Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Great Partnership

God, Science, and the Search for Meaning

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To my brother Brian
with love

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I tried out the central thesis of the book some years ago in a Credo column in *The Times*. The then Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, himself a distinguished author, expressed an interest which encouraged me to stay with the idea. When, in 2009, Iain McGilchrist published his magisterial *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, I knew I was on the right lines. I benefited enormously from a conversation I had with him.

Stuart Roden persuaded me that this was a book worth writing. As always I was encouraged by the lay leaders with whom I have had the privilege to work, especially Dr Simon Hochhauser, Peter Sheldon, Professor Leslie Wagner and Sir Ian Gainsford. I could not have asked for better friends. Thanks too to my office team, especially Joanna Benarroch.

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Jonathan Sacks
February 2011 / Adar Rishon 5771

Introduction

If the new atheists are right, you would have to be sad, mad or bad to believe in God and practise a religious faith. We know that is not so. Religion has inspired individuals to moral greatness, consecrated their love and helped them to build communities where individuals are cherished and great works of loving kindness are performed. The Bible first taught the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the imperative of peace and the moral limits of power.

To believe in God, faith and the importance of religious practice does not involve an abdication of the intellect, a silencing of critical faculties, or believing in six impossible things before breakfast. It does not involve reading Genesis 1 literally. It does not involve rejecting the findings of science. I come from a religious tradition where we make a blessing over great scientists regardless of their views on religion.

So what is going on?

Debates about religion and science have been happening periodically since the seventeenth century and they usually testify to some major crisis in society. In the seventeenth century it was the wars of religion that had devastated Europe. In the nineteenth century it was the industrial revolution, urbanisation and the impact of the new science, especially Darwin. In the 1960s, with the 'death of God' debate, it was the delayed impact of two world wars and a move to the liberalisation of morals.

When we come to a major crossroads in history it is only natural to ask who shall guide us as to which path to choose. Science speaks with expertise about the future, religion with the authority of the past. Science invokes the power of reason,

religion the higher power of revelation. The debate is usually inconclusive and both sides live to fight another day.

The current debate, though, has been waged with more than usual anger and vituperation, and the terms of the conflict have changed. In the past the danger – and it was a real danger – was a godless society. That led to four terrifying experiments in history, the French Revolution, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Communist China. Today the danger is of a radical religiosity combined with an apocalyptic political agenda, able through terror and asymmetric warfare to destabilise whole nations and regions. I fear that as much as I fear secular totalitarianisms. All religious moderates of all faiths would agree. This is one fight believers and non-believers should be fighting together.

Instead the new atheism has launched an unusually aggressive assault on religion, which is not good for religion, for science, for intellectual integrity or for the future of the West. When a society loses its religion it tends not to last very long thereafter. It discovers that having severed the ropes that moor its morality to something transcendent, all it has left is relativism, and relativism is incapable of defending anything, including itself. When a society loses its soul, it is about to lose its future.

So let us move on.

I want, in this book, to argue that we need both religion and science; that they are compatible and more than compatible. They are the two essential perspectives that allow us to see the universe in its three-dimensional depth. The creative tension between the two is what keeps us sane, grounded in physical reality without losing our spiritual sensibility. It keeps us human and humane.

The story I am about to tell is about the human mind and its ability to do two quite different things. One is the ability to break things down into their constituent parts and see how they

mesh and interact. The other is the ability to join things together so that they tell a story, and to join people together so that they form relationships. The best example of the first is science, of the second, religion.

Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. Without going into neuroscientific detail, the first is a predominantly left-brain activity, the second is associated with the right hemisphere.

Both are necessary, but they are very different. The left brain is good at sorting and analysing things. The right brain is good at forming relationships with people. Whole civilisations made mistakes because they could not keep these two apart and applied to one the logic of the other.

When you treat things as if they were people, the result is myth: light is from the sun god, rain from the sky god, natural disasters from the clash of deities, and so on. Science was born when people stopped telling stories about nature and instead observed it; when, in short, they relinquished myth.

When you treat people as if they were things, the result is dehumanisation: people categorised by colour, class or creed and treated differently as a result. The religion of Abraham was born when people stopped seeing people as objects and began to see each individual as unique, sacrosanct, the image of God.

One of the most difficult tasks of any civilisation – of any individual life, for that matter – is to keep the two separate, but integrated and in balance. That is harder than it sounds. There have been ages – the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries especially – when religion tried to dominate science. The trial of Galileo is the most famous instance, but there were others. And there have been ages when science tried to dominate religion, like now. The new atheists are the most famous examples, but there are many others, people who think we can learn everything we need to know about meaning and relationships by brain scans, biochemistry, neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, because science is all we know or need to know.

Both are wrong in equal measure. Things are things and people are people. Realising the difference is sometimes harder than we think.

In the first part of the book I give an analysis I have not seen elsewhere about why it is that people have thought religion and science are incompatible. I argue that this has to do with a curious historical detail about the way religion entered the West. It did so in the form of Pauline Christianity, a religion that was a hybrid or synthesis of two radically different cultures, ancient Greece and ancient Israel.

The curious detail is that all the early Christian texts were written in Greek, whereas the religion of Christianity came from ancient Israel and its key concepts could not be translated into Greek. The result was a prolonged confusion, which still exists today, between the God of Aristotle and the God of Abraham. I explain in chapter 3 why this made and makes a difference, leading to endless confusion about what religion and faith actually are. In chapter 4 I tell the story of my own personal journey of faith.

In the second part of the book I explain why religion matters and what we stand to lose if we lose it. The reason I do so is that, I suspect, more than people have lost faith in God, they simply do not see why it is important. What difference does it make any more? My argument is that it makes an immense difference, though not in ways that are obvious at first sight. The civilisation of the West is built on highly specific religious foundations, and if we lose them we will lose much that makes life gracious, free and humane.

We will, I believe, be unable to sustain the concept of human dignity. We will lose a certain kind of politics, the politics of the common good. We will find ourselves unable to hold onto a shared morality – and morality must be shared if it is to do what it has always done and bind us together into communities of shared principle and value. Marriage, deconsecrated, will

crumble and children will suffer. And we will find it impossible to confer meaning on human life as a whole. The best we will be able to do is see our lives as a personal project, a private oasis in a desert of meaninglessness.

