

International best-selling author **Haim Shapira, PhD**

Vanity of Vanities

What has been will be again  
light is sweet, and a pleasant *thing*  
*it is* for the eyes to behold the sun

all come from  
dust, and to  
dust all return

**THE**

anger resides in  
the lap of fools

THERE IS  
NOTHING  
NEW  
UNDER  
THE SUN

**WISDOM**

WHAT  
HAS BEEN  
WILL BE  
AGAIN

*of* **KING**

PATIENCE  
IS BETTER  
THAN  
PRIDE

**SOLOMON**

ENJOY LIFE WITH YOUR WIFE, WHOM YOU LOVE

WORDS ARE MEANINGLESS

A Contemporary Exploration of  
Ecclesiastes & the Meaning of Life

A TIME TO BE BORN,  
AND A TIME TO DIE

WISDOM IS BETTER THAN STRENGTH



**Haim Shapira** was born in Lithuania in 1962. In 1977 he emigrated to Israel, where he earned a PhD in mathematical genetics for his dissertation on Game Theory and another PhD for his research on the mathematical and philosophical approaches to infinity. He now teaches mathematics, psychology, philosophy and literature. He is an author of nine bestselling books. His stated mission as a writer is not to try to make his readers agree with him, but simply to encourage them to enjoy thinking. One of Israel's most popular and sought-after speakers, he lectures on creativity and strategic thinking, existential philosophy and philosophy in children's literature, happiness and optimism, nonsense and insanity, imagination and the meaning of meaning, as well as friendship and love. He is also an accomplished pianist and an avid collector of anything beautiful.

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*A Book of Love*

*Happiness and Other Small Things of Absolute Importance A Most Beautiful*

*Childhood Memory*

# **The Wisdom of King Solomon**

A Contemporary Exploration of  
Ecclesiastes and the Meaning of Life

**Haim Shapira, PhD**

Translated from the Hebrew  
by Baruch Gefen



**WATKINS**  
Sharing Wisdom Since 1893

*To my parents, Alexander and Tatyana Shapira*

**Author's Note** Quotations in English from Ecclesiastes are taken from the 21st Century King James Version, which is the 1611 King James Version slightly modified to modernize archaic vocabulary. The complete KJ21 translation of the Scroll of Ecclesiastes can be found at the back of the book (pages 222–43).

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# KING SOLOMON: A VERY SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Just before King David dies, he appoints as king his 12-year-old son Solomon, with these words:

“I go the way of all the earth. Be thou strong therefore, and show thyself a man; and keep the charge of the Lord thy God to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His judgements, and His testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest and whithersoever thou turnest thyself.”

1 Kings 2:2–3

This classic blessing is often quoted by Jewish fathers to their 12-year-old sons on the day of their Bar Mitzvah.

So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.

And all the earth sought Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart.

1 Kings 10:23–4

The Bible portrays King Solomon as the “wisest of all men”. When Solomon has a vision in Gibeon, God invites him to ask for anything, and Solomon requests “a heart that hears”, whereupon God gives him “a wise and understanding heart” like no one had before.

The best-known story of his wisdom is the “Judgement of Solomon”. In 1 Kings 3:16–28 we hear of two mothers, each with an infant son, all living under the same roof. One of the babies dies, and each woman claims the remaining boy as her own. By a clever tactic Solomon resolves the unsolvable dispute between these two women by proposing the baby be cut in two, each woman to receive half its body. The true mother begs Solomon, “Give the baby to her, don’t kill him!” The wise king then gives her the boy



her the boy.

The Bible says that King Solomon (also known as Jedidiah, which means “beloved of God”), son of King David and Bathsheba, ruled over a united kingdom that stretched from the Euphrates river to “the border of Egypt” (1 Kings 5:1). The biblical account of the 40-year reign of Solomon (971–931 BC) inspired artists, poets and theologians over the centuries to create some of the most beautiful depictions of this enlightened, benevolent, legendary, wise and unprecedentedly prosperous kingdom. King Solomon’s spirit appears to Dante in Heaven and the wise king also makes a surprising guest appearance in *One Thousand and One Nights*: he punishes a genie that displeases him by locking him in a bottle, sealed with the “Solomon seal”, and thrown into the sea. Islam views Solomon (Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd) as one of the elect of God, a divinely appointed monarch and one of the greatest world rulers, who was endowed not only with unprecedented wisdom but also with an ability to speak to animals and exert power over genies.

King Solomon’s palace was known for its splendour and the extent of property and people it contained, including thousands of horses and carriages, a harem of 1,000 women (the wise king had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines), expensive goods from exotic countries, slaves and trade delegations. They say that when Queen Sheba brought some of her treasures to Solomon’s palace, she was so amazed that she lost her breath until “there was no more spirit in her” (1 Kings 10:5). According to the Bible, the main reason for her admiration was the clever answers King Solomon gave to all the difficult questions she thought of. It is such a pity the Bible does not say anything about either the questions or the answers.

Solomon was also noted as a superb statesman. Stories of the way he held business negotiations with the King of Tyre, his international trade of fine horses, commercial delegations and gifts he received accentuate the glorious period of the Israeli Kingdom. Unlike his father David, who was a great warrior and military leader, Solomon attained his wealth thanks to his keen mind and business skills, not by the sword. He married the daughters and sisters of neighbouring kings (such as Naamah the Ammonite, Pharaoh’s daughter) to form and bolster political alliances.

The crowning achievement of Solomon’s reign is the building of the magnificent, gold-coated Temple in Jerusalem which his father, King David, had dreamed about: a sacred building the Jewish nation has cherished for millennia since.

*Sic transit gloria mundi.* The Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar

II after the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC – even lost temples can be cherished.

“Call no man happy before his death.” The Bible is full of surprises. The elderly Solomon loses the ability to distinguish between good and evil. He is influenced by his wives’ religious wishes and erects pagan temples at which they can worship their idols. It is even mentioned (1 Kings 11:4–5) that at some stage he becomes a follower of Ashtoreth (or Astarte in Greek, a form of Ishtar, the ancient Sumerian goddess of love, beauty and sexual desire). And, as if that were not enough, he also becomes excessively fond of wealth: “And all king Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold...” (1 Kings 10:21). Solomon ceases to be a wise ruler. He begins to oppress the people, imposing forced labour and high taxes on his subjects. He is no longer an admired king. What turns Solomon, the wisest of all men, from the right path? The Bible is silent on this.

Within weeks of Solomon’s death, the great Israelite empire built by his father, King David, has been destroyed.

# INTRODUCTION

Jerusalem. Thanks to some capricious cosmic probability I arrived in this city – which, according to the Talmud, was blessed with nine measures of beauty out of ten measures that descended on the world – on 18 November 1997, on the same day as Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat, who came there to make “the peace of the brave” between the People of the Book and the descendants of the Pharaohs. The purpose of my arrival was slightly less dramatic: I had emigrated from the Soviet Union, where I spent my first 15 years, to my spiritual homeland, the Holy Land. Three weeks later, I started attending the Rehavia High School, located in one of the prettiest spots of the eternal city. As fate would have it, the first class I joined studied the Bible: Ecclesiastes, in fact. That was my first encounter with the Book of Books – the Bible, which topped the list of banned books in the USSR. The writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin were the only scripture I had been allowed peruse.

So there I was, in a class full of Hebrew speakers who were reading and discussing Ecclesiastes in the original. I did not understand the words then, but I loved the sounds. I was so fascinated that on the very same evening I obtained a copy of Ecclesiastes’ book in Russian, my mother tongue, and though I could not even fathom the meaning of the title, I read and reread the text. At the time I was too young to grasp the depth of Ecclesiastes’ thoughts, his rare intellectual courage or the tragic meaning of his insights – but understanding is not really required to feel enchantment, amazement or even pleasure.

And so it came to pass that one of the strangest and most eccentric books of the Scripture served as my gate of entry to the wondrous world of the Bible. I have read – to give it its full name – the Scroll of Ecclesiastes (traditionally attributed to King Solomon) many times since and it has excited me every time. I believe it is one of the climactic expressions of the human spirit as a whole and particularly of contemplative literature.

In this book I do not presume to guide you through Ecclesiastes’ teachings. I have merely selected excerpts and rearranged them to match the issues I wish to address. Here we will discuss vanities and nonsense, wisdom, law and justice, life and death, passion and lust, joy and happiness, faith, old age, and women – Ecclesiastes is familiar with all things human. It is no accident that whenever I give a course on existential philosophy I dedicate the first two meetings to that book.

The Scroll of Ecclesiastes is not a very orderly piece of work. My book about the Scroll of Ecclesiastes also lacks any signs of order. One of the reasons

about the scroll of Ecclesiastes also lacks any signs of order. One of the reasons for this is my associative mind. Another reason is the fact that I decided to invite many wise men and women of all eras to help me comprehend the ancient scroll through their ideas and interpretations because I am not worthy of delving into this marvellous book all on my own. I came to the conclusion, therefore, that my main contribution to this discussion would be to find respectable guests to share my quest, though I will still present my own humble thoughts. The third and most important reason why this book lacks order is the fact that life is erratic too.

My main hope is that though this little book of mine does not present a definitive message, still it will interest you.

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.

Genesis 2:8

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.”

Genesis 2:16–17

But the man did eat from the tree of knowledge. And from this the whole tapestry of our predicament unfolded.

## **Wise Words for the Reader**

An Italian friend once told me that you become closely familiar with the main city square only after you walk all of the streets that lead to and from it, including dead ends. Let's go.

## CHAPTER 2

# VANITY OF VANITIES?

### Synopsis

*In this chapter we will try to understand the meaning of the word “vanity” (hevel in Hebrew) and then ask ourselves how well it describes life. We will familiarize ourselves with Tolstoy’s monumental book Reading Circle, and discuss the numerous similarities between the great Russian novelist and the Biblical poet. We will revisit an ancient parable about what goes on under the sun, and examine our hopes for the end of our lives.*

### The Unbearable Shortness of Being

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.  
“Vanity of vanities,” saith the Preacher. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” What profit hath a man from all his labour which he doeth under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever.

Ecclesiastes 1:1–4

Wow! What an exemplary opening! What an unequivocal statement right at the beginning! And the words! And the rhythm! (Forgive the exclamation marks: this opening statement amazes me every time I read it, especially in Hebrew).

As previously mentioned, when I first read the Scroll of Ecclesiastes in an Israeli high school, I did not have enough Hebrew to comprehend it. Reading the Scroll in Russian, I discovered that I don’t have enough days under the sun to grasp its profundity.

My first true reading of the original Hebrew version occurred when I was in my early 20s. Let me tell you: it is a great pleasure to just read the Bible with no mediators or interpreters, without teachers and knowledge graders, without fear. The Scroll of Ecclesiastes made such a huge impression on me that I decided to learn it by heart so that I’ll always have it with me.

This “great book of soul searching” as Professor Yechovsky Leibovitz

THIS great BOOK OF SOUL-SEARCHING, as PROFESSOR YESHAYAHU LEIDOWITZ called it, has been discussed by scholars, thinkers and commentators of all ages. It has been observed from every angle. No stone in it has been left unturned ... and every stone has been turned over and over.

The first word of the actual text is *hevel*. Studies have found that 38 of the 73 times that word appears in the Old Testament – more than half – are in Ecclesiastes. When one word so frequently appears in such a small volume, we should examine its meaning before we too delve into the book itself.

My Hebrew–Hebrew dictionary offers the following definitions of *hevel*:

- 1) hot air, vapour that comes out of a breathing mouth; 2) steam; 3) something worthless, a thing of folly; 4) in vain, for nothing.

A few entries later we find *hevel havalim* (“vanity of vanities”), which the dictionary explains as “absolute folly”, or something “devoid of substance, unreal”.

The aforementioned Klein and Fuchs suggest that the word could also mean “absurd” – referring to a situation or event that defies reason. This is an interesting meeting point between the biblical poet and Albert Camus, the philosopher of the Absurd.

In his major work *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus discusses the absurdity of existence and the rebellion against this meaninglessness. As may be recalled, the ancient Greek gods punished Sisyphus by forcing him to roll a heavy rock up a hill to the summit; but whenever he gets there, the rock rolls right back down and he is doomed to climb down and resume his futile mission. Surprisingly, Camus does not believe that Sisyphus’ life is filled with nothing but vanities and suffering. In the final sentence of this essay he even wrote that Sisyphus may be considered a happy man after all.

I was not surprised to discover that people who attempted to translate *hevel havalim* encountered some serious problems. Russian and English versions I examined offer diverse and often widely different interpretations of this opening statement. Guessing that most of my dear readers are not fluent in Russian, I have decided to focus on several English renditions.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.  
Absolutely pointless! Everything is pointless.  
Futility of futilities, all is futile.  
Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher.  
Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.

