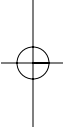
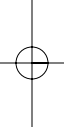
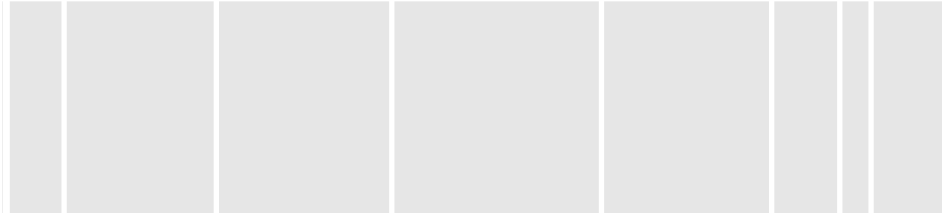
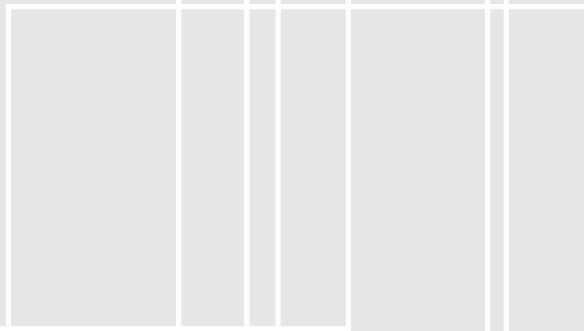
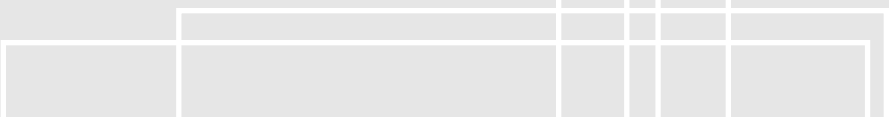
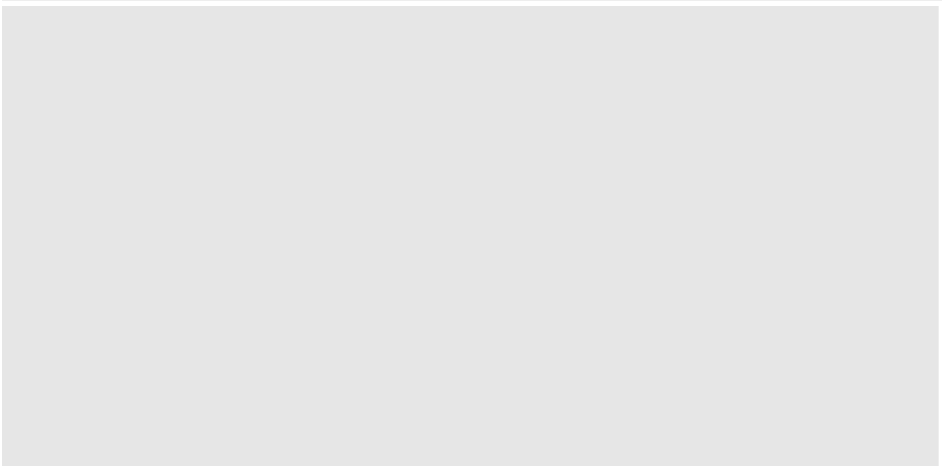
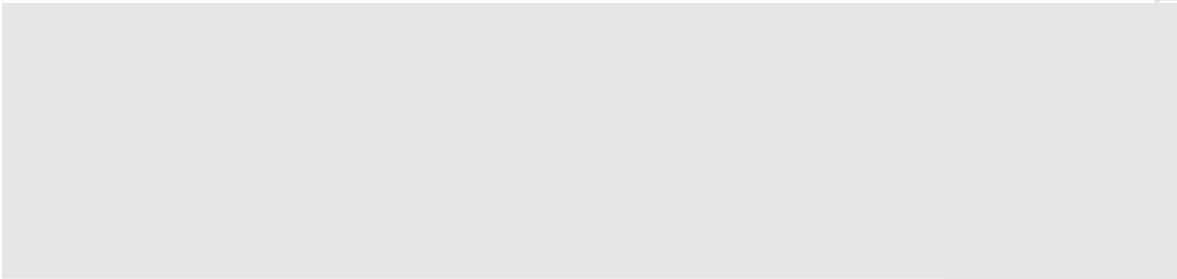