In a world in which God is believed to exist, the primary fact is relationship. There is God, there is me, and there is the relationship between us, for God is closer to me than I am to myself. In a world without God, the primary reality is 'I', the atomic self. There are other people, but they are not as real to me as I am to myself. Hence all the insoluble problems that philosophers have wrestled with unsuccessfully for two and a half thousand years. How do I know other minds exist? Why should I be moral? Why should I be concerned about the welfare of others to whom I am not related? Why should I limit the exercise of my freedom so that others can enjoy theirs? Without God, there is a danger that we will stay trapped within the prison of the self.

As a result, neo-Darwinian biologists and evolutionary psychologists have focused on the self, the 'I'. 'I' is what passes my genes on to the next generation. 'I' is what engages in reciprocal altruism, the seemingly selfless behaviour that actually serves self-centred ends. The market is about the choosing 'I'. The liberal democratic state is about the voting 'I'. The economy is about the consuming 'I'. But 'I', like Adam long ago, is lonely. 'I' is bad at relationships. In a world of 'I's, marriages do not last. Communities erode. Loyalty is devalued. Trust grows thin. God is ruled out completely. In a world of clamorous egos, there is no room for God.

So the presence or absence of God makes an immense difference to our lives. We cannot lose faith without losing much else besides, but this happens slowly, and by the time we discover the cost it is usually too late to put things back again.

In the third part of the book I confront the major challenges to faith. One is Darwin and neo-Darwinian biology, which seems to show that life evolved blindly without design. I will

argue that this is true only if we use an unnecessarily simplistic concept of design.

The second is the oldest and hardest of them all: the problem of unjust suffering, 'when bad things happen to good people'. I will argue that only a religion of protest – of 'sacred discontent' – is adequate to the challenge. Atheism gives us no reason to think the world could be otherwise. Faith does, and thereby gives us the will and courage to transform the world.

The third charge made by the new atheists is, however, both true and of the utmost gravity. Religion has done harm as well as good. At various times in history people have hated in the name of the God of love, practised cruelty in the name of the God of compassion, waged war in the name of the God of peace and killed in the name of the God of life. This is a shattering fact and one about which nothing less than total honesty will do.

We need to understand why religion goes wrong. That is what I try to do in chapter 13. Sometimes it happens because monotheism lapses into dualism. Sometimes it is because religious people attempt to bring about the end of time in the midst of time. They engage in the politics of the apocalypse, which always results in tragedy, always self-inflicted and often against fellow members of the faith. Most often it happens because religion becomes what it should never become: the will to power. The religion of Abraham, which will be my subject in this book, is a protest against the will to power.

We need both religion and science. Albert Einstein said it most famously: 'Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.'[1] It is my argument that religion and science are to human life what the right and left hemispheres are to the brain. They perform different functions and if one is damaged, or if the connections between them are broken, the result is dysfunction. The brain is highly plastic and in some cases there can be almost miraculous recovery.[2] But no one would wish on anyone the need for such recovery.

Science is about explanation. Religion is about meaning.

Science analyses, religion integrates. Science breaks things down to their component parts. Religion binds people together in relationships of trust. Science tells us what is. Religion tells us what ought to be. Science describes. Religion beckons, summons, calls. Science sees objects. Religion speaks to us as subjects. Science practises detachment. Religion is the art of attachment, self to self, soul to soul. Science sees the underlying order of the physical world. Religion hears the music beneath the noise. Science is the conquest of ignorance. Religion is the redemption of solitude.

We need scientific explanation to understand nature. We need meaning to understand human behaviour and culture. Meaning is what humans seek because they are not simply part of nature. We are self-conscious. We have imaginations that allow us to envisage worlds that have never been, and to begin to create them. Like all else that lives, we have desires. Unlike anything else that lives, we can pass judgement on those desires and decide not to pursue them. We are free.

All of this, science finds hard to explain. It can track mental activity from the outside. It can tell us which bits of the brain are activated when we do this or that. What it cannot do is track it on the inside. For that we use empathy. Sometimes we use poetry and song, and rituals that bind us together, and stories that gather us into a set of shared meanings. All of this is part of religion, the space where self meets other and we relate as persons in a world of persons, free agents in a world of freedom. That is where we meet God, the Personhood of personhood, who stands to the natural universe as we, free agents, stand to our bodies. God is the soul of being in whose freedom we discover freedom, in whose love we discover love, and in whose forgiveness we learn to forgive.

I am a Jew, but this book is not about Judaism. It is about the monotheism that undergirds all three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It usually appears wearing the

clothes of one of these faiths. But I have tried to present it as it is in itself, because otherwise we will lose sight of the principle in the details of this faith or that. Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe more than what is set out here, but all three rest on the foundation of faith in a personal God who created the universe in love and who endowed each of us, regardless of class, colour, culture or creed, with the charisma and dignity of his image.

The fate of this faith has been, by any standards, remarkable. Abraham performed no miracles, commanded no armies, ruled no kingdom, gathered no mass of disciples and made no spectacular prophecies. Yet there can be no serious doubt that he is the most influential person who ever lived, counted today, as he is, as the spiritual grandfather of more than half of the six billion people on the face of the planet.

His immediate descendants, the children of Israel, known today as Jews, are a tiny people numbering less than a fifth of a per cent of the population of the world. Yet they outlived the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, the medieval empires of Christianity and Islam, and the regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, all of which opposed Jews, Judaism or both, and all of which seemed impregnable in their day. They disappeared. The Jewish people live.

It is no less remarkable that the small, persecuted sect known as the Christians, who also saw themselves as children of Abraham, would one day become the largest movement of any kind in the history of the world, still growing today two centuries after almost every self-respecting European intellectual predicted their faith's imminent demise.

As for Islam, it spread faster and wider than any religious movement in the lifetime of its founder, and endowed the world with imperishable masterpieces of philosophy and poetry, architecture and art, as well as a faith seemingly immune to secularisation or decay.

All other civilisations rise and fall. The faith of Abraham survives.

If neo-Darwinism is true and reproductive success a measure of inclusive fitness, then every neo-Darwinian should abandon atheism immediately and become a religious believer, because no genes have spread more widely than those of Abraham, and no memes more extensively than that of monotheism. But then, as Emerson said, consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds.

What made Abrahamic monotheism unique is that it endowed life with meaning. That is a point rarely and barely understood, but it is the quintessential argument of this book. We make a great mistake if we think of monotheism as a linear development from polytheism, as if people first worshipped many gods, then reduced them to one. Monotheism is something else entirely. *The meaning of a system lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of the universe lies outside the universe*. Monotheism, by discovering the transcendental God, the God who stands *outside* the universe and creates it, made it possible for the first time to believe that life has a meaning, not just a mythic or scientific explanation.

