“Death is Nothing to Us”

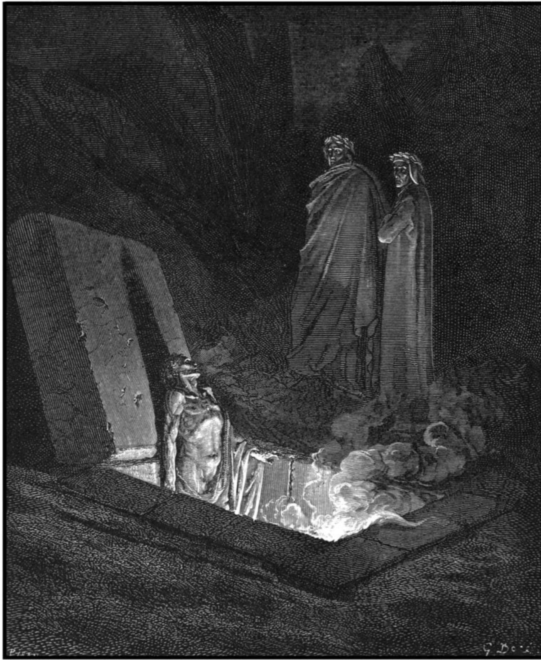
Death is inevitable. What it entails is largely unknown. Some believe that it permanently ends an individual’s existence; others that it simply provides a transition to another form of life. Most people fear it, but some consider it with equanimity. Among the latter are the followers of Epicurus, who claimed

Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us.
(Epicurus, reported by Diogenes Laertius, translated by Inwood and Gerson, 1997, p 32; another translation is by Yonge, 1983, p. 474).

Epicurus proposed
that human beings are made of complex compounds of atoms. At death these
compounds dissolve, releasing the atoms to form other things. The body decays
and the soul evaporates. Once we are dead, we are no more. We cannot feel what
it is like to be dead. And the dead certainly cannot experience pain. Death should
therefore not be feared.

Epicureanism was
popular during the Roman period. A common Latin epitaph summarized the life of
the Epicurean as a brief interlude between the nothingness preceding birth and
the nothingness following death:

> *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*
> (I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care).



Gustav Doré’s illustration (1857) of Dante’s Sixth Circle.

As Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Epicureanism faded into obscurity. Dante placed the Epicureans in the Sixth Circle of his *Inferno* (1320, Canto X). Those who did not believe in the afterlife were forced to spend eternity in graves that were completely closed just as in life their tenants’ obstinacy kept them from the truth. The graves were filled with fired graves just as in life the Epicureans were consumed by their heresy.

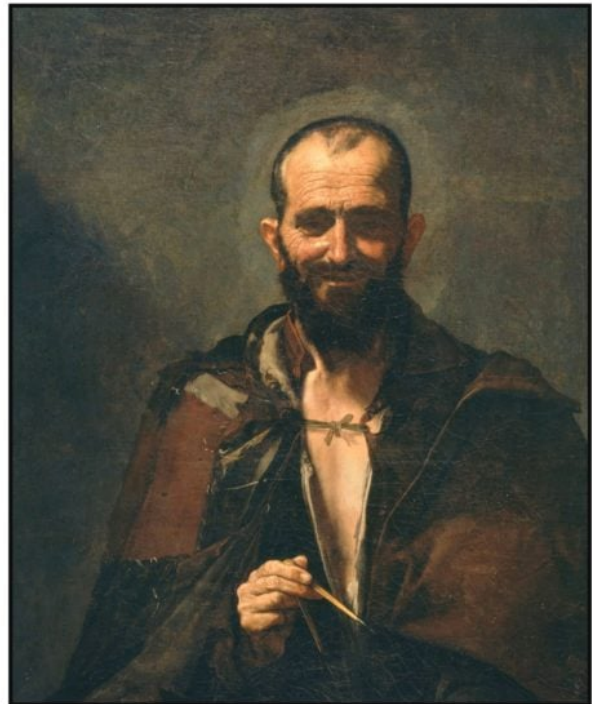
As the Western world
moved away from the dogmatism of the Middle Ages, the idea that man was not immortal
was once again considered. Those who now reject any belief in an afterlife sometimes
adopt the bravado of the Epicurean epitaph. But more often than not they care
deeply about death as the defining event in a life. It is not nothing.

Atoms and the Void

The philosophy of
Epicurus derives from the atomism of Democritus (460-370 BCE).

Democritus was
born and lived in Abdera, a city in Northern Greece, at about the same time as
Socrates was active in Athens. Democritus maintained that everything was made
of tiny indestructible atoms (Berryman, 2016). He claimed to have learned this
from Leucippus, about whom little is known, and who may be more mythical than
real.

Democritus was called the "laughing philosopher" to distinguish him from Heraclitus (535-475 BCE), the "crying philosopher," who believed that nothing was indestructible and that everything is forever changing. The cheerful and the tearful.



Jusepe de Ribera's imagined portraits of Heraclitus (1615) and of Democritus (1630), both now in the Prado Museum

Of the many
writings of Democritus, we now have only fragments, the most famous of which

is

By convention sweet is sweet, bitter is bitter, hot is hot, cold is cold, color is color; but in truth there are only atoms and the void (translation by Will Durant, 1939, p 393).

The concepts of
the atom and the void were derived from a combination of observation and logic.
Everyone perceives that the world contains objects and that these objects move:
matter and motion. Objects can be broken down into smaller pieces, and these
pieces can themselves be broken down into even tinier particles. But this
breaking down can only proceed so far, or all objects would by now have been
broken down to nothing. There must therefore be some indivisible particle
beyond which matter cannot be further broken. These atoms (from the Greek *atomos*,
uncuttable) are so tiny that they are cannot be seen by the eye: invisible and indivisible.
The void is necessary to explain how things move. How could something change
its location unless there were empty space for it to move into?

Atoms are infinite
in number but of a finite number of types. Moving atoms collide with one
another and join to form compounds. These compounds interact with each other to
create all that exists in the world. Combining atoms is like forming words with
the letters of the alphabet. From a few letters come a myriad words.

Though atoms are eternal, the compounds that they form are transient. Rock erodes to sand, which under pressure becomes stone again. Water evaporates and then condenses. Living things develop, become mature and then die. At death, the components of the body break apart, releasing its atoms for making other compounds.

> Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
> Might stop a hole to keep the wind away (*Hamlet*, V:1)

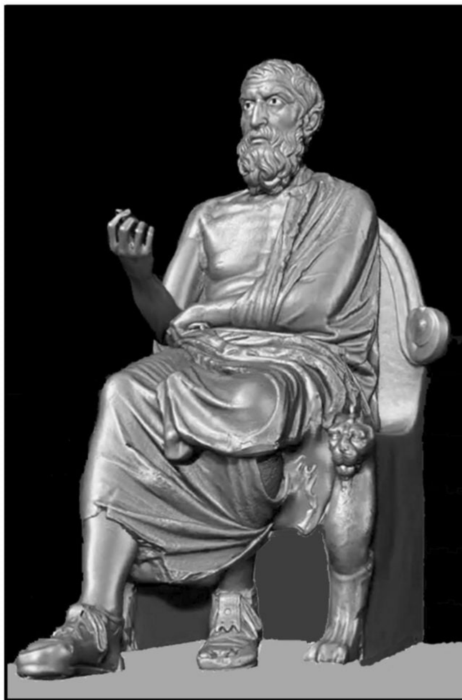
The soul is composed of atoms just like everything else. The atoms of the soul are extremely fine, perhaps similar to the atoms of fire. They permeate the body, giving it a conscious spirit. When the body dies, the atoms of the soul dissolve back into the void like all the other atoms of the body. The soul does not persist beyond death. There is no afterlife. We are transient like everything else, mortal like all other living things.

Democritus' absolute materialism differed from the philosophy of Plato, who proposed the primacy of ideas. Indeed, Plato was so upset with his rival's teachings that he reportedly urged that all the books of Democritus should be burned (Diogenes Laertius, p 393). So much for freedom of thought in a republic governed by philosophers.

The Garden of Epicurus

The ideas of Democritus were extended by Epicurus (341-270 BCE), who was

born on the Greek
island of Samos off the west coast of Turkey. In 306 BCE Epicurus established a
school of philosophy in Athens that met in a garden below the Acropolis (Jones,
1989; Konstan, 2018; O'Keefe, 2010; Wilson, 2015).



Epicurus (a digital reconstruction by Bernard Frischer that combines a head from Naples with a body from Florence)

He wrote extensively though none of his books survived the anti-heretical campaigns of the Christian Church. Most of what we know about Epicurus is preserved in the biography written by Diogenes Laertius (3rd Century CE), which includes some of the letters written by the philosopher to his colleagues, and a listing of his Principle Doctrines (*Kyriai Doxai*). The philosophy of Epicurus was popular in the Roman Empire, and several statues of Epicurus have survived in Roman copies (see right).

Among the lost books
of Epicurus was the *Kanon* (Rule, Criterion) which discussed how true knowledge
could be obtained. Epicurus proposed that sensation is the

most dependable
criterion of truth – the world is what we perceive. Ideas derive from rather
than precede the analysis of sensory information. This seems to have differed
from the ideas of Democritus, who believed that our perceptions were as much
convention as reality.

In the lost *Peri
Physis* (On Nature) Epicurus presented and extended the atomism of
Democritus. He acknowledged that there are only atoms and the void. The body
and the soul are made of atoms that fall apart when the corporeal body dies and
the conscious soul ceases. We do not live forever.

Epicurus appears to have deviated from the fixed determinism of Democritus byproposing the idea of the *clinamen* (swerve). Atoms falling through the void would never collide to form compounds unless some atoms at some time swerved from their predetermined path. Democritus also suggested that this unpredictable random movement was the basis of our free will, when we act according to what is desired of the future rather than what has been ordained by the past. In recent years similar ideas based on the uncertain behavior of atoms in the brain have been used to explain free will. Unfortunately, these ideas have little explanatory value. My actions are no more free when determined by random events in the present than when determined by the fixed events of the past.

Free will was
important to Epicurus because he wished us to choose the good life. This depended
on maximizing our happiness. Although maligned by Christian polemicists as a decadent
libertine, Epicurus actually practiced an ascetic hedonism. He

valued most the
simple sensory pleasures of his garden and the friendship of his colleagues. He
eschewed any participation in politics as causing too much anxiety. His goal
was *ataraxia* (tranquility, peace of mind, from *a-* not and *tarasso*,
disturb).

Although he was
described as an atheist, Epicurus thought that the gods were real because our
ideas of them were just too clear to be ignored. However, he argued that the
gods were not in any way concerned with human affairs. Like true Epicurean, the
gods enjoy themselves and refuse to be bothered by human politics.

Epicurus proposed
that we should not be frightened of death. Since our consciousness ceases when
we die, death is not painful. Since the gods are not concerned with human
beings, they have not provided an afterlife of punishment for all that we have
done wrong. If we attain a life of *ataraxia*, it matters not how long we
live (Lesses, 2002; Mitsis, 2002). Death is the natural and inevitable end to
life. The following is from the *Letter to Monoeceus*:

Get used to
believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in
sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a
correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us

> makes the mortality
> of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time to life but by
> removing the longing for immortality. For there is nothing fearful in life for
> one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the absence of life. Thus,
> he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when
> present but because it is painful when it is still to come. For that which
> while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when merely
> anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us;
> since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then
> we do not exist. (Inwood & Gerson, 1997, p 29)

Epicurus practiced
what he preached. He died from an attack of kidney stones. Despite severe and
prolonged pain, he maintained his *ataraxia*. His cheerfulness of mind and
his memory of philosophy counterbalanced his afflictions.

