



The Ubiquity of Impermanence at the Intersection of Qoheleth and Entropy¹

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Memento mori. Remember that you will die. Consider that this adage is not morbid. It is a universal, albeit blunt, reality common to all people, to all creatures, to the cosmos. We human beings, especially in the West, expend great amounts of energy and capital trying to undermine the inevitable. In his seminal work, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker captured the complicated relationship that humans have with death, saying, “The irony of [the human] condition is that the deepest need is to be free from the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.”² Indeed, it is more than energy and capital we expend. We spend life fearing, worrying about, and trying to avoid what is inevitable.

It should be no surprise that there is a theological consequence of this avoidance. At stake in the awareness of this universal is the articulation of the gospel

¹ I am borrowing the phrase “the ubiquity of impermanence” from physicist Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, trans. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell (New York: Riverhead, 2017), 97.

² Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 66.

Ecclesiastes presupposes that there is nothing in this world that does not come to nothing, ourselves included. In the terms of natural science, this is entropy—the same idea expressed a different way. But this eventual nothingness is reversed through the creative act that is resurrection in Christ, and our dying and rising in him.

of Jesus Christ, the full trajectory of which is revealed in God's bringing life from death, with the resurrection of Jesus being the first fruit of the cosmic promise (1 Cor 15:20). More succinctly, the resurrection of Jesus only makes sense if death is real. Jesus's death. Our death. The death of the cosmos.

This little essay is a thought exercise that juxtaposes Qoheleth's³ wisdom regarding death with observations that flow from the second law of thermodynamics, namely entropy. Less than a piece about the intersection of Scripture and science, which it is in part, the goal of the essay is to consider the theological contribution that both Qoheleth and the second law make to the texture of the proclamation of the gospel in this day and age.

Qoheleth's voice echoes from the fuzzy margins of the canon with a message that has not been pureed like baby food for easier ingestion. The tone and content of the book had the rabbis of the Tannaitic period (ca.10–220 CE) debating its canonicity.⁴ Origen (ca.185–ca. 253 CE), while not questioning its canonicity, does recognize the book's difficulty in his suggestion that the books of Solomon be read in a particular progression: "Proverbs is intended to instruct the young; Ecclesiastes is intended for one who has mastered the basic lessons and now needs to learn to despise the world; the Song of Songs is for the perfected."⁵ Jerome (ca. 342–420 CE), building on Origen's progression, lays out the challenge: "In Ecclesiastes [Solomon] is educating a man of mature age not to believe that anything among the affairs of the world is perpetual. To the contrary, he asserts, everything we see is transitory and brief."⁶ For Jerome, the proper reading of Qoheleth expects experience of the ephemeral nature of life and the ubiquity of death.

Save a brief epilogue (Eccl 12:13–14), which is bathed in a certainty that resonates with traditional wisdom as in the book of Proverbs, the remainder of the book is drenched with skepticism. Traditional wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, is built on foundations of predictability. Basically, you reap what you sow. Those who fear the Lord and abide by the wisdom of the Lord will prosper. The foolish and the wicked, not so much. An example of the certainty, the teaching of Wisdom herself:

For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster. (Prov 1:32–33)⁷

If one but abides by Wisdom's teachings, all will be well. Prosperity. Security. Life. In stark contrast, the wisdom of Qoheleth is clear that the same fate awaits

³ I have chosen to use Qoheleth (קֹהֵלֶת), the Hebrew name for Ecclesiastes.

⁴ The debate (cf. m.'Ed. 5.3 and m.Yad.3.5) was whether Qoheleth makes the hands unclean, the meaning of which is clarified as "All sacred scriptures impart uncleanness to hands" (m.Yad.3.5).

⁵ Summarized by Richard J. Goodrich and David Miller in their "Introduction" to *St. Jerome: Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 20.

⁶ Goodrich and Miller, "Introduction," 34.

⁷ Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

both the wise and the foolish. The crux of the contrast is heard in the following bit of self-reflection of one who learned of and pursued Wisdom's promise only to be encountered by experience:

So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the one do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

The wise have eyes in their head,
but fools walk in darkness.

Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. (Eccl 2:12–15)

Whether it is pessimism, realism, or both, we are all slowly dying. Such is our common denominator. Death's door beckons us all. To be clear, Qoheleth is not devaluing wisdom. Wisdom remains the best means for navigating the world. Wisdom's ways are valuable, but they cannot offer any alternative to the ultimate destination of all, which is death. As Qoheleth says:

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As if an epiphany about the nature of human existence, this gets under Qoheleth's skin to the point that we receive his most lasting observation: "Vanity of vanities!" (Eccl 1:2; 12:8). If there is no payoff for the striving that wisdom's way demands, what's the point?! The wise person dies just like the fool (Eccl 2:16b).

