

# Intercultural Interpretation of the “Good Shepherd” within the Indonesian Context

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## Abstract

*Inculturation permeates the life of the Catholic Church since its conception, making it stay relevant and creative with its evangelising mission amidst a multicultural world. This paper is a study of inculturation within the discipline of biblical exegesis. After a brief explanation about the essence of inculturation, it explores some forms of popular intercultural exegesis or contextual hermeneutics which was developed in Africa. One of them is the “four-legged stool” method designed by Elizabeth Mburu. We applied Mburu’s method to interpret the image of the “good shepherd” which was used by Jesus in John’s Gospel narrative (Jn. 10:1-12), a familiar passage to most Indonesian Catholics. Mburu’s method puts the metaphor align with the theological, literary, and historical context of the local reader. In this case, the research considers the meaning of “a good shepherd” understood through the Indonesian mindset. As a result, the biblical metaphor gained extra meaning from native roots.*

## Keywords

*inculturation, contextual hermeneutics, four-legged stool, good shepherd.*

## INTRODUCTION

Qohelet’s understanding of the meaning of life in the book of Ecclesiastes is best summarized by his repeated declaration that everything is “הבל (hbl),” often translated as “absurd,” “worthless,” or “meaningless.” This term appears thirty-eight (38) times throughout the book, emphasizing the irrationality or the fleeting and transitory nature of life’s pursuits and achievements.<sup>1</sup> Qohelet reflects on the futility of human endeavors and the impermanence of worldly pleasures, ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 35 - 36.

concluding that life's meaning is elusive and hard to grasp. So, does Qohelet, by using the word "הבל (hbl)," tell us that life is meaningless? To better understand Qohelet's perspective, this paper studies the word "הבל (hbl)" and explores various translations to seek a better way of understanding the book of Ecclesiastes in light of the leading modern existential philosophy that explores the question of life's meaning.

One of the leading modern existential philosophers who asks about life's meaning is Viktor Frankl in his logotherapy. Frankl's logotherapy emphasizes the human search for meaning as a fundamental drive, even in the face of suffering and adversity. Frankl's logotherapy is chosen because we want to know whether Frankl's logotherapy can be aligned with Qohelet's exploration of life's meaning in the book of Ecclesiastes. Frankl emphasizes that the human drive to find meaning is fundamental, even in adversity, mirroring Qohelet's quest for purpose in the face of life's uncertainties. Both touch on existential themes, resilience amidst suffering, and the integration of human psychology and depth spirituality, but these relevant themes are invalidated by the word "הבל (hbl)" and in saying "all is meaningless." Frankl's logotherapy is relevant for meaning seekers, but can it shed new light on reading the book of Ecclesiastes today to make it relevant for meaning seekers as well, or are they just incompatible?

In order to answer this, a word study approach will be employed to delve into the multifaceted concept of the word "הבל (hbl)" in the book of Ecclesiastes. There have been many suggestions as to how הבל (hbl) should be translated, which included "absurd"<sup>2</sup> by Michael Fox and "worthless"<sup>3</sup> by Mark Sneed. However, constrained translations of הבל (hbl), such as "absurd" and "worthless," restrict our perspective and limit our understanding of how the book of Ecclesiastes can be read, particularly concerning the issue of the meaning of life. With this, the paper argues that no specific one-word sweeping translations can exhaustively illustrate Qohelet's literary imagery of הבל (hbl).<sup>4</sup> Hence, this paper points out that הבל (hbl) can properly be read as Douglas Millier does being a symbolic metaphor which is 'vapor' that can have varying degrees of meaning which include insubstantiality, transience, and foulness. By this, life "under the sun" can have a new understanding and a

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<sup>2</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Mark R. Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 4 (2017): 879–94, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1364.2017.197928>.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas B Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 3 (1998): 437–54.

renewed perspective. With this new outlook, a discussion is possible on how meaning in life can be derived from the book of Ecclesiastes.

Using "הבל" (*hbl*) as a symbolic metaphor, we aim to make sense of Qohelet's perspective on life's meaning as it resonates with the principles of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy to get a deeper understanding of how that word can be meaningful for today, bridging the ancient and the contemporary with its common quest to discover life's meaning. Hence, we can read the book of Ecclesiastes in the light of Frankl's logotherapy, which gives us a new vantage point on how to comprehend the unique question of our own life's meaning. Deriving a new perspective in searching for the meaning of life from the concepts of both Qohelet and Frankl, the paper suggests three values to finding meaning in life, namely: (1) the value of pursuing creative endeavors in response to the transience of time, (2) the experiential value of a life lived in response to the insubstantiality of death, and (3) the value of our attitude towards life to give us a new perspective in the futility of life's randomness and suffering. Using the universal human realities presented by Qohelet and from the insights of Frankl's logotherapy, we can start to ask ourselves that perennial and fundamental question: "What is the meaning of my life?"

## WORLD BEHIND ECCLESIASTES: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### Author

The authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes has been a subject of debate for many years. The book is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, based on the references to the son of David, king of Jerusalem (1:1), surpassingly astute (1:16), and very affluent sovereignty (2:1-9). However, scholars have raised questions about this attribution due to differences in language and style compared to Solomon's other writings, suggesting a date beyond the 10th century BC.<sup>5</sup>

Qohelet is derived from the Hebrew root *qhl*, which encompasses both a verb meaning "to gather or call together" and a noun, *qahal*, signifying "an assembly or gathering." Hence, it is important to note that "Qohelet," the central figure in Ecclesiastes, can be understood as not a specific individual's name. Consequently,

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<sup>5</sup> "Ecclesiastes Barnes' Notes," accessed August 26, 2023, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/ecclesiastes/1.htm>.

Qohelet can refer to someone who addresses the assembly, and thus, he is often translated as the 'preacher' or 'teacher'.<sup>6</sup>

In another perspective, Peter Enns has observed that the book of Ecclesiastes appears to contain two distinct voices. While the book extensively discusses the words of Qohelet from 1:12 to 12:7, except for 7:27,<sup>7</sup> it begins with a narrator introducing Qohelet. It later resumes in the epilogue, where the narrator summarizes and evaluates Qohelet's words. In this interpretation, the book of Ecclesiastes should not be seen as primarily aiming to present a skeptical discourse. Instead, it uses Qohelet's words as a reference point for the narrator to offer comments that include both affirmation and correction. In this context, the true authorship is attributed to the narrator. Enns suggests that Qohelet might be either a fictional character, the author's alter ego, or a literary creation with an independent existence prior to its incorporation by the narrator.<sup>8</sup> In Enns' opinion, "Qohelet is a character created by the author to make his theological point."<sup>9</sup>

### Date

The book of Ecclesiastes is often interpreted from within the context of Judea's subjugation under Hellenistic rulers from Egypt, which resulted in a general feeling of powerlessness and frustration among the common people. The book is viewed as a reflection of an individual who has undergone a lifelong quest for purpose and meaning and who looks back and acknowledges the mistakes made along the way while offering advice to younger generations. There are differing views on when the book was written, with some scholars suggesting it was initially written in Aramaic and translated into Hebrew during the third century B.C.<sup>10</sup>, while others subscribe to the assumption that King Solomon being the author placed its composition no later than 931 B.C.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2011), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> "Ecclesiastes, THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES | USCCB," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/ecclesiastes/o>.

