

Imaging Nothing: Kierkegaard and the *Imago Dei*

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When considering what makes the human being uniquely human, or how it “images God” within the created order, Søren Kierkegaard does not turn to Genesis 1:27, the privileged passage of the Western theological tradition. He turns instead to Matthew 6, a passage in which the reader is instructed to “consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.” In several rounds of “upbuilding discourses” on this passage, Kierkegaard develops an “apophatic” approach to the imago Dei. The imaging of God that the human being is called to enact does not consist in any self-possessed capability, nor does it set the human being at the top of a hierarchically ordered creation. Rather, the human being images God only when it “becomes nothing” through an unconditional affirmation of existence that lets go of the need to posit a “tomorrow.”

Whom should the struggler desire to resemble other than God?

But if he himself is something or wants to be something, this something is sufficient to hinder the resemblance. Only when he himself becomes nothing, only then can God illuminate him so that he resembles God. However great he is, he cannot manifest God’s likeness; God can imprint himself in him only when he himself has become nothing.

When the ocean is exerting all its power, that is precisely the time when it cannot reflect the image of heaven, and even the slightest motion blurs the image; but when it becomes still and deep, then the image of heaven sinks into its nothingness.

Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*

I.

When articulating what makes the human being uniquely human, the Christian theological tradition, echoing Jewish and Muslim traditions, has turned most often to the language of “the image of

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God,” or *imago Dei*. The classic text here is of course Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This declaration occurs at the end of the first creation narrative in Genesis, and its purpose is to signal the uniqueness of the human being in relation to the rest of the created order. Unlike the fish of the sea or the birds of the air, unlike vegetable and plant life, unlike all other creatures that either creep upon the earth or soar in the heavens, the human being alone somehow images God.

Now, exactly *how* the human being images God, or what this image consists in, has never received a stable interpretation or consensus. In his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann catalogues no less than nine prominent interpretations of Genesis 1:27 over the centuries.¹ My aim here is not to sort through these options and determine their relative merits. I want simply to throw another option into the mix, one that arrives at a slant in relation to the mainstream theological tradition of reflecting on the uniqueness of the human being as that creature that images God.

Interestingly, Søren Kierkegaard does not turn to Genesis when he wants to develop a sustained discourse on the unique being of the human being. He turns rather to another biblical text in which the human being is situated amid the created order, namely, Matthew 6:25–34, the central verses of which are the following:

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry . . . but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. (NRSV)

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1994), 148–158.

Kierkegaard wrote three rounds of “upbuilding discourses” on this passage, one in 1847, one in 1848, and another in 1849. In what follows, I will turn primarily to the 1847 discourses, which differ from the later discourses in more directly unfolding Kierkegaard’s conceptions of time, selfhood, and God on which the later discourses build. In the second of the three 1847 discourses, Kierkegaard does make allusion to Genesis 1:27 and offers a brief, and what I would call apophatic, interpretation of the *imago Dei*. Because God is essentially invisible, unable to be captured or represented through any kind of positive image or concept, it follows, writes Kierkegaard, that “the image of what is invisible will itself be invisible.”² As George Pattison puts it, “The image of God in the human being . . . eludes representation in anything external, even language.”³ Imaging God, the human being images nothing, nothing visible, nothing that could stand out as a positive image or representation. The human being is called to be the invisible image of the invisible God.

Just what this means and how it relates to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, wholly visible phenomena, is my concern in what follows. To anticipate where I am going, I can say this: what the bird and the lily hold open for the human being is a mode of existing unstructured by anxiety, or concern for “tomorrow.” The bird and the lily live wholly for today. The bird takes flight and the lily blooms without temporal projects or concerns, entirely abandoned to the joy of existing today. In this, the bird and the lily are visible and external images⁴ of what the human being is to become invisibly and inwardly, namely, the site of an unconditional affirmation of existence. This is an affirmation that has no grounds and produces no results on what might be called the economic plane of human reality, that plane on which human beings calculate and store up capital and concern themselves with securing their lives through comparison, achievement, and identity. To image God, rather than “mammon,”

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings: Gift, Creation, Love; Selections from the Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. George Pattison (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 124.

³ George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 115.

⁴ For a sustained examination of how “images” become “icons of faith” in Kierkegaard’s texts, see Christopher Barnett, *From Despair to Faith: The Spirituality of Søren Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2014). Barnett helpfully shows how the notion of “image” for Kierkegaard marks a dynamism of movement rather a stasis of achieved content or form.

is to become the site of an unconditional affirmation of today that does not attach itself to tomorrow as a calculable outcome. The image of God is not a native or self-possessed capability that places the human being at the top of a hierarchically ordered creation. It has no positive or stable content. As Claudia Welz puts it, commenting on Kierkegaard, the image of God “in no way counts in itself.”⁵ The image is not a nominative property but a verbal operation. It is an act of dispossession, a becoming nothing, a movement of becoming an open site where even the frailest and most insignificant of creatures, the lily for instance, receives an unconditional affirmation.

