

**Being Human: Kierkegaard's 1847 Discourses on the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air**

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*This article is a reading of Kierkegaard's 1847 discourses on "The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air." In these discourses, I argue, Kierkegaard pursues the problem of the being of the human being—that is, engages a critique of the fundamental structures of human reality. I show, in particular, how Kierkegaard elaborates a critique of care or concern. The lily and the bird exist without concern. Without collapsing the difference between the being of the lily or bird and the human being, Kierkegaard elaborates a possibility of human existence that is not organized around the project—which is to say in terms of "care." Taking the lily of the field and the bird of the air as emblems of affirmation, he expresses human existence attuned to the superfluous or "whyless" character of reality.*

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There are several New Testament texts that Kierkegaard showed a particular attraction to, texts he returned to on multiple occasions. One of those texts is from *The Gospel of Matthew*: "Consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air." Indeed Kierkegaard wrote two small books on this one passage, in 1847 and 1850. I will focus on the 1847 discourses and argue that in these discourses Kierkegaard is centrally concerned with the problem of "being human." We are encouraged "to be content with being human" (first discourse) to reflect upon "the glory of being human" (second discourse) and to consider the happiness that is promised to us in being human (third discourse). What it is to be human is at stake here.

Indeed, what I would like to suggest is that across these discourses Kierkegaard succeeds in interrogating the being of the human being, that is, in raising an ontological problematic. Drawing upon a long tradition that originates in Paul (and that also includes Hegel) Kierkegaard names the being of the

human being by the term “spirit” (*Aand*). What is interesting, however, is that Kierkegaard clarifies the meaning of spirit by reference to that which is, apparently, not at all spirit: the lily of the field and the bird of the air. They are to instruct us in what it is to be human. There is a paradox here: the lily of the field and the bird of the air lack what might seem, from the standpoint of the idealist metaphysics of modernity, at least, to constitute the unique ontological structure of the human: consciousness or, more precisely, *self-consciousness*. From Descartes through the various permutations of Idealism—from Kant through Fichte and Hegel—the ontological specificity of the human being was understood in terms of the power to achieve and remain present to oneself, to present oneself before oneself, to *represent* oneself. This milieu of representation was considered a privileged domain of the real. Indeed, the milieu of representation was understood as that within which and upon the basis of which anything could become present at all. The gambit of idealist metaphysics was to justify self-consciousness as the *ground* of the real.

In these discourses on the lily of the field and the bird of the air Kierkegaard abruptly displaces this idealist problematic in order, as it were, to begin all over again. To grasp who we are, to come to terms with the being of our being, it is not adequate to retrace the ways and powers of consciousness, of representation, to render the real present. We must consider the lily of the field and the bird of the air; we must look to *that which has no interiority at all*. The blooming lily, the bird in flight, show forth an ontological dimension of the human being that is not, and cannot be, grasped in the terms of an idealist metaphysics.

What they show to us according to Kierkegaard, I will suggest, is a dimension of “whylessness” or, if one likes, “anarchy”—namely a dimension refractory to projects, reasons, principles, goals. The lily blooms because it blooms, without its blooming becoming a project; and the bird of the air “neither sows nor reaps nor gathers into barns,” it does not establish itself economically. According to these discourses the human being exists according to its deepest possibility, as spirit, only when it achieves a comportment in its existence isomorphic to the lily and the bird. Kierkegaard summarizes the whole trajectory

of these discourses as follows: “only when the human being, though he works and spins, is just like the lily, which does not work or spin, only when the human being, although he sows and reaps and gathers into barns, is just like the bird, which does not sow and reap and gather into barns, only then does he [exist according to his possibility as spirit]” (UDVS, 208; SV 11, 190).

I will proceed by considering each discourse in turn. All together, the three discourses constitute the progressive deepening of a problematic.

### **First Discourse: The Initial Critique of Care as an Ultimate Ontological Structure**

If these discourses involve a critical problematic directed against the metaphysics of representation, it is important to note that they engage this problematic in a concrete mode: namely, as a critique of concern or care (*Sorg*). The human being is, concretely, the being who is always already wrapped up in concerns—first and foremost in the concern to procure the material conditions of existence, what in Danish is called *Næringsorg* (literally, the concern for nutriment and alimentation). *Næringsorg* is the most basic modality of *Sorg*. The lily of the field and the bird, however, exist without concern: and not just as a matter of fact, but for essential reasons. In terms of the being of the lily and the bird there is no possibility of forming concern. And why not? Because the lily and the bird belong wholly to the moment, to the Now, in such a total way that it cannot even be called a “Now.” They exist “without temporality’s foresight, unaware of time, in the moment” (UDVS, 172; SV 11). The birth of concern in the human being, therefore, is linked to the upsurge of a temporal consciousness. Only a being whose existence is constituted on the horizon of temporality can, in general, become concerned. Time consciousness constitutes the general conditions for the possibility of concern.

