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### Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative

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## Free Will, Death, and Immortality: The Role of Narrative

*John Martin Fischer*

**Abstract:** In this paper I explore in a preliminary way the interconnections among narrative explanation, narrative value, free will, and immortality. I build on the fascinating and suggestive work of David Velleman. I offer the hypothesis that our acting freely is what gives our lives a distinctive kind of value—narrative value. Free Will, then, is connected to the capacity to lead a meaningful life in a quite specific way: it is the ingredient which, when added to others, endows us with a meaning over and above the cumulative value derived from adding together levels of momentary welfare. In acting freely, we are writing a sentence in the story of our lives, and the value of acting freely is thus a species of the value of artistic creativity or self-expression (understood appropriately). Finally, I contend that the fact that our lives are stories need not entail that they have endings, or that immortality would necessarily be unimaginable or essentially different from ordinary, finite human life. Yes, a certain sort of narrative understanding of our lives *as a whole* would be impossible in the context of immortality; but much of what we care about, and value, in our stories might remain.

Although the future is uncertain, we can at least be confident of one thing: the past is always changing. (Slavic folk saying)<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction

The notion of ‘narrative’ is rich and suggestive, but, at the same time, vexed. The notion is invoked by philosophers and literary theorists (and others) in very different ways. Despite the confusions engendered by its multiple meanings and uses, I believe that the notion of narrative can be illuminating with respect to issues about freedom, death, immortality, and the meaning of life. Care must be taken, however, to distinguish different ideas, and to apply them appropriately.

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<sup>1</sup> It is well known that it is difficult to predict the future. A colleague of mine once pointed out that the situation is even worse with respect to the past: it is, he said, *impossible* to predict the past.

In previous work, I have made some tentative and sketchy suggestions.<sup>2</sup> I have claimed that the value of acting freely, or acting in such a way as to be morally responsible, is the value of self-expression. This value is a kind of aesthetic value, or akin to an aesthetic value. When I act freely, I 'make a statement,' and the value of my free action is the value of writing a sentence in the book of my life (my narrative), rather than the value of 'making a difference' (of a certain sort) to the world. I have not suggested that artistic self-expression is the only value, or a hegemonic one; rather, the suggestion was that the value of free action is the value, whatever that is, of artistic self-expression. Further, I have suggested that our lives' having the signature features of narrative does not in itself imply that immortality would necessarily be undesirable (or even unrecognizably similar to our current lives).<sup>3</sup>

Here I wish to develop and tie together these ideas a bit further (although, perhaps inevitably, not as fully as I would like). I shall begin by laying out and discussing relevant aspects of the work of David Velleman on these topics.<sup>4</sup> I shall then argue that the value of our lives as free creatures is indeed a species of the value of artistic self-expression. More specifically, I shall contend that acting freely is what makes us the sort of creatures that live lives that have the characteristic features of narratives. Acting freely is what changes the depictions of our lives from mere characterizations to stories (or narratives). Further, I shall distinguish the claim that our lives can be explained in the distinctive manner of narrative explanation from the claim that our lives can be evaluated in the characteristic narrative fashion. Finally, I suggest that understanding our lives as narratives (in either sense) is compatible with the possibility that unending life would be attractive to human beings. Narrativity need not entail the necessity of endings.

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2 John Martin Fischer, 'Responsibility and Self-Expression,' *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1999): 277-297.

3 John Martin Fischer, 'Epicureanism About Death and Immortality,' forthcoming, *The Journal of Ethics*.

4 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991), pp. 48-77.

## II. Velleman on Narrative Value and Narrative Explanation

### II.1 Velleman on Narrative Value

Velleman argues that the overall value of our life, considered as a whole, is not determined by a function that merely adds together all of the levels of momentary well-being in our lives. Additionally, he contends that our levels of momentary well-being are not simply the marginal increment in our level of overall welfare or value. The two dimensions of value—momentary and overall—are not analyzed in terms of each other or reducible to each other.<sup>5</sup>

According to Velleman, we care not just about the total amount of momentary well-being in our lives, or even its temporal ordering; we care about the story of our lives, the narrative structure of our lives.<sup>6</sup> More carefully, the function that specifies the overall value of our lives takes into account in an important way certain characteristics that are signature features of what we take to be ‘good’ (in some sense) narratives.

As Velleman concedes, his point is not that we value narratives that are ‘better stories’ in a sense that would be of interest to potential readers of novels or (say) literary critics or reviewers. A life that makes a rather boring story might well be preferable, in terms of overall value, to a life filled with unexpected twists and turns, excitement, titillation, and tragedy. So exactly what does Velleman mean when he says that the overall value of our lives is importantly sensitive to narrative content?

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5 J. David Velleman, ‘Well-Being and Time.’

6 Cashiers in California have asked me, ‘How’s your day going so far?’ Also, I’ve been implored to ‘Have a great rest-of-your-day!’ Of course, these sorts of thoughts, from people one does not really know, are superficial and slightly irritating. They can also reflect a mistaken view about value—or, perhaps, a focus on only one dimension of value.

China’s Chairman Mao was asked what he thought of the French Revolution. He reportedly replied, ‘It is too early to tell.’ This clearly goes to the opposite extreme! Aristotle more moderately urged us ‘to call no man happy, until that man is dead,’ alluding to an old adage going back to Herodotus’ tale about King Croesus. The adage was ubiquitous in the 5th century BCE, made especially so by Sophocles, whose play, *Women of Trachis*, begins, ‘There is an old saying that no man is blessed until his final day.’ (Heracles dies at the end of the play, after entering as hero at the start.)

What are the signature features of narratives that help to shape the functions that determine the overall value of our lives?

