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BEYOND WORRY? ON LEARNING HUMILITY FROM THE LILIES AND THE BIRDS

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‘Therefore do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.’—Matthew 6: 34

INTRODUCTION

How on earth do I stop worrying? In *Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History*, Francis O’Gorman (2015: x) suggests that worries ‘are, of nature, like a strangling weed: they can’t be eradicated even if they can be cut back. They keep growing. They smother. They are exceptionally good at spoiling the view.’ In this chapter, I shall argue that part of the answer to the problem of worry is to be found in a certain view of humility: one that can be teased out from several Kierkegaardian discourses, and which has recently been gaining increasing support—from both philosophers and psychologists—against competing views of humility. Humility is understood not in terms of self-abasement, underestimating oneself, or being ignorant of one’s good qualities, but rather in terms of being focused on others and sources of value besides oneself: thinking not *less* of oneself, but thinking less *about* oneself. In exploring the centrality of future-oriented worries to Kierkegaard’s lily and bird discourses, a central thought will be that such worries often stem from excessive self-absorption, a particular aspect of Luther’s (and the wider Lutheran tradition’s) general objection to self-centred desire, and how the motive of our heart is ‘curved in on itself’ (*incurvatus in se*).¹ As O’Gorman (2015: 54) suggests:

Worrying can be a form of vanity. It can be a species of self-indulgence, a way of extending ego into a conversation, or of somehow confirming *selfness* in the head. To worry silently is to feel a certain kind of closeness to oneself, to the “real” needy person that one may believe oneself to be. To *talk* to others about worries is, in some ways, always to declare: look at me; listen to *my* pains; listen to what *I* live with; *I* am important in my own worry.²

Humility as it will be understood here provides an alternative to this debilitating self-absorption. O’Gorman also suggests that the worrier might relax by being a bit more humble, suggesting that a partial solution to the pain of worrying is ‘to moderate expectation; to be kinder to myself; to accept that I fail; to be ready to apologize; to be ready to take criticism’ (2015: 139). He seems to be suggesting a sort of pragmatic ‘realism,’ a recognition of one’s abilities unclouded by the distortions of a problematic kind of pride: ‘we worriers,’ he says, should not suppose we are ‘too good for failure, or too proud to deal with objections, or too grand to take responsibility for something that went wrong, or so grand that if anything goes wrong it *must* be our responsibility’ (2015: 140). That all sounds sensible enough, but—apart from perhaps the final suggestion—still sounds highly self-focused.³ The kind of humility I have in mind takes us much further beyond self-focus into other-focus. Let us get there via Kierkegaard’s ‘unlikely teachers,’ the lilies in the field and the birds of the air.

THE LILIES AND THE BIRDS

Kierkegaard wrote fourteen discourses on Matthew 6: 24-34, a key gospel passage in which Jesus discusses the lilies and birds. Here I shall focus mostly on those from 1847 (the second part of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*) and 1849, though with some complementary references to parts of the *Christian Discourses* of 1848.⁴ Both worry [*Bekymring*⁵] and joy are recurrent themes of these discourses.

The 1847 discourses

The gospel passage ‘addresses itself to those who are worried’ (UDVS, 160/SKS 8, 260), and the prayer in the preface presents the lilies and birds as ‘counselor[s] to the worried’ (UDVS, 157/SKS 8, 258). The first discourse, ‘To be contented with being a human being,’ presents the silence of the lilies and birds as part of their qualifications to be teachers: they are ‘silent—out of solicitude for the worried person’ (UDVS, 160/SKS 8, 260). Here we start to see the importance of the shift of attention necessary in learning from these teachers: *the worried person needs to forget himself in contemplating*

them (UDVS, 161/SKS 8, 261). This is why it is *silent* ones who have been ‘divinely appointed’ to teach us (UDVS, 157/SKS 8, 258): silence compares favourably with the potentially destructive power of *comparison* that is inherent in speech (since injunctions to rejoice, ‘be glad!’ or ‘be strong!’ imply: ‘as I am’ (UDVS, 161/SKS 8, 260–1)). Amongst the lilies, the human can be contented with being a human being—because we can be taken out of ourselves, forgetting our worries in contemplation of the lilies and their beauty.