One note on Kierkegaard’s discourses before turning to them. The genre of these discourses is not direct theoretical reflection or argumentative reasoning. They take as their point of departure not a theoretical problematic but the existential difficulty of coming into contact with one’s own humanity. In the prayer that opens the 1849 discourses, Kierkegaard prays, “Father in heaven! In the company of others, and especially in a crowd, it is so hard to discover what it is to be a human being. . . . May we therefore learn it from the lily and the bird.”⁶ The logic and movement of the discourses is not so much argumentative or theoretical as it is therapeutic, a progressively deepening challenge to the illusions that prevent us from embracing our humanity. Ironically, then, the discourses ask us not to look first at ourselves to discover ourselves, so mired as we are in illusions about ourselves, but at the birds of the air and lilies of the field. This is also why anything I say in this essay can only be a kind of preface to undergoing the work of the discourses themselves, just as the discourses themselves are only a kind of preface to letting the birds and lilies become our teachers. The real work happens beyond text, “out there” with the birds and the lilies, in the silent intimacy of the heart.

The bulk of what I will say here will be a reading of the 1847 discourses, taking each in turn.⁷ I will briefly turn to the 1849 discourses to conclude. What is important to see is how the discourses

⁵ Claudia Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2016), 42. Welz categorizes Kierkegaard under a “dynamic (con)formation” model of the *imago Dei*, along with Pico della Mirandola and Meister Eckhart. Rather than functional, mimetic, or relational, the image of God names an inward union with the divine act at the “ground” of the self.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 179.

⁷ My reading of these discourses is indebted to David Kangas’s essay, “Being Human: Kierkegaard’s 1847 Discourses on the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air,” *Konturen* 7 (August 2015): 64–83.

are organized by a movement of progressive deepening. They begin playfully and gently in order to make the reader feel welcome and understood, and then they take the reader ever more deeply into both the glory and the difficulty of being human.

II.

The first of the three 1847 discourses is titled “Be Content with Being Human.” It begins by opening up a place of empathy for the reader, who is in the midst of experiencing life’s sorrows and anxieties. Kierkegaard knows that the pain of life’s troubles is often exacerbated by well-meaning people who try to offer comfort or solidarity, and he also knows that in the midst of worry and concern an anxious person might not be able or ready to receive comfort from even the most sensitive and empathic of persons. He writes, “The happy do not understand them, and when those who are strong offer comfort they seem precisely to place themselves far above them by doing so, while what other anxiety sufferers have to offer only depresses them further.”⁸ Kierkegaard continues, “So if that’s how it is, then it’s best to look for other teachers who do not address us in such a way as to show they don’t understand, whose exhortations don’t contain some secret criticism, who do not look at us judgingly, and whose comfort does not serve more to stir us up than to calm us down.”⁹

The first discourse sends the anxious reader out from human company and the noise of human society into nature, where the lilies of the field and the birds of the air can become confidants and teachers for the anxious: “In relation to these teachers, so cheap that they ask for neither money nor deference, no misunderstanding is possible, because they keep silent—out of consideration for the anxious. . . . [Their] silence honors anxiety and the anxious person.”¹⁰ How is it that the lilies and the birds become teachers to the anxious? They do so simply by offering themselves to human sight and consideration—first simply as lovely distractions from whatever troubles a person might bring with them, but then more profoundly as images of an existence unstructured by anxiety.

In particular, what the lilies and the birds are free of is the anxiety of *comparison* and anxiety over *the future*, two anxieties that turn out

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 87.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 87.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 87.

to be intimately related. Go out there among the common lilies of the field, Kierkegaard counsels, the wild lilies that no gardener has cultivated, and what you will see is that each lily stands there glorious and happy with itself, unconcerned about whether it is better or worse than the lilies it stands next to. And then turn your eyes from the earth to the heavens and notice the birds. Notice how they fly so joyfully, how they gather food for today but keep no stockpile for tomorrow, seemingly unaware that there even is a tomorrow.

The bird and the lily “live without anticipating the future, unaware of time, in the moment.”¹¹ These creatures live in relation to time and in relation to each other without “representation.”¹² The bird flies and gathers its food in a continuously existing present that it does not in turn re-present to itself by placing the present in relation to a recollected past and an anticipated future. The bird knows no recollected past or anticipated future. It knows only the instant of its present. Likewise, the singular lily standing in the field amid thousands of other lilies does not have a representation of itself, an identity we might say, that would allow it to compare itself with other lilies and judge whether it is as good or beautiful or clever as its field mates. It stands sheerly in and as the presence that it is, unmediated by any representation or abstraction from the present moment that would allow it exchange its “real needs” for “represented future needs.”¹³ One could say that the bird and the lily belong immediately to the real. They simply are what they are without any possibility of being otherwise. They entrust themselves entirely to the precarity of their existence, without hesitation. They are entirely content to be creatures, happy in their finitude. It is another matter with us human beings.

What Kierkegaard would have us notice about ourselves by way of noticing the lily and the bird is that everything we human beings do, think, and feel is mediated through a capacity for representation and therefore comparison. Whereas the lily and the bird belong to the present moment immediately, we human beings mediate the present

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 100.