<sup>11</sup> "Introduction to Ecclesiastes | Bible.Org," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://bible.org/seriespage/1-introduction-ecclesiastes>.

## **Audience**

In Ecclesiastes, it can be perceived that the author addresses the youth (12:12), urging them to remember their Creator early in their lives before the challenges of life set in. The author intends to steer young people away from the mistakes he made, thus guiding them towards a better path. However, the message is not limited to the youth alone but is meant to be applicable to the entire congregation (12:9). Anyone who hears and heeds the teachings that the author imparts would be able to benefit from them, as the King took great care to seek out delightful words and write them correctly.<sup>12</sup> As such, the underlying truths contained within Ecclesiastes are universal and applicable to every individual, regardless of age.

## **Literary Style and Theme**

Ecclesiastes provides a reflective and introspective perspective to the practical and straightforward wisdom that is presented in Proverbs.<sup>13</sup> The book underlines the importance of fearing God and recognizing that His ways are often mysterious. It delves into the emptiness and lack of purpose in a life without God, which is rooted in humanity's fall from grace. Ecclesiastes emphasizes that seeking happiness apart from God is futile<sup>14</sup>, with the word "vanity" repeated throughout the book. The author's wisdom is used to examine human existence, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that life is under God's control, despite its mysteries. The journey from despair, highlighted by "Meaningless! Meaningless!" (1:2), leads to the acknowledgment of God as the ultimate authority, as seen in "Remember your Creator" (12:1) and "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13). Ecclesiastes offers guidance on how to live a purposeful, meaningful, and joyful life by placing God at the center, embracing one's divinely appointed role, and obeying the Creator-King within the theocratic order.<sup>15</sup>

Ecclesiastes is a book that extensively uses the literary tool of framing to emphasize the themes of futility or meaninglessness, which encompass the entire narrative (1:2; 12:8). These themes have their roots deeply embedded in the biblical narrative of Genesis, where the idea of life being as fleeting as a vapor was introduced.

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<sup>12</sup> "Introduction to Ecclesiastes | Bible.Org."

<sup>13</sup> "TGC Course | Knowing the Bible: Ecclesiastes | 12-Week Bible Study," The Gospel Coalition, accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/knowning-the-bible-ecclesiastes/>.

<sup>14</sup> "TGC Course | Knowing the Bible."

<sup>15</sup> "Book of Ecclesiastes – Read, Study Bible Verses," accessed September 6, 2023, [https://www.biblestudytools.com/ecclesiastes/#google\\_vignette](https://www.biblestudytools.com/ecclesiastes/#google_vignette).

The short life of Abel serves as an example of the briefness of human life, representing vanity or הבל (hbl) in Hebrew, a term that is repeatedly used in Ecclesiastes.<sup>16</sup> The book reflects on the sense of meaninglessness that the author portrays, a condition that reflects a fallen world devoid of God, a recurring theme throughout the scripture.

Qohelet also puts forward a different idea: to take pleasure in life. While Qohelet acknowledges the fleeting nature of human existence, he offers a constructive way to approach it. He suggests, "This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God." (5:18-19) In this passage, Qohelet implies that even though life can still be puzzling, it is not as overwhelming as it might seem. Humans cannot fully comprehend divine actions or control life's events, but nevertheless, man can live with them. Trying to change one's fate is just an illusion, but one can embrace life as it is and find joy.

## הבל (HBL) IN ECCLESIASTES

### What is הבל (hbl)?

In the opening verse of the book, the author declares, "Utterly הבל (hbl)! Everything is הבל (hbl)!" (1:2) and repeats this at the end of the book as well (12:8). The Hebrew word הבל (hbl) repeats thirty-eight times in the whole book, more than any books in the Bible. Notably, it is in significant junctures in set phrases throughout the book to emphasize this point, making its meaning of prime importance in understanding the message of the book. הבל (hbl) is used in Ecclesiastes to mean "vapor," "breath," "steam," or something that is fleeting and cannot be grasped or controlled.<sup>17,18</sup> Typically, הבל is employed as a term to describe concepts such as the briefness of human life (e.g., like "Abel" in Genesis 4, Psalms 78:33), the ineffectiveness of idols (e.g., Jeremiah 8:19), or the pointlessness of human endeavors (e.g., Job 9:29).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "TGC Course | Knowing the Bible."

<sup>17</sup> Douglas B. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 3 (1998), 437–54.

<sup>18</sup> Michael R. Emler, "Futility, Meaning, and Life under the Sun: Ecclesiastes for Everyday Life," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 37, no. 1 (2023), 6–21.

<sup>19</sup> Mark R. Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qohelet: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 4 (2017), 879–94, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1364.2017.197928>.

Moreover, the Hebrew word הבל (hbl) is traditionally translated as "vanity" in English, but it has a range of meanings that include "emptiness," "futility," "absurdity," "meaningless," "incomprehensible," and "zero." Some scholars have proposed a single, abstract meaning for הבל (hbl) that would apply to all its occurrences in Ecclesiastes. Michael V. Fox argued that הבל (hbl) should be translated uniformly throughout the biblical book as "absurd."<sup>20</sup> Marie Turner also concludes that the two most fitting translations are "breath" and "absurdity."<sup>21</sup> For Mark Sneed and Jaco Gericke, it is best translated as "worthless."<sup>2223</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine which proposed term is superior.<sup>24</sup>

