**Chapter 2: An Infinite Universe that is Indifferent to and Independent of Humans and their Actions**

The premise of this chapter is that the infinite universe (as perceived through the human senses and scientific methods) is independent of and completely indifferent to human actions and values. The universe presumably functions according to the mechanistic descriptions and explanations provided by scientific study. These explanations do not take into account the inner world of humans, their desires, beliefs, or consciousness.

This chapter discusses the observation that all phenomena in our world have the same developmental structure: birth, blooming, and death. The BBD structure can lead to despair among those who feel that, if this is how the world is built, there is no point in living. Such despair is related to Camus’ approach to the absurdity and incomprehensibility of the world and inevitable death, which led him to discuss suicide.

In this chapter, I propose arguments against this notion, based on the fact that human life is interwoven with and enveloped by numerous life-meanings. I also discuss various ways in which life-meanings can address profound and difficult life crises. Some life-meanings are transmitted by society to individuals from the moment of their birth. This type of life-meaning relates to the life paths that society wants its members to follow in order for them to be integrated into society and contribute to its prosperity.

This basic premise can be categorized as philosophical realism, an approach that assumes that the world exists independently of human consciousness. I see this as the most natural approach to everyday life. For example, I go to my office each day and find the same furniture, the same computer, and the most recent article I wrote still stored in its files. I exchange a few words with friends. It is clear that all the objects in my office as well as my colleagues continue to exist when I am not present. If one of my colleagues were to ask me if I have continued to live since we parted, I could answer without hesitation: yes, I am alive and kicking.

Science teaches us about the phenomenon of supernova, the explosion of a giant star (at least ten times the size of our Sun) that occurs when the gravitational force is greater than the opposing force of the nuclear reaction. Any supernova we see actually occurred thousands of years ago and many light years away. Somewhere in the universe, a mighty star existed for a vast stretch of time. Far away and much later, we witness its death as a result of a dramatic increase in the amount of radiation thrown as it exploded.

People are not born with such a conception of reality, but rather acquire it during their life. How did this approach evolve for me? It is based on two important learning experiences. First, as described above, the monstrous historical event of the Holocaust erased from my heart any belief in a divine entity that manages the world and human actions. On the Moon, no sorrow or nightmares emerged as a result of the Holocaust. I will not belabor this point, but for me God simply does not and cannot exist.

Second, if I don’t believe that God exists, how do I explain the existence of the universe, Earth’s living creatures, and their behavior? My answer is: through the descriptions and understandings provided by science. While science has not yet been able to describe or explain all the mysteries it encounters, it has been able to offer largely credible, if partial, descriptions and explanations of the world and the behavior of living things. I see no contradiction between these two major conclusions, that God does not exist and that science offers a satisfactory and rational way of describing and understanding the world.

Here, I would like to elaborate on some of the scientific information I have acquired in my life that supports the concept of the universe’s indifference to human actions and values (values differ across cultures, values often contradict themselves; see, for example, Belshaw, 2005; Carroll, 2016; Einstein, 2015; Kirsch, 2006). Major impressions I have drawn from my reading and learning include:

**The infinity of the universe**. An infinite number of galaxies exist in an infinitely vast space. As scientific knowledge evolved, our perception of the universe has changed and expanded from a small and local world, to an Earth orbited by the Sun, to an understanding of the solar system, to the discovery of the Milky Way, to the discovery of many other galaxies moving away from one another at tremendous speeds. This process of major revelations led to the conclusion that the universe is infinite. I do not know if this infinite universe includes a huge but finite number of galaxies. However, since clearly the probability of the creation of the Milky Way is greater than zero, the probability of the creation of galaxies throughout the infinite universe is also greater than zero. In addition to our knowledge of the macro-world, there is also accumulating knowledge regarding the micro-world, the infinite subatomic world. According to current scientific knowledge, this constitutes the world perceived by human senses.

**Science offers mechanistic descriptions and explanations**. These descriptions and explanations are not dependent on human consciousness. In the natural sciences, a large collection of phenomena regarding the subject of study is sufficient.

**Beginning, Blooming, Death.** One of the descriptive explanations that science provides is that every natural phenomenon has a beginning, a limited span of existence, and an end. For example, the Earth was created some 4.5 billion years ago from a particular cosmic occurrence, namely a massive molecular cloud, out of which the entire solar system formed. It is predicted that Earth’s lifespan will end in approximately 7 billion years, when the Sun will become a red giant that will engulf the Earth. However, other cosmic events may destroy the Earth and humanity much sooner. For example, there could be a collision between the Andromeda and Milky Way galaxies, or the Earth’s ozone layer may be destroyed. Further, the law of entropy indicates that chaos will intensify until eventually the world will simply shut down, there will be an extremely low and uniform temperature, and life will disappear. In this context, Carroll (2016) identifies a link between the progress of time, entropy (disorder), the phenomena of birth and death, and the birth of the universe via the Big Bang. The evolution of humans and the possibilities for our extinction have made a deep impression on me. Primates arose several million years ago. Homo sapiens appeared on the historical stage only about 200,000 years ago. Humans’ ability to write emerged some 5000 years ago. The extinction of any species (including man) is possible. Life on Earth has already undergone six mass extinctions. For example, all dinosaurs were destroyed in the fifth extinction which, it is postulated, occurred due to the impact of a huge asteroid that hit the Yucatan Peninsula. Now a large population of humans (about 7.5 billion people) are causing the massive extinction of other species, and possibly eventually ourselves, as a result of habitat destruction, air pollution, and climate change (not to mention the potential for atomic or biological warfare). On a personal level, every human clearly witnesses, during their short lifetime, that all people, animals, and plants, are born, live for a certain period of time, then die. The process of BBD is empirically stable.

