The Meaning of Life in Ecclesiastes: Coherence, Purpose, and Significance from a Psychological Perspective*

Arthur Keefer
Eton College; email: arthurkeefer@gmail.com

Abstract

Attending to ongoing debates about the "meaning of life" in Ecclesiastes, this article determines how Qoheleth addressed meaningfulness by drawing on a threefold scheme of definitions for life's meaning. These definitions are derived from psychological research and used to argue that all three conceptions appear within the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth was primarily concerned with life's "coherence," which depends on predictable and reliable patterns in life that render it sensible, yet he also addressed life's "purpose" and "significance." While primarily determining how these three forms of meaning, along with their attendant ideas, are handled within Ecclesiastes itself, this article also demonstrates how resources from psychological research help to resolve debates among biblical interpreters, who agree far more than it at first appears once clearer definitions of "meaning" are employed.

Keywords

Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, meaning of life, הבל/*heḇel*, psychology

* I am very grateful for the comments of the reviewers at *HTR*, whose suggestions I followed at many points, and I am especially indebted to Michael Rhodes for his help on an early version of the manuscript. The initial research for this article was funded by a generous residential grant from Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, Wales.

HTR 112:4 (2019) 447–466

Introduction

It has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the twentieth century to interpret the book of Ecclesiastes as if it addresses "the meaning of life." Beginning with explicit references to "meaning" in the early twentieth century and culminating with the New International Version's decision to translate הבל as "meaningless" in 1984, the trend to find concerns about the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes characterizes many recent approaches to the book.[1] James Crenshaw, for instance, claims that Qoheleth asks "the question of questions: Does life have any meaning at all?"—thus attributing to Qoheleth an interest in life's meaningfulness and, it seems, with the discovery that life may hold none at all.[2]

Opposed to meaning of life interpretations, certain interpreters have explicitly stated that Ecclesiastes does not address issues of life's ultimate meaning. They instead claim that the book harbors alternative concerns, no less comprehensive or significant for human life, yet not concerned with its "meaningfulness." Regarding the book's הבל statements, C.-L. Seow says that Qoheleth "does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension."[3] The comments of Crenshaw and Seow disclose a debate about if and how the meaning of life vexed Qoheleth, much of which entails competing assertions instead of developed arguments: according to interpreters, aside from their particular emphases and nuances, Ecclesiastes simply does or does not address the meaning of life. Interaction between these camps remains minimal, and the root cause seems to be that in most interpretations "meaning" remains undefined.[4]

[1] As far as I am aware, Arthur Peake made the first explicit comment about life's "meaningfulness" in Ecclesiastes (*The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament* [London: Epworth, 1904] 126). "Life is meaningless" because human action achieves "no abiding result," showing life to be "a closed circle from which man cannot get away." George Barton later commented on 1:2–11 that "Life and the processes of nature are an endless and meaningless repetition" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908] 69). He appeals to Wright who nowhere refers to the meaninglessness of such cycles. See Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes, Considered in Relation to Modern Criticism, and to the Doctrines of Modern Pessimism, with a Critical and Grammatical Commentary and a Revised Translation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1883) 141–82. Philosopher Wendell O'Brien says, "it was only early in the nineteenth century that writers began to write directly about 'the meaning of life,' " when Arthur Schopenhauer articulated "der Sinn des Lebens" ("The Meaning of Life: Early Continental and Analytic Perspectives," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/mean-ear). See Schopenhauer's essay "On Human Nature: Character" (1851).

[2] James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 116. I refer to the literary text as "Ecclesiastes" as distinct from "Qoheleth," whether narrator, persona, or implied author.

[3] Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 59.

[4] For interpreters who locate a concern with the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes, often without defining the concept, see, among others, Norbert Lohfink (*Kohelet* [KAT 1; Würzburg: Echter, 1980] 21) who writes: "Der Horizont der Frage [Eccl 1:3] ist die Welt als solche. Diese ist eine durchlichtete Wirklichkeit (»Sonne«), aber in ihr stellt sich dennoch für den Menschen die Sinnfrage [question

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The primary aims of the present article are to resolve this debate, to clarify the notion of life's meaning, and to make additional advancements in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes in its final form, all of which require resources external to biblical studies.[5] By consulting definitions of the meaning of life derived from psychological research, I argue that Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of life from three perspectives: "coherence," "purpose," and "significance."[6] These categories not only bring definition to a concept largely assumed and vague in biblical discussion; they also uncover how Qoheleth addresses different aspects of the meaning of life and how these aspects enrich our understanding of the book as a whole. As I will argue, all three receive attention in Ecclesiastes, yet "coherence" remains the book's unquestionable focus, since Qoheleth concentrates most on the (un)reliability and (in)comprehensibility of patterns in life. To each category, Qoheleth contributes his own insight, such as experiences or questions, which are presented throughout the article. The relationships of these three types of meaning of life are also explored, manifesting the importance of the less-present concepts known as "purpose" and "significance." In short, I interpret Ecclesiastes with three psychological categories of meaning, determine how Qoheleth supplements or nuances these categories, and suggest how they relate to each other.

As a consequent and secondary goal, I also show that employing such definitions in biblical interpretation partly resolves the assertive disputes about Ecclesiastes just described. In other words, without these psychological conceptual resources, interpretations of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes remain vague and in certain cases unnecessarily contentious. As secondary, this interest draws attention back to the study's primary focus, namely, the text of Ecclesiastes itself, meaning that while the book's history of scholarship will receive attention, benefiting from the clarity

of meaning]"); Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978) 59–60; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) passim; Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück. Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (BZAW 286; Berlin: de Gruyter) 32, 218; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) passim; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2004) 154; Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2007) 23, 51; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) passim; Melanie Köhlmoos, *Kohelet. Der Prediger Salomo* (ATD; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) 56–57. The pattern also appears among systematic theologians: Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation* (trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight; vol. 3.1 of *Church Dogmatics*; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) 245; Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 749. Aside from such assertions, certain interpreters argue against particular meaning of life interpretations, like Mark Sneed, for example, who accuses Fox and Crenshaw of anachronism because they overlap Ecclesiastes and modern existentialism (Mark Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes* [Ancient Israel and Its Literature 12; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012] 168–70). See below for further examples.

[5] Although the results of my argument may inform diachronic approaches to Ecclesiastes, I treat the book in its final form. Matters of authorship, redaction, and editing do not influence the present argument.

[6] For a concise overview of philosophical approaches to Ecclesiastes, see Jaco Gericke, "A Comprehensive Typology of Philosophical Perspectives on Qohelet," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36 (2015) 1–7.

and critique of psychological disciplines and my own interpretation of the text, the analysis of scholarship is brief and deliberately introductory when compared with my analysis of the primary source. Through an unprecedented approach to the book of Ecclesiastes, I aim, simply, to lay common ground upon which to settle apparent disagreements between scholars.