The theme of ‘the worried inventiveness of comparison’ (UDVS, 165/SKS 8, 265) is central to one of the most memorable parts of this discourse, Kierkegaard’s parable of the ‘worried lily’ (UDVS, 167ff./SKS 8, 266ff.) The basic thought behind this seems to be that a huge amount of human misery is the result of unproductive comparisons of ourselves to others, and that such comparisons produce an unhealthy kind and degree of anxiety.⁶

In this parable, Kierkegaard draws a parallel between the beauty of a lily and that of a human being. The sheer wonder of being alive, and of being human, is typically forgotten through comparison’s corrosive effects. In the parable, the life of a beautiful, carefree lily is complicated by the arrival of a capricious little bird who, instead of delighting in the lily’s beauty, stresses its difference (being free to come and go) and induces the lily’s worry by chattering about the beauty of other lilies encountered on its travels. Predictably, the lily becomes increasingly insecure. Its static life, previously unproblematic, starts to seem restrictive, and—falling prone to the spirit of comparison—it begins to feel humiliated, wishing it was a Crown Imperial, which the bird has told it is the most gorgeous lily of all. In a subtle twist, the lily convinces itself that its desire is reasonable, since it is not ‘asking for the impossible, to become what I am not, a bird, for example. My wish is only to become a gorgeous lily, or even the most gorgeous’ (UDVS, 168/SKS 8, 267-8).

Confessing its worries, the lily and bird together hatch a plan that will see the bird peck away the soil restricting the lily to its spot, uproot it, and fly it to where the most gorgeous lilies grow (UDVS, 168–9/SKS 8, 268). But inevitably, once uprooted, the lily withers and dies. The message seems to be that the anxious worry which led to its demise is a human, all too human trait. The lily is the human being, while the ‘naughty little bird’ is ‘the restless mentality of comparison, which roams

far and wide, fitfully and capriciously, and gleans the morbid knowledge of diversity' (UDVS, 169/SKS 8, 268). Further, the little bird is 'the poetic and the seductive in the human being' (ibid.), and the poetic is a mixture of truth and untruth. While the diversity it notes between human beings is not a falsehood, the poetic 'consists in maintaining that diversity [...] is the supreme, and this is eternally false' (ibid.). The bird's influence causes the lily to become problematically *proud* and *envious* (UDVS, 168/SKS 8, 267). But as noted, it convinces itself that it is not asking for anything unreasonable: it fails to see that wanting to become the most gorgeous lily does not become a reasonable desire simply in virtue of not being a wish to change species. Ultimately, the problem arises from stressing the diversity that results from the spirit of comparison—'status anxiety'?—more than our *common humanity*. From this Kierkegaard advances the bold claim that 'all worldly worry' is based upon an 'unwillingness to be contented with being a human being' (UDVS, 171/SKS 8, 270).

A second parable introduces a sub-theme: worry about making a living (an obvious example of future-oriented worry). Here the worrier is not a lily but another bird. Kierkegaard contrasts a wood-dove, also previously happy with its existence, with a tame dove it meets. Initially, the wood-dove has effectively taken the gospel passage's advice: to take each day as it comes. But the tame dove's one-upmanship starts to worry the wood-dove. As the farmer loads grain into the barn, the tame dove brags that it and its mate are well provided for. Again, the worry centres on *envy* at the tame dove's apparent knowledge of financial security: the wood-dove is 'struck by the thought that it must be very pleasant to *know* that one's living was secured for a long time, whereas it was miserable to live continually in uncertainty so that one never dares to say that one *knows* one is provided for' (UDVS, 175/SKS 8, 274). The wood-dove becomes worried about its *possible future need*—even though, crucially, it does not suffer *actual* need now. (My investment portfolio is doing well—but suppose the markets crash tomorrow?) Through entrapping itself in 'the idea' (UDVS, 176/SKS 8, 274) of its need for security, the bird's future-oriented worry causes it to lose its joy (UDVS, 175/SKS 8, 274). Like the worried lily, the wood-dove convinces itself that this is reasonable, since it too is not wishing to change its species: it wants to be like the wealthy tame doves, not to become a human being like the farmer. The dove changes its behaviour, trying to store up food for the future,

eventually hatching a scheme whereby it can join the tame doves, sneaking into the dovecote one night. Its fate is no happier than that of the worried lily: finding the strange interloper, the farmer places it in a box and kills it the next morning (UDVS, 176/SKS 8, 275).

