

# NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

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*All is vanity*, we learn early in *Ecclesiastes*. This is motivated by the mysterious aphorism that *there is nothing new under the sun*. But what does it mean to say that there is nothing new under the sun? One might interpret this as a statement of the *Eternal Return* of the past. Alternatively, one could understand it as a statement what we call the *Eternal Withering* of the past. Eternal Withering is the view that the present draws from the past but not all of the past repeats. We argue that Eternal Withering motivates the claim that all is vanity. We then show how this interpretation can help us explain the positive practical suggestions in *Ecclesiastes*.

## 1. All is Vanity

The author of *Ecclesiastes* is often thought to be Solomon. Scholars, however, date the text to after 450 BCE—half a millennium after Solomon flourished. The speaker, Qohelet, strikes many as pessimistic in his discovery of vanity throughout existence.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, sages of the Rabbinic tradition argued that the text should be concealed because it could so readily lead to heretical interpretations.<sup>2</sup> Telling

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1. We briefly comment on two families of religious interpretations of the text. One way of reading “everything is vain” is that only *the material world* is vain but the spiritual world is not. This is a Christian way of making sense of the text. This sort of reading can be seen to be exemplified in Schopenhauer’s pessimism, except that he does not posit a redemptive spiritual world (Schopenhauer 1892). We set this aside, since apart from a reference to *Sheol*, the text does not highlight the afterlife (Qohelet 2010: 945). The text can also be taken to be critical of only that which is under the sun, leaving room for something else that preceded the sun; that is, *the Torah* (Scherman 2021: xviii). Rabbi Scherman writes, “*Futility of futilities*, *Koheles* cries to us. *Adam-man*, how dare you limit your limitless potential to the strictures imposed by your stunted sun? Soar above it! Your life belongs to Torah” (2021: xlvi). We only remark that our arguments can be easily modified to fit with such a view if they are taken to be arguments for the character of *vanity under the sun*.

2. In *Shabbat* 30.b:3, we have, “Since contradictions in *Ecclesiastes* were mentioned, the Gemara cites additional relevant sources. Rav Yehuda, son of Rav Shmuel bar Sheilat, said in the name of Rav: The Sages sought to suppress the book of *Ecclesiastes* and declare it apocryphal because its

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oneself to enjoy pleasure, wine, building houses, planting vineyards and fruit trees, making gardens, owning things; having entertainment; having more of all those things than one's colleagues; and finding pleasure in the toil of life are just a few examples of vanities (Qohelet 2010: 938). Indeed, "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! *All is vanity*" (Qohelet 2010: 937).

In his commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, C. L. Seow explains what *vanity* means in our context:

Thus, the human life span and, by extension, human beings themselves are said to be *hebel*. . . . Human words, too, may be regarded as *hebel*. . . . as is physical beauty In this sense, *hebel* is that which is of no lasting consequence. . . . The point is that these things give the impression of substantiality, but they are only illusory. (2007: 101)

and:

The Hebrew word *hebel*, which is translated here as "vanity," has no single English equivalent. The literal meaning of the word is "vapor," "breath," "air," "steam," or the like. The word is most commonly used metaphorically for things that are ephemeral, insubstantial, delusive, or unreliable. (2007: 112)

But how could the world—that most weighty and earthy ground—be ephemeral and insubstantial? Seow answers:

. . . [P]eople cannot hold on to what they have (life, joy, success, wealth), control their own destiny by sheer effort and will, predict what will happen in the future, or comprehend all happenings. All that humanity is, does, and experiences on earth is *hebel*. (2007: 113)

Here the cause of vanity is just *humanity's* comparative ephemerality to existence; it is that our wills are ineffective in holding back the weight of the world.