TRACKING THE
meaning
OF LIFE



Yuval Lurie

Tracking the
meaning
of Life

*a philosophical
journey*

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS
COLUMBIA AND LONDON

Copyright © 2006 by
The Curators of the University of Missouri
University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 65201
Printed and bound in the United States of America
All rights reserved
5 4 3 2 1 10 09 08 07 06

CIP to come

♻️™ This paper meets the requirements of the
American National Standard for Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48, 1984.

Designer: Stephanie Foley
Typesetter: *foleydesign*
Printer and binder:
Typefaces: ITC New Baskerville and NeutraText

For Hagit

contents

Acknowledgments 00

Introduction 1

PART I: THE PROBLEM OF LIFE

Chapter 1. Tolstoy Confesses Publicly and Tells the Story of Ivan Ilych 1

Chapter 2. A Philosophical Question 9

Chapter 3. An Existential Question 21

Chapter 4. An Ancient Question 00

Chapter 5. A Modern Question 00

Chapter 6. A Defiant Question 00

Chapter 7. A Solution that Chases a Dream 00

PART II: THE SENSE OF THE WORLD

Chapter 8. Wittgenstein Turns to Philosophy 00

Chapter 9. The Logical Limits of the World 00

Chapter 10. The Cognitive Limits of the World 00

Chapter 11. The Ethical Limits of the World 00

Chapter 12. The Meaning of Life as the Sense of the World 00

Chapter 13. Mystical Experience as a Substitute for Ethics 00

Chapter 14. Overcoming the Problem of Life 00

Chapter 15. What Cannot Be Put into Words but Makes Itself Manifest 00

Chapter 16. Assessing Wittgenstein's View of the Meaning of Life 00

PART III: INVENTING A MEANING TO LIFE

- Chapter 17. Sartre Takes the Train to Dijon oo
- Chapter 18. Life Journeys and Personal Self-Identity oo
- Chapter 19. Attributing Personal Meaning to Life oo
- Chapter 20. A Phenomenological Ontology oo
- Chapter 21. Freedom as a Problematic Human Mode of Existence oo
- Chapter 22. An Existentialist Ethics oo
- Chapter 23. An Existentialist Conception of Meaning oo
- Chapter 24. Affirmation through Criticism oo

PART IV: LOSS OF MEANING FROM LIFE

- Chapter 25. Camus Tells the Stories of Meursault and of Sisyphus oo
- Chapter 26. Sartre Disputes Camus oo
- Chapter 27. Hare Disputes Camus oo
- Chapter 28. Nagel Disputes Camus oo
- Chapter 29. Meaning Blindness and Alien Life-Forms oo
- Chapter 30. The Soul of Life oo
- Chapter 31. The Moral of Camus' Story oo

EPILOGUE: Poor Man's Wisdom oo

Bibliography oo

Index oo

acknowledgments

THIS BOOK is a revised version of its Hebrew predecessor, published in 2002 by Haifa University Press and Maarive Publishing Company and awarded the Bahat prize. Some of the thoughts included in it appeared in two articles I previously published in Hebrew: "On the Very Question," in *The Meaning of Life*, edited by Assa Kasher, and "Wittgenstein on the Meaning of Life," in *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 49, 2000. I thank these outlets for making use of that material. My son, Yotam, instigated the philosophical journey undertaken here. Robert Albin, Leor Aviman, and Nechama Verbin read parts of the manuscript describing it. Gad Prodovski and two readers from University of Missouri Press read it in its entirety. All of them made valuable suggestions for which I am thankful. Ruvik Dannially made the initial translation of the book into English, and I thank him. I also thank Nimrod Maman and Ithai Smolyar for helping with the typescript.

