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“The Wise Die along with the Fool”

Terror Management Theory and the Book of Qohelet

Robert Williamson, Jr.

Hendrix College

Department of Religious Studies

One of the often noted characteristics of the book of Qohelet is its seemingly inescapable obsession with human mortality. While Roland Murphy can say that Proverbs “had as its single purpose the securing of life,”¹ James Crenshaw has famously characterized the book of Qohelet as existing “in the shadow of death.”² While Proverbs expresses confidence that “in the paths of wisdom there is no death” (Prov 12:28), Qohelet can only focus on the inevitability of death, which he believes encounters everyone on equal terms and negates the significance of one’s life. This transformation in attitudes between Proverbs and Qohelet clearly indicates some sort of transition taking place in the worldview of Hebrew wisdom literature, but the nature of that transition remains unclear. As Jack T. Sanders asks: “Why [Qohelet’s] emphasis on death as unfortunate, when the earlier wisdom tradition--and basically all of older Israelite tradition--had been content to accept death as inevitable and to emphasize the quality of life in the here and now? Why has death become a tragedy, even when it comes at the end of a long and successful and happy life?”³ In what follows, I will attempt to offer fresh insights into this question through an engagement with Terror Management Theory, a branch of experimental social psychology.

Terror Management Theory builds on the work of Ernest Becker, particularly as put forth in his *Birth and Death of Meaning* and *The Denial of Death*.⁴ The theory suggests that the natural state of humankind is a constant and terrifying awareness of our own impending mortality (which is the “terror” in “terror management”) brought about by the development of self-consciousness. The theory proposes that this predisposition to death anxiety arose evolutionarily as humans developed the capacity to anticipate the future in order to cooperate in the hunting of larger game. The development of self awareness in this regard led to the concomitant awareness of the possibility of one’s own death.⁵ TMT suggests that such unmediated awareness of impending mortality produced a psychologically untenable state that demanded to be overcome. A creature as helpless as humankind did not stand much chance of survival if constantly debilitated by his own fear of death.⁶

Terror Management Theory proposes that humankind overcame this fear of death at least in part through the construction of cultural worldviews, which function as buffers against death anxiety. As Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg--the three central proponents of TMT--state it: “Cultural worldviews consist of humanly constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that are shared by individuals in a group that function to mitigate the horror and blunt dread caused by the knowledge of the reality of the human condition, that we all die.”⁷ Successful cultural worldviews allow people to control death anxiety “by convincing them that they are beings of enduring significance living in a meaningful reality.”⁸ According to the theory, a successful cultural worldview provides its adherents with the sense that the world is characterized by order, stability, meaning, and permanence. Further, it gives the individuals living within the culture a set of prescribed values by which they can perceive themselves as valuable members of society. The specific values are, of course, determined by the particular cultures in question. As Pyszczynski puts it

Pastoral herders derive feelings of self-worth by the number of cattle in their possession; traditional Japanese women by their gracious hospitality; Samurai warriors by their

courage and ferocity; American males by the size of their penises and bank accounts; American women by the extent to which their figure approximates the shape of a piece of linguini.⁹

To the extent that a person is able to succeed in living up to the values prescribed by his cultural worldview, he is able to perceive himself as a person of significance in a world of meaning. In this way, cultural worldviews enable us to “deny that we are merely transient material organisms clinging to a clump of dirt in a purposeless universe fated only to die and decay. Instead, we live out our time on earth believing we are eternally significant contributors to a meaningful reality.”¹⁰

Terror Management Theory provides us with a framework from which to examine both Proverbs and Qohelet as symbolic worldviews and to consider their effectiveness as buffers against death anxiety in the sense described by TMT. First, Proverbs. For present purposes I will focus on Proverbs 10-29, commonly understood to be the earliest part of the book, most likely stemming from the period of the monarchy in ancient Israel.¹¹ Proverbs 10-29 constructs a cosmos so ordered and predictable that some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that it envisions a great world order in which the universe is essentially “self-righting.” Klaus Koch, for one, argued that in the worldview of Proverbs each action carries within itself its own consequence--the so called *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang*, or act-consequence relationship. While Koch’s formulation of the act-consequence nexus has subsequently been abandoned by most scholars, it nonetheless points to an expectation on the part of Proverbs 10-29 that certain actions will have predictable (if not guaranteed) outcomes:

Assuredly the wicked will not be unpunished

But the righteous ones will go free. (Prov 11:21)

No trouble befalls the righteous

But the wicked get their fill of evil. (Prov 12:21)

Second, Terror Management Theory suggests that a successful worldview offers its adherents a set of cultural values by which to measure their own value or significance. Proverbs

10-29 holds out to its adherents the possibility of being “righteous” or “wise” as the highest form of being. It promotes certain values, such as receptivity to learning, emotional composure, shrewdness, honesty, justice, uprightness, and compassion.¹² The person who is able to live according to these values is able to count himself among the “righteous” and therefore as living on the positive side of the act-consequence relationship.