The human being, unlike the lily and the bird, exists on the basis a power of temporal projection, what Kierkegaard calls *Forsynlighedens Arbejden*—that is, to translate it literally, the work of anticipative foresight. This work, the primordial labor of the human being, involves the synthesis of three modalities of

time: past, present and future. Speaking of the man of concern Kierkegaard writes: “When on the basis of a *past time* he has filled his hoppers, and is therefore provisioned for the *present time*, then he takes care to sow again for the future harvest, so that he can again fill his hoppers for the *future time*. For this reason three words are used to indicate the labor of anticipative foresight...and the three words indicate the determination of time, which constitutes the ground of anticipation (*Forsynligheden*)” (UDVS, 172; SV 11, 158, my translation). *Forsynligheden*, the power of consciousness to project a temporal horizon, the gathering together of past, present and future in a dilated present, constitutes the explicitly articulated foundation of concern.

As an abrupt contrast to what appears fundamental to human reality, however, Kierkegaard says of the lily and the bird: they “do not labor”—*de arbejder ikke*. In context this means precisely that they do not engage in the labor of projecting time. They belong to the moment but do not constitute the moment. They exist purely in the moment without any temporal ecstasy and, for this exact reason, they exist outside of the structure of concern—not merely contingently, but essentially, that is, outside the very *possibility* of forming concerns. Only on the basis of a consciousness of time and therefore on the basis of the labor of consciousness involved in the formation of temporal ecstasies *can* one have a concern. Concern is conditioned, in terms of its possibility, by the constitution of a temporal consciousness: and the lily and the bird do not labor.

Moreover, according to Kierkegaard the projection of time is in fact but one of the modalities of a more basic power: the power of representation (*Forestillingen*). Time consciousness arises only in and through the more general power of representation, something that belongs to and makes up the reality of consciousness. Human reality plays out, in fundamental and ineluctable ways, on the plane of representation. If the lily and the bird have no concern, this is because they do not exist within a horizon of temporality; and if they do not exist within a horizon of temporality, this is because they belong to the moment without having constituted the moment through their own labor, that is, through the

spontaneity of their own consciousness. The human being, however, exists on the basis of a strange aporia: the present moment, what seems always original, is in fact the *outcome* of a previous work: the present is in fact a recapturing of presence, thus a re-presenting. Thus the present has the quality of being, in some way, secondary or delayed. Without this gap or delay there could be no distance from the present and, thus, no possibility of constituting a dilated present that includes the past and the future. The whole plane of representation, the human plane, thus plays out at a certain essential remove from the real. The lily and the bird belong to the real without distance; not so the human being.

Insofar as the human being exists on the basis of a power of representation and thus does not immediately belong to the real, another modality of its life—one that relates intimately to concern—becomes possible: what Kierkegaard calls “comparison” (*Sammenligningen*). Comparison, a power founded in representation, is a fecund source of concern. Kierkegaard says “*Næringsorg* comes into being by means of comparison” (UDVS, 178; SV 11, 164). And it does so in a double way: first, existing with one another, speaking and taking notice of each other, human beings fashion comparative terms within which to understand themselves. An essential possibility for human beings, one that does not pertain to the lily and the bird, is to “not be contented with being human,” that is, to exist on the basis of a represented lack. Kierkegaard explores the folly of a human life consumed by the sense of lack, in a humorous vein, by imagining a lily comparing itself (negatively) to a Crown Imperial flower and a wild wood dove comparing itself to a well-fed domesticated dove. In each case they are completely consumed by the sense of lack and, aiming to overcome lack, they perish: the lily becomes uprooted and the wood dove becomes the farmer’s dinner. If we smile at the lily and the bird in this case, Kierkegaard suggests, we are only smiling at our own folly; we are acknowledging our own entanglement in representations.