### הבל (hbl) as "Absurd" and "Worthless" and their Criticism

According to Michael V. Fox, Qohelet regards rationality as an essential yardstick for evaluating life and all 'under the sun,' and because there is no rationality; hence, absurd.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the idea that events are reliably connected by cause and effect falls apart. Instead, he sees events as fragmented and disconnected, even though they are believed to be determined by a divine plan. This randomness leads him to conclude that, from a human perspective, these events are devoid of meaning – absurd.<sup>26</sup> For Fox, the literal translation of הבל (hbl) as 'vapor' does not make sense especially if this is to be applied in the text as 'hbl-judgments.'<sup>27</sup> Deriving from Albert Camus' concept of the absurd from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Fox translated הבל (hbl) as absurd. With this translation, Fox painted a picture akin to that of *Sisyphus*, who continually pushes on eternally, accomplishing nothing – a bleak reality. Since this translation emphasizes the illogicality and the unreasonableness of life, this would imply that searching for the meaning of life is ludicrous; hence, it is a futile endeavor. That is why, for this translation, life and the search for the meaning of life are construed as equally absurd. However, to imply that the search for the meaning of life

<sup>20</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> John I. Lawlor, "Ecclesiastes, An Earth Bible Commentary: Qohelet's Eternal Earth," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 28, no. 3 (2018): 479–81, <https://doi.org/10.5325/bullbiblrese.28.3.0479>.

<sup>22</sup> Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qohelet," 879.

<sup>23</sup> Jaco W. Gericke, "Axiological Assumptions in Qohelet: A Historical-Philosophical Clarification," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33, no. 1 (2012): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i1.515>.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 438.

<sup>25</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 71 (Decatur, Ga: Almond Press, 1989), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 30–33.

is absurd and futile is to neglect a fundamental human reality – the human being's need for meaning and transcendence. Poets, philosophers, and great thinkers of all ages agree that there is something valuable and greater than the mere mundane pursuit of survival. We are always attracted to the deeper truth, moved by profound goodness, and searching for beauty that transcends and harmonizes all reality; however, all these become mere ludicrous notions when, in the end, all is absurd.

To this, Mark Sneed refutes Michael Fox. For Sneed, Fox's argument is not viable for several reasons: it introduces a new meaning for הבל (hbl) that is not used anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, making it lexically and semantically flawed; it is out of place both in the context of Qohelet and the broader ancient Near Eastern context; and it diminishes the importance of the "carpe-diem" philosophy.<sup>28</sup> By translating הבל (hbl) as absurd, Fox is telling us that the separation between actions and their outcomes is the harsh reality that challenges human logic, making human actions seem unimportant and thus, weakening morality. Moreover, Sneed points out that the concept of 'absurd' is an offshoot of Camus' experience brought on by the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. For Sneed, the best translation would be 'worthless': הבל (hbl) the special sense of 'that which does not count or matter,' 'null,' 'vain,' and 'that which yields no results.'<sup>29</sup> Sneed points out that Qohelet's focus is not primarily on God but on human ambitions and work, particularly wisdom which aligns with Stephan de Jong's idea that the central message of Qohelet is the limitations of human beings.<sup>30</sup> But this raises a significant question: is הבל (hbl) supposed to be narrowly interpreted as such? In response to Sneed, Fox in a later article mentioned that absurdity does not necessarily mean that reality in itself is meaningless or worthless: "The absurd is an affront to reason, but it does not cancel the value of life or much in it."<sup>31</sup> Fox added that life is not "worthless" as Sneed emphasizes, not even "futile" or even "vain" because all the shortcomings of these terms are remedied by our own choices.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the translation being "worthless" which is also synonymous with "meaningless" drives the point very explicitly: that because all is "worthless", all is "meaningless." This logically implies that when all is

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<sup>28</sup> Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qohelet," 894.

<sup>29</sup> Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qohelet," 880, 888 – 889.

<sup>30</sup> Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qohelet," 893.

<sup>31</sup> Michael V. Fox, "On הבל in Qohelet: A Reply to Mark Sneed," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 3 (2019), 559.

<sup>32</sup> Fox, "On הבל in Qohelet: A Reply to Mark Sneed," 563.



meaningless, then life is meaningless. The pursuit to find meaning in life is likewise empty, vain, worthless, and pointless. The notion of an empty life and meaningless existence is perhaps one of the most dangerous ideas that paralyzes humanity's longing for progress and even cripples our capacity to experience substantial joy in life since this interpretation leaves the reader in a pessimistic impasse. When all is meaningless, what is living for? All these point to the reality that it is indeed difficult to ascribe one narrow term to unravel the depth of how Qohelet wants us to understand הבל (hbl).

## A NEW PERSPECTIVE: ECCLESIASTES' UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF הבל (HBL)

### הבל (hbl) as a Literary Symbol

A novel approach to interpreting the concept of הבל (hbl) is to view it as a symbol. According to Miller, the author adopted the term הבל (hbl), meaning "vapor," as "a symbol to represent the entirety of the human experience."<sup>33</sup> In this context, the term הבל (hbl) takes on three metaphorical meanings or referents, namely "insubstantiality," "transience," and "foulness," each contributing to its symbolic significance.

Miller's symbol thesis presents three distinctive aspects:

1. It asserts that הבל (hbl) in Ecclesiastes is used metaphorically, with multiple referents.
2. It suggests that הבל (hbl) becomes a literary symbol, encompassing the various metaphorical senses of the term as employed throughout the book.
3. While "Insubstantiality" and "Transience" are commonly accepted metaphorical meanings of הבל (hbl), this proposal introduces a third one, "Foulness," as developed by the author, Qohelet.

Given Qohelet's skillful use of language, it is not surprising that he employed a literary symbol. Such symbols are well-known in Israelite wisdom literature and can be found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Miller surmised that Qohelet searched for an image that could symbolize the human experience in its entirety, and he chose the Hebrew word "הבל (hbl)," which means vapor or wisp of wind. In his thesis statement (1:2), he presents הבל (hbl) omnivalently and then demonstrates how, in various

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<sup>33</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 453.

ways, life is vapor.<sup>34</sup> The reader is meant to recognize that any or all dimensions of הבל (hbl) are being alluded to, and that symbolizes all the experiences of life.

The use of הבל (hbl) as a symbol acknowledges a certain spectrum of usage for the word in its diversity of contexts. It recognizes that Qohelet is using it as a metaphor. None of the three metaphors by itself applies to all human experience, but with this symbol, Qohelet can demonstrate that "all is הבל (hbl)" in one way or another. However, it is noteworthy that Miller mentions that Qohelet opted for a symbol that had not been previously used in the tradition.<sup>35</sup>

### Miller's Symbolic application of הבל (hbl)

Qohelet employs הבל (hbl) as "transience" in a metaphorical manner to evaluate things that are swiftly fleeting away. This interpretation is supported by the mention of "few days" and the use of the term "shadow," which is a commonly used metaphor for brevity.<sup>36</sup> Just like a brief, fleeting shadow, vapor dissipates rapidly. The word הבל (hbl) is used in Ecclesiastes to convey the idea that life is fleeting and temporary. This implies time is a reality of all things "under the sun." Time is an aspect of life that makes all things pass in each moment. Time implies change, and so we can expect that life always changes – in progress and development, as well as in depreciation and decay. Thus, change can be both beneficial and destructive; nevertheless, it is inevitable. Understanding הבל (hbl) as "vapor" that is swiftly fleeting is to consider the reality of changes in life and the brevity as it happens.

