

Article

# Qohelet and the Marks of Modernity: Reading Ecclesiastes with Matthew Arnold and Charles Taylor

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Academic Editors: Katharine J. Dell and Arthur J. Keefer

Received: 1 May 2016; Accepted: 14 June 2016; Published: 16 June 2016

**Abstract:** The biblical book of Ecclesiastes is often claimed as a harbinger of modernity. In this essay, I compare Ecclesiastes with two overlapping constructions of modernity, taken from Matthew Arnold and Charles Taylor, focusing especially on Taylor's motifs of inwardness, narrativity, meaninglessness, and ordinary life. I suggest that the likeness to modernity in Ecclesiastes is a complex bundle of emphases held in tension, which remains hospitable to pre-modern understandings and commitments.

**Keywords:** Ecclesiastes; Qohelet; Charles Taylor; modernity; inwardness; narrativity; meaninglessness; ordinary life

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"The dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves."

(Matthew Arnold, Preface to *Poems*, 1853 [1].)

The book of Ecclesiastes has appealed to many readers as the most "modern" of Old Testament writings: one of the most influential studies of the book develops an extended comparison with Albert Camus, and numerous interpreters set Ecclesiastes in close correspondence with ideas of modernity, variously understood.<sup>1</sup> Why does this biblical book, in particular, strike us as so distinctively modern? The answer must have to do with the ways we define and describe modernity: modernity itself is a trope which stretches to span diverse eras, but takes similar shapes across time, and gathers together the same cluster of features over and over again. Matthew Arnold, high Victorian diagnostician of modernity and its discontents, introduced an 1853 collection of his poems by identifying modernity through "the dialogue of the mind with itself" [1]; for Arnold, what was modern was, in part, what was inward-focused, doubting, conscious of its own declension from a heroic age. He refers here to his own verse drama "Empedocles on Etna", first published anonymously in 1852, where the quintessentially modern figure is the pre-Socratic philosopher who acts as a cipher for Arnold's disillusion with his own modern age: "This envious, miserable age! I am weary of it!" ([6], Act II. 107–8). Arnold found all this not only in the middle of the nineteenth century, but also at the turn of the seventeenth century: from the vantage-point of his own time, he writes that in the jaded introspection of Empedocles "we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust" [6].<sup>2</sup> And with that "already", Arnold finds a foreshadowing of these later centuries within the age of Empedocles itself, "a time when the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists to prevail", an age of crisis after "the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity" of what he calls "the great monuments

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* [2]; see also Johnston [3,4]; Leithart [5]. Much of what these latter authors call postmodern falls within analytical categories used for modernity.

<sup>2</sup> Does Arnold here refer to Goethe's Faust, or to Marlowe's? From his description, it is surely Goethe's, thus spanning a further two centuries on from Hamlet.

of early Greek genius". Three modernities, then, in three widely scattered centuries, but with common themes of reflexivity and soliloquy, anxiety and individualism, clouds after sunny clarity.

All of Arnold's touchstones for modernity could be paralleled in the work of contemporary theorists of the modern; and all of them, I want to argue, find suggestive echoes within the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is good to think with about modernity because it reflects back at us the same constellation of "modern problems" which Arnold drew together in the nineteenth century, and which theorists and theologians of modernity continue to trace out in our own time. Of these writers, perhaps the preeminent example is Charles Taylor, whose probing of the conditions of modernity culminates in his 2007 volume *A Secular Age* [7]. I suggest, though, that we read Ecclesiastes alongside an earlier work of Taylor's, his 1989 *Sources of the Self* [8], which concentrates more narrowly on the being at the heart of Arnold's formulation of modern problems—the modern human creature, with a mind which speaks to itself in a new way. I will set Taylor's features of modern selfhood alongside the speaking self which emerges in the pages of Ecclesiastes, and tease out those resemblances which together make such a strong impression of startling modernness on so many readers of the ancient biblical book.<sup>3</sup>

I select four strands from Taylor's delineation of the modern self, each of which finds an echo in the central concerns of Ecclesiastes. This is not a full list of the traits Taylor assembles to make up the modern self (for instance, I leave aside the relation of self to nature, and also the "buffered self" of Taylor's later work), but these four are at the heart of his project. First, there is the inward-oriented, reflexive impulse of the modern self, Arnold's "dialogue of the mind with itself". Related to that, I next consider narrative, which Taylor judges to be the indispensable vehicle of modern selfhood. Third, and most centrally, modernity involves the self in a crisis of meaning—the doubts and discouragements of Hamlet and Faust, or of Arnold himself on *Dover Beach*. It is here that I want to problematize the claim that Ecclesiastes is modern, using Taylor's own counter-example of the very pre-modern crisis of Martin Luther. Finally, I consider Taylor's term "ordinary life", which he uses in a special sense to denote the modern turn from various idealized higher pursuits to a new value given to humdrum work and family life. Each of these, I suggest, enables us to probe our intuition that something about Ecclesiastes is itself paradoxically modern.