Again, Kierkegaard explains that the wood-dove is the human being—albeit this time with a qualification. His point is not to urge against saving for the future. Rather, what he is cautioning against is *overlooking our dependence upon God in an attitude of misguided self-sufficiency*:

It is certainly praiseworthy and pleasing to God that a person sows and reaps and gathers into barns, that he works in order to obtain food; but if he wants to forget God and thinks he supports himself by his labors, then he has worry about making a living. (UDVS, 177/SKS 8, 276)

The claim is that ultimately, without God, neither rich nor poor can provide for ourselves in the deepest sense. We are—in a phrase that will become important in the next section—*radically dependent*. Kierkegaard traces this problem to the ‘spirit of comparison’ too, in at least two ways. First, to want to be self-sufficient is to want ‘security by himself’ (UDVS, 178/SKS 8, 277), which only God can have. And second, ‘the actual pressing need of the day today’ has been replaced by ‘the idea of a future need’: it is this in which the worry about making a living in its problematic sense consists (UDVS, 178–9/SKS 8, 277). For some, this takes the form of the desire to be rich; for others, merely the desire to be fairly secure—but both stem from the spirit of comparison. And all this can be traced to the unwillingness to be contented with being a human being.

The second discourse, ‘How glorious it is to be a human being,’ continues the theme of escaping worry. Again, the focus is on escaping worry *by looking away from it* (down at the lily or up at the bird) (UDVS, 183–4/SKS 8, 281). The picture is that by focusing on something of value outside the self—things of value in the world—many of one’s worries are quietened.⁷ Through a discussion of the lily, Kierkegaard claims that the ‘invisible glory’ of the human being is ‘to be spirit’ (UDVS, 193/SKS 8, 290), here associated with being a worshipper. The focus, through worship, of how glorious it is to be a human being, occupies the worried person such that his attention shifts away

from his worries. And what do we learn from the bird? Again, matters are here slightly more complex. The bird lives only in the moment, yet a human has consciousness [*Bevidstthed*] in which ‘he is eternally far [...] beyond the moment’ (UDVS, 195/SKS 8, 292); he becomes aware of the future. Indeed, the human has ‘a dangerous enemy that the bird does not know—time’ (UDVS, 195/SKS 8, 292) (hence the worry about making a living).

The bird is the teacher of the human in the same way as the child is of the adult: in ‘jesting earnestness’ (UDVS, 196/SKS 8, 293). That our teachers are dumb flora and fauna like the lily and the bird is one of the reasons that Kierkegaard labels these discourses, and the parable of the worried lily in particular, ‘humorous.’⁸ And this adds a further complicating factor: the bird is the pattern or exemplar [*Forbilledede*] for the human—insofar as it has a worry-free existence—and yet insofar as the human is ‘higher’ than the bird, the human always recalls the true pattern, Christ (UDVS, 197/SKS 8, 293). Here—initially seeming to radicalise the issue about saving for the future mentioned above—Kierkegaard recalls the biblical passage about the Son of Man having no place to lay his head.⁹ Yet he goes on to say that it is, in the human, ‘a perfection’ to be able to worry about making a living (UDVS, 197/SKS 8, 294); a perfection to be able to *work* (UDVS, 198/SKS 8, 294), which the bird cannot do (the bird does not sow, reap or gather into barns). But what is being proposed here is a radically different view of the significance of work. Far from being a necessary evil—necessary because of worries about one’s future if one *doesn’t* work—work is presented as a good insofar as it enables us to avoid the sin of sloth and to become ‘God’s co-worker’ (UDVS, 199/SKS 8, 295).¹⁰ Part of the message seems to be: instead of worry being the motivation for work (as with the wood-dove)—think how glorious it is to be a human being, a key element of which is how glorious it is to work (as God’s co-worker). In this way, *work itself, far from being a curse or of merely instrumental value, can be the source of joy*. The point is that viewing work as either co-creation, vocation, or some combination of the two, offers a radically different view of its meaning from that tacitly assumed by the worried wood-dove (and us, insofar as we resemble it).

The 1849 discourses

The focus on addressing worry is continued into the 1849 lily and bird discourses. The focus of each discourse is, respectively, silence, obedience and joy. In the first, equivalences are drawn between ‘seeking first God’s kingdom’ (as in the gospel passage), becoming nothing before God, and learning to be silent (WA, 10–11/SKS 11, 16–17), and this is further connected with prayer (WA, 11–12/SKS 11, 17–18). Wanting to speak can be corrupting, a claim Kierkegaard illustrates through an example of someone who wants to ensure that he communicates a matter of grave importance to God with the greatest possible clarity, accuracy and completeness (WA, 11/SKS 11, 17). In prayer, as Kierkegaard tells it, the more fervent one becomes, the less one has to say, leading ultimately to silence:

Then what happened to him if he did really pray with all his heart? Something amazing happened to him. Gradually, as he became more and more fervent in prayer, he had less and less to say, and finally he became completely silent. (WA, 11-12/SKS 11, 17)

Instead of wanting to speak, one learns how to listen: to be receptive to divine wisdom.