It thus seems clear that Proverbs 10-29 meets the first two criteria of an anxiety buffering worldview, but according to Terror Management Theory such a worldview needs to supply its adherents with a sense of “*eternal* significance.” In other words, to the extent that Proverbs 10-29 functions as a buffer against death anxiety, we should expect that it offers its adherents the possibility of *transcending death*. Of course, the consensus position in biblical scholarship holds that for the book of Proverbs the life of the righteous does *not* transcend death, but rather that death claims the wise and the fool alike. As Samuel Adams states it, the authors of Proverbs “do not allow for a blessed afterlife, but only for the shadows of Sheol.”¹³

In my view, this conclusion that Proverbs views death as a complete termination of life for both the righteous and the wicked is grounded in an inadequate sense of what “death transcendence” means. Surely it is the case that Proverbs does not envision a *literal* life after death in the sense of a resurrection or an immortal soul or a “blessed afterlife.” But this does *not* mean that Proverbs views death as something that cannot be transcended. Here, Terror Management Theory helps us by pointing to the possibility of *symbolic* immortalities--modes of death transcendence that do not require a belief in a literal life after death.

The most extensive and widely accepted discussion of symbolic immortalities is that of Robert Jay Lifton, who argues that “immortality” in this sense involves the continued connection of the individual with some system of permanence greater than the self. Heuristically, Lifton divides symbolic immortalities into five modes: (1) The *biological mode*, in which a person’s connection to life is extended through her offspring. (2) The *creative mode*, in which a person is survived by a physical achievement, such as a monument or work of art, or by his direct influence

on other people, such as students, for a professor, or patients, for a doctor. (3) The *natural mode*, in which it is a person's connection to the permanence of the natural world that provides a sense of immortality. (4) The *religious mode*, which involves connection to a deity or sacred realm, and may include some sense of literal afterlife. (5) The *transcendent mode*, in which a person escapes his corporeal nature through meditation, drug use, or some other out-of-body experience.¹⁴ Thus, the idea that immortality can only take the form of a "blessed afterlife" is an unnecessarily limited view of death transcendence, and one that is biased toward a Christian conception of life after death.

When death transcendence is understood in the broader terms of Terror Management Theory, then it becomes clear that Proverbs 10-29 in fact envisions different ultimate fates for the wicked and for the righteous: death will terminate the wicked, but the righteous will live on in various ways. Perhaps the clearest example of symbolic death transcendence in Proverbs is 10:7

The memory of the righteous (becomes) a blessing,
but the name of the wicked will rot.¹⁵

The first colon considers the "memory" (זכר) of the righteous, which "becomes a blessing" (לברכה). Those who continue living, whether they be the person's biological descendants or students, or simply those who witnessed the person's righteous acts during his lifetime, carry the deceased with them in their memories. This remembrance constitutes an extension of the life of the individual beyond death; though he is dead, his memory lives on.¹⁶ It should also be noted that the verse does not portray the continuity of the name merely as an act of passive recollection. Rather, the memory itself continues to act in the world, as it becomes "a blessing" (לברכה).¹⁷ McKane, while rendering the Hebrew somewhat freely, captures the point clearly in his translation: "The remembrance of a righteous man is a source of blessing."¹⁸ That is, the memory of the righteous is not only passively recalled by the living, but rather actively effects a blessing upon them. The postmortem state of the wicked person is symbolized in 10:7b in quite the

opposite fashion.¹⁹ In contrast to the memory (זכר) of the righteous, which as we have seen continues to be connected to the world of the living, the name (שם) of the wicked rots away (ירקב). The verb connotes the rotting of bones or the disintegration of wood and suggests that the name of the wicked, like his body, is rotting away in the grave.²⁰ When the wicked person dies, his name and memory decompose together with his body. Symbolically, the righteous person transcends physical death through the memories of others, while the wicked person is utterly annihilated upon his demise; it is as though he had never existed.²¹

In Lifton's categorization of symbolic immortalities, the survival of a person's memory represents death transcendence in the *creative* mode. Proverbs 10-29 also symbolizes the righteous as transcending death in the *biological* mode, through the survival of one's progeny. For example, Prov 14:11, contrasts the family line of the wicked (רשעים) with that of the upright (ישרים) flourish:

בית רשעים ישמד ואהל ישרים יפריח

The house of the wicked will be wiped out
but the tent of the upright will bloom.

