Vanity of vanities in Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8 – Descriptive metaphysics of properties as comparative-philosophical supplement

In this article, a supplementary yet original contribution is made to the ongoing attempts at refining ways of comparative-philosophical conceptual clarification of Qohelet’s claim that הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים אָמַר הַקּוֹהֶלֶת הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים in 1:2 (and 12:8). Adopting and adapting the latest analytic metaphysical concerns and categories for descriptive purposes only, a distinction is made between הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים as property of כל in relation to הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים and the properties of כל in relation to הֲבֵל. Involving both correlation and contrast, the second-order language framework is hereby extended to a level of advanced nuance and specificity for restating the meaning of the book’s first-order language on its own terms, even if not in them.

Contribution: By considering logical, ontological, mereological and typological aspects of property theory in dialogue with appearances of הֲבֵל in Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8 and in-between, a new way is presented in the quest to explain why things in the world of the text are the way they are, or why they are at all.

Keywords: Ecclesiastes; הֲבֵל, כל; comparative philosophy; properties (philosophy).

Introduction

One of the fundamental associated comparative-philosophical foci in research on הֲבֵל in Qohelet is its appearance as הֲבֵל in Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8) with the traditional archaic English rendering as most readers have come to know it:

Involving both correlation and contrast, the second-order term of art and second-order essentially contested concept (Fox 2019:559–563; Sneed 2009:47–50; cf. Crenshaw 2009:47 and recently Weeks 2020:248–260; cf. Mokoena 2019 and classically Fox 1986:409–427). The word הֲבֵל takes second place and might have been ignored, were it not quantifying in 1:2 (and 12:8) and therefore part of what has been variously called the book’s motto, ‘thesis’, ‘challenge’, ‘theme’, amongst others (cf. Crenshaw 2009:47 and recently Weeks 2020:248 for an overview; Anderson 1998:289–300 for a neglected voice of reason). The major concern here is how Qohelet related to הֲבֵל, a problem was succinctly formulated by Lohfink (1989:201–216) in a highly influential related publication entitled: Koh 1, 2 ‘alles ist Windhauch’ – universale oder anthropologische Aussage?


Most of the research concerned with these verses is primarily focussed on the word הֲבֵל as first-order term of art and second-order essentially contested concept (Fox 2019:559–563; Sneed 2017:89–94; Weeks 2020:248–260; cf. Mokoena 2019 and classically Fox 1986:409–427). The word הֲבֵל takes second place and might have been ignored, were it not quantifying in 1:2 (and 12:8) and therefore part of what has been variously called the book’s motto, ‘thesis’, ‘challenge’, ‘theme’, amongst others (cf. Crenshaw 2009:47 and recently Weeks 2020:248 for an overview; Anderson 1998:289–300 for a neglected voice of reason). The major concern here is how Qohelet related to הֲבֵל, a problem was succinctly formulated by Lohfink (1989:201–216) in a highly influential related publication entitled: Koh 1, 2 ‘alles ist Windhauch’ – universale oder anthropologische Aussage?

Lohfink (1989) followed the tradition of calling 1:2 a ‘Motto’ (amongst other things) and also used terms such as ‘predicate’ and ‘subject’, mostly in their linguistic, that is, grammatical senses, implying that for Qohelet, כל was somehow an attribute of כל.

Doch was meint hakkol genau? Das ist hier keineswegs klar, denn es handelt sich um den ersten Satz des Buches. Die Windhauchaussage ist bei Kohelet geradezu das Leitmotiv des Buches. Daß nicht lange nachgewiesen werden. Was aber hakkol, das Subjekt, angeht, so wird aus den deutschen Übersetzungen ein entscheidendes Faktum kaum ersichtlich: kol ist im Hebräischen determiniert. (p. 201)

The reference to the presence of the definite article in the Hebrew and the relevance of the choice of words (‘determiniert’) for the present study will become readily apparent here. But first it is necessary to note what Lohfink (1989) wrote next, as it set the stage for how כל was understood or for which interpretation of its meaning and relation to כל had to be mentioned and opposed:


