



THE MEANING OF LIFE AND THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

Smile

EDITED BY
STEPHEN LEACH AND
JAMES TARTAGLIA

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10 Koheleth and the meaning of life

THADDEUS METZ

Introduction

Ecclesiastes stands out as the clearest instance of what one could call ‘Biblical existentialism’ (with Job being the next runner up). More than any other book of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Tanakh for Jews and the Old Testament for Christians, Ecclesiastes is naturally read as considering whether meaning can be found in an earthly life, and firmly concluding that it cannot.

Its opening chapter begins with, ‘Utter futility – said Koheleth – Utter futility! All is futile!’ (1.2), and the last of the quotations ascribed to Koheleth ends on the same note: ‘Utter futility – said Koheleth – All is futile!’ (12.8).¹ Although the words ‘meaningless’ or ‘insignificant’ are not used, talk of ‘futility’, or what is sometimes translated as ‘vanity’, connotes much the same concept. The key theme of the work is that human life on earth is pointless, akin to ‘the pursuit of wind’, another recurrent phrase in it.

Koheleth (or *Qoheleth*) is a Hebrew word for gatherer, often rendered as ‘teacher’ or ‘preacher’, while the title of the book ascribed to him, Ecclesiastes, is a Greek word for assemblymen or those who have gathered. There has been substantial debate about who Koheleth was, whether there was an additional author of Ecclesiastes beyond him, and when this book was written, with proposed dates ranging from the time of Solomon in the 900s BCE to that of Persian influence around 450–330 BCE to that of Greek influence c. 330–180 BCE.

Even supposing the latter time frame is accurate, Ecclesiastes remains one of the first written texts in the Western, monotheist tradition to address the theme of meaningfulness explicitly, and, above all, to posit its absence from our lives. It (along with Job) originated the tradition of nihilism or pessimism that in the modern era has been carried forward by Arthur Schopenhauer (1851b), Leo Tolstoy (1882) and Albert Camus (1942a). In fact, many, if not most, of these philosophers’ arguments can be found in this text that predated them by at least 2,000 years.

This chapter critically discusses the most salient arguments pertaining to meaning to be found in Ecclesiastes, that is, the ones that take up the most space or are repeated in the text and those that have been particularly

influential in the Western tradition of philosophy. These are considerations about: the mortality of humankind, the undeserved allocations of benefits and burdens we receive, and the inability to control our fate. Focusing on these respects in which there is, for Koheleth, ‘no real value under the sun’ (2.11) means that this chapter sets aside other claims about meaning to be encountered in Ecclesiastes. For example, it does not address Koheleth’s claims that our lives are futile insofar as they are repetitive (1.4–1.9), forgotten by others (1.11, 9.5, 4.16) and exemplify what we today would call ‘epistemic injustice’ (9.14–9.16).

Fleeting, mortal lives

It is well known that it is difficult to find any reference to an immortal soul in the Hebrew Bible. A plain reading of it suggests that those who composed it believed that there is a God who transcends the earth and determines what happens on it, but not that any of us will reunite with God forever in a Heaven.

It is not merely that there is an apparent absence of reference to an immortal soul in the Hebrew Bible, but that there is, moreover, the presence of scepticism about it, particularly in Ecclesiastes. One major source of Koheleth’s conclusion that life is futile is his belief that no one will survive the inevitable death of their body. Several of the relevant passages are poignant:

I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them [from] the divine beings and to face the fact that they are beasts. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same lifebreath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing.

(3.18–3.19)

For the time of mischance comes to all. And a man cannot even know his time. As fishes are enmeshed in a fatal net, and as birds are trapped in a snare, so men are caught at the time of calamity, when it comes upon them without warning.

(9.11–9.12)

Even if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be. The only future is nothingness!

(11.7–11.8)

These and still other clear references to death (e.g. 3.20–3.21, 9.9–9.10, 12.6–12.7) indicate that their author is distraught at the prospect of a ‘return to dust’ (3.20) since it entails that all is futility.

This position has been extremely influential amongst Western philosophers of life's meaning, particularly since the medieval era. Those sympathetic to it have usually been led to hold some kind of supernaturalism, the view that a necessary condition for meaning in life is the existence of a spiritual realm, specifically one that includes an immortal soul (e.g. Tolstoy 1882; Morris 1992; Craig 1994). There is, however, divergence amongst supernaturalists between those who believe we have a soul, such that meaning is possible for us, and those who, like Kohleth, do not believe we have a soul, and so believe that meaning is impossible for us.

The usual way that philosophers these days criticize Kohleth's position is by suggesting that, even though all of us might well be mortal, some of our lives have more meaning in them than others. The lives of Albert Einstein or Nelson Mandela intuitively are more meaningful than, say, those that may have been spent 'cultivating one's prowess at long-distance spitting or collecting a big ball of string' (Wolf 2010: 104). Furthermore, there are those who not merely deny that immortality is necessary for a meaningful life, but also contend that immortality would be sufficient for a meaningless one. Perhaps an immortal life would unavoidably get boring (Williams 1973) or would have to repeat itself (Smuts 2011).

Undeserved goods and bads

A second, distinct rationale for the conclusion that all is futility, to be found in Ecclesiastes, appeals to the amount of injustice in our earthly lives. In particular, Kohleth often conceives of justice in terms of desert, with desert determined by our efforts, and he notes how often we do not get what we deserve for what we have done. He has in mind the claims that those who have chosen poorly receive benefits they do not deserve, and that those who have chosen well receive burdens they do not deserve.

