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"WHAT IS GOOD":

QOHELETH AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF VALUE

JESSE M. PETERSON

SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
DURHAM UNIVERSITY
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2020

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation aims at a comprehensive understanding of Qoheleth's system of values, his thought as to what is good and bad in the human experience and how these values relate. It utilizes both standard exegetical methods as well as certain strands of contemporary philosophy—including value theory, theory of well-being, meaning of life philosophy, philosophy of death, and philosophy of pleasure—in order to clarify Qoheleth's concepts and implicit philosophical assumptions. The work proceeds by uncovering and reconstructing the layers of Qoheleth's value-centered philosophical vision with each consecutive chapter, at each step articulating his views in the terms of contemporary philosophy, as well as comparing Qoheleth's constructive philosophy to the views of certain contemporary philosophers. My central thesis is that, among the variety of Qoheleth's themes, his message is unified by the concept of value and he expresses a distinct, coherent vision as to where value is found—and not found—in human lives.

Part I one of the work (Chapters 2 through 4) concerns the negative side of Qoheleth's values by coming to grips with Qoheleth's conception and denial of "meaning" in human life. Chapter 2 articulates this notion of meaning, Chapter 3 explores the hindrance it finds in death, and Chapter 4 examines Qoheleth's concept of time's cyclicality as a further obstacle to meaning. Part II of the dissertation (Chapters 5 and 6) transitions to the more positive side of Qoheleth's values, his understanding of "what is good" in human life despite the absence of meaning. The question of the value of existence as such is taken up, as are Qoheleth's understandings of well-being and enjoyment. The conclusions about the sage's theme of enjoyment lead to a wider conclusion that, while he denies a certain type of human value in his resistance to the prospect of attaining meaning, Qoheleth does nonetheless subscribe to the possibility of genuine value in the human project.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Primary Sources and Translations

AEL	*Ancient Egyptian Literature.* Edited by Miriam Lichtheim. 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971–1980
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament.* Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
BWL	*Babylonian Wisdom Literature.* Edited by Wilfred G. Lambert. Oxford: Clarendon, 1960
CEB	Common English Bible
CJB	Complete Jewish Bible
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
Ep. Men.	Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*
ESV	English Standard Version
GNT	Good News Translation
HB	Hebrew Bible
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
Hipp.	Euripides, *Hippolytus*
ISV	International Standard Version
JPS	Jewish Publication Society of America Version
KJV	King James Bible
Lucr.	Lucretius, *De rerum natura*
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
Nic. Eth.	Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
Oed. Col.	Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*
OTP	*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.* Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–85
PE	Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*
Tro.	Euripedes, *The Trojan Women*

Secondary Sources

ABR	*Australian Biblical Review*
AJBI	*Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute*
AJP	*American Journal of Philology*
ANES	*Ancient Near Eastern Studies*

AO	*Antiguo Oriente*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
Bible Crit. Theory	*The Bible and Critical Theory*
Beit Mikra	*Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World*
BeO	*Bibbia e Oriente*
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BK	*Bibel und Kirche*
BNP	*Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World.* Edited by Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, and Christine F. Salazar. 22 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2002–2011
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BT	*The Bible Translator*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZ	*Biblische Zeitschrift*
CAD	*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.* Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CPUB	*Centro Pro Unione Bulletin*
CSR	*Christian Scholar's Review*
CTM	*Concordia Theological Monthly*
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
DCH	*The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew.* Edited by David J. A. Clines. 8 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic / Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2011
EQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
EuntDoc	*Euntes Docete*
FS	*Franciscan Studies*
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar.* Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910
HAR	*Hebrew Annual Review*
HTS	*HTS Teologiese Studies*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
IBHS	*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax.* Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990
J. Theol. Stud.	*The Journal of Theological Studies*
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JANES	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
J-M	*A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew.* Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka. 2 vols. Subsidia Biblica 14/1–2. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JS	*Jewish Studies*
JSem	*Journal for Semitics*

JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSQ	*Jewish Studies Quarterly*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LS	*Louvain Studies*
NEA	*Near Eastern Archeology*
OEBE	*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics.* Edited by Robert L. Brawley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015
OTE	*Old Testament Essays*
PIBA	*Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*
PJT	*Pharos Journal of Theology*
RelS	*Religious Studies*
RTP	*Revue de théologie et de philosophie*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
TBT	*The Bible Today*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The book of Qoheleth has elicited a variety of scholarly proposals concerning what theme, if any, binds the book together. Just what is the book finally *about?* Fox proposes that the book is about *meaning.*[1] Burkes and Adams suggest *death*.[2] Bundvad posits *time.*[3] Schellenberg nominates *knowledge.*[4] De Jong advocates *labor*.[5] Whybray claims it is *joy*, and likewise Gordis and Lee the *enjoyment of life*.[6] Of course, plenty of scholars offer the theme of *hebel,* or more likely a particular interpretation of it such as life's absurd, meaningless, or transient nature.[7] My own proposal is that the book's single uniting concept, worked out in a variety of ways, is that of *value*. To be clear, I do not mean value as a purely abstract, impersonal category, but value *for human beings,* value as it relates to the lives of individuals being better or worse off. Each one of the aforementioned

[1] Michael V. Fox, "The Inner Structure of Qohelet's Thought," 225–38 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 225; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 160.

[2] Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 1–2, 47–48; Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 121, 133.

[3] Mette Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[4] Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem: Qohelet und die Alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2002), 35.

[5] Stephan de Jong, "A Book on Labour: The Structuring Principles and the Main Theme of the Book of Qohelet," *JSOT* 54 (1992): 107–16.

[6] R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87–98; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 124; Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 34–35.

[7] James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 23; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 21, 32–34; Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), respectively.

themes—meaning, death, time, work, joy, knowledge—finds its place in Qoheleth's system of thought, but subsumed under his concept of value. In other words, Qoheleth's primary question with respect to each of these themes is whether its presence (or absence, in some cases) is good or bad for human beings, and why. I take as central Qoheleth's stated query to "see *what is good* for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life" (2:3; cf. 6:12).

That Qoheleth should be so concerned with value in the lives of human beings is one of the many reasons to read the book through a philosophical lens. Indeed, Ecclesiastes has often been regarded as the most philosophical book in the Bible, both by scholars and lay readers alike.[8] The protagonist's probing doubts, dark ruminations, self-reflexive dialogues, and unflinching observations have long invited a readership of the philosophically-inclined and have garnered for the book a certain literary fame. It is not surprising, then, that a wide spectrum of philosophical perspectives have been brought into dialogue with the book. This dissertation, for better or worse, adds another. Before expanding on my own value-oriented approach, however, it will be helpful to provide some background. In this first section I will summarize some of the main ways in which five broad strands or realms of philosophy have been paired with Qoheleth. I cannot here be exhaustive, but I will discuss several representative works for each category. My aim in this is primarily to summarize what has been done, but I will conclude the section with some general critical remarks. In the remainder of this chapter I will describe both my own methodology and the overall aim for this dissertation before concluding with two introductory matters regarding the book of Qoheleth—date and genre.

I. Philosophical Approaches to Qoheleth

A. Qoheleth and Ancient Greek Philosophy

By far the most common pairing between Qoheleth and philosophy has consisted of comparisons between Qoheleth and one or more representatives of Greek philosophy (or at times, Greek literature more broadly conceived). This has often been discussed alongside the issue of apparent Graecisms in Qoheleth. The major question grappled with here concerns whether Qoheleth was in

[8] Jennifer L. Koosed, *(Per)mutations of Qohelet: Reading the Body in the Book* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 88: "It is almost a truism that Qohelet is the most philosophical book of the biblical corpus"; Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Sean McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 14: "The book of Qoheleth is the most transparent place, within the Bible, where Israel meets with Greek philosophy" [emphasis omitted]. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 196, represents a common sentiment: "What we have before us here is primarily a philosophical work rather than a book of religion."

fact influenced by the philosophical Greeks, and if so, which particular school of thought. Most commonly, links are suggested with the Epicureans and the Stoics.

1. Epicurean Influence

Charles Whitley is one of the strongest proponents of the notion that Qoheleth owes much of his philosophy to Epicurus, though Whitley also allows for other Greek influences such as the Stoics and Hesiod.[9] He sees a parallel between Epicurus' conception of a deity that "knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other" and Qoheleth's notion that "God is remote, self-sufficient and reluctant to communicate with man."[10] Further, says Whitley, Qoheleth's belief that death amounts to "complete extinction" seems to be influenced by Epicurus.[11] Whitley also claims that Qoheleth's "reference to the breaking of the bowl and the pitcher [at 12:6] is an allusion to the Epicurean idea that at death the body is shattered and the soul released from it."[12] Not surprisingly, Whitley also finds kinship between the two writers' "concept of hedonism," reflected in the passages that commend the enjoyment of life.[13]

This last point is the one most commonly stressed where scholars have sought a link between Epicurus and Qoheleth, and the multiple-author views prominent in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ecclesiastes scholarship often took *one* of the book's hands to represent an Epicurean stance. Haupt, for instance, who holds that "the genuine portions of Ecclesiastes are Sadducean and Epicurean," notes the shared themes of "companionship (4:9) and cheerfulness (9:7) but also contentment (6:9) and moderation in sensual pleasures."[14] Siegfried, too, suggests that "Der epikuräische Glossator…hält dafür, dass essen und trinken in der That ein sehr reelles Vergnügen sei, in dem eine volle Entschädigung für alles Mühen des Menschen liege (5:17; 8:15), und er fordert den Leser auf, sich nach Möglichkeit diese und andere derartige sinnliche Freuden zu bereiten."[15]

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[9] Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 165–75.
[10] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 166.
[11] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 167.
[12] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 168.
[13] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 169–70.
[14] Paul Haupt, "Ecclesiastes," *AJP* 26.2 (1905): 125–71, at 125, 130; cf. also Paul Haupt, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1905).
[15] D.C. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied Übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), 10. See also David Russell Scott, *Pessimism and Love in Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1915), 125–35.

2. Stoic Influence

On the other hand, several scholars have proposed that the book is largely influenced by Stoic sources. Gammie finds several close connections between Qoheleth and Stoic thought, while still allowing for important differences.[16] For instance, Qoheleth and the Stoics hold similar views on divine causation. Both see God as a highly determining force (though the Stoics might variously label this force λόγος, πνεῦμα, or φύσις), yet both do still allow for a genuine human response.[17] Concerning the question of influence, Gammie believes it is "probable" that Qoheleth was "not unfamiliar with the main tenets of Stoicism as taught by Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus and Sphaerus," through either direct or indirect sources.[18] Gammie concludes that

> the Stoics, along with other Hellenistic philosophies, had an impact on the ancient Israelite sage, not only in specific teachings of divine causation, the cyclical nature of events, the relative value of education/wisdom, etc., but also in form of argumentation and, because of its advanced philosophy of language, possibly also in making Qoheleth more sensitive to the range of connotations in his use of terms such as *hebel.*[19]

Dominic Rudman proposes that although Qoheleth himself is not a Stoic per se, nevertheless some Stoic ideas are reflected in his work.[20] First, Rudman outlines one of the essential problems for the Stoics—the relationship between divine determinism and human evil—and believes that the answer to the problem proposed by the Stoic writer Cleanthes shares much in common with Qoheleth. For Rudman, while both writers believe in divine determination, they also share the desire for an "out-clause," so that God is not directly responsible for human evil. Rudman believes that Qoheleth provides such an exemption through his use of the Hebrew root שלט ("to have power over"). Following C. L. Seow's work on שלט in Aramaic texts, Rudman takes the word in a more legal technical sense—"to delegate authority / proprietorship"—and suggests that Qoheleth uses the word to delineate times when God gives some individual "the ability to act on his own authority."[21] Another specific link Rudman draws is between the Stoic term λόγος and Qoheleth's term חֶשְׁבּוֹן. Rudman suggests that "Qoheleth has borrowed the concept of the λόγος as the governing mechanism for existence" and uses it, just as the Stoics use λόγος,

[16] John G. Gammie, "Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth," *HAR* 9 (1985): 169–87.
[17] Gammie, "Stoicism," 175.
[18] Gammie, "Stoicism," 184.
[19] Gammie, "Stoicism," 185.
[20] Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 199.
[21] Rudman, *Determinism*, 159.

to convey both the "rationale" (or "account") of the universe and the "rationality" (or "reason," "thinking") employed by an individual wanting to make sense of things.[22]

Like others, Joseph Blenkinsopp has found Stoic influence in the book through the "Catalogue of Times" poem in 3:2–8, but Blenkinsopp's thesis is unique.[23] In keeping with the understanding of the poem which says there is a "proper time" for every activity, he infers that the poem's activities must be chosen. This normally leads to a problem when considering the first line of the poem, that there is a "time to be born [or give birth] and a time to die."[24] Blenkinsopp proposes that this last phrase can be made sense of in light of the Stoic teaching that suicide may be ethically permissible, even laudable, if chosen at the right time.[25]

3. Influence of Broader Greek "Spirit" or "Atmosphere"

Other scholars do believe the book reflects Greek influence but are hesitant to draw much of it from any one particular Greek source. Instead, these scholars prefer to maintain a broader connection, either by not emphasizing particular literary parallels at all and assuming Qoheleth gleaned his ideas from the general Hellenistic "atmosphere," or by highlighting a combination of literary parallels from sources such as playwrights, poets, and tomb inscriptions. Martin Hengel, in a section devoted to Qoheleth in his important 1974 work, *Judaism and Hellenism,* suggests that Qoheleth picked up ideas "presumably communicated by Ptolemaic officials, merchants and soldiers, who were not lacking even in Jerusalem. In this way Koheleth encountered not the school opinions of the philosophers, but the popular views of the Greek 'bourgeoisie'."[26] Rainer Braun, a doctoral student of Hengel's, provided one of the most thorough treatments of Qoheleth's relationship to ancient Greek philosophy, and his conclusions betray the influence of his teacher. In brief, he does posit Greek influence on Qoheleth, but rather than locating it in one or two main

[22] Rudman, *Determinism*, 193.

[23] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15: Another Interpretation," *JSOT* 20 (1995): 55–64.

[24] "If *lāledet* is understood literally, *lāmût* is left high and dry as the only one of the 28 actions or events not under human control" (Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 57).

[25] Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 57–58. On Qoheleth and the Stoics see also Otto Kaiser, "Determination und Freiheit beim Kohelet/Prediger Salomo und in der Frühen Stoa," 106–25 in *Gottes und der Menschen Weisheit: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998). It should also be noted that several scholars, while holding to a unity of authorship of the book (or at least the body of the text, 1:3–12:7) see both Epicurean and Stoic influence at work, e.g. Thomas Tyler, *Ecclesiastes: A Contribution to Its Interpretation* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874); E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881).

[26] Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 1:125.

philosophies he finds it dispersed across a legion of texts united under the category *Popularphilosophie*.[27]

Lohfink follows a similar approach when he posits that the book "can only be understood as an attempt to profit as much as possible from the Greek understanding of the world…" and "its inspiration is clearly drawn from Greek education and culture," a rather broad umbrella into which he includes Homer, dramatists such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, classic philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and also the "popular philosophers"—the Cynics, Cyrenaics, Skeptics, Epicureans, and Stoics.[28]

4. Against Greek Philosophical Influence

Not all Qoheleth scholars have been convinced by the foregoing proposals. A vocal minority has maintained that the book leaves no traces of direct Greek influence. For present purposes we need not delve into the specific counter-arguments levelled against some of the points above. But the general thrust from these scholars is that there is no reason to think Qoheleth's ideas betray Greek influence since the ancient Near Eastern thought-world was sufficient to have produced them. Renan asserts, "It has often been attempted to prove that the philosophy of our author bore traces of the influence of the Greek philosophy. Nothing could be more wide of the mark. Everything in the book is absolutely explained by logical development of the Jewish thought."[29] Barton concurs, "Everything in Qoheleth can be accounted for as a development of Semitic thought."[30] Scott agrees as well, "Our author's deepest roots…are in the skeptical, pessimistic side of Egyptian and Mesopotamian Wisdom on the one hand, and, on the other, in certain basic tenets of Hebrew thought."[31]

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[27] Rainer Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 170: "Es ist also zu folgern, daß Kohelet mit der griechischen Reflexion seiner Zeit vertraut war, ja, mehr noch, ihr Denken und ihre Lehren übernahm und in seiner Lehrschrift hebräisch formulierte." Braun provides a list of parallels between Qoheleth and Greek popular philosophy on pp. 146–49.

[28] Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 6. Cf. also Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *"Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück" (Koh 2,24): Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie* (vol. 2; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1994).

[29] Ernest Renan, *Cohelet, or, The Preacher* (London: Mathieson & Company, 1890), 36.

[30] George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Scribner, 1908), 34.

[31] Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 198. For similar conclusions see also A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 39–55; Johannes Pedersen, *Scepticisme Israélite* (Paris: Faculté de Théologie protestante de l'Université de Strasbourg, 1931), 22–28; Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1964), 45–57; C. C. Forman, "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," *JSS* 3 (1958): 336–43; Jonathan Barnes, "L'Ecclésiaste et le scepticisme Grec," *RTP* 131 (1999): 103–14.

I have summarized a representative sampling of the work that relates Qoheleth to ancient Greek philosophy since this has been the most common way scholars have coupled philosophy with the book. That said, it is not part of the present thesis to stake claims on any of these questions. In Chapter 3 I do generate a philosophical comparison between Qoheleth and Epicurus, but at no point do I address the issue of influence. For the sake of clarity I have avoided the issue, since it is simply not the aim of this project.

B. Qoheleth and Philosophies of Pessimism and Nihilism

For as often as Qoheleth has been labeled a "pessimist" or even a "nihilist," it is surprising that there are not more studies linking Qoheleth to the modern philosophical discussions on those matters. The topic has still mainly been broached with respect to the ancient Greeks.[32] Nevertheless, at least a few such studies may be found in the literature that do consciously probe Qoheleth's status as a pessimist or nihilist by relating him to more modern philosophical strands in which those terms are at home. Charles Wright's 1883 commentary features a lengthy chapter titled "The Pessimism of the Book of Koheleth and That of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann."[33] Wright concludes that despite some appearance of pessimism in Koheleth's work, his philosophy is differentiated from the modern pessimists by his belief in a personal God, divine judgment, life beyond the grave, and the "belief in the reality of sin which pervades his entire book."[34] In a similar vein, William Barthauer's 1900 dissertation (in philosophy) brings Qoheleth into dialogue with four modern philosophers—Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer, and von Hartmann.[35] The discussion revolves around the value of existence, whether it is construed optimistically (the world's value is positive) or pessimistically (the world's value is negative). Barthauer spends most of the work explicating the views of these philosophers, and while he does make some remarks comparing their views to those of Qoheleth, there is very little exegetical engagement with Qoheleth or Qoheleth scholarship. Moreover, the work is centered in a Christian theological perspective: "Da die Religion Koheleths, welche ihn vor optimistischer und pessimistischer Einseitigkeit in ihrer

[32] See, e.g., Pedersen, *Scepticisme Israélite*, 22–28.

[33] Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1883), 141–84.

[34] Wright, *Koheleth*, 164.

[35] Wilhelm Barthauer, "Optimismus und Pessimismus im Buche Koheleth," Inaugural dissertation, Halle an der Saale: hohen philosophischen Fakultät, Universität Halle, 1900.

Beantwortung bewahrte, nur eine Vorstufe der wahren, von Christus geoffenbarten ist, so muss diese Frage auf dem christlichen Standpunkt von neuem erörtert warden."[36]

Seizo Sekine's lengthy essay, "Qoheleth as a Nihilist," provides one of the more thorough interactions in the literature between Qoheleth and a modern philosopher. Sekine takes Qoheleth to be a nihilist in the sense with which Friedrich Nietzsche impregnated the term.[37] Nietzsche gave three conditions for the emergence of nihilism: (a) the loss of psychological motivation for action due to an absence of purpose; (b) the totalization and systematization of all events into a unity governed by one powerful being, followed by a loss of belief in the system of unified values; (c) the judgment that the created world is an illusion and requires an escape to another world. Sekine then attempts to show that "Qohelet fulfills all three of Nietzsche's conditions" for nihilism, since Qoheleth (a) sees that "no goals worthy of toil exist in the human world or in history"; (b) regards God as a "hidden existence" whose works are unknown, rather than as "a unified controller of the world"; and, (c) "refused to fabricate a real existence after death."[38] Sekine concludes that Qoheleth "lived his life sincerely as a nihilist, nothing more, nothing less."[39]

C. Qoheleth and Existentialist Philosophy

Many modern readers of the book of Ecclesiastes have noticed affinities between the book and the philosophies of existentialism, which gained prominence in the early-to-mid-twentieth century.[40] Robert Gordis notes some of the shared themes between the existentialist authors and Qoheleth, such as the rejection of inherited dogmas and strict systems of thought (whether philosophical or religious) as well as the struggle with death and meaning in life and the centrality of one's decision-

[36] Barthauer, "Optimismus," 45.

[37] Seizo Sekine, "Qohelet as a Nihilist," 91–128 in *Transcendency and Symbols in the Old Testament* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), translated from original essay, "Qohelet als Nihilist," *AJBI* 17 (1991): 3–54.

[38] Sekine, "Qohelet," 100–02. My main purpose here is not to critique, yet it is probably inaccurate for Sekine to posit that Qoheleth's denial of an afterlife fulfills Nietzsche's third condition for nihilism (101–02). Nietzsche's notion of some "other world" in that context refers to "belief in a *true* world," as opposed to the "world of becoming" or the world of appearance (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* [trans. Kate Sturge; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 218). Sekine's interpretation of Nietzsche has been filtered through Heidegger (which Sekine acknowledges on p. 96), and Heidegger reads this section of Nietzsche as a reference to "disbelief" in "an afterlife or heaven" (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume IV: Nihilism* (trans. Frank A. Capuzzi; New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 34), though Nietzsche makes no reference to that idea in the relevant text, instead summarizing the third condition for nihilism as the "concept of 'truth'" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (trans. Kate Sturge; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 219).

[39] Sekine, "Qohelet," 126.

[40] For overviews of existentialism see Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1956); Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Steven Galt Crowell, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

making. But Gordis maintains that the difference between existentialism and biblical wisdom (represented by Qoheleth and Job) is "far more significant than any superficial similarity." For where existentialism sees only absurdity and a meaningless universe, Qoheleth believes that "the meaning of reality is veiled from man, *but the meaning exists.*" Whereas the existentialists are marked by quietism, defeatism, and despair, Qoheleth "urges the enjoyment of life as the fulfillment of the Divine purpose in the world, to the degree to which that purpose is known to us."[41]

N. Karl Haden utilizes existential philosophy in his discussion of the theme of alienation in Qoheleth.[42] Drawing on writers such as Fredrick Heinemann, William Barrett, and Morton Kaplan, Haden understands alienation as an objective "break or rupture between human beings and their objects" which results in corresponding subjective states such as "disequilibrium, disturbance, strangeness and anxiety."[43] Although "the crux of alienation for Qoheleth is estrangement from God,"[44] Haden, like Gordis, nevertheless ultimately sees a difference between Qoheleth and the existentialists:

> The rupture between most modern existentialists and Qoheleth occurs precisely at the recognition of a higher level of meaning: for the existentialist, meaning escapes man because there is no reference point outside of humanity to give life meaning; for Qoheleth, meaning may be elusive and cause the feeling of *hebel*, but nevertheless, meaning exists because God exists.[45]

Others, however, have found that the kinship between Qoheleth and the existentialists runs deep. In a 1986 article, Michael Fox influentially appropriated existentialist writer Albert Camus's notion of the "absurd" as a translation for Qoheleth's oft-used term הֶבֶל.[46] This proposal will be discussed with more detail in the next chapter, so we can be brief here. But essentially, the appellation "absurd" denotes a "tension between a certain reality and a framework of

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[41] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 112–21 [emphasis original].

[42] N. Karl Haden, "Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation," *Christian Scholars Review* 17 (1987): 52–66.

[43] Haden, "Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation," 54 (from Heinemann's definition of alienation in Fredrick Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* [New York: Harper and Row, 1958], 9, cited approvingly by Haden).

[44] Haden, "Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation," 58.

[45] Haden, "Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation," 66.

[46] Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *JBL* 105.3 (1986): 409–27; Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989); 13–16, 29–51; Fox, *Rereading*, 27–49. As Fox acknowledges, he was preempted in translating *hebel* as "absurd" by Andre Barucq, *Ecclesiaste* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1968) and B. Pennacchini, "Qohelet ovvero il libro degli assurdi," *EuntDoc* 30 (1977): 491–510. Yet Fox developed and exegetically supported the idea more fully than his predecessors. Others who have followed the proposal are cited in the next chapter.

expectations,"[47] and it is precisely this tension between expectation and reality that Fox consistently finds in the situations Qoheleth labels הֶבֶל. Benjamin Berger assumes Fox's thesis and expands the engagement with the existentialists, finding "close philosophical analogues" for Qoheleth in the work of Camus and Leo Shestov: "In the end, they concur with the conclusion that all is absurd. The world is ultimately insensitive to the human existential condition and remains unresponsive to our demands for rational coherence and order."[48]

D. Qoheleth and Continental Philosophy

Several scholars have paired Qoheleth with continental philosophy, the broad philosophical lineage commenced by Kant and developed over the last two centuries primarily by German and French philosophers.[49] I will mention only a few representative works. In a recent article, Martin Shuster has proposed reading Qoheleth through the lens of twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger and his classic 1927 work *Sein und Zeit.* Several parallel themes are adduced.[50] First, both Heidegger and Qoheleth encourage one to live "authentically," that is, in full awareness of the unavoidable reality of death. Second, Shuster proposes that Qoheleth's much debated term הֶבֶל should be read as denoting the concept of "contingency," analogous to Heidegger's idea of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit).*[51] Third, both Qoheleth and Heidegger describe an "unshakeable joy" (*gerüstete Freude)* that "accompanies authentic existence."[52]

Under this heading we can also place works which have brought Qoheleth into dialogue with postmodern thought, particularly the concept of deconstruction and other Derridean ideas.

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[47] Fox, "*Hebel*," 409.

[48] Benjamin Lyle Berger, "Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd," *BibInt* 9.2 (2001): 141–79, at 174–75. See also Eric S. Christianson, "Qoheleth and the Existential Legacy of the Holocaust," *HeyJ* 38 (1997): 35–50; Mathew J. Schwartz, "Koheleth and Camus: Two Views of Achievement," *Judaism* 35 (1986): 29–34.

[49] See Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13, who summarizes that continental philosophy effectively began with Kant's critical works in the 1780s, developed further through nineteenth-century German idealism and romanticism (Frichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer) as well as the critical philosophers such as Nietzsche and Marx, and then continued in both German phenomenology (Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger) and French phenomenology (Kojève, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lvinas, Bataille, de Beauvoir), the hermeneutical philosophers (Dilthey, Gadamer, Ricoeur), Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School (Benjamin, Adorno, Habermas), French structuralism (Lévi-Strauss, Lacan), post-structuralism (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze), post-modernism (Lyotard, Baudrillard), and feminism (Irigaray, Kristeva).

[50] Martin Shuster, "Being as Breath, Vapor as Joy: Using Martin Heidegger to Re-read the Book of Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 33.2 (2008): 219–44. Heidegger could also have been placed in the previous section, regarding existentialism, since existentialism itself was a development within continental philosophy. But I have placed him here because whereas the influence of existentialism has waned, Heidegger's influence as a figure within the continental tradition has remained strong.

[51] Shuster, "Being," 229–235.

[52] Shuster, "Being," 243.

Mark Sneed, for instance, has asserted that Qoheleth is a "deconstructionist," in that he unravels the traditional dichotomies of wisdom/folly and profit/debit.[53] In a second article on the theme, Sneed attempts to deconstruct Qoheleth himself.[54] Here Sneed argues that while Qoheleth does deconstruct traditional dichotomies such as wisdom/folly and righteousness/wickedness, he nonetheless preserves his own dichotomy between those who fear God and those who do not.[55] Sneed also posits that Qoheleth's attempt at a masculine cognitive "mastery" of the world is undermined by "his exclusion of the feminine" (7:25–29), as "this Other is too dangerous for Qohelet to embrace."[56]

Eric Ortlund, in response to the second of Sneed's articles, faults Sneed for turning deconstruction into a "method" or "set of techniques" deployed upon Qoheleth from the outside.[57] Rather, Ortlund suggests, deconstruction involves "attending to" or "bearing witness to" a text's internal "instabilities," principally by observing the way the text's "presence," or meaning, depends on some implicit opposite which a given utterance excludes. In the case of 1:2–3, Ortlund posits that Qoheleth's הֶבֶל and יִתְרוֹן usage finds such a correlate in the "eternity" [עֹלָם] God has set in the human heart (3:11), which points to "what is 'above' the sun and outside of time."[58]

Several additional studies compare Qoheleth with aspects of postmodern thought, and here the boundary between philosophy and literary theory (as well as critical theory) is rather fluid.[59]

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[53] Mark Sneed, "Qoheleth as 'Deconstructionist'," *OTE* (1997): 303–11.

[54] Mark Sneed, "(Dis)closure in Qohelet: Qohelet Deconstructed," *JSOT* 27.1 (2002): 115–26.

[55] Sneed, "(Dis)closure," 117–22.

[56] Sneed, "(Dis)closure," 122–23, 125.

[57] Eric Ortlund, "Deconstruction in Qohelet: A Response to Mark Sneed," *JSOT* 40.2 (2015): 239–56.

[58] Ortlund, "Deconstruction," 255.

[59] See Eric S. Christianson, "Qoheleth and the / His Self among the Deconstructed," 425–33 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998); Gary D. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001); Hendrik Madsen, "Dekonstruktion im Kohelet-Buch—Anregungen zu einem interdisziplinären Dialog," *BZ* 47 (2003): 281–86; Davis Hankins, "The Internal Infinite: Deleuze, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency in Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 40.1 (2015): 43–59; Koosed, *(Per)mutations*; Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998); Leon A. Roper and Alphonso Groenewald, "Job and Ecclesiastes as (Postmodern?) Wisdom in Revolt," *HTS* 69.1 (2013): 8 pages, doi:10.4102/hts.v69i1.2002; Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon Among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Peter J. Leithart, "Solomon's Sexual Wisdom: Qohelet and the Song of Songs in the Postmodern Condition," 443–60 in *The Words of the Wise are like Goads: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century* (ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013); Mark R. Sneed, "Qohelet and His 'Vulgar' Critics: A Jamesonian Reading," *Bible Crit. Theory* 1 (2004): 1–11; T. A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Mark George, "Death as the Beginning of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes," 280–93 in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

E. Qoheleth and the Branches of Philosophy

While Qoheleth has often been paired with philosophy by exploring his relationship to a given "school" or viewpoint, particularly with regard to the ancient Greeks as we have seen, a different approach has been to explore Qoheleth's ideas in relation to one of the perennial branches of philosophy—epistemology, ethics, or metaphysics. Unlike all the works mentioned to this point, however, here Qoheleth scholars have tended to eschew direct engagement with philosophy or philosophers (apart from rare exceptions), despite the philosophical nature of these inquiries.

Beginning with epistemology, in a 1987 article Michael Fox proposed an "essentially empirical" epistemology for Qoheleth,[60] and Fox's discussion has elicited a number of replies and promoted general interest in the question. For instance, James Crenshaw has responded by emphasizing, in contrast to Fox's posited empiricism, that "Qoheleth accepted an astonishing variety of transmitted teachings without submitting them to the test of experience."[61] Daniel Verde mediates between the readings of Fox and Crenshaw by emphasizing both Qoheleth's "sensory exploration of the world" (in line with Hellenistic epistemology) as well as his "testimonial knowledge" (confluent with his Hebrew heritage).[62] Annette Schellenberg takes a somewhat different approach, one concerned more with highlighting the sources of Qoheleth's knowledge-limits than advocating some particular mode of knowing for the sage.[63] Very little in these discussions of Qoheleth's epistemology, however, draws upon the work of any actual philosophy besides that of the ancient Greeks (which is only present in Verde's work). The term "epistemology" is borrowed from philosophy, of course, as is a term such as "empirical," but aside from these superficial references there is virtually no substantial interaction with modern philosophy.

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[60] Michael V. Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 137–55, quotation at 137, 141.

[61] James L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry," 205–24 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998).

[62] Daniel Verde, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: On the Crucial Role of 'Testimony' in Biblical Wisdom Literature and in the Book of Qoheleth in Particular," *LS* 41 (2018): 359–76.

[63] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem*. See also M. Patrizia Sciumbata, "Peculiarità e motivazioni della struttura lessicale dei verbi della 'conoscenza' in Qohelet. Abbozzo di una storia dell'epistemologia ebraico-biblica," *Henoch* 18 (1996): 235–49; Luca Mazzinghi, "The Verbs מצא 'to Find' and בקש 'to Search' in the Language of Qoheleth: An Exegetical Study," 545–58 in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. A. Berlejung and P. van Hecke; Leuven: Peeters, 2007) Ryan O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 137–52; Ryan P. O'Dowd, "Epistemology in Ecclesiastes: Remembering What it Means to Be Human," 195–217 in *The Words of the Wise are like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century* (ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013); Jaco Gericke, "A Comprehensive Philosophical Approach to Qohelet's Epistemology," *HTS* 71.1 (2015): 9 pages, doi:10.4102/hts.v71i1.2868.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy most common to biblical studies. However, since ethical discussions are prevalent within the religious traditions to which the Bible has given rise, scholars often feel little need to draw on ethical or moral philosophy per se. Qoheleth's ethics have been treated by some scholars, though—again—only rarely in dialogue with any moral philosophy more recent than the Greeks'. William Brown, for instance, has looked at Qoheleth through the lens of ethical character. He finds that while "only snippets of the contours of right character can be discerned from wisdom so remote and abstract," Qoheleth's wisdom does aim at "the formation of personal character" and "arrives at a new notion of character that is distinctly individual."[64] Others have focused on the theme of moral virtue specifically in relation to Qoheleth's paraenesis in 7:15–18. Whybray asserts that the passage's apparent prohibition of too much righteousness does not render Qoheleth an "immoralist" since it is only "self-righteousness" the sage has in mind.[65] Schwienhorst-Schönberger finds the passage to commend a *via media* between righteousness and wickedness—an approach Greek philosophy called "good" and the Jewish tradition reframes as "the fear of God."[66] John Choi concurs with Schwienhorst-Schönberger that the passage does commend a "golden mean" approach to morality, but Choi suggests this is a "universal phenomenon" rather than one specifically owing to Hellenistic influence.[67]

Qoheleth's metaphysics have rarely been discussed by the use of that term, yet some important themes which are indeed metaphysical in nature have been taken up by scholars. For instance, Rudman (already cited with reference to Stoicism above) has explicitly examined Qoheleth's views on determinism, as have Otto Kaiser and Peter Machinist, among others,[68] and

[64] William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 120–50, quotations at 129, 135. Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), a doctoral student of Brown's, has also followed suit in examining Qoheleth partly in terms of "character."

[65] R. Norman Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16–17)," 191–204 in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J. G. Gammie et al; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978).

[66] Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Via Media: Koh 7,15–18 und die griechischhellenistische Philosophie," 181–203 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: de Gruyter, 1998).

[67] John H. Choi, "The Doctrine of the Golden Mean in Qoh 7,15–18: A Universal Human Pursuit," *Bib* 83.3 (2002): 358–74. See also Steven Shnider and Lawrence Zalcman, "The Righteous Sage: Pleonasm or Oxymoron? (Kohelet 7,16–18)," *ZAW* 115 (2003): 435–39; Luca Mazzinghi, "Qohelet tra Giudaismo ed Ellenismo: Un'indagine a partire da Qo 7,15–18," 90–116 in *Il Libro del Qohelet: Tradizione, redazione, teologia* (ed. Giuseppe Bellia and Angelo Passaro; Milan: Paoline, 2001).

[68] Rudman, *Determinism*; Kaiser, "Determination und Freiheit beim Kohelet/Prediger Salomo und in der Frühen Stoa,"; Peter Machinist, "Fate, Miqreh, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought," 159–75 in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995).

Mette Bundvad has recently explored the theme of time in the book.[69] Others have queried that theme but through more specific lenses: Katherine Dell probes the book's theme of cycles;[70] Michael Carasik, similarly, investigates Qoheleth's "twists and turns," positing that Qoheleth presents the world's path as "a circle, not a straight line;"[71] and John Jarick regards the work as a "Hebrew Book of Changes" that "revolves around the notion of change."[72] (Some of the foregoing themes will be taken up in Chapter 4.) Once again, however, virtually none of this work has utilized philosophy as a discussion partner useful for uncovering Qoheleth's own thought. Sensing this and concerned about the "distinct lack of philosophical sophistication and nuance" in such discussions, Jaco Gericke has written a "meta-theoretical prolegomenon to future research" on Qoheleth by proposing a wide variety of metaphysical questions that could be asked of the text in dialogue with metaphysical philosophy.[73]

F. Conclusion

We may conclude with a couple of general observations on the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches just outlined. To begin with, the first four categories (viz. pairing Qoheleth with ancient Greek philosophy, philosophies of pessimism and nihilism, existentialist philosophy, and continental philosophy) all generally entail placing Qoheleth in relation to either a specific philosopher or a philosophical "school," in an attempt either to unearth influence (as with the Greeks) or simply to let the comparison breed exegetical insight. Undoubtedly, these approaches can be helpful, and I will utilize a comparative approach in Chapter 5 of this work. But one problem with such methods is that by framing the discussion in terms of only one philosopher or a specific philosophical perspective, they will tend to restrict the lens through which Qoheleth's philosophy is viewed and thus may present a distorted or at least incomplete portrait.

Second, the fifth category (viz. viewing Qoheleth in relation to one of the branches of philosophy) theoretically avoids this problem in that the default aim is not to link Qoheleth to some particular philosophical *school* but simply to explore Qoheleth's own views with respect to a broad

[69] Bundvad, *Time*.
[70] Katharine J. Dell, "The Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes," *VT* 59.2 (2009): 181–89
[71] Michael Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns," *JSOT* 28.2 (2003): 192–209.
[72] John Jarick, "The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on *hakkōl hebel* and *lakkōl zemān* in Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 79–99.
[73] Jaco Gericke, "Possible Topics for a Comprehensive Philosophical Approach to *Qohelet's* Metaphysical Assumptions," *PJT* 96 (2015): 1–12, quotation at 8.

philosophical *field* or *topic* such as, again, epistemology, ethics, or metaphysics, or perhaps a subfield therein. This approach seems to hold more promise for allowing Qoheleth's own philosophical views to shine forth in a less restricted manner since, in theory, the approach can be rather inductive. That is, scholars can inquire as to which views Qoheleth seems to resonate with, among a variety of possible views within the relevant field of philosophy. However, as alluded to in the previous section, scholars have in practice failed to capitalize on the potential inherent to this method by generally not engaging with philosophical sources beyond superficial reference to the name of the subject matter at hand (e.g. epistemology).

What is needed, I propose, is a method that brings Qoheleth into dialogue with philosophy for the sake of clarifying (if only heuristically) Qoheleth's philosophical views, but does so without restricting itself to one specific philosophical school of thought. It will most helpfully be oriented around a *branch* of philosophy, then, within which a variety of philosophical theories or viewpoints may be presented as potentially, and to varying degrees, congruent with Qoheleth's thought. Yet unlike much of the past work relating Qoheleth to a branch of philosophy, this method ought to delve deeply into the philosophical literature in order to present philosophical theories with accuracy and substance and to apply the conceptual rigor common in philosophical literature to the interpretation of Qoheleth's own concepts. The approach undertaken in this dissertation, I submit, offers such a method.

II. The Distinct Methodology of This Dissertation

Given the great variety of approaches in which Qoheleth has been conjoined with philosophy, what has yet been left unsaid? What sort of contribution might the present thesis make? While this project does bring Qoheleth into dialogue with philosophy, as have many others, it does so in two distinct ways: (a) it employs an interpretive method proposed by Jaco Gericke as "philosophical criticism," which draws on contemporary philosophy as a heuristic tool to aid textual analysis; (b) the particular field of philosophy it engages is that known as axiology, or value theory, within contemporary analytic philosophy. I will explain each of these in turn.

A. Gericke's "Philosophical Criticism"

First, I am drawing on the work of Jaco Gericke, who has recently advocated a methodology for biblical scholarship he calls "philosophical criticism": "Philosophical criticism is understood as a

descriptive type of philosophical analysis aimed at the clarification of meaning in the biblical texts."[74] Gericke's proposal is not made in a vacuum. His monograph, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion,* provides the most thorough account to date on the various ways in which biblical studies and philosophy have been related, and the proposal he advances is meant to draw on the rich resources available in philosophy while avoiding past pitfalls at combining the two fields.[75] Gericke is well aware of a general hesitancy among biblical scholars to incorporate philosophy—at least anything other than ancient philosophies contemporaneous with the biblical texts.[76] Gericke cites a telling acknowledgment from James Barr that captures the tenor of the reluctance:

> It would be difficult to exaggerate the degree of alienation that the average biblical scholar has felt in relation to the work of disciplines like philosophical theology or philosophy of religion. Their modes of discussion and decision seem to him or her remote and unreal. The questions they discuss and the criteria they apply seem to be contrived and artificial, and the world of discourse in which they move seems to be quite a different world from the world of the Bible, to which the biblical scholar feels he has a sort of direct and empirical access.[77]

So the reluctance on the part of some biblical scholars toward interdisciplinary work with philosophy reflects a worry that the very *natures* of the two disciplines are virtually contradictory and mutually exclusive, such that conjoining them can only breed trouble. From the perspective of many biblical scholars, "Biblical studies are descriptive and historical, while philosophy of religion is evaluative and normative."[78] Somewhat more contingently, the reluctance is also partly a reaction against some of the problematic ways in which philosophical ideas have been co-opted in the name of "exegesis" (but which was probably closer to "eisegesis"): "Past attempts to read the texts from a philosophical perspective—and there have been many—are now considered to have failed spectacularly."[79]

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[74] Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 201.

[75] Although the title refers specifically to "philosophy of religion," Gericke's proposal applies just as equally to any branch of philosophy one might pair with biblical studies, and he himself has utilized plenty of philosophy beyond that subfield.

[76] The search for parallels (and thus influence) between biblical authors and ancient Greek philosophies, precisely of the sort outlined in this chapter, has generally been welcomed in biblical scholarship. It is the use of any post-biblical philosophy that has been particularly frowned upon, especially since the mid-twentieth-century, probably due to the influence of the "biblical theology movement" (Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 65).

[77] James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 146.

[78] Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 7.

[79] Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 7.

In the book Gericke responds to these and a variety of other objections advanced by biblical scholars with regard to the incorporation of philosophy in biblical studies.[80] He believes that, in light of such concerns, recent decades' biblical scholarship has developed a reactionary stance and is in danger of throwing the philosophical baby out with the "eisegetical" bathwater. But the brand of "philosophical criticism" he proposes should withstand biblicists' worries. For Gericke stresses that, in the first place, the "philosophical criticism" he advocates is purely "descriptive."[81] In other words, its aim is not constructive philosophy (or theology) but only historical exegesis—the attempt to describe in clearer terms (to us) what an ancient writer believed and wrote, particularly with regard to a given philosophical question.[82] Gericke emphasizes that analytic philosophy is particularly (though not exclusively) capable of serving exegesis because of its relentless emphasis on clarity,[83] and he has written many articles aiming to introduce various analytic-philosophical questions and topics to biblical scholarship.[84] I do not wish to claim that analytic philosophy is always or necessarily superior to continental philosophy for philosophically-oriented biblical exegesis, since the dialogue between continental philosophy and biblical texts may also yield much fruit.[85] But for this particular project the philosophical literature I have chosen to focus on and bring into dialogue with Qoheleth is work on the analytic side of the analytic-continental divide.[86]

Once again, to be clear, the sort of interaction between philosophy and biblical text I aim to foster in this study is *not* first and foremost a constructive philosophy that utilizes the biblical text for support. Others may be concerned with such a project, but my approach is the opposite.

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[80] Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 141–53.

[81] Gericke's project, thus defined, differs from that of Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Hazony seeks to identify the biblical books as "works of philosophy" themselves, but Gericke only aims to read philosophically relevant portions of the text through the (ideally) clarifying lens of philosophical discourse.

[82] That said, "historical exegesis" is necessarily done *by* present-day persons *for the sake of* present-day persons, hence the value (as I see it) in translating an ancient language into a modern-day language, and ancient ideas and concepts into their contemporary equivalents.

[83] Gericke, *Hebrew Bible*, 116–25.

[84] Aside from his articles on Qoheleth, cited above, see, e.g., Jaco Gericke, "A Philosophical Clarification of the Axiological Assumptions Behind the Concept of Goodness in Genesis 1," *JSem* 22.1 (2013): 210–25; Jaco Gericke, "Rethinking the 'Dual Causality Principle' in Old Testament Research—A Philosophical Perspective," *OTE* 28.1 (2015): 86–112; Jaco W. Gericke, "Ancient Israelite Perspectives on the Meaning of Life," *OTE* 24.2 (2011): 363–78; and many others.

[85] Twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy of religion has generally been more inclined to engage with scriptural texts than its analytic cousin has been (see, e.g., the work of Paul Ricoeur, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou). Analytic philosophy of religion, as practiced by those such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Antony Flew, et al., has until recently been uninterested in engaging deeply with biblical texts.

[86] On the relation between analytic and continental philosophy, see Neil Levy, "Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences," *Metaphilosophy* 34.3 (2003): 284–304.

The current project, following Gericke, is entirely historical-exegetical in its aims; it is essentially philosophically-oriented exegesis.[87] Philosophy is employed as a heuristic tool to aid interpretation, but the final aim is to interpret Qoheleth's ideas. While I believe this hermeneutical lens will bear much fruit, I do not claim that it is the only one or best one by which to read the book, since certainly it will leave some aspects of the book untapped. But inasmuch as we are interested in discerning Qoheleth's philosophical viewpoints, it is a helpful lens indeed.

B. Focus on Value Theory in Contemporary (Analytic) Philosophy

A second distinct aspect of my method in this study is the realm of philosophy I bring into dialogue with Qoheleth, what is most broadly called "value theory," or, axiology. This area of philosophy "concerns which things are good or bad, how good or bad they are, and, most fundamentally, what it is for a thing to be good or bad."[88] Under the broad rubric of value theory several relevant subfields are brought into play, including meaning of life philosophy, philosophy of death, philosophy of well-being, and philosophy of pleasure.[89] Many of the same philosophers work in and across the aforementioned subfields, since these topics are taken to be organically related (just as they are, I suggest, for Qoheleth). Prominent names in these fields over the last few decades include Thomas Nagel, John Martin Fischer, Thaddeus Metz, Susan Wolf, Fred Feldman, Shelly Kagan, Iddo Landau, Ben Bramble, Antti Kauppinen, and Steven Luper, to name only a few. Why are these the kinds of philosophers I see fit for a diachronic dialogue with Qoheleth? To put it simply, the topics consistently addressed by these and other philosophers in the relevant subfields are precisely the topics Qoheleth was directly addressing in his own way. I hope that this will become plain to the reader as we move through this study, but to give some sense of it for now, I

[87] Of course, there are plenty other ways in which philosophy and the Bible might be related than only these two. Gericke provides a brainstorming list of ten possible ways in which the two might be brought together. See Jaco W. Gericke, "Philosophical Criticism of the Hebrew Bible and the Analytic-Continental Divide," *OTE* 29.1 (2016): 85–99, at 86.

[88] Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson, "Introduction to Value Theory," 1–9 in *The Oxford Handbook of Value Theory* (ed. Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

[89] These are either subfields of value theory or related fields of philosophy. (For instance, philosophy of pleasure is sometimes treated under philosophy of mind, yet it is also obvious that a pleasure is a kind of value, hence it fits naturally with the other value-related topics and is often discussed by philosophers of value.) Moreover, the topics alluded to here are also at times spoken of under the wider heading of "moral philosophy" or "ethics," but instead of these terms I have consistently used the heading "value theory" (or "philosophy of value"), as do many in the field, for the kinds of topics addressed herein. I have done so in order to maintain a clear distinction between these (individual-oriented) topics and those (other-oriented) topics found in ethical or moral philosophy in its narrower sense, with its three common subcategories of normative ethics, applied ethics, and meta-ethics, none of which are taken up by this thesis.

will list merely a sample of the sorts of titles (and thus subject matter) typical in this realm of contemporary philosophy, all of which are clearly salient to the study of Ecclesiastes:

- "The Concept of a Meaningful Life" by Thaddeus Metz
- "Absurdity, Angst, and the Meaning of Life" by Duncan Pritchard
- "The Absurd" by Thomas Nagel
- "Contingency and the Quest for Meaning" by Beatrix Himmelmann
- "What Does Death Have to Do with the Meaning of Life?" by Michael Levine
- "Welfare and the Achievement of Goals" by Simon Keller
- "Accounting for the Harm of Death" by Duncan Purves
- "Death, Value, and Desire" by Christopher Belshaw
- "Time and Life's Meaning" by Richard Taylor
- "The Role of Pleasure in Well-Being" by Ben Bramble
- "Savoring Time: Desire, Pleasure, and Wholehearted Activity" by Talbot Brewer
- *Life's Values: Pleasure, Happiness, Well-Being and Meaning* by Alan H. Goldman[90]

The last few decades have witnessed hundreds of publications within academic philosophy on these kinds of topics—meaning, achievement, death, well-being, pleasure, and the value of existence as such—the very topics addressing the core of what is valuable in human life. Even a cursory reading of Ecclesiastes is enough to surmise that the book might have something in

[90] Except for this last title, I have only listed articles here since they tend to have more specific titles than books. But there are certainly plenty of books on these subjects, as well as a number of recent anthologies which highlight some of the most important work in this area, e.g. Joshua W. Seachris ed, *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); David Benatar ed, *Life, Death, & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). The full bibliographic citations of the titles listed above are as follows: Thaddeus Metz, "The Concept of a Meaningful Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38.2 (2001): 137–153; Duncan Pritchard, "Absurdity, Angst, and the Meaning of Life," *The Monist* 93.1 (2010): 3–16; Beatrix Himmelmann, "Contingency and the Quest for Meaning," 83–98 in *On Meaning in Life* (ed. Beatrix Himmelmann; Boston: de Gruyter, 2013); Michael P. Levine, "What Does Death Have to Do with the Meaning of Life?" *RelS* 23.4 (1987): 457–65; Simon Keller, "Welfare and the Achievement of Goals," *Philosophical Studies* 121.1 (2004): 27–41; Duncan Purves, "Accounting for the Harm of Death," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 97.1 (2016): 89–112; Christopher Belshaw, "Death, Value, and Desire," 274–93 in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (ed. Fred Feldman Ben Bradley, and Jens Johansson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Richard Taylor, "Time and Life's Meaning," *Review of Metaphysics* 40.4 (1987): 675–86; Ben Bramble, "The Role of Pleasure in Well-Being," 199–208 in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (ed. Guy Fletcher; New York: Routledge, 2016); Talbot Brewer, "Savoring Time: Desire, Pleasure and Wholehearted Activity," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6.2 (2003): 143–60; Alan H. Goldman, *Life's Values: Pleasure, Happiness, Well-Being, and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

common with such topics and, further, that such modern philosophizing might usefully contribute to our reading of the ancient text.[91] It is therefore a highly surprising fact that, despite the great variety of philosophical approaches that have been brought to bear on Qoheleth (as outlined earlier), this current philosophical discussion about life's primary value-questions has been left unutilized in the study of Qoheleth.[92] Reasons for the lacuna probably stem from some of the scholarly tendencies already discussed, such as the preference for comparisons with ancient Greek philosophy and the assumption that the use of contemporary philosophy necessarily entails anachronism. For now, we need only present the possibility that our proposed pairing is worth exploring, but if this thesis is successful it will show that the use of such discourse proves not only helpful but downright necessary for the clarification of Qoheleth's concepts.

As for the topics listed, it is hardly the case that these topics are entirely new to philosophy. What, then, is novel about these discussions in today's philosophy? It is that the subjects are discussed with an "analytic" philosophical method. Over the course of the last several decades, analytic philosophy has become the dominant philosophical tradition practiced in the English-speaking world.[93] The most distinguishing feature of contemporary analytic philosophy as I employ it here is its proclivity for conceptual analysis, that is, its tendency to name, clearly define,

[91] Many of the philosophers in this field have specifically cited Ecclesiastes as an ancient text concerned with these issues, e.g. Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 59, 124, 126, 132, 238; Brooke Alan Trisel, "Futility and the Meaning of Life Debate," *Sorites* 14 (2002): 70–84, at 67, 71, 80; Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8–9, 67; Joshua Seachris, "Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending," *RelS* 47.2 (2011): 141–63, at 149, 161–62; Wendell O'Brien, "The Meaning of Life: Early Continental and Analytic Perspectives," *IEP*, https://www.iep.utm.edu/mean-ear; John Kekes, *The Human Condition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 195–96; Steven Luper, "Life's Meaning," 198–212 in *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death* (ed. Steven Luper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 208; John Cottingham, "Meaningfulness, Eternity, and Theism," 99–112 in *On Meaning in Life* (ed. Beatrix Himmelmann; Boston: de Gruyter, 2013), 99. Palle Yourgrau, "The Dead," 137–56 in *The Metaphysics of Death* (ed. John Martin Fischer; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 137, labels as "the Ecclesiastes problem" the question, "How can one's life have meaning if after all is said and done one is simply dead?" While this dissertation is concerned with using present-day philosophy as an aid in reading Qoheleth, one could certainly proceed in the opposite direction—bringing Qoheleth's views into the contemporary philosophical discussion, just as current philosophers constantly engage with Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient philosophers to shape, bolster, and challenge their views.

[92] The only exception of which I am aware is a recent essay by Craig Bartholomew (in an edited volume of mostly religious-oriented meaning of life philosophy): Craig G. Bartholomew, "Wisdom and Meaning: Philosophy and the Theology of the Meaning of Life in Ecclesiastes," 209–30 in *God and Meaning: New Essays* (ed. Joshua W. Seachris and Stewart Goetz; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). Bartholomew references several essays from the Joshua Seachris edited anthology cited above as well as works by Julian Baggini and John Cottingham.

[93] Michael Beaney, "What is Analytic Philosophy?" 3–29 in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (ed. Michael Beaney; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

and juxtapose concepts and conceptual theories.[94] Naming a concept and clearly defining it by demarcating its constituent parts provides a certain level of consistency and accountability against the danger of equivocation that is not always present in interpretations of literature, biblical or otherwise. It is this naming aspect of analytic philosophy that I am applying to Qoheleth's views in order to achieve greater interpretive clarity of them. For instance, while Qoheleth scholars do often refer to philosophical concepts such as meaning (in life), pessimism, or hedonism, they rarely provide definitions of their terms, let alone more fully fleshed-out philosophical theories, to which the reader may hold them accountable and by which equivocation may be minimized.

Again, some may object to such a theoretical approach, wondering how an ancient Jew should be expected to subscribe to any theories propounded by twenty-first-century philosophers. This would be a valid point if we were comparing, say, Einstein's general theory of relativity with Parmenides' cosmology. In that case it would be unreasonable to expect Parmenides' views to resemble Einstein's, since science has developed so much in the two-thousand-plus years between them. But in the realm of value theory, where the primary questions concern matters such as meaning in life, the significance of death, and notions of what is ultimately good for humans, the essential "grammar" of this discussion has changed very little in the millennia since Socrates and Qoheleth inhabited the Mediterranean. What is new (or at least newly emphasized) in the contemporary philosophical discussions of such matters is not any empirical proof upon which all parties agree but simply a more rigorous, refined methodology that emphasizes demarcating clearly defined positions and then providing reasons for the position one finds most compelling. Such a philosophical method can aid us in attempting to discern Qoheleth's own implicit answers to these ancient questions.

III. Thesis: Qoheleth and Value

A. Clarifying Qoheleth's Value Concepts

As stated in the opening of this chapter, the book of Qoheleth is, above all else, about value. It represents the effort of one Hebrew sage to discern "what is good"—and what is bad—for human

[94] Michael Beaney, "What is Analytic Philosophy?" 3–29 in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (ed. Michael Beaney; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26, emphasizes the distinctness of analytic philosophy in terms of the various "conceptions and techniques of analysis" that have become part of its "methodological toolbox." Likewise, A. P. Martinech and David Sosa, "Introduction," 1–5 in *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy* (ed. A. P. Martinech and David Sosa; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 4, suggest that analytic philosophy is "not a set of doctrines" but "is more like a method, a way of dealing with a problem."

beings and to dispense these hard-won insights to his readers, that they may live well. The present dissertation attempts to rearticulate Qoheleth's values and evaluations in a manner somewhat more systematized than his own presentation and those typically found in the scholarly literature. My aim is to locate Qoheleth's philosophy of value within a wider philosophical landscape, so as to posit his stance on a variety of key axiological questions as identifiable positions that can be contrasted with other possibilities and thereby discerned with greater clarity.

Qoheleth scholars, and biblical scholars more broadly, are generally well-equipped to tackle the meaning of ancient texts on the linguistic and literary level, thus with regard to a text's grammatical, syntactical, lexical, semantic, and various literary features. This work is obviously crucial to biblical studies and the present dissertation will feature no shortage of these familiar methods. However, exclusive use of these methods can lead to overly atomistic reading. The meaning of a text and the point of view of its author lie not only in its grammatical structures and individual lexemes nor even its literary structure, but in the broader realm of ideas and concepts. Of course, there is no pathway into an author's ideas and concepts other than by starting with things like lexical and grammatical features. But an analysis may begin on the linguistic level and from there broaden out to the conceptual level. Yet it is precisely this second step that biblical studies has often lacked. The standard exegetical toolkit wielded by biblical scholars, primarily focused on the linguistic level of analysis, is by itself insufficient for a proper treatment of the broader conceptual level at which a text like Qoheleth—so pregnant with conceptual and philosophical content—should also be engaged. The conceptual analysis inherent to contemporary analytic philosophy, I propose, is needed as a supplement.

B. Value as Unifying Rubric

This broader level of analysis, concerned with the clarification of concepts, is also one which enables us to see how Qoheleth's concepts *relate* to one another. My claim is that the rubric of *value* is the hub around which all of Qoheleth's most central ideas revolve. Value serves as the most illuminating organizing principle by which to read the book and cohere its various themes. Of course, the book has no shortage of motifs; as already mentioned, themes such as meaning, knowledge, death, time, joy, and work are crucial to the message, and all of these will be discussed in due course. But none of these themes has the potential to unite the book's varied parts so cogently as the notion of value, and Qoheleth is concerned to communicate these other themes

only insofar as they serve his value-claims.[95] Once read through this lens, it becomes clear that virtually every line in the book can be oriented to the value-claims Qoheleth is driving toward in any given section, whether of positive or negative value. Qoheleth's message is unified by the concept of value and he expresses a distinct, coherent vision as to where value is found—and not found—in human lives.

Of course, speaking of any theme as "unifying" Qoheleth's words may come as a surprise to those who regard the work as hopelessly self-contradictory. Scholars have pointed to apparent contradictions with respect to Qoheleth's stance on wisdom (2:13–15; 7:11), wealth (5:9, 18),[96] enjoyment (2:1; 8:15), life's value (2:17; 4:2–3; 6:3; 9:4; 11:7), and divine judgment (8:10–14), among others. A number of approaches have been taken to deal with these apparent contradictions, such as positing quotations (or unmarked citations of others' views), editorial glosses, or the possibility that the entire book is a running dialogue.[97] But unifying a text is not simply making sense of its apparent verbal contradictions, which may be superficial.[98] The handful of verses just mentioned could be harmonized to a logician's liking yet we might still be left with a text that fails to hang together and lacks a core, that feels like a haphazard assembly of only loosely aligned sentiments, or worse, the laundry list of an ornery old man's petty grievances. A unified reading will attempt to reveal the book's web of thematic connections and deeper structure of thought, to determine how the parts work together to serve a whole, coherent message.[99] Though some may remain skeptical, I take it that in the case of Qoheleth such a project can be meaningfully pursued,

[95] For instance, as mentioned earlier Bundvad posits the theme of time as central to the book, but her main claim is that "Qohelet does not present time as a neutral reality, but depicts it as intensely problematic for human attempts to fashion a meaningful existence" (Bundvad, *Time*, 187). I agree with this, yet the statement itself reveals that Qoheleth's reflections on time only serve what is in fact more central—his ideas about meaning and value more broadly.

[96] For simplicity's sake, throughout this dissertation I will only refer to the Hebrew versification, which in all of Eccl 5 reflects a verse number one less than that of English translations, e.g. HB 5:9 = ET 5:10.

[97] See discussion in Fox, *Contradictions*, 19–28; Thomas M. Bolin, *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 69–108; Jimyung Kim, *Reanimating Qohelet's Contradictory Voices: Studies of Open-Ended Discourse on Wisdom in Ecclesiastes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), *passim*. The attempt to read Qoheleth in a more unified, less contradiction-addled manner is labeled a "modernist" project by Kim (5–17). But this is an odd historical claim in light of the Talmudic recounting of the early rabbinic concern that "its words are mutually contradictory" (b. Šabb. 30b). The aspiration to holistic reading of texts is hardly the invention of modernism.

[98] Cf. Fox, *Rereading*, x: "It is on this deep level of premises that Qohelet's true consistency is to be found, not on the bumpy surface that scholars have tried so hard to smooth out."

[99] This emphasis need not be inimical to one that stresses the Bakhtinian dialogicality in the text, as in Kim, *Reanimating*. I, too, regard Qoheleth as speaking in multiple voices (even apart from 1:1–2; 7:27; 12:8–14), in a sense that will be explained later. But, in my view over against Kim's, this dialogicality still serves the communication of an essentially unified, coherent message, rather than leaving the reader only with a plurality of strands, a set of "unfinalizable contradictions" (218).

if perhaps never perfectly accomplished. My central claim is that linking together the various "parts" of Qoheleth to the paramount question of value—the question of "what is good"—will allow for a deeper, more cohesive understanding of the sage's message and underlying worldview.

Many raise the concern voiced by Seow, that in dealing with the sage's message "there is always a temptation to over-systematize."[100] This may be true, and perhaps this project falls prey to it. But the opposite danger is no less problematic—the temptation to *under*-systematize and thus weaken what the original writer (and audience) might have grasped as a unified, impactful message. Seow therefore also notes that, "Alternatively, commentators sometimes choose key concepts to discuss: e.g., vanity, toil, joy, wisdom, death, and so forth. This approach avoids the imposition of a theological system on the book. Yet it is not entirely satisfactory, for the author's message becomes overly fragmented."[101] This latter approach is represented, for example, by Murphy, who writes, "The message of Ecclesiastes has suffered from excessive summarizing…It is truly difficult to give an overall picture of the work. Qoheleth's thought is tortuous, and the danger of selectivity on the part of the interpreter is ever present" (lviii). He then proceeds to offer Qoheleth's "message" by expounding ten themes without relating them to one another.[102] We can agree that reading the book cohesively is indeed a difficult task. But it is unduly minimalistic to assume that Qoheleth means to convey nothing more than a string of disconnected themes. We interpreters may fail in our attempts to grasp the big picture, but it is precisely the task of interpretation to try.

In this vein, and by way of analogy with my own project, I want to cite a few words from the introduction to John Richardson's book, *Nietzsche's System.* Anyone familiar with Nietzsche's work and the standard renderings of it will know that the great German philosopher is infamous for his supposed self-contradictions and "asystematicity." Yet, precisely aware of this, Richardson offers an alternative take, an experiment in unification:

> Others, who regret his (apparent) asystematicity and suspect that it leads him into inconsistency, may wish to judge whether his views can hang together, even if he himself never meant them to. For such readers, this book might be useful as an experimental effort to give conceptual specificity

[100] C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 47.

[101] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47.

[102] Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), lviii–lxix. W. E. Staples, "'Profit' in Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 4.2 (1945): 87–96, offers that the book consists of "a series of more or less isolated thoughts," though "all of which had a central theme—'life'—and might well have been entitled, 'Guesses at the Truth' " (96). Kurt Galling, "Kohelet-Studien," *ZAW* 50 (1932): 276–99, represents a more extreme version of such a reading, regarding the book as thoroughly fragmentary, arbitrarily arranged and essentially themeless.

> to what a 'Nietzschean system' (even if not Nietzsche's own) might be. Indeed, at many points this is all I can claim myself, since I often push for specificity beyond what can be found in Nietzsche's words: the system this book sketches is, in its details at least, a construction on and beyond what he says, and an effort to use, to think productively with, the ideas he leaves us. The boundary between these projects of describing and developing is, inevitably, very hard to draw, but I propose that the main lines of what follows do match the deep structure of his thought.[103]

Like Richardson's book, the present thesis may be regarded as an experiment, an attempt to see what happens when we treat Qoheleth as a thinker with more or less unified views about value—while still allowing for their development over time.

Now it is obvious that Qoheleth does not *present* his views in a systematic manner, as one would find in an Aristotle or Kant.[104] And it is also true that something is indeed lost in the translation from the sort of poetic imagery we find in, say, 1:4–7, 3:2–8, and 12:1–7, to more abstract propositions.[105] But the question is whether, underneath the narrative flow of observations and ruminations, there stands a coherent, worked-out set of value-relations, one which with a little effort can be excavated and drawn up to the surface. The wager of this monograph is that such a worldview may be mined, and that, while this is certainly not the only way to read the sage, it is one important way of drawing out his implicit, robust philosophy of value.[106]

In this sense my project is analogous to other recent attempts at reading ideas-oriented literature (that does not quite present itself as "philosophy" in the traditional Western sense) through a modern or analytic philosophical lens.[107] Moreover, the approach taken herein also finds

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[103] John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

[104] Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 128: "It is clear that Koheleth does not present a systematic philosophy in the grand manner of Aristotle, Spinoza, Hegel or Kant, but that is less of a defect than may appear."

[105] Qoheleth partially renders such a translation himself, however, in 1:8–11 and 3:9–15.

[106] Machinist, "Fate," 167, regards the matter similarly: "The observations we have been discussing, it should be emphasized, are not found in the book of Qohelet in the form of a systematically arranged treatise on time patterns and human and divine order. But when we consider them together, it is plain that they are the product of systematic, conscious, abstract reasoning on the issue." Machinist goes on to claim that "what is significant in Qohelet is not simply the concern with the subject matter on which human reason focuses and the conclusions it yields, but an awareness of a reflection on the reasoning process itself" (173).

[107] See, for example, Roy W. Perrett, "Tolstoy, Death and the Meaning of Life," *Philosophy* 60 (1985): 231–45; Dana Freibach-Heifetz, "Giving Sense to Generosity-Ethics: A Philosophical Reading of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*," *Philosophia* 36 (2008): 575–91; Alan Dagovitz, "Moby-Dick's Hidden Philosopher: A Second Look at Stubb," *Philosophy and Literature* 32.2 (2008): 330–46; Graeme Hunter, *Pascal the Philosopher: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); A. W. S. Baird, *Studies in Pascal's Ethics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); J. B. Schneewind, "Montaigne on Moral Philosophy and the Good Life," 207–28 in *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne* (ed. Ullrich Langer; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); Frits Gåvertsson, "Ethical Pluralism and Moral Conflict in Aeschylus's Oresteia," *Philosophy and Literature* 41.1A (2017): 24–39.

some degree of kinship with the scholarly field now called "ancient philosophy," which developed in the 1950s and 60s as a philosophical subdiscipline through the influence of analytic philosophy, and which, according to Christof Rapp, "encouraged readers of ancient texts to intellectually engage with the arguments in such works, and to take their authors seriously as philosophers who claim to have good reasons for holding the views for which they argue."[108] Likewise, Julia Annas writes,

> Ancient philosophy…is a philosophical way of engaging with these texts; that is what distinguishes it from other ways of studying them… Treating ancient texts philosophically can be…regarded as methodologically straightforward. You read ancient texts looking for the arguments which support the philosophical positions put forward.[109]

The main difference, then, between efforts in the field of ancient philosophy today and my own is that Qoheleth is Jewish, not Greek, and (therefore?) not generally considered among the pantheon of early philosophers from which Western philosophy developed.

C. Qoheleth's Language of Value

Given that this work primarily addresses Qoheleth's claims about value, it is worth briefly introducing the predominant Hebrew terms Qoheleth uses to express these evaluations (many of which we will investigate further in later chapters). The presence of one or more of these terms in a given passage is a good indicator that Qoheleth is there advancing some sort of value claim.

Negative Value Terms:[110]

Words:

- Futile / absurd [הֶבֶל][111]

[108] Christof Rapp, "The Liaison between Analytic and Ancient Philosophy and Its Consequences," 120–39 in *Philosophy and the Historical Perspective* (ed. Marcel van Ackeren; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 136.

[109] Julia Annas, "Ancient Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century," 25–43 in *The Future for Philosophy* (ed. Brian Leiter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25–26.

[110] My criteria for inclusion in the lists below is whether a term or phrase is used at least sometimes (a) to *predicate* or *attribute* positive or negative value to some thing, idea, or situation, or, (b) in statements that clearly oppose positive values with negative ones (e.g. "what is crooked cannot be made straight"). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that by placing these terms into simple "positive" or "negative" categories I am obviously generalizing; the purpose is to begin the discussion of evaluative terms which will require much nuancing as we proceed. I have omitted words such as "righteous," "wicked," "love," and "hate," because they are specifically ethical terms, whereas I am interested in Qoheleth's vocabulary pertaining to amoral axiological claims.

[111] (1:2 [5x]); 1:14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6, 9; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (2x); 9:9 (2x); 11:8, 10; (12:8 [3x]). I am placing in parentheses those verses I take to be an editor's handiwork.

- Bad / evil [רַע; רָעָה][112]
- Vexation / frustration [כָּעַס][113]
- Pain [מַכְאֹב][114]
- Crooked [עוּת][115]
- Loss / deficit [חֶסְרוֹן][116]
- Madness [הוֹלֵלוֹת][117]
- Folly [סִכְלוּת; שִׂכְלוּת][118]

Phrases:

- Striving after wind [רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ; רְעוּת רוּחַ][119]
- Not satisfied [לֹא־שָׂבַע][120]
- Not able [לֹא־יוּכַל][121]

Positive Value Terms:

Words:

- Gain / profit / advantage [יִתְרוֹן; מוֹתַר; יוֹתֵר][122]
- Good; the good / what is good; make good / cheer [טוֹב; טוֹבָה; יטב][123]
- Joy / enjoyment; be joyful / enjoy [שִׂמְחָה; שׂמח; שָׂמַח][124]
- Portion [חֵלֶק][125]
- Reward / wages [שָׂכָר][126]
- Beautiful [יָפֶה][127]
- Great; become great [גָּדוֹל; גדל][128]

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[112] רַע (adj): 1:13; 2:17; 4:3, 8, 17; 5:13; 6:2; 8:3, 5, 9, 11, 12; 9:3 (2x), 12 (2x); 10:13; (12:14); רָעָה (noun): 2:21; 5:12 [2x], 15; 6:1; 7:14, 15; 8:6, 11; 10:5; 11:2, 10; 12:1.

[113] 1:18; 2:23; 7:3, 9; 11:10.

[114] 1:18; 2:23.

[115] 1:15; 7:13; 12:3 (used with physical, non-evaluative sense in 12:3).

[116] 1:15.

[117] 1:17; 2:12; 7:25; 9:3.

[118] סִכְלוּת: 2:3, 12, 13; 7:25; 10:1, 13; שִׂכְלוּת: 1:17.

[119] 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9.

[120] 1:8; 4:8; 5:9; 6:3.

[121] 1:8, 15 (2x); 6:10; 8:18 (2x); cf. 7:13, מִי יוּכַל, which assumes a negative answer.

[122] יִתְרוֹן: 1:13; 2:11, 13 (2x); 3:9; 5:8, 15; 7:12; 10:10, 11; יוֹתֵר: 2:15; 6:8, 11; 7:11, 16; (12:9, 12); מוֹתַר: 3:19.

[123] טוֹב (adj): 2:1, 3, 24 (2x), 26 (2x); 3:12 (2x), 13, 22; 4:3, 6, 9 (2x), 13; 5:4, 17; 6:3, 9, 12; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8 (2x), 10, 11, 14, 18, 20, 26; 8:12, 13, 15; 9:2 (2x), 4, 7, 16, 18; 11:6, 7; (12:14); טוֹבָה (noun): 4:8; 5:10, 17; 6:3, 6; 7:14; 9:18; יטב: 7:3; 11:9.

[124] שִׂמְחָה: 2:1, 2, 10, 26; 5:19; 7:4; 8:15; 9:7; שׂמח: 3:12, 22; 4:16; 5:18; 8:15; 10:19; 11:8, 9; שָׂמַח: 2:10.

[125] 2:10, 21; 3:22; 5:17, 18; 9:6, 9; 11:2.

[126] 4:9; 9:5.

[127] 3:11; 5:17.

[128] גָּדוֹל: 9:13, 14 (2x); 10:4 (note that the uses in 9:13 and 10:4 are value-neutral, with the sense “significant”); גדל: 1:16; 2:4, 9.

- Delight / pleasure [חֵפֶץ][129]
- Straighten [תקן][130]

Providing a list of Qoheleth's value terms, however, is the easiest part of our task. The more difficult—and interesting—assignment is to discern the implicit logic of their relations and those of the concepts they signify. The book is suffused with the language of valuation. The narrator seems to have recognized this when he frames all of Qoheleth's words with the motto הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים . . . הַכֹּל הָבֶל (1:2; 12:8), thus characterizing Qoheleth's message as fundamentally a value claim.[131] Probing a bit further, we might wonder *why* Qoheleth frames so much of his discourse around the question of value. The answer may be partly grounded in the proposal of some scholars that Qoheleth was in fact a businessman.[132] The evidence for this is that a striking number of Qoheleth's favorite terms are essentially commercial or economic terms.

- יִתְרוֹן – gain / profit / surplus / advantage
- חֶסְרוֹן – loss / deficit
- שָׂכָר – wages / reward
- חֶשְׁבּוֹן – accounting / calculation[133]
- מנה – count[134]
- חֵלֶק – portion / share[135]
- עִנְיָן – business / business deal / task[136]
- עמל / עָמָל / עָמֵל – toil / labor[137]

[129] 3:1, 17; 5:3, 7; 8:6; 12:1; (12:10); but it is only used with the sense, "pleasure," in 5:4 and 12:1.

[130] 1:15; 7:13; (12:9).

[131] Commentators often treat 1:2 and 12:8 as though they are straightforwardly the first and final words of Qoheleth in the book, with 1:1 and 12:9–14 then relegated to the narrator or editor (however they might construe him). But I regard 1:2 and 12:8 every bit as much the work of the editor, who plainly speaks of Qoheleth in the third-person in both verses and is summarizing what he takes to be Qoheleth's essential message. I thus concur with Kurt Galling, "Der Prediger," 73–125 in *Die fünf Megilloth* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1969), 80, that "Überspitzt hat QR[1] [the first redactor] in 1:2 und 12:8 die Nichtigkeitsaussage durch Steigerung von הֶבֶל und sie so einseitig als allein geltende Summa der Weltsicht Q.s statuiert."

[132] See especially Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 34–37. Mitchell J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Bib* 33 (1952): 30–52, 191–221, lists twenty-nine commercial terms used in the book and concludes, "the over-all picture delineated by Ecclesiastes suggests a distinctly commercial environment" (220–21). Cf. also James L. Kugel, "Qohelet and Money," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 32–49.

[133] 7:25, 27, 29(?); 9:10.

[134] 1:15. The verb is used for counting money in 2 Kgs 12:11.

[135] 2:10, 21; 3:22; 5:17, 18; 9:6, 9; 11:2.

[136] 1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:2, 13; 8:16.

[137] עָמָל (noun): 1:3; 2:10 (2x), 11, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24; 3:13; 4:4, 6, 8, 9; 5:14, 17, 18; 6:7; 8:15; 9:9; 10:15; עָמֵל (adj.): 2:18, 22; 3:9; 4:8; 9:9; עמל (verb): 1:3; 2:11, 19, 20, 21; 5:15, 17; 8:17.

None of this commercial language contradicts Qoheleth's philosophical bent, a point that has apparently been lost on some scholars. Garfinkel, for instance, suggests that there are two very different ways of reading the book: (a) the philosophical reading—that "Qoheleth deals with grand philosophical themes" such as "what is the meaning, or the purpose of life?"; and (b) the "financial reading"—that the book's message "is not nearly so grandiose or audacious" but merely focused on the practical question, "what should one do with all the money he has accumulated?" Garfinkel advocates the second, claiming, "The existential concern does not address the economic issue, and the economic question can be addressed without providing a satisfactory response to the existential question. The two questions are qualitatively different and are, thus, neither antithetical nor complementary. They are simply not comparable."[138] In my view, this is a glaring misreading of the myriad of ways in which Qoheleth's value-laden philosophy is *embedded within* and *expressed through* the terminology of economy and commerce.[139] The יִתְרוֹן in view is no longer literal financial profit; the שָׂכָר is not a literal wage, and so on. The terms listed above highlight Qoheleth's predilection for repurposing language by conferring a more abstract, philosophical sense on otherwise concrete economic terms. Crucially, though, the bridge between these two worlds is the common denominator of *value.*

A further support for Qoheleth's concern with value is his penchant for "better" sayings or proverbs *(Tob-Spruch)*—statements of the form, "X is better than Y."[140] This sort of utterance is familiar elsewhere in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern literature, but Qoheleth contains a higher ratio of such statements than any other biblical book. "Better" sayings are also common in Proverbs, and accordingly many of Qoheleth's exhibit the tone of classic sentence literature, as in, "It is better for one to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools" (7:5).[141] But as one might expect, Qoheleth engraves his own stamp on this familiar form.[142] He employs it at

[138] Stephen Garfinkel, "Qoheleth: The Philosopher Means Business," 51–62 in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation. Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller* (ed. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Dianne M. Sharon; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns / Jewish Theological Seminary, 2007), 53–54.

[139] Cf. Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth," 57–77 in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (ed. Willy Schotroff and Wolfgang Stegemann; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 66, who suggests that Qoheleth "applies this commercial category to life as a whole."

[140] See 2:24(?); 3:12(?), 22; 4:3, 6, 9, 13; 5:4; 6:3, 9; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 15(?); 9:4, 16, 17(?), 18. In the standard "better" saying form the Hebrew includes טוֹב plus the comparative מִן.

[141] See Glendon E. Bryce, " 'Better'-Proverbs: An Historical and Structural Study," 343–54 in *1972 SBL Seminar Papers* (ed. L. C. McGaughty; Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972).

[142] See Graham S. Ogden, "The 'Better'-Proverb (Tôb-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *JBL* 96.4 (1977): 489–505; cf. Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing is Better'-Form," *JBL* 98.3 (1979): 339–50.

times to make almost shockingly existential claims, such as, "a stillborn child is better than [a certain man]" (6:3); "better than both is he who has not yet been" (4:3); "a name is better than good oil, and the day of death than the day of birth" (7:1); "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4). Yet he also uses the "better" formula in ways that show the nuances of his value hierarchies. For example, he may write, "X is better than Y," but then qualify it in a manner to say, "but Y is relativized by Z" (e.g. 4:2–3; 6:9; 9:16). What we will find, then, is a sage with a predilection for evaluating, who philosophizes not merely with a hammer but with a varied collection of scales, weights, and balances (cf. 12:9).

IV. Other Introductory Matters: Date and Genre

I will conclude this chapter by addressing two of the book's background matters, its date and genre.

A. Date

The date of composition has been the subject of much inquiry, yet scholars generally acknowledge that it has only minimal bearing on the book's interpretation.[143] For present purposes, therefore, we will only touch upon it briefly. One of the two Qoheleth manuscripts discovered at Qumran (4QQoh[a]) has been dated paleographically to 175–150 BCE, so 150 may technically be considered the book's *terminus ante quem.*[144] Determining the *terminus post quem* is more difficult, but ever since Hugo Grotius' 1644 proposal, the majority of scholars have regarded the book's unique vocabulary and grammatical features as exhibiting post-exilic, late biblical Hebrew (thereby overturning the traditional view that it was written by Solomon).[145] With regard to vocabulary, the fact that the book contains a great number Aramaic loanwords is generally taken to indicate a late date, as is the presence of two Persian loanwords (פַּרְדֵּס in 2:5 [cf. Song 4:13; Neh 2:8] and פִּתְגָם in 8:11 [cf. Esth 1:20]). The book also exhibits a number of Hebrew words characteristic of other biblical books widely regarded as post-exilic. In addition to vocabulary, the book's many linguistic

[143] Exceptions to this generality are those who read the book as referring directly to historical occurrences within Israel or Judah's history, particularly at 4:13–16 and 9:13–16, e.g. Jennifer Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Haupt, *Book of Ecclesiastes*; and those who read the book through a social-science lens, e.g. Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

[144] See James Muilenburg, "A Qoheleth Scroll from Qumran," *BASOR* 135 (1954): 20–28. The two short fragments from the other manuscript, 4QQoh[b], have been dated to the middle of the first century BCE.