This article, then, resolves a particular interpretive debate and in the process reveals the methodological insight of using extradisciplinary research in biblical studies. To demonstrate these points, I first delineate the meaning of life as defined in psychological research and then interpret Ecclesiastes with the threefold spectrum of meaning of life categories, attending lastly to their interrelationships. Before interpreting Ecclesiastes itself, then, the notion of life's meaning as prescribed by psychologists and philosophers must be laid out. For only by determining what is meant by the meaning of life can we determine if and how it appears in Ecclesiastes.

Psychological Definitions of the Meaning of Life

Descriptions of what the meaning of life means remain unclear not only among biblical scholars but also among philosophers, as they have arrived at no consensus about a singular definition.[7] Unsurprisingly then, two recent works in the field of psychology have categorized research about the meaning of life into a threefold scheme comprised of "coherence," "purpose," and "significance" (the work by Frank Martela and Michael Steger is followed in this article).[8] Research into life's meaning falls into one of these three categories, each of which defines meaning from a distinct perspective. "Coherence" refers to the human's cognitive comprehension of life, as life "makes sense" because predictable and recognizable patterns are discernable within it. When coherent, life holds epistemological integrity, especially with respect to stable patterns of cause and effect. The second type, "purpose," arises when life has a future, overarching goal. This goal gives direction to life and bears significance for present activities, so that to say "my life has purpose" amounts to saying "my life has meaning." Third, "significance" refers to life's value or worthwhileness, wherein factors past, present, or future generate a life that "matters."

[7] Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. E. N. Zalta), June 3, 2013, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/life-meaning. Metz has surveyed the field and determined that, by "meaning," many philosophers mean something different from happiness or rightness: "If talk about meaning in life is not by definition talk about happiness or rightness, then what is it about? There is as yet no consensus in the field." In view of this lack of consensus, Metz proffers possibilities that amount to "a grab-bag of heterogenous ideas." For a helpful discussion, see Ronald Hepburn, "Questions about the Meaning of Life," *RelS* 1 (1966) 125–40.

[8] Frank Martela and Michael Steger, "The Three Meanings of Meaning in Life: Distinguishing Coherence, Purpose, and Significance," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11 (2016) 531–45. I am using meaning *of* life to refer to what Martela and Steger call meaning *in* life, that is, how humans experience meaning, though the distinction is not entirely convincing (532). For similar results, see Login George and Crystal Park, "Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering: Toward Integration and New Research Questions," *Review of General Psychology* 20 (2016) 205–20.

Based on these definitions, the possibility arises that future goals may endow one's present life with significance. For example, living with the aim of making money could then make one's life worth living, and for the person adherent to this worldview, the inability to make money may result in an insignificant, worthless life. This relationship suggests some overlap between the purpose and significance categories and raises the question of how distinct they really are. Although these two concepts do overlap—since to establish a purpose for life may make that life worth living—they ultimately remain distinct: significance evaluates life as a whole—past, present, and future—while purpose focuses on the future alone and serves as a motivation for life. One evaluates the present based on many sources (significance); the other provides momentum for life based on the future (purpose). Coherence stands apart from both of these categories, as it simply describes rather than evaluates the world as one sees it.

These conceptual distinctions arise, in part, from the fact that the categories are often conflated, leading Martela and Steger to underscore the need to treat them separately, so that each fashions a distinct way of understanding life as meaningful. Amid the concern to distinguish concepts, a commonality is also proposed, one found in the function of these categories, as each "reflectively interprets" life.[9] Beyond this broad connection, Martela and Steger proffer hypothetical relationships between each type of meaning, to which I have already alluded and about which I say more later: coherence may be a necessary condition for significance; purpose could serve as a source of significance or vice versa; and coherence and purpose work together synergistically.[10]

With this scheme of definitions, I shall disclose in what ways Qoheleth does and does not address the meaning of life, that is, in what ways he views life as "meaningful" and "meaningless," an interpretation so far characterized by vagueness and often unnecessary dispute. Furthermore, albeit of secondary concern, this threefold scheme will resolve some such disputes, revealing that biblical interpreters clash less than it may at first seem. While laying out these introductory aims for my argument, I have been proffering semantic vagueness as the primary problem for interpretations of the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. The objection prudently leaves room for linguistic ambiguity, particularly for the sort of phenomenological language that we often employ with phrases like "the meaning of life," but such ambiguity does not enrich our reading of Ecclesiastes in this case. It is one thing to sanction ambiguity in biblical language, such as the multivalent meanings of the lexeme הבל, which sometimes constitutes the very depth of a text's message. However, it is much less enhancing to prefer vagueness in the concepts or conceptual structures used to approach a text, particularly an ancient text that can so easily become a victim of anachronistic interpretation or a container for modern-day assumptions. Rather than missing the point of the concept, a taxonomy

[9] Martela and Steger, "Three Meanings," 538.
[10] Ibid., 538–39.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the meaning of life will elucidate the manifold notions of this idea within Ecclesiastes.

By viewing the meaning of life categories as a boon in this way, it will become clear throughout the argument that the field of psychology does more than simply calibrate our definition of meaning. It will expose unforeseen relationships between some of the prominent concepts of the book, and it will refine our understanding of Qoheleth's metaphysics as well as the role of motivation within it. With these considerations settled and a set of conceptual resources in hand, I now turn to the biblical material itself. In what follows, the book of Ecclesiastes is interpreted in view of each psychological category—coherence, purpose, and significance—and plausible interrelationships are then laid out.

Coherence

In view of the first conception of meaning—coherence—Qoheleth investigates the meaning of life by delving into correlations that appear in the world, how predictable and recognizable patterns arise within it, and how these patterns consequently "make sense" of life.[11] Ecclesiastes 8:14, for instance, says that "There is הבל that occurs on the earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this is also הבל." According to Qoheleth, behavior and recompense do not properly align, as the wicked receive the outcome that befits the righteous, and the righteous receive what befits the wicked. This, says Qoheleth, constitutes הבל, a lack of correspondence in the world that he elsewhere observes with respect to wealth, work, stature, wisdom, and ability (5:9[10], 14[15]; 9:11), all of which fail to render stable "patterns and predictability."[12] In this sense, therefore, הבל at times means "meaningless," so that from the perspective of coherence, Qoheleth labels life as such.