De Rerum Natura

In about 50 BCE
Titus Lucretius Carus published a long Latin poem about the *Nature of Things.*
The poem probably derives from the *Peri Physis* of Epicurus. Little is
known about the poet. In his *Chronicon* (circa 380 CE), written some 400
years later, Saint Jerome included an entry for the year 94 BCE:

Titus Lucretius,
poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he had written, in
the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero revised, he killed
himself by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age. (translation by
Santayana, 1910, p 19)

Saint Jerome was a
devout Christian, completely opposed to the beliefs of Epicurus, who claimed
that the gods had nothing to do with human life, and who denied the immortality
of the soul. Most critics feel that Jerome was simply trying to belittle the
poet and to cast his work as nonsense: be not seduced by Epicureanism, since madness
and suicide follow from such heresies (e.g., Sedley, 2018, and Smith, 1992 in
his introduction to the Loeb edition of *De Rerum Natura*). However, the
biography may contain some threads of truth:

The love-philtre in this report sounds apocryphal; and the story of the madness and suicide attributes too edifying an end to an atheist and Epicurean not to be suspected. If anything lends colour to the story it is a certain consonance which we may feel between its tragic incidents and the genius of the poet as revealed in his work, where we find a strange scorn of love, a strange vehemence, and a high melancholy. It is by no means incredible that the author of such a poem should have been at some time the slave of a pathological passion, that his vehemence and inspiration should have passed into mania, and that he should have taken his own life. (Santayana, 1910, pp 19-20).

De Rerum

Natura is like no other
poem: a scientific treatise expressed in verse. The poetry is characterized by
brilliant language and intense imagery. Most impressive is the ongoing energy
of the argument as Lucretius moves from atoms to death, from the soul to the
cosmos, from the weather to the plague.

The poem begins
with a beautiful invocation of Venus as the mother of Aeneas, founder of Rome,
as the patron of all the creative forces in the world, and as the
personification of Epicurean pleasure:

> Life-stirring Venus, Mother of Aeneas and of Rome,
> Pleasure of men and gods, you make all things beneath the dome
> Of sliding constellations teem, you throng the fruited earth
> And the ship-freighted sea – for every species comes to birth
> Conceived through you, and rises forth and gazes on the light.
> The winds flee from you, Goddess, your arrival puts to flight
> The clouds of heaven. For you, the crafty earth contrives sweet flowers,
> For you, the oceans laugh, the skies grow peaceful after showers,
> Awash with light. (I: 1-10 Stalling translation)

On the right is the first page of a 1483 manuscript copy of the poem made for Pope Sixtus IV by Girolamo di Matteo de Tauris. The Latin text begins

Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas,
Alma Venus, caeli subter labentia signa
Quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis

The beginning of
the poem immediately questions the Epicurean view that the gods are not
involved with the human world. Why should Lucretius invoke Venus as a partner
in his poetry? The gods are a problem for Epicureanism: if they are real, they
must be made of atoms and, if so, they cannot be immortal; yet, if they are
mortal, they are not gods. Lucretius probably considered the gods more as
metaphors than as real beings. Later in the poem (II: 646-660)

he remarks that it
is customary to call the sea Neptune, the corn Ceres and the wine Bacchus
without actually meaning that these things are divine.

Lucretius quickly indicates that superstitious belief in the gods can lead to terrible wrongs by recounting the story of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon, who was sacrificed at Aulis to propitiate the anger of the goddess Artemis, and obtain fair winds to send the Greek ships to Troy. The illustration at the left shows a fresco in the House of Tragic Poet in Pompeii from about the same time as Lucretius. Iphigenia is carried by Achilles and Ulysses to be sacrificed by Calchas the priest, while her father on the left refuses to observe her death. Above, the goddess Artemis arranges for a stag to be substituted for Iphigenia, who will be spirited away. However, this will be done without any of the Greeks realizing that Iphigenia was not actually sacrificed. Human sacrifice is also part of the Hebrew Bible, which recounts the attempted sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis 22* and the actual sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter in *Judges 11*. As Lucretius clearly states, Iphigenia was

> An innocent girl betrayed to a sort of incest
> To be struck down by the piety of her father

> Who hoped in that way to get a good start for his fleet.
> That is the sort of horror religion produces.
> (I: 98-101, Sisson translation).

De Rerum Natura recounts the principles of atomism espoused by Epicurus. Lucretius describes the *clinamen* or swerve, and notes its importance for free will. We are not completely determined by our past:

> Again, if all motion is always one long chain, and new motion arises out of the old in order in-variable, and if the first-beginnings do not make by swerving a beginning of motion such as to break the decrees of fate, that cause may not follow cause from infinity, whence comes this free will in living creatures all over the earth, whence I say is this will wrested from the fates by which we proceed whither pleasure leads each, swerving also our motions not at fixed times and fixed places, but just where our mind has taken us? (II: 252-260, Rouse translation).

Lucretius considers death in many ways. The following passage provides the principal Epicurean argument:

> So death is nothing, and matters nothing to us
> Once it is clear that the mind is mortal stuff.
> …
> So when we are dead and when our body and soul
> Which together make us one, have come apart,
> Nothing can happen to us, we shall not be there,
> Nothing whatever will have the power to move us,
> Not even if earth and sea got mixed into one.
> (III: 830-1, 838-842, Sisson translation)

Lucretius also

adds the analogy of the mirror to the Epicurean comparison of the time before
birth to the time after death. If we are not concerned with what occurred
before we are born, why should we be afraid of its mirror-image: the time after
we have died and once again do not exist:

> Now look back: all the time that ever existed
> Before we were born, was nothing at all to us.
> It is a mirror which nature holds up for us
> To show us what it will be like after our death.
> Is it very horrible? Is there anything sad in it?
> Is it any different from sleep? It is more untroubled.
> (III: 972-977, Sisson translation)