[145] Hugo Grotius, *Annotate ad Vetus Testamentum: Tomus I* (Paris: Sebastian & Gabriel Cramoisy, 1644).

peculiarities have been well documented.[146] These vocabulary and linguistic features have garnered a majority's consensus for a late, post-exilic date, but a few scholars still claim that there is nothing in the book that necessarily rules out a pre-exilic date.[147] Others, therefore, are beginning to utilize more empirical approaches that might reassert and strengthen the case for a late—specifically, third-century BCE—date.

One example of such an approach comes from a recent paper by Nili Samet. Samet believes that a third-century BCE date can be confirmed on a stricter empirical basis than previous work has provided, and she has yielded some solid evidence for the claim. She does this by showing that two Aramaic calques found in Qoheleth, בשל אשר and כצל אשר, must be dated to the Hellenistic period.[148] This is because the Aramaic equivalents of the two phrases, בדיל די and בטלל / מן טלל, respectively, are found only in texts from the Hellenistic era onward (בדיל די: 4Q197 f4ii:2; 11Q10 29:7; 5/6 Hev57 1:5; בטלל / מן טלל: 11Q10 7a; 1Q20 19:16–17, 19) and are not found in Imperial Aramaic, yet they evolved from earlier forms that do appear in Imperial Aramaic. Samet's proposal bolsters the current scholarly consensus that the book was penned in the middle part of the third century BCE, a consensus with which I concur.

B. Genre

The greatest literary works are rarely the simplest ones to classify in terms of genre, and this is no less true of Qoheleth. The book incorporates a wide variety of literary forms familiar to its context—instruction, proverbs, poetry, narrative, autobiography, among others. But in terms of a single genre for the book, the label traditionally associated with Qoheleth is that of "wisdom literature." Wisdom literature's status as a genre, however, has recently come under heat from

[146] See, e.g., Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M. G. Easton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 190–96; Francesco Bianchi, "The Language of Qohelet: A Bibliographical Survey," *ZAW* 105 (1993): 210–23; C. L. Seow, "Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qohelet," *JBL* 115.4 (1996): 643–66; Dominic Rudman, "A Note on the Dating of Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* 61 (1999): 47–52; Robert D. Holmstedt, "The Grammar of שׁ and אשׁר in Qohelet," 283–307 in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century* (ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013); S. J. du Plessis, "Aspects of Morphological Peculiarities of the Language of Qoheleth," 164–80 in *De Fructo Oris Sui: Essays in Honour of Adrianus van Selms* (ed. I. H. Eybers et al; Leiden: Brill, 1971). Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 16–21; Stuart Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes: Volume 1, Introduction and Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6* (vol. 1; London: T&T Clark, 2020), 57–72.

[147] E.g. Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988).

[148] Nili Samet, "Linguistic Dating of the Book of Qohelet: A New Direction" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, Denver, CO, 18 November 2018).

many of its own most prominent researchers.[149] Is there an articulable set of criteria that demarcates a given book as a "wisdom" book? In the view of some, any such set on offer fails to comport with even the three "wisdom" books of the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job), let alone the later apocryphal works (Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira) or those found at Qumran (4QInstruction, 4Q184, 4Q185, 4Q525, Book of Mysteries). For other scholars, Mark Sneed's demand for "*necessary* and *sufficient* [conditions]…delimiting what should and should not be included within the wisdom category"[150] is an unrealistically high standard. It is not clear that meeting such a prerequisite is necessary for a genre to justify itself, however.

But this raises the question as to the nature of genre itself: what *is* a genre? Sneed draws on Kenton Sparks' distinction between "generic realism" and "generic nominalism."[151] The former views genres as fixed, ontological realities for which the task is simply to identify the appropriate textual participants. The latter sees genres as "flexible and partially arbitrary… taxonomic inventions."[152] Sneed finds problematic the approach of many wisdom scholars, who he says, buttressed by their generic realism, propagate an "insular" wisdom tradition "rigidly separated…off from the rest of the corpora."[153] He, along with Stuart Weeks and Will Kynes, would like to see the books traditionally classified as "wisdom" read not only in relation to one another but also in relation to other books with which each one may share a number of affinities outside of the classic "wisdom" paradigm.[154] Their practical suggestion, then, is to open up the avenues that might lead to fruitful interpretation by identifying more links with more texts and interpreting a given book (partially) in light of the resulting patterns. Kynes takes the criticism of wisdom even further, ambitiously pronouncing the very "death" of the genre.

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[149] See the essays in Mark R. Sneed ed, *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015).

[150] Mark R. Sneed, " 'Grasping After the Wind': The Elusive Attempt to Define and Delimit Wisdom," 39–67, at 59, in ibid.

[151] Sneed, " 'Grasping'," 59; Mark Sneed, "Is the 'Wisdom Tradition' a Tradition?" *CBQ* 73 (2011): 50–71.

[152] Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 6.

[153] Sneed, " 'Grasping'," 60. Such genre realism seems particularly problematic when employed so as to rule out certain interpretations of a text *a priori*, as in Pierre Gilbert, "Fighting Fire with Fire: Divine Nihilism in Ecclesiastes," *Direction* 40 (2011): 65–79, at 67: "to assert that Ecclesiastes' message is fundamentally cynical and pessimistic *betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of Hebrew wisdom literature.* Ecclesiastes *cannot be* an exposition of nihilism as the most coherent philosophical choice in the face of the apparent absurdity of human existence" [emphasis added].

[154] Stuart Weeks, "Is 'Wisdom Literature' a Useful Category?" 3–23 in *Tracing Sapiential Traditions in Ancient Judaism* (ed. Hindy Najman, Jean-Sébastien Rey, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar; Leiden: Brill, 2016); Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

We can welcome these scholars' practical suggestion without subscribing to Kynes' proposal that the "wisdom" genre classification is better off jettisoned.[155] While none of a text's links with other texts will serve as a univocal, exclusive pathway to meaning, we need not be intertextual egalitarians—some affinities are clearly more central than others to a text's self-identity.[156] The genre nominalists are correct that genre classifications are always imperfect social constructions, never Platonic forms that fall from the heavens. But as a starting point for orienting a reader's expectations and demarcating a text's participation in a certain conversation, they are useful—and the "wisdom" genre is undoubtedly more helpful than harmful in the case of Qoheleth. Wisdom literature, indeed, is characterized in part by its shared conversation concerning how one might discern and live a valuable life.[157] To be clear, the appellation "wisdom" to a group of texts does not presuppose some tidy, harmonious perspective agreed upon by all participants. An important aspect of Qoheleth's own project—as emphasized by twentieth-century scholarship's diagnosis of the "crisis" in Hebrew wisdom[158]—is to refute certain assumptions and claims of earlier sages (even as he may retain various other of their presuppositions). As such, even by disagreeing with earlier views he is participating in a distinct lineage of discourse of which he himself is not the progenitor—competitors on the field still play by the same rules. This lineage need not be regarded as an actual "school" or formal institution as some have claimed, since there is little evidence for that stronger claim.[159] But it is a particular tradition of discourse—a *genre*—nonetheless.

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[155] Even on a practical level, as Michael Fox says, "we're going to want to talk about works like Amenemope, Ahiqar, Proverbs, Ben Sira, Qoheleth, and others, without repeating the whole list every time." Michael V. Fox, "Three Theses on Wisdom," 69–86 in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies* (ed. Mark R. Sneed; Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 89.

[156] Sneed, "'Grasping'," 59, acknowledges this: "Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, the wisdom psalms, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon surely belong to the same family."

[157] Cf. Carol A. Newsom, "Positive Psychology and Ancient Israelite Wisdom," 117–35 in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life* (ed. Brent A. Strawn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119: "Within biblical literature, the wisdom tradition is distinctive in that here specific and sustained attention is given to the nature of human well-being and how that is to be secured"; James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 24: "Wisdom is the reasoned search for specific ways to assure well-being and the implementation of those discoveries in daily existence"; Tomáš Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs & Qoheleth* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 217: "The enterprise which [Proverbs and Qoheleth] witness to…has one specific end in view, to make the most of being, or as we may put it nowadays, to improve one's quality of life."

[158] E.g. Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," 141–53 in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Otto Kaiser, "Fate, Suffering, and God: The Crisis of the Belief in a Moral Order in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *OTE* 4 (1986): 1–13; Crüsemann, "'Crisis of Wisdom'," 57–77.

[159] See Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 132–56.

From another perspective, however—one more concerned with form than content—the book may best be classified as a form of "intellectual autobiography" or "philosophical memoir." Several scholars have highlighted its autobiographical aspect and compared it to other ancient autobiographies, particularly Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic royal autobiographical inscriptions in which kings would boast of their accomplishments.[160] These certainly do resemble Qoheleth's publication of his own achievements in 2:4–8. What sets apart Qoheleth's broader autobiography, however—both in 1:12–2:26 and the book at large—is its distinctly introspective, intellectual thrust. The Mesopotamian kings boast of battles they won, enemies they conquered, meals they provided, temples they constructed, animals they sacrificed, gifts they offered, divinations they received, cities they rebuilt, friends they blessed—in short, public accomplishments recited to attest their greatness *as kings.*[161] Yet for Qoheleth, the list of achievements in 2:4–8 serves a rhetorical purpose precisely the opposite of the Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic royal autobiographies. He is not providing proof of his public greatness as such, but demonstrating how far his achievements took him in his quest for lasting significance, ultimately only to show that such achievements came to nothing. For when he "considered all the works [his] hands had done, and the toil with which [he] had been toiling to accomplish it," he came to the conclusion that "all was *hebel* and a striving after wind" (2:11). The list of "royal" achievements thus retroactively reveals itself as a setup for the intellectual journey he is taking us on.[162] External events are relayed only inasmuch as they serve the story of the mind. And in this manner the book carries on, after 2:4–8 never again returning to describe any external actions from Qoheleth's own life,[163] but simply sharing the things that he saw and his own mental tossing and turning concerning them.[164]

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[160] See Y. V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006); Martin A. Shields, "Qohelet and Royal Autobiography," 117–36 in *The Words of the Wise are like Goads: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century* (ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013); Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991); Matthew J. Suriano, "Kingship and *Carpe Diem*, Between Gilgamesh and Qoheleth," *VT* 67 (2017): 285–306.

[161] See the translated texts provided in Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, 215–243. Of course, whether or not they are "fictional" is beside the point for present purposes.

[162] The passage also seems to cast an implicit *a fortiori* argument: if Qoheleth *as a highly successful king* could not accrue "lasting gain" for all his efforts, then good luck to any of his readers.

[163] The only possible exception to this is his finding of a man rather than a woman in 7:28, depending on how that difficult passage is construed.

[164] Cf. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Das Buch Kohelet: Eine philosophische Erörterung im Gewand einer Erzählung," 8–15 in *Kohelet: Herausgegeben vom Katholischen Bibelwerk e.V. mit Zeichnungen von Dieter Groß* (Entdecken: Lese- und Arbeitsbuch zur Bibel, 2005), 9: "Vom Inhalt her gesehen ist das Buch…eher eine

I suspect, therefore, that if the book or its twenty-first-century equivalent were written today, it would be found on the bookstore shelf labeled "intellectual autobiography."[165] The paired term conveys the combination of three major features: (a) the work is written from a particular, first-person point of view; (b) the point of view in question is in some sense telling a narrative of the person's own experience (where "narrative" implies change over time); (c) the content of this story is primarily one's thoughts, ideas, or philosophical perspective. The genre is a familiar one, and many classic works of literature or philosophy fit the bill, including Augustine's *Confessions,* Descartes' *Method on Discourse* and *Meditations,* Rousseau's *Confessions,* Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo,* John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography,* and Tolstoy's *Confession.* Stephen Mulhall, after naming titles including those above, notes, "It might even be argued that one could write an instructive (even if not exactly exhaustive) history of Western philosophy by concentrating solely on examples of philosophical autobiography."[166] Perhaps such a history ought to begin with Qoheleth.

Murphy suggests that the book's genre is most similar to Pascal's *Pensees,* the "reflections and jottings of a mature man on the meaning of life."[167] While the parallel is apropos in many respects, it falls short in that Pascal did not present his "thoughts" as part of any narrative; they are simply numbered thoughts. Here too we could mention Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which also bears a flavor similar to Qoheleth. But the crucial difference between these and our sage is that, beyond the communicated thoughts, Qoheleth consistently adds his own narration (quite apart from the book's epilogist).[168] This is most obviously true, of course, in the "royal autobiography" of 1:12–2:26. But the stance is maintained throughout the book, as Qoheleth consistently encompasses the communication of his ideas with verbs of narration—"I saw," "I turned," "I realized," "I spoke with my heart," "I laid this to heart," "there is an evil I have seen," and the

philosophische Abhandlung. Die Erzählung ist ihm nur wie ein durchsichtiges Kleid übergeworfen. Die Reflexionen sind an die Lebensgeschichte Kohelets rückgebunden. So kann man das Buch als eine in eine Erzählung gekleidete philosophische Abhandlung mit einer zum Teil autobiographischen Stilisierung verstehen."

[165] Fox, *Rereading*, 155, likewise submits that "perhaps the best way to characterize Qohelet would be 'reflective autobiography', as opposed to a celebratory autobiography that narrates deeds and accomplishments." Fox acknowledges that "parallels are few" but notes Khakheperre-sonb (*AEL* 1.146–49) and Ps 73 as comparable.

[166] Stephen Mulhall, "Autobiography and Biography," 180–96 in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature* (ed. Richard Eldridge; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[167] Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Coheleth," *CBQ* 17 (1955): 304–14, at 305.

[168] Cf. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 125: "We may do better to remember that he has adopted the format of a memoir, not a philosophical essay."

like.[169] The effect of such interjections is primarily to convey that the ideas laid out before the reader did not come to Qoheleth in some singular epiphanous moment. Rather, insights came scattershot, spread across time and circumstance. Qoheleth saw one thing, but later realized another, and later yet came to an articulated conclusion—to take the example of 2:13–15.[170] This is the sense conveyed.

Moreover, in addition to these specific moments of insight, one can also detect a broader movement of stages or phases through which Qoheleth's intellectual development passed. These will be discussed at points in the thesis as they are crucial to the argument I advance. The two most central of these involve a shift of emphasis from negative to positive value. The former is represented by Qoheleth's well-known *hebel* motif, the latter by his almost-as-well-known enjoyment refrain, and much scholarly interpretation of the book as a whole has hinged on which of the two emphases the reader deems more central. But against the tendency to read Qoheleth as either a wholly negative pessimist[171] or an utterly joyful optimist,[172] the interpretation I offer attempts to let both aspects fully stand. This is done partly diachronically, as just indicated, by seeing the two sides as representing two different stages of Qoheleth's thought. But it is done synchronically as well, inasmuch as Qoheleth's "positive" turn does not completely contradict or undermine his earlier negative values, and some important distinctions in value theory can help us understand the nature of Qoheleth's value-relations.

This thesis, then, exists in two parts, "Qoheleth's Negative Values" (Part I) and "Qoheleth's Positive Values" (Part II). Part I will examine the understanding of value implicit in Qoheleth's themes of meaning, death, and time, and Part II will consider his views on the value of existence itself as well as that of well-being and enjoyment. I will proceed by attempting to both uncover and reconstruct the layers of Qoheleth's value-centered philosophical vision with each consecutive chapter, at each step articulating his views in the terms of contemporary philosophy of value as well as occasionally comparing Qoheleth's thought with specific philosophers.

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[169] On Qoheleth's use of the perfect tense in his first-person narrative, see Bo Isaksson, "The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qohelet," 35–46 in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. A. Berlejung and P. van Hecke; Louvain: Peeters, 2007).

[170] See Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 10.

[171] E.g. Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 32–36; William H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and Its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1997).

[172] E.g. Graham S. Ogden, "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *BT* 38 (1987): 301–07, at 307: "[Qoheleth] is essentially an optimist."

PART I — QOHELETH'S NEGATIVE VALUES

CHAPTER 2

"WHAT GAIN?"
THE VALUE OF ABSENT MEANING

I. Introduction

A. Meaning in Qoheleth

The words of Qoheleth have long been associated with the question of life's meaning. This assumption has certainly held sway in the many cultural and literary references to Ecclesiastes which have accrued over the centuries. Leo Tolstoy's famous *Confession,* for instance, makes copious reference to the book in the midst of his tract on the "meaning of life" (a phrase he repeatedly uses).[1] Moreover, the text of Ecclesiastes is often reprinted in philosophical anthologies concerning the meaning of life.[2] But the idea that the book is about the meaning of life is found among its scholars as well: "My basic thesis is that the central concern of the book of Qohelet is *meaning*—not transience, not work, not values, not mortality. These themes are there, but they are all ways of approaching the more fundamental issue, the meaning of life."[3]

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[1] Leo Tolstoy, *Confession* (trans. David Patterson; New York: Norton, 1983).

[2] E.g. Joshua W. Seachris ed, *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 121–32; Oswald Hanfling ed, *Life and Meaning: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 7–8.

[3] Michael V. Fox, "The Inner Structure of Qohelet's Thought," 225–38 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 225 [emphasis original]. Cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 5, "At the heart of Qoheleth's search was the meaning of life in a world from which God had withdrawn into the heavens"; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 1:18, "Behind this question of 'gain'…is the basic question of the meaning of life"; Tomáš Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs & Qoheleth* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 155, "He is asking about the meaning of life"; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 21, "The bulk of the book is Qohelet's speech that is made up primarily of autobiographical reflections on the meaning of life"; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; vol. 1; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), 1:455: "In this question of the 'portion',

I registered my own claim in the last chapter that the most fundamental issue of the book is *value*, because it is a broader category than meaning and thus can encapsulate not only Qoheleth's denials but also his affirmations as to what, in the end, *is* good. However, in terms of the centrality of themes, meaning must rank as a close second. Meaning is arguably the most important *kind* of value for Qoheleth (though, as we will later see, it is not the only kind). Indispensable to Qoheleth's message are his ruminations on meaning in human lives, expressed, of course, through his own idiosyncratic nomenclature. Stating this much at the forefront hardly puts the matter to rest. The real quandary is not whether this is a central topic, but precisely what the sage has to say on this elusive, complex theme.[4]

One of the most common notions one finds in Ecclesiastes scholarship is the idea that Qoheleth sought to find life's meaning but finally acknowledged that such a meaning is unattainable by humans.[5] The problem is not that such repeated claims are wrong—they are not—but that they are not very precise. Modern-day English users have perhaps some intuitive understanding of the word "meaning" (as used in the phrase "the meaning of life"). Yet as philosophers such as Garrett Thomson have pointed out, the question about the meaning of life "itself needs to be analyzed and better understood, because it is not clear what it means and what would count as an answer."[6] If we are going to speak of Ecclesiastes as grappling with the question of the meaning of life, therefore, we ought to gain some clarity on what we mean by "meaning." If Qoheleth sustains a concept of meaning, what features mark out the concept? This chapter's

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the 'benefit', what is under discussion is the question of the meaning of life"; Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Coheleth," *CBQ* 17 (1955): 304–14: "It belongs…to the genre of Pascal's *Pensées*, reflections and jottings of a mature man on the meaning of life" (305); Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 24: "What Qoh. expresses is something real: the struggle with the meaning of our existence…"; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 17: "Qohelet sets out to explore the meaning of life"; William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 7: "Qoheleth searches hither and thither for some sense of meaning and purpose before death's inescapable presence."

[4] The elusiveness of the concept of meaning has been noted by several writers on the subject, e.g. Wim de Muijnck, "Good Fit versus Meaning in Life," *Symposion* 3.3 (2016): 309–24, at 311–13. For now, I will assume a generic, culturally shared sense of the term. But in the second half of this chapter we will provide distinct theories from the philosophical literature in our effort to more precisely articulate Qoheleth's own conception of meaning.

[5] E.g. Tremper Longman III, "'Meaningless, Meaningless, Says Qohelet': Finding the Meaning of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes," 231–46 in *God and Meaning: New Essays* (ed. Joshua W. Seachris and Stewart Goetz; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 233: "Qohelet has looked for meaning 'under the sun' and has come up empty"; Fox, "Inner Structure," 225: "What unites all of Qohelet's complaints is the collapse of meaning"; Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 227, "A thorough, rational examination of life is unable to find any satisfactory meaning"; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 24, 49, 74, 92.

[6] Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (Belmont, MA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003), 3–14.

primary aim is to articulate that concept with greater clarity and philosophical rigor than is usually done.

B. Method

If we are to discover Qoheleth's account of life's meaning, there can be no avoiding Qoheleth's most (in)famous leitmotif, the *hebel* [הֶבֶל] sayings.[7] Typically, scholars have highlighted and debated Qoheleth's use of the term *hebel* as articulating the loss of such meaning, in one sense or another.[8] This is a reasonable starting point, and I can only follow suit here. At the same time, however, the method of categorizing and proposing single-word glosses for *hebel* does not probe far enough in the quest for Qoheleth's underlying thought. For one thing, it often leaves unstated and ambiguous the precise sense of the correlating (positive) "meaning" in question, and this is something worth pursuing. In other words, if *hebel* refers to some perceived *lack* in the human experience*,* just what is the positive content of that which is lacking? Second and relatedly, as mentioned in the last chapter, the linguistic approach must be supplemented by an analysis which seeks to explicate and relate Qoheleth's ideas on the conceptual level.

This chapter therefore takes a new approach, at least in its second half. One presupposition behind it is that if we invert or "reverse-engineer" Qoheleth's *hebel* statements, we can more readily draw out Qoheleth's views on meaning as such. This is because negative statements are inherently more ambiguous than positive statements, and they need to be clarified with respect to the positive claims they deny. The negative is always derived from the denial of some positive good (as St. Augustine pointed out), whether conceived or actual. Such is the case with Qoheleth as well. His *hebel* sayings do not emerge from a vacuum, *ex nihilo.* They express criticism which is implicitly superimposed against some positive imagination of how the world *could* (hypothetically) be. However, it will be insufficient merely to flip from a negative single-word gloss to a positive one. A more rigorous conceptual and theoretical account of Qoheleth's notion of meaning is also needed, and this is what we will attempt to provide.

First, then, I will walk through a taxonomy of interpretations of *hebel* and then propose two of them as Qoheleth's primary intended senses (Section II). Second, I will draw on certain strands from meaning of life (MoL) philosophy in an attempt to reconstruct Qoheleth's positive

[7] Throughout this dissertation I will primarily retain Hebrew words in their own alphabet rather than transliterated and with Masoretic vowels included (except for verbal roots). But a few of the more central and recurring conceptual words, such as *hebel,* will often be referred to in transliteration.

[8] Many of the proposed interpretations of *hebel* imply this, though not all of them (as we shall see shortly).

views regarding what *would* constitute meaning in life, if such a thing were possible (Section III). By the chapter's conclusion we will have outlined the contours of Qoheleth's particular conception of life's meaning, one which looks to other human beings for existential vindication.

II. *Hebel:* Antithesis of Meaning

It is difficult to say much about Qoheleth's broader views without first addressing the *hebel* question, and this is all the more true in a chapter discussing the sage's conception of meaning in life. We will therefore evaluate several of the suggested interpretations of the word before articulating our own and proceeding to some of its implications.[9]

A. *Hebel* in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible (HB) outside Qoheleth, the noun הֶבֶל (*hebel)* is used thirty-six times, with (approximately) the following senses:[10] (a) breath, vapor, air;[11] (b) idol, worthless thing;[12] (c) futile, useless, vanity, in vain;[13] (d) fleeting, transient;[14] (e) insubstantial, insignificant.[15] The first category represents what all scholars take to be the original, concrete meaning of the term הֶבֶל.[16] The term's flexibility and diversity within the HB should caution us from drawing too direct and determinate a line from its non-Qoheleth biblical use to its meaning in Qoheleth. But after discussing its use in Qoheleth I will suggest a schema for the relationship between its respective use in the biblical and Qohelethan corpora.

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[9] For overviews on the *hebel* debate see also Russell L. Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings of Hebel (הבל) Ecclesiastes," *CurBR* 14.3 (2016): 279–97; Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *JBL* 105.3 (1986): 409–27.

[10] For discussions of *hebel* outside of Qoheleth, see especially Seybold, "הבל," *TDOT* 3:13–21; C. L. Seow, "Beyond Mortal Grasp: The Usage of 'Hebel' in Ecclesiastes," *ABR* 48.1 (2000): 1–16 (esp. 3–5); Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1964), 218–25.

[11] Isa 57:13; 62:10b(9b); Prov 21:6. Of these, only in Isa 57:13 does *hebel* signify "breath" (or "vapor") in a strictly concrete sense, without any metaphorical connotation. The latter two are recognizably metaphorical and will be discussed further below. Other uses are likely minimally metaphorical, such as Ps 39:6(5); 144:4; Job 7:16 (with sense "fleeting"), and Ps 39:12(11); 62:10a(9a); 94:11 (with sense "insignificant"), though the distinction between these two categories as well as between conceptual and minimally metaphorical senses is not always clear.

[12] Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8, 15; 14:22; 16:19; 51:18; Jonah 2:8; Ps 31:7(6).

[13] Isa 30:7; 49:4; Jer 10:3; Zech 10:2; Ps 39:7(6); 78:33; Job 9:29; 21:34; 27:12; 35:16; Lam 4:17.

[14] Ps 39:6(5); Ps 144:4; Job 7:16; Prov 21:6; 31:30. In all of these instances except possibly Prov 31:30, the sense of transience is communicated first "through" the metaphor of "breath."

[15] Ps 39:12(11); 62:10a(9a); 94:11.

[16] Essentially, it is "connected in some way with air, or the movement of air" (Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* [New York: T&T Clark International, 2012], 105).

B. *Hebel* in Qoheleth

What follows is a brief taxonomy and assessment of the more common scholarly views concerning the meaning of *hebel* in Qoheleth.

1. *Hebel* as "vapor, breath"

Several scholars have proposed that *hebel* should be translated in its most original, concrete sense—"vapor" or "breath."[17] The proposal claims not that Qoheleth is referring to an actual, physical breath (as in Isa 57:13) but that the word functions as a "live metaphor," as Qoheleth seeks to illumine various situations or events by thinking of them as a "breath."[18] It is difficult to address the merits of this proposal without delving into the arena of metaphor theory, at least briefly.

Although the notion of a distinction between "dead" and "live" metaphors is commonly referenced,[19] some recent metaphor theorists have questioned the distinction's legitimacy. Cornelia Müller argues that metaphors can be both "dead and alive at the same time."[20] Müller can say this because, over against previous metaphor theorists, she distinguishes between how a metaphor generally functions within a given culture's language and how an individual speaker may choose to use it. A metaphor may be considered "dead" on the collective level of a linguistic system in that it has become highly conventionalized, yet an individual speaker may nonetheless choose to "activate" it—may choose to make the metaphor palpable again.[21] For example, in present-day English, calling a person "sharp" is a highly conventionalized way of praising their

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[17] E.g. Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Sean McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Loretz, *Qohelet* ("windhauch"); Douglas B. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of הבל," *JBL* 117.3 (1998): 437–54; Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qoheleth's Work* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); Ardel Caneday, " 'Everything is Vapor': Grasping the Meaning Under the Sun," *SBJT* 15.3 (2011): 26–40; Carey Walsh, "Theological Trace in Qoheleth," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42.1 (2012): 12–17; Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Norton, 2010).

[18] Miller, "Symbolic Use," 441; Miller, *Symbol*. Some scholars assert that *hebel* is a live metaphor yet translate it conceptually, e.g. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*; 106.

[19] E.g. Max Black, "More about Metaphor," *Dialectica* 31.3/4 (1977): 431–57, at 439; Earl R. MacCormac, "Metaphor Revisited," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30.2 (1971): 239–50, at 239.

[20] Cornelia Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking: A Dynamic View* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 200. Müller's work builds upon the well-known conceptual metaphor theory in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). But she offers a different approach particularly in that she highlights the role of an individual speaker's use of metaphor, whereas Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of metaphor pertains only to the level of the large-scale linguistic system, not individual language-users within it. Lakoff and Johnson argued against many of their predecessors that many so-called "dead" metaphors are actually alive and well in that they have become ingrained within a culture's very conceptual systems and modes of thought.

[21] Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive*, 1–21, 62–113.

intellect. For many, it is a paradigmatically "dead" metaphor. But if one were to say, "Greg is really sharp—he slices right through his opponent's arguments," one would be elaborating on the metaphor of sharpness in a way that calls the listener's attention to it and thereby activates it to some degree.[22] We might say that doing so "resuscitates" or "resurrects" a "dead" metaphor, though Müller prefers the notion of "waking" a "sleeping" metaphor.

Müller's ideas about metaphor are important for our understanding of *hebel* because if she is right, then it is too simplistic to claim that *hebel* in classical Hebrew simply *is* either a "live" or "dead" metaphor, as though either one is a fixed property of the word within the Hebrew language of the period. Rather, the word's metaphoricity was latent and could potentially be drawn out—"wakened"—by the way a specific writer chose to use it. But how does one discern whether a writer is activating the word's metaphoricity? As implied with the "sharp" example above, Müller proposes that "waking metaphors are surrounded by metaphoricity indicators, such as verbal elaboration, specification, semantic opposition, syntactic integration."[23] For *hebel* in the HB, such activation was always a possibility at one's disposal, yet in practice it seems to have been rare. Psalm 62:10 (ET 62:9) is one of only two instances in the HB where the metaphoricity latent in *hebel* is discernibly "activated" by the writer: "Human beings are a mere *breath* [הֶבֶל]; people are a delusion [כָּזָב]. When they are weighed on the scales, all of them together are lighter than a *breath* [הֶבֶל]."[24] *Hebel* is used twice, and the latter part of the verse develops and plays with the *humans-as-breath* metaphor, so that its presence is undeniable. We can chart the "logic" of the metaphor as follows:

Metaphorical statement	**Concrete statement**	**Existential implication**
1) Humans are a breath	**2)** A breath is very light on a physical weight scale (implied in the comparative)	**3)** A breath is (existentially) insignificant
	4) Humans are lighter than a breath on a physical weight scale	**5)** Humans are (existentially) insignificant

[22] Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive*, 198, also proposes that metaphoricity on any given usage is a matter of gradation rather than a simple "dead" or "alive" binary.

[23] Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive*, 198.

[24] All Hebrew Bible translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

This verse is worth highlighting precisely because of its rarity. It shows us what it would look like for a biblical writer to "activate," or verbally elaborate, the metaphorical potential inherent to the word *hebel*. The other instance of an activated *hebel* metaphor in the HB is Prov 21:6: "Making money by a lying tongue is a driven vapor [הֶ֭בֶל נִדָּ֣ף] for those who seek death." The participle נִדָּף qualifies the *hebel* as being "driven," something only possibly true of a concrete "vapor" or "breath." The implied sense is of the ill-gotten gain's transience, but the mind must pass through the thought of a "vapor" to get there. Yet apart from these two instances, no other biblical writer offers a similar activation for *hebel,* including Qoheleth.[25] And the word's common use as a signifier for idols entirely lacks any sense of metaphorical activation (Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8, 15; 14:22; 16:19; 51:18; Jonah 2:8; Ps 31:7[6]). Given this range of use, it seems likely that *hebel* for ancient Hebrew speakers and writers was not entirely "dead," but what Müller calls "conventionalized and transparent," or "sleeping."[26] This means that while it was very often used conceptually, it still retained a literal counterpart, and therefore if a speaker or writer wanted to draw upon the word's metaphorical sense as a "breath," the word could still function as such.

We thus have little reason to suppose Qoheleth uses the word as a consistently "live" metaphor. Even if a rendering of "breath" for *hebel* is adopted on the level of translation, then the problem of interpretation is merely pushed back one more gradient, since one would then need to ask precisely what quality or characteristic of vapor or breath Qoheleth has in mind at any given occurrence—that it is "empty," or "transient," or "illusory," or "substanceless," or the like. No doubt even among scholars who do prefer the translation "breath" or "vapor," there are a variety of ways by which they exposit that reading.[27] Maintaining the metaphorical sense throughout the

[25] This is not to say that Qoheleth *could not have* intended the word in a highly metaphorical sense, but that he provided *no evidence* for thinking so. In Müller's usage, "activation" refers to empirical evidence of in the source material of, again, "verbal elaboration, specification, semantic opposition, syntactic integration," and the like. In his thirty-nine uses of the word, Qoheleth does not once "play with" the idea of "breath" or "vapor" at all; he provides no ground for thinking the word's metaphoricity is activated apart from simply assuming that it is.

[26] Müller, *Metaphors Dead and Alive*, 198: "Sleeping metaphors are singular uses of a verbal metaphor that are not elaborated by verbal, gestural, or pictorial means. Put differently, a sleeping metaphor is a metaphor whose metaphoricity is potentially available to an average speaker/listener, writer/reader because it is transparent, but there are no empirical indications of activated metaphoricity."

[27] Fox, "*Hebel*," 411–12, rightly claims, "Although *hebel* may still carry some associations of its original sense, "vapor" (see, e.g., Isa 57:13), most of the *hebel* predications in Qohelet are not live metaphors, because they do not demand a two-level interpretation—a literal interpretation overridden by a new, metaphorical one. In any case, the image of vapor does not provide much guidance in ascertaining the meaning of this word in Qohelet, because a vapor can represent many things."

book's *hebel* occurrences results in some very awkward sentences, such as, "I saw a breath under the sun" (4:7).[28] The supreme woodenness of this and plenty other of occurrences (on this translation) stems partly from the fact that, in order to comply with Qoheleth's usage, *hebel* must at least be translated by a term conveying negative judgment. Whatever הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים … הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל means, it is obvious that it was spoken emotively, emphatically—and that Qoheleth is not happy about it.[29] Yet how exactly can "breath of breaths" or "vapor of vapors" be an emphatic statement? What exactly is ultra-breathiness? Is it bad? It can only be taken as emphatic if some meaning *beyond* "breath" is assumed; if the translator does not do this work, it will be left to the reader.[30] Leaving the word as an unexplained metaphor in every occurrence is not helpful, given the wide variety of contexts in which the word is employed. It is better translated into the conceptual realm.

On several occasions Qoheleth applies the evaluation רַע / רָעָה ("evil, bad, terrible") in strict parallel with a *hebel*-claim, and in other cases the two terms appraise the same circumstance but at slightly different points within a passage. That which Qoheleth labels *hebel* he also calls "evil" [רָעָה, 6:1–2; רַע, 2:17; 9:2–3], "a great evil" [רָעָה רַבָּה, 2:21; cf. 10:5], a "sickening evil" [רָעָה חוֹלָה, 5:12, 15], an "evil sickness" [חֳלִי רָע, 6:2], and "a bad business" [עִנְיַן רָע, 4:8; cf. 1:13]. It is therefore difficult to deny that *hebel* encapsulates some kind of *disvalue,* or perhaps more than one kind. The translation "breath" does not communicate any clear sense of disvalue, so another term which does so must be preferred.

2. *Hebel* as "transient, fleeting"

[28] Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, xiv, admits the awkwardness, but says it is "justified by the fact that the Hebrew says literally that." Yet I am aware of no commentator on Deut 32:21 or 1 Kgs 16:13, 26, for instance, who would translate that the people had aroused Yhwh's anger on account of their "breaths," and then say the translation is justified by the fact that the Hebrew says literally that.

[29] Technically, that phrase is the editor's summation of Qoheleth's message, put into Qoheleth's mouth, but the repetition no doubt captures Qoheleth's emphatic tone. Cf. Seybold, "הבל," 3:13–21, on *hebel:* "It has a broad emotion-laden stratum with strong evocative possibilities, and it is especially suited therefore to be a keyword or catchword" (315).

[30] For instance, Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 57, writes regarding 2:26, "even the distribution of good fortune and bad fortune is a breath." Likely the reason for Qoheleth labeling the distribution *hebel* is due to its apparent arbitrariness. But calling the situation "a breath" communicates no semantic content. At best, the modern-day reader will have to make a guess when that work should have been done by the translator.

Some commentators have claimed that the term *hebel* conveys only Qoheleth's sense that things are *transient* or *fleeting*.[31] This understanding finds contextual support from three (or possibly four) of Qoheleth's *hebel*-judgments (6:12; 9:9; 11:10; possibly 7:15), and it could work in a few additional texts.[32] But for the vast majority of Qoheleth's uses it jars against the context and simply does not say enough. Again, the problem is that to claim something as "transient" is not necessarily to evaluate it negatively. Catching a virus such as influenza is usually temporary, and for this we are no doubt grateful. But again, Qoheleth's *hebel*-claims, if they are to mean anything at all, clearly comprise negative critiques. The problem of injustice referenced in 8:10, 14, for example, is not a "fleeting" problem—and the problem at large, not some smaller component, is what is deemed *hebel.* Likewise, there is nothing "transient" about the fact that the man in 6:2, blessed by God in every way, could not enjoy his own gifts. "Transient" or "fleeting" is thus too benign a rendering of the problems Qoheleth observes; the translation cannot by itself shoulder the weight of his complaints. However, the issue of transience (or lack of permanence) does certainly play a crucial role in Qoheleth's thinking about meaning and *hebel*. The important point, though, as we will see in later discussions, is that it is adduced as one factor among others which, when added together, comprise Qoheleth's concept of meaning. Transience cannot stand alone as a description for Qoheleth's chief complaints, and in the large majority of cases it does not properly translate *hebel.*

3. *Hebel* as "incomprehensible, enigma"

Here we could group together a handful of posited terms—incomprehensible, enigma, mystery, and the like. What is central here is that Qoheleth's *hebel*-judgments amount to an epistemological claim—that human beings' primary problem is due to their dearth of knowledge.[33] *Hebel* would therefore vanish if sufficient information were at hand.

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[31] E.g. Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993); Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1952), keeps "vanity" for the translation but suggests that it "connotes primarily that which is fleeting and transitory."

[32] 6:12; 7:15, and 9:9 involve a similar syntactical structure in which *hebel* concludes a construct chain referring to "days" or "life" and is modified by a pronominal suffix.

[33] Advocates of this interpretation include: W. E. Staples, "The 'Vanity' of Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 2.2 (1943): 95–104: "The author does not look upon these things so much as 'vain' as incomprehensible. They are mysteries which are unfathomable to his finite mind" (104); Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 14: "It identifies the enigmatic…it suggests that life is not fully comprehensible. It in no sense carries the meaning 'vanity' or 'meaningless' "; Graham S. Ogden, "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *BT* 38 (1987): 301–07; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*,

It is certainly true that incomprehensibility—or better, *ignorance*—constitutes a major theme in the book (2:19; 3:11, 21; 6:12; 7:14, 23–25; 8:7, 8:16–17; 9:12; 10:14; 11:2, 5). However, this proposal is dealt the serious blow that wherever Qoheleth complains of an epistemic lack (often in terms of an inability to "find / find out," מצא) he never once labels this lack a *hebel.* Inversely, among all his *hebel*-judgments not one directly professes a poverty of knowing, unless that idea is simply read into the word *hebel* itself. In other words, while both *hebel* and ignorance are prominent themes in the book, there is no reason to regard them as the self-same motif. They must be related in some fashion, though, and this question will be picked up below.

Moreover, the attempt to read *all* of the *hebel* sayings through the lens of an epistemic lack disperses that pointed theme too superficially across the book. The knowledge Qoheleth primarily has in mind in the texts concerning epistemic lack is knowledge of the future (3:22b; 6:12; 7:14b; 10:14). Hence, its truest shield from access is death: "For Qohelet, humans are not ignorant because the secrets of the world are concealed behind a curtain somehow, but because the limited spans of their own lives prevent them from seeing the bigger picture of which those lives are only a tiny part."[34]

There is no textual warrant, therefore, to gloss *hebel* as "incomprehensible." An evaluation or judgment cannot be made in the complete absence of knowledge. Qoheleth does not know everything, but he knows plenty, and on the basis of what he knows he pronounces judgments.[35]

4. *Hebel* as "worthless, nothing, zero"[36]

106. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), takes a slightly different approach in that he employs the traditional translation "vanity" for *hebel* in almost all instances, but his understanding of its meaning is closer to "incomprehensible" than the typical connotations of "vanity." In his essay, "Beyond Mortal Grasp," he writes that the world is for Qoheleth "imprehensible—not apprehensible and/or not comprehensible" (15). Thus Seow intentionally combines the often distinct senses of "transient, fleeting" and "incomprehensible."

[34] Stuart Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes: Volume 2, Commentary on Ecclesiastes 5.7–12.14* (vol. 2; London: T&T Clark, forthcoming), page numbers unavailable.

[35] Cf. Fox, "*Hebel*," 412–13.

[36] "Worthless": Mark Sneed, "Hebel as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis," *JBL* 136.4 (2017): 879–94; Seybold, "הבל," 3:13–21.

"Nothingness": Hans Brandenburg, *Das Buch der Sprüche, der Prediger und das Hohelied: Die Weisheit und die Liebe* (Giessen: Brunnen-Verlag, 1971); Kurt Galling, "Der Prediger," 73–125 in *Die fünf Megilloth* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1969); Konrad Ehlich, "Hebel–Metaphern der Nichtigkeit," 49–64 in *"Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit ...". Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit. Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Anja A. et al. Diesel; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996).

"Zero": H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 1, says it means "zero"; Stephen Garfinkel, "Qoheleth: The Philosopher Means Business," 51–62 in *Bringing the Hidden to*

Mark Sneed has recently revived the proposal that Qoheleth's *hebel* means "worthless."[37] "Worthless" is a fairly simple notion—a piece of garbage is called "worthless." It tells us that the object in question bears no value whatsoever—end of story. This is not what Qoheleth means by *hebel*. "All is *hebel"* does not mean, "no value exists in the world whatsoever." *Hebel* is, indeed, a negative value judgment, but its criticism of the world is more pointed than the fully nihilistic claim that all is worthless. In my view, Qoheleth is indeed claiming that a certain, and quite important, kind of value is lacking, but not all possible value. If *hebel* indicated a world devoid of worth, he could not proceed to praise "what is good," but this is precisely his posture in the famous "joy" texts to which we shall come. Thus Qoheleth's theory of value is more nuanced than what the *hebel-as-worthless* reading implies, and one of the aims of this dissertation is to show how his negative and positive values actually cohere.[38]

Reading *hebel* as "nothing" or "zero" is equally unhelpful, because in this case the original metaphor ("vapor," "breath") is simply translated into *another* metaphor ("nothing," "zero"), which cannot be regarded literally true. Almost all of the *hebel* occurrences describe *something* as taking place, so deciphering the sense as "nothing" only begs the question as to the sense in which the something is a "nothing." I suggest that Qoheleth is clearer than this.

5. *Hebel* as "futile"

Here too, a variety of translations have been provided for what is essentially the same idea. "Futile,"[39] "meaningless,"[40] "useless,"[41] "pointless,"[42] and "vanity"[43] can all signify a notion of

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Light: The Process of Interpretation. Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller (ed. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Dianne M. Sharon; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns / Jewish Theological Seminary, 2007).

[37] Sneed, "Hebel as 'Worthless'," 891–93. See also Fox's reply, Michael V. Fox, "On הבל in Qoheleth: A Reply to Mark Sneed," *JBL* 138.3 (2019): 559–63.

[38] Sneed offers "futile" as a gloss synonymous with "worthless," but the two should be regarded distinctly since "futile" is predicated only of actions, whereas "worthless" can be predicated of anything.

[39] NET; CSB; HCSB; Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 42 (though he also uses "fleeting"); James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 57 (and elsewhere). In distinction from Fox, Crenshaw does not distinguish between "absurd" and "futility," treating them as interchangeable synonyms.

[40] NIV; Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 32. "Meaningless" can certainly carry somewhat different connotations depending on the user. I do not use or understand the term as a synonym for "valueless" or "worthless," as some commentators seem to, because I assume a distinction between meaning and value that will be explained elsewhere in this thesis.

[41] GNT.

[42] CEB; CJB; ISV.

[43] KJV; ESV; NRSV; NJB; NASB; George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Scribner, 1908), 72: "everything is fruitless, ineffectual, unavailing"; J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York:

wasted or unsuccessful effort, labor that comes to naught.[44]

It is not without warrant that this sense has enjoyed such popularity. I propose that it serves as a crucial starting point for Qoheleth's intended sense of *hebel*. In my judgment it is one of the two main senses given to *hebel* in the book, and this first sense is primarily (though not exclusively) operative within Qoheleth's royal autobiography of 1:12–2:26. In broad terms, this autobiography contains descriptions of Qoheleth's own past actions (1:12–13a, 17a; 2:1–10, 12), statements of his intent or purpose with regard to the actions (1:13a, 17a; 2:3), and reflections or conclusions he drew from them (1:13b–15, 16, 17b–18; 2:13–17, 18–23, 24–26). The focus is therefore on Qoheleth's actions and their perceived utility with respect to desired ends. The "futility" interpretation can very plausibly make sense of Qoheleth's first several uses of *hebel* in this vicinity (1:14; 2:1, 11, 15 (?), 17). All describe scenarios in which toil was undertaken with the purpose of achieving some *telos* or intended goal, but wherein the effort did not succeed.

For example, in 2:2 Qoheleth writes, "This also was *hebel*…I said…of pleasure, 'What does it *do?'* [מַה־זֹּה עֹשָׂה]." The implication is that pleasure "does" or accomplishes nothing productive and is therefore useless, futile. He concludes the same section in 2:11, "But then I considered all the works my hands had done and the toil I had expended to accomplish it, but…all this was *hebel…"* What is being identified as *hebel* in these instances is the *action* or *effort* which, despite his many accomplishments, was unable to achieve a greater purpose.

This is crucial to note because as the book progresses, Qoheleth begins to expand the sort of referent which may be identified as *hebel.* Beginning ostensibly with 2:19 and continuing into the next several *hebel* occurrences, it is no longer only (inefficacious) *actions* that are identified as *hebel.* Now Qoheleth begins to label *situations*—that is, acts *along with* their consequences—as *hebel.* Expanding on this point will lead us into the next proposal.

Schocken, 1968). Several German commentators employ "eitel" / "Eitelkeit": Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963); Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978); Walther Zimmerli, "Das Buch des Predigers Salomo," 123–253 in *Sprüche, Prediger, Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Esther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967). Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), translates *hebel* consistently with "vanity" but also says he thinks " 'absurd' in the sense of incomprehensible is an adequate equivalent of the term" (lix). I have categorized "vanity" here under "futility" rather than "worthless" despite its etymological sense ("empty") perhaps being closer to the latter, because it is more often understood in line with the former—empty with respect to action, pointless.

[44] The LXX translates *hebel* along these lines with ματαιότης (except in 9:9), but the other three Greek translations (Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion) use a more literal rendition, ἀτμίς / ἀτμός. The Vulgate's influential *vanitas* preserved this line of interpretation for western Christendom.

6. *Hebel* as "absurd"

a. The "absurd" as a disjunction

In his influential 1986 article "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," Michael Fox proposes the translation "absurd," gleaning the notion from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus.*[45] For Fox, "The essence of the absurd is a disparity between two terms that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are, in fact, disjunct."[46] Elaborating on this by way of Camus, we can say that the "absurd" is a disjunction or mismatch between

> (a) the human desire and expectation for how things "ought" to be: a world of order, justice, stability, and rationality, with a stable cause-effect nexus, where deeds bring about their fitting rewards or consequences, simply put, a meaningful world;
>
> (b) and, the actual state of the world we find: a world that lacks justice, order, and rationality, lacks cause-effect, and therefore lacks meaning.[47]

Ryan Gillespie comments on Camus's notion: "The idea here is something like: there is nothing inherently troubling about meaning-seeking humans, in isolation, nor is there something inherently troubling about a silent universe, in isolation. When the two collide, however, a great dissatisfaction occurs, a sort of cosmic dissonance."[48] The word "absurd" registers that cosmic dissonance. We cannot presume every nuance of Camus' understanding of the absurd to be present

[45] Those who translate *hebel* as "absurd" include Fox, "*Hebel*," 409–27; Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), esp. 44; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*; Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth: Part II Vocabulary* (vol. 2; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 119–29; W. Sibley Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes," 267–360 in *The New Interpreter's Bible,* vol. 5 (ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998); William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 120–50; Benjamin Lyle Berger, "Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd," *BibInt* 9.2 (2001): 141–79; Elsa Tamez, "Ecclesiastes: A Reading from the Periphery," *Interpretation* 53.3 (2001): 250–59; Jimyung Kim, *Reanimating Qohelet's Contradictory Voices: Studies of Open-Ended Discourse on Wisdom in Ecclesiastes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 134–37. Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond, 1981) says "the word is used to point out incongruities," and as such it means "something very close to 'irony' and 'ironic' " (182).

[46] Fox, "*Hebel*," 409.

[47] This is my own summary of Camus's description of "the absurd" in Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (trans. Justin O'Brien; New York: Vintage, 1955), especially 28–30, 49–51.

[48] Ryan Gillespie, "Cosmic Meaning, Awe, and Absurdity in the Secular Age: A Critique of Religious Non-Theism," *Harvard Theological Review* 111.4 (2018): 461–87, at 462.

in Qoheleth. What is central is the confrontation and breakdown between the two realities—human expectation or desire, and the world as it stands.

As just mentioned, the instances of *hebel* in Qoheleth's first two chapters concentrate on *actions* which can ultimately be regarded as futile, acts that achieve no purpose. But from the end of chapter two onward Qoheleth highlights not just particular actions but *situations* or *scenarios* which he finds unexpected, troubling, and absurd. Actions are still embedded *within* those scenarios, but what we consistently find is that Qoheleth's antecedent for the demonstrative pronoun—"this" [זֶה] in the repeated trope "this is *hebel"*—is not one component or the other, but the entire situation, the "absurd" impropriety of fit between its parts. The relation is regarded not only as incongruous but as "oppressive, even tragic."[49]

It is beyond the purview of this chapter to support the *hebel-as-absurd* reading by providing an in-depth exegesis of the book's every instance of *hebel*,[50] though many of the texts will be more thoroughly explored at various points in this work. Rather than walk through the texts individually and inductively, as would be most ideal, I provide a table with interpretive paraphrases of all relevant occurrences of *hebel* in the book.[51] Much has been made in Ecclesiastes studies of the breakdown between act and consequence found in the book.[52] The distinction is indeed a helpful heuristic by which to evaluate Qoheleth's *hebel* language, and the table below shows that the majority of Qoheleth's *hebel* uses can be seen in terms of this bipartite structure. I have also provided a second table listing additional phrases that parallel the *hebel* sayings—that is, negative evaluative judgments that introduce or conclude some narrated scenario. In all cases the word or phrase used for negative evaluation is one which Qoheleth uses elsewhere in immediate parallelism with *hebel.* I regard these examples as communicating the same ideas(s) as the *hebel* sayings.

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[49] Fox, "*Hebel*," 410.

[50] Fox, "*Hebel*," provides something closer to this, however.

[51] By necessity, this involves making certain assumptions of interpretive framing which I cannot take the space to defend here, but I prefer this to the alternative of determining the meaning of the *hebel* sayings by picking only a few sample texts—I am trying to cover all of the relevant data. Many of the texts, however, will be returned to and discussed at greater length in the course of this thesis.

[52] Klaus Koch, "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?," 130–80 in *Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des Alten Testaments* (ed. Klaus Koch; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), republished in English as Klaus Koch, "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?," 57–87 in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; London: Fortress, 1983), famously registered the dichotomy as the "concept of an action with built-in consequences" (83). I do not intend that particular "built-in" sense in my use here, only that Qoheleth assumes that actions should bring about certain expected consequences. See further Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Richard P. Belcher, "Divine Retribution in Ecclesiastes: An Analysis of the Deed-Consequence Relationship with Implications for the Interpretation of the Book" (Westminster Theological Seminary, 2000).

Qoheleth's Use of Hebel *in Act-Consequence Structure*

	(Intentional) Action	**(Inappropriate) Consequence**	**Evaluation**
	A	**B**	
1:14	All the work that is done		*hebel,* and striving after wind
2:1	Test self with pleasure		*hebel*
2:11	All my hands had done and the toil I had expended		*hebel,* striving after wind
2:15	I have become exceedingly wise	yet same fate as the fool—death	*hebel*
2:17	What is done		bad, *hebel,* striving after wind
2:19	I have toiled and used wisdom to accrue possessions	yet an unknown person will be put in charge of them	*hebel*
2:21	A person has toiled with wisdom…	…but must leave it all for someone who did not work for it	*hebel*, and a great evil
2:23	His work… At night (the time for resting)…	…brings vexation …his mind/heart cannot rest	*hebel*
2:26	One finds favor with God… Another finds no such favor…	…and God gives him wisdom, knowledge, joy …and God gives him the burdensome task of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God	*hebel,* striving after wind
3:19	[Implicit: Humans exercise capacities greater than non-human animals]	yet all have the same fate of death, humans have no advantage	*hebel*
4:4	All work, skill, wisdom	*[Not consequence of, but motivation for action:* envy of neighbor]	*hebel,* striving after wind
4:7–8	An heirless person toils ceaselessly (for wealth)…	…yet is never satisfied with the wealth	*hebel* (2x), and a bad business
4:16	A youth led many people…	…yet no one later will honor him	*hebel*, and striving after wind
5:6	Dreams increase and words multiply		*hebel*
5:9	He who loves money/wealth…	…will not be satisfied with it	*hebel*
6:2	God gives a man wealth…	…but the man lacks the ability to enjoy it	*hebel,* an evil sickness
6:4	The stillborn child comes in *hebel* [53]		*hebel*
6:9	The wandering of the appetite		*hebel,* and striving after wind
6:11	More words spoken		*hebel*
7:6	The laughing of fools		*hebel* (cf. 2:2)

[53] The usage in 6:4 is unusual in that it is not a separate judgment ("this is *hebel*") but directly modifies the verb in a prepositional phrase. The sense could work as either "absurd" or "futile," but Qoheleth probably means that a stillborn's "coming" is an act of futility, since it is not coming in order to live. This use of *hebel* finds a parallel in Ps 78:33, where the psalmist says of the wilderness generation, "[God] made them complete their days *in hebel* [בַּהֶבֶל] and their years in terror."

7:15	A righteous man…[54] And a wicked man…	…perishes in his righteousness …extends his life in his wrongdoing	*hebel*
8:10	The wicked go in and out of the temple…	…yet are praised for it[55]	*hebel*
8:14	Righteous people… Wicked people…	…undergo consequences as if they were wicked …undergo consequences as if they were righteous	*hebel* (2x)
9:2–3[56]	Righteous and unrighteous, etc.	all have the same fate of death	*hebel,* evil

Additional Phrases Which Parallel Qoheleth's Use of Hebel [57]

	(Intentional) Action	**(Inappropriate) Consequence**	**Evaluation**
	A	**B**	
1:13b	Humans are preoccupied with a business/task God gave them		bad business
1:16–17	I gave my heart over to know wisdom and madness and folly With much wisdom… The one who increases knowledge…	 …comes much vexation …increases pain	striving after wind
2:2	Frivolity Pleasure		mad achieves nothing
5:12–13	Wealth was accrued and saved up by its owner (to pass on to his son as an inheritance)…	…but it was lost in a bad business venture	sickening evil
5:15	Just as he came… Someone toils for the wind…	…likewise shall he go …but for no gain	sickening evil
10:5–7	Folly is put in many high places… Slaves on horses…	…while the wealthy sit in low places …yet princes walking on the ground like slaves	evil, mistake

[54] In verses such as 7:15, 8:10, and 8:14, the "act" side of the act-consequence structure is implicit within the mention of "righteous" (or "wicked") people—standing behind the stative adjectival descriptor, of course, lies a lifetime's worth of righteous (or wicked) actions.

[55] This paraphrase reflects two common emendations for the verse: קְבֻרִים ("buried") to קְרֵבִים ("approaching"), and וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ ("were forgotten") to וְיִשְׁתַּבְּחוּ ("were praised").

[56] The inclusion of 9:2 here is due to an emendation of that text (from MT's הכל to הבל) which I will address in Chapter 3.

[57] The only other phrase which parallels Qoheleth's use of *hebel* but is not listed here is 4:6, "Better is one handful of rest than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind." It is not listed in the chart because the syntax of the sentence does not fit the act-consequence structure, but the meaning of the sentence itself points to the breakdown of the act-consequence structure—rest is better than toil since toil never fulfills its aspirations.

Of the thirty-nine instances of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes,[58] the five occurrences in 1:2 and three in 12:8 will be set aside as contextless and therefore question-begging.[59] The usage in 11:8 ("all that comes is *hebel"*) has virtually the same problem; the context of death is no doubt in view, but other than that the referent "all that comes" is broad enough to fit almost any of the proposed meanings. Of the remaining thirty, I have charted above all except for 6:12, 9:9a, 9:9b, and 11:10. The constructions in 6:12 and 9:9 (2x) are nearly identical (see below), and the mention of "life" and "(few) days" in the context, along with 11:10 and its reference to "youth" and the "prime of life," incline me to think that these four do share the sense, "fleeting." It is not impossible (if we want to press Qoheleth for consistency) that they mean "futile" or "absurd," but it seems less likely given their context.

> For who knows what is good for a man during his life—during the few days of his *hebel* life [בַּחַיִּים מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ]? (6:12)
>
> …all the days of your life of *hebel* [כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ] (9:9a)
>
> …all your *hebel* days [כֹּל יְמֵי הֶבְלֶךָ] (9:9b)
>
> …for youth and the prime of life are *hebel* [הַיַּלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת הָבֶל] (11:10)

That leaves twenty-six remaining instances, those charted above. My criterion for interpreting the sense as "futile" versus "absurd" is quite simple: If column B (Inappropriate Consequence) is empty, then "futile" applies; if not, then "absurd" applies. The reason is that, where column B is empty, Qoheleth is proposing (in column A) a human activity which *should* amount to some correlating fulfillment, yet such a fulfillment is simply lacking. The work that is done (1:14; 2:17), the testing with pleasure (2:1), the work of one's hands and one's toiling (2:11), the proliferation of dreams and words (5:6), the wandering of the appetite (6:9), the many words spoken (6:11), and the laughing of fools (7:6)—without some correlating fulfillment, these are deemed futile, a waste of effort. So an empty column B essentially means, "nothing comes of it." But in the majority of overall *hebel* occurrences we see a phrase represented in both columns, A

[58] Including the emended 9:2.

[59] Additionally, these uses in 1:2 and 12:8 are the work of the editor, placed into Qoheleth's mouth ("…says Qoheleth…") as his summary of the sage's message. (Against the more recent proposal which understands "Qoheleth" as a character constructed by the book's author, I regard Qoheleth as a historical person whose work was handed down by one or more editors. But virtually none of the arguments in this thesis strictly depend on that judgment.)

and B, because the majority of Qoheleth's *hebel* uses are not merely describing an object or even an action that fails to see fruition, but multi-faceted *situations,* which conceptually occupy both "sides" of the act-consequence structure.[60] The relation between A and B in these cases is ill-suited: the A-side provides an act or state for which one could expect a certain kind of corollary, but the B-side then identifies the surprising, inappropriate consequence or correlation. Apart from "absurd" none of the other proposed translations for *hebel* can account for this *situational* aspect of Qoheleth's *hebel*-usage. The most important claim here is not that the word "absurd" must be utilized for translations of *hebel* or that *hebel* must be read through the philosophy of Albert Camus. Rather, what is crucial is the recognition that in all of the cases charted above Qoheleth finds problematic the unfit relation between the two parts. The left-side action (or fact) sets up a certain expectation that is stymied by the right-side result. "Absurd," derived from the Latin *absurdus,* meaning "dissonant," "incongruous," "out of tune," is a natural term for expressing this sense of impropriety.

I cannot, of course, walk through every occurrence of *hebel*, but having laid out this basic approach I shall briefly comment on the text of a few representative examples. The point is only to hint at how I am reading *hebel* as it occurs in the book*,* not fully to expound these passages, a task for which there is not sufficient space given my other concerns. Qoheleth's quandary in 2:19, 21 is that he has worked hard to construct a business, yet once he dies his life's work will be taken over by someone who has not worked for it. If Qoheleth had only made the point that he will lose his business after death, we might consider that the act of accruing it had been futile. That much is no doubt implied, but Qoheleth says much more than that before he deems the situation *hebel.* By introducing his would-be "heir" into the discussion and that person's potential foolishness and lack of desert as essential to the problem, he adds layers of woe upon the original, makes the heartbreak all the more biting, and promotes the complaint from the realm of the "futile" into that of the "absurd."[61]

The comment regarding humans and animals in 3:19 describes not quite an *act*-consequence scheme as a *fact*-consequence scheme, given that humans beings did not perform actions to achieve their status as humans. Nevertheless, Qoheleth's point is that humans, being superior to animals, deserve some ultimate fate distinct from the beasts. The fact that they do not

[60] Fox, "*Hebel*," *passim.*
[61] Cf. Fox, "*Hebel*," 416–17.

receive this is neither "breath," nor fleeting (it is permanent), nor unknown (he has just recited it), nor worthless (it is a significant fact), nor precisely futile. It is absurd—contrary to reasonable expectation.

In 4:4 Qoheleth observes not merely that "all toil and all skill in work" are ultimately *futile* actions, though he conveys that idea elsewhere. The point here is that there is something troublesome, even wrong, about the source of their motivation. All human effort is driven by jealousy and the coveting of one's neighbor[62]—a disappointing feature of the world indeed. It is not transient, nor is it illusory or mysterious. It is simply a surprising and regrettable fact about human being in general, thus absurd.[63]

One could proceed through many such cases, but I trust my general approach to the issue has been made clear.

b. "Absurd" in relation to "futile"

I have proposed that Qoheleth uses *hebel* in two primary senses—"futile" and "absurd." These are not merely two unrelated senses, however; they are deeply conjoined.[64] As noted earlier, I take "futile" to be Qoheleth's starting-point sense, and this derives from his own experience (particularly as described in 1:12–2:26) of attempting, but failing to arrive at, a satisfactory *telos*—or, in his native tongue, a יִתְרוֹן.

In this Qoheleth provides an instance of a typical human phenomenon. In their knowledge and experience of the world humans by necessity start local. This is most obviously true in the case of child development, but it is no less true with insights that may occur later in life. But having begun contemplation on one's own experience, with all its attendant cases of trial-and-error, it is only natural for abstraction to occur. Individuals abstract from their own experience to another's, from another's to the wider group's, until eventually the level of abstraction might encompass all

[62] The key word, קִנְאָה, is used in other biblical contexts that deal with spousal jealousy (e.g. Numb 5:14, 29, 30).

[63] Cf. Fox, "*Hebel*," 418.

[64] Fox, "*Hebel*," 409, writes, "No one English word corresponds exactly to the semantic shape of *hebel* as Qohelet uses it, but it is possible to render the word by an equivalent that comes close to representing its range of meaning and that bears similar connotations." Although I agree with Fox that "absurd" is more all-encompassing a concept than other proposals and thus potentially more appropriate for rendering all of the book's occurrences of *hebel* (Fox, "*Hebel*," 414), it is nonetheless difficult to see it as the best semantic fit in every single instance. I have therefore slightly parted ways with Fox on this point, rendering the word primarily by "absurd" and "futile" while also attempting to show the logical connection between the two. Miller (*Symbol,* and "Symbolic Use"), on the other hand, has argued explicitly for the term's multivalency.

existence, with theories regarding the nature of humanity as such and reality itself. Thus what began for Qoheleth as a relatively confined observation, "this action of mine was *hebel"* gradually developed into the sweeping universal, "*all* is *hebel."*

A brief parable:

> Joanna wakes up one morning and pours a bowl of cereal only to discover there is no milk in the fridge (her roommate had unfortunately swallowed up the last bit without replenishing). She proceeds to put on her shoes and coat and walk fifteen blocks to the nearest market in order to get a pint of milk. But, as it turns out, on this morning the market has run out of milk and stocks none on the shelves. She returns home empty-handed, and, disgruntled, eats dry cereal from the bowl.

How shall Joanna afterward describe what happened? She could say it was a "futile" or "pointless" act for her to walk the fifteen blocks to the store for milk, since her only purpose in the walking was invalidated. But what if it happens again the next day? And the next again? And what if several of her friends tell her they just experienced the same thing with their own local market? What if, furthermore, none of the market owners provide any justification for this oversight—such as that the weekly shipments were running late—but simply state that they have ceased to offer milk? At this point, Joanna might be tempted to move beyond language of futility and declare, "It's completely *absurd."* She would then be referring not specifically to her action itself, but to the larger situation—namely, the fact that a market, whose ostensible purpose is to provide standard foods and beverages for purchase, would not stock any milk. This jars against one's reasonable expectation for what ought to be true of a city market—why should a market even exist if a person cannot rely on it for a pint of milk on a Tuesday morning? This situation creates an environment in which actions—such as Joanna's fifteen blocks of walking—will inevitably be nulled. We should not be surprised if Joanna very soon gives up the effort, stays home, and is merely left eating a dry bowl of cereal every morning. The inappropriateness of cereal without milk would only add to the absurdity of it all.

So then, "absurdity" is a way of describing the environment or context in which any attempted actions are met with frustration and inevitably result in futility. In an absurd environment, the futility of one's actions has become the norm and expectation. This leaves humans lacking in any motivational resource for performing one action over against another. Absurdity, however, is a broad enough notion that it also applies to situations that are not specifically about actions and their fulfillment. In general, what is absurd is a context in which

longings and expectations about the way the world ought to be are found to be unrelentingly (and oftentimes ironically) contradicted by the actual state of affairs at hand.

One implication of all this is that *hebel-as-absurd* is not a proposal that comes from the middle of nowhere (or, say, from the middle of Algiers by way of Paris). Rather, it rises up from the well-established sense of "futile" for *hebel.* Only, it is an abstraction *of* this sense. Absurdity is futility run amok and raised to a metalevel perspective. "In other words," Fox notes, "'toil' may be futile, but *the fact that* toil is futile is absurd."[65] Absurdity, then, transcends yet still includes (sublates) futility.

This close connection between the absurd and the futile is present in Camus's original essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus," from which Fox took inspiration in translating *hebel* as "absurd." Sisyphus' punishment—to push the massive boulder to the top of a mountain only upon competition to let it roll back down to the bottom, and then to begin the whole process again, and again, for all eternity—is the archetype of a "futile" *action.* Yet at the same time, the situation is also rightly called "absurd." For in the context of his captive environment, Sisyphus can expect nothing otherwise for all his efforts than complete futility. Any goal one might normally associate with boulder-pushing, whatever that may be, is out of the realm of possibility. The situation is *a priori* absurd.

The sense of *hebel* as "idol" elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is instructive in this regard, as it too exhibits a case of multi-leveled abstraction. The meaning "idol" could not have developed directly from the literal *hebel-as-breath.* The use of the word in these occurrences shows that it retains a sense along the lines of "worthless/empty thing" (see especially 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 10:15), insinuating that an idol makes for a worthless god and can in no way benefit the worshipper. The sense "idol" could not derive directly from "breath" because an idol is in no sense a "breathy thing." (In fact, this would be ironic indeed, in light of the psalmist's declaration in Ps 135:17 that there is "no breath in their mouths.") There is no correlation between the original *hebel* and "idol"; rather, the meaning "idol" likely developed as an abstraction of an *already derived* meaning of *hebel*—namely, "worthless, empty," or the like. I am proposing that the same is true in the case of "absurd"; it developed not out of thin air (literally), but developed as an abstraction from "futile, useless."

[65] Fox, "*Hebel*," 413 [emphasis original].

I have thus tried to provide what Sneed says "Fox has failed to show," namely, "how 'absurd' can be connected at all with either the concrete meaning of 'vapor' or 'wind' or with the word's metaphorical senses, such as 'transient', 'futile', 'vain', or 'insubstantial'."[66] Beyond the present proposal, an alternative possibility is that "absurd" or something like it could derive from a sense such as "worthless, nothing, substanceless" when applied with a specific view to the object of expectations. To call the object of one's expectations and desires a "nothing" (specifically in its relationship to expectations and desires) is to render a situation absurd, just as calling an act "futile" can be seen as deeming it a "nothing" *with respect to* the fulfillment of an action's intended goal. Given the great variety of (related) senses afforded by the word *hebel*, it is hardly inconceivable that a sense such as "absurd," highlighting the disjunction between expectation and reality, could have developed either out of the word's original sense or one of its derivations.

III. Qoheleth's Conception of Meaning

Qoheleth, we might say, has the gift of criticism. Although he does provide positive commendations in the book, his *forte* is in observing and condemning the problems that plague his soul. But we can turn his darkness into light simply by inverting his condemnations into the positive standards of meaning which he clearly did hold (otherwise he could have done no criticizing). One reason for attempting this act of "reverse-engineering" is articulated well by philosopher Joel Feinberg in his essay, "Absurd Self-Fulfillment":

> What could human existence conceivably be like if it were to escape this absurdity? This is a crucial question that all philosophical pessimists must answer if their sweeping judgments of universal absurdity are to be fully intelligible. For unless we know what contrasting situation is being ruled out we cannot be sure what a given assertion is "including in." Unless we know what *would* count as nonabsurdity, if there were such a thing, we have nothing to contrast absurdity with. If all conceivable universes are equally and necessarily absurd on their face, so that one cannot even describe what nonabsurd existence would be like, it is not very informative, to put it mildly, to affirm that this our actual universe is absurd. It is a test of the intelligibility of a philosophical doctrine that it succeed in ruling out some contrasting state of affairs.[67]

Along these lines, we could add that understanding one's positive values (even if hypothetical) reveals more about one's worldview than hearing only that person's negative

[66] Sneed, "Hebel as 'Worthless'," 889.

[67] Joel Feinberg, "Absurd Self-Fulfillment," 297–330 in *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 306 [emphasis original].

criticisms. In the second half of this chapter I therefore build upon and apply our conclusions about Qoheleth's *hebel* usage to the question of how Qoheleth would have construed a meaningful existence. What is Qoheleth's positive conception of meaning, even if he does not consider meaning obtainable? Although Qoheleth does not explicitly state in positive terms what he deems to be the "meaning of life,"[68] we can ascertain his view on the matter implicitly through his relevant denials and the assumed standards that existence fails to meet which, by his lights, renders life *hebel.*[69] Our endeavor, simply put, is to provide a rigorous conceptual analysis of Qoheleth's idea of meaning—something rarely offered in the literature on the book.

This is a complex undertaking, not only because of the need for reverse-engineering to uncover Qoheleth's positive values, but also because Qoheleth's complaints and criticisms run a wide gamut. On the surface, at least, there is not just one single culprit, but a plethora of offenders. The task, however, is to discern the structure of Qoheleth's thought by looking for those ideas which are more fundamental to his logic. As regards meaning, we are assimilating a wide variety of statements which rather obviously have *something* to do with the topic and attempting to hone in on some fundamental conception or account the sage assumes, out of which his various ventilations have materialized.

A. Meaning as Teleological Value

The Hebrew text lacks any word directly translated to English as "meaning" (although one is very close, as we shall see), but Qoheleth does in fact sustain a concept of meaning. Qoheleth certainly thinks in terms of values, and "meaning" is the most appropriate English-language term for one particular sort of value. Whereas *hebel* conveys a negative value, the notion of meaning registers positive valence. In Section II, we found that the two primary senses of *hebel* in Qoheleth's usage

[68] As will be shown in a later chapter, I regard Qoheleth's positive commendations of joy not as the answer to his *meaning* problem—to which the only answer is negative—but as the answer to the broader problem of *value.* Meaning and value are thus crucially distinct: meaning is one type of value, but value is a broader category than meaning—indeed, it is the broadest axiological category. This differs from the approach advocated by Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing is Better'-Form," *JBL* 98.3 (1979): 339–50, who conflates the two and regards Qoheleth's enjoyment refrain as the solution to his meaning [יִתְרוֹן] problem.

[69] Fox, "Inner Structure," 235, seems to support this strategy: "Qohelet's construction of reality rests on a hidden structure of assumptions, a theoretical scaffolding, so to speak. We can discern the outlines of this structure by observing Qohelet's expectations, which are in turn revealed by what *violates* them" [emphasis original]; and, Fox, "*Hebel*," 426: "Underlying Qohelet's *hebel*-judgments is an assumption that the system *should* be rational, which, for Qohelet, means that actions should invariably produce appropriate consequences. In fact, Qohelet stubbornly expects them to do so" [emphasis original].

are those of *futility* and *absurdity.* These two, when inverted in terms of value, correspond to two senses of "meaning." Corresponding to *hebel-as-futility* is an understanding of meaning which regards it as a "teleological" value. For an action *not* to be futile means that the action lands somewhere, it reaches its desired and final endpoint. And corresponding to *hebel-as-absurd* is not meaningful action precisely, but a meaningful, coherent *environment* (or, a person's inhabiting such an environment) within which actions may find success and an act-consequence nexus may hold firm. This section concentrates on the former of these two senses—meaning as teleological value—and later on we will more briefly discuss meaning as coherent environment.

1. The *Form* of Qoheleth's Meaning

In characterizing Qoheleth's conception of meaning, we will utilize the familiar distinction between *form* and *content*. By form, I am referring to the formal conditions intrinsic to the concept of meaning itself—not yet a particular theory of how meaning materializes for someone, which will be taken up in the next section.[70] These conditions distinguish it from other value concepts of Qoheleth's such as well-being or pleasure (both of which will be examined in later chapters). Comprising the formal conditions implicit within Qoheleth's conception of meaning I see four primary elements: (a) meaning as the final, terminal value of an agent's instrumental actions; (b) meaning as difficult to achieve; (c) meaning as competently caused by the agent; (d) meaning as permanent, or at least long-lasting.[71]

a. Meaning as the final value of instrumentally valuable action

One of the classic distinctions in value theory is that between "instrumental value" and "intrinsic value,"[72] though here I will use "final value" for the latter category, as advocated by several recent

[70] I recognize that the concept of meaning in life is obviously a complex, elusive notion. In laying out these conditions, I am attempting to filter some of the MoL literature's more commonly suggested formal elements through the lens of Qoheleth's repeated constructions and emphases. The following formal conditions are Qoheleth's own, I submit, but the various parts (if not precisely the whole) overlap at points with plenty of such proposals found among contemporary meaning of life philosophers. In other words, what follows is not simply a generic conception of meaning with which every MoL philosopher agrees (there is no such thing), but it is one with whose components many such philosophers would concur. For discussions on the concept of meaning itself see, e.g., Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17–36.

[71] There is insufficient space to adduce more than one or two textual examples in each case, but my claim is that these formal properties constitute Qoheleth's meaning conception, and they rise to the surface of the text at various points where this conception is discernible.

[72] See Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Value," 29–43 in *The Oxford Handbook of Value Theory* (ed. Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

philosophers.[73] Instrumental values (or goods) are those which lack value in themselves, yet contribute value solely by virtue of their connection to some end to which they are instrumentally linked as its means. Final values (or goods) are those good ends which are valuable in themselves and do not derive their value from serving some other end. Instrumental goods therefore *aim at* and *culminate in* final goods, and final goods receive the support of instrumental goods. Any instrumental good that has been severed from its presumed final good—such as if the attempt to link them is unsuccessful, or if there exists no final good after all—would therefore be entirely lacking in value. To draw on our earlier example, walking to the store when it is done solely to purchase (and then consume) milk is an example of an instrumental good. The consumption of the milk (with the cereal!) is the final good.

Bearing this basic distinction in mind, I suggest that a crucial first component of Qoheleth's formal conception of meaning is that it involves a final good generated by an agent's long-term, instrumental actions. In other words, the conception is teleological, purposive. Qoheleth, of course, does not employ the terminology of value theory as we know it. But he does utilize a distinct set of vocabulary to convey his ideas about value, and I would even claim that his vocabulary may be mapped onto the instrumental value / final value distinction. Qoheleth's two most revealing word-groups for this structure of meaning are עָמָל (or עמל), and יִתְרוֹן (or מוֹתַר, יוֹתֵר, all from יתר).

Qoheleth's primary word-group for the instrumental actions which serve to achieve meaning is עמל, in its verbal and nominal forms. After הֶבֶל, it is one of Qoheleth's most distinct and prominent terms: the noun עָמָל occurs in Qoheleth twenty-two times (out of fifty-five in the HB), the adjectival form עָמֵל five times (out of nine in the HB), and the verb eight times (out of eleven in the HB). The three occurrences of the verb in the HB outside Qoheleth provide a uniform sense: Ps 127:1 asserts that those who build a house without God "labor in vain" [עָמְלוּ]; Prov 16:26 says that a laborer's appetite labors for him [נֶפֶשׁ עָמֵל עָמְלָה לּוֹ]; and God says to Jonah that he pities a plant for which he did not labor [לֹא־עָמַלְתָּ בּוֹ] (Jon 4:10).[74] It is therefore not surprising

[73] Advocating the terminology of "final value" rather than "intrinsic value" for the value of an end, see Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "A Distinction in Value: Intrinsic and For Its Own Sake," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (1999): 33–52; Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 169–95. However, I will use the language of "intrinsic value" in Chapter 6 where we will consider values which are valuable in themselves, even if they are not regarded as "ends" served by any "means" (as is the case here).

[74] The verb is also used with the same sense in Sir 11:1; 31:4; 33:18.

that every instance of the verb in Qoheleth fits the sense of "labor, toil" (1:3; 2:11, 19, 20, 21; 5:15, 17; 8:17). The sense is mostly carried in the adjective form that appears in the HB as well, where it is used either predicatively ("toiling") or substantively ("one who toils, workman"). Matters are somewhat more complicated with the noun, עָמָל. In the HB outside Qoheleth the word is used with three different senses: a) trouble, hardship, misfortune; b) harm, mischief, wrong; c) toil, labor.[75] These three senses are clearly related and can be united by the basic sense "trouble."[76] Of the three, Qoheleth employs עָמָל almost entirely in the third sense, though again, the word's other connotations are often felt, such that "toil" is presumed to be a troublesome, difficult undertaking. While Qoheleth certainly uses the word with respect to one's activity of labor, it also takes on a much broader meaning, even to connote the act of living itself (at least when living is viewed from a certain perspective).

Further, Qoheleth's word of choice to represent his category of a final and highest (hypothetical) good—which I regard as functionally coterminous with the Western cultural-philosophical notion of "meaning"—is יִתְרוֹן and its cognates.[77] This sense admittedly only comes after a degree of abstraction; on the ground, יִתְרוֹן refers to "profit," "net gain" or, more originally, "what is left over," "what remains."[78] It is that which has been left over after the accountant has added and subtracted the costs and benefits of a business endeavor.[79] If Qoheleth may be regarded in some sense as a businessman, as I suggested in the last chapter, then יִתְרוֹן is a natural term for him to use to express a concept akin to "meaning" in life.[80] For, as Terry Eagleton notes, " 'The

[75] "עָמָל I," *DCH* 6:481–82. The *DCH* editors distinguish two senses within the final category: "toil" as such, and the "fruit of toil." The latter is the sense of עָמָל famously applied to Qoheleth—across every occurrence in the book—by H. L. Ginsberg. I will not address his proposal here but will do so in Chapters 3 and 6 where it is more pertinent to the argument.

[76] Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 99.

[77] I am not alone in seeing the word יִתְרוֹן as the closest verbal representative for Qoheleth's concept of "meaning" in life. Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück: eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 33, for instance, subtitles a section of his book devoted to יִתְרוֹן in Qoheleth, "Die Frage nach dem Sinn des Lebens."

[78] For Schoors' word study see Schoors, *Preacher*, 423–27. The word יתרן appears in an Aramaic text from Saqqara, with reference to ||| ||| יתרן כספא זי קים בשנת, "the balance of money remaining in year six," apparently indicating a profit (Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6,* 256). Parallel usage is also seen in the Akkadian noun *[w]atartu[m],* "excess, balance" (see "atartu A," *CAD,* 2:485–86) and verb *[w]atāru[m],* "to exceed" (see "atāru," *CAD,* 2:487–92). The Hebrew noun derives from the root יתר, the verbal form of which occurs 100 times in the HB and has the basic sense, "to be left over."

[79] Frydrych, *Under the Sun*, 45.

[80] Cf. Schoors, *Preacher*, 424: "Qoh uses the commercial term in a metaphorical way… The question is not limited to profit in this world, it is about the yield or profit of a whole life of toil in this world."

meaning of life' might well mean 'what it all adds up to'."[81] In both cases we are dealing with a kind of *telos,* a final aim, presumably a significant one, toward which all previous actions had been working and for which they had been accruing value. It is the value that still abides after an accomplishment has come and gone. Qoheleth's desire for יִתְרוֹן is seen through his palpable lamentation at the fact of its absence (1:3; 2:11; 3:9; 5:16; cf. 3:19; 6:8, 11).

The following verses reveal how Qoheleth's conjoined use of עָמָל and יִתְרוֹן (יוֹתֵר in the final case) conveys a teleological structure of meaning:

> What lasting gain [יִתְרוֹן] is there for a person[82] in all his toil[83] which he toils [בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל] under the sun? (1:3)
>
> What lasting gain [יִתְרוֹן] is there for the worker in that which he toils [עָמֵל]? (3:9)
>
> But then I considered all the works my hands had done and the toil I had expended [lit: toil in which I toiled, וּבֶעָמָל שֶׁעָמַלְתִּי] to accomplish it, but—as a matter of fact—all this was futile [הֶבֶל] and a striving after wind! There was no lasting gain [יִתְרוֹן] under the sun. (2:11)
>
> This is a sickening evil: just as he came, likewise shall he go. So what lasting gain [יִתְרוֹן] is there for the one who toils for the wind [שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל לָרוּחַ]? (5:15)
>
> All of a person's toil [עָמָל] is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. For what gain [יוֹתֵר] is there for the wise over against the fool? (6:7–8a)

[81] Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79.

