

Qohelet and the nature of morality: A meta-ethical framework for future research

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Abstract

The book of Ecclesiastes (here ‘Qohelet’), like many other books of the Hebrew Bible, is often discussed with reference to its supposed ‘ethics’. Within biblical scholarship, such research is often characterized by a meta-language filled with philosophically vague and fuzzy descriptive jargon, largely bereft of technical distinctions and nuance. One possible reason for this state of affairs may be the fact that Qohelet’s assumptions about the nature of morality have never been studied against the backdrop of issues and theories in contemporary analytic meta-ethics. In response to this gap in the research, and with proposals for conceptual refinement in mind, this article offers the first ever meta-theoretical introduction to some of the semantic, ontological, epistemological and other related meta-ethical concerns and categories which may be of use in future analyses of the foundations of Qohelet’s ‘ethics’.

Keywords: Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, philosophy, ethics, meta-ethics, meta-language, meta-theory

Introduction

The Hebrew name of this book and of its author, Qoheleth, is in fact a title, which possibly means “assembler” (of listeners) or “collector” (of wisdom sayings). The book is more commonly called the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is a close translation into Hellenistic Greek of this Hebrew word. The book consists of an extended reflective essay which makes use of an autobiographical narrative, proverbs, parables, and also a range of allegories. There is a tone of unrelenting skepticism in the entire work. The issues with which the writer grapples and the questions raised by him, are aimed at people who claim any absolute values in this life. This includes human possessions, fame, success, or even pleasure. Wisdom is challenged, and foolishness is condemned (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016).

The words ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ do not occur in the Book of Ecclesiastes (hereafter Qohelet). This does not mean, however, that some concept(s) of what these terms signify is not implicit in its text. Indeed, many popular commentaries appear to assume that, either in its entirety, or in part, Qohelet did presuppose some or other and ethical point(s) of view (cf. Barton, 1908; Scott, 1965; Crenshaw, 1974:23-55; 1987; Whybray, 1978:191-204, 1989; Loader, 1979; Lohfink, 1980; Gese, 1983:141-53; Ogden, 1987; Fox, 1989, 1999; Murphy, 1992; Perry, 1993; Seow, 1997; 2000:1-16; Longman, 1998; Brown, 2001:271-84; Kruger, 2004; Schwienhorst-Schonberger, 2004; Enns, 2005; Christianson, 2007; et al.)

More specifically, mainstream interpreters have classified sections of the second half of the book (4:17-12:8) as explicitly 'ethical', simultaneously viewing the text as a whole to be permeated by 'ethical considerations' (see Crenshaw, 1987:39). In other words, there is alleged to be a move from 'reflection' to 'ethics', in both 5:1-6:9 and again in 9:1-12:8 (see Seow, 1997:197). In light of the presence of an ethical dimension being almost uncontested, some scholars have sought to compare Qohelet's moral stance with possible parallels from Greek philosophy and ancient Near Eastern sapiential literature (cf. Ranston 1923:160-69; 1925; Braun, 1973; Lauha, 1978; Loretz, 1964; Gammie, 1985:169-187; et. al.). Others have traced the book's reception and have looked at it in comparison to past and contemporary theological and philosophical ethical positions (Fox, 1989: passim; Sekine, 1991:3-54; Bartholomew, 2009:35-39; Sneed, 2012:passim).

As for what exactly Qohelet was supposed to understand by the concept(s) of ethics/morality, biblical scholars in particular have been rather vague as far as their descriptive technical terminology is concerned. While some construct 'ethics' proper only in the scholarly meta-language describing the structure of certain collections of sayings in the book (cf. Seow, 1997:197), others detect only an 'ethical impulse' in Qohelet (see Perry, 2015:4), with still others considering the very notion of 'ethics' to be 'too positive' for what Qohelet was up to in the associated content (see Enns, 2005:66). Those commentators who do seek to describe the nature of (some parts of) Qohelet's 'ethics' have done so opting for a variety of labels, e.g. 'theonomous (ethics)' or 'dialectic ethics' (see Von Rad, 1993:92), a '*carpe diem* ethics', (see Crenshaw, 1987:51), 'practical ethics' (see Fox, 1989:109), a 'reflective ethics' (see Schoors 1998:6), a 'theological ethics' (Lee, 2005:138), an 'ethics of moderation' (see Bartholomew 2009:251), a 'situational ethics' (Brown 2011:42), to name a few. One popular technical term that commentators readily employ, whether approvingly or dismissively, is 'hedonism' (see Sneed, 2012:225). Finally, aside from Qohelet being called 'moral' by many, others have used the terms 'amoral' (Scott 1965:3) and even 'immoral' (see Whybray, 1978:191-204).

