests a law prohibiting overnight parking in her town by standing on her head three hours a day. At the same time, a local politician buys a new car and needs parking space, thus intervenes to abolish the law. Eventually, the law is abolished at his request. Although Joan's action was directed towards the same goal, she didn't cause the abolition of the law, and thus her action is not an achievement.

If causation is an essential part of events and actions that yield ethical or cosmic meaning, what is its value? Is it ethical, insofar as it constitutes the ethical meaning, and cosmic insofar as it constitutes cosmic meaning? Does the value of causation derive from the value of its effect? I am inclined to answer negatively. Let us take the example of a person who helps others. Catherine is a social assistant who found her purpose in life to help homeless people. The causes involved in her action have high moral value: she, as an agent, is a kind and generous person. Her final cause to help homeless people has the value of justice and generosity. The form of her action, giving clothes to homeless people, is valuable, too. But the very fact that Catherine causes homeless people's well-being is distinct from these values. Her causation's success is something different from the values of kindness, generosity, solidarity, and justice yielded by the causes involved. It is also different from the values of well-being carried by the effect: the sense of self-worth, the goodness of opportunities that arise when elementary conditions of living are met, etc. Obtaining the right effect carries a distinct kind of value. The efficacy at work in causation is different from the moral values of kindness, generosity, self-worth, and self-realization. The dispositionalist view best accounts for the success of causation. For dispositionalism, causation is a process in which the powers of the cause manifest in obtaining a certain effect, as Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum show.³⁵ The very manifestation of these powers differs from the values that the powers might yield. This manifestation has to do with the metaphysical structure of things and of their actions upon other things.

In this sense, I propose that causation has an ontological value, which arises

³⁴ Gwen Bradford, *Achievements*, 13.

³⁵ Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum, *Getting Causes from Powers*, 8, 119.

from the very nature of causes *qua* causes, namely from the ability of one thing to influence, change or even generate another thing. I borrow the term “ontological value” from Dietrich von Hildebrand. Hildebrand distinguishes between qualitative values (such as moral values, intellectual values, aesthetic values) and ontological values.³⁶ Qualitative values are independent of their bearer, although her attitudes and actions must embody them. We speak, platonically, about kindness, generosity, truthfulness, beauty as such. Ontological values, however, inhere in their bearer. For instance, the dignity of the human person is proper to the human being as such. A person may embody or not some moral values, but she always has her dignity and never loses it. Every human being has this ontological value, no matter his moral choices or intellectual activities. Moreover, not only human beings as such but also their powers have ontological value. There is a difference between the will’s ontological value and the moral value of a good will. The first comes from its own ontological constitution. In contrast, the second comes from will’s relation to the *eidōs* of a moral value. Similarly, Hildebrand argues, matter and its power have ontological value. Thus, ontological values inhere in beings by way of their own existence, nature, and powers.

In narrative causation, the value of causal relations inheres in their metaphysical structure. It is an intrinsic value, and it is not instrumental to values that make up the ethical and cosmic meaning.³⁷ Thus, I submit, narrative causal relations have a value of their own, which renders narrative meaning a distinct kind of meaning. The ontological value of causation does not admit of degrees. While ethical values can be embodied in different degrees (one person can be more generous than another), ontological values have no degrees. One person does not have more dignity than another person. Similarly, one causal relation does not have more ontological value than another causal relation. The ontological value of the causal process through which fire warms up a room is the same as the one of the process in which Catherine helps homeless people. The ontological value explains thus Nozick’s intuition that all human lives have meaning in the causal sense.

³⁶ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Steubenville: Hildebrand Press, 2020) 139. See also Rogelio Rovira, “On the Manifold Meaning of Value According to Dietrich von Hildebrand and the Need for a Logic of the Concept of Value”, in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No.1, 2015, 123.

³⁷ See also Rani Lill Anjum and Stephen Mumford, *What Tends to Be*, 165: “...there cannot be good and bad causes.”

One could object that narrative meaning also needs some values added to causal relations (values pertaining to ethical or cosmic meaning), as we have seen earlier. When telling life stories, we select significant causal relations that carry some value, either positive or negative. Those values would make narrative causation variable in degrees. However, cosmic and ethical meanings do not constitute causal relations. They are only conditions that discriminate between causal relations. They are criteria of selection but do not ground the order of narrative meaning, as Aristotle pinned it down in his *Poetics*. It is true that most of us prefer a positive story to a negative one, a story that includes achievement to one without achievement. This does not necessarily mean that narrative causation comes in degrees, but rather that when evaluating a life, ours, or somebody else's, we cannot consider only narrative meaning. We must also ponder its cosmic and ethical meaning. Narrative meaning, nonetheless, is distinct from these sorts of meaning, and its distinct nature rests on causal relations.

There are, nevertheless, some ways in which the narrative meaning of life admits of degrees. One way is the variation in the characteristics added to causation (temporal order, intensity, arrangements, and purposive orientation). These characteristics build up diverse patterns that can differ from each other even when the overall amount of goods and bads stays the same, as we have seen earlier in Kamm's account. In this sense, independently from ethical or cosmic meaning and from the process of causation, the end might be more important than the beginning, a progressive structure might be better than a regressive structure, or one arrangement of events might be better than another one. A second way in which narrative meaning can admit of degrees has to do with the self-understanding of the person whose life is at stake. One person can understand a part of her life better than another part or experience difficulties in understanding her life narrative. These variations are independent of the intrinsic value of causation. However, in both cases, causation remains the grounding factor, and it maintains its intrinsic value.

4. Conclusion

I have shown that causation is the core of the narrative meaning of life. For this purpose, I have defended a dispositionalist account of narrative causal relations derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this account, causes have powers that dispose them to cause specific effects. Causation is the manifestation of such

powers. This view, I argued, best captures the nature of the narrative meaning:

1. It gives equal importance to cause and effect, and it brings to the fore causal relations that are not limited to personal agency.
2. It substantially accounts for life changes, revealing properties of events and of the effects they have in our lives.
3. It places causation within the metaphysical structure of objects, allowing for both necessity and contingency. Narrative causation unfolds according to events' properties and interactions with other events, and not implacable laws.

My dispositionalist reading of the narrative meaning of life relies on Aristotle's requirements for the plot, which reveal the causal order of the narrative: (1) the complete structure of beginning-middle-end; (2) the magnitude of a causal process that yields life significance; (3) the unity and determinate structure of causes that act in a particular order around a unified subject; and (4) the universality that arises from the intelligibility of necessity and probability and the purpose of the causal process.

Finally, the dispositionalist view from within the causal process led us to postulate an ontological value of the narrative causation, distinct from the value carried by ethical or cosmic meaning. I argued that causal efficacy does not depend on ethical or cosmic meaning but on the causation process's metaphysical structure. While the ethical meaning and the cosmic meaning are relevant in selecting causal relations, they do not exhaust the value of narrative causation.

The narrative meaning of life is thus grounded in causal relations between life events. These causal relations have intrinsic value. Furthermore, the narrative meaning entails: (1) the embedding of causation in patterns shaped by temporal order, intensity, arrangements, and purposive orientation; and (2) values that discriminate between causal relations and pertain to ethical or cosmic meaning.³⁸

³⁸ I thank Catherine Barber and two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments and suggestions on this paper.