In the penultimate example quoted, *Kohelet* is translated as “teacher”, though I have seen it rendered as “preacher” and even “leader of the assembly”. (The most precise literal translation is “gatherer”).)

Although “vanity” is the most common translation of *hevel*, that’s a problem for English speakers because its numerous meanings (including its association with makeup) relate primarily to pride, the cardinal sin of hubris, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Yet the opening statement of Ecclesiastes has very little to do with pride. That said, an exception must be made for one very interesting aspect: despair may be viewed as a grave extension of pride in the sense that a desperate person may be too proud and vain to believe that not even God can help him. Thus, such despair is pride combined with blasphemy.

In any case, my translation of choice for *hevel* is “fleeting” – something that goes by in an instant, like beer foam, leaving very little trace behind.

Thus, in my humble opinion the first line of Solomon’s Scroll should be translated as:

Fleeting, everything is fleeting.

When Ecclesiastes says that “childhood and youth are *hevel*,” I tend to believe that means to say that every period of our lives ends swiftly – and he did not mean to say they were lived in vanity and folly. Even Arthur Schopenhauer believed childhood to be a wonderful period during which the child, who is not yet aware of sex and death, may experience periods of true bliss. Dostoevsky maintained that lovely childhood memories we keep and cherish could be very helpful in particularly hard times.

Everything is fleeting or, as Heraclitus said, you cannot enter the same river twice, because both you and the river are in a constant flux. Some of Heraclitus’ followers argued that you cannot enter the same river even once. Furthermore, time plays cruel jokes on us as well. For one thing, it does not flow regularly, as the classic physicists once maintained. The older we are, the faster time goes by, accelerating to reach unbelievable velocities.

The young view life as an endless future, while the old view it as a fleeting past.

Arthur Schopenhauer

Still, why should we think that temporary things lack value? Perhaps it is the fact that everything we do is a one-time thing that imbues it with so much meaning? After all, *everything* slips through our fingers. Moments of joy, creation, wonder



and exaltation all wither away, but that applies also to moments of pain, heartbreak, mourning for a loved one or any broken dream. Everything begins to fade the minute we first become aware of it: the smile of a child, empires and kingdoms, butterfly wings, falling leaves, sunrises and sunsets, ideas we have loved, people we have loathed, the first kiss and the last hug, all of history and every history book, the Milky Way and our debt to the tax authorities – all will be gone one day. Nothing lasts forever, and so our blue planet is doomed as well.

When my youngest daughter was three years old, she used to wake me up at 3am, drumming on my head and saying, “Daddy, I’m bored.” These days are gone now and my daughter is now a charming woman in her 20s. That child – whom I miss very much and who felt the night was too long and too boring – exists now only in photos and memories.

Our parents depart and leave behind empty chambers in our hearts and empty rooms in their houses. The river you cannot enter twice was “the present”, according to Heraclitus. Not a single moment of our lives will ever reappear. The great Polish poet Wisława Szymborska wrote that “present” is a paradoxical word: once uttered, it becomes the past.

Should we conclude that all is fleeting? If so, how do we implement that insight in our lives? Note that Heraclitus’ statement gives us no reason to rejoice or despair: it is merely an incentive for us to expand our presence, to live deeper in the present, to meet life fully conscious. The most important thing I believe he and Ecclesiastes wanted to teach us is that the present moment is all we have.

Let me put it this way. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wanted to pause a moment because he felt it was wonderful. I believe that every moment is wonderful precisely because it cannot be paused.

## **Language is a Virus**

Looking again at that word *hevel*, biblical scholars believe that Ecclesiastes assigns it different and often complementary meanings.

Here are a few examples from other Old Testament sources:

Man is like vanity (*hevel*); his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

Psalms 144:4

(Shakespeare, in *Macbeth*, translated King David as: “Life’s but a walking shadow.”)

“... every man walketh in a vain show ...”

“... your fathers ... have walked after vanity, and have become vain?”

Jeremiah 2:5

In any event, Ecclesiastes accentuates “vanity” by insisting on “vanity of vanities”, following the linguistic structure of “song of songs” and “holiest of holy” to indicate just how absurd and temporary everything is. He feels a “damp, drizzly November in my soul”, as Herman Melville puts it (at the beginning of *Moby-Dick*), and so he embarks on a philosophical quest to discover the meaning of life and what advantage there is to being human, if any. Surprisingly, he leads with the conclusion of his studies. Why?

Well, first I must state that nothing is simple in this Scroll of wisdom. Even if a sloppy or superficial reading could make it appear so, the book is not straightforward. Simply put, the first question is this: if all is vanity in the sense of being utter nonsense, stupidities and empty shells, why should Ecclesiastes even bother to put his thoughts in writing? Are they not vanities too?

Is the “vanity of vanities” necessarily the end-result of human intellect, or could it be just a half-way stop or even a port of embarkation?

According to certain books of the Kabbalah, God creates worlds with his mouth’s breath. In Hebrew, “breath of mouth” is ... *hevel*! Thus, not only is this *hevel* not insubstantial, not only is it not empty, not in vain, but it is actually the force that makes worlds happen. The idea that the world and everything in it are created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) with words and breath is not new, but the mystical *Book of Zohar*, the most important scripture of Jewish mysticism, takes it a step forward.

In *Zohar and Eros* Yehuda Liebes writes: “According to the Zohar, if the world was created by breath, then that *hevel* is the foundation of the world. ‘Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ The Zohar interprets this verse with reference to the seven vanities on which the world stands, which is the face of the King, which are the seven lower *Sefirot*.”

This interpretation claims that the opening verse speaks of seven vanities, one for each day of creation. If you cannot find the seven there, it is because you are not counting it right. Let’s see: “vanity” plus “vanities” is three; repeated twice, we have six; and the final “vanity” makes seven.

As noted, *hevel* appears 38 times in the Scroll of Ecclesiastes, but it is not the most commonly used word. The royal poet’s word of choice is “all” – which appears more than twice as many times. “All” is not just a word. Great danger

awaits its users; it must be applied with great care. For example, if we agree that *all* is vanity, we will have to accept that this very idea is vanity too. Still, we must not forget that the Scroll was written by a mighty king. Ordinary people's rules do not apply to him.

# COUNT TOLSTOY

It is time to explore the depth of soul of a 50-year-old man. He has long forgotten the aesthetic stage of his life, recently concluded the ethical stage, but has not yet made the leap of faith that would take him to the religious stage. So let me introduce you to a huge writer and a perplexed man whose tormented soul was overpowered by a damp, drizzly and particularly dark Russian November. He is not a king, only a count, but he has fame and fortune, perfect health, and the love of his wife, which has not brought him any closer to happiness or the answer to the question, “What profit hath a man from all his labour which he doeth under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:3).

## *Reading Circle*

After he has finished working on *Anna Karenina*, a novel that German philosopher Oswald Spengler crowned as “the best novel ever written and the best that can ever be written”, Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy feels he has exhausted his skills as a novelist.\* He has stopped caring about literature and devotes his time to finding the meaning of our existence under the sun.

This for me is a golden opportunity to acquaint you with a literary work I believe is one of the most important and original books in the history of Western literature: Tolstoy’s *Reading Circle*. I shall elaborate a little on the history of this work, because we will meet it again further down the road.

Regrettably, this masterpiece by Tolstoy is not popular today, and I suppose it never was. I imagine some of you have heard of it or know something about it, at best, but very few have actually read it, which is not surprising. My mother was a teacher of Russian literature. She owned a 40-volume set of Tolstoy’s works (published by the Russian Literature Academy), but *Reading Circle* was not in it – for a simple and infuriating reason. The work was boycotted before the October Revolution of 1917 – mainly because it protests against all kinds of governments and regimes; it favours anarchism, speaks against war, the Church, the rich who keep their treasures to themselves, the laws of inheritance, the prominence of the family nucleus, and exploitation, while advocating mutual help, human equality and brotherhood, and the love of truth. Its subtitle makes clear its ambition: “*On Truth, the Meaning of Life, and Modes of Behaviour*”. The book was boycotted *after* the October Revolution of 1917 for approximately the same reasons.

It all started on 15 March 1894. On that day Tolstoy wrote in his diary: “The

It all started on 15 March 1884. On that day Tolstoy wrote in his diary. "The people need a reading circle, and I even know whom they should read: Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Lao Tzu, Buddha, Pascal, the Gospel ... as well as Socrates, Confucius, the Talmud, Seneca, Plutarch, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant, Schopenhauer and Emerson ... Every man should know these things."

I could give you the entire list, but let me spare you. It includes some 300 thinkers and sources that Tolstoy believed are so essential that no one should die before reading them all. I'm sure it would come as no big surprise if I told you that Ecclesiastes is in there too (Tolstoy calls him "Solomon the Wise" – because a philosopher is someone who loves wisdom, but a wise person is one who already owns that wisdom).

At that stage Count Tolstoy no longer pursued personal fame, which is why he decided to write a truly important book enlisting the help of all Eastern and Western thinkers, writers and philosophers who ever graced this Earth with their presence and made an appreciable impact on humanity. The main idea was to collect the *crème de la crème* of human knowledge and wisdom to answer Ecclesiastes' eternal question: "What profit hath a man from all his labour which he doeth under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3).

The unique structure of Tolstoy's book is worth a brief discussion. The literary material it contains was selected, edited and arranged for daily readings – starting on 1 January and ending on the last day of December. Every daily reading carries the title of the subject to be discussed. I open the book at random. I chance upon 2 June and the subject of the day is "The Woman" (actually, I don't think this is at all accidental, because I often read this page). Tolstoy presents us with a selection of thought-provoking quotations from numerous writers, interspersed with his own remarks, and then adds a short story. In this case, it is Chekhov's wonderful "Dushechka" ("Darling"), with Leo's commentary. Every seventh day carries a slightly longer story, a kind of weekly sermon. The last day of every month has a special subject he chose to focus on and explore in depth. *Reading Circle* carries stories of varying lengths, some of which are his own (including some specially written for this work), while others are taken from Anatole France, Guy de Maupassant, Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Victor Hugo and many others who partake in Tolstoy's writing endeavour even without being asked.

The book's daily subjects include Knowledge, Faith, Solitude, Kindness, Education, Modesty, Lies, Love, Wisdom, Women, Self-Improvement, War, Law, Death, God, and many more.

*Reading Circle* quotes a whole range of sources, but it is much more than a mere collection of aphorisms and clever sayings. Tolstoy chose the quotes that

best expressed ideas he had thought up or fully believed to be true.

Michel de Montaigne explains the reason for the numerous quotations in this book better than I can:

I quote others only in order the better to express myself.

The passages selected are closely knitted, creating a fabric from which emerges the unique worldview of Tolstoy in his last few years of life.

Influenced by modern travel guides, I have rated the pieces in Tolstoy's work. I gave one star to interesting stories or insights, two stars to really fascinating items, and three stars to pieces and stories I will never forget ("Dushechka" explained by Tolstoy is one of the finest). I did not grade things I read and felt I would not mind forgetting. We will meet some of the superstars later.

Czech writer Milan Kundera (who is dear to me for his lovely idea that Jerusalem is the true heart of Europe, a heart pulsing outside the body) once wrote that when people become very old, they may ignore the opinions of the human herds and ignore their future. He said that the elderly are "alone with their approaching death, which has no eyes or ears", and so have no reason to make people like them, and can do or say whatever they please.

When he wrote *Reading Circle* Tolstoy was precisely at that point in life. He was free to say anything he wanted without fear. Furthermore, he believed it was his duty to express what was in his heart, the unadorned truth. On account of his advanced years (he was born in 1828 and the book was mostly written around the turn of the century), Tolstoy did not fear the government or the Church and did not bother to soften his views to please them. He did not feel compelled to speak in innuendoes or otherwise conceal his provocative and confrontational opinions. He did not even feel he must write a pure kind of literature. At that point, no one doubted his literary skills, so all he cared about was the truth.

So how did Tolstoy answer Ecclesiastes?

Well, I hope you did not expect to find the answer here and now. There is more to read. Go on!

## Lost

As noted before, after he has written *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy feels he can no longer write novels and dedicates himself to finding the meaning of life, which to him is a religious issue.

"All religions," he writes in *Reading Circle*, "primarily answer: What does Man live for?" He goes on:

At the core of all religions, from the loftiest to the simplest and most primitive, you find questions about the source of mankind and the relationship between Man and the world around him.

Tolstoy is not interested in the theoretical aspects of religion, knowing full well that those who do not live by the principles of their faith are not actually believers.

To die for a religion is easier than to live it absolutely.