I suggest that we begin by considering the examples Velleman employs. Velleman starts with an example of Michael Slote's:

A given man may achieve political power and, once in power, do things of great value, after having been in the political wilderness throughout his earlier career. He may later die while still 'in harness' and fully possessed of his powers, at a decent old age. By contrast, another man may have a meteoric success in youth, attaining the same office as the first man and also achieving much good; but then lose power, while still young, never to regain it. Without hearing anything more, I think our natural, immediate reaction to these examples would be that the first man was the more fortunate ...<sup>7</sup>

Whereas Slote concludes from this sort of example that we have a 'time preference for goods that come late in life,' Velleman concludes that we care about the narrative content of our lives (and not just the total levels of momentary well-being, added up or even added up and weighted according to temporal position). It is a distinctive feature of narratives that later events can alter the 'meaning' or 'significance' of earlier events. In this sense narratives can have 'loops,' as Derrida (notoriously, in some quarters) contended. It is not that we can change the physico-causal past; but we can sometimes change its meaning and thus its contribution to the value of our lives overall.

Velleman says:

Why would a person care about the placement of momentary goods on the curve that maps his changing welfare? The answer, I believe, is that an event's place in the story of one's life lends it a meaning that isn't entirely determined by its impact on one's well-being at the time. A particular electoral victory, providing a particular boost to one's current welfare, can mean either that one's early frustrations were finally over or that one's subsequent failures were not yet foreshadowed, that one enjoyed either fleeting good luck or lasting success—all depending on its placement in the trend of one's well-being. And the event's meaning is what determines its contribution to the value of one's life.

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7 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' p. 51 ; the quotation is from Michael Slote, 'Goods and Lives,' in his *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 23-4.

... The meaning of a benefit depends not only on whether it follows or precedes hardships but also on the specific narrative relation between the goods and evils involved. Slote's politician would have experienced an improvement in his well-being whether his years of toil were capped by electoral victory or merely cut short by his winning the lottery and retiring young. But the contribution of these alternative benefits to the overall value of his life wouldn't be determined entirely by how well-off each would make him from one moment to the next. Their contribution to his life's value would also be determined by the fact that the former would be a well-earned reward, and would prove his struggles to have been a good investment, whereas the latter would be a windfall in relation to which his struggles were superfluous. Thus benefits that would effect equal improvements in his momentary well-being might contribute differently to the value of his life, by virtue of lending and borrowing different meanings in exchange with preceding events.<sup>8</sup>

Velleman contends that it is better to thrive as a result of learning from one's misfortunes than simply as a result of (say) winning the lottery or some other windfall. As Velleman puts it:

A life in which one suffers a misfortune and then learns from it may find one equally well-off, at each moment, as a life in which one suffers a misfortune and then reads the encyclopedia. But the costs of the misfortune are merely offset when the value of the latter life is computed; whereas they are somehow cancelled entirely from the accounts of the former. Or rather, neither misfortune affects the value of one's life just by adding costs and benefits to a cumulative account. The effect of either misfortune on one's life is proportionate, not to its impact on one's continuing welfare, but to its import for the story. An edifying misfortune is not just offset but redeemed, by being given a meaningful place in one's progress through life.<sup>9</sup>

Velleman believes that the following pair of stories illustrates the same point. In both lives your first ten years of marriage are unhappy and are followed by equal amounts of contentment. But in the first life you get divorced and consider your first marriage a 'dead loss'; you just happen to meet someone else with whom you live happily (ever after!). In the second life, you learn from the troubles of your first ten years, and you

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8 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' pp. 53-4.

9 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' pp. 54-5.

save the marriage (and live happily ever after). Indeed, in the second story you think of the initial segment of the marriage as the ‘foundation of your [later] happiness.’ Velleman says that we would prefer the second life. He says, ‘You can simply think that a dead-end relationship blots the story of one’s life in a way that marital problems don’t if they lead to eventual happiness.’<sup>10</sup>

So it seems that the primary examples suggested by Velleman of salient features of desirable narratives (in the sense relevant to the function that determines overall value of a human life) are of hard work being rewarded and learning from mistakes, rather than simply profiting (comparably) from windfalls. My suggestion is that we interpret Velleman’s claim that we take narrative content into account in evaluating overall welfare as involving the idea that ‘narrative content’ is a shorthand for a kind (or perhaps kinds) of relationship among events of which his cases are instances. ‘Narrative content’ is not explained generally, but it involves the sort of relationships that are present in his cases and other, similar cases. When this sort of temporally extended pattern of events occurs, the kind of ‘exchange of meaning’ that is characteristic of narratives can take place.<sup>11</sup>

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10 J. David Velleman, ‘Well-Being and Time,’ p. 55.

11 Whereas Velleman’s contention here is appealing, it is tantalizingly underdeveloped. One problem is that there is a limited number of examples actually offered; also, as I point out in the text, Velleman does not offer any general formulaic explanation of narrative value. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, various philosophers have suggested to me that there are other potential explanations for our intuitions or judgments about various lives that are at least as plausible (as ‘narrative value’). Thaddeus Metz has suggested to me that we can account for the judgments to which Velleman draws our attention by keeping in mind that stretches of one’s life (or activities in these stretches) can have *instrumental* value as well as intrinsic value; thus, even a utilitarian can account for the greater value of certain lives by pointing out that stretches in certain lives (but not others) can have instrumental value. (For a discussion, see Thaddeus Metz, ‘Utilitarianism and the Meaning of Life,’ *Utilitas* 15 (2003), pp. 50-70.) David Hershenov has suggested that the judgments can be explained not so much by invoking narrative value, but by the moral value of staying married, the desire for (or value of) moral self-improvement, and so forth. (A skeptic about the invocation of the notion of narrative value here, such as Hershenov, might then seek to construct examples of lives that lack the putatively relevant features—moral self-improvement, staying married, and so forth—to see if the relevant evaluations of the life

Velleman applies his claim (that human beings are distinctive insofar as the overall value of our lives is partly a function of narrative content) to issues pertaining to the badness of death. A decision about physician-assisted suicide depends at least in part on whether the individual's life would on balance be worth continuing (on some appropriate metric). Velleman says:

The choice between heroic medical treatment and passive euthanasia is therefore frequently said to require so-called quality-of-life considerations. Whether days should be added or subtracted from a patient's life is to be judged, according to the prevalent view, by whether the days in question would be spent in a state of well-being or hardship.