The research problem

The technical terminology chosen to describe Qohelet's assumptions about the nature of morality is, from a philosophical point of view at least, rather 'fuzzy' and 'vague'. For example, if Qohelet was a 'hedonist', which philosophical interpretation of what is meant by this is implied to be present. What sub-species of 'hedonism' are we talking about? Also, suppose Qohelet is a 'hedonist', what does it imply regarding his moral semantics, ontology, epistemology, and so forth? The same questions can be asked with reference to any other label given for Qohelet's 'ethics'. Yet a closer look at the existing research concerned with ethical classification will reveal that these kinds of questions have not only remained unanswered; they have never even been asked to begin with.

Until now, scholarly discussions on ethics in Qohelet have been primarily concerned with so-called *substantive theories* of morality, e.g. with *descriptive ethics* (i.e., giving what purports to be an unbiased account of Qohelet's moral beliefs), *normative ethics* (i.e. classifying the contents of moral beliefs in Qohelet via *ethical theory*, e.g. hedonism), and *applied ethics* (i.e. looking at Qohelet's discourse with an eye to a specific contemporary relevant moral issue, e.g. the status of women). In doing so, however, philosophical issues related to analytical or meta-ethics have been neglected, as has been the case everywhere in Hebrew Bible studies (cf. Otto, 1994; Barton, 2003:45; cf. Barton, 2015:243).

In sum then, the gap in the current research on Qohelet can be found in the absence of any attempt at discerning a technical philosophical meta-language with which biblical scholars can clarify Qohelet's most basic and foundational assumptions about the nature of morality.

Objectives and methodology

The aim of this study will be to introduce philosophical *nuance* into the ongoing discussion of the nature of Qohelet's ethics. The purpose is not a sweeping dismissal of all that went before but rather as a *supplement* and *compliment* thereto. With the aid of meta-ethical concepts and related philosophical issues, the article seeks to introduce Qohelet specialists to the entire spectrum of meta-ethical perspectives in the hope that awareness thereof will eventually lead to conceptual *refinement* within our scholarly *meta-language*. The research findings can thus be seen to act as a *prolegomenon* to all future discussions of Qohelet's most basic assumptions regarding the nature of morality.

Situated within Hebrew Bible scholarship, this study will involve a meta-theoretical introduction to meta-ethics with special reference to Qohelet's moral assumptions. However, it will operate in contrast to traditional 'outside-in' approaches to Qohelet's ethics, all of which invariably start with an exegesis of the text and only thereafter attempts to link its moral assumptions to whatever broad populist ethical concepts and categories happens to be familiar to the particular interpreter. By contrast, this study will adopt an 'outside-in' approach by first taking cognizance of the issues and theories that are being discussed in analytic meta-ethics. Then, experimenting with what may be descriptively adequate meta-language, various hypothetical scenarios are then reconstructed for the sake of the argument in order to show what it might look like, should rudiments of a particular meta-ethical perspective be present in Qohelet. As such, the approach covers only a pre-exegetical phase of a larger-scale inquiry that will ultimately be necessary.

Relevance and actuality

This study represents the first ever attempt to discern a philosophical framework for identifying Qohelet's meta-ethical assumptions. In this way a space is opened up for the utilization of descriptively more satisfying meta-language in future discussions of Qohelet's ethics. The article also provides a convenient systematic collection of data that will allow for subsequent exegesis to more easily navigate both the auxiliary field (i.e. meta-ethics) and to philosophically analyze assumptions about the nature of morality implicit in Qohelet.

