Yoel Hoffmann and the Meaning of Life

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Approaches to the meaning of life can be divided in various ways. One classical division is between optimists and pessimists, that is, between those who think life can be meaningful and those who think it cannot. Another common distinction is between theists and atheists, namely, between those who think that life cannot be meaningful if there is no God and afterlife and those who think that it can. A third familiar division is between subjectivists and objectivists, that is, between those who take meaningfulness to depend on our subjective feeling and those who take meaningfulness to be objective. And yet a fourth possible distinction is between perfectionists and non-perfectionists, which will be the focus of this paper.

Perfectionists about the meaning of life are those who hold that in order to be meaningful, lives must include some excellence or difficult and rare accomplishments. Lives that lack these characteristics are meaningless. Meaningful lives, then, have to rise above the ordinary. According to this view, only people such as Michelangelo, Beethoven, Newton, Gandhi, or Aristotle lead meaningful lives, whereas your life or mine is meaningless. Perfectionists about the meaning of life are a bit like the perfectionist student who feels that she has failed after receiving a mark of less than a 100 in an exam. For her, a mark of a 98, a 91, an 86, or a 72 is like a zero. She fails to notice the continuum between a hundred percent and a zero. Similarly, a perfectionist would hold that if she does not write like Shakespeare, she should not write at all, or that if she is not as wise and deep as Aristotle, she should stop doing philosophy altogether.

Non-perfectionists, on the other hand, see a continuum of degrees of meaningfulness, and hold that perhaps Rembrandt, Einstein, or George Washington led more meaningful lives than you or I, but that our lives, too, may well be meaningful. For non-perfectionists, meaning is found not only in perfection or excellence, but also in the simple things in life. While perfectionists tend to be pessimistic about the meaning of life, non-perfectionists tend towards optimism. Traditionally, perfectionism dominated discussions on the meaning of life. Thinkers such as Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, as well as modern writers on the topic such as Nozick, Hanfling, Bond, and Brogaard and Smith, have endorsed perfectionism.[1] But there are also important and interesting non-perfectionist positions, such as those advanced by Emerson, Huxley, Taylor, Wolf,

Baier, and Trisel,[2] and today non-perfectionism is becoming more dominant.

We may identify perfectionism and non-perfectionism about the meaning of life not only in philosophy. For example, in Western painting we can see the shift from representing almost exclusively great religious, mythical, and historical events and figures—mostly gods, saints and heroes—typical of medieval and renaissance art, to depicting ordinary people, situations, and everyday objects, more typical of 17th century Dutch art and of Impressionist paintings. And in prose, too, we can identify some works that have a non-perfectionist message. For example, in Voltaire's Candide, we read how Candide, Pangloss and their friends, after taking part in many dramatic escapades, settle for a simple life of work in the garden. Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, in the eponymous novel, after having tried the options of asceticism and meditation in the forest, and then of carnal pleasures and material success in the city, finally finds his calling by working as a simple ferryman who helps people cross the river. Hemingway's short story *Big Two-Hearted River* tells us how Nick Adams, after returning from the horrors and senselessness of World War I, and perhaps suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, finds some solace in fishing. Tolstoy's Levin in *Ana Karenina* and Pierre in *War and Peace* find meaning in life, towards the end of these novels, not in the exceptional and great but rather in simple family life. Tolstoy emphasizes that both Levin and Pierre love their wives dearly and contentedly, but that their love is not the romantic, or romanticized, love in which lovers idealize and idolize each other.

In this paper I focus on one of Yoel Hoffmann's books, *The Heart is Katmandu*, and argue that it, too, is part of the non-perfectionist streak as regards meaning in life in philosophy, culture and prose.[3] I suggest that this book, too, proposes that value and meaning is found not only in the exceptional and excellent, but also in the quotidian and common, where we rarely look for meaning. Many of us are like a person who has several bank accounts, but has forgotten about the particular account that contains the majority of his funds. This person believes he is poor because he does not remember that he has much more than meets the insensitive eye.