One example involves the unfairly universal distribution of the burden of death. 'For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure ... That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all' (9.2–9.3; see also 2.14–2.16, 3.17).

However, there are myriad additional examples of undeserved conditions in the text. Those who are oppressed do not get comforted (4.1). One works hard to build up wealth, only to be dissatisfied upon obtaining it (4.8, 5.9), or to see it squandered (5.12–5.13), or to see someone else enjoy it and not oneself (6.2). A good or upright person suffers harm, while a wicked person flourishes (7.15, 8.14). A man 'who is pleasing to God' is not chosen by a woman, who instead selects a man who is displeasing to God (7.26). Scoundrels receive burial rites, whereas the righteous are forgotten and not honoured (8.10). In addition, Kohleth remarks,

I have observed under the sun that
 The race is not won by the swift
 Nor the battle by the valiant;
 Nor is bread won by the wise,
 Nor wealth by the intelligent,
 Nor favor by the learned.

(9.11)

And it does not stop there. For just two more examples: ‘He who digs a pit will fall into it; he who breaches a stone fence will be bitten by a snake’ (10.8).

Life does seem to be in vain or absurd insofar as the upright, the courageous, the wise, the educated and the hard working do not flourish, whereas the wicked, the cowardly, the foolish, the ignorant and the lazy do flourish – and, still worse, insofar as the latter receive the goods that the former had laboured to produce (2.12, 2.18–2.21)! Contemporary philosophers of meaning also continue to find this rationale compelling. As with the previous rationale, many drawn to this one appeal to a supernaturalist conception of what could make life meaningful. Since justice is clearly not done in this, earthly world, in order for anyone’s life to be meaningful, there must be another, spiritual world in which desert is meted out, presumably by God to souls that have outlived the death of our bodies (e.g. Camus 1942a; Davis 1987; Craig 1994; Quinn 2000).

Some critics of this reasoning contend that it is precisely the presence of injustice, at least in the form of undeserved harm, that offers our lives at least one major opportunity to obtain meaning. Returning to the example of Mandela, his life seems to have been meaningful because of the racial injustice he successfully helped to overcome. Peter Singer (1995) has argued that meaning in life comes particularly from acting from the moral point of view, and especially from doing what one can to reduce pain and dissatisfaction (one may add: of innocents); Singer’s own life has arguably been meaningful by virtue of what he has done to prevent the infliction of unnecessary suffering on animals. From these perspectives, undeserved harm does not render everyone’s life unavoidably futile, but rather can be what gives some lives a point.

Unpredictable predestination

By far the two most influential meaning-related views from Ecclesiastes are grounded on considerations of death and desert. However, there is a third recurrent theme from the text that is philosophically important and is still discussed, concerning the lack of control we have over our fate.

Koheleth routinely mentions two respects in which life is futile for us not being in charge of the course of our lives. For one, he contends that what befalls us is largely a function of God’s will. ‘Whatever happens, it was

designated long ago and it was known that it would happen; as for man, he cannot contend with what is stronger than he' (6.10; see also 7.13–7.14).

For another, even though God knows what will happen to us, we do not. Sometimes Koheleth makes this point in the context of death, pointing out how ridiculous it is not to know that one is just about to die (8.7, 9.12). Other times, however, the point is broader, that we cannot predict much of our future and are in that respect not in control of our lives. 'Just as you do not know how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of the pregnant woman, so you cannot foresee the actions of God, who causes all things to happen' (11.5; see also 3.22, 6.12, 8.17, 10.14).

These days, philosophers would frame these points in more secular terms, namely those concerning a complex, deterministic universe. At the level beyond subatomic particles, it appears that all events, including the choices we make, are necessitated by prior events. In addition, the events that influence our choices and their outcomes are too many and too complicated for us to be able to predict much. So, even if there is no God who is in charge of our lives, it still appears that we are not in charge of them. And that arguably renders them meaningless.

Although this pessimistic rationale has not been as influential as the others discussed above, nevertheless it, or something like it, was behind some of Immanuel Kant's inclination to maintain that we must believe that we have a kind of freedom that is not subject to natural laws. Kant (1790) thinks of life's meaning in terms of our 'highest good', the final end that human beings ought to pursue. For him, that is the state of affairs in which happiness is proportionate to virtue, with virtue requiring the ability to act on laws that we give ourselves and that are not laid down for us by nature, God or anything else.

While Kant would have been 'incompatibilist' about meaning being possible in a determined universe, in the twenty-first century those who are more 'compatibilist' have emerged. As the debate about free will has lately shifted away from narrowly moral considerations of blame to a broader array of evaluative and normative issues, some have contended that a meaningful life is compatible with a determined universe (Pereboom 2002–3; Arpaly 2006; Pisciotta 2013). No doubt they would also argue that determinism further facilitates a reasonable degree of prediction about how our lives will unfold, at least much more than would exist if indeterminism were rampant.

Conclusion: how one is to live

In closing, note that Koheleth does not suggest that mortality, injustice and a lack of control over one's fate means that there is literally nothing of value in life. He repeatedly says that it is worthwhile for a person to seek out pleasure, and worthwhile only to do so. '[T]he only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself' (8.15; see also 3.13, 3.22, 4.6, 5.17, 9.7–9.9, 11.9). What Koheleth is suggesting is that even if a life cannot have a point or

be significant, it could be pleasant. Happiness is one thing, and meaningfulness is another. Even if he is incorrect that all is futility, he is right to draw a distinction between futility and misery (cf. Metz 2013: 59–74).

Note

I All quotations are taken from Ecclesiastes, in *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Kohleleth c. 450?–180 BCE/1985: 1441–56).