Outline

The discussion to follow offers an introductory overview and summary of the background, issues and theories stereotypically part of the analytic meta-ethics. Not everything available can be covered, and what is covered can be done so only briefly. Being situated within biblical scholarship and not philosophy proper, the entire presentation is formulated in such a manner that the meta-ethical concepts and categories are consistently translated into a meta-language with hypothetical scenarios of what may (or may not) be implicit in Qohelet's own moral assumptions in view.

Possible concerns

Recourse to philosophy in this article does not require that the Book of Qohelet itself be seen as a philosophical text. It does however assume that, since scholars already talk about Qohelet's ethics – and since ethics is also a philosophical discipline – the use of philosophical jargon as potential descriptive tools for the meta-language with which we speak of Qohelet's assumptions about the nature of morality is not in itself a hermeneutically legitimate operation. In this regard, cognizance must be taken of the fact that all our technical vocabulary, whether in linguistic, literary, historical, social-scientific or theological approaches to Qohelet, is also anachronistic.

Yet as is the case in those approaches, anachronism in descriptive philosophical terminology (especially when the study is experimental and working with hypothetical possibilities) does not necessarily entail a distortion of textual contents.

Limiting the meta-ethical discussion to the analytic tradition of philosophy is not purposefully exclusive – or based on the assumption – of a supposed superiority or the sole legitimacy thereof. This particular meta-philosophical context for interlocution was decided on simply because, as a way of approaching Qohelet's ethics, it has never been involved before. Whatever the cons of this choice may be, it is taken for granted that it represents but one of many possible ways of responding to the research problem; also, alternative meta-philosophical perspectives (e.g. Continental, Feminist, African, etc.) are also sorely needed. The latter are, however, beyond the scope of the present discussion (and the competency of the author).

Finally, a lack of exegetical engagement with – and the provisioning of illustrations from – the actual Hebrew text of Qohelet is only to be expected given limitations of scope and space. This article is intended to function only as an introductory overview and preliminary discussion of potentially relevant meta-ethical issues for such hands-on engagement with the minutiae of the text..

Meta-ethics and Qohelet's assumptions about the nature of morality

What is meta-ethics?

Although the word 'meta-ethics' (more commonly 'meta-ethics' among American philosophers) hails from early in the twentieth century, the basic philosophical concerns it deals with go back to the very beginnings of philosophy (for an introduction, see Miller 2003; Shafer-Landau, 2001-2010; Fisher, & Kirchin, 2006). For instance, several interlocutors in the dialogues of Plato articulate aspects of various meta-ethical stances still popular in our time:

1. Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* (482c-486d) suggested that Nature does not deal in moral distinctions, the latter being mere conventions of human society (see Plato, 1997a).
2. Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* (336b-354c) proposed a form of meta-ethical nihilism by seeking an apology for the idea that justice is simply whatever those in power make it out to be (see Plato, 1997b).
3. Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro* (10c-12e) asked the question of whether divine commands can be distinguished from moral values, which has become a precursor to subsequent meta-ethical debates regarding the possibility of a secular justification of morality (see Plato, 1997c).

In addition to the above, Aristotle's seeking to ground happiness and virtue in the political and biological nature of humans (in Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*) also plays a pioneering role in the meta-ethical concerns of later moral philosophers (cf. Heinaman, 1995). At present, analytic meta-ethics is often traced back to ideas found in G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (see Moore, 1903). This work led to half-a-century of analytic moral philosophy becoming almost exclusively focused on meta-ethical issues, e.g. arguing whether or not moral language comes in the form of facts and whether the related ethical properties can be scientifically scrutinized (cf. Darwal, 2006:17-37). A next phase began in the 1970s, characterized by analytic moral philosophy focusing on applied ethics and normative theories (see, e.g. Rawls, 1971). Now, in the twenty-first century meta-ethics has become thoroughly interdisciplinary, involving not only other

philosophical disciplines (metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, etc.) but also other related fields (e.g. cultural anthropology, comparative politics, social psychology, etc.) (see Sayre-McCord 2014:n.p.; DeLapp, 2015:n.p).question whether divine commands can be distinguished from moral values question whether divine commands can be distinguished from moral values

Qohelet and issues in meta-ethics

What would a meta-ethical perspective on Qohelet actually involve? Briefly, one could summarize such an approach by saying that it would seek to identify Qohelet's assumptions about the status, foundations, and scope of moral values, properties, and words. Contrastively, one could also say that whereas involving previous approaches to Qohelet's ethics were concerned with what Qohelet assumed to be examples of moral actions, the present a meta-ethical perspective will wish to ask what Qohelet might have assumed morality as such is. As should be clear, a meta-ethical reading of Qohelet should be distinguished from perspectives found in 'first-order' moral theorizing, requiring as it does a 'second-order' type.