¹² See Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 108. The English translations of these discourses (Pattison and the Hongs) use “imagination” and its cognates to translate what I am rendering here as “representation.” The Danish is *Forestillingen*, which I prefer to translate as “representation” and its cognates in order to communicate the sense of a produced or mediated present.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 108.

moment to ourselves by bringing it in relation to a recollected past and an anticipated future. "The earthly person who looks to the future learns from time how to use time, and when their store is full of what has been gathered in the *past* so that they are well provided for in the *present*, then they go on to sow again for a future harvest so that they can again fill their store in *time to come*."¹⁴ Human beings are capable of representing time to themselves, *using* time to create their own present, which means that they are capable of comparing one day to another, comparing past, present, and future. Such capacity for comparison and representation is the basis of our entire economic life. What are money and trade and credit and stock futures and insurance and mortgages but elaborate systems of representation and comparison?

What is crucial to see is how such comparisons, or representations, even though they concretely structure everything we do as human beings, operate at a remove from reality, as mediations of reality. The human being is a site in which representations of reality create a whole plane of existence that exceeds the immediately real, or that entangles the immediately real in a set of essentially unfounded comparisons not necessitated by any "natural order of things." One day is compared to the next, one person is compared to another, one thing to another thing. This, in turn, opens the possibility of discontentment and anxiety, modes of existing that distort actual and real needs into fantasized and projected needs. And when this happens, when the human being lives on the basis of a fantasized security or wholeness that it spends its days striving after, a sense of lack comes to permeate and drive existence. It comes to live on the basis of what it perceives it is not—not as good, not as popular, not as desirable, not as smart, not as successful, not as wealthy—rather than what it is. Human beings in turn subjugate others and enlist them as objects in the futile project of their self-mediation. Only the human being can live with such a sense of discontentment and lack. Only the human being can entrap itself in its own representations, peeling itself away from its moment of existing and holding itself hostage by way of self-imposed fantasies of what it needs.

Kierkegaard's discourse stages the tragi-comedy of living on the basis of represented lack by playfully imagining a lowly lily comparing itself to a crown imperial flower, and a wild wood pigeon comparing

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 100.

itself to “tame doves” who are domesticated and well-fed by a farmer.¹⁵ In each instance, the lack that is generated through comparison, which is “nothing *real*,”¹⁶ causes the creature to rush headlong into its own destruction. The lily withers by allowing itself to be uprooted in search of a better field, and the wild pigeon ends up on the farmer’s dinner table by trespassing into the tame doves’ territory in search of a better home. Rather than remain content with their own “loveliness”¹⁷ and “possibilities,”¹⁸ these creatures, staging for the reader its own *human* folly, chase after fantasized possibilities.

At the heart of this discontentment, Kierkegaard finds a rebellion against creatureliness. We cling to our representations, our projected needs, because we are afraid of not being our own masters. “This is what it comes down to: to be content with being human, to be content with being the lowly one, the creature that is as incapable of keeping itself alive as it is of creating itself.”¹⁹ To be content with being human would be to consent without hesitation to the precariousness of existence: essentially frail, fleeting, and vulnerable—yet pregnant with possibility nonetheless.²⁰

The passage into the humanity of the human being, into the *reality* of its being, is one that passes beyond representation, or one that opens up a beyond within our representations. Such passage, traced in the second of Kierkegaard’s 1847 discourses, is a difficult and unending movement of dispossessing ourselves of those comparisons that alienate us from ourselves and place us in a futile and despairing rebellion against our finitude. It is in this passage, in this letting go of self that makes room for an unconditional affirmation of each frail instant of existence, that the human being enters most profoundly into itself.

III.

The second of the 1847 discourses is titled, “The Glory of Being Human.” Whereas the first discourse seeks simply to open up to view the distinction between reality and representation, along with

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 94–106.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 107.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 204.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 205.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 106.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 205.

the tragi-comedy of human beings clinging to their representations, the second discourse complicates this picture by asking the reader to contemplate the glory of the human capacity for representation. It is here where Kierkegaard resists any naive or romantic notion that human beings could simply do what birds and lilies do, namely, exist entirely free of a mediated relationship to reality. Human existence ineluctably unfolds as a process of re-presentation. While this is the source of the discontentment and lack that burdens the human realm, it is also what makes the human being uniquely “glorious.” Clarifying this ambiguity is the work of the second discourse.

