KIERKEGAARD, SPIRIT, AND THE DEFINITION OF THE HUMAN IN THE LILY-BIRD DISCOURSES

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Abstract: Through a focus on Kierkegaard's four sets of upbuilding discourses on the lily and the bird of Matthew 6, written between 1846 and 1851/1852, this article elucidates changes in the meaning of "spirit" and in the definitions of the human vis-à-vis the animal from the earliest lily-bird discourses to the latest. Kierkegaard gradually moves away from "spirit" in the sense of higher-order mental activities of self-relating and reflective understanding as what defines the human, and toward "spirit" as a pre-reflective awareness of and orientation toward the unconditional. This conception can serve as a Kierkegaardian amendment to the famous definition of the human at the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Keywords: spirit, the human, upbuilding discourses, the unconditional, nature

This article explores conceptual space for a Kierkegaardian definition of the human that places the emphasis quite differently than his best-known definition of a human being, in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The famous passage there reads as follows:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself . . . If . . . the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.[1]

The emphasis in this definition, as frequently noted in the secondary literature, is on spirit as an activity of self-relating.[2] The human being is a synthetic relation of two elements—"the infinite and the finite," "the temporal and the eternal," "freedom and necessity"[3]—and then also the self-conscious activity of relating to that synthesis. As spirit, I am not only constituted a certain way but am consciously aware of myself, and affirm

[1] SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.
[2] Cf. Marcia Morgan's entry on "Spirit" in *Kierkegaard's Concepts, Tome VI: Salvation to Writing*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), pp. 75–82.
[3] SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

myself, as being so. As C. Stephen Evans formulates it: "A spirit is a being that (at least partially) defines itself or helps to create its own identity."[4]

Self-consciousness can appear in varying degrees and modes; Merold Westphal notes that even when the self is unaware of having or being a self, this is not a complete absence of self-awareness since one can also be "self-conscious only in 'sensate' categories rather than those of spirit."[5] One can be aware, for instance, that one is hungry. Animals are self-aware in that sense too, without it becoming a matter of actively self-relating. But the pseudonymous Anti-Climacus' emphasis in *Sickness* is specifically on self-consciousness in categories of spirit. Thus he declares, "to be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is" and "not to be conscious of oneself as spirit—is despair, which is spiritlessness."[6] Only the human is capable of despair: "The possibility of [despair] is man's superiority over the animal, and this superiority distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit."[7] What is at issue for Anti-Climacus, as a matter of defining the human, is the capacity to relate to oneself in particular ways that involve higher-order mental activity.

But as several recent scholars have suggested, Kierkegaard's definition of the human in *Sickness* has some limitations. These can become apparent when one considers various forms of mental disability, for instance. Christopher Craig Brittain asserts that "Kierkegaard's emphasis on inwardness and subjective awareness is not immediately translatable to the conditions of mental disability."[8] Joshua Cockayne puts the point more strongly, asserting that "a straightforward reading of *Sickness* suggests that Kierkegaard would think of those with cognitive disabilities as similar to non-human animals."[9] Cockayne affirms the need for what he calls a "constructive amendment" to Kierkegaard's

[4] C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard and Spirituality: Accountability as the Meaning of Human Existence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), p. 15.
[5] Merold Westphal, "Divine Givenness and Self-Givenness in Kierkegaard" in Jeffrey Hanson, ed., *Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist: An Experiment* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. 46.
[6] SKS 11, 141 / SUD, 25. SKS 11, 159–160 / SUD, 44–45.
[7] SKS 11, 131 / SUD, 15.
[8] Christopher Craig Brittain, "Between Necessity and Possibility: Kierkegaard and the Abilities and Disabilities of Subjectivity" in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), p. 298.
[9] Joshua Cockayne, "Disability, Anthropology, and Flourishing with God: A Kierkegaardian Account" in *Religions* 11 (2020): p. 189, https://doi:10.3390/rel11040189.

anthropology as articulated in *Sickness*. In offering such an amendment, Cockayne has recourse to *Works of Love* and to the category of the neighbor.[10]

My focus in this article will not be on mental disability (though I hope to consider such issues in subsequent work). But while I am very sympathetic to Cockayne's goals, my sense is that his turn to *Works of Love* shifts the textual grounds of the argument away from the question of defining the human being. Kierkegaard deliberately avoids that question in *Works of Love*, where it appears in the form of the question of who our neighbor may be. Just as Christ did not answer this question, neither does Kierkegaard: the focus is not on identifying or knowing the neighbor but on becoming a neighbor oneself.[11] Kierkegaard does provide some initial thoughts, to be sure: "The word is obviously derived from 'nearest'; thus the neighbor is the person who is nearer to you than anyone else, yet not in the sense of preferential love . . . the concept 'neighbor' is actually the redoubling of your own self."[12] But Kierkegaard avoids analyzing further either neighbor or self, and instead refers to Christ's refusal to define the neighbor. Cockayne's analysis of inferences that we can draw on the basis of Kierkegaard's various examples of neighbors is cogent and well argued, but it occurs at the cost of distorting Kierkegaard's explicit focus on an ethical rather than an anthropological-definitional issue.