“House” (בית) and “tent” (אהל) are metonymies for the family line, so that the proverb should be understood to contrast the futures of the family lines of the upright and the wicked.²² According to the first colon, the house (בית) of the wicked will be “wiped out” (ישמד), an expression which elsewhere connotes violent and total extermination.²³ The family of the wicked (that is, their descendants) will be wiped off the face of the earth. The descendants of the upright, in contrast, are said to “bloom” (יפריח), a metaphor that expresses the full virility and vitality of the family line of the upright.²⁴ Unlike the biological line of the wicked, which is barren, the family line of the righteous continues in full flower.

While we could identify other examples of death transcendence for the righteous in Proverbs 10-29, for now these two will suffice. Far from viewing death as a fate encounters the

righteous and the wicked equally, Proverbs 10-29 envisions the righteous as transcending death through family and memory while only the wicked experience death as an utter annihilation. In the terms of TMT, Proverbs provides its adherents with a sense of “enduring significance” that renders death less potent. This attitude toward death can be seen in a number of Proverbs, such as 11:19:

Surely righteousness (leads) to life
but the ones who pursue wickedness (go) to death. (11:19)

or Prov 12:28

In the path of righteousness is life,
and in the way of its path there is no death.²⁵

In the terminology of Terror Management Theory, Proverbs 10-29 successfully construes its adherents as “eternally significant contributors to a meaningful reality.” It successfully buffers its adherents against death anxiety, such that we scarcely encounter any such anxiety expressed anywhere in the text.

Now we can turn our attention to Qohelet, where death anxiety is rampant. However, the death anxiety present in the book of Qohelet can be properly understood only in light of Qohelet’s central quest, which is to discover some vitalizing symbol that will allow him to imagine his life as having death-transcending significance. He expresses the question in terms of יתרון, a term most likely drawn from the economic language of the day, but undoubtedly employed to raise the question of the “enduring significance” of human life:

What profit does a man have in all his toil which he toils under the sun? (1:3)

In my view, Leo Perdue sees correctly when he argues that “Qoheleth desires to find something that endures beyond the limited lifespan of a human being, something that would enable one to

live beyond the grave, at least in human memory. Thus *yitrôn* in Qoheleth intimates ‘continuation’ or ‘endurance.’”²⁶ In the terminology of Terror Management Theory, Qohelet seeks some means of symbolic death transcendence.²⁷

The relationship between Qohelet’s quest for “enduring significance” and his attitude toward death can be clearly seen through an examination of the three central passages of the book related to the *מקרה*, or “fate,” of humankind. The first reflection on the *מקרה* of humankind appears in 2:14-16, closely following Qohelet’s reflection on the failure of the creative mode of death transcendence (2:1-12). Qohelet despairs that there is no difference between the wise and the fool when it comes to death, in contrast to what his wisdom tradition had promised:

The wise person has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness,
but I also²⁸ know that the same fate befalls both of them.²⁹

And I said in my heart: just like the fate of the fool, so it will happen to me.

And why then have I been so very wise?

And I said in my heart that this too is *hebel*. (2:14-15)

According to traditional wisdom, the post-mortem fate of the wise and the fool should not be the same, as we have seen in the discussion of Proverbs. Yet Qohelet denies the claims of symbolic death transcendence in traditional wisdom: the wise do not in fact have an advantage over the foolish. “Just like the fate (*מקרה*) of the fool,” concludes Qohelet, “so it will happen to me.”³⁰

It has become commonplace in scholarship to argue that in the book of Qohelet “*מקרה*” always connotes death.”³¹ However, this view lacks nuance in that it fails to grasp the symbolic nature of both death and death transcendence. For example, Crenshaw argues that Qohelet “realizes that his teachers have overlooked the most important fact of all, a bond that unites villain and hero, fool and sage. Qohelet announces his discovery in an emphatic manner: ‘Yet I also know that a single happening will befall both of them.’”³² That Qohelet’s predecessors could have “overlooked” death seems preposterous from the perspective of TMT, which identifies death awareness as a fundamental human concern.

Antoon Schoors argues that the sense of מקרה in the context 2:14-15 is “expressly suggested” in 2:16. He argues that “the same fate that will happen (יקרה) to both wise and fool is to be understood as death: ימות החכם עם־הכסיל.”³³ However, Qohelet’s concern in this verse is not merely that both the wise and the fool undergo physical death, which in any case seems inevitable, but rather that “the wise will die *just like* the fool” (ימות החכם עם־הכסיל). The reason Qohelet gives for this claim is that “there is no enduring memory for the wise along with the fool” (אין זכרון לחכם) (עם־הכסיל לעולם בשכבר הימים) and that “already in the coming days they both will be forgotten” (הבאים הכל נשכח). What Qohelet bemoans here is not merely physical death, but rather the fact that both the wise and fool will *die and be forgotten*. That is, the מקרה אחד to which Qohelet refers in 2:14-15 is death as a total severance of all connections to life, in this case due to the failure of memory.

