

The Axiology of Qohelet and Life ‘Under the Sun’: What is Good for Us to Do?

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Abstract

Many readers of the Book of Ecclesiastes have concluded that Qohelet (the ‘Preacher’) teaches that life ‘under the sun’ is meaningless or worthless. The aim of this paper is to show why that assessment is mistaken. In the first place, if life is as Qohelet describes it—as enigmatic and fleeting, most often frustrating, uncertain, incomprehensible, beyond human control, and subject to evil—then it makes sense to ask, as he did, what is to our advantage and good for us to do? To support this claim, Qohelet’s axiology—his view of the kinds of things that are good or valuable, what it is that makes them valuable, the kinds of value there are, and the relationship between ‘good’ and ‘right’—is clarified and described from a theological perspective. The analysis reveals that life ‘under the sun’ now requires prudence, and the most prudent thing to do is to fear God and obey his revealed moral will. This is not only the essence of wisdom; it is the only value that has implications for our present life and the afterlife. The paper also shows that Qohelet’s axiology is consistent with the teachings of Genesis 1–3, Deuteronomy 6, and the New Testament. It concludes that Qohelet deeply cares about our good, well-being, and happiness, and that the ultimate source of that care is ‘one

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Shepherd’, which makes it impossible to think that life is meaningless or worthless.

1. Introduction

It is commonplace in the literature on Ecclesiastes to find that commentators think that it is ‘not a theological work but a philosophical treatise’ (Seow 2008:54). RBY Scott (1965:196) puts it thus: ‘What we have before us here is primarily a philosophical work rather than a book of religion’. Peter Kreeft (1989:15) writes that ‘Ecclesiastes is the only book of philosophy, pure philosophy... in the Bible’. He also refers to King Solomon as a philosopher (p. 38) and believes that the ‘whole point of this book is “vanities of vanities”, the meaninglessness of human life’ (p. 22; cf. Bartholomew 2009:107; Berger 2001:173–174, 179; Longman III and Dillard 2006:278–288; Ryken 2010:37). In contrast to Kreeft, others believe that the main idea of the book is ‘not life’s meaninglessness or incomprehensibility, but its ultimate worthlessness’, which means that Qohelet teaches his readers that nothing in our world has any absolute value (Gericke 2012:6; cf. Berger 2001:176; Fee and Stuart 1993:234; Gale 2011:157; Scott 1965:206). Still others believe that Qohelet viewed life through a ‘God-centred theology’ (McCabe 1996:85–112) while he also ‘recounts his search for meaning and purpose in life’ (McCabe 2013:61).²

These claims raise for readers of Ecclesiastes a problem I wish to address.

2. The Problem: Did Qohelet Believe that Life is Meaningless and Worthless?

Many commentators have realised that it would be a mistake to think that the word *hebel* —translated as ‘vanity’³— in Ecclesiastes 1:2 has a single meaning (DeRouchie 2011; Fuhr 2013). Although Graham Ogden’s (1987) semantic analysis of the word indicates that it cannot mean ‘meaningless’, ‘valueless’ or ‘empty’, it is instructive to note at least three reasons why readers of Ecclesiastes may conclude that Qohelet believed that life is meaningless or worthless.

The first is because of wrong English translations of *hebel*, for example, as ‘meaningless’ in the NIV and NIVII. Jason DeRouchie (2011:6–7) noted that ‘vanity’ in most English translations is likely due to the ‘1611 King James Version, which took its lead from

2 Writers such as Longman III and Dillard (2006) refer to Qohelet’s search for ‘meaning in life’ (p. 281, 283) and the ‘meaning of life’ (p. 282) without indicating why we should think it means the same thing. According to Fuhr (2013:53, fn. 97), ‘Qohelet does not contend that life or anything else is without purpose, nor does he imply that his quest is for purpose’. Fox (1986a:409) thinks that *hebel* means ‘absurd’, thus that Qohelet claims that ‘everything is absurd’, irrational and meaningless (cf. Fox 1989:11). For Seow (2008:59), Qohelet ‘does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension’. Haden (1987:52, 54) writes that Qohelet wrestled with ‘man’s aloneness’ or alienation ‘from the universe at large, from society, and from one’s own self’, and that he dealt with this problem ‘with philosophical dexterity’. For Fee and Stuart (1993:235), Qohelet’s perspective ‘is the secular, fatalistic wisdom’ that ‘atheism produces... Ecclesiastes is the result’. For Piper (2011), ‘The writer of Ecclesiastes is speaking the words of a despairing man, not a man of faith... This is bleak theology’. Doukhan (2006:11) states that Qohelet could ‘see no sense to this life’, and then goes on to say that ‘Ecclesiastes affirms the value of work, wisdom, life and happiness, including religion and even righteousness’ (p. 12). It has not occurred to the latter writer how odd his statements would have appeared to Qohelet.