The way Lohfink sought to make sense of how כל was understood in relation to כל includes not only linguistic considerations but restatement of what Qohelet was up to in descriptive metaphysical terms. This was part of the reason for this article’s interest, namely the comparative-philosophical nuance it was able to add to the ongoing discussion of how Qohelet’s words כל כל might be correlated or contradicted to an old pre-Socratic quest in new post-Aristotelian form (cf. Müller 2003:67–80; cf. von Loewenclau 1986:327–338 and earlier through influential studies like those of Braun 1973, Ranston [1925] and Palm [1885] amongst others). To be sure, in contemporary discussions of the doxography of ancient Greek philosophy and in research on ‘pre-Socratic’ philosophers, Lohfink’s historically uncritical link with anecdotal secondary sources’ references to the saying of the Cynic Monimos (and the presumption of verbal equivalence entailing semantic identity) will appear controversial (cf. Curd 2020; Mansfeld 2020:n.p. and as repeated in Crenshaw 2009:41–62). In the end, Lohfink (1989) concluded that:

Wenn der Leser beim Kosmogedicht angekommen ist, ist er auf jeden Fall schon auf die anthropologische Fragestellung eingeschwungen. Das ist entscheidend für das Verständnis dieses Gedichts. Galt 1,2 nämlich kosmologisch oder grundsätzlich von allem Seienden, dann müßten die Kreislaufaussagen dieses Gedichts Orchesterklänge eines letzten kosmischen Pessimismus sein. So werden sie ja auch meistens gelesen. Das kommt durch das meist nicht reflektierte, aber wie selbstverständlich vorausgesetzte kosmisch-philosophische Verständnis von 1,2. Ist man von ihm aber nicht schon vorbestimmt, läßt man sich durch 1, auf einen anthropologischen Sinn des hakkol hinführen, dann entsteht erst der interpretatorische Freiraum, wo Kohelets kreisender Kosmos Schönheit, Fülle und Herrlichkeit sein kann. (p. 216)

This classic reading and its formulation of the problem of what Qohelet meant by כל in relation to כל in 1:2 and 12:8 (and elsewhere) is still the accepted frame of reference for the related research problems (see Weeks 2020:248–260; cf. Bartholomew 2009; Crenshaw 1987; Fox 1989, 1999; Köhlmoo 2015; Krüger 2001:184–195; Krüger 2000; Idem 2000; Lohfink 2003, 2009; Longman 1998; Murphy 1992; Schellenberg 2013; Schoors 2013; Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004; Seow 1997 et al.). As for the mode of description in the literature as to how Qohelet is thought to relate כל to כל, the philosophical flavour of the book of Ecclesiastes as it is known in English and the popular dating of the text to the Persian or Hellenistic periods have made comparative-philosophical perspectives on the text comparably less controversial than they would be when applied to other biblical modes of discourse. Not surprisingly then, existing comparative-philosophical readings include correlating and contrasting Qohelet with not only Western but also Eastern counterparts (see, e.g. Heard 1996:65–93; Lorgunpai 1994:155–162; Sekine 1991:3–54; for a more extensive overview of the associated research, see Gericke 2015a:1–7) for a more complete list of related research).

The present study’s original contribution to the related comparative-philosophical research is motivated by Lohfink’s seminal findings. A supplement to existing perspectives will be offered in light of new comparative-philosophical concepts, concerns and categories that have been doing the rounds (cf. Littlejohn 2021:n.p.) More specifically, the discussion to follow will investigate the pros and cons of a new way of restating what is involved when Qohelet used the words כל כל by way of an experimental adoption and adaptation of the language of ‘properties’ in analytic metaphysics (cf. Allen 2021:n.p.). This choice of the particular domain of second-order discourse is motivated, on the one hand, by the already accepted use of certain second-order terms indicated here (e.g. the relatively unproblematic tendency to refer to כל and כל as ‘concepts’ in a more or less technical sense in conjunction with linguistic cum philosophical jargon that include speaking of the concepts in connection with their relation to other theoretical entities, for example, כל as ‘predicate’, ‘attribute’, ‘feature’, ‘quality’, ‘characteristic’ of כל). On the other hand, the metaphysical assumptions, as opposed to epistemological and ethical ones in Qohelet, remain under-represented in the research (see Gericke 2015b:n.p.)