TRACKING THE
meaning
OF LIFE

introduction

The Philosophical Provocation for this Book

SOME OF US WONDER at times about the meaning of life. We may do so when pondering the cycle of life beginning with birth and ending in death, or when seeing the suffering of innocent human beings and their cruel and unjust fate, or when reflecting on the vicissitudes of history and the uncertainty at the basis of human life, or when thinking about the origin of the universe and the existence of God. We may do so at times of personal anguish, suffering, loneliness, sorrow, boredom, despair, bewilderment, or disappointment with our lives, as well as when we become concerned about what the future holds, while dreading the death that awaits us, or just the opposite, when we marvel at our very lives, wanting to find out how life should be regarded, valued, and lived. In the first instances, we wonder about the meaning of life as if we were gazing through the window of a moving train at a strange and bewildering landscape passing before our eyes. In the second instances, we wonder about the meaning of life as though we are carried on a huge wave threatening to smash and drown us at any moment. One way or the other, those of us who wonder about the meaning of life are apt to do so in solitude, as the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is not usually asked and answered in the ordinary stream of life.

The question is not an everyday question, which we might ask to extract useful information from someone who happens to possess it (such as, "When is the next bus leaving for the city?"). It is not a scientific question, which we might pose in seeking an explanation to a particular phenomenon (such as, "What causes liquids to freeze at a low temperature?"). It is not a moral question, which we might contemplate, regarding what we

ought to do (such as, “Is it moral duty to help the needy?”). It is not a practical question, which may require calculation, regarding what is worthwhile to pursue at a given juncture in life (such as, “Is it profitable to invest in studies for a college degree?”). Nor is it a question regarding the political, psychological, social, biological, or physical meaning of things and events in the world that is often explored and answered within various disciplines of study (such as, “What is the meaning of the sudden slack in holiday sales for the state of the economy?”).

The question about the meaning of life seems to be directed toward escaping the flow of life and the familiar contexts of supplying practical information, scientific explanations, moral justification, selfish and utilitarian reasons for actions, or providing insightful interpretations of the meaning of certain events—in order to grasp “the meaning of it all” in one instance. The answer to this question is supposed to unravel the “secret of life” and thus enable us to discover wherein lies life’s value, what can be expected of it, what should concern us about it, how it should be regarded, approached and lived, what can be hoped for, and how we should come to terms with our impending death.

To those of us who wonder about the meaning of life, the question seems of the utmost importance, as if everything depends on the answer to it. For that reason, it should take precedence over every other question and over every action, concern, and expectation. However, it is not at all clear how and where we should search for the answer. Because there is no single, clear context in which the question arises and needs to be answered, and therefore it is also not clear to whom it should be addressed or who is qualified to answer it, and because in the ordinary flow of life the question merely sows confusion and unease, it is sometimes laid at the door of philosophers, who are often viewed as having already divorced themselves from the ordinary, everyday flow of life, and therefore as having deliberately taken it upon themselves to search for a reasoned and learned answer to the question.

Philosophers these days are not always happy with the honor thus conferred upon them. Most contemporary philosophers, it seems, dislike the question, for most of them avoid answering it, discussing it, or even mentioning it in their lectures and writings. This may stem from the fact that the question appears too pretentious and unfocused to them; it is difficult to come to grips with without addressing an immense complex of issues, which are thus bundled together without any order. It is as if the questioners had asked them to stuff the entire contents of their philosophical library into the narrow confines of their bag; or as if they had asked them to tame a ferocious wild animal so that it can be taken to live in their home as a friendly pet. Or perhaps philosophers these days are repelled by the

PART I

The
problem
of Life

chapter 1

Tolstoy Confesses Publicly and
Tells the Story of Ivan Ilych

The Confession

Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, the renowned Russian writer, relates that in mid-life, at the height of his literary success, he came to the realization that life has no meaning. Until that time, he writes in *My Confession*, an essay whose religious title hints at some sin committed, his life had run its course without any unusual spiritual upheavals.¹ Tolstoy recounts that he was born into an aristocratic Russian family that led a traditional religious lifestyle—and he avoids mentioning the death of his mother when he was only two years old or the death of his father when he was seven. Like many of his generation and class, he adds, he stopped believing in God as he came to maturity. Afterward he studied for a short while at the university, served in the army, devoted himself to writing, took an avid interest in art, traveled abroad, got married, raised a family, and worked at developing his estate. His life was replete with all these activities, which he found very rewarding. But in the midst of this full and rich existence, he writes, “something very strange began to happen to me: I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then of an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do” (16). He began to wonder, “What is this leading to?” and his perplexity drew his attention to the fact that he could not answer the question, “What is the meaning of life?” This question nagged at him painfully.