Concerns about "coherence" also appear in the Mesopotamian text known as the *Babylonian Theodicy*. Written around 1000 BCE, with manuscripts appearing in both Babylonia and Assyria, the *Babylonian Theodicy* questions the neglect and justice of the gods, especially as the wicked seem to prosper. The affections and intellects of the characters center on divine justice and reward (265–75), so the Sufferer complains, "I, though humble, wise, and a suppliant, have not seen help and hope for one moment" (*rēšu palkû mutninnū anāku* / *rīṣa u tuklātum zamar ul āmur*; 289–90). Conversely, the *Theodicy* also notes the epistemic divide between the divine and human: "The divine mind, like the center of the heavens, is remote / Mastery of it is difficult; the masses are not learned" ([*l*]*ibbi ili kīma qirib šamê nesi-ma* / *le'ā'ussu šupšuqat-ma nīšī lā lamda*; 256–57).[13] The *Babylonian Theodicy*

[11] Ibid., 533.

[12] Ibid., 534.

[13] Normalizations and translations are my own. For transliteration, see W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (2nd ed.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 63–89, esp. 86.

focuses on divine (in)justice and the limitations of human knowledge, two concerns of Ecclesiastes that relate to the twofold problem of coherence: correspondence and epistemology. However, taken as a whole, as Christoph Uehlinger rightly argues, the *Theodicy* comparison reveals that Qoheleth "bezweifelt nun vielmehr den (existenziellen wie kognitiven) Nutzen bzw. die Verläßlichkeit der Weisheit [now rather doubts the (existential as well as cognitive) benefit, or the reliability, of wisdom]."[14]

Michael V. Fox has proposed a similar interpretation of Ecclesiastes that centers on life's meaning: "The book of Qohelet is about meaning. What unites all of Qohelet's complaints is the collapse of meaning. What unites all of his counsels and affirmations is the attempt to reconstruct meanings."[15] Fox derives his definition of life's meaning from the linguistic concept of meaning, which leads him to understand meaninglessness based principally upon causal order.[16] He clarifies: "Qohelet's central premise is that meaningfulness requires that an action or quality X produce the appropriate consequence X′, and that not-X *not* produce it."[17] Life is meaningless because actions fail to correspond with their consequences.

It seems, then, that meaning of life in the sense of coherence occupied Qoheleth. However, other interpretations of the book appear to counter this interpretation directly, as Seow, for instance, asserts that Qoheleth does not address issues about the meaning of life: "In Qohelet's view, humanity is set in a world over which mortals have no control. It is a world that is full of inconveniences, inconsistencies, and contradictions. . . . He does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension."[18] Comments like these, which seem to contradict those mentioned above, create far less conflict when read through the psychological categories of meaning of life. Although Seow resists notions of the meaning of life verbatim, notice what he does argue for—that Qoheleth spots the inconsistencies and contradictions of life. Such remarks about life's inconsistencies, says Seow, entail life's lack of "coherence" and its failure to make sense. Fox characterizes Ecclesiastes in a very similar way, and yet he frames it in terms of life's "meaning." Therefore, both interpreters define Qoheleth's central concern in terms reminiscent of what psychologists connote by "coherence." Life fails to operate according to reliable and predictable patterns, rendering the world senseless to human beings and in this way meaningless. On this

[14] Christoph Uehlinger, "Qohelet im Horizont mesopotamischer, levantinischer und ägyptischer Weisheitsliteratur der persischen und hellenistischen Zeit," in *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie* (ed. L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger; BZAW 254; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997) 155–248, at 175. Uehlinger specifically concentrates on the place of piety in both texts. I would argue that coherence-related issues can also be found in *Papyrus Insinger*, *The Complaints of Khakheperraseneb*, and *The Dispute between a Man and His Ba.*

[15] Fox, *Time*, 133.

[16] Ibid., 5. He does attach Albert Camus's notion of absurdity to this concept.

[17] Ibid., 138–39. He adds: "The foundation of this entire concept of meaningfulness is Qohelet's belief in a deity who, in principle, guarantees the working of right causation" (139).

[18] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 55, 59.

definition, Fox and Seow do not, as it first appears, contradict each other but instead largely agree in their principal interpretations of the book. Said conception of life's meaning, I have argued, appears in Ecclesiastes, and the psychological resources drawn upon here have resolved certain disputes about Qoheleth's epistemological priorities. However, coherence represents only one aspect of Qoheleth's view on life.

While Fox shows that the meaning of life as "coherence" accounts for the predominant portion of Ecclesiastes, he too comprehensively applies this notion to the whole book and all occurrences of הבל. For certain passages exhibit a use of הבל that does not correspond to notions of coherence.[19] In Eccl 4:4, for instance, toil arises from the envy of one's neighbor: "I saw all the toil and all the skill of work, that this is a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is הבל and a chasing after wind." Craig Bartholomew views 4:4–6—that labor stems from jealousy—as "enigmatic," which would support a concern for coherence in this passage.[20] However, 4:4–6's correlation with passages about laziness (e.g., Prov 6:10–11) and rivalry (Prov 14:30) suggests familiar rather than puzzling phenomena. The association of envy leading to or producing toil does not seem to give Qoheleth epistemic trouble, as if he fails to comprehend such a connection or suggests that one would disrupt predictable and reliable patterns in the world. The issue in 4:4, instead, plausibly results in despair for Qoheleth, as his "*he͏̱bel*" declaration indicates not an enigma but more so a tragic feeling, supported by the following reference to the fool who "eats his own flesh" (4:5), an evil and sad occurrence (see Ps 27:2; Isa 49:26; Mic 3:1–4). It is not odd but unfortunate that toil and skill arise from envy.[21]

Ecclesiastes 4:7–8 employs more direct language in this mode:

> Again, I saw הבל under the sun:
>
> There is one who has no other, neither a son nor brother, and there is no end to all his toil. Even his eyes are not satisfied with riches. "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of goodness?" This also is הבל and an evil business.

[19] Fox, *Time*, 49, 139. Fox derives five qualities of the acts-consequence connection from Ecclesiastes and proffers them as criteria for meaning. If an action lacks an immediate, individual, recognizable, consistent, or final consequence, then Qoheleth labels it meaningless (i.e., הבל). These criteria do account for certain statements in Ecclesiastes (e.g., 5:9[10], 14[15]; 8:14; 9:11) and illuminate part of Qoheleth's dilemma, but, as I show above, they do not account for all of the material, leaving significant exceptions for how meaning of life is understood in Ecclesiastes (see also the commendation to fear God and resist sin [5:5–6(6–7); 8:12]). For additional critique, see Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Skepticism* (LHBOTS 541; London: T&T Clark International, 2012) 110–20; cf. Mark Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis," *JBL* 136 (2017) 879–94.