The Heart is Katmandu is composed of what might be called prose poems, 237 in number, some of which are difficult to decipher. For lack of a better term, and following Rachel Albeck-Gidron's term, I will refer to these prose poems as "fragments."[4] Many of these fragments describe the lives and developing love between the two protagonists, Yehoahim and Batya, who live in Haifa, Israel. It is sometimes unclear whether the fragments describe the thoughts of the author or of the protagonists, although in some cases the author mentions that a particular thought should be attributed to Yehoahim or to Batya.

The book has much to do with issues traditionally taken to relate to the meaninglessness of life. The lives of Yehoahim and Batya are not easy, and include events that sometimes lead people to wonder whether their lives are meaningful or even to contemplate suicide. Yehoahim is 43 years old. His wife left him, and he seems quite lonely. The book offers no descriptions of his interactions with friends or loved ones, except for Batya. Nor do we read of any job or work in which he is engaged, or of any purpose or project that preoccupies him. He seems very unhappy, and from time to time he suffers from stretches of desolation. For example, in fragment 16 we read:

> Suddenly, with no reason, his heart breaks. The red heart, which has seen all sorts of things—streets, candles burning in the night, countless feet—the heart gives way out of loneliness and dread. There is no longer anything to hold on to (Yehoahim thinks) and he weeps like a jackal, or an owl, or a legendary river that sweeps along, with neither purpose nor end.[5]

We also read that occasionally Yehoahim goes through sudden bouts of pain, sometimes crying, as in fragment 98:

> These (Yehoahim thinks) are the legs I will lead to the Bank Café, a grasshopper like me, vay, and he cries over the sink, into the stainless steel. Something ascends through this internal fire and burns toward the ceiling: the life that is so dreadfully only for once.

Some of his dreams, or perhaps hallucinations, are frightening. In fragment 19 we read of a scene reminiscent of a Hieronymus Bosch painting in which many images seem to arise from Yehoahim's mouth. Some of them, such as turquoise birds hidden in the reeds, are beautiful. But as they progress they become less pleasant, and eventually, as if in a nightmare, "extremely dark, limbless creatures, composed of the bodies of memories" emerge.

Likewise, as is typical of people concerned with the meaning of life, Yehoahim is preoccupied with death. He considers, not theoretically but rather personally, both his own death and the death of those close to him. We already saw in fragment 98 how Yehoahim is in pain and cries when realizing that we live only once. But death also appears in many other places in the book. In fragment 17, for example, we read

> Now he is thinking: I had a dog and the dog died. I had a woman and the woman left. I have seen cadavers. The empty shell of a man, and I have heard the terrible noise that is beneath the surface of the world. He lies in bed and counts his limbs: Ten. Two. One. In a little while (he thinks) the heart will go still.

Likewise, in fragment 186 Yehoahim muses to himself that he is alive, but could have been dead, and fragment 221 says that "Death stands in the air, quite naturally, in the way one takes one's place at the table for lunch."

Related to Yehoahim's intense unhappiness and his interest in death is his suicidal tendency. Fragment 89 describes how "All of a sudden, as though for no reason, he picks up a knife and cuts into the flesh of his arm. Blood comes out of the cut skin and drips into the sink." Yehoahim's suicidal tendency is apparent also in fragment 136, in which we are told "Yehoahim requires extraordinary strength not to die." Since there is no reference in the text to any terminal sickness, it seems that Yehoahim has an urge to die, or to kill himself, and in order to resist this urge he must collect all his strength.