[82] With לָאָדָם Qoheleth may wish to refer to humankind in general, or, a given individual. The difference is not great, since, if the question is being asked of "*a* person," the person is universally representative. Although Qoheleth normally uses the definite article in הָאָדָם, throughout this work I generally translate the term as "a person," since English makes little use of "the person" or "the human" as a generic representative signifying humanity. While translating הָאָדָם with the gender-neutral "person," I have retained the masculine pronouns of the Hebrew for simplicity's sake.

[83] I take בְּ ("in") here and in 2:22, 3:9 to function instrumentally, "by means of."

The Hebrew parallels among the interrogatives in 1:3, 3:9, and 5:15 may be seen below, with the addition of 2:22 (which substitutes הֹוֶה for יִתְרוֹן):[84]

1:3	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן	לָאָדָם	בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ		שֶׁ	יַּעֲמֹל	
2:22	מָה־הֹוֶה	לָאָדָם	בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ	וּבְרַעְיוֹן לִבּוֹ	שֶׁ	עָמֵל	הוּא
3:9	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן	הָעוֹשֶׂה	בַּ		אֲשֶׁר	עָמֵל	הוּא
5:15	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן	לוֹ			שֶׁ	יַּעֲמֹל	לָרוּחַ

In 1:3, 3:9, and 5:15 Qoheleth posits a rhetorical question with an implicit negative answer: What יִתְרוֹן is there for humans? There is none.[85] Meaning is not, in fact, obtainable.[86] Yet what is also clear from these verses is that Qoheleth regards עמל as something that, at least hypothetically, would lead to and produce יִתְרוֹן. It *should,* in fact, produce such an effect. Thus עמל is to יִתְרוֹן as an instrumental good is to its corresponding final good. This teleological structure is a crucial component in Qoheleth's meaning conception.[87]

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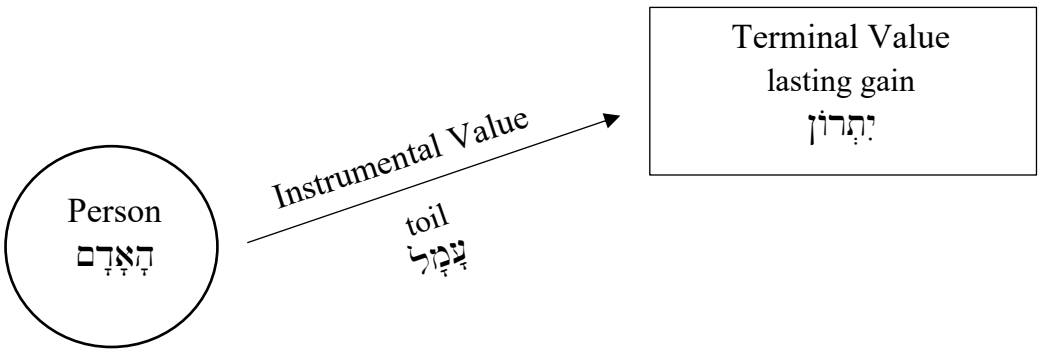
[84] I have reproduced the table found in Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 156.

[85] This is confirmed by context in each case and shown as well by the explicit denial in 2:11, אֵין יִתְרוֹן, clearly parallel to the others. Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück*, 34, posits that the rhetorical question's implicit answer is yet unclear at 1:3 (though 1:2 has given a hint) but becomes clear enough by the time the reader has absorbed the opening poem of 1:4–11. Some scholars, e.g., Pierre Gilbert, "Fighting Fire with Fire: Divine Nihilism in Ecclesiastes," *Direction* 40 (2011): 65–79, at 67–68; Longman III, "'Meaningless'," 231–46; Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 169, have read the "under the sun" motif as though it serves to qualify Qoheleth's entire discussion about meaning and leaves space for an opposite: everything is *hebel* "under the sun," but *above* the sun, in a divine, heavenly realm (or when viewing life from such a perspective), all is meaningful. "Under the sun," by this reading, refers to "life outside the sphere of accountability to God" (Gilbert, "Divine Nihilism," 68), "life…apart from God, or perhaps even apart from divine revelation" (Longman III, "'Meaningless'," 241). In fact, this reading was already prevalent among rabbinic (R. Judan) and medieval interpreters (Hugh of St. Cher, Guerric of St. Quentin). But, among other reasons, it must be ruled out by the presence of the phrase תחת שמש in fifth-century BCE Phoenician inscriptions that curse any potential grave robbers, such as this one from King Tabnit's tomb: "You shall have no descendants among the living under the sun [תחת שמש], nor a dwelling place with the Rephaim" (*KAI* 13.7–8; cf. *KAI* 14.12). In other words, "under the sun" in Qoheleth's context was a phrase used to refer to the realm of the living as opposed to that of the dead, not as opposed to that of the divine. Its opposite is not "*above* the sun" but, we could say, "under the *earth*," or perhaps, "*hidden from* the sun." No realm of human existence, therefore, escapes the tragic reality of meaning's absence.

[86] Qoheleth's denial that toil results in "gain" or "profit" opposes certain Proverbs which assert precisely that, employing the יתר cognate מוֹתַר (which Qoheleth uses in 3:19) for the presumed *telos*: "In all toil there will be gain [מוֹתַר]" (Prov 14:23a); "The plans of the diligent lead only to gain [מוֹתַר]" (Prov 21:5).

[87] Another of Qoheleth's common phrases which conveys his implicit teleological meaning structure is רְעוּת רוּחַ / רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ, "striving after wind" (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9; cf. 5:15). In seven of its nine occurrences the phrase is parallel to *hebel*, most often in its "futile" sense.

Qoheleth's Teleological Structure of Meaning



b. Meaning as difficult

A second formal condition for meaning in Qoheleth is that it is *difficult*. I am drawing here from philosopher Gwen Bradford's work on the concept of achievement, in which she proposes that achievement be defined as something that is both difficult and "competently caused."[88] We will take up the condition of difficulty here and discuss competent causation in the next section. Bradford writes,

> One feature that appears to distinguish…achievement…is that it is difficult… If writing a novel were so easy that anyone could do it, we wouldn't think of it as an achievement. Finding a cure for cancer is turning out to be difficult task. Writing a dissertation, running a marathon, or even smaller scale achievements, such as winning a game of chess, baking a soufflé, or cultivating a bonsai—all of these achievements are difficult to do.[89]

That Qoheleth sees meaning as difficult to achieve is perhaps implicit within the "trouble" connotation of עָמָל itself. But it also entirely fits with the texts cited in the previous section (1:3; 2:22; 3:9; 5:15), since יִתְרוֹן is there regarded as a would-be "payment" for the aches and agonies inherent in עָמָל. A passage from chapter four also conveys this notion that the task of meaning-accrual inherently involves difficulty, perhaps even a kind of suffering:

[88] See Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Although Bradford's main topic is achievement and not meaning per se, she does relate her analysis to meaning in life. In a conference presentation, she suggests that achievements are "especially good sources of meaning." Gwen Bradford, "Achievement and the Meaning of Life" (paper presented at the American Philosophical Association, Central Division, St. Louis, MO, 21 February 2015).

[89] Bradford, *Achievement*, 12.

> (7) Again, I saw an absurdity [הֶבֶל] under the sun: (8) there is a man who has no one else, neither offspring nor sibling, yet there is no end to all his toil [וְאֵין קֵץ לְכָל־עֲמָלוֹ], and his eye is never satisfied with riches. He asks,[90] "For whom am I toiling [עָמֵל] and depriving myself of what is good [מִטּוֹבָה]?" This also is absurd [הֶבֶל] and a terrible task. (4:7–8)

Here Qoheleth raises two possible factors which might have prevented the situation from having become הֶבֶל. First, if the man had some sibling or offspring for whose sake he were toiling and accruing wealth, then passing on the fruit of his labor to them would entail a sacrificial but meaningful act. Second, lacking that, if the man cannot aim at something meaningful he should at least enjoy his wealth, yet it seems his very toiling has prevented this. Thus the situation is doubly הֶבֶל. Relevant for our purposes is the man's rhetorical question, which posits a zero-sum relation between "toiling" and experiencing "good" in the present. This implies that to toil, as Qoheleth sees it, is to suffer laboriously for some end, *without* enjoying any fruits of the labor along the way. In light of the connotations of עָמָל elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, where it often alludes to suffering and misery, it is understandable that Qoheleth so consistently uses the word to convey this dual sense of work and woe. The pursuit of meaning therefore involves a kind of sacrifice—relinquishing short-term pleasure for long-term gain. This sacrifice is laudable indeed *if* one can reasonably expect their efforts to pay off and to arrive at some meaningful outcome. But if not, the would-be sacrifice becomes both pointless and pitiful.[91]

c. Meaning as competently caused

A third formal condition for Qoheleth's notion of meaning is that it is *competently caused* by the individual meaning-seeker. This idea helpfully narrows down the possibilities for what counts as meaning.[92] First, the relevant achievement is competently caused if a person accomplishes it by virtue of her own voluntary actions. It is *her* doing, rather than someone else's. Second, these actions should display a level of competence, skill, or ability without which the achievement would

[90] The MT has no introduction to the speech in first-person, although the Targum provides one (ולא יימר בליבביה) as does the Vulgate (*nec recogitat dicens*). Assuming a switch to a first-person quotation from the man—a common enough rhetorical device—is preferable to the alternative that Qoheleth himself is suddenly speaking in the first-person here. Having just introduced the "man," that would be an odd intrusion indeed. Further, Qoheleth nowhere else presents himself as *currently* "toiling" (עָמֵל, technically an adjectival form, carries a present tense verbal sense); he may have in the past, but by the time of writing he has learned his lesson.

[91] Qoheleth renders a similar verdict upon the man in 6:1–6, to be discussed in Chapter 5.

[92] See Bradford, *Achievement*, 1–25, though she discusses "competent causation" as a condition for "achievement" rather than "meaning."

not have been possible. Third, the person's skillful actions should bring about the desired outcome rather than it coming about merely by luck or chance. Bradford gives the example of two different men searching for a buried treasure, Lucky Lon and Diligent Don. Whereas Lon relies on "magic 8-balls ouiji boards, séances, and dowsing wands," Don uses historical documents, maps, land surveys, and a metal detector.[93] Should Lon find the treasure, it will have been by chance; should Don find it, the discovery will have been competently caused.

Qoheleth's criterion of competent causation is particularly evident when he laments the possibility of *someone else* taking over the business that *he,* through *his* own wise competence had worked so fervently to achieve: "So I [אֲנִי] hated all my business for which I myself [שֶׁאֲנִי] had toiled under the sun, since I would need to leave it to the man who will come after me…For there can be a man whose labor is done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill and yet he must pass on his lot to a man who did not labor for it. This also is absurd and a great evil" (2:18, 21). Qoheleth's double use of אֲנִי in v 18, especially when combined with the participle עָמֵל, draws attention to himself as the one who has been toiling, over against the hypothetical heir.[94] In modern-day English we might express the relevant phrase, "*I* was the one toiling!" Moreover, his labor was far more than mindless brawn. Qoheleth eagerly notes the "wisdom, knowledge, and skill" that went into establishing his business, surely on the assumption that precisely such capacities led to the flourishing of his endeavors. Thus, the notion of competent causation seems to helpfully pick out one of Qoheleth's assumed criteria for meaningful achievement.[95]

d. Meaning as permanent

A fourth element discernible in Qoheleth's structure of meaning is *permanence*: Qoheleth's idea of meaning necessitates permanency. Given my contention that Qoheleth's concept of meaning is teleological or purposive, the point here is that Qoheleth assumes that the particular goal to be achieved, whatever its precise content, must endow a *permanent* benefit upon its achiever. This

[93] Bradford, *Achievement*, 13–14.

[94] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6*, 448, 452.

[95] Another text implying this criterion of competent causation is 9:11–12, if read through an inverted lens. The fact that "the race does not belong to the swift, nor the battle to the strong" (etc.) is a misfortune [רָעָה] for Qoheleth because these achievements *should* belong to their rightful respective parties. In Qoheleth's ideal world, an individual's competent causation renders meaningful achievement. Yet, in the absurd world he has come to know, the arbitrary whims of "time and chance" topple human attempts at meaningful action. The passage will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, and this notion of competent causation will be further developed in Chapter 4.

condition is implicit within many texts, including 1:4a, 11, 2:11–17, 18–22; 3:19–20; 4:13–16; 5:12–16; 9:5, 11–12, 13–15 (all of which will be addressed at points in this thesis). In fact, it is the failure to satisfy this particular criterion—even when others are apparently met—that most consistently grounds Qoheleth's claim that teleological meaning cannot obtain.[96] As with the other criteria named, it is indirectly manifest; in this case, Qoheleth betrays the condition by being so distraught at the terminality of otherwise-worthy goods. For instance, the sum total of his royal accomplishments relayed in 2:4–8 is extremely impressive by any normal standard of a human life, and these would surely meet the first three conditions for meaning just presented: he had toiled instrumentally for an achievement of final value, the process was difficult, and he competently caused it himself. The only grounds he gives for finally dismissing it all as *hebel* in 2:11 is the insight he arrives at in 2:12–23, that the achievement cannot last. Moreover, within the latter section he also acknowledges that wise people do carry an "advantage" over fools in knowing how to live (2:13–14a), yet precisely because this advantage is undermined in death, it too is deemed a *hebel* (2:14b–15). We will explore these ideas in greater detail in the following chapter, but for now it is worth noting that this fourth formal criterion for meaning, the permanency requirement, appears to Qoheleth as an impossible enterprise, as the high bar which no human leap can reach.

In Qoheleth's view, unless something has "staying power," unless it lasts permanently, it must forsake the entirety of whatever value it has seemingly accrued. This point has been articulated by current philosophy as well. In his essay, "Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending," philosopher Joshua Seachris has explicitly labeled just such an intuition the "staying-power intuition" (SPI): "Roughly, SPI is the idea that, *ceteris paribus,* worthwhile, significant, and meaningful things *last*... In terms of human life, SPI requires that we leave some sort of indelible mark on reality."[97] Seachris adds to this the claim that, "The way a narrative ends *qua* ending, contributes to a wide range of broadly normative human responses…toward the narrative as a whole." In other words, it is common for our perception and evaluation of an entire

[96] This does not imply that the *meaning* of *hebel* simply reduces to transience, which I have already denied. Fox, "*Hebel*," 414, rightly observes, "We should distinguish the *qualities* that evoke the particular *hebel*-judgments (ephemerality, inequity, inefficacy, futility, nonsensicality) from the *meaning* of *hebel.*" What I am claiming in this section is that Qoheleth's conception of meaning is multifaceted, and the component of meaning which is most difficult to achieve—in fact, impossible—is permanence.

[97] Joshua Seachris, "Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending," *RelS* 47.2 (2011): 141–63 [emphasis original].

story to derive largely, if not solely, from the way that story *ends*—whether happily or tragically. The ending retrogrades its own value back on to the whole, coloring it all for better or worse.

What I have claimed in this section, then, is simply that Qoheleth possesses a concept of a certain kind of human value marked by these four formal features. He sometimes uses the Hebrew word יִתְרוֹן to demarcate this value, but in many places where that word is not present, the concept still is. I am using the English word "meaning" to refer to this concept where it is discernible, and I am summarizing the above four criteria by describing Qoheleth's form or structure of meaning as "teleological." That term particularly fits the first of the four criteria, but in a broader sense captures all four.

2. The *Content* of Qoheleth's Meaning

We have now begun to provide some contours to the structure of Qoheleth's thought concerning meaningful, non-futile action. We have seen that such action must be instrumental toward a final end, difficult, competently caused, and permanent—all of which amounts to a high standard indeed. But having clarified the *form,* the question still remains as to the *content* of this final good. What is the presumed יִתְרוֹן which, if achieved, would have made Qoheleth's life meaningful? What is the carrot Qoheleth was chasing? In other words, if we imagine that some achievement has in fact been undertaken which meets the formal requirements just outlined, and we are now on the other side of its completion, Qoheleth wants there to be something "left over," something still "remaining"—but what? This will prove a more difficult question, both because a few different candidates seem possible and because the evidence Qoheleth provides here is less conspicuous than the formal criteria, which are more readily discernible. Although I offer a proposal in this section, it should be considered provisional until more textual clues can be offered to support it in the chapters that follow, particularly Chapter 3.

Scholars who address the meaning of life question in Qoheleth often note particular *sources* in which Qoheleth attempts to locate meaning. For instance, Longman writes, "Qohelet tries to find meaning in a number of different areas, including wisdom (1:16–18; 2:12–16), wealth (2:7–11), women (2:8), and building projects (2:4–6)."[98] Longman's statement is not necessarily misplaced, but my approach here is different; I attempt to tackle the question from a more

[98] Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 7, cf. 77. See also Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 60.

theoretical vantage point. Philosopher Roger Crisp offers a useful distinction between what he calls *enumerative* theories and *explanatory* ones.[99] Applying this distinction to the meaning question, enumerative theories would posit specific sources of meaning (such as Longman's), but explanatory theories would attempt to explain what it is about those sources that make them meaning-conferring. Consonant with this, the philosophical literature on meaning in life does not simply propose various possible sources of meaning but rather a variety of *theoretical frameworks* within which those sources might play some contributing role. I am thus following the lead of this literature in attempting to reconstruct Qoheleth's implicit account of meaning in life.

The meaning of life philosophical literature provides us with an enormous array of theoretical answers to the question of life's meaning, and for our purposes it is neither possible nor even helpful to discuss all of them.[100] Instead, we will focus on a few proposals in the literature that seem to resonate more with Qoheleth's ideas. Three proposals for how an individual's actions might accrue meaning are *subjectivism*, *consequentialism*, and *intersubjectivism*. We will look at these in turn, finding in each of them some potential kinship with Qoheleth but advocating for the latter as most foundational to his thought.

a. Subjectivism: personal, psychological satisfaction

It is clear that Qoheleth is concerned with psychological satisfaction. Several times he describes the human tendency to lack satisfaction, communicating the notion four times with שׂבע (1:8c; 4:8; 5:9; 6:3; cf. nominal form in 5:11) and twice with מלא (1:8d; 6:7).

> An eye is not satisfied [לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע] with seeing, nor is an ear filled [לֹא־תִמָּלֵא] with hearing. (1:8b)
>
> There is a man who has no one else, neither offspring nor sibling, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eye is never satisfied [לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע] with riches. (4:8)
>
> The one who loves money will not be satisfied [לֹא־יִשְׂבַּע] with money. (5:9)
>
> If a man fathers a hundred children and lives a long life…but his desire is not satisfied [לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע] with "the good"…a stillborn child is better off than he. (6:3)

[99] Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102–03. He applies the distinction to the question of well-being rather than meaning, but it applies just as easily to discussions about meaning.

[100] Thaddeus Metz has provided the most thorough taxonomy of the various views within the meaning of life literature, both in Metz, *Meaning*, and more briefly in Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning.

All of a person's toil is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied [לֹא תִמָּלֵא]. (6:7)[101]

Qoheleth raises the theme of satisfaction only to deny it for humans—all four occurrences of the verb שׂבע are immediately preceded by the negative particle לֹא. Though this sense is not quite explicit, I take it that Qoheleth's chief complaint in all of these cases is the lack of satisfaction provided by reaching a goal—one which, at least while it is being pursued, looks to its pursuer very much like יִתְרוֹן (and not mere רוּחַ). In other words, he is assuming the structure of meaning I have just tried to articulate. Qoheleth's main point here is not merely to deny, for instance, that the person who randomly and with no prior effort cashes in a winning lottery ticket will be left unsatisfied by their money (though that may be true). His point is that what is particularly troublesome—and he labels some of the formulations *hebel* precisely to stress the point (4:8; 5:9)—is that the very content of the goals humans spend whole lifetimes chasing nonetheless leave them utterly unfulfilled, the long-term pursuit of wealth being one conspicuous example of this phenomenon. Not every one of these verses independently shows this teleological structure, but some of the parallels among them lend support. For example, 1:8 says nothing particularly teleological in itself (although it is found in the explicitly *anti*-teleological poem of 1:4–11, introduced by 1:3), but its phrase, "the eye is not satisfied," is taken up again in 4:8, where the man who has toiled endlessly for riches cannot by means of them satisfy his "eye." Likewise, 6:7 draws upon the teleological notion of "toil" [עָמָל] just analyzed and denies that the end of such toil ever brings satisfaction. So these verses might be taken to imply that the final יִתְרוֹן, or meaning, is simply a psychological sense of personal fulfillment that would reside exclusively in the mind of the achiever, as the achievement of a certain mental state. This sense of satisfaction would be *based on* the person's achievements, but the meaning itself would not reside in the fact of the achievements so much as the psychological state they generate, the fulfillment of which being determined solely by that individual.

[101] In propagating the theme Qoheleth does bear some resemblance to Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (trans. E.F.J. Payne; 2 vols; New York: Dover, 1958), 573: "Awakened to life out of the night of unconsciousness, the will finds itself as an individual in an endless and boundless world, among innumerable individuals, all striving, suffering, and erring; and, as if through a troubled dream, it hurries back to the old unconsciousness. Yet till then its desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart."

In the MoL literature, several philosophers have advocated *subjectivism,* a view that meaning in life is accrued to the degree that a person subjectively satisfies her own standards for achieving it and that there are no standards outside one's own desires and sense of fulfillment.[102] E. D. Klemke has offered one powerful articulation of subjectivism:

> It is true that life has no objective meaning. Let us face it once and for all. But from this it does not follow that life is not worthwhile, for it can still be subjectively meaningful. And, really, the latter is the only kind of meaning worth shouting about. An objective meaning—that is, one which is inherent within the universe or dependent upon external agencies—would, frankly, leave me cold. It would not be mine. It would be an outer, neutral thing, rather than an inner, dynamic achievement. I, for one, am glad that the universe has no meaning, for thereby is man all the more glorious. I willingly accept the fact that external meaning is non-existent…for this leaves me free to forge my own meaning.[103]

So subjectivism about meaning does not merely *emphasize* the subjective component of meaning; it posits that subjective fulfillment *exhausts* meaning. Here one does not discover a meaning for her life; she creates it.

The main problem with this stance, however, is its "seriously counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful."[104] If a person can determine their own meaning merely through the feeling of psychological satisfaction, there is no limit on what activities they might find subjectively meaningful. Thaddeus Metz cites some of the more amusing *reductio ad absurdum* examples offered by critics of subjectivism, such as hypothetically achieving meaning in life by collecting bottle tops, watching television reruns, memorizing the dictionary, lining up balls of torn newspaper into rows, maintaining 3,752 hairs on one's head, or ingesting one's own excrement.[105] These examples are of course not quite so relevant to Qoheleth, who never presses so far in the subjectivist direction as to beg such objections (and in any case, they likely do not fulfill the formal conditions for meaning outlined in the previous section). But another one of the

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[102] Recent proponents include E. D. Klemke, "Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life," 186–97 in *The Meaning of Life* (ed. E. D. Klemke; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," 167–75 in *The Meaning of Life* (ed. E. D. Klemke; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Brooke Alan Trisel, "Futility and the Meaning of Life Debate," *Sorites* 14 (2002): 70–84; Richard Double, "When Subjectivism Matters," *Metaphilosophy* 34.4 (2003): 510–23; Cheshire Calhoun, "Geographies of Meaningful Living," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32.1 (2015): 15–34; Frans Svensson, "A Subjectivist Account of Life's Meaning," *De Ethica* 4.3 (2017): 45–66; Daan Evers, "Meaning in Life and the Metaphysics of Value," *De Ethica* 4.3 (2017): 27–44. For a detailed discussion of the subjectivist position with a summary of arguments for and against it see Metz, *Meaning*, 163–79.

[103] Klemke, "Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life," 195 [emphasis omitted].

[104] Metz, *Meaning*, 175.

[105] Metz, *Meaning*, 175.

criticisms raised against subjectivism could well apply in Qoheleth's case: "the theory implies that no one can be wrong about how meaningful or meaningless they find their life."[106] Aaron Smuts develops this point by referring to the character of George Bailey in Frank Capra's 1946 film, *It's a Wonderful Life.* George becomes suicidal when the family business is failing, but an angel shows him the ways that he has positively impacted those around him—his life is meaningful after all—and thereby pulls him back from the precipice. Smuts notes that George "mistakenly thought that his life was meaningless… His despair was based on an incorrect assessment."[107] To correct George's misappraisal, the angel points to external facts of which George was not aware and George subsequentially sees the matter differently. But that George could have come to the brink of despair in the first place, on the assumption of failing to have achieved meaning, implies a non-subjectivist understanding of meaning on his part. The same appears to be true concerning the point of existential despair reached by Qoheleth in 2:11. It seems unlikely that a subjectivist Qoheleth, believing himself to construct his own meaning in life, would ever come to such a forlorn conclusion. Our sage, like George's angel, proceeds to follow the judgment of 2:11 by pointing to a slew of mind-independent facts. (The difference, of course, is that whereas the angel alludes to positive-value facts to overturn George's cynical self-assessment, Qoheleth's reasoning in 2:12–23 is meant to justify his despairing conclusion.)

Qoheleth's perceived problem of psychological dissatisfaction should therefore be regarded as one among many of life's absurdities, but it does not point us to the content of his assumed teleological meaning.[108]

b. Consequentialism: objective contribution to the world

Another view of life's meaning found in the MoL literature is one which Thaddeus Metz, Ben Bramble and others have identified as "consequentialism" about meaning.[109] It conceives of meaning not in terms of the subjective satisfaction felt by the individual but as the begetting of

[106] Aaron Smuts, "The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51.4 (2013): 536–62, at 544.

[107] Smuts, "Good Cause," 544.

[108] I should also acknowledge that subjectivism, virtually by definition, implies a contradiction with the fourth of the formal criteria we discerned in Section 1 above—namely, permanence. One's subjective experience of meaning in one's own life clearly comes to an end at death. I have nonetheless still proposed this view because it is a common one in the MoL literature and worth exploring in relation to Qoheleth's thought.

[109] As opposed to its better-known cousin, ethical consequentialism.

consequences which in some way benefit the world.[110] Under this view, meaning in life consists in making some contribution to the world such that the world is better off in light of one's having existed.[111] Consequentialism is thus essentially the opposite of subjectivism—it conceives of meaning purely objectively, and whether one *feels* that one's life is meaningful makes no difference as to whether it actually is. Aaron Smuts, who calls this view "the good cause" account, writes, "The good cause account does not imply that [subjective] fulfillment is sufficient or even necessary for meaning. It is an objectivist theory. It holds that one's life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good."[112]

Undoubtedly, we can discern in Qoheleth the desire to make a difference. This is most clearly seen in the uses of *hebel* that carry the sense "futile," as in the scattering of passages bemoaning the negligible contributory force of things like actions, words, dreams, and frivolous laughter.

> I have seen all the deeds which are done under the sun, and in fact, all is futile and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. (1:14–15)
>
> For where there are many words, futility only increases: what is the advantage for a person? (6:11)
>
> For in an abundance of dreams are many futile words.[113] (5:6a)
>
> For like the crackling of thorns under a cooking pot, so is the laughter of fools. This also is futile. (7:6; cf. 2:1–2)

In all cases Qoheleth exhibits a concern with *accomplishing* something, with making a difference, producing consequences; otherwise, he would not lament the lack of doing so. Also relevant here are the passages in which Qoheleth complains about humanity's inability to manifest some change in the world. In the book's opening poem, he longs to speak legitimately of "something new" having occurred (1:10). In subsequent chapters he will depreciate humanity's inability to alter what

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[110] See, e.g., Ben Bramble, "Consequentialism about Meaning in Life," *Utilitas* 27.4 (2015): 445–59; Smuts, "Good Cause," 536–62; Mark Wells, "Meaning in Consequences," *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5.3 (2015): 169–79.

[111] My wording is only slightly rephrased from Bramble, "Consequentialism," 446.

[112] Smuts, "Good Cause," 559.

[113] The syntax of this verbless clause is difficult: כִּי בְרֹב חֲלֹמוֹת וְהַבָלִים וּדְבָרִים הַרְבֵּה (lit. "in an abundance of dreams and futilities and many words"). I follow Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 197, in taking two of the three nouns as a hendiadys, though I find that pairing in וְהַבָלִים וּדְבָרִים, "futile words," a rending supported by the association in 6:11. As for the placement of the implicit predicate ("are"), it seems likely that הֲבָלִים (and thus also דְבָרִים) is here qualifying חֲלֹמוֹת, since virtually all other occurrences of הֶבֶל in the book are predicative and evaluative.

God has wrought (3:14; 6:10; 7:13). These texts will be explored more in Chapter 4, but the point for now is that in such statements Qoheleth eyes an effectuation of some change *in the external world,* not merely in one's own mind. We might be tempted to think, therefore, that a consequentialist theory fits best with his idea of meaning.

Approaching the matter from a slightly different angle, we noted in the introductory chapter the opinion of some scholars that in Qoheleth's view meaning *does* exist, because it exists for God, yet it is not accessible or receivable by humans.[114] Gordis, again, says Qoheleth differs from the twentieth-century existentialists in that whereas the latter regard the universe as utterly meaningless, Qoheleth presumes that "the meaning of reality is veiled from man, *but the meaning exists*."[115] This perspective is not identical to but is essentially congruent with the consequentialist view I have just been describing, since if the meaning is only God's and not humanity's, a subjective human reception of meaning is precluded, and all that matters is the final divine *telos* to which humans have unwittingly contributed.[116] We could designate this understanding as the "cog-in-the-machine" view of meaning: one's life may serve as a mere cog in God's grand machinations, and even if unknown this role would ground the existence of meaning.

However, I suggest that neither Gordis's "cog-in-the-machine" proposal nor a consequentialist theory more generically construed in fact represent Qoheleth's mindset. Qoheleth's יִתְרוֹן-statements consistently concern the reaping of "lasting gain" לָאָדָם—*for the human being*—whether such an individual be identified as אָדָם (1:3), "the worker" (3:9), "he who toils for the wind" (5:15), or the like. Qoheleth never asks the question as to whether יִתְרוֹן—which we have identified with "meaning"—exists in the abstract (or solely for the deity).[117] Nor, for that

[114] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 112–121; N. Karl Haden, "Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation," *Christian Scholars Review* 17 (1987): 52–66, at 66.

[115] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 116 [emphasis original]. Cf. Sneed, *Pessimism*, 169: "Though Qohelet is not fully positive about God's activities in the world, God does provide him with meaning and orientation. The irrationality of this world 'under the sun' indirectly implies the possibility of rationality beyond this world, à la God."

[116] See Metz, *Meaning*, 77–118, who identifies views akin to Gordis's as "purpose theory," the understanding that "one's life is meaningful just insofar as one fulfils a purpose that God has assigned to one" (80). Purpose theory is often (though not always) consequentialist in the sense defined above, in that it does not require the person's subjective awareness or appropriation of their would-be meaning in order for their life's conformity to a divine purpose to accrue such meaning.

[117] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 116, appeals to 3:11b, as have plenty others, in order to posit Qoheleth's "meaning" as equivalent to God's making "everything beautiful in its time" and "what God has done from beginning to end." But if we take our cue for "meaning" from יִתְרוֹן, Qoheleth had only two verses prior denied the existence of יִתְרוֹן for humans by his implicitly negative rhetorical question. Qoheleth's statements in 3:11 and elsewhere in the book concerning the "work of God" should not be read as references to "meaning" in any sense relevant to our present articulation of the concept. Moreover, as we will see in Chapter 4, even on a consequentialist or "purpose theory"

matter, does he conceive of meaning as some altruistic, world-bettering act that one sends off into the void, never to find out its fruits.[118] His conception of meaning is as a value (potentially) *accrued by humans.* His axiological concerns are thoroughly anthropological.[119]

Qoheleth desires that יִתְרוֹן or meaning be something he (and others) can "get," something that is "for" him and personally relates to him, yet not in such a way that it simply amounts to his own private, psychological satisfaction. But how can this be? How can meaning be a benefit that one receives yet which is based on external achievements and irreducible to the satisfaction of one's own idiosyncratic standard? A third proposal, intersubjectivism, offers just such an understanding.

c. Intersubjectivism: socially regarded accomplishment

As we have seen, Qoheleth at times emphasizes individual psychological satisfaction to the point that it appears constitutive of meaning. At other times the supposed meaning lies in objective realities that are external to one's own psychological state, the contribution made to the world outside of oneself. But what I will propose for Qoheleth's underlying conception of meaning is a view that falls in between these two extremes. Qoheleth, I want to argue, does indeed factor psychological states into his baseline theory of meaning—just not his own so much as *others'.* Meaning, that is, resides in the honor paid to a person by the larger society, and this becomes especially important to Qoheleth when the issue is posthumous remembrance and esteem.

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reading of such statements, the actual content of the work of God turns out to be far less teleological than these readings generally presume.

[118] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6,* 448–49, notes (concerning 2:18) that Qoheleth "shows no interest in the idea that humans might be motivated by a desire to improve things for the next generation."

[119] In value theory a distinction is made between personal value and impersonal value. The former is value that is "good for" an individual, whereas impersonal value is not good "for" anyone per se, it is good *simpliciter* (good as such, or good in general). See discussions in Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, *Personal Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Richard Kraut, *Against Absolute Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). This distinction can be applied to the particular value that is meaning, so as to distinguish between "personal meaning" and "impersonal meaning." With this in mind, Gordis's claim, which I deny, seems to entail that Qoheleth's notion of meaning entails "impersonal meaning" or "meaning *simpliciter"*—that meaning as such exists because "there is such a purpose, known to God" (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 116), even though it does not accrue meaningful value for humans. I claim, by contrast, that Qoheleth's only concern is with "personal meaning"—meaning ostensibly "for" someone, accrued by someone. In the work just mentioned, Kraut argues that impersonal (or "absolute") goodness is an unnecessary, unhelpful category (a kind of category error), since good *simpliciter* never functions as a reason for action. Though his philosophical argument is not quite our concern here, I would apply Kraut's idea to Qoheleth as well. Meaning, in Qoheleth's view, is meant to motivate a person's long-term action (עָמָל), but "meaning *simpliciter"* or "meaning-for-God" cannot do this. Qoheleth's only concern with meaning is that of "meaning for" a human being, or personal meaning.

This idea is clear from several passages in the book, but for now I want to draw attention to two similar vignettes of Qoheleth's, in 9:13–15 and 4:13–16. Both passages contain difficult textual issues, yet both can be read in a way that evidences Qoheleth's implicit understanding as to the hypothetical source of meaning in life.

> (13) This, too, I saw concerning wisdom under the sun, and it was significant to me. (14) There was a small city with a few men in it, and a great king came to it and surrounded it and built against it massive ramparts. (15) However, there was found[120] in the city a poor, wise man, and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man.[121] (9:13–15)

> (13) A poor but wise youth was better than an old and foolish king, who no longer knew how to take advice. (14) For that youth[122] came out of prison to rule, even though he had been born poor in his kingdom. (15) I considered[123] all the living, those who go about under the sun, in relation to[124]

[120] מָצָא is translated as passive by several of the ancient witnesses (Targum, Peshitta, Vulgate) as well as many commentators, e.g. Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 81–82; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 695. It is hard to explain how the king could have "found" the man while sieging the city, and there is no other subject available.

[121] Some scholars propose to take וּמִלַּט־הוּא אֶת־הָעִיר counterfactually, that the man "*could have* delivered the city," but in fact did not because at the time "no one remembered" to listen to his counsel, e.g. A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 80; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 310; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 166. Seow claims that the "the perfect is used here to indicate a hypothetical situation." But it is unclear why this should be so when all four preceding verbs in the story are also perfect (all with *waw,* just as here). Just like them, the וּמִלַּט is best read as a straightforward part of the narrative: "he delivered."

[122] I have supplied the presumed subject which is left ambiguous in the Hebrew, taking it as the "youth," as do the majority of commentators. That he "had been born poor" fits with Qoheleth's opening description of the youth in v 13.

[123] Hebr. רָאִיתִי, "I saw."

[124] Hebr. עִם, "with, along with." As I take it, Qoheleth is picturing all of humanity, past and present, along with the man, deeming the man's place in the broader scheme of things.

> that youth[125] who replaced the king.[126] (16) There is no end to all the people—to all who were born before both of them[127]—and even those who come later will not rejoice in him. This, too, is absurd and a striving after wind.[128] (4:13–16)

In 9:13–15 Qoheleth tells the story of a "poor, wise man" [אִישׁ מִסְכֵּן חָכָם] who by his wisdom rescued a city from an enemy king's threat. Clearly such a feat is deserving of wide celebration and honor. "But no one remembered the poor man" (9:15), the sage finally laments. Qoheleth had introduced the story in v 13 with the comment, "This, too, I saw concerning wisdom under the sun, and it was significant to me [וּגְדוֹלָה הִיא אֵלָי]." What is "significant" about the story to Qoheleth is not, for example, that a poor man could achieve such outstanding accomplishments, but rather the tragic last line, that *no one remembered* the man or his deeds. Here we are at the heart of Qoheleth's concern with meaning.

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[125] Hebr. הַיֶּלֶד הַשֵּׁנִי, lit. "the youth, the second." Many commentators therefore read it as a reference to a *second youth* who has now replaced the *first youth* from vv 13–14, e.g. Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 146–47; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 113–114. Others simply omit הַשֵּׁנִי as a gloss. Fox, *Rereading*, 224–28, even conceives that there are *three* youths in the story, besides the old king. But all of this renders a simple story unnecessarily complex. It is hard to imagine Qoheleth thinking his readers would follow the sudden import of a previously unmentioned "second youth" into the story, especially at its culmination—let alone a third. Accordingly, it would seem odd for Qoheleth to use an article before "youth" if he meant to introduce another character. (When Qoheleth initially introduces the youth in v 13, it is simply יֶלֶד without a definite article.) Moreover, why would the next king (third in the line, on some views) be yet another "youth"? Gordis, *Koheleth*, 245, has provided a far simpler and more persuasive solution: הַשֵּׁנִי is a simple appositive to הַיֶּלֶד, thus "the youth, who was second," implying second of the two men/kings already discussed, not specifically a second *youth.* He provides an "exact parallel" from Hos 2:9(7), wherein Israel-as-faithless-wife is said to proclaim, "I will return to אִישִׁי הָרִאשׁוֹן." As Gordis points out, this is often mistranslated, "my first husband," but it cannot mean that since the woman has had no other *husbands* after Yhwh; she has only had her "lovers" [מְאַהֲבָיִךְ, 2:7(5), 9(7), 14(12)]. Hence, הָרִאשׁוֹן is in apposition to אִישִׁי, meaning "my husband, who was first" (among the various lovers). Cf., similarly, Lauha, *Kohelet*, 94. Thus, Gordis' proposal seems to find a parallel, and it makes good sense of the vignette in 4:13–16. With that said, this is undoubtedly a complex passage to navigate and we lack sufficient space for a fuller discussion.

[126] That the original youth should "stand in his place" [יַעֲמֹד תַּחְתָּיו], i.e. replace the original king, fits with the facts that are already known from vv 13–14 and, again, minimizes the unnecessary complexity of having a second youth/king replace the first youth/king, who himself had presumably replaced the original, old king. Qoheleth is not quite so confusing a writer as such a reading implies.

[127] As Gordis, *Koheleth*, 246, also notes, the construction used here, אֲשֶׁר־הָיָה לִפְנֵיהֶם, "which were before them," is used four other times in the book (with different final suffixes) and always in a temporal (rather than locative) sense (1:10, 16; 2:7, 9). Moreover, its use in 1:10 as a reference to the past (לְעֹלָמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה מִלְּפָנֵנוּ, "the ages which were before us") contrasts with לָאַחֲרֹנִים and לָאַחֲרֹנָה in 1:11 signifying future generations. In all likelihood Qoheleth has the exact same pairing in view here in 4:16, lamenting that neither humanity past ("all the people, all who were before them") nor humanity future (הָאַחֲרוֹנִים, "those who come after") will recognize this remarkable man's achievement; its apparent significance is but an infinitesimal ripple in the ocean of time.

[128] Some scholars, e.g., Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6,* 604, treat vv 13–14 and vv 15–16 as two separate and only peripherally related sayings, neither expressing a narrative. But the three perfect tense verbs in vv 13–14 (יָדַע, יָצָא, נוֹלַד) seem to establish a narrative, and the use of יֶלֶד again in v 15 shows that vv 15–16 in some way round out the story. Verse 13 and v 15 contain the only two uses of יֶלֶד in the book, so it is unlikely they are only incidentally connected.

In a very similar vein, in 4:13–16 Qoheleth relays a vignette once again concerning a "poor" and "wise" [מִסְכֵּן וְחָכָם] protagonist in relation to a king, though in this case a youth who rose to kingship himself. Qoheleth briefly conveys the youth's impressive "rags-to-riches" story, coming out of poverty and prison to inherit the throne. Yet, on my reading, what Qoheleth does next is striking. He suddenly pictures the entire swath of humanity in aggregate—all who had ever lived before these two men, and all who would come into existence after them—set in relation to or alongside that single youth, as a pebble set between two mountains. From this perspective, the youth's once striking accomplishment immediately loses all its luster, and indeed, "those who come later will not rejoice in him" (4:16b), presumably because they will not even know who he was. Qoheleth then provides the familiar evaluation: "This, too, is absurd [הֶבֶל] and a striving after wind" (4:16c). The cause for absurdity and lack of meaning in both cases seems to lie in the fact that the man and his achievements are deserving of greater honor than merely to be forgotten by future generations. This cannot comport with a consequentialist theory of meaning that says what counts for meaning is simply the man's accomplishment as an objectively world-improving contribution—full stop. No pure consequentialist about meaning would grieve the fact that the man's world-bettering actions ultimately failed to receive any proper social recognition; that would be an irrelevant fact. Nor can the ostensible meaning that Qoheleth is frustrated to see denied for the man and his posthumous future consist in the man's own psychological satisfaction—a possibility for which his being dead by then would rather problematize. Instead, these stories imply that meaning resides in the payment of transtemporal, social honor toward one whose life and actions deserve it.[129]

William Faulkner has poignantly expressed Qoheleth's sentiment:

> I think that a writer wants to make something that he knows that a hundred or two hundred or five hundred, a thousand years later will make people feel what they feel when they read Homer, or read Dickens or Balzac, Tolstoy… He knows he has a short span of life, that the day will come when he must pass through the wall of oblivion, and he wants to leave a scratch on that wall—Kilroy was here—that somebody a hundred, a thousand years later will see.[130]

[129] Berger, "Exigencies," 149, comments that these two stories are "the paradigms of forgetfulness in which the achievements of their respective heroes are wiped out by a lack of memory…a forgetfulness that casts human meaning into doubt." Mette Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167–85, similarly regards the two stories.

[130] William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner; New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 61. Cited in Brooke Alan Trisel, "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts," *Philosophical Forum* 35.3 (2004): 371–91, at 374.

Faulkner's words comport with a common intuitive view that meaning in life is bound up with public recognition for one's achievements. Several recent philosophers have conceptualized meaning in life around this idea, and it has been identified as the *intersubjective* view of meaning.[131] Stephen Darwall writes, "Things that genuinely matter and give our lives meaning have a kind of importance that does not simply derive from our own individual and personal preferences for them." Rather, "something can give meaning to our lives only if we believe it to have intersubjective value"—that is, if "*others can recognize it and affirm it*."[132] Wai-Hung Wong provides a similar criteria when he writes,

> In order to be normative…a judgment [about a life as meaningful] has to be, like other normative judgments, at least in some respect *intersubjective* if not objective too. The normative force of such an evaluative judgment has to come, at least partly, from something beyond my subjective perspective in the sense that the correctness of the judgment is not simply up to me.[133]

So intersubjectivism about meaning provides a kind of middle ground between subjectivism and consequentialism. Subjectivism locates the final criteria for meaning only inside the mind of the individual seeking it, and consequentialism moves that final criteria outside of anyone's mind and places it in the world at large. But intersubjectivism locates the final judgment in minds—not the individual meaning-seeker's mind, but those of his fellow humans. The individual meaning-seeker need not have any awareness of their peers' appraisal; it is the fact of that appraisal that engenders its meaning, and this is compatible with meaning (hypothetically) accruing to the person after their death. To be clear, though, intersubjectivists are not saying that meaning could be solely constructed within even a plurality of minds, such as when fame is granted to those who have seemingly done nothing to deserve it. The assumption of intersubjectivists, shared by the previous two views discussed, is that actions *are* being performed out in the external world, but the degree of meaningfulness for those actions must be "evaluated (actually or potentially) against the relevant public measures of success."[134]

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[131] See Metz, *Meaning*, 167.

[132] Stephen L. Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 164 [emphasis added].

[133] Wai-Hung Wong, "Meaningfulness and Identities," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11.2 (2008): 123–48, at 138 [emphasis original]. I should note that for present purposes I am glossing over the distinction Metz makes between actual intersubjectivists and hypothetical intersubjectivists.

[134] Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith, "On Luck, Responsibility and the Meaning of Life," *Philosophical Papers* 34.3 (2005): 443–58, at 447.

My claim, then, is that the particular conception of meaning we find in Qoheleth is one which is best described as intersubjective. Qoheleth conceives of meaning not as the satisfaction of one's individual desires (*subjectivism*) nor the accomplishment of objectively world-bettering actions (*consequentialism*) but as the positive recognition of one's own achievements on the part of other humans (*intersubjectivism*). It is bound up with social regard, honor, and remembrance.

B. Meaning as Coherent Environment

In the preceding section we have considered actions and their accrued achievement as the "bearer" of meaning, the focal point where meaning resides. This teleological conception of meaning inversely corresponds to the sense of *hebel* we explored earlier that judges actions to be futile with respect to their intended end. But Qoheleth is not solely concerned with *actions* per se. As we have seen in our discussion of *hebel* as "absurd," he is also concerned with the *environment* or *context* in which the actions may (or may not) take place. Wim de Muijnck writes about this role of *environment* in a meaningful life:

> "Agent" and "environment" are…complementary notions, and the nature and identity of an agent cannot be understood in abstraction from what environment the agent has, and how it interacts with this environment. Thus, what constitutes an agent is not just its internal dynamics, but also its interrelatedness—its dynamic couplings or co-evolution—with the outside world.[135]

Thus by "environment" we have in mind the set of relations one experiences with the world. E. M. Adams states it as a matter of *context*: "The most important theoretical question for us is what kind of a stage do we require for our lives to be meaningful…The meaning of a life, as well as the meaning of life in general, depends on context."[136] And James Bennett frames it in terms of *conditions*: "Rather than asking, 'What is the meaning of life?' it seems more helpful to ask, 'under what conditions can life be experienced as meaningful'?"[137]

So it is also worth probing, albeit briefly, Qoheleth's assumptions concerning what sort of environment would, hypothetically, provide life with meaning. We have already seen the kind of features of reality that compel Qoheleth to label it "absurd." Absurdity, we saw, essentially refers

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[135] de Muijnck, "Good Fit," 317.

[136] E. M. Adams, "The Meaning of Life," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 51.2 (2002): 71–81, at 79.

[137] James O. Bennett, "'The Meaning of Life': A Qualitative Perspective," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14.4 (1984): 581–92, at 583.

to a disjunction or incongruence between one's expectations and the world's harsh realities. Given this, the opposite of absurd could be thought of as that which is "coherent" or "fitting." In abstract terms, it is coherent because the parts fit together to make something integrated and whole. What, then, would the world need to be like in order for Qoheleth to regard it as coherent, as non-absurd? The following are plausibly some such world-features, as derived from many of the things Qoheleth deems absurd. We can also regard this dual-pronged list as an informal summary of Qoheleth's value concerns, representing both the negative and correspondingly positive broad themes much of the remainder of this thesis will explore in greater detail.

Features of an Absurd World[138]	**Features of a Coherent World**
Toil and effort do not culminate in lasting gain[139]	Toil and effort culminate in lasting gain
Injustice—the righteous perish and the wicked prosper[140]	Justice—the wicked perish and the righteous prosper
Injustice in death[141]	Justice in death
Monotony, cyclicality, and the lack of novelty, progress, or change[142]	Linearity, novelty, progress, and change
No remembrance, former people forgotten[143]	Remembrance and honor of former people
Psychological dissatisfaction and unrest[144]	Psychological satisfaction and rest
Words accomplish nothing[145]	Words accomplish much

Qoheleth finds fault with the world in various ways, and each of these lamented features implies an opposite, a way he would wish the world to be instead.[146] But this wish is no arbitrary

[138] Technically, in Camus's usage, "absurd" would qualify the relation between the human being and the world, not the world itself.

[139] 1:14; 2:11, 15, 17, 19, 21; 3:9; 4:7–8, 13–16; 5:12–16; 9:11, 13–16.

[140] 7:15; 8:10, 14.

[141] 2:14–16, 18–21; 3:19–20; 9:2–3, 5–6, 11–12.

[142] 1:4–11; 3:2–8, 14–15; 6:10.

[143] 1:11; 2:16; 4:16; 9:5.

[144] 1:8; 2:23; 4:8; 5:9; 6:3, 7, 9.

[145] 1:8; 5:6; 6:11.

[146] I am using "world" as a collective term not just for the "natural world" but for all of the relevant aspects of existence critiqued by Qoheleth: the sphere of relationships (both human and divine); the cause-effect nexus pertaining

desire; it reflects the way he thinks the world *ought* to be and any just and reasonable sense of things would *expect* it to be. At this point we may well inquire of Qoheleth the question enshrined in Alasdair MacIntyre's oft-cited book title—"Whose justice? Which rationality?"[147] The heart of the answer is: the rationality Qoheleth inherited according to the wisdom tradition in which he was educated.[148]

Michael Fox is right to emphasize that, compared to the approach evident by the sages who wrote Proverbs, Qoheleth offers a more empirical, observation-based method for his truth claims.[149] And James Crenshaw is right to qualify Fox by noting that Qoheleth pronounces or assumes factual claims with respect to plenty of non-empirically verifiable matters (e.g. the existence of God, divine judgment, claims about the future, et al.).[150] But what is also crucial to note concerning Qoheleth's epistemology is the degree to which Qoheleth's presuppositions regarding what is *reasonable to expect* of the world, that is, what comprises one's "plausibility structure,"[151] were inherited from his community and the tradition he received—whether or not he later proceeded to question them via an empirical epistemology.[152] To make the point another way: Qoheleth's *hebel*-frustrations certainly do not arise from a proto-Enlightenment philosopher viewing the world through a neutral *tabula rasa* and then (for some reason) becoming disappointed with his findings. His axiological *hebel*-judgments only register against the background of some inherited traditional worldview which had taught a younger Qoheleth what to expect from the world.

In reference to the act-consequence rhetoric of the book of Proverbs, Timothy Sandoval describes that worldview as a "wisdom mythos," the purpose of which is to shape "how one

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to both the natural world and systems of justice; the relation between humans and other species; the effects of time on human experience; human productivity; physical and psychological facts about humans themselves; and so on.

[147] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

[148] There has been plenty of discussion concerning a possible wisdom "school" or "tradition" in ancient Israel; see especially Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). I wish not to enter that debate here and my claim is uncontroversially minimalistic. Clearly, whatever one might want to call it, Qoheleth was raised in some outpost of ancient Jewish culture that taught him to think and value in certain ways. And it is highly likely that we have testimony to some of those ways of thinking and valuing in sources such as the book of Proverbs (as well as Job and Ben Sira, perhaps Deuteronomy, among others).

[149] Michael V. Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 137–55.

[150] James L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth's Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry," 205–24 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 212–13.

[151] See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 12.

[152] This set of concerns explains how the epistemological is bridged with the axiological, for we are more inclined to value what we deem reasonable.

perceives the world."[153] Following the work of Carol Newsom on Job, Sandoval posits that the sages of Proverbs did not speak in terms of an act-consequence nexus so as to represent a world that fit with their empirical observations; rather, the rhetoric's aim was to communicate an ideology that could shape the next generation. They may well have been aware of exceptions to their rule, but calling attention to them was not the point. Jimyung Kim comments that the sage "tries to produce a submissive subject" who will perceive the world in line with the sage's construction of reality.[154] Undoubtedly, Qoheleth as a younger man *did* perceive the world in line with such traditional constructions. But for the older sage, that way of seeing proved itself an ill-equipped sense-making apparatus.

C. The Role of Knowledge in Relation to Meaning

Earlier I argued against interpretations of *hebel* that regard the word (and the book in general) as primarily concerned with knowledge, or the lack thereof. Yet, clearly, one of the prominent themes in the book is indeed that of ignorance—humans' inability to know very much about the world (1:17; 2:19; 3:11, 21, 22; 6:12; 7:14, 23–25; 8:7, 8:16–17; 9:12; 10:14, 15; 11:2, 5). If this theme does not comprise Qoheleth's *hebel*-complaints in particular, then what is its role in the book? How does it relate to the more central themes of futility, absurdity, meaning, and value? We can only deal with the question cursorily, but it will be helpful to articulate a basic framework within which the theme of knowledge is to be situated.

For Qoheleth, the world is a place for action, and he wants to be a man of action—profitable, consequential, valuable action. The underlying quest in all of Qoheleth's philosophizing, I suggested in Chapter 1, is the search to "see *what is good* for the children of man *to do* under heaven during the few days of their life" (2:3; cf. 6:12). The theme of knowledge must be understood in that context. He consistently refers to humanity's ignorance of the future, their inability to discover "what will be after" them:

> Who can bring him to see what will be after him [אַחֲרָיו]? (3:22b)
>
> For who can tell a person what will be after him [אַחֲרָיו] under the sun? (6:12)

[153] Timothy J. Sandoval, *The Discourse of Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 64 [emphasis original]. Kim, *Reanimating*, 117–22, draws upon Sandoval's term in his discussion of Qoheleth's multiple voices, aligning the "wisdom mythos" with what he calls the "voice of the Father," that is, the voice of " 'traditional' wisdom teachings."

[154] Kim, *Reanimating*, 117.

> God has made the one right alongside the other, so that humanity might not discover anything after them [אַחֲרָיו]. (7:14b)
>
> For he does not know what will be, for how it will be—who can tell him? (8:7)
>
> Humanity does not know what will be, and who can tell them will be after them [מֵאַחֲרָיו]? (10:14)

Why does Qoheleth find this lack of knowledge about the future so disconcerting? Before one can act, one needs an idea of "what is good…to do" (2:3). This is axiology, the realm of *value*—deeming some possible action as better or worse than another. As we have seen, Qoheleth's highest value, his idea of meaning, is teleological—the value of actions is bound up entirely with the outcomes they produce. He understands that it is very difficult for humans to act without an end in view. But axiology does partly depend on epistemology, in the sense that the value of two possible actions' respective ends cannot be compared if they are not known. This is where Qoheleth's noted problem of ignorance becomes salient, that a person cannot know "what will be after him." To grasp Qoheleth's point, we might imagine a golfer practicing his swing, trying to discern between various possible swing techniques. In order to improve, of course, the golfer must correlate his own physical motion in swinging with the effect that swing has on the ball and the ball's precise placement along the course. But if we imagine a golfer who for some reason cannot see where the ball lands, then practicing the swing becomes futile. There will be no criteria by which to discern the efficacy of one swing from another, no vision to direct his course. Without an understanding of the consequences of one's actions, the actions begin to look meaningless.[155] Unknown consequences relativize the value of actions, and a dysfunctional epistemology drags axiology down with it.

> The toil [עָמָל] of a fool wears him out, because he does not even know the way to the city.[156] (10:15)

The problem of meaning, for Qoheleth, is the problem of an inability to act profitably. *One aspect* of this problem is the inability to know long-term future states and their value, which

[155] "For the Preacher, systems are thus radically questioned: 'everything is vain and futile'…therefore one should be unassuming about the *possibilities for action*" (Manfred Lang, "Teleology," *OEBE*, doi: 10.1093/acref:obso/9780199829910.001.0001 [emphasis added]).

[156] Fox, *Rereading*, 308, notes that the expression may have metaphorical significance as it does in the Egyptian text *The Eloquent Peasant*, where " 'does not reach the city'…means to fail in attaining a goal" (see *AEL,* 1:182).

retroactively confers value or disvalue on present actions. But this is only part of the problem, and it must be stated alongside of what Qoheleth *does* claim to know with no small confidence. He knows that the act-consequence nexus is unreliable and that what he does observe in the world are innumerable futile actions and deeply absurd states of affairs.[157]

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter we have begun our study of value in Qoheleth by focusing on the central value I and others have identified as *meaning*. While the English word "meaning" is obviously not present in Qoheleth's work, the concept certainly is. It is a notion with which our sage grapples. Qoheleth articulates the loss of meaning for individuals largely through his *hebel*-language, a term which may best be understood in the related senses of "futile" and "absurd." But our study has not only addressed Qoheleth's negative articulations of meaning's absence at the level of linguistic translation, which is the typical manner in which Qoheleth scholars have confronted the issue. We have also sought to reconstruct Qoheleth's positive notion of meaning at the conceptual level so as to gain deeper insight into his philosophy of value.

Beginning with the *form* of Qoheleth's concept of meaning, we uncovered four aspects: (a) meaning as the final value of an agent's instrumental actions; (b) meaning as difficult to achieve; (c) meaning as competently caused by the agent; (d) meaning as permanent, or at least long-lasting. Qoheleth desired achievement marked by these four criteria. Stating this much already brings some clarity to discussions about meaning in Qoheleth. But beyond the formal conditions there remained the question of *content.* We therefore brought Qoheleth into dialogue with three theories from contemporary meaning of life philosophy which attempt to account for the locus of meaning. Here we concluded that the view known as *intersubjectivism* gets at the heart of Qoheleth's worries about meaning—his desire that, above all else, his (and anyone's) deserving achievements be acknowledged and honored by future generations.

But Qoheleth's ideal world is contradicted by the world he has come to know. There is, therefore, a significant kind of disvalue Qoheleth regards as inherent to human existence. The

[157] The Babylonian text *A Pessimistic Dialogue Between Master and Servant* (*ANET,* 437–38) also addresses the issue of the inability to know "what is good" and thence to act. The point of the dialogue seems to be that since opposite courses of action can always be rationalized, it is never obvious which course is better, thus relativizing value and perhaps undermining its existence altogether. That text, after asking "What, then, is good?" (*eninna mīnû ṭâba*) concludes with a darkly comedic enjoinder to suicide—"To break my neck and yours, and throw us both into the river is good!"—something Qoheleth never commends.

problem, generally stated, is that the set of circumstances required for at least some human beings to accrue the meaning their lives deserve fails to obtain. The actions humans undertake for the sake of long-term goals will not be achieved, and the very environment in which humans act is inhospitable, even hostile, to the fulfillment of such meaningful action. Moreover, the primary aim of such actions—long-term recognition and acclaim—is denied them.

It is difficult to fully explore this question of meaning, however, without addressing the closely related theme of death. To this theme we turn in our next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

"NO FURTHER REWARD": THE HARM OF DEATH

I. Introduction

In the previous chapter's first half we examined Qoheleth's use of *hebel* as a signifier for the various ways in which life under the sun is "futile" and "absurd." But in this chapter we turn to that single absurdity which, perhaps above all others, encapsulates what Qoheleth finds so insufferable in humanity's plight—death.[1]

Several previous studies in Qoheleth have brought the theme of death to the forefront and highlighted it from different angles. To cite a few representatives, Shannon Burkes argues that death is "the driving theme and main concern of Qoheleth" and that the book exemplifies "the changing views of death" characteristic of this period in the ancient Near East.[2] Alison Lo suggests that the theme of death "serves to set the stage for Qohelet's arguments, and that this theme links the whole book together within the frame of 1:2 and 12:8."[3] Matthew Rindge emphasizes the link between death and possessions in Qoheleth, arguing that "the recommendations to enjoy possessions are a direct result of his perception of death as an inevitable and unjust event that

[1] Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 48: "Death is that event which is most unlike what Qoheleth would desire and expect it to be."

[2] Burkes, *Death*, 1, 6.

[3] Alison Lo, "Death in Qohelet," *JANES* 31 (2008): 85–98, at 85.

destroys one's entire being" and that possessions are a means of "exerting control in the face of the loss of control represented by death."[4] Mark George claims that "Qohelet's views are predicated on the fundamental reality of death…and therefore life must begin from an awareness and acceptance of that reality."[5] Finally, and perhaps most relevantly to the present chapter, James Crenshaw proposes that while the authors of Proverbs viewed death in a "wholly negative manner," the matter was more ambiguous for Qoheleth.[6]

My own aim in this chapter is to approach the theme of death in accordance with my overall project, that is, through the lens of value. If the book is about value above all else, then it is crucial to understand the role that death plays in Qoheleth's axiology, as a significant harm to human beings. As such, I would like to raise a question which despite its benign appearance has not yet been proposed as the main focus for a study: What does Qoheleth regard as death's *harm*? What is the nature of the harm? Why is it bad? Of course, framing the question this way presumes that he did, in fact, consider death as a harm. This claim itself is not uncontested, as the Crenshaw article just mentioned shows. But I take it that this logically prior question will be answered of its own accord in the process of exploring *why* and *in what sense* Qoheleth considers death a significant harm for the one who dies. What we will find is something of a surprise: death furnishes humanity's greatest harm, yet the perpetrator is not quite death itself.

As with the other chapters in this dissertation, I will bring Qoheleth into dialogue with contemporary philosophers, this time with some who philosophize concerning death's harm. Distinct to this chapter, however, I will also set Qoheleth in discourse with his own contemporaries among the Greek philosophers—initially, Epicurus, and later, Aristotle. First, I will articulate Epicurus' famous argument for the benignity or non-harmfulness of death. Second, I will describe the most common rebuttal to the Epicurean argument in contemporary philosophy of death. Third, I will situate Qoheleth into this discussion by asking what it is about death that Qoheleth regards as bad. Here we will locate two primary strands within Qoheleth's thought for the harmfulness of death, one of which coheres with the standard view in contemporary philosophy, the other of which goes beyond it. Fourth, I will then develop further this second strand of death's harmfulness by

[4] Matthew S. Rindge, "Mortality and Enjoyment: The Interplay of Death and Possessions in Qoheleth," *CBQ* 73 (2011): 265–80, at 267–68.

[5] Mark George, "Death as the Beginning of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes," 280–93 in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 282.

[6] James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 573–85 in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1995), 574, 585.

relating it to Qoheleth's ideas about meaning that we explored in the last chapter. Fifth, before concluding we will explore, with the aid of Aristotle, how death's harm as an inhibitor of meaning can be viewed as a breach of justice.

II. Epicurus on the Harm of Death

Epicurus' well-known argument for death's benignity is still widely discussed in contemporary philosophy of death and value theory, providing a kind of roadblock through which any intuitive suggestion of death's harmfulness must find a way to pass. His classic articulation is found in the Letter to Menoeceus:

> Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us [μηδὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἶναι τὸν θάνατον], for all good and evil consist in sentience [αἴσθησις], and death is the privation of all sentience [αἴσθησις]; therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life an illimitable time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality. (*Ep. Men.* 124 [Hicks, LCL, modified]).

The basic argument could be represented syllogistically as follows:

a) For something to be good or bad for us—to carry axiological weight—we must consciously experience it.[7]

b) Death is not something that we humans will consciously experience.[8]

c) Therefore, death is nothing to us—it is neither good nor bad for us—it carries no axiological weight or value status whatsoever.[9]

This argument has been called Epicurus' "experience requirement."[10] It appears to be a strong argument for the idea that death cannot harm us, and Epicurus used it as the basis for his exhortation that people should not live in the fear of death.[11] Yet, clearly, the most controversial part of the argument is the first premise—that for something to be good or bad for people, they

[7] Epicurus uses the term αἴσθησις ("sentience" or "perception") to indicate conscious experience.

[8] Elsewhere Epicurus states that the soul dissolves at death, and it is for that reason that it loses all sentience: "When the whole frame is broken up, the soul is scattered and has no longer the same powers as before, nor the same motions: hence it does not possess sentience either" (*Ep. Men.* 65 [Hicks, LCL]).

[9] On Epicurus' argument see James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[10] See, e.g., Raymond Angelo Belliotti, *Posthumous Harm: Why the Dead are Still Vulnerable* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 10–16.

[11] See Warren, *Facing Death*, 1–55.

must consciously experience it. This premise is consistent with, and practically constitutive of, Epicurus' *hedonism*.[12] Epicurus was a hedonist in the philosophical sense, not that he advocated the ancient equivalent of sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll (pederasty, opium, and the strumming of the lyre?),[13] but that whatever activities he did commend were extolled because they were either pleasurable in themselves or led to the *telos* of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.[14] A good such as justice, then, one that is normally quite disassociated from pleasure, only becomes good in the Epicurean view when it leads people to a pleasurable (or pain-free) state of mind (*Kuriai Doxai* 34).[15] Pleasureless justice is not a good. By the same token, only consciously perceived pains—like stubbing one's toe, or bearing a direct insult—count as *harms* for the Epicureans. Unperceived injustice is not bad. Death, being entirely unperceived and unexperienced by the corpse in question, is therefore not a harm.

III. Response to Epicurus within Contemporary Philosophy: The Deprivation Account

The last few decades in contemporary philosophy have produced plenty of discussion concerning the harm of death, and a great deal of it takes Epicurus as its conversation starter. And while those philosophers wishing to condemn death are obliged to pass through Epicurus' arguments, Epicurus did not create an impenetrable bulwark. A minority of philosophers on death today are neo-Epicureans,[16] but the majority take issue with the Epicurean view of death's benignity and instead advocate the *harm thesis*—that "death is, at least sometimes, bad for those who die, and in this

[12] See Phillip Mitsis, "Epicurus: Freedom, Death, and Hedonism," 73–91 in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (ed. Roger Crisp; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[13] "When we say…that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean, the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality…" (*Ep. Men.* 131).

[14] Famously for Epicurus, these last two are really one and the same: "Pleasure in the flesh admits no increase when once the pain of want has been removed; after that it only admits want of variation" (*Kuriai Doxai* 18); "By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul" (*Ep. Men.* 131).

[15] Cf. John M. Armstrong, "Epicurean Justice," *Phronesis* 42.3 (1997): 324–34: "Nothing has intrinsic value but a pain-free body and a peaceful mind. Justice is not intrinsically good; injustice is not intrinsically bad. Their value or disvalue derives exclusively from whether they conduce to the end."

[16] See Stephen E. Rosenbaum, "How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23.2 (1986): 217–25; David B. Suits, "Why Death Is Not Bad for the One Who Died," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38.1 (2001): 69–84; Aaron Smuts, "Less Good but Not Bad: In Defense of Epicureanism About Death," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (2012): 197–227; James Stacey Taylor, *Death, Posthumous Harm, and Bioethics* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Stephen Hetherington, "Deathly Harm," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38.4 (2001): 349–62.

sense something that 'harms' them."[17] But on what grounds? The difficulty in evading Epicurus' argument is to account for some way in which death harms the now-dead person, despite that person's inability to feel anything.[18] The most common contemporary response to Epicurus and neo-Epicureans, and thus the most common argument for why death *is* a harm, has been labeled the Deprivation Account.[19] The Deprivation Account concurs with Epicurus that death cannot be a harm *on account of* any experience the subject undergoes in death, since the corpse experiences nothing, bad or otherwise. But, against Epicurus, this account posits that death is a harm precisely because of its capacity to *deprive* the dead person of the good things in life they would be enjoying, had they not died. Death's capacity to deprive is thus often designated an *extrinsic harm*: it is not intrinsically harmful in itself but only inasmuch as it restricts access to goods.[20] It is the locked door keeping one out of the funhouse, not the locked door keeping one inside the torture chamber.

Yet is it sensible to declare that death actually causes deprivation? The crucial premise on which the debate turns is the notion of "deprivation" itself: must "deprivation" refer only to a subjectively experienced reality, such as when one feels oneself to be deprived of food and therefore hungry? Or by "deprivation" might we also include things or circumstances that affect a person's life but of which they are not consciously aware and thus whose *lack* they are not subjectively *feeling as* a "deprivation"? If the latter is possible, then we can establish the possibility of *unexperienced harms,* and thereby refute Epicurus' crucial first premise, which denied their existence. In favor of this possibility, philosopher Thomas Nagel gives the example of a man who was once perfectly healthy but after a brain injury has been reduced to the state of a contented infant. Most of us would say the man was indeed harmed, even though in his new infantile

[17] Steven Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 60; cf. Stephan Blatti, "Death's Distinctive Harm," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49.4 (2012): 317–30, at 317.

[18] Epicurus denied the possibility of an afterlife, and most contemporary philosophers of death do not relate afterlife to these discussions, on the premise that a dead person has no conscious experience. Since Qoheleth likewise denies any afterlife for humans (a claim which will be supported in some of what follows), the present discussion proceeds on the same premise.

[19] For defenses of this account see, e.g., Thomas Nagel, "Death," 1–10 in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 143–56; Jeff McMahan, "Death and the Value of Life," *Ethics* 99.1 (1988): 32–61; Jeff McMahan, *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 95–188; Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 47–72; Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 205–33; John Martin Fischer, "Mortal Harm," 132–48 in *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death* (ed. Steven Luper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Frederik Kaufman, "Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36.1 (1999): 1–19.

[20] E.g. Feldman, *Confrontations*, 133–41.

condition he is completely unaware of what has happened—his "happiness consists in a full stomach and a dry diaper"—and thus he feels no subjective deprivation.[21] If forced to locate the relevant harm, we could not point to any pain the man is experiencing. Instead, we would probably point to all of the good things in life he once enjoyed but is no longer able to. Objectively speaking, he is now deprived of them, and that seems very much to be a harm. If such harms are possible for living people, then surely they could be applied to the unwitting dead as well.[22]

IV. Qoheleth on Death's Harm

How, then, does Qoheleth fit into this discussion? That Qoheleth views death as bad is virtually without question.[23] Death is one of the most common subject matters in the book, and Qoheleth variously labels it as both "evil" [רָעָה / רָע] and "absurd" [הֶבֶל]. In this sense the immediate contrast with his contemporary Epicurus is plain. But why is it so? What is Qoheleth's case against death? And how does it compare to the case against death promulgated by contemporary philosophers?

In what follows we will distinguish between two broad types of accounts Qoheleth employs in his designation of death as harmful: one that picks out death's capacity to deprive one of well-being in accordance with the Deprivation Account discussed above, and another that goes beyond the Deprivation Account by regarding death's harm as its proclivity for setting back a person's interests, including interests that stretch beyond one's lifetime. The former is more implicit in Qoheleth, while the latter is more explicit and ultimately his stronger claim. The one robs a person of their potential for pleasant subjective experiences, while the other steals goods of a more objective and longer-lasting sort. Moreover, within the latter, we will demarcate four different aspects about death that in Qoheleth's view contribute to this harm.

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[21] Nagel, "Death," 5–6.

[22] Aristotle mentions the same possibility: "For it is popularly believed that some good and evil—such as honours and dishonours, and successes and disasters of his children and descendants generally—can happen to a dead man, inasmuch as they can happen to a live one without his being aware of them." (*Nic. Eth.* I.10 [Thomson])

[23] Yet in fact, it has been questioned. David L. Smith, "The Concept of Death in Job and Ecclesiastes," *Didaskalia* 4 (1992): 2–14, for instance, argues on the basis of Eccl 4:1–3 and 6:1–6 that "Qoheleth exhibits a certain fascination with death, portraying its advantages over life." In fairness to Smith, these two texts do indeed problematize a simplistic interpretation of Qoheleth's evaluation of non-existence (particularly here *pre-natal,* as opposed to *postmortem* non-existence—though implications may cover both). For this reason I have devoted the bulk of Chapter 5 to addressing the two passages.

A. Death's Harm as the Deprivation of Life's Goods

1. "The Dead Know Nothing" (9:4–6, 10)

First, against Epicurus, we do find in Qoheleth something akin to the contemporary philosophical Deprivation Account concerning death's harm. In Ecclesiastes chapter nine Qoheleth writes,

> (4) For the one who is joined[24] with all the living has something to rely on,[25] for a living dog is better off than a dead lion. (5) For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. And they have no further reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. (6) Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more portion in all that is done under the sun. (10) Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. For there is no work nor thought nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol, where you are going. (9:4–6, 10)

This passage contrasts the good activities life affords the living with their complete absence in Sheol, the place of the dead. Here Qoheleth emphasizes not the possessions or objects one might necessarily dispense with at death but the core subjective experiences of being alive: the body's activity in work, the mind's consciousness in thought and knowledge, and the emotional pulls of the heart, whether love, hate or envy. Qoheleth writes, "forever they have no more portion in all that is done under the sun," and for him this is neither a positive nor neutral outcome: it is in fact a grave misfortune for the dead. The clear implication from this passage is that in life one possesses the capacity to enjoy various goods which will not obtain in death; death is bad in that it deprives one of these short-lived goods. Qoheleth thus assumes a view of deprivation that is not dependent on Epicurus' "experience requirement": like Nagel's brain-injured man, one can be harmfully deprived without knowing it, and just such a condition is true of the dead.

2. "I Take No Pleasure in Them" (12:1–7)

A view of death akin to the Deprivation Account can also be seen in Qoheleth's concluding passage, 12:1–7:[26]

> (9) Rejoice, young man, in your youth,

[24] Reading the *Qere* יְחֻבַּר rather than the *Kethib* יְחֻבָּר. So too multiple Hebrew manuscripts and the LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate, and Targum.

[25] "Something to rely on" translates בִּטָּחוֹן. The only other instance of בִּטָּחוֹן in the HB is 2 Kgs 18:19 = Isa 36:4, where the Assyrian Rabshakeh questions Hezekiah, מָה הַבִּטָּחוֹן הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בָּטָחְתָּ (lit. "What is this [object of] trust upon which you are trusting?" cf. NET: "What is your source of confidence?")

[26] The passage certainly bears a close relationship to 11:7–10 and thus several scholars treat them together. I have chosen to reserve my discussion of 11:7–10 for Chapter 6 which concerns the book's enjoyment refrain. Yet I have included 11:9a here before 12:1–7 to make clear the contextual summons to joy from which 12:1–7 proceeds.

and let your heart cheer you in the days of your prime…

(1) And remember your creator[27] in the days of your youth,
before [עַד] the bad days come and the years strike you
of which you will say, *"I take no pleasure in them"*;

(2) *before* [עַד] the sun and the light of the moon and the stars are darkened,
and the clouds return after the rain;

in the day when [-בַּיּוֹם שֶׁ] those who watch over the house will tremble,
and the strong men become bent down,

(3) and the grinders cease because they grow few,
and those who look through the windows become dimmed,

(4) and the doors on the street are shut;

when [-ב] the sound of the grinding is low,
and one rises up at the sound of a bird,
and all the daughters of song are brought low,

(5) and they are afraid of heights,
and dangers are on the street;
the almond tree blossoms,
the grasshopper drags itself along,
and the caper berry is scattered—
because man is going to his eternal home,
and the mourners lament in the streets—

(6) *before* [עַד] the silver cord is snapped,
or the golden bowl is broken,
or the pitcher is shattered at the well,
or the water wheel is broken at the cistern—

(7) and the dust returns to the earth just as it had been,
and the life-breath returns to God who gave it.[28]

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[27] The *yod* in MT בּוֹרְאֶיךָ is problematic, since a literal rendering would yield "your *creators."* The LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate, and Targum all attest it as "your creator." Given Qoheleth's theology as well as the present context, the meaning is probably that to remember one's creator is to remember to enjoy the life that creator has granted.

[28] James L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 139, notes a parallel text from *Instruction of Ptahhotep*:

> Age is here, old age arrived, feebleness came, weakness grows, childlike one sleeps all day. Eyes are dim, ears deaf, strength is waning through weariness, the mouth, silenced, speaks not, the heart, void, recalls not the past, the bones ache throughout. Good has become evil, all taste is gone, what age does to people is evil in everything. The nose, clogged, breathes not, painful are standing and sitting.
> (*AEL,* 1:62–63).

This is a notoriously difficult passage and a detailed parsing of its various interpretations lies beyond our current scope and purpose, which is to retain focus on the question of value.[29] But we may briefly offer two points in relation to the argument at hand. First, Qoheleth's insistent temporal modifiers ("before," "when"), which often commence the passage's many subordinate clauses, draw a stark dividing line between the time for enjoyment (reflected in the commands of 11:9–12:1a) and the time after which the joys of life will disappear forever. The rich imagery has been taken to metaphorically describe either the *moment* of death itself, or the *process* of dying as it merges into the state of being dead. The difference is not crucial for our purposes, but I think it more likely the process is in view up until 12:6, where a distinctly jolting, even violent moment occurs—a "snapping," a "breaking," a "shattering." The subsequent verse confirms the moment of death has arrived, with the return of the two anthropological ingredients, dust and divine life-breath, to their respective homes.[30] In either case, the intended contrast is drawn—the blissful "before" and the evil "after," the time for dancing and the time for mourning.

Second, death as the time of *pleasure deprivation* is implied in 12:1b, "before the bad days [יְמֵי הָרָעָה] come and the years strike you of which you will say, 'I take no pleasure in them' [אֵין־לִי בָּהֶם חֵפֶץ]." Whether the "bad days" refer to the time during which one is dead (recalling the "days of darkness" in 11:8) or the final span of earthly existence, or both, in any case Qoheleth clearly signifies that the period of pleasure deprivation to come will thereby render one worse off.

[29] The passage has traditionally been read as an allegory for old age, but other interpretations have been proposed. Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 333–49, suggests that three levels of meaning may coexist in the poem—literal, symbolic, and allegorical: "As literal depiction, the scene in 12:2–7 represents the day of a funeral. As symbolism, the constellation of imagery is suggestive of a world-end, which in turn signifies individual death. As allegory, the details of the depiction, or at least many of them, can be translated into aspects of death and dying. Thus whether we just picture what is happening, or stand back to take in the background as well, or peer closely to resolve the blurry details, we see the same thing: death" (347). Alternatively, C. L. Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," *JBL* 118.2 (1999): 209–34, reads the passage as an eschatological vision portraying the end of human existence in general.

[30] Despite the tendency to speak of the ancient Hebrews' non-dualistic thinking, the anthropology reflected in Gen 2:7, 3:19 and by derivation Eccl 3:21, 12:7 is in fact dualistic, at least in its origin. The "living being" [נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה] of Gen 2:7 is comprised of two ingredients: he is (a) materially fashioned out of dust [עָפָר], and (b) vivified by God's "life-breath" [נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים]. Qoheleth refers to these two categories here in 12:7 and in 3:20–21 (translated below), applying them to both humans and animals, though he uses רוּחַ instead of נְשָׁמָה. In early Jewish thought the life-breath was regarded as a temporary loan from God, to be retrieved by him at the end of one's days, when the body "returns to dust" (Ps 104:29; 146:4; Job 34:14; Wis 15:8, 16; Ps.-Phoc. 106). The allusion to Genesis makes plain that רוּחַ here means "life-breath," and in no sense does it refer to an individual's "soul."

B. Death's Harm as Setback to Interests

We have just seen that Qoheleth, unlike Epicurus, is an implicit subscriber to the Deprivation Account of death's harm. Death brings harm because it deprives one of opportunities for enjoyment that would have been possible had one not died. This is a mode of harm that bypasses Epicurus' "experience requirement": one can be harmed by being deprived even if one does not experience the harm. But Qoheleth's assault on death does not stop there. In fact, the sage's primary grievance with death is not simply that it prevents access to the stockpile of life's goods. As we will now see, his gravest objection seems to be a more genuine or active wrong perpetrated by death. The nature of this second sort of harm will be explored more fully in Section V. But a helpful starting point will be an important sense of harm drawn out by philosopher John Feinberg, arguably the most influential philosopher on the topic of harm in recent decades. Feinberg conceives of a harm as a wrongful *setback to interest.*[31] "One's interests," he writes, "consist of all those things in which one has a stake."[32] A person is harmed when their interests are thwarted or set back. Feinberg distinguishes between a setback to interest and a wrong: not all setbacks to interest involve wronging (i.e. violating one's rights), and not all wrongs entail setbacks to interest. But Feinberg acknowledges that in most cases the two overlap.[33] For the purposes of this section, then, we will draw upon Feinberg's understanding of harm as a wrongful setback to one's interest.