Monotheism, by giving life a meaning, redeemed it from tragedy. The Greeks understood tragedy better than any other civilisation before or since. Ancient Israel, though it suffered much, had no sense of tragedy. It did not even have a word for it. Monotheism is the principled defeat of tragedy in the name of hope. A world without religious faith is a world without sustainable grounds for hope. It may have optimism, but that is something else, and something shallower, altogether.[3]

A note about the theological position I adopt in this book: Judaism is a conversation scored for many voices. It is, in fact, a sustained 'argument for the sake of heaven'. There are many different Jewish views on the subjects I touch on in the pages that follow. My own views have long been influenced by the Jewish philosophical tradition of the Middle Ages – such figures as Saadia Gaon, Judah Halevi and Moses Maimonides – as well as their modern successors: Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch,

Abraham Kook and Joseph Soloveitchik. My own teacher, Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, and an earlier Chief Rabbi, J. H. Hertz, have also been decisive influences. Common to all of them is an openness to science, a commitment to engagement with the wider culture of the age, and a belief that faith is enhanced, not compromised, by a willingness honestly to confront the intellectual challenges of the age. For those interested in Jewish teachings on some of the issues touched on in this book, I have added an appendix of Judaic sources on science, creation, evolution and the age of the universe.

A note about style: often in this book I will be drawing sharp contrasts, between science and religion, left- and right-brain activity, ancient Greece and ancient Israel, hope cultures and tragic cultures and so on. These are a philosopher's stock-in-trade. It is a way of clarifying alternatives by emphasising extreme opposites, 'ideal types'. We all know reality is never that simple. To give one example I will not be using, anthropologists distinguish between *shame cultures* and *guilt cultures*. Now, doubtless we have sometimes felt guilt and sometimes shame. They are different, but there is no reason why they cannot coexist. But the distinction remains helpful. There really is a difference between the two types of society and how they think about wrongdoing.

So it is, for example, with tragedy and hope. Most of us recognise tragedy, and most of us have experienced hope. But a culture that sees the universe as blind and indifferent to humanity generates a literature of tragedy, and a culture that believes in a God of love, forgiveness and redemption produces a literature of hope. There was no Sophocles in ancient Israel. There was no Isaiah in ancient Greece.

Throughout the book, it may sometimes sound as if I am setting up an either/or contrast. In actuality I embrace *both* sides of the dichotomies I mention: science *and* religion, philosophy *and* prophecy, Athens *and* Jerusalem, left brain *and* right brain. This too is part of Abrahamic spirituality. People have

often noticed, yet it remains a very odd fact indeed, that there is not one account of creation at the beginning of Genesis, but two, side by side, one from the point of view of the cosmos, the other from a human perspective. Literary critics, tone deaf to the music of the Bible, explain this as the joining of two separate documents. They fail to understand that the Bible does not operate on the principles of Aristotelian logic with its either/or, true-or-false dichotomies. It sees the capacity to grasp multiple perspectives as essential to understanding the human condition. So always, in the chapters that follow, read not either/or but both/and.

The final chapter of the book sets out my personal credo, my answer to the question, 'Why believe?' It was prompted by the advertisement, paid for by the British Humanist Association, that for a while in 2009 decorated the sides of London buses: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' I hope the British Humanists will not take it amiss if I confess that this is not the most profound utterance yet devised by the wit of man. It reminds me of the remark I once heard from an Oxford don about one of his colleagues: 'On the surface, he's profound, but *deep down*, he's superficial.' Of course you cannot prove the existence of God. This entire book is an attempt to show why the attempt to do so is misconceived, the result of an accident in the cultural history of the West. But to take probability as a guide to truth, and 'stop worrying' as a route to happiness, is to dumb down beyond the point of acceptability two of the most serious questions ever framed by reflective minds. So, if you want to know why it makes sense to believe in God, turn to chapter 14.

Atheism deserves better than the new atheists, whose methodology consists in criticising religion without understanding it, quoting texts without contexts, taking exceptions as the rule, confusing folk belief with reflective theology, abusing, mocking, ridiculing, caricaturing and demonising religious faith and

holding it responsible for the great crimes against humanity. Religion has done harm; I acknowledge that candidly in chapter 13. But the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion, just as the cure of bad science is good science, not the abandonment of science.

The new atheists do no one a service by their intellectual inability to understand why it should be that some people lift their eyes beyond the visible horizon or strive to articulate an inexpressible sense of wonder; why some search for meaning despite the eternal silences of infinite space and the apparently random injustices of history; why some stake their lives on the belief that the ultimate reality at the heart of the universe is not blind to our existence, deaf to our prayers and indifferent to our fate; why some find trust and security and strength in the sensed, invisible presence of a vast and indefinable love. A great Jewish mystic, the Baal Shem Tov, compared such atheists to a deaf man who for the first time comes on a violinist playing in the town square while the townspeople, moved by the lilt and rhythm of his playing, dance in joy. Unable to hear the music, he concludes that they are all mad.

Perhaps I am critical of the new atheists because I had the privilege of knowing and learning from deeper minds than these, and I end this introduction with two personal stories to show that there can be another way.

I had no initial intention of becoming a rabbi, or indeed of pursuing religious studies at all (I explain what changed my mind in chapter 4). I went to university to study philosophy. My doctoral supervisor, the late Sir Bernard Williams, described by *The Times* in his obituary as 'the most brilliant and most important British moral philosopher of his time', was also a convinced atheist. But he never once ridiculed my faith; he was respectful of it. All he asked was that I be coherent and lucid.

He stated his own credo at the end of one of his finest works,

Shame and Necessity:

> We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities.[4]

Williams was a Nietzschean who believed that not only was there no religious truth, there was no metaphysical truth either. I shared his admiration for Nietzsche, though I drew the opposite conclusion – not that Nietzsche was right, but that he, more deeply than anyone else, framed the alternative: either faith or the will to power that leads ultimately to nihilism. Williams's was a bleak view of the human condition but a wholly tenable one. His own view of the meaning of a life he expressed at the end of that work in the form of one of Pindar's Odes:

> Take to heart what may be learned from Oedipus:
> If someone with a sharp axe
> Hacks off the boughs of a great oak tree,
> And spoils its handsome shape;
> Although its fruit has failed, yet it can give an account of itself
> If it comes later to a winter fire,
> Or if it rests on the pillars of some palace
> And does a sad task among foreign walls,
> When there is nothing left in the place it came from.[5]

I understood that vision, yet in the end I could not share his belief that it is somehow more honest to despair than to trust, to see existence as an accident rather than as invested with a meaning we strive to discover. Sir Bernard loved ancient Greece; I loved biblical Israel. Greece gave the world tragedy; Israel taught it hope. A people, a person, who has faith is one who, even in the darkest night of the soul, can never ultimately lose hope.