## 1. Inwardness

For Taylor, the first crucial element of the modern idea of the self is its inwardness. The self is what is inside us:

Our modern notion of the self is related to, one might say constituted by a certain sense (or perhaps a family of senses) of inwardness . . . The unconscious is for us within, and we think of the depths of the unsaid, the unsayable, the powerful inchoate feelings and affinities and fears which dispute with us the control of our lives, as inner ([8], p. 111).

This is so constitutive a part of our modern self-understanding that it strikes us as axiomatic: we cannot imagine anywhere else that "we" might be, other than inside our bodies. But other locations for imagining the self are possible: Taylor draws on the work of Clifford Geertz to unsettle this assumption and to establish the possibility of quite different understandings of "inner" and "outer" ([8], pp. 113, 536, n.5). Inwardness, then, is a marker (even though not a unique one) of the modern Western understanding of the human self. Correspondingly, the book of Ecclesiastes appears in a modern light to many readers because it so persuasively conjures up a reflexive, self-conscious interiority. Michael V. Fox has argued that "The book's cohesiveness inheres above all in the constant presence of a single brooding consciousness mediating all the book's observations, counsels, and evaluations" ([10], p. 151). That mediating consciousness is the character the book calls "Qohelet", perhaps translatable as

<sup>3</sup> For a parallel conversation between Charles Taylor and the Bible on this topic, see Lapsley [9], who sketches out a comparison between Taylor's delineation of the modern self and the self constituted by the book of Ezekiel.

“Preacher” or “Assemblyman”, though the portrait clearly also borrows, distantly and ironically, from the biblical Solomon.<sup>4</sup> Qohelet’s speaking voice in the book describes for us events and actions which take place within what we might translate as his “heart” or “mind”, to give the broader sense of Hebrew *leb* here, housing cognition and decision rather than just emotion.<sup>5</sup> For Qohelet, the language of bodily actions can be transferred within: it is the heart which seeks and pursues (1:12), and the heart is an instrument of his explorations (2:3); he talks with it (1:16) and in it (2:1, 2:14); it itself experiences wisdom and knowledge (1:16). When Qohelet toils and gets results, it is the heart which rejoices, and he deliberately does not restrain it from its enjoyment (2:10). In these ways, the heart sometimes seems parallel to but separate from himself, an instantiation of the self on the inside: literally, “I and my heart turned”, 7:25. Sometimes, it is true, this language of the heart sounds like nothing more complex than a straightforward device for self-reference, such as when Qohelet says “I applied my mind [lit. “heart”] to know wisdom” (1:17), or when the heart issues speech in 5:1: here, the heart seems to be no more than another way of saying “I”, and the same is true when it is the heart that cannot lie down at night (2:23), though this is an arresting physiological image.<sup>6</sup> But the late Hebrew use of *nefesh* as a personal pronoun is attested already in Ecclesiastes (e.g., 2:24 6:3), so the heart is not required to do all the grammatical work of self-reference: the heart in Ecclesiastes, then, hovers somewhere between being a simple reflexive pronoun and a way of speaking about inner states. The structures of grammar here mesh with the pressure of Qohelet’s particular kind of discourse: his relentless self-reference is an example of what Taylor calls “radical reflexivity”, a kind of self-writing which reflects in its forms the high definition given to the individual mind. We can thus see in Qohelet what is for Taylor a distinction between the modern world and the classical world: “The turn to oneself is now also and inescapably a turn to oneself in the first-person perspective—a turn to the self as a self . . . Because we are so deeply embedded in it, we cannot but reach for reflexive language” ([8], p. 176).<sup>7</sup>