In my view, however, deciding when to die is not (despite the familiar saying) like deciding when to cash in one's chips—not, that is, a decision to be based on the incremental gains and losses that one stands to accumulate by staying in the game. It is rather like deciding when and how to end a story, a decision that cannot be dictated by considerations of momentary well-being. Hence a person may rationally be willing to die though he can look forward to a few more good weeks or months; and a person may rationally be unwilling to die even though he can look forward only to continued adversity. The rationality of the patient's attitude depends on whether an earlier or later death would make a better ending to his life story.<sup>12</sup>

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stay the same.) Andrews Reath has suggested that what is significant about the cases under discussion is that they indicate that there are irreducibly *relational* goods; but this does not in itself entail anything about specifically 'narrative' value.

These matters require much more attention than I can give here. I should point out that I myself have some doubts about how to evaluate the various scenarios. For example, I do not think that it is somehow better or more valuable that a depressed individual pull out of his depression by pure strength of will, or a regimen of psychotherapy, or any other sort of extended and perhaps arduous set of activities and reflections, rather than by taking an antidepressant. Of course, if the chances of recurrence of the depression are greater if one simply takes the medication, then that counts against it. But I do not share the intuition that there is something less valuable—that it is somehow 'cheating'—to use the antidepressant (successfully). And it is not exactly clear to me how to distinguish this case, or class of cases, from those discussed by Velleman. I hope to turn to these issues in future work. Here I shall not press the worries, and take it, as a working hypothesis, that Velleman's intuitions or judgments about scenarios are plausible, and that his invocation of narrative value is explanatorily helpful.

12 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' p. 62.

### *II.1a Some Reflections*

The idea of employing the notion of narrative as a guide in potential cases of physician-assisted suicide is fascinating and suggestive. I think it has limitations, though. We saw above that the pertinent notion of ‘better ending to his life story’ cannot be the notion of ‘better’ important to a reader of a work of fiction or a literary critic. But we do not have a general account of the relevant notion of narrative content and thus of ‘better story’ or ‘better ending of the life-story.’ We *do* have a set of examples, and we can intuitively recognize similar sequences of events that have the requisite ‘narrative’ characteristics. But I think that this will only provide guidance in some cases—by no means all.

Certainly we can say that the death of someone in the prime of her life, with many ongoing professional and personal projects underway, and no significant health problems, would be a bad ending to her story, in the relevant sense. Similarly, we can presumably say of an elderly woman who has had a full, rich life and has completed all her important life-projects, has said goodbye to her loved ones and friends and made arrangements for the disposition of her estate, and is in significant pain, that it would not be a bad thing for her to die; death now rather than later would be a better ending to her life story. Velleman’s notion of narrative content arguably does help to sort through such examples.

But there will be many other cases in which it simply does not give sufficiently definite guidance. What about a person who has completed all his life-projects, but still to some extent enjoys simply watching certain television programs or reading the newspaper. He is physically confined to a bed, but is not in intolerable or significant pain. He knows however that he has a condition that will slowly incapacitate him further, and he has decided that now is the time to die. Would death now rather than in six months or a year or two years be a better ending to his story? Are his interests in television and the newspaper sufficient to say that death now would rob him of a ‘better’ ending to his story? What if he did not have such interests, or any interests? That is, what if he were largely indifferent to everything, including television and the newspaper and

even news of his family, and so forth? Would this make a difference, and, if so, would the narrative account suggested by Velleman entail (or help to explain) the difference in question?

The ideas that people should thrive because of their efforts, or in virtue of learning from their mistakes, do not provide sufficient guidance about the sorts of cases just sketched. Further, it is not clear how to extrapolate or extend the ideas to provide definite guidance in these and a whole range of cases. I would think that many (although certainly not all) cases of potential physician-assisted euthanasia pertain to elderly individuals who have completed the major projects of their lives, at least so far as ‘projects’ are understood in a fairly standard way. It is already the case that either they have learned from their mistakes or not, either they have flourished because of their efforts or not, and so forth. These considerations don’t seem to help with the decision about when exactly the decision to terminate life should be made, if at all. Of course, we could try to interpret ‘narrative content’ in such a way as to apply to anyone with ongoing interests of any kind, but this seems a stretch; here considerations of quality of life appear to be driving our judgments, rather than considerations of narrative content or structure. Thus, whereas Velleman’s idea is highly suggestive, it can give only a partial guide to the difficult decisions concerning physician-assisted suicide.<sup>13</sup>

Velleman also applies his insights about the significance of narrative content to the question of the distinctive badness of the death of a person. A human being can see his life as an extended sequence over time; also, he can see it as a story. A human being can thus care about the narrative structure of his life. According to Velleman, a nonhuman animal, such as a cow, cannot conceive of itself as a continuing entity—cannot even take an extended temporal perspective at all. What the animal cannot conceive it cannot care about. As Velleman puts it, ‘... a person can care about what his life story is like, and a premature death

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13 This is not necessarily a criticism of Velleman, as it is unclear that he envisaged his account as providing guidance in all cases of potential physician-assisted suicide.

can spoil the story of his life. Hence death can harm a person but it cannot harm a cow.<sup>14</sup>

