Introduction

Religious thought addresses problems, typically problems of an existential nature, if this peculiar modern term may be allowed. "Existential problems" are generated in response to human life as a whole. They respond to universal human themes, dilemmas, perplexities, and anxieties. Why are we here? Do we have a purpose? What is of value? Is what is of value to me truly of value? What is the significance, if any, of my life? How does it make sense if, indeed, it does? The slippage from "we" to "me" is intentional. Individuals capable of reflection put such questions to themselves, but they do so within a cultural context – a world of shared meanings. The endless diversity of cultures notwithstanding, we share the human condition that prompts the questions. Yet even within that larger framework, the search for answers takes us back to our own personal condition. Whatever counts as an answer must be something that you or I in our particularity must be able to live with or by.

Perhaps it wasn't always so. When the great religions were the dominant civilization shaping forces, when life took place within their protective atmospheres, the questions might not have arisen with much urgency. Perhaps religious thought "solved" the problems. I doubt, however, that that was the case. At least within the great traditions, with their complex literatures, religious thought was and is irreducibly heterogenous, even conflictual. Traditions are typically traditions of argument. The Jewish tradition, at least, did not relieve individuals of the burden of sensemaking and of struggling with discrepant texts and teachings. Even in less conflictual traditions, not everyone is content to go along with a consensus,

especially if the consensus is buttressed by powerful institutions. At least some human hearts rebel against coercion. Our peculiar modern restlessness notwithstanding, there is something intrinsically restless about the human mind; its questioning – sparked by wonder – is irrepressible. The problems that religious thought means to solve always give rise to new problems. Religious thought is a mode of engagement with existential problems. These problems may slumber, but they never fall soundly asleep.

This is no less true in our self-professed secular age. Secularity is an orientation consciously shaped by contrast with modes of life informed by religion. But the contrast is neither exhaustive nor tidy. Secular approaches to existential problems often reiterate the dilemmas explored by religious thought, as if there were only so many possibilities human minds can envisage vis-à-vis fundamental problems. Secular approaches may bracket crucial religious concepts or commitments – God, most prominently – but they too have their gods, their polytheisms, and their monotheisms. They have their institutional orthodoxies, high priests, prophets, tricksters, and pious fools. They too, when cynical or shallow, capitalize on credulity and, when earnest, ask for trust.

When self-consciously secular thinkers turn to the problems of value and meaning, they try to solve them within an "immanent frame."[1] They eschew transcendence, whether refined (as in Plato's "good beyond being" or Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern") or crude (as in the blunt supernaturalism of literalist believers). But transcendence does not leave them alone. They too need skyhooks. Their proposals for meaning, if they don't bottom out in just-so stories or cultural conventions, require the invocation of secular mysteries. The leap from what nature has selected us to be to how we ought, therefore, to live is also a leap of faith. It is an open question whether the secular is truly an alternative to the religious. We can use the binary opposition without entirely endorsing it.

This book is an analysis and critique of both a body of religious thought, drawn primarily from Judaism, and of a field within secular

thought – contemporary philosophical work in the analytic tradition on existential problems. (I draw from contemporary Anglo-American philosophy because I wish to enter the current conversation among writers on meaning.) The book looks – selectively, to be sure – at how Jewish thought has responded over the millennia to the problem of meaning. It brings that tradition of reflection, as mediated by academic scholarship, into conversation with the contemporary philosophical turn to the same cluster of questions. I try to show that, as different as these traditions are, at the base of each, there remains ineliminable perplexity. Each tradition reveals a gap between its claims and the mystery of human existence that the claims seek to illuminate. Accepting perplexity while confidently holding on to the tradition that generates it but cannot succeed in dispelling it is *absurd*. I use the terms "absurdity" or "the absurd" to indicate this paradoxical situation. The paradox is not a logical one; it is existential. It has to do with the commitments we make and live by, their irremediable conceptual problems notwithstanding.