Inwardness in Ecclesiastes also has the troubling depths which it possesses for Taylor’s modern self. Elaborating on those “powerful inchoate feelings and affinities and fears which dispute with us the control of our lives”, Taylor writes that “We are creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors. We all feel the force of Conrad’s image in *Heart of Darkness*” ([8], p. 111). The literary modernism of Conrad here finds a close correspondence in Ecclesiastes, where interior explorations yield similarly dark discoveries. At times, Qohelet can say that “the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead” (9:3), or that “the human heart is fully set to do evil” (8:11), and the most polemical evidence given for this is the stream of bile he spits out against women: “I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets” (7:26). The hearts of men are similarly dark, though the mode of expression is less poisoned: “God made man straight, but they have sought many devices” (8:29). As with Conrad, there are hints that this darkness at the heart of humanity is reflective of a deep, mysterious darkness at the heart of the universe: “Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many” (11:8); “That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (7:24). Qohelet speaks, then, with peculiar clarity to readers after Freud: he addresses our sense of ourselves as beings with cavernous inner spaces, and registers the disturbance which troubles these reservoirs we imagine within.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Christianson ([11], pp. 128–72).

<sup>5</sup> For the language of reasoning processes in Ecclesiastes, see Machinist [12].

<sup>6</sup> All directly cited English translations are from the NRSV, except where I indicate otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> For Taylor here, “This is what distinguishes the classical writers from followers of Descartes, Locke, Kant, or just about anyone in the modern world”.

<sup>8</sup> “Freud’s is a magnificent attempt to regain our freedom and self-possession, the dignity of the disengaged subject, in face of the inner depths . . . The very terms of Freudian science and the language of his analyses requires an articulation of the depths” ([8], p. 446).

## 2. Narrativity

Closely related to the construction of a self in Ecclesiastes is the book's use of narrative forms. It is certainly true that narrative is not the only or even the main literary genre in play: Ecclesiastes borrows eclectically from a number of formal possibilities, and at first sight we might think that Qohelet's anguished to-and-fro questioning is the literary device most constitutive of his strong speaking self. Argument is certainly one way in which the book fashions a self: Don Cupitt has observed that "in the Hebrew Bible . . . the dispute with God becomes the classic arena in which selfhood is elaborated and human subjectivity is produced", and this is surely true for the selfhood elaborated in Ecclesiastes, even though Qohelet is no Job and keeps God in the third person, disputing over what God does or gives rather than arraigning him directly (e.g., 3:10–14, 6:1–2).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of this generic diversity of Ecclesiastes, narrative is a deep structure which undergirds the book as a whole, and which builds a bridge to modern narrative and to the modern making of self through story; in Taylor's words, the era where "we understand ourselves inescapably in narrative" ([8], p. 51). Narrativity in Ecclesiastes emerges through the insistent rhythm of the "I"-statements which organize the book, beginning with the words which launch Qohelet's recounting of his quest: "I, Qohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12, my translation).<sup>10</sup> Everything that follows is punctuated by a long series of past-tense, first-person verbs of vision and cognition, which stretches -almost-to the end of the book: "I saw"; "I understood"; "I said to myself", "I turned". This is a string of events, even though they are events of perception; they shape a story whose protagonist recounts a quest. Qohelet narrates to us the progress of his observations and explorations, creating a narrative arc that moves through multiple points of crisis to something like a fragile resolution, in the final chapters' quietened tone and acceptance of risk.<sup>11</sup> Ancient readers noticed this likeness to story: both rabbinic midrash and the book's early Christian readers integrated this book into the story of Solomon and, in the latter case, the story of Jesus, picking up narrative cues from the past-tense voice of the royal protagonist. In the midrashic expansions of the Targum, Qohelet's tale is Solomon's own riches-to-rags narrative after he has been driven from his throne by the demon Asmodeus, as he wanders his land lamenting how he was once king of Israel in Jerusalem, in the words of 1:12; for Gregory of Nyssa, the same past-tense way of speaking turns the book into Jesus' own narrative of his descent from a heavenly throne to seek out the troubles of a suffering world [14].<sup>12</sup>

Taylor insists that the self is not imaginable without narrative, and that possessing a story is definitive of the modern self:

Typical modern forms of narrativity include stories of linear development, progress stories in history, or stories of continuous gain through individual lives and across generations, rags-to-riches stories, which have no ending point. And they include construals of life as growth, not just through childhood and adolescence, but through the later phases as well. Rather than seeing life in terms of predefined phases, making a story whose shape is understood by unchanging tradition, we tell it as a story of growth towards often unprecedented ends ([8], p. 105).

