

Chapter 3

THE WAY TO WISDOM: QOHELET'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Commencer à penser, c'est commencer d'être miné.

Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 17

§3.0 *The problem*

Qohelet praises wisdom, spells out its benefits, and calls it as superior to folly as light is to darkness. Yet he also teaches that human wisdom is strictly limited and cannot achieve its goals, that it might fail to provide the promised benefits, is vulnerable to folly, and in the face of death is as helpless as folly. Qohelet's ideas on wisdom seem to be pulling in all directions. To sort them out we must ask first about the way he views wisdom's validity—in other words, about his epistemology—and second, about the way he views wisdom's power and value.

Epistemology asks: what can we know and how do we know it? Everyone who claims to know something has at least a latent epistemology answering these inseparable questions. Qohelet has more than that, for he speaks explicitly about the possibility of knowledge and how he gained it. Indeed, the problem of knowledge—its possibility, its powers, and its limitations—is one of the central concerns of his book. Thus his epistemology must be in part accessible from his statements about knowledge as well as from his description of his procedure and the way he argues for and presents his conclusions.

Qohelet's epistemology is, it must be stressed, inchoate and unsystematic, and it lacks the refinements in vocabulary necessary to make unambiguous certain distinctions important for clarity in this matter.¹ Yet his thought is not chaotic. He reflects on the ways and

1. Thus he uses *hokmah* both of the faculty of reason and of the knowledge to which reason can lead. *Ra'ah* is applied both to the perception of data and to the inference of conclusions on the basis of that data. *Yada'* is used both of awareness of facts and of understanding them. These distinctions are not drawn lexically or in fuller statement.

possibilities of gaining knowledge and on the scope of the knowledge to be gained. His ideas on these matters, though marked by some inconsistencies, form a coherent whole and allow for systematic exposition.

After a consideration of the terms for wisdom and knowledge (§3.1), I will argue that Qohelet has an essentially empirical methodology: he seeks both to derive knowledge from experience and to validate ideas experientially (§3.21). He often reports his findings introspectively, communicating his discoveries as perceptions (§3.22). He conceives of knowledge as the product of human thought (§3.23). He emphasizes the limitations of wisdom, but in some ways he also extends wisdom's field of activity beyond those approved by conventional wisdom (§3.24). Qohelet teaches the great utility of wisdom (§3.31), but recognizes its vulnerabilities and failings as well (§3.32). Finally, he believes that there is an imperative to pursue wisdom, regardless of its utility (§3.4).

§3.1 *The terminology of knowledge: what wisdom is*

First, a few words about a vast topic: the words for wisdom and knowledge in the HB. *Hokmah* is the primary but not the only word used to designate wisdom and associated concepts. Intellectual qualities and activities encompassed by the term *hokmah* are designated also by derivatives of YD', BYN,² and MŠ'. In describing the concepts designated by *hokmah* (and its synonyms), we are defining a notion that was probably shifting and vague, by means of terms (such as "intelligence", "reason", "knowledge") whose meanings are certainly shifting, vague, and variously understood in English. The best we can do is to gloss the Hebrew terms with words we can define, albeit loosely, in ways that conform to the common English usage.

Hokmah has two fundamental aspects: (1) Reason, the faculty and mode of thought by which one may rationally seek and

2. *Binah* and *t'binah* are denotatively indistinguishable from *hokmah*. (The distinctions the lexicons draw are derived from etymology.) All three may refer to wisdom in its various forms: practical sagacity, technical expertise, common sense, social adeptness, ethical-religious awareness, personified wisdom, and more. *Binah* and *t'binah* are most commonly "B"-words, following *hokmah* in parallelism (e.g., Prov 3:13) or sequence (e.g., 1 Kgs 7:14). Qohelet does not use *binah* or *t'binah* (or the verb *hebin*).

comprehend truth.³ This is the instrumental aspect of wisdom, the ability to discern knowledge and to act successfully. It is partly inborn (and thus close to the modern concept of intelligence)⁴ and partly acquired. This aspect is in focus in, for example, Qoh 1:13; 2:3; Isa 44:19. It is *hokmah* as reason that enables Solomon to judge the prostitutes (1 Kgs 3:28). The faculty of reason is predominant when *hokmah* is used in reference to skills, such as those of an artisan, although these consist in knowledge as well as in ability (English would not usually use either “reason” or “wisdom” of manual skills, but Hebrew applies its terms for wisdom to various mental powers that English keeps distinct). (2) Knowledge, that which is known (knowledge of causes or motives may be called “understanding”). This is wisdom that is transmitted from father to son and is often parallel to “words”, “doctrine”, or the like; e.g., Prov 1:2; 2:2; 4:5; 5:1. An unambiguous example of *hokmah* as knowledge is Dan 1:4, where the Jewish youths are said to be “learned in all *hokmah*”.

In biblical literature, wisdom is perceived as a single mental faculty with different aspects or components—knowledge and reason—and many different applications. These applications should not be viewed as different meanings of *hokmah*, as if *hokmah* in one

3. This is not an attempt to define “reason”, a word used in various and incompatible ways in philosophy, but to find a word in English whose common use generally accords with a particular aspect of the biblical concept of *hokmah*. In this discussion, “reason” should not be understood in one of its technical senses, such as the faculty of deductive, as opposed to experiential, reasoning, as the Kantian “Vernunft”, or as an antonym of “faith”. “Reason”, when used with respect to the biblical concept of wisdom, will refer generally to the faculty of ordered, self-governing thought that may infer ideas from observed facts or draw conclusions logically from principles, and that applies such knowledge to behavior.

4. Whybray (1974:6-14) identifies the fundamental meaning of *hokmah* in the HB as “superior intellectual ability whether innate or acquired, in God, men, or animals” (p. 11).

Hokmah (/binah) refers to native intelligence in Job 39:17, where it is said of the ostrich that “God has deprived her of wisdom, and has not allotted her understanding”. Among the verses that speak of wisdom (or folly) as an innate quality are Prov 14:6 and 17:16 (the ability to acquire wisdom requires the right predisposition); and Sir 15:9. The last verse refers to the faculties God created in mankind; these include “knowledge of understanding” (Greek; Syriac: “wisdom and understanding”).

place meant artistic skill, in another, knowledge of divination, in another, knowledge of ethical behavior, and so on (the lexicons take this approach). Rather, wisdom, with its dual nature, may be used in whatever people undertake to do, with the relative importance of the two aspects varying according to the task, the person undertaking it, and the circumstances of its performance. The sages of Wisdom Literature in particular speak of wisdom as a single, known attribute that can be praised, described, and personified without further definition. This unitary conception of wisdom is conveyed dramatically in the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8, where she introduces herself and describes her origins, her relations with God and humanity, and her various powers, uses, and effects. Both aspects may be present in any one occurrence of the word, and full wisdom comprises knowledge together with the reasoning ability to apply it. But usually one aspect is more prominent in any single occurrence. Qohelet too intends a unitary mental quality throughout, designated both *hokmah* and *da'at*, though this quality may manifest itself differently in different persons and situations. (In the paraphrastic translation [§5.8] I represent *hokmah* by various terms in an attempt to suggest which aspect of this mental quality is most significant in context.)

In denotation, the noun *da'at* is scarcely distinguishable from *hokmah*. The distinction English makes between "wisdom", which implies sound judgment and sagacity, and "knowledge", a non-evaluative term for reasoned awareness of facts, does not apply to the Hebrew terms commonly translated by these words. Both terms in themselves are ethically neutral and can imply either sagacity or simple knowledge of facts. In Wisdom Literature, both are almost always ethically positive, and *da'at* as well as *hokmah* implies more than mere storage of information.⁵ Prov 1:7 shows this conclusively,

5. Partial exceptions are Prov 3:5, which implicitly distinguishes "your understanding" (or "reason"—*binah*) from God-given wisdom, and Prov 21:30, which denies that any wisdom, understanding, or planning can stand "against" the Lord. *Hokmah* and synonyms here encompass a type of wisdom whose efficacy is denied. Ben Sira too (19:24) speaks of the "(God)-fearing man who lacks understanding (σύνεσις)", preferring him to the one "who has much intelligence (φρόνησις) but transgresses the law". Both σύνεσις and φρόνησις almost always denote genuine, ethical wisdom (they commonly render *da'at*, *binah*, *ṭebunah*, and *śekel*), not mere cleverness.

for it says that the beginning of *da'at* is the fear of the Lord (in 9:10 this is said of *hokmah*).⁶

It is not clear whether *hokmah* (= *binah*, *t'ebunah*) and *da'at* in general BH usage could refer to all types of knowledge and reason (including skills). *Da'at*, judging from the range of the verb *yada'*, probably could be so used. Outside Wisdom Literature, the various terms for wisdom can refer to types of knowledge as diverse as seamanship (Ps 107:27), divination (Gen 41:8), business acumen (Ezek 28:3), and statecraft (whether used for better [2 Chr 1:10] or worse [Isa 29:14]). Wisdom Literature usually applies the terms only to knowledge of God's will, the causal relation between deed and consequence, and the principles of proper behavior, as well as to the reasoning ability to apply such knowledge. When I speak of "knowledge" in the epistemology of Qohelet and other Wisdom Literature, I am referring to knowledge of the sort *they* speak about. My observations might not apply to knowledge of other, ethically neutral, types (whether called *hokmah* or *da'at*) such as craftsmanship, arithmetic, or literature.

In view of the near-synonymity of these terms, we may refer to Qohelet's search for "knowledge" as a search for "wisdom". He himself calls the knowledge he acquired, including the sort that causes discomfort, both *hokmah* and *da'at* (1:16, 18).

Hokmah in BH differs from English "wisdom" in never referring to the literary genres modern scholars have grouped under the designation "Wisdom Literature", or to the ideas, assumptions, goals, and attitudes characteristic of those genres.⁷ This distinction is

6. The difference between *hokmah* and *da'at* is that the latter can be used of knowing a specific fact (e.g., Job 10:7), while *hokmah* refers to a broader complex of knowledge. (This seems probable particularly on the basis of the corresponding verbal usages). The difference is more a matter of deep syntax than of choice of referents, with *da'at* remaining a verbal notion that can take a semantic direct object in bound form (e.g., *da'at m'e'zimmot* = "knowing plans" [Prov 8:12]; *da'at d'rakeyka* = "knowing your ways" [Job 21:14]).

7. Thus Whybray (1974:6-14), with whose understanding of the concepts "wisdom" and "wise" the following description essentially agrees.