The theoretical argument of the study states that a fruitful distinction can be made between כל as property (of כל) and the properties of הכל (in relation to כל). The discussion to follow will operate mostly on the level of illustrated theory. Given the limited application value of opting for any particular interpretation of כל and כל, these terms will be left untranslated. When a specific interpretation is nevertheless presupposed or implied, it is used only...
as part of the hypothetical examples and as such does not imply committing to or being dependent on the associated meanings of הָבֶל and הָכל therein.

It is, however, not assumed that all perspectives in the related research and all possible translations of הָבֶל and הָכל are equally valid. In addition, the involvement of property theory as it has taken shape within analytic philosophy is motivated by comparative-philosophical interests and not by an assumption that the associated presuppositions, problems and perspectives represent a perennial philosophical idiom. Although not usually treated in the same idiom in 'Continental' and other thinkers, as one recent commentator observed:

[T]he nature and existence of properties as such have always been central in terms of predicates. The latter linguistic configuration in relation to the world of the text involve just one kind of exemplification, applying indifferently to different categories of הָבֶל-bearing entities in הָבֶל. This monist view may indeed be considered the default one as condition of possibility for the meaningfulness of the generalisation in Qohelet in 1:2 and 12:8. Even so, different theories of conceptual structure already in place can be supplemented with additional nuance and specificity by distinguishing הָבֶל as a property (of הָבֶל) as particular from it as a relation or state of affairs exemplified. Alternatively, a pluralist ontology in our categorial distinctions means the instantiation of הָבֶל as property (of הָבֶל) and the properties of הָכל (in relation to הָבֶל) in Qohelet can be treated as different sorts of objects, namely kinds (substantial universals), attributes and modes (tropes) (see Lowe 2006).

There appears to be a general agreement in the literature that הָבֶל-exemplifying states of affairs obtaining within relations in the world of the text involve just one kind of exemplification, and there are assumed to be properties of הָבֶל (in relation to הָבֶל) in the ontological assumptions in the world of the text to investigate, irrespective of our choice of associated vocabulary or whether הָבֶל was in fact assumed to be part of one or more than one kind of instantiation or exemplification (see, e.g. Lowe 2006:77).

In comparative-philosophical counterpart terms, הָבֶל as a property of הָבֶל is often located in ‘‘כִּי רַע עָלַי’’. This is further evidenced in the different number of ways in which the word לֶב is grammatically and semantically used and configured in relation to הָבֶל elsewhere in Qohelet:

In different related terminology, לֶב is assumed to possess, bear or have הָבֶל as a property so that, inversely, הָבֶל characterises or inheres in לֶב. In this sense, לֶב is assumed to be a property (of לֶב) and there are assumed to be properties of לֶב (in relation to לֶב in the ontological assumptions in the world of the text to investigate, irrespective of our choice of associated vocabulary or whether לֶב was in fact assumed to be part of one or more than one kind of instantiation or exemplification (see, e.g. Lowe 2006:77).

All this I have seen, even applied my heart thereto, whatever the work that is done under the sun: what time one man had power over another to his hurt (8:9)
As has already been noted in the research but not restated in these terms, the use of the word ‘הכל’ in Qohelet is not limited to the sense and reference it has in 1:2 and 12:8 in relation to ‘הבל’. Interestingly, appearing only in 8 out of 222 instances, after 1:2 and 12:8 have been excluded, ‘הכל’ appears at least twice in four of the six verses (2:11; 3:19; 9:1 [3x]; 11:9). It only features once in 2:17 and 8:9. In 10 of these 13 appearances in the book’s total of 15, only 4 instances connect it directly to ‘הבל’ as property in ways related to 1:2 and 12:8 (2:11; 2:17; 3:19 and 11:9). In only three of these does it appear as ‘הכל’ (11:9 only has ‘כל’). Of these four, two have ‘הכל’ as property, not of any metaphysical particular but of Qohelet’s ‘agency’ (and that related to him). An alternative philosophical term for what is present in the particular states of affairs would be ‘events’ (‘시험ָי’ לְחֵצֵי הַקָּרָא וְיִשְׂמָח). The other two simply refer to ‘הכל’ as property, once undefined as ‘הבל’ in the context of the mortality of living things (3:19) and the other as exemplified undefined in what is to come (11:9).

