5 Hassidic Idealism and the Meaning of Life

Samuel Lebens
University of Haifa, Israel

In this chapter, I argue that theists have been wrong to claim that only on the assumption of theism can life have meaning. And yet, I shall also argue that only on the assumption of a special *form* of theism can everybody's life take on a special *form* of meaning.

5.1 What Does "Meaning" Mean?

What we tend to mean by "meaning" has something to do with semantics, representation, and/or signification. When I ask for the meaning of a certain hand gesture, or for the meaning of a word, or for the meaning of the emptiness of the restaurant, I'm not asking about the value of these things. Rather, I want to know that the hand gesture is asking me to wait, that the word in question translates into English as "table," and that the emptiness of the restaurant signifies nothing more than the fact that it's closed for New Year's Day. But that's not the meaning of "meaning" that we tend to mean when we ask whether *life* is meaningful.

Instead, what we "mean" when we talk about the meaning of life, has something to do with value. To be interested in the meaning of life is to be interested in what can make a life valuable, and what can make the continuation of a life attractive.

Iddo Landau (2017, pp. 7–12) illustrates this claim with a number of examples. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl "describes how some concentration camp prisoners retained meaning in their lives, while others did not" (ibid.). What Frankl meant by this was that some of the prisoners managed to hang onto to conviction that "some aspects of life still held value for them, or could hold value in the future" (ibid.).

When people argue that the insignificance of human life, viewed from a cosmic perspective, entails that our lives are meaningless,[1] once again, Landau points out that it is *value* at stake. To have "a negligible effect on the universe," it is feared, is somehow to have a life of inconsequential value (ibid.). Another of Landau's examples is drawn from the Bible. Take the following verse from Ecclesiastes (2:11): "Then I considered all

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that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."

As Landau reads this verse, "the writer is saying that, in his view, all his actions have been worthless or futile since they do not bring about anything valuable" (Landau, 2017, p. 8). Or, take the following verses from the same book of the Bible (Ecclesiastes 2:15–16):

> Then I said to myself, 'What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like the fool!

As Landau understands these words, the "argument is that because we all ultimately disappear and are forgotten, there is no real difference between the life of the (worthy) wise and that of the (worthless) fool. Much of what seems to have value, the author suggests, in fact has none" (Landau, 2017, p. 9). In this way, Landau demonstrates that, in every context in which the meaning of life is discussed or questioned, it really is the *value* of life, or the value of a given life, that we're talking about.

Many of Landau's most moving examples are drawn from his experience as a volunteer secular hospital chaplain. This role has brought him into contact, and into intimate conversations, with many people at the end of their life. Invariably, Landau has discovered, that when these people come to assess the meaning of their life, or worse, to deny that their life had meaning, their talk of "meaning" could be best understood in terms of *value*.

You might think that sometimes, the complaint that life lacks meaning, draws from the more common notion of meaning – the notion that has to do with symbolism. A person might look at the *narrative* of their own life, for example, and worry that it lacks a certain sort of coherence. But even then, the complaint boils down to one that concerns value. A narrative is used to make the disparate elements of a person's life hang together. This, in turn, can help to make a person's life understandable. We need to understand things because only relative to a worldview or to a "categorization of how things are or should be," can attributions of value make sense (ibid., p. 13). According to Landau, this is why adolescents, "who are moving between two frameworks, that of childhood and that of adulthood (one hour they behave as though they were eight years old and the next as though they were twenty-five), are also sometimes … disoriented," such that they might complain that their lives are lacking in meaning (ibid.).

We can therefore conclude, with Landau, that for life itself, or for any given life, to be meaningful, it has to be (in some sense or other) valuable.

Some theists have argued that only on the assumption of theism can life be valuable and therefore meaningful. In the next section, I shall argue that they are wrong.

5.2 Theism and the Meaning of Life

Two well-known theistic philosophers have argued that the existence of God is a pre-condition for the meaningfulness of life: John Cottingham and William Lane Craig. One of the arguments they have in common is that only if God exists can we appeal to any sort of objective value for life to aim towards. In the words of Cottingham (2003, p. 33):

> If 'Truth' 'Beauty' and 'Goodness' have no reality beyond the localised and temporary desires and conventions of humans – those 'imbecile worms of the earth', as Pascal called us – won't it be just a grandiose fantasy to label some lives as more meaningful than any others?