Von Rad too draws a sharp distinction between "wisdom" as an intellectual quality and wisdom as a "geistige Bewegung". "Die Bezeichnung eines Textes als 'weisheitlich', überhaupt dieser ganze Begriff von 'Weisheit', als eines Gesamtphänomens ist ja in den Quellen keineswegs unmittelbar verankert" (1970:18f.).

important for defining *hokmah* and synonyms. Without it, one may confuse the description of the entire Wisdom enterprise with the meaning of one word, albeit a very important one, used in Wisdom Literature.⁸ Definitions of "wisdom" often are unclear on what they seek to do. Gordis, for example, says that "Hokmah may be defined as a realistic approach to the problems of life, including all the practical skills and technical arts of civilization" (1965:31). This might be an adequate description of the Wisdom enterprise—what the sages were trying to accomplish—as well as the activity of anyone else whose work required intellectual or manual skills (though a description of an enterprise in terms of its self-image may go beyond what the enterprise actually *was*). But it is certainly not a definition of *hokmah*, as an attempt to substitute the definition for the word defined makes clear. Likewise Crenshaw's discussion of "wisdom" (1981a:11-25) pertains to the activities and attitudes to which we might apply the term "wisdom". It does not define *hokmah*:

... wisdom is the reasoned search for specific ways to assure well-being and the implementation of those discoveries in daily existence. Wisdom addresses natural, human, and theological dimensions of reality, and constitutes an attitude toward life, a living tradition, and a literary corpus (1981a:25).

This is an apt description of the intellectual and cultural phenomenon I will call "Wisdom". It is not what any of the sages meant by the term *hokmah*.

In BH *hakam* refers to a wise man, an individual possessing wisdom, and only rarely to a member of the class of sages, the Wisdom teachers or the authors of Wisdom writings.⁹ I do not think there is any evidence for a "Wisdom School". It is more appropriate to speak of Wisdom Literature as a group of literary genres.¹⁰ To

8. Not nearly so important, however, in Egyptian Wisdom Literature as in Israelite, and not so important in Prov 10-31 as in Prov 1-9. As significant as the word *hokmah* (along with its synonyms and Egyptian equivalents) was in Wisdom Literature, it was not indispensable in teaching and describing wisdom.

9. In this too I concur for the most part with Whybray (1974:15-54). I do not, however, agree that *hakam* is *always* a personal attribute rather than a group identification. See Excursus IV.

10. These minimally include didactic, speculative [Job], and psalmodic Wisdom. More refined taxonomies can easily be produced (see Murphy, 1981, *passim*), but since these do not seem to correspond to differences in epistemology, they are not important to the task at hand.

describe the intellectual framework in which this literature was molded and transmitted, we may, however, speak of a *Wisdom tradition*, a term implying the assumption that certain texts or oral compositions were transmitted in a way that preserved their special formal and ideological characteristics, and these characteristics expressed a coherent group of attitudes, assumptions, methods, and beliefs. There is no justification for assuming that different genres were produced by different "schools",¹¹ or that an intellectual tradition is the exclusive possession of certain individuals who were ignorant of if not hostile to other traditions. The possibility that the same people can participate in more than one intellectual tradition is shown by the fact that the teachers whose proverbial wisdom is quoted in *Avot* (who also were called *hākāmim*) participated as well in the development of Halakhah and Midrash. Just as we may speak of midrashic traditions without implying the existence of a special school of midrashists who knew and were influenced only by midrash, so we can speak of the sages of Wisdom Literature without imagining them bound to Wisdom Literature.

§3.2 *Qohelet's epistemology: method and theory*

Qohelet's epistemology is essentially empirical. I apply this term to Qohelet's thought by analogy to the Western philosophical theories known as empirical, although Qohelet does not offer a philosophical theory or pursue a consistent methodology.¹² Much that he says comes from traditional learning, impulse, or vague deduction. Many of his ideas he formulates *a priori* (e.g., 3:17; 8:12b) or derives from assumptions that lack experiential grounding (e.g., 7:11-12). Nevertheless, the "empirical" label is justified, first, by Qohelet's conception of his investigative procedure, which looks to experience as the source of knowledge and the means of validation, and second, by his concept of knowledge, according to which knowledge is created by thought and dependent on perception.

11. See Whybray, 1974. As to the existence of an Egyptian "Wisdom School", see my remarks in Fox, 1980b:128f.

12. Using the concepts of Western philosophical empiricism, we can say that he holds a primitive form of the type of empiricism (the "weak form") that maintains that all knowledge comes from experience because every proposition is either a direct report on experience or a report whose truth is inferred from experience; see the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, II, p. 499.

Qohelet is unusual in his emphasis on validation, especially validation by empirical evidence. He is only vaguely paralleled in his introspective description of the experience of search and discovery. And he is alone among the sages in claiming to have pushed beyond tradition and to have discovered new knowledge on his own (1:12-16).

§3.21 *How knowledge is gained*

The attainment of new knowledge has two inseparable components: the procedure of discovery and the form of argumentation—inseparable because argumentation may turn a belief into knowledge (and so become part of the discovery process) and may also replicate the process of discovery. These components may, however, be distinguished for purposes of discussion.

§3.211 *Procedure of discovery*

Qohelet has a deliberate procedure of discovery, which he explains when he introduces himself (1:12-18 + 2:1-3). He will investigate the world with the aid of *hokmah*; this means that he will use his powers of reason rather than his prior knowledge in his inquiry. He never invokes prior knowledge, anything he “heard”, as an argument for his convictions. He will proceed by seeking experience, observing it, and judging it, then reporting his perceptions or reactions. He will also (though he does not mention this in the introductory passage) use experience in *arguing* for his propositions. He does not follow this procedure at every step, but he does speak of it as pertaining to his entire investigation. He mentions the investigation again in 7:23, 25, 27; 8:16, and he maintains its continuity by referring back repeatedly to his explorations, telling how he “turned” (PNH, ŠWB, SBB) from one thing to another or urged his heart to observe something new. All his teachings are encompassed by the framework of this report, and thus, it is implied, came to be known during the investigation described in 1:12-18 and exemplified in 2:1-26. The procedure described in these passages is, in Qohelet’s view, the method underlying his teachings as a whole.

Qohelet seeks out experience as a source of knowledge. After a preliminary meditation, he introduces himself and reports his decision “to investigate and explore with wisdom all that occurs under the heavens” (1:13; see commentary). He then proceeds to

relate how he investigated various activities, facts, and situations. In his first experiment (2:1-11) he chose an object of study, namely pleasure, then directed his heart to experience it and to observe its effects. He tried pleasures not in order to enjoy them, but as a means of answering a philosophical question: "what is good for people to do?" (2:3). So Qohelet did not merely go through life commenting on what he noticed. He chose a heuristic procedure deliberately and pursued it with determination, if not with consistency. This, I believe, is revolutionary: a sage chooses to seek out experience as a path to insight.

Before experience becomes knowledge, it must be interpreted by reason. Qohelet uses *hokmah*, reason, as an instrument of guiding, organizing, and interpreting experiences (1:13). He says that he "spoke to" [or "in"] his heart (1:16; 2:14, 15; etc.), "set" (*natan*) his heart (1:12; 1:17; 8:9, 16), "set" something "upon" (*'el*) his heart (8:9; 9:1), "explored" in his heart (2:3), "turned with" his heart (7:25), said to his heart that he will make it experience pleasure (2:1). He reports that he did not withhold pleasure from his heart (2:10) and that he rid his heart of illusions (2:20). His heart, for its part, "sees" wisdom (1:16), conducts itself in wisdom (2:3), and receives pleasure.

Qohelet does not consistently distinguish his heart from *himself*—the "I" or ego that speaks to the heart. Yet the prominent role he gives his heart in the passages where he discusses his investigation (1:12-2:26) suggests that he does ascribe distinctive functions to it. Qohelet mentions his heart twelve times in 1:12-2:26,¹³ a frequency 13.8 times greater than elsewhere in the body of the book (he mentions his heart elsewhere only in 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1 [twice, emending to *wlby r'h*]).¹⁴ This uneven distribution indicates that Qohelet's interest in his heart is not merely a habit of style. He mentions his heart so frequently in 1:12-2:26 because he is reflecting on the process of perception and discovery, and the heart has a central role in this process. He is not only exploring but also observing himself explore. He is his own field of investigation.

We may schematize the heart's role thus: (1) The person (Qohelet,

13. He also twice refers to the heart of the toiler in this unit (2:22, 23), where he is generalizing from his own situation.

14. Qohelet refers to a "man's" heart (in the third person) in 2:22-23, where he sees himself an example of such a man.

the "I") desires knowledge and (2) directs his heart to attaining it (1:13; 2:1a; 8:9). It seems that Qohelet must persuade his heart to take part in the investigation (we might say: he must persuade himself). (3) The person does something so that his heart may "see" or "observe" (usually R'H) the sensation it causes (2:1a, 10ba). (4) Since the heart is the seat of wisdom/reason (1:13, 16, 17; 2:3), it can assimilate and evaluate the sensations it perceives, in order to produce knowledge and report this knowledge to the person. Thereupon the person realizes (YD') a fact. We see the heart's experience ("e") enabling the person to attain knowledge ("k") in several places: 1:16 (e)—1:17 (k); 2:1a (e)—2:1b (k); 2:3abα (e)—2:3bβ (k); 7:25 (e)—7:26 (k); and 8:16 (e)—8:17 (k).¹⁵

§3.212 *Argumentation*

Empirical argumentation too proceeds from sensory experience. Qohelet does not always present arguments on behalf of his ideas, but when he does, he generally uses experiential ones.

Qohelet's argumentation is often in the form of *testimony*. In testimony one claims to have observed the fact that is being asserted or a fact from which conclusions are drawn. Qohelet uses testimony most prominently in 2:1-10, where he infers the value of pleasure from his experience with it. In 4:1, Qohelet observes oppressions; this is a conclusion as well as a basis for a further inference about the value of life (4:2). He argues for the proposition, "Better a wise youth than an old king who no longer knows to take care" (4:13), not by declaring the rewards of wisdom, but by recounting an incident he claims to have seen (4:13-16). In 7:15-16 he makes an observation and derives advice from it. In 8:9 he testifies in a general way to the statements of 8:1b-8. See further 5:12-13; 6:1-2; 8:10.

15. A similar conception of the heart's function is expounded in the Egyptian "Memphite Theology": "Sight, hearing, breathing—they report to the heart, and it makes every understanding come forth. As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart has devised" (*AEL* I, p. 54). The senses (Qohelet, less specifically, says "I") transmit sensations to the heart, which organizes them into knowledge; the heart then passes this knowledge to the tongue (again, Qohelet says "I"), which speaks what it is told. Since Qohelet is more concerned with understanding, whose agent is the heart, than with the senses and speech, he subsumes the eyes, ears, and tongue to the "I", while frequently distinguishing the heart from the person.

Testimony is effective only if the audience accepts the speaker's credibility, his rhetorical ethos. Qohelet tries to strengthen his credibility by reiterating and emphasizing that his ideas are all first-hand perceptions: I saw this; or better: *I* saw this. The frequent redundant first person pronoun focuses attention on the perceiver: *paniti 'āni, ra'iti 'āni, šabti 'āni wa'er'eh*, and so on (Muraoka, 1985:48f.). On Qohelet's introspective reporting see §3.22.