3 Its literal meaning is ‘breath’, ‘whiff’, ‘puff’, ‘steam’ (Seow 2008:47). ‘The idiomatic phrase *hebel hebalim* ‘breath of breaths’ expresses the superlative and may be translated ‘ultimate breath’ or ‘utterly breath’ (DeRouchie 2011:18–19). *Hebel* is used the thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes: 1:2 (5x), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (2x); 9:9 (2x); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (3x). DeRouchie (2011:6) points out that interpreters are likely correct to maintain continuity of meaning for all the *hebel* texts—at least those wherein conclusive judgements are

made. Of all the *hebel* texts, only the following ones exclude statements of judgement: 6:4, 11, 12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10. In 1:3, Qohelet asks what is referred to as his 'programmatic question': 'What advantage [or gain, benefit; *yitron*] does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?' It is noteworthy that it is never used in Ecclesiastes with a material sense (DeRouchie 2011:20). Cf. the noun *yitron* (1:3, 2:11, 13 [twice]; 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12; 10:10, 11; the noun *motar* (3:19), and the participle *yoter* (6:8, 11; 7:1), which is sometimes used as an adverb (2:15; 7:16; 12:9, 12).

4 Fox (1989:68) states that pleasure was Qohelet's 'supreme value'. Fee and Stuart (1993:234) put it thus: '[T]he "Teacher's" advice is existential in character: Enjoy life as much as you can while you are alive... there is nothing else'. Ryken's (2010:46) reading of Ecclesiastes 2:1 leads him to conclude that Qohelet became a 'self-centered pleasure' seeker or 'experimental hedonist'. Qohelet would not have agreed with these writers. He says, for example, only 'the mind [lit. heart] of fools is in the house of pleasure' (Eccl 7:4). When he sought to 'explore how to stimulate my body with wine', he said that he did so 'while my mind [lit. heart] was guiding me wisely' (2:3), which is unlike leaders who prefer feasting and drinking rather than fulfilling their duties (10:17-19).

Jerome's use of *vanitas* in the Vulgate—a Latin term that limited the semantic range to a value statement, such as "emptiness, worthlessness, unreality, vanity", but not "transitory" or "enigmatic".

The second reason is because of the rendering of the Hebrew word by different commentators. The most unfortunate result is that the rendering of *hebel* as 'vanity', 'futility' or 'absurdity' induces many readers to read Ecclesiastes 'with a deprecatory slant, thus requiring great efforts to redeem or correct his theology' (DeRouchie 2011:7; see also fn. 1 above), which cannot be dismissed as an overstatement.

A third reason why someone may conclude that Qohelet teaches that life is worthless is that the commentators filter Qohelet's message through their own pessimistic, sceptical or atheistic worldview. For instance, theologian Jaco Gericke (2012) concludes that Qohelet was a naturalist and subjectivist, that Qohelet recommended the pursuit of sensual pleasures,⁴ that Qohelet thought that nothing had intrinsic or absolute value, and that Qohelet's assumptions are not coherent. Thus, he believes that 'Qohelet teaches a form of active nihilism (cf. Nietzsche)' (Gericke 2012:6; cf. Scott 1965:191–192). The problem is exacerbated when commentators fail to bring the rest of scripture to bear on their hermeneutical approach or method.

DeRouchie (2011:7) advances three reasons why these beliefs cannot be sustained, to which I wish to add a fourth. Firstly, if the true rendering of *hebel* in the book is 'worthless', then one would expect to find other words or phrases in the Old Testament that denote 'vanity', 'meaninglessness' or 'worthlessness' alongside Qohelet's use of the word in Ecclesiastes. Put another way, if *hebel* denotes 'worthless' or 'valueless', then the meanings of the following list of words—used nearly one hundred times outside Ecclesiastes—are to be expected in Qohelet, but they are not: *ayin* ('nothing', 'naught'), *req* ('empty', 'idle', 'worthless'), *riq* ('emptiness'), *siwe* ('worthless', 'without result'), and *tohu* ('nothingness'). Secondly, if 'everything [*kol*, "all"] is *hebel*' (1:2; 12:8) means 'all is meaningless, absurd or senseless', then Qohelet's claims that 'nothing is better than...' (2:24; 3:12, 22) and that 'x is better than y' (4:9; 5:1; 7:1–10; 9:4, 16–18) would mean that something that is meaningless, absurd or senseless could be more meaningless, absurd or senseless than it already is, which is unintelligible. Finally, if all things 'under the sun' are meaningless, worthless or senseless, on what basis should we accept that what Qohelet claims are not also meaningless, worthless or senseless?

The fourth reason is consistent with the aforementioned reasons: a lack or an inadequate understanding of Qohelet's axiology. I wish to submit that Qohelet's point about his message is straightforward: if life on earth since the Fall and God's curse on his Creation is as he describes it—as enigmatic and fleeting, most often frustrating, uncertain, incomprehensible, beyond our control, and subject to evils such as injustices, suffering and death—then he asked a question every person should ask himself or herself: What 'advantage' (gain, profit, benefit) does a person have in all his or her work 'under the sun' (1:2; cf. 3:9; 5:16; 6:8, 11)?⁵