The only time he ever challenged me about my faith was when he asked, 'Don't you believe there is *an obligation to live within one's time*?' It was a fascinating question, typical of his profundity. My honest answer was, 'No.' I agreed with T. S. Eliot, that living solely within one's time is a form of provincialism.[6] We must live, not *in* the past but *with* it and its wisdom. I think that in later years Williams came to the same conclusion, because in *Shame and Necessity* he wrote that 'in important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime'.[7] He too eventually turned for guidance to the past. Despite our differences I learned much from him, including the meaning of faith itself. I explain this in chapter 4.

The other great sceptic to whom I became close, towards the end of his life, was Sir Isaiah Berlin. I have told the story before, but it is worth repeating, that when we first met he said, 'Chief Rabbi, whatever you do, don't talk to me about religion. When it comes to God, I'm *tone deaf*!' He added, 'What I don't understand about you is how, after studying philosophy at Cambridge and Oxford, you can still believe!'

'If it helps,' I replied, 'think of me as a *lapsed heretic*.'

'Quite understand, dear boy, quite understand.'

In November 1997, I phoned his home. I had recently published a book on political philosophy which gave a somewhat different account of the nature of a free society than he had done in his own writings. I wanted to know his opinion. He had asked me to send him the book, which I did, but I heard no more, which is why I was phoning him. His wife, Lady Aline, answered the phone and with surprise said, 'Chief Rabbi – Isaiah has just been talking about you.'

'In what context?' I asked.

'He's just asked you to officiate at his funeral.'

I urged her not to let him think such dark thoughts, but clearly he knew. A few days later he died, and I officiated at

the funeral.

His biographer Michael Ignatieff once asked me why Isaiah wanted a religious funeral, given that he was a secular Jew. I replied that he may not have been a believing Jew but he was a loyal Jew. In fact, I said, the Hebrew word *emunah*, usually translated as 'faith', probably means 'loyalty'. I later came across a very significant remark of Isaiah's that has a bearing on some of today's atheists:

> I am not religious, but I place a high value on the religious experience of believers . . . I think that those who do not understand what it is to be religious, do not understand what human beings live by. That is why dry atheists seem to me blind and deaf to some forms of profound human experience, perhaps the inner life: It is like being aesthetically blind.[8]

Since then I have continued to have cherished friendships and public conversations with notable sceptics like the novelists Amos Oz and Howard Jacobson, the philosopher Alain de Botton, and the Harvard neuroscientist Steven Pinker (my conversation with Pinker figures in the recent novel by his wife Rebecca Goldstein, entitled *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, subtitled *A Work of Fiction*).

The possibility of genuine dialogue between believers and sceptics shows why the anger and vituperation of the new atheists really does not help. It does not even help the cause of atheism. People who are confident in their beliefs feel no need to pillory or caricature their opponents. We need a genuine, open, serious, respectful conversation between scientists and religious believers if we are to integrate their different but conjointly necessary perspectives. We need it the way an individual needs to integrate the two hemispheres of the brain. That is a major theme of the book.

When he last visited us, I asked Steven Pinker whether an atheist could use a prayer book. 'Of course,' he said, so I gave

him a copy of one I had just newly translated. I did not pursue the subject further but I guess, if I had asked, that he would have told me the story of Niels Bohr, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist and inventor of complementarity theory.

A fellow scientist visited Bohr at his home and saw to his amazement that Bohr had fixed a horseshoe over the door for luck. 'Surely, Niels, you don't believe in that?'

'Of course not,' Bohr replied. 'But you see – the thing is that *it works whether you believe in it or not*.'

Religion is not a horseshoe, and it is not about luck, but one thing many Jews know – and I think Isaiah Berlin was one of them – is that it works whether you believe in it or not. Love, trust, family, community, giving as integral to living, study as a sacred task, argument as a sacred duty, forgiveness, atonement, gratitude, prayer: these things work whether you believe in them or not. The Jewish way is first to live God, then to ask questions about him.

Faith begins with the search for meaning, because it is the discovery of meaning that creates human freedom and dignity. Finding God's freedom, we discover our own.

PART ONE

God and the Search for Meaning

1

The Meaning-Seeking Animal

To know an answer to the question, 'What is the meaning of human life?' *means* to be religious.

Albert Einstein[1]

The idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system.

Sigmund Freud[2]

To believe in God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.

To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.

Ludwig Wittgenstein[3]

When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.

Tom Stoppard[4]

Two Stories

The first: In the beginning, some 13.7 billion years ago, there was an unimaginably vast explosion of energy, out of which the universe emerged for no reason whatsoever. In the course of time stars coalesced, then planets, then, 4.54 billion years ago, one particular planet capable of supporting life. Seven hundred million years later, inanimate matter became animate. Cells began to reproduce. Life forms began to appear, first simple, then of ever-increasing complexity. Some of these

survived; others disappeared. Eventually a life form came into being capable of complex patterns of speech, among them the future tense and the ability to ask questions. For the first time something in the universe became capable of knowing that the universe existed, that it might not have done, and of asking, 'Why is it here? Why are we here?'

The formation of the universe involved massive improbabilities. Had a single one of the mathematical constants that determined the shape of the universe been slightly different – even by the order of one in a million – there would have been no stars, no planets, no life. Had the evolution of life been slightly different, had the dinosaurs not become extinct, for example, there would have been no Homo sapiens, no self-conscious being and no civilisation. But all of this was accidental, blind, mere chance. It happened. No one intended it to happen. There was no one to intend it to happen, and there is no meaning to the fact that it happened. The universe was. One day it will cease to be. To the question, 'Why are we here?' the answer is silence.

We, members of the species Homo sapiens, are wrong to believe that our questions and answers, hopes and dreams, have any significance whatsoever. They are fictions dressed up to look like facts. We have no souls. Even our selves are fictions. All we have are sensations, and even these are mere by-products of evolution. Thought, imagination, philosophy, art: these are dramas in the theatre of the mind designed to divert and distract us while truth lies elsewhere. For thoughts are no more than electrical impulses in the brain, and the brain is merely a complicated piece of meat, an organism. The human person is a self-created fiction. The human body is a collection of cells designed by genes, themselves incapable of thought, whose only purpose is blindly to replicate themselves over time.