Gregory Beabout (2007: 145-46) describes this silence as the typically unnamed virtue of ‘active receptivity’ or ‘welcoming openness.’ Such receptivity, which is importantly different from a passivity constituted merely by lack or deficiency, involves ‘attentively opening oneself up and waiting’ (2007: 144); this is ‘the practice of silence.’ This connects to other spiritual qualities valorised in Kierkegaard’s discourses, namely patience and hope.¹¹ One obvious link to humility here is our being urged not to become more important to ourselves than the lily and bird who are our teachers. At first, this might sound like a *ranking* view of humility: don’t overestimate your own importance. But the wider context enables us better to understand this. The listening that is the ultimate attitude of prayer does not begin and end in isolation before God. Elsewhere, such as in *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard stresses in various passages how love of God may be expressed through love of neighbour. For instance: ‘If you want to show that your life is intended to serve God, *then let it serve people*, yet continually with the thought of God’ (WL, 161/SKS 9, 161, my emphasis); ‘To love people is the only thing worth living for, and without this love you are not really living’ (WL,

375/SKS 9, 368); ‘In the Christian sense, to love people is to love God, and to love God is to love people—*what you do unto people you do unto God*’ (WL, 384/SKS 11, 376, my emphasis). In combination, this seems to valorise a kind of *God-saturated loving attention to the other* (as opposed to self-focus). I suggest that other-centred humility of this sort looks like a plausible answer to the question of what it means to embody the ‘listening,’ receptive or attentive attitude in the way one lives.

The second discourse focuses on the unconditional *obedience* to God that the lily and bird are also said to teach (WA, 24/SKS 11, 29). This discourse builds on the first insofar as to become silent is said to be the first condition for truly being able to obey (WA, 24/SKS 11, 29). But in a discussion of a lily assigned to a place ‘as unfortunate as possible’ (WA, 27/SKS 11, 31), Kierkegaard seems to get at this obedience in terms of a contrast between what he takes to be the typical attitude of the human to such a scenario and that of his imagined lily. Humility seems quite central to this contrast. The human, Kierkegaard claims, would say:

it is too much to endure. To be a lily and as lovely as a lily, and then to be assigned a spot in such a place, to have to flower there in surroundings as unfavourable as possible, as if the intention were to destroy the impression of one’s loveliness—no, it is too much to endure; indeed, it is a self-contradiction on the part of the Creator! (WA, 27/SKS 11, 31-32)

But the lily’s response is one of humility:

I myself, of course, have not been able to determine the place and the conditions; this is not in the remotest way my affair. That I stand where I stand is God’s will. (WA, 27/SKS 11, 32)

And the attitude behind this humility becomes easier to acquire if one’s focus is not constantly on oneself.

The third discourse focuses on joy. Here exemplarity is important: joy is best taught by the joyful, who have nothing else to do but to ‘be joy’; to be ‘unconditionally joyful’ (WA, 36–7/SKS 11, 40–1). In other words, the bird *embodies* joy. But the *content* of its ‘teaching of joy’ is: ‘There is a today—and there is no worry [...] about tomorrow or the day after tomorrow’ (WA, 38/SKS 11, 42).

This is ‘the joy of silence and obedience’ (WA, 38/SKS 11, 42) that links the three discourses. But how does this connect with humility—and again, of what sort?

ADDRESSING WORRY THROUGH HUMILITY

Before sketching in more detail the kind of humility that I suggest is at work in Kierkegaard’s discourses, a caveat. It is common-place in writing on humility to note the bad press this quality typically receives, writers typically being keen to distinguish ‘virtuous’ humility from various forms of excessive self-abasement, insincere duplicitous manipulation (think Dickens’ Uriah Heep), or the qualities that led Hume (1975: 270) to dismiss humility as a ‘monkish virtue.’ The discussion above shows that we also need a conception of humility in which comparison with others is downplayed (at least as much as possible). In much recent debate about humility (or modesty), scholars disagree about whether it involves a disposition to *underestimate* accomplishments or self-worth in some respect (and if so to what degree)¹² or whether it involves, on the contrary, *accurate* self-assessment which nonetheless does not *exaggerate* one’s importance.¹³ Such accounts risk relying too heavily on ‘the spirit of comparison.’ As noted, what we need is an account in which the humble person is characterised not by thinking *less* of themselves (like the worried lily and wood-dove, comparing themselves with others and ranking themselves relatively low), but that they think *about* themselves less. They resist the temptation towards a mindset and orientation towards the world in which the self, its needs, concerns and accomplishments are uppermost. Different aspects of such a view of humility have recently been emphasised by Joseph Kupfer, Robert C. Roberts and Nicolas Bommarito.¹⁴ In what follows, I shall aim to show that the seeds of such a view can be found in some of Kierkegaard’s discourses.