Qohelet indicates that there is only one sure way to know what is to our advantage or benefit, and that is to know what is good for us to do. He not only used the phrase 'x is better than y' about 25 times, 'good' 51 times and 'bad' no less than 30 times in Ecclesiastes; he also clearly expressed his interest in valuing things in the following words: 'I explored with my mind [lit. heart] ... until I could see [know, understand] what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives' (2:3). If considered from a theological perspective, that is Qohelet's central concern in Ecclesiastes, or so I will argue.⁶ By clarifying his theological axiology, I hope to show that life 'under the sun' is neither meaningless nor worthless. It will become apparent that pleasure was indeed a value for Qohelet, but far more valuable to him is to 'fear God and keep his commandments' (12:13). That is the essence of Qohelet's wisdom. Not only is that wisdom most consistent with that of Moses in Deuteronomy 6, Qohelet's axiology is also consistent with the teachings of Genesis 1–3 and the New Testament. Thus, despite the disastrous effects of God's curse on his Creation, as we will see, not a single thing of what God created has lost any of its intrinsic or absolute goodness. In conclusion, I hope to show that Qohelet cared deeply about our good or well-being and happiness, and why that is so.

3. Qohelet's Theological Axiology

Axiology (Greek *axio*, 'value') is the theory of value or good. The aim of those who work in this field of ethics is to study things that are valuable or good, including what it is that makes them good, the kinds of value there are, how we can know value claims are true, and the relationship between value and the moral rightness of actions (Hirose and Olson 2015:1; Schroeder 2016). It will, therefore, be useful to first make a few introductory observations about Qohelet's axiology. I will then identify and describe the kinds of things that are good or valuable, what it is that makes

5 All references are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise indicated.

6 In addition to Gericke (2012) referred to above, Jones (2014:21) accepts that 'Ecclesiastes is a book of values'. Despite this insight, Jones' elucidation is elementary at best.

them valuable, as well as the kinds of value there are in Ecclesiastes. What we shall see is that Qohelet's view of what is to our advantage and good for us to do is not a view from nowhere. Finally, I will clarify what I believe to be the relationship between 'good' (evaluations) and 'right' (prescriptive) actions.

3.1. General observations

3.1.1. Qohelet's semantics of value

To ask what is to our advantage or benefit and is good for us to do, as Qohelet did, is to ask about what is valuable. It means that Qohelet used 'good' as a general standard for the evaluation of things. In fact, words such as 'good', 'better', 'best', 'bad', and 'worse', and words such as 'courageous', 'generous', 'gracious', 'kindness', 'oppression', and 'shameful' are all evaluative words. When we use them, we express an evaluative judgement of the worth (value and importance) of something. However, it is not always necessary to use 'good' or 'bad' when evaluating a thing. Qohelet says, for instance, that 'a bribe corrupts [lit. destroys] the heart' (7:7), which implies that it is bad for both oneself and others.

All that leads to the following important question. What did Qohelet mean when he said he set his heart on seeing and exploring with wisdom (2:3) what is good for us to do? The short answer is: he believed that wisdom is all about how to live one's life 'under the sun' (cf. Frydrych 2002:16, 18; Zimmerli 1964:150). Or, in different words, he believed that there are some ways of living that are better than others, which best promote our well-being. If that is an intelligible position to hold, then we need to understand the relation between living rightly and living well. I hope to show it is crucial to understanding Qohelet's wisdom.

We can discern at least six ways in which Qohelet used sentences to make evaluative claims or value judgements:

- (1) He often uses 'good' to express or imply a general value. For example, 'It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not to let go of the other' (7:18). The sense is that of 'intrinsic goodness' ('just plain good' or 'being good', period).
- (2) When he claims that 'x is good for' us, he refers to what is good for our lives or well-being. The sense is that of 'prudential value'.
- (3) When he claims that 'x is beautiful', he expresses what is aesthetically valuable.

- (4) When he says that ‘a wise man’s words are gracious’ (10:12), he refers to the good content or quality that characterises the wise person’s speech.
- (5) When he claims that ‘x is better than y’, he compares or contrasts two valuable things (7:1–10).
- (6) He often uses an attributive value adjective or predicate ‘good’ to modify a noun, for example, ‘good person’ (9:2). The sense is that of ‘moral goodness’.

An analysis of Qohelet’s ‘better than’ sentences can be divided into two groups. They all serve a single emphatic purpose: they draw the reader’s attention to what is valued (cf. Ogden 1977:489–505). The first group consists of 17 examples of the ‘better than’ judgements (4:3, 6, 9, 13; 5:5; 6:3, 9; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8 (twice), 10; 9:4, 16, 18). In this group, the adjective ‘better’ (*tob*) is used together with ‘than’ to express a comparative value. Some sentences imply that two things share the same property (‘goodness’), but in different degrees, for example, wisdom and strength (9:16). Both are good, but wisdom is better. Other statements imply that the opposite of ‘better’ is not less good, but not good at all. For instance, ‘It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay’ (5:5). However, there are some uses of ‘better’ in this group which lack the use of ‘than’ but nevertheless clearly compare two things. The only difference seems to be a different syntactical arrangement (4:2; 5:1; 9:17). In one verse, two relatively valued states of affairs are presented to which a third is more favourably compared (4:3).