In a deeper and more intimate way, however, comparison transpires in and through the consciousness of time: where the present acquires its meaning (or has its meaning evacuated) through a comparison with the future. In these

terms, concern arises as founded upon the “*representation* of need in the future” (*Forestilling om Trang I Fremtiden*). Kierkegaard writes: “comparison constitutes the ground of *Næringsorg* insofar as this latter does not express an actual, but a represented need” (UDVS, 179; SV 11, 165, my translation). The future arises through the projective power of consciousness and thus has the ontological status of a representation; the future has no actuality. And yet, through comparison, this represented reality is allowed to determine the reality of the present. It is there one finds the upsurge of concern and, in concern, the peeling apart of the human being from its own moment, its own reality, and thus its subjection to the vast world of lack. Again, the lily and the bird form the abrupt contrast: “How is it that the bird has no *Næringsorg*? For this reason: that it does not compare one day with another” (UDVS, 179; SV 11, 165, my translation).

Against the representation of future lack, along with the concern it generates, human labor must dedicate itself to “storing up in barns,” that is, to stockpiling capital as a hedge against the future. Thus, the primary laboring of fashioning a consciousness of time constitutes the condition for what in the broader sense is called economic life. Human labor always already transpires in a domain of political economy where the value of labor and the value of commodities produced have the status of representations. Human life itself becomes predicated upon relations of comparison: comparing one day to the next, one person to another, one thing with another thing. None of the comparisons are ontologically founded, and yet—in terms of political economy—they do constitute the very reality of human life. There is the rub, there is the bottomless source of concern. For Marx, there is the bottomless possibility of a disfigured social and human existence.

The realm of concern, then, coincides in an interesting way with the realm of what Marx called “ideology:” that which is in essence representational comes to determine actuality. As Kierkegaard puts it, the central problem is the possibility of becoming *self-ensnared* in our own representations. Only the human being, who exists precisely on the plane of representation, can entrap *itself*. Thus Kierkegaard says that the concerned one has “entrapped himself in

the snare...in which only the free [human being] can ensnare himself: in representation" (UDVS, 175; SV 11, 162). It is something remarkable: we are able to ensnare ourselves in comparative categories and in temporal projections. All of the concerns of human beings have their origin in this possibility of self-ensnarement. Things that are not real, things we present to ourselves as real—abstract notions like “tomorrow” or “wages”—for human beings constitute the very domain of the real. Existing with one another, we speak, and in speaking we fashion comparative terms—abstract categories—within which we then understand ourselves. This world of concern is an inverted world: the represented becomes the most real and the most real can appear to us only in a figure—namely, in terms of the being of the lily and the bird. The passage back to reality for the human being, then, involves a movement beyond representation, a comportment in existence that does not rely upon projections that have their origin in our free spontaneity. In this, the lily of the field and the bird of the air can be our teachers.

And yet, is there not a problem here? Is there not an ontological chasm between human reality, which exists always upon the basis of representation, and the lily and the bird, who do not? Does not this divide preclude any essential instruction? Are we lilies? Are we birds?

Now, the first discourse, which we must remember is written in a comic mode, sends us out into the fields to look at the lily and the bird. Why out into the fields? Precisely because “out there” human life is not organized by an economy founded in representation. “Out there” the lily blooms and the bird takes wing wholly in the instant itself, in the joyous upsurge of being, without fashioning any abstract, comparative terms within which to live. If we imagine the lily and the bird living in terms of comparative terms, living through representations of future lack, we smile. But if we smile, Kierkegaard suggests, we are only smiling at ourselves—smiling at our own comical conflation of the real and the representation of the real. The point of the first discourse, however, is only initially to open up the distinction between something like the real and the representational order. To pay attention to the lily and the bird allows, for the

person suffering concern, a momentary lifting of the reign of comparative terms and the burdens of temporality. Seeing the representational status of the terms in which we live, we are free of their tyranny. “Out there” we get what is called “perspective.” Yet this is only momentary. The human problem goes deeper and requires a deeper reflection.

### **Second Discourse: Spirit as Capability**

The second discourse comes to grip with the fact that temporality, labor and comparison—in general, the whole order of representation—belongs essentially to the human condition. It seeks to clarify the ontological chasm that separates human reality from the joyous kingdom of being of the lily and the bird. Human reality is characterized by an essential ambiguity: to be *capable* of labor, *capable* of constituting a time consciousness, *capable* of representation, these constitute the “glory” of the human; nevertheless, such capability constitutes also the conditions for the possibility of a destitution, misery and illusion that are never found in the joyous kingdom of nature. The second discourse is dedicated to the clarification of this ambiguity. And here it becomes clear that the lily and the bird cannot, in the strictest sense, be our teachers. Nevertheless, we can still learn from the lily and the bird.