Up to now I have focused on Yehoahim. But Batya, too, does not have an easy life, and some of what we hear of her also relates to the meaninglessness of life, even if not as intensely as with Yehoahim. She too does not have a family, although in her case it is she who has left her partner, Robert. She is a single mother to a baby with Down syndrome. As with Yehoahim, there is no mention of friends or of a job. And like Yehoahim, she too is subject, even if less frequently, to difficult moods that are not caused by any specific unpleasant event. Fragment 184 narrates how Batya thinks to herself that she is going toward love almost out of desperation. In fragment 182 tears just stream down Batya's face after an inner voice tells her to cry, for no reason, while she is walking back home from the medical center. Admittedly, crying is not always bad. Sometimes people cry from happiness. But the fragment tells us that tears stream down Batya's cheeks like worn plaster crumbling and falling from the walls of old houses. This analogy does not bring to mind anything good or happy but, rather, connotes decomposition and decay. The text continues with Batya thinking that there is no end or purpose to things,[6] but that nevertheless she is walking under the sun. The expression "under the sun" seems to allude to Ecclesiastes, the biblical text that raises questions relating to the meaning of life. The expression "under the sun" appears often in Ecclesiastes—thirty times—and nowhere else in the Old Testament,[7] and in almost all thirty cases in verses that suggest that life is meaningless. There are also more allusions to the meaning of life in *The Heart is Katmandu*, such as the mention of Nietzsche's theme of the death of God (fragment 135), or the description of Batya's baby crying as if from *Weltschmerz* (fragment 136).

Up to now I have tried to establish that the meaning, or perhaps meaninglessness, of life is one of the themes of *The Heart is Katmandu*. I should now like to suggest that this book, too, could be typified as belonging to the non-perfectionist tradition as regards the meaning of life. The book avers

that there is much value also in the small, ordinary things in life. Its heroes, or rather anti-heroes, find some relief and consolation in the simple and mundane rather than in the transcendent, absolute, or ideal. The trivial, the book suggests, is often not trivial at all.

Take, for example, the text's use of "Halleluiah," originally a religious term, most densely used in Psalms 111-117 and 145-150 in the Old Testament as a way to praise God (which is the term's literal meaning in Hebrew) or to thank God for helping the righteous and performing great acts of salvation. However, although fragment 12 opens with "Hallelujah," punctuated with an exclamation mark, no great miracle, mystical union, or wondrous achievement follows the interjection. Following this "Hallelujah!" the text only indicates:

> The sun finally sets and, as though at a concert, an invisible conductor turns on the streetlights. Variatzia the waitress gathers the coffee pots and wipes off the surface of the table with a damp cloth. Maybe because of the cloth, or the motion of her hand, or her fingernails, which are red, Yehoahim is suddenly filled with joy.

In another passage, from the latter part of fragment 220, "Hallelujah" is also employed in a non-perfectionist way: "Hallelujah! Thanks for all the graces, like for instance the skin that envelops us or the fingernails, and also for the shadow that the kettle casts and for the lamp within which the filament burns like, in the Bible, that bush." The bush is the biblical *sneh* that Moses saw burning without being consumed (Exodus 3, 1-6), and from which God talked to Moses and appointed him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The narrative of the burning bush recounts an extremely dramatic and important religious event in the Old Testament. But the book compares this miraculous, mystical event with the common modern light bulb whose filament is illuminated without withering away. By employing this unlikely analogy, the author suggests that small, common things can be as meaningful as dramatic, holy events, if we are ready to open up and experience them as such.

The notion that if we take the trouble to be sensitive enough we can find great value in the common and mundane also appears in fragment 15, where the text focuses closely on a relatively ordinary item, a philodendron plant in a pot, calling us to de-trivialize it: "In the kitchen there stands a clay pot, and in it—a philodendron plant. No one knows its first name, but it has a clear articulation: Leaf. Leaf. Leaf. Leaf. And it continues today what it started yesterday." De-trivialization is achieved here not only through focus and sensitivity, but also through naming. The same is true of fragment 47, which suggests that we give a name to each step we walk. Similarly, in fragment 100 Hoffmann writes: "The unbelievable: He walks step after step to the Bank Café, in an infinite space, on the external crust of a planet." Thus, a very common event, walking, is described

in a way that makes it special, new, and even exciting. Likewise, in fragment 160 Yehoahim understands that the act of loving or opening up to another is itself a miracle, and in fragment 165 the baby with Down syndrome, Yonatan, laughs because he learns the wonder, Hoffmann writes, of having ten fingers. The non-perfectionist sentiment in the book is again expressed in the following passage from fragment 204: "Then the happiness spreads. She acknowledges the quotidian when making a single act: attaching socks to a line or rinsing a teaspoon."