These three types of knowledge that emerge from the scientific method led me to several conclusions: First, it seems inconceivable to me that there is such an entity called God, who plans and oversees the details of the infinite universe and everything contained therein, inanimate systems as well as living creatures including human beings (I am convinced that in this infinite universe there are beings even more advanced and intelligent than the human race). In contrast to the impossible premise that God oversees the infinite universe and everything in it, the description of God in the holy texts of the three monotheistic religions (the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Koran) has no basis in current scientific knowledge. The world known to the writers of these texts was geographically small and included essentially only the Mediterranean, Middle East, Europe, and North Africa. In terms of astronomy, people were only aware of the Sun, Moon, and stars. This seems quite limited in comparison to the contemporary concept of an infinite universe filled with galaxies, giant stars, black holes, and so on. In the ancient world, humans imagined some formidable entity responsible for the creation of the universe who (with the help of messengers and angels) manages the universe and, in particular, oversees the behavior of the crowning glory of creation - humans. People attributed to this divine entity the extensive, magnificent, and empowering traits and powers of the father of the family. God was viewed as providing sustenance and education, simultaneously a disciplinary figure and a benevolent and compassionate parent.

Second, science has been able to offer reasonably satisfactory mechanistic descriptions and explanations, without resorting to the existence of God or explanations based on people’s conscious will and beliefs. Science offers mechanistic explanations for how a wide variety of natural phenomena come into existence and operate, in spite of or even contrary to humans’ will and beliefs. For example, people want to live eternally without illness or suffering, but learn quite quickly that this is a fantasy. A volcano erupts, but not because it obeys the will of God who heard a man’s prayers to annihilate his enemies. The Moon does not send magical rays of light to a man and his beloved, imparting a yearning to be united.

Third, the highly plausible descriptions and explanations offered by science indicate several things. The world operates with indifference to human desires and will. Every phenomenon has a beginning and an end (death), following the BBD structure. This can lead people to the reckless conclusion that existence is meaningless, and that nothing they do can influence the universe (for example, the Moon’s movement away from Earth at a rate of about four centimeters per year will not be affected by prayers and supplications to God or a Moon goddess that the Moon will not leave its orbit and abandon the Earth in solitude. Eventually, the Moon will not be visible from Earth.) Moreover, if all the great scientific theories and achievements in the arts are to be forgotten and no intelligent creature in the universe will know of their existence (and it seems this will eventually happen), then people may enter a state of despair and depression. They may feel there is no point in making any effort. If everyone will die in the end, and anything humans do is insignificant, then life has no meaning. However, as we will see below, this is not the conclusion of the present book.

Even someone who makes such a cynical claim can be told not to be discouraged, because human actions do affect the world! How? Humans have polluted the world with non-degradable waste, pushed many species to extinction, caused global warming and massive climate change, and raised the likelihood of an atomic or chemical-biological war. These destructive actions could destroy all living things—including humans! Therefore, no one can argue that people’s actions have no influence. Humans act with great determination to destroy the world, cutting down the very branches on which they are metaphorically perched.

But even such arguments can be dismissed as giving little comfort, because in relation to the infinite universe, the changes humans make are of no consequence. Even if, in our immense wisdom, humans manage to destroy the entire solar system, it would still be nothing in comparison to the infinite universe. A number of philosophers have offered similar ideas of despair, nihilistic approaches according to which life is absurd and meaningless (Metz, 2013; Nagel, 1971, 1986; Seachris, 2019; Vohanka & Vohankova, 2011).

In this context, I distinguish between two different levels of despair due to the meaninglessness of life. The first is the personal level. An individual awakens one day, suddenly struck by awareness of his own mortality, and his life seems futile. The second, general level relates to all of humanity and the universe as a whole. Compared to the infinite universe, knowing that our world and solar system will eventually be annihilated, people may wonder not only about the meaning of their individual lives, but also the meaning of humanity as a whole, and ask: “What is the point of all this?”

In the following section, I concentrate on individuals who react to the harsh realization of their own impending death, the end of the Earth, and the infinity of the universe, by perceiving life as meaningless, unimportant, and without value.

**Mankind Faces an Infinite and Indifferent Universe**

What are the implications of a worldview according to which the universe is indifferent? I did not consent to my own birth. I will eventually die without consent (barring an extreme case such as suicide to escape a terrible illness). There is no supreme God that plans life or oversees that humans’ conduct is righteous. (I will not discuss here the difficult question of what constitutes righteous conduct among humans). I truly believe that the infinite universe is indifferent to my existence and that my actions have no impact on it. Given all this, what expectations can I have for my life? What meaning does it have? Is it not time to end this absurd and incomprehensible life by committing suicide?