Velleman believes that, because a nonhuman animal cannot take a temporally extended perspective, it is incoherent to say that one sequence of moments can be better for a cow than another sequence of moments. He says, 'For a lower animal, then, momentary well-being fails not only of additivity but of cumulability by any algorithm at all. Consequently, the totality of this subject's life simply has no value for him, because he cannot care about it as such ...'<sup>15</sup>

It is not clear to me that value (and harm) should be tied so closely to a subject's ability to conceive of the relevant thing. I do not know how to adjudicate this sort of issue. But I would simply point out that even if we granted that a cow's death deprives the cow of a sequence of future experiences (which on balance are positive), this is not the distinctive sort of value of which death can deprive a human being. That is, death can be bad for a person in a special way: it can rob a person of a good ending to his life-story, whereas it cannot so rob a cow. The lives of human beings (or, more carefully, persons) have a dimension of value over and above the accumulation of momentary well-being, whereas at best this sort of accumulation exhausts the value of a cow's life. Thus death can be bad for a person in a distinctive way, even if we grant that there is a cumulative dimension to the value of a nonhuman animal's life.

Note that Velleman contends that the capacity to adopt a temporal perspective from which one can see an extended period of time is necessary for the capacity to care about the story of one's life. Thus, on Velleman's view, such a capacity is a necessary condition for the overall value of humans' lives being affected by narrative considerations.<sup>16</sup> I do

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14 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' p. 71.

15 J. David Velleman, 'Well-Being and Time,' p. 71.

16 For skepticism about the necessity of this sort of capacity for the distinctive notion of 'valuing' (as opposed to merely preferring) and also for autonomy, see Agnieszka Jaworska, 'Respecting the Margins of Agency: Alzheimer's Patients and the Capacity to Value,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29 (1999), pp. 105-38.

not however believe that the capacity to take this sort of perspective is *sufficient*. Consider a human being who is being thoroughly controlled by remote-control direct stimulation of the brain, so that his choices and actions are intuitively not his own, free choices and actions. This individual may well have the normal capacity to take a more expansive temporal perspective, but the fact that he never acts freely inclines me to say that his overall level of well-being is to be determined by simply adding his momentary welfare values. For an individual who does not act freely, there is no separate dimension of value—the narrative dimension—irreducible to the intertemporal aggregation of momentary welfare. Such an individual would be ‘in between’ mere animals (on Velleman’s account) and ordinary human beings (and other persons). That is, he would have the capacity to take the relevant temporal perspective, and yet not act freely. Thus, unlike mere animals (on Velleman’s account), his momentary welfare values could be added together; but unlike ordinary human beings, he would not have a separate narrative dimension of value.

If I am correct about this supposition, then acting freely is the ingredient that gives us the distinctively narrative dimension of value. Acting freely is the feature which, when added to the others (including the capacity to take the appropriate temporal point of view and thus to care about one’s story), transforms us into creatures whose lives can be evaluated by reference to salient sorts of narrative relationships.<sup>17</sup>

It is typically held that only a free creature—only a creature capable of acting freely—can have a meaningful life. It emerges now that acting

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<sup>17</sup> I do not know how to prove my supposition, and I recognize that it would be good to have more to say here. I base the claim on consideration of contexts in which we would normally suppose that there is narrative value and thus the ability of the relevant agent to affect the meanings of past events, but in which it is explicitly understood that the agent is manipulated in such a way as not to be acting freely; in this range of thought experiments, my intuition is that the agent cannot affect the meanings of the past events, and that this is precisely because he does not act freely. I hope to be able to justify this intuition (at least to some extent) in future work. I thank Ward Jones for emphasizing the need for further defense of my suggestion.

freely is the specific ingredient that endows our lives with the distinctively narrative dimension of value. Only a creature who can act freely can affect the ‘meanings’ of past events by virtue of affecting the narrative relationships among various events in his life. Death robs a person of something especially important—the capacity to continue to lead a meaningful life. That is, it can now be seen that it robs a person of the capacity to continue to lead a life with a narrative dimension of value, and thus with a specific sort of meaning. It is sometimes said that death is bad because it deprives us of possible future goods. On the view I have sketched, it is also bad because it can deprive us of the possibility of changing the narrative meaning of the past.

On this sort of view (to which I am attracted), one can disagree with Velleman’s claim that death cannot be bad for a cow, but still maintain that the death of a person is bad in a special way. Death arguably can be bad for the cow insofar as it deprives the cow of future pleasures (pleasures that would be part of an extended sequence that overall has considerably more pleasure than pain). But death can be bad for a person insofar as it deprives him of past goods as well as future goods: it cuts off the accumulation of momentary well-being, and it can prevent us from writing a better ending to our story (and thus vindicating our pasts).<sup>18</sup>

I follow Carl Ginet in holding that our freedom is the freedom to add to the given past, holding the laws of nature fixed.<sup>19</sup> This sort of ‘fixity-of-the past’ view pertains to the physico-causal events and features of the past, and not to their ‘meanings.’ This constraint applies to both the notion of ‘freedom to do otherwise,’ and the notion of ‘acting freely.’ Whereas we cannot go backward in physico-causal space-time and ‘change the past,’ we can readily go backward in narrative space-time. Whereas it is a constraint on our freedom that the physico-causal past be

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18 Of course, the past goods in question are not ‘experiential’ goods.

19 Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990). See, also, John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will: An Essay on Control* (Cambridge, Ma.: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

fixed, and that our actions be extensions of the given (physico-causal) past, it is precisely our capacity to act freely that provides the ingredient that allows for backward travel in narrative space-time.<sup>20</sup>

### *II.2 Velleman on Narrative Explanation*

In a fascinating recent article, David Velleman has sought to give an account of narrative explanation (which, of course, is distinct from narrative value).<sup>21</sup> As Velleman puts it, ‘A story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but also understanding.’<sup>22</sup> Velleman seeks to describe the distinctive explanatory force of narrative, and to distinguish narrative explanation from explanation in the social and natural sciences.