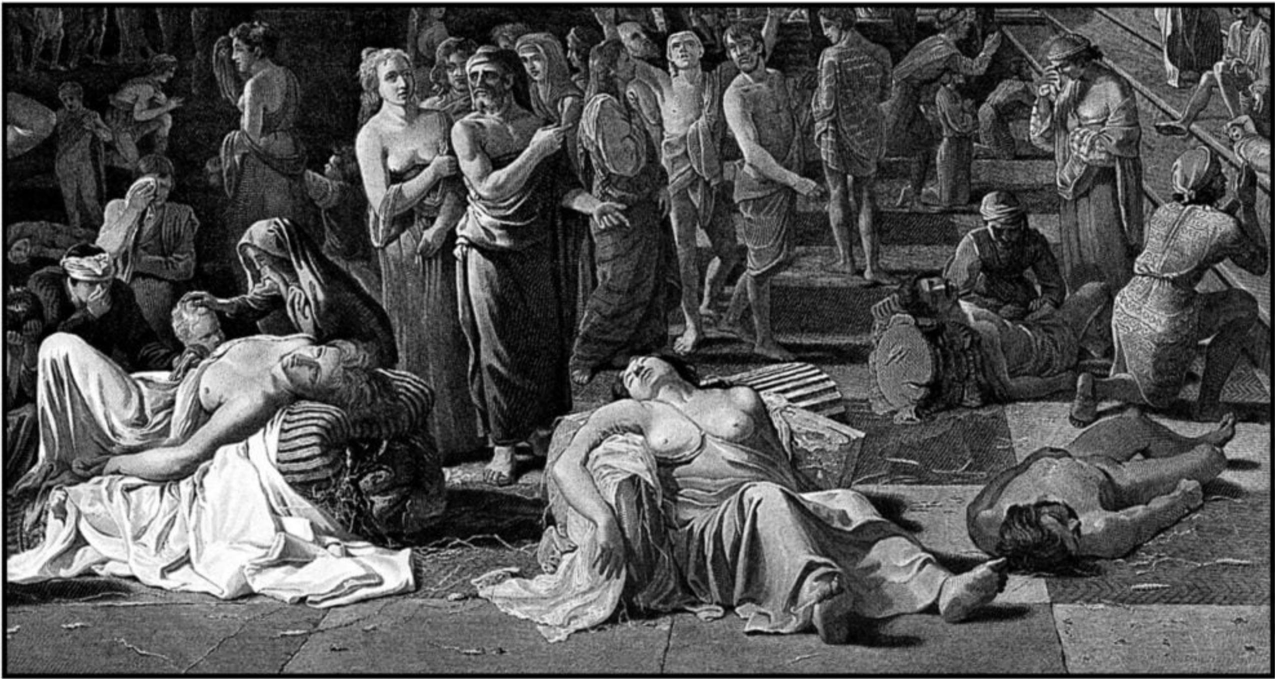
The poem goes on
to consider many natural phenomena. Some of the explanations that Lucretius
offers are good, and some are similar to those proposed in modern science.
However, most of the explanations are wrong. Science and poetry are not well
suited: poetry attempts to say things that will last forever, whereas science is
always changing.

At the end of the
VI Book of *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius vividly describes the great Plague
of Athens that began in 430 BCE during the Peloponnesian War. There is great
debate about the nature of the plague, which was perhaps caused by an
Ebola-like hemorrhagic fever.

> The symptom first to strike was fiery fever in the head,

And both eyes, burning hectic bright, were all shot through with red.
The throat as well would sweat with blood, all black within. And stung
With sores, the pathway of the voice would clog and choke. The tongue,
Interpreter of the mind, oozed pus, and, made limp with the smart,
Was too heavy to move, and rough. Thence the disease would start,
Passing the gullet, to fill the chest, and flood the heavy heart
Of the afflicted, and then, indeed, all of the gates of Life
Began to give. From the open mouth, there would exhale a rife
Stink, like the stench of rank unburied corpses left to rot.
And then all of the powers of the mind and body, brought
To the very brink of doom, began to flicker. Mental strain
Ever danced attendance on intolerable pain;
Pleas mingled with moans. Ceaseless retching, lasting day
And night, was ever causing seizure and cramp, and wasting away
The strength of men already racked with suffering and worn out.
(VI: 1145-1161, Stallings translation)

Death was everywhere. Below is a detail of an engraving (from the Wellcome Library) from a 1654 painting by Michael Sweerts, once thought to represent the plague of Athens:



The Plague of Athens

The prevalence of
death tore at the moral fabric of the city:

> The present grief was overwhelming. No one any more
> Observed the rites of burial they had observed before,
> For the whole populace was thrown in disarray and cowed.
> Each mourner buried his dead just as the time and means allowed.
> Squalid Poverty and Sudden Disaster would conspire
> To drive men on to desperate deeds – so they'd place on a pyre
> Constructed by another their own loved-ones, and set fire
> To it with wails and lamentation. And often they would shed
> Much blood in the struggle rather than desert their dead.
> (VI: 1278-1286, Stallings translation)

De Rerum
Natura ends here. Most
critics feel that Lucretius died before he could finish his poem, and that he
probably intended to explain how philosophy could help one

face the horrors of
such a plague with equanimity. But he did not. And one wonders if he could not.

Stoicism

At the time of
Epicurus, Athens was home to several other schools of philosophy. The most
important of these were the Skeptics who refused to believe in anything, and
the Stoics who differed from the Epicureans mainly in their promotions of
virtue rather than pleasure as the goal of human life (Baltzly, 2019; Long, 1986).
The Stoics proposed that the universe proceeded according to its own *Logos*, and
that human benefit was not necessarily part of this determined path. One had to
accept one's fate and do the best that one could. The Stoical idea of the *Logos*
goes back to Heraclitus. Indeed, Stoics and Epicureans can trace their
emotional origins to tearful Heraclitus and cheerful Democritus.

Marcus Aurelius

The Stoics also differed from the Epicureans in their approach to death. While the Epicureans tried to ignore death, the Stoics paid it constant attention. Death brings one's life to an end, and therefore settles the sum of one's virtues and achievements. Life should therefore be lived as if death were imminent. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the 175 CE statue of whom is illustrated on the left, voiced these Stoical precepts in his *Meditations*:

Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice; and to give thy self relief from all other thoughts. And thou wilt give thyself relief, if thou doest every act of thy life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy, and self-love, and discontent with the portion which has been given to thee.

Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good

(Marcus Aurelius, 180 CE, II: 5 and III: 17, translation by Long)

Stoicism became more popular with the Romans than Epicureanism. And Stoicism fitted more easily to the doctrines of Christianity, which accepted and transformed the Stoic idea of *Logos*, making Christ its personification.

Epicurus and Modernity

The works of Democritus and Epicurus did not survive beyond Roman times. However, a manuscript of *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius was diligently copied and re-copied by Christian monks, and finally discovered in a German monastery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini (Greenblatt, 2011). The first printed publication of *De Rerum Natura* was in 1473.

The rediscovered book brought the atomism of Democritus and Epicurus to the attention of the philosophers and scientists of Europe. Pierre Gassendi (1592-1665) in France and Robert Boyle (1627-1691) in England were attracted to the explanatory power of atoms and developed a "corpuscular philosophy" (Wilson, 2008). They tried but failed to reconcile this atomism with Christian beliefs in the immortal soul and a beneficent God.