Now, also in the first section of *Ecclesiastes*, we find the expression of the following principle:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. (Qohelet 2010: 937)

Call the above the *Ecclesiastes Principle*. How does the view that vanity is caused by the ephemerality of humanity in the natural world relate to the Ecclesiastes Principle? Seow writes:

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statements contradict each other and it is liable to confuse its readers" (*Shabbat* n.d.: 30.b:3). See Scherman (2021: xli) for discussion.

Qohelet says that “what has happened—that is what will happen, and what is being done—that is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun” (v 9). This is essentially the point made by the poem: human beings and the forces of nature all participate in routines, and there seem to be no breakthroughs despite all the toil. (2007: 116)<sup>3</sup>

Observe, however, that the above interprets the Ecclesiastes Principle *figuratively*. It is not that there is *actually* nothing new under the sun, it is that there is nothing *surprising* about humanity’s failure to tame existence. This reading thus psychologizes the lack of novelty of existence in the following sense. Events, strictly speaking, *are novel*. Vanity is only found in the subject’s evaluation of events. On this view, the Ecclesiastes Principle is at best a statement of the subject’s disposition to judge things as vain. This reading therefore does not explain *why* the subject should judge things as vain, but instead merely assumes it.<sup>4</sup>

If we interpret the Ecclesiastes Principle non-figuratively, we can use it to instead *motivate* the vanity of existence. On our reading, the Ecclesiastes Principle is Qohelet’s premise; it is that *there is nothing new under the sun* that provides reason for the claim that all is vanity. Non-figurative interpretation has the advantage of thus providing additional argumentative, and therefore explanatory, structure to the work. On our view, Qohelet is not merely declaring the vanity of existence; *he is showing it*.

## 2. Nothing New Under the Sun

There are at least two non-figurative interpretations that suggest themselves. These are available to us depending on how we read the emphasis of the Ecclesiastes Principle.

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3. See also Seow (2007: 112).

4. Rav Schlomo ben Yitzchok (1040–1105) interprets the Ecclesiastes Principle as also about the world, normally construed. He understands it as the claim that “whoever pursues secular matters will find nothing new—only what has already existed since the Six Days of Creation. Only in Torah-study does one experience ‘new’ interpretation” (Qohelet 2021: 58). It is interpreted this way in the Nietzsche literature as well. The pessimist will find Eternal Return terrifying—whether it is interpreted literally or as a thought experiment—because they will be trapped in a sort of worst case scenario. Scott Jenkins, writing about thought experiment style interpretations of Eternal Return, traces the origin of an attitude of positivity toward the repetitiveness of life to *Ecclesiastes*, “On this reading, ER as the highest formula of affirmation is the combination of a thought experiment borrowed from the pessimists and a recommendation of a positive attitude towards the circle of nature—a recommendation that dates back to Ecclesiastes, as Nietzsche well knew” (2020: 30). On this view, nature begets genuine novelty. It does so, however, in predictable ways.

The first reading is as:

**Everything** that has been will be, and **everything that** has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

The second reading is:

What has been **is all that** will be, and what has been done **is all that** will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.

The first reading emphasizes that *everything* from the past will repeat, the second reading is different in that all it says is that *if something will happen, it has already happened*. That is, we have first that if it was the case that *F* then it will be the case that *F* and these past *F* are all that will happen, and second, that if it will be the case that *F* then it was the case that *F*.

To make this clearer, let us briefly look to tense logic. Where **P** and **F** are temporal operators for “it was the case that” and “it will be the case that,” respectively, consider:

$$\mathbf{PF} \rightarrow \mathbf{FF} \quad (1)$$

and:

$$\mathbf{FF} \rightarrow \mathbf{PF} \quad (2)$$

These principles are worlds apart. Logically, (1) has the effect of ensuring future times if there is a past time while (2) ensures a past time if there is a future time. (1) alone leaves open the possibility that the future is expansive, that is, that there are new events that did not happen in the past, while (2) does not.