In the second group the ‘better than’ and ‘better for’ judgements are preceded by ‘nothing’ (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15). In this group, Qohelet’s counsel is to enjoy the simple things in life: ‘eat your bread and drink your wine’ (9:7), and enjoy your work (toil) because it is ‘good for’ all people (8:15). Together, all these judgements serve as Qohelet’s response to the question in the first chapter: What advantage (gain, profit or benefit) do human beings have in all their activities ‘under the sun’ (1:3)?

3.1.2. Distinctive marks of Qohelet’s axiology

Qohelet’s axiology is characterised by at least four distinct features: realism, universality, normativity, and self- and other-directedness.

- 1) *Realism and objectivity.* Qohelet was a realist (Whybray 1989:24–25, 28; DeRouchie 2011:8), and as a realist he believed that his claims report or state facts about how things are in the world, that his claims are true and

represent facts that exist objectively, independently of what he thought, believed, felt or desired about them.

With regard to (1), Qohelet did not intend to deceive us, for he says that he ‘sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly’ (12:10), for the words of the wise are ‘given by one Shepherd’ (12:11; cf. 2:26; Job 28:12–13; James 1:5).⁷ It is consistent with what the Apostle Paul teaches about inspired scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. Qohelet also leaves no indication that the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of something depends on someone’s personal taste or how much something is liked or desired by any given individual (i.e. subjectivism).

⁷ Most English translations capitalise ‘Shepherd’ in order to identify this shepherd with Yahweh, the one God of Israel (DeRouchie 2011:12-13).

(2) *Universality*. Qohelet made it clear that his axiology has a universal scope; he did not intend to restrict or make it relative to a single individual, group of people, or culture.

With regard to (2), Qohelet let us know that his axiology applies to every person ‘under the sun’ or ‘under heaven’. He says so in the first chapter (v. 3; cf. 2:3ff.) as well as in the final chapter (12:13): ‘For God will bring every act [of every person] to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or bad’. It is also consistent with what our Lord (Matt 16:27) and Paul teach in the New Testament (Rom 2:1–11; 2 Cor 5:10; cf. Heb 9:27).

(3) *Normativity*. If x is ‘better than’ y and ‘nothing is better than’ x, then x provides us with a reason to choose, pursue, obey or perform, and promote or protect it.

Qohelet says ‘It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay... Rather, fear God’ (5:5, 7), and ‘I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one’s lifetime’ (3:12).

(4) *Self- and other-directedness*. If some things are ‘good for’ us, then they provide us with a reason to care for our own well-being and that of others.

Qohelet writes that it is good for me to avoid sorrow in my heart and pain in my body (11:10). Because his axiology is universal, it follows that what is good for one person is good for another. Qohelet also states that ‘oppression makes a wise man mad’ and ‘a bribe corrupts the heart’ (7:7). That is because those who oppress others dehumanise them and those who accept bribes undermine justice and, by so doing, the happiness or well-being of others. Instead, ‘there is nothing better’, says Qohelet, than to do good in one’s life time (3:12).

3.1.3. Qohelet's sources of knowledge (epistemology)

The final observation about Qohelet's axiology that deserves mention is that he acquired knowledge through personal experience, observation, reflection, and the Torah, but especially Genesis. He says, for example, that he 'explored' things 'with his heart' (2:3) and 'saw' (realised or understood) 'that wisdom is better than folly as light is better than darkness' (2:13). Not only is it acknowledged by scholars that Old Testament wisdom is shaped 'within the framework of a theology of creation' (Zimmerly 1964:148), but it is also widely accepted that Qohelet's reflections occurred against the background of the events described in Genesis 1–3 (Caneday 1986:30, 51; Clemens 1994; DeRouchie 2011; Forman 1960; McCabe 1996; 2013; Shank 1974; Zimmerli 1964; Zuck 1991), therefore, the special revelation of God. A single example will suffice to make the point: 'All go to the same place. All come from the dust and all return to the dust' (3:20; 12:7; cf. Gen 3:19).

In contrast to the absence of evil in God's 'very good' Creation in Genesis 1, Qohelet knew that that was no longer the state of affairs or situation 'under the sun'. A radical change occurred since Adam's rebellion and God's subsequent curse (Gen 2:16–17; 3:1–6, 14–19). No wonder he exclaimed: 'So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous [lit. evil] to me; because everything is *hebel* [upside down, uncertain, deeply frustrating, and fleeting]' (2:17; author's own rendering). That, however, does not mean that Qohelet thought of life as meaningless or worthless. To see why, I will next turn to Qohelet's axiological categories and distinctions.

3.2. The bearers of value

Since Qohelet refers to our Creator (12:1) and Giver of life (8:15), it can safely be assumed that he knew that God introduced value into our world (Gen 1:31; see Joubert 2018). That means that value is not a human invention, and it is also quite evident in Ecclesiastes 2:3 and 6:12. To 'see' what is good for us to do presupposes the 'good' in our world, otherwise Qohelet would not have been able to tell us what he saw (cf. 2:13; 3:10, 22; 4:1, 4–7, 15; 5:18; 7:15, 27; 8:9, 16–17; 9:11, 13; 10:5–7).