What is important about the lily and the bird in the second discourse is that, in spite of their difference from the human, they are nevertheless, through a contrast, able to bring human beings to the contemplation of their own “glory.” Concretely, to be human is to be mired in the concerns and comparative categories that belong to temporal existence. In the concrete sense, the terms by which human beings affirm themselves are comparative and relative. And yet, according to Kierkegaard, this is where the lily and the bird can intervene in order to reorganize the human gaze upon itself. The second discourse begins by comparing concern to a fixed stare: “How could one better indicate how concern takes root in the soul than by saying that it is like the eye which *stares*. When the eye stares it gazes fixedly ahead of itself, seeing only one thing, though in fact not seeing anything, since as the scientist explains it sees its own seeing. But



then the physician says: move the eye” (UDVS, 184; SV 11, 169, my translation). In concern the gaze fixates upon the blank nothing of the future. Though it appears to be seeing something, in fact it is seeing only its own seeing. Concern, in other words, is a modality of self-consciousness. In concern the human being rotates upon himself, immersing himself in his own projections, even while seeming to look outward. The “cure” for this is to move the eye—that is, to reorient the quality of attention, to reorganize the gaze, and in such a way that there is an exit from self-consciousness. The lily and the bird, in their manifestness, serve as a catalyst for this movement.

What the lily and the bird can do, in particular, is to bring the human being to what Kierkegaard calls that “first thought” (*Første Tanken*), that is, to an affirmation of itself that is naive, or non-comparative. The lily and the bird can provoke the human to see itself through itself, as a genuine phenomenon, in the original naivete of its reality, liberated from the accumulated ideas of what it is to be human. The lily and the bird can provoke what Husserl later called an “epoche of the natural attitude.”

Take the lily, which is arrayed in a glorious raiment. Kierkegaard says of the lily: “it is said that the lily is arrayed, but this is not to be understood in such a way that the lily’s existence is one thing and the fact of having raiment is something different; no, its raiment is the being lily itself” (UDVS, 188; SV 11, 173, my translation). The lily exhausts the whole plenitude of its being in manifesting itself; it is nothing other than its self-manifesting. Or, to put it differently, the lily *is* the blooming of the lily, something like a pure surface, an outside with no inside. The lily, to put it in the terms Kierkegaard uses, belongs entirely to the order of *the visible*. Its glory is a visible glory.

Now, here is why we can learn from the lily: the lily can teach us what it means to look at a phenomenon. Having learned what it means to see from the show of the lily the human being can bring this same gaze upon himself—namely, to regard his own being as clothing, as glorious raiment, as a phenomenon. Kierkegaard writes: “Being clothed means then being human—and so to be well-clothed” (UDVS, 188; SV 11, 173, my translation). The lily can

awaken us again, we who are burdened by concern and enmeshed in comparative categories, to that basic posture of *wonder* in which we pay attention only, as it were, to the outward show of the thing, to the immediate blazing forth of the thing as the thing it is. The profoundest gaze upon the lily is not the gaze of the scientist, interested for example in a comparative taxonomy of lilies. No, the profoundest gaze is one which sees in the lily nothing more than its raiment, nothing more than a surface to take delight in. The lily becomes an object of wonder, and wonder is the form of attention which lets a thing show itself as the thing it is.

As we look at the lily, we might look at ourselves. For the human being too, our “raiment,” in other words the being of our being, is something that can manifest itself to our naïve gaze. In the biblical language Kierkegaard draws upon, this will say that the being of our being has the ontological status of an *image*—we are, namely, made in “the image of God.” If our being has the ontological status of an image, that means it belongs, like the being of the lily, to the order of the visible. Indeed, to speak of the glory of the human being is already to situate human beings with respect to the visible, since glory is a category of the visible, of the manifest. And yet, here is where Kierkegaard’s discourse takes a turn, where the phenomenology becomes radicalized. For the human being Kierkegaard finds it necessary to speak, paradoxically, of an “invisible glory.” He says: “To be spirit, that is the human being’s invisible glory” (UDVS, 193; SV 11, 177). The glory of the lily is a purely visible glory; the glory of the human an invisible one. Therefore, to affirm the human being in a naïve way, to remain in that “first thought” about the human, will be to affirm a dimension of invisibility as what essentially belongs to the human. And yet, paradoxically, this invisibility can itself become a phenomenon to the extent that the being of the human is an “image.”