Humans might write novels, compose symphonies, help those in need, and pray, but all this is a delicately woven tapestry of illusions. People might imagine themselves as if on a stage under the watchful eye of infinity, but there is no one

watching. There is no one to watch. There is no self-conscious life anywhere else, either within the universe or beyond. There is nothing beyond sheer random happenstance. Humans are no more significant, and less successful at adapting to their environment, than the ants. They came, they will go, and it will be as if they had never been. Why are we here? We just are.

The second: The universe was called into being by One outside the universe, fascinated by being, and with that desire-to-bring-things-into-being that we call love. He brought many universes into being. Some exploded into being, then collapsed. Others continued to grow so fast that nothing coalesced into stable concentrations of matter. One, however, so closely fitted the parameters that stars and planets did form. The One waited to see what would happen next. Eventually life formed and evolved, until one creature emerged capable of communication.

The One sent messages to this creature. At first no one noticed. Thousands of years passed during which the creatures invented tools, hunted, developed agriculture, and eventually built cities and constructed cultures. They told all sorts of stories to explain why they were there, fanciful stories to be sure, for this was the childhood of civilisation. But eventually one man, Abraham, a shepherd far away from the noise of the city, listened to the silence for long enough, intently enough, to discern a message, *the* message. The one heard the One.

It was enough to send him on a journey. Where, why, to do what – of these things he had no more than a dim intuition. But he sensed that he had stumbled on something of immense significance, and he handed on the memory to his children with the instruction that they should hand it on to theirs. Eventually his descendants grew to become a nation, not numerous, not powerful; indeed they had become slaves. This time another individual, Moses, a complex figure who had spent his life among strangers as an Egyptian prince and then as a shepherd among the Midianites, heard the voice again. What it told him changed his life. Through an immense historic drama of

liberation and revelation it transformed Abraham's children, by then known as the Israelites, into a covenanted nation under the sovereignty of God. Eventually it changed the world.

It said that every human being had within him or her a trace of the One who created the universe. Like the One, human beings could speak, think and communicate. They could imagine a world not present to the senses, entertain different scenarios for the future and choose between them. They could change their environment because they could change themselves. They could show that history is not destined to be an endless replay of the victory of the strong over the weak. They could construct a society built on respect for human dignity, equality and freedom, and though they failed time and again, the prophets who came after Moses never gave up the vision or the hope. Somehow they sensed that something of larger consequence was at stake.

And so the journey continued, haltingly, never without relapses and sometimes with terrible failures. The people Moses led, known to themselves as the Israelites, to others as the Hebrews, and to history as the Jews, never lost faith with that original vision even when they lost everything else: their land, their sovereignty and their freedom.

Other people in the course of time were impressed by their message and adapted and adopted it in somewhat different forms, becoming new religions in their own right. One became known as Christianity, the other Islam. Eventually it became the faith of more than half of the six billion people on the face of the planet. It did not fully transform humanity. We remain fallible people, all too often falling short of what we are called on to become. Yet those who followed Abraham's call gave rise to moments of graciousness that lifted our small and insignificant species to great heights of moral, spiritual and aesthetic beauty.

Thus the One came to be known by the many, obscurely to be sure, in visions and voices that strained against the limits

of language, for the words we have to describe things within the universe are by definition inadequate to describe what lies beyond it. The closest the voice ever came to identifying itself was in the cryptic, enigmatic words *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, 'I will be what I will be'. But in striving to listen to the more-than-human, human beings learned what it is to be human, for in discovering God, singular and alone, they eventually learned to respect the dignity and sanctity of the human person, singular and alone. We may be dust of the earth, the debris of exploded stars, a concatenation of blindly self-replicating genes, but within us is the breath of God.

Two rival views, each coherent and consistent, each simplified to be sure, but marking out the great choice, the two framing visions of the human situation. One asserts that life is meaningless. The other claims that life is meaningful. The facts are the same on both scenarios. So is the science that explains the facts. But the world is experienced differently by those who tell the first narrative and those who tell the second.

We can imagine them arguing. The first says to the second, 'What hubris to imagine that there is a Being for whom we matter.'

The second says to the first, 'What hubris to think that what we can see and prove is all there is.'

The first says to the second, 'What abasement to believe that there is someone else who tells us what to do.'

The second says to the first, 'What abasement to believe that, given the tragic, destructive history of humankind, we know best what is best for the world.'

The first says to the second, 'Do you not recall the words of Xenophanes, that we make God in our own image? "Man made his gods, and furnished them with his own body, voice and garments." If a horse could worship, he would make his god a horse. If an ox had a god, it would be an ox.'

'You forget,' says the second, 'that Xenophanes used this

argument to refute polytheism and argue for monotheism. Xenophanes was not an atheist but a believer.'

The argument is interminable, but though it is usually portrayed as an argument between religion and science, that is not what it is. The science is the same in both stories. The difference lies in how far we are willing to push the question, 'Why?' The first story says there is no why. The second says there is. If the universe exists, and there was a time when it did not exist, then someone or something brought it into being, someone whose existence is neither part of nor dependent on the universe.

If so, why? The most economical hypothesis is that it did so because it willed so. But why would a being independent of the universe wish to bring a universe into being? There is only one compelling answer: out of the selfless desire to make space for otherness that, for want of a better word, we call love.

Such a Being would create precisely the kind of universe we inhabit, one that gave rise to stars, planets, life in endlessly proliferating diversity, and eventually the one life form capable of hearing and responding to the call of Being itself. The existence of the universe from the perspective of God, and the existence of God from the perspective of human beings, is the redemption of solitude. We exist because we are not alone. Religion is the cosmic drama of relationship.

The second story stands to the first as poetry to prose, music to speech, worship and wonder to analysis and experimentation. It has nothing to do with science, the observation and explanation of physical phenomena, and everything to do with human self-consciousness, freedom, imagination, choice, and existential loneliness, the I that seeks a Thou, the self in search of an Other. It is about the question that remains when all the science is done. When we know all that can be known about what happened and how, we may still disagree on the *meaning* of what happened.