Qohelet saw and speaks about various bearers or carriers of value, such as consumer goods (5:11), persons (2:26), states of affairs (4:1–16; 5:18; 7:10; 9:1ff.), action (5:4; 7:2, 5; 8:11–12), speech-acts (a rebuke–7:5; gracious words–10:12), relationships (4:9–12), pleasure (8:15), wisdom (7:11; 10:10), patience (7:8), a good name or reputation (7:1), to be alive (11:7), and leadership (10:15–19).

These goods illustrate why none of these things can be worthless. Consider the following three examples.

3.2.1. Enjoyment

Qohelet says, 'Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works' (9:7; cf. 3:22). Because of uncertainty and the fact that no person is master of the future, it makes sense to enjoy the present, which makes life both fulfilling and valuable. The same points are made in the New Testament: 'Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor 10:31). Here Paul's point is to honour God in everything we do, but also adds that we should respect another's conscience: 'But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak' (1 Cor 8:9). Elsewhere, Paul states that we should not 'be conceited' and set our 'hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy' (1 Tim 6:17; see also vv. 18–19).

3.2.2. Diligence

Qohelet's advice is to 'Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good' (11:6). Because the unknown future and the uncertain results of our work, the more diligently we should go to work. The point is a positive one, not a counsel of despair or to regard our efforts as worthless. Paul also speaks of spiritual riches: 'Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary' (Gal 6:9).

3.2.3. It is good to be alive

'The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes [a person] to see the sun' (11:7). Since that is so, it can be neither meaningless nor worthless 'to remove vexation [or sorrow] from your heart and put away pain [lit. evil] from your body' (v. 10). Qohelet emphasises not only the goodness (value) of spiritual and bodily wellness (cf. 3 John 2), but also tells us to pursue it. The problem is that too many people think that joy and responsibility do not mix; hence, they ignore or forget either the fact that 'childhood and the prime of life are fleeting' or that their Creator will call them to give an account of their actions (11:9).

So what is it that makes good things good?

3.3. The source of goodness

Qohelet makes it known that what makes good things good is our Creator, and refers to them as ‘gifts of God’ (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9). As noted earlier, some of the items that are specified for enjoyment are food, drink, and work. It ‘is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without him? To the person who is good in his sight he has given wisdom, and knowledge and joy’ (2:24–26; cf. 3:10, 22). To these he adds wealth, possessions, and the number of days of one’s life which God gives to those ‘under the sun’ (5:18–19; 8:15). It underlines an important relation: the goodness of the gifts and the goodness of their Giver (Ps 34:8; 106:1; 136:1; 1 Tim 4:4; 6:16–19). Thus, if the gifts draw us to their Giver, then it becomes difficult to comprehend how they could be worthless or why God would provide us with good things when life is meaningless.

I will next show that the things Qohelet judged to be good can be categorised into at least two basic categories or kinds of ‘goodness’: the intrinsic ‘good’ and what is ‘good for’ us. These can then be further distinguished into the aesthetically and morally valuable.

3.4. Qohelet’s categories of goodness

3.4.1. Intrinsic goodness

The first important category of ‘goodness’ in Qohelet’s axiology can be referred to as ‘intrinsic goodness’ (equivalent: just plain good or good absolutely). To say ‘x is good’ is to say x has the property of ‘being good’, period. Put differently, to ask ‘What is good?’ is to ask what is good in itself or good for its own sake. Certain goods, such as wisdom, knowledge and skill (2:13, 21; 4:13; 7:11–12, 19; 9:13–18), pleasure, joy in one’s work (2:24–26), companionship (4:9–12), justice (5:8), and a good name or reputation (9:1) are examples. Thus, if something is intrinsically good or just plain good, then it is good at all times and places, and ‘goodness’ is a property that all good things have in common, as we shall see shortly.

Qohelet says, ‘It is good *that* you grasp one thing, and also not to let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them’ (7:18; emphasis added). It is just plain good to hold on to one piece of advice or something learned and not to neglect or let go of other equally important pieces of advice or knowledge. Read with verses 16 and 17, we may say it is just plain good to understand the dangers of an overly one-sided view of religiosity (‘excessive righteousness’; 7:16) and also good never to let go of one’s convictions about an overly one-sided view of sin (‘excessive wickedness’; 7:17). For example, Jesus berated the Pharisees for

their 'long prayers', their empty oaths, and claims to keep the law of Moses while they neglected 'justice and mercy and faithfulness' (Matt 23:14, 16–23; cf. 5:20). By emphasising only certain aspects of what the law of Moses required, they became at the same time hypocritical or overly wicked (cf. Luke 11:42–52; John 8:42–46).

However, the claim that 'goodness' is something all good things have in common needs to be qualified to avoid misunderstanding. It would be a mistake to think that the concept of 'good' applies to all objects in entirely the same way. If it does, then we would think that 'goodness' would describe pleasure, companionship, fruit, vegetables, animals, humans, and God in exactly the same way. So how should we understand the goodness of God (Matt 19:17) in relation to the goodness of his creation? The alternative, as we saw earlier, is to see that good things have the same property ('goodness') in common but in different degrees.⁸ It is quite evident in Qohelet's judgements that some things are 'better than' others (7:1–10) and some things 'more bitter than death' (7:26). Jesus says, 'you are of more value than sparrows' (Matt 10:31) and of 'much more value than a sheep' (Matt 12:12).