Qohelet also uses experience as *validation*, basing propositions on publicly observable facts. An example of validation is 2:21-23, where Qohelet argues that toil is absurd by pointing to the fact that at death (if not before) a toiler passes his wealth on to another person, one who did not toil for it. Qohelet takes this publicly observed fact as a premise. A similar, but more complex example of validation is the description of natural phenomena, which recur endlessly (1:4-7). This description serves to justify the conclusion, "That which happens is that which shall happen, and that which occurs is that which shall occur, and there is nothing at all new under the sun" (1:9). This conclusion in turn validates 1:3: man is not adequately compensated for his toil. The implicit rationale is that if even the powerful, incessant forces of nature can achieve nothing new, certainly human toiling can not do so. The fate of human toil is subsumed to a universal rule, which is learned from and validated by observations of particulars. Another example of empirical validation is 5:7f., where Qohelet explains the existence of "oppression of the poor and robbery of justice and right in the state" by the observation (whose validity he assumes the reader will grant) that one person of rank watches over another. (The usual Wisdom approach would be to point to consequences rather than causes, to teach, for example: If you see oppression of the poor, etc., know well that the oppressors shall be punished.) The importance Qohelet gives to validation is unique in Wisdom Literature.

Qohelet's argumentation is not, it should be stressed, always valid. Its main flaws are those to which all induction is susceptible: generalization from too few examples and transference of conclusions to inapplicable categories. His argumentation is, however, significant because of what it *attempts* to do: to prove the propositions of wisdom from experiential evidence.

§3.213 *Comparison with other Wisdom Literature*

The procedure of discovery and the forms of argumentation of other Wisdom Literature differ significantly from Qohelet's. Contrary to a widespread assumption, Wisdom's epistemology is not empirical. To be sure, many of the sages' teachings undoubtedly derive from the observations of generations of wise men (though always shaped in accordance with prior ethical-religious principles).¹⁶ My concern, however, is not with what the authors of Wisdom or other sages actually did—this is at any rate unrecoverable—but with what they *present themselves* as doing, in other words, with their epistemological self-portrait. For the way they present themselves shows their theory and ideal of what a wise man does, and thus reveals their conception of wisdom. And the fact is that whatever the teachings' actual derivation, the sages do not offer their experience as the source of new knowledge, and they rarely invoke experiential arguments on its behalf. Nor do they even refer to the experiences of predecessors.

In a few passages, the teacher in conventional didactic Wisdom does refer to something he saw, giving an appearance of empiricism. But that is for the most part a rhetorical strategy, not, as in the case of Qohelet, a fundamental methodological principle.¹⁷ In didactic Wisdom, reporting of individual experience is used to engage the pupil's attention and inspire him to obey the teachings.

The author of Prov 24:30-34 says that he "saw" what happened to a lazy man's field; the sage of Proverbs 7 "saw" a woman entice a

16. The same can be said for teachings that present themselves as revelatory in origin, e.g., the Covenant Code; yet no one would think of them as empirical.

17. Rhetoric is, to be sure, an expression and manifestation of an underlying epistemology.

The rhetoric of Wisdom Literature has been neglected. Crenshaw (1981b) has sketched some lines of Wisdom rhetoric under the rubrics of ethos, pathos, and logos (i.e., logic) (these "warrants", as Crenshaw calls them, are of course present in all rhetoric; the question is just how they are realized in specific texts). As the form of "logos" characteristic in Israelite Wisdom, Crenshaw mentions argument from consensus. This is likewise a way to strengthen ethos, since, as Crenshaw observes, ethos in Wisdom Literature derives from community. In fact, the seemingly empirical arguments in Wisdom Literature are primarily ways of strengthening ethos by creating consensus.

youth to fornication.¹⁸ These passages may well report actual experiences, but the experiences are not claimed as the source of new knowledge or even as its proof. In Prov 7:6-20, the teacher reports seeing the seduction but does not even claim to have observed the consequences; those he already *knows*. In Prov 24:30-34, a lesson follows upon an observation, but a truth is only called to mind, rather than being discovered or inferred. The sage does not say that he saw a field gone wild, looked for the cause, and found that its owner was lazy, nor does he claim to have looked at lazy farmers and observed what happens to their fields. Rather he came across a field gone wild, and this sparked a meditation on its causes. Experience is simply an occasion for thought. Likewise, when a sage tells the pupil to go to the ant (6:6-8), in a passage often considered a prime example of Hebrew *Naturwissenschaft*, he uses the ant as a teaching device, an illustration of diligence. He does not use the observable facts about ant behavior to prove a point, but merely to make his point more emphatic. And note, the sage does not himself go to the ant—he does not have to—but just sends the pupil.

A sage may also make general reference to his life-experiences in order to strengthen his ethos. Ben Sira speaks of experiences that enriched his sagacity and gave him the cunning to escape danger (34:9-12). He does not, however, claim that these are the basis of the wisdom he teaches. Another case of experience mustered to reinforce the speaker's ethos is Ahiqar l. 111, "I have carried sand and hauled salt, but there is nothing more burdensome than debt" (similarly ll. 105a and 112).¹⁹

These passages are as close as didactic Wisdom gets to empiricism, and they are rare. We might even say that the empirical garb of these teachings is necessary only for the callow youth to whom they are

18. LXX has the *woman* looking through the window in 7:6-7, but that accords poorly with v. 10, because *w'hinne* in that verse must introduce what is seen from the perspective of someone other than the woman in question.

19. Von Rad (1970:56-58) recognizes the essentially rhetorical function of the "autobiographical style" in Wisdom Literature, a style he considers a "traditionelle Stilform" (p. 57). He observes that in these passages there is a tension between the form, which implies personal experience, and the content, which is impersonal and general. In this way the teacher shows that such knowledge must be anchored in the life of the individual.

directed. A wise, mature man would not need such extraneous reinforcement of belief.

Personal experience is more often cited in theodicy, by both the sufferer and the defenders of divine justice.²⁰ The sufferer in particular draws inferences from what he has undergone (though we cannot assume that all his statements are to be understood as knowledge from the *author's* point of view). The defender too, whether in dialogue or in argumentative soliloquy, sometimes appeals to experience to support his tenets. For example, the psalmist of Psalm 37 claims that he never saw a righteous man abandoned (v. 25), whereas he did see the wicked cut down (vv. 35-36). Eliphaz says he observed evildoers reaping what they sowed (Job 4:8). Ben Sira uses personal testimony in the same cause: "Many such things my eyes have seen, and mightier things than these my ears have heard" (16:5). Note that the events he recounts in vv. 8-10 are examples of punishment in ancient times, things "heard" rather than "seen". Observation in theodicy testifies to old truths; it does not uncover or argue for new ones. Sounding a note of exasperation, the psalmist and Eliphaz mention their experiences in order to emphasize the obvious. Qohelet's use of experience does have certain parallels in theodicy both in the sufferers' complaints and in the defenders' theodicy. He differs in the greater importance he gives to the "I" and, more significantly, in the reasons for which he appeals to the ego. While the sufferers and defenders try to understand what they observe, they, unlike Qohelet, do not observe *in order* to gain knowledge.

§3.22 *Reporting discoveries*

The last step in Qohelet's procedure is to report his discoveries. This he often does in an unusual way, relating them introspectively. Instead of simply stating truths, he looks back and tells what he earlier "saw", "realized" (*yada'*), "found" or "apprehended" (*maša'*), and "said" (i.e., thought; at that stage he was speaking to himself). Concerning the wise man and the fool, for example, he says: "But I also realized that the very same fate befalls them both" (2:14) (not only: "but the very same fate befalls them both"); "I next saw that under the sun the race does not necessarily go to the swift . . ." (9:11)

20. Höffken (1985:123f.) describes well the various functions of the "I" in first-person discourse in Job.

(and not: "Under the sun the race does not necessarily go to the swift").

In line with this type of introspective reporting, Qohelet often evaluates situations and activities not by an independent external standard but by their effect on him. "Of amusement I said, 'Inane!' and of pleasure, 'What does this accomplish?'" (2:2). Thinking about the unfairness of death made him "disgusted" with life (2:17). He "found" woman to be more bitter than death (7:26). An event he "saw" (a wise man saving a city) he considered significant (as he puts it, "it was great upon me"; 9:13). The *hebel*-judgment too describes a psychological datum, for absurdity exists only as presented to the mind. Qohelet constantly interposes his consciousness between the reality observed and the reader. It seems important to him that the reader not only know what the truth is, but also be aware that he, Qohelet, saw this, felt this, realized this. He is reflexively observing the psychological process of discovery as well as reporting the discoveries themselves.²¹

§3.221 *Other Wisdom Literature*

Qohelet's introspective reporting has no close parallels in other Wisdom Literature. To be sure, a sage may occasionally say "I saw" something, or even report an experience at greater length (this happens most often in theodicy, e.g., Job 4:12-21; Ps 73:13-28). The best parallels are in the Individual Lament psalms. There is, however, a fundamental difference: the speakers in those psalms report, for the most part, their personal pains and misfortunes, not (with rare exceptions) facts about the world at large. Qohelet reports his personal discomfort but also, and mainly, draws conclusions about the external world. Furthermore, the lamenters are not looking inward in order to find knowledge, but have had it thrust upon their consciousness by experience, whereas Qohelet sets knowledge as his conscious goal. In any case, none of the sages or psalmists speaks about or refers to (as opposed to expressing) his perceptions and

21. In his perceptive study of the role of the ego in Wisdom Literature, Höffken (1985:125f.) points out the unusual importance Qohelet gives the ego and explains its role as criterial—Qohelet will evaluate transmitted teachings (*Bildungsgut*) by the measure of his own experiences. In my view, however, Qohelet is only occasionally and incidentally concerned with evaluating or testing ideas of others.

feelings as frequently and as systematically as Qohelet. His intense concern with the process of perception is a concomitant of his conception of the ontology of knowledge.

§3.23 *The ontology of knowledge*

Qohelet conceives of knowledge as a product of thought and discovery, not as an entity independent of the individual mind. He does not phrase his idea in this way, of course, but such a notion is implied by his description of what happens when he reaches the boundaries of knowledge. Having surpassed his predecessors in wisdom, he sets out on his own "to investigate and explore with wisdom all that occurs under the heavens" (1:13). He pursues knowledge not merely by absorbing existing wisdom and elaborating on it or applying it intelligently, but by pushing back the frontiers of wisdom, creating knowledge that did not exist before his investigation. Thus he determined to try out pleasure, "so that I might see ('ad 'āšer 'er'eh) what is good . . ." (2:3). Knowledge is subsequent to and dependent upon observation. In one verse Qohelet does speak of *hokmah* and *da'at* being given by God to a favored man (2:26). That, however, surely refers to wisdom in the sense of a disposition to do what is wise, in other words, to the faculty of reason. It is not a statement about the source of knowledge in general. *Hokmah* and *da'at* here do not refer to a deeper understanding of life such as Qohelet sought, for that type of wisdom brings misery (1:16-18), hardly an expression of divine favor.