How do (1) and (2) relate to our two interpretations of the Ecclesiastes Principle? The first interpretation of the Ecclesiastes Principle assumes both (1) and (2).<sup>5</sup> That everything that has happened will happen, and that is *all* that will happen—setting aside the aforementioned nuance—just is the doctrine of *Eternal Return*. This thesis, made famous by Nietzsche (1954),<sup>6</sup> has well-known ancient

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5. We do not, however, identify this first interpretation with the conjunction of (1) and (2). One could have a model with infinite fresh worlds toward the past and toward the future but the same propositions repeating in them. This would satisfy (1) and (2) but *ex hypothesi* not be a case of Eternal Return.

6. It is an interpretive question of how literally Nietzsche intended his discussion of Eternal Return to be taken. See Lanier (2017) for an overview. See Loeb (2006) and Loeb (2013) for discussion of a literal interpretation.

origins.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, scholars remark on the similarities of Qohelet and ancient Greek, specifically, Stoic, cosmology. Gammie (1985: 175) points out that where Chrysippus took the constant element to be fire, it is possible to read Qohelet's *earth* as the element from which and to which things come. The thought here is that the world recurs again and again, exactly how it has; if time is cyclical, then if it was the case that *F* it will be the case that *F* and if it will be the case that *F* then it was the case that *F*.

On the other hand, if events repeat themselves but the stock of future events withers away, then we have a model of time that satisfies (2), but not (1). Call this view of time the *Eternal Withering* of the past. To get clearer on this, let us consider an example. Imagine times ordered as two copies of the natural numbers. Let it be the case that if something happens at a later copy of *n*, then it happens at the earlier copy of *n*. Let the actual world be, say, 7 in the second copy of the natural numbers. Neither 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 nor 7 will ever recur, hence there is no Eternal Return, yet everything that will be the case was already the case. It is clear that (1) and (2) are conceptually independent.<sup>8</sup> Hence, because Eternal Return presumes both (1) and (2), Eternal Withering and Eternal Return are independent as well and correspond to two distinct interpretations of the Ecclesiastes Principle.

Both Eternal Return and Eternal Withering provide an explanation for the claim Qohelet's judgement that all is vanity. Indeed, the cyclic nature of Eternal Return motivating a disillusionment with life is a common theme in nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy. Eternal Withering explains this as well. On this view new events draw from the old but every old event need not occur. The theme here is not the *repetition* of the world but instead its *disintigration*.<sup>9</sup>

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7. On Stoic *ekpyrosis*, or world-conflagration, see Baltzly (2019) and Harriman (2020).

8. The above model only shows that (2) does not entail (1). To see that (1) does not entail (2) take a model of time that begins and then continues repeating exactly the same. At the first world, it holds that (1)— $\mathbf{PF} \rightarrow \mathbf{FF}$ —because the antecedent fails due to the fact that there is no past. It holds at every other world because we consider a model where things repeat exactly the same. On the other hand (2)— $\mathbf{FF} \rightarrow \mathbf{PF}$ —fails at the first world since there is no past.

9. Both Eternal Return and Withering presume that there is a sense in which events can *come back*. There is a question about what it means for events to return in this way. On one reading, it is not literally one and the same individual that returns. On such a reading, it is a new but very similar individual that exists. Alternatively, we can understand these theses in terms of the view that it is *literally* the same individual that exists again. Obviously, the second reading is presupposed by our discussion (and in general by discussions of Eternal Return, if the thought is meant to motivate action for a *specific* individual). It might be objected that there is limited evidence for the second view in *Ecclesiastes*. We point out that such a view is nonetheless evidenced in *Ecclesiastes*. As we will discuss in Section 3, in the text it is argued that those who have never lived are the most fortunate, and then those who have died, and only then those who are currently alive. It seems clear that it is *the same* entity being considered across possible states. That is, it is best for *me* that *I* was never born, and then that *I* would have died, and then, last, that *I* be alive now. We thank Reviewer 2 for encouraging this discussion.