Notably, Qohelet’s conclusion comes shortly after an extended exploration of the creative connection of immortality, which he undertakes in the guise of Solomon (2:4-11). In that text, Qohelet explores the possibility that one can symbolically transcend death through great wisdom or great achievements, finally concluding that “there is no יתרון under the sun” (2:11). It should be clarified that Qohelet does *not* determine that his building projects and other endeavors produce no יתרון because death is inescapable, as some interpreters would have it. Crenshaw, for instance, wrongly concludes that “the threat of death rendered every conceivable bonus in life utterly meaningless” for Qohelet.³⁴ The structure of Qohelet’s argument suggests that precisely the opposite is true: the failure to achieve any יתרון (as promised him by his inherited worldview) has rendered the prospect of death utterly threatening.³⁵ As a result, Qohelet concludes that he “hates life” (שנאתי חיים) and that “everything is vapor and chasing after the wind” (הכל הבל ורעות רוח) (2:17).

In terms of Terror Management Theory the structure of the passage can be understood as follows: (1) the traditional worldview fails to provide Qohelet with symbolic means of death transcendence in the Solomonic fiction (יתרון; 2:1-11), (2) bringing him face-to-face with an

unbuffered awareness that death is a complete termination of the self (2:14-16), (3) causing Qohelet to hate the life he now perceives as meaningless and fleeting (2:17). The failure of symbolic structures of meaning leads to increased despair over death, and not the other way around.

In the following chapter, Qohelet again contemplates the nature of death, this time comparing humankind to animals. Whereas Qohelet had previously suggested in 2:12-17 that there is no distinction in the post-mortem states of the wise and the foolish, here he goes a step further to conclude that humans and animals are alike in death. When Qohelet concludes that “just like the death of this one, so is the death of that one” (כמות זה כן מות זה; 3:19) he does not simply mean that both humans and animals physically die, which would be a rather unremarkable observation. Rather, Qohelet is troubled by the idea that humankind has no advantage over animals when it comes to transcending death (ומותר האדם מן-הבהמה אין; 3:19). Qohelet reaches this conclusion based on his observations concerning the relationship of human work to God’s work in 3:1-11. Because God has placed עַלְמ in the human heart to obscure their understanding of “what God has done from beginning to end” (אשר-עשה האלהים מראש ועד-סוף; 3:11), human efforts can be nothing more than “preoccupations” (ענין; 3:10) that provide no ultimate “advantage” (יתרון; 3:9). Thus, it is once again the observation that human life produces no net gain that evokes Qohelet’s conclusion that death is an utter annihilation, and not the other way around. Death does not nullify the gains of life; rather, the failure of the possibility of death transcendence amplifies anxiety about death.

The magnitude of the collapse of Qohelet’s symbolic buffers against mortality is further suggested by his equation of human death with that of animals. Ernest Becker argued that cultural worldviews have their roots in humankind’s attempt to differentiate itself from other animals, particularly as concerns mortality.³⁶ Recent research in TMT confirms that people faced with reminders of death attempt to distance themselves from their animal nature, responding with heightened degrees of disgust to their own bodily functions, as well as to animals in general.³⁷

The researchers conclude that “distinguishing ourselves from animals may be an important component of the way in which most, if not all, worldviews protect humans from anxiety associated with the awareness of death.”³⁸ Qohelet’s conclusion that humankind is no different than animals suggests a total collapse of the anxiety-buffering symbolism of traditional wisdom.

Finally, the collapse of Qohelet’s culturally constructed buffer against mortality salience is also evident in the observations of Qoh 8:16-9:3, which functions as a summary of Qohelet’s perspective on life and death. In this text, Qohelet’s reflections on death once again proceed from his observations that humankind cannot understand the work that God does in the world. Since people are disconnected from God, who is inscrutable, and from the cosmos, in which they cannot participate in any meaningful way, they are unable to connect to any system of meaning larger than themselves, again rendering death an utter disconnection from life.

This passage is often misconstrued to suggest that Qohelet’s concern is about either the universality of death or the fact that righteous people sometimes die earlier than they ought. For instance, according to Michael Fox Qohelet “remarks on an injustice that befalls all: death. Equal fates for unequal persons is an absurdity from which not even the fortunate are exempt. Qohelet alone in the Bible complains about the universality of death.”³⁹ As my analysis has attempted to show, Fox is only partially correct in his assessment of Qohelet. While it is true that Qohelet is troubled by equal fates befalling unequal persons, it is not the case that the common fate that concerns him is the *universality* of death. Rather, Qohelet complains that death universally terminates all *connections* to life for both the righteous and the wicked.