Albert Camus, the author and philosopher who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, asked similar questions in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his essay on the absurd (1992). Camus discusses whether there is any point in preferring life over suicide without belief in God, in an absurd world in which death is inevitable. He suggests that choosing to live is an absurd act of rebellion. Life is absurd because people continue to live in spite of the certain realization that life has no meaning: death is inevitable and the world is incomprehensible. As Camus points out, Dostoevsky also dealt in his novels and personal diaries with the problem of life-meaning and suicide as a solution to the despair in the face of certain death and disbelief in God, immortality, or an afterlife.

The incomprehensibility of the world also pertains to daily events, such as a man noticing that a flower in his garden suddenly wilted, a cat is giving birth in his yard, a crow left droppings on his car, and in the distance a police car siren is wailing. How can he understand all these events as being organized into a holistic and unified world? Everything appears to be a chaotic collection of meaningless parts, and thus absurd.

The approach of the current book is different from that of Camus. I believe that human life is filled with various life-meanings in terms of the values and goals that guide each person’s path in life. One cannot understand humanity without recognizing that a person’s life grows on a rich substrate of meaning. Let us re-examine the argument that a sense of absurdity emerges from a quest for understanding in a fundamentally incomprehensible world. I assert that the incomprehensibility of the world can result in behavior opposite to that which Camus suggests. To me, the desire to unravel the mysteries of the world provides an inexhaustible source of life-meaning. This desire drives scientific development, yielding inspiring, if only partial, progress in the understanding of the universe and the behavior of living things, including humans. This is in contrast to Camus’ approach: “... science that was to teach me everything ends in a hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art…. The world in itself is not reasonable….” (Camus, YEAR, p. 28). To that, I respond that Camus expected too much of science. Perhaps he was seeking a substitute for the certainty provided by religious belief. However, science provides no more than theories that have not been refuted.

Why then do I think human life is saturated with meaning, and why does Camus believe life is meaningless and absurd? Camus’ approach asserts that that human life has no meaning—everything is an incomprehensible and chaotic collection of events that cannot be organized into one single intelligible entity. If my life and my very essence have no meaning or importance, am I then justified in saying that I am no different from a pile of feces drying in the Sun, because both are just two more things among an infinite number of things in the universe? The present book responds to this question in the negative, as, I believe, would most people, asserting: “I am not a pile of feces, or a stone, or a cat, or a dog. I am a human. I am something special!” As soon as people make such statements, they begin to endow their life with meaning: “I am different from everything else. I am special. I am distinct from among all the other things the world. I have a purpose!”

Meaninglessness and a sense of absurdity arise precisely when life-meaning is harmed by the inevitability of death, scientific predictions of the eventual end of the solar system, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge indicating that the world is indifferent to humans. If our lives have no meaning, and our behavior is no different from the behavior of the celestial bodies (no one believes that the Moon derives a sense of “lunar meaning” from its orbit around the Earth), then there is nothing to be damaged by the realization of the finiteness of life and the indifference of the universe. In the absence of some prior life-meaning, scientific knowledge regarding the mortality of all living things and the indifference of the universe has no impact. No one would be disturbed by the awareness that an individual human is but a tiny and meaningless dot in the universe, which is indifferent to and unaffected by all actions and values of human beings (who consider themselves to be superior to other living things). Whether or not people’s intentions are fulfilled or their desires are met is irrelevant. In other words, if human life had no meaning, people would accept these statements simply as scientific facts and pieces of information! They would be perceived as no more than a long series of zeros and ones, as are used in computer software. In fact, the scientific process would not have developed, because no questions would have spurred research. No curiosity would emerge from a meaningless life. No problems are hidden among meaningless elements. No effort would be made to figure out these problems, because the answers would have no meaning. A computer does not care if it is frozen due to an internal contradiction between its software components. Its curiosity is not aroused. It does not ask, what is wrong with me? It does not think that it is an absurdity to exist when it can freeze up for no apparent reason. The only people who care about computer problems are the programmer and the people running the software development company.

In short, scientific curiosity would be snuffed out before it was ignited, because the conditions for its kindling would not exist. Why would anyone ask what distance a body travels in free fall lasting one second? (I will skip here the development of common relevant concepts such as time, distance, and ways of accurately measuring them.) If Galileo Galilei did not have an underlying idea that phenomena have meaning, the theoretical gap in scientific knowledge that bothered him regarding the question of falling bodies would not have arisen in his mind. He would not have bothered to ask whether, in free fall, a heavy object would land before a light object. Aristotle thought the answer was that the heavy object would land first, but Galileo thought otherwise. The experiments that Galileo conducted (including elegantly designed theoretical experiments) had far-reaching and tangible significance. He changed the worldview that was prevalent in his times.