[20] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 187–88.

[21] Although Köhlmoos says that envy motivates work, the text may also remain a predication, defining all work as envy (*Kohelet*, 133–34; so Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 294): וראיתי אני את־כל־עמל ואת כל־כשרון המעשׂה כי היא קנאת־איש מרעהו.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here, הבל pairs with "an unhappy/evil business" [ענין רע] to describe the person who lacks an inheritor and works endlessly for riches that do not satisfy. Elsewhere, the one whose "business" [ענין] is a vexation [כעס] lives "all of his days" in "sorrows" [מכאבים; 2:23], suggesting that Eccl 4:7–8 conveys a sad and foolish character rather than an enigmatic activity. Based on these passages and others, הבל and "chasing after wind" often connote but do not uniformly mean "enigmatic" (see 2:19; 7:6; 11:10), indicating that the "sense-making" characterization of coherence does not accurately represent the entirety of Qoheleth's investigation. Albeit located in contexts associated with "coherence," these passages indicate that Qoheleth is concerned not only with the epistemic challenges but also with the tragic feeling of experiencing certain correlations in life. His reflections on life's coherence are more nuanced than cognitive dissonance, encompassing an affective response to the discord that he sees between cause and effect.

In sum, a bulk of evidence in Ecclesiastes, corroborated by the *Babylonian Theodicy*, discloses that issues of correspondence vex Qoheleth, who observes that life contains unreliable and unpredictable patterns that he labels הבל and in this sense "meaningless." Such a problem matches what Martela and Steger call "coherence," one of three types of "meaning" in life according to psychological research. Qoheleth underscores the epistemic nature of this problem, as life fails to make sense due to the lack of correspondence in action and consequence, which permits the conclusion that Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of life in this sense and, furthermore, resolves an apparent disagreement among interpreters. As demonstrated, though, coherence does not account for every passage in Ecclesiastes, with 4:4 and 4:8 as notable exceptions, and even these exceptions do not represent all of the evidence relevant to the other meaning of life categories. Two remain, and the claims of Qoheleth must be considered also in light of these.

Significance

The notion of significance in life, according to Martela and Steger, refers to its worth or value, answering the question, "Is life worth living?" The concept aligns with Qoheleth's inquiry about the good, as Ecclesiastes includes forms of טוב forty-one times, a term nearly synonymous with "pleasure/joy" (2:3, 24; 3:12; 4:8; 5:17[18]; 6:6; 9:7; 11:7; cf. 6:3). It also carries the sense of "better than" to convey the best option (4:6; 7:1; 9:4; possibly with a moral nuance in 4:12; 5:4[5]), "fortunate/well" (8:13, 15; 11:6), and moral "good" (7:20; 9:2, 18; 12:14; cf. 7:18, 26). As something worthwhile or valuable, "good" suggests an overlap with life's significance, for "good" refers to valuable things (6:3) and comparative values (4:6, 9; 9:4): "If a man fathers a hundred [children] and lives many years and the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with good things [טובה], and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he" (6:3). In addition to labeling things as good, Qoheleth also determines value by making comparative value statements: "Better [טוב] is a hand full of quietness than two hands full of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

toil and striving after wind" (4:6); "Two are better than one, because they have a good wage for their toil" (4:9); "For whoever is joined to all the living, he has hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4; so 6:3 cited previously).

Qoheleth is clearly concerned with value, worth, and therefore significance in certain aspects of life. However, whether the remarks in the cases just mentioned establish the perspective necessary for "significance" as a type of life's meaning remains obscure. The evidence so far mentions the value of certain objects or activities (e.g., quietness), not the value of life itself. Yet the omission is not wholesale. For two passages do reflect a concern for the value of life as such: Eccl 9:4–6 and 11:7–8. In 9:3, Qoheleth laments the fact that all people alike will die, calling this "evil" [רע], and goes on to suggest that universal death does not negate the value of living, so long as one is alive:

> For whoever is joined to all the living, he has hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion.
>
> For the living know that they will die, but the dead, not them, they know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.
>
> Even their love, their hatred, their envy have already perished, and they have no more share forever in all that is done under the sun. (9:4–6)

The value for life in this passage is bolstered by its contrast with death, and thus it seems that life's value here would constitute a comparative value, consequently failing to meet the criteria for psychological notions of meaning of life, since the concept of significance applies to life's inherent, not comparative, value. According to Martela and Steger, "This sense of having a life worth living is understood to be an independent notion of value not reducible to mere happiness or other similar experiences," but rather, some describe it as "life's inherent value."[22] For psychologists, it is life, not some other object or a comparative value, that has significance and thereby meaning, and it is this object of life as such that Qoheleth seems to omit when making statements of value, especially in his use of טוב. However, in 9:4–6, despite his comparative comments, Qoheleth gets as close as he will to recognizing the inherent value of life.

Ecclesiastes 9:4 says: "whoever is joined to all the living, he has hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion." Bartholomew rightly observes the irony in preferring a living dog to a dead lion, as they represented, respectively, two of the most despised and most admired animals in the ancient Near East.[23] According to him, such irony leads to the view that "Life may be thought to have some advantages over death, but that is like thinking that it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion," and that death "completely overshadows any value to life."[24] However, 9:4–6 more plausibly warrants the conclusion that life is valuable in spite of death, even

[22] Martela and Steger, "Three Meanings," 535.

[23] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 302.

[24] Ibid., 302–3. So Lauha, *Kohelet*, 167–68.

if by a dog-like margin.[25] For, in 9:5–6, Qoheleth offers reasons for his axiological claim—including the hope (v. 4), knowledge (v. 5), and share in life's activities (v. 6) that the living possess—and with each of these affirms the value of life as such. He sees merit in living and therefore addresses, albeit briefly, the perspective on life's meaning known as "significance," implying that life is meaningful in this regard.

The value for life exhibited in 9:4–6 is qualified by 6:1–6. In this passage, Qoheleth reflects on the person who possesses all that he desires but lacks the ability to enjoy his possessions: "If a man fathers a hundred [children] and lives many years and the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he" (6:3). Qoheleth prefers the stillborn child to a man who lives without enjoying his possessions, because the child avoids a tarnished reputation (v. 4), knows nothing, and finds rest (v. 5). In this instance, Qoheleth implies that death is better than life, and thereby that death carries more value. But death's value in this passage is qualified, as it is preferred not to life as such but to a life lived without enjoying good things. Ecclesiastes 9:4–6 suggests that life as such carries marginal value over death; 6:1–6 indicates that if life includes an abundance of unenjoyed possessions, then death is better.