Human beings have a capacity for representation that birds and lilies do not have. What Kierkegaard points to, however, what he finds glorious, is not the achievements or results that human beings generate through their capacity for representation—the whole realm of culture, for instance. Any determinate achievement inevitably supplies material for the anxious and despairing game of comparison. What is glorious, rather, is that the capacity for representation places human beings before the task of overcoming or releasing the representations we inevitably generate. In other words, what is uniquely glorious about the human being is that, because of our capacity for representation, we face the work of dispossession. The bird and the lily do not face this difficulty. They always already are dispossessed of a representational relation to reality. This is what Kierkegaard elsewhere calls their “fortunate privilege.”²¹ Human beings, by contrast, have to *become* dispossessed. We must *breakthrough* into nothingness. This is our burden—but also our glory, that we are tasked with such an enormous difficulty:

Birds do not worry about what to eat. But is this, in fact, a perfection? Is being heedless of danger, not noticing it, not knowing it's there, a perfection? Is being sure-footed because one is blind or walking with a firm tread because one is sleepwalking a perfection? Not at all. It would be truer to say that it is a perfection to know the danger, to look it in the eye, and to be awake to it. Thus, it is a perfection *to be able* to worry about what to eat precisely in order to overcome such fear, and to let faith and confidence drive fear out so that one

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39.

truthfully doesn't worry about what to eat, because one has acquired the carefree outlook of faith. For only being care-free in faith is, in a godly sense, the kind of hovering of which the birds' easy flight is a beautiful but imperfect image.²²

The human being enacts its unique glory as it transforms its capacity for representation into what the poet John Keats called "negative capability"—the capability, as he puts it, of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."²³ To be able to worry, and yet not worry, to be able to compare, and yet not compare, to be able to plan, and yet not plan, to be able to control, and yet not control, to be able to speak, and yet to learn the "art of becoming silent"²⁴—that is the glorious difficulty to which the human being is called. It is here, in this difficulty, where the human vocation to image God resides.

It is in this second of the 1847 discourses, "The Glory of Being Human," that Kierkegaard turns explicitly to the language of the "the image of God." His main concern in taking up this language is to distinguish the "pagan" or philosophical sense of image from what he calls the "Christian" sense. The ancient Greeks also regarded the human being as an image of divinity. What is characteristic of the Greek sense of image, however, is that it gathers itself around human capabilities and their rational mastery within a hierarchical construal of being. Unlike the brute beasts that creep low to the earth on all fours, the human being stands upright, transcending a base attachment to materiality. Its upright carriage lifts the human mind to contemplate lofty and heavenly things, the eternal forms that give reality to material existence. This is why, for the Greeks, the athletic, virile, rational man is the one in whom the image of the gods shines most potently. A man's man, ready to protect the city at all costs, ready to sacrifice himself on the sports field or on the battlefield, a rational man, not subject to the material and bodily passions of women, in control of his sexuality as the always dominant partner—here we can catch sight of the glory of divinity.

²² Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 126–127.

²³ Keats, John, *The Love Poems of John Keats: In Praise of Beauty* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2007), xi.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 184.

Now, of course, something like this sense of image has found its way deeply into Christian theology, in particular the prioritizing of rationality and its normative location in men. Kierkegaard, however, regards this as the complete antithesis of the Christian sense of the image of God. In what is perhaps the most crucial passage of the second 1847 discourse, he writes the following:

The upright carriage was a mark of distinction, but to be able to cast oneself down in worship is still more glorious. . . . This is what is expected of us: not that we should come and assume dominion, which is also glorious and for which we are suited, but that we should worship the Creator. . . . This nature cannot do, since it can at most remind human beings to do it. It is glorious to be clothed 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. . . . Worship is not having dominion, and yet it is precisely in worshipping that a human being is like God. . . . The pagan was not aware of God and therefore sought the likeness in having dominion. But that is not where the likeness lies—on the contrary, that is to claim it in vain. . . . Human beings and God are not alike in a direct way but inversely. Only when God has become the eternal and omnipresent object of worship in an infinite sense and the human being has become and forever remains a worshipper, only then are they like each other. If human beings want to be like God by exercising dominion, then they have forgotten God, and God has departed from them, leaving human beings to play at being God in God's absence.²⁵

What is especially interesting here is how, in distinguishing the “Christian” sense of image from its pagan sense, Kierkegaard also moves against the plain sense of Genesis 1, where the image of God is affirmed in the context of the command given to human beings to assume dominion over the created order. He denies that the image of God has anything to do with the exercise of dominion. The human being images God not as it rises to claim superiority at the top of a hierarchically ordered creation, not as it structures existence through

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 125.

its power of representation, even if it be benevolent representation, but as it casts itself down in worship. And to worship is to become *nothing*—a withdrawal from the whole regime of representation and comparison. To clarify the sense of imaging God, it is therefore necessary to understand more deeply what Kierkegaard means by “becoming nothing.” For this, a detour outside of the lily and the bird discourses is required.

IV.

To become nothing is to enter into the deepest truth of the self—that in relation to itself it is radically *incapable*. In his 1844 discourse, “To Need God Is a Human Being’s Highest Perfection,” Kierkegaard writes, “The highest is this: that a person is fully convinced that he himself is capable of nothing, nothing at all. . . . This is the annihilation of a person, and the annihilation is his truth.”²⁶ Such incapability is not the relative incapability of not being able to do this or that—speak a particular language, for instance. It concerns an originary incapacity that underlies all relative capacity and incapacity, including the capacity to represent time and project a future. Fundamentally, the human being is incapable of positing or securing itself in being, “incapable of keeping itself alive as it is of creating itself.”²⁷ Given to itself from beyond itself, “established by another,”²⁸ as *The Sickness unto Death* puts it, the human being does not and cannot master the conditions of its existence. Relating to itself across a “derived, established relation,”²⁹ the self cannot come to grips with itself. It cannot grasp or put to use the ordinary conditions of its existence. The effect is that “a human being is not capable of overcoming himself.”³⁰ Tragically, or comically, all human capability plays out within a deeper incapability.³¹

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 307.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 106.