What conclusion can be drawn from this? I suggest that the question of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life tends to arise in a crisis, when a certain meaning at the basis of a person’s ordinary, everyday life is suddenly undermined. Thus, the feeling that life is meaningless can only arise against the background of a previously held belief in the existence of some meaning. Eagleton (2013, p. 89) writes, “For those who claim that life is meaningless, it is possible to offer an unequivocal answer: ‘What is meaninglessness?’ The answer must be worded in terms of meaning.”

This conclusion requires broad development, which I propose to do with the following questions: What is the normal life-meaning that a person held, before it was undermined? When and how is it acquired? What factors can undermine normal life-meaning? How do these factors operate?

**Ordinary Acquired Life-meaning**

People respond in one of three ways to the indifference of the universe. One, they may attribute meaning to the world and live their life in accordance with that meaning. Two, they may try to understand why and how the world operates as it does, and live in accordance with the understandings they acquire. These two responses are not necessarily contradictory. Science would not have developed without a prior assumption of meaning, based on which questions were developed via scientific methodology. Hence it is possible to develop a life-meaning and way of life on the basis of scientific knowledge (even the partial knowledge of popular science). At the same time, humans are able to simultaneously hold on to two incompatible information systems, and to live with them peacefully and undisturbed. For example, a person can base his life-meaning on strongly-held religious beliefs, and also participate with great success in scientific research. This person might not allow any contradictions between the conclusions of religion and those of science (for example, regarding the age of the Earth and its creation) interfere with his or her daily life. These two realms can coexist, as the person alternates between his or her roles as a religious devotee and as a scientist.

Another option is to commit suicide. Camus struggles with this in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and I reject it outright. To my understanding, people commit suicide when they feel they have reached the end of their life and their physical or mental suffering becomes unbearable, or because they attribute greater meaning to the afterlife than to any life-meaning. I do not accept suicide as a solution to the meaninglessness of life, because I believe life is meaningful. There is no such thing as meaningless life. A meaningless life can only be “lived” by an unconscious being, like a robot. Even superior animals, such as monkeys, dolphins, dogs, and cats, have a certain level of conscious experience and thus a certain level of life-meaning (probably less than that of humans), which is expressed in their behavior. When I observe animal behavior in nature or in documentaries, I marvel at their love and concern for their families, packs, and herd. They search for food and water, and prepare for the seasons. I am amazed by the migrations of birds, predators chasing their prey, and the wisdom of both during the hunt. I have the impression that these animals’ lives are meaningful to them, although they are unlikely to be able to reflect on this question: What is the meaning of my life? Their behavior convinces me that their lives are meaningful to them, and they experience that meaning in every moment.

Humans must undergo long-term preparation to live according to the meanings they have acquired or their understandings of the world achieved through science. In the case of scientific learning (in any field) one must undergo a long period of in-depth study and specialization. At the same time, there is a need to train people in the behavior that is perhaps more important than any other: that of attributing meaning to their life and the world. This ultimately constitutes a basis for their path in life.

People must determine what criteria to employ in order to attribute meaning to their lives, as well as what standards to use to determine the appropriate scientific methodology to achieve understanding. It is more difficult to decide the criteria according which a person will accept one type of life-meaning or another. While one must also choose the most appropriate field or method of scientific study, this can be answered with relative ease. Essentially, this determination is made according to two basic criteria. The first is rational considerations, such as the chosen methodology not containing internal contradictions. The second is the degree to which the scientific explanations correspond to reality. This is a criterion that requires that the predictions that emerge from a given theory are aligned with empirical observations in specific situations (see the rich literature in the philosophy of science; e.g., Hempel, 1965, 1966; Popper, 1995; Rakover, 1990, 2018).

Choosing criteria according to which life-meaning may be constructed is much more difficult. One might suggest that the response to an indifferent world is not curiosity, but fear of the unknown. If lack of understanding of the world and the place of humans in this world is overwhelming, a person is likely to choose a way of life that will overcome or reduce this existential fear. However, this aggressive response to the threatening situation presented by the world is not tenable (because whatever people do, climb a high mountain, or draw a sword, what are they overcoming—the mountain or the sky above?).

The simplest approach is the construction of a life-meaning that submits to how the world seems to operate. This may be surrender to a representative of the world, for example, worship of a person considered to be the son of God, the (crucified) savior of humanity and the Almighty. In other words, a non-aggressive approach to developing meaning in the face of threatening stimuli is that people submit, they worship and deify the Earth, Sun, Moon, mountains, sea, and rivers, or else worship an abstract omnipotent God.

Whatever rationale life-meaning and a worldview are built upon, it necessitates long-term preparation and learning beginning at birth. Families that belong to a tribe or nation do not leave the question of life-meaning until their children become thoughtful adults capable of philosophical reflection on their place in the world. Rather, newborn babies receive the life-meanings that are acceptable to their family, tribe, people, and nation.

Here, I would like to note two things. First, the life-meanings transmitted to male children are often different from those transmitted to female children. I will describe the transmission of meaning to children without discussing this gender difference, mainly for reasons of convenience. Second, the transmission of life-meanings varies between religions, nations, and peoples. I do not discuss these important differences either, but rather describe the outline of the process of the acquisition of life-meaning.