More specifically, the various meta-ethical positions to be discussed below in hypothetical relation to Qohelet may be distinguished with regard to their answers to the following questions:

- 1) What exactly was Qohelet doing when using moral concepts such as 'good' and 'righteous'?
- 2) What precisely was a moral value in Qohelet assumed to be in the first place, and was it assumed to be similar to other entities such as an object or property?
- 3) Where, according to Qohelet, were moral values assumed to come from, i.e. what were supposed to be their source and foundation?
- 4) Did Qohelet assume that some things were morally right or wrong for all people at all times, or does Qohelet imply that morality varies from person to person, context to context, or culture to culture?
- 5) How, according to Qohelet, did the mind operate in relation to moral phenomena?

To determine what Qohelet might have assumed on these matters, a stereotypical comprehensive meta-ethical approach to the text will attempt to answer the questions above by attending to:

- 1) the *semantics* of Qohelet's moral assumptions;
- 2) the *ontology* of moral properties assumed in Qohelet;
- 3) the *epistemology* of Qohelet's coming to know moral values;
- 4) the *philosophical anthropology* implicit in Qohelet's moral assumptions;
- 5) the *philosophy of mind* implicit in Qohelet's moral assumptions.

These are then, broadly speaking, the typical meta-ethical issues of interest for a philosophical approach to Qohelet's presuppositions about the nature of morality.

A caveat regarding conceptual complexity

Since philosophers vary in their understanding of what meta-ethics involves, the concerns mentioned here can be worded differently, as well as supplemented with a variety of related problems and perspectives. It is also important to take cognizance of the fact that both the various categories in 1) – 5) as well as the theories to be discussed do not exist in isolation. A meta-ethical view in one category (e.g. moral semantics, e.g. various forms of non-cognitivism) inevitably links up with compatible or derivative views in other categories (e.g. moral ontology, e.g. various forms of anti-realism). However, views across philosophical categories are not strictly correlated on an individual basis so that a theory in one may be compatible with not only a theory in another but also with its opposite (e.g. moral subjectivism is compatible with both realism and anti-realism). Thus if a given text in Qohelet assumed a particular sub-type of meta-ethical perspectives (e.g. some unarticulated version of a epistemological theory), this may or may not imply that the same text assumed something popularly associated with another sub-type (e.g. a psychological one). Yet it will assume whatever is logically entailed by a given view in a given meta-ethical category.

Of course, given that Qohelet never used modern analytic philosophical jargon and since any given text is never explicit on the meta-ethical assumptions it holds to (whether the author was aware of the given belief or not) it might be that the text cannot so easily be completely and verifiably harmonized with any of the theories discussed below. Moreover, given that the text of Qohelet might even be characterized by meta-ethical pluralism (i.e. different verses might presuppose different meta-ethical perspectives, irrespective of whether we assume they are from the same author or not), the situation is complicated even further (see Fox. 1989 on Qohelet's 'contradictions'; cf. also Barton 1908 and Perry, 1993 for source-critical speculation regarding problems of coherence in the text, above and beyond the generally accepted editorial editions and/or frame-narration, on which, see Fox 1989; Longman 1998). Perhaps the most efficient use of the research will therefore involve a piecemeal analysis of presuppositions, implicature and logical entailment, simultaneously working with (not against) the findings of already available linguistic, literary, historical, social-scientific and other types of findings regarding various sorts of interpretative intricacies attached to a given passage's moral assumptions.

Qohelet's hypothetical meta-ethics in the context of semantic theories

The theories discussed under this rubric represent a response to the (1) above. As such they basically attempt to answer the following question: 'What, according to Qohelet, was the meaning of moral terms or judgments?'