It is of course possible for an individual to increase his wisdom by receiving knowledge from others. Qohelet introduces himself as one who excelled at that in the past (1:16). But he believes that as well as receiving truths, an individual can produce fundamentally new knowledge—truths never before known, and not only transmitted knowledge. Within the investigation that Qohelet reports in his monologue, he does not picture himself as learning facts others already know, but as discovering truths that would not otherwise be known. Above all, his awareness that "all is absurd", which encompasses many of his other conclusions, is a fundamentally new perception. He never suggests that anything but his own investigations contributed to that discovery. Much wisdom, he implies, already exists, but wisdom in its totality does not.

Qohelet's new wisdom he calls *da'at* and *hokmah* (1:17-18), just

like the wisdom he believes others can have (1:16; 2:12-14; etc.). This newly acquired wisdom is wisdom as knowledge—the sort of wisdom that can be increased through study and observation—rather than wisdom as reason. He does not speak of the development of reasoning powers; these he already possessed at the beginning of his inquiry. Knowledge, on the other hand, comes into existence by the process of thought and discovery.

Qohelet clearly perceives at least some of his most important findings to be fundamentally new knowledge, not merely truths long known that he might have garnered from others' wisdom. He does not bring this perception into confrontation with his statement that "there is nothing at all new under the sun" (1:9), but the two ideas do not necessarily contradict each other. The statement in 1:9 refers to events (*mah šehayah, mah šenna'āšah*; see commentary), and it is unlikely that Qohelet would apply it to anything as abstract as thoughts or items of knowledge. If, however, he does intend to assert that ideas cannot be innovative, he is first of all contradicting himself—which Qohelet is quite capable of doing—and second, he is simply wrong, as his book itself illustrates.

Qohelet's epistemology makes knowledge (at least knowledge of the sort that interested the sages) dependent on the knower's perceiving it. For Qohelet there is no body of truth standing above the individual and demanding assent, no Dame Wisdom who was created before mankind and who would exist even if all humans were fools. For Qohelet, wisdom must be justified through the individual's experience and reason. Qohelet alone of the sages speaks with "a voice that justifies itself by reference to the good sense of the individual's reflections on his experiences" (J. G. Williams, 1981:85). But argumentation based on justification of that sort could well turn against the speaker, weakening the rhetorical ethos it is meant to strengthen. After all, what right does the individual have to look about and within himself and come up with things not known to contemporary wise men, let alone to the wise men of old?

By making knowledge relative to the knower, Qohelet sacrifices the right to claim certainty or built-in authority for the wisdom he teaches. This loss may exacerbate his frustration at the impossibility of attaining the kind of certainty he longs for (7:23-24; 8:16-17).

The belief that knowledge proceeds from perception may also produce philosophical skepticism, for the subject is likely to

recognize the inherent fallibility and unverifiability of his own knowledge. In 6:12 Qohelet seems to do just that. He ironically undermines his own—quite serious—series of statements about what is “good” (7:1-12) by first denying the possibility of knowing “what is good for man”. This is not radical epistemological skepticism; Qohelet believes his knowledge is genuine. It is, however, an awareness that one’s knowledge cannot lay claim to certainty. This reflexive skepticism is more dangerous to Wisdom beliefs than are remarks about the limitations of wisdom (see §3.24), for it undercuts certainty, not only with regard to specific items of knowledge, but with regard to knowledge itself. Not only is there much that man cannot know (with this all would agree), but even what he *does* know is uncertain and unverifiable. Other sages revealed no such self-doubt; they would, I believe, have found it incomprehensible.

One means of strengthening the ethos endangered by Qohelet’s conception of knowledge is the Solomonic fiction, which bestows on the book the prestige attached to that archetypal wise man. Additionally, the epilogist (who I think is the author; see Excursus III) tries to blunt the brashness of this claim by speaking in the traditional stance of a father transmitting wisdom to his son (12:12). The epilogue informs the readers that the words have been channeled through the pipeline of tradition *from* Qohelet if not to him, and transmission in itself has legitimizing force. Finally, the introspective report, though contrary to the usual claim of traditional authority, strengthens the speaker’s ethos. Qohelet interposes his consciousness between the facts and his readers, for he seeks to persuade by empathy. He bares his soul in all its twistings and turnings, ups and downs, asking his readers to join him on an exhausting journey to knowledge. His new episemology has led to a new rhetoric. If the readers can replicate the flow of perception and recognition as it developed for Qohelet, they will be more open to accepting the author’s conclusions as their own.

§3.231 *Other Wisdom Literature*

In the usual Wisdom conception, wisdom—in both its aspects, knowledge and reason—exists essentially independent of the individual mind. What the individual knows would be known even without him. Knowledge exists “out there”, waiting for man to appropriate. It need not be proved, only found and applied. This notion is nowhere

stated, but it is implicit in the way wisdom is personified and by the way the sages speak about the process of gaining wisdom.

The images of wisdom in Proverbs (1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-12) and Ben Sira (14:20-15:8; 24:1-29) are a configuration of the same wisdom that is taught and praised elsewhere in the wisdom texts. If personified wisdom represented something fundamentally different,²² the image of wisdom as a person would communicate nothing about the wisdom the sages were trying to inculcate.²³ These personifications show that knowledge is thought of as existing, in essence if not in specifics, before mankind. The preexistence of the substance of wisdom—knowledge itself—is expressed most clearly by Ben Sira. He says that wisdom proceeded (at creation) from the mouth of God (24:3), and that those who desire wisdom need only come to her and satisfy themselves from her produce (24:19-22). She was present at the first and available to the first man (24:28; cf. Job 15:7). What place can there be in such a conception for the individual to increase the total store of knowledge in the world by observing life and watching his own reactions? A human being, whether as wisdom's plaything (Prov 8:31) or as a passer-by invited to her noble banquet (Prov 9:1-7) can hardly expect to make significant additions to this awesome force, but can, at most, seek to refine and express it in new ways.²⁴

The conception of wisdom as a static entity, independent of the human mind, is manifest also in the sapiential idea of the way

22. Such as the world-order or the "self-revelation of Creation", as von Rad understands it (1970:189-228). I cannot agree with him that "[d]iese 'Weisheit', 'Vernunft' muß also etwas wie den von Gott der Schöpfung eingesenkten 'Sinn', ihr göttliches Schöpfungsgeheimnis bedeuten..." (pp. 193-94). Contrary to von Rad, wisdom is not "die der Welt von Gott eingegebene Ordnung" (p. 194), but rather knowledge *about* that order. The personification texts do not suggest that knowledge can be extracted from the created order by observation. In fact, Job 28 (which von Rad brings in, perhaps improperly, as an example of personification) teaches that it *cannot* be.

23. In identifying personified wisdom with Torah, Ben Sira is not redefining wisdom, but subsuming the wisdom taught in his book (and elsewhere) to the concept of Torah. It is the concept of Torah, not wisdom, that is being redefined by radical expansion.

24. Ben Sira says, "If a man of understanding hears a wise saying, he will praise it and add to it" (21:15). This means that the essence of the saying, the idea it teaches, is already there, and the wise man elaborates it.

wisdom is gained. One gains wisdom by absorbing and applying existing knowledge. The sages prided themselves not on having created knowledge but on having taken it to themselves. Whereas Qohelet's favorite verb of perception is "seeing", theirs is "hearing".²⁵ The Egyptian sage Ptahhotep describes the pupil's duty as "hearing" his father's teaching in order to recount it to *his* children, thereby "renewing the teaching of his father" (ll. 588-95). The teacher in Proverbs 1-9 (where alone in Proverbs we find much reflection on the process of acquiring and transmitting wisdom) enjoins the pupil to "hear" and "keep" his father's wisdom. Whereas for Qohelet "seeking" and "finding" wisdom refer to exploration and discovery, in Proverbs these concepts imply striving and succeeding in absorbing and understanding existing truths. For the most part, the sages of didactic Wisdom sought not to discover truths but to inculcate them. This sapiential attitude is attested in Wisdom Literature from its beginnings in the Egypt of the Old Kingdom down to the Demotic Wisdom books and *Pirque Avot*.

Since knowledge, in the sapiential view, is not created through the individual's thought, its truth and authority need not be established by argumentation. Wisdom Literature, as noted earlier, uses argumentation less to prove its propositions than to establish the speaker's ethos and to motivate the pupil. Mainly Wisdom argues deductively, inferring truths from axioms or extending the application of given concepts.²⁶ Wisdom Literature shows very little attempt at argumentation from individual experience. In fact, there is little argumentation of any sort. The sage need not prove the truth of his wisdom, because if it *is* wisdom, it is not essentially his. He has partaken of it, not produced it. He does not know everything, of course, and he may be mistaken in what he thinks he knows, but the

25. "Seeing" denotes immediate experience, not necessarily visual; "hearing" means mediated, reported knowledge (Job 42:5).

26. Höfken (1985:122) says that in traditional Wisdom Literature (in particular, Proverbs, Ps 37, and the friends' speeches in Job), the primary functions of the teacher's ego are deduction (as in Prov 24:30-34) and affirmation. As I see it, although deduction is the main form of reasoning in Wisdom Literature, virtually the only function of the interposition of the teacher's ego in didactic Wisdom is (in Höfken's terminology) *affirmation*, i.e., the strengthening of traditional teachings by appeal to the "geballte Lebenserfahrung des Ego" (p. 122).

knowledge he does have, certified by its conformity to tradition, is secure.

Job 28 presents a divergent concept of wisdom. The poem asks: where can wisdom be found? and answers: it cannot be *found*; it cannot be bought. God alone knows the way to it. Thus man can partake of wisdom only through God's mediation (v. 28). Fearing God, man will do what is wise. Proverbs too asserts that fear of God is the path to wisdom (1:7; 2:5f.; 8:13; 9:10), but Proverbs also requires the individual to participate in the process of acquiring wisdom; fear of God is only a starting point. The implicit starting definition of wisdom in Job 28 resembles Qohelet's concept of wisdom as the product of discovery, but the author of the former presents this concept only in order to insist on the invalidity of such an approach. Westermann (1977:132) correctly calls Job 28 radical and polemical. It is, in a sense, more skeptical than Qohelet, for it insists that whatever man can attain by his skills and efforts is not to be reckoned as wisdom, whereas Qohelet grants that the knowledge the human intellect is able to grasp is truly wisdom, though the limits of this wisdom are strict and oppressive.²⁷

In contrast to Qohelet and Job 28, most Wisdom Literature conceives of wisdom as existing independently of the human mind and always available for appropriation. In brief, if one could ask a

27. Job 28 has been ascribed variously to a later hand, to the author of Job at an earlier stage (Gordis, 1965:101-103) or a later stage (Driver and Gray, and many), and to the author of Job at this stage (Andersen; Westermann, 1977:130-33; by the latter view, the poem is authoritative within the world of the text).