Ecclesiastes is one such tale of growth towards unprecedented ends: "I said to myself, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me'" (1:16); "I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem . . . Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil" (2:9–10). Qohelet

<sup>9</sup> See Cupitt ([13], p. 32), though he considers this only in the psalms.

<sup>10</sup> The NRSV turns this into a subordinate clause ('I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem . . .'), but there is no indication of this in the Hebrew.

<sup>11</sup> The most complete recent study of Ecclesiastes' narrativity is Christianson [11], which also explores comparisons to modern narrative forms; see too Fox ([10], pp. 363–77).

<sup>12</sup> See Targum Qohelet 1:12, in ([14], p. 22), and Gregory of Nyssa in ([15], pp. 48–59).

here imitates the ancient Near Eastern genre of royal boast to the point of parody, as he narrates spectacular gains and their ironic fragility [16]. He does this, too, across the length of a life: the strange past tense in which he speaks of his kingship (1:12) and the elegiac, reckoning-up mood of the closing poem on death and dissolution both suggest, perhaps, that the book is cast in the voice of an old man, looking back on life. This over-the-shoulder look at a life in memories also recalls Taylor's analysis of the modern narrative subject: Qohelet, too, is "the disengaged, particular self, whose identity is constituted in memory" ([8], p. 289).

For Taylor, modern narrative also has a tension all of its own: it must negotiate a troubled relationship to the archetypal models which structured older kinds of narrative. He traces this problematic to a new, modern sense of time. Once, storytellers could set their events in a time-frame which was "the locus for the recurring embodiment of archetypes, not themselves temporally placed"; this was the kind of narrative time which gave rise to myth and allegory, or to the weak sense of anachronism that was comfortable with a thirteenth-century Madonna having the features of a Tuscan merchant's daughter. But now, in the new "time of physics", "it becomes harder to take over the story ready-made from the canonical models and archetypes. The story has to be drawn from the particular events and circumstances of this life" ([8], pp. 288–89). That is, modern narrative is freed from the templates which guided authors as they traced individual lives over larger patterns, but this is a difficult freedom. Something like the same uneasy relationship to past archetypes underlies the narrative choices made by the writer of Ecclesiastes: his Qohelet wears royal robes borrowed from the legendary Solomon of Israel's sacred literature, but they sit heavily on him, and this tale which situates itself at the center of the Davidic kingdom, looking out from the throne in Jerusalem, must negotiate the realities of life in tiny, post-exilic Persian-occupied Yehud. It is against this backdrop of the ghostly presence of old archetypes that Qohelet traces out the unfolding of his own inner life.<sup>13</sup> In all these ways, the narrative form which most closely parallels Ecclesiastes is the autobiography, which Taylor considers the central example of the close relationship between narrativity and modernity:

This mode of life-narration, where the story is drawn from the events in this double sense, as against traditional models, archetypes, or prefigurations, is the quintessentially modern one, that which fits the experience of the disengaged, particular self. It is what emerges in modern autobiography, starting with the great exempla by Rousseau and Goethe . . . And it reaches one of its characteristic expressions in the Bildungsroman, where the double-sided emergence of a life-shape from the events becomes the explicit theme of the work ([8], p. 289).

Qohelet, then, speaks with a characteristically modern voice not only in his narrativity, but in the particular form it takes.

### 3. Meaninglessness

Perhaps the central reason that Ecclesiastes has been claimed as a "modern" book is in the way it thematizes a crisis of meaning. Qohelet seems most modern when he is heard giving voice to the sense of meaninglessness which is a common thread in many construals of modernity. Taylor expresses it thus:

The problem of the meaning of life is therefore on our agenda . . . either in the form of a threatened loss of meaning or because making sense of our life is the object of a quest. And those whose spiritual agenda is mainly defined in this way are in a fundamentally different existential predicament from that which dominated most previous cultures and still defines the lives of other people today ([8], p. 18).