⁸ Note that God values humans more than animals: Matt 6:26, 10:31, 12:12 and Luke 12:7, 24.

The fact that something is just plain good or absolutely good has at least three logical implications. The first is that it is by virtue of its intrinsic nature that something is good, irrespective of whether prudentially, aesthetically or morally good (cf. fruit, vegetables, enjoyment or happiness, companionship). Therefore, and second, when Qohelet says that 'x is good' or 'x is better', he cannot mean that it is intrinsically bad or worthless. Finally, whether something is intrinsically good does not depend on anyone's point of view or on how much it is liked, preferred or desired by anyone. All three points are affirmed by the Apostle Paul: 'I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself' (Rom 14:14), and 'everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude' (1 Tim 4:4).

3.4.2. The good for (prudential goodness)

The second main category in Qohelet's axiology refers to what is 'good for' or beneficial to us. Just to give it a label, this sort of value could be called 'prudential goodness' because it concerns our life, well-being and happiness 'under the sun'. There are several senses in which x can be good for y: x may be useful as a means to some goal or purpose, for example, good for making something; x may be good for someone to do (take a run or a swim); x may be good for someone to have (a good rest); and 'x is good for y' when x sustains or makes y's life better (i.e. leaves y 'better off'; Eccl 4:3; 6:5–6).

‘Wisdom’, for example, is not only an intrinsic good, it also is a prudential good in the sense that it ‘strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city’ (7:19). Qohelet states that ‘a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure’ (8:5). The latter kind of wisdom I shall refer to as ‘prudence’.⁹ I will explain.

In Proverbs, Qohelet (i.e. King Solomon)¹⁰ tells his readers that his proverbs are intended to ‘give prudence to the naïve’ (1:1, 4; cf. 8:5, 12), about which at least three things should be said. Firstly, prudence is an ethic of responsibility; it requires that we answer for our intentions, motives, and the consequences of our actions. Secondly, understanding of, deliberation on, and choices between the best means to an end depends on prudence. It explains why the prudent person is most concerned with prudential goodness or value (i.e. well-being or wellness) and the best means by which it can be attained (cf. Prov 8:5). In a word, prudence helps us to determine which means (the instrumental good) is the most apt to some end. And thirdly, prudence involves effort, attention, and carefulness as opposed to indifference or passivity. Qohelet says, ‘Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks’ (10:18). It requires that one ‘looks at’, ‘looks for’, ‘listens to’ and ‘listens for’ particular things, and then does something about it. These are all actions a person performs. For instance, Qohelet ‘turned to consider...’ (2:12), then ‘looked again at...’ (4:1, 7), and he says ‘it is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than for one to listen to the songs of fools’ (7:5; cf. 5:1). One of the things he saw was that a blunt axe only makes work more difficult (10:10). Thus, if a worker runs into difficulties in his or her work, then he or she must consider the means used to accomplish it. That wisdom, says Qohelet, ‘has the advantage of giving success’ (10:10).

To summarise: Qohelet tells us what is ‘good’ in itself, and he underscores what is ‘good for’ us. Things that are intrinsically and instrumentally good for us share essentially the same property: they support, as opposed to undermine the value of every person’s life, happiness or well-being. They are, by implication, far from valueless or worthless. Things that are just plain, intrinsically or absolutely good and good for us can be further qualified.

3.4.3. Aesthetic value

Many things make a qualitative difference to life ‘under the sun’, including beautiful things. For instance, it is written that every tree that God planted in the Garden of Eden was ‘pleasing to the sight and good for food’ (Gen 2:9). Beauty is, therefore, the value beautiful things have for us. Qohelet says that God has in his

⁹ Proverbs 8:12 says, ‘I, wisdom dwells with prudence’. Zimmerli (1964:149) wrote that ‘the primary character of wisdom’ is prudence. Fee and Stuart (1993:237) predicate the same of Proverbs: the prudent person is most concerned with how to ‘make responsible, successful choices in life’. However, they disappointingly contrast that with what they consider to be the ‘speculative cynicism’ of Qohelet.

¹⁰ For confirmation of Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, see McCabe (2015:3-20).

sovereignty planned the timing of all things (3:1–8), and ‘has made everything appropriate [lit. beautiful] in its time’ (3:11), ‘which unmistakably reflects Genesis 1’ (Zimmerli 1964:155; cf. Joubert 2018). We may say that everything, for which there is a time, is beautiful. In the words of Qohelet: ‘Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting [lit. beautiful]: to eat, to drink and enjoy [lit. to ‘see’ or experience good] oneself in all one’s labour in which one toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward’ (5:18; cf. 9:9). Through all the *hebel* (gloom, frustration and the perplexity) of events, we can still see and experience God’s beautiful design of things (Ps 19:1ff.).

Thus, if something beautiful is good or valuable, then it makes some response to it appropriate: to love, desire, promote, and care for it, but above all, not to destroy it. It would be difficult to understand how this could be without making use of ‘beautiful’ or ‘good’ and if life ‘under the sun’ is meaningless or worthless.