Jorge Luis Borges, Alfred Adler and many others

At the age of 50 Tolstoy experiences a deep spiritual crisis. Everything just shattered into pieces, he recounts. Things that he has always believed he understood become totally unfathomable. His life, which he earlier describes as full of charm and magic, is now shallow, totally meaningless and “absolutely lifeless”, as he puts it. “Death is all around me. What am I to do?” Asking himself this question, he cannot find an answer.

In his monumental book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, psychologist and philosopher William James copied Tolstoy’s own moving account of his crisis from *Confessions*. Since Russian is my mother tongue, let me translate it for you from the original:

I felt that things that have so far served me as levers were now broken and gone, that I had nothing to hold on to, that my reasons for living are no longer with me, that my life has stopped moving, and an irresistible force is drawing me toward abandoning this life one way or another. ... I tried my best to find a way to escape my own life.

There I was, a supposedly happy man, finding myself hiding my own shoelaces for fear I might hang myself from the roof beam in my room, where I go up alone every evening to change clothes. Furthermore, I stopped going hunting with my gun for fear I might not resist the temptation and use that easy opportunity to end my life. I did not know what I wanted. I feared life and wanted to escape it, though I still had some hopes, after all. All of that happened to me when, from whatever angle you may choose to observe it, my life was what people call “a life of perfect bliss”. I was not yet 50; I had a good, loving, and beloved wife; I had good children and a large estate that kept growing and expanding without any effort on my part; more than ever, I was respected by people I knew and those I had not known; everyone praised me, and I let myself believe, without risking exaggeration or misjudgement, that I was world-famous.

I was of sound mind and body. In fact, I had incredible physical and mental powers that are rarely found among people my age. I could harvest with the peasants without lagging behind, and I could persist with my mental efforts for eight to ten hours straight and experience no unwelcome signs of strain.

It was under these circumstances that I could no longer find a logical reason to go on with my life, which seemed to be an unfunny, evil and stupid joke. A man can live his life for as long as his life intoxicates him, but a man who has sobered up can see, against his will, that everything is a lie – a cruel and stupid lie! Yes, a vicious and stupid lie – as simple as that.

What happened to make Tolstoy feel this way? How can a person who has everything feel he actually has nothing? What was it that turned his fine and magical life into a lifeless thing?

Tolstoy offers a partial solution of this riddle in a parable:

### **White Mouse, Black Mouse**

An oriental tale describes a traveller who happens upon a monstrous and predatory beast at the heart of the barren prairie. Attempting to escape its threatening fangs and claws, the traveller climbs down an empty well he comes across. As soon as he starts climbing down, he realizes that a dreadful dragon is at the bottom, opening its mouth to swallow him whole. Stuck between the beast and the dragon, the traveller suddenly notices a small shrub growing from a crack in a stone. He grabs it and holds on to it for dear life.

The hours go by and our hapless traveller feels that his arms are weakening and knows he will eventually have to let go and face his fate, above or most likely below. But not yet! Suddenly he sees two mice, one white and one black, who take turns energetically nibbling at the shrub he is holding. Our poor friend knows then that all hope is lost and he is doomed to be eaten by the hungry dragon. Hanging there, suspended in midair, he suddenly sees a tiny red fruit growing on the shrub. He sticks out his tongue and starts eating it with great relish.

Just like that traveller, I too hang on to dear life, said Tolstoy, though I know that the merciless dragon awaits me at the bottom of things, and there is no escaping him. I just cannot understand what is the point of this horrible torment that precedes the end, he went on. I am trying to enjoy the little red fruit as I did before, but it no longer comforts me. Nothing tastes good any more, and the white and black mice – like days and nights – keep gnawing at the shrub I hang from. All I can see now is the dragon's open mouth, from which there is no escape, and the mice chewing at the rest of my life under my terrified gaze.



escape, and the mice chewing at the rest of my life under my terrified gaze.

This is not a parable, Tolstoy states, but the very truth, an indisputable truth, a truth all men are aware of. We live and die at the very same time because every minute of our lives brings us a minute closer to our death.

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Ecclesiastes 3:20

After telling the story and explaining its meaning, Tolstoy wishes to make sure we all understand him unmistakably, using simple and direct words that go right to the heart of the matter.

What will be the outcome of things I did today? Or yesterday? Or things I will do tomorrow? What will be the result of my life? What is their meaning? What should I live for? Why should I do anything? Does life have any kind of meaning that will not be lost to Death, which awaits me?

These questions are seemingly the simplest there are. They feature in the souls of every human – from a carefree youth to a seasoned elder. If no answers are given to these questions, life cannot go on, as I have personally experienced. Yet there still may be something – I keep telling myself, time and again – that I have not noticed or have failed to understand. After all, I cannot believe that despair is the natural state of humans. So I started looking for solutions on every branch of knowledge and wisdom that people of all countries and times have acquired. I searched and investigated and queried for a long time, making great efforts. I was searching for answers not out of vain curiosity, but with great pain. Not idly did I search, but with great exertion and determination of spirit. I searched day and night, far and wide, seeking answers like a dying man seeks salvation – and yet I could not find answers. And if that was not enough, I became convinced that all those who searched before me for the same answers I sought, found nothing. Not only did they not find the truth, but they even determined that the absence of meaning in our lives and our actions is the only truth in existence and there is no other.

## **The Oedipus Rex Complex**

Sophocles, the greatest tragic writer of ancient Greece, wrote (in his play *Oedipus at Colonus*): “Not to be born is best, beyond all estimation; but when a

man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came.” This, naturally, reminded me of Ryunosuke’s foetuses from the first chapter of this book: those who refused to be born after receiving their lives’ forecasts.

In *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles describes how Oedipus lost his high status and deteriorated to the lowest department in Hell; but in *Oedipus at Colonus* he tells how Oedipus rises from the lowest pit to receive the gods’ grace. Even so, his final words are “Not to be born is best.”

For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life being spent as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 6:12

The aforementioned William James suggested the following experiment. Pick a person who seems to be having a good life. If possible, choose one whom people envy. Next, try to find out if his or her happiness is real or fake. James was willing to bet that you will soon discover that in nine of ten cases, people just act happy. You will find that deep down in their hearts no one feels any kind of satisfaction; that people’s desires by far exceed their achievements; that people have secret desires that can never be fulfilled; and that the cellars of our minds contain desires we do not even want to see.

I once conducted a similar experiment during one of my lectures. I asked the audience (320 people aged 30–70) to mentally count the blissful people they knew. They could not think of too many, but there were some. Next I asked them to eliminate the people they did not know intimately and for a long time from their lists. The lists emptied completely. Nobody was left.

Conclusion: the happy people are those we do not know well enough.

I once heard there was a happy man somewhere. In Brazil, I think.

Vladimir Mayakovsky

It is important not to confuse happiness with *moments* of happiness or, more precisely, happy periods. It is possible to be happy for a time – be it two hours or two days or a month – and some of us may even enjoy a wonderful year now and then. But that’s all.

Woody Allen does not agree with me on this one.

He believes our joyful periods are much shorter. He claimed that if someone is happy for three days in a row, this only means that other people are hiding things from him; while a lifetime of happiness is simply impossible and illogical. In any event, we must not forget that, in the restaurant of life, the last thing served is the bill.

Count no man happy until he be dead.

Ancient Greek saying

The intention that man should be happy is not in the plan of Creation.

Sigmund Freud

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, author of *Faust*, was an important poet, thinker, theologian and scientist, and one of the wisest and most optimistic people to ever grace this planet. Here is what he had to say at his old age:

I will say nothing against the course of my existence. But at bottom it has been nothing but pain and burden, and I can affirm that during the whole of my 75 years, I have not had four weeks of genuine wellbeing. It is but the perpetual rolling of a rock that must be raised up again forever.\*

And this is a statement of an optimist! Yes, even Goethe believed that life is vanity of vanities, a burden, and a whole heap of suffering.

It seems that Tolstoy is not the only one who experienced a crisis while searching for the meaning of life. Tolstoy has found no signposts to follow, but he is not going to give up and will look elsewhere. We will join him on his quest.

Before I end this chapter, let me refer to the following verse by Ecclesiastes:

For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 6:12

“After him” is often interpreted to mean “after his death”. Thus, I read two questions in this phrase. First: What will happen to my relatives, acquaintances, nation and world after I am gone? This is a very interesting prospect, but the second question is much more fascinating: What will happen to *me* after I die? I had a friend who argued that hell is better than nothingness. I objected, saying

that nothingness is preferable to hell, and I tend to believe it may even be better than heaven. (I once had a dream of a paradise that looked very much like this world of ours and several philosophers who were present justified its faults by saying that this was “the best of all possible heavens”.)

Czesław Miłosz, the great Polish poet and Nobel laureate (1980), who was born in Lithuania and is honoured at Israel’s Yad Vashem memorial to the Holocaust as one of the “Righteous among the Nations”, supports my view, claiming that the true opium of the people is a belief in nothingness after death – the huge solace of thinking that for our betrayals, greed, cowardice and (in some cases) murders we are not going to be judged. There is nothing like the peace and comfort found in believing that all our deeds and sins will disappear into the vast ocean of forgetfulness.

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\* If you are too lazy to read this huge novel in its entirety, let me recommend Vladimir Nabokov’s wonderful discussion of *Anna Karenina*, to be found in a collection of *Lectures on Russian Literature*. Nabokov’s analysis is not as entertaining as the original book itself, but more so than many other novels. I believe that if you read it – in the original or a good and faithful translation – you will have to agree with Spengler: it is truly an immaculate novel.

\* This is taken from *Conversations of Goethe* by Johann Peter Eckermann, Walter M Dunne Publishing (1901) – one of the oldest books in my library.

## CHAPTER 4

# THE MENTAL HEALTH WARD, OR THE GATES OF SADNESS AND HAPPINESS

### *Synopsis (of Chapter 4 and the non-mandatory sub-chapter that follows)*

*This chapter starts with some remarks on happiness by Ecclesiastes. I present a “Mendeleev Table” of emotions I’ve composed. Ecclesiastes says a few opening words on anger. We meet a man who has no talent for negative emotions. We discuss a few central aspects of Spinoza’s teachings and follow him for a while on his path to happiness and redemption. I give you a translation of Tolstoy’s story of St Francis of Assisi and his quest for a complete joy. For dessert, I tell you a story my mother told me, which offers an interesting perspective on happiness.*

### **Let the Good Times Roll**

I said in mine heart, “Go now, I will test thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure.” And behold, this also is vanity.

I said of laughter: “It is madness”; and of mirth: “What good doeth it?”

Ecclesiastes 2:1–2

Speaking to his own heart, Ecclesiastes decides to try cheer up, but is not too thrilled about the idea.

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

“Labour” is a key word in Ecclesiastes, which is why it is worth noting that the poet uses this word in two ways, referring to a) property and wealth accumulated through life; b) the trouble taken in accumulating these things.

Therefore I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

Ecclesiastes 3:22

No one can tell what will happen in the future, and so the best thing to do is to rejoice in your own works. Ecclesiastes argues that pessimists and optimists both arrive at exactly the same place in the end, but the latter enjoy their trip more.

Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry, for that shall abide with him from his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 8:15

So joy is highly praised here, but don’t worry: happiness does not last. Ecclesiastes’ interpreters in the classical rabbinic commentary *Kohelet Rabbah* (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah*) threw a wet blanket on happiness with the understanding that “After all of your joy, death comes; so what benefit is joy?”

## **Emotions in Motion**

I have a small confession to make. If I ever went back to academic research, I would probably study the emotions. While everyone agrees that emotions are central in our lives, they remain a fascinating subject about which very little is known.

Let’s not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realizing it.

Vincent Van Gogh

*Homo sentiens* (Feeling/Emotional Man) sounds just as good as *Homo sapiens* (Thinking/Wise Man). Surprisingly, however, after decades of great debates, scientists still disagree on the answer to a seemingly basic question: what are

emotions?

Let me throw in a few questions of my own. What is the difference between emotion and feeling? Can we create a Mendeleev Table of basic emotions that will cover their entire spectrum? (Dmitri Mendeleev was the originator of the Periodic Table.) Can emotions be directed? Can emotions be consciously awakened? What are the neurological and physiological characteristics of emotions? What do neurobiologists have to say about these aspects? What do evolution experts know about the evolution of human and animal emotions? (Darwin wrote about that in *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*.) What is the impact of culture on emotions, and are certain emotions found in given cultures while others are not? Can we say that animals have human-like emotions, or are humans alone in experiencing emotions? How many emotions can one experience simultaneously? Do the genders differ in the scope and power of their emotions?

Well, as you know, it is very easy to pose hard questions.

Let us form a basic table of emotions (feelings), acknowledging immediately that the following table is neither exhaustive nor scientific; nor it is definitive.

I've left a few boxes for you to fill in at will. Furthermore, although I created this table quite spontaneously and with no specific method in mind, I did try to avoid repetition. For example, mercy and compassion are two different emotions: mercy comes from above (God has mercy) whereas compassion exists at eye level.