For a hedonist like Epicurus, once again, any talk of personal harm must be confined to consciously experienced harm (i.e. pain). But Qoheleth, despite a reputation to the contrary, is not a philosophical hedonist. The wrongs he sees in death have nothing to do with conscious pain, yet wrongs they are. The category of harms as "setbacks to interest" is helpful in that it provides a way to conceive of harms that are unexperienced and thus objective yet more profound and wrongful than harms of deprivation. In this section we will briefly highlight four ways in which Qoheleth

[31] See Chapter 2, "Harms as Setbacks to Interests," in Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others (The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law Volume 1)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[32] Feinberg, *Harm*, 34. An "interest" for Feinberg is not simply a desire, but represents what is objectively good for someone. Feinberg writes, "These interests, or perhaps more accurately, the things these interests are *in,* are distinguishable components of a person's well-being: he flourishes or languishes as they flourish or languish" (34). I would only add the caveat to Feinberg's definition that the concept of meaning comports better than that of well-being with the fulfillment of the sort of interests Qoheleth has in view here, arguably the sort that Raymond Belliotti calls "transcendent interests" (discussed further below).

[33] Feinberg, *Harm*, 34–35.

regards death as a harm in the sense of a wrongful setback to one's interest, quite apart from (and in addition to) death's capacity to deprive one of pleasures.[34]

1. "Common Fate": Death's Unjust Equity (2:13–15; 9:1b–3; 3:19–20)

We may begin with one of Qoheleth's resounding themes—the notion of a "common fate" [מִקְרֶה אֶחָד].

> (13) I saw that there is an advantage to wisdom over against folly, just like the advantage light has over darkness: (14) The wise person has his eyes in his head, while the fool walks in darkness. Yet I also recognized that the same fate [מִקְרֶה אֶחָד] happens [יִקְרֶה] to them both. (15) I said in my heart: Just like the fate [מִקְרֶה] of the fool, so also will happen [יִקְרֵנִי] to me. Why, then, have I tried to become so excessively wise? (2:13–15; cf. 6:8)

> (1b) All that lies before them is (2) absurd [הֶבֶל],[35] as the same fate [מִקְרֶה אֶחָד] comes to all—to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,[36] to the clean and the unclean, to the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner, and the one who swears is as he who forsakes an oath. (3) This is an evil [רָע] in all that is done under the sun: that the same fate [מִקְרֶה אֶחָד] comes to all. (9:1b–3)

> (19) For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same fate [מִקְרֶה אֶחָד]. As one dies so dies the other; the same life-breath [רוּחַ אֶחָד] is common to both and humans have no advantage over animals. For all is absurd [הֶבֶל].[37] (20) Both go to the same place [מָקוֹם אֶחָד]—all are from the dust, and to the dust all return. (3:19–20)

Qoheleth's charge against death in these texts is that death bestows *equal fates* upon *unequal*

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[34] The categories are distinguished by their theme rather than their place in the book, yet in the first three we can follow Qoheleth through his autobiographical complaints about death's harm in 2:13–23.

[35] Our translation reflects an emendation from MT's הכל to הבל, according with the LXX (ματαιότης), Aquila, Peshitta, and Vulgate versions and suggested by the *BHS* editors; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 656; Fox, *Rereading*, 291; George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Scribner, 1908), 158; A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 78–79, 149. The MT's הַכֹּל כַּאֲשֶׁר לַכֹּל is unclear, as is הַכֹּל לִפְנֵיהֶם in relation to what precedes it in v 1. Scribal sight confusion seems likely given that the MT has two occurrences of הכל plus one occurrence of לכל in the span of five words. Thus the phrase is better construed, הַכֹּל לִפְנֵיהֶם הֶבֶל.

[36] The MT lacks "and the bad," but given the otherwise consistent pairings and the presence of καὶ τῷ κακῷ in Aquila we may assume Aquila was translating a *Vorlage* containing וְלָרַע which was later lost by a scribal error (due perhaps to the visual similarity between the two halves of וְלָרָשָׁע לַטּוֹב וְלָרַע וְלַטָּהוֹר).

[37] James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 101, here renders הַכֹּל הֶבֶל as "both are transient." This is partly to maintain consistency with the two other uses of כֹּל in vv 20–21, where the reference is to "both" humans and animals (so translated above). But I take the phrase as an instantiation of Qoheleth's thesis (articulated elsewhere) that "all is absurd" (1:14; 2:17; 1:2 and 12:8 from editor's hand). This discrepancy between anticipated hierarchy and ultimate equality between humans and animals is only a species of the general breakdown between expectations and reality consistently regarded by Qoheleth as הֶבֶל.

persons.[38] Three times in 2:13–15 Qoheleth uses a form of יתר (יִתְרוֹן in 2:13 [2x]; יוֹתֵר in 2:15), always to insinuate that there was something "extra" about Qoheleth's arduous investment in accruing wisdom such that it warrants a correspondingly substantial recompense. Like a student who has studied tirelessly over against those who have slumbered and cheated their way through, Qoheleth demands rightful recognition of his efforts. But reality will not afford him this right. By different paths, the industrious scholar and the lazy fool will arrive at the same destination.

Strikingly, the Hebrew phrase מִקְרֶה אֶחָד, "same fate," is reprised in three different contexts to make the point about seemingly disparate parties receiving their common due. Qoheleth is an heir of the Hebrew wisdom tradition, and much like modern-day computer software, Hebrew wisdom speaks a binary language. He lays out pairs of A-B binaries: wise and fool, righteous and wicked, good and evil, clean and unclean, one who sacrifices and one who does not. People spend their whole lives sculpting out their distinctions from others, yet death's oblivion effaces all such distinctions. This bothers Qoheleth in a way that betrays his distance—ideologically if not temporally—from truths the Judeo-Christian tradition would later engrave into orthodoxy: "Our culture has taught us to regard all persons as of equal worth, and our religions tells us that this is even God's estimate…We need only to be born, and our worth is once and for all assured."[39] Qoheleth is not an egalitarian; he does not want all to be treated "one and the same" in worth. (Though a proto-modern in other respects, here he would not make a very good modern.) But death blithely ignores Qoheleth's stratified ideals, and the ensuing injustice Qoheleth recognizes as both "evil" [רָע] and "absurd" [הֶבֶל]. There is no thought here of death despoiling life's goods, nor is this a harm the dead will ever directly sense. Nevertheless, death's unjust equity is itself a fully equipped evil, one which undermines Qoheleth's interest in the proper recognition of his own status and achievements.

[38] Fox, *Rereading*, 292. The word translated in these passages as "fate," מִקְרֶה, elsewhere in the HB conveys a happenstance, a surprising or seemingly chance occurrence (1 Sam 6:9; 20:26; Ruth 2:3). But Qoheleth uses it differently, essentially of an outcome. Some scholars press further, suggesting that in Qoheleth's use it is a *divinely determined* outcome. Whether or not or in whatever sense divine determination is a part of Qoheleth's worldview (a matter we shall discuss in Chapter 4), it is not possible to see determination solely from his use of מִקְרֶה in these passages, *pace* Peter Machinist, "Fate, Miqreh, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought," 159–75 in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995): "The word *miqreh* is here…an 'occurrence'—not just any occurrence, but one that is predetermined" (166).

[39] Richard Taylor, "Time and Life's Meaning," *Review of Metaphysics* 40.4 (1987): 675–86.

2. "Already Forgotten": Death's Erasure of Memory (2:16–17; 1:11; 9:5)

Another of Qoheleth's indictments against death is that it erases the memory of the deceased, and this is alluded to at various points in the book:

> For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance [אֵין זִכְרוֹן…לְעוֹלָם],[40] since in the days to come everyone will already have been forgotten [נִשְׁכָּח]. Oh, how the wise dies just like the fool! (17) So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was terrible [רַע] to me, for all is absurd [הֶבֶל] and a striving after wind. (2:16–17)

> There is no remembrance [אֵין זִכְרוֹן] of former people,
> nor of those who are yet to exist.[41]
> There will be no remembrance of them [לֹא־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם זִכָּרוֹן],

[40] The function of לְעוֹלָם can be taken one of two ways: either (a) there will be "no remembrance" of the wise and the fool *forever*—i.e. it will permanently be the case that neither the wise nor the fool will be remembered, or, (b) it is denied that the "remembrance" of the wise and the fool will last "forever"—i.e. they may be remembered for a shorter time, but not permanently. Qoheleth's emotive emphasis on this theme throughout the book inclines me to the former interpretation.

[41] רִאשֹׁנִים does not mean "former things," though it has often been translated as such, beginning with the ancient versions. First, as several scholars, e.g., Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 208, and James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 68, have pointed out, the HB maintains a semantic distinction between the masculine רִאשֹׁנִים and the feminine רִאשֹׁנוֹת when functioning substantively. The former always refers to "former people" / "forefathers" (Lev 26:45; Deut 19:14; Jer 11:10; possibly 2 Chr 22:1), and the latter always indicates former "things" or "times" (Isa 41:22; 42:9; 43:9, 18; 46:9; 65:17). Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.*6, 325, cites Ps 89:50(49) as a potential counterexample but there הָרִאשֹׁנִים modifies the preceding masculine plural noun חֲסָדֶיךָ (cf. NET, "your earlier faithful deeds"), so the function of הָרִאשֹׁנִים is not substantive.

Second, the parallel between 1:11 and 2:16 also argues strongly for reading רִאשֹׁנִים as people. In both cases Qoheleth uses the construction אֵין זִכְרוֹן ל- to introduce what will not be remembered. It is clearly people in 2:16 (the wise person and the fool), thus we should expect people in 1:11 as well. This is also the natural reading of the ל, since it indicates those *for whom* remembrance is granted; it is the sort of benefit only (one-time) conscious beings appreciate. Further supporting this point is that in Mal 3:16, the one other biblical instance in which ל partners with זִכָּרוֹן to indicate the object of remembrance (rather than those who are to be "reminded," as ל normally points to when used with זִכָּרוֹן), the object of the preposition is a group of people: "a book of remembrance was written before him *of those who feared* [זִכָּרוֹן . . . לְיִרְאֵי] Yhwh." Moreover, as explained in the next footnote, in both 1:11 and 2:16 the two relevant parties are linked by עִם: "no remembrance for X, *along with* Y."

Third, turning to אַחֲרֹנִים, here too, all other substantival instances of the word in the HB refer to later people, not later things (2 Sam 19:12, 13; Isa 41:4; Job 18:20; Eccl 4:16). The usage in Eccl 4:16 is, of course, the most relevant, and that verse and 1:11 share strong parallels (as mentioned last chapter). It is undisputed that הָאַחֲרוֹנִים in 4:16 refers to later people, so that fact alone argues for the same in 1:11. Further, although the setup is different, Qoheleth's basic point is the same in both cases: individual humans are not remembered in the colossal machinations of passing time.

Fourth, in favor of the "things" / "times" reading some scholars have simply pointed to the context of 1:4–11, e.g. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 90. But given that the poem begins in v 4 with a reference specifically to human generations "going and coming," it should not be surprising that Qoheleth would conclude the poem with a similar focus. Furthermore, the whole poem is proffered as an answer to the anthropocentric question מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם—and Qoheleth's serpentine musings always return home. In sum, the evidence strongly favors reading רִאשֹׁנִים and אַחֲרֹנִים as a reference to forgotten human beings who have been or yet will be.

> nor of[42] those who will exist later still. (1:11)
>
> For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. And they have no further reward, for the memory of them is forgotten [נִשְׁכַּח זִכְרָם]. (9:5)[43]

This is one of the areas of Qoheleth's thought that most obviously repudiates traditional Israelite wisdom. Other sages taught that "the righteous will be remembered forever" (Ps 112:6; cf. Prov 10:7) and that their "name" will abide among future generations (Sir 15:6; 37:26; 39:9–11; 41:11–13). But Qoheleth demurs, claiming instead that the deceased will soon be forgotten.

The passage cited from 2:16 is of course the continuation of 2:13–15, just discussed, and it appears to give a grounding to death's harm deeper even than that provided in v 15. Qoheleth's first thought is that wisdom holds an advantage over folly (2:13–14a). Next, he comes to the chilling realization that both die just the same (2:14b–15). Finally, he gives the reason (כִּי, "for") why this democratized death is so bad, why it is deemed *hebel*: "For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, since in the days to come everyone will already have been forgotten" (2:16a). After a brief lamentation over this fate (2:16b–17), he then grapples with death's harm from another angle beginning in v 18, which we will take up in the next section. But it is instructive that in the midst of Qoheleth's autobiography, which lays out the groundwork for the entire book, 2:16 burrows down to the deepest foundation of Qoheleth's logic concerning the nature of death's harm. The "common fate" of v 15 is unjust in itself, as Qoheleth sees it, but the spoiling of one's merited posthumous legacy (v 16) illuminates the accumulated, long-term trajectory of damage such a "common fate" will produce.

Qoheleth's reassertion of the theme in chapter nine once again falls only sentences after his allusion to the "common fate." Many commentators have stumbled over Qoheleth's claim in 9:5 that "the dead…have no further reward [שָׂכָר]": "The use of the word 'reward' does not, at first glance, seem to make sense."[44] Fox suggests, "When he says that the dead have no more *śakar*,

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[42] Hebr. עִם, "with." It is possible to take it in the sense of "among," or "on the part of," implying that the last group mentioned are the ones who will fail to remember the preceding group. However, in 2:16 Qoheleth uses the same construction to say that there is no remembrance for the wise עִם ("along with") the fool. The combined use of אֵין זִכְרוֹן ("there is no remembrance") and -לְ ("for") to indicate the first mentioned party both imitate 1:11. Therefore, the use of עִם in 2:16, which certainly means "along with," should carry the same meaning in 1:11, signifying that there is a lack of remembrance for the one group of future humans *as well as* for the humans to come later still.

[43] Cf. also Eccl 4:16; 5:20; 9:15.

[44] Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Sean McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 112.

the implication is that there *are* cases of recompense in life."[45] Qoheleth does, of course, believe that life has its own rewards—most notably, the opportunity for שִׂמְחָה—but that this is not the point here is made clear by the following clause: "*for* [כִּי] the memory of them is forgotten." Qoheleth thus identifies one's unbestowed "reward" not as the perks within life nor a blessed afterlife but precisely as posthumous, intersubjective "remembrance."[46] This "further reward"—the hypothetical reward awaiting an honorable life—is in fact unavailable. The dearth of this remembrance, this reward, constitutes a serious harm because it denies Qoheleth's interest in the social honor due to him and others like him.

3. "To a Man Who Did Not Labor for It": Death's Absurd Bequeathal (2:18–22)

Last chapter we briefly noted 2:18 and 2:21 when we discussed "competent causation" as an element of Qoheleth's conception of meaning. Here I reprise the section (2:18–22) since it constitutes Qoheleth's final complaint about death in his opening autobiography.

> So I hated all my business for which I myself had toiled[47] under the sun, since I would need to leave it to the man who will come after me (19) —and who knows whether he will be a wise person or a

[45] Fox, *Rereading*, 293.

[46] The כִּי lays out the logic straightforwardly: "they have no further reward, *for* [כִּי] the memory of them is forgotten." Thus, the reward *would have been* comprised of remembrance. Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 149, wrongly presuming that שָׂכָר must only mean a "material reward," claims that the latter part of the verse "hardly accounts for the lack of 'reward', as no amount of remembrance will produce a material reward for the dead." He then claims that the כִּי is "asseverative" (translating it with "indeed"), but this is patently unnecessary.

[47] Hebr. אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִי שֶׁאֲנִי עָמֵל, commonly translated "my toil/labor (in) which I toiled..." in which case the noun עָמָל ("toil") would refer to activity. This would ostensibly work fine until we read אַנִּיחֶנּוּ ("I must leave it") later in the sentence. The 3ms suffix נּוּ- ("it") in אַנִּיחֶנּוּ cannot be discerned if עָמָל earlier in the verse is taken in its normal sense as the *action* of toil—one cannot leave one's *action* behind after death. One solution, advanced most famously by H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 1, is that עָמָל in Qoheleth always means "not 'toil' but 'gain, profit, or earning (thru toil), or yield, or income," in other words, not the labor itself but its fruit or produce. But this is an overcorrection, since עָמָל in Qoheleth does still *primarily* refer to the activity of toiling, and in most of the book's occurrences it cannot simply mean "wealth." See, e.g., 2:10 in which the enjoyment of wealth is deemed by Qoheleth חֶלְקִי מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי ("my reward *from* all my labor"); 2:11 in which עָמָל שֶׁעָמְלָתִי ("toil which I toiled") is parallel with כָּל־מַעֲשַׂי שֶׁעָשׂוּ יָדָי ("all the works that my hands had done"); 2:22 in which עֲמָלוֹ ("his toil") is parallel with רַעְיוֹן לִבּוֹ ("his striving of heart"). Many scholars follow Ginsberg in part, at least rendering עָמָל as "wealth" (i.e. toil's produce) in a few places, including the two occurrences in 2:18–19. But Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6,* 418, has proposed another solution: "The key uses of עָמָל to indicate something other than labour do not point to it being simply the income derived from that labour after its completion: it is, rather, the continuing income, or sources of income, established by that labour. The English 'industry' or 'business' captures some of this." For support Weeks reexamines the rabbinic evidence such as b. Ketub. 69a, where עָמָל refers "not to wealth *per se,* but to income, or sources of income." Further, Ps 105:44 is often referenced as evidence for עָמָל as wealth (toil's produce), but Weeks points out that עָמָל in the verse (speaking of the Israelites' inherited possessions in lands previously occupied by other nations) would refer not to "whatever piles of money or crops are lying around"

> fool? Yet he will be in charge of all my business for which I have toiled and for which I have become wise under the sun. This also is absurd [הֶבֶל].[48] (20) So I turned to let my heart feel despair[49] over all the labor I had expended under the sun. (21) For there can be a man whose labor is done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill and yet he must pass on his lot to a man who did not labor for it. This also is absurd [הֶבֶל] and a great evil [רָעָה רַבָּה]. (22) For what is there for a person in all his toil and the striving of his heart? (2:18–22)

Having narrated an account of his impressive achievements only to recast them as הֶבֶל, Qoheleth relays the progression of his internal frustrations to the point of feeling "hatred" toward "all [his] business for which [he] had toiled under the sun" (2:18). Just as with his condemnation of wisdom-accrual in 2:12–17, the real culprit is not his labor itself but the absurd, undermining effect death has on it. If we follow Stuart Week's proposal, Qoheleth's worry concerns the bequeathal not merely of his "possessions" or "wealth,"[50] but his actual business, the "infrastructure of his fortune."[51] Qoheleth states or implies a cluster of associated misgivings: (a) that the heir of Qoheleth's business is someone *other* than Qoheleth himself; (b) that the heir is *unknown* to him; (c) that the heir's identity is *arbitrary*; (d) that the heir might well be a *fool*; (e) that the heir *did not work for it*, as Qoheleth did. What these add up to is the serious possibility that an undeserving fool will be put in charge of Qoheleth's business. This would be bad, presumably, for two potential reasons: its intrinsic unfairness, and, more pragmatically, the possibility that this fool-heir would run Qoheleth's company into the ground and thus spoil his good name. Hence, should his worries see the light of day, Qoheleth's interest in preserving his company and his own long-term reputation therewith would be stifled.

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but "the fields, vineyards, and all other mechanisms which have been produced by the work of the peoples, and which will now be worked to create their own produce." Cf. also Anson F. Rainey, "A Second Look at Amal in Qoheleth," *CTM* 36 (1965): 805, who translates as "trade (profession)" and comments regarding 2:18–21, "The passage thus reflects the age-old practice of keeping the family trade or profession alive by passing it on from father to son. It is not only the material possessions that this man will leave for his heir; it is something more precious, his priceless skills that he learned from his forbears and perfected through a lifetime of toil." In line with these scholars I have translated עָמָל as "business"—the infrastructure into which Qoheleth had poured his labor—in the instances where it seems to mean something more than "toil/labor."

[48] Cf. Sir 11:18–19, 14:15.

[49] יאש ("to despair") occurs five other times in the HB (1 Sam 27:1; Isa 57:10; Jer 2:25; 18:12; Job 6:26) but elsewhere always in *niphal;* this is the only occurrence in *piel* and seems to be causative with אֶת־לִבִּי as its object.

[50] So Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth*, 1.

[51] Weeks, Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6, 418.

4. "Time and Chance": Death's Disruption of Life's Projects (9:11–12)

> I turned and I saw under the sun that the race does not belong to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor the bread to the wise, nor wealth to the understanding, nor favor to the knowledgeable, because time [עֵת] and chance [פֶּגַע] happen [יִקָּרֶה] to them all. (12) For indeed, one does not know his time [עִתּוֹ]. Like fish that are caught in an evil net [בִּמְצוֹדָה רָעָה], or like birds that are caught in a trap—like them, human beings are trapped at an evil time [לְעֵת רָעָה], when it suddenly falls upon them. (9:11–12)

Qoheleth here discerns an additional harm regarding death, twice calling it "evil" [רָעָה]: its pounce is sudden*,* unexpected, unpredictable, without warning. A person "does not know his time," Qoheleth writes, referring here to one's time of death.[52] But it is not necessarily the timing per se that is the essence of the problem. The trouble is that death's unknown, arbitrary timing is sure to disrupt one's plans and aims, the very sorts of aims outlined in 9:11. The sprinting athlete, the wise learner, the skilled warrior—they are all tragically toppled precisely in the midst of their teleological striving, before attaining the hoped-for achievement appropriate to each case.[53] For Qoheleth, the battle *should* belong to the strong and the bread to the wise, yet anti-teleological forces—"time and chance," as he calls them—are perpetually on the prowl to sack all teleological strivings before they can reach any fulfillment.

Qoheleth's concept of time is a complicated subject that will demand our attention in the next chapter. For now I will anticipate later conclusions only slightly by saying that Qoheleth's use of עֵת (most notably in 3:2–8) accentuates the inevitability of an occurrence, more than its exact timing. An עֵת is something that is going to happen sooner or later, though we know not when. This understanding comports well with Qoheleth's use of עֵת here in 9:11–12, although 9:11–12 does highlight the note of chance, arbitrariness, and unpredictability. What, then, is the role and relationship of the two key words in the sentence "*time* and *chance* happen to them all"? I would paraphrase as follows: "inevitable negative, offsetting occurrences (death being paradigmatic), yet whose timing is unanticipated and seemingly arbitrary, happen to them all."

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[52] There is some debate as to whether Qoheleth has precisely death in view (so Fox, *Rereading*, 297) or any unfortunate occurrence in one's life (so Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 686–87, while Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 164, says it is ambiguous). I take the reference in v 12 primarily to be death, both given that this passage comes immediately on the heels of 9:1–10, Qoheleth's most sustained meditation on death in the book, and that the trapping of animals very likely insinuates a lethal aim.

[53] This seems to be the connection between these two verses, since v 12 is presented as an explanation [כִּי] for v 11.

Bumper-sticker manufacturers have paraphrased the idea more tersely as, "[Stuff] happens."

We can press the issue and ask what precisely it is about death's unwelcome disruption that Qoheleth regards as "evil." As with the previous three harms, the "evil" is not merely found in the deprivation of goods that death engenders by coming earlier rather than later—or never. Rather, the Jewish sage intuits some genuine wrong inflicted upon the human person, or that person's life. For one thing, just as one would not presume to show up at a king's door for an impromptu meeting, death's unannounced arrival mocks the apparent dignity of persons, treating them instead like baited varmint suddenly pounced on by their trappers. But, secondly, or perhaps more specifically, death disrespects people's proclivity for setting and achieving goals. Life is meaningless apart from the establishment and fulfillment of goals, yet if death can come at any hour, how can a person maintain motivation to make any plans beyond the present?

V. Death's Harm Vis-à-vis Meaning in Life

A. Death's Accomplice

At this point, having explored several ways in which death wrongfully sets back or thwarts one's interests and thus brings harm, we can now begin to tie some of the ideas from the previous chapter together with the present one in order to coordinate Qoheleth's notion of death's harm with his conception of meaning in life and his belief that such meaning is unattainable.

Philosopher Palle Yourgrau has stated the issue bluntly with what he calls the "Ecclesiastes problem": "How can one's life have meaning if after all is said and done one is simply dead?"[54] But as our discussion to this point already implies, that way of stating the question is indeed too blunt. That's because it is not the bare fact of death that destroys the possibility of meaning—but death's *accoutrements*, or better, death's *accomplices.* This point has been lying beneath the surface of our discussion throughout the chapter. For simplicity's sake I have until now referred to the harm *of* death, the harm *caused by* death, and the like. But strictly speaking, this is not quite accurate in the case of the four harms we identified in the previous section. In these cases, it is death *plus* something else that depletes one's life of meaning.

Death, for Qoheleth, does indeed annihilate all first-person conscious experience, and thus in its wake go all of life's experiential goods. That is the point in 9:4–6, 10 and 12:1–7, discussed

[54] Palle Yourgrau, "The Dead," 137–56 in *The Metaphysics of Death* (ed. John Martin Fischer; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 137.

earlier. Otherwise put, death is entirely bad for the person's *well-being*—essentially, how well the person is faring at any given time.[55] The harm of that deprivation is significant, to be sure, but for Qoheleth it cannot match the infinitely darker shadow cast by death's role in the erasure of life's *meaning*. Yet how exactly does death contribute to Qoheleth's perception that meaning is eradicated? A distinction offered by philosopher Shelly Kagan may prove helpful here. Kagan suggests that we should distinguish between the two concepts, "me" and "my life." "Me" serves as a stand-in for one's first-person experience of the world, one's self, one's consciousness, one's lived-in reality. "My life," on the other hand, represents one's deeds, accomplishments, correspondences —essentially one's "life" as received and perceived by anyone else, thus from the third-person perspective. It is "something like a sequence of events or facts" about one's life, the sort of events or facts that might be written in a biography or obituary.[56] One's "life" may be regarded as analogous to a work of art or a story that one crafts about oneself. The crafter of that story will die, but the story lives on. Her "life" exists as a representative for the person who once lived and as an entity which may be referred to, interpreted, evaluated—remembered and honored or disdained and forgotten. The reason this distinction is important for our purposes is that meaning in life as conceived by Qoheleth maps on to "my life" rather than "me." In other words, the *bearer* of meaning is one's "life" as viewed from an external, third-person perspective, not the perspective of the subject herself.[57] The harm accrued for the one is different than the harm accrued for the

[55] Guy Fletcher, "Introduction," 1–6 in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (ed. Guy Fletcher; New York: Routledge, 2016), 1: "What is distinctive about the philosophy of well-being is its focus on the question of which things in and of themselves make someone's life go better or worse for them. It thus seeks an account of what is fundamentally, or non-instrumentally, good or bad for us and why" [emphasis omitted]. "Well-being" is a category of personal value used for evaluating the present-tense welfare of a living person, and thus it is distinct from the value of "meaning" (as will be explained further in Chapter 5.) Death is bad for people's well-being on the assumption, plausibly true for most people, that the benefits of living outweigh its harms (a question also to be explored in Chapter 5).

[56] Shelly Kagan, "Me and My Life," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 94 (1994): 309–24, at 318 (the latter claim is my own commentary, not Kagan's). The distinction is followed by Walter Glannon, "Persons, Lives, and Posthumous Harms," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32.2 (2001): 127–42; Belliotti, *Posthumous Harm*, 101–34, who both term the respective categories "biological" and "biographical" lives. Daniel Sperling, *Posthumous Interests: Legal and Ethical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34–40, makes a similar distinction, though his term parallel to Kagan's "life" category is "the Human Subject" in distinction from the "person." Cf. too, Wai-Hung Wong, "Meaningfulness and Identities," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11.2 (2008): 123–48, at 129–31, who speaks of one's "biographical life" as that which is "subject to the evaluation of meaningfulness."

[57] This juxtaposition is also advocated by Steven Luper, "Life's Meaning," 198–212 in *The Cambridge Companion to Life and Death* (ed. Steven Luper; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 198: "The bearer of meaning is not, strictly speaking, a living subject, but rather that subject's *life"* [emphasis original]. Cf. Thaddeus Metz, "Meaning as a Distinct and Fundamental Value: Reply to Kershnar," *Science, Religion and Culture* 1.2 (2014): 101–06: "The bearer of meaning in life is in the first instance a life of a human person" (102).

other,[58] and Qoheleth's paramount interest lies in how his "life" fares in the accumulation of lasting meaning.

This means, again, that it is actually not *death* per se that withholds meaning in life, since death itself only brings an end to the living subject, not the "life" she has crafted (in the sense described above). So then, inasmuch as death is a destroyer of meaning, it must partner with an accomplice. We have already met this accomplice, but an interesting way of reprising the theme will be to draw on "a crude and morbid thought experiment" from philosopher Sam Scheffler.[59] He writes, "Suppose you knew that, although you yourself would live a normal life span, the earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid. How would this knowledge affect your attitudes during the remainder of your life?"[60] Scheffler suggests, plausibly enough, that most people would find this knowledge to be of great and harrowing significance—*even though* by the time cosmic extinction strikes they will already have died anyway. In raising the question Scheffler's aim is to highlight an underacknowledged human value. The hope for a personal afterlife has, of course, remained a central human question throughout the ages. What Scheffler wants to highlight, though, is what he calls "the collective afterlife"—that is, the ongoing existence of *other people* after one's own demise.[61] Scheffler thinks that for human lives to be meaningful *now,* our actions must be predicated on an assumption that future generations of human beings will follow after us.

But why should that matter so much? Simply put, we need *them* to vindicate *us.* The classic Zen koan asks, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?" We can ask the same question with respect to human lives: "If people accomplish much and live seemingly productive, meaningful lives, but no one acknowledges or remembers them after their death, were their lives actually meaningful?" Qoheleth's answer, I have already posited, is, "No." As we saw already in the last chapter, meaning for Qoheleth is bound up with and dependent upon *intersubjectivity,* the ascription of worth to the long-accrued achievements of others.

Death's "accomplice" then, in the destruction of meaning, is what we can call *metaphorical mortality.* Metaphorical *immortality* represents the notion of "living on" past one's death, not

[58] Glannon, "Persons," 129: "The question of how well or badly one's life goes and how well off a person is should be treated separately."

[59] Samuel Scheffler, "Lecture 1: The Afterlife (Part I)," 15–49 in *Death and the Afterlife* (ed. Niko Kolodny; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18.

[60] Scheffler, "The Afterlife (Part I)," 18.

[61] Scheffler, "Lecture 2: The Afterlife (Part II)," 51–81.

physically, but in the hearts and minds and memories of others. Metaphorical mortality, or what Brian Schmidt calls the "death after death,"[62] is simply its opposite: a lapse that lingers into the blank oblivion of forgotten history. Philosopher Robert Nozick has expressed this human desire for a metaphorical afterlife in terms of the "traces" that people hope to leave behind after death:

> Death wipes you out. Dead, you are no longer around—around *here* at any rate—and if there is nowhere else you'll be…then all that will be left of you is your effects, leavings, traces. People do seem to think it important to continue to be around somehow. The root notion seems to be this one: it shouldn't *ever* be as if you had never existed at all. A significant life leaves its mark on the world. A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life.[63]

There are essentially two kinds of traces, physical and mental. The dead are kept in view either by objects such as statues, books, and buildings, or by the mental impressions and memories retained in other people's minds. Qoheleth articulates his desire for both even in the span of a few verses as he first grieves the fact of his life forgotten (2:16) and then deplores the potential dismantling of his business and possessions (2:18–23). We should emphasize that, over against the consequentialist view of meaning discussed in the last chapter, such "traces" are not meant to be read by a lifeless cosmos. They are signifiers for *sapiens.* They are invitations—even pleas—for human connection across time and space, across even the threshold that separates the living from the dead. From Qoheleth's vantage point, meaning is found in intersubjectivity, if it is found at all.

This is, of course, no new human value. The prospect of one's truncated existence becoming embedded into the fabric of ongoing generations was as important to the ancients as it is for us, if not much more so. Many scholars have drawn attention to this phenomenon in the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Of course, the autobiographical tomb inscriptions mentioned in Chapter 1 exemplify this desire in embodied form (and often go one step further by cursing those who might efface the memorial with their own mortal afflictions). But other means of memory-keeping were maintained. For instance, Brian Schmidt highlights the role of commemorative cults in ancient Ugarit which would publicly recite the names of community

[62] Brian B. Schmidt, "Memory as Immortality: Countering the Dreaded 'Death After Death' in Ancient Israelite Society," 87–100 in *Judaism in Late Antiquity, Part Four: Death, Life-After-Death, Resurrection and The World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity* (ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 2000).

[63] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 582 [emphasis original].

members who had died, being "designed to generate and sustain the recollection of the deceased in the minds of the living."[64] Similarly, Akkadian texts refer to the practice of "invoking the name" (*šuma zakāru*) of a dead relative, and the same idea is alluded to in 2 Sam 18:18, where Absalom erects a stela, saying, "I have no son to invoke my name" [הַזְכִּיר שְׁמִי].[65] More corporeally, the care of the dead was an important practice in ancient Israel that involved collecting and entombing the bones of the deceased, maintaining the grave, and preserving the identity of the dead, all with a view to "transcend death through the continuity of family, which is the essence of functional immortality."[66] So Qoheleth is hardly unique in broaching the topic of metaphorical immortality or in desiring its maintenance. His uniqueness lies, rather, in denying its reality for everyone.

B. Metaphorical Afterlife, Not Literal Afterlife

This is not always sufficiently recognized, and other concerns are regularly deemed more central to Qoheleth's death-talk. It is often proposed that a barely hidden polemic behind the sage's claims of death's finality is aimed at advocates of a literal (individual) afterlife or immortality. Samuel Adams, for instance, writes, "[Qoheleth's] denial of the possibility for a blessed afterlife demonstrates that he had opponents on this issue *and* that the topic had become a focal point for discussion."[67] Perdue concurs, "Most likely, Qoheleth is here [at 3:21] engaged in a repudiation of apocalyptic sages who affirmed a life after death."[68] But I suggest this need not be the case. There

[64] Brian B. Schmidt, "Afterlife Beliefs: Memory as Immortality," *NEA* 63 (2000): 236–39, at 238; see also Schmidt, "Death After Death," 87–100.

[65] See David Janzen, "A Monument and a Name: The Primary Purpose of Chronicles' Genealogies," *JSOT* 43.1 (2018): 45–66, at 56–63.

[66] It should also be noted that the relationship of the living to the dead in the ancient Near Eastern world was not *only* one of remembrance of a former person or care for that person's physical remains. There is clear evidence for a "cult of the dead" in Egypt and Mesopotamia, in which living persons would offer prayers, offerings, and veneration to and on behalf of the deceased. Whether similar practices existed in Israel remains a point of scholarly debate. It is clear that food provisions were made for the dead, but their significance has been variously interpreted. See, e.g., Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Neukirchener: Butzon & Kevelaer, 1986); Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992); Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Religion and Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994). Whatever the views of his fellow Judeans, Qoheleth's own denial of an afterlife accords with his view that the primary way one *could* benefit the dead is by posthumous remembrance (not by prayers or offerings to a posthumously conscious being), yet even this he denies.

[67] Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 134 [emphasis original].

[68] Leo Perdue, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qoheleth," 231–58 in *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition* (ed. F. García Martínez; Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2003), 257. Cf. also Jack T. Sanders, "Wisdom, Theodicy, Death, and the Evolution of Intellectual Traditions," *JSJ* 36.3 (2005): 263–77: "Why has death become a tragedy, even when it comes at the end of a long and successful and happy life? Is it not because the possibility of an alternative to everlasting death, of immortality, has appeared on

is little evidence that Qoheleth entertained the possibility of a literal afterlife even enough to bother refuting it.[69] Instead, Qoheleth's polemic, if that is still the proper word for it, concerns indeed the prospect of a *metaphorical* afterlife—not its value, to be clear, but its reality. The contention, if directed at anyone in particular, was aimed more at traditionalists spouting claims to supposed lasting legacies than any avant-gardists' ideas of a soul's ascent to the heavens.

In addition to the passages discussed earlier, Qoheleth takes up this theme with his several references to "what will be *after* him/them," always with the preposition אַחַר followed by the pronominal suffix ו (3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 10:14; cf. 2:12, 18). We cited this phrase in the previous chapter as a strong clue for how to relate Qoheleth's epistemic lack to his meaning problem, since the fuller phrase is always a question along the lines of, "Who can tell him what will be after him?" But it is worth emphasizing again in this context that, against the opinions of some scholars, "what will be after him" is *not* a reference to "afterlife" in the common sense of the term.[70] Rather, it refers precisely to the idea illumed by Scheffler: the goings-on "under the sun" (and that phrase modifies the "after him" in 6:12) that continue after one has died, among future generations on earth.[71] For Qoheleth, then, human ignorance is temporally bidirectional: current humans will not know what is to be after them, and those to come will not remember their predecessors.

But Adams, again positing an afterlife, suggests that "Qoheleth wants to satisfy the desire for a continuation of existence and therefore an ultimate reward" (140). Yet in fact, as we have seen, when Qoheleth mentions "reward" [שָׂכָר] in the context of death, it is the reward of posthumous remembrance [זֵכֶר] he has in view, not immortality (9:5). "The book seems to long for a hereafter," Adams continues, "to rectify the inequalities the sage has witnessed and to

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Qoheleth's horizon (as on Job's), but he cannot accept it?" (269); Jimyung Kim, *Reanimating Qohelet's Contradictory Voices: Studies of Open-Ended Discourse on Wisdom in Ecclesiastes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 157.

[69] The only possible grounds for thinking so is the question in 3:21, but, as mentioned earlier, given that Qoheleth's conception of the רוּחַ there bears all the marks of the traditional Hebrew idea of the "life-breath" temporarily loaned from God to humans while they live (and this buttressed by 12:7), there is no reason to read the text as concerned with an immortal soul ascending heavenward. Qoheleth is not so much as doubting that idea; he is not referring to it at all.

[70] *Pace* Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 121–22; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 131.

[71] So Franz Josef Backhaus, *"Den Zeit und Zufall trifft sie alle": Studien zur Komposition und zum Gottesbild im Buch Qohelet* (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1993), 141–42; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1952), 101; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6*, 533: "humans cannot see how things will be in the world after they have left it."

preserve some sort of *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang.*"[72] Certainly Qoheleth is grieved by injustice, and Second Temple Judaism would eventually extend the logic of its necessary corrective to a postmortem divine judgment.[73] But refuting that logic is not our sage's concern, and while he would no doubt prefer a longer life he exhibits no specific desire for a "hereafter." There was plenty of opportunity for Qoheleth to address the matter plainly, yet he does not. The book does reveal a notion of divine judgment, to be sure, but it is always a this-worldly (in)justice mostly relegated to the length of one's life. If exercised, judgment for the wicked (or the merely foolish) is to "perish" (7:15), be "destroyed" (5:5; 7:16), "die before [one's] time" (7:17; cf. 8:11), while judgment for the righteous (or wise) is to "prolong [one's] life" (7:15; 8:12, 13).[74] Such temporal remittance, along with a few other possible dispensations of earthly weals and woes (cf. 2:26; 7:26; 5:18; 6:2), are all that Qoheleth means by God's "judgment." Nothing properly eschatological falls within his purview.[75]

C. Posthumous Harm

In contemporary philosophy of death the *harm thesis*, as already mentioned, is the thesis that death can harm the deceased. A slightly different but closely related question concerns the *posthumous harm thesis,* which says that one can be harmed *after* one has died, not precisely by death itself but by some other postmortem event.[76] Despite the close relation of the two ideas, the notion of posthumous harm is much more highly contested in the philosophical literature than is the harm thesis, and some philosophers deny the legitimacy of posthumous harm while upholding the harm thesis concerning death itself.[77] Most philosophers who engage these questions want to say that death itself renders significant harm against the deceased (where what is meant by that is the

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[72] Adams, *Wisdom*, 141. He also posits that Qoheleth was "aware of a new dynamic in the tradition: fulfilling the act-consequence relationship through eschatological means" (106).

[73] See Richard Bauckham, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in Second Temple Judaism," 245–56 in *The Jewish World around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

[74] Cf. Fox, *Rereading*, 55: "God's archetypal, and decisive, judgment is realized in lifespans: the righteous live long and the wicked die young."

[75] The viewpoint of the editor at 12:14 is potentially another matter, but should not be read into Qoheleth's own perspective.

[76] Advocates for the concept of posthumous harm include Belliotti, *Posthumous Harm*; Feinberg, *Harm*, 79–93; George Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21.2 (1984): 183–88; Dorothy Grover, "Posthumous Harm," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 334–53; Barbara Baum Levenbook, "Welfare and Harm after Death," 188–209 in *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death: New Essays* (ed. James Stacey Taylor; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[77] E.g. Bradley, *Well-Being*, 43, argues that "*death* is bad for the one who dies" yet "*posthumous harm* is impossible" [emphasis original].

extrinsic harm of deprivation), but once the deceased has died, many philosophers do not see how further harm could accrue.[78] Walter Glannon, applying the Epicurean logic to the question of posthumous harm, writes, "Because there is no mind and thus no person after death, a person cannot be harmed posthumously."[79] Ernest Partridge likewise comments, "Nothing happens to the dead. No posthumous events can in any way alter a single instant of the full scope of events that constitute a completed life."[80]

Other philosophers, however, argue that posthumous harm is a legitimate category of harm. A common example found in the literature is that of a person whose reputation has been wrongly soiled at a time after her death. Falling into disrepute certainly seems to be a harm, and if the spoiling occurs after one's death it seems to provide an instance of posthumous harm. For instance, after Jane's death her former college roommate, envious of Jane's accomplishments, successfully spread the rumor that Jane had cheated her way through school when in fact this was not true. Has Jane been harmed? Just as with the question of whether death itself can harm someone, so too posthumous harms are only possible if one does not subscribe to Epicurus' "experience requirement" but instead allows that one can be genuinely harmed by an occurrence or state of affairs one does not consciously, subjectively experience. Yet once this is granted, the central difficulty with the possibility of posthumous harm lies in discerning precisely whom or what is harmed and when. Joel Feinberg and George Pitcher have advocated one influential set of answers, now known as the Feinberg-Pitcher account.[81] They posit that a case such as Jane's is indeed a posthumous harm yet the one who is harmed is the *antemortem* Jane. That is, while Jane was still alive, she was subject to harm because it would come to pass after her death that her interest in maintaining an upstanding reputation would be thwarted. (She began to be harmed when she first developed that interest.) An apparent problem with this solution, as some have pointed out, is that it must assume a kind of retroactive harming whereby the harm stems from some postmortem event but is then launched back into the former life of the deceased.[82] But Feinberg and Pitcher

[78] Philosophers who deny the possibility of posthumous harm include Ernest Partridge, "Posthumous Interests and Posthumous Respect," *Ethics* 91 (1981): 243–64; Bradley, *Well-Being*; Glannon, "Persons," 127–42; John Harris, "Doing Posthumous Harm," 213–21 in *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death: New Essays* (ed. James Stacey Taylor; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Don Marquis, "Harming the Dead," *Ethics* 96.1 (1985): 159–61; James Stacey Taylor, "The Myth of Posthumous Harm," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 42.4 (2005): 311–22; Taylor, *Death*.

[79] Glannon, "Persons," 128.

[80] Partridge, "Posthumous Interests," 253.

[81] See Pitcher, "Misfortunes," 183–88; Feinberg, *Harm*, 89–93.

[82] See W. J. Waluchow, "Feinberg's Theory of 'Preposthumous' Harm," *Dialogue* 25 (1986): 727–34.

argue there is no backward causation at play, but rather a revealing of what was always true about one's life while one lived.[83]

An alternative solution advocated by William Ruddick to the problem of posthumous harm draws on the distinction highlighted earlier between oneself and one's "life" (or, in Ruddick's terms, between one's "biological life" and one's "biographical life"). Applying the distinction to posthumous harms, we could say that posthumous harms do not affect the *person* per se*,* who is dead by the time of their occurrence, but they do affect and harm that person's "life"—the narrative, image, or reputation *about* the person. Since it is difficult to explain how the dead person is harmed by events that take place after their death, it is more sensible to identify the subject of posthumous harm as the "life" associated with that person:

> If we are willing to allow lives-as-narrated to continue after death even if bereft of lives-as-lived, then we have…as good a post-mortem surrogate for the no longer existing liver of that life as we could want, a surrogate that can be harmed or benefited—and further extended—by what others do or say after the liver's death.[84]

The "surrogate" is the "life" of the person, rather than the actual person, and it is this surrogate that is subject to posthumous harm. The surrogate is a reasonable one because most people take immense interest in the success of their biographical "lives." Thus while posthumous harm cannot harm the *person*, it can harm that which the person likely identified with and cared more deeply about than anything else—their own *life.*[85]

Applying this category to Qoheleth, it is perhaps surprising to consider that our second grouping of death-related harms in Section IV, those which convey harm as a setback of interest and which I have claimed Qoheleth regards as most significant, are in fact best understood as occasions of posthumous harm. This seems to be true of three out of the four, at least. In all cases, moreover, what is harmed is not the person him or herself but the person's "life," as vouchsafed

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[83] Pitcher, "Misfortunes," 185–88; Feinberg, *Harm*, 91–93.

[84] William Ruddick, "'Biographical Lives' Revisited and Extended," *The Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 501–15, at 512.

[85] Feinberg's earlier work suggested that what is harmed is the interest itself, a position critiqued by Partridge, "Posthumous Interests," 243–64, who argued that disembodied interests cannot be harmed, only persons, and in any case, an "interest perishes with [a person] upon his death" (253). On account of the critique, Feinberg modified his position so as to posit the antemortem person as the subject of harm, as already mentioned. But drawing on Kagan's distinction between persons and lives, Belliotti has reinstated a position similar to Feinberg's early position but with an important modification. As just quoted, Belliotti claims, "Biographical lives…are legitimate subjects of posthumous events and states of affairs" (*Posthumous Harm,* 131).

in what Raymond Belliotti calls their "transcendent interests" (further discussed below). On the one hand, this is surprising given our entire discussion, because it would mean that in Qoheleth's view the most serious death-related harm that can be predicated of a person lies not precisely in *death itself,* but in some other event that occurs after one has died—an event which is given opportunity to materialize precisely because one is now dead. Yet, on the other hand, this notion of posthumous harm entirely fits with the conceptual relations we have already established: that there is a difference between well-being and meaning, that Qoheleth regards the latter with higher hypothetical value and therefore its loss as a greater harm, and that whereas *death itself* is entirely bad for one's well-being by terminating first-person consciousness and thus all capacity for experiencing life's goods, *posthumous harm* depletes not one's well-being but the meaning that can accrue for one's life.[86]

Once the category is posited, it seems entirely clear that Qoheleth is dealing with posthumous harms, as opposed to death itself, in the case of the lack of remembrance (2:16–17; 1:11; 9:5) as well as the postmortem, unwitting bequeathal of his business (2:18–22). Yet it is also quite plausible in the case of the unjust equity between disparate parties (2:13–15; 9:1b–3; 3:19–20). It is worth dwelling on this last one for a moment, to consider how exactly the harm in view works. Qoheleth, again, writes in 2:15 that, "the same fate happens to both," the wise person and the fool. Qoheleth clearly regards this as a misfortune. But how does the misfortune, or harm, actually manifest itself? Given that he rejects any postmortem consciousness, Qoheleth surely does not think that the wise person, once dead, will experience himself as having been "brought down" to the level of the fool. If there is a harm here, it goes unexperienced. But nor does Qoheleth have in mind some objective, ontological sense in which the two dead parties have been democratized. Rather, once again, Qoheleth conceives of the harm intersubjectively. Given the "same fate" for the wise and foolish, he asks, "Why, then, have I tried to become so excessively wise?" (2:15) That "why?" [לָמָּה, lit. "for what?"] implies a purpose. If his wisdom-accrual was initially aiming at postmortem remembrance and honor—precisely what 2:16 implies here and what Qoheleth insinuates *should have* obtained for the two wise protagonists in 4:13–16 and 9:13–15—then the

[86] Bradley, *Well-Being*, 44, writes, "There is a crucial difference between death and posthumous harms. *Death* makes an impact on its victim's well-being, by reducing it to zero, but events happening *after* death do not—once a person has died, his well-being level is stuck at zero forever, no matter what happens afterwards" [emphasis original]. We can completely concur with this statement and yet think that Bradley, from Qoheleth's perspective, is missing something crucial—*meaning* as a value category that either accrues or fails to accrue posthumously.

harm marshalled by a democratized death only occurs posthumously, whenever posterity commits a "sin of omission" by failing to set apart and honor whomever among their predecessors Qoheleth thinks deserves it.

If this is so—if these three of Qoheleth's identified death-harms are in fact posthumous harms—then it reveals a logical distinction between the harm Qoheleth finds inherent to death itself and harms that accrue posthumously. Even if Qoheleth could not, we can at least imagine a possible world in which one dies but one is not forgotten, or one's business and possessions are passed along to a fellow wise man who handles the business with even greater acumen than his predecessor. In logical terms, this means that death itself is a necessary condition for the harm that destroys meaning for one's life, but it is the posthumous harms against the dead that provide sufficient condition for meaning's downfall.

What this analysis also entails is a point implied by the discussion of meaning in our last chapter—namely, that meaning for Qoheleth is essentially a *posthumous benefit.* Why, after all, does Qoheleth specifically choose the word יִתְרוֹן—that which is "left over" or "remaining"—to represent his notion of meaning? "Remaining" after what? Death.

Meaning, for our sage, consists in precisely those interests whose fulfillment cannot be obtained until one's life has been completed. Raymond Belliotti modifies Feinberg's notion of "interest" in speaking of "transcendent interests" as interests which stretch beyond the purview of one's biological lifespan:

> Most humans beings have transcendent interests—those desires and preferences in which we have invested enough of our energy and effort to crystallize as interests, and that can be fulfilled or thwarted only after we are dead. The most commonly held transcendent interests focus on the disposition of our property and belongings at death; the handling of our corpse; the integrity of our posthumous reputations; the fulfillment of deathbed promises; the flourishing of children, relatives, and friends after we die; and the successful completion of important projects with which we were closely connected while alive….
>
> Transcendent interests are not merely preferences and desires about our posthumous legacy. They root our labors while we are alive; they connect us vividly to meaning and value as we invest our enthusiasm and energy into related projects; and most importantly, they ground our biological lives to purposes that go beyond the self.[87]

[87] Belliotti, *Posthumous Harm*, 141.

There can be no doubt that Qoheleth's transcendent interest in the possibility of a posthumous legacy served to "root his labors" until he began to see that legacy as a phantom and thus its correlating labors as vain.

What all of this adds up to is the realization that the mature Qoheleth's deepest problem with death is not death itself but the posthumous harms it affords. Death is bad because it deprives one of pleasures, but more damaging than that, it furnishes a path for worse harms to follow—the very posthumous harms that Qoheleth perceives so strikingly antithetical to meaning, harms which wrongly cast into eternal oblivion lives worthy of honorable recognition.[88]

Summary of Qoheleth's Death-Related Harms

Philosophical Account of Harm	**Source of Harm**	**Value Eradicated**	**Personal Perspective**	**Qoheleth's Terms**
Deprivation account	Death itself	Well-being (especially pleasure)	First-person	"no more portion" (9:6)
Wrongful setback to (transcendent) interests	Posthumous harms (metaphorical mortality)	Meaning	Third-person	"same fate" (2:14; 3:19; 9:3) "no remembrance" (1:11; 2:16) "no further reward" (9:5)

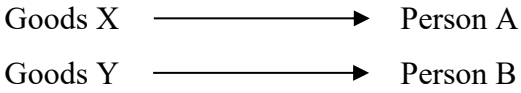
VI. Qoheleth and Aristotle on Justice: Meaning as an Earned Good

Qoheleth's discussions about death confirm that meaning for him is chiefly bound up with social regard, as we initially discovered in the last chapter. But, crucially, it is not unearned "fame" that

[88] Although I have not focused on them, the somewhat perplexing lines of Eccl 7:1 may be grasped in light of the framework established in this chapter. Qoheleth writes, "A good name is better than oil, and the day of death than the day of birth." The Hebrew wordplay [טוֹב שֵׁם מִשֶּׁמֶן טוֹב] and poetical context warn us perhaps not to regard this as Qoheleth's most settled view on death. Nonetheless, it cannot be entirely dismissed. As I take it, Qoheleth certainly recognizes the theoretical worth of an outstanding reputation: this, I have argued, is the very essence of his idea of meaning. He correlates one's "name" with death here because, as we have noted earlier, one's reputation (meaning) begins to accrue value at death, and it is precisely this which would be "left over" or "remaining" after one has died—*if* meaning were possible, that is. The point is a theoretical one, yet as it is, Qoheleth denies the possibility of a long-lasting name or reputation for anyone.

Qoheleth has in view. For him, the social regard that supplies "metaphorical immortality" is a matter of justice and thus its lack is an instance of injustice. This has been implicit since we first broached Feinberg's notion of harm as the *wrongful* setback of interests. But it is an issue worth clarifying in more detail by drawing into the discussion another ancient philosopher's well-known conception of justice.

A century before Qoheleth, Aristotle had articulated his conception of justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* He demarcates the elements involved in distributive justice (as opposed to corrective justice) as follows. There are (a) divisible *goods*, (b) *persons* who receive these goods, and (c) *equality,* a relationship in which two things are equated (*Nic. Eth.* V.3). In Aristotle's view, justice is indeed conditioned upon equality, but it must be equality of the right kind. It can neither be equality of goods nor of persons, since, for Aristotle, people will always differ, and thus differ too in what is owed them.



Instead, Aristotle proposes, the equality must be found in the *proportions*—the proportion of X in relation to A, and Y in relation to B.[89] "Justice is therefore a sort of proportion" (*Nic. Eth.* V.3.8; cf. V.3.14). But what exactly distinguishes Person A (Aaron) from Person B (Bob), such that the two individuals could receive a different amount of goods and yet the proportion be just? Aristotle says that Aaron and Bob differ in terms of their *desert,* their respective deserving of goods. If we suppose that Aaron has labored ten units of effort on the building project, but Bob has only labored five units, then it follows that Aaron deserves to receive ten units of goods, whereas Bob deserves five units. The proportion or ratio of *goods-to-desert* is the same (in this case, one-to-one), so justice is served, despite the difference of outcome for the two individuals. The kind of equality upon which justice hinges, then, is equality of proportion—proportion between the person's desert and the goods owed them.[90]

[89] Michael Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 192.

[90] Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* V.3.7–8: "If the persons are not equal, they will not have equal shares; it is when equals possess or are allotted unequal shares, or persons not equal shares, that quarrels and complaints arise. This is also clear from the principle of 'assignment by desert.' All are agreed that justice in distributions must be based on desert of some sort, although they do not all mean the same sort of desert." (transl. Rackham)

I make no claim that Qoheleth derived his view of justice from Aristotle, but I do suggest that the underlying assumptions are largely the same (if less precisely worked out in Qoheleth's case). For Qoheleth, as Aristotle, a just distribution of goods amounts to each person receiving goods *in accordance with their due,* or their desert. On what basis does one deserve their due? In line with what we have highlighted already, Qoheleth seems to believe that desert accords with a person's *accomplishments* and resulting *identity* or *status*—what they have made of their life, and who they are (in relation to others) as a result.[91] Those who have made more of their lives, who have carved out certain distinctions of honor not shared by all, ought to deserve a greater share of the society's distributable storehouse of goods.

This conception of distributive (in)justice is discernible as a background to nearly all of the setback-to-interest harms we have identified in association with death in Qoheleth. In the first three of four, it is a distinctly *comparative* distributive sense in view—that is to say, different people are contrasted in terms of their desert—while in the fourth it is a non-comparative sense. But in all cases, the harm is cast as a matter of injustice. First, in the case of the "unjust equity" levelled upon antithetical persons such as the wise and the fool, the righteous and the unrighteous, and so on (2:13–15; 9:1b–3; 3:19–20), death is an indiscriminating benefactor: all parties receive the same amount of goods—*zero.* This is unjust because, in Qoheleth's view, the former of each pair deserves more than the latter, and what is deserved is some kind of societal recognition or honor for the values by which the individual has lived and the accomplishments they have thereby achieved. Second, with regard to the lack of remembrance (1:11; 2:16; 9:5), the unjust equity between the wise person and the fool does apply in 2:16, where Qoheleth implies that the wise in particular are owed the "goods" of being remembered and honored over time. But in the remaining passages on memory (1:11; 9:5), death's harm *qua* social amnesia is less comparative; it is simply bad for everyone. Third, in the case of Qoheleth's nameless would-be heir (2:18–21), the "good" that Qoheleth feels he is owed is precisely to maintain his good name in the business for which he has labored. Having the business stripped from himself is already one level of harm, but to have it subsequently bequeathed "to a man who did not labor for it" (and who will likely drive the company into bankruptcy) is yet another. Finally, concerning death's unknown timing (9:11–12), even here too the objective harm may be regarded by Qoheleth as a matter of justice, yet not one

[91] Cf. Qoheleth's claims, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me" (1:16), and, "I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem" (2:9).

in which individual persons differ. Here, as in 3:19–20, it is the fact that humans in general could be treated like animals that Qoheleth finds so ignoble.

Notwithstanding nuanced differences, the overall picture Qoheleth presents is that death's harm consists in a violation of basic human dignity; it robs an individual of the meaningful place they have attempted to carve out for themselves within their own society and those of future generations. This injustice negates meaning in *both* senses explored last chapter: it renders futile one's attempt at achieving a legacy, and it is itself the profoundest sort of absurdity.

VII. Conclusion

For all his apparently Epicurean tendencies when discussing the good things in life, Qoheleth is not strictly a hedonist as Epicurus is, and he takes a decidedly anti-Epicurean position by positing that death significantly harms its victims by means both direct and indirect. Against Epicurus, Qoheleth does share the view of most contemporary philosophers on the subject that death is at least an extrinsic harm because of its capacity to deprive its victim of life's experiential goods. But additionally, Qoheleth goes quite beyond that position by arguing that death's crime is not merely that it withholds future pleasures but that it outfits the weaponry necessary for the destruction of a life's meaning. Death's deepest harm, it therefore turns out, is neither experienced nor concerned with the deprivation of experiences. To pull off this more heinous atrocity, however, death must take on an accomplice—its more recondite cousin, the "death after death," metaphorical mortality, or what we have identified as *posthumous harm.* This pairing is truly a tragic one for human beings. It not only prevents a person from further enjoyment but devastates any hope a human has for achieving meaning in life by erasing all "traces" of one's existence. Death and the posthumous harms it affords perpetrate an injustice against its victims—particularly against those victims who, in Qoheleth's opinion, deserve the greater share in society's honors.

One mystery that still remains, however, concerns this mass-scale societal amnesia that Qoheleth finds so inevitable: Why the inevitability? Why is Qoheleth so certain that future generations lack all memory of their bygone predecessors, that physical mortality necessarily entails metaphorical mortality? Again, in virtually all of the setback-to-interest harms calculated by death, we can imagine a world in which someone dies but the harm Qoheleth describes fails to obtain. So why can't he? What is the hidden premise? For a proper understanding we need to examine Qoheleth's view of time—the subject of our next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

"WHAT HE HAS MADE CROOKED": TIME, AGENCY, AND VALUE

I. Introduction

Time and value are intrinsically linked. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this is that, as Cheshire Calhoun notes, "We are evaluators…We are also temporally oriented beings…Our pursuit of what we value typically takes place over time."[1] A cursory reading of Qoheleth reveals that both of these themes, time and value, are central to the Jewish sage. While the overall aim of this dissertation is to examine Qoheleth's understanding of value, we cannot do so without grasping that theme's relation to time. This chapter, therefore, will seek to unearth Qoheleth's view on the value (or disvalue) of the human experience of time and its comprised activities inasmuch as these are owing to God as the ultimate source behind the world's temporal structures.

Qoheleth's discussion of time is most pointedly addressed in the so-called "Catalogue of the Times,"[2] the fourteen-line poem of 3:2–8. We will therefore use the poem as an entry point into Qoheleth's ideas on the topic. While the poem is clearly about time in some sense, I will argue that the tendency to read the poem as primarily concerned with *timing* is misplaced. Over against the two most common ways of reading the poem, I will propose a third interpretation—one which is perhaps not entirely new in each of its constituent parts, but distinct, I hope to show, in the way

[1] Cheshire Calhoun, *Doing Valuable Time: The Present, the Future, and Meaningful Living* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1 [emphasis omitted].

[2] C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 170, calls it a "Catalog of Occasions."

it brings various threads together. When we read the poem in light of other closely related passages, it becomes clear that a poem ostensibly about "time" is much less concerned with *timing* than is typically thought, but instead signifies Qoheleth's frustration with the nature of time itself and the inevitable equilibrating tendency embedded into every human task.

Interpreting the significance Qoheleth gives to 3:2–8 will thus lead us to look at several other related texts, including 1:4–11, 6:10–11, 7:13–14, and a few others. After doing so we will round up our findings by demarcating what the interpretation of these texts communicates about Qoheleth's philosophy of value, first within Qoheleth's own historical context, and secondly in relation to two modern philosophers. What we will find is that, for Qoheleth, it is not only death and its associated posthumous harms that hinders meaning in one's life, but the achievement of meaning is also thwarted by the nature of time and the particular restrictions God has placed on human agency.

II. Ecclesiastes 3:1–15 and 1:4–11

(1) For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

(2) A time to be born[3] and a time to die,
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted,
(3) A time to kill and a time to heal,
A time to tear down and a time to build up,
(4) A time to cry and a time to laugh,
A time for mourning and a time for dancing,
(5) A time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones,
A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
(6) A time to seek and a time to lose,
A time to keep and a time to throw away,
(7) A time to tear and a time to sew,

[3] A minority of commentators, such as Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15: Another Interpretation," *JSOT* 20 (1995): 55–64, at 56–57; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 160; Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 28–29; Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 83, have argued that לָלֶדֶת must be translated in the active sense of "to give birth" rather than the passive "to be born." But the vast majority of commentators find the passive sense grammatically acceptable since the infinitive construct form is "neutral in respect of voice, namely the active form can be passive in force" (J-M §124s, citing Gen 4:13; 6:20; Josh 2:5; 11:19; Esth 7:4; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* [Leuven: Peeters, 2013], 237, additionally cites Deut 31:17; Jer 25:34; Hos 9:11), and the passive sense is preferable here in light of the parallel with לָמוּת. Defenders of the active sense often prioritize the parallel with לָטַעַת, "to plant," but all twenty-eight activities in the poem are human activities, and it would be rather odd to expect a person to "be planted," thus the parallel is of little value in determining the sense of לָלֶדֶת.

A time to be silent and a time to speak,
(8) A time to love and a time to hate,
A time of war and a time of peace. (3:1–8)

A. The "Proper Times" Reading of Ecclesiastes 3:2–8

Scholars have long debated the meaning of Qoheleth's famous "Catalogue of the Times." One common interpretation has been to read the poem as referring to the proper, appropriate, or opportune time at which to act.[4] There is a "rightness" to an action when done at a particular time, and the wise person will be cognizant of that timing and so choose to act appropriately when the time comes. Thus the emphasis falls upon human agency (in both recognizing and choosing to act) and upon the fact that some "times" excel others with respect to a given activity. According to this view Qoheleth's subsequent comments on the poem in 3:9–15 convey his frustration over humanity's inability to know the times and thus to find success in this way.[5]

This interpretation certainly has its strengths. First, it is quite reasonable to expect that a poem which contains twenty-eight occurrences of the word עֵת ("time") would be about *timing.* Moreover, the infinitive constructs prefixed by –לְ seem naturally, both in Hebrew and in their English translations, to convey a sense of what one ought "to do" (just as in English phrases such as "time to wake up!" or "time to go!"). An intuitive reading of the poem on its own, apart from its context in Qoheleth, seems to give credence to this conclusion.[6] Second, there are other texts

[4] Scholars who advocate this interpretation include E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881), 126–31; Kurt Galling, "Das Rätsel der Zeit im Urteil Kohelets (Koh 3, 1–15)," *ZTK* 58 (1961): 1–15; Kurt Galling, "Der Prediger," 73–125 in *Die fünf Megilloth* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1969), 93–95; Walther Zimmerli, "Das Buch des Predigers Salomo," 123–253 in *Sprüche, Prediger, Das Hohe Lied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Esther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967), 167–75; Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1964); Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 191–214 (which is a reprint of Michael V. Fox, "Time in Qohelet's 'Catalogue of Times', " *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 24.1 [1998]: 25–39); R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: JSOT / Sheffield Academic, 1989), 36–37; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 216–217; Richard L. Schultz, "A Sense of Timing: A Neglected Aspect of Qoheleth's Wisdom," 257–67 in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients. Essays offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebel, and Dennis R. Magary; Winona Lake, IN: de Gruyter, 2005); Mette Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90–109; Melanie Köhlmoos, *Kohelet: Der Prediger Salomo* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 116.

[5] R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 73: "Since man is totally ignorant of the appropriate moment for his actions, he cannot derive from them the advantage which he strives to gain"; Galling, "Der Prediger," 95: "Wie kann ein Tätiger mit seinem auf Zukunft gerichteten Handeln etwas erreichen, wenn er nicht um die rechte Stunde weiß?"

[6] It is for this reason that several scholars suggest that the original poem, as a free-floating entity, did carry the traditional "proper times" sense, but that it was picked up by Qoheleth who then utilized it for different purposes, e.g. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 31; Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 116; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 67, 70; Addison G. Wright, "«For

from the wisdom corpus that similarly indicate the rightness or wrongness of a certain action as contingent upon its timeliness (Prov 15:23, Sir 1:23–24; 4:20, 23; 20:7, 20). Third, 3:11a could be read as good support for this understanding: that God "makes everything beautiful in its time" would mean that things will go well ("beautifully") for the one undertaking an action when it is performed "in its [proper] time."

On the other hand, there are evident problems facing this reading. The first problem I will mention involves part of the poem's content, but the others relate to the poem's awkward fit (given this reading) with Qoheleth's commentary in 3:9–15. First, the opening line of verse two discloses that there is "a time to be born, and a time to die." As many have pointed out, if the point of the poem were to emphasize human agency and ethical duty, it would be strange to begin with a pair of activities ostensibly beyond human control. Fox acknowledges that this initial pair cannot be chosen but posits that the remainder of the poem's activities can be.[7] Yet this only restates the problem, as it seems unlikely that Qoheleth would begin the poem with a pair of exceptions to the poem's general message. It is more sensible to presume the author would commence the poem with a pair of actions that sum up (or at least accurately reflect) the intent of the poem as a whole.

Second, if the poem's aim is indeed to exhort its readers to choose to act at the "proper time," this implies the poem is in some way a celebration of human agency. Yet, in 3:14 it is precisely the role of human agency within God's scheme that Qoheleth denies: "Whatever God does endures forever; there is no adding to it, nor is there any subtracting from it. God has acted…" Third, if the focus of the poem concerns humanity's ability to choose the correct time for action, Qoheleth's pessimistic question immediately following the poem in 3:9 strikes the reader as counterintuitive. Why should the call to act at an opportune time lead to the conclusion that there is no lasting gain? To make sense of 3:9, the "proper times" view must read into it the unstated

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Everything There is a Season»: The Structure and Meaning of the Fourteen Opposites (Ecclesiastes 3, 2–8)," 321–328 in *De la Tôrah au Messie: Études d'exégèse et d'herméneutique bibliques offertes à Henri Cazelles pour ses 25 années d'enseignement à l'Institut Catholique de Paris (Octobre 1979)* (ed. Maurice Carrez, Joseph Doré, and Pierre Grelot; Paris: Desclée, 1981), 327; Alexander A. Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 224. It is not crucial, for our purposes, to stake a claim on the question as to whether Qoheleth originally penned the poem or whether he is simply citing an inherited piece (and the question becomes even more hermeneutically complex for scholars who think that "Qoheleth" is a fictional character constructed by the author of Ecclesiastes). I am more inclined toward the view that Qoheleth penned it, but my argument will not not depend on it, since if he did not originally write the poem, the important question is how he is *interpreting* it and conveying it to his audience—what he considers its message to be in its contribution to his work as a whole.

[7] Fox, *Rereading*, 201–09.

premise that people lack knowledge of the poem's "times" or opportunities and for that reason fail to take advantage of them, resulting in the exasperated question of v 9, "What gain?" But the verse does not itself state this. A reading in which v 9 constitutes a more direct, fitting response to the poem in 3:2–8 is to be preferred. Fourth, Qoheleth in 3:17 links back to the diction of 3:1–8, yet the one activity "there is a time for" in this verse is only an act of God—his judgment—not one possible for humans to choose.

B. The Common Determinist Reading of Ecclesiastes 3:2–8

Many scholars have argued for an entirely different reading of the poem, what may be called the determinist reading. They contend that Qoheleth's reference to the "times" is not signifying the right time for a human to act, with the correlating implication that the person might well miss the opportunity. The poem is not *prescribing* the "proper times" at which the wise person should choose to act, but is instead *describing* the fact that God has ordained all of the times at which the activities reflected in the poem will occur.[8] Scholars do not always convey this determinism in the same terms. Some primarily emphasize that God is in the control of the "times," and he thus brings it about that human beings do his bidding. He has the power to intervene and shape history as he

[8] Commentators defending one variant or another of a determinist reading for the passage include Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 40–44, 83–98; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 39; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes,* 227–82; Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 51–56; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 158–74; Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 190–96 [previous to Fox's change of mind]; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 228–34; Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 226–37; 263–65; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 1:121; Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17.2 (1964): 146–58; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 220–21; Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919), 141; Gerrit Wildeboer, "Der Prediger," 109–68 in *Die fünf Megillot (Das Hohelied, Das Buch Ruth, Die Klagelieder, Der Prediger, Das Buch Esther)* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Mohr [Siebeck], 1898), 131–34; Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1883), 338–45; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M. G. Easton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 254–64; Christian D. Ginsburg, *Coheleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1861), 303–14.

James L. Crenshaw, "The Eternal Gospel (Ecclesiastes 3:11)," 23–55 in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics, J. Philip Hyatt in Memoriam* (ed. J.L. Crenshaw and J.T. Willis; New York: Ktav, 1974) regards the original poem as a piece of wisdom instruction concerning the right time, but which "in its present setting cannot be an affirmation" of this. Rather, taken up by Qoheleth it "laments the pre-determined monotony of all human affairs" (34–35). Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," offers an interesting variation in that he takes 3:1–8 to be Qoheleth's quotation of an earlier "Stoicized Jew" to which Qoheleth then responds critically. Peter Machinist, "Fate, Miqreh, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought," 159–75 in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), also emphasizes determinism (and "fate") in Qoheleth, but without specific reference to 3:2–8.

sees fit. But on another, stronger articulation of the determinist reading, "time" [עֵת] refers to "a time for human action which is predetermined by God, and in accordance with which human beings must act."[9] We are in the realm not of ethical duty, but metaphysical necessity.

There are several attractive features to the determinist reading of 3:2–8 over against the "proper times" reading. First, the determinist reading makes much better sense of the commentary section immediately following the passage, that of 3:9–15, where Qoheleth provides us with the lens through which he is reading the poem.[10] In particular, Qoheleth's lamenting question in 3:9 could follow naturally from the idea that all human behavior is preprogrammed, much more naturally than it follows an admonition for readers to act at the "proper time."[11] Further, 3:14 represents, at minimum, a strong proclamation of God's sovereignty and the inability for humans to change his plans, thus aligning nicely with the determinist reading. Finally, as already mentioned, Qoheleth in 3:17 links God's judgment to the phrase from 3:1, "(there is) a time for every matter," perhaps implying that the phrase has had divine action more in view than human action all along.

The determinist view also confronts its own obstacles, however. The primary problem is that this view sometimes assumes a brand of determinism that is far more particular than Qoheleth's words necessitate. It is not only that God is intervening in human affairs in real-time; it is also the case, as mentioned above, that all human actions are foreordained by God in advance, such that humans will necessarily act in accordance with the predetermined divine will at the moment established for them to do so. This is, at least, what several scholars claim. For instance, Morris Jastrow writes,

> The happenings of this world are preordained by God and take place in the order and at the time determined by the great Power who governs all things… The time when a man is to be born is fixed

[9] Rudman, *Determinism*, 200. Additional scholars representing this view will be provided below.

[10] It is not actually crucial, for our purposes, to stake a claim on the debated question as to whether Qoheleth originally penned the poem in 3:2–8 or whether he is simply citing an inherited piece (and the question becomes even more hermeneutically complex for scholars who think that "Qoheleth" is a fictional character constructed by the author of Ecclesiastes). I am more inclined toward the view that Qoheleth penned it, but my argument does not depend on it, since if he did not originally write the poem, the important question is how he is *interpreting* it and conveying it to his audience—what he considers its message to be in its contribution to his work as a whole. The view that the poem is a traditional piece of wisdom writing which Qoheleth then repurposed is held (e.g.) by Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 69–70.

[11] E.g. Wright, *Koheleth*, 188: "Man, however, has no profit in all his labour, for he has no certain power to regulate his own destiny."

> as is the time of his death (3:2)—fixed as definitely as the time for sowing seeds and for pulling up the ripened plant. If everything is preordained, it is idle to make the effort to change things.[12]

Similarly, Aarre Lauha writes, "Die anaphorische Wiederholung des עֵת Wortes (28mal) schafft ein Grundgeftihl des Fatalen… alle Ereignisse sind an die für sie festgesetzten Zeiten gebunden und darin begrenzt… der beherrschende Aspekt ist die determinierte Zeitgebundenheit allen Geschehens… Alles ist determiniert."[13] And Otto Kaiser: "These times are strictly determined… there are preordained, pre-qualified times for everything we may undertake."[14] Others express Qoheleth's views in the same manner.[15]

However, it appears that these scholars have imputed to Qoheleth a version of determinism derived not from the text of Qoheleth itself but from other (mostly later) ancient Jewish texts, as well as theological and philosophical traditions. Despite the linkage between the two claimed by von Rad,[16] there is nothing in Qoheleth of the sort of determinism one finds in much of Jewish apocalyptic literature, particularly that of the Qumran sectarians. This strict form of determinism is indeed marked by explicit statements that God exercises complete control over the thoughts and deeds of individuals, and has even planned these since before the creation of the world.[17] Thus,

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[12] Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, 141.

[13] Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 63–64, 68.

[14] Otto Kaiser, "Fate, Suffering, and God: The Crisis of the Belief in a Moral Order in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *OTE* 4 (1986): 1–13, at 7.

[15] To those already provided we could add Scott, *Ecclesiastes*: "the doctrine of divine Providence has become in Qoheleth an arbitrary and absolute determinism" (198); "the unknown and unknowable Being…has predetermined all that happens in the natural world and in human experience" (226); "Everything that is, is predetermined and foreknown. Man cannot alter his fate" (233); Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 254–55: "In general all happens when and how God wills, according to a world-plan, comprehending all things which man can neither wholly understand, nor in any respect change… All that is done here below is ordered by God at a time appointed, and is done without any dependence on man's approbation, according to God's ordinance, arrangement, and providence." Rudman, *Determinism*, also argues for a hard determinism in the book, referring to "the list of predetermined actions and emotions in 3.1–8" (59) and consistently positing that for Qoheleth "all human business is predetermined by God" (54, cf. 89, 126, 128, 131, 138, 149, etc.). Fox, *Rereading*, 197, writes: "If by *'et* Qohelet means a unique moment on the time-line, he is assuming a strong determinism: every act and event is assigned in advance a moment at which it will occur." Fox acknowledges that that was his view in his *Contradictions* monograph. In *Rereading,* however, Fox now sees "a less rigid sort of determinism" in chapter three.

[16] von Rad, *Wisdom*, 263–83.

[17] E.g. "From the God of Knowledge comes all that is and all that happens. Before ever they existed he established their whole design and when, as ordained for them, they come into being, it is in accord with his glorious design that they accomplish their task, and there is no changing" (1QS 3.15–16); "Surely apart from You the way cannot be perfected, nor can anything be done unless it please you. You teach all knowledge and all that shall be, by Your will shall it come to pass" (1QS 11.16–18). See also 1QHa 18:7–11; 4Q417 I, 1.10–12; 4Q180 I 2–3. Such clear-eyed determinism is also manifest even in some non-apocalyptic Jewish works, such as Judith: "All that happened then, and all that happened before and after, was your work. What is now and what is yet to be, you have planned; and what you have planned has come to pass. The things you have foreordained present themselves and say, 'We are here.' All your ways are prepared beforehand" (Jdt 9:5–6).

while the determinism of the Qumran community may well match these scholars' descriptions, it is much less clear in the case of Qoheleth—or so I will argue as we proceed.

A second problem for many determinist interpretations of 3:2–8 (and 3:1–15) is that they fail to account for the important contribution of 3:15, the culminating verse of the section yet one that is often swept to the side in discussions about determinism in Qoheleth. By definition, talk of God's *pre*-determination or *pre*-ordination of events must assume a linear timeline, of which the deity's causations stand at the front. Yet 3:15 (along with other texts) jars against the linear-time metaphysic which determinist readings frequently presume. This will be taken up in detail at a later point.

C. An Alternative Reading of Ecclesiastes 3:2–8: Cyclical, Anthropological Determinism

To these two predominant views of the "times" poem I wish to propose a third alternative, what I will (somewhat cumbersomely) call *cyclical, anthropological determinism.*[18] This phrase is meant to highlight three closely interrelated aspects of Qoheleth's worldview, which we may summarize in reverse order:

> (a) God has *determined*, or, caused to bring about, the essential nature of the world and human existence. Yet, in distinction from the common determinist view, the sense of "determine" here refers not to the preordination and real-time intervention of unique, individual events plotted along historical time, but instead refers to the establishment of a broad framework within which human existence occurs.[19]
>
> (b) This broad framework is *anthropological*; it concerns what humans can and cannot do, both their capacities and limitations, not with respect to their "free will" in some specific instance but with respect to the very structure of their existence as a whole. Qoheleth uses

[18] Clearly, the latter of these implies I am not in complete disagreement with the "determinist" view just represented. But I think any reference to determinism in Qoheleth demands much qualification; we need to take a fresh look at what *kind* of determinism the book does or does not espouse.

[19] On this point I find much kinship with David J. A. Clines, "Predestination in the Old Testament," 2:524–41 in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967–1998* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1998), 533–34: "Predestination for Ecclesiastes does not mean that the particular acts of individuals are fixed in advance by God, but rather that the possibilities open to humans and the value of human activities are settled in advance by the framework of God's created order, which terminates everything with human death"—although I will want to add more to the framework than that it terminates in death.

the controlling metaphor of a "business," with its employer and employed, in order to explicate this aspect of the divine-human relationship.

(c) This anthropological structure which God has set in place is *cyclical;* human activities oscillate ceaselessly (reflecting nature itself) and thus the events of the present and future are nothing but reiterations of what has already happened in the past.

The remainder of the chapter will defend this reading and then draw out its implications for Qoheleth's ideas about value and meaning.

1. Cyclicality in Ecclesiastes 1:4–11

The first step toward this third reading begins with facts that various commentators have acknowledged—namely, the strong similarities between the poem of 3:2–8 and that of 1:4–11. We therefore need to begin with a brief discussion of 1:4–11 in order to explore the theme of cyclicality as it appears there.

(4) A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever the same.
(5) The sun rises, and the sun sets,
and hurrying back to its place, it rises from there again.
(6) Going to the south and circling back down to the north,
turning and turning goes the wind,
and upon its circuits the wind returns.
(7) All the streams go into the sea, but the sea is never filled.

To the very place from which the streams flow[20] they return.[21]

[20] MT אֶל־מָקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים שָׁם (lit. "to the place which the streams flow there") should be emended to אֶל־מָקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים מִשָּׁם (lit. "to the place which the streams flow from there," i.e. "to the place from which the streams flow") on account of haplography of the מ in מִשָּׁם. This is reasonable in light of the many surrounding occurrences of final *mem* as well as the support for this reading found in Symmachus (εἰς τὸν τόπον ἀφ᾽ οὗ οἱ ποταμοὶ πορεύονται) and the Vulgate (*ad locum unde flumina reuertuntur*), though it must be noted that the latter probably depends upon the former. Several other contextual factors lend support to this reading over its primary alternative, "to the place *to which* the streams flow": (a) Though the Masoretic pointing aligns שָׁם with the following הֵם שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת and many scholars assume this reading, שָׁם should be read as concluding the prior phrase, אֶל־מָקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים. A phrase involving a noun of place (or source), a relative pronoun (אֲשֶׁר or שֶׁ), and a verb of movement should normally be followed by a שָׁם which is suffixed by either -מ (מִשָּׁם, "from there," i.e. "from which," e.g. Gen 3:23; 10:14; 24:5; Numb 23:13, etc.) or the directional ה (שָׁמָּה, "to there," i.e. "to which," e.g. Gen 20:13; Exod 21:13, Lev 18:3, etc.) in order to disambiguate the relative pronoun; שָׁם by itself is insufficient when either a source or destination needs to be identified. Positing מִשָּׁם as concluding the prior phrase thus solves the issue. (b) The employment of both אֶל־מָקוֹם and שָׁם in 1:7 corresponds to the use of both terms in 1:5. In 1:5, אֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ refers to the sun's movement *back to* its original starting point (from B back to A), and שָׁם indicates the place from which the cyclical movement will begin again ("it rises there" implies "rises *from* there," not "rises *to* there"). According to the reading I am proposing, the same is true in 1:7: אֶל־מָקוֹם refers to the streams' movement back to their origin or source—not to the sea—and שָׁם again signifies that original location from which the water cycle renews, not its polar opposite (the sea). (c) The complicated syntax of 1:7b seems rather superfluous and devoid of new informational content if the meaning is merely that the streams keep flowing into the sea, a point already established in 1:7a. Rather, the syntactical features—particularly, the fronted prepositional (אֶל) phrase with מָקוֹם, the use of the relative שֶׁ, the presence of שָׁם (מִשָּׁם), as well as the verb שׁוב and the particular construction לָלֶכֶת + שׁוב which will be highlighted in the next footnote—all point to a more complex idea, one of cyclical return.