In a valuable article, Joseph Kupfer (2003) has argued for four dimensions of the ‘moral perspective of humility.’ First is acknowledgment of our *radical dependence*: the need to acknowledge how much of whatever we might have achieved depends upon people, institutions and circumstances beyond our control, which ties humility to *gratitude* (2003: 252–53, 260–61). The

obvious contrast here is with the ‘vice of pride’ that Robert C. Roberts (2016: 66) labels ‘hyper-autonomy,’ such as in cases where, having been rescued from, say, financial disaster by a friend’s efforts, one secretly resents the friend because he is a constant reminder of one’s dependency on others. The ultimate source of ‘every good and every perfect gift’ (EUD, 31–48/SKS 5, 39–56) for Kierkegaard is of course God, and it is this recognition of radical dependence that such an attitude primarily registers.¹⁵ There are several examples of this in the first part of the *Christian Discourses*, ‘The worries [*Bekymringer*] of the pagans.’ For instance, Kierkegaard’s discussion of the person who prays for his daily bread (CD, 14/SKS 10, 26), in his discourse on the worry of poverty. But also, and less obviously, in his discussion in the immediately following discourse on the worry of abundance, of the relatively wealthy person who manages to lose ‘the *thought of possession*’ (CD, 26/SKS 10, 38); the thought that the abundance that he has is really *his*. This latter is achieved in two ways. First, by realising that to ‘be secure *for* tomorrow,’ one must ‘be sure *of* tomorrow’—and yet the attitude of ‘this very day’ bears in mind the possibility that one might die ‘this very night’ (CD, 27/SKS 10, 38–9).¹⁶ Second, by realising that everything one has can be lost: indeed, being loseable is its ‘essential feature’ (CD 27/SKS 10, 39). One is only a steward of what one has: it is on loan from God (CD, 29/SKS 10, 40). Radical dependence also emerges in some of the later discourses, such as in ‘The worry of presumptuousness [*Formastelighedens*],’ in which the Christian who lacks this worry is said to avoid it by recognising that to need God is a human being’s highest perfection (CD, 64/SKS 10, 73), such that he lacks all ‘self-will,’ craving only to be satisfied with God’s grace.

The second feature of Kupfer’s moral perspective of humility arises in response to a concern—prevalent in much recent writing on humility—about how those of particularly impressive achievements may nevertheless remain humble. He notes that a focus on morally exemplary people helps to keep our ‘technical’ (e.g. sporting, academic or professional) achievements in perspective: someone of exceptional achievements of this kind may thereby come to realise that their ‘technical’ inferior is their moral superior, say in terms of the time, energy or resources they give to others (2003: 253).¹⁷ For Kierkegaard, the key focus on the exemplary concerns the relation to Christ as pattern, but there are other, more surprising, examples. In the fourth discourse in ‘The Gospel of Sufferings,’ the repentant robber crucified alongside Jesus emerges as such an exemplar. His ‘depth and humility’

(UDVS, 272/SKS 8 368) inheres in grasping that to suffer as guilty (the headline topic of the discourse), to recognise oneself as a sinner, ‘is an alleviation [*Lindning*] in comparison to’ the pain of Christ’s death (UDVS, 272/SKS 8, 368–9). Now, the focus on another person illustrated here is hardly one in which the robber joyfully forgets his own sufferings—a tall order while nailed to a cross—yet the emphasis is that, even in such circumstances, he is able to recognise Christ’s goodness, such that even here he can realise that there is one final task: repentance (UDVS, 280–1/SKS 8, 376–7). And in more everyday examples, we can sometimes be taken out of our worries altogether by a focus on others. A further example of this kind of valuable self-forgetting can be found in ‘The Worry of Lowliness,’ in which the ‘lowly’ Christian’s focus on God as the pattern in ‘faith’s joy’ over divine glory enables him to forget his own lowliness. However, the most obvious parallel with Kupfer’s claim occurs in Kierkegaard’s fourth ‘worries’ discourse, ‘The Worry of Loftiness [*Høihedens*],’ in a discussion of how a relatively ‘eminent’ [*fornemme*] Christian avoids this worry. Such a person recognises, however the world treats him, that all human beings are of equal value in the eyes of God: our common humanity is again what matters. The challenge he faces—in the light of various admirers and hangers-on—parallels that facing those of great ‘technical’ achievements in Kupfer’s discussion. What keeps such a person’s feet on the ground is his belief that all are equal in the sight of God; that he too is a sinner in need of God’s forgiveness; and that nobody comes to Christ except as lowly (CD, 51–2/SKS 10, 61–2). Thus the first criterion—recognition of our radical dependence—is combined with the second.