Velleman says:

This question arises for various disciplines in which narrative comes into play. For historians, it is the question whether narrating historical events conveys understanding over and above that conveyed by subsuming the same events under the generalizations of economics, political science, or sociology. For clinical psychologists, it is the question whether fitting symptomatic behaviors into a life-story adds to the understanding gained by fitting them into diagnostic categories. Even the police or the jury must ask themselves what sort of explanatory value there is in a suspect’s giving his alibi in the form of a story.<sup>23</sup>

In providing his account of the distinctive potency of narrative explanation, Velleman builds on the work of Louis Mink and W.B. Gallie.<sup>24</sup> Both of these theorists emphasize the importance of

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20 We now have available to us a kind of ‘alternative’ explanation—no doubt, not the intended explanation—of the putative fact alluded to in footnote 1 above—that it is impossible to predict the past. If we can go backward in narrative space-time by freely acting in the future, and this free action cannot be predicted, then we also cannot predict what the narrative past will have been.

21 J. David Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ *Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), pp. 1-26.

22 J. David Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ p. 1.

23 J. David Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ p. 1.

24 Louis Mink, ‘Philosophical Analysis and Historical Understanding,’ in Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University

characterizing events in terms of their relations to outcomes or ‘endings’. Velleman says:

A narrative must move forward not only in the sense of telling one event after another but also in the sense of approaching or at least seeming to approach some conclusion to those events, some terminus, finish, or closure.

Here I should elaborate on a point ... about the difference between narrative and the artistic genres that employ it. A novel or a theater piece need not reach a conclusion or even seem to approach one. But a novel or a theatre piece need not be a work of narrative, either; it may be a work of narrative only in parts, or it may be ‘of’ narrative only in the sense of commenting on the requirements of narrative only by pointedly defying them. A bad story can make for a great novel (though perhaps not the sort of great novel that one likes to read). The necessity of an ending is not inherent in the aesthetics of the novel or play but in the nature of storytelling, a form of discourse that a novel or play need not employ.<sup>25</sup>

On Velleman’s view, a narrative explains by allowing the audience to assimilate the events in the story to a familiar emotional pattern or ‘cadence.’ He says:

A story therefore enables its audience to assimilate events, not to familiar patterns of *how things happen*, but rather to familiar patterns of *how things feel*. These patterns are not themselves stored in discursive form, as scenarios or stories; they are stored rather in experiential, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic memory—as we might say in the muscle-memory of the heart. Although the audience may have no discursive memory of events such as those of the story, it nevertheless has an experience of *deja senti*, because its emotional sensibility naturally follows the ups and downs of the story, just as a muscle naturally follows the cycle of tension and release.

What’s more, the emotion that resolves a narrative cadence tends to subsume the emotions that preceded it; the triumph felt at a happy ending is the triumph of ambitions realized and anxieties allayed; the grief felt at a tragic ending is the grief of hopes dashed or loves denied. Hence the conclusory emotion in a narrative cadence embodies not just how the audience feels about the ending; it embodies how the audience feels, at the ending, about the whole story.<sup>26</sup>

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Press, 1987), pp. 118-46; and E.B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964).

25 J. David Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ p. 10.

26 J. David Velleman, ‘Narrative Explanation,’ p. 19.

So, on Velleman's account, narrative explains by getting the audience to understand the relevant events because it '*knows how they feel*, in the sense that it experiences them as leading it through a natural emotional sequence,' and also because '*it knows how it feels about them*,' in the sense that it arrives at a stable attitude toward them overall.<sup>27</sup>

### *II.2a Some Reflections*

Above I distinguished two notions of 'better story' and, derivatively, 'better ending of the life-story.' One notion is, as I put it, especially relevant to potential readers of the story or critics, such as reviewers. Employing this notion, one might say that a certain story is better insofar as the ending is unpredictable, or there are unexpected and exciting twists and turns of plot, and so forth. It is clear that it cannot be this notion that is pertinent (say) to questions about physician-assisted suicide. Rather, a second notion is pertinent, and we can get a grasp on it by considering salient examples from what are considered 'good' (in the relevant sense) life-stories: persons thriving because of their efforts (and not merely because of unexpected windfalls), persons learning from their mistakes and thus flourishing (rather than deeming their mistakes 'dead-weight losses' or flourishing by lucky accidents), and so forth. It is this second notion that is relevant to questions about physician-assisted suicide.

In his paper on narrative explanation, Velleman says:

... the question how storytelling conveys understanding is inseparable from the question what makes for a good story. Of course, a good story can be good in many accidental respects, ranging from the elegance of its diction to the personal attractions of its characters. But what makes a story good specifically as a story—what makes it a good example of storytelling, or narrative—is its excellence at a particular way of organizing events into an intelligible whole.<sup>28</sup>

I am not sure whether Velleman intends to be making the following sort of suggestion, or whether he would agree entirely, but I would

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27 J. David Velleman, 'Narrative Explanation,' p. 19.