Motion of Gas Molecules

As science progressed, corpuscular philosophy developed into modern chemistry. Atoms of different types combine to form

molecules of various chemical compounds. The pressure of a gas depends on the force exerted by the continual movement of its molecules. This is illustrated on the right, in which five of the molecules are colored red to make their motion easier to follow. The molecules move like the motes of dust in the sunlight that were described in *De Rerum Natura* (Book II:62-79). Science now knows that atoms are not indivisible, but modern science owes much to Lucretius.

As the Enlightenment progressed, some thinkers decided to reject God and immortality and to accept Epicurus' views of death. Of these perhaps the most famous is David Hume (1711-1776) who, when dying of cancer, was interviewed by James Boswell (1740-1795). Boswell was disconcerted by Hume's refusal to believe in the afterlife, and by his cheerfulness in the face of death (Miller, 1995):

> I asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius observes. (Boswell, 1776).

Fear of Death

Despite the cheerfulness with which Epicurus and Hume faced death, Epicurean logic fails to convince most human beings not to fear death. Since death before maturity prevents us from reproducing, evolution must clearly have given preference to those whose fear of death made them avoid potentially fatal situations.

Epicurus promoted
pleasure as the goal of life, but had difficulty handling its relation to time.
Common sense definitely presumes that pleasure is greater when it lasts longer.
A death that shortens a potentially pleasurable life should therefore be
feared. Epicurus proposed that *ataraxia* is the same regardless of the
duration, but his argument is unconvincing:

> Epicurus holds that pleasure is the supreme good, and yet claims that there is no greater pleasure to be had in an infinite period than in a brief and limited one. Now one who regards good as entirely a matter of virtue is entitled to say that one has a completely happy life when completely virtuous. Here it is denied that time adds anything to the supreme good. But if one believes that the happy life is constituted by pleasure, then one cannot consistently maintain that pleasure does not increase with duration, or else the same will apply to pain. Or are we to say that the longer one is in pain the more miserable one is, but deny that duration has any bearing on the desirability of pleasure. (Cicero, 45 BCE, II: 88)

Nagel (1990) makes
a similar point:

> Observed from without, human beings obviously have a natural lifespan and cannot live much longer than a hundred years. A man's sense of his own experience, on the other hand, does not embody this idea of a natural limit. His existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future, containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so tolerable in the past. Having been gratuitously introduced to the world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he finds himself the subject of a life, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future. Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt

cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods. Normality seems to have nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer.

Most people feel
that death comes before their lives have been properly completed. Some things
have not yet been experienced, others have not yet been atoned for; their
achievement is not enough, their legacy not sufficient. As Cicero (44 BCE)
remarked "No one is so old that he does not expect to live a year longer."

The Makropulos Case

How much longer should
one then wish to live? Forever may be as frightening as tomorrow. This idea was
considered in an important paper by Bernard Williams (1973) that took as its
point of origin a play by Karel Capek that premiered in Prague in 1922 – *The
Makropulos Case.* Leos Janacek's operatic version of the play was produced
in Brno in 1925.

In the play Emilia
Marty, a beautiful and successful opera singer, turns out to be Elina
Makropulos, a young Greek woman who was given an elixir of longevity by her
physician-father in 1601. Having lived over 300 years without aging she has
returned to Prague to find the elixir's formula so that she can further prolong
her youth. The following photograph from the San Francisco

Opera (2016) shows
Nadja Michael in the role of Emilia in the first act of the opera (which takes
place in a law office):

In the end Emilia
decides that she does not want to live longer. She explains to the others:

> Oh, life should not last so long!
> If you only realized how easy life is for you!
> You are so close to everything!
> For you, everything makes sense!
> For you, everything has value!
> – for the trivial chance reason
> that you are going to die soon.
> … It's all in vain
> whether you sing or keep silent –
> no pleasure in being good
> no pleasure in being bad.
> No pleasure on earth,

> No pleasure in heaven.
> And one comes to learn
> that the soul has died inside one.
> (Janacek version)

Williams (1973) agrees
with Emilia. After a while immortality will become tedious. Human desires are
designed for shorter periods. Evolution has made us long to live longer. Yet
the usual span of human life gives us about the right amount of time to
experience what we can, and to accomplish what we should.

Aubade

Another aspect of
death not considered in Epicurean philosophy is that it is the end of the
"person." Each individual spends a lifetime developing a collection of
experiences and achievements, out of which are derived a set of values and an
accumulated knowledge. Warren (2004, chapter 4) considers these as the personal
"narrative." At death the story ends. The person vanishes. Some traces will be
preserved in the memories of others but these are but faint copies of the
original.

This is the reason
why Lucretius' analogy of the mirror does not work. We are not concerned with
the time before we were born because we did not exist then. However, this is
not the mirror image of the time after our death when we again do not exist.

Because in the meantime we have existed. Time only goes one way.

Personal annihilation is perhaps the most frightening part of death. On December 23, 1977, Philip Larkin published a poem about death in the *Times Literary Supplement*. (The full text is available at this link). In a letter to a friend he called it "a real infusion of Christmas cheer" (Larkin, Burnett, 2012, p 495). Fletcher (2007) provides some discussion of the poem and its relation to one of John Betjeman's. An aubade is typically the dawn song of a lover as he leaves his mistress. Larkin's poem is a death song about leaving his life. He is intensely afraid:

> The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
> —The good not done, the love not given, time
> Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because
> An only life can take so long to climb
> Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
> But at the total emptiness for ever,
> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

He laments the
inability of religious faith or philosophical reason to provide any comfort:

> Religion used to try,
> That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
> Created to pretend we never die,
> And specious stuff that says *No rational being*
> *Can fear a thing it will not feel,* not seeing
> That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
> No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
> Nothing to love or link with,
> The anaesthetic from which none come round.

Larkin provides us with no resolution of this fear. In the final lines of the poem he watches as the dawn breaks and people get ready for work. Phones will ring and letters will be delivered. Communication is perhaps our only comfort. The following is Larkin's recitation of the poem.

Endings

So we come to the
end of this essay on endings. Though death is not desired, it is inevitable.
Epicurus was right about there being nothing after death, but death itself is
not nothing. It marks the transition of a life from the individual
consciousness to the memory of others. Henry James noted in 1916 when his final
stroke began, "So here it is, the distinguished thing" (Edel, 1968, Callahan, 2005).