On the one hand, we may start by asking how Qohelet's meta-ethical assumptions may be related to so-called '*moral cognitivism*' (cf. van Roojen, 2015:n.p.). Rather misleadingly, the latter concept is not concerned with moral cognition but with moral language. In this case, the general theory, if implicit in Qohelet, would assume that the book's evaluative moral sentences express propositions about the way the world actually is aside from human linguistic practices (i.e. they are 'truth apt' or 'truth bearers', capable of being true or false). In this regard, the most famous argument in favor of meta-ethical cognitivism by appeal to the apparent logical structure of moral discourse is known as the *Frege-Geach Problem* in honor of the philosophers credited with its articulation (see Geach, 1960, 1965; Schroeder, 2008). For example, if Qohelet was a moral cognitivist, it will be evident in demonstrating that he assumed, when implying that something is moral or immoral, he was involved in fact-stating descriptions (as opposed to merely expressing sentiments). If this is what is going on in Qohelet from a meta-ethical perspective, then we would expect the text to presuppose some form of cognitivism, which in turn suggests that moral

statements implicit in the discourse were also assumed to be true (in accordance with the concept of ‘truth’ in *correspondence theories*)

By contrast, if Qohelet’s moral assumptions contain beliefs that are demonstrably more like ideas from *non-cognitivist* theories, we should expect to find the implicit belief that ethical sentences were assumed to be neither true nor false (in the above-mentioned logical sense, although it could be, in the context of a different theory, on which, see below on coherence; and cf. van Roojen, 2015:n.p.) Such would be the case if and only if it can be argued that for Qohelet such sentences were not assumed to express genuine propositions. It would also be confirmed if Qohelet was some sort of anti-realist in his meta-ethical ontology (on which, see below). But even if it could be shown that Qohelet did imply a form of non-cognitivism, one would still have to be more specific and try to bring into consideration all of the following:

1. *Expressivism* would be present in the text if the ethical statements implicit in the moral assumptions of Qohelet were taken to be conventional devices for expressing pro and con attitudes towards their objects (cf. Boisvert, 2008). However, it may also be that Qohelet, like other views in this category, assumed that moral statements express commitments, not to idiosyncratic personal feelings, but instead to the particular cultural mores that enable communication and social coordination (cf. Gibbard, 1990:46).
2. *Emotivism* would be present in the text if the ethical statements implicit in the moral assumptions of Qohelet are presupposed as being little more than a reflection of the affective state of the author(cf. Ayer, 1936). In other words, did Qohelet think that moral terms in grammatically assertive utterances function primarily to express emotion and perhaps also to elicit similar emotions in others (cf. Hume, 1740; Altham, 1986:275-288).
3. *Quasi-realism* would be present in the text if the ethical statements implicit in the moral assumptions of Qohelet were intended to behave linguistically like factual claims and can be appropriately called ‘true’ or ‘false’, even though it was also assumed that there are no ethical facts for them to correspond to (cf. Blackburn, 1984, 1998).
4. *Prescriptivism* would be present in the text if Qohelet can be shown to have assumed that moral judgments are a species of prescriptive judgement and that moral sentences in the indicative mood are semantically more akin to imperatives than indicatives. In this case, moral terms would function as force indicators on analogy with mood (cf. Carnap, 1937: 23–24, 29).
5. *Projectivism* would be present in the text if the ethical statements implicit in the moral assumptions of Qohelet were held to be projections of the moral imagination onto amoral reality as opposed to be depictions of actual states of affairs (cf. MacDowell, 1987).
6. *Moral fictionalism* would be present in the text if the ethical statements implicit in the moral assumptions of Qohelet were presupposed as being no more than practically useful fictions that were supposed to achieve a desired purpose, as opposed to being scientific-type accounts of the world (cf. Joyce, 2001; Kalderon, 2005).

7. *Universal prescriptivism* would be present in the text if the ethical statements implicit in the moral assumptions of Qohelet functioned like universalized imperative sentences where suggesting something is right or wrong merely meant suggesting that one should perform or refrain from performing the particular action (cf. Hare, 1952; Foot 1972:305-316).