Judaism, despite its robust faith in a God who creates, reveals, and redeems, preserves unsettling doubts about the meaning of creation, revelation, and redemption – as well as about the power of the God who is the agent of these acts. I take creation, revelation, and redemption to be concepts that make meaning from the facts of human experience and the values revealed by it. The concepts are expressed in stories that Jews have told for millennia. When the stories are analyzed conceptually, however, innumerable doubts and perplexities arise. Continuing to affirm the truth, however metaphorical, of the story while acknowledging the doubts requires a sense of the absurd. Judaism's core affirmations about the meaning of human life butt up against absurdity, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes just out of view. Judaism can be a balancing act on what Martin Buber called "a narrow ridge."[2] This is especially true for modern Jews and modern Judaism.

Similarly, modern philosophical thought in its struggle to ground a livable answer to the meaning of (or more modestly – itself

a retreat or concession – the meaning *in*) human life also comes up against the absurd. We are told, by some science-oriented philosophers, that we are just social primates or just brains; that our values and the cultures that express them are just survival mechanisms, naturally selected within our ancestors' environmental niches. Yet the seeming realism of such commonplaces is not realistic enough to accommodate our felt experience of what it is like to be human beings. The philosophers' proposals for values, for how we are to live, are often based on reasons that compound rather than relieve our perplexity. (One philosopher, whom we will treat in Chapter 2, for example, essentially argues: Well-functioning brains need pleasure, work, and connection so live in such a way as to maximize pleasure, work, and connection! Could one live meaningfully within such a biological straitjacket? The struggle to persuade ourselves that we are "just brains" presupposes that we are more than just brains.[3]) Some philosophers are honest about the deep schism between biologizing and humanizing stories about human life.[4] They sense the absurdity of the schism and yet persevere in maintaining it. Others try to define the human down and deny absurdity. Still others accept absurdity but give up on the tension and embrace nihilism: the ultimate meaninglessness of life. Philosophers too walk that narrow ridge.

Is a conversation between these different groups of seekers possible? This book attempts to motivate one. It explores the existential problem of meaning in both Judaism and philosophy. It invites a reconsideration of the role of absurdity in both. I write as a Jew with religious commitments, who is also a philosopher with no small measure of skepticism toward my religious commitments *and* toward my philosophical influences. I have come to accept absurdity as an unwelcome guest but one that cannot be turned away. Nonetheless, I do try to turn away an even more unwelcome one, nihilism. The two are not the same, I will argue. Absurdity is an ongoing concomitant of commitment; it leaves the doors of discovery open. Nihilism locks the doors.

The fundamental, ineliminable perplexity at the root of thought shakes some of Judaism's claims, as it does those of philosophy. For both, there are, at bottom, aporias. Given this, I claim that a self-aware, self-critical Judaism can be an ally of philosophy, not a zero-sum competitor. Many works of contemporary philosophy of meaning reject such irenicism. I hope to show, at least obliquely, that they are wrong to do so.

Of course, our basic perplexity, or to be blunt, our ignorance, should not bring on the night in which all cows are black. It shouldn't level distinctions between better and worse worldviews, explanations, values, or modes of being. At some point, we have to choose those views that best preserve what we – and the traditions within whose horizon we live – take to be the noble, courageous, humane, and true. Such are the touchstones of a meaningful life. Nonetheless, nagging doubts about the soundness of our choices may remain. Doubt at this level may be a permanent feature of our condition. But unless we repudiate meaningfulness altogether – unless we opt for nihilism – we must take a risk and commit. Our commitments are neither as well-grounded as we would like nor entirely as arbitrary as we might fear. I think that we can find good (but not unimpeachable) reasons, for grounding a meaningful life. I do not think that we are condemned to brute decisionism. This book is an essay on these dilemmas.

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To begin, let us not address meaning head-on but rather its contrary, meaninglessness. I do not take meaninglessness to be our original condition in the sense that the universe per se is meaningless and our efforts to find meaning in it are human projections onto an infinity of brute facts. On that view, rock bottom reality is meaningless, full stop. Claims to the contrary are delusional. The ubiquity of such a view in the contemporary literature notwithstanding, I think it claims more than it can know. It posits a world-in-itself, untouched by mind, uninfected by value, even those epistemic values by which

we could know such a world. I don't see how we could know that "the universe" is a value-free collection of empirical furniture/brute facts such that all values and meanings are inessential, humanly imposed additions. Thus, rather than blaming the universe for our crises of meaning, I take meaninglessness to be a condition *within* human experience. Something that once had worth – life as such and the projects meant to protect and sustain it – has lost that worth. We might invoke some metaphysical view of the universe as a reason for the loss of meaning, but such reasoning already assumes meaningful human practices, such as reason-giving, justification, etc. The dogmatic assumption that the universe in itself lacks value and meaning is overly hasty. It is nihilistic. Nihilism, for all of its assumed certainty, is question-begging.