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Vanity of Vanity

> The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
> Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.
> (Ecclesiastes 2:1-2)

Thus begins *Ecclesiastes*, the most unusual book in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Unlike the rest of the Bible, this book claims that the nature of the world is neither revealed to us nor accessible to reason. The universe and its Creator pay us no particular regard. Man is not special. Heretical though these thoughts might be, *Ecclesiastes* contains some of the world's most widely quoted verses of scripture. The words of the Preacher resonate through the seasons of our lives. This post comments on several selections from the book.

Qohelet

The author of the book is called *Qohelet* (□□□□ in Hebrew). This word derives from a root meaning to "assemble" or "bring people together." The name suggests a sage who teaches a group of disciples. The translators have taken it to mean someone who preaches in a church (Latin, *ecclesia*). Yet Qohelet was clearly neither priest nor preacher. He was a rich man, a master of estates and an owner of palaces. The title *Ecclesiastes* is inappropriate. As pointed out by Lessing (1998),

> thus do the living springs of knowledge, of wisdom, become captured by institutions, and by churches of various kinds.

According to the first line of the book, its author was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. However, although Qohelet may have been a descendant of David, linguistic evidence (reviewed in Bundvad, 2015, pp 5-9) indicates that he wrote in the 3rd century BCE during the Hellenistic period (323-63 BCE), some seven hundred years after Solomon. Other scholars have suggested that the author may have written several centuries earlier during the Persian period (539-323 BCE), but this would still be long after Solomon (10th Century BCE).

The first line of the book may have been added by a later editor who wished this scripture to partake of Solomon's fame.

More likely, it is original, indicating that *Ecclesiastes* is a fictional testament: an imagined description of what Solomon might have thought (see discussion in Batholomew, 2009, pp 43-54). However, the book is ambiguous in terms of its narration. As the book progresses Qohelet becomes clearly distinguished from Solomon. And even Qohelet vacillates between two minds: that of a Jewish believer and that of a Greek philosopher (Bartholomew, 2009, p. 78).

Ben Shahn (1971) imagines Qohelet as a simple teacher. Though once rich and powerful, his thoughts have led him to withdraw from high society. Although dismayed that he has not been able to understand its meaning, he still enjoys the life he has been granted.

Vanity

Qohelet’s summary of his philosophy is that “All is vanity.” Shahn (1971) presents the beginning of the second verse in calligraphy:

The full verse and its transliteration follows. Note that the Hebrew goes from right to left whereas the transliteration goes from left to right (As Qohelet later says, “The wind goeth toward the south and turneth about unto the north”):

[illegible]

havel havalim amar kohelet, havel havalim hakkol havel.

The sound of the Hebrew follows (just in case you wish to denounce the world’s latest frivolity out loud):

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-1-2.mp3

The key Hebrew word is *havel* ([illegible]). This

> indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air (Alter, 2010, p 340)

The word can be directly translated as “vapor” or “breath.” Alter translates *havel havelim* as “mere breath.” It denotes something without material substance or temporal persistence. Many translators have characterized it in abstract terms: meaningless, transient, empty, useless, absurd, futile, enigmatic, illusory.

The word *havel* has the same letters as the name of Abel, the second son of Adam, slain by his brother Cain. Qohelet was likely aware of this association (Bundvad, 2015, pp 79-80). Abel was the first man to die. His life was fleeting and uncertain, his death unjust, his person only faintly remembered.

The King James Version of the Bible (1611) translates *havel* as “vanity.” This word comes from the Latin *vanus* meaning empty. The translators used “vanity” to denote a lack of meaning, value or purpose. The secondary, now more common, meaning for the word – self-admiration, excessive pride (the opposite of humility) – may have come about as a particular example of worthless activity.

At the time of the King James Version, the term *vanitas* was also used to denote a type of painting became popular in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries. The example below is by Pieter Claesz (1628). These paintings arrange objects to show the transience of life, the limits of understanding and the inevitability of death. Despite their meaning, the paintings are imbued with sensual beauty:

> The appeal of the *vanitas* painting tradition lies in its successful capture of the subtle balance between transient and joyful modes of living, so vociferously endorsed by Qoheleth. (Christianson, 2007, p 122).

Benefit

After introducing himself and summarizing his message, Qohelet poses the main question of the book:

> What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes, 1:3)

The word translated as “profit” is *yitron* (□□□□□). This word is only found in the Bible in *Ecclesiastes*. Perhaps “benefit” might be a better translation (Bartholomew, 2009, pp 107-108). The “labour” involves both physical and mental work. The idea is how best we should lead our lives.

The answer begins with the glorious poem

> One generation passeth away,
> and another generation cometh:
> but the earth abideth for ever.
>
> The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down,
> and hasteth to his place where he arose.
>
> The wind goeth toward the south,
> and turneth about unto the north;
> it whirleth about continually,
> and the wind returneth again

according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full;
unto the place from whence the rivers come,
thither they return again.

All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it:
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;
and that which is done is that which shall be done:
and there is no new thing under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 1: 3-9).

The poetry is beautiful but there is no profit in it. Human beings come and go. The human mind cannot gain sufficient knowledge of the world to understand its workings or to change it in any significant way. The world is as frustrating as it is beautiful. The more one knows, the more one is convinced of one's transience:

> For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1: 18)

Qohelet realizes that life can nevertheless be enjoyable.

> There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2: 24)

This is the old man's version of the Andrew Marvel's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The sentiment is perhaps as old as poetry. The Roman poet Catullus in the 1st Century BCE also wrote how the sun arises after it goes down but man does not:

soles occidere et redire possunt;

nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
da mi basia mille, deinde centum

Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World* (1614) translated this as

The Sunne may set and rise
But we contrariwise
Sleepe after our short light
One everlasting night.

Raleigh does not translate the continuation of the poem wherein Catullus goes on to request a compensatory thousand kisses from his lover Lesbia.

Time

Qohelet has been considering the passage of time. The word used for time in Ecclesiastes – *eth* (□□) – generally refers to a moment of time. The other Hebrew word for time is *olam* (□□□□) which takes all of time into account and is usually translated as "for ever" (as in Ecclesiastes 1:4). In the first chapter Qohelet contrasted world time with human time.