In Kupfer’s third criterion, setting high moral ideals enables even the morally exemplary to keep their ethical achievements in perspective, as the infinite nature of the ethical demand means that there is always more to be done. When they succeed, they are aware of how much more is to be done, so rather than bask in their success they just get on with doing more of what is needed. Their focus is on the pursuit of the good, rather than their own achievements in pursuing the good. (What makes this possible is, perhaps, that they are not hindered by what Roberts calls the ‘vices of pride’: such features as the desire for domination, hyper-autonomy, vanity, arrogance, and envy.) The fourth and final dimension of Kupfer’s moral perspective of humility is an orientation towards objectively valuable

things in the world such that we appreciate and promote the value of these goods (e.g. scientific and artistic achievements; the glories of nature) *apart from their instrumental value to ourselves* (2003: 253, 256). Outstanding people of great humility, claims Kupfer, are typically ‘committed to serve something outside themselves, such as art or science, mankind or God, because it is worthwhile in itself’ (2003: 257). The upshot of this is that the humble person’s attention is outwardly directed, as a result of which they ‘are disposed not to dwell on themselves’ (2003: 251). The ‘spirit of comparison’ against which Kierkegaard warns is dispelled: as their humility deepens, ‘they are less inclined to compare themselves with others—on either technical or moral grounds’ (2003: 253). But this lack of self-absorption need not—*pace* Driver—entail self-ignorance. Roberts, who sees humility as the absence of ‘the vices of pride,’ presents a similar picture, of humility as ‘a trait marked by the absence of a certain kind of concern or concerned attention’ (2009: 129) such that the humble person is focused on value-not-necessarily-related-to-the-self rather than herself. Nicolas Bommarito also echoes such a view in his account of humility as a ‘virtue of attention,’ characterised by ‘*inattentiveness* to good qualities that reflect well on oneself, the value of such qualities, and one’s own role in bringing them about’ (2013: 111). The last seems to me crucial. It cannot be only inattention or the right kind of attention (to such qualities or their value) which makes such humility a virtue. This is why Kupfer’s initial focus on our ‘radical dependence’ on others is important, as it highlights the importance of gratitude in developing the virtue of humility. The person who simply does not dwell on his good qualities or their value seems *ceteris paribus* less humble than the person who does not do so *because he recognises what he owes to others*.

This focus also enables us to highlight another important point. Distinguishing *acting* immodestly (a social vice) from actually *being* immodest, Bommarito asks what is wrong with the latter when it does not manifest itself in the former. After all, plenty of people short on humility have mastered the idea that *acting* immodestly is socially vulgar, yet they remain lacking in humility even if they are not so clumsy as regularly to *display* this fact. Consistent with the view I have been sketching here, Bommarito persuasively suggests that their problem is one of overattending to their own goodness at the expense of attending to the good qualities of others (2013: 114–15). Such

immodesty is a vice of self-centeredness (which, I have argued elsewhere (Lippitt 2013: 115–16), is different from the vice of selfishness). The absence of such self-centredness might itself be described as a ‘virtue of (in)attention.’

Moreover, this also enables us to see that the humble person’s not dwelling on her own qualities does not rule out the possibility of self-improvement. It might be thought that only by focusing on my strengths and weaknesses—and thus comparing myself to others in the relevant respects—can I ever hope to improve. Bommarito suggests that one can still *pay attention* to something about one’s qualities without *dwelling* on them. The person seeking self-improvement will have to pay more attention to her shortcomings than her good qualities: ‘what is essential is attending to her present weaknesses—the very things she will try to improve. She will also attend to the good qualities of *others* that she wishes to emulate’ (2013: 109–10). This is precisely the purpose of the focus on moral exemplars in Kupfer’s account of humility. However, in that account, the first two features (radical dependence and moral comparison) ‘tend to fade in importance the more humility is informed by the latter dimensions of moral ideal and objective valuation.’ Kupfer concludes:

Paying less rather than more attention to ourselves is the hallmark of the deepest, most advanced humility [...] The more individuals are occupied with their guiding ideals and standards, and what they find objectively worthwhile in the world, the less they will attend to themselves. (2003: 265)¹⁸

