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Not much actually happened in *Cosmicomics* by Italo Calvino. Most of the stories within the book end in a state of questioning. The narrator ends up wondering whether anything that just happened in his existence actually matters, since often his actions get him nowhere. This futility presents itself in many of the chapters in the book, promoting the idea as a major theme of the book as a whole.

Much of the futility in the book is portrayed in a way that almost seems to make sense. This contradiction comes from the fact that human beings in the real world, as opposed to the world of *Cosmicomics*, often pursue pointless endeavors. The unusual setting of the stories in *Cosmicomics* serves to exaggerate the pointlessness and futility of many commonplace human actions. The science strewn throughout the book interacts intricately with this idea. Upon first glance, a story ending in futility can be seen as logical and easily explained by the science involved. For example, the chapter “At Daybreak” has Qfwfq and his entire family living on a nebula. The narrator goes into quite a bit of detail about their living situation:

“It was like lying down, we were flat and very still, turning as they turned. Not that we were lying outside, you understand, on the nebula’s surface; no, it was too cold out there. We were underneath, as if we had been tucked in under a layer of fluid, grainy matter.” [p 19]

The situation is explained with such authority, that the reader almost can’t help but accepting it as fact. Features of the nebula are described that are in line with what we

know about actual nebulas, which are broadly defined as interstellar clouds of dust, hydrogen, and plasma. The narrator describes “little grains of dust” [p 20] and “gaseous matter.” [p 21] Aside from the realistic description of a nebula (if living on a nebula can ever be described realistically), the overall situation of the book makes living on a nebula seem quite plausible. In a world where you can jump up onto the moon, have all of humanity existing in a single point, and receive a sign from two hundred million years before; why can't a family live on a nebula? The realistic feel given to many of the chapters and to the characters in the book create an atmosphere that allows for these characters to be looked at as human beings. As a result, their thoughts and actions, which seem so human, can be compared to the thoughts and actions of humans in a normal setting, i.e. not living on a nebula.

The theme of futility of human actions first shows up in “At Daybreak” when the family members count the rotations of the nebula. This didn't actually get them anywhere, since they “had no reference points.” [p 19] Later in that chapter, the narrator says, “What we were waiting for, nobody could have said,” [p 19] which demonstrates the pointlessness of their existence. It comes up again in “A Sign in Space” when the narrator is searching for his sign. He says:

“And for a second I was sure I had rediscovered my sign, on the Earth or in space, it made no difference, because through the signs a continuity had been established with no precise boundaries any more.”

[p 39]

Searching for his sign was pointless, since he would never recognize it anyway, and it no longer marked a point of reference, since “any sign heaped up with the others could be mine.” [p 39] An interesting take on the theme is that the narrator realized the futility of his search at the very end of the chapter. Speaking of his sign, he says, “discovering it would have served no purpose, because it was clear that, independent of signs, space didn’t exist and perhaps had never existed.” [p39]

The chapter “The Form of Space” also contains futility throughout the story. The narrator is falling, forever presumably. The narrator realizes that it is hopeless to wish for something that can’t happen, as expressed here:

“I too, naturally, dreamed only of meeting Ursula H’x, but since, in my fall, I was following a straight line absolutely parallel to the one she followed, it seemed inappropriate to reveal such an unattainable desire.” [p 116]

The narrator analyzes his meeting with Ursula H’x over and over again, trying to come up with some scientific anomaly that will allow them to meet. However, science is not on his side, as the chapter ends with Qfwfq (the narrator) still pondering the impossibility of their meeting.

Despite the many examples throughout the chapters of the book, one chapter in particular stands out in representing the theme of futility. “Games Without End” presents a situation of Qfwfq and Pfwfp playing a game. This is the type of story that should end normally enough. A game has rules and ends with someone winning. This game in

question in this chapter seems at first to follow the normal constructs of a game: rules and competition; it even had strategy. The narrator explains the concept of the game:

“Since space was curved, we sent the atoms rolling along its curve, like so many marbles, and the kid whose atom went farthest won the game. When you made your shot you had to be careful, to calculate the effects, the trajectories, you had to know how to exploit the magnetic fields and the fields of gravity, otherwise the ball left the track and was eliminated from the contest.” [p 63]

Science even comes into the rules of the game:

“We were careful not to throw them too hard, because when two hydrogen atoms are knocked together, click! A deuterium atom might be formed, or even a helium atom, and for the purposes of the game, such atoms were out.” [p 63]

Science gives the rules of the game legitimacy. Perhaps two hydrogen atoms crashing together could actually form deuterium or helium. Who are we, as the reader, to question the ‘rules’ of science?