28 J. David Velleman, 'Narrative Explanation,' p. 1.

recommend that we interpret Velleman's remarks as suggesting a way of giving more concrete content to the first notion of 'better story'. That is, I suggest that 'good story', in the sense relevant to potential readers and reviewers, is goodness in presenting a sequence of events in such a way as to have emotional resonance (that is, to map onto the natural cadence of our emotions in a natural way). The various devices of plot and literary style can be seen as ways of seeking to achieve a resonance with our natural emotional cadences—to achieve '*deja senti*' in various ways. Some such devices work considerably better than others (for individual readers and also groups of readers). The classic literary (as well as musical) forms can be considered 'tried and true' ways of evoking emotional resonances. (It then becomes the challenge of the author—or composer—to work creatively and in original ways within the structure of these forms, or perhaps to transgress the boundaries set by these forms, so as to achieve emotional resonance.) Now I certainly doubt whether the notion of 'good story' of interest to readers and reviewers of literature can be reduced to a single idea, but this suggestion can perhaps illuminate at least a central aspect of the notion.<sup>29</sup>

Velleman says:

Any sequence of events, no matter how improbable, can provide material for storytelling if it completes an emotional cadence. Twins separated at birth are ideal protagonists for a story even if their eventual reunion is a fluke. A discovery due to serendipity, a tragedy narrowly averted by dumb luck, a mundane act that unforeseeably becomes the last in a life accidentally cut short—these are the stuff not only of literary storytelling but of legend, gossip, and other forms of everyday narrative. Whether a winning lottery ticket or a fatal housefire makes enough of a story to be featured on the local news depends, not on whether its causes can be told, but rather on whether the surrounding circumstances will call up feelings that can be brought to some resolution by this inexplicable stroke of good or bad fortune. So long as we feel an anxiety relieved or a hope dashed, we have the sense of hearing a story, even if we have no idea why events took the relevant turn.<sup>30</sup>

29 To add just one dimension of complexity: note that a typical literary work or musical composition will not simply evoke one emotion, but many (sometimes colliding) emotions.

30 J. David Velleman, 'Narrative Explanation,' pp. 6-7

How exactly do these remarks fit with the point made above that the narrative value of a life in which efforts are rewarded is greater than that of a life in which one thrives by serendipity or lucky windfall? We have to distinguish between narrative understanding and narrative value. We can achieve narrative understanding, and we could even say that the story is a good story, when we are told of someone flourishing by winning the lottery. Depending on the details of the presentation, the sequence of events can resonate with an emotional cadence—the story can depict the sequence of events in such a way that it feels familiar—it feels like a recognizable human drama. Upon hearing the presentation, we are inclined to say, in our hearts, ‘Ah yes ...’ But it does not follow that such a story depicts a life with great *narrative value*. So, for example, such a story does not depict a life with more narrative value than the story of a life of flourishing as a result of lessons learned or simply hard work. A better story in the telling need not make for a story of a life with more value. An ending that is ‘better’ in the sense of narrative understanding need not be ‘better’ in the sense of narrative value.

Return to Velleman’s claim, ‘... the question how storytelling conveys understanding is inseparable from the question what makes for a good story.’ The question of how storytelling conveys understanding is inseparable from what makes for a good story, in the sense that is relevant to readers and reviewers of literature. Further, it seems that only a life that can be explained in the distinctively narrative way is capable of having the characteristic narrative value—is capable of being evaluated through a function that is sensitive to the sorts of structural relationships sketched above. So the possibility of narrative explanation is inseparable from the possibility of narrative evaluation; being a narrative is a necessary condition for having narrative value. Of course, it does not follow from anything said thus far that the better a story is in the telling—the greater its virtues along the dimension pertinent to narrative understanding—the higher the value of the function that determines overall value of the life will be (other things equal).

As I said in the introductory section of this paper, I have suggested in previous work that the value of acting freely is the value (whatever that is) of writing a sentence in the narrative of one's life. On some approaches, acting out of character is inconsistent with the idea of one's life's having narrative structure (and admitting of narrative explanation). But I do not employ the idea of narrative in a way that would rule out free action that is 'out of character'. The situation here is a bit like the possibility of narrative explanation of flourishing as a result of a windfall, such as winning the lottery. If the storyteller is adept, the story will resonate; that is, the structure of the story will map onto the emotional memory of the 'listener' or 'reader'. As above (in the case of succeeding as a result of a lucky accident), the story of action out of character can be told in such a way that it feels familiar—it feels like a recognizable human drama. It all depends on the way the story is told, and it is a delicate matter to tell the story in such a way as to elicit an emotional response of the proper sort. Certain ways of telling the story will result in puzzlement, whereas more skillful storytelling will evoke that heartfelt, 'Ah yes ...', indicating an isomorphism with a human emotional cadence. One can freely act out of character, even on an approach that invokes the importance of narrative explanation, and identifies the value of acting freely with a certain sort of aesthetic value (defined in terms of narrative value).

On certain views of moral responsibility, one is morally responsible insofar as insofar as one expresses an enduring 'character trait'. This approach follows David Hume. But the basic problem with the Humean approach is that one can act freely, and be morally responsible, even when one acts out of character. The Humean may try to find some more 'complicated' character trait that is expressed in the behavior, but I believe that this trail leads inevitably to an unacceptable etiolation of the ordinary notion of 'character trait.' On this approach, it will turn out in the end that 'character traits' do not play any substantive, independent explanatory role. Despite the considerable attractions of a Humean approach to such matters, I believe that the possibility of acting out of

character—and doing so freely—constitutes a significant and, indeed, insuperable problem.

On my view of acting freely and moral responsibility, one need not be expressing any sort of enduring character trait, or expressing any sort of ‘commitment’ or ‘positive evaluation’ of the relevant behavior. Rather, one is expressing oneself in the sense of writing a sentence in the narrative of one’s life. If the story of one’s past, and one’s behavior, resonates appropriately, then one is acting freely and is morally responsible for the behavior in question. Again: it all depends on whether the storytelling is adept. In some cases the story can be told in such a way that the behavior under consideration is ‘prefigured’, even if it is out of character. When the behavior is in this way prefigured, the story resonates with the listener (or ‘audience’) in the indicated way, and the agent is morally responsible.<sup>31</sup>

### III. Narrative, Endings, and Immortality

On the view of narrative explanation under consideration here, a narrative must have an ending. If our lives are narratives, or have the distinctive structure of narrative, then they must have endings. On this view, we cannot be immortal (insofar as our lives are narratives or have narrative value), if our lives are indeed narratives. To imagine immortal human life is to imagine human life devoid of an essential or at least very important characteristic: having narrative structure and thus a distinctive dimension of value.