1. Tolstoy, “My Confession: Introduction to the Critique of Dogmatic theology and Investigation of the Christian Teaching,” 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

The problem of each man in life is to save his soul; in order to save his soul, he must live according to God's command, and to live according to God's command, he must renounce all the solaces of life, must work, be humble, suffer, and be merciful" (72). In doing so, we experience the will of God as guiding us and determining what happens in our lives. We thus discern that there is an eternal and sublime meaning to our mundane and finite existence, although we cannot say what it is. All this happens without the use of theological assumptions as a basis for religious belief in the existence of God. As Tolstoy summarizes elsewhere, "the meaning of our lives, the only, rational, and joyful meaning, consists in serving and feeling ourselves as serving the work of God."²

Ivan Ilych

Some time after publishing his confession, Tolstoy wrote a story entitled "The Death of Ivan Ilych," in which he gave powerful expression to the anguish he had experienced when he began thinking that life has no meaning.³ In the story, Tolstoy describes how a man named Ivan Ilych realizes that he is about to die. In the wake of this realization he experiences his life as devoid of meaning, and this experience takes root in his soul and causes him great suffering. The story begins at the end: a brief notice has appeared in the newspaper, notifying the public of the death of judge Ivan Ilych. His courthouse colleagues, who have not seen him in some time due to his illness, are saddened momentarily upon reading of his passing in the newspaper obituary, but they also feel a certain relief that it has not happened to them. Afterwards they go on with the routine of their lives. This sums up the meaning of Ivan Ilych's life in the eyes of his acquaintances: a brief notice in the newspaper, to be thrown out with the garbage the next day, vacating its place to other fleeting bits of news, and a twinge of sorrow at his passing. To forestall any thought that whatever gave meaning to Ivan Ilych's life simply is not known to his friends, Tolstoy goes on to relate how this selfsame Ivan Ilych grasped his own life. And here, specifically from the personal viewpoint of the man himself, his life is revealed to be even more meaningless.

To all appearances, everything was fine: Ivan Ilych's life was a success story by the accepted social standards of success and the good life. He was born into a wealthy Russian family, studied at the best schools, took up law, furthered his career, became a judge, married and had children, purchased a house, acquired friends, was accepted as a member of clubs, liked to play

2. Tolstoy, "The Meaning of Life," 440.

Tolstoy Confesses Publicly and Tells the Story of Ivan Ilych

13

ascribed to his life was summed up by his ability to attain them. As a modern, urban human being, he was able to further his personal affairs in a rational manner and to use his sharp mind to get ahead in his profession as a judge. As such, he has no real belief in what religion tells him about God, and he is unable to change his stripes now and suddenly turn into a believer. He therefore has nothing on which to support his longing for a final touch of divine grace that will redeem him from his despair and anxiety in the face of death by giving a transcendent, divine meaning to his fast-fading life.

Near the end of the story, Tolstoy takes pity on his tormented hero. At the last moment, he grants him the touch of grace he has longed for and redeems him from his mental anguish. He enables Ivan Ilych to overcome the Problem of Life that afflicts him—how to experience the existence of a divine meaning to life that transcends the mundane meaning of events that occur in life and which can dispel the despair and fear of death that afflicts him, all without the use of a religious worldview requiring the acceptance of certain theological principles. According to the story, two hours before his death, as Ivan Ilych was screaming and waving his arms, his younger son, a schoolboy, slipped into his father's sick-room and approached the bed. The dying man's hand happened to fall on the boy's head, and the boy caught it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. "At that very moment Ivan Ilych fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. He asked himself, 'What is the right thing?' and grew still, listening" (155). He looked at his son and his wife and saw the suffering in their faces, and his pity was aroused:

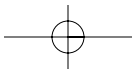
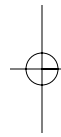
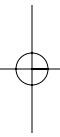
And suddenly it grew clear to him, that what had oppressed him, and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides. He was sorry for them, he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. "How good and how simple!" he thought. . . . He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. . . . In place of death there was light. "So that's what it is!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud. "What joy!" To him all this happened in a single instant, and the meaning of that instant did not change. (156)

A short while later he died peacefully in his bed.