Another possible theoretical divergence in relation to Qohelet's meta-ethical assumptions might arise with the distinction between so-called *thin moral concepts* (e.g. good, bad, right, and wrong) and *thick moral concepts* (e.g. just, dishonest, humble, etc.) (see Geertz, 1973:3-30). With this in mind, the following two theories would also need to be compared to what can be discerned as possibly being implicit in Qohelet's own assumptions on the related matters (cf. Hurley, 1989).

1. *Centralism* would be present in the text if Qohelet held that the thin concepts are antecedent to the thick ones, thereby viewing the latter as somehow dependent on the former. If this was the case then Qohelet would have assumed that one must understand words like 'right' and 'ought' before understanding words like 'just' and 'unkind.'
2. *Non-centralism* would be present in the text if Qohelet would, by implication, reject the aforementioned view, instead holding that thin and thick concepts are on par with one another and even that the thick concepts are a sufficient starting point for understanding the thin ones.

With these examples of semantic perspectives behind us, we now turn our attention to the sorts of metaphysical issues to will have to be addressed in any future meta-ethical reading of Qohelet.

Qohelet's hypothetical meta-ethics in the context of and ontological theories

With regard to the concern in (2) above, meta-ethical theories possibly related to Qohelet are commonly categorized, firstly, as types of *moral realism* which assumes that moral facts are about mind-independent properties of the world and comes in two main varieties (on which, see De Caro & MacArthur, 2004).

1. *Ethical naturalism* would be present in any part of Qohelet's ethical assumptions if the text implies that there are objective moral properties and that these properties are reducible or stand in some metaphysical relation (such as supervenience) to entirely non-ethical properties (cf. De Caro & MacArthur, 2004).
2. *Ethical non-naturalism*, as put forward by G. E. Moore, would be presupposed in Qohelet if the text assumed that there are objective and irreducible moral properties (such as the property of 'goodness'), which exists apart from natural drives and social conventions, and that people sometimes have intuitive or otherwise *a priori* awareness of moral properties or of moral truths. Related to this view is Moore's '*open question argument*' where he identified the so-called '*naturalistic fallacy*' (arguing that because something is according to x, where x is any state of affairs, facts or tendencies, it is good) (cf. Frankena, 1939:464-477)

If Qohelet did not assume some form of realism, Qohelet could be said to presuppose some form of '*anti-realism*' regarding moral facts if he did not assume that ethics is about properties of

things ‘out there’ or ‘in themselves’, i.e. existing independent of our thoughts and language about them. If this perspective was present it would mean that we should be able to find in his discourse hints of so-called *ethical subjectivism* (or *non-objectivism*). The latter, if present in Qohelet, would mean that Qohelet held that moral statements are made true or false by the mental attitudes and/or conventions of a subject of alleged moral authority (e.g. a god), or by people, either those of each society, those of each individual, or those of some particular individual (cf. Brandt, 1959:153-154). It would include the following subtypes:

1. *Ideal observer theory* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that what is right is determined by the attitudes that a hypothetical ideal observer would have. In Qohelet’s case, an ideal observer can also be characterized as any entity who is assumed to be perfectly rational, imaginative, and informed, among other things (cf. Firth, 1952:317-345).
2. *Divine command theory would be implicit* in Qohelet’s ethics, if the text assumes that for a thing to be right is for a supreme being, i.e. deity, to approve of it. If Qohelet assumed as much, an additional question of interest would be whether the text implies any indirect response to the problem identified by Plato in the Euthyphro (the ‘Euthyphro dilemma’) which, somewhat adapted, is concerned with whether what is good is such because a god commands it, or inversely, whether a god commands something because it is good. If the former of the two responses is present in Qohelet he also assumed a form of moral relativism. If the latter, there was assumed to be a moral standard ontologically independent of and morally superior to the divine will (cf. Zagebski, 2004).
3. *Error theory* would be present in the text if Qohelet’s moral assumptions implied that although ethical claims do express propositions, all such propositions are false. On this view, both the statement ‘x is morally wrong’ and the statement ‘x is morally permissible’ are false, because ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’ are redundant to explain human action and its motivation (cf. Mackie, 1977).