The concept of "insubstantiality" comes into play when Qohelet assesses labor, wisdom, and pleasure and considers all three as endeavors that yield no substantial or meaningful advantages.<sup>37</sup> This interpretation also applies when he discusses the empty words of foolish individuals, the general lack of satisfaction in wealth, and the frailty of the human condition. By taking הבל (hbl) as "vapor" which can be like smoke as a symbol of insubstantiality, we can construe that life can have aspects that seem to and apparently define or substantiate it. Still, it turns out to be empty and insubstantial. For example, money or career seems to be for some the most important aspect of their life. Many spend their days and waste their health to earn money and have a successful career, but if we look at the bigger picture, money and career only

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<sup>34</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 443 - 445.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 454.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 448.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 446 - 447.

have artificial values, which simply means that they are only important because we make them important. In and by themselves, money is just printed paper with the assigned value used for commercial exchange, and our career is only a name to distinguish our performance and nature of work. Money and career are הבל (hbl) like smoke that we seem to fill ourselves with. Like grabbing smoke, trying to grab these insubstantial things will leave the person empty.

הבל (hbl) can also be understood as "foulness," where vapor has become "bad air," perhaps noxious vapor or miasma. The notion of foulness is unique to Miller's symbolic interpretation; however, many indications qualify הבל (hbl) to be understood as "bad air" or "miasma." The meaning of הבל (hbl) is qualified by guarding terms that distinguish between foul and non-foul "הבל (hbl)."<sup>38</sup> "Evil" used in several passages (i.e., 4:1-16; 6:1; 9:3; 10:5) is a guarding term to distinguish one symbolic interpretation of הבל (hbl) from another. This also proves that הבל (hbl) cannot be interpreted with a sweeping one-word translation because of the different nuances. With this, some aspects of life are not only transient and insubstantial but also 'evil' or harmful. Using the same example, money and career are in themselves insubstantial, but if we begin to build our life from them, it becomes dangerous. Just as it is harmful to build our life in smoke, to build our life in things we consider הבל (hbl) is a perilous pursuit.

By taking Miller's understanding of הבל (hbl) as a symbolic metaphor that translates it generally as "vapor" and specifically exemplifies the image of transience, insubstantiality, and foulness, we cannot yet still say that life has meaning. Qohelet is silent when it comes to the question of the meaning of life. Instead, saying "all is הבל (hbl)" or "all is vapor" gives us a statement that does not contradict the possibility of finding an answer to the meaning of life. In saying "all is vapor," there is an openness to explore the question of life and its meaning. This new way of interpreting the book of Ecclesiastes makes the pursuit of finding meaning in life not any more absurd or worthless. Nevertheless, one needs to exert effort to make an attempt to delve into and reconcile the question of the meaning of life, considering and taking into perspective the realities presented by Qohelet in order to derive a new outlook from the book of Ecclesiastes in finding meaning in life. Hence, we need to look at one modern existential philosophy relevant to modern thinkers and make an attempt to

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 449 - 452.

understand and give a new light to the message of the book of Ecclesiastes in modern existential studies in finding life's meaning.

### **VIKTOR FRANKL AND HIS SEARCH FOR MEANING**

Now that we have discussed how we can understand הבל (hbl) as a literary symbol with various metaphorical senses let us now explore Viktor Frankl's search for meaning in life.

#### **Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy**

Viktor Frankl's three-year stint in Nazi concentration camps during World War II deeply impacted his development of logotherapy. He noted that survivors often found meaning in their suffering, including having a purpose to fulfill. Frankl was personally motivated to rewrite a confiscated manuscript. After liberation, he resumed his work as a neurologist and psychiatrist, eventually publishing "Man's Search for Meaning" in 1946, detailing his camp experiences and introducing logotherapy's key principles.<sup>39</sup>

Logotherapy, a branch of humanistic and existential psychology also known as the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy, centers on the will to meaning, contrasting with Adler's will to power and Freud's pleasure principle. Originally called height psychology as opposed to Freud's depth psychology, it emphasizes transcending natural processes. Unlike psychoanalysis, logotherapy is less retrospective and introspective, focusing on a patient's future and their pursuit of meaning.<sup>40</sup> Logotherapy gets its name from the Greek word "logos," which means "meaning," and "therapy," which means treatment. This approach is based on the idea that a quest for a life purpose drives humans, and logotherapy is all about finding that meaning in one's life.<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, logotherapy has three core principles: (1) life always has meaning, (2) our main motivation is to find meaning, and (3) we have the freedom to choose our attitudes even in the toughest situations.<sup>42</sup> Viktor Frankl, the founder, suggests that we can find meaning through creativity, meaningful experiences with others, and

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<sup>39</sup> "Logotherapy," accessed August 28, 2023, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/logotherapy>.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy: The Search For Purpose and Meaning," *Student Pulse* 4 (June 1, 2012), 1 - 3.

<sup>41</sup> "Logotherapy."

<sup>42</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 1-2.

by choosing our attitudes. Creative activities like painting or gardening, meaningful connections with loved ones, and the ability to choose our response to adversity are all pathways to discovering meaning. Frankl also introduces the idea of "tragic optimism," which means we can maintain optimism even when facing unavoidable hardships like guilt, death, and suffering.