Meaninglessness is a token of something we have lost. It is a sign that our world has fallen apart. The props of the world – selfhood, customs, traditions, norms, and hopes – have weakened and tottered. The authority of received wisdom has lapsed. One lives a life that one can no longer understand insofar as the markers of intelligibility have been removed. Just as one experiences shock and disorientation at the death of a loved one, so the loss of meaning deranges and discomfits. Reality is no longer what it was, and the new reality is pressing, insistent, and opaque. It is both unclear how to go on and, more fundamentally, whether one can or should. The significance and self-evidence of the world have been lost. Does one have the strength to make a new world? What, after all, would be the point? Meaninglessness is worldlessness. It is a whirlpool stirring itself into dissolution. How does this happen? How does the familiar and meaningful become foreign and unjustified?

THE CRISIS OF MEANING IN TOLSTOY

Let us consider two approaches to these questions, both drawn from the work of the great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy. (Although not alone among nineteenth-century authors who grapple with meaning and nihilism, Tolstoy does so explicitly, hence my choice of him.)

Tolstoy's novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, is a classic fictional portrayal of a crisis of meaning. Ivan Ilych is an ordinary, unimaginative man, neither appealing nor repellant. He is a lawyer in a Russian province, a careerist who has climbed the ladder to his current high post as a judge. He fulfils his duties officiously, enjoying his power and showing cool condescension toward inferiors. His marriage is mostly unhappy. He lives beyond his means. He sometimes feels that he doesn't get the respect (or the salary) he deserves or that he is being eclipsed by younger, inferior men. But his life on the whole is leisurely, decorous, and easy. He believes that he lives properly. He is entirely oriented by the norms of his culture and class: Appearance, dress, home décor, rank in the hierarchy of social status, appropriate emotions toward family, friends, and officialdom – these secure a tolerable, largely pleasant life for him. He lives in a meaningful world. Questioning it would be out of the question. But circumstances force him to do so.

He begins to notice a pain in his side and becomes increasingly concerned about it. His wife, unsympathetic and resentful, blames him for his pain. He seeks out doctors. They disagree with one another and treat him with the same condescension that he has shown to the litigants who stood before his bench. His friends, with whom he plays bridge, are bothered by him; he is no longer right, no longer good company. The relations he has had with others over the years fray, showing their shallowness and falsity. While he is in pain, both physically and emotionally, the others retreat. His pain causes them discomfort. It upsets their stable, pleasant equilibrium. They blame him for upsetting them.

As Ivan Ilych's condition worsens, it begins to dawn on him that he is dying. The doctors cannot, given the medicine of their day, correctly diagnose him. Some of their diagnoses (such as "a floating kidney") gave him grounds for hope. The problem is trivial and can correct itself! But he soon sees that his hope was deceitful. So too is the empty solicitude of his wife and friends. He is consumed by anguish and rage. He withdraws from everyone, as they withdraw

from him. He is sickened by their lies. Every time his wife or a doctor asks whether he has taken his medicine, he sees it as an evasion of reality: He is dying, but they pretend that the world can be made right again by proper emotions and prudent actions. They are living in the conventional reality that he has lost. That is not just callous, from his point of view, but mendacious. Life has been a lie, an absurdity.