[21] There is a lack of consensus concerning the translation and sense of הֵם שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת (שָׁם). Some (e.g. Schoors, Longman, Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Lohfink, Whybray, Plumptre, Ellermeir) take שָׁבִים as referring to a return from the sea back to the streams' source (usually coupled with an additional reference to the cycle starting again at this source, due to לָלֶכֶת), while others (e.g. Seow, Gordis, Weeks, Murphy, Krüger, Barton, McNeile, Wright) take it to convey a unidirectional continuation of waters traversing from rivers to sea. Those of the latter opinion usually add "again" to the translation, noting that שׁוב coupled with an infinitive construct can mean "to do [X] again," a sense found in eight of the forty-two occurrences in classical Hebrew where the two are conjoined (Deut 24.4; Ezek 8:17; Hos 11:9; Ezra 9:14; Deut 30:9; Isa 6:13; Ps 104:9; Job 7:7). But I will suggest a modification of the former view, modified in that I do not see לָלֶכֶת as indicating an additional cycle or movement beyond the "return" conveyed by שָׁבִים. Evidence in support of this reading and against the unidirectional reading is that the exact construction used here—שׁוב followed by הלך in infinite construct—is an apparent idiom attested four times elsewhere in classical Hebrew and in all cases can only refer to a "return" in the sense of "going back" the way something came (i.e. returning from B back to A, after having gone from A to B), rather than "going *again"* (i.e. repeatedly going from A to B). This apparent idiom should take precedence over the occasional sense of "to do again" just outlined. To begin, we remain in Ecclesiastes: "As he came from his mother's womb he shall return [וְשָׁוּב לָלֶכֶת]" (Eccl 5:14). Clearly, Qoheleth does not have in mind a repeated movement from the womb to the world, but of a backward turn (not *into* the womb, of course, but *out of* the world, at any rate). The same sense is true with the remaining instances. In 1 Kgs 12:24 the men of Judah and Benjamin who have come out to fight Israel are told, "Every man return [שׁוּבוּ] to his home," and so "they…returned [וַיָּשֻׁבוּ לָלֶכֶת], according to the word of Yhwh." In the following chapter (13:17), the "man of God" is commanded, "You shall neither eat bread nor drink water nor return [תָּשׁוּב לָלֶכֶת] by the way that you came" (this repeats the same phrase from 13:9, except v 9 does not include לָלֶכֶת). 1QHa 26:15 speaks of "raising up those who stumble and fall, by restoring [lit, "to turn back," לשׁב לכת] the way of those who wait for knowledge" (repeated in 4Q427 VII 1.20). In none of these instances can the meaning of the construction be, "go again" (in the sense of going from A to B multiple times); it always refers to a "turning back" (go back to A from B, having originally come from A). In light of these, it seems best to translate הֵם שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת as simply "they return" (in the sense of turning back*)*, instead of "they continue to go/flow." The present examples also show that לָלֶכֶת in the construction is essentially

(8) All words are weak,[22] a man is not able to speak.

An eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is an ear filled with hearing.

(9) That which has been—it is what will be.

And that which has happened—it is what will happen.

And there is nothing new under the sun.

(10) Is there anything of which one can say, "Look here! This is new!"?

It already has been, in the ages which were before us.

(11) There is no remembrance of former people, nor of those who are yet to exist.

There will be no remembrance of them, nor of those who will exist later still.

(1:4–11)

A particular conception of cyclicality consistently emerges from 1:4–11, one that emphasizes bidirectionality and oscillation. Beginning with 1:4, Qoheleth does not say that "a generation comes and a generation goes," but the inverse: "a generation goes [הֹלֵךְ] and a generation comes [בָּא]." This inversion is one indication he is thinking cyclically: he specifically chooses to highlight not the span of one generation, but the moment of turn or transition, the passing of the torch between two generations, one passing away and the other coming to be.[23] This

redundant and idiomatic, presumably clarifying the sense of the preceding שׁוּב as indeed a "backward" return. It is best left untranslated if "return" is used, and it should not be rendered as implying an additional purposive clause, "*in order to* go/flow" in Eccl 1:7. In sum, the verse alludes to a "going" and a "turning back," not an additional "going" beyond that double-sequence, nor a continual "going" in the same direction. This latter half of the verse thus provides the *reason* for the claim of 1:7a that "the sea is never filled": no sooner do the streams arrive there than they begin their trip back home.

[22] הַדְּבָרִים יְגֵעִים is a difficult phrase in that (a) דְּבָרִים may mean either "things" or "words," and (b) יְגֵעִים has been taken as an adjective, "weary, tired," or, with a causative sense, "wearying, tiresome," while still others regard it as a participle, "laboring, toiling." Those who translate הַדְּבָרִים as "things" do so on the assumption that it summarizes the content of 1:4–7. But the reference to speech in the very next line [לְדַבֵּר] implies we are dealing here with "words." An often overlooked factor is the theme of the impotence of words that appears not only in 1:8b, but throughout the book. This issue will be addressed later in the chapter (see chart in section III), but for now it is sufficient to note the apparent parallels between, e.g., 1:8aβ [לֹא־יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר] and 6:10c [אָדָם לֹא־יוּכַל לָדִין], as well as, more loosely, 1:8aα ("All the דְּבָרִים are weary") and 6:11 ("many דְּבָרִים...are *hebel*). Cf. also 5:3, 7; 10:14, which make the point that a "multiplication" of words is profitless. All of this evidences a well-established theme in Qoheleth that words are powerless to change the (often frustrating) circumstances in which human beings find themselves in the world. The mastermind behind it all does not seem to be interested in hearing out his creatures' opinions on how things should be run. This makes decent sense of 1:8a, if we can allow it to be slightly elliptical. I have translated יְגֵעִים as "weak" in light of the above and since it is a small semantic leap from "weary" to "weak" (cf. instances of the verbal form in Eccl 10:15; Isa 40:28, 30, 31; 57:10; Jer 45:3; Ps 6:6; 69:3; Lam 5:5). It should be acknowledged, however, that a translation such as, "All things are laboring," would also fit the context.

[23] A common understanding of 1:4 posits a contrast between the transient "generations" [דּוֹר] and the permanent "earth" [אֶרֶץ], where אֶרֶץ is understood literally, as the physical *terra firma* upon which humans dwell. But Michael

focus sets the stage for what will follow, as Qoheleth draws upon nature's oscillatory movements in order to emphasize two qualities inherent to the human experience: its cyclical and ateleological character.

Next, in 1:5 Qoheleth mediates that from the phenomenological perspective, the sun rises in the east, then traverses to the opposite side of the sky, but eventually circles back to the place where it began—"panting" [שׁוֹאֵף] along the way—and soon repeats the whole process over again. "Its place" [מְקוֹמוֹ] here refers to its starting point, from which it rises again.[24] The opening words of verse 6 present an initial ambiguity concerning the subject of the participial actions, "going to the south and turning back to the north," but the vast majority of modern commentaries and translations rightly regard this as a somewhat crafty way to introduce the wind, rather than a continuation of the sun's movement in the sky.[25] In this case, as with the sun, there is a traverse from one point (from its starting point "to the south"), and then a return to its antipode ("north"). The pair of repeated participles that follow, סוֹבֵב סֹבֵב, have often been rendered, "circling, circling," though a few commentators have expressed reservations.[26] But the point is not so much that the wind is literally traveling in circles. This phrase should be read through the initial use of סבב in 1:6a, where it refers to the "turning back" from a northward direction to a southward direction (cf. Qoheleth's use of סבב in 2:20 and 7:25 for "I turned"). In light of this, as well as the parallel with the sun and streams (including the parallel use of שׁוב in 1:7), it is not likely Qoheleth is imagining a geometric circle, but something more like parallel tracks in which a 180-degree "U-

V. Fox, "Qohelet 1:4," *JSOT* 13 (1988): 109, has alternatively argued that אֶרֶץ in v 4 "does not mean the physical earth, but humanity as a whole" (cf. Gen 6:11; 11:1; 1 Kgs 2:2; Ps 33:8;). Fox is followed by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 106; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 33, among others. It would be odd for Qoheleth to emphasize the permanence of the physical earth in 1:4b, at the very commencement of the book's argument, since that emphasis recurs nowhere else in the poem nor book at large. What seems more sensible in the context of the poem is that Qoheleth is highlighting the same kind of "permanence" he has in mind in 1:9–11, namely, the character of human experience as a cyclical phenomenon. Though one generation replaces another, and the particulars change, ineluctable traits of human being remain.[23] Stuart Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes: Volume 1, Introduction and Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6* (vol. 1; London: T&T Clark, 2020), 272, suggests that it is also quite possible that the word can be used broadly enough to include both humans and their physical habitation, just as with "the world" in English.

[24] An interesting parallel is found in a Babylonian text, which highlights the ancients' readily acknowledged ignorance as to how the sun returns to מְקוֹמוֹ:

"To unknown distant regions and for uncounted leagues
You press on, Šamaš, going by day and returning by night.
Among the Igigi there is no one who toils but you…" (*BWL,* 128–29, lines 43–48)

[25] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 6, says "this translation is certain." For a review of this verse in the history of Jewish exegesis, see Sara Japhet, "Goes to the South and Turns to the North (Ecclesiastes 1:6): The Sources and History of the Exegetical Traditions," *JSQ* 1 (1993/4): 289–322.

[26] E.g. Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 49.

turn" is undertaken in order to bring back the object to its starting point (see figure below). The movement envisioned is less like a hurricane's swirl than a boomerang's forward-and-back reprise, and it is this "turning, (re)turning" that persists unhindered.[27]

In 1:7 Qoheleth describes that the streams, too, start at their source and then traverse over to the sea, before finally turning back to the original source.[28] The repetition of this process, if not quite explicitly stated in this case, is certainly implied. Hence the surprising fact that despite the constant movement of the streams into the sea, "the sea is never filled." What is going into it is always coming out; its gains are always counterbalanced by losses.

In each of the four verses in 1:4–7, then, we have a set of opposite binaries establishing an A-B structure:

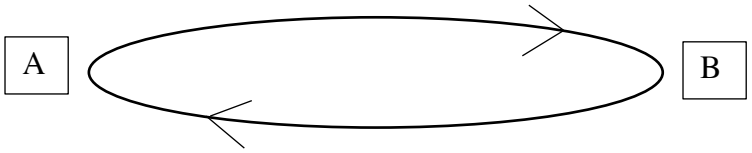
	A	**B**
generation	goes	comes
	הֹלֵךְ	בָּא
sun	rises	sets
	וְזָרַח	וּבָא
wind	south	north
	אֶל־דָּרוֹם	אֶל־צָפוֹן
streams	sea	source
	אֶל־הַיָּם	אֶל־מְקוֹם

With each pair of binaries the point is essentially two-fold: (a) that the activity or movement in each case repeatedly "travels" between the two binary poles, oscillating back and forth; (b) and, as a result, the movement never arrives anywhere "new" (cf. 1:9–10). It merely continues traversing along already-trodden ground (cf. v. 6, "circuits"), never arriving at something outside

[27] Whether or not the north-south axis represented the most common wind-pattern experienced by Qoheleth, it was probably chosen as a compliment to the more obvious east-west dichotomy already taken by the sun (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 108).

[28] Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 106, addresses the concern as to *how* Qoheleth would have conceived of the water making its way back to the original source: "We are apt to read into the words the theories of modern science as to the evaporation from the sea, the clouds formed by evaporation, the rain falling from the clouds and replenishing the streams. It may be questioned, however, whether that theory, which Lucretius states almost as if it were a discovery, were present to the mind of the Debater [Qoheleth] and whether he did not rather think of the waters of the ocean filtering through the crevices of the earth and so feeding its wells and fountains."

this familiar schema, something which might constitute "gain" or "surplus" [יִתְרוֹן]. Hence the movement is confined to endless cycles, perpetual repetition.



All of this can stand on its own from 1:4–7, but a cyclical conception is all the more confirmed once we read 1:9–11. Verse 9 is as clear and concise a statement of "cyclical time" as one is likely to find in the ancient world. The future is identified with the past, foregoing any structure which might cultivate the possibility for newness. Yet, unlike many of Qoheleth's contemporaries (some of whom will be discussed below), Qoheleth's version of cyclical time is not a metaphysical theory per se, supposing that every precise state of the universe will eventually repeat itself, and do so again and again eternally. Rather, Qoheleth's notion of cyclicality is abstracted up a level from the world's physical (or metaphysical) constituents, into the realm of classifications, types, and archetypes. It is the same *types* of events and activities that will recur *ad infinitum*.[29] (Given that it is still a theory about the way reality is structured, however, we may call Qoheleth's idea a "quasi-metaphysical" theory.)

The statement in 1:10 is an immediate practical application of the principle of cyclicality declared in v 9. If someone thinks they can ever legitimately exclaim, "Look! This is new!"—they are mistaken. Since whatever happens now is categorically equivalent to what has happened before, there technically can be no "new" thing—nothing which is unclassifiable into the already

[29] I concur with Fox, *Rereading*, 168: "The assertion that 'there is nothing new under the sun' cannot apply to events as specific, unique occurrences. World War II, the book of Qohelet, the death of Lincoln—these had not happened before. But in some sense Qohelet would regard their reality as inhering in their realizing of archetypes: war, book, assassination. Only in that way can he deny their newness." Cf. Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, 122–23: "The variations in the repetition do not affect essentials"; Tomáš Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs & Qoheleth* (Leiden: Brill, 2002): 119: "The predictability of Qoheleth's world happens on an abstract phenomenal level, pertaining to issues such as birth and death, joy and sorrow, but does not extend to the lower detailed level of specific human actions and their consequences." That is why the theme of repetition and cycles does not contradict ideas prominent elsewhere in Qoheleth about life's unpredictable nature (e.g. 9:11–12; 11:1–6). The precise circumstances may be unknown and unpredictable, but the broader picture and patterns will only repeat themselves. Cf., too, James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 24: "Even the monotonous cycles of nature defy prediction—*that* they will repeat is sure, but *when* and *how* remain obscure" [emphasis original].

familiar categories. The fundamental aspects of human existence, just as the movements of the sun, wind, and waters, have already been well established. And henceforth, "it is known what a human being is" (6:10).

Qoheleth concludes the poem in 1:11 by denying proficiency to human memory [אֵין זִכְרוֹן]. While at first glance this may seem an outlier to his prior discussion, a connection can be made when we consider that what humans remember of their predecessors are the anomalies—those deeds which stand out as "new" and unique from the unending stream of information. By drawing up the lines to claim that there really are no new distinctions among human behavior, Qoheleth has established a framework in which memory is powerless. The "new" feeds the cultural memory; where nothing is new, nothing is remembered.

Seeing the theme of "cyclical time" in Qoheleth, and particularly in 1:4–11, is certainly no novel proposal. Readers of the book have been discerning this theme from the very earliest interpretations on record,[30] and the great majority of commentators on this passage have taken it as describing cyclical realities to one degree or another.[31] The fact that Qoheleth commences his book with a lengthy poem about cyclicality implies that this is indeed an important, even central, aspect of his philosophy. The entire poem, 1:4–11, serves as the answer to Qoheleth's opening question in 1:3, "What gain is there?" With its depiction of well-worn cycles that fail to effect change, the poem clearly provides a negative answer.[32] This is all the more confirmed by the way Qoheleth picks up the discussion two verses later in 1:13, referring to the "bad business" God has

[30] See, e.g., the discussion in Augustine, *de civ. Dei,* 12.14.

[31] Those who have particularly highlighted this theme in recent years include Katharine J. Dell, "The Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes," *VT* 59.2 (2009): 181–89 183–85; Roger N. Whybray, "Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 and the Wonders of Nature," *JSOT* 13 (1988): 105–12; Michael Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns," *JSOT* 28.2 (2003): 192–209; T. A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On the other hand, the cyclical interpretation of 1:4–7 is challenged in Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 46–53.

[32] There are a few readings of Qoheleth's cyclicality theme, particularly in 1:4–11, that understand him as regarding it positively. For example, Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Sean McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 40, says that the poem implies nothing negative but only "praises the cosmos as glorious and eternal in this image of cyclic return." Similarly, Dell, "Cycle," 189, commenting on "the cycle of life as controlled by God" and "the cycles in the natural world," writes, "There is a positive aspect to the simple description of the interaction with the natural world that cheers the human spirit… The author displays…an appreciation of the circularity of the process." And Carl S. Knopf, "The Optimism of Koheleth," *JBL* 49.2 (1930): 195–99, suggests that the thrust of Qoheleth's cyclical language is "the inevitable law and rationale of our world" (198). But these readings, in fact, miss the point. Readers *may* deduce that repeating phenomena are orderly, and that order is good. But this is not the conclusion Qoheleth draws from these phenomena. Features of the natural world such as order or consistency are little valued by the sage if they do not result in *gain* for human beings. Given that Qoheleth frames 1:4–11 in relation to the question concerning gain in 1:3, the poem's declaration of the world's gainless, cyclical nature is the direct, negative answer to that question and the passage's central point.

given humans, and that all that is done is *hebel* and striving after wind. With this understanding of 1:4–11 in view, we may now turn to 3:1–15.

2. Reading Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 in Relation to 1:4–11

A strong case can be made for reading 3:2–8 in the light of the bipolar cycles theme of 1:4–11.[33] First, 3:2–8 is clearly structured in terms of binary pairs, which in every case present mutually exclusive opposites. Since a similar A-B structure also marks 1:4–7, this fact alone provides some clue that the two passages share a conceptual link and should be read similarly.[34] Second, the poem of 1:4–11 is directly introduced by the same rhetorical question which immediately follows 3:2–8: "What lasting gain is there for a person ("worker" in 3:9) in (all) his toil?"

1:3	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן	לָאָדָם	בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל	תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
3:9	מַה־יִּתְרוֹן	הָעוֹשֶׂה	בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא עָמֵל	

1:3	What lasting gain is there for	a person	in all his toil which	he toils under the sun?
3:9	What lasting gain is there for	the worker	in what	he toils?

Third, the subsequent verse (3:10) virtually repeats a sentence which had followed closely after the conclusion of the poem in 1:4–11, concerning the "business" God has given humans.

1:13	נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ	רָע	הוּא עִנְיַן
3:10	נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ	אֲשֶׁר	רָאִיתִי אֶת־הָעִנְיָן

[33] Other commentators who read 1:3–11 and 3:2–8 (or 3:1–15) as connected and mutually interpretive include Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 75–76; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 52; A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 15; Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," 141–53 in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 147–48; Otto Kaiser, "Qoheleth," 83–93 in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton* (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H.G.M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 86.

[34] Several scholars have noted the importance of opposites for Qoheleth (either in this pair of passages, or more broadly), e.g. Perry, *Ecclesiastes*, 84: "What both [1:3–11 and 3:2–8] have in common, at a deeper structural level, is neither the "time" nor the particular desire or *khepets*…but the perspective of a totality composed of opposites." Ernest Horton, "Koheleth's Concept of Opposites: As Compared to Samples of Greek Philosophy and Near and Far Eastern Wisdom Classics," *Numen* 19.1 (1972): 1–21, finds Qoheleth's "doctrine of opposites" throughout the book, positing that the sage "assumes that reality occurs in pairs" and "argues for the diverse and contradictory nature of existence" in which "nature provides life and death, war and peace, patience and anger, as well as good luck and misfortune" (4). Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 235, too, summarizes: "Everything has its opposite (cf. 3:1–8), so that man must not count on the continuance of either good or bad fortune."

1:13	It is a bad	business	that God has given humans to be busy with
3:10	I have seen the	business	that God has given humans to be busy with

This means that some of Qoheleth's most immediate interpretive comments on the book's opening poem likewise comprise his commentary of the second poem. If the immediately adjacent comments on each passage are virtually identical, this would seem a strong indicator that the content and overall meaning of the two poems is regarded similarly by Qoheleth. Thus, if the subject matter of the first poem is that of the cycles and repetition in earthly existence, we might well expect this same essential message in the second poem. Fourth and finally, the fact that 1:4–11 and 3:2–8 represent two of the book's three poems (the other being 12:1–7) and that 1:3–11 opens and 3:1–15 concludes the book's opening core unit (1:3–3:15) are further indicators that the two poems ought to be mutually interpreted.[35]

If we are correct to read 3:2–8 in light of 1:4–11, then the following features emerge as significant. When Qoheleth says that "there is a time for [A] and a time for [B]," the emphasis lies not on the precise *timing* at which A or B occurs—whether chosen by the individual or ordained by God—but on the fact that the opposite realities of *both A and B* will inevitably occur, not just one or the other.[36] That two opposing realities will always (sooner or later) manifest themselves implies that imbedded into the created order itself is a kind of equilibrating tendency, a drive toward "zero." This homogenizing proclivity naturally catalyzes the question of 3:9, "What gain?" Further, just as in 1:4–11, what is implied in 3:2–8 is not only that A happens and then B (its opposite) happens [A → B], but additionally, the constant *oscillation* between A and B [A → B → A].[37] There is a cyclicality intrinsic to everything done under the sun such that human activity in

[35] Kaiser, "Qoheleth," 84: "Only in i 3–iii 15 do we find what is obviously a carefully planned composition." Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 1–83, and Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 44–76, regard 1:3–3:15 as a kind of overture of Qoheleth's main ideas. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 5, notes that the book's primary opening unit (1:12–2:26) is flanked by poems (1:3–11; 3:1–9, in his numbering) which both either begin or end with the question concerning "gain" for human beings.

[36] Similarly, Jennifer Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54–76, stresses that in the poem "everything happens" (56): "Qohelet's times…are not primarily 'right' times, but simply times when something happens" (55). I concur with Barbour that the point is more *that* all these things happen than precisely *when* they happen, but our interpretations differ in that Barbour would still plot the events of 3:2–8 along a linear timeline ("they are different points on a *temporal* continuum…the variety of human experience as a linear series of times…" 57), whereas I see them as occurrences on polar ends of the oscillating cycles. Cf. also J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 30.

[37] There are other ancient Jewish texts in which the notion of binary opposites is emphasized, and in some it is spoken of in terms of sequence, one following after the other: *T. Ash* 1:3–4; 5:1–2, "God has given two ways to the

any given sphere continually oscillates between two poles. To expand on two of Qoheleth's own examples: People plant in the spring but inevitably uproot in the fall. Spring will come again soon enough, though, and round it goes. People laugh with joy at the baby's birth but mourn at the elder's funeral days later. Yet laughing will reprise in due course. This is the way the world turns. This is the nature of time as humans experience it.[38]

We should note, too, that in 1:4–11 Qoheleth's concern is neither ethical (in the sense of the "proper times" reading of 3:2–8) nor determinist (as though the main point were to convey God's temporal preordination of the movements in the natural world). Rather, the emphasis in 1:4–11 is merely descriptive—this cyclical manner is the way the world works—and the sage's negative evaluation of this description is inferred by Qoheleth's comments immediately leading into ("What gain is there for a person…?" 1:3) and following the poem ("It is a bad business…" 1:13). Thus the same is arguably true for 3:2–8.[39]

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sons of men, and two inclinations, and two kinds of action, and two manners (of action), and two goals. Therefore all things are by twos, one over against the other…Therefore observe, children, how there are two in all things, one against the other, and the one is hidden by the other: Death succeeds to life, dishonor to glory, night to day, and darkness to light"; Sir. 33:14–15, "Good is opposite evil, and life is opposite death; so a sinner is opposite a pious person. And so look at all of the works of the Most High, two by two, one opposite the other one"; Sir 18:25, "Remember in time of plenty the time of famine, poverty and need in your days of wealth." The closest parallel to Eccl 3:2–8 may be Sir 34:28–31, which emphasizes that opposite actions undermine each other and result in gainlessness (though Sirach's concern is particularly with the efficacy of piety): "One builds, and one tears down—what did they gain more than hard labors? One prays, and one curses—to whose voice will the master listen? When one bathes due to a corpse and when one touches it again—what did he gain by his washing? So is a person when he fasts for his sins and goes again and does the same things; who will listen to his prayer, and what did he gain by humbling himself?"

[38] A few commentators have characterized 3:2–8 as cyclical (often, but not always, connecting it back to 1:4–11), even if this element has not received the strongest accent in their interpretation: George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Scribner, 1908), 98: "His point is that there is a proper or divinely ordered time for all human activities, and that these go on over and over again"; John Jarick, "The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on *hakkōl hebel* and *lakkōl zemān* in Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 79–99: "For good or ill, the times are constantly changing. Time itself is shot through with strings of syzygies—to borrow a term from the Gnostics—which replace each other in endlessly repetitive cycles" (91); Wright, *Koheleth*, 342: "Man is conditioned by this constant change of times and circumstances which he cannot alter. The acts of man, like those of nature, must be again and again repeated. As in nature (chap. 1) so in human affairs, all things seem to move in a circle." Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, 221, speaks here of the "endlessly repeated round of human experience"; Davis Hankins, "The Internal Infinite: Deleuze, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency in Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 40.1 (2015): 43–59, of "eternal recurrence and ceaseless change, repetition and difference" (46–47); Dell, "Cycle," 187, of "God holding the key to the cycles of life"; and Bundvad, *Time*, 91, of "human existence as a movement back and forth between contrasting poles of life and death, happiness and sorrow, building and destruction, and so on."

[39] It is important to be clear that by using the term "cyclical" I do not intend to refer to a certain *order* in which a series of different events must always occur. I agree with Fox, *Rereading*, 200, that it need not always be the case that "crying follows laughing, which follows crying, and so on *ad infinitum*." Fox continues, "Several 'crying times' may follow in succession before it is right to laugh. Rather, [Qoheleth] describes a *binary pairing of opposed event-types as a structural property of reality*, not as a temporal sequence" [emphasis added]. Yet if the various spheres of reality are structured in binary pairs then both sides will eventually take place, and if we are dealing with only two constituents, then this is still alternation in a broader sense. In other words, a movement such as A-A-A-B-B-A-B-B-

3. Support from Ecclesiastes 3:9–15

(9) What lasting gain is there for the worker[40] in that which he toils?

(10) I have seen the business that God has given to humans to be busy with. (11) He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has, moreover, set the desire for perpetuity[41] in their hearts, yet without any ability for humanity to discover the work that God has done from beginning to end. (12) I realized that there is nothing good for them except to be joyful and to do what is worthwhile in one's life. (13) Moreover, every person who eats and drinks and sees good in all his toil—this is God's payment. (14) I know that everything God does—it remains forever; upon it nothing can be added, and from it nothing can be taken away.[42] God has acted so that people might fear before him.

(15) Whatever has been—it already was.[43]

B is reducible to A-B-A-B, and is cyclical in that sense. "Cyclical," then, is still a helpful word to use for the phenomenon in question, because it conveys a notion of repetition in which reiterations take place through an oscillatory back-and-forth movement, as in, for instance, the oscillating cycles of a sound wave.

[40] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 69, 72, argues that in contrast to other parallel constructions of this phrase in Qoheleth (1:3; 5:15; 6:8, 11; cf. 5:10—all of which use ל to refer to the "gain" that exists "for" the person), מַה־ יִּתְרוֹן הָעוֹשֶׂה here refers to the gain "from" the worker (thus a genitive of source). But this is probably reading too much into what is more likely the same sort of stylistic variation that applies to many of Qoheleth's repeated phrases. If the question in 3:9 were "What lasting gain is there *from* the worker?" as Weeks suggests, then given what Qoheleth goes on to say concerning God's "exploitation" of human labor, some *affirmative* answer would seem to be required (gain *from* the worker *for* God). Yet this would be quite exceptional for a writer who elsewhere employs such rhetorical questions to emphasize the negative response. On the whole, it is still best to regard the genitive הָעוֹשֶׂה as a subjective genitive (if we take "gain" as a verbal idea, the "worker" is the one performing the action of "gaining") and merely a stylistic variation on the parallel constructions which employ ל.

[41] The well-worn scholarly debate concerning that which God has placed into human hearts—הָעֹלָם—has produced a range of interpretive options: (a) "eternity" (LXX αἰῶνα; McNeile; Lohfink; Seow; Schoors; Weeks); (b) "world" (Vulgate *mundum);* (c) "ignorance," "darkness," "obscurity," derived from either *DCH*'s עלם I, "to hide" (as in Eccl 12:14) or עלם II, "to be dark" (Crenshaw; Frydrych; Scott; Barton; Plumptre); (d) "toil," derived from amending עֹלָם to עָמָל (Fox; Ginsburg), inter alia. I have taken it in a sense closest to (a), but I share with others the concern that "eternity" imports a Western philosophical and theological category likely foreign to Qoheleth's thought. Rather, I regard the idea here as congruent with other emphases we have drawn out in previous chapters—that in Qoheleth's view humans desire a long-term *telos* to work toward and that such an accomplishment would ensure them an enduring name for posterity. These ideas are apparently compressed into the single word, הָעֹלָם, and I have tried to capture this with "perpetuity" (cf. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 80, "distant time"). "Desire for" has been added to communicate the assumed sense.

[42] As elsewhere in later biblical Hebrew, אֵין followed by an infinitive construct may express impossibility ("nothing can") rather than mere negation ("nothing is"). See Esth 4:2; 8:8; Ezra 9:15; Ps 40:6.

[43] Robert D. Holmstedt and Andrew R. Jones, "The Pronoun in Tripartite Verbless Clauses in Biblical Hebrew: Resumption for Left-Dislocation or Pronominal Copula?," *JSS* 59.1 (2014): 53–89, identify the הוּא in מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה כְּבָר הוּא as one of many instances of a tripartite verbless (or nominal) clause in the HB where "the pronoun…should be read as the resumption pronoun in a dislocation" (77), as opposed to other cases of the construction in which they identify the pronoun as a copula. As an instance of left-dislocation (a term from linguistics), 3:15a has the structure, "X—it is Y" (cf. also 1:9; 2:23; 3:21; 4:8; 5:18; 6:2). But 3:15a is particularly unique in that there is no Y component (no predicate nominative). Instead, Qoheleth's stress is on the כְּבָר ("already"), which adverbially modifies an implicit copula, hence "already was." The implicit copula is rendered past tense by its pairing with כְּבָר and due to context. Another unique aspect to this text is the word order—in such a case הוּא should normally precede כְּבָר. But in both of

And whatever will be—it already has been.
And God seeks to do what has already been pursued. (3:9–15)

It is almost unanimous among commentators that 3:9–15 represents Qoheleth's commentary on the poem of 3:2–8. We will now walk through 3:9–15, noting several ways in which these verses support the present argument.

Beginning with 3:9, we have already noted the close parallel between 1:3 and 3:9. The only notable difference between them is the identification of the toiler here as "the worker" [הָעוֹשֶׂה] rather than the more generic אָדָם, and this itself is significant for our argument. Why would Qoheleth immediately describe the activities in 3:2–8 as the "toil" of a "worker"? Our answer depends on connecting this word to v 10. Here too we have just seen the tight parallel between 1:13 and 3:10. The "business" (or "job," "task" [עִנְיָן]) given to humanity is identified as a "bad" [רָע] one in 1:13, and there is no reason to think it has escaped that characterization two chapters later. In 3:9–10 Qoheleth has thus proceeded from a poem describing twenty-eight human activities to a characterization of the human predicament in terms of the "worker" who "toils" and the "business" given to people "to be busy with." This persistent "business" theme implies that 3:9–10 serves to summarize 3:2–8 as something like the "job description" allotted to humankind.

Furthermore, the common determinist reading of 3:2–8 claims that the lack of gain Qoheleth identifies is owing purely to God's predetermination of all human actions. Yet, since 3:9 is a clear echo of 1:3 it is reasonable to assume that the lack of gain in 3:9 relates closely to the same lack in 1:3. But the poem of 1:4–11 says nothing concerning God's determination of events, emphasizing instead the cyclical nature of existence. What the discussion in 3:9–15 adds to 1:3–11 is the clarification that behind the cycles of existence stands a "prime mover"—or better, "prime recycler"[44]—who has pushed the cycles into motion. But it is foremost the cycles that elicit the response of מַה־יִּתְרוֹן, not strictly the notion of a determinist, interventionist deity.

The implications of this understanding are already significant for showing how my proposed reading differs from the common determinist reading of 3:2–8. Qoheleth encourages us

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the first two stiches of the verse כְּבָר is focus-fronted (another linguistics term). In his Qoheleth commentary Holmstedt (et al.) translates 3:15a, "Whatever is—it was already," which is congruent with my own rendering apart from the tense of הָיָה. As with 1:9–10 and 3:15b, Qoheleth is contrasting two periods of time and stating that the occurrences of the later period (whether, from Qoheleth's point of view, they are past, present, or future) are always only repetitions of what had already occurred before them.

[44] William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 45.

to think of humanity as employees of the divine employer, the cosmic "CEO." What does the CEO of a company "determine," with respect to the CEO's employees? To take a familiar modern example, the workers on Henry Ford's factory assembly line presumably did not feel some external, physical compulsion to move their hands in a particular direction at a specific time, according to the behest of the man in charge. He was not a puppet-master in that strictest sense. What Henry Ford did control was the workers' "job description": he assigned their general (repetitive) task, and it was theirs to carry out. I suggest that the case is similar with Qoheleth's humanity and their deity: God has determined the fates of humans only insofar as he has assigned them the "task" (1:13; 3:10) of carrying out mutually counterproductive, gainless activities (3:2–8).

While the Ford example is meant only as a heuristic, further considerations support the suggestion that Qoheleth viewed humanity's relation to God through an employer-worker model. First, as mentioned in Chapter 1, some scholars have proposed that Qoheleth is presented as a "businessman," since a striking number of his favorite terms are commercial or economic terms: יִתְרוֹן ("gain"), חֶסְרוֹן ("loss"), שָׂכָר ("wage, reward"), חֶשְׁבּוֹן ("accounting"), מנה ("count"), חֵלֶק ("share"), עִנְיָן ("task, business"), עָמָל ("toil, labor").[45] Second, Stuart Weeks argues that another such term, מַתַּת, can mean "payment" in a broader sense than its common translation, "gift," since "the Hebrew probably bears no implication that what is offered has not been earned."[46] Thus the rendering, "this is God's payment," in 3:13 would cohere well with the business metaphor we have already seen in 3:9–10. The divine CEO may employ unwitting laborers to carry out his bidding, but they are not unpaid slaves—they are hired servants. They may not reap the desired "lasting gain," but in providing the possibility for enjoyment he does at least grant his employees a wage.[47] Third, as is well known, several other ancient Near Eastern texts present humanity as created to labor for the gods (e.g. Enuma Elish, the Atrahasis Epic, Enki and Ninmah, Song of the Hoe, *KAR* 4). So it is not unreasonable that Qoheleth would have viewed humanity similarly—at least as God's "workers," if not slaves.

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[45] See Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34–37; Mitchell J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth," *Bib* 33 (1952): 30–52, 191–221.

[46] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 73, referencing Sir 42:7; 1 Kgs 13:7; Prov 25:14; Ezek 46:5, 11.

[47] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5*.6, 484: "If humans are employed by God, on tasks that ultimately yield no gain…then this, at least, is their wage."

Proceeding to 3:14, this verse elicits two main questions: (a) What is the referent for "everything God does" [כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים]? (b) What does it mean that it "will be forever" [יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם], and that there can be no "adding to it" [עָלָיו אֵין לְהוֹסִיף] nor "subtracting from it" [וּמִמֶּנּוּ אֵין לִגְרֹעַ]? Regarding the first, determinist readings of the book generally assume that God's עשׂה refers to specific acts of divine determination which are then subsequently enacted in the human sphere. In reference to the activities listed in 3:2–8, then, "there is a time for planting" would mean something like, "God has preordained that Joe will plant at 8:22am on May 7th, 1978," and innumerable other such instances. As a universalized doctrine, the claim is that God determines every specific activity on the part of every person for all time.[48] But, as I suggested earlier, this is far too expansive an idea to import into the poem's relatively bridled phrasing, especially when a much simpler hypothesis is possible. Apart from the two abstract nouns at the poem's end, the activities listed in 3:2–8 are comprised of infinitive constructs, the most abstract grammatical form for identifying a verbal activity. All concrete details normally included with a finite verb, such as the subject, tense (timing), mood, and aspect are left completely unstated.[49] On my reading, Qoheleth's choice of the infinitive construct is fitting since the poem is merely stating that the named activities do inevitably occur, and occur cyclically at that, as part and parcel of the general human "job description" assigned by God. When, how, and by whom specific actions come to be performed are not the questions Qoheleth—nor Qoheleth's God—finds relevant. God's עשׂה, then, is simply the assigning and maintaining of this broad human task. If this is correct, then the poem is hardly an ode to the sort of hard determinism so commonly presumed.

As for the second question, Qoheleth says that "everything God does—it will be forever" [כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם], and the denial that there is any "adding to it" [עָלָיו אֵין לְהוֹסִיף] or "subtracting from it" [וּמִמֶּנּוּ אֵין לִגְרֹעַ] rules out the possibility that any human agent

[48] E.g. Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 62, believes that 3:14 refers to "the divine act by which God has predisposed everything to happen at certain times and in certain ways," and that "Qoheleth probably has in mind written decrees, tablets of destiny, on which the events of a human life are inscribed in advance and by which they are divinely predetermined." Similarly, Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 312: "The second lesson which Coheleth learned from the facts described in 1–9 is, that all the affairs of human life alluded to, which God has preordained, are *immutably* fixed, that no ingenuity or industry, however great, can affect it in the slightest degree" [emphasis original].

[49] This being the case, it is not clear why Bundvad, *Time*, 83–109, acknowledging the poem's abstractness, should also regard it as "most firmly anchored to the temporal realm of the present" and reflecting "the character and value of the present in human existence" (90). Even if one reads the poem as highlighting human agency in that there is a time to choose various actions, there is no reason to see the poem as prescribing that such agency be exercised *now* rather than sometime later. On the "proper times" reading, that is the entire point: one must know the *right* time to act. Nothing of this logic by itself implies that the right time is always "the present."

could change what is divinely wrought. But the "it" [הוּא] can be construed in two different ways, according to the two versions of "determinism" on offer. On the common view, it is God's foreordained *decision about* the specific future event (such as, again, "Joe will plant at 8:22am on May 7th, 1978"—or the universal collection of all such events across time) that is deemed eternal and immutable. The meaning of 3:14 would be that what God *decides* remains true forever—it is a settled choice and will definitely happen. But on the reading I am proposing, it is not God's decision about future actions which is deemed unchangeable, but the actions themselves—the cyclical and therefore ultimately unchanging activities which typify human existence (3:2–8).[50] Qoheleth's use of a verb of action, עשׂה, rather than a verb for deciding, combined with the verb's imperfect form [יַעֲשֶׂה], argues strongly for the latter option. Qoheleth is saying that what God *does,* the state of affairs he establishes and maintains (which itself entails human action), remains in place indefinitely. Despite the constant motion and alternations, the lack of forward movement implies a situation that ultimately stays the same (cf. 1:4b). As we will see, the next verse fully supports this reading, whereas it fails to comport with a reading of v 14 concerned with foreordained decisions.

Finally, then, we come to 3:15. I have translated the first two clauses as, "Whatever has been—it already was. And whatever will be—it already has been." The allusion to 1:9 is clear, and the alignments below represent the division of time shared between 1:9–10 and 3:15.

Distant Past	**Future**		**Recent Past**[51]		**Distant Past**		**Recent Past**	**Future**	
	הוּא שֶׁיִּהְיֶה	=	מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה	1:9	כְּבָר הוּא	=	מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה		3:15a
כְּבָר הָיָה לְעֹלָמִים		=	הוּא [חָדָשׁ]	1:10	כְּבָר הָיָה[52]	=		אֲשֶׁר לִהְיוֹת	3:15b

[50] Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35: "It is worth noting that Qoheleth is speaking of the immutability of the divine *deed,* not word" [emphasis original].

[51] Just as with the English use of the perfect tense, in many cases the Hebrew perfect tense includes both the (recent) past and the present, thus מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה is often translated "Whatever *is*." See Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1987), 50; Antoon Schoors, "The Verb *hāyâ* in Qoheleth," 229–38 in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw* (eds. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

[52] It is also possible that כְּבָר הָיָה would function here as "recent past" and could be translated with "is" (so Isaksson, *Studies*, 29), but in either case it is the "already," the antecedency with respect to אֲשֶׁר לִהְיוֹת, that is stressed.

Qoheleth had concluded the poem in 1:4–11 by asserting through abstract temporal use of הִיה the cyclical nature of the world he had previously conveyed through natural imagery (1:5–7). Now in 3:15, closing out the section which began with twenty-eight concrete examples of human activities, he once again employs הִיה to construct temporal phrases only modified from those in 1:9–10. The effect, as in 1:9–10, is to equate the events of disparate eras and thereby strike the clear note of cyclicality. In both cases he has clarified and generalized with abstract propositions what had previously come in the form of poetic concreteness. Further, 1:9 and 3:15 both begin with מַה־ שֶּׁהָיָה. In 3:15 this phrase means essentially, "Take any example from the list just provided—whether planting, uprooting, crying, laughing, or any other. Whatever given activity you pick, that same activity (and its opposite, its subversion) has already been done before and will be done again." The parallels between 1:9 and 3:15 are hardly coincidental, and most commentators recognize them. What is surprising, however, is how little the cyclicality of 3:15 is taken into account with regard to the interpretation of 3:1–15 more broadly. Many commentators betray a certain unease here and either seem to avoid situating the verse within a "proper times" or determinist reading of the wider passage or else do so in too simplistic a manner.[53] But the point about cyclicality is more central to Qoheleth's thought in 3:1–15 than is typically recognized. Any interpretation of the passage must reckon with its implications.

Moving to the latter part of the verse (3:15b), on an initial reading the final phrase of this section (וְהָאֱלֹהִים יְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת־נִרְדָּף) may seem entirely out of place. Literal translations such as the RSV render the line, "God seeks what has been driven away," or the like, but that leaves ambiguous its meaning in context. Several ancient versions and older commentaries often find here a reference to God helping those who are on the societal periphery (taking נִרְדָּף as "persecuted"),[54] but as Plumptre reports, this "introduces an idea quite foreign to the train of thought."[55] This final line of the unit of 3:1–15 is, in fact, climactic. That is because it coalesces the two strands of cyclicality and determinism in a way that had previously been implied but not yet made explicit.[56] What has been "driven away"—or better, "pursued"—is none other than the events of the past. In saying

[53] Rudman's treatment of the verse is one such example, offering little more than that "all is controlled by God" (*Determinism*, 93–94).

[54] Cf. LXX, Targum, Peshitta, and the probable reference in Sir 5:3; Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (trans. D. W. Simon; Philadelphia: Smith, English, 1860), 111–12.

[55] Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.

[56] So Robert D. Holmstedt, et al., *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 134.

that God "seeks" them, Qoheleth means that God seeks to bring them back around, to repeat them.[57] The verse is climactic in that even though the cyclical theme appears as early as 1:4–11, it is only here in 3:15 that Qoheleth explicitly identifies God as its catalyst. The world's cyclical nature has been established by God, and he is the one who keeps the circle revolving. Again and again he pushes the "merry-go-round" of human existence around for yet another spin.

A. Responding to Objections

It may be helpful here to address two objections anticipated from the material so far presented.

1. The Meaning of עֵת

One might object that my reading does not lend sufficient weight to the "time" aspect of the poem, in light of its repeated use of עֵת. I offer two notes in response, first concerning the importance of the word, and second, concerning its meaning. Apart from containing a long list of activities, the poem in Eccl 3:2–8 contains two striking features: (a) the twenty-eight instances of the word עֵת; and (b) the binary structure, which sets fourteen antitheses against one another in pairs. It is probably not feasible to regard both of these aspects as equally crucial to the poem's essential meaning; one or the other must be privileged. One commonality between the "proper times" interpretation and the determinist interpretation is that they both prioritize the repetition of עֵת over the binary structure. In other words, on both of these readings, the poem is primarily about "time"—in the sense of *timing*—and the presence of binary antitheses is merely incidental to the poem's meaning. Thus the poem could have been written by listing various activities without paired antitheses and nothing central to the meaning would have been lost.

My view takes the opposite approach. I regard the binary structure as central to the poem, and, accordingly, the repeated use of עֵת (and its association with "time") as relatively peripheral and incidental. The uses of עֵת primarily serve to highlight the infinitive verb of each hemistich.

[57] So Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 90: "God 'seeks what has been driven away'—that is, repeatedly makes sure that what has happened once happens again and again (1:9)"; Wright, *Koheleth*, 345: "God seeks the past, and brings it again into being. He alone can bring that back which was once past and gone"; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 103: "He conceives of event as chased by event, until it is itself brought back by God"; Thomas Tyler, *Ecclesiastes: A Contribution to Its Interpretation* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), 90; McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 63; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 234; Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 62–63; Robert H. Pfeiffer, "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 53 (1934): 100–109, at 107; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 100. Cf. Vulgate, *et Deus instaurat quod abiit* ("and God restores what has passed").

Qoheleth's point, as I understand it, is less about the *timing* of the various events than about the *fact* that they happen and that they happen in binary duality.

Second, how does the interpretation on offer construe the meaning of עֵת in 3:2–8? On the basis of his book-length philological study of the word, John Wilch argues that the basic meaning of עֵת is "not primarily concerned with the temporal aspect of the particular occasion."[58] He claims, rather, that the word in earlier use signifies the "relationship between occasions" and later comes to signify "the particular occasion itself," that is, "the *fact* of an occasion more than its temporality."[59] Wilch therefore advocates translating עֵת as "occasion" in virtually all occurrences in the HB, including those in Eccl 3:2–8, such that there is not a "time for" but an "occasion for" the various activities listed.[60] While I have retained the standard translation of "time" for עֵת, the implied sense should be understood along the lines of Wilch's thesis. If this is correct, then the fact that my interpretation does not prioritize the *timing* of the activities is not a strong objection against it.

2. "He Has Made Everything Beautiful in Its Time" (3:11a)

The most difficult verse for the interpretation of Eccl 3:1–15 herein proposed is 3:11a, "He has made everything beautiful in its time." It is an apparent problem for my interpretation since I take Qoheleth to construe everything else in 3:1–15 negatively (besides the parenthetical joy commendation in 3:12–13), yet "beautiful" [יָפֶה] would hardly seem to convey negative value. On the face of it, this sentence could align with the "proper times" interpretation of the poem, especially if one translates יָפֶה as "appropriate," which is commonly done. However, there may be more to the situation. And in any case, the single clause of 3:11a is probably insufficient to ground the proper times interpretation, in light of the many other elements of 3:9–15 that disfavor it.

I suggest that it is possible to make 3:11a cohere with the other aspects of my interpretation. The two factors driving this interpretation are the negative context of 3:1–15 as well as the possibility that Qoheleth can distinguish between God's evaluative perspective and humanity's (as

[58] John R. Wilch, *Time and Event: An Exegetical Study of the Use of ʾēth in the Old Testament in Comparison to Other Temporal Expressions in Clarification of the Concept of Time* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 162 [emphasis omitted].

[59] Wilch, *Time*, 161 [emphasis omitted], 162 [emphasis original].

[60] Wilch, *Time*, 117–28.

represented, we may assume, by the author). We can discern both of these factors at play as we move through the text. Qoheleth writes in 3:9, "What gain is there *for the worker*…?" As elsewhere, the implicit lack of יִתְרוֹן, "gain" or meaning, is clearly a disvalue for Qoheleth, who desires a world in which meaning obtains. But it is also important to emphasize, as we have in previous chapters, that Qoheleth's statements concerning the lack of gain hold true not in some impersonal, abstract sense, but specifically *for human beings* (cf. 1:3; 3:19; 6:11). This implies that, from the vantage point of other, non-human perspectives, things may well be seen in a different light. Verse 10 follows, "I have seen the business that *God* has given *humans* to be busy with." In light of the almost identical parallel with 1:13b (cf. 5:13) it is fair to assume that Qoheleth regards this business or task as a "bad" [רַע] business—a vocation that brings humans no benefit. Taken together, 3:9–10 juxtapose the perspective of the human "worker" [הָעוֹשֶׂה], who would merely like a bit of יִתְרוֹן for his labors, with the employer-deity who assigns the "business" with which humans must keep "busy," but grants them no share in the profit. Much as a company's CEO will regard the company's business in a very different light than one of the employees, so too God's appraisal of the human task differs widely from humanity's own.

Thus, when Qoheleth does state the seemingly positive notion in 3:11 that "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time," we may legitimately ask: from whose perspective is it "beautiful"? I suggest that Qoheleth means things have been made beautiful from the *perspective of God,* not from the *perspective of humanity.* It can be argued that there is precedence for seeing this difference in perspective elsewhere in the book. As Paul Sanders has suggested, Qoheleth assumes such a distinction and reflects *God's* perspective—with which Qoheleth does not necessarily agree—when he parses the persons respectively labeled טוֹב לְפָנָיו ("good before God") and חוֹטֶא ("sinner") only a few verses earlier in 2:26. Though scholars sometimes claim Qoheleth uses those familiar terms (particularly the latter, חוֹטֶא) in a non-moral sense,[61] it is better to say that the Hebrew terms are in fact used with a moral sense—it is just that God's moral sense may differ from humans'.[62] Concerning 3:1–15, then, according to Qoheleth the situation is

[61] E.g. Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth: Part II Vocabulary* (vol. 2; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 226–27; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 157–58.

[62] Paul Sanders, "A Human and a Deity with Conflicting Morals (Qohelet 2.26)," 237–46 in *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond: A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking* (ed. Marjo C. A. Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), posits, by parallel with the Akkadian *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* and Ugaritic *Legend*

overwhelmingly negative: he doesn't like it, and in this he apparently feels he is representing the viewpoint of humans at large, on whose behalf he speaks. Yet Qoheleth seems to acknowledge a potential gap between his own axiological perspective and God's, such that talk of the "beautiful" plan God has devised can only be placed in quotation marks, as it were. The proposition, "He has made everything beautiful in its time," means only that he, God, has made everything beautiful *to him* in its time, and he alone will reap the "gain."[63]

Additional support for the possibility that we should not read 3:11a as a straightforward, universally-valid statement comes from 7:13: "Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what he has made crooked?" Has God made things beautiful, then, or crooked? That both 3:11a and 7:13 speak to the same domain is evidenced by the two verses' parallel phrases, "the work of God" [מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים] and "the work which God has done" [הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים]—essentially, a reference to the overall framework for human existence that God has established. These opposite construals of that framework can be accounted for if 3:11 considers the framework from God's perspective, while 7:13 evaluates the framework from humanity's view.

III. Ecclesiastes 6:10–11[64]

> (10) Whatever has been was already named, and it is known what a human being is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he. (11) For where there are many words, futility only increases: what is the advantage for a person?[65]

This section, and 6:10 in particular, strengthens the case we have established for "cyclical, anthropological determinism." We will look at each of the initial verse's three clauses in turn, since

of Aqhat, that in Qoheleth, "God's moral considerations are assumed to differ from human considerations about what is good or bad" (241), though he does not apply this to Eccl 3:11.

[63] Likewise, Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 86: "Thus, if from God's perspective 'everything…is beautiful in its time,' from the human perspective, nonetheless, not everything is 'good' in its time"; cf. Wildeboer, "Der Prediger," 133, "die schönen Gottesgaben scheinen ihm nur geschenkt, um ihn zu plagen."

[64] The unit extends through v 12 but I will only concentrate here on vv 10–11 to stay on task with the argument.

[65] This same Hebrew sequence occurs in 1Q27 1 ii 3, מה הוא היותר ל, revealing a possible quotation of Qoheleth on the part of the Qumran sectarians. See further Armin Lange, "In Diskussion mit dem Tempel: Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Kohelet und weisheitlichen Kreisen am Jerusalemer Tempel," 113–59 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 125–26, but also the critique of Lange in Torleif Elgvin, "The Use of Scripture in *1Q/4QMysteries*," 117–31 in *New Perspectives on Old Texts: Proceedings of the Tenth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 9-11 January, 2005* (ed. Esther G. Chazon and Besty Halpern-Amaru; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 128–29.

each may be seen to represent our tripartite thesis of "cyclical, anthropological determinism"—and in that very order.

A. "Whatever Has Been Was Already Named" (6:10a)

Scholars have often taken this line to be a simple statement of determinism. Yet there is a gap between what Qoheleth actually says and the deterministic conclusions typically gleaned from it. Seow, for example, writes that "the idiom in this context simply refers to the divine predetermination."[66] Schoors, likewise, comments on 6:10a–b, "The general purport of this double sentence is that all things, and especially those concerning any human being have been fixed before. The connotation of 'give a name' is 'preordain'."[67] He cites six texts (Gen 1:5, 8, 10; Isa 40:26; 43:1; 45:3), but none offer a true parallel to the sense he desires in 6:10—"naming" as preordaining or predetermining specific events.[68] It is by no means obvious that "naming" should necessarily carry that sense.

But if the common determinist rendering will not suffice, why *does* Qoheleth here speak specifically of naming, that "whatever has been was already *named"* [literally, "called its name," נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ]? In light of Qoheleth's use of the phrase מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה in 1:9, 3:15, and here in 6:10, the starting point for interpretation must be to relate 6:10 to these earlier verses.[69] Once we do, we are back in the realm of cyclicality. Yet how would "naming" comport with that structure? There is a discernible logic here. "Naming" signifies "categorizing" or "taxonomizing"—calling a thing what it is, not in terms of predicting a specific event to happen at a certain time, but in terms of allotting something its place within a broader structure of distinctions and relations.[70] For Qoheleth, cyclicality and taxonomy are interrelated notions: calling something what it is follows from the

[66] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 230.

[67] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes,* 487.

[68] I concur with Stuart Weeks' response to Schoors on this point: "Not one of these examples has anything to do with preordination. To be sure, determinism is an important aspect of Qohelet's thought, but I see no reason to suppose that it is an issue for him here…The point is rather that, in a world where the identity of everything is already established, no human can hope to transcend the limitations of that identity" (Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 5.7–12.14*).

[69] Furthermore, in 6:10 מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה is followed by כְּבָר, just as in 3:15 (מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה כְּבָר הוּא); כְּבָר is also used in 1:10 in a sentence clearly expanding upon 1:9 (הוּא כְּבָר הָיָה). All of this argues for a strong association of intent behind these three verses.

[70] For instance, when Adam "names" [וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁמוֹת] the animals in Gen 2:20 he names *categories* of things, not specific events or occurrences.

habitual actions of that thing (what it "is" follows from what it "does").[71] The idea in 6:10a would then be that everything in existence has already been taxonomized or categorized, since the same sorts of things have been happening repeatedly for ages. And though the point is not explicitly reemphasized here, that "there is nothing new" follows as a natural implication. The reason Qoheleth can say "nothing is new" is not because certain particles of matter have not aligned themselves into some new position or relation but because everything in the realm of human experience has already been categorized and familiarized, and Qoheleth has found nothing in his experience that jars the established categories. In this sense, "whatever has been was already named."

The statement in 6:10a would thus also align closely with our reading of 3:1–15, and 3:2–8 in particular. The activities of the poem convey not that God has foreordained specific events, but that he has already *named* the categories of human existence: birthing and dying, planting and plucking up, laughing and mourning, and so on. These are the broad types and categories of activities that constitute humanity's (cyclical, habitual) patterns of existence "under the sun."

B. "It Is Known What a Human Being Is" (6:10b)

This line, too, strongly supports the interpretation I have been proposing. The reason "it is known" is that, as 6:10a announced, what is now true about the world has already been "named," already distinguished and duly categorized, due to the recurrence of the same events. Qoheleth in 1:4–11 acknowledged that while there will certainly be new individual humans along with new "generations," none of them will overturn the system of distinctions and categories (and the ongoing, inevitable oscillation between opposite "types") already inherent to the human experience. All of this is essentially "what a human being is," and this is what is already "known"— in this sense, human behavior truly is typical.[72] This verse provides the most direct justification for terming this view "anthropological," though I have tried to show that precisely the same undercurrent is present in the earlier passages, 1:4–11 and 3:1–15. (The poem of 3:2–8 is no

[71] Daniel Lys, *L'Ecclésiaste ou que vaut la vie? Traduction, introduction générale, commentaire de 1/1 à 4/3* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1977), 367, also connects 6:10 to 3:15 and regards the naming as "cataloguing": "6/10 dira que tout ce qui existe est déjà catalogué."

[72] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 132, articulates a reading of this verse akin to my own: " 'What was has already been given names'; that is, there is nothing new for which one would have to invent a new 'name,' a new designation. That is also true for human beings: their 'nature' is known and will not change."

more than Qoheleth concretizing the idea of this verse with twenty-eight examples, together a representative sample of what humanity "is.")

C. "He Is Not Able to Dispute with One Stronger Than He" (6:10c–11)

The fact that the clause preceding this one is an anthropological statement implies very strongly that there is something about the human predicament that renders humans unable to contend with God. Put into the terms used earlier regarding 3:1–15, humanity has been handed a "job description" by the divine CEO, but they have utterly no say as to its content. As in 3:14, they cannot "add" or "subtract" anything from the task which has been assigned them and which they have no choice but to fulfill. Here again, the task consists not of a particular action at a particular time, but of the general anthropological framework constituted by the inevitable repetition of binary-opposite actions. With respect to this framework, God is the determiner, and humanity is the powerless worker "unable to dispute with one stronger than he."

The following chart shows several of the verbal and conceptual resonances among the passages examined thus far, 1:3–11, 3:1–15, and 6:10–11.

Verbal & Conceptual Parallels Between 1:3–11, 3:1–15, and 6:10–11

1:3–11	**3:1–15**	**6:10–11** (order prioritized)
Whatever has been is *what will be* (1:9) It **has** already **been** (1:10b) מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה הוּא שֶׁיִּהְיֶה הוּא כְּבָר הָיָה	**Whatever has been** already was and *that which is to be* already **has been** (3:15) מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה כְּבָר הוּא וַאֲשֶׁר לִהְיוֹת כְּבָר הָיָה	**Whatever has been** was already named (6:10a) מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה כְּבָר נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ
It is a bad **business that God has given to the children of humanity to be busy with.** (1:13) הוּא עִנְיַן רָע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ	I have seen the **business that God has given to the children of humanity to be busy with.** (3:10) רָאִיתִי אֶת־הָעִנְיָן אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ	
(Human & natural) cycles (1:4–7)	(Human) cycles (3:2–8)	It is known what a human being is (6:10b)

The earth (i.e. human existence in general) **remains forever the same** (1:4) וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת	All that God does—it will **be forever** (3:14) כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם	
A man is not able to speak (1:8aβ) לֹא־יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר **All** the **words** are weak (1:8aα)	Upon it **nothing can be added,** and from it **nothing can be taken away** (3:14a)	**A person**…**is not able** to dispute with one stronger (6:10c) אָדָם לֹא־יוּכַל לָדִין Where there are **many words**, futility only increases (6:11)
What lasting gain is there for a person in all his toil? (1:3) מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ	**What lasting gain** is there for the worker in what he toils? (3:9) מַה־יִּתְרוֹן הָעוֹשֶׂה בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא עָמֵל	**What gain** is there for a person? (6:11) מַה־יּוֹתֵר לָאָדָם

IV. Ecclesiastes 7:13–14

Yet another text in which the same cluster of themes recur is Ecclesiastes 7:13–14:[73]

> (13) Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what he has made crooked?
> (14) In the good day, be of good cheer, but in the day of evil, consider this: God has made the one right alongside the other, so that humanity might not discover anything after them.

Three points may be noted from 7:13–14 in connection with our previous discussion. First, this text seems to affirm that the "work of God" [מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים] consists in "what [God] has made crooked [עות]." Given the negative connotations of the word elsewhere in the HB, where it always signifies a kind of moral "perversion" (Amos 8:5; Ps 119:78; 146:9; Job 8:3 [2x]; 19:6; 34:12; Lam 3:36), this is as direct an affront to the plain sense of Eccl 3:11a ("He has made everything beautiful…") as Qoheleth could pen. If Qoheleth is equally earnest in both statements, and if they both refer to the world at large (not necessarily a primordial creation in either case, but more generally "the way things are"), then it would seem difficult to avoid a plain contradiction. But as I have already indicated, I am inclined to think that 7:13 reflects Qoheleth's thought on the matter

[73] It is fitting to treat 6:10–11 as well as 7:13–14 in relation to our theme since the two passages likely form the bookends of the literary unit 6:10–7:14 (so Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 50).

from his own human perspective, with 3:11a containing a more sarcastic reference to what God is supposedly up to, from God's own mysterious, idiosyncratic perspective.[74]

Second, the question "Who is able to straighten…?" is yet another instance of the repeated trope in which Qoheleth denies agency to the human being who would attempt to change what God has already established (1:8–10; 3:14; 6:10). The combination of "crooked" [עות] and "straight" [תקן] in this sentence forges a clear link with 1:15, "What is crooked [עות] cannot be straightened [תקן]." The difference is that what was implicit in the earlier text is now stated outright: God is the one who bends reality, and humans are those who "cannot straighten" it. In line with other texts we have seen, this question implies that what God has determined is the anthropological situation, and it is with respect to that broad framework (as opposed to specific, mundane decisions within the framework) that humans lack agency or "free will." The language of "crookedness," moreover, is hardly an outlier among the thematic linkage already noted.

Third, as in 3:2–8, v 14 deals with a pair of opposites (אֶת־זֶה לְעֻמַּת־זֶה, "the one right alongside/opposite the other") which are qualified with a temporal term: the "day of good" [יוֹם טוֹבָה] and the "day of evil" [יוֹם רָעָה]. Once again we can observe an A-B structure. Qoheleth can take for granted that there will be some good days [A], days in which one might "laugh" or "love." But what he wants to deny is that the nature of living is merely one-sided or unidirectional, affirming instead life's composite unity of opposites. The bad days should come as no surprise, for both "A" and "B" happen. This is precisely in line with Qoheleth's understanding of the binaries represented in 3:2–8: both will happen, not just one or the other.

3:11 (+ 3:2–8, 3:14)	**7:13–14**
The work which God has done (3:11)	Consider the work of God (7:13a)
Upon it nothing can be added, and from it nothing can be taken away (3:14a)	for who is able to straighten what God has made crooked? (7:13b)
There is a time for [A] and a time for [B] (3:2–8)	In the good day [A], be of good cheer, and in the bad day [B], consider this (7:13a)
He has made everything (i.e. both A & B types) beautiful in its time (3:11)	God has made the one [A] right alongside the other [B] (7:13b)

[74] Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 54–55, regards the tone similarly.

without any ability for humanity to discover the work that God has done (3:11)	so that a person may not find out anything after him (7:13c)

V. Other Instances of Cyclicality in Ecclesiastes

A. Ecclesiastes 5:14–15

In 5:15 Qoheleth comments on the man who lost his fortune in a "bad business" arrangement:

> Just as he came from the womb of his mother, naked he will return[75] just as he came. And he will take nothing in his toil which may go in his hand. (15) Again, this is a sickening evil: just as[76] he came, likewise shall he go. So what lasting gain is there for the one who toils for the wind? (5:14–15)

In a likely reference to Job 1:21, Qoheleth three times imparts that when the toiler dies he will return "just as" he came.[77] Having entered the world empty-handed, he will leave it likewise bare. Despite the man's immense striving and effort between these two seemingly disparate junctures—including the (ultimately failed) attempt to secure a significant inheritance to pass to his son (5:13)—the end will look just like the beginning. The man cannot "take *anything* [וּמְאוּמָה לֹא־יִשָּׂא]" with him outside his life's cycle—an "anything" recognized in v 15 as would-be יִתְרוֹן. The use of בא and הלך echoes the "coming" [בא] and "going" [הלך] of the "generations" in 1:4; there as here they refer to people's cyclic entrance into and departure from existence.[78] As with the sun, wind, and streams of 1:5–7, there is a boomerang-like structure to the imagery conveyed: the man "comes" from non-existence, then "goes" back to non-existence, traversing along the same track in both directions, as it were.

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[75] As noted earlier, the two-word idiom יָשׁוּב לָלֶכֶת mirrors שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת from 1:6. It does not mean "return (in order) to go," but simply "return." If we were to account for the לָלֶכֶת in a literal translation, we would render "*turn* to go (back)" (which essentially means "return"), but not "*re*-turn to go."

[76] Here the MT reads כָּל־עֲמַת which is almost certainly not original, since עֲמַת never appears except with the ל preposition as a prefix. The original was either כִּלְעֲמַת (so *DCH;* Schoors; Gordis; Whitley), or כִּי לְעֲמַת (so McNeile). For full discussion see Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 5.7–12.14,* who argues this latter is more likely in light of LXX γὰρ not found in other versions.

[77] The phrase "Just as he came from his mother's womb, naked he will return, just as he came" [כַּאֲשֶׁר יָצָא מִבֶּטֶן אִמּוֹ עָרוֹם יָשׁוּב לָלֶכֶת כְּשָׁבָא] in 5:14 bears a striking resemblance to Job 1:21a: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return there" [עָרֹם יָצָתִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי וְעָרֹם אָשׁוּב שָׁמָּה]. Verbal links between the two texts include שׁוב, עָרוֹם, and יצא.

[78] The odd suggestion of Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 82, that the man will "once again begin his life" in terms of financially starting over misses the point of the passage.

Immediately following this reference to cyclicality Qoheleth again raises his programmatic question, מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל, "What lasting gain is there for the one who toils…?" This time it includes the additional modifier, לָרוּחַ, "for the wind," which links it to the prominent phrases רְעוּת רוּחַ (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ (1:17; 4:16), "striving after wind." Once again, then, we have the question "What gain?" raised in the immediate context of cyclicality. As before, there is an implicit traverse from point A to B, and then a return from B to A. Whereas the traditional inclination is to regard the A → B movement as teleological, entailing the acquisition of יִתְרוֹן, Qoheleth has discovered that teleological pretensions inevitably reveal cyclical, ateleological realities.

B. Ecclesiastes 3:20, 12:7

In 3:20 Qoheleth cites the ancient trope that "All are from the dust, and to dust all return [שָׁב]" (cf. Gen 2:7; 3:21). The theme recurs at his closing words in 12:7: "And the dust returns [וְיָשֹׁב] to the earth just as it had been, and the life-breath returns [וְיָשֹׁב] to God who gave it." It is no coincidence that Qoheleth speaks of death as a "return," or the completion of a bidirectional cycle—though in this case, it is one that will not repeat.[79] The ostensibly superfluous phrase, "just as it had been" [כְּשֶׁהָיָה], reminds the reader of 5:14–15, "as he came" [כְּשֶׁבָּא], and powerfully communicates an individual's life-circle closing its loop. The starting ingredient for one's creation, dust from the ground, is miraculously taken up and vivified by the divine רוּחַ into a living, fleshly human whose life will run its course with all the characteristic sound and fury of that species, only to arrive finally at its appointed end—to decompose back into itself and fall upon the ground, *just as it had been,* with "nothing in its hand" to show for its venture into consciousness.

The foregoing passages, particularly 5:14 and 3:20, are two of only a few clear intertextual allusions to earlier biblical literature found in Qoheleth.[80] Both of these passages explicitly concern the notion of cyclicality, and both use the verb שׁוּב to convey it. This implies that for Qoheleth, the point about cyclicality may well have been the one theme in his work he wanted to justify by

[79] While the cycle will not repeat for a given individual, the same dust and life-breath will vivify future generations.

[80] The other is the reference to Deut 23:22–24 in Eccl 5:3–4, on which see Bernard M. Levinson, "'Better That You Should Not Vow Than That You Vow and Not Fulfill': Qoheleth's Use of Textual Allusion and the Transformation of Deuteronomy's Law of Vows," 28–41 in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes; London: T&T Clark, 2014). But see the other essays in the volume just cited for additional proposals.

its connection to earlier Hebrew texts. At the very least, it is a theme whose older locutions he is greatly interested to find and reuse.

As a closing note on this section and our textual analyses more broadly, we have now noticed a great number of instances in which Qoheleth's cyclical language is used in the same context as some version of his complaint about the lack of יִתְרוֹן attainable by humans, compiled in the brief chart below. This is unlikely a mere coincidence. Rather, there is a discernible connection between the two ideas, which we have already explored. The lack of any "lasting gain" prehensible by humans, as Qoheleth sees it, is a fact rooted in the world's quasi-metaphysical, typological structures, structures which are both ateleological and cyclical, the former supervening upon the latter.

Cyclicality in the Vicinity of מַה־יִּתְרוֹן[81]

Cyclicality	1:4–11	3:2–8, 15	6:10	3:20	5:14–15a
מַה־יִּתְרוֹן	1:3	3:9	6:11	3:19	5:15b

VI. Qoheleth's Cyclical, Anthropological Determinism in Historical Context

Qoheleth's notion of a cyclical, anthropological determinism that emerges from the passages discussed above is one of philosophical interest. Before relating this to Qoheleth's philosophy of value, it will be useful to show how Qoheleth's idea, particularly its cyclical element, embodies a distinct but not unprecedented philosophical contribution within the ancient world. The concept of cyclical time and its related unity of opposites are certainly not original to Qoheleth, as one or both of these ideas can be found, for instance, in early Greek literature and philosophy as well as ancient Near Eastern ritual and mythological traditions from the first millennium BCE and earlier. Beginning with the latter, there is sufficient historical evidence for the claim that many ancient peoples believed, and enacted through ritual, notions of time that may be rightly regarded as "cyclical."[82] Mircea Eliade's influential 1947 work, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal*

[81] Or variations such as מַה־יִּתֵּר (6:11); אֵין …מוֹתַר (3:19).

[82] See the many examples in E. O. James, *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East: An Archaeological and Documentary Study* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958).

Return, discusses at length the annual rites of ancient peoples (such as, e.g., the Babylonian New Year festival, though his sample base is broader than ancient Near Eastern cultures) in which the attempt is made to return to the moment of creation via a "cyclical regeneration of time."[83] By this means the community is purged from its evils and given a fresh start. But the abolition of sins is not the only motivation for the "eternal return" to cosmic beginnings. There is also what Eliade calls the "terror" of history. History is terrifying because it is the theater of human choice and freedom. "Archaic man," Eliade proposes, would rather maintain a cyclical existence in the safe confines of the familiar primordial myths than venture out into a future filled with unknown and risky novelties. By returning annually to the myth, then, "history"—the sense of historical progress, in which human freedom is enacted—is held at bay.[84] This is a value for the ancient societies in which "history is a terror." Only with the coming of Judeo-Christianity, posits Eliade, can such "archetypes and repetition" be transcended.[85]

This sense of cyclical time differs from Qoheleth's in that it is primarily ritually rather than philosophically oriented. However, inasmuch as Eliade tries to uncover the underlying philosophy at play, we can compare it with Qoheleth's. What Eliade designates as the sense of "history" is essentially what we have already identified as the "teleological," a state in which change is attempted for the sake of progress and some ultimate end. Therefore, although both Qoheleth's הָאָדָם and Eliade's "archaic man" live in what these writers deem a "cyclical" world, the respective evaluations of this state of affairs are completely opposed. Qoheleth desires teleology and historical progress ("newness") *if it were possible,* though he believes it is not. The ancient viewpoints as construed by Eliade, on the other hand, fear the possibility of a progressive history, and they avoid this foreboding reality by cycling back to the myth of primordial origins.

Turning to the Greeks, the Presocratics were also particularly interested in cyclical notions.

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[83] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 52–53.

[84] "The man of the traditional civilizations accorded the historical event no value in itself" (Eliade, *Cosmos*, 141).

[85] Eliade, *Cosmos*, 161. While Eliade's oblique implications of Judeo-Christian superiority have understandably been criticized (see the critiques of Jonathan Z. Smith), even Eliade's more central thesis has not gone unchallenged. S. G. F. Brandon, *History, Time, and Deity: A Historical and Comparative Study of the Conception of Time in Religious Thought and Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 65–105, argues that Eliade has made insufficient use of the ancient sources and that the evidence is more ambiguous. While he concurs that many ancient peoples did in fact carry out mythical rites with a cyclic notion of time, this was not always done in order to return to the beginning; sometimes the aim was rather to evoke the past in order to justify the present. For instance, Brandon interprets the Babylonian New Year festival as an annual vindication of the *present* lordship of Marduk (due to his triumph over Ti'amat, the primeval monster of chaos), rather than an attempt to live continually in the past (72–73).

Guthrie summarizes that for the early Greek mind, "The cosmic movement was circular. Everything returns to what it was before, and what has been will be again. As their ancient poets had taught them, not only does 'everything come to be out of one thing', but 'it is resolved into one again', and the process recommences."[86] Empedocles, for instance, proposed that the universe is constantly oscillating between a uniting or harmonizing force ("Love") and a destructive, separating force ("Hate"). These two, "in so far as they never cease their continuous exchange, in this sense they remain always unmoved as they follow the cyclic process" (Empedocles, frg. 17, cf. frg. 26).[87] Jonathan Barnes outlines Empedocles' cyclical view of the cosmos in terms that comport with Qoheleth's understanding:

> Roughly, Empedocles' position is this: *within* any cosmic cycle there is constant change—birth and decay, alteration and locomotion; but viewed from a higher vantage point the cosmos exhibits an eternal fixity—there is nothing new in the world; each event has occurred already infinitely many times, and will recur infinitely often.[88]

This Presocratic dual-emphasis on change or motion as taking place within a more fundamental stability or unity is also seen in Heraclitus. Some passages place greater emphasis on the movement between opposite states: "And what is in us is the same thing: living and dead, awake and sleeping, as well as young and old; for the latter having changed becomes the former, and this again having changed becomes the latter" (frg. 88; cf. frg. 67). Likewise, "Cold things grow hot, hot things grow cold, the wet dries, the parched is moistened" (frg. 126). It is this implicit movement between opposites that helps to explain the sense in which harmony arises from strife, as articulated in other Heraclitean passages: "That which is in opposition is in concert, and from things that differ comes the most beautiful harmony" (frg. 8); "They do not understand how that which differs with itself is in agreement: harmony consists of opposing tension, like that of the bow and the lyre" (frg. 51).[89]

It should be noted that neither for Heraclitus nor Empedocles, as representatives of early

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[86] W. K. C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning: Some Greek Views on the Origins of Life and the Early State of Man* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 63.

[87] Translations of the Presocratic fragments in this section are gleaned from Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

[88] Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1982), 247.

[89] See further on Heraclitus' "unity-in-opposites" theme, Edward Hussey, "Heraclitus," 88–112 in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (ed. A. A. Long; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Greek philosophy, is this cyclical nature of the cosmos generated by the handiwork of a god, at least not in anything close to the Hebraic sense of that term—that is, a deity who acts with intention and ordains his fancies. Rather, Heraclitus' "first cause" seems to be none other than an eternal fire: "The thunder-bolt steers the universe" (frg. 64); "This ordered universe, which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or mankind, but it was ever and is and shall be ever-living Fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure" (frg. 30).[90] Empedocles' thought retains a stronger divine component, but even here "the gods are…transformed into universal principles of natural existence and natural processes."[91] Dorothea Frede encapsulates the point: "In early Greek philosophy the question of human destiny is replaced, in Heraclitus, in Empedocles or in Atomism, by that of natural order and its laws."[92]

Clearly, Qoheleth lived at a time when "cyclical" talk was one important way of conceptualizing phenomena. Comparing Qoheleth against this background (rather than only to the rest of the Hebrew Bible) reveals a sage at home in the wider thought-world of both ancient Near Eastern cultures and Hellenism, yet who nonetheless presents a distinct worldview without precise parallel. In regard to the present theme, Qoheleth's conception of cyclicality is set apart by the two other elements of our characterization. His insistence that God is the intentional causal agent (the "determiner") behind the repetitive, cyclical behavior of humanity differentiates itself from two common alternatives: divine determinism within a *linear* conception of time, and *non-theistic* cyclical fatalism. As we have now seen, unlike other prominent notions of divine determinism, whether ancient or modern, Qoheleth does not conceive of a linear history onto which God is plotting in advance the times of specific events and then acting on individuals in time to bring about a detailed plan. And against his Greek contemporaries, Qoheleth grounds the idea of cyclical time neither in nature's elemental processes nor in some impersonal notion of Law, *Logos,* or Fate.

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[90] Cf. Guthrie, *In the Beginning*, 59: "For Heraclitus the divine and rational principle was fire." Although Heraclitus' *logos* doctrine is sometimes taken as a reference to the divine, Edwin L. Minar Jr., "The Logos of Heraclitus," *Classical Philology* 34.4 (1939): 323–41, still represents the scholarly consensus in positing that the *logos* is "not deified." It is rather an "account" of that which happens: "That which is separated from all things is not a transcendent God but a principle of explanation" (340). Cf. Hussey, "Heraclitus," 88–112; James Warren, *Presocratics* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), who both regard Heraclitus' *logos* as primarily referring to publicly accessible reason or rationality.

[91] Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 153.

[92] Dorothea Frede, "Fate," *BNP*, 5:366–68, at 366. Cf. William Chase Greene, "Fate, Good, and Evil in Pre-Socratic Philosophy," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 47 (1936): 85–129, who offers a related point: "For even those philosophers who had most conspicuously emphasized the conception of a divine, cosmogenetic principle had failed to show that the supreme power in the world—God, or *Physis*, or Fate—has either the purpose or, except incidentally, the effect of causing Good or Evil" (128).

Rather, it is the work of a conscious deity, הָאֱלֹהִים, who intentionally seeks to repeat what has passed away (to paraphrase Eccl 3:15c). It is in this way, by means of ordaining time's cyclical nature, rather than through the ad hoc control of minute events or human actions, that Qoheleth's deity exercises his sovereignty.[93] Yet in his role as the propagator of cycles, Qoheleth thinks of God as the great "underminer." Where humans believe themselves to be running along a marathon track headed toward a finish line, God has quietly placed a treadmill under their feet, so that they end up going nowhere, making no progress. Qoheleth, then, propagates his own distinct way of relating God and humanity to time.

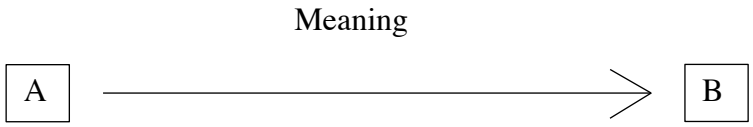
VII. Implications for Qoheleth's Philosophy of Value

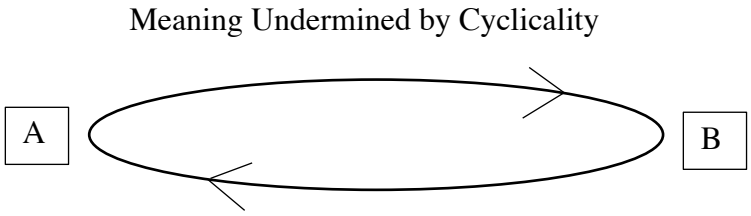
We turn now explicitly to the question of value. Given the interpretation of Qoheleth we have designated *cyclical, anthropological determinism,* how does this (quasi-)metaphysical perspective relate to Qoheleth's philosophy of value? What do the ideas seen in this chapter add to the system of values we have reconstructed for Qoheleth thus far? I submit that they provide two main takeaways with respect to Qoheleth's values. The two takeaways both relate to meaning but do so at its opposite "ends": the initial creation of meaning at the "front-end," and its final achievement at the "back-end." I first want to say a brief word about how this chapter's findings relate to this latter, culminating aspect of meaning, but the remainder of the section and our use of contemporary philosophy will explore how this chapter contributes to the "front-end" of meaning, that of meaning's origin or creation.

A. The Undermining of Meaning's Arrival

Qoheleth's view of cyclical time as conveyed above undermines meaning because it precludes the arrival at a *telos.* If the goal is to depart from Point A and arrive at Point B in such a way that one truly lands with weight and permanence, this goal is sabotaged by the discovery that one has no choice but to oscillate back and forth between Point A and Point B.

[93] Fox, *Contradictions*, 195: "The events God brings to pass steamroller over whatever man can do, so nothing new can interrupt the awesome cycles of events that God has ordained."