If—as I believe to be the case—this is broadly right, then this highlights the need to clarify something important about Kierkegaard’s ‘spirit of comparison.’ As the case of the humble person striving for self-improvement illustrates, comparison can have a positive value. But much of what I take Kierkegaard to mean by the ‘spirit of comparison’ is something quite different from that manifested in our humble self-improver. We can see this by considering a possible objection to the account sketched here. Why don’t the achievements of the morally exemplary, in comparison to my own, inspire the same anxiety that troubled the worried lily? Why should I not feel the same inadequacy in the face of their achievements as the lily felt in comparison to the Crown Imperials? The answer is that the lily’s problem was its *competitive ego*. Without this ego’s demands, it is possible genuinely to enjoy, to

delight in, the achievements of others, including their moral achievements.¹⁹ The virtuously humble do not feel this anxiety insofar as they have ‘died’ to a significant extent to their competitive egos (a central element in the talk of ‘dying to the self’ that runs through Kierkegaard’s writings). This gives them what Roberts describes as ‘a transcendent form of self-confidence’ (2007: 81) stemming from a worldview in which—despite the great differences of achievement, moral and otherwise—everyone is viewed as of ultimately equal value, rather than others being viewed as ‘the competition.’ The ideal here, which Roberts discusses in the context of raising a child in a healthily loving environment, is a sense of one’s own worth which, ‘if carried into adulthood by becoming articulated in a definite life view, would *be the radical self-confidence that Christians call humility*: a self-confidence so deep, a personal integration so strong that all comparison with other people, both advantageous and disadvantageous, slides right off him’ (2007: 90, my emphasis). He has a sufficient sense of his own worth neither to be distressed by the fact that others are in several respects ahead of him in aspects of life, nor to take a gleeful pleasure in the respects in which he is himself ahead. Thus, the humble high achiever neither basks in his success nor feels the lily’s debilitating anxiety about his failures. *Kierkegaardian joy, I suggest, can be an expression of this rather unusual form of ‘self-confidence.’* Such an attitude manifests a self-acceptance that enables one to keep worry in its place, and is rooted in considering our common humanity to be more important than the differences highlighted by ‘comparison’ as competition.²⁰

It is in this light, finally, that I suggest we see Kierkegaard’s focus on avoiding the worries of ‘tomorrow’ or ‘the next day’: the future-oriented worry that has been our central theme. In ‘The Worry of Self-Torment,’ Kierkegaard describes ‘the next day’ in nautical terms as the grappling-hook by which worries seize hold of one (CD, 72/SKS 10, 81), but claims that ‘the next day’ does not exist for the Christian who has got beyond the worry of self-torment, since he has taken to heart the gospel’s claim that tomorrow will worry about its own troubles—so he need not. In a memorable image, Kierkegaard suggests that just as a rower turns his back to his direction of travel, so does the person who lives absorbed in today turn his back on future-oriented worry (CD, 73/SKS 10, 82). The problems of tomorrow do not thereby disappear in a puff of smoke. But the worries that stem from

pointlessly focusing on issues beyond one's control and which render any action in pursuit of the good likely to seem pointless, can indeed be dispelled. I suggest that the conception of humility sketched here is a major way in which one transcends such debilitating worry: at the very least, one does not add to the ordinary forms of 'torment' life can throw at us this additional, avoidable self-torment that is the cost of excessive self-absorption in light of the 'spirit of comparison.' In other words, the humility we can learn from the lilies and the birds is a major part of the proposed cure.

RELATED TOPICS

'Love for Humans: Ethics as the Heart of Kierkegaard's Religious Philosophy,' Sharon Krishek; 'Kierkegaard on Nature and Natural Beauty,' Anthony Rudd

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FURTHER READING

Pattison, G. and H. Møller Jensen (2012) *Kierkegaard's pastoral dialogues*. Eugene, OR:

Wipf and Stock.

A representation of some key insights from Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses - including those on the lilies and birds - in the form of dialogues between a believer and non-believer. Includes three brief distinct responses to the dialogues.

Roberts, R. C. (2007) *Spiritual emotions: A psychology of Christian virtues*, Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans.

An accessible account of several of the New Testament's 'fruits of the Spirit' as 'emotion-virtues', rooted in the author's extensive work on the philosophy of the emotions, and set against the background of a discussion of 'humility as a moral project'.

Worthington, E. L. Jr., D. E. Davis and J. N. Hook (eds) (2017) *Handbook of humility:*

Theory, research, and applications, New York: Routledge.