There will be those who say, beyond the facts and the explanation of the facts, there *is* no meaning. There will be others who say there is. The universe does not come emblazoned with its purpose. To fathom it has taken much wisdom and humility and the experience of humankind over many centuries. To express it may take music and art, ritual and celebration. But to say, 'What is, is, for no other reason than it is,' is to halt prematurely the human tendency to ask and never rest satisfied with the answer, 'It just is.'[5] Curiosity leads to science, but it also leads to questions unanswerable by science.

The search for God is the search for meaning. The discovery of God is the discovery of meaning. And that is no small thing, for we are meaning-seeking animals. It is what makes us unique. To be human is to ask the question, 'Why?'

Scientists of a certain type seem to take perverse pleasure in declaring that life is in fact meaningless. Here, for example, is Jacques Monod:

> Man must at last wake out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realise that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world, a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes.[6]

And, more bluntly, Steven Weinberg:

> It is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more or less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes, but that we were somehow built in from the beginning . . . It is very hard to realise that this is all just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe . . . It is even harder to realise that this present universe has evolved from an unspeakably unfamiliar early

> condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.[7]

Such sentiments are not new. You can find them in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes:

> 'Meaningless! Meaningless!'
> says the Teacher.
> 'Utterly meaningless!
> Everything is meaningless . . .
> Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless.' (Eccl. 1:2; 3:19)

As a mood, most of us have experienced times when that is how the world seems. In the midst of crisis or bereavement, the fabric of meaning is torn apart and we feel strangers in an alien world. Yet a mood is not a truth; a feeling is not a fact. As a general statement of the condition of the universe, there is nothing whatsoever to justify Monod's or Weinberg's conclusions. To grasp this, listen to perhaps the most eloquent account of atheism ever given, by Bertrand Russell in 'A Free Man's Worship':

> That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a

> universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's salvation henceforth be safely built.[8]

C'est magnifique. One can scarce forbear to cheer. But one can produce almost exactly the same peroration in praise of faith:

> That man, despite being the product of seemingly blind causes, is not blind; that being in the image of God he is more than an accidental collocation of atoms; that being free, he can rise above his fears, and, with the help of God, create oases of justice and compassion in the wilderness of space and time; that though his life is short he can achieve immortality by his fire and heroism, his intensity of thought and feeling; that humanity too, though it may one day cease to be, can create before night falls a noonday brightness of the human spirit, trusting that, though none of our kind will be here to remember, yet in the mind of God, none of our achievements is forgotten – all these things, if not beyond dispute, have proven themselves time and again in history. We are made great by our faith, small by our lack of it. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding hope, can the soul's salvation be safely built.

I never understood why it should be considered more courageous to despair than to hope. Freud said that religious faith was the comforting illusion that there is a father figure. A religious believer might say that atheism is the comforting illusion that there is no father figure, so that we can do what we like and can get away with: an adolescent's dream. Why should one be considered escapist and not the other? Why should God's call to responsibility be considered an easy option? Why should the belief, held by some on the basis of scientific determinism, that

we have no free will and therefore no moral responsibility, not be considered the greatest escapism of them all?

There is absolutely nothing in science – not in cosmology or evolutionary biology or neuroscience – to suggest that the universe is bereft of meaning, nor could there be, since the search for meaning has nothing to do with science and everything to do with religion. We now need to see why.

The Meaning of a System

Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world.[9]

There is a marvellous scene in Peter Shaffer's play *Royal Hunt of the Sun* in which Pizarro, the Spanish explorer, hands Atahualpa, the Inca god-king, a Bible. Gingerly Atahualpa stares at it, smells it, feels it, licks it, puts his ear to it and eventually tosses it away. He thinks of it as a fetish, perhaps with magical properties. He has no conception of a book. Imagine what it would take to explain what a book is. The explanation would have little to do with its physical properties and everything to do with the history of writing, the development of the alphabet, and so on. Meaning, when it comes to artefacts or institutions, has little to do with the physical properties of things and everything to do with the way they symbolise and ritualise aspects of the human condition. Meaning is a phenomenon not of nature but of culture.

Imagine what it would take to explain to someone who had no conception of money, what is involved in withdrawing cash from a dispensing machine. He might watch the process a thousand times, understand precisely the physical properties of the credit card and the dispensing machine, but still have no idea of what had taken place. Explaining the transaction might include a history of the division of labour, exchange, barter, the origins of precious metals as currency, the shift from real to nominal value represented by a banknote, what a bank is, what deposits, withdrawals and credit are, and so forth.

Take a game like football. Some hypothetical visitor from a land to which football has not yet penetrated wants to understand this strange ritual which excites so much passion. You explain the rules of the game, what counts as a foul, what constitutes a goal, and so on. 'Fine,' says the visitor, 'I now understand the game. What I don't understand is why you get so excited about it.' Here you might have to launch into some larger reflection about games as ritualised conflict, and the role of play in rehearsing skills needed in actual conflict. You might even suggest that ritualised conflict reduces the need for actual conflict: the football pitch as a substitute for the battlefield.

There is an *internal logic* of the system – the laws of banking, the rules of football – but the *meaning* of the system lies elsewhere, and it can only be understood through some sense of the wider human context in which it is set. To do this you have to step outside the system and see why it was brought into being. There is no way of understanding the meaning of football by merely knowing its rules. They tell you how to play the game, but not why people do so and why they invest in it the passions they do. The internal workings of a system do not explain the place the system holds in human lives.

The meaning of the system lies outside the system. Therefore, the meaning of the universe lies outside the universe. That was the revolution of Abrahamic monotheism.

Monotheism was not a mere mathematical reduction of many gods to one God. That might have economised on temple building, but it would not have transformed the human condition. What did transform it was *the discovery of a God beyond the universe*. This idea, and this alone, has the power to redeem life from tragedy and meaninglessness.

People err in thinking that polytheism and monotheism are two species within the genus religion, variants of the same thing. That is not so at all. The gods of polytheism, in all their buzzing, boisterous confusion, were within the universe. They were subject to nature. They did not create it. They may have been stronger than human beings. They were certainly longer lived; they were immortal. But they were within the universe, and therefore in principle they could not give meaning to the universe.

The same is true for science, whose subject is the interrelationship of things within the natural world. There is a great deal of difference between giving a climatological explanation of rain, and explaining that rain is the work of the Aztec god Tleloc, the Persian god Tishtrya, Taki-Tsu-Hiko in Japan, Imdugud in Assyria, and so on through an impressive cast list of gods and goddesses of inundation. Science is not myth, myth is not science, but they are both explanations of some phenomenon within nature in terms of other phenomena within nature. In this sense, myth is proto-science. Science displaces myth.