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness*, 13.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 320.

³¹ Compare with Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 363: “And it is difficult to understand this, [that I am able to do nothing at all], to understand it not at the moment when one actually is unable to do anything, when one is sick, in low

For Kierkegaard, the project of self-mastery will always founder upon two originary conditions: contingency and need. With respect to contingency, the projects of the self, its initiatives to enact its capabilities and establish its self-identity across time, are subject to the irrevocable uncertainty that “even at this moment everything can be changed.”³² As David Kangas puts it, “There remains an unbreachable schism between self-consciousness and its projects and the gyrations of the world . . . everything can be undone in an instant.”³³ The environment of the self’s givenness is a world it does not control, radically so.

On its own, however, contingency does not render the self absolutely incapable with respect to itself, “capable of nothing, nothing at all.” It was, after all, the contingency of the world that occasioned the Stoics to find a capability of the self not dependent upon the success of external projects, namely, *nous*. Accessing *nous*, the mind’s interior self-grounding power, the human being can detach itself from the sway of external contingency and access an undisturbed reservoir of resilience and rational self-determination. Kierkegaard pushes past this capability to access a deeper incapability at the ground of the self, one more interior than *nous*, namely, *need*. “Need” names a fundamental dependence and incompleteness that arises from the originary givenness of the self’s relation to itself. Given to itself from beyond, struck with itself prior to any intentionality, the self is irrevocably bound to itself, yet incapable of fulfilling itself. It cannot overcome itself, that is, complete itself, either through its external projects, subject as they are to contingency, or through an internal project of self-grounding. At its most intimate and inceptual point, the self emerges as a site of ontological dependency, unable to interiorize the conditions of its existence. Unable to accomplish or still itself, the self is tensed with an originary need that remains opaque to every effort at theoretical or practical mastery. To be a human being is to be subject to an ontological poverty, a lack of interior foundation, that outstrips every project of self-overcoming. This is the annihilation of the human being—and its deepest truth.

spirits, but to understand it at the moment when one seemingly is capable of doing everything.”

³² Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 315.

³³ David Kangas, *Errant Affirmations: On the Philosophical Meaning of Kierkegaard’s Religious Discourses* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 75.

Kierkegaard's 1844 discourse offers no consoling way out of this bind, no way to fill or satisfy the constitutive lack or incompleteness that structures the human self. Yet neither does it simply resign itself to lack. What the discourse does instead is perform an inversion: it proclaims need as the human being's "highest perfection." In what sense? Kangas puts it this way:

In the sense that in the anguish of incapability, in its nihilation, the self discovers for the first time the power by which it exists, the very power of being, as not originating in itself, and yet as bearing essentially and intimately on its own self, and therefore capable of liberating the self from self. If a self-overcoming is possible it will be on the strength of this power, both intimate and irreducible to the self's ownmost possibility.³⁴

In and through its own annihilation, its confrontation with radical incapability, the self discovers a capability that emerges outside the structure of its projects and representations. "Need" is the "site" in the self that is touched by this capability without appropriating this capability as the self's own. It is what leads the self outside of the structure of appropriation to the inappropriable ground of its existence. Expropriation, rather than appropriation, is the human being's perfection. There is the possibility of self-overcoming, but not as a project of the self, only as an overcoming of the self in its project structure. Hence the reason Kierkegaard says the human being is incapable even of its own incapability: "To comprehend this annihilation is the highest thing of which a human being is capable . . . yet what I am I saying—he is incapable even of this."³⁵ Annihilation, becoming the ontological poverty that one is, does not, then, function the way "the negative" functions in Hegel, as a dialectical moment of self-alienation that sets up a return to a self more fully possessed of its own conditions. Annihilation is not the prelude to or mediating moment of the human being's truth. It is its truth, its perfection, its referral to an ordinary capability utterly intimate yet absolutely other.

³⁴ Kangas, *Errant Affirmations*, 76.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 307.

The difficult truth of the human being is that in relation to its own capacities, even those most immediate of capacities we are most tempted to regard as our own, the very power to say “I,” for instance, we are in fact incapable, not the authors and masters of ourselves. Everything the human being is and does “transpires in the strength of a power irreducible to the self’s ownmost power,”³⁶ leaving the self irreducibly “in need.” Kierkegaard is rigorous here. The person who knows that they are “not capable of the least thing” knows that on the basis the self’s ownmost possibility or spontaneity, they are “unable even to be happy about the most happy event.”³⁷ Even the most spontaneous and natural of affects in the self are not proper to the self, but emerge by virtue of nonappropriable power. The self is not the owner or originator of itself, its own property. The self is nothing—an open site for a singular traversal of the event of existence.