And, if all of our lives are of equal value, what's the point of striving to live a *good* life? Moreover, if all of our lives are of equal value, in a world without God, then the value system according to which any life *could* have value, will one day be wiped out, as human civilisation, and indeed the universe itself, will one day come to an end since, to quote Craig (2013, p. 159):

> Eventually all the stars will burn out and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. There will be no light at all; there will be no heat; there will be no life; only the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, ever expanding into the endless darkness and the cold recesses of space—a universe in ruins.

Only the possession of objective value could give our lives significant meaning; a meaning that will, in a sense, outlast even the death of the universe. And only if God exists can we hope for such value to attach to our lives. For only then could we, to quote Cottingham (2003, p. 62), "locate our human destiny within an enduring moral framework." That is to say, the existence of a supremely valuable, necessary, and eternal being provides a moral framework that doesn't depend upon the contingent whims of human beings, for our lives to operate within:

> So far from being a cosmic accident or by-product of blind forces, our lives would be seen as having a purpose – that of attuning ourselves to a creative order that is inherently good. Our deepest responses would be seen as pointing us towards such a goal, and our deepest fulfilment to be attained in realising it. (ibid.)

Does God really help us to establish an objective moral framework? What about the Euthyphro dilemma? On one horn of the dilemma, we identify the objectively good with the will of God. The other horn of the dilemma has it that God wills what he will because his will is responsive to the independent standards of morality and value. On the first horn, it looks like the dictates of morality are nothing more than the contingent whim of the deity. Had God willed for murder and rape instead of justice and charity, then murder and rape would have been virtuous. Surely that's unacceptable. On the second horn, however, the existence of God seems to do nothing for the foundation of objective norms, since those norms seem to be external to God to begin with. Cottingham's preferred response to the dilemma is to say that moral dictates are more than a mere Divine whim. Instead, they are a function of God's *nature*. For example, that murder is wrong is, on Cottingham's view (2005, p. 47), "an inseparable part of the structure of the divine mind."

But even if God can play this role, as the grounds of objective value, what Cottingham and Craig fail to prove is that there *can't* be objective normative facts *without* the existence of God. Why not think that Plato's heaven contains a whole slew of normative properties that can attach to actions, events, and people, even in the absence of God, just as the atheistic Platonist thinks that the Platonic property of evenness attaches to the number two, with or without the existence of God?

Craig seems to assume that no such position is possible to maintain. He describes the universe as a two-story building:

> In the lower story is the finite world without God … In the upper story are meaning, value, and purpose. Now modern man lives in the lower story because he believes there is no God. But he cannot live happily in such an absurd world; therefore, he continually makes leaps of faith into the upper story to affirm meaning, value, and purpose, even though he has no right to, since he does not believe in God. (Craig, 2013, p. 164)

But this isn't an argument. It is a hurried assertion. Craig simply claims that only those who believe there to be a God on the second story of the universe are entitled to any of the other treasures that are thought to reside there. But atheistic ethical non-naturalism just *is* the position that Plato's heaven, so to speak, is home to all sorts of normative properties which can be instantiated in the concrete world, even though there is no God. To establish that this isn't true, we need more than a mere denial. We need an argument. To his credit, Cottingham doesn't simply dismiss the option of atheistic ethical non-naturalism. He attempts to provide an argument against it.

According to Cottingham, atheistic ethical non-naturalism cannot escape a collapse into an untenable relativism. The non-naturalist starts

out with the claim that cruelty, for example, possesses some property or other that gives us conclusive reason not to *be* cruel. But, if there's no God, Cottingham worries that no reason not to be cruel can ever be *completely* conclusive.

> If it is merely the contingencies of our genetic and cultural makeup that have produced our moral aversion to cruelty, then it is hard to see how we have an objective reason (a reason independent of the contingent set of our desires), let alone a 'conclusive' reason, not to be cruel. For the theist, by contrast, there is a domain of eternal and necessary value, a divine reality that infuses all possible worlds; the purposes of God are necessarily good, and the nature of humans, qua created beings, is such that they can only be truly fulfilled by living in conformity with his moral purposes. (Cottingham, 2005, p. 56)

Here Cottingham makes a number of unfair assumptions about the non-naturalist position. He assumes that our aversion to cruelty is, for the atheistic non-naturalist, a contingent feature of our evolution, such that the possession of some property couldn't give us a necessarily conclusive reason to act or not to act in a certain way. Had we been wired differently, what would count as conclusive reasons would differ too. But perhaps the non-naturalist will claim that our moral sense evolved in ways that are responsive to the ethical facts, just as our mathematical sense evolved in ways that are responsive to the mathematical facts.[2] On that view, evolution was, you might think, bound to converge upon an aversion to cruelty.