In Chapter 3, he considers a different aspect of time. God has ensured that events occur at their appropriate time. Eternity has been arranged in its proper sequence.

To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones,
and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace,
and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Ben Shahn (1971) portrays the essence of these lines with a wheat field at harvest time:

These verses can be interpreted in two main ways. The first proposes that time has been pre-ordained to work out the purposes of God, that we cannot change these things, and that we should be resigned to what happens. Everything is for the best. The other interpretation uses these words to justify one's actions. Martin Luther quoted these verses when the time had come to speak out against the Catholic Church (Christianson, 2007, p 166). Thus are human actions divinely justified. Luther believed in predestination. He spoke out not by choice but because he had no choice: he could not do otherwise.

These verses were set to music by the folksinger Pete Seeger in the late 1950s. His lyrics directly quote the King James Version using the first verse with the addition of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" as the refrain. After "a time of peace" Seeger added "I swear it's not too late." The song became an anthem of the peace movement. The following is an excerpt:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/seeger-second-half.mp3

Qohelet recognizes the beauty of God's time. Yet he is frustrated that he can never understand it:

> I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.
> That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.
> (Ecclesiastes 3: 14-15)

This idea of time as divinely ordered but incomprehensible to the human mind pervades T. S. Eliots' *Burnt Norton* (1935) which begins:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Qohelet goes on to state that since we cannot understand we are no different from other animals. We live, we die.

> For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.
> All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.
> (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)

These statements go against all previous Jewish teachings. Qohelet's book

> amounts to a denial of divine revelation, and of the belief that man was created as an almost divine being, to care for and exercise dominion over the other creatures and all the works of God's hands. … In the final analysis man is like the animals rather than superior to them (Scott, 1965, p. 205)

Johannes Brahms was devastated when his friend Clara Schumann suffered a stroke in 1895 and was close to death. During this time, he composed his *Four Serious Songs Opus 121*. The first song is uses Luther's translation of *Ecclesiastes* 3: 19-22. The following is the beginning (up to *wird wieder zu Staub* "turn to dust again") as sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/brahms-4-serious-songs-1-fischer-dieskau.mp3

> Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh; wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch; und haben alle einerlei Odem;und der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn das Vieh: denn es ist alles eitel.
> Es fährt alles an einen Ort; es ist alles von Staub gemacht, und wird wieder zu Staub.

This first song is desolate – we die like beasts, our life is empty, we are made of dust. The later songs in the series progress from deep sadness to quiet resignation. The final song sets verses from the New Testament, among them

> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (I Corinthians 13:12)

Brahms called his songs "serious" (*ernst*) rather than "sacred." This is a fitting description of the book *Ecclesiastes*.

Justice

After considering the inevitability of death, Qohelet turns to evaluate the course of human life. He finds that success does not necessarily reward those who most deserve it:

> I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.
> (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

A brief adaptation of this verse was included in the posthumously published *Last Poems* of D. H. Lawrence (1932). The poem *Race and Battle* is notable for its image of the "streaked pansy of the heart" which recalls the title of his earlier book *Pansies,* itself a pun on Pascal's *Pensées*. Lawrence attempts to explain how to accept that life may be unfair and preserve a personal sense of justice.

The race is not to the swift
but to those that can sit still
and let the waves go over them.

The battle is not to the strong
but to the frail, who know best
how to efface themselves
to save the streaked pansy of the heart from
being trampled to mud.

Lawrence's poem adds to Qohelet's resignation some of the later teachings of Jesus – Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth… Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God (Matthew 5: 5,8).

Instruction

Qohelet's search for wisdom has led him to dismay. Death is inevitable and unpredictable. Life is without justice. Nevertheless, Qohelet urges us to enjoy our life:

> Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.
> Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.
> Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.
> Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.
> (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

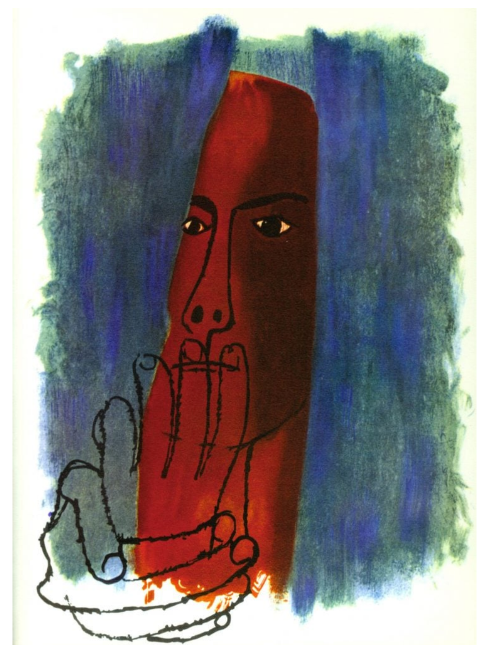
White clothes are worn for festive occasions. Their whiteness contrasts with the black of mourning. Anointing one's hair with oil is another sign of gladness. Yet the most important of Qohelet's injunctions is to work at whatever needs to be

done.

Qohelet’s advice is related to the philosophies of Epicurus (341-270 BCE) in its enjoyment of life and of the stoic Zeno (334-262 BCE) in its promotion of right action. If, as most scholars now believe, Qohelet wrote in the 3rd Century BCE, he could have been influenced by such Greek philosophies. He certainly based his search for truth on reason rather than on revelation. Yet his philosophy is his own. It is religious rather than materialist.

Scott (1965, p 206) summarizes Qohelet’s reasoning:

> Thus the good of life is in the living of it. The profit of work is in the doing of it, not in any profit or residue which a man can exhibit as his achievement or pass on to his descendants. The fruit of wisdom is not the accumulation of all knowledge and the understanding of all mysteries. It lies rather in recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and power. Man is not the measure of all things. He is the master neither of life nor of death. He can find serenity only in coming to terms with the unalterable conditions of his existence, and in enjoying its real but limited satisfactions.