I think that, strictly speaking, this is correct. If a narrative must have an ending, then it is clear that our lives cannot have the sort of meaning that involves taking a retrospective perspective on its totality, as it were, and assigning a meaning that reflects the overall arc of the lifestory. But

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<sup>31</sup> I can only gesture briefly at an account of these matters here. Note that my sketch here may suggest an unintuitive ‘relativization’ of moral responsibility to a particular bit of story-telling. I do not know whether this is genuinely problematic; if so, one could define acting freely and moral responsibility in terms of the ‘availability’ (in some sense) of a story of the right sort.

an immortal life could have something very much like narrative meaning, strictly conceived; or, perhaps better, the relevant temporal stages or parts could be explained in the distinctive and strict narrative manner, and they could have the signature features of narrative value. Whereas the life as a whole could not be considered a narrative, the parts could be, and this would seem to render immortal life recognizably like our current human lives and also potentially desirable (in a distinctive way).<sup>32</sup>

The literary analogue for such a life is not the novel, but perhaps a collection of short stories. Of course, the collection needs to be infinitely large, and the short stories need to be interconnected, with the same character appearing as the protagonist. Perhaps a better analogy would be a series of novels with the same protagonist, like a mystery series with the same detective. Over time the detective's character may change, but the changes can be organic; they need not be discontinuous.<sup>33</sup>

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32 It is a staple of 'postmodern' critiques of 'narrative' that they posit some sort of overarching or 'totalizing' meaning. On my account of the narrative structure of an immortal life, there is no single 'grand narrative' and thus no 'totalizing meaning'; and yet there remains much to which a postmodernist could object, given that the sub-parts of the immortal life are taken to have suitable meanings.

33 In Amanda Cross's (Carolyn Heilbrunn's) delightful series of academic mystery novels, Kate Fansler (English Professor and detective extraordinaire) changes noticeably but understandably over time. As she ages, Kate is no longer the hard-drinking detective who solved the murder of the first tenured woman professor at Harvard in *Death in A Tenured Position*. In the later works, she worries about her excessive indulgence in alcohol, and seeks moderation in this and other pleasures.

The story of Heilbrunn's own life, as opposed to that of her fictional professor/detective, ended rather abruptly. The *Los Angeles Times* obituary (October 15, 2003), says:

Carolyn G. Heilbrunn, a distinguished feminist scholar who illuminated the female experience through erudite reinterpretations of classic English literature and in literate mystery novels written under the name Amanda Cross, was found dead in her New York City apartment Friday after an apparent suicide. She was 77.

The pioneering feminist critic had decided years earlier that she would end her life by the age of 70 to avoid the inevitable deterioration of age, but she later explained that she had let the deadline pass when her 60s proved deeply satisfying.

In *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty*, a book published the year she turned 71, she said she would decide each day whether to keep on living. Her son Robert told the *New York Times* last week that she had not been ill when she decided to kill herself.

Another analogy would be a ‘serial’ novel or even a television series. Our lives may seem to be soap operas at times! Or perhaps they are ‘sitcoms’; if so, mine is in certain respects (apart from pecuniary considerations) more like Larry David’s on HBO’s marvelous series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, than Ward Cleaver’s on *Leave it to Beaver*. Now, of course, all sitcoms do eventually get cancelled—*Leave it to Beaver* can only be seen in syndicated reruns. But, as far as I can see, it is not part of their distinguishing features or essence that they be so (cruelly) terminated. A serial novel, a television series, a series of mystery novels with the same detective, a collection of short stories—they all have parts that can be explained and evaluated in the characteristic narrative fashion.<sup>34</sup>

If I consider an apparently possible immortal human life, I can see parts of it as having the distinctive features of narrative understanding and value. Parts of the life can be explained in such a way as to achieve emotional resonance and resolution. But since the life as a whole has no ending, there is no possibility of achieving distinctively narrative understanding of the whole life. And thus there is no final answer, as it were, giving the narrative value of the life as a whole. Whereas this is indeed the case, I do not think that it renders immortal life unintelligible or unrecognizably human; nor do I think it makes it impossible for a human being to find such a life valuable and desirable.

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It is almost as if Heilbrun always knew the end of her life-story, but she couldn’t wait for the organic development of the plot. In any case, the details of her reasons for choosing to commit suicide when she did may remain (not inappropriately) a mystery.

<sup>34</sup> In his classic paper, ‘The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,’ Bernard Williams argues that an immortal life would be essentially meaningless and unattractive: Williams, Bernard. *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 82-100, reprinted in John Martin Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 73-92. In my paper, ‘Why Immortality Is Not So Bad,’ I argue against Williams’ view. I suggest that the sort of immortality suggested in the text of the current paper—along the lines of a character in a series of novels or a continuing television series—could be appealing: John Martin Fischer, ‘Why Immortality is Not So Bad,’ *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 2 (September 1994), pp. 257-270, reprinted in J. Feinberg, ed., *Reason and Responsibility*, Ninth Edition (Wadsworth, 1996), pp. 401-409.

(After all, to find such a life potentially desirable does not require rank-ordering it even ordinally against other such lives, or against finite human lives. And even in a finite life, there is the problem of combining the two irreducible dimensions of value into some overall value score—the cumulative measure of momentary well-being and the narrative dimension.)

Someone might say that there is a big difference—a big and crucial difference—between merely (!) very, very long life and *infinitely* long life. It might be suggested that, although we can ‘get our minds around’ long life, it is a mistake to suppose that infinitely long life is relevantly similar to merely very long, finite life. The infinite, if might be said, is just fundamentally different, and thus fundamentally mysterious (and not presumably amenable to evaluation in the relevant ways).