Underneath what is oft translated "vanity" is the Hebrew *הֶבֶל* (*hebhēl*). Not to disagree with the rather abstract idea that is "vanity," but a more visual rendering of *הֶבֶל* like "vapor" is preferred. Such a move is amply supported when comparing Qoheleth's use with other Old Testament occurrences⁸ as well as with cognates in

⁸ Outside of Ecclesiastes, *הֶבֶל* indicates something which is there and yet not there, whether breath (e.g., Ps 39:5; 94:11), descriptions of idols (e.g., Jer 10:15), or idols themselves (e.g., Deut 32:21).

other ancient Near Eastern languages.⁹ Likewise, when *הָרָלָה* is held in parallel, as it often is throughout Qoheleth, with “a chasing after wind,”¹⁰ what we have is a vibrant, yet misty image of the value of life’s toiling and wisdom’s benefits at life’s finish line. While “vapor of vapors” does not have the same poetic quality as “vanity of vanities,” the image of striving to grab ahold of vapor and chasing after wind captures visually the impossibility of the promise of traditional wisdom. No matter the striving, death awaits wise and foolish alike.

As there is no difference in the fate of the wise and the foolish, there is also none between human and beast. “For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity” (Eccl 3:19). That is, all is vapor—there but not, unable to be grasped. The optimistic promises of traditional wisdom evaporate in the face of this reality. And what is left? The simple distinction between God and creation. The whole of creation. Wisdom cannot and does not provide protection from death, which is the destination of all creation.

Clarifying the fundamental and categorical difference between Creator and creation is at the heart of this alternative wisdom. Striving after an exception is a striving after wind. It is trying to hold vapor in your hand. Qoheleth’s voice, with this emphasis that death is the great equalizer among creatures, brings a precision to this distinction. Within the Christian canon, Qoheleth drives this universal truth home.¹¹

A good name is better than precious ointment,
and the day of death, than the day of birth.
It is better to go to the house of mourning
than to go to the house of feasting,
for this is the end of everyone,
and the living will lay it to heart. (Eccl 7:1–2)

Theological anthropology and theology are two sides of the same LP, to use a dated but retro-chic reference. Johann Michael Reu (1869–1943), whose theological and pedagogical stamp remains on the institution where I serve, Wartburg Theological Seminary, wrote that the funeral sermon should include for the living “a solemn reminder of the inexorable hour of death.”¹² This wisdom, that reverberates from the core of Qoheleth, is necessary given another of Reu’s essential elements of the funeral homily: “a public witness to the hope in the resurrection.”

⁹ K. Seybold, “*הָרָלָה*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 313–14.

¹⁰ E.g., Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4.

¹¹ Also from within Old Testament Wisdom literature, Job, the other pillar of alternative wisdom, hears the Voice from the whirlwind (chs. 38–41), whose leading questions put Job in his place: “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?” (Job 38:17, NRSV).

¹² Johann Michael Reu, *Homiletics: A Manual of the Theory and Practice of Preaching*, trans. Albert Steinhäuser (Dubuque, IA: Wartburg, 1924), 311.

Lest the cart end up before the horse, however, there are a couple additional points that need tending.

Another aspect of Qoheleth's wisdom alongside the inevitability of death is toil. Work. From the outset, Qoheleth is concerned with work: "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" (Eccl 1:3). This question assumes the response: zilch, nada, nothing. Toil is a consistent concern for Qoheleth, occurring twenty-six times, all cognates of the Hebrew, עמל (*a-mal*). Is there gain from toil? Never. To expect one's toil to result in anything but temporary pleasures of the moment is foolishness. Consider:

I hated *all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun*, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of *all for which I toiled* and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning *all the toil of my labors under the sun*, because sometimes *one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill* must leave all to be enjoyed by another *who did not toil for it*. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from *all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun*? For all their days are full of pain, and *their work* is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. (Eccl. 2:18–23)

This is no testament to the so-called American Dream. To be clear, Qoheleth does not speak as one who is down on their luck. At least with the literary framework of the book, they have had great success, including loads of silver, gold, and concubines.¹³ He has sought out "what [is] good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life" (2:3b), with material success.¹⁴ And yet, in the end (at death) all this toil and work is vexatiously vapid.