In the four texts observed, the property is lost in translation in the sense of being temporally located as being exemplified specifically (also) in the present twice (2:11 and 3:19), in the past (2:17) and in the future (11:9). Spatially all are either explicitly or implicitly ‘ Maharּ_fake 1 יִשְׂמָח ’ ‘under the sun’ (3:19; 9:1; 11:9 lacking the phrase in the verse but featuring it in the surrounding pericope). The other uses of ‘ כל ’ with or without prepositions are as indicative of both every particular subject and object in the domain of discourse (2:11 x 1; 8:9 x 1; 9:1 x 2) and is extended in use to refer to all being of one ‘air, breath’ (3:19) and all of the ‘days’ and ‘all this’ (וְכָל-הָבֶל 8:9 x 2 and 9:1 x 1) that Qohelet has seen, thought of and sought (thus links to as property of ‘כל’ and the properties of ‘כל’ only implicitly).

In the light of these observations, it seemed that interpreting ‘כל’ as a property of ‘כל’ and the properties of ‘כל’ in relation to ‘כל’ in 1:2 and 12:8 and in explicit references to ‘כל’ or ‘כל’ quantified over one state of affairs or another is both unified and diverse. Although Qohelet is of course focussed on the human condition, the anthropological domain is supervened on by cosmological spatio-temporal mereological part–whole relations for ‘כל’. Here a problem arises for an analytic metaphysical or ontological restatement operating in tandem with the comparative-philosophical counterpart for ‘כל’ as property of ‘כל’ and the properties of ‘כל’, that is, the predication of ‘כל’ as property of ‘כל’ and the properties of ‘כל’ are not univocal. This makes formal-logical specificity in analysis seeking to clarify the identity and existence conditions and mereological nuances in the nature of the relation between ‘כל’ and the properties of ‘כל’ impossible. That being granted, as Qohelet uses ‘כל’ in a metaphorical sense and ‘כל’ rarely quantifies over a universal state of affairs, analogical predication and a fictional ontology, perhaps a neo-Meinongian framework able to operate with two modes of predication (‘external’ and ‘internal’) is better suited to comparative philosophical restatement (cf. Allen 2021:n.p.).

The above-mentioned alternative approach combined with an exemplar (as opposed to classical or prototype) theory of conceptual structure when considering extensions in texts explicitly mentioning ‘כל’ and with reference to which it can be restated property of ‘כל’ in terms of its constituent parts, for example, ‘… This is also ‘כל’ (2:1 of enjoying life in pleasure); 2:15 [of being wise yet suffering the same fate as the fool in the end]; 2:19 [of the possibility of wise bequeathing success to fools]; 2:21 [of those who toiled leaving the fruits of their labours to those who did nothing to obtain it]; 2:23 [of vexed and restless prosperity]; 2:26 [the gift of wisdom and happiness from favour and the material benefits therefrom obtained from those without it]; 3:4 [excellence in work as made possible by envy]; 3:7–8 [hard work and self-sacrifice and deprivation without joy, satisfaction or beneficiaries]; 3:16 [the eventual loss of however great one’s fame, power and role]; 5:10 [the loving of prosperity as unsatisfactory and insatiable]; 6:1 [lacking nothing through divine blessing unable to enjoy it whilst others will]; 6:9 [seeing better than desiring]; 7:6 [hearing the laughter of fools]; 8:10 [the burial and forgottenness of the pious wicked]; 8:14 [when the good suffers the fate of the bad and vice versa]. Atypical contexts without the conclusion that ‘This is also ‘כל’ include 6:4 [as the state of the stillborn]; 6:11 [as something that is increased the more words one uses]; and 11:10 [of youth and early life]).

Restated in comparative-philosophical terms, ‘כל’ and ‘כל’ are clearly fuzzy concepts as their boundaries of application in the world of the text and in their relations to each other vary considerably according to Qohelet’s foci. The associated vagueness gives the impression that both terms lack fixed meaning in spite of obviously and most certainly not lacking in specificity. This relativises the value of even a formal fuzzy concept analysis, which usually seeks to link ‘כל’ and ‘כל’ by making the former the point of departure. In the given table, this relation is inverted according to extensional and intensional aspects of ‘כל’ in relation to ‘כל’ in 1:2 showing the problematic, somewhat arbitrary and generally unsatisfying outcome of attempting precise and concrete descriptions of the relation to the respective ‘כל’-instantiating states of affairs in conjunction with dispositional attitudes, agency and events in their metaphysical senses.