Ben Shahn presents the thoughts of Qohelet as balanced between his inability to understand and his realization that life can nevertheless be enjoyed:

Qohelet has much in common with the existentialism of the 20th Century. Albert Camus remarks in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942):

> *Je ne sais pas si ce monde a un sens qui le dépasse. Mais je sais que je ne connais pas ce sens et qu'il m'est impossible pour le moment de le connaître.* [I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I cannot grasp that meaning and that it is impossible now for me to grasp it.]

Camus is much more tentative than Qohelet in his conclusion that we should nevertheless enjoy our life. He retells the myth of Sisyphus who was condemned by the Gods because he had tried to cheat death. He was made to roll an immense boulder up to the summit of a mountain, but every time he reached the top, the rock would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to begin his task again.

> *La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme; il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.* [The very struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.]

Bread upon the Waters

Qohelet presents us with multiple proverbial injunctions about

how one should live one’s life. Perhaps the most quoted of these is:

> Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.
> Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.
> (Ecclesiastes 11: 1-2)

The verses have been interpreted in many ways. Merchants have considered them in terms of overseas trade. Christians have proposed that it means to spread the teachings of Christ throughout the world. This idea derives from Christ’s statement that he was the “bread of life” (John 6:35). Qohelet had neither of these ideas in mind. He was encouraging us to be generous, to provide for our fellows. He was suggesting that such human charity could compensate for life’s injustice.

In his own old age, the wise Richard Wilbur (2010) wrote a poem about these verses

We must *cast our bread*
Upon the waters, as the
Ancient preacher said,

Trusting that it may
Amply be restored to us
After many a day.

That old metaphor,
Drawn from rice farming on the
River’s flooded shore,

Helps us to believe
That it’s no great sin to give,
Hoping to receive.

Therefore I shall throw
Broken bread, this sullen day,

Out across the snow,

Betting crust and crumb
That birds will gather, and that
One more spring will come.

Light and Dark

Qohelet reminds us that life brings both enjoyment and dismay. The verses are illustrated by Ben Shahn on the left.

> Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:
> But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many.
> (Ecclesiastes 11: 7-8)

Remember Now

The last chapter of *Ecclesiastes* contains its most famous poetry. Qohelet, who has become old and wise, advises his youthful followers. He tells them to rejoice in their youth for life is beautiful. Yet they must always bear in mind that they must grow old and die:

> Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,
> while the evil days come not,
> nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say,
> I have no pleasure in them;
>
> While the sun, or the light, or the moon,
> or the stars, be not darkened,
> nor the clouds return after the rain:
>
> In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble,
> and the strong men shall bow themselves,
> and the grinders cease because they are few,
> and those that look out of the windows be darkened,
>
> And the doors shall be shut in the streets,
> when the sound of the grinding is low,
> and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,
> and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;
>
> Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high,
> and fears shall be in the way,
> and the almond tree shall flourish,
> and the grasshopper shall be a burden,
> and desire shall fail:
> because man goeth to his long home,
> and the mourners go about the streets:
>
> Or ever the silver cord be loosed,
> or the golden bowl be broken,
> or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,
> or the wheel broken at the cistern.
>
> Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:

and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8)

Qohelet refers to God as the Creator (*borador*, □□□□□□). This is the only time he uses this term; elsewhere he uses *Elohim* (□□□□□). Qohelet is here invoking Genesis: we must view the end of an individual life in relation to the beginning of all life. Some commentators (Rashi; Scott, 1965, p. 255) have remarked on the relations of this word to *bor* (□□□) which occurs in the 7th verse. This means “pit,” in the sense of either a “grave” or a “cistern.” This verbal association also brings the end of life back to its source.

The poem is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. The initial verse of the poem clearly states that it is concerned with human mortality. Yet how the images relate to old age and death is as uncertain as the breath that ceases. And the poem ends on the words that began the book – all is vanity, merest breath.

A literal interpretation is that the poem describes a village or estate in mourning for a once-great person lately fallen on hard times. Perhaps Qohelet is foreseeing his own death. The windows of the house are darkened, the mill is quiet as the workers remember their late master, the mourners go about the streets, and finally dust is scattered over the body as it is buried.

A long tradition has provided allegorical interpretations of the images, relating them to the physical and mental decline that attends old age. The underlying idea is that the aging body is like a house in decay. For example, the commentary of the 11th-century Jewish rabbi Rashi suggests

> the keepers of the house: *These are the ribs and the flanks, which protect the entire*

body cavity
the mighty men: *These are the legs, upon which the body supports itself*
and the grinders cease: *These are the teeth*
since they have become few: *In old age, most of his teeth fall out*
and those who look out of the windows: *These are the eyes*.
And the doors shall be shut: *These are his orifices*.
when the sound of the mill is low: *the sound of the mill grinding the food in his intestines, and that is the stomach*

The problem with such specific allegories is that different commentators provide different meanings. Do the doors that shut denote the eyelids or the lips?

Other interpretations are more abstract. Does the pitcher broken at the fountain represent the bladder or the loss of the life force? Is the silver cord the spinal column or the genealogical tree that ends at the death of a person with no heirs?

Some Hebrew interpretations consider these verses as representing the desolation of Israel following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The image of the golden bowl might then represent the broken lamp that no longer lit the sanctuary.

Some Christian interpretations see the imagery as a vision of the end times that will precede the final judgment. This fits with the epilogue that follows the poem.

No single interpretation conveys the sense of the poem. All meanings overlap. The poem is better listened to than imagined. The following is by the YouTube reader who goes by the name of Tom O'Bedlam

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tom-obedlam-ecclesiastes-12.mp3

Judgment

The book concludes with an epilogue that many take to be the words of a later editor. However, it rings true to Qohelet:

> Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.
> For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.
> (Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14)

Why else should one remember one’s Creator? Why else should one bear in mind one’s ultimate old age and death? The sentiment is similar to Marcus Aurelius (167 CE):

> Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.
> (Meditations IV:17)

Qohelet is also proposing that to be good is to be truly human – “the whole duty of man.” Any judgment of us as human beings must rest on whether we have done good or ill. Qohelet’s instruction derives from man as much as from God.

The following presents the Hebrew (in Ben Shahn’s calligraphy) together with its transliteration and an audio version of Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

סף דבר הכל נשמע את האלהים
ירא ואת מצותיו שמור כי זה כל האדם:

sovf dabar hakkol nishma eth ha’elohim yera eth mitzvotav shemovr ki zeh kol ha’adam.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-12-13.mp3

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