A second contribution to the view that life as such carries worth arises in Eccl 11:7, where Qoheleth asserts that "light is sweet, and it is good for eyes to see the sun." He follows on with an admonition to rejoice during one's life, knowing that if these years are many, then dark days also will accompany them (v. 8). In 6:5 the phrase "seeing the sun" refers to living, a connotation that it also seems to carry in *The Dispute between a Man and His Ba* (59–60) when the *ba* threatens, "You will never go out to see the sun!"[26] According to Qoheleth, "it is good for eyes to see the sun"—that is, it is good to live—a bald statement about the value of life that seems undoubtedly positive about life's worth. Even if it lasts for years and comes with dark days, life has significance.

Interpreters have picked up on Qoheleth's axiological concerns and, as is the case with coherence, exhibit apparent disagreement. Jaco Gericke, for example, argues that Qoheleth's use of economic metaphors, like "profit," wages, and labor, corroborate his axiological focus.[27] Yet Gericke endorses no connection between

[25] Fox, *Time*, 292.

[26] *AEL* 1:165. Arguing that the idiom means "to be alive," Seow mentions Pss 49:20[19] and 58:9[8]; Job 3:16; and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (*Ecclesiastes*, 347–48).

[27] Gericke, "Axiological Assumptions in Qohelet: A Historical-philosophical Clarification," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33 (2012) 1–6. See also Fox, *Time*, 140–44; Daniel Lys, *L'Ecclésiaste. Ou, Que vaut la vie?* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1977) 73. In 1885, E. H. Plumptre wrote, "The question [Eccl 1:3] is in substance, almost in form, identical with that of our times 'Is life worth living?' " while in Austria, near the same time, G. W. Bickell articulated a similar interpretation in terms of "den Wert des Daseins" and concentrated on absolute and relative goods in the book. See Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes; or, The Preacher, with Notes and Introduction* (CBSC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885) 104; Bickell, *Der Prediger [Ecclesiastes] über den Wert des Daseins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884) 1–54, esp. 29, 57.

these statements of worth and the notion of life's meaning: "Perhaps Qohelet was in fact making a claim about the value of things, as opposed to denying their meaning or comprehensibility. From this perspective, it is possible that the metaphor of vapour connoted 'worthlessness.' . . . In the end it is possible that the main idea of the book is therefore not life's meaninglessness or incomprehensibility but its ultimate worthlessness."[28]

By affirming a focus on value in Ecclesiastes, Gericke denies the likelihood that Qoheleth is investigating the meaning of life and therefore seems to conceive of these two interpretations as incompatible. Compare Tremper Longman, who rightly argues that הבל can denote "useless" or "worthless" speech (Jer 16:19; Zech 10:2) and in this sense, I would suggest, meaningless (so Isa 30:7; Prov 31:30; Job 21:34).[29] The term grounds Longman's argument that Qoheleth addresses the meaning of life, as he attributes to Qoheleth "the search for ultimate meaning in life" and titles Eccl 1:13–2:26, "Solomon's Quest for the Meaning of Life."[30] For Longman, it seems that worthlessness and meaninglessness are not only compatible but are identical. Although these facets do not characterize the entirety of Gericke's or Longman's interpretation, they do demonstrate that both regard value as central to Ecclesiastes, which in the case of Gericke grounds a denial of concern for life's meaning and in the case of Longman justifies the centrality of this very concept. Both interpretations fall within the scope of axiology and, when assessed with the psychological categories of the meaning of life, align with the category of "significance": does life, or anything at all, matter? Again, with the help of psychological definitions, I would argue that interpreters agree at a point that at first seems irreconcilable.

Two points remain for this discussion on "significance" as the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. First, when exploring the value of things, Qoheleth gives most attention to knowing the good instead of determining life's value.[31] With 6:12, Qoheleth inaugurates a passage key to his axiology, asking "who knows what is good for man in the few days of his הבל life?"[32] Ecclesiastes 7:1–14 then includes 25 percent of the book's references to טוב, containing a collection of proverbs and a concluding declaration of ignorance (7:14). At stake is not the value of life, for Qoheleth comments on the value of reputation (v. 1), emotions (v. 3), and patience (v. 8). At stake, rather, is the scope and reliability of knowledge. According to Fox,

[28] Gericke, "Axiological Assumptions," 6.

[29] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 62–64.

[30] Ibid., 77, 121.

[31] A concentration on Qoheleth's search for happiness and the greatest good (*summum bonum*) characterizes interpretations of Ecclesiastes throughout the first two millennia of the Common Era. See Christian D. Ginsburg, *Cohelet, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861) 27–98, cf. 68; see also Ruth Sandberg, *Rabbinic Views of Qohelet* (Biblical Studies 57; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1999); Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 98–141.

[32] The Mesopotamian *Dialogue of Pessimism* concludes with the question, "What then is good?"

Qoheleth "(basically but not invariably) values life . . . [and] is demonstrating by his own example a more fundamental truth: man (even the wisest) is hopelessly ignorant, and even when he can discover some truths (such as those expounded in the present unit), their validity is shaky and they clash with other things he knows."[33] Qoheleth already values life and, even though his references to the good pertain implicitly to questions about what makes life worth living, he principally intends to show the limitations of human knowledge.[34] Although Qoheleth recognizes the "significance" of life in 9:4–6 and 11:7–8, it is the problem of knowing rather than life's meaning as such that primarily vexes him.

The second point is to note how Ecclesiastes contributes to this axiological category of meaning. Despite his search for what is "good" and his secondary remarks about the value of life, Qoheleth remains most occupied with the question of יתרון ("gain"; ESV; NRSV). יתרון refers to a profit, gain, or surplus (1:3; 3:9; 5:16), and if Qoheleth is looking for any one thing, it is this.[35] After his declaration at the outset of the book that "all is הבל" (1:2), he states the question, "What is the יתרון for a man in all his toil, at which he toils under the sun?" If the question in 1:3 is rhetorical, implying the answer "none" (i.e., no gain), then that does not prevent Qoheleth from demonstrating his attempt to answer the question and arriving at firm conclusions based upon it. First, human toil does produce something, for the pursuit of pleasure in Eccl 2:1–10 renders enjoyment, as after his construction project and acquisition of all sorts of precious possessions, Qoheleth concludes that "my heart rejoiced in all my toil" (2:10).[36] But the fruit of his toil does not extend beyond this enjoyment, for still, "there was no יתרון" (2:11). The יתרון that Qoheleth seeks is not just any payoff from his efforts—for the enjoyment of toil would have sufficed. It is, rather, a surplus, a profit, an extra "edge" gained from his activity.[37] Before death, for instance, wisdom carries a יתרון over folly: "And I saw that there is more יתרון in wisdom than in folly, as there is more יתרון in light than darkness" (2:13).[38] But toil itself, while productive and valuable, and to a

[33] Fox, *Time*, 250–51.