It is, on the one hand, the insignia of the human being’s ontological specificity as spirit that, in some way, the human being resembles God; a lily, by contrast, does not. And yet, on the other hand, Kierkegaard does something quite interesting with this traditional motif: if one is to speak of the human being

as an image of God, it is necessary to think about an image in a way entirely different than a representation. Generally an image, thought as a representation, is poor in being, a copy, a reflection, a lack; it acquires its reality from something external to it. Kierkegaard writes: "When a person sees his image in the mirror of the ocean, he sees his own image, but the ocean is not his image, and when he departs the image disappears. The ocean is not the image and cannot keep the image. Why is this, except for the reason that the visible form by its very visibility is powerless" (UDVS, 192; SV 11, 176). That which is visible can manifest itself only in a medium other than itself. The visible image is for this reason emptied out of its own reality, characterized by essential lack. Human reality, however, does not belong to the plane of the visible, but rather the invisible. In other words, if we resemble God, it cannot be through any property of ourselves that belongs to the order of the visible.

What Kierkegaard's discourse invites us to do is to look at the entire dimension of human lack, the whole realm of human errancy, of concern, as expressive of the glory of the human being. For underneath the human being's exposure to itself, underneath its forming of concern, underneath its establishment of representation as the domain of the real, there is the fundamental ontological power of the human being: being able (*at kunne*). Only the human being is capable of erring, capable of concern, capable of representation. This, its capability, is its glory. Capability, being-able as such, is our raiment, our invisible glory. So, for example: to live a life burdened by the concern over procuring the conditions of existence, a life consumed by labor aimed at protecting oneself against some represented future need, such a life is not a perfection. The lily and the bird are perfect in being free of concern and labor. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard says, the *capability* of having concern, the *capability* of labor, these are, *thought purely as capabilities*, perfections.

But the dimension of capability, the dimension of spirit, is fundamentally invisible. How so? Kierkegaard asks: "How is it that concern is possible?" In other words, how are we capable of concern? He answers: "Only by the fact that the eternal and the temporal touch each other in a consciousness; or, more correctly,

that the human being has consciousness. In consciousness he is far, far above the instant, no bird flew so high up.” The lily and the bird belong so wholly to the instant, to the Now, that it cannot even be called a Now. They belong to a plane of pure presence. It is precisely because they inhabit this plane of presence that they have no capability and, to be precise, that they are unable to form any concern. The human being, the being who is capable, on the other hand, both inhabits the instant and also stands far, far above it. In other words, the human being is the being that is always already divided from itself, incapable of being at one with itself. Thus, human capability originates in this radical incapability, in this rift or fracture, this rupture from immediacy. The dimension of invisibility that constitutes the very glory of the human being, then, is its reference to this gap in presence. Not belonging to the plane of presence constitutes the conditioning possibility of the human being.

Thus the glory of the human is caught sight of inversely through the possibility of suffering all the excesses of consciousness: for example, boredom and concern over the future. Even more deeply, human glory shines inversely in the possibility of extreme destitution and misery, as in the New Testament saying that the “son of man has no place to lay his head”—something that can never be said of the bird or the lily. Only the human being can really suffer this essential placelessness. Placelessness is not itself a perfection, of course, but the possibility of not belonging to place is a perfection, the very perfection of spirit. Only the human is *able* to lack place. The divine image constitutive of human reality is, again, essentially invisible.

It is only through this originary rupture from the plane of presence, then, that the human being has capability at all. The divine image is invisible. Only through its not being at one with itself can the human being, in the strictest sense, become something. The human being, to put it precisely, is the *being who is capable of becoming*. However, the way Kierkegaard develops this problematic in this discourse is to say that the human being is the only being who is capable of worship: “in truth to be able to worship is the invisible glory of the human above all other creatures” (UDVS, 193; SV 11, 177).