### 3. Return to Dust

We now argue that Eternal Withering best makes sense of Qohelet's claims surrounding antinatalism. Antinatalism is the thesis that we should not bring people into existence. In the ancient context, this was known as *the Wisdom of Silenus*;<sup>10</sup> today it has been defended famously by David Benatar (2006). Qohelet expresses his antinatalism as the preferred state in the following hierarchy among states:

... And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.  
(Qohelet 2010: 940)

Best is to never enter the world of existence at all, second best is to have passed from it, and third is to be in it.

Now both Eternal Return and Eternal Withering can account for the best possibility being to never have entered existence. With the strict repeating of Eternal Return, however, we cannot account for a genuine passage from existence. Indeed, the end of any current passage through existence will just signal its future return in the presence of Eternal Return.

On the other hand, in the context of Eternal Withering, we can make sense of the possibility of a genuine *end*. Eternal Withering allows that events fail to repeat in some future cycle, thereby allowing that things pass from existence.

We can strengthen this interpretation by returning to the text. Consider Qohelet's claim:

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. (Qohelet 2010: 943)

Why is the end better than the beginning? Because an end, on Eternal Withering, offers a chance for escape from existence. No escape is guaranteed, of course. Put simply, Eternal Return necessitates that ends are *temporary* while Eternal Withering allows that they be *forever*.<sup>11</sup> Considering the above and *Genesis 3:19*,<sup>12</sup> for example, these ends clearly play a central role. Eternal Withering allows us to make sense of a genuine *return to dust* (Qohelet 2010: 940).<sup>13</sup>

10. See *Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 1967: 42).

11. For this reason, because of the necessity of a genuine end to the world in Christian thought, Eternal Return is incompatible with Christianity. This is not so for Eternal Withering.

12. "By the sweat of your nostrils you will eat bread until your return to the ground, because from it you were taken. Because dust you are, and to dust you will return" (Bandstra 2008: 199).

13. Eternal Withering presumes that history can occur in different ways. This is obviously precluded by Eternal Return. We thank our first referee for pointing out also that the possibility of history occurring in a different way is well-attested in the *Taanit* 25a. Therein, Rabbi Elazar ben

#### 4. Beyond Hatred

Qohelet proclaimed that *all is vanity*. One way of interpreting this was as just a judgement of the subject on the world. We argued that this sort of reading gave a figurative interpretation to the Ecclesiastes Principle—that there is nothing new under the sun—and so glossed over the argumentative structure of the text. We introduced two non-figurative readings of the Ecclesiastes Principle, *Eternal Return* and *Eternal Withering*, and showed how they both could philosophically ground the vanity of the world. We then argued that *Eternal Withering* best accounted for Qohelet’s antinatalism and his claims about *ends*. We close with a discussion of optimism in *Ecclesiastes*.

The text presents us with a final puzzle. We go from a statement of explicit hatred of life:

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me;  
for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. (Qohelet 2010: 938)

To positive practical recommendations of behavior. We are instructed to enjoy toil, rejoice in long life and youth, *banish anxiety*, be temperate, keep promises, be moderate in virtue, avoid becoming too wise, and ultimately to fear God (Qohelet 2010: 938, 939, 941, 942, 943, 947, 948).

While it is not clear how to motivate each of these specific moral claims, they presume that Qohelet has moved beyond his expressed hatred of life. How does he justify this? We argue that if *Eternal Return* can account for the step away from the hatred of life, then *Eternal Withering* can do so *better*. How would one use *Eternal Return* to ground a love of life? In the section “The Greatest Stress” of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* he writes:

How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a grain of dust.” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or

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Pedat reports on a dream in which God offers him the chance to begin his life again. God says to him if he takes this possibility, his life will be shorter. R. ben Pedat then is rewarded by God for choosing to live his current life.

did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, "You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly." (1954: 101–2)