At the end of the novella, Ivan Ilych, Job-like, hurls accusatory questions at God (notwithstanding that he doesn't quite believe in Him). He wants to know why this has happened to *him*. That disease and death happen to human beings in their generality everyone knows, but why has this happened to Ivan Ilych Golovin? He has lived his life properly; he has done everything right. Had he lived his life wrongly, he could understand his fate. It would have been a kind of punishment for having broken the rules. But he broke no rules. The disproportion between the presumed propriety of his bourgeois life and the horror of his encroaching death torments him. Indeed, his anguish prevents him from dying. He needs a meaningful answer to his question. Without an answer, he cannot die. Release – and death – come when Ivan Ilych's young son enters the room. His mind clears briefly from its delirium and he sees his son crying by his bedside. He tries to put his hand on his son's head, as his heart fills with pity for him. He even begins to pity his wife, who has entered the room, freeing himself from years of anger and resentment toward her. He tries to say the words "forgive me" but is too weak to enunciate them. It is at this moment, when he reaches beyond the narrow bounds of morbid self-concern and rises to compassion, indeed to selfless love for the people he is leaving behind that he experiences an epiphany. He accepts his pain. But as to death …

> And death? Where is it?
> He searched for his old habitual fear of death and didn't find it.
> Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death.

> Instead of death there was light.
> "So that's it!" he suddenly said aloud. "Such joy!" …
> "It is finished!" someone said above him.
> He heard these words and repeated them in his heart. "Death is finished," he said to himself. "It is no more!"
> He breathed in, stopped halfway, stretched himself, and died.[5]

In this story, Ivan Ilych's experience of meaninglessness comes about as a result of a deadly disease. The mysterious illness has laid bare how fragile the interrelated structures of social and personal reality are. The structures present a coherent, intelligible world marked by meaningful values, such as dedication to family, work, cultivating pleasurable friendships and activities. Ivan Ilych has constant intimations that things are far from perfect, but he doesn't question the basic structures until the illness dislodges him from them. This is not primarily a philosophical crisis, such as Tolstoy relates of his own struggle with nihilism in his *Confession*. Nor is it Camus's portrayal of the invasion of absurdity into daily life by "beginning to think." ("Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined."[6]) Ivan Ilych would have had nothing to do with philosophical nihilism, nor with thought – he was a calculating, not a thoughtful man – had his life not been hijacked by illness. There are many ways the familiar can become foreign, the onrushing presence of death, one's own or that of a loved one, is surely one of them. It is likely not the most common one, however. We are capable of discomfiture and of a radical reassessment of the value and meaning of our lives *in medias res*, not just *in extremis*.

Ivan Ilych was in extremis. He did not get to rebuild his world. He experienced a kind of repentance, *teshuva*, as Judaism would call it, or *metanoia*, as the New Testament puts it. He got to redeem his life, in Tolstoy's unorthodox but deeply Christian view, by turning from self-centeredness to self-abnegating compassion. Death lost its sting, victory, and dominion. For the rest of us and for Tolstoy himself, however, the challenge remains of how to go on. Ivan Ilych

achieved insight into the disjunction between "how it ought to be" and "how it is," as well as into the arbitrariness and contingency of conventional social meaningfulness. But he did not get to reintegrate those insights into a meaningful worldview and ethos. Death relieved him of having to go forward. Just as one must find a way to go on after the death of a loved one, one must figure out how to build up a livable world after a fundamental loss of meaning. A livable world for human beings is one that is held together by meanings, but when all of the meanings are tainted by absurdity, it is difficult to envision how any world could be a home.

But why should we accept the claim that all meanings are tainted by absurdity? Ivan Ilych came to this conclusion due to what we might call ethical considerations. In the first instance, it wasn't existential absurdity as much as mendacity that troubled him. The way people, his former self included, lived was false, cheap, superficial, and duplicitous. He lost confidence in his former way of life not because it was, finally, improper to pursue career, friendship, domesticity, and pleasure but because these were insufficient to attain truth and goodness in an absolute sense. Until his deadly illness, he had no interest in such goals. He had become inured to the inhumanity of daily life and indifferent to a higher humanity of which he was capable. He had not sought for an ultimate significance to human life. He was content with the local, contingent, social meanings provisioned by his culture. But that changed. Faced with his own onrushing demise, he groped toward a truth that could redeem or at least make sense of his life. The perspective of one whose life is ending, a singular event, demands a singular significance to life, an unequivocal end of equivocations. (Whether meaning can bear this strain is an open question. Some philosophers, as we will see, accuse Tolstoy of "perfectionism."[7] His option for an ultimate answer imposes undue stress on meaningfulness, anti-perfectionists claim. Those social meanings that we incorporate as personal meanings just *are* what constitute meaning in life. On this view, while meaning is crucial, its claim to ultimacy must be deflated.)