The capability to “worship,” then, summarizes the very meaning of human capability and thus marks the distinction between the human and the lily and the bird. In the naivete of their being the lily and the bird are “atheist.” So what, then, is worship *thought as a pure capability*? Kierkegaard contrasts the Christian point of view to that of the Greeks. The Greeks, he says, saw the glory of the human being in the erect posture and in the gaze of the eye. In other words, the Greeks understood the being of the human being in the power of *theoria*, intellectual vision, and in the exercise of sovereignty. Standing above the elements, commanding them, ruling, constitutes Greek glory. For Kierkegaard, this was still to think of the human in terms of a visible glory—that is, in terms of a capability exercised wholly upon the plane of the visible. It does not come to terms, in other words, with the decisive, ontological dimension of the human being.

To be exact, it does not grasp the nature of the becoming that is proper to the human being. Worship grasps this capability, this becoming. But the crux of worship is the following: “It is glorious to be arrayed like the lily; even more glorious to be the ruler who stands erect; but it is most glorious to be nothing through the act of worship” (UDVS, 193; SV 11, 177, my translation). Only the human being is the being who is capable of grasping his own nothingness, of entering into and assuming that nothingness. Becoming nothing is the way of human becoming. Only the human being can see and experience and consent to its own non-sovereignty, its inability to posit being or to posit itself in being. To worship, thought as a capability, thus turns around to become the capability of not being able. Worship signifies the human capacity to see its capability as something for which it is not capable. Thus, returning to the lily and to the reorganization of the gaze, Kierkegaard writes: “if a human being is going to compare himself to the lily, he has to say: All that I am by being a human being—that is my clothing; none of it is owing to myself, and yet it is glorious” (UDVS, 192; SV 11, 176). Capability is indeed the human being’s *own* capability; and yet the human does not, as Fichte would have it, posit itself as capable.

### Third Discourse: Decision as Radical Capability

According to the second discourse the glory of the human being lies in its capabilities. In the third discourse Kierkegaard tries to clarify a further element of capability, that of choice or decision. Being able to choose constitutes the glory of the human and separates the human from the lily and the bird, whose existence plays out on a plane of necessity. And as Kierkegaard will say, the only real choice is the choice between “God” and “mammon.” We shall have to see what this choice means.

In the third discourse there is a definite shift of focus. Kierkegaard considers the being of the lily and the being of the bird with respect to what might be called the general economy of nature. In the order of nature, life and death are tragically conjoined, to the point of identity. The death of one thing is already the beginning of something else, the making room for, enabling, fertilizing some other thing. Life and death are so inseparably joined in nature that it becomes impossible to say what power is actually manifest in nature. Of the blooming lily, Kierkegaard asks, with the full pathos of a lacuna: “*is it life or is it death?*” When a lily blooms in all its splendor, he continues, is this “the life which, eternally young, renews itself, or is it the corruption which treacherously conceals itself?” (UDVS, 203; SV 11, 185). What power is it, exactly, that manifests itself in the blooming of the lily? Is it life or death? Is it natality or mortality? Can one even answer this question? Is it even intelligible to speak of a difference?

The impossibility of any resolution to this question, of any disjoining of life and death, is what Kierkegaard calls the “corruptibility” of nature. All things, human and inhuman, are subject to corruption. However, there is already something different happening in the human: it is the human being who is capable of asking “is it life or is it death?” At the site of the human, the site of spirit, things do not merely expend themselves, they are “recollected” in the fragility of a trace. The general economy of nature is, as it were, upset or suspended in recollection: things do not just pass, they linger. Last summer’s lilies, once in bloom but now no more (never more, as Poe would say), yet bloom still in recollection. This lingering of things prior to their annihilation is what

Kierkegaard calls *Veemod*, melancholy. Melancholy to this extent constitutes the very structure of consciousness; and it is as though melancholy were already the beginnings of something different, a different kind of blooming altogether. And indeed for Kierkegaard it is.

Melancholy is the intensification of concern. Or rather, it is already a rupture of all the structures of concern inasmuch as it is the gripping of the human being by an essential indetermination. Melancholy constitutes the very resonance of the question: is it life or is it death? In melancholy the meaning of being becomes questionable and so calls forth, according to Kierkegaard, a fundamental decision, a choice. And here we gain a sense of the specific meaning of the capability of the human, that which constitutes its invisible glory: the capability for a radical decision. The lily of the field and the bird of the air play out their whole being, Kierkegaard says, on a plane of necessity, without choice. The human being is the being who must decide concerning the meaning of its being. Melancholy is the crisis which calls forth a decision.