Reading the story in the light of what Tolstoy preached in his confession, the light shown to Ivan Ilych at the end manifests the divine, transcendent meaning of life that he had so longed to experience, which now also enabled him to face his death without fear. The pity for his son and the rest of his family that was aroused in him enabled him to sever himself from the



EPILOGUE



Poor Man's Wisdom

The Wisdom of Hindsight

Philosophical journeys are conducted far from home, in alien and untamed reflective regions. The philosophical journey on the trail of the meaning of life, which I joined in the previous four parts of the book, has been conducted in such a region by four writers who set out to seek an answer to the question about the meaning of life: Tolstoy, Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Camus. Like pathfinders who set out at dawn ahead of the rest of the camp to plot a course to their destination, the four of them left their homes and familiar surroundings to discover a philosophical road leading to the meaning of life, returning later to tell about the travails, anxieties, hopes, successes, and disappointments that they experienced, and which await anyone who follows in their footsteps. For their daring and resourcefulness, they both deserve and have my admiration, just as they both deserve and have my gratitude for their help in confronting my own quandaries about the meaning of life.

All the same, the wisdom of philosophy is not exhausted by the ability to blaze a winding path to some sought-after goal through alien and untamed reflective territory. Sometimes philosophical wisdom consists in understanding why we are unable to reach our destination through the untamed reflective regions of philosophy. The wisdom of philosophy is also a poor man's wisdom, which is the wisdom of hindsight. This is a wisdom achieved through self-reflection and self-criticism that often destroy our previous complacent faith in the enticing answers compiled for us, but which in

bibliography

- Anderson, C. Thomas. *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*. Chicago: Open Court, Chicago, 1993.
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.
- Austin, John L. "The Meaning of a Word." In *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- . *The Magus of the North*. Edited by Henry Hardy. New York: Fabbar, Straus & Giroux, 1994.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage Books, 1960.
- . *The Outsider*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1962. Also published as *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage Books, 1946.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- . *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Charmé, Stuart Zane. *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the World of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991.
- Descartes, René. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In *Philosophical works of Descartes*, Vol. 1, translated by Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross. Dover Publications, Inc., 1955.
- Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991.
- Engelmann, Paul. *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*. Translated by Furtmuller. New York: New Horizon Press, 1968.
- Flew, Antony. "Tolstoy and The Meaning of Life" *Ethics* 73: 110-118.

- . “My Confession: Introduction to the Critique of Dogmatic Theology and Investigation of the Christian Teaching.” In *The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy*, Vol. 13, translated by Leo Wiener. New York: Colonial Press Co., 1904.
- Tugendhat, Ernst. “Über den Tod.” In *Aufsätze 1992-2000*. Suhrkamp, 2005.
- Weiner, David Avraham. *Genius and Talent: Schopenhauer’s Influence on Wittgenstein’s Early Philosophy*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1994.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. “A Lecture on Ethics.” In *Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951*, edited by A. Nordmann and J. Klagge. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993.
- . *Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper and Row, 1958.
- . *Culture and Value*. Edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- . *Notebooks, 1914-1916*. Edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961.
- . *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953.
- . *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London & New Jersey: Routledge Humanities Press, 1961.
- Zane, Stuart Charme. *Vulgarity and Authenticity: Dimensions of Otherness in the World of Jean Paul Sartre*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts, 1991.
- Zemach, Eddy. “Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of the Mystical.” In *Essays on Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, edited by I. M. Copy and R. W. Beard, 359-76. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966).

Collections of Essays on The Meaning of Life

- Hanfling, Oswald, ed. *Life and Meaning: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.
- Klemke, E. D., ed. *The Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Moorhead, Hugh S., ed. *The Meaning of Life*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1988.
- Westphal, Jonathan, and Carl Levenson, eds. *Life and Death*. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.