Happiness	Sadness	Anger	Rage	Shame	Envy	Jealousy
Disappointment	Love	Mercy	Sorrow	Boredom	Amazement	Gratitude
Hunger (metaphysical)	Curiosity	Confusion	Pride	Hope	Horror	Remorse
Lust	Frustration	Fondness	Disgust	Indifference	Gloating	Relief
Joy	Confidence	Disdain	Depression	Agitation	Longing	Nostalgia
Despair	Worry	Hostility	Euphoria	Grief	Inner peace/ Serenity	Emptiness
Loathing	Compassion	Shame	Frustration	Loneliness	Anxiety	Hate
Insult (Offence)	<i>Schadenfreude</i>					

This is a table of very basic emotions, which can be used to construct more complicated ones. For example:

Resentment = Anger + Frustration + Disappointment + Regret

(This equation is a very approximate one and in any event each component should appear in different percentages.)

## THE WOLVES WITHIN

The tale of the Two Wolves is a popular legend of unknown origin, possibly passed down from Native American Cherokee elders. The following version is based on our table of emotions.

A Cherokee grandfather and his grandson are sitting around their campfire. The old man says to his grandson: “An eternal fight is going on inside me and inside every man alive. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is evil – he is anger, envy, hostility, indifference, rage, shame, Schadenfreude, depression, remorse, greed, pride, self-pity, guilt, tight-fistedness, resentment, malevolence, despair. The other wolf is a good one – he is joyfulness, gratitude, inner peace, love, hope, faith, benevolence, empathy, generosity, compassion, confidence, admiration. The same fight is going on inside you.”

The grandson thinks about this for a minute or two and then asks his grandfather: “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee answers: “It depends which one you feed.”

Although we have so many words for different feelings, the truth is that every person’s heart is an inaccessible island – feelings almost always mean much more than one is capable of saying. In his monumental novel *In Search of Lost Time* Marcel Proust at times went as far as writing more than ten pages in his attempt to capture and describe a single feeling a little more accurately.

Sometimes people send out letters, scrolls and even tomes that describe their islands, but they still won’t let strangers visit them there.

How can a heart expression find?  
How should another know your mind?  
Will he discern what quickens you?  
A thought once uttered is untrue.



From Vladimir Nabokov's English rendition of "Silentium", a wonderful poem  
by Fyodor Tyutchev

Now let's conduct a small, very unscientific experiment. Think about your own repertoire of emotions. Which are the most frequent and which are rare? If you enjoy working with numbers, rank them on a scale from 0 to 100 to measure the relative duration and strength of each emotion when it occurs. I believe that if I collected my readers' results, I'd discover substantial differences between people. Now let's repeat this experiment, in slightly modified form. This time make a list of emotions you would like to keep and those you would love to give up.

Let's examine anger. Would you like to erase it from your repertoire? Emerson, as I mentioned before, has said that we boil at different degrees. Some people are calm in almost every situation, while others get angry even before they know why – anger is their mental default.

*Ira furor brevis est.*  
(Anger is a short madness.)

Horace

Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry, for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

Ecclesiastes 7:9

King Solomon is right, of course. Even I know that anger makes us look (or act) like fools, and we should always count to ten (better yet, to 77) before we react after something has upset us. I also know that anger is a quality of fools and idiots who cannot understand the other party and have no desire to do so. I know that the old Hebrew sages cautioned: "speak and act calmly always and to every person; this will save you from anger, which is an evil and makes others sin." I know that getting angry is a way of punishing myself for the stupidity of others, particularly when I'm right. I know that getting angry is a way of punishing myself for my own stupidity.

So I know all that. Is knowledge helpful in such cases? Well, sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't.

Though I know all there is to know about the direct and indirect, internal and external damage that anger causes, I still get mad sometimes. Giving ourselves sound advice is easy; following that advice is a different story.

## CAN'T COMPLAIN

People complain about everything: their memory and health, the failings of politicians, injustice, work, reality shows, family, the IRS, the government, global warming, local cooling, their maths teacher, airline food, slow download speeds, height, weight, wife, laws and lawyers, the weather, TV commercials, bad news and fake news, traffic jams, the stupidity of others, illness, death. Some people are angry at all of those things at once. Yet I've noticed that even people who can never be pleased are absolutely happy with their own wisdom.

And so I've reached the conclusion that brainpower was very generously doled out to humankind. After all, no one complains about their level of intelligence.

Emotions play a major part in our lives, often a much larger part than reason. Still, just as we boil at different temperatures, each and every emotion has its own threshold. Some people have hearts full of compassion for all living things, while others have never felt compassion for anyone. Some worry about everything, including the endless expansion of the universe, while others are not worried even when their parachute seems to be jammed. Some surrender to their passion even before it declares war against them, while others rarely experience true passion.

Now I will try to focus on the emotions of joy and happiness, and on their complementary emotion – sadness. I call it “complementary” because I don't believe that sadness is the opposite of joy.

Naturally, every person has a unique threshold of sadness. Some people spend their lives in a detrimental state. They get extremely sad when it rains outside their window, when their shirt gets stained, or when a zit appears on their nose. Other mortals are saddened only by tragic events on a colossal scale. And there are others who almost never feel sadness.

William James argued that different sadness thresholds require different types of religion.

One of the finest examples of a person totally devoid of sadness is American poet Walt Whitman. He had no talent for negative emotions at all. You don't believe me? Read on.

## Leaves of Grass and Joy

Dr Richard Maurice Bucke, a prominent Canadian psychiatrist and scholar of the human psyche, who knew Walt Whitman well, published a biography of the poet in 1883.

In 1879 Bucke published *Man's Moral Nature: An Essay*. This is the opening dedication:

I dedicate this book to the man who inspired it – to the man who of all men past and present that I have known has the most exalted moral nature – to Walt Whitman.

Bucke (who knew all of *Leaves of Grass* by heart) believed that Whitman was not only a great writer, but also a groundbreaking revolutionary of human morality. He believed that Whitman was on par with Buddha and Jesus.

In Whitman's biography Bucke tells us the following:

In the first place he learned life – men, women, and children; he went on equal terms with every one, he liked them and they him, and he knew them far better than they knew themselves. Then he became thoroughly conversant with the shops, houses, sidewalks, ferries, factories, taverns, gatherings, political meetings, carousing, *etc.* He was first the absorber of the sunlight, the free air and the open streets, and then of interiors.

He knew the hospitals, poorhouses, prisons, and their inmates. He passed freely in and about those parts of the city which are inhabited by the worst characters; he knew all their people, and many of them knew him; he learned to tolerate their squalor, vice, and ignorance; he saw the good (often much more than the self-righteous think) and the bad that was in them, and what there was to excuse and justify their lives. It is said that these people, even the worst of them, while entire strangers to Walt Whitman, quite invariably received him without discourtesy and treated him well. Perhaps only those who have known the man personally, and have felt the peculiar magnetism of his presence, can fully understand this. Many of the worst of those characters became singularly attached to him. He knew and was sociable with the man that sold peanuts at the corner, and the old woman that dispensed coffee in the market.

Dr Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman*

In the faces of men and women I see God.

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Was this man an exceptional human being or what? I mean, if Ecclesiastes believed that all is vanity, Whitman believed that everything is truly wonderful.

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,  
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.

Walt Whitman, "Miracles"

Dr Bucke's descriptions of Whitman may be doubted or even rejected. Many might find it hard to understand how anyone can love the whole of humanity. Some feel that people who do so actually hate individual human beings. I found support for this belief in the words of wonderful Polish poet Wisława Szymborska, who wrote: "I prefer myself loving people to myself loving mankind."

Sigmund Freud felt that we have a finite quantity of love, which is why we should carefully consider whom we give it to. Should we give our love to flowers and blades of grass? Whitman felt we should. He even maintained that all good things are as perfect as all bad things. To him a lilac flower, a caterpillar, a thunderstorm, a person's genitals, every man and woman, young and old alike, the moon in spring, boatmen and farmers, trees in the woods, honey bees busy in the hive, health, sickness, life and death – all is divine and wonderful and beautiful in this benevolent world.

In the 1892 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman gives us the following advice (among the best ever):

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals,  
despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid  
and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue  
not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people,  
take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or  
number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with  
the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the  
open air every season of every year of your life, reexamine all you  
have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever  
insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and  
have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of  
its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every  
motion and joint of your body

motion and joint of your body.

American philosopher and psychologist William James says that Whitman “suffered” from extreme individualism, exaggerated and often fake optimism, and even a hint of hubris. I have not counted the number of times Whitman uses the word “I” in his poems, but I feel intuitively that very few poets have written it as often as he did. However, often after writing “I”, he speaks too of every man or woman ever endowed with life or death. Some might admonish him for choosing, consciously or not, to look almost exclusively at the positive side of human existence. Well, you can love life so dearly even without turning a blind eye to its more horrible aspects. Perhaps. After all, there are probably many truths out there, and each person should choose their own. I would rather think that Whitman was a remarkable human being who had an extraordinary capacity for wonder and love.

Ecclesiastes believed that joy is a gift from God. If so, Whitman was gifted.

# A NON-MANDATORY SUB-CHAPTER

## MENTAL THERAPY ACCORDING TO SPINOZA

### PART 1: THE BEST THERE IS

Anything that brings joy is good.

Baruch Spinoza

In this sub-chapter we will meet a truly unique man who set his heart on attaining happiness, joy, redemption and inner peace by means of nothing but his common sense. I am speaking of 17th-century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who is often praised as a “philosopher’s philosopher”. Furthermore, renowned German philosopher and historian Georg Friedrich Hegel commented that the philosophers of his time were either “Spinozists” or not philosophers at all. Friedrich Nietzsche, who cannot be blamed for easily falling for people (he wasn’t known as a great compliment-giver; he loved very few individuals) was deeply impressed with Spinoza and called him the “purest of thinkers”. He even believed that the two of them shared quite a few ideas as well as personal qualities. Both philosophers were very lonely eccentrics, so he may be basically right. French philosopher Henri Bergson argued that every philosopher has two main philosophies: his own and Spinoza’s. The books Spinoza wrote were placed on the Catholic Church’s *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Forbidden Books), which is a great honour.

In his book *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression* (1968), French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called Spinoza the “prince of all philosophers”. He and his associate Felix Guattari even said that Spinoza was “Jesus of the philosophers”, because all other philosophers are merely his apostles. So if I say

here that I believe Spinoza is the greatest Jewish philosopher of all times, I would not be adding much to his praise.

I hope everyone will understand now that we have to take some time to consider the ideas of Baruch (or Benedictus de) Spinoza, because we have to understand what it was that earned him such high esteem in the world of philosophers, and what was his path to endless happiness and complete joy.

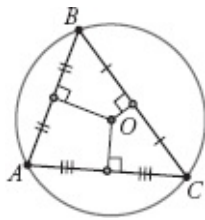
## PART 2: THE GEOMETRY OF EMOTIONS

Spinoza's primary claim to fame is an exemplary book known as *Ethica: Ordine geometrico demonstrata* (Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometrical Order).

Spinoza's *magnum opus* is one of the most wonderful and crazy creations of the human spirit. What is interesting is that the work is both wonderful and crazy for the same reasons.

Spinoza decided to write a book that would address all the important themes: God, the soul, emotions, humanity's enslavement, the power of the mind, freedom, happiness. So far, this has all been done before. Yet Spinoza did not follow his spiritual ancestors but took a giant step in a most surprising direction. He decided that he would not address these most important issues in the usual way, but would find the truth about them using pure thinking, and would prove all his theses the way you once proved Pythagoras' Theorem in a geometry class! After all, the subtitle *Ordine geometrico demonstrata* makes it clear that Spinoza intended to delve into the things that truly matter, find the whole truth about them, and prove this truth indisputably.

So now we need to consider what is a geometric proof. Here, I'll take advantage of my being a former mathematician, walk into my study, and pull out a book that must be in every mathematician's library, the one that served Spinoza as a model: Euclid's *Geometry* or, as the book was originally called, *Elements*. Euclid started his book with 23 definitions and five axioms (the first definition, for example, states that "a point is that which has no parts"), and used them to prove numerous claims that are known in mathematical lingo as theorems. The fact is that all the foundations of geometry as it is taught in schools today are found in Euclid's millennia-old book. For example, he proved that any triangle can be inscribed in a circle.



If you remember anything from your geometry classes, you know how to read this drawing.



How is this associated with Spinoza's philosophical concerns? This is what the "prince of all philosophers" said: "I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes and bodies."