But *neither yields meaning*, since meaning is only provided by something or someone outside the system. So, the rain falls on the righteous and wicked alike. The innocent and the guilty starve together in times of drought, and drown together in a flood. In ancient times the gods were at best indifferent, at worst actively hostile to humanity. Scientists like Jacques Monod and Steven Weinberg say the same about nature today, and within their own terms of reference they are right. Nature is sublimely

indifferent to who we are and what we deserve. There is nothing moral about it; it carries no meaning within it. Myth and science in their different ways tell us how the parts are related. They cannot tell us what the totality means.

Only something or someone outside the universe can give meaning to the universe. Only belief in a transcendental God can render human existence other than tragic. Individual lives, even within a tragically configured universe, may have meaning, but life as a whole does not. Bertrand Russell was right. Take God out of the equation, and we are left with unyielding despair. On this he was more honest than most of his successors.

Can we prove life has a meaning? Clearly not. Imagine two people reflecting on the course of their own lives. One looks back and sees a mere series of events, with no connecting thread. The other sees a coherent narrative. Her life has a meaning. It can be told as a story. To be sure, she knows that there were distractions, setbacks, false turns, long periods in which nothing significant happened. But looking back, she can see that she was drawn to a calling, falteringly at first but then with ever-increasing confidence. The two people inhabit the same world, but they live different kinds of lives.

Almost none of the things for which people live can be proved. Consider trust. There are people whose attitude to the world is confident, positive, hopeful. They trust others. From time to time that trust is betrayed. They learn to be more circumspect. They find that certain individuals and types are best avoided. But they see these as exceptions. They do not lose their fundamental trust in people. Equally, though, we can think of people who, perhaps never having had in childhood a loving, stable relationship, see every human interaction as a potential threat. They view others with suspicion. Their assumption is that human beings are unreliable. They let you down. It is always wrong to trust and dangerous to love. All the proofs in the world will not get them to change their mind.

For them to be able to trust will require not *evidence*, but *healing* – something not unlike a religious conversion.

That is at a personal level. The same applies across a broader canvas. Take history, for example. There are those who see no meaning in history whatsoever. They see it in terms of Joseph Heller's graphic description, 'a trash bag of random coincidences torn open in a wind'.[10] But there have been others – notably Tolstoy in *War and Peace* – who believed that beneath the surface of events a larger plan was unfolding, of which the participants in history were unaware.[11] The prophets believed history was a drama about redemption. For Christians it was about salvation. For the heroes of the Enlightenment it was a narrative of progress. These are not disagreements about the facts of history. They are disagreements about the interpretation of the facts of history.

We cannot prove that life is meaningful and that God exists. But neither can we prove that love is better than hate, altruism than selfishness, forgiveness than the desire for revenge. We cannot prove that the hope is truer to experience than the tragic sense of life. Almost none of the truths by which we live are provable, and the desire to prove them is based on a monumental confusion between explanation and interpretation. Explanations can be proved, interpretations cannot. Science deals in explanation. Meaning is always a matter of interpretation. It belongs to the same territory as ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics. In none of these three disciplines can anything of consequence be proved, but that does not make them insignificant. To the contrary, they represent three of the greatest repositories of human wisdom.

Often the different stances people take towards the human condition are *incommensurable*. No proof, no evidence, no court can decide between them, because people have different views as to what counts as proof, what constitutes evidence and which is the appropriate court. It is no more possible to show that one is true, the other false, than it is possible

to prove the truth of optimism against pessimism, science against art, prose against poetry, courage against a play-it-safe, minimum-risk approach to life.

But the idea that *it does not matter which we choose* could not be more wrong. A life without trust or love is, most of us would feel, an impoverished thing, missing out on a range of experiences that have been held by poets and philosophers to be supreme expressions of our humanity. Life without meaning is a fearful prospect. Albert Camus, who believed that there was no meaning and that life is absurd, argued in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the fundamental question of philosophy is, 'Why should I not commit suicide?' It is possible to live without meaning, just as it is possible to live without music, a sense of humour, or the courage to take a risk. But it cannot seriously be argued that the loss of meaning is not a loss.

Beliefs that lie too deep to be proved are best understood as *framing beliefs*. Like a frame, they are not part of the picture, but they give it its shape, its outline, its orientation. Every individual, and every culture, has framing beliefs that determine their fundamental stance towards the world. Those beliefs shape the way we see things, how we talk about them and the way we respond. Usually we are not conscious of them, precisely because they are frames, not part of the picture itself.[12]

One of the most significant framing beliefs is the one assumed by science: the idea that the universe is governed by certain immutable laws. As David Hume showed in the eighteenth century, the truth of this principle can never be proved. The fact that certain phenomena have occurred a million or a billion times does not entail that they will do so next time. Bertrand Russell illustrated this by life as it seems to a turkey. Every day it is fed by its owner. Being a scientific turkey, it concludes that this is a rule of nature. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving it discovers the difference between probability and certainty.[13] This, the so-called 'problem of induction', is insoluble. Science

rests on the faith that, in Einstein's words, 'God does not play dice with the universe'. It cannot be proved, but it works.

There are many other unprovable framing beliefs, and they have perplexed philosophers since humans first thought systematically about such things. Is there really a world out there, or are there only our sense impressions? Are there other minds? Do we have free will? Has the universe existed for billions of years, or did it come into existence five minutes ago, together with false memories and evidence? These are staple topics of any introductory course of philosophy. Framing beliefs – that there is an external world, and other minds, and free will – lie beyond the scope of proof. Nonetheless, they are what give meaning to the chaos of experience.

I said that it is possible to live without meaning. But it will be a strange, foreshortened, defensive kind of life. We know this because of the historical parallel. The world as conceived in the twenty-first century by the new atheists is recognisably the world of ancient Greece in the third pre-Christian century, the age of the Stoics, Sceptics, Cynics and, above all, the Epicureans. Epicurus, and his Roman disciple Lucretius, believed that the material world is the only reality, that the world is made of atoms that simply reconfigure over time, and that the gods have no interest in the affairs of humankind. The Epicureans are the ancient counterparts of the new atheists in their reductive materialism and their hostility to religion. They held that there is no soul, no life after death, no meaning to history and no transcending purpose to life. The Epicurean formula for happiness is to maximise pleasure while minimising risk.