### **Viktor Frankl's Anthropology: Key Assumptions of Logotherapy**

Frankl believes that we should not simplify human behavior by attributing it solely to psychological or biological factors. He sees humans primarily as spiritual beings, which means they are not controlled by determinism but can make choices freely and responsibly while discovering value and meaning. According to Frankl, humans exist in three dimensions: the physical (body), the mental (mind), and the spiritual (noetic). These dimensions are fundamentally separate ways of existence and cannot be reduced to each other in terms of their essence.<sup>43</sup> His anthropology revolves around fundamental principles: humans exist in these three dimensions—physical, mental, and spiritual, with the spiritual aspect holding paramount importance. This spiritual dimension grants individuals the capacity for autonomous decision-making, emancipating them from deterministic biological or psychological influences. Within this freedom, humans possess the ability to transcend limitations and detach from their immediate selves. At the core of human existence lies the pursuit of meaning, which is realized by living in harmony with objective values. These values, along with the meaning they engender, are anchored in objectivity. Each situation presents a singular, meaningful solution that necessitates the exercise of freedom and responsibility. The conscience serves as a compass in the quest for this meaningful resolution. Subjective meanings are perceived as part of a grander, divine meaning determined by a higher power, forging an inherent connection between humanity and God, whether consciously acknowledged or not.<sup>44</sup>

At the core of Frankl's anthropology is his view of humans as individuals, and he defines a person by three essential traits: (1) firstly, personal existence is unique and cannot be divided; (2) secondly, it is a complete and distinct entity that cannot be combined with others; (3) thirdly, each person is entirely one-of-a-kind. Due to the

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<sup>43</sup> Claudia Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," *Existential Analysis* (October 1, 2015), 344.

<sup>44</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 349 - 350.

first two traits, Frankl concludes that a person cannot be just the result of sexual reproduction because a person cannot be formed from something divisible or combinable, like physical and mental aspects. In terms of ontology, a person is not part of the material world like the body or mind and does not originate from it. Parents do not create the spiritual person; they only provide the foundation. According to Frankl, the spiritual person is somehow added to the body and exists beyond time and space constraints.<sup>45</sup>

### **Man's Existential Crisis**

The term "noölogical" is rooted in the Greek word "noös,"<sup>46</sup> which means mind or spirit, and it is all about humanity's quest for meaning. This dimension involves our consciousness, responsibility, and freedom, setting us apart from animals, which have only biological and psychological dimensions due to their inability to transcend themselves. Humans, however, exist in all three dimensions: biological, psychological, and noölogical, thanks to our capacity for self-transcendence. When people face existential frustration, it can lead to something called "noögenic neuroses,"<sup>47</sup> which do not arise from psychological conflicts but rather from existential challenges, such as feeling a lack of purpose. Frankl observed individuals responding to this by engaging in harmful behaviors. Importantly, Frankl emphasized that pondering the meaning of life is a normal and natural concern, not a sign of mental illness. He also introduced the concept of "noö-dynamics," where meaning emerges from embracing existential tension rather than seeking inner balance.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, Frankl introduced the concept of "existential frustration,"<sup>49</sup> which occurs when a person's search for meaning is thwarted, often due to prolonged boredom or apathy. He likens this feeling to meaninglessness or an "existential vacuum."<sup>50</sup> People try to fill this void with temporary and shallow pursuits. Additionally, Frankl believed that these negative behaviors, such as depression, aggression, and addiction, stem from this misdirected quest for meaning, which can

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<sup>45</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 345-355.

<sup>46</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

<sup>47</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 353-354.

<sup>48</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

<sup>49</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

<sup>50</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

be collectively found in specific societies or generations and is called "collective neurosis."<sup>51</sup>

### **Meaning and "Super-meaning"**

Frankl emphasizes that the meaning of life varies from person to person and from one situation to another. He argues that there is no specific meaning in life that can be applied to each individual for all of humanity; rather, there is a unique and ever-changing meaning for everyone stemming from absolute meaning. Frankl also highlights the idea of self-transcendence, which means that people can find purpose and meaning by focusing on something or someone beyond themselves. This idea is connected to the concept of "super-meaning,"<sup>52</sup> which represents an ultimate, profound meaning that goes beyond human understanding. While some philosophers suggest that life is inherently meaningless, Frankl suggests that humans struggle not with meaninglessness but with comprehending the boundless depth of meaningfulness represented by the concept of "super-meaning."<sup>53</sup>

As Rohr explains, the concept of "super-meaning" refers to a unifying, transcendental principle embodied in a personal image of God.<sup>54</sup> Viktor Frankl's *Anthropological Foundations* offers insight into the ultimate justification of meaning through God. He argues that as long as we exist, our existence is inherently oriented towards meaning and value, and this orientation implies a connection to something of higher value than ourselves, essentially a "super-person,"<sup>55</sup> which is God. In simpler terms, our existence always points toward God because values and meaning have their roots in God. Since individuals seek meaning and value due to their innate desire for it, they can only truly understand themselves in relation to something transcendent. Hence, each realization of meaning can be seen as a step toward God, and this movement finds its origin in God, aligning with Frankl's idea of a higher causality with a sense of purpose.<sup>56</sup>

Super-meaning is a central concept in Frankl's philosophy. It provides two key things: (1) the ability for individuals to discover personal meaning and (2) the

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<sup>51</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

<sup>52</sup> Reiting, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 349 - 350.

<sup>53</sup> Devoe, 4 - 5.

<sup>54</sup> Reiting, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View.": 350 - 351; c.f. Rohr, W. (2009), 354.

<sup>55</sup> Reiting, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 350.

<sup>56</sup> Reiting, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 350 - 351.

motivation to do so through their will and freedom to find meaning. Because super-meaning is objective, subjective or personal meaning also becomes objectively grounded in it. As individuals are drawn toward super-meaning, there is an inherent purpose in their pursuit of personal meaning, reflecting Frankl's idea of a purpose-driven orientation.<sup>57</sup>

While Frankl acknowledges that atheists or agnostics may not equate this transcendent force with the voice of God, from a philosophical standpoint, such an association is unavoidable within Frankl's worldview. He emphasizes that all humans have a connection to God.<sup>58</sup> However, for those who are not religious, this connection to God is unconscious. Frankl suggests that this "transcendent unconscious"<sup>59</sup> signifies that humans have always had an intentional relationship with something beyond themselves, even if they are not consciously aware of it. If one were to label the object of this unconscious relationship as "God," it is appropriate to speak of an "unconscious God."<sup>60</sup> Importantly, this does not imply that God is unaware of Himself but rather that God may be unknown to humans, and their connection to God may be subconscious. Since we are constantly in this relationship with God, we can orient ourselves toward finding meaning and answering life's questions in a meaningful way. By this understanding, we can assert that as individuals realize their meaning in life, they draw closer to God.

## SYNTHESIS: AFFINITY OF ECCLESIASTES' AND FRANKL'S MEANING OF LIFE

### An Impasse for Sweeping One-word Translations of הבל (hbl)

In every translation, there is a corresponding interpretation. We have exposed different translations of הבל (hbl) and depending on how this single word is translated, the perspective and how we approach the question of the meaning of life in the book of Ecclesiastes changes. For those who, like Fox, understand that הבל (hbl) is absurd – makes life absurd, illogical, and arbitrary. They would have to understand that Ecclesiastes would take on the pessimistic tone that construes that all of life is absurd.<sup>61</sup> When all is absurd, there is no logic and life is only a random

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<sup>57</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 349 - 350.