Moreover, a fallibilist atheistic non-naturalist will readily accept that our moral sensibilities *could* have been, or could even currently be, globally mistaken. But that doesn't mean that we can't make sense of objectively conclusive reasons not to be cruel, even if our human sensibilities might fail to be sensitive to them. Objectively conclusive reasons not to-ϕ might just be a brute metaphysical reality; a reality that exists independently of contingent human sensibilities, and independently even of the conceptual frameworks of any particular species.

So, Cottingham and Craig end up assuming without basis that objective, non-relative, value is impossible to ground without the existence of God. The second problem with their arguments is their assumption that *relative* value could never suffice for a meaningful life. Craig maintains that life without God, "means that the life we have is without ultimate significance." But Landau is surely right to point out that "having no ultimate significance and having no significance at all are very different. A life can be significant even when it is not ultimately so" (Landau, 2017, p. 37). Indeed, it can even be objectively (rather than subjectively) significant relative to a system of thought, without being *ultimately* significant – i.e., significant relative to no system of thought.

As I understand Thomas Nagel's position on these matters, it is always going to be the case that an evaluation of a life will be relative to some system of thought or other. But that shouldn't *undermine* the value in question. It might be the case that your life was only meaningful relative to a particular conceptual scheme, but if that conceptual scheme is human ethics and value, then that's quite an achievement.

Nagel (1971) points out that life will always appear absurd when you step outside the value and thought systems through which you normally view things. But that's just a consequence of the human ability to abstract ever further beyond our first systems of thought, and beyond the reference frames in which we first found ourselves. But that fleeting sense of absurdity doesn't undermine the fact that, relative to the systems of thought that matter most to us, our lives can be full of meaning – even objectively so.

The fact that the value of our lives isn't grounded relative to some mythical *view from nowhere* that transcends all ways of thinking, shouldn't undermine the fact that our lives *do* have value relative to systems of thought that matter to us. Once again, and to echo Landau: a life can be significant even if not ultimately so. And we can even celebrate the fact that we sometimes get a vertigo-inducing glimpse of reality from a more transcendent perspective, relative to which our lives are devoid of meaning. That feature of human life is itself a consequence of one of the faculties that, relative to our systems of value, give our lives more meaning, and not less – the faculty for abstract thought.

Finally, Cottingham and Craig argue that only the existence of God can rescue the meaning of our lives from their temporal finitude. If your life is valued by God, then it is valued forever. But if the systems of value according to which your life is valuable are grounded in the human species, then, once you have been forgotten, as you surely one day will be, since, in the words of the Bible, "there is no enduring remembrance" (Ecclesiastes 2:16); or once the human race, or perhaps all intelligent life, has expired from our dying universe, then all of your achievements will amount to nothing.

But that's not true. If you did something valuable at time *t*, then it will *always* be true, for all eternity, that you did something valuable at time *t*. Nothing can ever change that. Even when nothing remains but the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, it will *still* be the case, whether or not anyone remembers it, that at time *t*, you did something valuable (see Landau, 2017, pp. 85–86). Perhaps it's all the *more* valuable for the fact that its value *doesn't* depend upon someone (even God) remembering it.

God isn't necessary for making life meaningful – even if He's eminently helpful! Life can have objective and eternal meaning without His existence, perhaps it cannot have *ultimate* meaning without His existence, but even that is debatable. Still, objective and eternal meaning, relative to the systems of value that matter to us, should be enough! Consequently, I deny that God is necessary for life to be robustly

meaningful. But there is a *form* of meaning that only a certain *form* of theism can offer a life. It is to that topic that I turn, in the remainder of this chapter.

5.3 Hassidic Idealism

The form of theism that I want to explore, in the remainder of this chapter, I call Hassidic idealism. In my opinion, Hassidic idealism is just a form of monotheism. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that, with only a few uncontroversial assumptions, any standard form of monotheism is bound to collapse into Hassidic idealism (Goldschmidt & Lebens, 2020). Others disagree. Some present Hassidic theology as resolutely pantheistic (Michaelson, 2009); committed to the identity between the universe and God. Yet others take Hassidic theology to be committed to acosmism (Melamed, 2018); the doctrine that denies the existence of the universe. I deny that either of those labels apply straightforwardly to Hassidic thought. But what matters for the purposes of this chapter is that Hassidic idealism, however best to classify it, is a form of theism that lends each human life a new form of meaning that more standard forms of theism overlook.