Following the consideration of a few of the available ontological perspectives in meta-ethics, it’s now time to move on to what might be the case with reference to Qohelet’s assumptions regarding the sources and justification of moral knowledge.

Qohelet’s hypothetical meta-ethics in the context of epistemological theories

In Qohelet, morality is presumably assumed to be justified by knowledge of moral facts. In this context, any implied meta-ethical theory assumed to justify moral judgements would be epistemological in nature. In this regard, the question is whether Qohelet, as is the case with most moral epistemologies, assumed that moral knowledge is somehow possible, or whether Qohelet endorsed some form of moral skepticism. Another way of stating the distinction just mentioned is to speak of some form of meta-ethical *foundationalism* vis-à-vis its opposite, i.e. *non-foundationalist perspectives* (cf. Hare, 1996)

With regard to *foundationalism*, if this is present in the text of Qohelet we can expect to find the view implicit that moral beliefs are epistemically justified by appeal to other moral beliefs, until this justificatory process terminates at some bedrock beliefs whose own justifications are self-evident. If Qohelet was of this view, all justified moral beliefs were therefore assumed to be either foundational or derived. A derived belief about morality in Qohelet would be one that was

assumed to get its justification through inference, either directly or indirectly, from foundational beliefs presupposed in the text.

Supposing Qohelet was a moral foundationalist, where did he assume we get non-inferential justification for our foundational moral beliefs?

1. *Empiricism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that knowledge of moral facts are gained primarily through observation and experience. Such empirical arguments for ethics, if found to be attested in Qohelet's moral assumptions, might also attest some sort of awareness of the so-called '*is-ought problem*,' which asserts that the way the world is cannot alone instruct people how they ought to act (cf. Hume 1740; Moore 1903).
2. *Moral rationalism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that moral truths (or at least general moral principles) are knowable *a priori*, by reason alone (cf. Plato 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Kant 1998)
3. *Moral sense theory*, or some version thereof, would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed the existence of a uniquely moral sense by which we perceive rightness or wrongness. If this view is indeed Qohelet's, the perception in question is reflexive, grounded in a kind of sentiment or feeling, which is secondary to, and attendant upon, perceiving actions or states of affairs with ordinary senses(cf. Shaftesbury, 1699–1714:16)
4. *Moral epistemic intuitionist* theory, or some version thereof, would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that one can non-perceptually recognize some moral truths in a way that can non-inferentially justify one in believing them. On this view, Qohelet, would imply that some moral propositions are self-evident, so that merely understanding them produces, at least in the most virtuous people, justification for believing them (cf. Haidt & Joseph, 2004)

By contrast, a few *non-foundationalist* theories of moral epistemology might also be worth taking a closer look at with an eye on comparing them with Qohelet's own related assumptions.

1. *Coherentism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that all justified beliefs can only be inferentially justified, i.e. there are no foundational beliefs. In other words, Qohelet would have assumed himself to be justified in holding meta-ethical beliefs because of their membership in a coherent set of beliefs within the text. and as such they cannot be assessed when evaluated in isolation (cf. Sayre-McCord, 1996)
2. *Moral particularism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that there are no defensible moral principles, that moral thought does not consist in the application of moral principles to cases, and that the morally perfect person should not be conceived as the person of principle. In this case, Qohelet would assume moral principles as crutches that morally sensitive people would not require as they might lead one into moral error (cf. Blum, 1991:701-725; Hooker & Little, 2000; Dancy, 2006)
3. *Epistemic contextualism* would be present in the text if Qohelet's moral assumptions implied the view that justified beliefs can owe their nature to beliefs that are (even if not justified) not in need of justification under the circumstances, i.e. they

are contextually basic. Which of Qohelet's beliefs would have been contextually basic in a given context would depend on various considerations, such as who one was talking to, and how serious it would be if one was wrong, and so forth (cf. Timmons, 1996).

4. *Moral skepticism* would be present in the text if Qohelet's moral epistemology assumed that no-one has any actual moral knowledge. If this is the case, Qohelet would be like those moral skeptics who hold the stronger, modal, assumption that moral knowledge is impossible (cf. Butchvarov, 1989).