The underlying value-claim of the poem in 3:2–8 concerns this inability to achieve a meaningful *telos*. It is sometimes posited that one side of each antithetical pair [A] represents what is "good" or "desirable" and the opposite side [B] represents what is "bad" or "undesirable."[94] While in some cases the two sides of a given pair might intuitively divide into positive and negative values (e.g. being born versus dying, mourning versus dancing), in many cases it is far from obvious which of the two actions would represent a more positive or negative value in relation to the other (e.g. planting versus uprooting, throwing stones versus gathering stones, keeping silent versus speaking). Rather than assume that the division between positive and negative value runs through each pair, I propose that what Qoheleth finds problematic (so as to prompt the question, "What gain?" in 3:9) is not necessarily one side or the other in itself, but simply the fact that the two activities bear opposite intentions or directions and therefore cancel one another out.[95]

In the parallel passage of 1:4–7, it is not that one side of the pole is undesirable in relation to the other—there is nothing troublesome, for instance, about the sun's rising or setting in itself, nor the wind's southward or northward blowing. What Qoheleth finds problematic about these circumstances is that the oscillatory movement incessantly undermines itself, thereby canceling out any יִתְרוֹן, any "profit" or "surplus," any sense of arriving at a *telos,* somewhere "new."[96] The

[94] J. A. Loader, "Qohelet 3:2–8: A Sonnet in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 81.2 (1969): 240–42, followed by Wright, "For Everything," 321–28; Jarick, "Hebrew Book of Changes," 79–99.

[95] Horton, "Koheleth's Concept of Opposites," 6, refers here to a " 'principle of cancellation', wherein two events take place, but the one cancels the other." Cf. Frydrych, *Under the Sun*, 43–46; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 96.

[96] Cf. Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1–15," 61: "In a word, the basic issue for Qoheleth is whether these actions [in 3:2–8] can have some *surplus value* (*yitrôn,* profit) carrying beyond the mere doing of them"; Edwin M. Good,

same applies to the pairs in 3:2–8. We need not assign each action as "desirable" or "undesirable" simpliciter. It is enough that as recurring alternates they can arrive nowhere other than an equilibrated "zero." Reality, Qoheleth believes, is regulated by its oscillatory nature; this mitigates deep loss, but also withholds "lasting gain" [יִתְרוֹן]. Whether or not Qoheleth penned the poem in 3:2–8, his reading of it highlights the lack of gain for the human "worker" carrying out its activities. The poem provides a panoply of the sorts of paired antithetical activities human beings inevitably and repeatedly carry out, in which every "doing" gets "undone." How, then, does the cyclical theme in this poem and elsewhere in the book undermine meaning in life? To state the matter directly but abstractly: cyclicality entails ateleology, and ateleology undercuts meaning.

B. The Undermining of Meaning's Origin

A second aspect of meaning that Qoheleth's cyclical, anthropological determinism touches is not so much the completion of meaning as its birth or original conception. We can show the difference that this chapter's proposal makes to Qoheleth's conception of meaning and value by briefly comparing its implications with those of the other two common interpretations of Qoheleth's "times" poem (3:2–8) and its associated commentary (3:9–15). On all three views, Qoheleth's appraisal of the "times" is negative, but for different reasons. On the "proper times" view, the times theoretically provide opportunity for humans to act for success, however, people's ignorance concerning the *timing* of these "times" prevents them from actually doing so. What is bad, then, is the *epistemological* lack, nothing else: a lack of knowledge, but not a lack of, say, power or freedom. On the common determinist view, as well, Qoheleth construes the "times" negatively. But here it is because God controls humans as a master controls his puppets, stripping them of any sense of agency, or, in the parlance of modern philosophy, libertarian free will.[97] The lack is not epistemological, but *volitional*. Finally, on the alternative view proposed in this chapter, the problem is also volitional rather than epistemological, but the volitional predicament occurs on a wider expanse. The problem does not simply concern a lack of libertarian free will. For a person could technically have libertarian free will—the power of contrary choice—while serving time in

Irony in the Old Testament (Sheffield: Almond, 1981): "Time too cancels out profit… Man's actions add up to nothing, each balanced by one from the other side. Hence, ironically, as man acts responsibly with the deed appropriate to every present moment, he ensures that he does not come out ahead" (185).

[97] "Libertarian free will" refers to an understanding of free will which is incompatible with determinism and in which an agent could always have chosen otherwise than they did in fact choose. See Robert Kane, "Libertarianism," 5–43 in *Four Views on Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

a prison cell. One could just as well choose to sleep on one's right side as one's left, for example. Yet one would still remain confined to the small cell, with life's possibilities drastically diminished and one's existence itself radically restrained. Accordingly, questions of free will in relation to determinism tend to focus on a person's ability to choose among the options with which they are presented, but this approach leaves unaddressed the givenness of those various options. It is this givenness of the created order—this already delimited scope of existence into which humans are born and involuntarily participate—that Qoheleth calls into question. Its cyclical allowances and inevitable affordances engender a kind of prison cell from which no one can escape.

But can we more clearly articulate the positive conception of meaning underlying Qoheleth's critique? A person's values can be discerned not only by what they esteem, celebrate, and praise, but just as much by what upsets, frustrates, or causes them grief. That is why, in Chapter 2, we inverted Qoheleth's negative *hebel*-statements as an aid to understand how he conceives of the hypothetical positive value of meaning. Here too, with respect to cyclical, anthropological determinism, we can inquire: what positive-value scenario do Qoheleth's complaints imply as his ideal? Further, how would this value relate to his conception of meaning in life as conveyed in Chapter 2? The final section of this chapter will draw upon the work of two contemporary philosophers about life's meaning, Timothy Mawson and Richard Taylor, whose work finds particular kinship with Qoheleth's ideas and thus helps us articulate those ideas afresh.

1. Timothy Mawson: Self-Creative Autonomy and the Limits of Meaning for Theism

An essay by philosopher Timothy Mawson with the intriguing title, "What God Could (and Couldn't) Do to Make Life Meaningful," has some remarkable parallels with the reading of Qoheleth I have offered in this chapter.[98] Mawson begins by citing the famous Jean-Paul Sartre lecture, "Existentialism as a Humanism," in which Sartre argues that if the God of classical theism should exist, "he would constrain our powers of self-creative autonomy," and this constraint would make our lives less meaningful.[99] Though Mawson is a theist and Sartre an atheist, Mawson concurs with Sartre on the point just stated: "God's existence, should he exist, is not unqualifiedly

[98] Timothy Mawson, "What God Could (and Couldn't) Do to Make Life Meaningful," 37–58 in *God and Meaning: New Essays* (ed. Joshua W. Seachris and Stewart Goetz; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016). See also Mawson's book-length treatment of the subject, T. J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[99] Mawson, "Meaningful," 37 [cited words are Mawson's, not Sartre's].

good news from the point of view of our lives being meaningful even if it is on balance good news. His existence is, one might say, a mixed blessing."[100] Using an analogy of the same sort employed earlier in this chapter, Mawson likens humans in God's world to a hypothetical friend employed as a "Junior Widget-Affixer" at a car factory. The friend tells us he is about to resign from the job, since, as he puts it, "It is a meaningless position, meaningless in the sense that I'm given no responsibility for designing any significant aspect of my role; all those details are laid down by Management."[101] Mawson says we might try to persuade our friend from quitting by telling him that the job is, in fact, a meaningful one. We might remind him that "the widgets [he] is attaching are actually crucial parts of the cars…which go out into the wider world and are used as small ambulances, being instrumental in saving lives."[102] Nevertheless, Mawson comments, "That fact, were it to obtain, would seem to add this sort of [instrumental] meaningfulness to his activities, but it would not thereby affect the meaninglessness of his role in Sartre's sense."[103] In other words, the factory job might indeed aid the production of what Mawson calls "valuable causal consequences," but that would not change the fact that neither the job's task nor the job's consequences were *chosen* by our Widget-Affixer friend. In the terms used above, the problem with this scenario is that while it might provide meaning in the "back-end" sense (the completion or achievement of a "meaningful" task) it would not provide meaning in the "front-end" sense (the initial conception and choice of that task). Thus, in neither of these two possible roles would our Widget-Affixer friend exercise "self-creative autonomy." In the same way, writes Mawson, "The fact that we don't live in a Godless universe means that our lives are not as meaningful in the sense that Sartre has well marked out…We won't be 'self-employed', as it were… Like it or not, *realize* it or not—we will be 'working' for someone else."[104]

Mawson's description can readily be applied to Qoheleth. It entails that one way of describing the positive value Qoheleth is frustrated to have denied for humans is that of *self-creative autonomy.* This is a value that can be related back to our discussion of the formal criteria for meaning in Chapter 2. I suggest it is a further qualification of the notion (gleaned from Gwen Bradford) we identified as *competent causation.* There we discussed how Qoheleth requires that a

[100] Mawson, "Meaningful," 40.
[101] Mawson, "Meaningful," 40–41.
[102] Mawson, "Meaningful," 42.
[103] Mawson, "Meaningful," 42.
[104] Mawson, "Meaningful," 43–44 [emphasis original].

person's meaning-conferring achievement be produced neither by someone else nor by arbitrary chance but by one's own skillfully employed action. The necessity of self-creative autonomy stipulates that such action is not only *carried out* by oneself, but it is originated, thought of, brought into existence and chosen by one's own self-determining powers.

This stipulation also bolsters the criticism we raised in Chapter 2 against the "cog-in-the-machine" view of meaning as expressed by Gordis and Haden. Qoheleth would be discontented to play the role of a mere cog contributing unwittingly to some impersonal value from which he is existentially decoupled, an idea entirely misaligned with his notion of a meaningful life.

Perhaps most striking about Mawson's essay is that it is the rare modern case of a theist who articulates a way in which God's sovereignty can actually be seen to detract from, rather than to bolster, a meaningful life. This puts Mawson in company with Qoheleth, a fellow theist, of course, but one who likewise does not neatly align God's existence with the endowment of meaning in human life. Mawson calls God's existence "a mixed blessing" with respect to the question of meaning.[105] Qoheleth goes further. Far from providing the very foundations of meaning, Qoheleth's deity is apparently to blame for the meaninglessness that besets humanity (cf. 7:13; 1:15), since it is he who has placed their feet on a treadmill going nowhere (3:15).

2. Richard Taylor: Meaning as Creativity

Another philosopher diagnoses the problem of meaning in a rather similar fashion. Richard Taylor begins a now-classic essay, "Time and Life's Meaning,"[106] by encouraging us to imagine the world devoid of animate life.

> The earth turns…but…each turning is the same as the others… What happens is but a consequence of what has already happened. Such a world could not, to any god contemplating it and capable of understanding it, contain any surprises. Nothing, in short, would ever be created in such a world. There would be novelties of sorts—for example, a snowflake that resembled no other—but these would not be creations in any sense.[107]

The philosopher may as well have been rewriting Qoheleth's opening chapter. Taylor then likens such a world to the famous myth of Sisyphus: "a world without history, a world that is in this significant sense devoid of time…like the cycles of Sisyphus, a world of endless and pointless

[105] Mawson, "Meaningful," 58.
[106] Richard Taylor, "Time and Life's Meaning," *Review of Metaphysics* 40.4 (1987): 675–86.
[107] Taylor, "Time," 676–77.

repetition."[108] Even when Taylor contemplates the addition of non-human life into the cosmos, such an existence would still epitomize "endless and pointless repetition" in which occurs "the same behavior day after day, and all to no purpose whatever beyond more of the same, that is, the begetting of new generations that will repeat the same meaningless cycles."[109]

Taylor's aim is to show what it takes to convert such a meaningless existence into a meaningful one—what about it would need to change? His claim will rest on the specific role human beings play in their potential to fashion a meaningful existence. Continuing with the legend of Sisyphus, Taylor suggests we modify the original account until it shifts from describing pointless repetition to exhibiting the very embodiment of a meaningful life. If Sisyphus were to haul a different stone up the mountain each time and leave that stone remaining at the top of the hill—would that help him arrive at meaning? No, says Taylor, since all the stones are the same. Next, we might modify the story so much as to imagine Sisyphus gradually piling the stones on top of each other and constructing an enormous, beautiful temple. Yet we have still not arrived at a meaningful existence if Sisyphus is not *aware* of what he is doing. Next, we stipulate that Sisyphus *"is* aware of its importance and beauty" and can take great satisfaction in that. However, this is still not enough, says Taylor. For all of this is yet "consistent with the idea that Sisyphus is a mere slave, a rational slave up to a point, to be sure, but still one who goes through endless and repetitive motions over which he has no choice, these being entirely dictated by others, and for a result in which he has no hand, but can only passively observe."[110] Here we find Taylor's modified Sisyphus as a seemingly close bedfellow with Qoheleth. One thing we lack. What is it?

> One final modification is needed, then, and that is to imagine that Sisyphus not only moves this prodigious quantity of stones to the top of the hill, but that he does so for the very purpose of seeing it then converted to a beautiful and lasting temple. Most important of all, this temple must be something of his own, the product of his own creative mind, of his own conception, something which, but for his own creative thought and imagination, would never have existed at all. It is at this point, then, that the idea of a fully meaningful existence emerges for the first time.[111]

[108] Taylor, "Time," 679.

[109] Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life," *Philosophy Now* 24 (1999): 13–14. In this short piece, the final of four articles on the meaning of life throughout his career, Taylor recapitulates and summarizes the view already posited in the 1987 article cited above.

[110] Taylor, "Time," 680.

[111] Taylor, "Time," 681.

For Taylor, therefore, a "fully meaningful existence…is inseparable from the concept of *creativity.*"[112] This capacity for creativity is a uniquely human prerogative: "Nature, however beautiful and awesome, exhibits nothing of creative activity until we include in it rational beings, that is, beings who can think, imagine, plan, and execute things of worth, beings who are, in the true sense, originators or creators."[113] The sort of "originators" and "creators" Taylor has centrally in mind are the "creative geniuses"—he names, for example, Chopin, Mozart, Matthew Arnold, Plato, Picasso. "The work of the vast majority of persons does not deviate much from what others have done and from what can be found everywhere," Taylor reports. "But that some of these should, in varying degrees, be capable of creating worlds of their own and history—thereby creating time in its historical sense—is what gives our lives whatever meaning they have."[114]

Taylor's proposal, like Mawson's, is pertinent to Qoheleth in several ways. Taylor arguably presents exactly the kind of meaningful world Qoheleth *desired* to be true. Taylor's final version of the story perfectly aligns with the *form* of meaning we articulated in Chapter 2, the four conditions of which included (a) instrumental action carried out for the sake of some final, intrinsic good; (b) competent causation by the meaning-seeker; (c) difficulty for the meaning-seeker; (d) permanence of the final good. Focusing again on the criteria of "competent causation," both Qoheleth and Taylor seem to share the idea that in order to count toward the production of meaning, this "competent causation" demands something more than a mere baseline autonomy or libertarian free will. Like Qoheleth, Taylor establishes a criterion for meaning which is unimpressed until it detects "something new," and insists that one's autonomy be used in an extraordinary, creative way. Taylor's criterion of *creativity* is thus similar to the one articulated by Mawson as *self-creative autonomy.* But there is a slight difference: whereas Mawson underlines the need for one's meaningful actions to be self-chosen and not merely assigned from above, Taylor emphasizes that to be meaningful these actions must truly be "creative" in the profoundest sense—they must imagine and originate the sorts of uniquely valuable creations the world has not yet seen and would never see apart from these creative acts. Taylor seems to believe that only a small minority of humans are capable of such creativity, and thus, of achieving meaningful lives.

[112] Taylor, "Time," 681 [emphasis added].
[113] Taylor, "Time," 681.
[114] Taylor, "Time," 686.

From what we have already seen, it appears that Qoheleth would concur with both Mawson's and Taylor's articulations of the role of agency and creativity in meaning-making. Meaningful enterprises must be conceived and chosen by oneself and human beings must have a right to self-determination (3:14; 6:10; 7:13; cf. 1:15), but they must also be genuinely creative in that they bear witness to "something new," something strikingly different from the past which would not have existed apart from a given person's creative action (1:9–10; 3:15; cf. 3:2–8; 5:14–15; 2:12; 3:20; 12:7). Both of these ideas, if adhered to by Qoheleth, would well explain why he finds the cyclical repetition of human acts and the restricted framework of human possibilities to represent such a profoundly tragic condition. These articulations, then, likely reflect the positive values which undergird Qoheleth's negative judgments in the texts discussed in this chapter.

Nonetheless, it is in the negative form that Qoheleth's ideas about time and agency are actually presented to us. And here, as we have already surmised in previous chapters, Qoheleth differs from Taylor in his assumptions as to the possibility of genuinely meaningful lives. Taylor requires for meaning such a level of creativity that only those rare "creative geniuses"—Mozart, Plato, Picasso, and the like—will achieve it. Yet Qoheleth's demands are even higher, so high as to rule out any possible attainment. Whereas Taylor allows that "some" humans possess the capacity of "creating worlds of their own and history—thereby creating time in its historical sense"[115]—Qoheleth seems not to grant this capacity to anyone.[116] His democratized humanity crowds together in the same prison cell: wise or fool (2:14), righteous or unrighteous (9:1–3), the powerlessness to break the bonds of the human task is shared by הָאָדָם at large.

VIII. Conclusion

In the end, the human situation as Qoheleth sees it is a "bad business" (1:13), and this badness is primarily owing to the lack of meaning available to human beings in their ceaseless yet goalless toil. This chapter has focused on the concept of cyclical time found throughout the book (but especially in 3:1–15) in order to show the foundational role the idea plays in Qoheleth's ideas about meaning and value. Meaning fails to obtain, says Qoheleth, because the cyclical nature of reality undermines the possibility of arriving at some virgin shore or even making progress thereto.

[115] Taylor, "Time," 686.

[116] Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 24, comments, "There is nothing, properly speaking, *creative* about Qoheleth's cosmos" [emphasis original].

For human doings inevitably come undone. But meaning is also lacking because even before the possibility of culminating a meaningful act, one has already been stripped of the agency to determine which act may be performed, which task may be chosen, and this further implies that genuinely creative acts are out of the question. The divine CEO has assigned the tasks, and it is for his employee-creatures simply to fall in line and get to work. Variation can be expected in the specifics of time and circumstance, but from a broad perspective the old, familiar tasks will only repeat themselves. For Qoheleth, this dearth of self-autonomy and creativity is yet another important hallmark of the absence of meaning in human existence.

CONCLUSION TO PART I

In our investigation of value in Qoheleth we have thus far examined his views on three main subject matters—meaning (and its lack), death (and its harm), and time (and the limitations it places on human agency)—all of which draw out the negative side of Qoheleth's values. Before proceeding to Part II of the thesis, which transitions to Qoheleth's more positive values, it will be useful to pause and try to address the *relationship* among these three areas of his thought. In Chapter 2 I argued that the highly debated term *hebel* primarily conveys two related senses in Qoheleth; it sometimes deems actions "futile," and at other times it renders an entire situation "absurd." The two senses are related in that "absurdity" may be seen as a metalevel extension of futility that still embeds the latter idea within itself. I then proposed that by "reverse-engineering" Qoheleth's use of these negative terms we can begin to discern his criteria for meaning in life: at minimum it would include non-futile, meaningful actions, that is, actions which are teleologically successful. We attempted to articulate the criteria Qoheleth bears in mind for his conception of meaning. We analyzed the assumed *form* of meaning in Qoheleth as one which includes (a) instrumentally valuable actions carried out for a final intrinsic good; (b) difficulty in performing those actions; (c) competent causation on the part of the meaning-seeker; (d) permanence for the

achievement. In addition, in order to discern the *content* of meaning, I brought Qoheleth into discussion with three prominent philosophical theories concerning meaning in life. We found that while Qoheleth has some affinity with each of the three on offer, in the end it is best to see Qoheleth's own view of meaning as a version of what some have termed *intersubjectivism.* This is the view that meaning resides in the positive social regard for one's achievements, particularly the long-term lingering of this regard after one's own demise.

In Chapter 3 we explored Qoheleth's axiology of death, specifically, his articulation of the various ways in which death harms the person who dies. Here we found that, over against the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, Qoheleth does align with those contemporary philosophers who subscribe to the Deprivation Account of death's harm, in which death is extrinsically bad on account of the goods of which its victim is posthumously deprived. But we also found that the more severe harm leveled by death against humans is its role in the thwarting of their transcendent interests, particularly the interest in "metaphorical immortality," the maintenance of a deservedly good name and memory long after one's time "under the sun." Thus Chapter 3 supported and strengthened the conclusions offered in Chapter 2 regarding the intersocial locus of meaning.

In Chapter 4 I argued that Qoheleth's conception of time is circular, as seen in 3:1–15 and 1:4–11, among other texts. More specifically, I proposed that Qoheleth there promotes a metaphysic (or at least quasi-metaphysic) of *cyclical, anthropological determinism.* This metaphysic represents a *disvalue* for Qoheleth; it is not the way he would like the world to be. This is firstly because Qoheleth desires progress, forward movement, and the fulfillment of goals as bound up with the attainment of meaning. In the second place, it is because Qoheleth values human agency—the capacity to offer something "new" (1:10), to "add" to, or even "take away" from, what has already been done (3:14), to "dispute with one stronger than he" (6:10). But this cannot happen, because no one is "able to straighten what [God] has made crooked" (7:13). A cyclical, repetitive world in which the same sorts of events continually occur by the dispensation of a divine CEO for whom human beings are essentially employees—the whole scenario bespeaks limitation, frustration, and futility, as far as Qoheleth is concerned. In short, Qoheleth wants agency and bemoans a world that begrudges it. These ideas in Chapter 4 further articulate Qoheleth's conception of meaning in life and explain why he finds that meaning to be lacking.

So Chapters 2 through 4 have been about meaning, death, and cyclical time: what is the relationship among these three? Thus far I have independently discussed the relation between

meaning and death (Chapter 3), and meaning and time (Chapter 4). But it is now the relation between the latter two chapters that requires further probing. I submit that it is these two categories, death and time's cyclicality, that constitute the two greatest הֲבָלִים for Qoheleth. Both obstruct meaning and yield disvalue but do so differently. Death's weightiest harm against any individual is its close alliance with metaphorical mortality: that the posthumous harms which it catalyzes cut one off from a meaningful existence. If we envision an individual's existence as a straight line, it eventually comes to a clear endpoint, after which not only the biological person but their associated "life" is no more.

But the cycles of time work differently from this. They bring disvalue on a wider scale. It is no doubt part of Qoheleth's point that the cycles function *within* a given individual's lifespan, as with the activities mentioned in 3:2–8. But Qoheleth also presses the *transgenerational* aspect of cyclicality, the sense in which the cycles encapsulate broad swaths of time (e.g. 1:4, "generations") and equate eras past, present, and future (1:9; 3:15). As mentioned in the last chapter, a number of Qoheleth commentators regard the first central unit of the book to be 1:3–3:15. As also noted, this section begins and ends with poems, constituting two of the book's three poems (the other concluding the book at large, in 12:1–7). This does not seem coincidental, and I have already drawn plenty of attention to the cyclical theme in both 1:4–11 and 3:2–8 (with commentary in 3:9–15). But what I now want to highlight is the importance of this section's structure. The remainder of that opening unit is 1:12–2:26, Qoheleth's royal autobiography, where he valorizes his achievements only to repudiate them, subjugating all his worldly glories to the cold, hard prison cell of death. Thus, the central autobiographical section chiefly concerned with death's effect on the individual is flanked by two poems about the cyclical experience of time and transgenerational human activity at large. In other words, it appears as though Qoheleth has set a broadly chiastic structure upon his entire opening unit, 1:3–3:15, precisely to highlight and relate these two macro-themes.

Chiastic Structure of Ecclesiastes 1:3– 3:15

A – 1:3–11 Poem: *Transgenerational Cyclicality*

- Abstract point of view (*sub specie aeternitatis*), observing human existence in general, cycling across generations
- Question concerning lack of *yitrôn* immediately preceding poem (1:3)
- Poem begins with generational coming (birth) and going (death) (1:4)
- Explicit statement of cyclicality at end of section (1:9–11)

B – 1:12–2:26 Prose: *Individual Death*

- Concrete, first-person, autobiographical perspective
- Question concerning lack of *yitrôn* in middle of section (2:11)
- Descriptions of the events and (hypothetical) ending of one human life
- Chief complaint concerns death and its undermining effects on an individual

A' – 3:1–15 Poem: *Transgenerational Cyclicality*

- Abstract point of view (*sub specie aeternitatis*), observing human existence in general, cycling across generations
- Question concerning lack of *yitrôn* immediately following poem (3:9)
- Poem begins with generational coming (birth) and going (death) (3:2)
- Explicit statement of cyclicality at end of section (3:15)

Qoheleth thus juxtaposes two related questions: (a) Can an *individual* make progress, achieve meaning? (b) Can *humanity-in-general* make progress, achieve meaning? In both cases, the implicit answer is negative. But they are not independently negative; the answer to the former depends on the answer to the latter. It might seem that the reason individuals cannot achieve meaning is simply because they die—full stop. But that is not it. As we saw in the latter part of Chapter 3, it is not quite death per se that robs life of meaning. Death does directly defraud one of the ability to enjoy goods, so in that sense death deprives one of well-being. But well-being for "me" is distinct from meaning for "my life," where, again, this latter category refers to the story about one's life as received by others. The lack of meaning more precisely derives from what Qoheleth regards as death's common associates, posthumous harms such as the flattening of posthumous regard paid to the dead, lack of remembrance for them, and the arbitrary dispensation of the dead's hard-earned business and property which itself may ruin their long-term reputation. In other words, as we have said, Qoheleth wants "traces" of his and others' personhood to linger for future generations' acknowledgment, yet he knows it cannot happen. Why not?

I believe the answer is bound up with his notion of cyclical time. Qoheleth does not explicitly state his reasons for believing that human memory is inoperative. But as indicated last chapter, it may be inferred from 1:11 in the context of 1:4–11. Why does Qoheleth mention the lack of remembrance in the last verse of that poem? Longman's answer is a common one: "The verse explains why what appears novel to us is really not new but a repeat of something old."[1] This is plausible, but I would suggest the link works differently. As we have seen, in that poem Qoheleth illustratively presents nature's processes as cyclical, repetitive, and devoid of a *telos* or end (1:4–7)—a predicament to which the human sphere is no exception. In 1:9–10 he reduces these radiantly concrete images into abstract propositions, equating "what has been" with "what will be" and concluding that "there is nothing new under the sun." This cannot be literally true, nor does Qoheleth believe it to be. Rather, his point is that the same *types* of events keep recurring, and will continue to do so ad infinitum. From this point of view—so broad as to be approaching a "view from nowhere"—the distinctions we normally take for granted, and which enable both the possibility for future "newness" as well as the processing of memory, are blurred. Reality becomes amorphous and indeterminate. Hence the ensuing claim in 1:11 about memory's failure. As I argued last chapter, it is the memory of bygone persons, any given generation's predecessors, that he deems deficient. While Qoheleth may hold that some such state of affairs is always true—that we fail sufficiently to acknowledge others even while they live—memory's breakdown becomes exacerbated when a person dies. A living person is there to remind one of himself or herself, in all their distinctiveness. But once they are gone, and the maintenance of the distinctions can depend no longer on physical reality but only mental powers, those left behind will inevitably fail to maintain the distinctions, and the deceased person along with their accomplishments will be lost to oblivion.

Verse 11, therefore, is not a *ground* of what precedes it, but a *consequence* of time's cyclicality, perhaps even (from the divine perspective) a purpose. It is because time is cyclical (1:4–10) that no one can remember past people and their achievements (1:11). A cyclical cosmos breeds forgetful humans, as the seemingly distinct sand-crystals of individual human lives are all but washed over and anonymized in the beating waves of time's ocean tide. Since the profoundest *telos* Qoheleth can conceive of is to be remembered honorably in the "collective afterlife,"

[1] Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 75.

Qoheleth's grief for the nullity of meaning can then set its blame squarely at the feet of not just one but two partners in crime—death, of course, but also the nature of time itself.

In this regard, it is rarely noticed how the poem's two outermost verses, v 4 and v 11, themselves form an inclusio which brings together these two threads and provides a powerful answer to the question of 1:3:

> (3) What lasting gain is there for a person in all his toil which he toils under the sun?
>
> (4) A generation goes, and a generation comes,
> but the earth forever remains the same.
>
> (11) There is no remembrance of former people,
> nor of those who are yet to exist.
> There will be no remembrance of them,
> nor of those who will exist later still.

A sizeable segment of Qoheleth's core message, at least on its negative axis, is captured in these few lines. Death will come. The cycles of time will continue on. No one will be remembered. Therefore, lasting gain—meaning—is left wanting.[2] We concluded Chapter 3 by asking why, for Qoheleth, physical mortality should so necessarily entail metaphorical mortality when the two are technically distinct issues. The answer is that the link between physical mortality and metaphorical mortality is forged by the phenomenon of cyclical time.

Once we have seen that the two primary exemplars of *hebel* are individual death and universal cyclicality, it is striking, but hardly coincidental, that Qoheleth's final (first-person) words in the book, from the concluding poem of 12:1–7, express both notions within one utterance: "And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the life-breath returns to God who gave it" (12:7). The complete destruction of a distinct individual person is only the closing of a circular trajectory never meant to reach anywhere but its own starting point.

[2] Cf. this connection in Gary D. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 266: "The pericope [1:3–11] ends in a cascade of negativity with the particles *lō*' and *'ēn* dominating the reader's attention in v. 11. This gives the reader a strong hint that the initial 'what profit?' question posed in v. 3 should be answered in the negative. By arguing that there is no remembrance of a person after his or her death, Qoheleth obliquely suggests that nothing will be 'left over' subsequent to one's death."

PART II — QOHELETH'S POSITIVE VALUES

CHAPTER 5

"A STILLBORN IS BETTER OFF": THE VALUE OF (NON-)EXISTENCE

I. Introduction

Albert Camus famously opined that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide."[1] But one could argue that a question of even greater significance comes prior: not whether one should continue a life already being lived, but whether one should begin life in the first place. Contemporary philosopher David Benatar has recently advanced the self-evidently controversial claim that "coming into existence is always a serious harm."[2] This answer to the question of life's worth stands within the tradition of pessimism which stretches as far back as the Greek poet Theognis and the tragedians Sophocles and Euripides,[3] was revived in the nineteenth-century writings of Arthur Schopenhauer,[4] addressed by Nietzsche,[5] and is now represented within

[1] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (trans. Justin O'Brien; New York: Vintage, 1955), 3.

[2] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1. The term "harm" in this context refers to an overall "net harm" as opposed to a "net benefit" (1) as a value judgment concerning one's existence as a whole, in comparison to non-existence. See Joel Feinberg, "Wrongful Life and the Counterfactual Element in Harming," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 4 (1986): 145–78; Stephen Perry, "Harm, History, and Counterfactuals," *San Diego Law Review* 40 (2003): 1283–313.

[3] "It is best of all for mortals not to be born and not to look upon the rays of the piercing sun, but once born it is best to pass the gates of Hades as quickly as possible and to lie under a large heap of earth" (Theognis, 425–428 [Gerber, LCL]). "Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best; but when a man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came" (Sophocles, *Oed. Col.* 1224–1226 [https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5299]). "It is all one, I say, never to have been born and to be dead, and better far is death than life with misery" (Euripides, *Tro.* 636–639 [Kovacks, LCL]).

[4] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (trans. E.F.J. Payne; 2 vols; New York: Dover, 1958); Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; London: Penguin, 2004).

[5] In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche recounts a legend derived from Aristotle's mostly lost *Eudemos* in which King Midas asks one Silenus "what is the best and most excellent thing for human beings." Silenus replies that "the very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be,* to be *nothing*." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The*

analytic philosophy most prominently by Benatar. In this tradition, pessimism has been understood (in its full philosophical sense) as the view that existence is valueless at its core and thus human beings would be better off not existing.[6]

According to many of his readers, Qoheleth fits squarely into this pessimistic stream, regarding life's value with a grim nihilism that runs as thick as Benatar's.[7] The previous three chapters have, admittedly, given us little reason to doubt such a construal. Further grounding for this assertion is that Qoheleth, like Benatar, raises the issue of whether coming into existence may be a harm—and gives an affirmative answer. In the two "better-than" sayings under discussion in this chapter, Ecclesiastes 6:3 and 4:3, Qoheleth declares that a hypothetical non-existent person is better off than their existing counterpart.[8] Yet the meaning and implication of the claim in both texts is far from obvious. Does Qoheleth imply that the non-exister's state is paradigmatically and universally superior? Or is he instead speaking exceptionally, of particular people in particular circumstances?

In this chapter, I will begin by articulating the primary argument advanced by David Benatar for his "anti-natalism" philosophy. Secondly, by examining Qoheleth's two "better-than" statements in their literary context, I will argue that he intends these examples as exceptions. He does not go so far as to make the supremely nihilistic claim that coming into existence is always, or even generally, a harm; yet he does concede that, in certain cases, it can be. Third, I will bring the two thinkers into dialogue, comparing certain aspects of Qoheleth's argumentation with

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Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings (trans. Ronald Speirs; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22–23 [emphasis original]. Nietzsche cites this as part of his argument that "the Greeks knew the terrors and horrors of existence, but they covered them with a veil in order to be able to live" (124). This point of view, however, does not seem to have played a large part in Aristotle's philosophy.

[6] See especially Paul Edwards, "Life, Meaning and Value of," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 5:345–58. Despite the entry's title, Edwards focuses on the question of pessimism.

[7] For example, Zimmermann's psychoanalytic construal of the sage remains one of the most pessimistic: "He is a pathological doubter of everything, stemming from a drastic emotional experience, a psychic disturbance. He is doubtful about himself as a person of worth and character. He has no self-esteem or value of himself. His doubt has destroyed all values. He is an inferior, of no account, and he demeans himself constantly. His doubt comes from a parapathy, a disease of the mind which he shares with many neurotics" (Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: Ktav, 1973)], 8). With a more philosophical orientation, Seizo Sekine designates the sage as "Qoheleth the Nihilist"; see Seizo Sekine, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Old Testament* (trans. J.R. Short; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 123, and "Qohelet als Nihilist," *AJBI* 17 (1991): 3–54.

[8] Statements to the effect that one is better off not to have been born may be found elsewhere in the ancient Jewish world, see Job 3:3–26; 10:18–19; Jer 20:14–18; 2 Esdras 4:12; 5:35; 7:63, 116; *1 En.* 38:2; *2 En.* 41:2; Mt 26:24 (=Mk 14:21); b. Eruvin 13b. Other ancient Near Eastern texts concern the question of life's value (usually on account of suffering) yet without framing it in explicitly anti-natalist terms, e.g. the Egyptian text, *Dialogue between a Man and his Ba;* and the Mesopotamian texts, *A Pessimistic Dialogue Between Master and Servant, Babylonian Theodicy,* and *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi;* and the Sumerian text *Man and His God.*

Benatar's in order to discern why and where they part ways. After this I will draw upon contemporary philosophical well-being discourse to attempt to categorize Qoheleth's implicit theory of well-being. Finally, I will conclude with a systematic schema for relating Qoheleth's values.

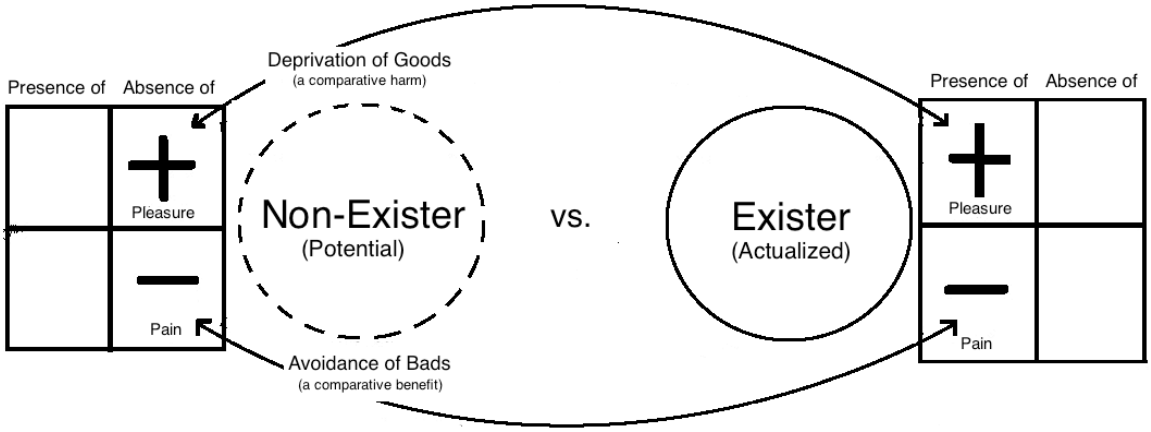
II. David Benatar's "Anti-Natalism"

David Benatar claims that "coming into existence is always a serious harm," or stated otherwise, that it is "better never to have been."[9] What could justify such a claim? Before stating Benatar's argument, we may consider an intuitive conceptual framework (depicted in *Figure 1*) for comparing the goods (pleasures) and harms (pains) of coming into existence versus those of remaining non-existent.[10] Under such a framework, it is the actual experiences of existing people, both pains and pleasures, that are compared with the hypothetical state of non-existence. Non-existence is, of course, characterized by absences (the absence of both pleasure and pain), while existence is marked by presences (the presence of both pleasure and pain). The absence of both pleasure and pain in non-existence would seem to render the overall value of this state as a "zero" (if put into quantitative terms)—neither positive nor negative, but value-neutral. If so, the question would then be whether the overall value of existence, with its presence of both pleasure and pain, will be greater or less than zero. A case against existence would presumably claim that life's pains outweigh its pleasures, rendering the net sum a loss.

[9] Benatar, *Better*, 1.

[10] "Intuitive" in a way I hope to explain—though I acknowledge that casting the issue in terms of a distinction between "pleasures" and "pains" already frames the discussion within a rather utilitarian structure. I have done so simply because this is Benatar's starting point, but one burden of the chapter is to test whether this sort of framework serves to illuminate Qoheleth's thought.

Figure 1 – Pleasures and Pains in Non-Existence Compared to Existence



But that is not Benatar's argument.[11] Instead, Benatar's primary argument is an *a priori* argument, proceeding from definitional analysis rather than experiences. It analyzes the relative value of existence in comparison to non-existence by considering the way pleasure and pain inhere in either state as such (according to an assumed definition of that state), but this is done almost entirely apart from any consideration of the relative amounts of pleasure and pain actually experienced by existing persons.[12] To make this case—which he elsewhere calls the "Asymmetry Argument"[13]—Benatar refers to a basic asymmetry between pleasure and pain. Benatar claims that when we consider bringing future humans into the world, the avoidance of pain is almost always prioritized above the possibility of experiencing pleasure. Thus, for instance, we feel an obligation *not* to bring into the world a child who would be subjected to a life of utter misery, yet we sense no corresponding obligation to bring *into* the world a child who would live a happy life. The impulse underlying such a decision—this purportedly common asymmetry of values—is what Benatar wants to press to its logical conclusion.[14]

[11] At least, this is not his primary argument. He does, in fact, posit a separate argument appealing to human experience in his book's third chapter (*Better,* 60–93), but he maintains that the argument described herein can independently justify his thesis (see *Better,* 18–59, for the full argument). In addition to considerations of space, I have chosen to focus on Benatar's Asymmetry Argument because its method of comparing the harms and benefits of existence with those of non-existence runs so congruently with Qoheleth's approach.

[12] See Bruce Russell, "A Priori Justification and Knowledge," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/apriori.

[13] David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19–39.

[14] The reference to the values that "we" typically "feel" (in his view) does not undermine the point that Benatar's argument is an *a priori* one*,* since he is only drawing on these purportedly common asymmetrical value judgments as

Why do we value the avoidance of pain above the experience of pleasure? Benatar seeks to explain this basic asymmetry of values by evoking the principle that "those who never exist cannot be *deprived"*[15]—that is, they cannot subjectively feel a lack—of goods or pleasures they have missed by not partaking of existence.[16] Benatar takes this lack of felt deprivation to imply that the non-exister's pleasureless state is "not bad," even though this state is devoid of life's goods.[17] Thus, however good life's pleasures may be for those who experience them, "the pleasures of the existent…are *not an advantage* over non-existence, because the absence of pleasures is *not bad*."[18] The couple considering bringing into the world a would-be suffering child, then, will do no harm to the potential child by denying it existence, since the child would never know the difference, whereas they would harm the child by bringing it into the world, given life's inevitable pains. Benatar is claiming that the intuitive advantage we generally assume existence holds over non-existence by virtue of life's blessings should not be regarded as an "advantage" to those (non-existers) who feel no lack or deprivation toward it. Yet this does not mean the playing field is even: non-existers*,* for their part, can benefit from their non-existent status by necessarily avoiding life's would-be pains (see *Figure 2).*[19] Given that life will always involve at least some pain, and non-existence will always retain its pain-free status, the net result is that it is always

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a pointer to an underlying fact about the world which he then justifies on *a priori* grounds and not because of any generally assigned asymmetrical values or any experiences of pain or pleasure in the world.

[15] Benatar, *Better,* 1 [emphasis added].

[16] For present purposes I will assume it is meaningful and not senseless to speak of hypothetical or potential non-existent persons. Who are they? Essentially, they are those who could (or could have*)* come into existence if certain conditions were met, such as a particular pair of humans procreating at a certain time (see Mary Anne Warren, "Do Potential People Have Moral Rights?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 [1977]: 275–89). But a possible person might or might not be actualized; Benatar clarifies that he is "using 'non-existence' to denote those who *never* exist" (*Better,* 30, n. 22 [emphasis added]). The sense in which we may compare the state of such hypothetical people as better or worse than their corresponding hypothetically existent counterparts is only the sense in which we regularly compare possible situations to actual ones and inquire which is better.

[17] This essential aspect of Benatar's argument was predated nearly two millennia by Lucretius: "How could it have harmed us never to have been created? Are we to believe that our life lay groveling in murk and misery until the first day of creation dawned for us? All people, once born, must certainly wish to remain in life, so long as seductive pleasure detains them; but if one has never tasted the love of life or been numbered among the living, how does it harm one not to have been created?" (Lucr. 5.173–181 [Smith]).

[18] Benatar, *Better*, 41 [emphasis added]. He adds, "For the good to be an advantage over non-existence, it would have to have been the case that its absence were bad (41)." If we were to make explicit Benatar's implied premise we might syllogize as follows:

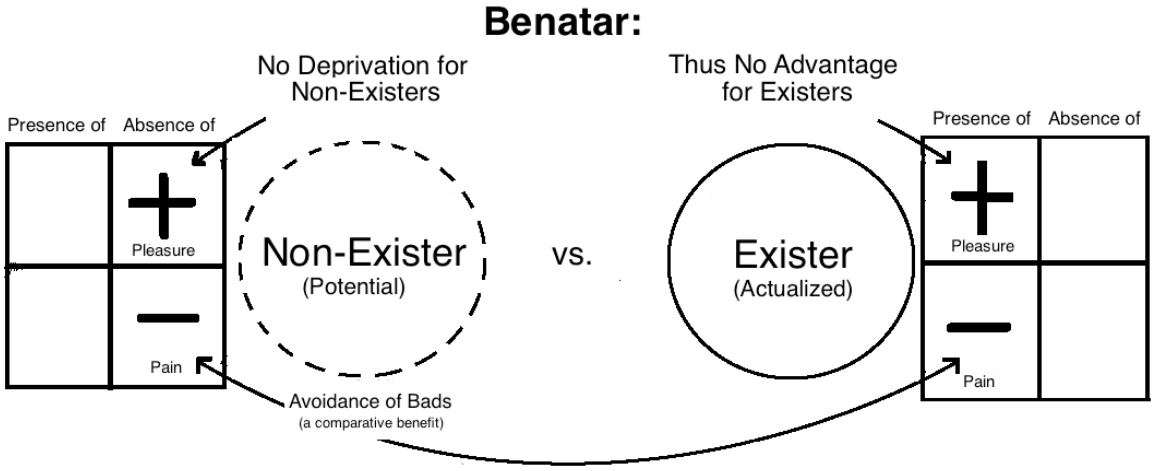
Premise A:	If X is not bad, then nothing can be an *advantage* with respect to X.
Premise B:	The absence of pleasures (in non-existence) is not bad.
Conclusion C:	The pleasures of the existent are not an advantage over (the absence of pleasures in) non-existence.

Once rendered in this way, Premise A strikes one as patently contestable, yet Benatar nowhere argues for it.

[19] "There is a crucial difference between harms (such as pains) and benefits (such as pleasures) which entails that existence has no advantage over, but does have disadvantages relative to, non-existence" (Benatar, *Better*, 30).

better not to exist.[20] Benatar's import is almost incredible: humans should cease to procreate as soon as possible, thereby engendering the extinction of the species—a view known as "anti-natalism."[21]

Figure 2 – Benatar's Foundational Premise for Why Coming into Existence is a Harm



III. Ecclesiastes 6:3 in the Context of 5:9–6:9: "A Stillborn is Better Off"

A. Ecclesiastes 6:1–6

In Eccl 6:3 Qoheleth audaciously states that a stillborn is "better off" [-טוֹב מִ] than a man he has just described. This man comes as the second of two examples with virtually identical structure, which either refer to the same man, or are parallel enough that we may analyze them interchangeably and draw the same conclusions about both.[22]

[20] For the full argument see Benatar, *Better*, chapter 2, 18–59.

[21] I should note that this is virtually an *a priori* argument, but not entirely one. All that Benatar needs to assume regarding the amount of pleasure and pain a hypothetical person will experience is the smallest imaginable amount of pain—such as, say, a single stubbed toe in an otherwise pain-free, pleasure-filled life. As long as such a miniscule amount of pain may be assumed for all human lives, that is, as long as the amount is greater than "zero," his entire argument takes effect. This slightest bad outweighs any amount of good because the goods do not count. Hence Benatar's *a priori* argumentation has furnished him with the absolute predictive power needed for such a claim as that "coming into existence is *always* a serious harm."

[22] Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 53, suggests that vv 3–6 "can be considered an extension or an intensification of vv 1–2 in that the failure to enjoy one's possessions and to fulfill one's desires remains the problem."

Introduction – 6:1[23]

There is an evil [רָעָה] that I have seen under the sun, and it weighs heavily upon humanity:

Example #1 – 6:2

[*IF* there is…]
a man to whom God gives
wealth, possessions, and honor

such that he lacks nothing which his נֶפֶשׁ desires,

BUT…
God does not give him power to enjoy [or consume, אכל] them

but a stranger enjoys [consumes] them.

[VALUE JUDGMENT]:
This is הֶבֶל and an evil sickness.

Example #2 – 6:3-5

IF
a man

fathers a hundred children and lives a long life,

such that the days of his years are many,

BUT…
his נֶפֶשׁ is not satisfied with 'the good' [לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע מִן־הַטּוֹבָה]—

and he does not even receive a proper burial—[24]

[VALUE JUDGMENT]:
I say: A stillborn child [נֵפֶל][25] is better off than he [טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ].

FOR
THOUGH
it comes in הֶבֶל,
and goes in darkness,
and in darkness its name is covered,
and though it has not seen the sun
nor known anything,[26]
YET

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[23] The following represents my translation of 6:1–6, but formatted to highlight the structure. (Words in brackets are not part of the translation proper but help to exhibit the structure.)

[24] I take this clause as parenthetical, with גַּם translated "even." A lack of burial would be salt on the wound for a joyless life, but it is not central to Qoheleth's concerns here.

[25] Apart from 6:3 נֵפֶל occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible:

Let them be like…a stillborn child [נֵפֶל] *that never sees the sun.* (Ps 58:8)

Or why I was not hidden like a stillborn [נֵפֶל], like infants *who have never seen the light?* (Job 3:16)

Strikingly, all three instances identity the stillborn as one who "never sees the sun" or light, reflecting an ancient Near Eastern circumlocution for consciousness as such.

[26] The Hebrew posits no object for לֹא יָדָע. This is unusual but not without precedent. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 212–13, cites intransitive use of ידע in Isa 44:9, 18; 45:20. In all three cases the verb is negated, and in the former two texts the idols' lack of knowing is paralleled by a lack of seeing [ראה]. The import is that idols possess no cognitive faculty as such, and Qoheleth uses similar language to render the same point concerning the stillborn.

Some of the ancient versions alternatively read נַחַת as the object of יָדָע ("it does not know rest"), but the sentence's remaining syntax is then "exceedingly awkward" (Seow, 213). Moreover, the affinity of our text with Job 3:11–26 runs deep, and Job's repeated claim in the passage is that had he died as a "stillborn" [נֵפֶל] he would have been at rest [נוח, 3:13, 17, 26]. Job and Qoheleth agree that all that the stillborn *does* know is "rest."

it finds rest [נַחַת] rather than he.[27]

In the first case, the man has been divinely bestowed with riches, wealth, honor—seemingly all he could ever want—yet he lacks the ability to enjoy (literally "consume" or "eat" [אכל]) these goods.[28] In the second case, the man is said to have fathered a hundred children and lived an extraordinarily long life—the very ancient Near Eastern model of "the good life"—but nevertheless the man's נֶפֶשׁ, his desire or appetite, is not satisfied with such good things.[29] The crucial point is that in both cases the man is in possession of *external*, *objective* goods yet lacks a certain kind of *internal, subjective* response—namely, a positive, joyful one. Qoheleth's conclusion that the "stillborn child is better off" most directly refers to the second example, but again, given the strict parallelism it can almost certainly be applied to both cases.[30]

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[27] The string of descriptives by which Qoheleth characterizes the stillborn in 6:4–5 should be regarded as *concessive* with respect to the final clause ("Although…yet…" as in the translation provided above). So JPS; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 170; R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 231; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 45. Others begin the concessive at v. 5: NIV; NKJV; ISV; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 120; Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 202; Mette Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124. The concessive sense is not derived from any explicit Hebrew terms. Rather it is inferred by Qoheleth's implicit logic in the relationship between the value-states predicated of the stillborn. Verse 3 claims that the stillborn is better off than the man, and the כִּי ("for") at the beginning of verse 4 promises to provide justification for the claim. Yet none of the verbal clauses in v 4 or the first half of v 5 suffice, since none represents a positive value. Only the concluding statement in 5b that there is "*rest* for this one rather than that one" (lit. Hebr.; cf. 3:19, זֶה . . . זֶה) fulfills the justificatory role of the כִּי with respect to v 3b, and this relation is all the more confirmed by the *comparative* מִן in the two relevant phrases [נַחַת לָזֶה מִזֶּה … טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ הַנֶּפֶל]. This linkage, in tandem with the negative value accorded to the stillborn's non-activities in vv 4-5a, logically implies that the intervening clauses in vv 4-5a (before the line about rest in v5b) function as a setup for the conclusion, conceding plenty about the stillborn's state as undesirable, but maintaining at least one decisive point over against the tragic man of 6:3. The stillborn is better off than the man, because despite its own obvious deficiencies it at least has more rest than the man. Cf. Martin Rose, *Rien de nouveau: Nouvelles approches du livre de Qoheleth* (Fribourg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 314: "Le premier terme positif est נחת («repos», v.5b). C'est lui qui doit expliquer pourquoi donner la préférence à l'état d'un fœtus inapte à vivre (v.3b)." Moreover, the structure of Qoheleth's sentence about the stillborn (6:4–5) approximately parallels his sentence about the man (6:3). In the case of the man, a long list of positive traits is provided, only to undermine their value with a single phrase at the sentence's conclusion ("a stillborn is better off"). In the case of the stillborn, a long list of negative traits is given, only to subvert their *disvalue* at the sentence's surprising positive conclusion ("it finds rest rather than he").

[28] Robert Salters, "Notes on the Interpretation of Qoh 6:2," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 282–89, assumes that אכל must be taken literally. But this is an uncommon view. Most scholars think it can sometimes mean to "consume" in a broader sense, to "enjoy." See, e.g., George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Scribner, 1908), 129; Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Norton, 2010), 366: "The usage is an anticipation of a common idiom in rabbinic Hebrew, in which the verb 'eat' (*'akhal*) means to enjoy the fruits of something."

[29] For clarity's sake, I have omitted v 6 from the translation above, but it too reiterates the requisite of subjective enjoyment: "Even if he should live a thousand years twice over *yet not see* (or *experience*) *good* [וְטוֹבָה לֹא רָאָה]—do not all go to the same place?"

[30] The statement in 6:2 that "he lacks nothing which his נֶפֶשׁ desires" can only mean that the man has possession of all the objective goods which he would desire on the presumption that they will bring him subjective satisfaction; given what follows Qoheleth clearly cannot mean by this that the man has no subjective lack.

It is not difficult to see that the man constitutes a specific, contingent case. This fact alone distances Qoheleth's claim from Benatar's to some degree, since the stillborn is only said to be "better" than a man whose life meets these conditions. But, again, what is debated is whether this particular case nonetheless functions paradigmatically and definitively for Qoheleth. Inasmuch as this man's experience is meant broadly to represent the human condition—as is the case with so many of Qoheleth's vignettes—the sage would be claiming that non-existence is, if not always, at least generally preferable to human existence. There are scholars who think this is precisely the nature of Qoheleth's claim. Tremper Longman, for instance, writes that for Qoheleth, "Even if one should attain wealth, its enjoyment is rare…Only in those *few cases* where God gives not only wealth but also the ability to enjoy is the person buffered from the harsh pain of real life."[31] James Crenshaw likewise posits that "Qoheleth's hatred of life was no momentary phase but persisted to the end, notwithstanding the seven texts that soften the pessimism *for the lucky.* For *everyone else,* God's favor did not abound."[32] William Anderson, as well, suggests that 6:2 undermines the joy statement at the end of chapter five, turning the possibility of joy into a sick joke.[33] However, there are several factors which, when taken together, challenge such an interpretation and urge us to regard the man's case as important and constitutive within Qoheleth's system of values, but nonetheless exceptional rather than universal. The argument will require some development.

B. Ecclesiastes 6:2–3 as Exceptional Rather Than Universal

To begin with, Qoheleth's description of the man in 6:2 is closely connected to his earlier description of "the good life" in 5:17–19. In fact, 6:2 almost exactly recapitulates an eleven-word Hebrew phrase from 5:18:

כָּל־הָאָדָם	אֲשֶׁר	נָתַן־לוֹ	הָאֱלֹהִים עֹשֶׁר וּנְכָסִים		וְהִשְׁלִיטוֹ		לֶאֱכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ
אִישׁ	אֲשֶׁר	יִתֶּן־לוֹ	הָאֱלֹהִים עֹשֶׁר וּנְכָסִים	וְכָבוֹד	וְלֹא־יַשְׁלִיטֶנּוּ		לֶאֱכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ

5:18	*everyone*	to whom God has given	wealth and possessions	*and*	the ability	to enjoy it
6:2	*a man*	to whom God gives	wealth and possessions *and honor*	*but does not give*	the ability	to enjoy it

[31] Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 175 [emphasis added].

[32] James L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth's Hatred of Life: A Passing Phase or an Enduring Sentiment?" in *Wisdom for Life* (ed. Nuria Calduch-Benages; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 119–131, at 128 [emphasis added]. Elsewhere Crenshaw opines that for Qoheleth "suicide offers a compelling alternative to further living. Its lure would seem irresistible for one who hates life and falls into despair's vice-like grip." James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 573–85 in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1995), 582.

[33] William H. U. Anderson, *Scepticism and Ironic Correlations in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 54.

The only two differences (besides the addition of "and honor" in 6:2) lie in (a) the subjects involved ("*everyone* to whom" versus "*a man* to whom"), and (b) the לֹא-negation in the last clause of 6:2. Regarding the first, identifying the subject as "everyone [כָּל־הָאָדָם] to whom God gave" is a much broader way of speaking than "a man [אִישׁ] to whom God gave." This fact alone might imply that 5:18 is the more universal of the two.[34] Regarding the second difference, the לֹא-negation in the second clause of 6:2 produces a pronounced contrast with 5:18. That Qoheleth would negate not the granting of possessions but specifically the ability to enjoy them demonstrates that that is indeed Qoheleth's focus here—subjective appropriation, not objective possession. Mere possession of goods by no means guarantees their enjoyment, yet both are necessary for a truly good life. This differs from interpretations which hold that the "stranger" who is said to enjoy the man's goods in his stead has actually *dispossessed* the man of them.[35] To be sure, that is a concern of Qoheleth's earlier in the book (2:18–23), but it is decidedly not the point in 6:2. Here in 6:2 the stranger [אִישׁ נָכְרִי]—which in this context most likely refers only to "someone else"[36]—is enjoying the goods still possessed by the man.[37]

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[34] Likewise Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 225; Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1987), 121–22, who says that כָּל־הָאָדָם in 5:18 indicates "the general rule" where אִישׁ in 6:2 "typifies singular people, but not all men…the possibility of exceptions to the rule" Cf. 3:13, in which כָּל־הָאָדָם is again used for those who may "eat and drink and see good in their toil." In this case too, their ability to do so is grounded in "the payment/gift of God," yet the emphasis is by no means exclusive, but inclusive and invitational.

[35] See, e.g., James L. Kugel, "Qohelet and Money," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 32–49; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 130; William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 64–65; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 257; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004), 352.

[36] Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 80; Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987), 91; James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 126.

[37] It is understandable that some commentators, e.g., Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 75, would connect the man's lack of enjoyment here with the possibility that God has dispossessed him of his property, because in 2:18–23 the "despair" (and implicit lack of enjoyment) is due to the dispossession of wealth that is both inherited and thereby "enjoyed" by one "who did not toil for it" (v 21). A further connection (between 6:2 and ch. 2) is proposed by those (such as Fox, *Rereading,* 129) who relate 2:26 to 2:18–23, since it could suggest the additional idea that the toiler's loss and the would-be fool's gain in 2:18–23 was in reality a divine prerogative. In light of the divine-causality rhetoric in 6:2, might not the same idea apply here and thus the man's inability to enjoy be provoked by a (divinely instigated) dispossession of property? But against this, the already discussed parallel between 5:18 and 6:2 strongly implies that in 6:1–6 Qoheleth is concerned to clarify a point he fears remains yet opaque—the absolute necessity of subjective enjoyment—and the point is best made via an example of a man who maintains possession of his wealth. In this way the lack of objective goods cannot be the source of blame. The joy Qoheleth commends in 5:17–19 could be misconstrued by his audience as a merely natural consequence of possessing "wealth and possessions" and similar external goods. But the emphasis in 6:2—that the external, objective goods could be had without an internal, subjective appreciation for them—rules out any necessary correlation between the two aspects. Qoheleth could not have made

The issue, then, is this: the goods are at hand, but this man cannot partake [אכל] of them. Why not? Answering this question will help us understand why the man's inability to enjoy renders his life inferior to the non-existent stillborn's.[38] Most commentators here throw up their hands and offer something along the lines of Seow: "We do not know what kind of person Qohelet has in mind, or what circumstances may cause one not to enjoy material possessions. One can only guess whether the author is thinking of economic, physical,[39] or psychological handicaps."[40] Other scholars lay heavy emphasis on Qoheleth's reference to divine causality, that the man's absent joy is a gift withheld by God: "[Qoheleth] directly and solely attributes this negative state of affairs to God."[41] To be sure, God's immanence in this text is unavoidable, yet does the appeal to divine causality exhaust all other explanations? In fact, Qoheleth elsewhere presents a *concurrentist* viewpoint, quickly appealing to divine causality as though it were the last word, only to offer a more "human" explanation for the same phenomenon within the turn of a few words (Eccl 7:13, 29).[42]

So why can't the man enjoy*?* I would like to suggest that the answer has been, so to speak, right under our noses all along. For Qoheleth states in 6:5 that the stillborn achieves "rest" *rather than* the man.[43] The man's problem, then—his inability to enjoy "the good" [הַטּוֹבָה] and its resultant inferiority for his existence at large—apparently owes itself to some kind of *unrest.* But precisely what sort?

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that particular point if the dispossession of wealth were in view, for then the lack of enjoyment would be imputed to the external void.

[38] On the assumption already stated, that 6:2 and 6:3 either refer to the same man or are parallel enough to treat together, such that the stillborn "better" saying applies equally to the man of 6:2.

[39] Kurt Galling, "Der Prediger," 73–125 in *Die fünf Megilloth* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1969), 103, posits that "Krankheit verhindert das Genießen."

[40] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 225; see also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 126; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 53. For these scholars what is at least ruled out as the cause is dispossession. The handicap is something that coincides with the man's maintaining his goods, though its precise nature remains unclear.

[41] Longman, *Ecclesiastes,* 170; see also Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 462. Stuart Weeks also emphasizes God's role in dispensing or withholding the ability to enjoy goods, but he minimizes the apparent arbitrariness of the act by tying it to divine judgment: "It is something offered in return for righteousness, or at least for pleasing God, while the withholding of the ability would constitute an effective punishment" (Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism,* 84).

[42] See, e.g., Psalm 7, which initially warns of seemingly unmediated divine punishment, "If a person does not repent, God will sharpen his sword" (v 12), but quickly thereafter clarifies the more mundane means: "[a person] digs a pit and then falls into the hole he has made" (v 15). Cf. Yairah Amit, "The Dual Causality Principle and Its Effects on Biblical Literature," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 385–400.

[43] The majority of commentators construe the phrase נַחַת לָזֶה מִזֶּה in a contrastive sense ("rather than"), although there are some who take the phrase in a comparative sense ("more than").

Our text is embedded within the larger unit of 5:9–6:9. The primary theme of this unit is undoubtedly that of unfulfilled desire. Qoheleth begins the unit with the proverb, "The one who loves money will not be satisfied [לֹא־יִשְׂבַּע] with money" (5:9). And he concludes the unit in like fashion: "All of a person's toil is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied [הַנֶּפֶשׁ לֹא תִמָּלֵא]" (6:7); and, "Better is the sight of the eyes [i.e. immediate enjoyment, cf. 11:9] than the wandering of desire [הֲלַךְ־נָפֶשׁ] [i.e. unrelenting, insatiable desire]" (6:9). [44] Between the inclusio containing three proverbs on each end (5:9–11; 6:7–9) lie three sub-units—5:12–16, 5.17–19, and 6.1–6.[45] The first tells of the man we met briefly in Chapter 4, who had toiled to accrue and then guard his riches, hoping to pass them on to his son as an inheritance, yet they were lost in a bad investment (5:12–13). Despite his toil [עָמָל in 5:14, עמל in 5:15], the man will depart to the grave as naked as he came from the womb, having never achieved lasting "gain" [יִתְרוֹן] (5:14–15). Moreover, we are told that the man spends his days in "darkness and in much vexation [כַּעַס], sickness and anger" (5:16). In other words, we might say that the man's compulsive teleological desire and his struggle to achieve meaning—his always wanting more, or his obsession to maintain what he has—is indeed a form of (what I will call) *psychological unrest.*[46] In fact, the language here is highly reminiscent of chapter two, where Qoheleth reflects on the morose state of the toiler [עָמָל and עמל in 2:22] who achieves no יִתְרוֹן: *"*All his days bring pain [מַכְאֹבִים], and his work brings vexation [כַּעַס]. Even in the night his mind cannot *rest"* (2:23).[47] This affiliation is further supported by 4:6,

[44] The phrase הֲלַךְ־נָפֶשׁ has sometimes been taken as a reference to death, as in "the passing of life" (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 228). This is unlikely for at least two reasons. First, נֶפֶשׁ only refers to "desire" or "appetite" in Qoheleth, not "life." Second, translated as "the wandering of desire" the verse could not be better suited to its context, bringing the unit of 5:9–6:9 to a fitting conclusion. The two halves of the verse correlate perfectly with the two sections, 5:12–16 (the constant, lustful roaming of desire) and 5:17–19 (the ability to "see" as "good" that which is present).

[45] A few highly chiastic structures have been proposed for 5:9–6:9. See Daniel C. Fredericks, "Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9," *JBL* 108 (1989): 17–35; Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 216–18. It is reasonable to see some resonance within the sections (e.g. the parallel between the "birth" language of 5:14 and 6:3), but the level of chiastic parallel assumed by these scholars is unpersuasive. My take on the structure of this section is only broadly chiastic, with a proverbial framing and the middle three sub-units reflecting a chiasm in basic theme ("evil" versus "good") while still maintaining progressive movement in the content of the argument (see below).

A - Three Proverbs on Insatiable Desire (5:9–11)
B - "There is an Evil [יֵשׁ רָעָה]" (5:12–16)
C - "What is Good [טוֹב]" (5:17–19)
B' - "There is an Evil [יֵשׁ רָעָה]" (6:1–6)
A' - Three Proverbs on Insatiable Desire (6:7–9)

[46] The man's psychological problems are not meant merely as a *result* of his misfortune, but as concomitant with it. The same is true with 2:23 in relation to 2:18–22. See also 1:18, where "vexation" [כַּעַס] and "pain" [מַכְאוֹב] occur together, just as in 2:23.

[47] This interpretation particularly illuminates certain other passages in Qoheleth:

"Better is a handful of *rest* [נַחַת] than two hands full of toil [עָמָל] and striving after wind." The connection is clear: the toiler's compulsive teleological desire surfaces as psychological unrest—and unchecked psychological unrest incites the suffocation of joy.[48] The problem is not the attempt at achieving meaning in itself, but the refusal to abandon that attempt once it goes awry and its inefficacy becomes obvious.

It is crucial to emphasize that Qoheleth is not only claiming that those enslaved by delusional teleological desire and the toil undertaken to that end fail to satisfy those (long-term) desires. He is also claiming that their future-obsessed psychosis can sometimes produce an unshakeable mindset that backfires onto the present, incapacitating them from even enjoying the best of what life does offer—eating, drinking, enjoying one's toil—impermanent benefits, but valuable nonetheless.[49] In such a state, with the mind restlessly fixated only on what is beyond the horizon, a person is utterly incapable of enjoying present goods—the sort proposed in 5:17–18 but denied the man in 6:2–3. This, I propose, accounts for the man's inability to enjoy his good possessions in 6:2. And it is this backfiring effect of insatiable teleological desire which, according to Qoheleth, can render a life worse off than non-being.

But to return to our question: Who can enjoy such goods? Only a few? In light of our proposed rationale for the man's inability to enjoy good in 6:2, we can see the way the unit's structure—specifically the relation between the three sub-units 5:12–16, 5:17–19 and 6:1–6—argues for reading 6:1–6 as exceptional.

The distressed toiler of 5:12–16 may well represent a broad swath of humanity for Qoheleth, not in terms of the man's precise circumstances as much as the story's broader

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a) 11:9–10: Qoheleth's exhortation at the end of chapter eleven is to "walk in…the sight of your eyes," i.e. immediate enjoyment (11:9; cf. 6:9), and to "remove *vexation* [כַּעַס] from your mind" (11:10). He is again commending the embracement of present joys as a way out of the psychological unrest ("vexation") that plagues those enslaved by toil and teleological desire.

b) 5:11: "The *sleep* of the laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance [הַשָּׂבָע] of the rich will not allow him to sleep [מַנִּיחַ לוֹ לִישׁוֹן]." Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* 52, comments: "It is as if the riches that the eyes contemplated so avidly now keep them from being closed in sleep."

[48] Schopenhauer similar conceives of existence as "essentially unceasing motion*,* without any possibility of that repose which we continually strive after…Existence is typified by unrest" (Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, 52 [emphasis omitted]). See also Euripides, *Hipp.* 189–190: "But the life of mortals is wholly trouble, and there is no rest from toil."

[49] For instance, the toiler in 5:16 is not even able to enjoy "eating," though the next verse designates the same activity as "good." The toiler in 4:8 represents another instance of this principle in the book. His toil is driven by an insatiable desire ("There is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are not satisfied with riches"), and his self-critical question reflects the presupposition that the toiler's future-oriented desire *prevents* him from present enjoyment: "For whom am I toiling and *[thereby]* depriving my נֶפֶשׁ of good [מְחַסֵּר אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִטּוֹבָה]?"

application: every human will eventually return to the grave "naked" and no one's toil will result in permanent gain. It is all "toiling for the wind" (5:15). Given this theme's prominence in the book, Qoheleth at least seems to think that in some form or another unfulfilled teleological desire is epidemic among humanity. That is precisely why Qoheleth's next move (and one made throughout the book) is to provide a remedy for this all-too-common malady: to turn one's eye from whatever future *telos* is believed to fill the insatiable hunger of the נֶפֶשׁ, and instead turn to "see good" in one's present (5:17–19). Qoheleth's clarion calls to joy throughout the book carry hortatory force.[50] His assumption is therefore that in principle anyone can do this—again, the rhetoric of divine causality notwithstanding. Anyone can heed his words and turn from a slavery to teleological desire toward the free embracement of present goods, the only "portion" [חֵלֶק] God has provided. Even in the face of life's inevitable הַבָלִים, anyone can choose a life which, at the very least, is worth living and is better than non-existence. All that is required is a change in mindset.

In a few unique circumstances, however, the "demon is in too deep." Herein lies the "evil sickness" [חֳלִי רָע] of 6:2–3. Some, such as the man portrayed in these verses, have become so entrenched within their teleological desire that they are incapable of curbing those desires for something more within reach. If the movement from 5:12–16 to 5:17–19 represents the shift between a description of the malady and a prescription for the remedy, we might say that the final move to 6:1–6 represents a description of those for whom this cure is sadly ineffective. Only with respect to these, the tragically incurable, is Qoheleth obliged to admit that the stillborn's serene, painless state is "better": while neither enjoys life's goods, the stillborn at least finds (psychological) "rest." The movement between these sections therefore exhibits a progressive narrowing within Qoheleth's field of vision. In light of this, the man of 6:2–3 represents not the rule, but an exception.

[50] Qoheleth's joy commendations begin with his definitive statements of what "is good" for a person to do (2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–18) but are eventually expressed as explicit injunctions to the reader in the imperative mood (7:14; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:8–10).

IV. Ecclesiastes 4:3 in the Context of 4:1–3: "Better Is the One Who Has Not Yet Been"

In Ecclesiastes 4:2–3, Qoheleth follows a description of a community suffering oppression (4:1) with two statements praising the state of non-existent persons: "And I praised the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still alive. But better than both [וְטוֹב מִשְּׁנֵיהֶם] is the one who has *not yet been* and has not seen the evil deeds that are perpetrated under the sun" (4:2–3). Some scholars have been hesitant to take Qoheleth seriously here. Barton suggests this was "not [Qoheleth's] settled opinion. It was rather a transitory mood."[51] On the other hand, pessimistically inclined interpretations of the book see verses like these as quintessential to the sage's thought: "This preference for the nonexistent over the dead or the living suits the hatred for life that Qohelet expressed in 2:17," writes James Crenshaw.[52] Likewise, W. Sibley Towner: "Nonexistence is preferable to existence, though the Teacher does not advocate suicide."[53] It is true that these statements have more of a universal ring to them than the "stillborn" saying in 6:3. But, once again, there are good reasons to think Qoheleth has something more particular in mind.

First, the verb ראה, one of Qoheleth's favorites, is used here with reference to "seeing the evil deeds that are perpetrated under the sun." Taken in its literal sense, Qoheleth would be suggesting that merely witnessing evil or oppressive acts renders one inferior to the non-existent. In that case, presumably a large percentage of humanity would be negatively construed. But Qoheleth is quite apt to use the root ראה in another sense—that of immediate experience. Apart from his own first-person uses (e.g. "I have seen"), this is the most common sense in the book, employed roughly twelve times.[54] Even in the text from chapter six discussed earlier, Qoheleth refers to enjoyment with the Hebrew phrase literally rendered, "see good" [רָאָה . . . טוֹבָה, 6:6].[55] In such cases ראה itself refers only to the value-neutral apparatus for experience-intake; it is the verb's object—in this case the טוֹבָה—which justifies an idiomatic translation of "enjoy." So too, here in 4:3, "seeing *the evil deeds*" [רָאָה אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הָרָע] may legitimately be glossed as "suffering from oppression." Applied to ראה in 4.3, Qoheleth would not be asserting that the non-

[51] Barton, *Ecclesiastes,* 114.

[52] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

[53] W. Sibley Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes," 267–360 in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 5:311.

[54] 1:16; 2:1, 3(?), 24a; 3:13; 4:3; 5:17; 6:6, 9; 8:16b; 9:9; 11:9 (6:9 and 11:9 use the nominal form מַרְאֶה).

[55] The "see good" idiom is employed in 2:1, 3, 24; 3:13; 5:17; 6:6; cf. 9:9.

existent are better off than all those who have witnessed oppression—again, this would presumably condemn most of humanity—but only better off than those who have not directly *experienced* such oppression as is described in v 1.

But there is more to this negative experience than its external harms. In v 1, Qoheleth not only grieves the oppression undergone at the hands of those who abuse power, but with a kind of mournful repetition he twice bemoans the additional fact that "there is none to comfort them." As in chapter six, our sage is concerned not only with the objective situation in which humans find themselves, but their subjective response to it. It is precisely the subjective-appropriative side of things—the compensatory feeling of comfort—which the presence of comforters would engender for those undergoing oppression. Yet this is denied them. The implication is that an irredeemable evil plagues this community; they experience only harm and no good. As such, Qoheleth affirms that it would indeed be better for them not only to have died, but not to exist.

Second, and related to this last point, Qoheleth's exact wording of the phrase in question is striking: "better than both is he who has *not yet been* [עֲדֶן לֹא הָיָה]."[56] The sage is considering the lot of a hypothetical, non-existent person, but he does not articulate this as, for instance, "one who *never will* be." He describes the person as in a state of "not yet" existing (as well as not yet "seeing the evil deeds"), implying that this one may well come into existence at some future point.[57] If so, he is likely thinking of (not just any person but) one born into the oppressed community. Such a person is in a better state for as long as they remain non-existent; for upon entering the community's woeful state, things will quickly become bleak.[58]

It would appear, then, that, in contrast to David Benatar, neither of Qoheleth's aforementioned "better" statements (6:3; 4:3) constitute a definitive claim by the sage that non-existence would be universally better for all people, or even the vast majority of humans. Qoheleth does indeed think that some people's lives—whether through an utter inability to experience the good things in life, or through a situation of irredeemable evil in which both objective and subjective goods are lacking—do indeed fail to produce value. But these are exceptions; they are not the norm.

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[56] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 239, notes that "the common Mishnaic עדיין, 'yet', suggests rather that our spelling here is the old orthography for the *ai diphthong* in which the Yod was unexpressed."

[57] Longman, *Ecclesiastes,* 135.

[58] Cf. 2 Bar 10:6–7, 14–16.

V. Dialogue with David Benatar

Thus far, I have done little to justify my earlier promise concerning a dialogue between David Benatar and Qoheleth. I have mainly used Benatar's thesis as an opportunity for Qoheleth to respond (via my pen) to the challenge it poses and to clarify the rationale for Qoheleth's view, which we have found to differ from Benatar's thesis in its main conclusions. But I would like now to fill the lacuna by offering some semblance of dialogue.

First, what do the two philosophies share in common? Qoheleth shares Benatar's intuition that there is something rather enviable about non-existent persons: they bask in an utterly peaceful, painless nothingness, finding the perfect "rest" to which so many of we existers ever fruitlessly aspire.[59] One step further, Qoheleth agrees that this blissful nothingness can, at times, outweigh the value of a life bereft of both long-term goal-satisfaction and short-term happiness. Remarkably, both Qoheleth and Benatar are at least sometimes comfortable predicating "betterness" to a hypothetical person in a non-existent state. Moreover, both deny that life offers any grand meaning for individuals. Thus, they agree that if any value is available for human beings in order to counteract life's sorrows and make living worthwhile, it will not come from the sort of value that meaning ostensibly provides.

But, secondly, where do the two part ways? It has already become apparent that their conclusions ultimately differ: despite the pessimistic tones of Ecclesiastes 4:3 and 6:3, Qoheleth would not agree with David Benatar that coming into existence is always, or even generally, a harm. But what exactly is the line of reasoning at play that leads to these divergent conclusions? Essentially, it is a difference of epistemological method. Whereas Benatar's "Asymmetry Argument" utilizes an *a priori* argument devoid of appeal to human experience, Qoheleth's method is more empirical—that is, it involves investigating and giving credence to the benefits and harms experienced by particular humans.[60] Not until that empirical work has been done is Qoheleth willing to stake a claim that either existence or non-existence would be better in any given case. Universal judgments are thrown out of court entirely.[61]

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[59] Clearly, I am "personifying" the non-existent somewhat to make the point.

[60] As mentioned in Chapter 1, the most influential work on Qoheleth's epistemology remains Michael Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 137–55, which argues that the sage exhibits "an essentially empirical methodology" (137) on account of Qoheleth's own "conception of his investigative procedure, which looks to experience as the source of knowledge and the means of validation" (141).

[61] Qoheleth's method is therefore similar to the "intuitive" method we considered at the beginning of this chapter and portrayed in *Figure 1.* But the difference is that Qoheleth is not considering human existence as a conglomerate

One correlating aspect of this methodological difference lies in the two thinkers' respective assumptions about the possibility for a comparison between the goods of existence and the lack of such goods in non-existence:[62] Benatar's disallowal of such a comparison coheres with his *a priori* method, while Qoheleth's openness to this comparison aligns with his empirical method. To unpack this distinction in greater detail, a brief review of Benatar's thesis on this point may be helpful. Benatar's proposal, we may recall, is that while the pains of existence do indeed compare unfavorably with the painlessness of non-existence, the pleasures of existence are (quite surprisingly) "not an advantage" over their absence in non-existence. Where we expect symmetry, Benatar pronounces asymmetry. By saying that the goods are "not an advantage,"[63] Benatar is implicitly claiming that the goods of existence cannot genuinely be compared with their corresponding absence in non-existence—thus, the two states are incommensurable.[64] Harms can be compared, he maintains, but benefits cannot be. And if so, then life's goods can never be taken into account and the mere possibility that the goods will outweigh the harms in any individual's experience is ruled out. If only pains, and not pleasures, are weighed on the scales of value, then the scales will weigh in favor of non-existence every time. But what is distinct about life's goods, such that Benatar feels justified to rule them out? Once again, Benatar's foundational premise for this argument is that non-existers cannot be deprived—that is, according to his particular use of the term, they cannot be said to feel a subjective lack that they are "missing out" on some good thing existers experience, since if they never come into existence they will have no reason to "miss" anything.[65] Would Qoheleth agree with this?

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and then declaring "better" or "worse" over it *in toto;* instead the value judgment is only assigned to particular people or groups of people, given their particular circumstances.

[62] This comparison is represented by the upper arc in *Figure 2* and *Figure 3.*

[63] Benatar, *Better*, 41: "The pleasures of the existent, although good, are not an advantage over non-existence, because the absence of pleasures is not bad. For the good to be an advantage over non-existence, it would have to have been the case that its absence were bad."

[64] Benatar does not explicitly claim incommensurability, but it is a logical implication of his notion that if the absence of X is "not bad," then the presence of X is not an "advantage" or better (see previous note). We might add parenthetically that if Benatar's conclusion seems confusing, it is because he appears to be equivocating on the term "bad" and conflating the categories of intrinsic bad (or harm) and comparative bad (or harm). As pointed out above in n. 20, the fact that some circumstance is "not bad" in itself (i.e., not intrinsically bad) never implies that some other circumstance could not be better—as Benatar here claims it cannot be. That which is worse off in a comparison suffers not intrinsic harm but comparative harm. The runner who finished in second place is in a "not bad" state, all things considered, yet she suffered the comparative harm of not finishing in first place. Correspondingly, the first-place finisher enjoys advantage or comparative benefit over the second-place finisher.