Children quickly learn that their parents provide them with their basic needs, including emotional needs for touch and care. They learn to receive love from their family. They are given rewards and penalties for their behavior. Socialization is a complicated and long-term learning process, through which the individual acquires the values of family, tribe, people, and nation. These values are nurtured throughout the years of growth and maturation, as individuals progress from infancy to childhood, adolescence, and finally independent adulthood. These values are transformed into the individuals’ life-meaning as they move towards independence, seek their place in the society to which they belong, and walk along a life path deemed meaningful by the seeds of ideas planted in them from birth. This is the way in which society guides its children and integrates them into the social fabric. Any child born to a normal family goes through this process of transmission of life-meaning. The impact of this socialization process is enormous and can be seen in several ways.

First, individuals face great difficulties in being integrated into society when something interferes with or undermines this long-term educational process (for example, the death of a parent when the individual is still a child). Second, it takes migrants many years to shed the values of their home society and adopt those of the society into which they are being integrated. Third, one major and important function of any society is its assessment of its members’ actions. Children first seek their parents’ praise, then desire the esteem and admiration of their peers. Once they establish a career, they want positive feedback from their colleagues. Athletes long for medals, journalists for awards, authors hope for positive reviews, scientists want others to cite and quote their articles, and every blogger boasts about the number of people following everything they post on social networks. I have no doubt, then, that human life is founded on a network of values that carry tremendous significance, guide individuals’ lives, endow them with meaning, and constitute the purpose underlying their actions.

A person with such values does not face the questions: What is the meaning of my life? Where does all this lead? These questions are automatically answered by the values they have acquired from society. Usually, for people who have successfully undergone this education process, the question of life-meaning does not arise.

**The Undermining of Ordinary Acquired Life-Meaning: Loss of Direction**

 Daily human life is imbued with a web of meanings imparted by society and internalized by its members either fully, partially, or with personal variations that are usually made in areas where such adaptation is socially acceptable. Few people stop suddenly and for no reason in the middle of their life and ask: “What does all this mean? Is this really what I want to do with my life? Am I wasting my life trying to please others? Life is short and it is impossible to believe nothing will remain of me after I die.”

Such questions and reflections tend to arise in a person’s heart and mind during a great crisis or loss of direction, something the person has difficulty coping with. Such a significant rupture can cast a shadow on an individual’s ordinary acquired life-meaning, and damage or even negate it. The significant values that ordinarily support individuals may fail to offer tools that could enable them to deal with a crisis. Ordinary acquired meaning cannot lead them out of the dark pit of depression, because that meaning led them into the pit in the first place. Ordinary acquired meaning planted the seeds of doubt.

This idea of a life crisis appears in the works of other scholars. Eagleton (2013, p. 34) writes, “Investigations of life-meaning on a large scale tend to begin when the assumed rules, beliefs and conventions are in crisis.” He notes that the German existentialist philosopher Heidegger wrote his great philosophical works during World War I and the French philosopher Sartre wrote his during World War II. I will discuss three major types of crises that may cause people to question their ordinary acquired life-meaning: emotional fatigue, loss of direction, and war.

**Emotional fatigue**. A member of a community, let’s call him Joseph Shimshoni, leads his life in pursuit of societal goals that he has internalized: earning a living and starting a family. Joseph is married to his beloved wife, Sarah. Joseph earns good living as an accountant at a local bank, and Sarah works as a teacher. They bought a spacious apartment and two cars. They are raising their three adorable and happy children. On the weekends, Sarah and Joseph meet their friends, and enjoy going to movies, theater, and concerts. Once a year, they travel overseas. The family is like an advertisement for the good life. Joseph and Sarah lived this pleasant routine, day after day for 25 years. Then one day, at the end of a day of work as a bank accountant, when Joseph was supposed to return home, he sat immobile behind his desk, staring out his office window at the darkening sky. A terrible lethargy settled over him. He imagined seeing his wife preparing dinner as usual, going through the same motions, saying the same things to him, wearing her faded pink housedress. After the meal, they would clear the table together, as they always did, then stare tiredly at the television. Why did the idea of having dinner with his family not bring him the usual joy? How, without noticing, did he not tell his wife he loves her for two years, or even longer? He wonders if this is all that awaits him in the years to come—this endless repetition of work, dinner, staring at the television. If so, what meaning can it possibly have? What is the meaning of all this effort if he only achieves something so mundane? For what purpose was his soul brought down from heaven?

Joseph is searching for an answer to questions of life-meaning. He does not yet have an answer, because the system of life-meaning he had acquired and accepted until this moment is what ultimately led him to this state of disappointment and even disgust with his life, and to disregard all his trite “achievements”, even the woman he once loved, whom he now sees as a faded figure walking around their apartment yelling at the children. Even his children seem like no more than his biological offspring. He cannot recall the nights he could not sleep out of passion and love for Sarah! She no longer arouses any emotion in him, except perhaps a rebuff that gets caught in his throat. In short, Joseph Shimshoni has reached a crisis in his life. He experiences a sense of exhaustion and burnout that overshadows his former way of life, which now seems an insignificant and false direction. He reaches the terrible conclusion that his life has no purpose or meaning. The next section will address the question of what happens to our hero Joseph, and whether he will consider suicide as the solution, as Camus suggests.