Here, roughly, is how an Epicurean would advise us to live. Do not make emotional commitments. Seize the day and harden yourself against a darker tomorrow. Do not pledge your life in marriage or suffer the burdens of bearing children. There is only one life, so there is no point in foreclosing your options or spending your time raising the next generation, for by the time

your investment bears fruit you may no longer be here to see it. Do not get involved in public life: it is stressful and creates envy. Do not spend too much time on others: they seldom repay your efforts or even thank you for them. What matters is you. The others can look after themselves and if they cannot, that is their problem, not yours. Spend your time with friends. Live simply. Get used to solitude. Know that the highest form of freedom is the consciousness of necessity, and the highest form of knowledge is to know that we know nothing. Do not ask what life is for. Live it day by day. And when it becomes burdensome, end it at a time and place of your choosing.

This is a sane response to a universe without meaning. But it is also the symptom of a civilisation in advanced decline. Individuals can live without meaning. Societies in the long run cannot.

I end this chapter with the story of a man I never met, but whose life's work inspired me. His name was Viktor Frankl. Born in Vienna in 1905, he was deported with the rest of his family to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt in 1942, and spent the next three years in extermination camps, among them Auschwitz and Dachau. He and one of his sisters were the only members of the family to survive.

Already a distinguished neurologist, he preserved his sanity in the camps by observing his fellow prisoners, as if he and they were taking part in an experiment. He noticed the various phases they went through. The first was shock and complete disillusionment. The Nazis began by dehumanising the prisoners in every conceivable way. They took from them everything that gives people a vestige of humanity: their clothes, shoes, hair, even their names. They seized Frankl's most precious possession, a scientific manuscript containing his life's work. Frankl says that at this point, 'I struck out my whole former life.'[14]

The second stage was apathy, a complete dulling of the emotions. People became automata, hardly living, merely

existing from day to day. It was then that Frankl asked the fateful question. Is there any freedom left to a person who has been robbed of everything: dignity, possessions, even the power of decision itself? The Jewish victims of earlier persecutions had been given a choice: convert or die. During the Holocaust there was no choice. *What remained once you had lost everything there was to lose?* Frankl realised that there was one freedom that can never be taken away:

> We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.[15]

The freedom that remained was *the decision how to respond*. Frankl survived by constantly observing others and helping them find a reason to continue to live. One of the most deadening conditions in the camps was what he called 'futurelessness', the total absence of hope. Frankl recalls, 'A prisoner marching in a long column to a new camp remarked that he felt as if he were walking in a funeral procession behind his own dead body.'[16]

Two of his fellow inmates were contemplating suicide. By conversing with them, he was able to get each to see that they had something still to do. One had published a series of books on geography, but the series was not yet complete. A task awaited him. The other had a daughter abroad who loved him devotedly and longed to see him. A person awaited him. In both cases, what was essential was the realisation that there was something to be done that could be done by no one else.[17] This became the core of an insight Frankl was to turn, after the war, into a new school of psychotherapy. He called it *logotherapy*, from

the Greek *logos*, meaning 'word' in the broadest sense – the spiritual dimension of human life, that which endows life with a sense of purpose. He summarised his teaching in the title of his most famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Homo sapiens is the meaning-seeking animal, Frankl argued. But to preserve meaning in desperate circumstances we must be able, or be helped, to do a number of things. First is the refusal to believe that we are victims of fate. We are free. Within limits, we are the authors of our lives. Second is the knowledge that there is more than one way of interpreting what happens to us – more than one way of telling the story of our life. Third, Frankl insists that *meaning lies outside us*. It is a call from somewhere else:

> In the last resort, man should not ask, 'What is the meaning of my life?' but should realise that he himself is being questioned. Life is putting its problems to him, and it is up to him to respond to these questions by being responsible; he can only answer to life by answering *for* his life. Life is a task. The religious man differs from the apparently irreligious man only by experiencing his existence not simply as a task, but as a mission. This means that he is also aware of the taskmaster, the source of his mission. For thousands of years that source has been called God.[18]

To find meaning in life is to find something we are *called on to do*, something no one else can do. Discovering that task is not easy. There are depressive states in which we simply cannot do it on our own ('A prisoner cannot release himself from prison,' says the Talmud about depression[19]). But once we have found it, our life takes on meaning and we recover the will to live.

Frankl's psychotherapy is part of a wider conception I call the ethics of responsibility.[20] The word 'responsible' is related to *response*. It is an answer to a question posed by another. Responsibility is not something that comes from within, but

is always a response to something or someone outside us. In *The Responsible Self*, Richard Niebuhr writes, 'Responsibility affirms: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions as to his action.'[21] He adds, 'We are most aware of our existence in the moment, in the now, when we are radically acted upon by something from without, when we are under the necessity of meeting a challenge with an action of our own, as is the case in every important decision.'[22] The responsible life is one that responds. In the theological sense it means that *God is the question to which our lives are an answer*.

Frankl rescued lives by helping people find a reason to live, a reason that comes from outside the self. This is, if you like, a secularised version of Abrahamic monotheism, which began with a divine call. Frankl's faith, which is mine, is that the search for meaning constitutes our humanity.

So, to summarise: Science is the search for explanation. Religion is the search for meaning. Meaning is not accidental to the human condition because we are the meaning-seeking animal. To believe on the basis of science that the universe has no meaning is to confuse two disciplines of thought: explanation and interpretation. The search for meaning, though it begins with science, must go beyond it. Science does not yield meanings, nor does it prove the absence of meanings.

The meaning of a system lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of the universe lies outside the universe. The belief in a God who transcends the universe was the discovery of Abrahamic monotheism, which transformed the human condition, endowing it with meaning and thereby rescuing it from tragedy in the name of hope. For if God created the physical universe, then God is free, and if God made us in his image, we are free. If we are free, then history is not a matter of eternal recurrences. Because we can change ourselves, we can change the world. That is the religious basis of hope.

There are cultures that do not share these beliefs. They are,

ultimately, tragic cultures, for whatever shape they give the powers they name, those powers are fundamentally indifferent to human fate. They may be natural forces. They may be human institutions: the empire, the state, the political system, or the economy. They may be human collectivities: the tribe, the nation, the race. But all end in tragedy because none attaches ultimate significance to the individual as individual. All end by sacrificing the individual, which is why, in the end, such cultures die. There is only one thing capable of defeating tragedy, which is the belief in God who in love sets his image on the human person, thus endowing each of us with non-negotiable, unconditional dignity.