<sup>58</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 353 - 354.

<sup>59</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 351 - 352.

<sup>60</sup> Reitinger, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 351.

<sup>61</sup> Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 30.



conglomeration of fragmented reality.<sup>62</sup> הבל (hbl) can also mean worthless, as Sneed would understand it.<sup>63</sup> Life is worthless. It does not have intrinsic value. Everything is vain and, nothing really matters. Both Fox and Sneed raise very cogent arguments but, in a way, encapsulate and restrict the meaning of הבל (hbl) which may inevitably distort it. Hence, no single translation can exemplify the depth of meaning of this single word.

Taking how Fox and Sneed would translate and interpret הבל (hbl), there can be a minimal or even downright absence of any semblance or affinity between the book of Ecclesiastes and Frank's logotherapy. There can be no meaning that can be ascribed to life and all its endeavors. Qohelet's pessimism about life and "all things under the sun" would contradict any notion of giving life meaning since everything is either absurd or worthless.

### **Symbolic interpretation הבל (hbl) to open the quest for Meaning in Life**

Sweeping one-word translations could not capture the depth of Ecclesiastes' poetic imagery using the word הבל (hbl), which the understanding of the whole book heavily hinges upon. We must first understand that Qohelet is a wise sage and scribe who would have used his literary prowess to utilize the imagination of his readers. It would be reasonable to agree with Miller that Qohelet could have used הבל (hbl) symbolically, which can be understood and interpreted metaphorically.<sup>64</sup> With this, הבל (hbl) is translated directly from its literal meaning "vapor," as "a symbol to represent the entirety of the human experience"<sup>65</sup> which can mean many things even within the book of Ecclesiastes itself depending on the context and qualifiers that further define the image of "vapor" within the text. By looking at how Qohelet pictures out הבל (hbl) using qualifying imageries by means of similar or dissimilar terms or images and further clarifying how הבל (hbl) is used by guarding terms, Miller points out that הבל (hbl) translated as "vapor" can be understood as either "insubstantial" "transient" or "foul."<sup>66</sup>

With Miller's symbolic interpretation of הבל (hbl), we can say that life and all the many things in life are "vapor." Thus, all things "under the sun" cannot be just

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<sup>62</sup> Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 10 – 11; 31.

<sup>63</sup> Sneed, "הבל as 'Worthless' in Qohelet," 894.

<sup>64</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 441 – 445.

<sup>65</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 454.

<sup>66</sup> Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of HBL," 446- 452.

absurd or worthless. Like vapor, there are aspects in life that are insubstantial, which agrees with how Fox and Sneed understand that there are some aspects of this world that can be absurd or worthless. Nevertheless, not *all* are. There are aspects of life that, like vapor, are transient and fleeting. This does not make it absurd or worthless. Finally, there are aspects of life that are like a noxious vapor, which is foul and dangerous. Seeing life as vapor, being transient, fleeting, and even foul, does not make it meaningless.

Hence, Miller's symbolic interpretation of the Hebrew word הבל (hbl) opens a possibility of a connection between the book of Ecclesiastes and Frankl's Logotherapy. הבל (hbl) which is interpreted as "vapor," can help us understand the meaning of life according to Frankl's ideas about subjective and objective aspects of meaning. In this construal, it can be said that the symbolic interpretation of הבל (hbl) aligns closely with Frankl's subjective meaning of mundane aspects of life.

### **הבל (hbl) and Frankl's Subjective Meaning in Life**

Before beginning to explain the affinity of הבל (hbl) to Frankl's Subjective meaning, we must have at least a basic understanding of what is Frankl's subjective meaning in life. Subjective meaning is the capacity for the individual to find or ascribe meaning in one's life. This is both a bane and a boon. The capacity to ascribe meaning is a fundamental freedom of man. This allows the person to find or create meaning for one's existence, as explained in Frankl's logotherapy. Man is free to ascribe what makes one's life meaningful. With that said, there is a difference between someone who finds one's meaning in life by seeking money, prestige, and reputation and someone who finds meaning in life by pursuing what is truly good and beautiful. This is where the symbolic interpretation of הבל (hbl) becomes significant. הבל (hbl) is "vapor" which includes all those objects "under the sun" that come and go in life. This is not a mere idea of absurdity, nor can worthlessness or meaninglessness be in question, as these are matters of personal judgment of values. Nonetheless, הבל (hbl) are in themselves insubstantial whiffs of smoke that many mundane and material things are alluded to. That is why, although we can enjoy all the הבל (hbl) that comes into our lives, to build our lives and ascribe our life's meaning to these fleeting and empty things is dangerous. As the Scripture goes, "It's better to build a shack on a rock than a castle on sand." (Mt. 7:24-29). Nevertheless, subjective meaning gives us the capacity and freedom to ascribe our life's meaning to הבל (hbl). However, at the same time, subjective meaning also precludes and points towards objective meaning in life.

This is exactly how logotherapy works – to build a healthy freedom to choose that which makes life truly meaningful. Logotherapy entails responsibility and freedom for ourselves. Hence, this implies that we also have the freedom to let go of all הבל (hbl) without necessarily letting go of life and that which makes life truly meaningful.

### **Frankl's Objective Meaning in Life: Transcending הבל (hbl)**

Objective meaning is directly connected to transcendence. Frankl associates this with "super-meaning" which represents fundamental meaningfulness that is God in God's self. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the use of the phrase "under the sun" implies leaving out any reference to God or spirituality in life. Since all is הבל (hbl) is "under the sun," objective meaning can only be derived when one transcends הבל (hbl). Although objective meaning gives inherent meaningfulness to all, when things "under the sun" are cut off from the ultimate source of meaning, things in themselves become like הבל (hbl), a vapor that disappears. So, life does have meaning, but it cannot be found in itself alone. Just as clouds are made of vapor, הבל (hbl) obfuscates the light of the sun, the source of life on Earth. הבל (hbl) can be symbolically interpreted as those that obfuscate us from objective meaning. When we let go of הבל (hbl) in life, we realize that we find ourselves in greater clarity to understand the inherent meaning in our life that a self-centered introspection cannot find; but rather, a looking outward at ourselves and beyond all הבל (hbl) – a constant step towards that which is transcending all things. Hence, objective meaning grounds and substantiates our capacity and freedom to find meaning in life by relinquishing הבל (hbl).