As noted in my Introduction, Spinoza decided to make a great effort to *non ridere non lugere neque detestari sed intelligere*: "not to laugh, cry or curse about, but to understand" life under the sun, while attempting to look at all things from the vantage point of eternity – *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Do you get the idea? Spinoza believed that just as mathematicians can prove that the meeting point of perpendicular bisectors is the centre of the circumscribed circle, he can prove theorems that explain the actions and appetites of mankind. It is not hard to guess that the book he wrote does not make things easy for us readers and does nothing to entice ordinary people.

The book comprises five parts, the first of which is named "God". Spinoza started that part by defining several complicated and difficult terms: *self-caused, substance, finite of its kind, mode, God, free, eternity, attribute*. Next he wrote seven axioms, which are clear and self-explanatory statements. In this case, we should remember that the word "clear" refers to matters that Spinoza alone believed were self-evident and crystal-clear. I honestly believe we should be very careful about anything self-evident, because many of those "clear" points are not only unclear, but often simply wrong. For example, a part is not always smaller than the whole, the sum total of zeros is not always zero, and so on. (Are you surprised? You should be. Ask any mathematician – he or she will verify the truth of these strange statements.) If he lived today, Spinoza would have been very surprised to find out that although Euclid's geometry was flawless, it is not the only geometry, and there are non-Euclidian geometries with different sets of axioms.

In any case, this is what he wrote in Theorem 29 of the first part of his *Ethica*:

Nothing in the universe is contingent, but all things are conditioned to exist and operate in a particular manner by the necessity of the divine nature.

Spinoza did not believe in free will. He felt that humans are not aware of the true reasons for their acts and thoughts. We are aware of our appetites and passions, but we don't know what caused them. The classic example that clarifies this idea is that of a stone falling off a cliff. If it were conscious, it might be certain it was falling of its own choice. Hitting the ground below, it might imagine it has decided to lie on the beach for several hundred years, until the morning when a

small child comes by and kicks it – because the stone has willed that too.

Nothing is good or bad in Spinoza's teachings, because how can these qualities have any meaning in a world dominated by absolute determinism? People who are not fully versed in Spinoza's ideas may be surprised by that, but this is not the greatest surprise he has in store for us.

How does Spinoza prove his theorem on absolute determinism? You are welcome to peruse any book on his philosophy, but your conclusions are not my responsibility. As noted, the book is very hard to read and even harder to understand – but if you have the stamina, it is worth the effort. Here below is the final proposition of the entire book. I will start with the Latin original, to present you with a small portion of this work as Spinoza conceived it, with the proposition or theorem followed by its proof. Note the aesthetic qualities of *Ethica* – its beauty.

### ***PROPOSITIO XLII***

Beatitudo non est virtutis præmium, sed ipsa virtus; nec eadem gaudemus, quia libidines coercemus; sed contra quia eadem gaudemus, ideo libidines coercere possumus.

### ***Demonstratio***

Beatitudo in Amore erga Deum consistit (per Prop. 36 hujus, & ejus Schol.), qui quidem Amor ex tertio cognitionis genere oritur (per Coroll. Prop. 32 hujus), atque adeo hic Amor (per Prop. 59 & 3 p. 3) ad Mentem, quatenus agit, referri debet; ac proinde (per Defin. 8 p. 4) ipsa virtus est, quod erat primum. Deinde quo Mens hoc Amore divino, seu beatitudine magis gaudet, eo plus intelligit (per Prop. 32 hujus), hoc est (per Coroll. Prop. 3 hujus), eo majorem in affectus habet potentiam, & (per Prop. 38 hujus) eo minus ab affectibus, qui mali sunt, patitur; atque adeo ex eo, quod Mens hoc Amore divino, seu beatitudine gaudet, potestatem habet libidines coercendi; & quia humana potentia ad coercendos affectus in solo intellectu consistit, ergo nemo beatitudine gaudet, quia affectus coercuit; sed contra potestas libidines coercendi ex ipsa beatitudine oritur. QED.

The last proposition, stripped of its proof, translates as follows:

### **THEOREM 42**

Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; neither do we rejoice therein because we control our lusts, but contrariwise, because we rejoice therein, we are able to control our lusts.

The translation may help us understand the words of the theorem, but the proof (*Demonstratio*) remains incomprehensible in both Latin and English:

The Blessing of Happiness stands on the Love of God (*per* Prop. 36), which is born out of the third type of cognition (*per* Prop. 32), which is why (*acc. to* Prop. 59) this Love ...

You get the drift. Now you see that English is not always capable of clarifying Latin. In any event, this sentence contains a most important psychological insight, which I will try to convey in the simplest words I know. Spinoza (departing from the Stoics, with whom he had a lot in common) believed that *reason cannot overpower passions or desires; the only thing that can defeat any one of those is a stronger passion or desire.*

Think about it. Satisfaction guaranteed.

The book contains countless educative psychological insights, which several times are found in the footnotes. But if Spinoza is to be credited for his psychological perceptions, what about the promised geometry? Are Spinoza's proofs mathematically valid?

I have to be completely honest here and admit that I've never had the patience to check that, but other people have done so. The great German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is one of the few who traversed Spinoza's work from cover to cover. He argued that the proofs are not always perfectly sequential, and I trust him.

Still, as one who does not believe that the world of humankind can be studied only rationally, I do not care too much about the precision of Spinoza's proofs. I'm fascinated by the insights this wise man gained, and enjoy paying close attention to his theorems, footnotes, definitions and side remarks. The truly important things often reside in the smallest of details and in places where you wouldn't look for them.

Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.

Bertrand Russell

## PART 3: GOD, NATURE AND FREE CHOICE

Here I would like to present two basic arguments of Spinoza's thinking.

### God or Nature?

The best-known argument Spinoza made is: *Deus sive Natura* ("God or Nature"). It would seem that our fine philosopher is saying that God and the universe are one and the same. Thus, theoretically, prayers are redundant in this world because, being part of the universe, Man is part of God, and why should you pray to yourself? Philosophers called this type of belief "Pantheism". However, with Spinoza nothing is as simple as it seems.

Spinoza wrote to German philosopher and theologian Henry Oldenburg that people who think he believes in a total identity between God and nature are wrong. Confused? So am I, and I won't even go near the numerous arguments and discussions that attempted to settle this issue. Instead, I'll just say that French philosopher Martial Guérout, who specialized in 17th-century philosophies, suggested that "Panentheism" (implying "all *in* God") is a better term to describe the relations between God and the universe in Spinoza's thinking. Mathematicians would say that according to Panentheism the universe is a proper *subset* of God.

When in the late 20th century Albert Einstein was questioned about his faith in God, he said, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals Himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind."

Einstein loved Spinoza with all his heart and admired his work. He even wrote a song honouring Baruch-Benedict, which starts something like, "How I love that man/no words could even describe." (Einstein was a better physicist than a poet.)

In any event, note what Spinoza said: other than God, no object can be present and not be perceived.

He proves this assertion in the first part of *Ethica*.

### Nothing Is Accidental in Nature

As we have already seen, in his mind and heart Spinoza fully believed in

absolute determinism. He took the view that people are not conscious of the reasons for their actions, in which case they could not have been acts of free will. The illusion we entertain – that we possess and act on free will – follows from the fact that, among other things, the real reasons for our actions are actually hidden from our brains by a wall of ignorance. Spinoza teaches us that the mind must want one thing or another for a given reason, which in turn follows from another reason, which is based on yet a third reason, and so on *ad infinitum*. Now comes the most important thing. To know and understand this endless chain of reasons we must fully acknowledge and understand the order and workings of nature; and since the “rule of nature” is one of God’s names, it follows that if we want to understand a certain event and find the reasons why it happened and why it was inevitable, we must know and understand the nature of God.

Clearly, no human being will ever attain such an understanding.

Let me sum this up again. According to Spinoza, there is no free will or free choice, only a chain reaction of reasons that we cannot fathom.

This topic alone could fill a book, which is why I will only invoke Isaac Bashevis Singer, who joked that we have to believe in free choice because we have no other choice.

## PART 4: THUS SPOKE SPINOZA

This seems like a good time to climb down from the peaks and present you with a personal selection of Spinoza's ideas that relate to humankind's enslavement and the possibility of happiness.

### On Pride and Prejudice

Spinoza maintained that a person is proud when, out of selflove, he overestimates his worth. Arrogance, he said, is a type of madness. It is actually very easy for people to value themselves and the things they love more than they actually deserve. I would say that pride is an overmotivated error of judgement which springs from selflove. Spinoza remarked that the opposite doesn't exist, that no individual thinks himself to be less than he is out of self-hate.

He who despises himself, esteems himself as a selfdespiser.

Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche (separately)

### Jealousy and Envy Are as Hard as the Grave

Again, I considered all travail and every right work for which a man is envied by his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 4:4

The Hebrew word *kin'a* has two related meanings that refer to an unpleasant feeling prompted by another's (real or imaginary) success: "envy" and erotic-romantic "jealousy". Ecclesiastes speaks of the first kind, which others have referred to by the Latin word *invidia*. This is directly associated with *mal occhio* (the evil eye), and the Roman Empire had laws concerning the damage caused in its wake. *Invidere* means "to regard someone with hostility" (a word to the wise: don't try this attitude when in Naples). *Invidia* is also one of the Seven Deadly Sins in Pope Gregorius' Canonic List.

Spinoza said that *envy is hatred*, to the extent that one is saddened when another is happy and joyful at another's downfall. He went on to say that we envy only those we can compare ourselves with. That is to say, no philosophy professor is supposed to envy Spinoza (except that he went out of his mind and

never returned). It is more reasonable to assume he would envy a slightly more successful or wiser colleague. We do not envy a lion for its power or an oak tree for its height. Similarly, we do not envy the people who have lost their place under the sun and moved on to a better world. We, living human souls, are incomparable with anything else – which is why it is so easy for living writers to praise dead ones. Spinoza maintained that the more people resembled each other, the stronger would be the envy between them. Thus, it is no accident that the first manslaughter in the Bible was fratricide due to envy.

As for romantic-sexual envy – or jealousy – Spinoza says it is inevitable that if a person thinks or suspects that his loved one has had a sexual liaison with or felt love for another, his love will turn into hatred and he will envy (be jealous of) his rival.

He who loves without jealousy does not truly love.

# Book of Zohar

In Part III of *Ethica* Spinoza wrote:

If anyone conceives, that an object of his love joins itself to another with closer bonds of friendship than he himself has attained to, he will be affected with hatred toward the loved object and with envy toward his rival.

That argument is presented as Prop. 35, but what fascinated me was not the actual proposition and certainly not its tedious proof, but the footnote he added, probably as an afterthought:

He who thinks that a woman whom he loves prostitutes herself to another will feel pain not only because his own desire is restrained, but also because, being compelled to associate the image of her he loves with the parts of shame and the excreta of another, he loathes her.

Anyone who reads these lines will find it hard to accept that certain researchers believe Spinoza was never seriously involved with a woman and never really experienced the intense emotions of physical and emotional love. Indeed, although Spinoza argued that he reached his insights through geometry, I have no doubt that he experienced jealousy and was thus able to describe it so graphically. I do not know if Spinoza inspired S Y Agnon when he wrote “The Doctor’s Divorce”, but the Nobel laureate’s story nicely portrays the above lines.

## ***Ethica* Part III: Theorem 38**

If a man has begun to hate an object of his love, so that love is thoroughly destroyed, he will, causes being equal, regard it with more hatred than if he had never loved it, and his hatred will be in proportion to the strength of his former love.

## ***Ethica* Part III: Theorem 43**

Hatred is increased by being reciprocated, and can on the other hand be destroyed by love.

The Buddha said the exact same thing – that only love can defeat hate – but since



THE Buddha said the exact same thing, that only love can defeat hate, but since he felt compassion for all beings, he did not follow it up with a mathematical proof.

Jealousy and envy will be discussed later in this book, but now let's go back to happier subjects.

## **Happiness, Love and Hope**

Happiness is Man's transition from a small perfection to a greater one.

This clarifies Spinoza's definition of the opposite emotion: sadness.

Sadness is Man's transition from a great perfection to a smaller one.

And here is what the philosopher's philosopher had to say about love:

Love is happiness accompanied by an idea of an external cause.

Just think about that definition for a few minutes (or hours) and you'll discover its beauty.

Have you discovered it? No? Let me give you my interpretation. I believe that when Spinoza wrote that "Love is happiness accompanied by an idea of an external cause," he meant something like: *I am glad you exist*; or, *the thought of your existence in this world fills my heart with joy*; or, *the joy I feel in my heart comes from knowing you exist*. Are these the most beautiful declarations of love you ever heard, or might they actually drive the listener away? Either way, clearly very few of us live to hear such statements spoken to them. One of the unique things about them is that they ask nothing in return. When a man states, "I am so glad that a woman like you spends her time among us mortals! You can be with me, or alone, or with another man, or men, or women – I don't care. My heart is filled with gladness because you exist, and my joy depends on nothing but your presence in this world" – now that is love!