In the shorter-term, however, toil has a different texture.

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. (Eccl 2:24)

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. (Eccl 3:12–13)

¹³ Cf. Eccl 2:4–8. Of course, this could be poetic license to bring the character of the literary work in line with stories of Solomon's accumulated wealth.

¹⁴ A counter-balance to Qoheleth's search for what is good is articulated by the prophet Micah:
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)

For further exploration of this comparison, see Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, trans. Orville C. Dean, ed. Klaus Baltzer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 65.

While it appears a contradiction, the difference here is about perspective. Toil in the moment can have value and bring joy.¹⁵ If, however, one expects toil to yield something long-lasting, especially lasting beyond a person's years, there is nothing but disappointment. In effect, life is like a country-and-western song: you came into this world with nothing, and you're leaving it the same.¹⁶ In the meantime, and with a splash of Epicurean bitters and a wedge of lime, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself, as these are gifts of God (Eccl 8:15).

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In his commentary on Qoheleth referenced earlier, Jerome makes a comparison between the progression in which one should study the Solomonic books and the pedagogy of philosophers, who "educate their followers in a way that is not far from this [Solomonic] order of teachings: they teach ethics first, then they interpret natural science, and when they see a student has advanced in these arts, they lead him up to theological study."¹⁷ In parallel, then, with the teaching of Qoheleth, we turn to science.

Qoheleth and thermodynamics meet at the crossroads of toil and death. Thermodynamics is the study of energy, heat, temperature, and work in systems as varied as steam engines, the cosmos, the human body, information, and quanta. The primary observation that informs the intersection with Qoheleth is the second law of thermodynamics and, even more precisely, an aspect of the second law: entropy.

The basic idea of entropy is quite simple. In short, it is the observation that time is irreversible, and that decay and death are inevitable. The mechanics of entropy are a bit more complicated. In the interest of trying to be both precise and accessible, the following description of the mechanics of the second law and of entropy is as short as possible.

A helpful first step on this brief journey is to imagine yourself as a heat engine. In the history of thermodynamics, the steam engine was among the first to play this role. Hence, if you'd like to consider yourself a "Little Engine That Could" or one of the many characters in "Thomas, the Tank Engine," be my guest. Chug away!

¹⁵ Also, Eccl 5:19.

¹⁶ "As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands" (Eccl 5:15).

¹⁷ Goodrich and Miller, "Introduction," 34.

Thermodynamics as a field of study got its foothold during the industrial revolution as machines—many powered by steam—were designed to do the work of many people. Somewhere between the drive to mass-produce and the drive to ease the burdens of horse and human . . . Who am I kidding? The drive to mass-produce drove the interest in increasing the efficiency of the machine. In 1824, French engineer Sadi Carnot (1796–1832) published his observation regarding the working of steam engines, that “all heat engines receive heat from a hot body and reject waste heat to a cold body.”¹⁸ In spite of the fact that Carnot’s understanding of heat proved to be inaccurate,¹⁹ his basic observation about the transfer of heat serves as the basis for the second law. While not capturing the fullness of Carnot’s observation, the basic phenomenon that he observes happens in a crude formulation for me every morning. I do not drink my coffee fast enough. As such, what is steaming hot when I pour it into my cup becomes ever closer to room temperature as it sits waiting to be consumed. The heat of the fresh coffee dissipates into the atmosphere. There is no work being done in this dissipation (and no benefit to yours truly!), but the motion is the same. The heat of the coffee transfers as “waste heat” to the surroundings.

Without getting too deep in the weeds, it is important to note that the first law of thermodynamics, the articulation of which came after Carnot’s observation, has to do with the conservation of energy. That is, “energy can neither be created nor destroyed.”²⁰ From this roll two additional observations: first is that “work is the transfer of energy that makes use of the uniform motion of atoms in the surroundings,” and the second is that “heat is the transfer of energy that makes use of the random motion of atoms in the surroundings.”²¹ Notable here is that heat is no longer understood as a substance, “caloric,” that passes between bodies. Rather, heat has to do with the vibration of particles.²²

(Dear reader, hang in there just a bit longer. If you are a theologian with no interest in physics, I beg your pardon. If you are a physicist who is chafing at the hurried imprecision of my description of the laws of thermodynamics, I beg your pardon as well. Shortly, this little essay does turn back toward the intersection with Qoheleth.)