Thus, death is not the central problem in the book of Qohelet any more so than it was in Proverbs. There is no difference in the death that so troubles Qohelet and the death that hardly gives pause to the sages of Proverbs 10-29, who boldly claimed that in the paths of wisdom “there is no death” (אֵל מוֹת? Prov 12:28). Death is as it always was. Rather, the central issue in the book of Qohelet is the collapse of the cultural worldview that buffered those earlier sages against the finality of death by rendering them persons of significance in a meaningful universe whose lives in

some manner transcend death. Whereas that worldview succeeded for the sages of Proverbs, it has failed Qohelet abjectly.

But what would cause the cultural worldview that buffered the sages of Proverbs against death anxiety to collapse in the case of Qohelet? Here again, Terror Management Theory may point us toward an answer. One set of experiments has particular relevance for the present discussion. Terror Management Theory proposes that a successful cultural worldview buffers its adherents against death anxiety. One may test this theory by weakening the worldviews of study participants and then measuring their levels of subconscious death anxiety. In a series of experiments, Schimel et al. tested this hypothesis, demonstrating that exposing individuals to challenges to their own worldview does in fact result in increased accessibility of death-related thoughts.⁴⁰ In the study, a group of Canadian participants read an article derogating either Canadian values (the test group) or Australian values (the control group). Participants then completed a word-fragment completion test that could be answered with either death-related or non-death-related words. For example, the fragment “COFF _ _” could be completed as either “COFFEE” or “COFFIN.” The results showed that death-related thought-completions were significantly higher for Canadians who viewed the anti-Canadian article than for those who viewed the anti-Australian article.⁴¹ This result suggested that the worldview does indeed buffer against death anxiety and that the weakening of the worldview raises death anxiety closer to consciousness. As Schimel interprets the significance of his findings:

[E]very now and again, cherished values and beliefs are brought into question, causing absolute faith in people’s views of reality to wane. When this happens, people’s fundamental beliefs need to be fortified and safeguarded or else goal-directed action may, over time, bog down with chronic thoughts and concerns about human mortality.⁴²

According to Robert Jay Lifton such challenges to cherished values and beliefs eventually lead every cultural worldview to the point of collapse in circumstances in which “[historical change] is

too rapid and extreme to be readily absorbed.”⁴³ According to Lifton, “major turning points in human history involve fundamental alterations or recombinations of these modes [of symbolic death transcendence].”⁴⁴ Worldviews that are unable to adapt rapidly enough, however, eventually collapse, a process that Lifton refers to as “historical desymbolization”⁴⁵ or “historical dislocation.”⁴⁶

My analysis has suggested that the book of Qohelet represents a desymbolization of the anxiety buffering worldview of traditional Israelite wisdom. The modes of symbolic immortality that functioned effectively in the earlier tradition have become impaired, leaving Qohelet with the conclusion that life produces no “net gain” and thus that death proves to be a complete annihilation of both the righteous and the wicked. This position is entirely consistent with Lifton’s argument that such desymbolizations take place during periods of large scale historical dislocation.

Most scholars date the book of Qohelet to the Ptolemaic Period, which was by all accounts a period of rapid cultural and socioeconomic transition.⁴⁷ Economically, international trade increased dramatically in the Ptolemaic Period, including contact with Egypt and Arabia as well as the Aegean and western Asia minor.⁴⁸ The robust international trade of the period undoubtedly brought the Jews into contact with the worldviews of other cultures, exposing them to worldviews alternative to their own.⁴⁹ Economic changes also threatened to undermine old ideas about how to achieve success. Under the Ptolemies, positions of influence were given to those who could derive the most tax revenue from the people, as was the case with the Tobiad Joseph.⁵⁰ There was possibility of great financial gain during this period, but also the threat impoverishment, if one’s fortune turned. The traditional systems for transferring land and wealth from one generation to the next within a family were upended, and, as a result, traditional wisdom’s advice on how to be successful became less relevant, as it was based on unstable assumptions about the social structure. Other religious and intellectual crosscurrents are also notable in Ptolemaic period Palestine. Jewish apocalypticism was on the rise during this period, and ideas about the possibility of literal immortality began to be entertained in various quarters.