## **I Have a Hope for Hope**

Hope is unstable happiness born out of an idea of a thing in the future or the past, the end-result of which we slightly doubt.

Dostoevsky learned that hope is the last thing that dies. When he was 28 years old, he was placed in front of a firing squad, but survived because the Tsar

decided to pardon him. Owing to some cruel joke (the Tsar's or the squad commander's: opinions vary) the pardon decision was announced after the squad had been ordered to raise their weapons. Dostoevsky was amazed to find that even one second before his certain death came, he still had hope. It just would not die before he did. In his case, hope turned out to be justified, but that is not the issue.

There is no hope without fear and no fear without hope.

François de La Rochefoucauld

## **The Greatest Passion of All**

It is time to deal with loftier issues.

After Spinoza analysed our appetites (desires), emotions and weaknesses – all those things he believed enslave a person – he suggested a path to freedom, redemption and happiness.

Let us start with two insights that appear near the end of Part IV of his great book:

The mind's highest good is the knowledge of God, and the mind's highest virtue is to know God.

*Ethica* IV: Theorem 28

A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation not on death but on life.

*Ethica* IV: Theorem 67

Ecclesiastes agrees with the first assertion, which of course he thought up long before Spinoza. But I have the feeling that the Scroll writer would be less excited by the second proposition.

In the fifth part of the book we can read a little about Spinoza's ideas on attaining the blessing of true happiness.

He, who loves God, cannot endeavour that God should love him in return.

The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body; there remains of it something which is eternal.

We feel and know that we are eternal.

The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God.

God loves Himself with an infinite intellectual love. The intellectual love of the mind toward God is that very love of God whereby God loves Himself.

Moreover, as previously quoted from Theorem 42:

Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself.

All of this means that, according to one of Spinoza's main ideas, the greatest passion of all – the desire to know and love God – can help us overcome small desires and great weaknesses, and this should pave our path to freedom and happiness.

You may have received the impression that Spinoza had no weaknesses. Well, that is not entirely true. Despite his magnificent and rational mind, he remained human. For example, he conducted a protracted inheritance trial against his sister (and won, but took only a bed he wanted and gave the rest of the bequest to her). He collected spiders and made them fight each other, while organizing fascinating fights between spiders and flies as well. He was enraged when a mob murdered Jan de Witt, his friend the Dutch statesman, made his way to the murder site and placed a sign there that exclaimed *Ultimi barbarorum* – “O you lowliest barbarians!”

## PART 5: SUMMARY

I truly hope no one believes I have attempted to explain the secrets of Spinoza's teachings in the few pages I have dedicated to him here. Of course not. Some of you may have noticed that I have not said a word about his personal life. You can find more in several good books – my choice would be *Spinoza and Other Heretics* by Professor Yirmiyahu Yovel (Princeton, 1989). I have simply tried to lure you into gaining some slight acquaintance with the pure philosophy of the “purest philosopher”.

Spinoza suggested there is a path to happiness and never-ending bliss, but it's a very hard one. Although he considered the things that take place under the sun from eternity's vantage point, we ordinary people take a more human view of those matters.

His path is quite narrow, though not very straight. It can support only a few, and I would even venture to say that only Spinoza managed to walk it all the way, from beginning to end.

As noted before, the most beautiful things are often found on the margins. This is why I should like to conclude our encounter with Baruch (Benedictus de) Spinoza with a moving, wise and beautiful note he added to Theorem 42, the last in his book:

For the ignorant man is not only distracted in various ways by external causes without ever gaining the true acquiescence of his spirit, but moreover lives, as it were unwitting of himself, and of God, and of things, and as soon as he ceases to suffer, ceases also to be.

Whereas the wise man, in so far as he is regarded as such, is scarcely at all disturbed in spirit, but, being conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, by a certain eternal necessity, never ceases to be, but always possesses true acquiescence of his spirit.

If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected?

*But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.*

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As a final postscript, strongly related to Spinoza, I offer my version of Tolstoy's version of a famous story about St Francis of Assisi:

### **Perfect Joy**

*by Leo Tolstoy*

One winter day, St Francis and Brother Leo were returning from Perugia to Assisi. The bitter cold made them shiver. St Francis called to Brother Leo, who was walking a little ahead of him: "Brother Leo, I hope that all the Friars Minor in every country will show a great example of holiness and integrity and edifying morals – nevertheless, note down carefully that perfect joy is not to be found in that."

And after they had walked on a bit further, St Francis called him again, saying: "Brother Leo, even if the Friars Minor could give sight to the blind, heal the paralysed, drive out devils, give hearing back to the deaf, make the lame walk, and restore speech to the dumb, and even bring back to life a man who has been dead for days – write that perfect joy is not to be found there either."

Then, a few minutes further on their path, St Francis cried out again in a strong voice: "Brother Leo, if the Friars Minor knew all languages and all sciences and scripture, if they also knew how to prophesy and reveal not only the future but also the secrets of the consciences and minds of everyone – note down carefully that perfect joy is not to be found in that."

And as they walked on, after a while St Francis called again forcefully: "Brother Leo, Little Lamb of God, even if Friars Minor could speak with the voice of angels, and knew the courses of the stars and the powers of herbs, and knew all about the treasures in the earth, and knew the qualities of birds and fishes, other animals, humans, trees, rocks and waters – make a careful note that true joy lies not in that."

Eventually, after hearing him talking this way, Brother Leo in amazement asked him: "Father, I beg you in God's name, tell me where perfect joy is to be found."

And St Francis replied: "When we come to St Mary of the Angels, soaked by the rain and frozen by the cold, all soiled with mud and suffering from hunger, and we ring at the gate of our own monastery, and the brother porter comes and says angrily, 'Who are you?' And we say, 'We are two of your brothers.' And he contradicts us, saying: 'You aren't telling the truth. Rather, you are two rascals who go around deceiving people and stealing

what they give to the poor. Go away!’ And he does not open for us, but makes us stand outside in the snow and rain, cold and hungry, until night falls – then, if we endure all those insults and cruel rebuffs patiently without being troubled and without complaining, and if we reflect humbly and charitably that God makes him speak against us ... oh, Brother Leo, write that this is perfect joy!”

St Francis of Assisi was born in the late 12th century. He was a Catholic preacher and the founder of the Franciscan Order. He is the patron saint of all animals and, together with Catherine of Siena, patron saint of Italy. St Francis was deeply influenced by Matthew 10:9–10, which reads:

“provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves.” (This always reminds me of the splendid scene in Federico Fellini’s movie *Roma* where he mocks the Vatican clergy who put on a splendid “fashion show” with a great display of riches, clearly having forgotten all about Matthew and even Francis.)

The Franciscans indeed lived simply and sparingly, wandering around Umbria barefoot, but always full of joy and songs of praise. Many legends were associated with St Francis, who could communicate with animals, flowers and trees. According to one legend, he persuaded a vicious wolf to forgo his evil ways and even convinced the creature to make a peace pact with the local villagers. Another legend has him thanking his donkey for its faithful services, which made the donkey burst into tears. He was declared a saint in 1228, and many scholars consider St Francis the first Italian poet known today. Writing his exciting biography, Russian journalist and writer Emilia Pimenova (1854–1935) perfectly described the man from Assisi as *nihil habentes, omnia possidentes* (“owns nothing, has everything”).

Tolstoy wanted to make sure we understood the story of St Francis correctly. After making it the 8 May entry in *Reading Circle*, he revisited the tale on 12 May, saying: “Complete happiness is found in man’s ability to overcome unfair strokes of fate and unjustified suffering without feeling hostility toward their causes. Complete joy is found in a consciousness of complete faith and in complete love of such magnitude that no wickedness or misfortune could eliminate it.”

Surrender and love are the nuclei of St Francis’s mode of living. Similar ideas appear in the writings of 11th-century Spanish-Jewish philosopher and judge Bahya ibn Pakuda, who wrote *The Duties of the Heart*, viewed by some as the first Jewish book of morals (written in Arabic around 1040). This rabbi

divided all human duties into “duties of the body”, which anyone can perform, and “duties of the heart”, which are private and personal. In their heart of hearts, he said, only the individual knows if they love and fear God, if they truly want to do good for others or hold grudges, and whether their innermost soul is modest or conceited. These are secrets only the heart can tell – although some secrets are so complex they are not known even to their owners.

The rabbi wrote:

And if you think only of improving your body and pay attention only to it, you will be ignoring the betterment of your soul. Similarly, if you set your mind on reviving and watching over your soul alone, you’ll be ignoring many of your body issues. Now, you should strengthen your soul more than your withering body. You should visit it and sense it, but do not cut short on matters that your body requires or you might burden and weaken it, which will cause the weakening of both. You should provide your body with the sustenance it needs and provide your soul with wise and moral knowledge, to a greater degree than its current need.

According to Rabbi Bahya ibn Pakuda, true surrender is expressed in modest conduct, meekness of soul, great forgiveness, endless patience, the desire to do good, the ability to overcome the hardships of life without grudges, and a feeling of great love for God and all of His Creation.

Returning to Francis and Tolstoy, I believe their handbook of “complete joy” is slightly problematic. It is no accident that the man from Assisi was declared a saint; that Roberto Rossellini, Franco Zeffirelli and Liliana Cavani made movies about him; that Franz Liszt wrote music in his honour; and that G K Chesterton and Nikos Kazantzakis wrote books about him. Francis of Assisi was not an ordinary human being. The problem is that most of us *are* ordinary people, afflicted with human weaknesses. We find it hard to overcome strokes of fate, particularly when they are perceived as unfair (and we aren’t happy about the fair ones either). It is difficult for us not to get angry at people who hurt us. Actually, it is difficult for us not to get angry in any case. We are too lazy to do good. We are enslaved by our passions and desires. Our ambitions are greater than our abilities. Our faith is full of doubts, and even our love is not independent of its objects.

## **A Story My Mother Told Me**

My mother was a teacher of Russian literature for many years. She is still an

admirer of Russian culture and eagerly watches TV channels from faraway Russia. One fine day, on a visit to me, she decided to educate me with a story. Here goes:

While watching a Russian TV channel last week, I came upon a show of the kind you hate. It's a game show named *Polygraph*. People are connected to a lie-detector and answer embarrassing questions. If they tell the truth, according to the machine, they win sums of money that accumulate. But if they lie just once, all of their profits are taken away.

On that particular show, a woman managed to collect a very nice sum, but then she was asked a relatively easy question that theoretically shouldn't have embarrassed her: "Are you happy?" the compère asked. The woman said "Yes, I am," but the polygraph said she was not, and the TV channel kept its money.

Clearly, if the woman were aware of the fact that she was not in Seventh Heaven and that her nervous system was not flooded with happiness hormones, she would have said as much and won a fortune. After all, there's no shame in being unhappy. Apparently, the woman truly believed she was happy and said so ... and thereby failed the test.

I know all about the flaws of lie-detectors, but I still believe that asking people if they are happy and checking what the machine says about their answers could be a very interesting experiment. I would be particularly interested in cases where the tested person says he or she is unhappy and the machine does not agree.

(While writing these lines I've decided to take such a test myself as soon as I've completed this book.)



# FINALE

## ECCELESIASTES' MIRROR

So what did Ecclesiastes want us to know? What was this wonderful poet thinking that he did not put in writing? Which emotions did he hide deep inside his mind? What did his soul yearn for?

Sadly, we will probably never answer these questions.

“A book is a mirror,” Georg Lichtenberg rightly stated. That insight is doubly true when it comes to the Scroll of Ecclesiastes. Yet not only does the book place different mirrors before different people, it even places different mirrors before repeat readers. It is the same Scroll but the reader has changed. Insights I gain from it are different every time I peruse it in depth. On top of the text there is a wide forest of commentaries with all types of trees.

The Scroll is an invitation for readers to contemplate the issues that troubled its wise poet. Ecclesiastes does not teach us to think along his lines, nor does he trace a path for us to follow. He sends us on solo excursions into the valley of great questions. He merely helps us by spreading around some orientation points: vanity, mankind, the world, labour, advantage, sun, good, time, light, vexation of spirit, wisdom, love, life and death. The ultimate compass bearing for Ecclesiastes' own trip was the fear of God.

Dear reader, if you came so far, I'm sure you already know that I won't provide a summary of the Scroll, distil its message or give you lifestyle tips. Advice is the smallest currency and I rarely use it. Instead, I'd like to shine a light on some issues I find important.

### **On Audacity and Honesty**

Most of the Scroll commentators accentuate its pessimistic aspect. However, I believe that Ecclesiastes was not a pessimist. I think he was courageous, wise and honest.