Readers find this newly-arisen problem of meaning reflected back at them in Ecclesiastes, in both of the forms which Taylor names: Ecclesiastes is animated by both loss and questing. The book opens with

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<sup>13</sup> I have explored this relationship to Israel's literary history in more detail in [17].



a programmatic question which addresses the problem of meaningfulness in life: “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” (1:3). Qohelet worries away at the apparent futility of human effort and the pettiness of all our striving: “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind” (4:4). Humans amount to no more than beasts, and die the same way (3:18–21). Most obviously, the problem of meaning confronts us in Qohelet’s repeated refrain of *hebel*, widely understood as “vanity” from the King James Bible. The Hebrew word reactivates a dead metaphor of breath or vapor, and has connotations of fleetingness, insubstantiality, futility.<sup>14</sup> Qohelet uses the word as a protest against the perceived meaninglessness of death (“This also is vanity . . . How can the wise die just like fools?”, 2:16); the unpredictable returns of labor (“the lover of money will not be satisfied with money . . . This also is vanity”, 5:10); the fickleness of memory (“I saw the wicked buried . . . and they were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity”, 8:10); and the vagaries of justice (“there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity”, 8:14). All of this bears close comparison with Taylor’s extended treatment of the precise ways in which moderns experience meaninglessness:

Typically, for contemporaries, the question can arise of the “worthwhileness” or “meaningfulness” of one’s life, of whether it is (or has been) rich and substantial, or empty and trivial. These are expressions commonly used, images frequently invoked. Or: Is my life amounting to something? Does it have weight and substance, or is it just running away into nothing, into something insubstantial? Another way the question can arise for us . . . is whether our lives have unity, or whether one day is just following the next without purpose or sense, the past falling into a kind of nothingness which is not the prelude, or harbinger, or opening, or early stage of anything, whether it is just “temps perdu” in the double sense intended in the title of Proust’s celebrated work, that is, time which is both wasted and irretrievably lost, beyond recall, in which we pass as if we had never been ([8], pp. 42–43).

Here, Taylor invokes the sense of insubstantiality and deficit which *hebel* captures, especially in its frequent correlation with *re’ut ruach*, or “chasing the wind”; his language of life “running away into nothing”, “one day just following the next” seems to echo Qohelet’s opening poem, where all streams run into the sea and one sunrise follows another without anything really changing (1:5, 7). The past falls into nothing, and we pass as if we had never been; as Qohelet says, “A generation goes, and a generation comes . . . The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them” (3:4, 11). Taylor calls all these “peculiarly modern forms and images” ([8], p. 43) and yet they correspond exactly to the language of Ecclesiastes.

But it is worth pausing to wonder whether this likeness is partly an optical illusion. Qohelet may act as something of a mirror for moderns, reflecting back an existential crisis which in fact has a rather different valence in his own case. Partly, we should remember that all of his bleak verdicts and outbursts of “*hebel*” are plotted on a narrative trajectory: they represent stages in a mental journey, rather than the final conclusions of a treatise. He is reporting what he said and felt at particular times, not advancing a timeless argument; and the line of his narrative has a curve, reaching towards meaning rather than away from it, as the past-tense reportage yields to tentative proverbial counsel in the closing chapters. It would also be wrong to characterize Qohelet’s complaints too narrowly as *ennui*, or as a voice from a world which has lost spiritual contours, and where nothing is worth doing, in Taylor’s words ([8], p. 18); often, it seems that Qohelet’s spiritual contours are all too sharp, and his outrage is directed against miscarriages of justice and the failure of enterprises that were well worth doing. We might think of passages like the witnessing of wrongdoing in the place of justice (3:16),

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<sup>14</sup> For a survey of the evidence, though with a different emphasis, see Fox [18].

the cry “Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no-one to comfort them!” (4:1), or the lament for a land suffering under the burden of misrule (10:16ff); these all sound like the blistering pity of an angry prophet rather than the uncertainty of a seeker after meaning. Qohelet’s crisis is too complex to be reduced to the loss of meaning; often, the pain is precisely that meaning remains even when its laws seem to be broken.