With some of the epistemological perspectives now behind us, what can be said with reference to the philosophical anthropology implicit in Qohelet's assumptions about morality?

Qohelet's hypothetical meta-ethics in the context of philosophical anthropology

Under this rubric, the question to be asked is whether Qohelet assumed there to be some standard(s) of morality or not. If so, the next concern is whether one could classify Qohelet's assumptions on this issue as:

1. *Moral universalism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that the same moral facts or principles apply to everyone everywhere, or, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality, or other distinguishing feature (cf. Hare, 1954:306). If so, a further important here pertains to Qohelet assumptions about values:
 - a. *Value monism* would be present in the text if Qohelet subscribed to a common form of universalism and assumed that all goods are commensurable on a single value scale (cf. Hurka, 1996).
 - b. *Value pluralism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed there to be two or more genuine scales of value, knowable as such, yet incommensurable, so that any prioritization of these values is either non-cognitive or subjective (cf. Stocker 1990; Berlin, 1997).
2. *Moral relativism* would be present in the text if Qohelet believed that different moral facts or principles apply to different people or societies. If this was the default moral anthropology of the book it would mean that Qohelet assumed that all the descriptive properties of terms such as 'good', 'bad', 'right', and 'wrong' do not stand subject to universal truth conditions, but only to societal convention and personal preference (cf. Levy, 2002).
3. *Moral nihilism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed something similar to the meta-ethical view that nothing is morally preferable to anything else. If this was the case then Qohelet believed that an action, committed for whatever reason, would be neither morally right nor morally wrong (cf. Mackie, 1977; Joyce, 2001).

Moving on to our final topic for the present discussion, we turn to issues related to morality and mind, and how these might relate to what, if anything, Qohelet might have implied regarding related issues.

Qohelet's hypothetical meta-ethics in the context of philosophical psychology

One of the most pressing questions within an analytic meta-ethical perspective on Qohelet's moral assumptions would be how morality was assumed to engage embodied human psychologies (cf. Jackson & Pettit, 1995). Specifically, how (if at all) did Qohelet assume that moral judgments moved people to act in accordance with them? (cf. Platts, 1991) For example, did Qohelet assume there to be any reason to be moral for its own sake, and did he think one could give any psychologically persuasive reasons to others to act morally if they do not already acknowledge such reasons? Alternatively, did Qohelet take it for granted that it is part of the definition of moral concepts such as 'right' and 'wrong' that they should or should not be pursued. Also, did Qohelet think it to be possible to know that, say, foolish pursuits are morally wrong, but nonetheless not recognize any reason not to act foolishly? In this regard, two views need require comparison with Qohelet's own assumptions on these issues.

1. *Motivational internalism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that the psychological motivation to act morally is already implicit in the judgment that something is morally good. If so, Qohelet might be either a *weak* motivational internalist or a *strong* one, according to the strength of the motivation that the text assumed true moral judgments come pre-packaged with (cf. Williams, 1979; Jackson & Pettit 1995).
2. *Motivational externalism* would be present in the text if Qohelet assumed that sincerely judging that something is morally wrong automatically supplied a reason for the judger that would justify acting on the basis of that judgment, that is, a reason that is external to or independent of what the judger feels or wants (cf. McDowell, 1978).

Whichever view can be consistently correlated with the data in Qohelet, if any, remains a topic for discussion in future philosophical exegesis.

Conclusion

In this article it was suggested that biblical scholars interested in Qohelet's 'ethics' have thus far utilized a meta-language that is characterized by brevity, fuzziness, vagueness and a lack of philosophical nuance. However, by providing a meta-theoretical introduction to possibilities for conceptual refinement, it was shown how particular substantive exegetical debates regarding Qohelet's ethical theory can now be supplemented with analytic discussions focusing on the book's implied meta-ethics. By reconstructing hypothetical relations between Qohelet's moral assumptions and theories in philosophical moral semantics, metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology and psychology, the research done offers a prolegomenon to future exegesis interested in such matters. For it is only by way of meta-ethical description that the foundations of Qohelet's 'ethics', in as much as there is such a thing to begin with, can be laid bare.

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