### **LOCATING LIFE'S MEANING**

הבל (hbl) can be compared to the life of Abel from the Bible – here one moment and gone the next. Similarly, the meaning of life is like a fleeting vapor. We might believe we can grasp it in our hands, but it slips away from us. The more we try to understand it using our worldly measures and parameters, the more unclear it becomes. In fact, if we become overly fixated on trying to understand it, it can turn into an unhealthy obsession that limits our perspective and endangers us. Frankl refers to this state as "noögenic neuroses,"<sup>67</sup> "existential frustration,"<sup>68</sup> or "existential vacuum."<sup>69</sup> When applied to an entire society or generation, it becomes a "collective

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<sup>67</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5

<sup>68</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

<sup>69</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

neurosis."<sup>70</sup> All of this underscores the reality that our search for meaning can sometimes lead to self-destructive feelings of emptiness and purposelessness. The meaning of life is elusive and can slip away if we become too obsessed with understanding it through worldly means.

There is indeed meaning in life, but we need to clear away the confusion to see it clearly. Often, we try to make sense of the fleeting and elusive aspects of our lives by focusing solely on our capacities and perspectives. However, the real meaning in life is not found there; it is like trying to make sense of vapor, which, as Fox aptly puts it, is absurd. The elusive aspects of our lives, which can be called *הבל* (hbl), might include our pursuits of wealth, career, reputation, pleasure, and all the other materialistic concerns. These pursuits, in themselves, are not bad and can bring joy. However, if we become too attached to these temporary things and derive our life's meaning solely from them, then our sense of purpose will vanish along with them.

Furthermore, it is risky to become overly attached to just one aspect of life, such as our physical bodies, our secular knowledge, and everything limited to what happens "under the sun." This kind of attachment fragments us and separates us from our spiritual side. In simpler terms, if we focus too much on material and worldly pursuits or limit our understanding of what we can see, touch, and reason, we miss out on the deeper, spiritual, and meaningful dimensions of life.

Ultimately, the true meaning of life is discovered in the One from whom all meaning originates. Frankl refers to this as the objective meaning or the "super-meaning,"<sup>71</sup> which is linked to a higher, transcendent principle represented by a personal image of God.<sup>72</sup> Our existence constantly points towards God because the values and meanings we hold are rooted in God. People naturally seek meaning and value because of their inherent desire for it, and they can only fully understand themselves when they are connected to something beyond this world. Every realization of meaning can be viewed as a step towards God, while at the same time, this movement has its starting point in God. This aligns with Frankl's concept of a higher causality that imparts a sense of purpose. In simpler terms, our search for meaning in life is initiated by God and cooperated by our freedom to embark on a journey towards God.

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<sup>70</sup> Devoe, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy," 5.

<sup>71</sup> Reitingner, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 349 -351.

<sup>72</sup> Reitingner, "Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy from a Philosophical Point of View," 350 – 351.

Now, having this said, there is still an important question that demands an answer: "Where is the meaning of life, here and now?" or, to put it correctly, "How do I spend my life in such a way that it can become meaningful?" There is no easy answer to that. There is no argument that, indeed God, being the ultimate good and the source of life's meaning, is the source, goal, and ultimate meaning of life, but the road that leads us to God is personal and unique for each one of us. Hence, there is no one-way path for all. However, in order for us to speak about and suggest a path, we will use three primary realities shared by all humanity that Qohelet's הַבַּל (hbl) points to us, namely: (1) the transience of time, (2) insubstantiality of death, and (3) the foulness of life's randomness and suffering. Using these, let us look at how we can navigate life's deepest question using Frankl's three distinct ways of discovering life's meaning.

### **The Transience of Time and the Creative Value**

"Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever" (1:4), says Qohelet, emphasizing the transience of time. Nevertheless, he also gives us a glimpse of the possibility of an alternative optimistic perspective on time: "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens." (3:1). In this transient life, we can choose activities to fill our time with which we can make these meaningful. Frankl proposed this as our capacity to have creative value by accomplishing something worthwhile. It can be a form of work, craft, or art. These creative avenues may become a livelihood, but they are not particularly intended for that. Frankl tells us not to seek primarily for success or happiness:

"Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it"<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, Harold S. Kushner, and William J. Winslade, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 112.

We do these activities not primarily to be paid or to be recognized, but we do these activities for their own sake. These are more life-giving activities that have value in themselves, but this value is both subjective and objective. It is subjective because different people are unique, creative, and life-giving in their way. Some people are so passionate about painting that they could immerse themselves in hours perfecting the colors and shapes and expressing themselves in their art. For others, their intellectual pursuit gives insight and depth to how they perceive the world and life in general. Still, for others, service to others and social advocacies provide depth and meaning in how they spend their time. We can also see this in the various works and charisms of many saints throughout history. According to Frankl, "What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthy goal, a freely chosen task."<sup>74</sup> Regardless of what that might be for us, these activities are objectively meaningful because they reflect and point toward something objectively good, true, and beautiful while being alive. All our creative pursuit points toward the reality that God is accomplishing something in us and through us.

### **The Insubstantiality of Death and the Experiential Value**

Death is man's greatest equalizer. The rich cannot buy themselves out of it, and no intellect or wisdom can solve this enigma: "The same destiny ultimately awaits everyone, whether righteous or wicked, good or bad, ceremonially clean or unclean, religious or irreligious... there is nothing ahead but death anyway." (9:2-3) No one escapes death; nonetheless, this does not make life insubstantial because the experience of living has value in itself. Life is a gift from God, an unmerited grace that is given freely by our creator. God is the source of life and source of absolute meaning; hence, life being lived shares the meaningfulness of that which is the source of it. There is value in life being lived. There is value in watching the sunset while walking quietly with a friend. There is value in smelling the delicate scent of flowers and tasting the delectability of our favorite food. There is value in sharing a meal with our family while sharing our stories of joy, success, struggles, and pain with them. There is value in holding someone else's hands. There is value in being part of communal celebrations as well as private moments of silence. If we look at Jesus, there is indeed value in the incarnation and His hidden life. Jesus showed us that in the hiddenness of life's mundane routine, there is value because life truly lived has its inherent

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<sup>74</sup> Frankl, Kushner, and Winslade, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 112.

goodness and beauty. According to Frankl, "What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you"<sup>75</sup> and in itself are valuable. While creative value involves our active initiative to do something worthwhile with our time, the experiential value of just living life requires us to appreciate every moment of our life. By relishing our experiences and seeing them as gifts, we are filled with gratitude for the abundance of graces we have received from God, the source of life and the fullness of life's meaningfulness.