So what sort of decision is at issue here? Kierkegaard formulates the terms of this choice by drawing upon the language of the New Testament: it is a choice between "God" and "mammon." He writes: "The human being must choose between God and Mammon. This is the eternal, unalterable condition of choice" (UDVS, 207; SV 11, 189). The lily and the bird do not possess this capability of choice; it is the glory of the human. However, it is necessary to ask, what is this choice between God and mammon? Why is it that Kierkegaard formulates the question of the meaning of being as a choice between God and mammon? Is this not arbitrary? And, just to make explicit an issue that might arise, does not this appeal to God involve precisely an abandonment of the question of being? Does Kierkegaard not explicitly adopt a mode of thinking that must be called ontotheological, namely, a thinking that tries to secure the meaning of being by representing the highest instance of being (namely, God) as the ground of being and reason for being? Aren't we dealing with the terrain of representations on literally the highest level? Though Kierkegaard without a

doubt inherits a certain discourse on God, what is necessary is to examine the text itself.

First of all, the choice between God and mammon is not a choice between one thing and another thing. God is not present to the choice simply as an object of choice, but rather as the very condition of choosing. Kierkegaard says: “God’s presence in the choice [is what] posits the choice—between God and mammon” (UDVS, 207; SV 11, 189, my translation). One could say that, more basically than some thing chosen, God constitutes for Kierkegaard this persistent structural possibility of choosing. God is the name for the rift which involves the human being in a choice concerning the meaning of its being. In addition, to choose God is not to choose some ultimate object, but rather to choose a certain way of being. This is why one is dealing here with what might be called a fundamental choice, a choice that bears upon *how* I will be in each moment. By the very nature of such a choice it is something that is chosen “first.” Or, in the biblical language Kierkegaard appeals to, it is necessary to “seek *first* the kingdom of God.” Kierkegaard underscores the originary nature of the choice.

So, God/mammon, the choice of the world, or of the kingdom of God, these are the terms of a radical choice, where the being of the human being is at stake, which is to say its most basic comportment. To choose *first* the kingdom of God is the New Testament name for this comportment. So again, what is it to choose God?

Over several pages Kierkegaard works out a series of substitutions on the name “God,” which I summarize as follows: to choose God, he says, means to choose “the kingdom of God;” and to choose the kingdom of God means to choose the justice that belongs to this kingdom, God’s “righteousness;” and to choose the justice that belongs to this kingdom is to choose, Kierkegaard says, to “remain in one’s place” (*bliver paa Stedet*). Kierkegaard writes: “while then the visible world is destroyed and sinks in corruption, *then you still remain in your place*, and the beginning is first to seek the kingdom of God.” He continues: “but if it is true that the whole visible world is to sink in corruption, then the human being has no other point to which he can flee, and precisely for that reason he



remains at that place” (UDVS, 211; SV 11, 193, my translation). At what place? At the place where the human belongs in the totality of its being to the corruptibility of all things.

Consequently, to choose God, to seek God’s kingdom first, signifies for the human being *to consent to its place*, that is, to its belonging to the order of total corruptibility, to consent with absolutely no reservations. The lily of the field and the bird of the air remain ever “in place.” Even the bird, though in constant movement, never really moves since it never moves outside its own “Now.” Only the human being can move, can become, and to become means precisely here to *become finite*, to *assume* or take on corruptibility as a condition. Only the human being can actually enter into its own finitude. To assume the condition of finitude, to remain in place, is simultaneously to open oneself to the gratuity of life. It is to learn to see life itself as what has the structure of a “remainder”—Kierkegaard uses the Danish word “*det Øvrige*”—namely as excess, as what overflows beyond any necessity. The being of the human being, then, is that site in being where the gratuity of being can be marked. This is the meaning of spirit.

### **Concluding Preface: Becoming a Lily**

In conclusion I want to return to the question of how the human being can, in its own way, become lily-like and bird-like. As Kierkegaard said: “only when the human being, though he toils and spins, is absolutely like the lily, which does not toil and spin; only when the human being, although he sows and reaps and gathers into barns, is absolutely like the bird, which does not sow and reap and gather into barns, only then does he not serve mammon.” To serve mammon is to organize one’s existence around the project, which is to say in terms of final ends and on the basis of future possibilities which originate in the representational power of consciousness. Serving mammon only has a sense within a horizon constituted by concern.