3.4.4. Moral value

Recall that Qohelet announced that his goal was to ‘see what is good for the sons of men to do under heaven’ (2:3). In the middle of his book, he expresses the same thought in the form of a question: ‘who knows what is good for’ us? (6:12). The hedonist might say that Qohelet taught that nothing matters more in life except one’s experiences, namely, pleasure. Indeed, Qohelet ‘commended pleasure’ (8:15). The danger, however, is to adopt a utilitarian criterion of action, such as ‘act to increase pleasure’; therefore, to think that an increase in pleasure would increase the quality of one’s happiness or well-being, when it would not. Qohelet’s conclusion about who knows what is to our ultimate advantage is unambiguous: ‘The conclusion when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep his commandments, because this applies to every person’ (12:13; cf. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13). It is not difficult to establish what Qohelet meant and how he arrived at his conclusion.

In the first place, many writers call the ‘fear of God’ the ‘motto, or the key word, of wisdom writings... the highest maxim, the queen of all the rules of direction’ (Blocher 1977:4; cf. Zimmerli 1964:151). In Proverbs, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’ (1:7); it is ‘the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding’ (9:10); and it is said to be ‘the instruction [education] for wisdom’ (15:33). Most significantly, Job equates the value of wisdom (28:13) with the fear of God: ‘The fear of the Lord that is wisdom’ (28:28; cf. Deut 4:5–6). It suggests that of all the things that are good for us to do, nothing can be

compared to the value of the fear of and obedience to God. It is the principle or essence of wisdom.

In the second place, Qohelet would have us know that the value of that wisdom is the only value that has implications for our present life and the afterlife. If Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 is the conclusion of all that Qohelet is teaching us between Ecclesiastes 1:2 and Ecclesiastes 12:12, then 12:13–14 can be paraphrased as follows: ‘You have heard me saying a lot of things about life ‘under heaven’ and about what things are better than others; but let me now tell you what is the absolute best: fear God and obey him. It will determine the state of your well-being (happiness) in the present life and the life to come’. I believe we can discern at least two senses of the value of that wisdom. There is the sense of its spiritual and moral value, which entails devotion and loyalty to our Creator as well as the ‘turning away from evil’ (Job 28:28; cf. Prov 3:5–7; 1 Pet 3:11). There is also the sense of its preventative value. James Crenshaw (2013:97) writes that the phrase ‘fear God’ carries ‘a basic sense of dread’. If so, then Qohelet’s plea is to take the fear of God and obedience to his revealed moral will seriously: ‘For God will bring every act [of every person] to judgement, everything...’ (12:14; cf. Rom 2:1–11; 2 Cor 5:10). Thus, if an emotion (fear) provides a person with a motive to act, then it would be prudent for us to make Qohelet’s wisdom our own.

Finally, I believe that Qohelet would have us know that his conclusion did not come from nowhere. A brief comparison of what he said about the fear of and obedience to God, and what is good for us to do, with how these themes are presented in Deuteronomy 6, shows why.¹¹

- ‘[L]isten and be careful’ to do what God commands ‘that it may be well with you’ (Deut 6:3; cf. 4:1, 40; 5:29, 33; 13:4; 27:1, 9–10; 29:9); ‘Hear, O Israel!’ (Deut 6:4; cf. 9:1).

‘When all has been heard: keep God’s commandments’ (Eccl 12:13); ‘I know it will be well for those who fear God’ (Eccl 8:12).

- ‘[W]atch yourself, lest you forget the Lord’ (Deut 6:12; cf. 4:9; 8:11–14, 18–19).

‘Remember also your Creator... Remember him’ (Eccl 12:1, 6).

- ‘[D]o what is right and good in the sight of the Lord’ (Deut 6:18; cf. 12:25, 28; 13:18).

¹¹ Seow (2008:56) is quite aware that ‘Qohelet appears to have been familiar with Deuteronomy’, but fails to notice how Deuteronomy 6 underlies Qohelet’s teaching.

‘I know there is nothing better than... to rejoice and to do good’ (Eccl 3:12).

- ‘[F]ear only the Lord your God... [It is] for our good and for our survival’ (Deut 6:13, 24; cf. 4:10; 8:6; 10:12–13, 20; 13:4).

‘Fear God...’ (12:13); ‘[I]t will be well for those who fear God’ (Eccl 8:12).

The comparison underlines something of extreme importance: the God who speaks through Moses is the same God who speaks to us through Qohelet. The message can be stated in the axiological language of Deuteronomy 6:18: ‘[D]o what is right and good in the sight of the Lord’ (cf. Luke 6:27; Acts 10:38; Rom 2:7, 10; 12:9, 21; Gal 6:10; 1 Pet 3:11).

Since it is reasonable to conclude that Qohelet believed that there are ways of living that are better than others, which best promote our happiness or well-being, it will be useful to say something about the relation between ‘good’ and ‘right’.