What is apparent from the intensionally and extensionally inadequate representation of ‘כל’ as a property of ‘כל’ and the properties of ‘כל’ instantiated in all the above contexts is that Qohelet sometimes does diverge to include exemplification.
links to and inseparable from more abstract objects such as youth and the future in general (see Table 1). It also shows why an exemplar approach to the properties as concepts may work better than classical and prototype views of conceptual structure. A piece-meal identification goes a lot further than finding a common denominator in either necessary and sufficient conditions or in family resemblances. Doing so in conjunction with property theory may not solve the interpreter’s version of the ‘one over many problem’, that is, of finding unity in diversity with reference to property as a general term and the properties of רע, yet it will be better able to dissolve some of the problem’s rough edges via a more nuanced clarification of its complexity. After all, such was one of the main motivations for including properties in both philosophy and in world of the text ontologies to begin with (Allen 2021:n.p.)

Although not usually approached from this angle, it therefore appears relevant to ask how רע as property of רע and the properties of רע, as conceived in Qohelet in relation to the universal–particular debate since Plato. When commentators refer to רע or רע by using words such as idea or form they usually do not use these terms with the original metaphysical import of indicating Platonist realism as universalia ante res-universality as coming before particulars in רע. Yet this does not do away with the question of how Qohelet assumed the variety of רע-instantiating things as all capable, (in typical cases) of having the same properties that makes רע and allow for the superlative relation within the broader mereology as condition of possibility to claim: רע (wholly כְּבָלָה). Despite the vagueness in Qohelet’s language, what is obvious is that in relation to property כְּבָלָה as general term is also a kind of universal existing and exemplified only in particulars instantiating the properties of רע (universalia in rebus). It seems hard to affirm or deny this with reference to the world of the text, which is basically silent about this matter even when using רע as a general term in relation to and quantified by רע. And thought as the second-order language of the real reader today may assume a form of conceptualism or nominalism in discussing these terms as part of describing a world of the text by default operating on a fictionalist ontological status, attributing this to Qohelet would be conceptually historically anachronistic. It would therefore fail to be descriptively apt in classifying the mereology involved in the one-over-many problem, adapted to the discussion about רע as a property of רע and the properties of רע in relation to רע.

The same applies to literary-critical approaches where רע as a property of רע and the properties of רע are deemed to function in a figurative sense, for example, metaphorical and constructed as tropes. The latter term in the domain of discourse as it appears in biblical scholarship should, however, not be confused with the metaphysical sense of being aligned to nominalism, despite some form of nominalism being the default literary-critical ontology as well. Since trope-theory is often discussed separately from property theory in metaphysics, futher related remarks are beyond the scope of the remainder of the discussion about רע as property of רע and the properties of רע in relation to רע.

To close the discussion, the interest now turns to the type of property that רע as property of רע was assumed to be. Not because Qohelet had such an interest but because the text contains related assumptions allowing for conceptual clarification of the properties involved along these lines and irrespective of one’s ontological commitment to a specific type (or the lack thereof). Although not exhaustive in typological terms, the following will suffice to illustrate the ways in which this element of property theory can be comparative-philosophical correlation and contrasting can be part of conceptual clarification.

Based on their distinction in Aristotle, רע was assumed to be an accidental property of רע in the context of all רע despite it being permanently instantiated. In other words, it was conceivable for Qohelet that in at least one possible world, the one in which the conditions of possibility for the discontent are found, רע as a whole of sorts with reference to the related mereological parts would not lose its identity is רע was not exemplified as

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might have meant by these words, it does help to describe the way אֱלֹהֵי is instantiated in relation to אֱלֹהִים and its own properties thereby exemplified. Although the language was philosophical and the distinctions second-order, it is clear how the concepts under consideration can be correlated and contrasted in order to restate the associated metaphysical and ontological assumptions in Qohelet’s language on their own terms, even if not in them. Thus, constructing אֱלֹהֵי as a property of אֱלֹהִים and distinguishing it from the properties in relation to אֱלֹהִים, irrespective of the merits of the philosophical views utilised in philosophy itself, is in the ways illustrated helpful to describe dimensions of the conditions of possibility that must be postulated to account for why things in the world of the text are the way they are, or why they are at all.

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J.G. is the sole author of this research article.

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