The view here is that even the thought of Eternal Return would make the strong "*crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal*" (Nietzsche 1954: 102). Indeed, if one knew they were doomed to repeat the next year over and over again, they would take great care to make sure that that year was as good as possible. One strategy here is that of *avoiding the worst case scenario*. One does so, of course, because otherwise they would have to suffer their regrets again and again for eternity. Call this the *Worst Case Avoidance* justification of optimism.<sup>14</sup>

Does Eternal Withering provide a Worst Case Avoidance justification for optimism as well? We argue that it does, and it does so better than Eternal Return. Imagine that one were doomed to live parts of the next year over and over again, but they did not know just how much of that year they would live again and again. They would then take *even more* care to ensure that *every part* of the year was as good as possible, lest one get stuck with a bad part. One cannot be comforted by the thought that, while the bad is inevitable, so too is the good. Not even a small comfort is to be found in the regularity of the guarantee that *everything* will recur.

With Eternal Return, one *knows* that everything one does will come back again and again. With Eternal Withering there is an epistemological barrier: one *does not* know which parts of their life will repeat. If one was inclined to make the most of life and thereby avoid negative scenarios repeating in the context of Eternal Return, they would be even more inclined to do so in the context of a repetition where they did not know which events they would be stuck with.

The advantage of Eternal Withering is not limited to Worst Case Scenario Avoidance reasoning. Eternal Withering enjoys a positive possibility that Eternal Return does not have. An agent operating under the assumption of Eternal Withering has the added motivation of trying to aim for an *ideal outcome*. We contrast this with the motivation to aim for what we call a *good outcome*, which the agent operating under the assumption of Eternal Return shares. To get clear

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14. It might be proposed that Eternal Return be qualified to account for an epistemic uncertainty with respect to how large a unit of time was fated to recur. The agent could have lived a full life, but from their perspective, the concern is whether or not a present action—and not the rest of their life—is fated to return. This is a clear departure from Eternal Return as articulated by Nietzsche. On this view we have abandoned "*everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence*" (Nietzsche 1954: 101) in favor of a smaller unit of return. It is hard to see, however, how this would not just be a version of Eternal Withering; the thesis that if something will happen it has already happened.



on this distinction, consider the agent on either assumption. In either case, the agent is ignorant about what happened in prior iterations of that scenario. Even if their actions are thwarted, they have reason to try to make this iteration of events as good as possible knowing that they will have to repeat these events or some subset of those events. In this sense, both agents can aim for a *good outcome*.

An *ideal outcome* is only available to the agent under the assumption of Eternal Withering.<sup>15</sup> An ideal outcome is a return of events with only positively valued events. An outcome is *more ideal* than another if it has a higher percentage of positive events. That a return be *more ideal* than a previous one is, of course, not available on the assumption of Eternal Return. This is, however, available on the assumption of Eternal Withering. An earlier cycle could have 50 favored and 50 non-favored events, while a later cycle could have 30 favored events and 20 non-favored ones. Moreover, given Eternal Withering, eventually there could be *only* favored events. While both the assumption of Eternal Return and Eternal Withering allow for agents to aim for *good outcomes*, only the assumption of Eternal Withering allows agents to aim for *ideal* ones.

The discussion of optimism can be clarified here.<sup>16</sup> Optimism can be understood as having to do with what one can reasonably hope for and with what one is properly motivated to do. We have shown that the agent acting under the presupposition of Eternal Withering has the advantage over the agent acting under the presupposition of Eternal Return in the sense that they have *reason to strive* for an *ideal outcome*. Do they have the same advantage in the other sense of optimism? We put forth only the qualified proposal that *if one thinks that the agent acting under the assumption of Eternal Return is properly motivated to act to bring about good outcomes*, then the agent acting under the presupposition of Eternal Withering has the additional proper motivation to act to bring about an *ideal outcome*.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Obviously this is available as a remote possibility to the Eternal Return theorist; it is available exactly to the extent that one's life, as it has been in past cycles and so will always be, is already ideal. This is possible in the same way as it is possible to take some arbitrarily high number of coin flips and have them all turn up heads. On this analogy, the Eternal Withering theorist takes that set of outcomes and eliminates flips from them. There are a number of ways that they can eliminate flips so the ratio of heads to tails becomes more favorable, while the Eternal Return theorist is tied to the initial set of outcomes.