As an authorial statement this chapter is awkwardly placed. It proposes a solution to the crisis—fear of God—but this comes too soon to be the author's solution and vitiates the actual climax. Moreover, it sides too strongly with the friends' attitude: the only wisdom is self-effacing affirmation of God's justice. Although Job does in the end choose this path, at least in part (42:5f.), this is not the point of God's message, nor is it the author's "solution". Only for the friends is this an adequate solution to Job's dilemma.

I believe that we should reconsider the thesis of Graetz (1872) that Job 28 is a continuation of Zophar's third speech, begun in 27:7. (The introduction of the speaker has been lost before this speech, as most commentators realize; 27:11f. should perhaps, but not necessarily, be ascribed to Job.) 27:13

more conventional sage, "How do you know this?" he would, I believe, answer: "Because I learned it". To this question Qohelet would reply: "Because I saw it". The shift is profound.

§3.24 *The scope of wisdom*

In sharp contrast to didactic Wisdom Literature, Qohelet emphasizes the limitations and vulnerabilities of wisdom. This emphasis on the negative has led commentators to view the book as an attack on wisdom or a polemic against those who ascribe to wisdom powers that, in Qohelet's view, it lacks. Such an attack would be a polemic against Wisdom (whether perceived as a "school" or only as a way of thinking accompanying a literary genre), for Wisdom Literature above all praises wisdom and promises great benefits to those who possess it.

The following sections (§§3.241-3.32) seek to describe Qohelet's evaluation of wisdom—the pluses and minuses he sees in it—and to compare this with the ideas expressed in other Wisdom Literature. This description will put us in a better position to decide if Qohelet is indeed a polemic against the sages—the authors and teachers of

repeats Zophar's words in the second dialogue, 20:29. Job 27:1-4 is Job's brief and eloquent assertion of innocence, appropriately short in view of his lengthy apologia in chs. 29-31. Like others of the friends' speeches, 27:7-28:28 is compounded of threats and a bit of *Schadenfreude* alongside an apparently sympathetic call to humble piety. Job 28 is entirely in accord with the sort of tactical skepticism Zophar propounds in 11:5-8, asserting that wisdom is hidden with God. It is deeper than Sheol and broader than the earth, and thus hopelessly beyond human reach.

The main argument used against the ascription of Job 28 to Zophar is aesthetic. The poem seems too subtle and eloquent for Zophar (Rowley, 1963:166f.; Gordis, 1965:102). It is indeed eloquent, but it is also somewhat banal and more than a little irrelevant to Job's plight. In any case, much that the friends say (including ch. 11 and not excluding some of their nastier moments) would be reckoned magnificent and inspirational if it were found (as similar material indeed is) in Proverbs, Psalms, or the Prophets. The friends are not straw men; they are wise, and they are often eloquent. This eloquence is, of course, the author's, and is not to be taken as validating the friends' position.

Wisdom Literature—as many commentators believe.²⁸

Again, the biblical concept of wisdom includes both knowledge and reason. While a particular passage may emphasize one or the other of these aspects, the distinction is not lexicalized. For Qohelet, as for the other sages, the denotations of *hokmah* and *da'at* are virtually coextensive. When Qohelet speaks of the limitations of knowledge or the power of reason, he is referring to the scope and abilities of human wisdom.

In Qohelet's evaluation of wisdom we may distinguish two issues: wisdom's scope—what can and what cannot be known (§3.2)—and its utility—what benefits it provides its possessors and in what ways it fails them (§3.3). In both these matters, Qohelet's attitude toward wisdom is complex and nuanced, not merely a pro or con stance.

Qohelet denies the possibility of two types of wisdom: the knowledge of the future and the understanding of life. But alongside these negations, he also affirms wisdom's essential validity.

§3.241 *Knowledge of the future*

Qohelet insists repeatedly that man cannot know what will happen. The issue is not, of course, the validity of prophecy; the possibility of divine communication through dreams or visions is not touched upon in Qohelet and scarcely mentioned in earlier Wisdom Literature. The issue for Qohelet is the possibility of extrapolating the future from facts of everyday life in order to know the consequences of plans and deeds. Without such foreknowledge (and in the absence of

28. Many interpreters (e.g., Zimmerli, 1962:132-35) have said or implied that Qohelet is a polemic against Wisdom (or the Wisdom "School"). Fichtner (1933:8) says that Qohelet undertakes "eine radikale Kritik an dem Wert der Weisheit". Von Rad says: "Daß sich Kohelet gegen die herrschenden Lehren wendet, ist nicht zu bezweifeln" (1970:301); and "... sich Kohelet ja nicht nur gegen Auswüchse der traditionellen Lehre wendet, sondern gegen das ganze Unternehmen". The main conclusion of Loader is that "... Qohelet is constantly polemizing [sic] against general *hokmā* by turning its own topoi against it, by using its own forms and types with antichokmatic function and by categorically opposing the very heart of chokmatic optimism" (1979:117). Schmid says that it is generally granted that Qohelet takes a stance critical of wisdom (1966:186; see p. 186 n. 218 and p. 194 nn. 260-62 for further references). Kroeber (p. 270) is one of the few who denies that the purpose of the book is polemical. He understands the dialectic with the older world view to be itself a form of wisdom.

another source of knowledge, which Qohelet does not mention), man cannot "know what is good" for him (6:12).

Several times Qohelet declares flatly that "no one can enable (man) to see what will happen afterwards (*'aḥārayw*)"²⁹ (variants of the formula use the verbs "see", "find", and "tell"; 3:22b; 6:12; 7:14; 10:14; cf. 8:7). *'aḥārayw* usually refers to the future within an individual's life (6:12b; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14a). In 3:22b this word seems to mean "afterwards", referring to the time after death (cf. 3:21).

Qohelet uses similar vocabulary in denying the possibility of knowing one's "time" (i.e., time of death; 9:12), and of knowing what happens after death (3:21), what misfortunes will occur (11:2) and which planting will succeed (11:6).

In spite of these denials, Qohelet assumes that some things *can* be known about the future. He makes statements about the expected consequences of various deeds, as in 7:1-7, 11-12; 8:1b, 5; 10:8-9, 12b-13, 20; 11:1, 4. He asserts that God will judge (3:17), that it will go well with the righteous and ill with the evildoer (8:12-13a; 7:17), and that God may punish rash vows (5:5). Qohelet also believes it possible to know what *types* of events will inevitably come to pass. Because nothing new ever occurs (1:9f.; 3:15), the future must echo the past. The fact that "everything has a time" (3:1-8) means that "everything"—every type of event—will occur and recur. In this sense, we do indeed know what will happen in the future.

The tension between Qohelet's assertions of knowledge and his blanket statements of ignorance (especially 7:14) can be explained, though not eliminated, by defining more closely just what kind of foreknowledge he considers impossible.

Not to know what will happen means, in Qohelet's view, to lack foreknowledge that is both certain and specific. In 8:7 he says that the reason man is ignorant of "what will happen" (*mah šeyyihyeh*) is that he does not know "when it will happen". Knowing "what" is dependent on knowing "when". From this we learn that knowledge of "what will happen" does not mean knowing the expected result of behavior; for example, the fact that God will punish the careless oath-taker, or that one who digs a pit will probably fall into it, or that death will occur—for it is possible to know a general truth without knowing when a particular manifestation of it will take place. "What will happen" in 8:7 means a specific occurrence, such as a certain

29. The rhetorical question serves as a negative.

person's undergoing judgment, an individual's death, the outbreak of a specific war. A man knows he will die; but because he does not know the time of his death, he cannot, in Qohelet's terminology, be said to know "what will happen".³⁰ Qoh 10:8-14 supports this explanation of what it means to know "what will happen". In 10:8-13 Qohelet makes some statements about certain ironic reversals that can be expected to occur and teaches or implies the importance of taking precautions (10:10-11). Such statements assume an ability to estimate the effects of present actions. Yet in encapsulating this unit his conclusion is: "Man does not know what will happen, for who can tell him what will happen afterwards?" (10:14).³¹ The fact that Qohelet believes that ironic reversals demonstrate ignorance rather than knowledge shows that "knowing" here means awareness of the particulars of an individual's fate. Such knowledge is, of course, impossible, but the principle—one's deeds may rebound on him—is accessible.

In any particular case, there can be no certainty even about the broad outlines of the future, except with regard to the universal fact of death (9:5). Man cannot know whether a certain person will prosper or suffer, live long or die young, for there are always exceptions to the rules that would predict these things (7:15; 8:11-14). Man cannot even know whether wisdom and diligence will bring prosperity, for though they may be expected to do so, wealth can easily perish in an unfortunate incident. Conversely, while one's folly usually harms him, it may happen that a fool gains a wise man's wealth (2:19) or is appointed to high office (10:6). Although wisdom will usually bring wealth, the wise cannot be said truly to possess property, because '*et waḡega*', lit., "time-and-accident" (9:11), in other words, happenstance, may sever deed from outcome.

As different as Qohelet's vision of the world is from other Wisdom

30. The Instruction for Kagemeni uses the phrase "what will happen" in the same way: "One knows not what may happen, what god does when he punishes" (Pap. Prisse 2,1; *AEL*, I, p. 60). "What may happen" refers to the particular punishment awaiting an individual. The man spoken of in this passage thinks he has the future under control but may be in for a surprise. On the other hand the principle—divine retribution—is indeed known. Sir 9:11 and 11:4 show the same concept of "not knowing" the future.

31. *Me'ahārayw* is ambiguous but probably refers to the future in general, including the future within an individual's life; see comment on 10:14.

Literature, his skepticism about the future is not in itself a radical *conceptual* break from other Wisdom Literature. He still assumes the existence of patterns and principles, and these are accessible and do allow *probable* knowledge of the future. They are not, however, inviolable. While man can discern what types of consequence will probably ensue from deeds, he cannot have knowledge of the specifics of future occurrences. Again: some knowledge, some ignorance; but for Qohelet it is the latter that defines the quality of human powers.

The sages manifestly believed that they were able to predict what *kind* of consequences moral character (if not specific acts) would produce, at least in the long run: "Righteousness delivers from death" (Prov 10:2); "The fear of the Lord increases one's lifetime" (10:27); "Honor the Lord from your wealth, from the first fruits of all your produce, and your barns will be full of provisions, your vats will overflow with new wine" (3:9f.). Almost every saying in didactic Wisdom displays confidence in man's ability to forecast the types of effect human behavior will have.