Simone Weil has allegedly stated that the great anger all pessimist philosophers feel when it comes to death and suffering in life is illogical. If life is suffering and vanity, why should they complain about the Angel of Redemption who rescues them from all this once and for all?

The Scroll poet is not a pessimist. He hates death because he loves life so intensely. Yet Ecclesiastes loves and loathes life at the same time: he loves life because it is wonderful, and loathes life because it is vanity, a passing shadow, vexation of spirit.

I am not a great believer in the optimistic approach to life. In my opinion, at the very foundation of optimism lies great horror. I believe that uncritical optimism primarily emerges from a fear of truth: optimists dare not look life or death in the eye.

Ecclesiastes is courageous, so he cannot be an optimist; and because he is wise, he cannot be a pessimist. In fact, the Scroll poet describes life as it is, in true colours, with great and moving candor.

Referring to the dead, he says that “the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished” (9:5–6). He would not regret perished and forgotten loves if he did not love life. Ecclesiastes knows that life is a miracle and that those who (still) live under the sun have a great advantage over those who have been swallowed by the endless emptiness of the dark and silent kingdom.

Still seems it strange, that thou shouldst live forever?  
Is it less strange, that thou shouldst live at all? This is a miracle; and  
that no more.

Who gave beginning, can exclude an end.

Edward Young, *Night Thoughts, or the Complaint and the Consolation*

# THE KING'S SCHOOL

Here are several wise ideas for life that I collected from the school of the wisest ever.

## 1. Don't Give Up on Life's Pleasures

Since the Scroll, like all books, is a mirror, we can all find verses in it that reflect our minds.

In chapter 9, some of which is quoted above, Ecclesiastes advises us fully to experience life's pleasures.

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 hast done 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

*Carpe diem* (“Seize the day”)

Horace

(by the way, you can find this famous saying on the road from Florence to Fiesole)

So much kindness and comfort is found in the Ecclesiastes passage just quoted. Verse 9:9 (in bold type) is my favourite. There are many pleasures in life, but nothing compares to living joyfully with a woman you love, and I'd like to elaborate on that a little.

The best-known verse on women appears in chapter 7:

And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands as bonds. Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her.

“Behold, this have I found,” saith the Preacher, “counting one by one to

find out the account,  
which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: One man among a thousand  
have I found, but a woman among all those have I not found.”

Ecclesiastes 7:26–8

What a terrible passage!\* What drove our Ecclesiastes to write this and so bluntly contradict “He who finds a wife, finds a good thing” (Proverbs 18:28)? – I’m sure you remember that according to the Jewish tradition King Solomon is in authority for both verses.

Nietzsche attempted to synthesize these views into one and came up with this: “Ah, women. They make the highs higher and the lows more frequent.”

So what is the truth? Can a woman truly help her man, or does she hinder him? Is she really bitterer than death, or is she as good as life itself, and even gives life meaning?

I know where I stand on this, but I wonder: why do most people remember “more bitter than death” and just a few mention “the wife whom thou love”? Tolstoy believed that people have the extraordinary and inexhaustible ability to believe in bad things and keep them in their memory forever, but are very quick to express doubt when they hear good things. I have found that people enjoy citing the gloomier passages from Ecclesiastes. Why is that? What is wrong with “eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart”?

Later, I will refocus on the positive aspects of the Scroll, which are often neglected. I mean, the recommendations that its author makes could merge together into an anthem for life.

But before I do that, let me discuss the issue of women some more.

Of course, what is surfacing from the Scroll here is an irruption from the now hopefully outdated masculine-first point of view.

Leading Jewish philosopher Moshe Mendelssohn, a founder of his nation’s Enlightenment movement, was also struck by the “more bitter than death” verse. The grandfather of composer Felix Mendelssohn argued that Ecclesiastes wrote so negatively about women because he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (he assumed Ecclesiastes was King Solomon). Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz explains in *Five Books of Faith* that Mendelssohn believed that if King Solomon had had only one wife whom he loved very much, he would not have said that. Leibowitz added that Mendelssohn had a very special relationship with his wife, Fruma. Judging from letters the couple exchanged – written in German with Hebrew letters – the Mendelssohns enjoyed a great love under the sun.

One totally unrelated thing I just have to tell you is that in 1763 Moshe Mendelssohn won the first prize in a philosophy competition sponsored by the

Prussian Royal Academy of Science. Are you impressed? No? OK. I will add that the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant came second(!).

Tolstoy too has been a victim of the human tendency to mainly remember and believe in the worst of things. People recall his *Kreutzer Sonata* with its negative remarks about the female species, but he had other, more wholesome views on women too. Reviewing Chekhov's short story "Dushechka" (The Darling), Tolstoy wrote that "women can do anything that men can, but there is one thing that only women can do and men cannot. Only women can love unconditionally."

Ecclesiastes suggests that we do everything we can and experience as much as we can. Humbly echoing the great king's advice and remembering that *Fortune favours the bold*, I suggest we should live daringly and that in the last days of our lives we regret, if anything, the things we did and not things we did not do, because regretting the latter is infinite. And I say:

Love a woman or a man, listen to music, go see the Dolomites and the temples of Bagan, read poetry, write your memoir or a children's book, fight, forgive, sing in the shower, watch cherry trees blossom, learn a new language, get mad, get happy, get sad, let yourself be hurt, let yourself be amazed, love the rain and the sun, wonder, pray.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might ...

Ecclesiastes 9:10

And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced in all my labour, and this was my portion from all my labour.

Ecclesiastes 2:10

Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun ...

Ecclesiastes 11:7

The light is sweet. I can envision King Solomon sitting on his huge throne, on a mountain of embroidered cushions, in the splendid garden of his enormous palace. It is early in the morning and the sun, rising behind the Temple, lights up the tops of tall palm trees and dances on the locks of dozens of beautiful women who surround him. The king is writing a scroll: "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity." All shall pass into nothing. The king is thrilled by the beauty that fills

his eyes. Life is great, light is sweet, and it is good to see the beauty of the sun and the women around him. But why does it all have to end?

The king loves life passionately and hates it at the same time for its transience.

## **2. Make a Friend**

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour.

For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up.

Again, if two lie together, then they have heat, but how can one be warm alone?

Ecclesiastes 4:9–11

Ecclesiastes' views on the importance of friendship are so clear and straightforward that I have nothing to add. Happy is a person who has a friend.

## **3. Live a Life of Labour**

The sleep of a labouring man is sweet whether he eat little or much, but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.

Ecclesiastes 5:12

By much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands the house leaks.

Ecclesiastes 10:18

Tolstoy adopted this recommendation in his late years, working as an old man with his farmers, harvesting. He did not cut himself any slack and worked as hard as the young peasants. The count thus rediscovered the joy of having a hearty meal after a hard day's work, and of deep and peaceful sleep that comforts the spirit of the tired man.

The rich are so full (of food or themselves) that they cannot sleep.

## **4. Try to Be Happy**

... 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 11:8

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth. And walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes ...

Ecclesiastes 11:9

Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh ...

Ecclesiastes 11:10

Ecclesiastes knew full well that the ability to rejoice is God-given. Modern psychologists claim that even the ability to get out of bed on a gloomy morning with a smile on your face is partly genetic. In any case, a wise person must try to learn how to be more contented and remove at least some anguish from his or her heart.

Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry, for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.

Ecclesiastes 7:9

## 5. Be Good

Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.

Ecclesiastes 11:1

Many have attempted to interpret this verse, but my favourite echoes come from the Far East. Although Eastern philosophy has no place for Ecclesiastes, sometimes it speaks in perfect resonance with the book.

As mentioned earlier, the Buddha taught us that the only things we get to keep are those we give away. This is very profound! Cast thy bread not because you will find it after many days, but because you will benefit immediately from that act of goodness. A good thing we did will forever remain ours, because we get to keep forever only what we give away.

Here are some of my favourite lines of poetry:

... that best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered acts Of kindness and of love.

William Wordsworth,  
"Lines Written a Few Miles above  
Tintern Abbey", from *Lyrical Ballads*

And this to me is one of the most important verses in the Scroll of Ecclesiastes:

I know that there is no good in them [people in general], but for a man  
to rejoice and to do good in his life ...

Ecclesiastes 3:12

In many Jewish commentaries the common interpretation of "doing good" is that a person should make the best and enjoy the most of his life under the sun. Let me suggest another version, one that could not be simpler – it reads the text to the letter. Perhaps Ecclesiastes intends for us to do good things for other people, not only to try to be happy, but to try making others happy too. Perhaps doing good is the path to a little happiness under the sun. Could this be one of the major messages of this Scroll?

In her book *The Time of Angels*, British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch offers an atheistic interpretation of the Book of Job, the text we discussed earlier. She finds that God's answer to Job means that there is no God, and thus the highest human value we should attain is that "one must be good for nothing".

Commenting on that, Professor Leibowitz points out: "Murdoch says that you have to be good even though that good does not benefit you nor help you in any way. Yet, even if this good is for nothing, you should do it because it is good."

Murdoch wrote, "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real." Clearly she was inspired by Simone Weil, whom she greatly admired. To love someone, Weil wrote, means that you don't see them as something that merely adorns your all-important life. It is understanding that they exist, just like you do.

Love defeats death. Love is life. Everything that I understand, I understand from love. Love is God. My dying means that I – a tiny particle of love – will return to the eternal and infinite source.



... Logic discovered the struggle for existence and the idea that I must remove from my path all those who prevent me from fulfilling my wishes and desires. This is the logical deduction, but the Law of Love cannot be understood with logic because it is illogical.

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Leibowitz went on to say that “good for nothing” is precisely the atheist equivalent of “faith for faith’s sake” in religious lore. Let me summarize his argument for you:

*Faith that is not for faith’s sake* is a means of human redemption. Man expects to be rewarded for worshipping God and being virtuous and to be punished for abstaining from worship and leading a sinful life. This type of faith goes from the top down: God in the service of humankind.

*Faith for faith’s sake* is, according to Judaism, the very purpose of Man. That is, Man expects nothing for worshipping God; worshipping *is* his reward, and being dissociated from God is punishment in itself. This type of faith goes from the bottom up: humankind in the service of God.

Leibowitz argued that we should aspire for faith for faith’s sake, but realizing that not all believers are capable of that, he does not scorn faith that is not for faith’s sake.

The more I read Ecclesiastes, the closer I get (though in baby steps) to this conclusion: that the Scroll author wanted us to know that we need to aspire to faith for faith’s sake, while seeking to enjoy life and be good people for as long as we are on our journey to that goal.

## **6. Don’t Miss the Past**

Say not thou, “Why were the former days better than these?” For thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.

Ecclesiastes 7:10

Ecclesiastes urges us to avoid nostalgia, because it is neither good nor wise. It is foolish to believe that the past was better than the present: as the Scroll author has already explained, nothing ever changes. Perhaps the only good reason to look back is to see how far we’ve come. Besides, we all know what happens to people who look back – remember Orpheus, who lost Eurydice in the Underworld; or Lot’s wife, who became a pillar of salt.

The great Florentine poet Dante Alighieri has Francesca say in these famous

lines from *The Divine Comedy*:

*“Nessun maggior dolore.  
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice.  
Nella miseria ...”*

The Italian version is so beautiful! Read it even if you don't speak Italian. Here is the English version:

“There is no greater sorrow  
Than to be mindful of the happy time In misery ...”

Dante, *Inferno*, canto V, translated by H W Longfellow

## **7. Don't Be Too Righteous**

Dear reader, now we have spent so much time together, I feel I must tell you which are my favourite verses of our great soul-searching poem. The following are not the most important verses in Ecclesiastes, only those that I personally like the most:

Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself overwise: why  
shouldest thou destroy thyself?

Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish. Why shouldest thou  
die before thy time?

It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from the other  
withdraw not thine hand. For he that feareth God shall come forth from  
them all.

Ecclesiastes 7:16–18

I love these verses because I find them very comforting.

I mean, look at this revolutionary and daring concept by the Scroll poet: don't you get too righteous on me now! We all know that good people sin too. Sinning a little, as long as the sins are small ones, is not the end of the world ... as long as you get the dosage right.

When I first read these verses, years ago, I felt like crying out with joy. Ecclesiastes understood me! I never could stand hypocrites who pretend to be angels who have just descended from Heaven. I have never believed people who claim to do nothing but good in their lives.

And then there are those really bad, annoying people: those who dare preach to others while referring them to the example of their own conduct – which is

to others while referring them to the example of their own conduct – which is immaculate, of course. Enough said.

Good and evil struggle against each other in every human heart, and sometimes it is very difficult to tell which is which. All of us have shameful thoughts, and we have all done some things we are proud of and some we are not so proud of. The key is balance.

OK: enough of my take on the Scroll recommendations for a better life. You are welcome to add your own.