16. We thank Reviewer 2 for encouraging this discussion.

17. Samuel Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt point out that Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner argues that one day it will be the case that evil *will not have* existed, which they call the *No More Evil* principle (Lebens & Goldschmidt 2017: 2–3). Lebens and Goldschmidt show how this can be consistent with Orthodox Jewish Philosophy (see, for example, Lebens & Goldschmidt 2017: 11). We can view this advantage of Eternal Withering in terms of the work of Lebens and Goldschmidt. In their framework, the advantage of our proposal is that it opens the possibility for a R. Leiner-style *No More Evil* situation in a way that Eternal Return does not.

## 5. Conclusions

While we recognize that more work has to be done to justify the specific moral claims made by Qohelet, we have aimed to show that if Eternal Return can justify a move away from pessimism (in Qohelet's terms, a move away from *hatred of life*), then so can Eternal Withering. We are thus able to provide special sense to Seow's reading of the text (Seow 2007: p. 187):

People, by their very existence, have already been assigned their lot. Life is just so to Qohelet. For him, to be is to see these tragic things that happen in life. What is better, then, is not to somehow be shielded from life's painful realities but, as he intimates in 3:22, to enjoy oneself whenever it is possible to do so.

We argued that Eternal Withering could do this, and that it can do it better than Eternal Return.

We can restate our contribution in the following way. One can view Eternal Return in the passage from the *Gay Science* we looked at earlier as dividing people into two groups: there are those who wholeheartedly affirm Eternal Return and there is everyone else. We argued that the first group would also affirm Eternal Withering. We also argued that the second would similarly not affirm Eternal Withering. We called these two groups optimists and pessimists, respectively. We can ask the following questions: First, would the optimist think Eternal Return or Eternal Withering to be *better*? And second, would the pessimist think Eternal Return or Eternal Withering to be *worse*?<sup>18</sup>

For the pessimist, Eternal Withering is worse than Eternal Return because it also includes repetition. While it allows for the possibility of a genuine end, which is a grace to the pessimist, it also allows for the possibility that things get increasingly worse for the agent as comforts are stripped away on future cycles. In this way, it allows for a worst-case scenario.

For the optimist, Eternal Withering is better than Eternal Return for two reasons. First, it allows for the possibility of even better outcomes. Second, it allows for the possibility of ideal outcomes.

The picture we get of the text is one where Qohelet finds all to be vanity—because of Eternal Withering—but then steers himself toward optimism. Ecclesiastian optimism is one that is able to recover from the terror of Eternal Withering and become energized by that same fact. Gilgamesh's response to Enkidu, afraid to challenge Humbaba, represents this progression:

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<sup>18</sup>. *Ex hypothesi*, the optimist is not concerned with which is worse and the pessimist does not ask which is better.

[W]e are mortal men. Only the gods live forever. Our days are few in number, and whatever we achieve is a *puff of wind*. Why be afraid then, since sooner or later death must come? (Mitchell 2004: 93, emphasis ours)

All is but a *puff of wind*.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, our hero has decided to face fate valiantly. We argued that the key to understanding how Qohelet is an optimist in the face of the vanity of the world is found in Eternal Withering; Eternal Withering is both what is responsible for the vanity of Qohelet's world and simultaneously energizes him to face that world.

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Sergei Artemov, Joseph Frankel, Alfredo Roque Freire, Michael Kryluk, Jessica Moss, an audience at the 2022 Long Island Society of Philosophy Conference, the students of NYU's CORE 400 class, and many others for discussion and comments.

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19. Note the similarity of sense to *hebel*. This is not an accident of this translation, see also George (2003: 566–67, line 235).

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