Back to the second law. A few short decades after Carnot’s observations about the irreversible passage of energy (a.k.a., heat) from a hot body to a cold body, two folks articulated the second law in different but complementary ways.

¹⁸ Summary by Don S. Lemons, *Mere Thermodynamics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 31. Cf. Sadi Carnot, *Reflections on the Motive Power of Fire*, trans. E. Mendoza (New York: Dover, 1960).

¹⁹ Carnot, along with other physicists of his day, hypothesized that heat was a substance, called “caloric.” Cf. Lemons, *Mere Thermodynamics*, 19.

²⁰ Peter Atkins, *The Laws of Thermodynamics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 35.

²¹ Atkins, 24–25.

²² “The heat of a solid represents the total amount of internal energy due to its internal molecular motion. . . . As the temperature of a solid increases the molecular agitation becomes greater and greater.” Robert K. Logan, *The Poetry of Physics and the Physics of Poetry* (Oxford: World Scientific, 2010), 90.

A version of the second law comes from Rudolph Clausius (1822–1888), who is credited with bringing Carnot’s observations about the movement of energy as heat from hot to cold into line with the first law’s conservation of energy, which in the meantime was formulated by James Prescott Joule (1818–1889). Clausius’s statement of the second law is this: “Heat does not pass from a body at low temperature to one at high temperature without an accompanying change elsewhere.”²³ That is to say, the only way to move heat from a cold body to a hot body (e.g., a refrigerator) is to exert additional energy. Rivers naturally (spontaneously in physics) run downstream, from a higher point to a lower point. The Mississippi River has run in the opposite direction at least once, but this was not spontaneous. It was the result of a massive exertion of energy from a series of large earthquakes in the Mississippi Valley at the end of 1811 and the start of 1812. The natural flow was only interrupted by an exertion of energy.

Another foundational version of the second law comes from William Thomson (1824–1907), who would later become Lord Kelvin. His statement is this: “No cyclic process is possible in which heat is taken from a hot source and converted completely into work.” As Peter Atkins clarifies, “Nature exerts a tax on the conversion of heat into work, [meaning that] some of the energy supplied by the hot source must be paid into the surroundings as heat.”²⁴ This “tax” is sometimes called heat loss. The heat, however, is not really lost or misplaced. Rather, it dissipates in directions that do not result in the conversion of the energy to work.

The articulations of the second law of thermodynamics by Clausius and Kelvin, while emphasizing different aspects of the law, are “logically equivalent. That is, Kelvin’s statement implies Clausius’s and Clausius’s statement implies Kelvin’s.” For the proof, see the work of Peter Atkins and others.²⁵

At this point we can speak of entropy. Entropy is the irreversible movement from order to disorder. The natural movement of the energy of a warm body to a cold body (a fundamental aspect of the second law) demonstrates this. This is always true of natural processes. To move in the other direction is neither spontaneous nor natural, as it requires additional energy, as is the case with refrigerators and air conditioners.²⁶ Entropy increases or remains the same. It never decreases naturally. The equation is $\Delta S \geq 0$. The change (Δ) in entropy (S) is always equal to or greater than zero. As put by Carlo Rovelli, this is “the equation of time’s arrow,” and “it is the only equation of fundamental physics that knows any difference between past and future. The only one that speaks of the flowing of time. Behind this unusual equation, an entire world lies hidden.”²⁷

²³ Atkins, *The Laws of Thermodynamics*, 42.

²⁴ Atkins, 41.

²⁵ Atkins, 42–43.

²⁶ Cf. Logan, *The Poetry of Physics and the Physics of Poetry*, 95.

²⁷ Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time* (New York: Riverhead, 2017), 27. Elsewhere, Rovelli writes: “The difference between past and future exists only when there is heat. The fundamental phenomenon that distinguishes the future from the past is the fact that heat passes from things that are hotter to things that are colder.” *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, trans. Simon Carnell and Erica Segre (New York: Riverhead, 2016), 53.