**Loss:** A person who loses a loved one, such as a spouse or a child, often goes through a severe life crisis. Everything changes and is overshadowed by suffering, since the person who died was a significant part of the individual’s life-meaning, which is now destroyed. Society can offer consolation at the death of a spouse, because this is a natural phase of life, and most people eventually recover from and learn to cope with the natural death of a spouse. It is far more difficult and even unbearable to lose a young son or daughter, or to lose a loved one in an accident, or to war or sudden illness. In such cases, the sense of loss and the feeling of the meaninglessness of life is great.

Rather than dwelling on such unfortunately all-too-common events, I will describe how Asa Kasher, a philosophy professor whose beloved son Yehoraz died in an accident, addressed this tragedy in two of his books (Kasher, 1999, 2002; both books were published by Hakibbutz Hameuchad and the Yehoraz Foundation established in memory of Kasher’s son). These two books illustrate the tremendous efforts Kasher made to regain life-meaning and to cope with the fact that he continues to live and even enjoy life, despite his son’s death. In his book, *A Small Book on the Meaning of Life* (2002), Kasher writes, “The path advocated in *A Small Book on the Meaning of Life* is not just for those who find themselves in desperate situations. On the contrary, any person may walk it; as long as he possesses reason, emotion, and will, he also has the power to follow this path, to shape for himself the meaning of his life,” (p. 10). He continues: “The whole work of this book was marked by my daring, good, painful, tormented love of Yehoraz, which is, in my world, one of the few focal points of the meaning of life” (p. 12). Kasher implicitly discusses the concept of life-meaning and suggests it is at the heart of the practical question of how to live a life that is good in one’s own eyes. He discusses factors that affect life-meaning. Perhaps the primary factor, addressed by every existentialist, is the inevitability of death. How can a person live a meaningful life with the sword of death hanging over one’s head? Ultimately, Kasher suggests that consolation is found in the memory of the loved one, whose life was taken before its time, yet who continues to exist in the hearts of the living. He writes, “A man who speaks of his loved one, recalling the clear picture of the person’s life that exists in his heart, speaks in the present tense, not the past tense, as much as possible. I love Yehoraz in the present. I am proud of Yehoraz in the present. I learn from Yehoraz in the present. I miss Yehoraz in the present. Yehoraz lives in my heart after his death as much as he lived in my world during in his life, to the extent this is possible,” (ibid., p. 130).

**War**: War is another type of crisis, during which people lose their way of life, even if they do not suffer a military conquest (see Eagleton, 2013). Loved ones are killed, wounded, disabled, and battle-scarred. There is a dramatic change in routine, a decline in standard of living, and so on. I was born in the shadow of World War II, and I lived through all of Israel’s wars and the terrorist attacks against it. A sense of endless warfare follows me and all Israelis. The feeling constantly gnaws at the stomach, the anxiety that the State of Israel will be nothing but a passing historical episode, a country that developed an excellent army and strong security forces, but was not invincible forever. Israel is surrounded by large, hostile Muslim nations, and Palestinians and Israelis are locked in unresolved conflict because two nations live in the same land. One of the consequences of this constant extreme tension is a dramatic rise in religiosity, because Israelis are comforted by the belief that the Land of Israel was given to them by God.

**Psychological / Observational, Philosophical, and Theoretical Approaches**

Reading the literature on existentialism and life-meaning has given me the impression that it is not always possible to distinguish between the following three approaches to the topics of the present book:

**The psychological / observational approach** is expressed in Camus’ famous novel *The Stranger* (1985), which describes the loss of life-meaning for the novel’s hero, Meursault. Meursault makes observations and perceives the sequence of life events, but does not understand their meaning. The book is a literary-psychological-observational account that reinforces the strange and flawed character of Meursault.

**The philosophical approach** is expressed in Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1992) and Sartre’s critique of Camus’ books (Luria, 2002; Sagi, 2000). This approach analyzes the phenomenon of loss of direction and the meaninglessness of life using philosophical terms. It attempts to determine whether the meaninglessness of life is a universal phenomenon arising from the structure of the world and human society. Camus suggests in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that without a belief in God, human life is absurd, futile, and meaningless, given the inevitability of death and mankind’s inability to perceive the world as an organized and understandable collection of events and phenomena. Sartre does not accept the meaninglessness emphasized by Camus, because he believes that life is filled with the meanings he attaches to the world of the individual.

Although I agree with Sartre that life is filled with meaning, I do not believe this meaning can be attributed solely to the world of the individual. Attributing meaning to the world is an act beyond the power of a single individual. Therefore, every society develops a characteristic conception of a meaningful way of life. Individuals internalize these meanings fully, partially, or with certain variations. (In the next section, I propose that nature equips individuals with an innate meaning that protects them from bleak despair and loss of direction.)