A little more than half-way through the book, where a meeting between Yehoahim and Batya is described, we learn about Batya's non-perfectionism, which Yehoahim does not yet grasp:

> Batya turns on the radio and they hear the news: the laundry in such and such a place has dried faster than expected. There is an apple that is eaten by worms. Dust covers the kitchenware and someone is crossing the street. In the place where she is, on the other side of the world (Yehoahim thinks), the sun certainly rolls over twice, and he touches Batya's back like wind on soil. This, then, is happiness, he thinks. And because of that his heart breaks like the sides of the mountain when the lava rises" (fragments 143-144).

Usually, the news relates what could be considered great or important events, such as earthquakes, wars, or exceptional achievements. But for Batya the news has to do with what she and the author take to be *really* important, that is, the simple, mundane events that form the foundation of a life, such as the laundry drying on the line, dust covering the pans in the kitchen, or worms in an apple. Yehoahim understands that this is happiness, and his heart so to say breaks, because he knows that he cannot yet sense things as Batya does. But although he does not yet sense this type of happiness, Yehoahim does understand, thanks to his relationship with Batya, what this happiness is and where to look for it. And this, too, is important progress. As the book advances, so does Yehoahim, who learns to actually see the good, important and valuable in simple, everyday life. Thus in fragment 229 Yehoahim, like Yonatan the baby in fragment 165, realizes that "The number of my and her fingers and toes (Yehoahim thinks) is forty together, and he is filled with wonder." Note that earlier, in fragment 3, after Yehoahim and Batya meet for the first time, Yehoahim also observes that his and Batya's toes add to twenty, but at that early point he notes it as a trivial detail, without being filled with wonder.

Interestingly, the author briefly mentions, but does *not* develop, a sphere in which Yehoahim and Batya could have found meaning, namely literature. Hoffmann hints that both Yehoahim and Batya know something about literature. In fragments 185 and 186 we read that Yehoahim dreams the words "the mountain falls on me" and then thinks to himself that he could have been dead but is, in fact,

alive. This suggest that Yehoahim is familiar with S.Y. Agnon's short story *Fernheim*, in which we hear about a certain Karl Nice, who was thought to be dead because , as Agnon tells us, a mountain fell on him, a somewhat odd way to describe what was probably an avalanche or a landslide. Karl Nice afterwards turns out to be alive. Likewise, two fragments earlier, in fragment 183, we learn that Batya is reminded, for a reason that she herself does not understand, of the words *the streets of the river*, which is the name of Uri Zvi Greenberg's 1951 book of poems whose theme is the Holocaust. The explanation appears immediately afterwards, when we are told that when Batya sees the thin arms of the nurse Pirhia "she looks off in another direction." The thinness of the hands, which is so unpleasant for Batya that she has to turn her eyes away, must have reminded Batya, unawares, of pictures of starved inmates in concentration camps, and thus brought to mind, by association, the name of Greenberg's book, although Batya herself does not understand this relation of associations. Both Yehoahim and Batya, then, seem to be more familiar with modern Hebrew literature than the typical Israeli, and they may have been capable of finding meaning in literature, as some people indeed do. But this path to meaning is only mentioned, and then not pursued in the book, perhaps because it would have portrayed Batya and Yehoahim as finding meaning in something more exalted and special than the ordinary and mundane. Batya and Yehoahim find their happiness in the ordinary things in life.