In Kierkegaard’s texts, the nonappropriable power through which the self is capable is of course God. God is only ever encountered truthfully in this context, namely, in the expropriating movement of becoming nothing, becoming incapable: “Insofar as a person does not know himself in such a way that he himself is capable of nothing at all, he does not actually become conscious in the deeper sense that God exists.”³⁸ A discourse on God is therefore inseparable from, or has no relevance outside of, a discourse on becoming nothing, sinking into a power of existence that touches the self only outside of or prior to the structure of its projects. Likewise, a discourse on imaging God is inseparable from, or has no relevance outside of, a discourse on becoming nothing, becoming a site for the operation of the inappropriable power that is God. The human being images God “inversely,” not through its native capabilities being brought to perfection, but in the perfection of becoming transparently open to a ground it cannot interiorize, an unground. “Worship” is this becoming-transparent.³⁹

The human being images God only in its most radical interiority, in the “ground” of the self, locatable nowhere, where it receives its

³⁶ Kangas, *Errant Affirmations*, 77.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 318.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 321. Compare with Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 362: “It is self-renunciation which discovers that God is.”

³⁹ For a reading of “worship” as the site of the *imago Dei* in Kierkegaard, see Matthew Drever, “The Image of God in Augustine and Kierkegaard,” in John Doody, Kim Paffenroth, and Helen Tallon Russell, eds., *Augustine and Kierkegaard* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017).

being and finds itself affirmed—*loved*—outside of any context of representable meaning. As Kangas puts it, “‘God’ is here a placeholder for the essence of reality as what escapes one’s control, but also a placeholder for the affirmability of reality outside contexts of meaning. Reality can be affirmed without that affirmation being grounded in a meaning.”⁴⁰ The possibility of such groundless affirmation as the imaging of God is the culminating moment of the 1844 discourse, “One Who Prays Aright Struggles in Prayer and Is Victorious—in That God Is Victorious.” Kierkegaard writes,

Who, then, was victorious? It was God, because he did not give the explanation requested by the one who prayed, and he did not give it as the struggling one requested it. But the one struggling was also victorious. Or was it not a victory that instead of receiving an explanation [*Forklaring*] from God he was transfigured [*forklaret*] in God, and his transfiguration [*Forklarelse*] is this: to reflect the image of God.⁴¹

“Explanation” here refers to an event taking up place within a totality of meaning. To request an explanation is to ask “why?” Why this event? Why this suffering? Why this existence? Why this world? The request betrays a desire for a principle of sufficient reason, for a ground in which everything has a reason, cause, and telos. The work of Kierkegaard’s discourse is to let God be the destruction of such a principle and so “victorious”—victorious over the human insistence that existence have an ultimate “explanation.” God is this—that explanation is withheld. And yet God’s victory is also victory for the human being, for it marks a transfiguration in which existence is affirmed in the absence of grounding principles, “by virtue of the absurd,”⁴² if one likes. Abandoning the desire for explanation, the human being is transfigured “in God.” Which is to say, entering into the ground of the self, becoming transfigured there, resting “transparently in the power that established [the self],”⁴³ is to undergo an exit from dependence on structures of meaning. Such an exit is an

⁴⁰ Kangas, *Errant Affirmations*, 168.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 400.

⁴² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 49.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness*, 14.

exit from self, a self-overcoming not as a project of the self but as its “liberating annihilation.”⁴⁴ To undergo such liberation is to reflect the image of God. God is imaged when reality is affirmed in the absence of explanation, without why.

Living on the basis of such whyless affirmation, reflecting the image of God by becoming nothing, the human being becomes the site of a “jubilating,” a joy over existence that is not dependent on anything determinate. In its ground, “in God,” the human being becomes the joy of its giftedness or gratuity, which is the joy, one might say, of the ontological “nevertheless” that the human being is. Despite being “capable of nothing, nothing at all,” nevertheless the human being is here, gifted with time and possibility, loved in excess of any achievement or identity. Imaging God, then, is a matter of becoming a surprise to oneself, entering into the gratuity of one’s existence that each moment renews itself in excess of any project of meaning. Kierkegaard puts it this way:

Thus a human being is great and at his highest when he corresponds to God by being nothing at all himself. . . . And the person who understood this found no pain whatsoever in it but only the overabundance of bliss, who hid no secret desire that still preferred to be happy on its own account, felt no shame that people noticed that he himself was capable of nothing at all, laid down no conditions to God, not even that his weakness be kept concealed from others, but in whose heart joy constantly prevailed by his, so to speak jubilantly throwing himself into God’s arms in unspeakable amazement at God, who is capable of all things.⁴⁵

The possibility of such jubilation is what the third of Kierkegaard’s 1847 discourses seeks to open—by letting the lily and the bird become our teachers.

V.