Terror Management Theory helps us account for how this rapid social and economic flux may have evoked the death anxiety so readily apparent in Qohelet. The transitions of the Ptolemaic Period called into question the efficacy of the traditional worldview of Israelite Wisdom which, in the context of monarchical Israel, had given its adherents a sense that they were “beings of enduring significance living in a meaningful reality” and thus successfully buffered against death anxiety. In the transition to the Ptolemaic Period, this traditional worldview desymbolized in the face of overwhelming economic and cultural changes that threatened the efficacy of the worldview. The book of Qohelet reflects this desymbolized worldview, in which there is no symbol system to show him how his existence has meaning or how his life transcends death. Thus, the death anxiety that should be buffered by the worldview rises to the fore, threatening to overwhelm Qohelet with the terror of death.

Notes

¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (rev. and enl. ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 66.

² James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," in *Israelite Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. John G. Gammie, et al.; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1978), 205–16.

³ Jack T. Sanders, "Wisdom, Theodicy, Death, and the Evolution of Intellectual Traditions," *JSJ* 36 (2005): 269.

⁴ For an accessible assessment of the state of TMT research, see Sheldon Solomon, et al., "The Cultural Animal: Twenty Years of Terror Management Theory and Research," in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (ed. Jeff Greenberg, et al.; New York: Guilford, 2004), 13–34 and the other essays in the same volume. The original statement of TMT is Jeff Greenberg, et al., "The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory," in *Public Self and Private Self* (ed. R. F. Baumeister; New York: Springer Verlag, 1986). Detailed reviews of the support for TMT at different stages of its development can be found in Jeff Greenberg, et al., "Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology Volume 29* (ed. Mark Zanna; Orland, Fla.: Academic Press, 1997), 61–139 and Tom Pyszczynski, et al., *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 11–92. For a more broadbased assessment of the implications of the thought of Ernest Becker for the humanities, see Daniel Liechty, ed., *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker* (Westport, Conn. (ABB?): Praeger, 2002) For a helpful introduction to TMT, as well as links to a number of online articles, see <http://www.tmt.missouri.edu/>

⁵ On the connection between objective self awareness and mortality salience, see especially Paul J. Silvia, "Nothing or the Opposite: Intersecting Terror Management and Objective Self-Awareness," *European Journal of Personality* 15 (2001): 73–82.

⁶ TMT aims to be broadly consistent with evolutionary theory, grounding the psychological development of human beings, along with its biological development, in the context of adaptation. On the connection between evolution and the symbolic self, see Constantine Sedikides and J. J. Skowronski, "The Symbolic Self in Evolutionary Context," *Personality and Psychology Review* 1 (1997): 80–102. For an argument for the connection between TMT and evolutionary theory, see especially Sheldon Solomon, et al., "Human Awareness of Death and the Evolution of Culture," in *The Psychological Foundations of Culture* (ed. M. Schaller and C. Crandal; Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2003), 15–40. For a defense of TMT in light of critiques from an evolutionary perspective, see Mark J. Landau, et al., "On the Compatibility of Terror Management Theory and Perspectives on Human Evolution," *Evolutionary Psychology* 5 (2007): 476–519.

⁷ Pyszczynski, et al., *In the Wake of 9/11*, 16.

⁸ Pyszczynski, et al., *In the Wake of 9/11*, 16.

⁹ Solomon, et al., "The Cultural Animal," 17.

¹⁰ Pyszczyński, et al., *In the Wake of 9/11*, 17.

¹¹ For the arguments for dating the text to the period of the monarchy, see, e.g., Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 504–505. While Proverbs are traditionally associated with King Solomon, and among some contemporary scholars with the so-called “Solomonic Enlightenment” of the 10th century, this model does not accord well with what we now know about Judah in the time of Solomon (See, *inter alia* Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* [New York: Free Press, 2001], 128–45.) The attribution to Solomon likely stems to his traditional status as the paragon of the wise ruler (see 1Kgs 3:1–28). While some of the individual Proverbs contained in Prov 10–29 may have originated in the Solomonic period (so Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 3) the *collections* as we have them are almost certainly later. For a view that espouses a Solomonic dating for these texts see especially Jehoshua M. Grintz, “‘The Proverbs of Solomon’: Clarifications on the Question of the Relation Between the Three Collections in the Book of Proverbs Attributed to Solomon,” in *Twice-Told Proverbs and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (ed. and trans. Daniel C. Snell; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 87–114. Jehoshua M. Grintz, “‘The Proverbs of Solomon’: Clarifications on the Question of the Relation Between the Three Collections in the Book of Proverbs Attributed to Solomon,” in *Twice-Told Proverbs and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (ed. and trans. Daniel C. Snell; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1993).

¹² Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 928–930.

¹³ Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (SJSJ 125; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 55.