[65] Benatar, *Better*, 58. We may note a questionable element in Benatar's foundational premise, which then logically extends to his entire project. He assumes that "deprivation" is only a subjective category involving the conscious awareness of that which is lacking: since non-existers have no consciousness of what they lack, they are not being "deprived" of life's goods. This, of course, relates to the Deprivation Account of death's harm we discussed

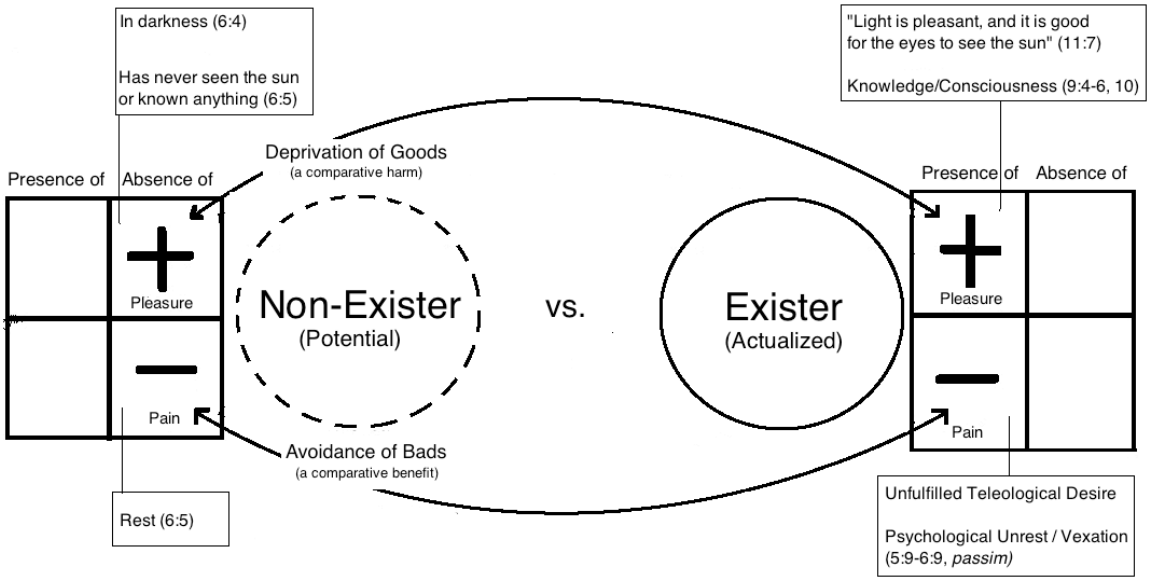
Qoheleth would in fact reject this premise (see *Figure 3),* and as a result he would also deny Benatar's claim of incommensurability. We know this because when he speaks of non-existers he not only mentions their relative benefits—their perfect "rest" in place of insatiable desire (6:5), or their auspicious fortitude from oppression (4:3). But he also acknowledges their deprivations—they never "see the sun" [שֶׁמֶשׁ לֹא־רָאָה], never "know anything" [לֹא יָדָע]; they traverse only "in darkness" rather than light (6:4–5).[66] All of these things are explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the book as objective values, even comparative advantages or benefits*,* for the living, and thus to go without them is to be objectively deprived. In 11:7, Qoheleth begins his final exhortation, "Light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun [טוֹב לָעֵינַיִם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הַשָּׁמֶשׁ]." Likewise, in chapter nine Qoheleth surmises that "a living dog is better off than [טוֹב מִן] a dead lion" (9:4), because the living at least have knowledge and the experience of brute consciousness, unlike the shadowy non-existers of Sheol, who "know nothing" [יוֹדְעִים אֵינָם מְאוּמָה], for whom "there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom" (9:5–6, 10).[67] People are better off for experiencing these things, and worse off for lacking them.

in Chapter 3. There we noted Thomas Nagel's argument (against Epicurus's "experience requirement") that the brain-injured man is genuinely deprived of goods while internally feeling no lack. For a second example, the 2015 film *Room* portrays a boy who has spent the first five years of his life trapped inside a small, filthy room, playing with paper boats in toilet water. The boy experiences no subjective awareness (and thus feels no subjective deprivation) of the world beyond those walls—of grass, trees, animals. Yet, this in no way prevents us from surmising that the boy has been genuinely "deprived" of something which would have been good for him. The same would seem to apply for non-existent persons: they are missing something which would have been good for them to experience, whether or not they know it.

[66] As discussed in n. 29, Qoheleth lists the deprivations that can be predicated of the stillborn as concessive with respect to its sole advantage—rest.

[67] Qoheleth's ominous address to the reader in 9:10 ("Sheol, where you are *going*," אַתָּה הֹלֵךְ שָׁמָּה) corresponds to the stillborn's dark traverse ("in darkness it *goes*," וּבַחֹשֶׁךְ יֵלֵךְ, 6:4) and the rhetorical question of 6:6b, "do not all/both *go* to one place?" [הֲלֹא אֶל־מָקוֹם אֶחָד הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ] (see also 3:20; 5:14–15; 12:5). Even though the book's prologue characterizes "going" [הלך] in the world as a generally interminable affair (e.g. 1:4, 6, 7), death provides the exception to the rule. If any *telos* be granted for human "goings" in Qoheleth's philosophy, it is death alone.

Figure 3 – Qoheleth in Relation to the Structure of Benatar's Argument



For Qoheleth, then, it is false that "those who never exist cannot be deprived." But this is not because Qoheleth thinks non-existent persons are somehow aware of life's goods and yearning to experience them. Rather, it is because Qoheleth, unlike Benatar, regards a "deprivation" as an objective lack of some good, whether or not a felt sense of lack enters one's subjective awareness. Since the objective possession of goods (in existence) and their lack (in non-existence) can be compared, Qoheleth can therefore posit a genuine value-comparison between existers and their non-existent counterparts with respect to both the relevant pains and—here in distinction from Benatar—pleasures. This by itself does not guarantee a worthwhile existence, but it does mean that existence and its goods may be weighed against non-existence on an unbiased, evenly balanced scale.

For the ancient sage, life's mundane pleasures (seeing the sun, having knowledge) are examples of intrinsic goods, and a person would be (comparatively) harmed by not enjoying them.[68] Yet, as we have seen in section III, enjoy them they must—this part is not optional. In

[68] This account of harm is referred to in contemporary philosophical literature as the counterfactual comparative account (CCA). See Feinberg, "Wrongful Life," 145–78; Craig Purshouse, "A Defence of the Counterfactual Account of Harm," *Bioethics* 30 (2016): 251–59; Justin Klocksiem, "A Defense of the Counterfactual Comparative Account of Harm," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (2012): 285–300. Klocksiem defines a harm as the following: "an event, *e,* constitutes a harm for *S* if and only if *S* is better off in the nearest possible world in which *e* does not occur than she is in the relevant *e*-world" (285). I would only modify this account by clarifying that the event which constitutes the harm may also be a "non-event," or non-occurrence. This would be true in cases where a potential person (who, if conceived and born, would have lived an overall beneficial life) is harmed by not being brought into

other words, what we have now seen is that Qoheleth's philosophy of life's value fully hinges on both the subjective enjoyment of the goods at hand as well as the objective, intrinsic worth attributed to those goods. The objective possession of goods (over against their utter lack in non-existence) meets a necessary condition or minimum requirement for positive value, but the subjective enjoyment of these goods meets the sufficient condition: both are required for the triumph of being over non-being.

This means that only in comparison to a life which is not enjoying these things anyway—a life for which these goods do not "count"—would non-existence be better.[69] What the stillborn and the man in 6:2–3 share in common is an inability to enjoy good; but the stillborn's stated advantage is that it alone obtains "rest"—which is to say, it evades the pain of unfulfilled teleological desire and its attendant psychological unrest.

We have seen, then, that despite initial appearances, Qoheleth does not regard coming into existence as a universal harm. To put it simply, it depends. Shelly Kagan has provided a basic tripartite categorization of views on the value of existence *vis-à-vis* non-existence: (a) *optimists* are those who think that always and for everyone, existence is better than non-existence; (b) *pessimists* believe the opposite, that non-existence is always to be preferred; (c) *moderates* hold that it depends on the given circumstance, on the quality of one's life.[70] While David Benatar is a true pessimist, Qoheleth, despite his reputation for being one, is in fact not a pessimist. Nor, for that matter, is he a naïve optimist. Qoheleth is actually a moderate, a realist. Such cases as he has described in 4:3 and 6:2–3 are best seen as exceptions to the norm rather than paragons of

existence: a particular event which might have occurred does not occur, and this creates a harm. It must be acknowledged that this position does entail an apparently ludicrous implication—namely, that billions upon billions of potential but unconceived humans have been "harmed" by not being brought into existence, and thus deserve our grief (Shelly Kagan, *Death* [New Haven: Yale University Press], 221). But this implication need not be a defeater for CCA. It may well be the case that some untold number of potential, non-existent persons have been harmed in the comparative sense, but a comparative harm is (in most cases) not nearly as severe as an intrinsic harm (such as being inflicted with prolonged pain), and so the degree of grief we might feel for the billions of unconceived persons might be comparable to the degree of grief we feel that many of our own lives are not much greater than they actually are, certainly not as great as they theoretically could be if other events would have occurred (or not occurred). My interpretation of Qoheleth suggests he would concur with a CCA account.

[69] Note that both Benatar and Qoheleth arrive at the conclusion that non-existence is better only in situations where no goods are tallied whatsoever. In other words, neither of them makes the claim based only on some amount of badness outweighing some lesser amount of goodness. The difference is that for Qoheleth, this non-contribution of goods is a unique condition, whereas for Benatar, it is *a priori* universal, given his "no deprivation for non-existers" premise.

[70] Shelly Kagan, *Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 258.

pessimism, and they can easily be avoided if one heeds the sage's exhortation to exchange the insatiable desire for what lies beyond in favor of a joyful engagement with what lies at hand.

VI. Qoheleth's Theory of Well-Being

Up to this point the broad question in view has been the value of existence in relation to non-existence. Is it good to be born—or not? Is it better for a potential person to come into existence, or to remain non-existent? But in the process of exploring Qoheleth's ideas it has become clear that this question about the value of existence is necessarily tied to the *quality* of one's existence. If we imagine the mere fact of being alive as a kind of container for one's experiences, then we can take note of two distinguishable value-questions: (a) What is the value of the container itself—i.e. life itself, the mere fact of being alive? (b) What is the value of the contents placed inside the container—i.e. the experiences *in life* had by living humans?[71] According to some philosophies, the answers to (a) and (b) are entirely independent. Namely, for both pessimists and optimists, (a) can be answered without reference to (b), since "life itself" is rendered with an *a priori,* universal judgment: the fact of being alive is either necessarily bad (pessimism) or necessarily good (optimism), quite apart from one's experiences. But it is not so for a moderate perspective, such as represented by Qoheleth. In his case, the "container"—life itself—is neutral in value and thus the overall value of being alive cannot be calculated until the *quality* of one's experiences has been assessed. Whether it is good to come into existence depends, for Qoheleth, on the *kind* of life that one will live.

But this raises its own question: what is Qoheleth's standard for determining one's quality of life? For Qoheleth to state that a non-existent stillborn is "better off" than the man of 6:2–3 implies that Qoheleth has standards for "betterness." Qoheleth carries assumptions about the sort of criteria that determine whether a person's quality of life is better or worse. This is essentially the category philosophers now call *well-being* (or *welfare).* In Chapter 3 we referred to the category of well-being by way of contrast with the category of meaning. In this section we will draw from 6:1–6 as well as other ideas in the book in order to reconstruct and clarify Qoheleth's "mature" assumptions about well-being—about what renders a person better off—not merely hypothetically (as with our discussion of meaning), but *actually*. We will do so by engaging with a few of the

[71] The container analogy is also drawn from Kagan, *Death*, 258–63.

most prominent theories within contemporary well-being philosophy. Thus in this section we transfer from the more detailed exegetical discussion of the two passages highlighted earlier to a broader theoretical grappling as we attempt to categorize Qoheleth's overall view of well-being in terms of contemporary philosophy on well-being. As with our exploration of Qoheleth's concept of meaning in Chapter 2, here we will explore certain philosophical theories about well-being that do not necessarily represent Qoheleth's views along the path to discovering one that does seem a better fit. This is helpful because situating his views within the context of the main philosophical theories about well-being—even if only to explain why they do *not* fit with Qoheleth—brings greater clarity to the particular conception of well-being the sage does hold. But first we need to gain a better grasp of the concept of *well-being* itself.[72]

According to the philosophy of well-being, to inquire of someone's well-being (or welfare) is to determine what is "good for" (or "bad for") that person.[73] Guy Fletcher, in his introduction to a major recent anthology on well-being philosophy, writes: "What is distinctive about the philosophy of well-being is its focus on the question of which things in and of themselves make someone's life go better or worse for them. It thus seeks an account of what is fundamentally, or non-instrumentally, good or bad for us and why."[74] This question is hardly peripheral to Qoheleth's concerns and, as I have attempted to show, it stands at the center of the sage's whole project, which aimed to "see what is good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life" (2:3; cf. 6:12). But before exploring a few different answers to the question we should briefly review and clarify the important distinction between the concepts of meaning and well-being, which are the two broad types of personal value with which our project is concerned.[75]

Referring back to the discussion on the form of meaning in Chapter 2 will be a helpful starting point. One way of stating the difference between meaning and well-being is that meaning

[72] The modern terms "well-being" and "welfare" cover roughly the same conceptual territory as the ancient Greek term εὐδαιμονία.

[73] The distinction is made between something being "good" absolutely (i.e. impersonal good) versus being "good for" some particular person (i.e. personal good). See Mark Schroeder, "Value Theory," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-theory.

[74] Guy Fletcher, "Introduction," 1–6 in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (ed. Guy Fletcher; New York: Routledge, 2016), 1 [emphasis omitted]. Note that Fletcher is not using "life" in the technical sense we referred to in Chapter 3.

[75] Arguably, there is only one additional category of value for a person beyond these two, that of moral value, or virtue.

requires the four formal conditions we specified there, whereas well-being, simply put, does not. None of those four conditions—instrumentally valuable actions done with a view toward some corresponding terminal or final value, the difficulty of those actions, competent causation on the part of the actor, or the permanency of the achievement itself—are required with well-being. It is worth expanding on those differences.

Regarding the first, we could say that meaning is a *diachronic* category; it accrues its particular value by redeeming deposits dispersed across time. Well-being, on the other hand, is a *synchronic* category; it is concerned strictly with the present-tense welfare of a given individual, apart from what may have led to that state of affairs, or what future consequences that welfare might entail. One's well-being is the true answer to the question, "How is So-and-so doing?" Second, meaning requires difficulty, but well-being does not. If it turned out that sitting on the sofa watching television for nineteen hours a day increased one's well-being, that would be perfectly compatible with the concept of well-being as such (whereas meaning would rule out such a possibility from the beginning). Third, meaning must be accrued through one's own competent causation, but this is not so for well-being. One's well-being at a given time could have been generated by the actions of some external determining force, or perhaps by arbitrary chance, such as winning the lottery or randomly inheriting a business for which one has not labored. None of these possibilities would deplete the value inherent in well-being. The quality such a scenario would birth for one's life can be considered on its own merits, simply on the basis of one's current welfare. Regarding the fourth condition, meaning is characterized by the "permanency requirement." Meaning accrues over time, but once it obtains it is to hold serious staying power, while well-being can last for any amount of time, long or short. This also implies that the arrival of meaning is more like a "one-time" occurrence. A life either achieves meaning or does not, but one's life cannot, for example, vacillate in and out of meaningfulness on a daily basis. One's well-being, on the other hand, could be high on Monday but low on Tuesday. The category of well-being does not tell a story about one's whole life the way the category of meaning does.[76]

[76] This point is debated within the meaning of life literature, but my aim is to represent the conception of meaning assumed by Qoheleth. Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37–58, discusses the difference between "part-life" and "whole-life" views concerning the bearer of meaning, as well as the question as to whether the presence of meaning in life is a gradient or an all-or-nothing binary. Given that Qoheleth initially aimed for an ultra-meaningful life but then finally reckoned that *no* meaning is possible (as opposed to some smaller degree of meaning), I would place Qoheleth in the latter camp on both questions: the bearer of meaning is one's whole life (not merely a part), and life either achieves meaning or it does not. As Qoheleth would come to believe, of course, no one's life achieves it.

Besides these four conditions on the formal concept of meaning, another crucial component of meaning is one we explored in Chapter 3: that the *bearer* of meaning is, technically, the "life" of the person who lived, not the person herself. But in the case of well-being the bearer *is* the actual person, since, again, well-being is essentially the true answer to the question, "How is So-and-so doing?"[77] A final key difference between meaning and well-being for Qoheleth is that whereas meaning does not finally exist as a reality for humans—and thus our queries about it always remain *hypothetical*, clarifying a concept that holds no ontological water—well-being *does* exist. The mature Qoheleth commends what he has truly discovered to be good for human beings, what promotes their well-being, given the absence of meaning and absurdity of existence.

A. Three Theories of Well-Being and Qoheleth

Having thus achieved some clarity on the *concept* of well-being, we can now look into a few theories as to what actually constitutes well-being for a person in order to investigate any possible overlap with Qoheleth's own implicit theory. Here, analogous to our approach in the latter part of Chapter 2, we will explore a few different prominent theories on offer in the relevant literature, and propose one of them as fitting best with Qoheleth's implicit view. Theories of well-being have in recent decades typically been classified among three main options: (1) hedonism, (2) desire-fulfillment theory, and (3) objective-list theory.[78] According to hedonism, well-being consists in the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. Desire-fulfillment theory claims that a person's good estate consists in having her desires satisfied. Objective-list theories propose "lists" of distinct objective items or facts which a person's life must contain in order to be deemed a good one. Note that the former two theories look for good solely within a person's internal mental state, whereas the latter category moves outside to the person's external world. With these in view, is it possible to see Qoheleth's own theory of well-being in terms of one of these three options?

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[77] In the article from which we drew this distinction in Chapter 3, Shelly Kagan writes, "A theory of well-being provides an account as to which facts constitute my being better off. But whatever the relevant facts are, presumably at the very least they must be facts about *me*" (Shelly Kagan, "Me and My Life," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 94 (1994): 309–24, at 313 [emphasis original]).

[78] See discussions oriented around these three categories in, e.g., Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 492–502; L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45–137; Richard J. Arneson, "Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16.1 (1999): 113–42; Benatar, *Better*, 69–88; Steven Luper, *The Philosophy of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88–97; Roger Crisp, "Well-Being," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/well-being.

1. Hedonism

First, then, could Qoheleth have been a *hedonist*, in the philosophical sense? Earlier, in Chapter 3, this question was broached when we compared Epicurus' view of death's harm to Qoheleth's. There we pointed out that Qoheleth's judgment that death harms the one who dies implies he could not be a full hedonist—that is, one who believes that all goods in life may be reduced to the category of pleasure and all harms to that of pain.[79] But here we want to explore the topic again from a broader perspective than the lens of death. Qoheleth has often been taken for a hedonist,[80] and such an interpretation might initially suggest itself to the reader in light of Qoheleth's clarion calls to enjoyment in the book's seven "joy passages" (2:24–25; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–19; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10). However, there are significant problems with this classification. To cite a well-known philosophical objection to hedonism, a classic hedonist should be perfectly happy to live her entire life in something akin to Robert Nozick's imagined "experience machine," wherein a person's brain is wired to simulate a blissful virtual reality, and "life" consists solely of the mental, imaginary experiences had while "floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to [her] brain."[81] Clearly, Qoheleth does not mention this particular possibility, but it is doubtful he would have been on board for the ride. Instead, there are good reasons to think that, for all his praise of subjective enjoyment, Qoheleth is still concerned with what he takes to be the objective realities lying beyond his prefrontal cortex.

In fact, Qoheleth carries out his own "experience machine" of sorts with the pleasure-experiment he describes in 2:1–11. The hedonistic overtones of the passage are prominent, particularly in 2:1–3. But Qoheleth's later repudiation of this course of life (branding it הֶבֶל in 2:1 and 2:11) implies that at the time of writing the book his assumed theory of well-being—his stance

[79] For defenses of the hedonistic theory of well-being see, e.g., Ben Bramble, "A New Defense of Hedonism about Well-Being," *Ergo* 3.4 (2016): 85–112; Jeffrey Goldsworthy, "Well-Being and Value," *Utilitas* 4.1 (1992): 1–26; Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature, Varieties, and Plausiblity of Hedonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Torbjörn Tännsjö, "Narrow Hedonism," *Journal of Happiness Studies* 8.1 (2007): 79–98.

[80] E.g. Carol A. Newsom, "Positive Psychology and Ancient Israelite Wisdom," 117–35 in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life* (ed. Brent A. Strawn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), ultimately regards Qoheleth's worldview as an instance of "the hedonism of despair" which values "pleasure for pleasure's sake" (135); Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 1, thinks our author represents a hedonism which "regards sensual desire, pleasure, and enjoyment as the motive, aim, or proof of all moral action." (For this definition of hedonism Krüger cites Georgi Schischkoff, ed., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch: Begründet von Heinrich Schmidt* [Stuttgart: Kröner, 1974], s.v. "Eudämonismus" and "Hedonismus.")

[81] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 42.

on what is "good for" someone—is likely something other than pure hedonism. Qoheleth will, of course, go on to commend a life marked by enjoyment in the seven texts noted in the previous paragraph. But the conception of enjoyment or pleasure envisioned in the joy texts seems markedly different from what we find in 2:1–11, even if the same term is employed [שִׂמְחָה].

Apart from the use of the word שִׂמְחָה, some of the overtly hedonistic overtones in 2:1–3 which demarcate it from the book's joy passages include the following. First, Qoheleth speaks to himself, "I will test *you* with pleasure [אֲנַסְּכָה בְשִׂמְחָה]" (2:3); that is, he designates the *self* as the locus of examination, rather than some external object or activity. The undertaking will not simply involve enjoying an activity or two, but examining the effect on his body while doing so. Second, and probably as further specification of what the examination involves, Qoheleth says he searched how to "pull" or "draw" his flesh with wine [לִמְשׁוֹךְ בַּיַּיִן אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי].[82] The reason for this choice of verb [משׁך] is not entirely obvious but the combination with "flesh" [בָּשָׂר] seems to signify some kind of *physical provocation* by means of alcohol—becoming intoxicated for the feeling of it. We may think of the modern-day metaphor of "pushing" oneself to one's limit.

It is not surprising, then, that Qoheleth pronounces negative judgments on this early attempt at pleasure, and these negative appraisals are never reprised in the joy passages. "Frivolity" [שְׂחוֹק],[83] cited as a parallel to שִׂמְחָה in 2:2, is condemned as "insanity" [מְהוֹלָל, a *poal* participle of הלל III in *DCH*], whereas nowhere in the joy passages is שְׂחוֹק reused. Moreover, Qoheleth labels the partaking of שִׂמְחָה as הֶבֶל in 2:1 and possibly 2:10–11, yet in none of the joy passages' frequent use of שִׂמְחָה and שׂמח does Qoheleth call them הֶבֶל. Further argument will be provided in our next chapter, but even on the basis of the foregoing evidence we have good reason to regard the empty indulgences by which Qoheleth tested himself in 2:1–3 as quite distinct from the more

[82] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 126, notes that the closest parallel use of the verb משׁך is Ps 28:3, "Do not *drag me away* with the wicked."

[83] שְׂחוֹק is literally "laughter" (cf. 7:3; 10:19; verbal form in 3:4) but the word clearly insinuates something more degenerate than innocent laughing here, as in 7:6. Cf. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 505, commenting on the word in 7:6: "It belongs to the semantic field of superficial enjoyment, which ignores the certainty of death." Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 79, says the word signifies "unrestrained merriment." Fox, *Rereading*, 117 is correct that the word שְׂחוֹק as such cannot simply be contrasted with שִׂמְחָה, as an opposition of "trivial gaiety versus deeper happiness," because it is also used in positive contexts (Ps 126:2; Job 8:21). In both cases it depends on the word's use in a given passage. Here in 2:1–3 Qoheleth uses both words in the more trivial sense; in the joy passages, the sense of שִׂמְחָה will deepen.

mature, "grown-up" beckoning to enjoyment we will find in the book's classic joy texts. If so, the portrait in 2:1–3 alone should not render Qoheleth a hedonist.[84]

A second reason to doubt hedonism as best representing Qoheleth's view of well-being is that a hedonistic theory makes well-being dependent upon one's own internal experience of pleasure (and lack of pain). Yet in Qoheleth, while the body of the text is written from the first-person perspective, the author's subject matter is only rarely constituted by his own direct experiences (as in 1:12–2:23). Much more commonly he is inquiring about and testifying to that which he has seen to be true in the experience of הָאָדָם, humanity in general, or in specific instantiations thereof.[85] Moreover, his *hebel*-judgments often move beyond the realm of his own personal degree of pleasure or pain. For instance, he grieves over the societal injustices he has witnessed (e.g. 3:16; 4:1; 7:15; 8:10, 14, etc.); he condemns incongruities which have no exclusive relationship to himself (e.g. 4:4; cf. 10:5–7); he hates that others who accomplished much will be forgotten (4:16; cf. 9:15). Examples could be multiplied, but the point is that Qoheleth's theory of well-being cannot be *solely* tied to his own experienced ratio of pleasure-versus-pain, as important as such a rubric may be for him.

A third and final reason Qoheleth should not be regarded as a hedonist is the fact that Qoheleth undeniably reserves some value for truth, wisdom, and knowledge as such (e.g. 2:14, 26; 7:4, 5, 10–12, 19; 8:1; 9:5, 10, 16–18; 10:2, 10; cf. 12:9). Beyond the passages which positively appraise wisdom in some manner, this point is also implied by the text in that Qoheleth has rejected certain beliefs (e.g. that toil achieves יִתְרוֹן, that good behavior inherits rewards, et al.), yet these are beliefs he would prefer to be true (hence his frustration that they are not). His rejection of them is not motivated by preference, but intellectual honesty. Indeed, Qoheleth acknowledges that, "With much wisdom comes much vexation, and the one who increases knowledge increases pain" (1:18). This means that Qoheleth's beliefs about the world, his estimations concerning what is true, cannot merely be reduced to instruments of pleasure.[86] But the thoroughgoing hedonist would have

[84] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 26, concludes similarly: "There is no basis here for the charge of hedonism… Such a charge is denied by 2:2, that pleasure is folly. The accent in [2:24] differs from 2:2, which envisioned a deliberate striving after pleasure as a goal."

[85] הָאָדָם is used in this way in 1:3, 13; 2:3, 22, 24; 3:10, 11, 13, 18, 19 [2x], 21, 22; 5:19; 6:1, 7, 10, 11, 12 [2x]; 7:2, 14, 29; 8:6, 9, 11, 14, 17 [2x], 9:1, 3, 12; 12:5.

[86] Cf. Fox, *Rereading*, 94: "The anodyne did not, however, work for Qohelet (2:1–2, 11), who, by persisting in his search for knowledge, proves that he is driven to strive for enlightenment rather than to eliminate the concomitant pain."

no reason to pursue knowledge of truth as such and, if consistent, would only retain those beliefs which maximize pleasure, since truth itself would hold no inherent value on a purely hedonistic theory of well-being. Hedonism was a known philosophy at the time of Qoheleth's writing, and it involved certain ideological entailments. Some of the hedonistic and skeptical Greek philosophies of Qoheleth's day—Cyrenaicism and Pyrrhonism—denied any necessary connection between sensory appearances and external or objective reality.[87] Particularly in the case of the Cyrenaics this was done precisely for the reason just suggested, to maintain a consistent hedonism. Their aim was solely to satisfy the fleeting pleasure of the moment, for which truth and appearance were roughly equal servants.[88] The existence of these philosophies in and around Qoheleth's Hellenistic environment is important, because it means this philosophical direction was (likely) open to him—but it was a path he did not take.

2. Desire-Fulfillment Theory

A second prominent account for well-being is known as the *desire-fulfillment theory.* If Qoheleth cannot properly be considered a hedonist, might he fit better as a desire-fulfillment theorist? Desire-fulfillment theory shares some kinship with hedonism in that both emphasize the subjective and experiential pole of value over against the objective.[89] The former theory states that "what is good in itself for people…is their getting what they want, or the fulfillment of their desires, and what is bad in itself for them is their not getting what they want, or the frustration of their desires."[90] To be clear, according to this view some desired good is valuable toward well-being simply *by virtue of its being desired* (and the person is benefited when that desired good is obtained), not on account of its own inherent value independent of that desire.[91] For example, a man who desires to

[87] The Cyrenaics' essential *credo* was that "feelings [πάθη] alone are apprehensible" (Diogenes Laertius, II.92) and "we have perception of feelings alone" (Eusebius, *PE*, XIV.18.31–32). A. A. Long, "The Socratic Legacy," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (ed. Keimpre Algra et al; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 615–41, comments: "Since all that securely exists for someone is what he is currently experiencing, immediate feelings are the only guide to what is genuinely valuable" (634). Cf. also Jacques Brunschwig, "Introduction: the Beginnings of Hellenistic Epistemology," in ibid., 227–59.

[88] Voula Tsouna, *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 138: "The Cyrenaics consider the exploration of epistemological issues instrumental to their hedonism."

[89] Chris Heathwood, "Subjective Theories of Well-Being," 199–219 in *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism* (ed. Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 208.

[90] Chris Heathwood, "Desire-Fulfillment Theory," 135–47 in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (ed. Guy Fletcher; New York: Routledge, 2016), 135. Other advocates include Mark C. Murphy, "The Simple Desire-Fulfillment Theory," *Noûs* 33.2 (1999): 247–72; Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

[91] Heathwood, "Desire-Fulfillment Theory," 135.

spend his life counting blades of grass would be well-off if and only if that desire were fulfilled. This theory seems similar to hedonism, but the two do indeed differ. For one thing, a person's desires could be satisfied without it resulting in a pleasure-over-pain mental state (when the object of their desire is not necessarily pleasurable). Inversely, a pleasure-over-pain state might be acquired unintentionally, thus without satisfying a desire—and this would not count toward well-being.

We have already seen the importance of desire in Qoheleth's thought, but it is important precisely because of his denials that a mode of living oriented around desire could represent the good life. In Chapter 2 we discussed Qoheleth's repeated use of the verbs שׂבע and מלא with the negative particle לֹא to stress that human desires consistently fail to be satisfied (1:8; 4:8; 5:9; 6:3, 7). And in this chapter in particular we have noted Qoheleth's antipathy for what I have called *teleological desire,* essentially an unrelenting pursuit of teleological meaning. The reason Qoheleth detests this tendency enough to rank its captors below a stillborn is that, as he sees it, such a person as the man in 6:2–3 is slave to an illusion. To be sure, Qoheleth would have had sympathy for this mode of life when he was still hot in the pursuit of meaning himself—indeed, he was likely one of its exemplars. But *once* it becomes clear that all is absurd and the cosmos simply refuse to yield any meaningful "gain" to would-be claimants, at that point a stubborn reluctance to adjust to the facts exhibits the height of human folly. Even when many good things are provided for people, as with the man in 6:2–3, human desires still bulge and bloat beyond their proper bounds. Qoheleth therefore does not think highly of human desire as a starting point for well-being.

3. Objective-List Theory

A third common theory advocated by philosophers as an account of well-being is known as the *objective-list theory.* Given the apparent problems with the first two options, is it possible Qoheleth would ascribe to an objective-list theory of well-being? This theory holds that there exists a plurality of goods in life which are objectively beneficial for someone irrespective of the person's subjective response to these goods, and it is the presence of these goods which renders one better off, while the absence of these goods renders one worse off.[92] This view is thus similar to the

[92] Advocates of this view include Fletcher, "Objective List Theories," 148–60; Guy Fletcher, "A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being," *Utilitas* 25.2 (2013): 206–20; Arneson, "Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction," 113–42; Christopher M. Rice, "Defending the Objective List Theory of Well-Being," *Ratio (new series)* 26 (2013): 196–211; Ben Bradley, "Objective Theories of Well-Being," 220–38 in *The Cambridge Companion to*

consequentialist theory of meaning we discussed in Chapter 2 in that it solely emphasizes the objective pole over the subjective, yet without the teleological structure implicit there, since this is not a theory about meaning but more simply about well-being. As far as the contents of goods on the "list," there are likely as many different lists as there are advocates of this view. What is important is not which precise items are on the list but simply the fact of their plurality and thus the irreducibility of these various goods, in contrast to a view like hedonism where all apparent goods can be reduced to the single phenomenon of pleasure. Derek Parfit, for instance, offers the following list: "moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one's abilities, having children and being a good parent, knowledge, and the awareness of true beauty."[93]

The objective-list theory fits certain aspects of Qoheleth's thought, but is clearly dissonant with others. Where it fits is that Qoheleth does seem to identify various objective goods that can enhance a person's well-being (not here counting "joy" itself)—goods such as seeing the sun (11:7; 6:5), knowledge (1:16; 2:26; 9:10), wisdom or reason (1:16, 2:3, 9; 7:11; 2:13–14a), labor (2:24; 3:13, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:9–10), eating and drinking (2:24; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7), romantic love (9:9), companionship (4:9–12), aesthetic enjoyment (2:4–8; 9:8), rest (4:6; 5:11; 6:5), and potentially others. Some of the aforementioned goods are indeed repudiated by Qoheleth in his discussions about meaning, but that should not lead us to suppose he is denying that they hold any value whatsoever. All that is being denied in those cases is their value *with respect to* "gain," or meaning. Their potential within his implicit theory of well-being is another matter, and here there is no reason to doubt that their value is affirmed.

That is because in Qoheleth's philosophy, if a potential good turns out useless with respect to the accrual of meaning—and all of them do—it gets one more chance at value. Something might be denied value with respect to being meaningful, but it may nonetheless be "good" in a different and more generic sense, a sense that does not contribute to meaning but still retains value. This kind of "good" is what I have in this section identified with "well-being." This collateral value has its own requirement, however. We have already seen through Qoheleth's condemnation of the man in 6:2–3 that many "objective" goods do not register any actual benefit toward a person *unless* they are *subjectively* received in the right kind of way—in this case, joyfully. In philosophy, this

Utilitarianism (ed. Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Alexander Sarch, "Internalism About a Person's Good: Don't Believe It," *Philosophical Studies* 154.2 (2011): 161–84.

[93] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 499.

idea that well-being hinges on subjective appropriation is called "internalism." It has been expressed more technically: "Something X can be good for a person A only if A is capable of caring about X."[94] Such a statement represents precisely the sort of perspective the sage allies himself with in Ecclesiastes 6:2–3. As with our exploration of Qoheleth's notion of meaning in Chapter 2, here too we seem to be caught in a labyrinth between the objective and subjective poles of value. Is there some way out?

B. A Fourth Option: *Enjoying the Good* Hybrid Theory

In light of the imperfect fit between Qoheleth and each of these three aforementioned theories, is it possible we have not yet exhausted our options? Again, the aim here is to discern whether there exists some philosophical account of well-being, some theory of "the good," which might articulate in contemporary philosophical terms the notion of well-being implicit in Qoheleth. What we have found in Qoheleth's case is an emphasis on both the objective and subjective components of well-being: the "good life" depends on both the way things are and the way one perceives them. Thankfully, several recent well-being philosophers have seen the need for a theory that combines the subjective purview (as solely required in hedonism and desire-satisfaction theory) with objective factors (as solely required in objective-list theories). Theories of this fourth variety are appropriately designated *hybrid theories.*[95] I suggest that a hybrid approach will provide a coherent understanding of Qoheleth's conception of well-being.

The hybrid theory which best fits Qoheleth's mature theory of well-being is embodied by the phrase *enjoying the good.* As implied by that phrase, this theory conjoins the hedonistic and objective-list theories. Shelly Kagan has articulated this view as follows, and the parallels with Qoheleth are striking:

> To at least a significant extent, well-being requires that one's enjoyment be properly connected to objective goods…At a minimum, then, we might say that well-being requires taking pleasure in the objective goods that I actually possess.[96]

> Suppose, then, that my life contains or possesses a number of significant objective goods, that I "have" them in the relevant sense (whatever that is). But imagine that I don't, in fact, enjoy these goods; I take

[94] Sarch, "Internalism," 163.

[95] See Christopher Woodard, "Hybrid Theories," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (ed. Guy Fletcher; New York: Routledge, 2016), 161–74.

[96] Shelly Kagan, "Well-Being as Enjoying the Good," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 253–72, at 257–58.

> no pleasure in their possession. Since well-being consists in *enjoying* the good, I am not made better off. That is, despite the fact that my life contains these various objective goods, *I* am not made better off.[97]

Without question, Kagan's proposal finds a close analogue in Eccl 6:1–6. As we saw earlier, Qoheleth's concern in the passage is to emphasize the necessity of subjective appropriation of life's goods. But for the reasons provided above we should not think that Qoheleth solely locates a person's welfare in the subjective terrain. Each of the two poles of value, the subjective and the objective realms, provides in itself a necessary but not sufficient condition for well-being. It is the conjoining of the two that secures an improvement in one's well-being. Moreover, part of the reason for exploring Qoheleth's overall theory of well-being in a chapter originally concentrated on 6:1–6 is that it is precisely this "enjoying the good" hybrid, so clearly evident in 6:1–6, which best captures Qoheleth's mature thought about what is "good for" a person. This is evident not only in this passage but throughout the work, particularly in the joy passages which will be the focus for the next chapter.

VII. Conclusion

Two main conclusions about Qoheleth's philosophy of value follow from the discussion in this chapter. First, despite his many complaints about the absurdity of human existence "under the sun," Qoheleth is not a philosophical pessimist. David Benatar has typified for us that perspective, yet he and Qoheleth differ in important respects. On the broad question of the value of existence, Qoheleth is a moderate who evaluates lives on a case-by-case basis. Second, the basis or criteria by which Qoheleth appraises human lives is a hybrid one—it looks not only for the presence of objective goods but also for a positive subjective reception of those goods into one's life.

Beyond these two, what this chapter has also helped us to see is that the ancient sage has an implicit value ranking of hypothetical life scenarios (see *Figure 4* below*)*. Non-existence is not at the top, as it is for his interlocutor, David Benatar. Pride of place belongs to an existence marked by fulfilled teleological desire, or meaning—a person toils, constantly longs for more, grasps for permanence—and lo, they achieve it. They obtain satisfaction of those desires and thus achieve a meaningful life. Qoheleth can apparently imagine such a world, and it often serves as the standard

[97] Kagan, "Well-Being," 256–57 [emphasis original].

against which he evaluates the world he knows by experience. But it is purely hypothetical, an unattainable mirage. Indeed, in light of humanity's inability to achieve such meaning, one *must* abandon the pursuit so as to open oneself up to alternative forms of value. Moving on, then, from the hypothetical to the real, next best would be an existence that is indeed marked by הֶבֶל and frustration, as life "under the sun" inevitably is, but nonetheless affords its own enjoyable goods. There is real value to living in such a world, even if it is less than ideal. Enjoyment of the opportunities at hand is the life which Qoheleth himself seeks and commends to his readers as constitutive of well-being. However, if that sort of existence cannot be obtained, the next best option—third in Qoheleth's rankings—is that of non-existence. The painless serenity of non-existence would indeed out-benefit its next competitor, the life in which a positive appraisal of goods (or even a positive coping with evil, as in 4:3) is not possible, the life completely devoid of joy. Avoiding this last possibility and advocating instead a life marked by rich enjoyment is indeed central to the sage's message, thus our next and final substantial chapter will explore his joy commendations in much greater detail.

Figure 4— Qoheleth's Implicit Value Ranking of Scenarios

Value #	**Value Category**	**Qoheleth's Terms**	**Relative Goods / Benefits**	**Relative Harms**	**Status?**	**Possible?**
Value #1 (5:12–16)	Meaning	יִתְרוֹן gain עָמָל toil	Teleological desire for long-term gain [יִתְרוֹן] satisfied by means of toil [עָמָל]	(none)	Existent	*Impossible* *Hypothetical*
Value #2 (5:17–19)	Well-being	רָאָה טוֹבָה see good חֵלֶק portion	Rid of (unsatisfiable) teleological desire Able to enjoy present goods / activities	Ideal teleological desires not satisfied	Existent	Possible
Value #3 (6:3b–5)		נֵפֶל stillborn נַחַת rest	Achieves "rest"—the lack of unsatisfied teleological desire and psychological unrest	Unable to obtain long-term gain [יִתְרוֹן] Unable to enjoy present goods	*Non-existent*	Possible
Value #4 (6:1–3)		לֹא־שָׂבַע no satisfaction כַּעַס vexation	(none)	Teleological desire for יִתְרוֹן unsatisfied but unabandoned and thus unable to enjoy the good and unable to "rest"	Existent	Possible

CHAPTER 6

"NOTHING BETTER": ENJOYMENT AS INTRINSIC VALUATION

I. Introduction

The driving concern of this dissertation is to articulate Qoheleth's values and evaluations. In Chapters 2 through 4 we examined Qoheleth's particular brand of *disvalues*—the *hebel*-complaints, death, and the limitations put on human agency due to time's cyclicality, respectively. Following these, Chapter 5 initially continued Qoheleth's negative themes by raising the question of the value of non-existence in relation to existence. But, perhaps surprisingly, such a dark theme actually transitioned our study into a consideration of Qoheleth's positive values, because we discovered that the sage's praise of non-existence is only reserved for those few people unable, or unwilling, to engage with the positive goods life does generally afford the living. So while human existence may weave its darker threads and often fall short of expectations, desire, and even logic, underneath it all there yet subsists a basic positive value to the human project. We then fleshed this out by inquiring into Qoheleth's philosophy of well-being. There I argued that it is best described as an instantiation of the hybrid theory Shelly Kagan has dubbed *"enjoying the good,"* so called because it combines the subjective and objective poles of value. The present chapter will round out our study by taking a deeper look at the subjective side of Qoheleth's values. Thus we will examine the concept of enjoyment itself.[1] The theme is primarily represented in seven related

[1] To be clear, we are not again addressing the question of hedonism, which has been broached in Chapters 3 and 5. The question now is not whether Qoheleth regards *all* value as subsisting in pleasure—the question of hedonism—but what the *nature* of pleasure or enjoyment is.

passages often grouped together, which I will refer to collectively as the "joy (or enjoyment) passages" (2:24–25; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–19; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10).

The theme of enjoyment in Qoheleth has elicited scholarly discussion with a wide range of views concerning the nature of Qoheleth's commended enjoyment. We can place these, loosely, along a spectrum from evaluatively "negative" to "positive":

1. An ironic joke, "wishful thinking," not actually meaning what it says.[2]
2. A "narcotic"—a bit of empty pleasure to help numb an otherwise depressing, painful existence.[3]
3. Hedonism.[4]
4. Resigned quietism.[5]
5. Authentic joy, a full embracement and affirmation of life.[6]

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[2] William H. U. Anderson, "Philosophical Considerations in a Genre Analysis of Qoheleth," *VT* 48.3 (1998): 289–300; William H. U. Anderson, *Scepticism and Ironic Correlations in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010); James L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 116 (but see below, as Crenshaw appears to have changed his view over time).

[3] Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 73: "Pleasure is an anodyne to the pain of consciousness"; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 113–15; Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 169, "die Devise der Freude gefällt Gott, weil sie als Betäubungsmittel dem Menschen die Erbärmlichkeit seines Lebens zu vergessen hilft"; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 35: "Joy is simply a narcotic that numbs the recipient to the true nature of reality"; James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 144: "The sources of pleasure—woman, wine, food, clothes, ointment, toil, and youth—are empty like life itself…In spite of the limited satisfaction such pleasure affords, it does amount to something…[it] renders existence endurable."

[4] Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 1, writes that for Qoheleth "pleasure [is] the 'highest' and 'only good' " (94); George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Scribner, 1908), suggests Qoheleth promotes "animal satisfaction" (47) and getting "the most physical pleasure [one] can" (84) as the best things in life; Carol A. Newsom, "Positive Psychology and Ancient Israelite Wisdom," 117–35 in *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life* (ed. Brent A. Strawn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), contrasts the "hedonic" vision of Qoheleth with the "eudaimonic" vision of Proverbs.

[5] Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992), speaks of Qoheleth's "resigned conclusions about accepting whatever pleasures this life can afford" (lxiv; cf. xl, 26, 27, 35, 39, 53, 87). Christian D. Ginsburg, *Coheleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts, 1861), 17; Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919).

[6] Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 34: "Qohelet's notion of enjoyment entails an authentic experience of the world that recognizes both its tragic limitations and its joyous possibilities of good… [Enjoyment] has to do with *living life* to the full—with full recognition of life's travails and woes—and making the most of every God-given opportunity"; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 124; Bertrand Pinçon, *L'énigme du bonheur: Étude sur le sujet du bien dans le livre de Qohélet* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), who regards the first four joy statements as more tentative (given their negative context) but the latter occurrences (including 7:14) progressing to genuine commendations; T. A. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87–98. Whybray's article is often referenced as the most extreme example of a "positive" take on the book's message, but it is usually missed that the claims of the article itself are much humbler than the title might imply. Nowhere within the article does Whybray actually identify Qoheleth as a "preacher of joy" nor does he gloss over the book's darker themes. Whybray's concern is to show that the theme of joy is not peripheral to Qoheleth's concerns and that each time it occurs it is in the midst of one of Qoheleth's primary

6. The genuine solution to Qoheleth's *hebel*- and *yitrôn*-problems.[7]
7. The divine revelation of joy.[8]

Typically, the more a given scholar emphasizes Qoheleth's joy commendations, the less that scholar will emphasize the darker side of Qoheleth's teaching—the *hebel* sayings and Qoheleth's other apparently pessimistic assertions.[9] Likewise, the more this darker streak is intimated, the less one is willing to give much credence to an authentic call to joy. Thus, what both sides of the spectrum often share in common is the assumption that Qoheleth's negative and positive value statements—his "pessimism" and "optimism"—constitute a zero-sum game. It is one or the other, not both. But I wish to dispute this claim. It is not only possible but highly plausible to read Qoheleth in such a way that both antinomies hold their weight, that he could passionately deny *and* affirm value at the same time. One key, I have suggested, lies in that the denials of value in the *hebel*- (and related) sayings are not excluding *all* value but only the kind of value we have identified as *meaning.* Likewise, the affirmations of value in the joy sayings are not affirming all value, but nor are they essentially worthless assertions, as some regard them. Rather, they are promoting a genuine value for which a "meaningless" cosmos can still carve out some territory.

My aim in this chapter, therefore, will be to dispute the views on the "negative" side of the interpretive spectrum concerning Qoheleth's joy motif—particularly the view (second on the list above) that Qoheleth commends pleasure only as an empty "narcotic" to manage life's pains until they are quelled by death. Instead, I endeavor to show that Qoheleth's conception of joy and enjoyment is a robust one, value-laden in its volitional, psychological, and emotional dimensions.[10] However, I will also take issue with views on the far positive side of the spectrum, such as the interpretation (sixth, above) that regards the joy theme as a direct answer to and satisfaction of

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hebel-complaints. Whybray's minimal thesis is that a recognition of the joy theme is "incapable of reconciliation with a fundamentally pessimistic standpoint" (92).

[7] Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 48, 56, 86.

[8] Norbert Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 625–35: "The joy of the heart must be something like divine revelation. When we experience joy at least in one small moment, we come in touch with that sense of things which normally God alone sees. That could well be the message of 5:19b" (634).

[9] For example, it is probably no coincidence that scholars such as Ogden and Lohfink, who have particularly stressed Qoheleth's joy theme, have also interpreted הֶבֶל in rather neutral terms, viz., as merely referring to "transience" (Ogden) or "breath" (Lohfink) (see Chapter 2).

[10] Eunny Lee's monograph, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric,* is one the strongest cases in recent years for a more "positive" take on the joy passages. My overall interpretation of the joy passages is generally similar to Lee's, but my actual argumentation is often different from hers, and I lay less stress on the theological components. Moreover, by the chapter's end I show how this reading can be aided by contemporary philosophy about pleasure, which is not something she engages.

Qoheleth's *hebel* problems. While Qoheleth's joy is indeed a *response* to what is *hebel,* it is not an *eradicator* of *hebel*, and the two human realities, joy and *hebel,* can coexist. Moreover, further distinguishing it from other approaches is that my argument for reading the joy theme positively will not primarily derive from theological considerations in the text, such as the repeated trope that joy is a gift (or payment) from God. Qoheleth undoubtedly emphasizes this fact, but the *source* of enjoyment is not the same as that enjoyment's *nature*, and our present concern lies in discerning the nature of the pleasure Qoheleth commends, as he imagines it. This requires an inquiry that is more philosophically than theologically oriented.

First, then, the majority of the chapter will be spent walking through the seven relevant passages in their textual sequence, commenting on them not exhaustively but as necessary to expound the key themes and guide the line of argument. Second, after examining these seven passages, we will reflect on the transformation undergone by Qoheleth so as to arrive at what I take to be his mature view, as expressed in these joy passages. Finally, once again drawing on contemporary philosophy as a discussion partner, I will highlight the two primary competing understandings of pleasure advanced by philosophers over the last century and show how one of them freshly articulates and clarifies Qoheleth's concept of enjoyment.

II. The Seven Enjoyment Passages

I would now like to proceed through the seven texts up for discussion, 2:24–25, 3:12–13, 3:22, 5:17–19, 8:15, 9:7–10, and 11:7–10. Given the repetition of themes among these seven passages (see *Figure 1* below), I have chosen to highlight a given motif under only one of the textual headings (rather than every place where it occurs), while still referring to its other occurrences as necessary. Again, I will not comment thoroughly on each passage, but instead focus on the most common repeated themes and the elements most relevant to my argument. Nonetheless, in light of the need to discuss all seven passages representative of the enjoyment refrain, this section will involve one of the longer stretches of exegetically-focused material in this dissertation. I am attempting to argue for a reading of the seven joy passages by initially drawing on the familiar exegetical methods and only after having done so to correlate these findings with theories about pleasure found in contemporary philosophy. Whereas Qoheleth's joy refrains grow longer as they progress sequentially, my comments on them will get progressively shorter, since by the time we approach the later ones most of the key themes will have been covered.

Figure 1 – Parallels in Qoheleth's Enjoyment Refrain

this is the gift of God / from the hand of God	during (all the days of) his life	this is his portion	in his toil / work	see (or do) good	enjoy / rejoice	drink	eat	except / than that	in / for man (or as subj.)	(no) good / better	
גַּם־זֹה ... מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא			בַּעֲמָלוֹ	וְהֶרְאָה אֶת־ נַפְשׁוֹ טוֹב		וְשָׁתָה	יֹאכַל יֹאכַל	מִן[1]	בָּאָדָם	אֵין־טוֹב	**2:24** **2:25**
מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא	בְּחַיָּיו		בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ	וְלַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹב וְרָאָה טוֹב	לִשְׂמוֹחַ	וְשָׁתָה	יֹאכַל	כִּי אִם שֶׁ	בָּם כָּל־הָאָדָם	אֵין טוֹב	**3:12** **3:13**
		הוּא חֶלְקוֹ	בְּמַעֲשָׂיו		יִשְׂמַח			מֵאֲשֶׁר	הָאָדָם	אֵין טוֹב	**3:22**
אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים	מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־ חַיָּו	הוּא חֶלְקוֹ חֶלְקוֹ	בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל בַּעֲמָלוֹ	וְלִרְאוֹת טוֹבָה	 וְלִשְׂמֹחַ	וְלִשְׁתּוֹת	לֶאֱכוֹל לֶאֱכֹל		 כָּל־הָאָדָם	טוֹב	**5:17** **5:18**
נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים	יְמֵי חַיָּיו		בַּעֲמָלוֹ		וְלִשְׂמֹוחַ	וְלִשְׁתּוֹת	לֶאֱכוֹל	כִּי אִם	לָאָדָם	אֵין־טוֹב	**8:15**
(כִּבֵּר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ)	כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ (2x)	הוּא חֶלְקְךָ	בַּעֲמָלְךָ אֲשֶׁר־ אַתָּה עָמֵל	(בְּלֵב־טוֹב) (רְאֵה חַיִּים)	בְּשִׂמְחָה	וּשְׁתֵה	אֱכֹל				**9:7** **9:9** **9:10**
					יִשְׂמַח שְׂמַח				הָאָדָם		**11:9** **11:10**

[1] Reflects emendation from the MT.

A. 2:24–25

(24) There is nothing better for a person[11] than that[12] he should eat and drink and bring himself to see good in his toil.[13] This too, I realized[14]—that it is from the hand of God. (25) For who can eat and who can worry[15] apart from him?[16]

This text, the first of Qoheleth's joy passages, comes at the conclusion of his autobiographical narrative, 1:12–2:26. What is striking about this conclusion, in comparison to all that precedes, is that the temporal aspect shifts: whereas all of 1:12–2:23 had been conveyed narratively, with Qoheleth's reported thoughts embedded inside accounts such as "I saw this," and "I realized that," now for the first time Qoheleth simply states what apparently for him are present-tense truths

[11] Qoheleth's use of the preposition בְּ ("in/with") with בָּאָדָם ("in/with man") in the MT has been construed variously. Some take it in (what may be called) a locative-moral sense, "nothing (intrinsically) good in man," characterizing humanity's moral nature, e.g. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1952), 74; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 58; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.*6, 470–71. Others have emended the בְּ to לְ in order to conform it to 8:15 (לָאָדָם), but this is unnecessary, as the sense need not differ greatly. It is clear enough from context, and by parallel with 3:12, 3:22, and 8:15, that Qoheleth is specifying *for whom* this טוֹב applies. I take the בְּ as a *beth* of specification (cf. *IBHS* §11.2.5.e, which references Lev 5:22; Deut 26:11, et al.), "with respect to," but the sense is more simply translated with English "for."

[12] MT אֵין־טוֹב בָּאָדָם שֶׁיֹּאכַל. I follow the majority of commentators in emending the MT to בָּאָדָם מִשֶּׁיֹּאכַל on the assumption of haplography of the second *mem,* which functions comparatively ("better than that…"), and also on the basis of several ancient witnesses—Old Greek, Vulgate, Peshitta, and Targum. See, e.g., Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M. G. Easton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 251–52; Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 300; Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1883), 336–37; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 96; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 225–26; James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 89; Fox, *Rereading*, 189; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 24; R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 63; Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

[13] Hebr. הֶרְאָה אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ טוֹב, lit. "cause his נֶפֶשׁ to see good." Cf. 4:8, מְחַסֵּר אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִטּוֹבָה, "depriving my נֶפֶשׁ of good?" All occurrences of נֶפֶשׁ in Ecclesiastes situate it as desiring something that is (or at least appears) good, though in almost every case the desire is not satisfied (2:24; 4:8; 6:2, 7, 9; 7:28).

[14] Hebr. רָאִיתִי, "I saw." It seems fitting, however, to translate with "I realized," because it is clearly not an empirical claim, unlike other of Qoheleth's observances which were (purportedly) learned from his observations of the world.

[15] The verb יָחוּשׁ is a crux. It has often been translated "enjoy" due to its context and by virtue of an assumed cognate with Akkadian *ḫašāšu*, but as Gordis, *Koheleth*, 226, notes, this has "scarcely been proven." The root חוּשׁ III (*DCH* 3:179) means "worry" in Mishnaic Hebrew and the Akkadian cognate *ḫâšu*, and this meaning works well for חוּשִׁי in Job 20:2 (the only other plausible occurrence of the root in the HB). See especially Friedrich Ellermeier, "Das Verbum חוּשׁ in Koh 2,25: Eine exegetische, auslegungsgeschichtliche und semasiologische Untersuchung," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 75 (1963): 197–217. Others supporting the gloss include Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 58–59; Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 107–09; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 213–15; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1.1–5.6*, 473–76.

[16] The MT, Vulgate, and Targum here read חוּץ מִמֶּנִּי ("apart from me"), while the LXX, Peshitta, Jerome, and some Hebrew manuscripts read חוּץ מִמֶּנּוּ ("apart from him," viz., God). I follow the majority of commentators in emending in line with the latter, on the assumption that an original *waw* was misread for a *yod* and since only with this emendation does v 25 makes any sense in justifying the last line of v 24 (which, by virtue of the opening כִּי, it should). See, e.g., A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 61; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 227; Fox, *Rereading*, 189.

without qualification or distance. The implication is that we have now arrived at his "mature" view, the perspective from which he is writing the book. While much of the book is critical in tone, pointing out problems and disvalues in human experience, this mature perspective is particularly concerned with highlighting what is of positive value, what is "good."

1. "Nothing Better"

Qoheleth begins with a phrase he will use to commence four of the seven joy statements, אֵין־טוֹב. Two questions arise: (a) What is meant by "good" [טוֹב] in this context? (b) And what is added to the message by the particular construction אֵין־טוֹב?

First, then, what does Qoheleth mean by "good"? While טוֹב clearly spans a broad set of meanings both in the HB and Qoheleth,[17] the sage's particular use of טוֹב in the joy passages (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 11:7) is meant, I suggest, to answer the programmatic quest of 2:3, "…until I might see what is *good* for the children of man to do [עַד אֲשֶׁר־אֶרְאֶה אֵי־זֶה טוֹב לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ] under heaven during the few days of their life."[18] In positing this, I am assuming two important distinctions. First, some of Qoheleth's uses of טוֹב are more central to his philosophical claims than others, and thus following Staples we may distinguish his "absolute" use of the term from its "relative" sense.[19] The latter sense represents the more mundane uses of the term in various specific contexts (e.g. 7:5: "It is better for one to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools"), but the former aligns it with the deeper philosophical sense of "the

[17] The Hebrew word itself encompasses roughly the same wide range of uses as its English counterpart (see "טוֹב I," and "טוֹב II," *DCH* 3:250–56; Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth: Part II Vocabulary* [vol. 2; Leuven: Peeters, 2004], 27–44). Qoheleth employs the word in its various forms (יטב / טוֹבָה / טוֹב) fifty-one times in the book (leaving aside the narrator's use in 12:14) and his usage likewise reveals a variety of senses. In broad categories, it is employed with reference to human activities (2:24; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:17; 6:9, 12; 7:2, 5, 20; 8:15), states of well-being or qualities of a person (2:1, 3, 26 [2x]; 4:3, 6, 8, 9, 13; 5:4; 6:3b; 7:1, 3, 8, 11, 14b, 18, 26; 8:12, 13; 9:2 [2x], 9:4), abstract situations (7:8a, 10, 14a), objects/possessions (5:10; 6:3a), and consequences of actions (11:6). In many cases it is used as a comparative conjoined with -מִן, "better" (4:3, 6, 13, 5:4; 6:3b, 9, 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10; 9:4, 16-17, 18a). While the moral sense of the word is common in the HB, in Qoheleth this usage is rare (7:20; 9:2 [2x]).

[18] I have translated אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ, "that they might do," as the infinitive "to do" for the sake of English style. The importance of 2:3 to the book's message is often overlooked but recognized by, e.g., Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 82; Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 169–71.

[19] W. E. Staples, "'Profit' in Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 4.2 (1945): 87–96, distinguishes between an "absolute" and "relative" sense in Qoheleth's use of both יִתְרוֹן and טוֹב. The terms are imprecise but mainly meant to distinguish something like existential significance. By "relative" neither Staples nor I mean the grammatical comparative usage of טוֹב, as referred to in note 17.

good": that which is finally valuable in the lives of human beings. In the enjoyment passages, what Qoheleth proclaims as "good" in this absolute sense is not an object or an impersonal state of affairs but a collection of personal activities or behaviors (which will turn out to be more unified than they initially appear). This fits precisely with what he claimed to be looking for in his stated quest of 2:3, to "see what is good for the children of man *to do."* While none of the sage's observations are trivial, his use of טוֹב in the four אֵין־טוֹב occurrences (2:24; 3:12, 22, 8:15) as well as 5:17 constitute a wider-scope normative judgment about the sorts of activities that will prove valuable for human beings.

Second, I am assuming an important distinction between טוֹב and יִתְרוֹן (and the latter's cognate forms). As discussed earlier, יִתְרוֹן is the word that comes closest to signifying Qoheleth's concept of meaning. Meaning, as we saw in Chapter 2, is a specific type of value—one whose value is derived from the *relations* among parts, particularly in their movement across time, such as when one labors for many years in pursuit of some far-off end.[20] Meaning is not properly predicated of one specific occurrence or moment as such; it can only exist where that moment is connected to other parts which comprise some larger unitary whole. But by contrast, that which is simply "good," טוֹב, *can* be considered on its own terms, without respect to anything else, standing in complete axiological isolation.

Some scholars have conflated this important distinction between יִתְרוֹן and טוֹב, meaning and the good, by proposing that the joy statements' claims regarding "the good" effectively and sufficiently answer Qoheleth's question, "What gain?"[21] But the distinction needs to be maintained. The two run along separate tracks, as it were. The questions about יִתְרוֹן and meaning are never answered affirmatively and only denied (implicitly and explicitly), while the questions about what is good are in fact answered by the joy statements. There is no intermingling between the two categories; they are kept entirely distinct. Qoheleth's opposition between the two categories is furthermore perceptible in the fact that, so often, his affirmations of טוֹב follow soon after his denials of יִתְרוֹן. The rhetorical movement can be summarized: "There is no יִתְרוֹן. Since

[20] Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67, "It appears that the source of meaning is often relational, i.e., logically depends on something beyond an action, which is (typically) the bearer of meaning. An action can be more or less meaningful because of something outside of it, and, especially, what has caused it and what it will cause."

[21] See Ogden, *Qoheleth*, "This basic attitude [in the joy passages] stands as Qoheleth's most profound and positive response to the search for meaning" (86; cf. 48, 56); Staples, "'Profit'," 89.

there is no יִתְרוֹן, is there any טוֹב? Yes, there is still a certain kind of טוֹב." Thus the distinction is crucial because it means that Qoheleth's denials of יִתְרוֹן do not drag טוֹב along with them. Rather, what is טוֹב is preserved as a value independent of the hypothetical path to יִתְרוֹן. Even if all יִתְרוֹן is rejected, טוֹב may still be affirmed. The following table displays these two separate tracks for meaning and the good, while also showing the close proximity of the two themes when they occur.

Qoheleth's Quest for Meaning and the Good

	Meaning		**The Good**
1:3	What *lasting gain* [יִתְרוֹן] is there for a person in all his toil which he toils under the sun?	2:1, 3	Look into what is *good* [רְאֵה בְטוֹב] …until I might see what is *good* [אֶרְאֶה אֵי־זֶה טוֹב] for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.
2:11	I considered all the works my hands had done and the labor I had expended to accomplish it, but—as a matter of fact—all this was futile and a striving after wind! There was no *lasting gain* [יִתְרוֹן] under the sun.	2:24a	There is nothing *better* [טוֹב] for a person than that he should eat and drink and bring himself to see *good* [טוֹב] in his toil.
3:9	What *lasting gain* [יִתְרוֹן] is there for the worker in that which he toils?	3:12–13	I realized that there is nothing *good* [טוֹב] for them except to be joyful and to do what is *worthwhile* [טוֹב] in one's life.
3:19	As one dies so dies the other; the same life-breath is common to both and humans have no *lasting advantage* [מוֹתַר] over animals. For all is absurd.	3:22	Then I saw that there is nothing *better* [טוֹב] than that a person should enjoy his work.
5:15	What *lasting gain* [יִתְרוֹן] is there for the one who toils for the wind?	5:17	Look, what I myself have seen to be *good* [טוֹב], what is indeed beautiful, is to eat and to drink and to see *good* [טוֹב] in all of one's toil which he toils under the sun for the few days of his life which God has given him.

What Qoheleth calls טוֹב, then, when the term is used in its absolute sense, are those valuable human experiences which provide an alternative to יִתְרוֹן, or meaning. Qoheleth may rank יִתְרוֹן higher on the scale of (hypothetical) value, but the activities labeled טוֹב do nonetheless comprise real and significant value. They are worth doing, and they represent precisely what one *should* do while one lives, since one must abandon the pursuit of meaning.

Taking up our second question, what is added to the meaning of the joy passages by Qoheleth's repeated use of the אֵין־טוֹב construction—that "nothing is better than X" or "nothing is good except for X"?[22] According to the great majority of scholarly readings of 2:24, 3:12, 3:22, and 8:15, none of these verses employ the particle of non-existence [אֵין] in order to actually deny the existence of good.[23] Rather, in each case, אֵין־טוֹב is followed by a clause which takes exception to the denial of goodness's existence, either by means of the comparative מִן (2:24; 3:22) or the exceptive כִּי אִם (3:12; 8:15), thus affirming it instead. The effect of the construction in either case depends on the linking of its two parts.

Nothing is better	than X
Nothing is good	except X

How a given scholar reads these statements depends on which side is given the greater axiological weight, the initial pronouncement ("nothing is good / better") or the concluding comparative / exceptive ("than / except X"). But the preferred sense will need to derive from contextual factors other than the phrase itself. Given the book's surfeit of negative proclamations, it is understandable that many Qoheleth scholars read the phrase as inherently signifying, "X is not very good."[24] Yet this is hardly logically required. As we will continue to see in this chapter, it is not necessary to think that the acridity perceptible in Qoheleth's denials of life's meaning spills into and poisons *all* of his value-assessments. The joy passages may well preserve a space for (relatively) untainted

[22] Outside of the four instances in Qoheleth, the phrase אֵין־טוֹב only occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible (Jer 8:15; 14:19), and twice more in Ben Sira (as אין טובה, Sir 12:3; 30:16). Ogden examines Qoheleth's use of the construction in Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing is Better'-Form," *JBL* 98.3 (1979): 339–50.

[23] This denial was more common in older commentaries, however. For example, Thomas Tyler, *Ecclesiastes: A Contribution to Its Interpretation* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), 123–24, attempts to connect the sense of 2:24 to that of 2:3 and 2:11, where Qoheleth seems to conclude that it is *not* good to שִׂמְחָה. He thus translates, "Good is not with the man who eateth and drinketh…"

[24] E.g. Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 107: "He purposely avoids an unqualified positive statement such as 'This is good.' Instead, he couches his language in a way that communicates his reluctance and his lack of enthusiasm"; cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 89.

sweetness (11:7) and beauty (5:17), despite everything. Can the phrase אֵין־טוֹב not be read in such a manner? Contemporary English often makes use of the phrase, "there is nothing better than X," and while it can be used with either a depreciatory sense ("but X is not very good") or an affirmatory sense ("and X is quite good"), it is arguably used positively more often than not (e.g. commercials in which it is stated, "there is nothing better than a cold drink on a hot summer's day").[25] Perhaps the phrase encapsulates in very short order Qoheleth's project of tearing down and building back up: אֵין־טוֹב on its own signifies the most straight-forward denial of value, yet once stated, Qoheleth immediately qualifies it by what turns out to be a surprising, bold affirmation of value. Thus one can sense a "revaluation of values" compressed into the tersest of phrases.[26]

2. "To Eat and Drink"

In 2:24 we have Qoheleth's initial employment of what will become a familiar trope, that of "eating and drinking." Here, too, the commendation of such actions may indicate a value greater than the empty hedonism they are often taken to exemplify. The combination of אכל and שׁתה is used in five of the seven joy passages (2:24; 3:13; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7). In every case it is followed by an additional word or phrase that conveys enjoyment, either to "see good" (ראה טוֹב, 2:24; 3:13; 5:17) or "enjoy" (שׂמח / שִׂמְחָה, 8:15; 9:7). This makes perfectly clear (in case there was any doubt) that Qoheleth's convocations to consume are not merely for one's health or survival but are bound up with the enjoyment of life. While this broad claim is undisputable, debate enters the picture once we attempt to understand precisely how the eating and drinking are tied metonymically to enjoyment. Does Qoheleth advocate eating and drinking because he thinks they are (more or less) guaranteed sources of pleasure? This is implied on the view that Qoheleth is advocating pleasure as an anesthetic to numb the pains of existence—one simply takes the medication and lets it produce the intended effect. An alternative to this understanding, and the one I propose, is that eating and drinking are indeed generally joyful activities, but ones which must be approached with a certain mindset or attitude in order to tap their latent value.[27] That is why Qoheleth will go on to

[25] On the exceptive side, we might think of Jesus' statement in the gospels, "No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). Obviously, the phrase is meant to highlight and strengthen the goodness of the exception rather than weaken it.

[26] The phrase and concept is employed by Friedrich Nietzsche.

[27] Cf. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 157, "He is not referring here to specific activities of eating and drinking, but to a general attitude toward life."

say in 9:7, "Go eat your bread *with* joy! And drink your wine *with* a cheerful heart!" It is the combination of external activity and internal attitude that generates a positive experience. Moreover, that eating is not a guaranteed pleasure-source is shown by the reference to the pathetic toiler in 5:16: "all his days he eats in darkness and in much vexation, sickness and anger."[28] Nothing about that man's eating is said to pull him out of the dumps (as a narcotic would, at least temporarily); rather, the reverse is implied: eating becomes a sorrowful activity, due to his psychological incapacity for joy. Thus what is crucial about eating and drinking for Qoheleth, and the reason why he consistently acclaims them, is not their inherent sensory pleasures per se, but the fact they are examples of goods to be valued for their own sake and not as a means toward some other aim. This is an argument to which we will return.

B. 3:12–13

> (12) I realized[29] that there is nothing good for them[30] except to be joyful and to do what is worthwhile[31] in one's life. (13) Moreover, every person who eats and drinks and sees good in all his toil—this is God's payment.

In 3:12–13 we meet the second occurrence of Qoheleth's enjoyment refrain. As mentioned before, I will comment on aspects of the text relevant to the argument at hand. In this section we will focus on a crucial matter for understanding the overall sense and tone of these seven joy-oriented texts—namely, Qoheleth's use of the verb שׂמח and the cognate noun שִׂמְחָה.

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[28] The fact that Qoheleth follows this with a joy statement in the very next verse (5:17) that once again stresses that it is "good…even beautiful…to eat and to drink…" shows all the more clearly that the value lies not in the food's inherent pleasure but the attitude with which a person partakes of it.

[29] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 266, translates יָדַעְתִּי here as "I know" but says that it "expresses something like 'I came to the conclusion that.' "

[30] Hebr. בָּם, lit. "in/with them." As with 2:24, the בְּ can be taken as a *beth* of specification, "with respect to them," and translated with "for." Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Sean McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 62, is unique in taking "in them" to refer not to humans but "to the activities, i.e., the theme of 3:9–11."

[31] The Hebrew לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹב, lit. "to do good," resounds in our ears with moral connotations, and some commentators have read it as such, e.g. Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (trans. D. W. Simon; Philadelphia: Smith, English, 1860), 108–09; E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881), 133. But it is unlikely that Qoheleth's emphasis in this context is on doing morally right actions. As I have argued above, the primary sense of טוֹב for Qoheleth, especially with regard to human actions, is that which is worthwhile and promotes one's well-being. The category of well-being may well overlap with morality, but the two are certainly distinct.

"To Be Joyful"

Apart from the phrase "to see good," Qoheleth's primary word to communicate the enjoyment that is central to the associated passages is the Hebrew verb שׂמח, along with its correlating noun, שִׂמְחָה. The root שׂמח (whether in nominal or verbal form) is used seventeen times in the book (שׂמח: 2:10; 3:12, 22; 4:16; 5:18; 8:15; 10:19; 11:8, 9; שִׂמְחָה: 2:1, 2, 10, 26; 5:19; 7:4; 8:15; 9:7), and it is employed at least once in all seven of the joy passages (2:26; 3:12, 22; 5:18, 19; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9, 10). But what exactly does Qoheleth mean by the term? Michael Fox has advanced the thesis, "*Śimḥah* in Qohelet means pleasure, not happiness and certainly not joy."[32] Elsewhere he explains,

> שׂמחה in Qohelet does not mean joy or happiness. That misunderstanding has lead *[sic]* to the image of Qohelet as a "preacher of joy." There would be little point in commending joy as a solution to life's joylessness. That's like telling a chronically depressed person just to "cheer up." Qohelet certainly has little joy. As often in the Bible, שׂמחה refers to pleasure, whether trifling or significant. Labor produces wealth, wealth buys pleasure, and pleasure is good."[33]

While "pleasure" may be conceived in different ways (as we will later see), Fox specifically has in mind (a) "the sensation of pleasure," i.e. pleasure as a *bodily sensation*, and (b) "the means of pleasure," i.e. the *sources* for such bodily sensations, the activities and objects that produce them ("such as wine and music").[34] With respect to the former, what Fox apparently wants to rule out is that שִׂמְחָה implies any of the emotional, psychological, or attitudinal aspects normally connoted by the terms "happiness" or "joy." Fox marshals five arguments for the claim that "*śimḥah* never means happiness in Qohelet."[35] The first three depend on the use of שִׂמְחָה in 2:1–11, where Fox's main point is that according to his own testimony Qoheleth "had a great deal of *śimḥah*…but little happiness."[36] However, if it is true, as many commentators hold and I argued in the last chapter, that the joy passages represent a change of heart from the perspective relayed in 2:1–11, then the instances of שִׂמְחָה in 2:1–11 become irrelevant to furnishing a definition for שִׂמְחָה in the joy passages.[37] Fox's fourth and fifth arguments for שִׂמְחָה as pleasure in the strict sense of bodily

[32] Fox, *Rereading*, 113.

[33] Michael V. Fox, "The Inner Structure of Qohelet's Thought," 225–38 in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 227–28.

[34] Fox, *Rereading*, 114–115.

[35] Fox, *Rereading*, 115.

[36] Fox, *Rereading*, 115.

[37] As discussed last chapter, the occurrences of שִׂמְחָה at 2:1, 2, and 10 should be distinguished from the those in the joy passages; in the former the emphasis does seem to lie with pleasure in the sense of bodily sensation. Some

sensation amount to the same point derived from two slightly different grounds—that Qoheleth would not need to urge or advise anyone to be happy—both because "everyone wants happiness" and because "happiness is not something people can impose upon themselves."[38]

Though we will save a fuller discussion on the philosophical concept of pleasure for the latter part of this chapter, it is nonetheless necessary to get some clarity on Fox's proposal. The meaning assigned to שִׂמְחָה / שׂמח by Fox could be analogized as follows. We could imagine a man, Jerry, who is utterly depressed. He has recently lost his job, been scorned and abandoned by his family and informed by his doctor that he has a terminal illness. Jerry perceives no real reason to live anymore, and he feels nothing of what would normally be called "happiness" or "joy." Nevertheless, he does maintain one or two comforts for all his sorrow: he takes a small amount of sensory pleasure from chewing gummy bears. When he meets someone else in a similar woeful state, he recommends gummy bears to that person as well, adding only that the gooey mastication makes the pain retreat for a season, and besides, "there is nothing better." Fox's description of Qoheleth implies that, while the details of circumstance may differ, Qoheleth's emotional and psychological state is essentially no different from Jerry's, and Qoheleth's commendations for שִׂמְחָה should be seen in like manner to Jerry's gummy bear endorsement. The שִׂמְחָה, pleasure, in view would then involve nothing of a person's will, attitude, or emotion—it is simply a sensation of the body.

Against this understanding, I suggest that שִׂמְחָה for Qoheleth does indeed allude to "enjoyment" or "pleasure"[39] (and sometimes "joy") yet it is an enjoyment which involves not merely the sensorial, but also the psychological, volitional, and emotional aspects of a person. Thus שִׂמְחָה registers as a genuine, positive value for human beings. The following four arguments support this alternative, richer account of שִׂמְחָה. First, Fox claims that שִׂמְחָה in the Bible "often,

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may regard this distinction as special pleading, but in fact virtually all commentators end up with some such distinction for שִׂמְחָה in light of its use in 7:4: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of שִׂמְחָה." It is hard to imagine that Qoheleth "praises" (8:15) and generally commends שִׂמְחָה in the same sense by which that word condemns the fool. It is better to see a distinction between the sort of שִׂמְחָה that is commended (2:26; 5:19; 8:15; 9:7) and the sort that is condemned (2:1, 2, 10; 7:4). (The same distinction would apply to שְׂחוֹק, "laughter," which is used negatively in 2:2; 7:3, 6, but positively in 10:19.)

[38] Fox, *Rereading*, 115. While it is likely true on an abstract level that "everyone wants happiness," it is also true that people do not actively and energetically seek it. It is a typical feature of human nature that we still constantly need to be encouraged to pursue that which we say we want.

[39] Though "enjoyment" and "pleasure" bear slightly different connotations in English (with the latter more readily serving for the sort of feeling Jerry's gummy bears conduce), I take them as functional synonyms.

perhaps usually…means 'pleasure', without necessarily connoting happiness."[40] This is an overstatement. Of the 175 occurrences of the verbal form in classical Hebrew, *DCH* classifies only two of them with a sense of deriving "pleasure" (in both cases, sexual pleasure: Song 1:4, Prov 5:18).[41] The nominal form occurs ninety-four times in classical Hebrew and here *DCH* places thirty-four instances under the broad category, "joy, merriness, gaiety, pleasure," but in the translations provided only the occurrence in Eccl 2:10 is translated "pleasure."[42] Overwhelmingly more common, according to *DCH,* are the verbal senses "rejoice (in)," "be glad," "be happy," while the noun is most commonly translated with "joy" and "happiness." A great number of these reflect the Israelites' religious sense of "rejoicing in Yhwh" or in Yhwh's salvation or benefits (e.g. Deut 26:11; 1 Sam 2:1; Isa 25:9; Joel 2:23; Ps 31:8; 32:11; 40:17; 63:12; 64:11; 66:6; 70:5; 85:7; 97:12; 104:34; 149:2). Others involve the joy expressed by Yhwh himself, as in Zeph 3:17, "Yhwh your God…will exult over you with joy [בְּשִׂמְחָה]." Moreover, since Qoheleth regularly pairs the call to שִׂמְחָה / שׂמח with eating and drinking, it is also worth noting that in the vast majority of HB texts where eating or drinking is paired with language of joy or pleasure, the connotation is positive and the joy is holistic and divinely sanctioned.[43] In brief, clear uses of שִׂמְחָה with the sense of "pleasure" that Fox sees in Qoheleth are extremely rare elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Of course, this does not rule out that sense for Qoheleth, but it implies that a greater burden of proof should be required to construe it as such and that the more common senses of the word should suffice until shown unsuitable.

Second, as we noticed in Chapter 5, Qoheleth clearly has a category for a capacity to enjoy life, one he says some people possess (5:18) and others sadly do not (6:2–3). It is doubtful, I have argued, that this (in)ability would pertain only to some physical handicap rather than one's psychological state of mind. If the argument in my previous chapter is correct that the reason the man of 6:2–3 cannot enjoy is due to his psychological unrest, it would entail that Qoheleth conceives of a person's subjective will and attitude, their psychological and volitional state, as

[40] Fox, *Rereading*, 113 [emphasis added].

[41] "שׂמח I," *DCH* 8:158–63.

[42] "שִׂמְחָה," *DCH* 8:163–66.

[43] Deut 12:7; 14:26; 27:7; Isa 24:11; 65:13; Jer 48:33; Zech 10:7; Ps 104:15; Song 1:4; Neh 8:12; 1 Chr 12:41; 29:22. Included here are a few texts in which the situation for Israel is negative because God will remove eating/drinking and joy from their midst, but the connotation with respect to those activities is implicitly positive—their presence would be beneficial (Isa 24:11; 65:13; Jer 48:33). The only non-Qoheleth HB texts that conjoin the eating/drinking and joy/pleasure themes with a negative connotation are Isa 22:13 and Prov 21:17.

playing a significant role in whether any actual enjoyment is *experienced*.[44] The kind of attitude or mindset that the man lacks is precisely the sort of שִׂמְחָה Qoheleth advocates throughout the joy passages (and in this case, specifically 5:18–19). All of this goes well beyond the claim that שִׂמְחָה refers strictly to hedonic, sensorial pleasure.

Third, when Qoheleth commends שִׂמְחָה, what is it that he actually hopes to convince his reader to do? If Fox's thesis is correct, Qoheleth's enjoinders would amount to saying, "Go to the appropriate external sources of pleasure (food, drink, etc.). Partake of those pleasure-sources and they will take care of the rest—pleasure will automatically come." Heeding Qoheleth's call would bear simply on whether one had in fact partaken of the appropriate external pleasure-sources, not on any interior disposition of the person. The person could be in any mood, any emotional or attitudinal state, even the darkest or gloomiest sort, and the effect would remain the same, since those factors would play no role. However, the sorts of goods highlighted in the joy passages do not seem to be automatically pleasure-conferring. Rather, they appear to be *hedonically ambiguous*.[45] Three examples will establish the point. First, in 2:26 Qoheleth says that God gives "wisdom [חָכְמָה] and knowledge [דַּעַת] and שִׂמְחָה" to the person he regards as "good before him" [טוֹב לְפָנָיו]. Thus these three attributes or capacities are parallel—all good gifts which the fortunate receive from God and the unfortunate do not. Yet, strikingly, the careful reader will acknowledge that neither wisdom nor knowledge is a *necessarily* pleasant activity. For Qoheleth only a chapter earlier points out that, "With much wisdom [חָכְמָה] comes much vexation [כַּעַס], and the one who increases knowledge [דַּעַת] increases pain [מַכְאֹב]" (1:18). The positive portrayal of wisdom and knowledge in 2:26 (not to mention 1:16; 7:12; and implicitly 2:21; 9:10) must qualify their characterization in 1:18, and vice versa. Bringing the two verses together, then, 1:18 should not be taken to imply that either wisdom or knowledge is *intrinsically* painful, and 2:26 should not be taken to imply that either is *intrinsically* pleasurable. It seems, rather, that the exercise of wisdom and knowledge holds the *potential* to bring either pleasure or pain. The difference depends on

[44] This point is not undermined by Qoheleth's emphasis on a divine dispensation of the ability to enjoy in 5:18 and 6:2, because the ability that is granted by God still must be regarded as of a certain nature, whether physical, or psychological, or the like.