[34] The additional introductory passage (1:12–18) confirms the epistemological flavor, as do terms that relate to investigating and knowing throughout the book (see, e.g., ראה in 1:14; 2:3, 12; 3:16; 5:17[18]; 8:9; 9:11; and ידע in 1:17; 2:14; 3:12, 14; 7:25; 8:16; 12:9).

[35] Cf. 7:12 and 10:11, as well as other lexemes derived from the root יתר, referring to a comparative advantage (a sense of "better for"; 2:13; 5:9; 6:8; 7:11–12; 10:10–11; cf. 6:11) or something in excess (2:15; 7:16; 12:12).

[36] Qoheleth views "toil" [עמל] as efforts to produce in life, or the productions themselves, which are subject to frustration (2:18, 22–23; 10:15). Yet toil is given by God (5:18[19]; 8:15) and can be done with wisdom and pleasure (2:21; 5:17[18]), even producing a good wage (4:9). These conflicting results puzzle Qoheleth and his audience throughout the book (see, e.g., 2:17 and 9:4–6; 2:13 and 2:15–16). However, the fruitfulness of some toil and, in all cases, its relative productivity indicate that futility or unprofitability in life does not characterize the entire human endeavor. Humans can and do achieve something of value through work, suggesting that an absence of significance is not Qoheleth's main problem.

[37] "Edge" is Seow's language (*Ecclesiastes*, 104).

[38] So also 2:15–16 and with other lexemes derived from יתר (e.g., 3:19; 7:11).

degree intelligible, does not furnish the יתרון that Qoheleth seeks. Therefore, I contend that a יתרון would constitute not meaning in and of itself but something in addition to a meaningfully significant or coherent life, a surplus to a life that is presumably already meaningful.[39] In the end, Qoheleth does not clarify the surplus. What he does find is that human toil does not produce it.

The meaning of life, in the sense of significance, does not inhabit the book of Ecclesiastes in the way that meaning of life coherence does, though it is addressed by Qoheleth, primarily in 9:4–6 and 11:7–8, and to this limited extent incorporated into the book. To this axiological perspective Qoheleth also adds another horizon in his search for the extra edge in life's produce. What is the surplus, the יתרון, from human toil? Although this question does not ponder the value of life as such, it explores the worth of life's activity by considering the profit of its produce.

Purpose

The third and final perspective on the meaning of life is "purpose," what Martela and Steger associate with direction in life and its future-oriented goals: "Despite some differences in definition, research on purpose in life seems to agree that it is essentially about some future-oriented aims and goals that give direction to life."[40] As we have seen, Qoheleth knows that the future of life entails death, which will be accounted for in this section too, but death does not represent his only orientation toward the future. With confidence he asserts: "Though a sinner does evil and prolongs himself, yet I know that it will be good for those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be good for the wicked, and he will not prolong days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God" (8:12–13). Qoheleth reflects on the well-being of those who fear God, asserting that their future will not be dissolved like the wicked but will entail good—an assertion about the direction of life and its future-oriented goal that correlates with the "purpose" perspective on life's meaning.

Qoheleth also broaches purpose when he mentions future judgment: "Rejoice, young man, in your youth, and let your heart please you in the days of your youth. And walk in the ways of your heart and in the sight of your eyes. And know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (11:9); "For God will bring every deed into judgment, concerning every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:14). These passages disclose a confidence about the direction of life and stabilize certain concerns that Qoheleth and his readers have about the present. Ecclesiastes 11:9 asserts confidence in God's judgment after admitting the unknowability of

[39] Gerhard von Rad suggests that the "lot" [חלק] given to humanity (Eccl 3:22; 5:18–19) is the search for meaning (*Wisdom in Israel* [trans. James Martin; London: SCM, 1972] 231, 235); similarly, Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 56–57. But the חלק extends more from the search for "profit" [יתרון] in life and refers to the portion of life's activity (5:18[19]; 9:6), possessions, and pleasure (2:10; 9:9) that one has been granted.

[40] Martela and Steger, "Three Meanings," 534.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which human efforts will and will not prosper (11:6). In the same way, the enigmas of life and morality explored throughout the book lead Qoheleth to conclude that God judges all deeds, even those "secret things," based on objective good and evil (12:14). The confident claims about future events give direction to less certain aspects of current life, lending credit to the conclusion that Qoheleth views life as meaningful, due to its purpose.[41]

While 8:12–13; 11:9 and 12:14 attest to goals in the future, notably affixed to God as their point of anchor, another perspective on "purpose" appears to contradict the optimistic conclusions just made. In multiple instances, Qoheleth asserts that death comes to everyone, regardless of behavior or status, and at times even arrives prematurely. For instance, those who act wickedly sometimes prolong their lives, even though such long life should be enjoyed by the righteous person (7:15; 8:14). The righteous and wicked do not receive their just desserts, not at least in this life, for ultimately, Qoheleth observes, death comes to all without distinction (3:19–20; 9:1–2). While uniform death appears to contradict the positive, theologically certain statements of purpose, the tension actually exposes the textures of Qoheleth's thought on the matter. In the first place, in the passages mentioned earlier, it is the impending and just judgment of God rather than delayed death or an afterlife that, for Qoheleth, informs the purpose of life. Assured death and God's judgment are distinct and create no tension for life's meaning (e.g., 3:16–22). In the second place, death does inform Qoheleth's observations about the present life, as it constitutes an object of knowledge for the living (9:5) and leads to his carpe diem refrain (8:15; 9:7–10). While the experience of death extinguishes the positive possibilities of living (9:5), and at that point renders life "meaningless," it will be seen shortly that the carpe diem refrain, prompted by the reality of death, instills life with meaning in the "purpose" sense. In short, dying ends a potentially purposeful life and in that sense can be said to make it meaningless. However, impending death, while not a "purpose" to live for, does offer direction for the living and thereby renders life, in certain ways, meaningful.