Something of a contemporary 'state of the art' collection on accounts of humility, mostly from psychology and counselling studies, but also including contributions from scholars of philosophy and religion.

NOTES

¹ In his wide-ranging history of the concept of joy (a concept of great interest to Kierkegaard), Adam Potkay suggests that Luther is the author who turned the word *angst* (and its cognates in other languages) towards its modern sense of 'pervasive gloom and oppressive, future oriented worry' (Potkay 2007: 78).

² Though 'vanity' is not, in my view, quite the right term for this kind of self-absorption or self-centredness.

³ In terms of other available views of humility—more of which later—this sounds more like either the 'accurate self-assessment' or 'owning one's limitations' view.

⁴ The remaining discourse—in addition to the three each in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and *Without Authority*, and the seven in *Christian Discourses*—is found in *Judge for Yourself!*

⁵ This is the term translated 'care' in the Hong translation of *Christian Discourses*, in its discussion of 'the cares of the pagans.' The term 'worry' strikes me as less ambiguous, so I shall use that translation in what follows.

⁶ I have suggested elsewhere (Lippitt 2016) that Kierkegaard seeks to oppose such anxiety with a certain kind of self-acceptance, rooted in a sense of life as a gift and a fundamental trust in the goodness thereof. The next couple of paragraphs are adapted from this paper.

⁷ See for instance UDVS 194/SKS 8 291.

⁸ For more on this, and the combination of jest and earnestness more generally, see Lippitt 2018.

⁹ Matthew 8: 20.

¹⁰ The hardworking apostle Paul is presented as exemplary here (UDVS 199-200/SKS 8 296).

¹¹ It also suggests comparisons with the notion of ‘attention’ in such thinkers as Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil.

¹² Julia Driver has been the most prominent proponent of the underestimation view. For some key discussions in this debate, see Driver 1989, 1999, 2001 and Schueler 1997, 1999. Nicolas Bommarito notes that ‘The bulk of the contemporary philosophical literature on modesty is made up of various responses to Julia Driver’s account’ (2013: 95). Taking his terminology from this discussion, Bommarito uses the term ‘modesty’, while acknowledging this term and ‘humility’ to be interchangeable (2013: 93n1). Likewise, I reject the distinction between humility and modesty made in some of this literature, also treating them as interchangeable terms, but I shall not argue that case here.

¹³ See for instance Richards 1992: 8; Flanagan 1990; Whitcomb et al 2017 (though this latter offers a distinct view, ‘owning one’s limitations,’ that I have no room to discuss here).

¹⁴ Aspects of this view are also prevalent in many of the accounts found in Worthington et al 2017. In noting these commonalities, I do not mean to imply that the accounts offered by each of these writers are identical.

¹⁵ I have argued elsewhere (Lippitt 2018) that this is a key feature of what Kierkegaard calls ‘jest.’

¹⁶ In an 1847 journal entry, Kierkegaard notes: ‘Augustine has said it so well: God has promised you forgiveness - but he has not promised you the next day’ (KJN, 4/SKS 20, NB3: 56).

¹⁷ I see this as a particular twist on a more general claim made by Flanagan: that the world’s fastest runner, say, ‘might think that being the world’s fastest human is not so important *sub specie aeternitatis*’ (1990: 425).

¹⁸ Similarly, I suggest that in more advanced states of humility, the gratitude discussed earlier may be the background assumption against which a life operates rather than being the continual focus of conscious attention.

¹⁹ Both Kupfer and Bommarito make this point of the humble person, and it is at least implicit in Roberts’ inclusion of envy as one of the vices of pride. The ability thus to delight, one might claim, is an aspect of love.

²⁰ One of the editors raises an interesting question here: is there room for the humble person to be disappointed in their moral progress in comparison with others? The suggestion is that this may be morally beneficial despite having a comparative element. She asks: Would the person who has a sufficient sense of their own worth never feel this kind of distress? Consider Frank, someone who grew up in the kind of home alluded to, and who readily admits his faults - but who does not take any fault very seriously. Surely – goes the objection - such a person as Frank suggests that contentment with one’s moral progress is not the right attitude? So while debilitating anxiety about one’s failures is clearly unhelpful, is there a *healthy* anxiety about those failures? I think the answer to this question is probably yes. To clarify, then: I am not claiming that Kierkegaard’s lilies and birds discourses can properly be used to justify *complacency* (which is, I take it, the charge against Frank). I am not valorising contentment as complacency. What Kierkegaard is *inter alia* offering us, in my view, is rather a kind of encouragement in the face of disappointment with ourselves, as an alternative to an attitude that allows that disappointment to become distress.