It is instructive to compare at this point Qohelet’s crisis with that of Martin Luther, as Taylor describes it. Taylor brings in Luther as a foil for his description of the modern crisis of meaning: the young Luther, in Taylor’s account, exhibits a completely different kind of personal, existential crisis. Taylor contrasts the threat of meaninglessness with the threat faced by Luther, where “an unchallengeable framework makes imperious demands we fear being unable to meet . . . The form of the danger here is utterly different from that which threatens the modern seeker”. Of Luther’s early terror of damnation he writes that “However one might want to describe this, it was not a crisis of meaning . . . The ‘meaning’ of life was all too unquestionable for this Augustinian monk, as it was for his whole age. The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness. The dominance of the latter perhaps defines our age” ([8], p. 18). Where would we put Qohelet in this contrast between a modern crisis and a pre-modern one? Qohelet’s affinity with modernity still stands out—at many moments meaninglessness does haunt him, as we have seen, and it would be impossible to say that Qohelet fears eternal condemnation as Luther did. And yet perhaps Taylor’s account of Luther can alert us to some nuances in Qohelet’s crisis which do inflect it slightly differently. Sometimes Qohelet shares in a sense of unmeetable demands, like Taylor’s Luther: “All a man’s work is for his mouth, and the appetite will never be full” (6:7); “I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me” (7:23). This includes even at times the unmeetable demands of a distant God: “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11); “I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals” (3:18). Qohelet’s is not altogether an exclusively modern crisis of meaning: there is fear of God (3:14, 5:6–7, 7:18, 8:12–13; 12:13), not only disillusion.

#### 4. Ordinary Life

Before we are seduced into claiming Ecclesiastes for modernity and diagnosing Qohelet’s crisis as purely a modern crisis of meaning, it should give us pause to realise that Luther, whose own crisis Taylor reads as a wholly pre-modern one, found that Ecclesiastes spoke exactly to his sensibility. “It is a book of comfort”, Luther wrote in his 1524 Preface to the Books of Solomon, and this is not said without registering the world-weariness of Ecclesiastes: “When a man would live an obedient life . . . he becomes weary and disgusted with his duty, and is sorry for everything he has begun; for things will not go as he wants them to. Then arise worry, labor, disgust, impatience, and murmuring”. The book’s offered solution, as Luther sees it, is “to do the duty of the hour with peace and joy” ([19], p. 391). That duty, on this reading, is “the governance of the state or the family”; it is marriage and political office. “The summary and aim of this book, then, is as follows: Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life” ([20], pp. 4, 5, 7). What Luther pinpoints here is very similar to what Taylor calls “ordinary life” as a term of art, “the notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life” ([8], pp. 23, 211). The high value set on this ordinary life is, in his analysis, another of the marks of modernity. Finding it in Luther is not surprising, since Taylor traces the genealogy of this idea of ordinary life back to the Reformation, even though it is so thoroughly secularized in its modern formulation:

I believe that the modern naturalist-utilitarian hostility to “higher” goods and defence of ordinary, sensuous happiness emerge from what I have been calling the affirmation of ordinary life, which in early modern times brought about a similar repudiation of supposedly “higher” modes of activity in favour of the everyday existence of marriage and

the calling. The original form of this affirmation was theological, and it involved a positive vision of ordinary life as hallowed by God ([8], p. 104).

Modernity, then, sets an almost redemptive value (in non-theological terms) on the ordinary life of daily work and family. This, too, is a note which resonates with a central motif in Ecclesiastes. Taylor's modern turn from "aristocratic" striving for fame or martial victory to "bourgeois" happiness centered on work, home and family is amply paralleled in the words of Qohelet. The book is punctuated by a series of "joy sayings", beginning at 2:24: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil"; for Luther this verse is "the principal conclusion, in fact the point, of the whole book" ([20], p. 46). These sayings offer the simple pleasures of food, drink, work, clothing, marriage and merriment as instances of "what is good" in the midst of disillusion, and as Qohelet's words unfold, the commendation of joy gets stronger and stronger across a series of seven sayings (2:24–5; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:18–19; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–10).<sup>15</sup> The fullest of these is at 9:7–10: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going". This could come from Taylor's evocation of modernity; it could also come from Luther's excerpting of Ecclesiastes to serve reforming ends. Ordinary life, then, is another aspect of Taylor's modernity which can be paralleled from Ecclesiastes; but it is one which also serves to remind us that such a modernity is a complex bundle of traits, containing within itself unresolved contradictions. Qohelet the sceptic may strike us as an identifiably modern figure, but the Qohelet of simple everyday pleasures is one too. To call Ecclesiastes modern, then, is not to reduce it to a single reading, nor to deny the ways in which the book could speak to a quite different, pre-modern mindset. As a pattern observable in eras from Empedocles' to Qohelet's to Arnold's and beyond, modernity is a useful heuristic term to isolate a particular constellation of emphases; but it does so successfully because its tensions—like those in the book—are irreducible. Ecclesiastes seems to offer itself as a mirror for the modern self, but—as the comparison reveals—the trope of modernity itself is no less of a mirror for each age to find its own reflection.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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