Admittedly, at the end of the book non-perfectionism is mixed with perfectionism, as the end describes also extraordinary, miraculous events, such as in fragment 237: "It's hard to believe, but suddenly the sun is shining. At half past 9 in the evening it's shining on the ceiling … Also the caption 'This is a family' passes across the ceiling as if a light plane is carrying it … ." But there is also much that is non-perfectionist at the end. While the caption "This is a family" carries the connotation of the Christian Holy Family, the light plane that carries this caption is typical of commercial advertisements for soft drinks and the like. Similarly, we read in fragment 230 that when Batya invites Yehoahim to lie down beside her "it's hard to describe the simplicity of the act." Likewise, the ordinary objects in the room are conceived differently, freshly: "Within the room, everything is created anew: the twin bed. The dresser, etc. like big icebergs rising up out of the water. The names too are created…" (fragment 237). The non-perfectionist approach also appears in the way that this love story diverges from the genre of romantic fiction. Unlike most romantic stories, this one lacks an extraordinary event. There are neither great conflicts nor great achievements. There is hardly a plot. And although we learn that our anti-hero and anti-heroine eventually find a degree of happiness and that their condition greatly improves, what they achieve differs from what lovers achieve in generic love stories. Here, the "happy ending" is neither very

happy nor really an end. True, the book concludes when Yehoahim and Batya are happily together. However, the lovers do not meet in a meadow full of flowers and birds or at a lake on top of a mountain with a beautiful sunset in the background. Rather, they are in a much more conflicted, tense condition. Batya screams, perhaps climaxing sexually, and Yehoahim almost faints, but at the same time Robert, Batya's ex-husband, keeps knocking on the door and shouting that he wants it opened, Batya tells Yehoahim not to open it, Yonatan the baby cries, and Hoffmann mentions Edvard Munch's unsettling painting *The Scream* (fragments 233-235). All of these bring tension into what is often described, at the end of romantic novels, as a perfect, harmonious event. In generic love stories there is a radical difference between the bitter, troubled life before the happy ending and the sweet, trouble-free life expected to follow the happy end. But Yehoahim and Batya, it seems, did not completely overcome all their difficulties. The only difference is that at the end of the book they are in a better position to *cope* with the difficulties they must face. The reader is also left with the impression that both protagonists are likely to face many more ups and downs in their lives, even romantically. But, nonetheless, we feel happy for them, and congratulate them for finding something truly good and valuable in the regular, un-assuming, non-excellent aspects of life, aspects in which one can find a lot of joy if one is open to the possibility. And perhaps we may even learn something for our own lives from Batya, from Yehoahim, and from Yoel Hoffmann here.

Notes

1 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin M. Curley, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 617; Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 34, 38; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 458, 506; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen, 1966), 566; Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 17–22; Oswald Hanfling, *The Quest for Meaning* (New York: Blackwell, 1988), 24; Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 582; E. J. Bond, *Reason and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 159–161; Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, "On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life," *Philosophical Papers* 34, no. 3 (2005), 446.

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 351; Aldous Huxley, "Swift," in *Do What You Will* (London: Watts, 1936), 79–80; Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E. D. Klemke, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174–175; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two

Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14, no. 1 (1997), 224; Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in Klemke, *Meaning of Life*, 126–129; Brooke Alan Trisel, "Futility and the Meaning of Life Debate," *Sorites* 14 (2002), 75–80.

3 Yoel Hoffmann, *The Heart is Katmandu*, translated by Peter Cole (New York: New Directions, 2001). All citations are from this translation, sometimes slightly modified.

4 Rachel Albeck-Gidron, "Everything Has a Name and the Name Itself Has a Name: Onomatopoeia as a Wish in the Novel *The Heart is Katmandu* by Yoel Hoffmann" (in Hebrew), *Criticism and Interpretation* 38 (2005): 141-160.

5 Unlike Cole, I translated here the Hebrew אימה as *dread* rather than as *fear*, as the latter is usually understood to be object specific, while Yehoahim's emotional reaction seems to be general.

6 This echoes Yehoahim's sentiment in fragment 16. In both cases Hoffmann employs the Hebrew word Tichla תכלה.

7 Ecclesiastes I 3,5,9,14, II 11,17, 18, 19, 20, 22, III 16, IV 1, 3, 7, 15, V 12, 17, VI 1, 5, 11, VIII 9, 15, 17, IX 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, X 5.