¹⁴ Robert J. Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1979) PAGE NUMBERS

¹⁵ BHS proposes emending ירקב, “will rot” to יוקב, “will be cursed.” While the emendation may produce better parallelism (cf. Pro 11:26; 24:24–25), there is no warrant for it here.

¹⁶ On this point there is remarkable agreement among scholars, including those who deny that Proverbs otherwise symbolizes the extension of life beyond death. Whybray, for instance suggests that “the survival of a man’s name represented a kind of prolongation of his life” (R. Norman Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972], 62) while Fuhs interprets the verse to mean that “the righteous lives on in the memory of his descendants” (Hans F. Fuhs, *Das Buch der Sprichwörter: Ein Kommentar* [FB 95; Würzburg: Echter, 2001], 181 [my translation]). Some even go so far as to apply the term “immortality” to this persistence of the name, as Murphy does when he writes that the verse “reflects the notion of the immortality of the name. . . , the blessed memory that the virtuous leave after them” (Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* [WBC 22; Nashville: Nelson, 1998], 73). Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs*, 62.

¹⁷ Some scholars understand לברכה to have a passive sense here, i.e., “to be blessed.” Toy, for instance, translates the colon, “The memory of the righteous will be blessed,” which he understands to mean that “men will bless the one, or will regard him as an example of blessedness or prosperity” (Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* [ICC; New York: Scribner’s, 1899; repr., 1916], 202; cf. Franz Delitzsch, “Proverbs,” in *Commentary on the Old Testament* [ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; trans. M. G. Easton; 6 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1866–91; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1966], 155) Waltke

is correct, however, in arguing that “the lexical data support and active sense of *librākā*,” citing as examples Deut 23:6, Neh 13:2, and Ps 37:27 (Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 1:448, n. 22).

¹⁸ William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 225.

¹⁹ The clarification “state of being dead” is necessary because English does not clearly distinguish between the two senses of “death”: 1) the act of dying and 2) the state in which one exists after having died.

²⁰ Cf. Job 13:28; Isa 40:20; Hos 5:12

²¹ This may help to explain why, according to Pro 22:1, “a good name is preferred to abundant riches.”

²² So Fuhs, *Das Buch der Sprichwörter*, 230Fuhs, *Das Buch der Sprichwörter*, 230.

²³ As, for instance, in the pronouncement of the destruction of the line of Jereboam in 1 Kgs 15:29: “And this thing became a sin upon the house of Jereboam (בית ירבעם), to destroy it (להכחיד) and to exterminate it (להשמיד) from upon the face of the earth.” The terms שמד and בית occur together elsewhere in Gen 34:30; 1 Sam 24:22; 1 Kgs 16:12; and Amo 9:8), each with similar connotations.

²⁴ Cf. Prov 12:3, 12.

²⁵ The major difficulty with the interpretation of the verse as a reference to immortality is that the unusual usage of the particle אַל (*ʾal*) to negate a noun, whereas it elsewhere functions only to negate verbal forms. Beginning with the LXX, this difficulty has led interpreters to revocalize from *ʾal* to the preposition *ʾel* (“to”), which involves no emendation of the consonantal text. However, the resulting second colon, “the way of its path, to death” suggests that righteousness itself, as the subject of the first colon, leads to death. As a result, further emendation of the second colon is required. The LXX, for instance, reads οδοις δε μνησικακων εις θανατον: “but the way of *those who bear malice* (leads) to death,” a reading whose *Vorlage* is difficult to reconstruct. Others emend נתובה to תועבה, “abomination,” yielding: “the way of abomination (leads) to death” (So, e.g., Murphy, *Proverbs*, 88, n. 28a, Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* [Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 269; Longman, *Proverbs*, 269). However, it is difficult to imagine a process by which תועבה could have been corrupted into נתובה. A more satisfactory solution may be that of Tournay, who emends to פתי בא, yielding: “the way of the simple leads to death” (R. Tournay, “Relectures bibliques concernant la vie future et l’angélologie,” *RB* 69 (1962): 495–97; followed by McKane, *Proverbs*, 451). The result is an antithetical saying in which the ways of righteousness and folly are contrasted as leading to life and death, respectively. Based on the framework I have outlined above for understanding the meaning of “life” and “death” in Prov 10-29, this verse would then be understood as contrasting the utterly disconnected death of those on the path to folly from the death of those on the path of righteousness, which yet remains connected to life. However, it is not clear that there is any reason to discard the MT’s reading of אֵל־מוֹת as “not-death.” While it is true that the particle *ʾal* does not elsewhere negate a noun in biblical Hebrew, Dahood has identified a similar construction in the Ugaritic text of 2 *Aqhat* VI: 25-32. The text evinces a parallelism between the Ugaritic *blmt*, the apparent equivalent Hebrew אֵל־מוֹת, and *hym* (“life”), suggesting the validity of such a parallel in Prov 12:28 (Mitchell Dahood, “Immortality in Proverbs 12:28,” *Biblica* 41 [1960]: 176–81). Such a reading is supported not