The best way to think oneself into Hassidic idealism is to start with the belief in a perfect being. A tension is then supposed to emerge between this belief and the belief that this universe exists outside of that being, even as one of its creations. The basic intuition that gives rise to this tension is that God's perfection would leave no room for anything else to exist. This is clearly a metaphor. The best way to cash that metaphor out, and to arrive at real a philosophical puzzle, I explore elsewhere (Goldschmidt & Lebens, 2020). But once you believe that such a tension obtains between the existence of a perfect being, and there being *room* for the existence of anything else, then you have a choice: (1) you can deny that the universe exists (the acosmic option); (2) you can deny that the perfect being exists (the atheistic option); or (3) you can claim that God somehow contracted His perfection, so as to make room for the creation of a universe. This third option is the doctrine of *tzimtzum* (divine contraction).

The problem with *tzimtzum* is that it might be incompatible with perfection. Would a perfect being choose to rein in her perfection? Perfection never chooses imperfection. And thus, the contraction that was required for the creation of the world, may have been impossible. This lead some Kabbalists, and the majority of Hassidic thinkers, to the following view: (1) God couldn't create a universe without reining in some of His perfections; (2) given His perfection, God couldn't rein in any of His perfections; therefore (3) God couldn't create a universe; instead, God created the *illusion* of a reining in of His perfections; this created the *illusion* of an empty space in which creation should occur;

God then created the *illusion* of a universe within the illusory space vacated by His illusory contraction.

One can immediately see the attraction of describing this position as acosmic, since it regards the universe as an illusion. But I think that might be too hasty a conclusion, since, on this Hassidic view, the universe *does* exist. It exists as something like an idea in the mind of God. It exists, even if it isn't what it seems to be. This isn't pantheism so long as we can distinguish between God and His ideas. This needn't even be panentheism – the doctrine that the universe is somehow part of God – because it's not obvious that an idea *is* a part of the mind that thinks it, in anything but a metaphorical sense.

Why think that ideas aren't parts of the minds that think them? For one thing, thoughts seem to have a public aspect: more than one person can think the same thought. But if your mind was just the mereological fusion of your thoughts, then two minds thinking only the same thoughts would collapse into being the same mind. Moreover, since mereological fusions are nothing more than the sum of their parts, it would turn out that every new thought you think would kill the mind you used to have and give rise to the birth of a new mind in its place. I would rather insist that minds *have* ideas without being *constituted* by them.

However we classify her position, the Hassidic idealist has to distinguish between two levels of reality, or two levels of discourse. There are the claims that are true relative to the image that God imagines. Relative to this level of reality, it is true that you and I exist as human beings with bodies made of flesh and blood. It is true that we have free will. But there are also claims that are true relative to God's own level of reality – reality behind the illusion of *tzimtzum*. Relative to that layer of reality, it is true to say that we are only ideas in the mind of God and that we only do what God imagines us to do. Compare: relative to the story of Hamlet, Hamlet is a Danish prince, and he has free will; beyond the story, however, it is true to say that Hamlet is merely a figment of Shakespeare's imagination and does only what Shakespeare imagines him to do.

One might argue that Hassidic idealism, were it to be true, would strip our lives of meaning. We're nothing more than figments of God's imagination, and everything we do, even if we think that we're doing what we're freely choosing to do, is pre-ordained for us in the script that God is writing in His mind. We are mere puppets on heavenly strings.

Elsewhere I have sought to dismiss these concerns (Lebens, 2015). You really are free to shape your own life. That really is true, relative to the only layer of reality that need bother you most of the time. To worry that there's some broader perspective from which it's not true to say that you're free makes no more sense than it would for Sherlock Holmes to worry that, from some broader metaphysical perspective, it's not true to say that Baker Street had 221 houses at the time when Holmes was alive. In the story, Holmes has a key to 221B Baker Street, and that should be

good enough to set his mind at ease. Likewise, in the story that we call reality, you and I have libertarian free will. That should be good enough to set our minds at ease, even if there's some more ultimate perspective from which it's not true to say that we're free. Moreover, if the concern is that Hassidic idealism doesn't give a person the same ontological ultimacy as it gives to God, then the complaint reveals a desire to share an ontological pedestal with God. That simply isn't a desire upon which a theist should place any weight. There's nothing impious about wanting to *exist*, but to want to be as *fundamental* as God Himself is a desire that seems incompatible with religious devotion to God.