### **The Foulness of Life's Randomness and Suffering and the Attitudinal Value**

Finally, Qohelet observes that fate does not often favor the skilled, the good, or the wise: "The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skillful are not necessarily wealthy. Moreover, those who are educated do not always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy." (9:11-12) Certainly, life is random and uncertain. Although we have the freedom to make certain choices in life, there are more things beyond our control. Hence, life offers the possibility that despite our best intentions and conscientious effort, we will incur loss, suffer pain, and grieve life's tragedies. We cannot control life, and life's miseries happen even to good and diligent people. There are many hardworking employees who lost their jobs when the COVID pandemic happened and now suffer from homelessness. There are many good and honest people who found out they have cancer in their 30s. There are many innocent children below 10 years old who are suffering from congenital diseases. There are patients who are paralyzed from the neck down and who lie down in bed for all their lives until death relieves them. There are many displaced families torn by war. There are many sexually or physically abused victims who suffer the trauma of their tragedy. Furthermore, still, suffering is true even for us. We all share the suffering of having lost a loved one. We experience the pain of being separated from our family and friends. We all experience the frustration of failure or the agony of loneliness. However, in all these, we can derive meaning not by changing or controlling the inevitable suffering that we are in but rather by changing our attitude towards the situation. Frankl asserts that we can give meaning to our suffering. According to Frankl, "When we are no

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<sup>75</sup> Frankl, Kushner, and Winstlade, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

longer able to change a situation: just think of an incurable disease such as incurable cancer – we are challenged to change ourselves.”<sup>76</sup> Frankl tells us that human beings have the fundamental freedom to respond to particular situations because we are not merely biological beings. We are, above all, spiritual beings with freedom in how we see ourselves despite our condition. We are not merely our career, our reputation, our wealth, or our health. Frankl would assert that we are not merely our body. These are all important aspects of life, but we are more than that. Thus, we can choose how to respond to our suffering. Accordingly, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way.”<sup>77</sup> There is value in seeing ourselves for who we really are despite our miseries and tragedies, and we can see this only when we are spiritually free to see our sufferings as a form of sacrifice and accept it courageously as something uniquely ours. By rising from our hopeless situation and facing life’s inevitable fate of suffering, we can spiritually grow and turn our tragedies into triumphs. In our Catholic faith, we are able to find meaning in our suffering by uniting them to the suffering of God in Jesus. By faith, we unite with Christ on the cross and so be united with Him in His resurrection. What great comfort it is to unite ourselves to the ultimate source of meaning in our lives.

Finally, the quest for meaning is a very personal question, and it “can never be answered by sweeping statements.”<sup>78</sup> Like vapor, the more one chases and grasps it, the more it evades and escapes us. Nevertheless, life in itself is concrete and real. As the book of Ecclesiastes would tell us, we can only live and enjoy life. However, I propose to use the word relish instead of enjoy. To enjoy connotes simply to take pleasure, but there are events in life that are certainly unpleasing. It is certainly difficult and even insensitive to tell the person suffering from a terminal illness or grief from the loss of a loved one to enjoy life. Moreover, if we turn the tables around, how would you feel when someone tells you to ‘enjoy life’ when you are sick or when you are grieving the death of a loved one? Certainly, it is a problematic statement. Hence, I propose ‘relish’ rather than ‘enjoy.’ We may not enjoy all the events in our lives, but we can relish the joys and sorrows of life. We can choose to remain and find substance and meaning from it. In fact, the more we relish life for whatever it is in our creative

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<sup>76</sup> Frankl, Kushner, and Winslade, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 112.

<sup>77</sup> Frankl, Kushner, and Winslade, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 66.

<sup>78</sup> Frankl, Kushner, and Winslade, 77.



work, our experiences, and even our suffering, we are moved to look to the ultimate meaning in life – namely, God. On our part, we have the responsibility and freedom to relish life as a gift from God. As Frankl would say:

“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; he can only respond by being responsible.”<sup>79</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: MODERN MAN’S SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE**

Qohelet and Frankl have different emphases when it comes to the question of the meaning of life. For Qohelet, a symbolic interpretation of **הבל** (hbl) gives us different images of the reality of life, namely, transient, insubstantial, and foulness. This does not necessarily answer the question of what makes life meaningful; nonetheless, this opens up a new perspective on how to understand the book of Ecclesiastes in light of modern discussions regarding the meaning of life. Frankl’s logotherapy, as well as the new symbolic interpretation of **הבל** (hbl) are the lenses from which we re-read the book of Ecclesiastes for us to derive meaning in life. In particular, we have found that finding meaning in life is unique for each person. However, there are three values that guide us to how we can make our life meaningful, namely: (1) Creative value, (2) Experiential value, and (3) Attitudinal value.

In today’s modern world, the lives of ordinary people are filled with a wide range of things and activities. We have electronic devices and various gadgets, hobbies, and collections, along with television shows, games, and many entertainment choices. Knowledge is expanding rapidly thanks to advances in science and technology, allowing us to explore outer space and gain a deeper understanding of the human mind. Economies are thriving, and a significant part of our time is dedicated to work. In this fast-paced, secular, and consumer-driven world, the pursuit of more never seems to end. For Qohelet, all these pursuits are like **הבל** (hbl), which means something fleeting or insubstantial, akin to vapor. The more we acquire, use, and consume, the more we add to the haze that obscures our true understanding of life and its meaning. It is no surprise that many people experience depression after dedicating their lives to accumulating wealth or building their careers and reputations, only to realize that the true meaning of life cannot be found in those

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<sup>79</sup> Frankl, Kushner, and Winslade, 109.

pursuits. However, for some, the never-ending race continues. Modern life is filled with distractions that do not lead to a deep sense of fulfillment.

With this, the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us of the importance of relishing what life offers. We do not have to give up on life to search for its meaning. Similarly, Frankl believed that we should not discard the subjective meaning of life. Both the subjective, personal, human meaning and the objective, transcendent super-meaning can coexist. Just as God is both beyond and within everything, meaning can be discovered in all aspects of life as a subjective reality, yet meaning in itself is beyond our subjective comprehension and points to a broader, distinct, and entirely objective reality – the super-meaning that we attribute to as God. As long as we do not separate the physical, mental, and spiritual facets of the human being, there is a reason to find happiness in discovering meaning in our life by actually living it. Hence, this paper will not end with an answer to the meaning of life; rather, it will end with a question: “What do you live for?” or rather, “Who do you live for?”

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