[45] To clarify, by using this phrase I am *not* denying that the "goods" in question hold objective value. I have already tried to establish the point in our last chapter that they do hold objective value, and that is why I do not regard Qoheleth as a hedonist but as one who holds a hybrid theory of well-being ("enjoying the good"). My point now is only that these goods do not *force* a person to enjoy them. They are there for the partaking and are latent with true value, but a person must actively choose to regard them valuably in order for any value to obtain.

factors such as one's attitude, expectations, and the like—in other words, internal, psychological factors. If this is so, then it is fitting that Qoheleth would conceive of שִׂמְחָה in much the same way—that in itself, it is hedonically ambiguous. Second, in 3:22 Qoheleth says that "there is nothing better than that a person should enjoy his work" [יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׂיו]. The issue will be explored in detail later in the chapter, but for now it is sufficient to point out that the activity of "work" [מַעֲשֶׂה], like knowledge and wisdom, is also a hedonically ambiguous good: objectively a good, that is, since the exercise of such capacities is good (more on this below), but ambiguous as to its pleasure-versus-pain effects on any particular occasion, depending on the person partaking of it.[46] Third, as discussed a few pages back, even "eating and drinking" cannot be regarded as guaranteed sources of pleasure, in light of Qoheleth's sad description of the man in 5:16 who indeed "eats" yet simultaneously is suffocating in "vexation, sickness and anger." Fox claims that, unlike a command to be happy, "The advice to undertake pleasurable activities *can* be carried out. One can indulge in such things even when the heart is heavy."[47] Yet by all indications the man in 5:16, surely an exemplar of a heavy heart, ingests his victuals pleasurelessly and is hardly the prototype of one heeding Qoheleth's call to "eat and drink" with שִׂמְחָה. Qoheleth's renewed joy-exhortation in the very subsequent verse (5:17) makes for a striking, presumably intentional contrast with the man's dreary life. My argument, then, is that the sorts of activities or goods Qoheleth commends for "enjoyment" he does not regard as automatically pleasure-conferring; therefore, the commendation to שׂמח them implies something more attitudinally active than the joyless, passive reception of a guaranteed pleasure-source.

A fourth point, related to the previous one, concerns Fox's claim that joy cannot be urged or commanded. In fact, throughout the Hebrew Bible we find commands to rejoice:

- "Of Zebulun he said: Rejoice [שְׂמַח], Zebulun, when you go outside" (Deut 33:18, NET)
- "Be happy for [שִׂמְחוּ] Jerusalem and rejoice with her, all you who love her! (Isa 66:10, NET)
- **"**Do not fear, my land! Rejoice and be glad [שְׂמָחִי], because the LORD has accomplished great things!" (Joel 2:21, NET)

[46] Negative uses of מַעֲשֶׂה include 1:14; 2:11, 17; positive uses include 3:22; 9:7 (and implicitly 9:10). The same argument applies to the near-synonym, עָמָל, but I am reserving discussion of that word for a later point in this chapter.

[47] Fox, *Rereading*, 115 [emphasis original].

- "Shout for joy, Daughter Zion! Shout out, Israel! Be happy [שִׂמְחִי] and boast with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!" (Zeph 3:14, NET)

These and many other instances of שׂמח exhibit the imperative mood, yet what is commanded is clearly not the consumption of some pleasure-source but, at minimum, the active fostering of an attitude or mindset involving one's will and emotional life. I suggest that in this respect Qoheleth's assumptions cohere with other canonical authors. The experience of joy is at least partly dependent on attitudes and perspectives one can choose to cultivate, and as such it represents a holistic and genuinely positive facet of one's life.

C. 3:22

> Then I saw[48] that there is nothing better than that a person should enjoy his work. For this is his portion. For who can bring him to see what will be after him?

What is perhaps most noteworthy about this third joy text is the absence of the "eating and drinking" trope in favor of a sole concentration on the enjoyment of one's work— יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׂיו. I will postpone further comment on the significance of this phrase until the section below, "See Good in His Toil." For the moment we will solely highlight the phrase, "this is his portion."

"This is His Portion"

In 3:22 we encounter Qoheleth's first use of the phrase, "This is his portion" [הוּא חֶלְקוֹ], which will be reused in later joy statements (5:17; 9:9; without הוּא in 5:18). The noun חֵלֶק is used sixty-six times in the Hebrew Bible (and the related noun חֶלְקָה an additional twenty-three times). חֵלֶק signifies a "share" or "portion" one has been allotted from some larger dispensation, often of territory (e.g. Deut 10:9; 12:12; Josh 14:4; 18:5; 19:9; Ezek 45:7; Job 17:5), or food (e.g. Gen 14:24; Lev 6:10[17]; Num 31:36; Deut 18:8; 1 Sam 30:24), or pertaining to inheritance (e.g. Gen 31:14; 2 Sam 20:1; Neh 2:20). It can at times denote the "recompense" one has coming, whether good or bad (e.g. Isa 17:14; Job 20:29; 27:3; 31:2). Qoheleth's use of the word is closest to this latter sense, but he also emphasizes that one's חֵלֶק is what one *can* get out of life, in distinction

[48] Though we have retained the literal "I saw" from וְרָאִיתִי, the sense here and elsewhere (2:13, 24; 3:10(?), 22; 4:4; 5:17; 8:17(?)) is closer to, "I realized" (so Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 311), since what is "seen" is an idea more than a physical sight.

from what one *cannot* get, what is off-limits or "out of bounds." What one cannot get is יִתְרוֹן, lasting gain or meaning, a good secured for a person's life that remains in their possession and for their benefit even after death. By contrast, what one can get, what is within reach, are joyful experiences of present-tense activities and goods. Of course, what is also stressed is that this is *all* one can get. "In Qoheleth's mind, there could be no talk of having the whole pie. A small slice is all that will be granted."[49] But as Qoheleth eventually came to see, one can take great joy in even a small slice of the pie.

D. 5:17–19

> (17) Look, what I myself have seen to be good, what is indeed beautiful, is to eat and to drink and to see good in all of one's toil which he toils under the sun for the few days of his life that God has given him. For this is his portion. (18) Moreover, everyone to whom God gives wealth and possessions and the ability to enjoy it and to take up his portion and to enjoy his toil—this is God's payment. (19) For he should remember[50] that the days of his life are not many, but[51] God will preoccupy him[52] with the joy of his heart.

This fourth enjoyment text falls near the book's midpoint, and as we saw last chapter, it lies sandwiched between two of the sage's bleakest depictions of *hebel,* both introduced by versions of the phrase, "there is an evil that I have seen" (5:12; 6:1). Like those texts, 5:17–19 also begins with Qoheleth's testimony as to "what [he has] seen" (5:17), but in explicit contrast to the depictions of harm in 5:12–16 and 6:1–6, here the phrase's complements are words of positive value—"good," and even "beautiful."

1. "What is Beautiful"

In 5:17 Qoheleth crystallizes his emphasis on the intrinsic value of the actions he is commending. They are not only טוֹב, "good," they are יָפֶה, "*beautiful.*"[53] Such a qualifier would seem aberrant

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[49] Crenshaw, *Qoheleth*, 84.

[50] יִזְכֹּר is likewise construed as injunctive by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 209: "they should not much call to mind." See further support for the translation in Section D.3 below.

[51] I take the כִּי here as introducing a contrast, as in 4:14b; 5:6b; 6:2; 8:12; 9:4.

[52] The translation assumes the majority view that מַעֲנֶה is derived from root ענה IV (in *DCH)* in the *hiphil,* "to keep occupied," which is supported by Qoheleth's use of the same verb (though in *qal*) in 1:13, 3:10 and the cognate noun עִנְיָן in eight places. But a sizeable minority of scholars (including Ibn Ezra and Rashbam) have suggested ענה I (in *DCH)*, "to answer," and a few other less likely senses for the root have been proposed.

[53] Hebr. יָפֶה is often here (and in 3:11) translated "appropriate" (e.g. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 202). But the word never has that meaning in its forty other occurrences in the HB. In every case outside Qoheleth the reference is to aesthetic beauty, usually with respect to people (mostly women, e.g., Gen 12:11; 2 Sam 13:1; Job 42:15; occasionally men, e.g.

and unnecessary if his tone were only one of resignation. Indeed, the syntactic appositive seems precisely to function as a rhetorical self-correction, as though Qoheleth wants to "up the ante" in his own valuation of these practices. This jars against the notion of שִׂמְחָה as a mere band-aid covering over a person's pitiful life, a role which could hardly be deemed "beautiful."

2. "See Good in His Toil"

Qoheleth here expresses a message we have already seen but have not yet highlighted— that what is good for a person is, literally, "to see good in all his toil" [לִרְאוֹת טוֹבָה בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ]. The phrase is important to the argument of this chapter, so it is worth exploring in some detail. It appears with slightly varied form in 2:24, 3:13, and 5:17 but always in the sequence ו + עָמָל + בְּ + טוֹב + ראה.[54] In addition, Qoheleth employs nearly synonymous phrases in 5:18, which has שׂמח instead of טוֹב ראה [= לִשְׂמֹחַ בַּעֲמָלוֹ], and 3:22, which allows the foregoing exchange and also has מַעֲשֶׂה instead of עָמָל [=יִשְׂמַח בְּמַעֲשָׂיו]. What does Qoheleth intend by this language? Here, too, I want to argue that this phrase rightly construed provides key evidence for our thesis that Qoheleth's enjoyment-language involves one's attitude and agency, thereby comprising a more genuine, holistic value than it is often taken to signify.

Three main lines of interpretation are found in the literature, differentiated by two ways of reading the noun עָמָל ("toil, labor, work" versus "wealth") and two ways of reading the preposition בְּ (indicating the *object* of enjoyment versus the context in or during which enjoyment takes place, albeit through some other means). We may paraphrase the readings as follows:

(1) To take enjoyment *from* the *fruits* of his toil, i.e. his wealth, as toil's reward.[55]

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1 Sam 17:42), but also animals (e.g. Gen 41:2) and vegetation (e.g. Ezek 31:9). Only in Qoheleth is it used to qualify abstract notions. "Appropriate" is assumed from the context of 3:11, but that depends on one's reading of 3:1–15 as a whole. Here in 5:17 there is no reason not to translate the word as "beautiful." Qoheleth was reaching for a word that conveys deep worth and attractiveness.

[54] This and other similar sequences conveyed in this chapter should be read right to left.

[55] H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 1; Scott C. Jones, "The Values and Limits of Qohelet's Sub-Celestial Economy," *VT* 64 (2014): 21–33, translates the relevant phrase in 5:17 as, "to enjoy all one's *earnings* which one has *earned* under the sun…" and comments, "Qohelet's commendation of joy arises from his recognition that it is more beneficial to enjoy one's earnings while one has them than to sulk over the fact that they will not last forever" (27). Jones likewise translates עָמָל as "earnings" in 2:24 and 5:18. Cf. also Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 301, "the best thing for man is to enjoy the fruit of his labour" (on 2:24); Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, 165: "Koheleth looks upon enjoyment as the fruit of labour" (3:22); Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 52: "perceive happiness in all his possessions" (2:24).

(2) To take enjoyment *in the midst of* his toil (through some other means than the toil itself).[56]

(3) To take enjoyment *in the act of* toil itself (i.e. the toil or labor is itself the object of enjoyment).[57]

The first of these options was strongly advocated by H. L. Ginsberg, who claimed that עָמָל in Qoheleth always means "not 'toil' but 'gain, profit, or earning (thru toil), or yield, or income."[58] Ginsberg's thesis is highly dubitable and almost certainly a gross overstatement. In many occurrences עָמָל cannot mean "wealth" and must instead refer to "toil" or "work" (human activity, in any case). For example:

- 2:11: עָמָל שֶׁעָמַלְתִּי ("toil which I toiled") is parallel with כָּל־מַעֲשַׂי שֶׁעָשׂוּ יָדַי ("all the works that my hands had done"); both phrases convey activity, not possessions.
- 2:22: עֲמָלוֹ ("his toil") is parallel with רַעְיוֹן לִבּוֹ ("striving of his heart"); again, both imply activity.
- 4:4: The two things Qoheleth has seen which are motivated by envy are כָּל־עָמָל ("all toil") and כָּל־כִּשְׁרוֹן הַמַּעֲשֶׂה ("all skill of work"); the two are clearly parallel, and "toil" naturally comports with "skill of work," while "wealth" does not.
- 4:6: "Better is a handful of rest than two hands full of toil [עָמָל] and striving after the wind." Here, too, the complementary opposite to "rest" [נָחַת] is toil, not wealth, since the point is that a smaller amount of peaceful inactivity is better than a larger amount of stressful activity—especially when the activity accomplishes nothing, which Qoheleth

[56] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 58, translates the phrase in 2:24, "allow himself something good in all his toil." As will be mentioned below, some commentators within this camp lay emphasis on the enjoyment as not merely happening within the broader context of toil but as a counter-balance or remuneration for the toil (while still regarding עָמָל as "toil, work" and not as "wealth"). For instance, Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic*, 171: "Koheleth's enjoyment of life is that which comes as a respite from toil"; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 211: "enjoyment is a help or support in toil, it lightens the burden or counterbalances it."

[57] William P. Brown, "'Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do': Qoheleth's Work Ethic," *Interpretation* 55 (2001): 271–284; Longman III, *Ecclesiastes*, 107–08, 113, 126, translates, "enjoy their toil"; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 156, "enjoys happiness in his work" (3:13), but Gordis translates the phrase differently at 5:17, "enjoy himself in return for the toil" (168); Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 67, "take pleasure in his business" (2:24); Tomáš Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs & Qoheleth* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 73, "enjoy his achievement" (2:24), but translates differently at 3:13, "enjoy the fruit of his labour" (75); Anson F. Rainey, "A Second Look at Amal in Qoheleth," *CTM* 36 (1965): 805, paraphrases the idea, "to find one's enjoyment in the practice of one's profession, in the use of one's God-given talents and skills."

[58] Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth*, 1.

elsewhere claims of "toil." The concluding parallel between עָמָל and רְעוּת רוּחַ ("striving after the wind") makes the case even stronger.[59]

- 4:8: Qoheleth says of a man who has no relatives, "there is no end to all his עָמָל." In the next line he uses the same root in the rhetorical question he places in the man's mouth, "And for whom am I toiling [עמל] and depriving myself of good?" The verbal connection strongly implies עָמָל as "toil" over "wealth."
- 4:9: "Two are better than one," Qoheleth writes, "because they have a good reward בַּעֲמָלָם." It is far more reasonable to assume two makes better than one in the act of their mutual labor than somehow "in their wealth."

Plenty of additional verses could be cited, but the examples provided sufficiently demonstrate that עָמָל does not exclusively or even primarily mean "wealth" in Qoheleth. Since there are many clear cases where the noun must mean "toil," any ambiguous instances are best read through that lens. Beyond these, there remain likely only one or two occurrences of עָמָל in the book where the noun means something other than laborious activity. These were discussed in Chapter 3, where I concluded that they are best taken in the sense, "business," not wealth.[60] So it seems very likely that עָמָל in Qoheleth primarily means "toil," not the fruits of toil, "wealth."

The second option for ו + עָמָל + בְּ + טוֹב + ראה is that the phrase "see good in his toil" encourages one to discover whatever good should manifest in an otherwise burdensome context, to unearth a few blossoms along toil's otherwise rocky path. The prepositional phrase in which עָמָל is embedded [בַּעֲמָלוֹ] relates to the main verbal idea [ראה] either a) temporally, b) spatially (including spatial-metaphorically), c) concessively, or even d) compensatorily. Thus, one may "see good" *during* one's toil, or *in the sphere of* one's toil, or *despite* one's toil, or *in compensation for* one's toil. But common to all these variations is that the "good" is not sourced in the עָמָל, as it is in the first and third of our three options (whether עָמָל is construed as "wealth" or "toil"). Three

[59] Fox, *Rereading*, 221, suggests that " '*Amal* here means earnings rather than the activity of toiling, for 'fistfuls' is something that can be possessed rather than an action." But surely this is taking the image of a "fistful" (or "handful") in unnecessarily literal fashion, especially for a proverb-like saying (and how could one possess a "fistful" of "rest"?).

[60] *DCH* 6:481–82, is only slightly more generous to the notion of עָמָל as "wealth," categorizing 2:18, 19, 4:6, 5:14 with that sense, and all other occurrences in the book as "toil."

main arguments can be provided for this general understanding, variants aside. First, the view interprets עָמָל in Qoheleth as essentially referring to "toil," difficult labor, rather than "wealth," and in light of the evidence provided above this seems correct. Second, given Qoheleth's hard-won lessons concerning the difficulty of עָמָל and the impossibility of trading it in for יִתְרוֹן, it is not unreasonable to read the sage as commending a kind of compensation or counterbalance against such toil in the form of "seeing good" instead. Third, perhaps the strongest argument for this understanding of the phrase stems from 8:15, where Qoheleth says that, "This [joy] should go with him in his toil [בַּעֲמָלוֹ] during the days of his life that God has given to him under the sun." Here the phrase "during the days of his life that God has given to him" [יְמֵי חַיָּיו אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים] seems to explicate בַּעֲמָלוֹ. These are solid reasons, yet this view fails to persuade—not because of any inherent faults but because there exists an even stronger alternative which draws on more important parallels.

I propose that the third option for the וְ + עָמָל + בְּ + טוֹב + ראה construction best fits Qoheleth's meaning, that Qoheleth is calling his audience to take enjoyment, literally to "see good," in their toil itself. In other words, to "see good in one's toil" means to see one's toil *as good.* Grammatically, then, the בְּ would point to or locate the *source* in which one "sees good," that source being עָמָל. (A modern English parallel to the "see good in X" sense would be a phrase such as, "I don't understand how you see any good in him.") Of course, in light of Qoheleth's less than flattering portrait of "toil" everywhere in the book outside the joy passages, the idea of "seeing good" in it might initially sound rather implausible. However, I suggest that the key to this reading is recognizing the fundamental transformation of worldview Qoheleth underwent, one which is central to the book and makes sense of many of the book's thornier juxtapositions. Given Qoheleth's one-time view of עָמָל, the present idea represents a veritable about-face for the sage.[61] Having previously regarded עָמָל as an extrinsic good, of no value in itself but only valuable for the way it instrumentally produces some terminally valuable יִתְרוֹן, Qoheleth now advocates a rather stunning evaluation of עָמָל —that it can and should be regarded as intrinsically valuable in itself, quite apart from any long-term aims it produces.[62] It should be noted, however, that if a

[61] I do not mean that within the span of the book itself we witness Qoheleth's conversion, but rather that the book gives us a glimpse to the stages of Qoheleth's development which had taken place before the book's writing.

[62] Once again, this hardly implies that עָמָל is automatically pleasure-inducing—far from it. As I have said, עָמָל, like other of Qoheleth's goods, is technically ambiguous with regard to its pleasure or pain output. It is the combination

person fails to see עָמָל in this new light and adheres to the old means-to-end mindset, עָמָל will continue to exemplify futility, devoid of positive value.

There are a couple of key exegetical considerations that support this view. First, this full construction is used nowhere else in classical Hebrew, so there are no exact parallels, but the next best lines of evidence for its sense are Qoheleth's synonymous phrases וְ + עָמָל + בְּ + שׂמח in 5:18 and וְ + מַעֲשֶׂה + בְּ + שׂמח in 3:22. Both occur within one of the joy refrains and are clearly parallel in sense to the וְ + עָמָל + בְּ + טוֹב + ראה constructions in 2:24, 3:13, and 5:17. These phrases can help us because the verb שׂמח is followed by בְּ forty times in the HB (including three times in Qoheleth), and in the overwhelming majority of the non-Qoheleth occurrences (thirty-one of thirty-six, or 86.1% percent) בְּ is used to indicate the object of the verb, that is, the source *in which* one takes joy or happiness.[63] (The other main synonym for שׂמח in the HB is גיל, and here too, out of twenty-four occurrences in which בְּ modifies גיל, in twenty-one of them [87.5%] בְּ indicates the object or source of enjoyment.) This means that, barring strong evidence to the contrary, we have *a priori* reason to think that Qoheleth's בְּ + שׂמח usage would comport with the construction's most common use in Hebrew. And, in fact, 3:22 is universally taken in this sense. I am not aware of any published translation or commentary that reads וְ + מַעֲשֶׂה + בְּ here in any sense other than indicating the object of the verb שׂמח, thus saying that "a person should *enjoy his work* [יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׂיו]." That sets a clear precedent. Qoheleth did at least sometimes speak unequivocally of enjoying one's labor. Since Qoheleth feels comfortable interchanging the וְ + עָמָל + בְּ + טוֹב + ראה construction with variations employing שׂמח instead of טוֹב + ראה (5:18; 3:22—the latter also exchanges מַעֲשֶׂה for עָמָל, a fact which only adds support for rendering עָמָל as "toil" rather than "wealth"), this strongly implies that בְּ functions within all cases of the general construction to indicate the *source*

of the individual's mindset *and* the activity that result in either pleasure or pain, enjoyment or frustration. Thus these two different ways in which עָמָל is presented in the book—as extrinsic (instrumental) value and as potential intrinsic value—should not be seen as contradictory; rather, they are two different ways one *may choose* to orient oneself to עָמָל.

[63] Deut 12:7; 16:14; 26:1; Judg 9:19 (2x); 1 Sam 2:1; Isa 25:9; Jer 31:13; Joel 2:23; Ps 31:8; 32:11; 40:17; 63:12; 64:11; 66:6; 70:5; 85:7; 92:5; 97:12; 104:31, 34; 105:38; 106:5; 118:24; 122:1; 149:2; Job 31:29; Prov 23:24; 24:17; Song 1:4; 2 Chr 6:41. Of the five other occurrences, three times בְּ indicates a locative relationship to the verb (Exod 4:14; Deut 33:18; Isa 56:7), once a temporal relationship (Ps 90:14), and once it morally qualifies the verb (Ezek 25:6). Additionally, in all three occurrences of בְּ + שׂמח in Ben Sira, בְּ indicates the object of enjoyment.

of enjoyment—in this case, עָמָל.[64] All scholars construe מַעֲשֶׂה as indicating the source of enjoyment in 3:22, yet they do not always recognize that the tight parallels between the joy passages should imply the same basic sense for the "see good in his toil" passages.

Second, the "see good in his toil" passages function as Qoheleth's most pointed response to his previously stated quests concerning *wherein* he might "see good." We already noted how the use of טוֹב throughout the enjoyment passages likely refers back to the stated quest of 2:3. But the link is even stronger among Qoheleth's uses of the phrase, "see good." In 2:1 ראה and טוֹב are combined as he exhorts his own heart to "look into what is good" [רְאֵה בְטוֹב].[65] They are also paired in 2:3, when Qoheleth expresses his endeavor "to see what is good [אֶרְאֶה אֵי־זֶה טוֹב]"—more literally "*where* [אֵי] is this good"—for humans while they live. It seems hardly coincidental that Qoheleth would have expressed his quest in such terms in 2:1, 3, and then only verses later proclaim that there is "nothing better than" for people to "see good *in* their toil." The verbal connection is meant to ring a bell. In other words, in 2:1, 3 he relays his quondam self-imperative to ascertain wherein "the good" may be found, and beginning in 2:24 he reveals his answer: *"in"* one's toil itself.

But as for Qoheleth's choice of phrase, why *does* he address the matter in terms of ראה טוֹב, "seeing good"? Though he can interchange the phrase with a verb such as שׂמח for the general sense, this particular wording may still maintain a unique nuance. To "see good in X" means to see or regard X *as* good. The phrase implies that valuing is bound up with interpreting: one chooses to interpret X in a certain way, namely, as "good." This becomes especially salient, I have indicated, when X is itself ambiguous and open to more than one kind of appraisal—or, indeed, when X is thought to hold no value at all. In the case of "toil," Qoheleth at some point realized the bankruptcy in constantly viewing his toil (or life, in general) as only a means to some further end, thereby instrumentalizing and relativizing the value of his labors. For instrumental value that never

[64] Cf. Staples, "'Profit'," 90: "From these passages, then, we may assume that either to rejoice or to rejoice in one's work are synonymous terms for seeing good or seeing good in one's work."

[65] The phrase רְאֵה בְטוֹב in 2:1 is often translated, "enjoy yourself" (e.g. Fox, *Rereading*, 174; ESV; RSV; NASB). This is understandable in light of ראה טוֹב elsewhere in the book conveying a sense akin to "enjoy." But here the בְּ before טוֹב is crucial, and all other instances of טוֹב + בְּ + ראה in the HB refer to the actual observance of something good (Jer 29:32; Ps 27:13; 106:5; 128:5), not its enjoyment per se. This evidence, combined with the nearby phrase in 2:3, "I might see what is good" [אֶרְאֶה אֵי־זֶה טוֹב], implies that 2:1 is an imperative to "look into," or investigate, what is good. (Note, too, the instances of בְּ + ראה in 3:22 [לִרְאוֹת בְּמֶה שֶׁיִּהְיֶה] and 11:4 [רֹאֶה בֶּעָבִים], where בְּ marks the object that is seen, or is a *beth* of specification.)

culminates in a final value amounts to zero value. Thus, had he stopped at this insight, he would have been left without any clear value in life. But he did not. Rather, his pursuit of "what is good" led him to find an alternative kind of value. Trading in his old value tablets for a new set, to "see good in his toil" became for Qoheleth an alternative mantra, signifying the fresh imperative to view one's work as *intrinsically* valuable. Hence, while it is indeed a shocking claim to think Qoheleth could regard עָמָל, "toil," as a potential *source* of joy rather than its drain, precisely such a revaluation of values lies at the heart of the book's message.[66]

3. "He Should Remember That the Days of His Life Are Not Many"

As we have already mentioned, many of Qoheleth's interpreters regard his conception of "joy" as little more than a pleasing anesthetic that holds at bay the inherent pains of living, and 5:19a is a text to which such interpreters commonly appeal. We can take Barton's translation of v 19a as representative of many: "For he will not much think on the days of his life, for God occupies him with the joy of his heart."[67] Longman comments, "Finding solace in the little pleasures of life is a distraction from the harsh reality that life is difficult and then you die."[68] Fox concurs, "Pleasure is an anodyne to the pain of consciousness,"[69] as does Schoors, "There is no doubt that for Qoheleth enjoyment is something like a narcotic."[70] But the import of the verse might not be so straightforward, as the Hebrew contains several lexical and syntactical ambiguities. Qoheleth continues his admonition concerning the person who has been given the opportunity for enjoyment by saying, לֹא הַרְבֵּה יִזְכֹּר אֶת־יְמֵי חַיָּיו. The common translation has לֹא הַרְבֵּה modify יִזְכֹּר, "he will *not much* remember." This is certainly possible, but owing to a parallel with 11:8, I follow Ginsburg and Ibn Ezra in taking לֹא הַרְבֵּה to complement אֶת־יְמֵי חַיָּיו: "*not many*…are the days of his life."[71] Here is the parallel:

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[66] Cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 63: "The positive evaluation of '*āmāl* as a possible source of enjoyment here and in some other passages…would show that Qoheleth made a distinction between work undertaken out of a frenetic desire to amass wealth, which always leads to disappointment (1:3; 2:10–11, 18–23) and simply working for one's living (or for some other reason such as creative inspiration), the enjoyment which comes from God."

[67] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 126.

[68] Tremper Longman III, "'Meaningless, Meaningless, Says Qohelet': Finding the Meaning of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes," 231–46 in *God and Meaning: New Essays* (ed. Joshua W. Seachris and Stewart Goetz; New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 238.

[69] Fox, *Contradictions*, 73.

[70] Antoon Schoors, "Qoheleth: The Ambiguity of Enjoyment," 35–41 in *The Bright Side of Life* (ed. Ellen van Wolde; London: SCM, 2000), 38.

[71] Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 356: "he should remember that the days of his life are not many"; Ibn Ezra, שהוא כן יזכור כי לא הרבה ימי חייו. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 256–57, flirts with the proposal but finally translates (somewhat unclearly),

	Verb	Object	Complement
5:19	יִזְכֹּר	אֶת־יְמֵי חַיָּיו	לֹא הַרְבֵּה
11:8	וְיִזְכֹּר	אֶת־יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ	הַרְבֵּה יִהְיוּ
5:19	Let him remember	the days of his life	not many
11:8	Let him remember	the days of darkness	will be many

That all three parts of the phrase would appear in both verses with matching constructions implies that the syntax should be read in the same way, even though Qoheleth fronts לֹא הַרְבֵּה ("not many") in 5:19. The verbal forms are the exact same between 5:19 and 11:8, and 11:8 is almost universally taken as a jussive, so this should not be ruled out for 5:19. This rendering becomes even more attractive when we notice that it comports with 11:8 not only in syntax but in meaning: the complementary inverse to remembering that the "days of *darkness* [i.e. *death*] will be many" is recalling that the "days of one's *life"* will be "*not* many," i.e. few. Moreover, it would seem odd for the sage who so tirelessly reminds his readers of the "few days of their lives" (2:3; 5:17; 6:12; 8:15; 9:9)—including the mention of מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיָּו only two verses prior (5:17)—to suggest that people should forget this fact (or that it will be beneficial for God to make them forget).[72] One of the clear macro-themes of the book is that enjoyment is to be partaken of precisely in full awareness of the brevity of life and imminence of death. If this reading is correct, then 5:19 furnishes no support for the "narcotic" reading of Qoheleth's enjoyment refrain.

"for not long will he remember the days of his life." Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 209, who takes לֹא הַרְבֵּה as adverbial with יִזְכֹּר, nonetheless notes that "the Masoretic disjunctive accent on *harbēh* is peculiar, perhaps reflecting the view that *harbēh* is adjectival and is referring awkwardly to *'et-yĕmê-ḥayyāyw* (cf. 11:8)." Rashbam ties the phrase to the theme of people not being remembered: שׁהרי לא הרבה ימים שׁלאחר מיתתו לא יזכור אותו, "for not many days after his death, no one will remember him" (Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir Rashbam on Qoheleth* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985], 142).

[72] Most scholars who read the verse as teaching that God will make humans forget about "the days of their lives" think that what is being forgotten with respect to יְמֵי חַיָּיו is not the *content* of their days gone by, but the *fact that* the days are so few, e.g., Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 128; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 125; Fox, *Rereading*, 240; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 5.7–12.14.* Thus the majority view does not deal adequately with the tension between this verse so interpreted and Qoheleth's other statements which imply one should remember the brevity of one's life as the ongoing grounds for enjoying it to the full (cf. also 9:5 in relation to 9:7–10).

E. 8:15

> But I myself commend joy, because there is nothing good under the sun for a person except to eat and drink and be joyful.[73] And this should go with[74] him in his toil during the days of his life that God has given to him under the sun.

1. "I Commend Joy"

A distinct feature of this fifth joy text is Qoheleth's explicit statement that he commends, more literally "praises," joy or enjoyment [וְשִׁבַּחְתִּי אֲנִי אֶת־הַשִּׂמְחָה]. In the context of 8:10–15 this strikes a contrast with Qoheleth's description of the unjust, "absurd" situation in 8:14. Since the righteous person will not accrue a just recompense for his deeds, Qoheleth cannot commend a life devoted to righteousness—at least not as an exclusive enterprise (cf. 7:15–17). What he *can* commend instead is a life marked by joy—that mode of living other than which, he reminds us again, אֵין־ טוֹב.

2. "This Should Go with Him"

In the second half of the verse Qoheleth writes, "This [הוּא] should go with him…" The pronoun הוּא refers either to the final infinitive, "to be joyful" [לְשִׂמְחָה] or all three infinitives along with the opening phrase. In any case, the referent in view is essentially that of joy or enjoyment. What does it mean that joy should "go with" or "accompany" a man in his toil? I have already emphasized my interpretation of Qoheleth's שִׂמְחָה—that it is not mere sensory pleasure but an active engagement of the will and emotions. This active engagement is what must accompany one's toil. In Chapter 5 we saw from 6:1–6 that what Qoheleth deems necessary for the good life is not only the possession of externals goods, but the internal, psychological ability to enjoy them. It makes sense, therefore, that the שִׂמְחָה he commends to "go with" someone is precisely that psychological

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[73] שׂמח here (and in 3:12) should be translated as "be joyful" (or "rejoice") rather than "enjoy," since it would be odd for Qoheleth to convey an object-directed sense ("enjoy") without connecting it to any such objects.

[74] The verb used here for "go with" (or "accompany"), לוה, is used elsewhere in the *qal* form only in Sir 41:12. Its other biblical uses are in *niphal* (Gen 29:34; Num 18:2; Isa 14:1; 56:3; Jer 50:5; Zech 2:15; Ps 83:9; Esth. 9:27; Dan 11:34). I take the mood of יִלְוֶנּוּ as jussive rather than indicative, as does Wright, *Koheleth*, 404. Since Qoheleth elsewhere acknowledges the possibility that some people cannot find enjoyment (e.g. 6:2–3), and since the very point of the joy passages is to commend and exhort this kind of life, it would seem out of character for him to promise that "this [joy] *will* go with" a person; at the very least, such a statement would seem to be elliptically conditional upon the person having the joy in the first place. Another possibility is that the clause continues the preceding string of infinitives, still governed by אֵין־טוֹב, thus "…and *that* this [joy] might go with him" (so Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 351).

disposition more than it is the external goods themselves. As we will explore more below, Qoheleth's recommended joy is an attitude inclined to value things and activities intrinsically. To say that שִׂמְחָה should "go with him" means that precisely this internal attitude, this way of seeing and valuing, should accompany all of his external activities.

F. 9:7–10

> (7) Go, eat your bread with joy! And drink your wine with a cheerful heart! For God has already approved your actions. (8) Let your clothing be white at all times, and do not refrain from anointing your head with oil.[75] (9) Enjoy life[76] with a woman[77] whom you love for all the days of your fleeting life that God has given to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For this is your portion in your toil which you toil under the sun. (10) Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might![78] For there is no work nor thought nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.

The final two joy passages of the book, 9:7–10 and 11:7–10, are both the most expansive and the most distinct from the other five texts employing the refrain. It is thus difficult to deny that the book exhibits something of a progression on this enjoyment theme, but the progression is discernible not only in terms of length but also of mood—from indicative statements about what is good (2:24–25; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–19), to a "commendation" of joy that falls just short of command (8:15), and finally to this climactic pair of passages both constituted by a string of direct imperatives (9:7–10; 11:7–10).[79] In the end it is not enough for Qoheleth only to describe what is good, he must prescribe it as well.

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[75] As many scholars have noted, oil is often connected to joy in the HB, cf. Ps 23:5; 45:7; 104:15; Prov 27:9; Am 6:6.

[76] Hebr. רְאֵה חַיִּים, "see life."

[77] The Hebrew lacks a definite article before אִשָּׁה, thus potentially referring to "*a* woman," as in *any* woman (implying the behavior of a wanton bachelor?), or one's "wife," since אִשָּׁה can mean either. But Fredericks' suggestion that the phrase "probably implies that one should choose such a woman to marry" seems reasonable, particularly since by 11:9 the addressee is identified as a young man (Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 68).

[78] The prepositional phrase, בְּכֹחֲךָ, "with your might," has been taken by some as qualifying the preceding infinitive לַעֲשׂוֹת on account of the Masoretic accentuation, rendering the sentence, "Whatever you find to do with your might, do it." But such a construction is highly unlikely and was probably influenced by traditional rabbinic exegesis (Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 679). Fox, *Rereading*, 295, follows the Masoretes, commenting, "Qohelet does not recommend all-out expenditure of effort (as would be implied by *b^{e}koḥăka*), but only moderate exertions in accordance with one's abilities." In Schoors' view, "this argument is extremely weak" (679).

[79] Whybray, "Preacher of Joy," 87–88, notes this progression.

1. "Go, Eat Your Bread with Joy!"

The passage begins with references to the same three verbal ideas so common in the joy passages—eating, drinking, and work. The first two are commanded with an emphasis on the *manner* in which they are to be done, "Eat your bread *in joy* [אֱכֹל בְּשִׂמְחָה לַחְמֶךָ], and drink your wine *with a cheerful heart!* [וּשְׁתֵה בְלֵב־טוֹב יֵינֶךָ]" We have already noted that these qualifiers pertaining to one's psychological and emotional state while eating and drinking support our argument that the subjective attitude a person brings to their enjoyment is as important as the objects of enjoyment.

Unique to this text among the book's joy passages are the exhortations concerning clothing, oil, and the beloved. What do these practices signify? Gary Anderson has argued that the biblical conception of שִׂמְחָה is often bound up with ritual practices, and that these joy-oriented practices are mirrored by an antithetical set of practices associated with mourning:[80]

Joy	**Mourning**
Eating and drinking	Fasting
Sexual relations	Sexual continence
Anointing with oil	Putting ashes or dust on one's head
Festal garments	Sackcloth or torn clothes
Praise of God	Lamentation

Anderson suggests that in the HB as well as the Epic of Gilgamesh—a text whose parallels with Ecclesiastes 9:7–9 are consistently noted (Gilg. X.3.3–5)—these practices of joy are often prescribed as the means by which one leaves behind a state of mourning. As such, they embody the participation in and celebration of life over against death. Though Anderson rightly emphasizes the ritual-behavioral component of שִׂמְחָה, it would be going too far to claim that the biblical rituals associated with שִׂמְחָה ever deplete the word of its emotional, cognitive, or psychological dimensions, as though reduced to pure behavioralism. It is better, I suggest, to see these behaviors as the culturally shared practices by which one *expresses* the celebration of life and its blessings.

[80] Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 49. The table is an exact replica of Anderson's except that the Praise of God category has been moved to the bottom, since it is the one element under the "Joy" heading not present in Eccl 9:7–9. Despite the title of Anderson's work he references Ecclesiastes only in one footnote without discussion.

By analogy, the modern Western practice of celebrating a child's birthday with a cake and gifts implies neither that those material objects supply the sole source of enjoyment for the occasion nor that the joy of commemorating birth is reduced to a set of culturally shared behaviors. Rather, they are practices meant to give celebratory expression to the joy of one's heart. In the same vein, Qoheleth's commended practices will not guarantee anyone a pleasure that lacks internally, but for those that can enjoy, they are natural, fitting expressions of one's שִׂמְחָה.[81]

2. "Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do, Do It with Your Might!"

This ardent injunction from v 10 sits tightly with the reading offered in this chapter, whereas it is difficult to square with the "narcotic" view of Qoheleth's enjoyment-language. Fox, perhaps aware of this, attempts to soften the saying by emending בְּכֹחֲךָ ("with your strength") to כְּכֹחֲךָ ("according to your strength"): "Qohelet is advising us to expend effort only in accordance with our abilities, to do what we can manage to do."[82] Schoors, normally quite sympathetic to Fox's proposals, calls this argument "extremely weak."[83] The emendation is unnecessary because the notion of passionate work is entirely at home in Qoheleth. It perfectly incarnates his idea that a person should enjoy and "see good in" his toil. One should enjoy one's toil not on account of the future goods one imagines it is securing—that is what Qoheleth rules out. Then what is left to enjoy about the act? The performance of labor *as such,* apart from what it produces— the "self-satisfying expenditure of power," as William Brown puts it[84]—this alone is what one can enact and enjoy. People should exercise their full capacities whole-heartedly for the simple reason *that they possesses them*—and that these capacities are good. Qoheleth's justification in the second half of the verse makes this reasoning all the more explicit: "for there is no work nor thought nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol, where you are going." Life's attendant capacities will soon be out of reach forever; one must exercise them while one can.

[81] See further discussion on Anderson's work applied to Eccl 9:7–10 in Lee, *Vitality*, 62–68.
[82] Fox, *Rereading*, 295. He appeals to LXX ὡς as normally translating an MT -כ rather than -ב.
[83] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 679.
[84] William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 95.

G. 11:7–10

> (7) Light is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. (8) For if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all.[85] But let him remember the days of darkness, that[86] they will be many; all that comes is absurd. (9) Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your prime. Walk in the ways of your heart[87] and in the sight of your eyes. But know that with regard to all these things God will bring you into judgment. (10) Banish unrest from your mind, and put away trouble from your body. For youth and the prime of life are fleeting.

This text, the last of the seven enjoyment passages, comprises the first section of the larger unit, 11:7–12:7, which brings Qoheleth's words in the book to a close. More than any other of the joy passages, this one directly juxtaposes Qoheleth's positive commendations with the book's darker themes, a fitting orientation as we approach the end.[88] As death presses in, the necessity to enjoy life is expressed with conviction, passion, even exuberance.

1. "Light is Sweet, and It Is Good for the Eyes to See the Sun"

The opening line of 11:7 is a straight-forward affirmation of the goodness of existence, the raw experience of being alive. Qoheleth had earlier used the same phrase, "see the sun," with reference to the stillborn whose inability to see it is one marker of its essential non-existence (6:5). The phrase also refers to existence in 7:11, where Qoheleth speaks of wisdom as an advantage "for those who see the sun." As mentioned in the last chapter, language of "seeing the sun" or the light of day functioned in the ancient Near Eastern world as a circumlocution for consciousness as such.[89] Fox suggests that the inclusion of "eyes" in "it is good for the eyes to see the sun" renders the statement one of "subjective value"—simply an acknowledgement of the fact that "people

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[85] This line inversely corresponds to the man seen earlier in 6:2–3, who, although he "lives many years" [שָׁנִים רַבּוֹת יִחְיֶה] cannot bring himself to experience any joy (and is not permitted by God to do so).

[86] I take the כִּי here not as causal ("for") but as introducing an object clause which is appositional to "the days of darkness."

[87] Qoheleth's admonition finds a corollary in the phrase "follow your heart" which appears several times in ancient Egyptian literature (*AEL*: 1:66, 103, 196, 197).

[88] This juxtaposition is seen to a lesser extent in a few of the other joy texts, such as the reference to ignorance in death in 3:22b and the reference to one's הֶבֶל life and final destiny of Sheol in 9:7–10.

[89] See, e.g., *Epic of Gilgamesh,* X.1.10–15, "Let mine eyes behold the sun / That I may have my fill of the light!…May one who indeed is dead behold yet the radiance of the sun!" (*ANET,* 89); *A Dispute Between a Man and His Ba*, 59–60, "You will not go up to see the sun" (*AEL,* 1:165); K 3641 (Plate 53), reverse IV.1–2, "He who goes down to my thicket does not get out again, / Nor does he escape to see the light of the sun" (*BWL*, 201); *Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World,* obverse, 1–10 (*ANET,* 107); *Nergal and Ereshkigal,* III.1–5 (*ANET*, 509); *The Myth of Zu,* II.15–16 (*ANET,* 515).

desire to live."[90] But the mere mention of eyes as the organ that sees should hardly imply this. The verse is a straightforward טוֹב-claim of accord with Qoheleth's many others, and the axiological judgment is his own. Moreover, it is an affirmation strikingly unconcerned with worldly accoutrements or even "lasting gain." By peeling back the layers of what can be deemed valuable down to the very nucleus of human experience—that of seeing the sun's light with one's eyes, that of simply being alive—Qoheleth reorients one's mode of being so that value is virtually omnipresent if one would have it.

2. "Rejoice, Young Man, in Your Youth"

In his final exhortation, Qoheleth crystallizes the logic that had been driving his enjoinders to joy all along: life is short, death is imminent, and one must savor life's sweetness while one can. Some lives will be longer than others, and those blessed with more years should, of course, enjoy them all. But however long one's years may extend, they will undoubtedly be dwarfed by death's timespan—a point the sage will emphasize a few verses later with reference to man's admission to his "eternal home" (12:5). As though Qoheleth had not already sufficiently grounded his pleas, 12:1–7 will hold nothing back for the young addressee in its evocative imagining of death's encroachment on the still-living body. It is thus needful all the more for youths, those least yet touched by death's looming shadow, to enjoy life's goods. The comparative brevity of life to death vouchsafes its preciousness. Life is short and brims with capacities; death is long and marked by incapacities. Therefore, one must enjoy life to the full.

As always in Qoheleth's joy proclamations, that which is affirmed as valuable is not a set of objects per se but a string of behaviors and, more importantly, the attitude with which one should approach them. Yet here the injunctions become more abstract than before. Rather than commend the concrete activities of eating, drinking, and enjoying one's toil "accompanied" by the disposition of שִׂמְחָה, Qoheleth now encourages seeing the sun, enjoying one's "years," letting one's heart cheer oneself, and walking in the ways of one's heart. This abstraction puts all the more emphasis on a generally joyful *attitude* and *disposition.* Qoheleth is not stressing so much *what* to do as *how* to do it. "Whatever" one may find to do, particularly while one is still young, the approach must be characterized by the aptitude for enjoyment ensuing days will assuredly dull.

[90] Fox, *Rereading*, 317.

III. From Instrumental to Intrinsic Value

As I conveyed in Chapter 2, a key component of Qoheleth's conception of (hypothetical) meaning in life is its teleological structure. That is, meaning occurs when instrumentally valuable actions [עמל / עָמָל] are undertaken for the sake of achieving some permanent, terminally valuable aim [יִתְרוֹן], and this aim is in fact fulfilled. Under such a worldview, the greatest human lives are those that struggle long and hard toward impressive goals, attain them, and are remembered honorably long afterward. But as is clear by now, Qoheleth eventually lost faith that such a meaning in fact exists for humans. He began to see it as tragically beyond the pale in a cosmos utterly hostile to such hubris. The relentless pursuit of יִתְרוֹן turned out to be a striving after רוּחַ. The new light shed on עָמָל was no more flattering. For עָמָל, as instrumental value, is therefore also a *dependent* value, impotently at the mercy of the final value it so dutifully serves. Where that final value succeeds, its associated instrumental value soars; where the former flounders, the latter withers away.

Qoheleth's shift of worldview is seen throughout the book but is most explicitly clear in the royal autobiography section of 1:12–2:26. There he relays how his one-time presuppositions became disrupted and displaced by new insights. At this point what Qoheleth conveys is primarily a tearing down: the movement from a positive evaluation of his efforts, on the assumption that they were producing something of lasting value, to a negative appraisal in which his efforts were deemed futile. But what the conclusion of that section does begin to adumbrate and the book's remaining six joy texts confirm is that Qoheleth's transformation in worldview involved not only a tearing down but also a building up. Even though the concepts involved in each case are somewhat distinct—the tearing down of meaning followed by the building up not of meaning precisely but of value in another sense—the direct line of continuity between the two categories is simply the question, "What is good for a person to do?" If Qoheleth had only addressed the question of meaning, "What is good for a person to do *so as to achieve meaning?"* his answer would be, "Nothing." Yet Qoheleth's probing about *value* in life did not stop once he reached his abnegation of the possibility of meaning. Rather, he realized there is in fact value [טוֹב] in life, even if it differs from the sort [יִתְרוֹן] he had once posited.

This is clear on an exegetical level because the implicit answer to Qoheleth's rhetorical question "What gain?" [מַה־יִּתְרוֹן] is always, "None." Yet this conclusion never leads Qoheleth to deny the existence of טוֹב, and of course, the point of the joy passages is precisely to assert what

is טוֹב. As intimated in our discussion on the meaning of *hebel,* this is also one reason why translations of *hebel* along the lines of "worthless" or the like cannot be correct. Qoheleth's *hebel*-judgments are not meant to deny *all* the world's worth. Rather, what is denied is the expression of value we are diagnosing as "meaning"—but this leaves open conceptual space for the ascription of value in other forms.

The alternative form of value that Qoheleth not only reconciles himself to but begins to champion and celebrate is that of *intrinsic* value. Gilbert Harman defines intrinsic value as follows: "Something x has intrinsic value to the extent that x has value that is due entirely to what x is intrinsically and apart from x's relations to other things."[91] Here one values a thing in itself, not for what it produces, nor for any bonds or linkages to other value. No act-consequence nexus is necessary for the production of this value. The distinction between these two kinds of value, instrumental and intrinsic, is summarized by John Hospers:

> The first kind of good is called instrumental good because the goodness or worthwhileness of these things lies in their being instruments toward the attainment of the other things which are considered good not merely as instruments. The second kind of good is called intrinsic good because we value these things (whatever they may turn out to be) not for what they lead to but for what they are.[92]

The examples of positive commendation Qoheleth provides us throughout the book's joy passages are chosen because they so clearly exhibit Qoheleth's mature conception as to wherein lies "the good," a life focused on intrinsic rather than instrumental value: Eating and drinking need not be instrumentally valuable toward some further end, but can be valuable activities in themselves. Joy is not instrumentally valuable toward some further end, but is valuable in itself. The same is true for the donning of bright clothing and anointing with oil, enjoying one's beloved and seeing the sun with one's eyes. Qoheleth commends these particular activities not because they are the only activities he can think to commend in good faith nor even because they are necessarily always guarantors of pleasure, but because they represent the kind of activities that can naturally lend themselves to intrinsic valuing rather than instrumental valuing. Yet, as we have stressed, the matter is still entirely dependent on the person's attitude, on whether one cultivates a propensity to value and "see good" in such activities.

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[91] Gilbert Harman, "Intrinsic Value," 137–48 in *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 141.

[92] John Hospers, *Human Conduct: An Introduction to the Problems of Ethics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 105.

The only activity among Qoheleth's joy passages which seems a rather odd fit with the notion of intrinsic value is that of toil or work. As our previous chapters have shown, toil or work *may* be regarded as only instrumentally valuable toward the (hypothetical) production of meaning. That is the framework Qoheleth assumes in the passages where he denies the possibility of such meaning. But again, I take it that this teleological structure represents Qoheleth's former view, and that his eventual shift in perspective enabled him to recognize an alternative value for toil. Toil need not function *only* instrumentally—since its efforts on that front are bound to fail—but toil can actually be regarded as intrinsically valuable, as good in itself. From this new perspective toil's value depends not on its outcome but on whether it is undertaken with joy. One can fully engage the process without the need for a final product to justify that process.[93]

IV. Qoheleth and Philosophical Theories of Pleasure

Having explored Qoheleth's enjoyment refrain in some detail, we are now in a position to bring Qoheleth's concept of pleasure into dialogue with modern philosophical ideas of the same. Just as with our previous chapters, my underlying premise is that this dialogue with contemporary philosophy can bring a greater conceptual clarity to ideas biblical scholars may often refer to, yet without precisely defining their terms. Just as we have previously attempted to clarify the author's notions of meaning, well-being, and death's harm, in the present case it is the concept of pleasure itself that requires a deeper examination.

A. The Felt-Quality Theory of Pleasure

What is pleasure? Modern philosophical thought concerning the nature of pleasure can be divided into two broad camps. According to the first, which Chris Heathwood calls the Felt-Quality Theory, "pleasure is some one kind of immediately felt quality, and…various human activities (like eating, reading, listening to music) cause us to feel it."[94] G. E. Moore represents this view in

[93] Cf. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 90: "The joy that he commends…is more than an antidote for toil, since Qoheleth finds enjoyment and intrinsic value in work itself."

[94] Chris Heathwood, "The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire," *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007): 23–44, at 26. Heathwood's "Felt-Quality Theory" subsumes within it what Fred Feldman divides into two separate views, namely, the "Distinct Feeling View" and the "Hedonic Tone Theory" (Fred Feldman, "Hedonism," *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 663). According to Feldman, the Distinct Feeling View holds that "there is a certain special feeling of 'pleasure itself' " (Fred Feldman, "On the Intrinsic Value of Pleasures," *Ethics* 107.3 (1997): 448–66, at 452) while the Hedonic Tone Theory claims that, "all [pleasurable feelings] are alike in a certain phenomenally given dimension" and "share a certain positive 'tone' " (Feldman, "Hedonism," 663).

his influential 1903 work *Principia Ethica,* in which he writes that when someone experiences pleasure, "his mind…has at this moment a certain definite feeling called pleasure… In so far as it is pleasure we have…what we have is one definite thing, absolutely indefinable, some one thing that is the same in all the various degrees and in all the various kinds of it that there may be."[95] Moore means that the experience of pleasure, even if it is "indefinable" or unnameable, qualitatively *feels the same* to every person who experiences it and at all times when it is experienced. We may draw an analogy with the sensation we experience when eating sweet foods (such as gummy bears). Sweetness (or more precisely, the tasting thereof) is a definite, distinct feeling or sensation, a certain phenomenological quality. Everyone with a rightly functioning tongue experiences it in (roughly) the same way. A certain food may taste more or less sweet than another, but the basic sensation of sweetness remains the same throughout, and in that sense it is a "definite feeling." Accordingly, Leonard Katz writes that pleasure is a "single simple (feature of) experience that makes experiences good and attractive to the extent it is present."[96]

Murat Aydede notes that on this view, "Pleasant sensations are inherently motivating. *Inherently,* because it seems that, in order for them to motivate, the experiencer need not have any further motivating beliefs and desires."[97] In other words, a person need not have any particular attitude toward the experience in order for this distinct feeling of pleasure to be felt. No particular attitude or psychological or emotional state is necessary. Rather, the feeling simply arises from the pleasure-source, as long as the pleasure-source is in fact a source of pleasure, in the sense of providing the "certain definite feeling" in question. If it is, pleasure will come, regardless of one's subjective attitude toward it.

Before continuing on to the second philosophical theory of pleasure, I want to pause to relate the Felt-Quality Theory of pleasure to Qoheleth. I have already discussed Michael Fox's view of Qoheleth's conception of pleasure, but it is helpful to return to his view in the context of these philosophical theories. For in his discussion Fox applies a definition of pleasure from a 1941 article by philosopher Karl Duncker called, "On Pleasure, Emotion, and Striving." Duncker there

[95] G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 12–13.

[96] Leonard D. Katz, "Pleasure," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/pleasure.

[97] Murat Aydede, "A Contemporary Account of Sensory Pleasure," 239–266 in *Pleasure: A History* (ed. Lisa Shapiro; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 243 [emphasis original].

writes that "pleasure is a feeling-tone," and Fox twice repeats the statement.[98] Duncker's article was a relatively influential one within twentieth-century philosophy concerning pleasure, so it is reasonable that Fox would cite it authoritatively. Moreover, given the nature of my own project, I am glad to see Fox engaging with philosophical literature in a biblical studies monograph—as he has done elsewhere throughout his work, much to his credit. But I only wish to point out that Duncker's view on the nature of pleasure as a "feeling-tone" represents one view on what was then and is still a contested topic in philosophy. Duncker's description comports with what Feldman has called the "Hedonic Tone Theory" of pleasure (see n. 95 above) and fits more broadly within the Felt-Quality theories (in Heathwood's terms).[99] It cannot necessarily be assumed that this particular theory of pleasure represents Qoheleth's own, as articulated in the joy passages. In fact, I will suggest that the other main philosophical theory of pleasure, which we will consider below, aligns much more closely with the conception of enjoyment we have identified in Qoheleth.

B. Attitudinal Theories of Pleasure

A second camp of philosophers on pleasure represent the cluster of related views known as "Attitudinal Theories."[100] According to them, the Felt-Quality Theory fails because the various pleasures humans experience are far too varied to share in common some one distinct feeling. This has been called the "heterogeneity problem."[101] Consider the great variety of sources of human pleasure: tasting ice cream, receiving a high grade on an exam, listening to beautiful music, seeing a loved one again after time apart, finishing the remodeling project, the fact that one's favorite athlete won the gold, and so on. The experience involved with these examples seems to vary so widely, the "felt-quality" of each seems so different, claim the Attitudinal theorists, that it is impossible to bunch all of these experiences together as triggering some singular homogenous feeling. Yet some basis of unity seems required, inasmuch as we describe our various positive experiences with the common term "pleasure."[102] In his work *The Methods of Ethics,* nineteenth-

[98] Karl Duncker, "On Pleasure, Emotion, and Striving," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1 (1941/42): 391–430, at 400. See Fox, *Rereading*, 113, 114.

[99] Heathwood, "Reduction," 26, explicitly categorizes Duncker as representing a version of the "Felt-Quality Theory."

[100] Feldman, "Hedonism," 663.

[101] See, e.g., Heathwood, "Reduction," 25–26; Aaron Smuts, "The Feels Good Theory of Pleasure," *Philosophical Studies* 155.2 (2011): 241–65, at 243.

[102] Some philosophers, however, do *not* believe this linguistic unification is required or possible, advocating a view called *hedonic pluralism,* e.g., Georg Henrik Von Wright, *The Varieties of Goodness* (London: Routledge, 1963); Ivar Labukt, "Hedonic Tone and the Heterogeneity of Pleasure," *Utilitas* 24.2 (2012): 172–99. Irwin Goldstein,

century philosopher Henry Sidgwick supposed that such an array of pleasing experiences share no phenomenologically identical feeling or sensation, but what they share in common is the *attitude* a person takes with respect to them—namely, desiring them.[103] Over the last century plenty of other philosophers have followed up on Sidgwick's idea. The precise "attitude" in view has broadened out to a variety of proposals which include but also go beyond "desiring," such as "liking," "loving," "approving," "wanting to continue," and being "interested in." But they are united in identifying pleasure (or enjoyment) with some sort of "pro-attitude,"[104] rather than any felt sensation in the body. To restate the idea for clarity's sake, the attitudinal theories of pleasure are motivated by the fact that: (a) the concept of pleasure is (or at least is treated and spoken of as) a unified concept, and in light of this, there must be some common unifying factor among its various manifestations; (b) the range of experiential "feelings" of pleasure is too vast and the instances all too different to be unified as one "distinct feeling"; (c) therefore the unifying factor is not a feeling of bodily sensation but is instead a pro-attitude which one applies to the activity, by virtue of which it is deemed pleasurable or enjoyable.

Within the Attitudinal camp, in the mid-twentieth century Gilbert Ryle propounded a view of pleasure which galvanized philosophical discussion for decades.[105] Like Sidgwick, Ryle argues that pleasure or enjoyment is not a bodily sensation. Rather, he explains enjoyment as a kind of "heed, concentration, paying attention, care," or "attending or giving one's mind to":[106] "To say that someone is now enjoying or disliking something entails that he is paying heed to it."[107]

> Think of the partly metaphorical force of the expressions "absorbed" and "occupied." When the blotting-paper absorbs the ink, we picture the ink as unresisting and the blotting-paper as having

"Hedonic Pluralism," *Philosophical Studies* 48.1 (1985): 49–55, combats this view, thus representing the more common *monistic* view assumed in our discussion. I take Qoheleth to share the monist view of pleasure in part because of 8:15, "But I myself commend שִׂמְחָה, because there is nothing good under the sun for a person except to eat and drink and be joyful." Qoheleth clearly writes here with a nod to his earlier joy statements, and the fact that he could summarize his commendation of various activities as a commendation of the singular phenomenon, שִׂמְחָה, implies that he sees them all as united in and entailed by that particular term and the concept it represents. The question presently under discussion concerns how that is possible, if it is not sourced in a singular "felt-quality."

[103] Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1982 [orig. publ. 1874]), 125–31. He writes, "When I reflect on the notion of pleasure…the only common quality that I can find in the feelings so designated seems to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term 'desirable' " (127).

[104] Patrick Horace Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1954), 112–13, originated the term "pro-attitude," which has since been used widely.

[105] See David Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 217–21.

[106] Gilbert Ryle, "Pleasure," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 28 (Supplementary Volume) (1954): 135–46, at 141–42.

[107] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2009 [orig. publ. 1949]), 116.

> the power. It thirstily imbibes every drop of the docile ink and will not give it up again. Somewhat similarly, when a child is absorbed in his game, he—every drop of him—is sucked up into the business of manipulating his clockwork trains. All his thoughts, all his talk, all his controllable muscular actions are those of his engine-drivers, signalmen and station-masters. His game is, for the moment, his whole world.[108]

More recently Talbot Brewer has attempted to build upon Ryle's view that "to take pleasure in an activity is to do it in a particular way—unreservedly, with wholehearted enthusiasm or rapt attention."[109] Brewer thinks Ryle's definition is headed in the right direction yet Brewer notes that attention alone is not enough to make an activity enjoyable, since it is certainly possible to focus on an activity one regards as dull, such as watching paint dry. Thus there must be something about the activity which makes it attractive or compelling, a reason for doing it. But, says Brewer, "this is still not sufficient to yield pleasure," because extrinsic motivations (such as threat of punishment for not doing the activity) might ground the activity's attractiveness. Brewer articulates his full view of *pleasure-in-activity* when he writes,

> If doing what one desires to do is to yield pleasure, the desire must not only be unequivocal; it must also involve a tendency to see something *intrinsically* good or worthwhile about the activity itself… If one were struck only by the activity's instrumental value, one's evaluative attention would be directed not at the activity but at its expected results. Such attention does not complete our activity nor render it unimpeded; it absents us from our activity and renders it burdensome.[110]

Thus it is not attention alone (as in Ryle) but the joining of attention with seeing the activity as *intrinsically* valuable that constitutes enjoyment in an activity. Brewer continues that when we have the sort of desire called "pleasure,"

> what we have is a vivid and appreciative awareness of the aspects of our activity that make it intrinsically valuable. To appreciate our own activity in this way is to live a stretch of life unreservedly, without those distractions or inner doubts that so often leave us at odds with ourselves and alienated from our doings. It is not hard to see why savoring one's doings in this way deserves to be called pleasure.[111]

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[108] Ryle, "Pleasure," 143.

[109] Talbot Brewer, "Savoring Time: Desire, Pleasure and Wholehearted Activity," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6.2 (2003): 143–60, at 149.

[110] Brewer, "Savoring Time," 151 [emphasis original].

[111] Brewer, "Savoring Time," 153.

My proposal is that Brewer's view of pleasure finds a close correspondent in Qoheleth's mature notion of שִׂמְחָה. Brewer further postulates, "When we have a continuous and vivid sense of the value of a genuinely good activity, this does not leave the activity unchanged. It alters the activity itself and enhances its value by making it unreserved rather than reserved, wholehearted rather than half-hearted."[112] These words draw the link we find implicit in Qoheleth, between שִׂמְחָה as intrinsic valuing and his imperative, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might!" When the future's unattainable ends are finally released from one's attempted grasp, one's hands are free to engage full-on with whatever of value lies completely within reach. One can concentrate all one's energy into the present: שִׂמְחָה manifests as whole-hearted engagement with the task at hand.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to clarify Qoheleth's conception of enjoyment or pleasure, as expressed in his seven-fold enjoyment refrain. The thrust of my argument has been to challenge the interpretation that regards the theme as a commendation merely to passive, sensory pleasure, as a narcotic to stave off life's pains. On this reading, the advocated enjoyment really holds nothing of intrinsic positive value; it is only a means of avoiding the intrinsic harm of pain. This view, I submit, is unwarranted. In its place, I have offered a reading whereby Qoheleth conceives of joy and pleasure as fully incorporating one's active volition—one's mind and even one's "might." Here one chooses to regard one's activities as intrinsically valuable—valuable in themselves rather than as a means to some end or "gain." Qoheleth insinuates that such intrinsic valuing can and should be directed at *hedonically ambiguous* goods—goods that do not guarantee pleasure in themselves (if partaken of passively, joylessly) but produce it when approached with the mindset just described. Hence, Qoheleth's understanding comports with the "Attitudinal theories" of pleasure advocated by many contemporary philosophers, finding a particularly close ally in the recent proposal of Talbot Brewer.

In an article responding to Sam Scheffler's cataclysmic thought experiment cited in Chapter 3, philosopher Mark Johnston expresses the nature of joyful human activity in a way that harmoniously expands upon Qoheleth's own sentiment:

[112] Brewer, "Savoring Time," 158.

> There is simple human joy, the joy that comes from eating, drinking, sensing, moving one's body, engaging one's intellect, conversing, hanging out with friends and family, making love, raising children, playing games; enjoying nature, music, dance, and art; and telling and listening to stories. This kind of joy is wholly legitimate, a proper response to these activities, and also self-standing, in that it does not give hostages to futurity as a condition on its legitimacy.[113]

The last line perfectly encapsulates what becomes so central to Qoheleth's idea of joy: "it does not give hostages to futurity as a condition on its legitimacy." The joy commended by the sage will not "remain" or be "left over" after one has died, but that is no longer a worry. It is indeed "self-standing," unbeholden to a master end. It will not be remembered or admired by any future third-person arbiters. It will be entirely spent, used up, poured into its activities—and then gone. Qoheleth's one-time "staying power intuition" has thus been abandoned. Values need not attain permanence in order to justify themselves: "finite values can still be great."[114]

An important implication of this argument is that Qoheleth does not need to overturn his *hebel* conclusions in order to posit genuine value for the human experience. What is *hebel* and what is good are not direct competitors in a fight for value. Rather, they are complementary realities, or perhaps, "non-overlapping magisteria," to use Stephen Jay Gould's well-known characterization of science and religion. That "all is *hebel"* does not rule out all possible kinds of value from the land of the living, but only the value we have identified as "meaning." Since meaning is a teleological value, the absence of meaning does indeed preclude all *teleological* values. But, crucially, meaning's absence does not entail the exclusion of *non-teleological* value, or what we have identified as *intrinsic* value—the value of the moment, the value of things in themselves. Qoheleth's mature philosophy not only allows for this second kind of value but eagerly encourages the attitude which fosters it.

[113] Mark Johnston, "Is Life a Ponzi Scheme?" *Boston Review* (2014), http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/mark-johnston-samuel-scheffler-death-afterlife-humanity-ponzi-scheme.

[114] Robert Audi, "Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life," *Philosophical Papers* 34.3 (2005): 331–55, at 354.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Is there a method to Qoheleth's madness? The working hypothesis of this dissertation has been that there is. I have claimed that Qoheleth's message is unified by the concept of value and that he expresses a distinct, coherent vision as to where value is found—and not found—in human lives. Our burden has thus been to mine Qoheleth's central value claims and from there to carve out something approaching his system of thought as to "what is good" in the lives of human beings. Under the broad rubric of value, we have examined several of the most prominent themes in Qoheleth—futility and absurdity, meaning, death, time, agency, existence (and non-existence), well-being, and enjoyment. In each case, we have studied these themes by employing the usual toolkit of Hebrew Bible exegesis—examining lexical usage, grammatical structures, literary context, and the like. But we have also taken the themes a step further than is typically done. Establishing a dialogue between Qoheleth and contemporary philosophy of value has enabled us to supplement the exegetical task with a more rigorous *conceptual* analysis of Qoheleth's ideas than is usually found in biblical scholarship—a discipline well-suited to render textual details but often ill-equipped to classify and relate a text's broader, more abstract ideas. The result, I suggest, has been a reading of Qoheleth with crisper philosophical conceptions linked together by tighter bonds.

Part I of the dissertation analyzed the themes which manifest Qoheleth's negative values. Chapter 2 broached the topic of meaning in life—a theoretical positive value for Qoheleth, but one which becomes negative in its presumed absence from the human experience. We saw that by means of his infamous *hebel*-motif Qoheleth conveys that much of life is futile and absurd, thus lacking meaning. We then attempted a conceptual analysis of Qoheleth's idea of meaning, distinguished in terms of *teleological* and *environmental* senses. Most of the discussion, however, focused on the teleological sense, which was distinguished further in terms of form and content. The aim was to reconstruct Qoheleth's understanding of the kind of life that *would* be characterized by meaning, even though Qoheleth no longer believes any such life is possible. On the formal side, we proposed four criteria for meaning: (a) instrumentally valuable actions attempted for the sake of a final intrinsic good; (b) difficulty in performing the actions; (c) competent causation on the part of the agent; (d) permanence for the achievement. As for the content of meaning, we concluded that Qoheleth conceives of meaning not merely as the satisfaction of one's own desires (*subjectivism*) nor the accomplishment of world-bettering actions (*consequentialism*) but as the recognition of and high regard for one's own achievements on the part of other humans (*intersubjectivism*).

Chapter 3 continued our probe into Qoheleth's negative values by attempting to gain clarity on the nature of the harm (or disvalue) of death as Qoheleth sees it. We initially found that Qoheleth would agree with the majority of contemporary philosophers of death, who regard death as extrinsically harmful on account of the fact that it deprives its victims of the good things they would experience had they not died (the Deprivation Account). But we saw that Qoheleth's deeper sense of death's harm advances beyond this notion by regarding death as a setback to one's interests, particularly one's "transcendent interests." These transcendent interests are ultimately thwarted not by death itself, but by the posthumous harms death affords. These harms can be generalized as owing to "metaphorical mortality"—the lack of proper posthumous recognition and remembrance. In other words, Qoheleth's view concerning death's harm bolsters the proposal from Chapter 2 that meaning is bound up with social regard, and therefore the undermining of this prospect entails the eradication of meaning in life. Since meaning is a social good that at least some human beings are owed by their present and future peers, the sage also regards its absence as a form of injustice against those who deserve it.

Chapter 4 focused on the book's theme of time, which led to a consideration of determinism and human agency. Here I proposed a quasi-metaphysical perspective for Qoheleth under the heading *cyclical, anthropological determinism.* This idea conveys that (a) God has determined the essential nature of a broad framework within which human existence takes place; (b) the framework is intentionally limiting for human beings, who have no say in the matter, and, (c) human activity within this framework is cyclical and oscillatory. Two main conclusions related to value follow from this idea, both with respect to the loss of meaning. First, time's cyclical nature is seen as the basis for ateleology, thus undermining any progress humans might make in the direction of meaningful accomplishment since all of their "doings" eventually come "undone." Second, humans' lack of agency and self-creative autonomy prohibits them from the authentic creation of their own valuable projects, yet another aspect of their estrangement from meaning.

Our conclusion to Part I brought together these latter two strands of death and cyclical time, showing how they are linked as the two primary harms which elicit *hebel* and rob human beings of a meaningful existence. Death operates on the level of individual humans, marking their breakpoint with life and its accrued values, but Qoheleth's quasi-metaphysical notion of cyclical time works on a more transgenerational plane, circumventing the chances of humanity-at-large making progress toward anything meaningfully "new."

Part II then turned to consider themes that, perhaps surprisingly, begin to evidence Qoheleth's positive values by showing he is not quite the pessimist he is often portrayed as. Chapter 5 examined Qoheleth's two passages on coming into existence and found that, unlike the pure pessimism of philosopher David Benatar, Qoheleth positively values human existence as such—*unless,* that is, a person is utterly incapable of receiving life's goods. Qoheleth seems to think that the majority of people can take up God's offer of enjoyment and that those who cannot, like the man in 6:2–3, are enslaved to the pursuit of ambitions whose fulfillment the cosmos will simply not grant. The latter part of the chapter continued our consideration of the subjective and objective poles of value in life by considering Qoheleth's views in relation to the main competing proposals within the theory of well-being. Whereas meaning is Qoheleth's highest *hypothetical* value, well-being is the category of "good" to which he makes authentic appeal. Here I advocated a hybrid theory Shelly Kagan has called "enjoying the good" as particularly akin to Qoheleth's perspective, one which locates a person's good in their ability to subjectively enjoy life's objective goods.

Chapter 6 then delved more deeply into this theme of subjective enjoyment, since it is Qoheleth's clearest, most emphatically positive value. Here we concluded that Qoheleth conceives of enjoyment or pleasure not as a mere narcotic to stave off life's pains but as genuinely value-laden in its emotional, cognitive, and volitional components. This emphatic joy is certainly surprising, given the book's otherwise consistent stress on life's disvalues and harms. But the logical space for such positive value is supplied by the fact that meaning does not have a monopoly on value. There are other kinds of values than meaning, and the value Qoheleth commends when he advocates joy is one essentially decoupled from the passing of time and the long-term aims humans so commonly stretch across it. We then brought Qoheleth's notion of pleasure into dialogue with contemporary work in the philosophy of pleasure. Here we found a deep kinship between Qoheleth's ideas and the so-called Attitudinal theories of pleasure advanced by philosophers such as Henry Sidgwick, Gilbert Ryle, and more recently, Talbot Brewer. According to their view, the unifying nature of pleasure resides not reliably in some "felt-quality" or perceived sensation, but in the attitude that is brought to the experience by the enjoyer. Essentially, it is an attitude inclined to regard things as intrinsically valuable, valuable for their own sake. This view, I posited, articulates Qoheleth's own mature conception of pleasure.

Throughout this thesis, then, I have related the two sides of Qoheleth's values—the good and the bad—in a synchronic manner, showing how the two facets do not contradict one another and can both be upheld in their proper place. But along the way, I have at times also pointed out that the two can be related diachronically as well, in terms of a development in Qoheleth's thought that resulted in a shift in emphasis. Qoheleth can be seen as a figure who, like Friedrich Nietzsche, undertook a "revaluation of values."[1] Three stages are discernible, with two "conversion" moments separating them.[2] The first stage is marked by an assumption of teleology as the highest value

[1] See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (trans. Kate Sturge; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151–52, 209.

[2] I realize that any such historical reconstruction of Qoheleth's biography may call to mind older generations of Qoheleth scholars' rather speculative biographies of the sage, e.g. E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881), 35–55. I have no wish to pursue a flight of fancy here, but it does seem difficult entirely to avoid the issue, and we have already approached it at points in the thesis. Either what we are presented with in the book represents one static perspective, or it represents a development over time. If the latter is believed—which I suggest the text clearly insinuates—then *some* minimal attempt at reconstruction is required simply to justify our reading strategy. I have tried to keep my proposal as minimalist as possible, while still positing a way of cohering the text's implicit "geneaology."

Implied within a "historical reconstruction" is the fact that I do indeed regard Qoheleth as historical person (although "Qoheleth" was unlikely his actual name). This is a point worth mentioning because in recent scholarship the idea has gained some prominence that Qoheleth is a fictional character, a creation of the book's actual author, who

structure.[3] Within this stage Qoheleth carries out a quest for meaning (in particular) and "what is good" (more broadly), as expressed in 1:12–2:23. The quest culminates in the first conversion moment, the deconstruction of the old teleological worldview. This conversion moment is articulated most clearly in 2:11, with further rationale provided in 2:12–23. The second stage is then marked by Qoheleth's critical attitude toward the world and a frustration with platitudes he was once taught. Much of the content of the book reflects this second phase. Here Qoheleth develops his philosophy in accordance with the "negative value" themes outlined in Part I of this thesis, such as *hebel,* death, and cyclical time. His critiques of meaning and the values which serve it are so unrelenting and pervasive that one might think—as have many scholars—that this is the whole story. But it is not.

For Qoheleth eventually came to another insight, which is that the undermining of teleological value need not itself discredit *all possible value.* There are other kinds of value available, namely, what we have identified as intrinsic value, or what could be called the "value of the moment." The joy statements proceed from this insight. This third and final stage of thinking about value directly contradicts his *initial* stage, the teleological stage, which presumes that *all value* must be teleological. But it does not contradict the second stage, the anti-teleological perspective. Even though the emphasis in the second stage is negative and that of the third stage is positive, these are complementary truths. Much (if not all) of reality is absurd, in that it does not match our expectations for a reasonable, meaningful, just world. And much human action is futile and bound to fail with respect to its aims. But what Qoheleth came to see in addition to these truths

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is identified with the narrator. See, e.g., Michael V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83–106; Carolyn J. Sharp, "Ironic Representation, Authorial Voice, And Meaning In Qohelet," *BibInt* 12 (2004): 37–68. I have no space here for a detailed discussion of the complex matter, and the argument of this thesis does not necessarily depend on my answer. But I do not think that the person or persona of Qoheleth is a fabricated one. One reason for my skepticism is that Qoheleth seems to me a far too complicated and nuanced personality, with too sophisticated a worldview, to simply represent a foil on the part of another mind, especially if the latter intends to depict Qoheleth's worldview as essentially flawed. It seems unlikely to me that an author of a conservative persuasion (as indicated in 12:13–14) has made up the character of Qoheleth in order to represent a viewpoint this author despised. On other hand, if the author constructed a character named Qoheleth to represent his own views and only added the epilogue to distance himself from such views in order to save face within his social context, then it would seem less than fully accurate to describe Qoheleth as merely a "character"; rather, the case would be more like pseudepigraphy. In my view, it is still best to construe the relationship between the body of the text and the epilogue in the manner that the text most straightforwardly conveys and that has been espoused by the majority of modern commentators: the epilogue was written by an editor (or perhaps two editors) seeking at least slightly to tidy up the message of an unorthodox, difficult book by offering a more traditional final word (so, e.g., Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 391–96; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 826–54; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 189–92; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 208; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 349, among many others).

[3] To be clear, this teleological perspective is never stated directly in the book. I am suggesting that it is the genealogical background against which Qoheleth's anti-teleological statements have been formulated.

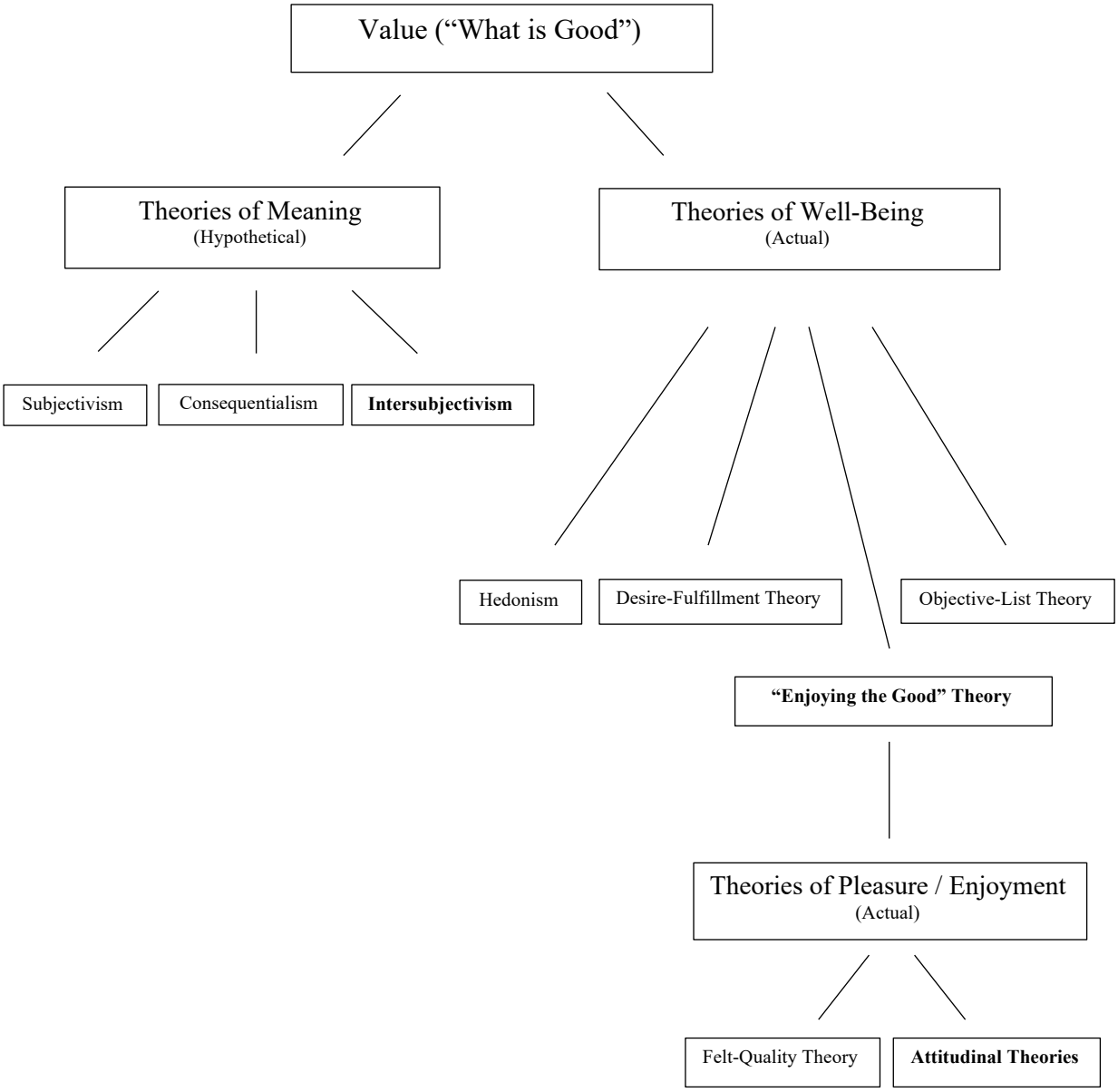
is that there can be tremendous value in the "thing in itself." Something can hold great intrinsic value as a singular object or activity, a lone experience, unfettered to causes and consequences, when the enjoyer approaches it with such an attitude.

Scholars who acknowledge the loss of meaning in Qoheleth sometimes speak of the joy passages as constituting the "recovery" or "reconstruction" of this meaning.[4] I have not put the matter this way because doing so conflates the distinctions in terminology Qoheleth maintains and thus may cause confusion. As we relayed in Chapter 2, the word יִתְרוֹן is the closest direct substitute for the notion of "meaning" in Qoheleth, and nowhere in the joy passages does Qoheleth intimate that יִתְרוֹן, "gain," is found or revived. Qoheleth's denials of יִתְרוֹן maintain their ground. We do not observe a recovery of *meaning* in Qoheleth, but we do see the recovery and even celebration of *value*, of what is טוֹב.

The underlying claims of this dissertation have been that the book of Qoheleth is unified by the notion of value, that Qoheleth holds a particular philosophy with respect to questions of human value, and that Qoheleth's thought on value can be usefully clarified and to some degree systematized through the lens of contemporary philosophy of value. I believe the foregoing work has established these points. (See the diagram below summarizing Qoheleth's views in relation to the theories by which we explored meaning, well-being, and pleasure.) On a broader level, this dissertation has also contributed to a long-running debate in the history of biblical scholarship—the question of the relationship between the Bible and philosophy. What I hope our method has shown is that biblical scholarship need not remain the enemy of philosophy, and vice versa. Whatever historical distrust may have existed between these two disciplines in the last century, it is time to move both fields forward by opening up the interdisciplinary possibilities inherent in such a dialogue.

[4] Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 3, 133, 140–45; Jennie Grillo, "The Wisdom Literature," 183–205 in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion* (ed. John Barton; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 197.

Qoheleth's Philosophy of Value in Terms of Contemporary Value Philosophy [5]



[5] The theories which have been found to align with Qoheleth's views are set in bold font.

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