Last, amid his remarks about the future, Qoheleth still asserts the mystery of impending events (3:21; 8:7–8; 9:1; 11:1–6). In 2:18–19, for instance, he says that after death, all of his toil will be left to someone else, and "who knows if he will be a wise man or a fool?" The character of Qoheleth's inheritor remains unknown, indicating that in certain respects humans do not know what comes after them, that a look toward the future offers little insight and thereby less direction than one

[41] In *The Doomed Prince* (*AEL* 2:200–203) a prince receives a fate at birth that he will die by one of three animals, so his father keeps him within a house. Once grown, the prince asks, "To what purpose is my sitting here?" While the prince questions the reason for remaining inside, and in that way resembles the "purpose" meaning of life, the narrative reveals an inquiry not so much into this concept as it does into the prince's desire to follow his heart despite prophetic prediction (*AEL* 2:200–201). Concerns for purpose are more firmly taken up by Aristotle (Hallvard Fossheim, "Individual, Society, and Teleology: An Aristotelian Conception of Meaning in Life," in *On Meaning in Life* [ed. Beatrix Himmelmann; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013] 45–64).

might wish. In 3:16–22, he also acknowledges the unknowability of what occurs in the afterlife (vv. 21–22) and leaves action in the hand of God (v. 17), suggesting a limitation in his theological knowledge.[42] The future then, in terms of meaning of life "purpose," entails aspects of certainty—namely, the future action of God, one's relationship with him, and death's arrival—and yet each of these acquires the flavor that pervades all of Ecclesiastes: epistemological limitation.[43] While an entire explanation of Qoheleth's "contradictions" cannot be given here, the tensions most pertinent to psychological meaning of life categories have been assessed to reveal that life may have purpose and therefore meaning, but only from limited perspectives and in limited amounts.

This category of purposefulness has exposed a set of issues that are often classified as concerns about the "future" in Ecclesiastes, particularly death and the judgment of God. Notions of purpose as understood here, however, rarely receive attention among interpreters, who may comment, as Aarre Lauha does, on the "Ziel" and "Zweck" of life in Eccl 1:3–11, or wonder, as Gregory of Nyssa did as early as the fourth century CE, "What is the purpose of life?" But interpreters do not extend such questions to the whole of Ecclesiastes or identify how Qoheleth's view of the future might inform them.[44] Hence, the psychological resources pertaining to life's meaning not only sharpen our definition of the concept but also illuminate overlooked relationships of frequently observed material within Ecclesiastes. Whilst calibrating our definition of the meaning of life is a starting point for exegetical insight, it is not the total or terminus in the case of Ecclesiastes.

[42] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 175. On an apparently mundane level, but again theologically informed, the sayings of 11:1–6 may advise various postures toward an unknown future, whether taking risks and being generous despite the circumstances (vv. 1–2) or guarding against analysis paralysis (v. 4). Although the meaning of these passages and their relation to purpose are not as clear as the others, they seem to reinforce the combination of epistemological limitations and future-oriented thought and action (so "you do not know" in vv. 2, 5–6).

[43] For additional biblical literature, see, Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem. Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (OBO 188; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002). She considers "Erkenntnis als Problem" in Old Testament wisdom, prophetic, and apocalyptic literature, asking where, why, and how this problem arose and occurred. With a sharp look at Qoheleth's epistemological struggle, Schellenberg determines the greatest thematic areas of knowledge and its limitations as "Tod, Zukunft, 'Tun Gottes'" (74, also esp. 36–43, 64–74). As a whole, her study exposes a manifold set of knowledge themes, with the meaning of life not included (for a thorough summary see 291–300).

[44] See Lauha, *Kohelet*, 30–33, 36; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World—A Study of Ecclesiastes* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 115–16, also 113–21. See *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies; Proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (St. Andrews, 5–10 September 1990)* (ed. Stuart George Hall; trans. S. G. Hall and Rachel Moriarty; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993) 35 (281:5–8).

The Relationship of Coherence, Significance, and Purpose in Ecclesiastes

Having delineated the presence of coherence, significance, and purpose in Ecclesiastes, the interrelationships of these categories call for further detail. The intersection of mystery, commendations of joy, and the future discovered in the previous section reveals plausible relationships between different conceptions of life's meaning. When Qoheleth encounters either epistemological limitation ("coherence") or the cessation of life ("purpose"), he commends joy with his carpe diem refrain. Hence, a lack of coherence in life (2:18–26) and the sheer unknowability of it all (3:11–13), as well as the event of death (9:6–7; see also 5:17[18]) and what appears to be a combination of incoherence and death (8:14–15), prompt the conclusion that one should "eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." It seems, then, that "coherence and purpose likely work together synergistically," and not, in Qoheleth's case, to produce a meaningful life but to compound the lack of life's meaning, whereby death impedes purpose and inconsistency impedes coherence.[45] However, the carpe diem passages themselves reflect a sort of purpose statement that sets a goal for the present life. In view of incoherence and an unhopeful future, the commendation of joy offers purpose for the present—that is, something to live for.[46] In this way, life may be meaningful in the sense of purposeful without being meaningful in the sense of coherent. Said otherwise: having described his world as a place deficient in meaning, Qoheleth proffers motivation for living meaningfully therein.

As for life's significance, it was argued that life as such carries marginal value over death (9:4–6), unless life itself includes an abundance of unenjoyed possessions, thereby making death better (6:1–6). The carpe diem refrain again asserts its authority. The scenario in 9:1–6 can be understood as a depiction of life that lacks a realizable goal of enjoying one's lot, that is, a life that lacks purpose. Life consequently loses its significance—it is not worth living—suggesting that, to an extent, life's significance depends upon life's purpose. If one has purpose, for instance, the ability to enjoy God-given possessions, then one has significance. But in the event that enjoyment becomes unattainable, that one has riches and companions and yet cannot seem to derive any pleasure from them, then life loses its significance. Based on 6:1–6, the same might be said of coherence, without which life is drained of its significance. For when work and longevity produce no joy and thus defy their predictable pattern, it is better to be "a stillborn child" (6:3) than to live at all. In sum, a lack of purpose or coherence leads to a lack of significance. In addition to these possible relationships, a final and firm observation remains: nearly every aspect of life's meaning yields to epistemological limitations, in some way either failing to make sense or exceeding Qoheleth's cognitive reach. But within

[45] Martela and Steger, "Three Meanings," 539.

[46] For a convincing treatment of the carpe diem and הבל statements, see Seow, who argues that fulfilling the carpe diem refrain lies largely outside of human control (*Ecclesiastes*, passim).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press

this situation, aspects of meaningfulness still protrude, as life has a goal of joy whenever and to whatever extent one can find it, and to that end has significance. Perhaps, then, Qoheleth advocates that his readers embrace a meaningful life, one with purpose and significance, in spite of not knowing everything about it.[47]

To this he adds a theological perspective—which is integrated with the carpe diem refrain and decisively concludes the book—to suggest that, while such knowledge (i.e., coherence) may appear to be necessary for a meaningful life, by relying on the Creator it actually is not: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. . . . The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:1, 13). Given that coherence serves to describe life while significance and purpose evaluate it, God alights on the descriptive level of Qoheleth's analysis, forming a part of Qoheleth's world as it is and thereby challenging the unstable patterns that he observes within it. Theology informs other areas of the meaning of life but does so from within the realm of coherence, because God, presumably, constitutes part of Qoheleth's reality. Such a conclusion demonstrates the metaphysical significance of psychological research for biblical interpretation, helping us realize how divine realities fit within the Bible's vision of life. The interrelationships of the three categories of "meaning," as examined in this final section, expose the integrated role of these concepts in Ecclesiastes, as well as the place of the book's refrain and its theological perspective.