**The theoretical approach** entails trying to explain people’s perception of the world as meaningless, futile, and meaningless, and their reaction to this. This approach, based on scientific methodology, attempts to offer a satisfactory explanation for this uniquely human phenomenon of loss of direction and loss of life-meaning. According to this approach, the absurd dichotomy between the continuation of life in the face of certain death, and the desire to understand an incomprehensible world, is nothing more than the assumption that human behavior requires explanation. This approach is essentially the one on which the current book was built, although its development was also influenced by the philosophical approach.

In some cases, the distinction between these three approaches is blurred. This is especially true for the distinction between the theoretical approach (whose role is to explain empirical phenomena) and the philosophical approach (whose role, in the current case, is to clarify and enlighten, in a rational way, the existential condition of humanity). How can we understand the meaninglessness of life?

At the philosophical level, the world is a set of stimuli to which one may react with a sense of loss, anxiety, confusion, or absurd behavior, that is, the act of continuing to live despite the futility of life. Camus regards such behavior as a rebellion against the meaninglessness that characterizes the world. At the theoretical level, a person has cognitive-behavioral responses to crises and loss of direction in life that may have arisen due to various factors, such as emotional burnout, loss of loved ones, or war.

A philosophical question emerges from the possibility that people live in and react to a meaningless world. Does the assumption of the non-existence of God and a universe that operates with indifference towards and independent of the actions and thoughts of humans necessarily lead to a meaningless life for people? Camus seems to answer this question in the affirmative, because he sees human life as absurd in the face of inevitable death and an incomprehensible world. However, one need not interpret the murder committed by Meursault, hero of *The Stranger*, as an expression of the meaninglessness of life and the idea that nothing has any importance, meaning or purpose and therefore there is no reason to live. Rather, it may be interpreted as a highly meaningful act that defies the most important commandment “You shall not murder!” In this way, Meursault is similar to Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment* (1961), in which murder is portrayed as the act of a “superior man” breaking taboos and crossing boundaries.

This point leads us to a theoretical realm, in which murder may be considered an act of rebellion. If we now consider the possibility that a sense of meaninglessness is a person’s emotional-cognitive response to crisis and loss, the theoretical question arises regarding what could explain such a behavioral phenomenon.

Indeed, the approach outlined above is linked to the attempt to explain such a response to crisis. Such a reaction arises against the background of a previously held life-meaning, which necessarily includes the absurdity of being born against one’s will, suffering throughout life against one’s will, and eventually dying against one’s will. Before addressing this question, I first will offer three comments that shed light on the distinctions between psychology / observation, philosophy, and theory.

**Death**. Personally, I believe that scholars discussing the meaning of life have overstated the importance of death as a factor overshadowing life and making it seem ultimately meaningless. In terms of psychology (the behavior), I believe that a large number of people (myself included) do not fear death (no one has returned from Hades and told us how terrible it is). If people were so frightened of death that all meaning waned and disappeared from their lives, they would never leave home. Doing so would be pointlessness and the lurking danger of death would constantly await them. They would be afraid of falling and breaking their skulls (the probability of which is not zero, of course). They would avoid driving, because morning and evening they hear news of horrifying traffic accidents. If humans were as terrified of death as they are purported to be, their fear would become a self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, fear would manifest and multiply until humanity drove itself to extinction.

But this is not the problem. In my view, the greatest fear is of terrible suffering before death, fear of old age and the accompanying loss of ability and control, dependence on others, severe illness, physical and mental pains that make life unbearable. Personally, I am ready to sign a contract with anyone at any price if they could promise the kiss of death, that I could simply go to sleep and never wake. I have no doubt that extending life through medical means, with a host of pumping and beeping machines surrounding the patient’s body, connected to tubes and wires, in a pathetic and absurd effort to keep him alive as his spirit wanes and he is unable to move or even breathe independently, is only a medical “bear hug”, good intentions that pave the way to hell, while the patient, with what is left of his reason, longs only for the angel of death to cut him down with his fatal scythe.

In her book, Lieblich (2019) addresses group discussions held in her home on the topics of death, the plethora of problems facing humans, and the emotions related to the approach of the final moment. If this is the actual psychological situation, then Camus’ philosophical attempt in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* to justify the absurdity of life in the face of death is surely relevant to a small number of people at best. The absurdity of existence in the face of death may be an empty absurdity.

**The individual is not the determinant**. The argument that people attribute meaning to their own life is too general, overly broad, and in my opinion largely wrong. This is an accepted view in existentialism. For example, Luria (2002), who discusses Sartre’s philosophical approach, writes, “The meaning of each person’s life is personal, and he is the most competent (and the only one) to determine it. Hence the idea that every person should determine the meaning of his or her own life, without having what or who to rely on in this matter,” (p. 199).

I do not claim that there is any objective life-meaning embedded in the world that has physical or chemical properties like other types of substances. I agree that humans attribute meaning to the world and their lives. However, it is not individuals alone who determine the life-meanings; this is an act above and beyond the power of the individual. In general, the life-meanings, values, and rules of behavior according to which individuals operate are determined by the society to which they belong, transmitted by agent-educators, such as family, teachers, friends, and so on. One cannot assume that children can determine life-meanings for themselves, for the simple reason that they are still adjusting to the world, still learning to manage within the family, among friends, at educational institutions, in the military, at work, and so on. If they discover they have some special abilities, these usually pertain to one of the life paths that society offers them, for example, excellence in academics (mathematics, painting, theater, music, sports).