This raises difficult and obscure questions. Consider, first, the putative Divine Attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, moral perfection, and so forth. It is sometimes claimed that we cannot understand these properties, since they are fundamentally different from the bounded and finite analogues in human power, knowledge, and goodness. The standard reply, of course, is that the Divine Attributes, although different from their finite analogues, are to be understood along the lines of those attributes; the relationship between the infinite and finite here is one of analogy.

Similarly, the arithmetical rules that define certain operations, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division are different for infinite and finite numbers. It is sometimes supposed that, because the arithmetics are different, there must be a difference in *kind* between finite and infinite magnitudes (and thus between finite and immortal lives). Given this difference in kind, it may not even be possible to grasp or comprehend an infinitely long human life. But, again, the reply should be that, although the rules pertaining to the relevant mathematical operations are different in finite and infinite numbers, they are not totally dissimilar. Indeed, there are sufficient similarities to suggest that the relationship between these sets of rules is one of *analogy*.

But Erich Reck has raised an interesting question here:

... one can now start to play with other mathematical facts about the infinite to create some curious questions: Suppose, e.g., that every hundred years I have one bad day (for whatever reason). Then over the span of an infinite life (say a life that is omega days long—the smallest infinite), the number of bad days will still be infinite. In fact, the number of bad days overall will be the same as the number of good days (both omega). Or to modify the example a bit: suppose you have a bad day after ten days, then the next after 100 days, then the next after 1000 days; i.e., the intervals between bad days get longer and longer. Overall, there will still be infinitely many bad days, thus the same (infinite) number as the good days. Or to turn the example around: imagine that after ten days you have your first good day of your life, then the next good day after 100 days, then the next good day after 1000 days, etc. Overall you will still have the same (infinite) number of good and bad days. These kinds of examples are used in the literature on the infinite to illustrate how different it is from the finite.<sup>35</sup>

In my view, the difficulties to which Reck brings our attention pertain to any attempt to quantify and aggregate welfare in the way typically employed by the function that determines overall welfare, given information about momentary welfare. These phenomena need to be addressed. But they do not pertain to the second dimension of value, the narrative dimension, which is irreducible to the first. The narrative dimension of value has to do with the structural relationships among events; it does not involve any sort of addition or mere quantitative analysis of good and bad experiences, good and bad days, and so forth. Here then is a way in which the narrative dimension of value is *better* able to address certain features of immortal life.

Similarly, consider a point raised by Borges in his short story, *The Immortal*, as described by Gustavo Llarull:

... the immortals are fundamentally devoted to intellectual pursuits; their physical needs are very easily satisfied (they can go without food for days) and sensual pleasures do not entice them. They are immersed in thought for entire weeks, and they barely talk to each other. In this context, Borges presents an interesting episode: one of the immortals falls from a cliff.

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<sup>35</sup> Erich Reck, personal correspondence.

Although the other immortals know about this accident, they go to his aid *months later*. Borges suggests that what from our finite view is surely deemed as cruelty or negligence may simply be the natural expression of attitudes that have changed in virtue of the correlative change in time patterns. In an average life span of 70 years, taking 15 minutes to help someone in need may be appropriate ... Now, the same proportion, for a life span of 7,000 years, yields 25 hours! Needless to say, the idea of having to wait 25 hours, or more, to be aided by my fellow immortals, when they are fully aware that I am in need of help, sounds repulsive to say the least ...<sup>36</sup>

As Llarull points out, Borges' description need not be the reality in an immortal life. Llarull says, '... "negative" or pain-related episodes, interactions or events would *not* lose their urgency [in an immortal life].'<sup>37</sup> It is clearly a mistake to think of immortal human life along the lines of an anatomical 'horizontal (or longitudinal) explosion' of ordinary, finite human life, keeping the temporal proportions fixed, as it were. Although there are perfectly good welfare-based reasons not to take the 'longitudinal explosion' model seriously, one can also invoke narrative relationships. Pain must be responded to as soon as possible, other things equal, and this fact would still obtain, in an immortal existence. It is a mistake to take a purely quantitative approach to envisaging and evaluating the relationships between finite and infinite human existence.<sup>38</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

I have in a tentative way explored the interconnections among narrative explanation, narrative value, free will, and immortality. I have built on

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36 Gustavo Llarull, 'The Problem of Immortality: A Response to Williams,' unpublished manuscript, University of California, Riverside department of philosophy.

37 Gustavo Llarull, 'The Problem of Immortality: A Response to Williams.'

38 The mistake of ignoring the crucial narrative structure of life, even infinite life, is also found in this passage from Victor Frankl: 'What would our lives be like if they were not finite in time, but infinite? If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now; every act might just as well be done tomorrow or the day after or a year from now or ten years hence. But in the face of death as absolute *finis* to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities—whose "finite" sum constitutes the whole of life—pass by unused.' (*The Doctor and the Soul* [New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957], p. 73.)

the fascinating and suggestive work of David Velleman. I have suggested that our acting freely is what gives our lives a distinctive kind of value—narrative value. Free Will, then, is connected to the capacity to lead a meaningful life in a quite specific way: it is the ingredient which, when added to others, endows us with a meaning over and above the cumulative value derived from adding together levels of momentary welfare. In acting freely, we are writing a sentence in the story of our lives, and the value of acting freely is thus a species of the value of artistic creativity or self-expression (understood appropriately). Finally, I have suggested that the fact that our lives are stories need not entail that they have endings, or that immortality would necessarily be unimaginable or essentially different from ordinary, finite human life. Yes, a certain sort of narrative understanding of our lives *as a whole* would be impossible in the context of immortality; but much of what we care about, and value, in our stories might remain.<sup>39</sup>

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