The final 1847 discourse is titled “The Blessedness Promised to Being Human.” The path to blessedness, however, is not direct. It

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 382.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 311, 318.

must pass through what Kierkegaard calls “melancholy.” In this third discourse, there is a significant shift in mood. Rather than emblems of the playful exuberance of life, the lily and the bird become emblems of the tragic simultaneity of life and death:

There is indeed beauty, there is youth and delight in nature; life is indeed manifold and teeming, there is joy and rejoicing—but there is also something like a deep unfathomable sorrow that none of the creatures out there suspect, and precisely the fact that none of them suspect it is melancholy in human eyes. To be so lovely, to flower like that, to flutter about, and to build one’s nest with the beloved like that, to live like that—and then to die like that! Is this life, or is it death?⁴⁶

Looking at this year’s blooming lilies, human beings, because of our capacity for representation, are able to remember last year’s lilies that have withered and died. We are therefore able to be conscious of the reality that the destiny of all life is death, or that life is inextricably bound up with death. Last year’s lilies leave a trace in our memory, they linger, and this lingering produces the longing of melancholy. “We cannot forget the bird and the lily; it is as if [we] want to rescue them from death by keeping them alive in memory and save them for a longer life—and therein is melancholy.”⁴⁷ Death as an abstract concept or figure is fearful enough, but when death clothes itself as the trace of what we have loved and lost, it grips us to the core. “Death comes in a more fearsome guise as the grim reaper, but we are grasped even more forcefully when it comes clothed in loveliness as a lily.”⁴⁸

Melancholy sharpens the focus on what is essentially human. It is disclosive of the fact that human being confronts an aporia as it stands in existence. What is constitutive of human existence is the essentially unanswerable question, “Is this life, or is it death?” What is more primary, natality or mortality? Attending to the frail and fleeting life of birds and lilies, we are reduced to silence by such a question. Such an aporia, or “objective uncertainty,” as Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus names it, is what calls forth the constitutive crisis of the human

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 137.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 138.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 138.

being, namely, that it must *choose* the meaning of its existence, and do so in the absence of any objective certainty. The “inward, invisible glory”⁴⁹ of the human being, its constitution as “spirit,” can be spoken of more specifically and pointedly as the exigency of a *choice*, a fundamental or radical choice about how to comport oneself in an existence that, as life-death, offers us no objective certainties about its meaning.

Kierkegaard’s discourse, using the language of Matthew 6, goes on to describe this choice as the choice “between God and mammon.”⁵⁰ It is important to see that “God” and “mammon” here do not refer to external objects of choice. The choice between God and mammon is not a choice between two things. It is a choice about what comes prior to any choice about things. Choosing either God or mammon is not to choose some ultimate object but rather *how* the self will exist in each moment of its existence. The decision between God and mammon is a decision about what structures subjectivity in its most basic comportment. It is a decision about what comes “first,” styling all subsequent choices.

“Mammon” in the context of Kierkegaard’s discourses signifies the whole realm of representation and comparison that grounds the cultural and economic life of human beings. It signifies what human capability makes of the world as opposed to what the world is as God’s creation. Not to choose God is therefore *de facto* to choose mammon. And to choose mammon is to choose to live on the basis of what human beings fantasize and project for themselves. It is to posit the human ego as originary, as “first,” and so it is to choose the futile project of trying to ground that ego through achievement and identity. For Kierkegaard, no matter how you style it, such a choice always ends up in despair.

What then does it mean to choose God? To seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, as the Gospel text puts it? Crucially, Kierkegaard asserts that to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness is actually not to seek anything at all, if by seeking one means going out into the world either to find something or to implement some plan or project. Rather, to seek God first, to seek God as the first, as the originary ground of subjectivity, is to “remain where you are, in the place assigned to you, for every kind of seeking that

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 145.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 142.

leaves this place behind is already a form of unrighteousness.”⁵¹ What is this place that has been assigned to us where we are to remain? It is creation as a realm of “perishability.”⁵² It is existence as life-death, existence as finite. That is where we are to remain, the place we are to consent to without hesitation. To remain here, to affirm ourselves here, as part of a world that lives only as it dies, is to choose God:

So while the visible world declines and sinks down in perishability, you shall nevertheless remain in your place and begin by first seeking the kingdom of God. We flee the earthquake for a safer place, forest fires drive us to unwooded regions, and floods make us seek out higher ground, but if it is the case that the entire visible world is sinking in perishability, then there is no other place for us to flee to, and that is precisely why we have to stay where we are and seek first the kingdom of God.⁵³

What is this decision to remain? This decision to take up our place in a world sinking in perishability? What is chosen by choosing not to flee this world for another one but to remain absolutely in this world even as it dies and we with it? Most importantly, how is God imaged in this decision? The decision to remain is the enactment of an excessive or “errant” affirmation, one not authorized by any structure of meaning or “explanation.” It is a yes to life, even though it is bound up inextricably with death, a yes to life as frail, unmasterable, and perishing. Choosing God, what comes first in everything is an unconditional affirmation, one that does not first calculate and anticipate a good outcome, but one that lets go of the need to ground itself in outcomes. Such an affirmation would be capable of abiding the best and the worst. It would be an affirmation capable of finding God’s love everywhere, in everything, even in death.

When God is sought first, when what is most basic in each moment of existing is an unconditional affirmation, an affirmation without why, then “all these things will be given to you,” as the Gospel text puts it. Kierkegaard interprets this passage not as a promise that if you seek God then everything will turn out all right. He interprets

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 147.