You might think that the problem of evil is exacerbated by Hassidic idealism. I have argued that that's a mistake (ibid.). It is true that God is the author of every evil thing that happens. But, from the perspective from which that shocking fact is true, it's also true to say that all of the evil in this world is merely fictional. Furthermore, according to the Hassidic idealist, God is also a character in the story of the world who interacts with the other characters. Relative to *that* layer of reality, God isn't the author of the evil choices that humans make all on their own. All of the regular theodicies that are open to the theist in general can be used to defend God, as He appears as a character in our story. The problem of evil is a thorny problem. But it's no less severe for the regular theist than it is for the Hassidic idealist.

5.4 Hassidic Idealism and the Meaningful Life[3]

In the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera discusses one of his characters, Tereza, who is stuck in a situation in which she feels torn between something she deeply wants to do and her feeling of nausea. Her mind wants one thing and her body another. Kundera says that she was born in that moment. It was for this scene that she was created:

> It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation … Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach … Tereza was born … of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience. (Kundera, 1995, p. 37)

Later, he returns to his theme (ibid., p. 215):

> [C]haracters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about.

Kundera doesn't deny that Tereza has a mother. In fact, he tells us lots about her. But *outside* of the story, her *real* mother – so to speak – is a *metaphor*. *Every* character is a metaphor for something that the author wants to express. This insight can serve as a key with which to understand a great deal of Kabbalistic and Hassidic commentary to the Bible.

Abraham was the son of a woman, the wife of Terach. The Bible doesn't tell us her name, but it's safe to assume that Abraham had a mother. He even refers to her, if somewhat obliquely, at one point in the story (Genesis 20:12). The Babylonian Talmud calls her Amathlai (Baba Batra 91a). So, Abraham lived a real life, and real things happened to him. But, in the Kabbalistic tradition, he's also an expression of an *idea*.

According to the Kabbalistic tradition, Abraham symbolises God's חסד (loving-kindness). God's justice is represented in this world by Isaac. Jacob (somewhat surprisingly, given all of the deceit that marks his early life) is taken to represent God's truth. This hermeneutic makes sense on the adoption of Hassidic idealism. Abraham may have been born of a woman, *in the story*, but that doesn't undermine the fact that his real mother was a *metaphor*.

When the Torah tells us a story, two things are happening: there's what's true in the story – the real history about real people – but there's also the drama that's ongoing in the mind of God; a drama that's expressed through the unfolding of the story. The *Zohar* (I.7b) alludes to this. The Torah starts with the second letter of the alphabet, with its numerical value, 2. It does so, according to the Zohar, in order to illustrate that there are *two* stories unfolding in unison; one revealed, and one hidden; a story told, and a story about the author telling the story. It's as if the Kabbala seeks to gain a psychological appreciation of God, by looking at the story He tells, and coming to know more about *Him*, just as we might psychoanalyse an author through their novel.

What's more, the story of this world doesn't end with the Bible. The story is still unfolding. Consequently, if you seriously entertain Hassidic idealism, every single person you meet is the expression of a divine idea; they are a character in God's story. Everything that happens in your life, even those things that are truly random, and truly coincidental, the highs and lows, the pleasures and the pains, the successes and the disappointments, can *all* be saturated with meaning and religious significance. In a novel, *every* event is ripe for interpretation, even if the narrator insists that it was a coincidence. Indeed, to read a novel is often to search for meaning in every detail. Every aspect of one's life can be elevated by the supposition that it's being lived in the very mind of God. Moreover, we're left with a probing existential question. If *you* are a metaphor, then what are you a metaphor for?

Consider the poem, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, by William Carlos Williams:

> so much depends
> upon
>
> a red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens.

The poem seems to describe an unremarkable scene: a wet wheelbarrow besides some white chickens. But then, why is it a poem? Why are the lines broken up in the way that they are? It has been said that, "since the poem is composed of one sentence broken up at various intervals, it is truthful to say that 'so much depends upon' each line of the poem" (Napierkowski & Ruby, 2017). Had the same sentence been uttered in a different context, and without the enjambment it would seem absurd to ask, "yes, but why is the wheelbarrow red? And, why were the chickens white?" Abstracted from the context of the poem, red and white are just the colours that those things have. In the context of the poem, however, we're invited to search for some deeper significance. This is also true with every thing that happens in our lives, on the assumption of Hassidic idealism. Events and circumstances can be complete coincidences, or human injustices, or accidents, relative to the story in which we live – but all of them, without fail, have a deeper symbolic meaning, in the context of this world viewed as a story told by God. Humility insists that we should never be too certain that we know what the meaning of any event might be. But like a poem, the world invites us to speculate.