3.5. The ‘good’ and the ‘right’

If we say, for instance, that someone is good, we are partly expressing an evaluative fact and partly describing the person. We say that there are certain facts about him or her which we regard as sufficient to warrant or justify the use of the word ‘good’. In contrast, the commandments of God are not describing anything. They are prescribing what people ‘ought’ and ‘ought not’ to do (i.e. their duties). That contrast raises the question about the relationship between the evaluative concept of ‘good’ (or ‘bad’) and the prescriptive deontic concept of ‘right’ (or ‘wrong’, ‘obligation’ and ‘ought’).¹² Because of space constraints, I will first specify three main differences between these concepts and two areas in which they overlap, and then draw three conclusions.

The first principal difference between the concept of ‘good’ and the concept of ‘right’ is that the evaluative ‘good’ takes comparative and superlative forms. ‘Good’, but not ‘right’, admits of degrees. One can say ‘x is better than’ and ‘nothing is better than’, but one cannot say that what God commands is more or less right or obligatory. Another difference is that ‘good’ covers a wider range of things than ‘right’. We evaluate objects, states of affairs (situations), and people and their actions. In contrast, what is ‘right’ is typically used to refer to agents¹³ and their actions. There is a third difference. It seems that value (‘good’) is more closely tied to feelings (5:8; 7:7–10; 8:15; 9:4; 11:7) and desires (6:3, 6–9; 11:9),

¹² Actions and the value of their ‘rightness’ are the focus of what is known in the literature as ‘deontological ethics’ (from the Greek *deon*, which means ‘binding duty’; cf. Kaiser 1983:21; Moreland and Craig 2003:446ff.).

¹³ An ‘agent’, such as a human, is equipped with a two-way ability: to act at will and to refrain from acting.

and what is right more closely to the volition of a person (5:19–20; cf. Jer 7:22–26; 11:7–8; 13:11; 25:3–4).

The first area in which ‘good’ and ‘right’ overlap pertains to what is obligatory for us. We ought to approve what is good, disapprove of what is bad, and despise what is despicable (cf. Rom 12:9), just as we ought to approve what is right and disapprove of what is wrong (cf. Rom 12:17). And we ought to love, desire, protect, and care for what is good, just as we ought to love, desire, care for, and defend what is right. The evaluative ‘good’ and the prescriptive ‘right’ also overlap in the area of reasons for action. In ethical judgements, things that possess value provide reasons to promote and protect and not to destroy them. Reasons, in other words, explain why such actions are both good and right.

The differences and areas of overlap between the ‘good’ and the ‘right’ lead to three reasonable conclusions. First, although the relationship between ‘good’ and ‘right’ is very close in the sense that we can apply ‘ought’ to both what is good and what is right, they are nevertheless two distinct kinds of normative concepts. Second, the main difference is the conceptual roles ‘good’ and ‘right’ play in our lives ‘under the sun’: evaluative concepts allow us to describe and compare things, including people and their actions; deontic concepts prescribe what we ought and ought not to do, or what ought or ought not to be. Finally, by using prescriptive sentences, we may influence the conduct of people by simply pointing out the consequences of their acts or the consequences of their beliefs, feelings, attitudes and desires (cf. 4:1ff; 5:5–6; 7:7). But a value judgement is primarily aimed at *altering* the beliefs, feelings, attitudes and desires of people (cf. 4:13; 5:5–8; 12:13–14).

4. Summary and Concluding Remarks

Although ‘Solomon has a message for all people about their finitude and depravity as well as about God’s design for enjoying the basic gifts of life as he enables’ (McCabe 2015:19–20), we sense that he first, and foremost, cares about our good, well-being, or happiness. In a world in which things are enigmatic and fleeting, most often frustrating, incomprehensible, beyond our control, and subject to pain, suffering, and death, it makes sense to ask what is to our advantage and what is good for us to do. I wish to submit that his concern about our good or well-being should not be seen as a coincidence. According to Qohelet, its ultimate source is ‘one Shepherd’ (12:11; cf. Ps 23:1–6; 80:1), whom the New Testament refers to as the ‘good’ (John 10:11, 14), ‘great’ (Heb 13:20) and

‘Chief Shepherd’ (1 Pet 5:4), the ‘Guardian of our souls’ (1 Pet 2:25).

The analysis of the things that are good or valuable, what it is that makes them valuable, the kinds of value there are, and the relationship between ‘good’ and ‘right’ cannot support the thesis that life is meaningless or worthless. Qohelet’s axiology is also consistent with the teachings of Genesis 1–3, Deuteronomy 6, and the New Testament. None of the good things that God created lost any of their intrinsic or absolute goodness. It explains why things that are intrinsically good and good for us share essentially the same property: they underline, as opposed to, undermine the value of every person’s life, well-being, or happiness. However, because of the reality of sin and other evils in our everyday lives, some things are now ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for us, and some ‘better than’ or ‘worse than’ others. To discern the difference requires prudence, which begins with the fear of God and obedience to his revealed moral will. It is the essence of wisdom, and it has value for our present life and the one to come. About that, Qohelet leaves no one in the dark: ‘I know it will be well for those who fear God, who fear him openly. But it will not be well for the evil man... because he does not fear God’ (8:12–13). It entails a very specific kind of life before and in relation to our Creator and our neighbour. In the language of biblical axiology: live well and live right.

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