Out of this second law of thermodynamics, then, we have the scientific observation of the movement of time by way of the gradual (on a cosmic scale) movement from order to disorder. More recent developments in quantum physics, rooted in the observations of Ludwig Boltzmann (1844–1906) that the smallest bits that make up our world are always in motion, are shifting this understanding of entropy from an absolute reality to a relational reality.²⁸ Because of the limits of our human physiology, we cannot see this constant motion with the naked eye. A solid looks like a solid. It feels like a solid. But it is not completely solid. These tiny, tiny bits—molecules and atoms and quanta that comprise everything that is—are always moving. Our experience of reality, then, is blurred.²⁹ Like fish in water,

we observe the universe from within it, interacting with a minuscule portion of the innumerable variables of the cosmos. What we see is a blurred image. This blurring suggests that the dynamic of the universe with which we interact is governed by entropy, which measures the amount of blurring. It measures something that relates to us more than to the cosmos.³⁰

This blurring, which is a humbling realization, does not falsify Clausius’s original equation for entropy: $\Delta S \geq 0$. As Rovelli puts it, “The entire history of the universe consists of this halting and leaping cosmic growth of entropy.”³¹ This is how the universe rolls. From order to disorder. From past to future. From life to death. The universe is less a collection of stuff and more “a collection of events” that share “the ubiquity of impermanence.”³²

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As with the universe as a whole and the quantum interactions of which everything, including time and gravity, is composed, remember that you are The Little Engine That Could! Like all other aspects and inhabitants of the cosmos, we are destined for death and decay—for the ubiquity of impermanence.

Contrary to the cultural tides that ebb and flow around us, death is the end of everyone. Enoch and Elijah are exceptions within the biblical narrative that prove

²⁸ Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, 145.

²⁹ “The growth of entropy is nothing other than the ubiquitous and familiar natural increase of disorder. This is what Boltzmann understood. The difference between past and future does not lie in the elementary laws of motion; it does not reside in the deep grammar of nature. It is the natural disordering that leads to gradually less particular, less special situations.” Rovelli, 29.

³⁰ Rovelli, 154.

³¹ Rovelli, 163.

³² Rovelli, 97.

the rule. No one else, our Lord and Savior included, has escaped death's clutch. Lazarus lived to die another day. You and I, our neighbors and enemies will meet death regardless of our efforts to the contrary, regardless of wisdom or wealth for both righteous and unrighteous. From prettying up the dead to the ancient, now hyper-commercialized search for the fountain of youth, the culture in which we live is saturated with death's denial.³³ The contortions that we find ourselves in as we fear and fight and deny death's inevitability give me existential charley horses just thinking about them. One might even dare refer to these contortions as "vanity and a chasing after wind" (Eccl 1:14 et al.).

At the same time, we are emerging (fingers crossed!) from a global pandemic that dampened our denial of death only to heighten our collective and individual fear of the same. As if we had harnessed death prior to those early weeks in 2020, it was suddenly unleashed, foaming at the mouth, working indefatigably to exploit vulnerabilities among and within us. As we emerge from beneath Covid's pall, there has been and remains a real cost. Many died. Many continue to struggle with lasting effects of the disease. And many more struggle with lingering fear over a still-mysterious killer that steals taste and extinguishes breath.

While Covid-19 has been the most viral (pun intended!) player in death's starting lineup over the last three years, death has not given up earlier efficiencies. In the last few weeks, my eyes have been wet for three people claimed by cancer, one of death's modern mainstays. At this point, I'm not worried about sounding morbid; actually, I am worried about *not* sounding morbid. Edna St. Vincent Milay's poem "I Know a Hundred Ways to Die" gets at the point without any further beating of a horse already, well, dead.

Death is inevitable. This has been and remains true. It is woven into the fabric of the universe. Qoheleth is on board with this, given the realism of his approximation of wisdom. Human, beast, and cosmos are all headed along a common trajectory. To think and to live as if anything else were a possibility is vapor and a chasing after the wind. *Memento mori*.

All this said, there is also promise at the intersection of Qoheleth and entropy: resurrection. Nothing less than the gospel is at stake. Death must be real if resurrection is to be real—if new creation is to be real.

Paul writes to the folks in Corinth:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (1 Cor 15:12–14)

At the crossroads where Qoheleth and entropy resonate with one another, death is real for all alike and for the cosmos. The movement from order to disorder, from life to death, is part of the fabric of the cosmos. It is the ubiquity of

³³ See Becker, *The Denial of Death*.

impermanence. It is the necessary context for the proclamation of the gospel, which is the message of life coming from death, where the triune God causes the river to run backwards into something altogether new. Might it be that Christ's toil—incarnation, death, resurrection—is that unnatural energy capable of reversing entropy's steady increase in ways wilder than we can imagine.³⁴

With gratitude to the ancient voice of Qoheleth and the modern observations of thermodynamics and quantum mechanics, the challenge of the church is to language the promise of resurrection in ways that resonate with both, lest our message be a vapid chasing after wind. ⊕

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³⁴ Speaking figuratively here while being mindful of Matt 27:52.