Moreover, on the assumption of Hassidic idealism, if there are *n* billion people on earth, then God could be thought to be writing *n* billion stories concurrently. In our own stories, we're the main character. But, in other people's stories, we're supporting cast, or merely incidental, or we don't appear at all. This makes sense of the practice of the famous Hassidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Peshischa (1767–1827). In each pocket he carried a slip of paper. On one he had written, in accordance with the saying of the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5): "for my sake was the world created." On the other, he had written the words of Abraham (Genesis 18:27): "I am dust and ashes." Both can be true, since we may well be appearing in multiple, overlapping, concurrent, stories. In some of them, the first slip of paper describes our situation. In others, the second slip describes our situation. Both have their place. We are all the lead role in

our own lives which are more than non-fictional lives; they are novels written by God. But we are also supporting cast, or barely existent, in the stories that God tells about other people. This gives each life tremendous significance without thereby creating any ground for arrogance.

The sense of meaning that emerges, in this context, takes us back to the more common notion of *meaning* – not value, but something semantic, or symbolic. For a life to be meaningful in this more common sense of "meaning," would require that a life somehow takes on a significance that points, in some way or other, to something beyond itself. Of course, a life that takes on such a meaning wouldn't necessarily take on any positive *value*. The life of Adolf Hitler has taken on a massive amount of meaning. In our society, he personifies evil, megalomania, racism, hatred, and more. And so, his life is a very meaningful one. And yet, his life, taken as a whole, has no positive value to it at all. His life was a tremendous stain upon world history. His life has negative value, despite its "meaning." In fact, the fact that his life has come to mean such horrible things probably takes even more value away from his life. Indeed, this is the sort of meaning we should all want to avoid. In the Biblical curses, Moses raises the terrifying threat that the people of Israel, will become "a consternation, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples to which the LORD will drive you" (Deuteronomy 28:37). No one wants to be a byword for cursedness.

Moreover, even without the assumption of any form of theism, your life *can* come to symbolise something of value, and thereby inherit an added positive value. Though none of these human beings are beyond criticism: Martin Luther King's life has come to symbolise the dignified and peaceful struggle against racial injustice; Winston Churchill's life has come to symbolise a certain sort of grit and resilience in the face of evil; Mother Teresa's life has come to symbolise saintliness. All of these symbolic properties would be held by these lives whether or not God exists. But, what Hassidic idealism adds to the picture is that every single life, and every single event, is saturated in symbolic meaning. My claim is that it is of tremendous value to be living in a world in which every event and circumstance, and every life, truly carries Divine significance. Of course, this can backfire on us if our lives come to stand for something bad. But the opportunity itself is priceless. There is no moment devoid of Divine significance. This is a value that our lives come to carry upon the assumption of Hassidic idealism.

To summarise what I've tried to establish in this chapter: The truth of regular theism isn't a pre-requisite for living a meaningful life, even though it tends to carry the promise of an infinitely valuable *after*-life. Of course, this isn't to say that the truth of theism would add no value at all. It's just to say that the truth of theism isn't necessary for our lives to have value. In addition, I have argued that the truth of Hassidic idealism, in contrast to regular theism, would add a completely new sort of value, potentially to every single moment of our lives in this world.[4]

Notes

1 See, for example, Benatar (2017).
2 Admittedly, this opens the atheistic ethical non-naturalist up to Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (Plantinga, 2011). According to Plantinga's argument, the only reason we have for thinking that our evolution was responsive to truth and falsehood depends upon the belief that our evolution was guided by God. I think it fair to leave this argument to one side, for the purposes of this chapter, on the assumption that Plantinga's argument allows for various avenues of response, see, for example, Beilby (2002).
3 Much of this section draws from §5.4 of (Lebens, 2020) but updated, expanded, and repackaged in service of the different philosophical question at the heart of this chapter.
4 Thanks to Iddo Landau, Gaby Lebens, and Kirk Lougheed for comments on an earlier draft.

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