At the end of life, you always understand that your life was a lesson, but you were a reckless and inattentive student.

# THE STORY ENDS

... then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Ecclesiastes 12:7

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 judgement, including every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14

Certain Bible researchers believe that these last two verses were added to the Scroll to avoid problems with the censors. I humbly share Leibowitz's view, that this final verse is an integral part of the Scroll and sums it up. I believe that this summation is full of meaning, but only for true and observant believers. Ecclesiastes has not really answered the question regarding Man's advantage, but has explained that fearing God and keeping his Commandments is all anyone can do. Indeed, everything in this world is vanity of vanities, except for faith for faith's sake, which is the very purpose of a person with faith in his heart.

But what could this ending mean to people who are "doomed to be free" in their thoughts and deeds?

Well, the free individuals will have to think about this alone. I have said enough.

And further, my son, by these words be admonished: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh.

Ecclesiastes 12:12

... let thy words be few.

Ecclesiastes 5:2

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\* Here, Ecclesiastes' misogyny outdoes even the famous woman-hater that we have met before – Arthur Schopenhauer, who believed (most of his life) that women have no sense of justice and naturally tend to

engage in deceit and fraud.

# APPENDIX

# THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

## THE 21ST CENTURY KING JAMES VERSION

### 1

1. The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
2. “Vanity of vanities,” saith the Preacher. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”
3. What profit hath a man from all his labour which he doeth under the sun?
4. One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever.
5. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteneth to his place where he arose.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
9. 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.
10. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, “See, this is new”? It hath been already in olden times which were before us.
11. There is no remembrance of former things, neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those that shall come after.
12. I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.
13. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven. This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.
14. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.
15. That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.
16. I communed with mine own heart, saying, “Lo, I have come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in

- Jerusalem; yea, my heart had great experience in wisdom and knowledge.”
17. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly. But I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.
  18. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

## 2

1. I said in mine heart, “Go now, I will test thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure.” And behold, this also is vanity.
2. I said of laughter: “It is madness”; and of mirth: “What good doeth it?”
3. I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine (yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom), and to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for the sons of men, which they should do under heaven all the days of their life.
4. I made me great work, I builded me houses, I planted me vineyards.
5. I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit.
6. I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees.
7. I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house. Also I had great possessions of great and small cattle, above all that were in Jerusalem before me.
8. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces. I got me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments, and those of all sorts.
9. So I was great and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.
10. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced in all my labour, and this was my portion from all my labour.
11. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do; and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.
12. Then I turned myself to behold wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do that cometh after the king? Even that which hath been already done.
13. Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly as far as light excelleth darkness.



14. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walketh in darkness. And I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.
15. Then I said in my heart, "As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me, and why was I then more wise?" Then I said in my heart, "This also is vanity."
16. For there is no more remembrance of the wise for ever than of the fool, since all that now is shall be forgotten in the days to come. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool!
17. Therefore I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me. For all is vanity and vexation of spirit.
18. Yea, I hated all my labour which I had done under the sun, because I must leave it unto the man who shall be after me.
19. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? Yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shown myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.
20. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I had done under the sun.
21. For a man may labour in wisdom and in knowledge and in equity; yet to a man who hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.
22. For what hath man for all his labour and for the vexation of his heart wherewith he hath laboured under the sun?
23. For all his days are sorrows and his travail grief. Yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.
24. 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.
25. For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto more than I?
26. For God giveth to a man what is good in His sight: wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner He giveth travail to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

### 3

1. To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven:
2. a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up

- that which is planted;
3. a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
  4. a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
  5. a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; 6. a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
  7. a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
  8. a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.
  9. What profit hath he that worketh in that for which he laboureth?
  10. I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.
  11. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time. Also He hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.
  12. I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice and to do good in his life,
  13. and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour: it is the gift of God.
  14. I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. And God doeth it, that men should fear before Him.
  15. That which hath been is now, and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.
  16. And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgement, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.
  17. I said in mine heart, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."
  18. I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts.
  19. 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 man hath no preeminence above a beast, for all is vanity.
  20. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.
  21. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?
  22. Therefore I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should

rejoice in his own works, for that is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

## 4

1. So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: And behold, the tears of those who were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter.
2. Therefore I praised the dead who are already dead more than the living who are yet alive;
3. yea, better than both of them is he who hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.
4. Again, I considered all travail and every right work for which a man is envied by his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.
5. The fool foldeth his hands together and eateth his own flesh.
6. Better is a handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of the spirit.
7. Again I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun:
8. There is one who is alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother, yet there is no end to all his labour. Neither is his eye satisfied with riches; nor saith he, "For whom do I labour and bereave my soul of good?" This is also vanity; yea, it is a sore travail.
9. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour.
10. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up.
11. Again, if two lie down together, then they have heat, but how can one be warm alone?
12. And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a three-strand cord is not quickly broken.
13. Better is a poor and wise child, than an old and foolish king who will no more be admonished.
14. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.
15. I considered all the living who walk under the sun, with the second child who shall stand up in his stead.
16. There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them; they also who came after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity

and vexation of spirit.

## 5

1. Guard thy feet when thou goest into the house of God; and be more ready to hear than to make the sacrifice of fools, for they consider not that they do evil.
2. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God. For God is in heaven and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.
3. For a dream cometh through a multitude of business, and a fool's voice is known by a multitude of words.
4. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it, for He hath no pleasure in fools; pay that which thou hast vowed.
5. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.
6. Let not thy mouth cause thy flesh to sin, neither say thou before God's angel that the vow was an error. Why should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?
7. For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also diverse vanities. But fear thou God.
8. If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgement and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter; for he that is higher than the highest regardeth, and there are higher than they.
9. Moreover the profit of the earth is for all; the king himself is served by the field.
10. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase. This is also vanity.
11. When goods increase, they are increased who eat them; and what good is there to the owners thereof, except the beholding of them with their eyes?
12. The sleep of the labouring man is sweet whether he eat little or much, but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.
13. There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely: riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt.
14. But those riches perish by evil travail; and when he begetteth a son, there is nothing in his hand.
15. As he came forth from his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour which he may carry away in his

hand.

16. And this also is a sore evil: that in all ways as he came, so shall he go. And what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?
17. All his days also he eateth in darkness, and hath much sorrow and wrath with his sickness.
18. Behold that which I have seen: It is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him; for it is his portion.
19. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given power to eat thereof and to take his portion and to rejoice in his labour, this is the gift of God.
20. For he shall not much remember the days of his life, because God answereth him in the joy of his heart.

## 6

1. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men:
2. a man to whom God hath given riches, wealth and honour, so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet God giveth him not the power to eat thereof, but a stranger eateth it. This is vanity, and it is an evil disease.
3. If a man beget a hundred children and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial, I say that an untimely birth is better than he, 4. for he cometh in with vanity and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness;
5. moreover he hath not seen the sun, nor known any thing. This one hath more rest than the other:
6. yea, though he live a thousand years twice-told, yet he hath seen no good. Do not all go to one place?
7. All the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled.
8. For what hath the wise more than the fool? What hath the poor, who knoweth how to walk before the living?
9. Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.
10. That which hath been is named already, and it is known what man is; neither may he contend with Him that is mightier than he.

11. Seeing there are many things that increase vanity, how is man the better?
12. For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life being spent as a shadow? For who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

## 7

1. A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth.
2. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart.
3. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.
4. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
5. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.
6. For as is the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity.
7. Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad, and a bribe destroyeth the heart.
8. Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.
9. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry, for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.
10. Say not thou, "Why were the former days better than these?" For thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.
11. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and by it there is profit to them that see the sun.
12. For wisdom is a safeguard, as money is a safeguard, but the excellency of knowledge is that wisdom giveth life to them that have it.
13. Consider the work of God; for who can make straight that which He hath made crooked?
14. In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider this: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him.
15. All things have I seen in the days of my vanity: There is a just man who perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who longeth his life in his wickedness.

16. Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself overwise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?
17. Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish. Why shouldest thou die before thy time?
18. It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this; yea, also from the other withdraw not thine hand. For he that feareth God shall come forth from them all.
19. Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men who are in the city.
20. For there is not a just man upon earth who doeth good and sinneth not.
21. Also take no heed unto all words that are spoken, lest thou hear thy servant curse thee.
22. For oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.
23. All this have I tested by wisdom: I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.
24. That which is far off and exceedingly deep who can find it out?
25. I applied mine heart to know and to search and to seek out wisdom and the reason for things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness.
26. And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are as bonds. Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her.
27. "Behold, this have I found," saith the Preacher, "counting one by one to find out the account,
28. which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: One man among a thousand have I found, but a woman among all those have I not found.
29. Lo, this only have I found: that God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions."

## 8

1. Who is as the wise man? And who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed.
2. I counsel thee to keep the king's commandment, and that because of thy oath to God.
3. Be not hasty to go out of his sight. Stand not for an evil cause, for he doeth

whatsoever pleaseth him.

4. Where the word of a king is, there is power; and who may say unto him, "What doest thou?"
5. Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing, and a wise man's heart discerneth both time and judgement.
6. Because for every purpose there is a time and a judgement, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.
7. For he knoweth not that which shall be; for who can tell him when it shall be?
8. There is no man who hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit, neither hath he power in the day of death. And there is no discharge in that war, neither shall wickedness deliver those who are given to it.
9. All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein a man ruleth over another to his own hurt.
10. And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This is also vanity.
11. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.
12. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him.
13. But it shall not be well with the wicked; neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he feareth not before God.
14. There is a vanity which is done upon the earth: that there be just men, unto whom it happeneth according to the works of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happeneth according to the works of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.
15. Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be merry, for that shall abide with him from his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.
16. When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth (for also is there that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes), 17. then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun, because though a man labour to seek it out, yet shall he not find it; yea further, though even a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.



## 9

1. For all this I considered in my heart, even that I might declare all this: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. No man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before him.
2. All things come alike to all: there is one event that happeneth to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that doth not sacrifice: As is the good, so is the sinner, and he that taketh an oath, as he that feareth an oath.
3. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun: that there is one event that happeneth unto all. Yea, also the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live; and after that they go to the dead.
4. For him that is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.
5. For the living know that they shall die; but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.
6. Also their love and their hatred and their envy is now perished; neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.
7. Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.
8. Let thy garments be always white, and let thy head lack no ointment.
9. 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 hast done under the sun.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. For man also knoweth not his time: As the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, so are the sons of men snared in an evil time when it falleth suddenly upon them.
13. This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me:
14. There was a little city and few men within it. And there came a great king

- against it, and besieged it and built great bulwarks against it.
15. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man.
  16. Then said I, "Wisdom is better than strength"; nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.
  17. The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools.
  18. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroyeth much good.

## 10

1. Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour; so doth a little folly in him that hath a reputation for wisdom and honour.
2. A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left.
3. Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh along the way, his wisdom faileth him, and he saith to everyone that he is a fool.
4. If the ire of the ruler rise up against thee, leave not thy station; for yielding pacifieth great offences.
5. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun as an error which proceedeth from the ruler:
6. folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in lowly places.
7. I have seen servants upon horses, and princes walking as servants upon the earth.
8. He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh through a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.
9. Whoso removeth out stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.
10. If the axe be blunt and one does not whet the edge, then must he put to it more strength; but wisdom is profitable to direct him.
11. Surely the serpent will bite if not charmed, and a babbler is no better.
12. The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool will swallow himself up;
13. the beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is mischievous madness.
14. A fool also is full of words: A man cannot tell what shall be; and what shall be after him – who can tell him?

15. The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.
16. Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child and thy princes feast in the morning!
17. Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength and not for drunkenness!
18. By much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands the house leaks.
19. A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry; but money answereth all things.
20. Curse not the king, no, not even in thy thoughts, and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber; for a bird of the air shall carry thy voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

## 11

1. Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.
2. Give a portion to seven and also to eight, for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.
3. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if the tree fall toward the south or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be.
4. He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.
5. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones grow in the womb of her that is with child, even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.
6. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand; for thou knowest not whether either this or that shall prosper, or whether they both shall be alike good.
7. Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun;
8. 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. All that cometh is vanity.
9. Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth. And walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou that for all these things, God will bring thee into judgement.

10. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity.

## 12

1. 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"; 2. while neither the sun nor the light, nor the moon nor the stars be darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain; 3. 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 the eyes that look out of the windows be darkened; 4. 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 a bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; 5. 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; 6. 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 – 7. then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.
8. "Vanity of vanities," saith the Preacher. "All is vanity."
9. And moreover because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed and sought out and set in order many proverbs.
10. The Preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth!
11. The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the master builders, which are given from one Shepherd.
12. And further, my son, by these words be admonished: of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh.
13. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.
14. For God shall bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.



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