Nevertheless, the conventional sages too taught that the future is hidden. It is hidden first of all from an individual whose plans violate the moral working of the world. The consequences of his behavior are different from what *he* expected. He falls into the pit he dug for another.³²

More fundamentally, the sages taught that there can never be certainty about the future in any specific case. No one can know the outcome of his plans. Several Egyptian sayings teach this; for example: "There is no one who knows (the outcome of) his plans, that he might plan the morrow".³³ The book of Proverbs similarly warns: "Do not boast about the morrow, for you do not know what the day will bring forth" (27:1); "From the Lord are a man's steps, so [w^e-] how can a man understand where he is headed [darko]?" (20:24). Further examples of proverbs that speak of the obscurity of the future are Prov 14:12; 16:1, 9, 25; 19:21; 20:24; 27:1; Sir 9:11; 11:4. Wisdom Literature manifests a sense of the contingency of

32. This topos is widespread in Wisdom Literature. Variant formulations appear in Prov 26:27; Pss 7:16; 9:16; Sir 27:26; *Qoh Rab* 7:21; Onchsheshonqy 22,5; Petubastis 26-27 (quoted in Lichtheim, 1983:29f.).

33. Ptahhotep l. 345 (*AEL*, I, p. 69); similarly "Eloquent Peasant" B 1, 183 (*AEL*, I, p. 177); Amenemopet 19,13 (*AEL*, II, p. 157).

events and a respect for the unpredictability of God's will.

J. G. Williams has observed that proverbs asserting retribution should be understood as speaking of typical cases, as teaching that "*usually or typically* one obtains results in terms of what one gives and how one takes a stance toward others" (1981:18). Proverbial statements are principles, not strict predictive formulae. The sages were aware of exceptions, although they rarely mention them in didactic Wisdom, whose purpose, after all, was inculcating proper behavior, not addressing existential or epistemological problems (a task that few besides Qohelet took on themselves). Theodicy, of course, does wrestle with the implications of exceptions to the principles Wisdom teaches. The answers are too various to summarize, but one of the basic postulates of theodicy (put forward by both the author of the book of Job and by Job's friends) is that man is indeed ignorant—not of the principles of God's rule but of the way these work out in reality. Thus human ignorance is made to serve as a buffer to human knowledge. The exceptions move from being the problem to being part of the solution.

In the matter of knowledge of the future, Qohelet does not differ conceptually from didactic Wisdom Literature. The difference—and this is a significant one—is in the greater emphasis Qohelet places on the inevitability of human ignorance.

Qohelet alone is troubled by the limitations on knowledge of the future. He alone is burdened by the inability to know when one will die (one's "time")—a limitation the other sages seem to have accepted easily enough, or at least did not brood over. Qohelet thinks that the lack of this knowledge makes man as helpless as a trapped fish or bird (9:12). Now we might object that knowing when we will die would still not make us less helpless in the face of death. But not only helplessness bothers Qohelet. Ignorance in itself, apart from its actual consequences, oppresses him, as if knowledge of the time of death would make the thought of death easier to bear.

When Qohelet denies the possibility of foreknowledge, he is implicitly defining knowledge as both certain and specific.³⁴ He does

34. The assumption that knowledge must be certain enters into the conundrum of Western skepticism as well: if knowledge is justified true belief, we cannot *know* that something will happen until it has happened. But if I believed that something would happen, and it does, did I not *know* it would happen?

not apply this conception consistently, but it does inform his statements about foreknowledge. For him, anything less than certainty is ignorance; a grasp of patterns and probabilities does not qualify as knowledge. Qohelet experiences disappointment because he expects of wisdom more than it can deliver, more even than it was thought to deliver.

None of this places Qohelet in the ranks of the orthodox. The different emphasis results in a book unlike any other Wisdom text. The other sages saw the same realities as Qohelet (how could one avoid being aware of the injustices he points out?), but he responds to them and interprets them differently.

Qohelet desires knowledge, in particular a knowledge of the consequences of deeds. An intense desire for knowledge, knowledge defined most stringently, rather than a contemptuous rejection of someone else's claim to have it, is the source of Qohelet's obsession with ignorance of the future.

Qohelet seems to start with the expectation that reason can provide certainty, and when he sees that it does not, he is struck by its frailty. The other sages seem more comfortable with the limitations of knowledge. A belief in God's beneficence allows them to trust in his guidance of human affairs even when humans cannot see clearly where they are going, and moreover to feel that this is all to the good.³⁵ Qohelet does not have a confidence in God's benevolence that could make his awareness of ignorance more bearable.

§3.242 *Understanding of life*

Besides seeking to know what will happen, man desires to understand life, but this, Qohelet says, is denied him. Yet in some ways Qohelet attributes to the human intellect potentials and prerogatives far beyond what the other sages allowed for.

To refer to the type of understanding denied man, Qohelet uses much the same vocabulary as he used in denying knowledge of the

35. This, as well as the infirmity of human planning, is the lesson of Prov 16:9: "A man's heart plans his way, but God establishes his step". In other words, whether a man will succeed, will walk securely to his goal, ultimately depends on God. But since God's favor can be secured by proper behavior, the outcome can be influenced by humans, even though individuals cannot know just how their plans will eventuate.

future, usually the verbs *maša'* and *yada'*, both of which sometimes mean "understand". The near synonymy of *maša'* and *yada'* is seen in 8:17b: even if the wise man intends to "know" (YD'), he cannot "find" (MŠ'). *Yad'a* clearly means "understand" in Prov 30:18. Examples of *maša'* in a closely related sense are Judg 14:18b; Job 11:7; 37:23. *Maša'* always refers to the result of a process, usually a deliberate search, such as Qohelet's own investigation (see the interplay of *baqqeš* and *maša'* in 7:23-8:1; 8:17). *Maša'* signifies attaining the understanding designated by *yada'*. We can often translate *maša'* as "come to an understanding of", or "apprehend", as in Judg 14:18b (*mēša'tem hiddati* = "come to understand my riddle", i.e., solve it) and Sir 31:22 (*tms' mry* = "understand my words"; *tšyg mry* in the doublet). (Qohelet does not use *hebin*, the word most commonly translated "understand".)

To designate the objects of the desired understanding, Qohelet uses the phrases *mah šehayah*, *ma'āseh ha'ēlohim*, *hamma'āseh 'āser na'āšah taḥat haššemeš* (and variants). These phrases all signify the events of life. *Ma'āseh ha'ēlohim* means "God's work" in the sense of the events that he brings to pass. This is the same as "that which occurs [*na'āšah*] under the sun", inasmuch as God "makes everything happen" (11:5; similarly 3:11); see §§5.11, 5.13. *'āšah* in 3:11 does not refer to Creation, which would be irrelevant to this context, but to events in human life, such as summarized by the "catalogue" of 3:1-8. Qohelet's claim is that no one can understand what God brings to pass, in other words, what happens in life (3:11; 7:23-24; 8:16-9:2; 11:5).

Man's inability to understand what happens on earth is, in Qohelet's view, equivalent to the incomprehensibility of God's will. This is clear in 8:17, where *ma'āseh ha'ēlohim*, "the events that God brings to pass", is rephrased as "the events that occur under the sun" (see commentary). These are what man cannot understand.

Just what type of understanding is denied man? He is not denied understanding entirely. It is, for example, possible to understand that wisdom is of great value (7:11-12) or that bribes will corrupt judges (7:7). The understanding impossible for man is of the sort Qohelet set out to find (1:13) but found stymied by life's absurdity (1:14).

Qohelet's insistence on the incomprehensibility of life is another expression of his assertion of life's absurdity, as the restatement, in very similar phraseology, of Qoh 1:13-14 by 8:16-17 shows. Both

speak of Qohelet's inquiry and its failure—the first describing life's absurdity, the second its incomprehensibility. It is the absurdity of life—the divorce between expected and actual consequences—that makes it incomprehensible and prevents knowledge of the future. Thus both limitations on human wisdom result from the same quality of reality. Not everything in life is absurd, but enough is absurd that this becomes the salient characteristic of the totality, and that characteristic prevents the understanding of life and God's will.

By looking at the phenomena that proved counter-rational and thus incomprehensible, we see examples of the kind of understanding Qohelet sought. Qohelet desired to understand the relation between toil and consequences, between people's moral quality and the length of their lives, between a person's wisdom and his possession of wealth, and so on. In other words, Qohelet sought to grasp the rationale of events in human life, to know the logical connection between behavior and outcome. When he could not find a logical, infallible connection, he pronounced the phenomena he observed, and life as a whole, absurd.

This insistence on the absurdity of life, which is to say, its incomprehensibility, is not an attack on human intellect so much as a complaint against the barriers placed upon it. Even if the power of human intellect were vastly increased, it would face the ineluctable irrationality of life. The limitations of human wisdom are thus rooted in the very nature of the world.

Even while pointing out these barriers, Qohelet reveals a sense of the mind's power to grasp widely and deeply. He maintains the essential epistemological validity of wisdom, believing that human wisdom is truly knowledge. He manifests this belief first of all in stating that he possessed and used much wisdom (1:13, 16) and then declaring, with a certitude rivaling that of Job's friends, the conclusions to which his wisdom led him.

The validity of wisdom is revealed in one of its severe shortcomings: it exposes painful truths (1:17f.; 7:15f.). When Qohelet warns of the dangers of growing too wise (as he does in 7:15f.), he assumes the epistemological (and not merely the practical) validity of wisdom. It is important to remember that Qohelet considers the unpleasant truths he discovered to be wisdom no less than the conventional counsels he offers.

With regard to the attempt to understand the logic of events Qohelet is indeed critical of the wise, but the nature of this criticism needs to be defined. He is not attacking the teachers of Wisdom Literature for extravagant claims. Rather, in asserting the hopelessness of speculation such as he himself undertook, Qohelet is chiding anyone who makes such an attempt. Wisdom is properly used in such an investigation (1:13), and the wise man is the person best equipped for the task (8:16-17), though others too may attempt it (8:17 speaks of "the wise man" as one type of person who might try to comprehend the events of life). The wise man in question is not perceived as a member of a "school" or "profession" or as an author of didactic Wisdom Literature. While authors of speculative Wisdom (such as the book of Job) might be included, Qohelet's remarks are not directed specifically at people who write or teach about the rationale of the events of life. The wise man that Qohelet is representing and addressing is anyone who sets out to "investigate and to explore with wisdom all that occurs under the heavens".³⁶ In any case, the criticism is not polemical, because Qohelet does not say it is *wrong* to do this, only that such thinkers weary themselves out in a hopeless task. This criticism, which is really more in the nature of a warning, is incidental to his belief that it is unfair for such understanding to be withheld.