The movement of Kierkegaard’s discourses, however, have disclosed a dimension of capability that is prior to that of concern. And then again, going even further, have disclosed a dimension of radical incapability underneath

capability as its conditioning possibility (no one gives capability to themselves). Finally, they have pointed to an expression of this capability—decision—which no longer has anything like the project about it. To choose the justice that belongs to the kingdom of God is to remain at, or enter into, one's place. This is justice as adjustment, as a being situated. It is entering into one's own site, one's own givenness. Nothing is produced in this labor; it is labor as expenditure, without finality—and to this extent, it passes over from labor, organized around ends, into something like growth (lily) or flight (bird).

In conclusion let us ask: what kind of existence is this? How is it that a human being can achieve a comportment that is lily-like and bird-like? What would it mean to exist no longer on the basis of concern, without project? What would a relation to the real be that is unmediated by representation? Actually, these have been persistent questions in the western tradition, or at least within a certain stratum of that tradition. To be specific, Kierkegaard's discourses must finally be understood in terms of a problematic inaugurated by Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, according to which only that which lives "without a why" truly lives.<sup>1</sup> This tradition reemerges with great force, even if in a transformed way, in the later thought of Heidegger.<sup>2</sup>

In order to sketch the direction of such a thought, and without being able to address Kierkegaard's relations to these thinkers here, it would be most appropriate to turn to the preface to *What We Learn from the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air*. The preface opens a path, not only of reading, but also already of existence. Kierkegaard writes: "Although this little book is without the *authority* of the teacher, [is] a *superfluity, insignificant*, like the lily and the bird—Oh, if only it were so!—it nevertheless hopes that by finding the only thing it seeks, a good place, it finds the *significance of appropriation* for that singular one whom I, with gladness and gratitude, call *my reader*" (UDVS, 157; SV 11, 145, my translation).

Already contained in this preface is a certain circularity that relates to the reading of the text: the book is to guide human beings into a comportment that is lily-like and bird-like, and yet it can only be read appropriately—that is, in such a

way as to allow it to find *its* place—on condition that one is already able to grasp lily-being and bird-being. But this means already having become lily-like and bird-like. The book presupposes in the reader, in other words, the very comportment to which it wants to lead the reader. It presupposes that the reader is already capable of grasping the significance of that which has no significance, of that which in its very being is superfluous. The book itself, ontologically, is a bird, a lily; and it arises out of a posture that is lily-like and bird-like. Therefore it can only be read appropriately—which means here *appropriatively*—out of a prior sensitivity to the superfluous and insignificant. In other words, the very structure of the book presupposes that there is something already within the existence of the reader that is receptive to that which overflows economies of meaning and acting-for-ends. So it is not really a question of “how to become a lily or a bird;” rather, it is about allowing this dimension of anarchy, what *already* structures life prior to and after the mediations of self-consciousness, greater place.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase occurs for the first time explicitly in the writings of Marguerite Porete. See her *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, translated by Ellen Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), chs. 89, 93, 134, 135. Meister Eckhart mostly likely inherited the phrase from Porete. See Michael Sell’s analysis of the relation between Eckhart and Porete in his *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 80ff.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1950 lectures, *Der Satz vom Grund*, Heidegger too turned toward a flower—the rose—in order to displace, fracture, and begin to delimit the seeming hegemony of the principle of reason as formulated by Leibniz, according to which “nothing is without a why.” In contrast to this, Heidegger bluntly confronts Leibniz’ mighty principle with a verse from the religious poet Angelus Silesius, who directly inherits the Eckhartian tradition, according to whom “the rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms.” And for Heidegger what is ultimately at stake in Silesius’ poem, and thus in the Eckhartian tradition, is the possibility of another kind of comportment for the human being, one falling outside the activity of rendering reasons. He writes: “What is unsaid [in Silesius’ fragment]—and everything depends on this—[is that] humans, in the concealed grounds of their essential being, first truly are when in their own way they are like the rose—without why” (38). Heidegger immediately adds “we cannot pursue this thought any further here.” However, what finally has no Why, for Heidegger, is not, in the first instance, the human being, as for Eckhart or Kierkegaard—rather, it is being itself, being as *physis* or origination, being as the ever-recurrent opening of the play-spaces of being. Being plays the way a child plays: without why, without goal or purpose, outside the project structure, without telos. On the differences between Eckhart and Heidegger on this point, see Reiner Schürmann’s *Wandering Joy* (Lindisfarne Books, 2001), pp. 204 ff.