⁵² Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 147.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 147–148.

it as saying that when you seek God first, when an unconditional affirmation comes first, then all these things, all the pursuits and plans and achievements and failures and worries that make up our lives, will become excess or gratuity for you. They will become “the rest,”⁵⁴ the remainder, what overflows beyond any necessity. When you seek God first, when you seek the one thing necessary, an unconditional affirmation of each naked instant of existing, then the whole order of creation, all of its joy and all of its pain, comes to have the status of a gratuity.

In a sense, it all becomes meaningless, or the meaning that is liberated overflows any teleology, any theodicy, any rational harmony, any narrative. “How highly the kingdom of God is to be valued, then,” Kierkegaard writes, “if we can talk like that in relation to [‘the rest’]—so carelessly, so curiously, so sublimely.”⁵⁵ He continues, “So let ‘the rest’ be needed for a long or short time; let it come in abundance or but little; let all these things have their moment, their time to be let alone or to be possessed, their moment when they are talked about, until, in death, they are eternally forgotten.”⁵⁶ The point is not to shun “the rest” or to disengage from the pursuits that make up our lives. The point is to open up within our representations—our plans, our projects, our discourses, our needs, our desires—space for what precedes and exceeds them. This is to open up within ourselves a liberating nothingness roomy enough for both joy and brokenness, life and death. It is in choosing this nothingness, indeed *becoming* this nothingness, that we image God. God, in other words, is the love by which we love and take joy in our frail, meaningless lives, which today are, but tomorrow will be cast into the oven.

In this difficult task, the task of saying yes to today, yes to whatever arrives, we have, thanks be to God, the kindest and loveliest of teachers, the lily and the bird. In the 1849 discourses, Kierkegaard counsels the reader to turn to these teachers in order to learn an unconditional joy:

Learn from the lily . . . and learn from the bird, for they are masters in the art of existing, of *being today*, of *being joy*. . . . The lily and the bird also have their sorrows, as the

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 148.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 148.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 149.

whole of nature has sorrows. Doesn't all creation groan under the perishability to which it is subjected against its will? For everything is subjected to perishability! . . . And even if the lily avoids the fate of being cast straightaway into the oven, it must nevertheless wither after having beforehand suffered one thing and another. And even if it was granted to the bird that it should die of old age, it must one day die and be separated from those it loves after having beforehand suffered one thing and another. Ah! . . . and yet the lily and the bird are unconditionally joyful, and here you see properly the truth of the gospel saying that you *ought* to learn joy from the lily and the bird. You could not ask for better teachers than those who, although they bear the burden of an infinitely deep sorrow, are nevertheless unconditionally joyful and are joy itself.

How the lily and the bird deal with this looks almost like a miracle: in deepest sorrow to be unconditionally joyful; to *be* when tomorrow is so frightful, that is, to be unconditionally joyful today.⁵⁷

The joy that is able to bloom today even when it is a day of death is the joy of remaining present to oneself:

For if you remain in God, whether you live or die, whether it goes well with you or badly, as long as you live and whether you die today or only after seventy years, and whether your death is in the ocean's deepest depths or you are blown into thin air, you are never outside God, you *remain*—that is, you are present to yourself, in God, and therefore, even on the day of your death, you are today in paradise. The bird and the lily live only for a day, but even a very short day is nevertheless joy, because . . . they truly *are today* and are *present to themselves* in this today.⁵⁸

Such joyful self-presence is not the uncertain and anxious pleasure of re-presentation, the pleasure of presenting oneself to oneself by way of one's achievements and their recognition. The

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 218–219.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 224.

pursuit of such *represented* presence is always despair, no matter how glittering or brilliant the achievement. To remain present to oneself “in God” rather than “in mammon” is to remain present to oneself as nothing. It is to become the site of an apophatic affirmation. As Kierkegaard puts it in an 1844 discourse on patience,

The child is astonished at insignificant things. The adult has laid aside childish things; he has seen the wondrous, but it amazes him no more; there is nothing new under the sun and nothing marvelous in life. If, however, a person knew how to make himself truly what he truly is—nothing—knew how to set the seal of patience on what he had understood—ah, then his life, whether he is the greatest or the lowliest, would even today be a joyful surprise.⁵⁹

So what is to image God? It is to image nothing, nothing but the unconditional affirmation by which all things exist. Coming from God, creation has no representational telos. We are not here to build kingdoms for ourselves or even kingdoms for God. We are here for no particular reason at all, the way a child plays for no particular reason at all. God shines through creation not visibly and directly, not through its external beauty and power or those who know how to harness these to impressive and awe inspiring ends. God shines in creation invisibly and darkly, in that creature who consents to be nothing, who lives not for the future it is able to produce but for the today it receives as an unmasterable gift. God is imaged by that creature who, even though capable of dominion, dispossesses that capability in favor of its more basic incapability, taking its place among the most insignificant and superfluous of creatures, the lilies of the field and the birds of the air.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding*, 226.