Qohelet's recognition of the futility of speculation is not unique. Agur declares that wisdom—defined by the parallel stich as "knowledge of Holiness" (i.e., God or God's will)—is beyond him (Prov 30:3-4). Ben Sira says, "Who has seen [God] and can tell about it? Who can extol him as he is? There is much hidden that is greater than these things, for we see but little of His works" (43:31-32; cf. 11:4b; 16:20-22; 18:4-7). In a similar vein Zophar asks: "Can you discover the mystery of God? Can you discover the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven—what can you do? It is deeper than Sheol—what can you know?" (Job 11:7f.).

Didactic Wisdom Literature does not attempt the kind of investigation that Qohelet criticizes. The field of vision that didactic

36. Gordis (pp. 25-28) distinguishes between "practical" wisdom and "speculative" wisdom, the latter comprising Job, Qohelet, and Agur (Prov 30). It would be better to distinguish two (among the many) different *applications* of wisdom: speculation and practical ethics. There is no reason whatsoever to associate these two activities with different "schools".

Wisdom Literature chooses for itself is modest enough. It never claims to fathom the mysteries of Providence, never even tries to do so. It is rarely speculative and never esoteric. When it speaks about Creation (in particular in Prov 8), it identifies the primordial wisdom with the wisdom manifest in daily life and accessible to everyone. In fact, the book of Proverbs as a whole, and probably all of Wisdom Literature, understands true wisdom not as comprehension of life's mysteries, but simply as piety and everyday good sense. The sages repeatedly define wisdom by equating it with attitudes and actions that are within the individual's control—fearing God, staying away from another man's wife, speaking honestly, bridling one's temper, and so on—as if to assure the reader that everyday morality and sensible behavior is ample wisdom, and no deeper understanding of life is necessary. This is close to the message of Job 28 and of the proverbs that identify wisdom with fear of the Lord and moral behavior. And it is not far from the teaching of Qohelet. Qohelet is a speculative thinker who warns against the futility—not the legitimacy—of speculation.

While Qohelet is at one with the Wisdom tradition in insisting on the mystery of God's work, two deep differences divide him from the other sages.

First, the others are not troubled by the limitations on human reason. They believe that what knowledge is accessible to humanity is quite adequate, and they feel no need to push beyond this. Qohelet, in contrast, feels just such a need, and tries to push beyond, then feels hemmed in by the barriers to wisdom, and is oppressed by the limitations of his knowledge. Again we see Qohelet's fierce demands on wisdom: if it is unable to apprehend the fundamental rationale of events, it has not achieved what it should have.

Second, Qohelet chooses a perspective far broader than the authors of didactic wisdom, wider even than that of other speculative wisdom, such as Job. Qohelet extends wisdom's horizon by undertaking an inquiry of a scope unparalleled in earlier Wisdom. As von Rad observed, Qohelet views life in its totality:

Ihm geht es weniger um die Fixierung und die Diskussion von Einzelerfahrungen als um das Lebensganze und um ein abschliessendes Urteil darüber. Darin also ist Kōhelet in theologischer Hinsicht viel anspruchsvoller geworden (1970:293).

Didactic Wisdom evaluated human actions, confining itself to informing the pupil and reader which behaviors win "favor and a good opinion in the eyes of God and man" (Prov 3:4) and which provoke disfavor. Qohelet alone tries to think about life in its totality. Not only that, he also dares to *judge* it (others might do so only to the extent of echoing God's primordial declaration of the world's goodness). The book of Job comes closest to the breadth of Qohelet's field of vision yet seems finally to veer away from a global judgment. Though Qohelet believes himself unable to understand life and God's ways, he does not draw back from evaluating them. One cannot understand things that are absurd, but he can know them to be so.

Qohelet assumes that the individual has the ability and the right to discover certain fundamental and disturbing truths. God can prevent man from knowing the particulars of the events to come in the drama of human life and from making sense of the events in it, but he cannot keep man from judging the play. Qohelet thus arrives at a peculiar combination of humility and arrogance in his attitude toward the scope of knowledge: you cannot know the particulars of the events that God will bring to pass, and you cannot understand their reason or nature, but you *can* know about—can, indeed, pass judgment on—the rationality of God's behavior. And this judgment too is wisdom: knowledge attained by a wise man through the exercise of *hokmah* (1:13). Man's power of moral judgment can assess realities his intellectual powers could not untangle.

These differences, significant as they are, do not constitute a dispute, an argument *against* someone. In exposing the limitations of reason, Qohelet is not attacking the wise (or the sages) for overstepping boundaries or for pretending to greater knowledge than they have. He does not do this even in Qoh 8:17, which is commonly thought to be rebuking the sages for their pretensions to knowledge. Zimmerli, for example, invokes this verse to depict Qohelet as a polemicist:

All seine [sc., Qohelet's] Bemühung ist im Grunde ein großes Kampfgespräch mit der Weisheit, die meint, die Dinge der Welt in ihren Zusammenhängen, und damit auch Gott, verstehen zu können und die darauf ihre zuversichtliche Lebenskunde baut (1962:223).

But this verse does not rebuke the wise man. When Qohelet says, "And even if the wise man intends [not 'claims'—see commentary] to understand it, he is not able to apprehend it [sc., what God brings to pass]" (8:17b), he is not blaming or mocking the wise man for presumptuous claims, but rather heightening the complaint of 8:17a. No one, *not even* the wise man—the one most able to gain understanding and most deserving of it—can discover the rationale of what happens in life. There is a note of sadness and even indignation here, a feeling that it is unfair to deprive one of the knowledge he desires, a desire imposed on him by God (3:11). Qohelet is indignant that the wise man does not receive the full rewards of his wisdom, just as he is irritated that a toiler may not get the full benefits of his earnings (6:1-6) or that the rich may have to "sit in lowly places" (10:6).

Qohelet's distress at the inevitability of ignorance is not polemical. He does not say: wise men think that their wisdom shows them what will happen, but *I* say that the future is hidden. He says: using wisdom, I came to realize that the future is hidden. He does not criticize the wise for speaking about the future. It is not they, but the foolish, that dare to speak much about what will happen (10:14). Qohelet assumes that the wise man knows better; indeed, one who did not know better would not be wise. Likewise he does not set his knowledge against that of the wise, but takes his own wisdom, whose validity he assumes, to show the limits placed about human knowledge.

In complaining about the limits of wisdom, then, Qohelet's stance is not polemical but protective. He himself is a wise man and a sage, and he shares the sages' esteem of wisdom. Therefore he feels chagrin at the world—and thus, indirectly, at God—for denying wisdom its just rewards.

§3.3 *What good is wisdom? The pragmatics of wisdom*

Modern commentators, in emphasizing (quite rightly) Qohelet's statements about the shortcomings of wisdom, tend to push his affirmations of wisdom's benefits far to the periphery, taking them as minor concessions to wisdom's "relative" or (merely) practical value (see n. 38). Qohelet is believed to be denying the speculative, philosophical value of wisdom, conceding to it only a modest, restricted usefulness. Traditional exegesis, on the other hand (like the

epilogue itself), focused on the affirmations of wisdom, playing down Qohelet's observations of its violability by viewing them as admissions of the failure of certain types of wisdom (in particular, practical cunning) in certain circumstances. This section will compare the negative with the positive in order to achieve a more precise understanding of Qohelet's attitude and to see where his emphasis lies.

§3.31 *The benefits of wisdom*

Qohelet asserts the practical value of wisdom frequently and emphatically. He says that wisdom is superior to folly. We may call this advantage "relative", but it is certainly not a marginal one; it is as extreme as the advantage of light over darkness (2:13). For the wise man has eyes to see where he is going and can maneuver through life, while the fool stumbles about in the darkness of ignorance (2:14a). Nothing Qohelet says ever contradicts this estimation of the advantage of wisdom.

The benefits of wisdom are vast. It may bring a man wealth (7:11-12a), the showcase example being, of course, Qohelet himself, who grew rich by laboring in wisdom (2:9, 19, 21). The wise man's mind ("heart") helps him, the fool's harms him (10:2-3). The wise man's mouth gains him favor, while the fool's destroys him (10:12). Wisdom guides a man to correct and careful behavior in the presence of a ruler (8:1b). Wisdom's aid is more valuable than the wealth of a city's rulers (7:19; see comment). Wisdom can save a city (9:14f.), for it is more powerful than a warrior's might (9:16) or than weapons of war (9:18). It can bring a poor youth from prison to kingship (4:13f.). The softly spoken command of a wise man has a greater effect than a ruler's shout among fools (9:17). The rebuke of the wise improves one's mind (7:3). Wisdom even keeps its possessor alive (7:12). All these are benefits of the highest magnitude.

§3.32 *The failings of wisdom*

Among the blessings Qohelet praises wisdom for conferring, one benefit conspicuously lacking is happiness. Wisdom, at least in high degree, may in fact be a source of unhappiness and disappointment. It may also fail to provide other promised advantages.

Wisdom causes unhappiness first of all by revealing bitter realities. This is a lesson of Qohelet's experience, discovered when he set out

"to investigate and to explore with wisdom all that occurs under the heavens" (1:13). As Qohelet's wisdom increased (1:16), so did his misery (1:17-18). The cause for his misery, stated earlier, is the world's absurdity and perversity (1:14-15). The wise man, who "has his eyes in his head" (2:14), sees this and is distressed; if he pushes his wisdom too far, he may become "dumbfounded" (7:16).

Second, wisdom's efficacy is uncertain. It is too vulnerable to life's exigencies to guarantee the benefits promised by the wise men (Qohelet among them). As valuable as wisdom is (9:13-15a), people respect wealth more, often holding the wisdom of a poor man in contempt (9:16b). And if they heed it, they quickly forget the wise man himself, even if his wisdom saved their city (9:13-15). One offender (9:18), one offense (10:1), can undo much wisdom. Wisdom can indeed be expected to produce wealth, yet a fool may come into a wise man's property without effort (2:19). Though wisdom may make a man king, he too will be replaced and forgotten (4:14-16). The wise cannot secure their bread, wealth, or favor (9:11), because all efforts and talents are buffeted about by the vagaries of chance (v. 12).

Qohelet bemoans the treatment the wise receive at the hand of God and man. "How the wise man dies just like the fool!" (2:16) is a lament, and "to what purpose, then, have I become so very wise?" (2:15) is a complaint.³⁷ Qohelet feels cheated; the equal treatment of wise man and fool is a severe injustice. But this does not make Qohelet repudiate wisdom any more than the undeserved fate of the righteous (7:14) makes him repudiate righteousness. The injustices wrought upon wisdom do not obviate the qualitative difference between wisdom and folly; rather, the difference exacerbates the absurdity.