only by scholars who elsewhere suggest a doctrine of immortality in Proverbs, such as Waltke (Waltke, *Book of Proverbs*, 1:518, 544–45) but by others less predisposed to finding references to life after death, such as both Fuhs and Vawter (Fuhs, *Das Buch der Sprichwörter*, 209, 215; Bruce Vawter, “Intimations of Immortality in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 [1972]: 168).

²⁶ Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 192.; cf. Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 252.

²⁷ So, for instance, Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (2d ed.; Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 18.

²⁸ Both the *vav* and *gam* are adversative, indicating the extent to which Qohelet’s own experience contradicts the perspective of traditional wisdom. On adversative ׀ see notes on 3:11. On contradictions in Qohelet, see Chapter 4.

²⁹ ׀ may mean “both” when referring to two items (Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* [2 vols; OLA 143; Leuven: Peeters, 1992–2004], 2:5); cf. Qoh 7:15.

³⁰ On Qohelet’s contradictions and his relationship to the Wisdom tradition, see Chapter 4.

³¹ Schoors, *The Preacher*, 2:205. For extended discussions of the sense of מִקְרָה in Qohelet, see Peter Machinist, “Fate, *Miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour p Gittin, and Michael Sokoloff; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 165–70 and Schoors, *The Preacher*, 203–5.

³² James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 84.

³³ Schoors, *The Preacher*, 2:204–5.

³⁴ James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 242.

³⁵ Cf. Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 4: “The ‘lost theme’ to be addressed is not quite death itself. These days, in fact, one has the impression . . . that death has been all too much found. Much more elusive is the psychological relationship between the phenomenon of death and the flow of life.”

³⁶ See particularly Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ??; cf. Sander L. Koole and Agnes E. Van den Berg, “Paradise Lost and Reclaimed: A Motivational Analysis of Human-Nature Relations,” in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (ed. Jeff Greenberg, et al.; New York: Guilford, 2004), 87–90.

³⁷ Jamie L. Goldenberg, et al., “I Am *Not* an Animal: Mortality Salience, Disgust, and the Denial of Human Creatureliness,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 130 (2001): 427–35. See also Cathy R. Cox, et al., “Disgust, Creatureliness, and the Accessibility of Death-Related Thoughts,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37 (2007): 494–507 and Jamie L. Goldenberg, et al., “Fleeing the Body: A Terror Management Perspective on the

Problem of Corporeality,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4 (2000): 200–18.

³⁸ Goldenberg, et al., “I Am *Not* an Animal,” 433. In a separate article, the authors argue that the need to distance themselves from the animals accounts for typical human embarrassment and highly ritualized behavior around sexual behavior and human waste (Goldenberg, et al., “Fleeing the Body,” 200–18). One may think here of Gen 3:6-7, in which human self-awareness is accompanied by the donning of clothes to cover up nakedness.

³⁹ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 292; cf. Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 304: “As elsewhere in the book, the ‘one fate’ here refers to death as the great leveler. In 2:14-15, the fool and the wise are said to have ‘one fate,’ in as much as they all die. In 3:10, it is said that human beings have the same fate as animals, since they all die. Now the author reiterates that there is one fate for everyone.”

⁴⁰ The death-thought accessibility hypothesis (DTA) states that “if a psychological structure (e.g., the cultural worldview) buffers people from thoughts about death, then weakening this psychological structure should momentarily bring thoughts about death closer to awareness.” See Jeff Schimel, et al., “Is Death Really the Worm at the Core? Converging Evidence That Worldview Threat Increases Death-Thought Accessibility,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92 (2007): 789–803 The quotation is from *ibid*, 789.

⁴¹ Schimel, “The Worm at the Core,” 791–93.

⁴² Schimel, “The Worm at the Core,” 802.

⁴³ Robert J. Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 14.

⁴⁴ Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 284–85.

⁴⁵ Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, 293.

⁴⁶ Lifton, *The Protean Self*, 14–17.

⁴⁷ In fact, my argument does not hinge on a precise dating of the text, but only on the hypothesis that the book was written during a time of significant cultural flux, which comports well with either the Ptolemaic period or the end of the Persian Period, to which other scholars assign the book.

⁴⁸ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 56 Hengel notes the connection between this trade and the early evidence of Jewish communities in these areas.

⁴⁹ Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 44.

⁵⁰ Grabbe, *The Persian and Greek Periods*, 197.

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