The game progresses as any game should. The two players, Qfwfq and Pfwfp, obviously take the game very seriously. With the appearance of new hydrogen atoms, the strategy changed and the game became more intricate. With the new atoms, the narrator

states, “In this way our game never ended, and it never became boring either, because every time we found new atoms it seemed as if the game were new as well, as if we were playing it for the first time.” [p 64] This is the first sign of the pointlessness of this game. Theoretically, there should be a winner, since the rules lend themselves to one person winning. The point of a competitive game is to determine the best player. If the game never ends, then the whole competition failed to achieve anything.

Despite the seeming pointlessness of the game, both competitors take it very seriously. Pfwfp goes so far as to break the 50-50 rule and hoard new atoms for himself. Qfwfq retaliates by following him, discovering his secret, and then getting even. His plan for getting even is tricky and quite complicated, especially for a seemingly pointless game. Qfwfq put a lot of thought into this, and he states:

“I wanted to catch him in a trap worthy of his own perfidy. First of all, I started making fake atoms: while he was occupied with his treacherous raids, I was in a secret storeroom of mine, pounding and mixing and kneading all the material I had at my disposal.” [p 65]

Both Qfwfq and Pfwfp put so much effort into winning the game. Pfwfp spend hours running around collecting the new atoms as soon as they appeared, and Qfwfq spend hours in his storeroom constructing fake atoms to fool Pfwfp. Both boys are portrayed as normal kids, who have no responsibilities and nothing else to do except play this game. All of their time and effort went into the game, and their lives seemed to revolve around playing the game. However, the game is ended before either of them win.

This results in all their efforts and plots of the entire game resulting in nothing – nothing gained and nothing lost.

The frustrated Pfwfp decides that they must change games, and a new game with new rules results. Again, the point of all this is to determine a winner. Both Qfwfq and Pfwfp enter this new competition with enthusiasm and a fierce competitive spirit, but it doesn't get them anywhere. The ultimate futility results at the end of the chapter, when Pfwfp chases Qfwfq through space. Somehow, they end up chasing each other, without and end to the chase. The narrator states:

“And so after every Qfwfq there was a Pfwfp, and after every Pfwfp a Qfwfq, and every Pfwfp was chasing a Qfwfq, who was pursuing him and vice versa.” [p 68]

The chase is futile, since a winner can never be found. After some time:

“It was clear that one would never overtake the other, nor the other overtake one. We had lost all pleasure in this game of chase, and we weren't children any more for that matter, but now there was nothing else we could do.” [p 68]

The senselessness of this chase seems to make both boys realize something larger than themselves. The idea that what you are doing doesn't actually matter is a very adult concept, and one which Calvino seems to hint at throughout the book. The realization

that the galaxy game would never end causes the boys to grow up instantly. They lose pleasure in their new game, which would normally keep young boys entertained for weeks. The idea of no longer being children has large implications. The two boys can no longer play these games, since they now realize how pointless they are. Qfwfq and Pfwfp are now left with nothing else to do.

Since the entire narrative of the book is told in hindsight by Qfwfq looking back on his childhood (which seemed to last for several hundred million years), an adult view has been placed on this story of the young boys. The boys were playing useless games, but they didn't always realize it at the time. It took them growing up to fully comprehend the situation that they were in. This lends itself to the idea that everything we do is essentially pointless and futile, but we won't realize it until we can look back upon our actions in the past.

This indirect message that appears at various points throughout the book is stated most boldly in "Games Without End." The subtlety of the message is easily overlooked, but it is backed up by examples of futility throughout the book. It is easy to cover up the idea with science, since so much of science and of the universe is unknown. The act of studying the universe and of making assumptions about the behavior of galaxies, nebula, and space as a whole is often seen as being just as futile as playing a game with no end. If one can not figure something out for sure, then is there a point of studying it at all? Calvino does not answer these questions in the book, but his writing does cause the reader to question their own actions. For example, looking back in twenty years, will this paper have served any purpose? Or is class/school/life futile?