In comparing Qohelet's view of wisdom's benefits with that of other Wisdom Literature, we may consider one common formulation of Qohelet's ideas. It is often stated, by way of resolving the tension within Qohelet's evaluations of wisdom, that he grants wisdom a "relative" value, or a merely practical value (hence his "positive" evaluations), but not an absolute value (hence his "negative"

37. R. E. Murphy (1979:237) points out that 2:15-16 is not a rejection of wisdom but a complaint about its failure to deliver. The complaint is against a wrong *done to* wisdom and presumes that wisdom is intrinsically valuable.

evaluations). This is thought to distinguish him from conventional Wisdom Literature, which supposedly absolutized the value of wisdom.³⁸

We must ask what it means to ascribe a relative value to wisdom. It could mean that wisdom is valuable only by comparison with folly, but not in and of itself. But this formulation characterizes neither Qohelet nor the other sages. First, all values are relative in the sense of being determined by the relation between qualities on the same scale. The issue is where one places the qualities in question. The sages placed wisdom and folly on two extremes of the moral-intellectual scale, and Qohelet did the same. He taught that wisdom is at the opposite extreme from folly, no less than light is from darkness (7:11); wisdom is life-preserving (7:11-12). This is no begrudging admission of a small relative value, but an insistence on a vast relative value.

Alternatively, to say that wisdom has a "relative value" may mean that it is (intrinsically) useful but not invariably so; it may not succeed in all ways and in all circumstances. In this sense, Qohelet

38. See, for example, the comments of Hertzberg, Zimmerli, and Lauha on Qoh 2:13-15. A distinction of this sort seems to be the solution advocated by Loader (1979). He summarizes the "polar structure" of 1:12-2:16 as follows:

Pole: General *hokmā*

Contra-pole: Folly

Tension: Relative advantage of the general *hokmā*

Pole: General *hokmā*

Contra-pole: Occur[r]ences of life

Tension: Worthlessness of the *hokmā* (pp. 42, 35-66, *passim*)

It is not clear how "occur[r]ences of life" are the "contra-pole" of "general *hokmā*", and it does not seem that what Loader calls "tensions" are really that (perhaps he means "resolutions"). Throughout his book Loader seems to argue that Qohelet sets up tensions between opposites (and complements) of various sorts and resolves them either by rejecting one pole or by judging one pole preferable. (I am not certain that this is Loader's point. He is extremely unclear on the nature of his "poles" and "tensions".) If by the second "tension" Loader means that Qohelet regards wisdom as vulnerable to mishaps, that is certainly correct. But such vulnerability does not make wisdom ("general" or otherwise) "worthless". In any case, if wisdom has an advantage "relative to" anything, it is not worthless. (It is not clear what Loader means by "relative to" in his description of the second polar structure.)

does indeed regard wisdom as a relative value (it would be better to call it a "contingent" value). But in this same sense wisdom is a relative or contingent value in all Wisdom Literature. Though this is rarely stressed in didactic Wisdom (probably for pedagogic rather than ideological reasons), the sages recognized that success cannot be secured perfectly; wisdom cannot overcome all of life's contingencies or the unpredictable turns of God's will. (This has been shown by von Rad, 1970:131-48.) Qohelet does not differ from the conventional sages in recognizing that wisdom is powerless before the inevitability of death, just as he agrees with them in his belief that wisdom (and the attendant piety) can save one from a premature death (thus we are to interpret the promises in Qoh 7:12; Prov 11:4; etc.). But certainly Qohelet departs sharply from the other sages in emphasizing the contingency of wisdom's effectiveness. The difference is once again that Qohelet is disturbed by a fact that was generally recognized but, for the most part, taken for granted.³⁹ He will not dismiss impingements on wisdom's efficacy as temporary or localized anomalies, but interprets them as further evidence of universal injustice and absurdity.

Qohelet believes that wisdom can grasp significant truths, but these do not include an understanding of the rationale of events, for an absurd world defies such insight. He believes that wisdom has great value, but that this value is often undermined by the accidents and injustices of an absurd world.

Qohelet diverges from didactic Wisdom also in recognizing that knowledge—genuine knowledge, and not just opinion—could cause unhappiness (the authors of Job and Ps 49 knew this, but they believed that painful knowledge could be subordinated to a broader perspective). There may be some dissent in this divergence; Qohelet may be implying: wise men think that knowledge (i.e., wisdom) makes one happy, but in my superior wisdom I discovered that it can cause discomfort as well. Yet the first part of this statement is not heard in Qohelet, so although he may be consciously moving away from a common opinion, he is not *attacking* it or the people who hold to it. He is certainly not directing a polemic against wisdom or Wisdom teachings, any more than a moralist is attacking ethical

39. An exception is the author of Ps 49, who is troubled to see the wise dying like the foolish and leaving their wealth to others (vv. 11f.), though he does hint obscurely at a solution (v. 16).

philosophy by recognizing that moral people often know disappointment and failure, and that they may even be especially sensitive to the pain of human suffering. Qohelet knows that wisdom is vulnerable, and he emphasizes this more than most sages, but he does not treasure wisdom less for recognizing—and complaining about—its vulnerability.

§3.4 *The wisdom imperative*

Wisdom, Qohelet believes, is to be pursued for its own sake, apart from any utilitarian motivations. It is, in fact, sometimes the opposite of useful, but its value, whatever its failings, is fundamental. This valuation of wisdom is not so much a teaching, expressed in observations or words of counsel, as an attitude, an unspoken ethic, manifest more in what Qohelet does than in what he says about wisdom. On the deepest level, Qohelet feels it imperative to pursue the truth.

The wisdom imperative makes itself felt even (and perhaps especially) when Qohelet is not praising wisdom. It comes to expression when he explains that people imagine an event to be new only because they forget the past (1:11). He is certainly not saying this with a sigh of relief. This verse is part of a gloomy passage whose tone of weary resignation is sounded by 1:3 and 8. Qohelet is annoyed at people's unawareness of reality. Underlying this annoyance is a feeling that they *should* be aware of the fact that there is nothing new under the sun, although that truth is vexing and not particularly useful. The praise of wisdom in 2:13-14 may also reveal this attitude: the wise man's seeing and walking in light may signify not only that he manages better in life, but that he alone sees reality. If so, the verse does not praise wisdom for its practical utility so much as for its grasp on truths, including unpleasant ones such as Qohelet rakes up in this very unit—the absurdity of toil and the leveling of the wise and the foolish by death.⁴⁰ Qohelet believes that it is better to live with open eyes, whatever one may see.

Qohelet again reveals the value he places on knowledge for its own sake when he advises the reader to pursue life's activities, because

40. Thus Plumptre interprets 2:13-14: "A man is conscious of being more truly man when he looks before and after, and knows how to observe". Plumptre compares the *Iliad*, xvii 647: "And if our fate be death, give light, and let us die" (similarly Barton).

“there is no activity or calculation or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are headed” (9:10). You should embrace these things while they are still possible, even if the effort is futile and the knowledge oppressive. The intrinsic value of knowledge gives the living, however unhappy, at least one advantage over the dead: “the living know that they will die”—a most painful awareness—“while the dead know nothing” (9:5). The living should keep this disturbing truth ever in mind (7:2); thus the thoughts of the wise man dwell in the house of mourning (7:4). Qohelet does not tell us just what “good” this will do. Some truths have slipped through the barriers God placed before human knowledge. The fact of death is one, and it should not be avoided.

More fundamentally, we may ask to what end Qohelet reports the maddening inequities and absurdities he sees in life. Why does he tell us of the oppression and the callousness he observed, or of the unfair treatment of the wicked and righteous at death, or of the righteous dying young? Or, for that matter, why does he harp on the absurdity of life itself? He proposes no remedies for these inequities. He recommends the balm of pleasure to soothe the observer, but if soothing was his main concern, why rake up the disturbing facts in the first place? Qohelet reports the injustices he sees because he feels that the reader *should* know these truths.

Once, to be sure, Qohelet seems to advocate a blurring of consciousness as a way of dulling the pain of awareness. In 5:19 (and only there), he explains why pleasure is useful. A person allowed to steep himself in pleasure “will not much call to mind the days of his life, since God is keeping him occupied with his heart’s pleasures”. Pleasure is an anodyne for the pain of consciousness, but it has not worked for Qohelet, who, by persisting in his search for knowledge, shows that he considers it more important to achieve wisdom than to eliminate the attendant discomfort. In any case, the remark in 5:19 is contradicted by the emphatic teaching in 7:2-4, that it is better to go to a house of mourning, so as to keep death in mind, than to go to a place of festivity (*beyt mišteh*, also called *beyt šimḥah*).

In 7:16 Qohelet warns us against going so far in wisdom as to be dumbfounded. The wisdom he is cautioning about here, the wisdom that might dumbfound you, can only be the honest, unflinching exercise of reason, the willingness to face facts such as he reports in 7:15, namely that there are just people who die young and wicked

people who live long. To see such inequities is *le'hitḥakkem yoter*, "to become exceedingly wise". But this advice (like his warning against great righteousness) should not be isolated and elevated to the status of a fundamental principle. Although he here warns of the consequences of pushing too hard for wisdom, he himself pursues just this sort of wisdom throughout the book, showing that he values wisdom even while aware of the price it exacts.

The compulsion for knowledge that Qohelet recognizes in himself, he considers divinely imposed upon him and upon mankind generally. He describes his exploration of "all that occurs under the heavens" as "an unfortunate business that God has given people to busy themselves with" (1:13b). God has put "toil" (reading *he'amal*) in man's heart, this toil being the hopeless task of seeking to "apprehend [*maša*'] . . . that which God has brought to pass" (3:11). Once implanted, however, that compulsion becomes part of human volition, so Qohelet can say that he took it upon himself to investigate all that happens in life (1:13a).

For Qohelet, wisdom means lucidity, the virtue Camus calls *clairvoyance*. Man's knowledge, as Qohelet sees it, is hemmed in by a jealous deity, and man's achievements are undermined by God's inexplicable, apparently arbitrary, rule. But through wisdom man may rise above his helplessness, look at the world and at God from a certain distance, and judge both. Yet this lucidity is not for Qohelet (as it is for Camus's hero of the absurd) an act of rebellion, at least not deliberate rebellion. Qohelet neither challenges God nor hopes for change. Human freedom resides not in action but in wisdom: the observation of life by independent human reason. Qohelet, the archetypal wise man, is a Sisyphus, ever condemned to pushing a rock to the top of a mountain knowing that it will immediately roll back down. For Camus, the moment of lucidity at the top of the mountain, before the rock rolls back, constitutes Sisyphus's triumph over his fate; indeed, in this lucidity, Sisyphus the rebel triumphs over the gods. For Qohelet, on the other hand, an authentic life is not a rebellion, nor is lucidity man's triumph over divinity (it may, on the contrary, be another divine affliction). Yet Qohelet too affirms lucidity apart from its practical benefits. By relentlessly pursuing a truth that does him no "good" to discover, subordinating every other consideration to this "unfortunate business" (1:13), Qohelet shows that he cherishes wisdom, wherever it leads, above the