Conclusion

This article has determined if and how the meaning of life was addressed in the final form of Ecclesiastes by interpreting the book with the conceptions of life's meaning as held by recent psychologists. Rather than imposing a definition of "meaning," or assuming a popular notion, or leaving the concept undefined, as most interpreters of Ecclesiastes have done, I bring external research to bear on the biblical material to show that Qoheleth did investigate the meaning of life and did so from all three psychological understandings of meaning, most of all "coherence." I have also shown that consulting such psychological definitions alleviates what otherwise appear to be disagreements among interpreters of Ecclesiastes, revealing that many who counter meaning of life interpretations propose an exposition that actually corresponds with psychological notions of meaning.

In view of the three categories of the meaning of life—coherence, significance, and purpose—Qoheleth struggles first and foremost to view life as "coherent," that is, comprised of patterns and reliable correspondences that help him make sense of the whole. Instead, cause and effect appear to be breaking down, rendering correlations in life unpredictable and unreliable, which relates to the epistemological barricade that rises again and again in Ecclesiastes. Therefore, life, to some extent,

[47] This embrace of meaning in life over against its incoherence perhaps reflects Qoheleth's point in 11:1–6, put so well by Weeks: "Any life faces uncertainty and unpredictable ruin, but no life will be improved by indecision and inaction" (*Ecclesiastes*, 96).

is "meaningless" in the sense that events fail to correspond to their outcomes and strain a sense-making mind. The category of "significance" correlates to Qoheleth's statements of value, which primarily concern comparative values and "good" objects other than life as such. But Eccl 9:4–6 and 11:7–8 do disclose a concern for life's inherent value and demonstrate that, for Qoheleth, life is worth living and thereby significant, that is, meaningful. Last, so long as one is living, life possesses "purpose," that category of meaning that encompasses future-oriented goals to offer direction in life. Qoheleth makes confident claims about God's role in the future and, in view of impending death, uses carpe diem to direct life, but he nevertheless continues to acknowledge the unknowability of the future, disclosing a vision of the purpose of life that remains limited as well as theological. The increasing exegetical yield of this argument shows that quite simple, psychological conceptions of life's meaning are but a few of the insights gained when consulting psychological resources. The definitions provided by this discipline, which help to disclose varied perspectives on life and the nuances of their interrelationships in Ecclesiastes that otherwise remain obscure to interpreters, have served as a starting point for unlocking more complex aspects of the biblical text. Consequently, it can be said that precision in the language we use to interpret biblical literature enriches its message, even amid and while at the same time respecting the ambiguous language of that literature (e.g., הבל). Such interdisciplinary benefits, though, do not move in only one direction, for Ecclesiastes itself contributes its own insights to the field of psychology.

To each category of meaning, Qoheleth contributes a particular nuance. He notes the tragic feeling that arises for those who perceive a lack of coherence in life; he considers the question of a "surplus" or an extra edge [יתרון] for the significance of life's activities; and, overall, including for life's purpose, he champions the epistemological limitations in discovering each conception of life's meaning and couches them within a theological context that exceeds any "philosophical" or "psychological" reflection. One of the more interesting insights based on these contributions arises in Qoheleth's treatment of coherence, as he attributes emotions of sorrow and anger to his own experience of reflecting on life (1:13, 18; 2:20–21), as well as to the experience of others working in the world who likewise feel frustrated at the lack of predictable outcomes (2:22–23). According to Ecclesiastes, the study and experience of incoherence in life beget despair, which might adjust our own expectations when engaging in such activities. Perhaps the process of pondering life's varied shades of meaninglessness, now as then, will not be a pleasurable task. Relatedly, and in the face of our world's instability, which does at times appear incoherent, it is worth considering the place of God in one's vision of reality. For Qoheleth, God provides a sort of anchor amid life's unpredictability, and while the divine in many ways remains beyond human comprehension in Ecclesiastes, it serves an indispensable role when exploring the meaning of life. As to the relationship of these meaning of life categories, I tentatively argued that

life may be "coherently" meaningless yet "purposefully" meaningful, and that a lack of purpose or coherence leads to a lack of significance. Amid this exploration of relationships, the carpe diem refrains emerged as points of stability for life's meaning, endowing it particularly with purpose so that, through reliance on the Creator, life remains meaningful in spite of epistemological limitation. As a motivational category according to psychologists, purpose in Ecclesiastes can spur one on within a life that may prove to be chaotic.

In at least one respect, the emphases of life's meaning in Ecclesiastes contrast with popular and philosophical notions. Martela and Steger claim that the purpose perspective is often considered synonymous with the meaning of life, so that as life has purpose, it has meaning. Yet philosophical discussion, they say, usually explores life's significance, framed with the question, is life worth living?[48] In a proportional sense, Qoheleth remarkably features the remaining category—coherence—giving much less attention to significance and purpose. Perhaps this accentuation indicates that the perspective of concern on the meaning of life has changed across the millennia, transitioning from questions of correspondence and epistemology to those of purpose and value. Perhaps Qoheleth's theological mode of thought, which pervades each category of meaning in Ecclesiastes, explains his preoccupation with life's coherence, a plausible idea given God's relation to creation and biblical notions of order. All the while, it should not go unnoticed that, qualitatively, purpose plays an important role in alleviating the disorder that Qoheleth observes in life, which offers an intriguing point of contact between the book and other ancient sources, such as the commendations of joy in the context of Egyptian funerary inscriptions (e.g., *Song from the Tomb of King Intef*) or the Greek notion of εὐδαιμονία in works like *Nicomachean Ethics*. Exploring such proposals is now more readily achievable, as is locating Ecclesiastes within the history of the quest for the meaning of life, given this article's assessment of the book based on multiple notions of life's meaning. The chosen combination of disciplines—psychology and biblical interpretation—has proven insightful for interpreting Ecclesiastes, useful for resolving scholarly debates, and promising for new avenues of study.

[48] Martela and Steger, "Three Meanings," 535–36.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000233 Published online by Cambridge University Press