Alternately, they could rebel against their family, educational setting, or military discipline. Even when individuals become able to stand up for their own opinions and develop maturity in judgment, they are unable to shape the basic foundation of their own life-meaning and path in life. This situation is analogous to a person transplanted into a completely foreign society. For example, a baby who grew up in a pack of wolves and then moved to a modern city. Even if we assume this young man does not feel threatened by the urban phenomena such as crowded buildings, lights, cars, noise, and the tremendous number of people in the streets, and if we further assume he quickly adapts to all of this, he will nevertheless be shocked by the sheer number of choices he must make regarding the meaning of his new life. How can he know what is the best and most appropriate life path for him? For example, will his life be limited to appearing in a circus and mimicking the howls of wolves?

Individuals are socialized to assimilate the life-meanings of the society into which they were born. Gradually, these meanings become a part of individuals’ essence. Each person eventually chooses, among the various paths towards a meaningful life that society offers them at each stage of development, the one that seems the best and most meaningful and in accordance with their natural inclinations. Furthermore, some societies educate individuals to think they will make their own decisions regarding which life path to choose. Why? That is how to ensure the most stable, thorough, and loyal integration into the social system. If this is an accurate description of reality, the question arising from the existentialist approach to meaning-making will be expropriated from the realm of philosophy and taken up by psychology and theoretical explanations.

**Choosing evil life-meanings**. The effort needed to create life-meaning is enormous. Most people are satisfied when society equips them with recommended meanings to internalize, releasing them from the effort of choosing a life path. Like Camus (1992), who suggests that Sisyphus can be seen as being satisfied with his endless act of pushing a stone to the top of the mountain, futile because it endlessly rolls back to the bottom, I suggest viewing ordinary people who undertake this effort (which is like pushing a stone to the top of a hill), as a meaningful way of life. One might ask why anyone would choose such an absurd act of pushing a stone to the summit of a mountain if it will only roll back to the bottom?

The answer is that a Sisyphean effort can be perceived as an action with an important purpose, like a game in which people compete with each other. Society establishes various kinds of games that are as futile as pushing a stone uphill, and imbues them with the highest positive meaning, which individuals internalize and devote their whole lives to. For this reason, people compete with each other to determine, for example, who can throw a javelin or iron ball the furthest, climb a vertical wall the fastest, make the highest number of flips while diving into deep water, knock out an opponent in a boxing match, or even jump from a ledge attached to a bungee rope. There is no shortage of sports to which people are addicted and which they see as giving meaning to their lives, whether they are competitors themselves or devoted fans. We can think of Sisyphus as the winner of a competition for pushing stones uphill, or a survivalist contest in which the winner is the one who does not go insane when the stone endlessly returns to the bottom of the mountain; that is, whoever can survive this crazy situation for the longest amount of time. Or we could see Sisyphus as a contestant in a competition to see who will first break his stone by rolling it down the mountain. It is possible that Sisyphus enjoyed watching the stone roll down the mountain and wondering when it would finally crash to pieces. There are people who enjoy watching buildings or bridges be destroyed to make way for new construction (this is profitable for contractors). There are people who enjoy watching the destruction of cities by typhoons, or the spectacular eruption of a volcano, or even air raid bombings. This analysis shows it is possible to find a psychological explanation of the Sisyphean state.

If individuals are the only ones to determine the meaning of their own lives, on what basis can they differentiate between positive and negative (evil) meanings? If they do not internalize, through socialization, basic human values, they are likely to choose a way of life that is meaningful only for themselves, responding to their own primal impulses and instincts. Such a life path can lead to horrific crimes (theft, rape, murder). There is nothing to prevent people from choosing a way of life that is meaningful in their own eyes, but which is widely perceived as taboo and criminal in human society and culture. History is full of monstrous examples of rulers with unlimited power who cast off their humanity, for example, Caligula, Nero, Hitler, and Stalin. Doesn’t every human reject in disgust the life-meanings espoused by these rulers? Not necessarily. Not everyone rejects these nefarious ways of life. Many of the people under the authority of those hideous rulers supported them (not to mention the phenomena of the underworld of organized crime, which I will not discuss here). Why? For two main reasons: fear and pleasure.

The first reason is fear of the ruler. Their subjects quickly learn that all who oppose the ruler meet the bitter ends of prison, exile, torture, or murder. The second reason has to do with the rewards that subjects can receive from the ruler. Most rulers create a hierarchical network of recipients of favors, who they are confident will help them maintain their corrupt government. Rewards are given in the form of property, money, jobs, control over others, and the like. One only has to look at films documenting how the German and Austrian people were delighted to accept the Führer Hitler after his first successes, including the start of World War II, to understand the immense power inherent in the distribution of wealth and other rewards. Furthermore, it is impossible to separate such distribution of rewards and benefits from the fear of losing those benefits. Any individual not loyal to the ruler will lose their benefits, which will be given to others. In particular, there is a fear of a regime change, because in this case, the favors will be immediately transferred to the new rulers.