I propose that we are on firmer textual ground when we turn to Kierkegaardian texts that take up, rather than reject, the question of an anthropological definition, and that can therefore provide a more direct amendment to the argument of *Sickness*. The texts I propose to consider are Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses on the lily and the bird from Matthew 6, in which the issue of defining the human vis-à-vis the animal (and plant) is an explicit focus. I follow Frances Maughan-Brown in identifying four sets of such discourses. I also follow both Maughan-Brown and David Kangas in asserting the philosophical significance of the upbuilding discourses even as they are written in such a way that tools and techniques of literary analysis are essential to draw out that significance.[13] When Brittain asserted that there is some difficulty in making sense of mental disability with Kierkegaardian conceptions, he also added that Kierkegaard's treatment of "the grace and beauty of the 'birds of the air'" does offer directions that could be pursued

[10] Ibid.
[11] SKS 9, 29–30 / WL, 22.
[12] SKS 9, 28–29 / WL, 21.
[13] David Kangas, *Errant Affirmations: On the Philosophical Meanings of Kierkegaard's Religious Discourses* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Frances Maughan-Brown, *The Lily's Tongue: Figure and Authority in Kierkegaard's Lily Discourses* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

further.[14] He does not elaborate. But in my view, it is not the birds' grace and beauty that are most helpful, but rather Kierkegaard's wrestling with the definition of "spirit" and with the definition of the human being as he follows, repeatedly, the gospel injunction to consider the lilies and the birds.

The first set of lily-bird discourses is comprised of three discourses in "What We Learn from the Lilies in the Field and from the Birds of the Air" in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, written in the fall of 1846 (published March 13, 1847). The second set involves seven discourses in "The Cares of the Pagans" in *Christian Discourses*, written near the end of 1847 (published April 26, 1848). The third set is found in *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air,* written during the second half of 1848 (published May 14, 1849), and the final discourse is "Christ as Prototype, or No One Can Serve Two Masters" in *Judge for Yourself!*, written in 1851–1852. Notably, the first two sets of lily-bird discourses were composed before the writing of *Sickness* (which took place in the spring of 1848), and the third and fourth sets were composed afterwards.

Taken as a whole, Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses reveal a development of thought that can be charted as a movement away from a definition of the human as spirit in the sense of higher-order mental capacity, and toward a definition of the human as spirit in the sense of having been given life in particular modalities that shape a pre-reflective form of intelligent awareness. In the earliest lily-bird discourses, spirit is a qualification of the human and is absent in nature; by the time of the latest lily-bird discourse, Kierkegaard asserts baldly that "surely there is spirit in nature" too. This is one textual marker of the conceptual distance Kierkegaard traverses in these discourses. A second is to be found in his very different invocations of the Socratic discussion of the human being's erect walk and upright head as markers of the human. In the 1846/47 discourses, Kierkegaard invokes that discussion only to discount it and emphasize that it is spirit that truly distinguishes us from the animals. But in the discourse of 1851/52, Kierkegaard affirms aspects of that discussion even as he gives it his own interpretation: the shape of our head and neck *is* the start of what makes us human, because it allows us to look up to the sky and to acquire a pre-conscious awareness of a dimension of absolute height and thus of the unconditional. This awareness is what he now calls "spirit." In this way, Kierkegaard's developing thought begins to anticipate aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of bodily intentionality, in which my presence in the world already has an

[14] Brittain, "Between Necessity and Possibility," p. 298.

intelligent orientation prior to conscious thought.[15] Our task to become a human being, for Kierkegaard in the later lily-bird discourses, requires that we move beyond the higher-order capacities of self-aware thought that have a tendency to obscure this pre-reflective awareness of the unconditional. Higher-order mental capacities are no longer foundational for what it means to be human.

A word on method. There are many ways to read Kierkegaard, but for purposes of this article my method is to treat Kierkegaard as "a kind of poet"[16] whose figures of speech and (sometimes unelaborated) word choices are just as important as his explicit argumentative claims in performing conceptual work. I contend that these texts reward an engagement that involves the close reading of literary analysis as well as philosophical analysis, both with respect to what the texts say and do and also with respect to how they open on to additional philosophical questions. Aside from taking *Sickness* as a familiar reference point, I am unconcerned to articulate where and how the conceptions in Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses align with or depart from others of Kierkegaard's texts; that would be a separate and subsequent project.

1. "What We Learn From the Lilies in the Field and From the Birds of the Air"

In these earliest lily-bird discourses, Kierkegaard's definition of the human being is closely aligned with what will become the definition in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Kierkegaard addresses the question in the second of these three discourses, and much of the focus centers on how the human differs from the animal. The first assertion is that the human being has been isolated in a way that animals have not: "God isolated the human being, made every human being this separate and distinct individual . . . The individual animal is not isolated, is no unconditionally separate entity; the individual animal is a number and belongs under what that most famous pagan thinker has called the animal category: the crowd."[17] The category of isolation here anticipates Kierkegaard's discussion of spirit a few pages later. But first, Kierkegaard invokes Socrates' (Plato's) account of the glory of the human body in its distinguishing features. Socrates, Kierkegaard asserts, saw "the upright walk" as "the distinguishing mark of being human," and also marveled

[15] Cf. Ronald L Hall's argument that spirit for Kierkegaard emerges in or from nature dynamically. "The Origin of Alienation: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12.2 (1981): pp. 111–122, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00135377.
[16] Cf. Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).
[17] SKS 8, 287 / UD, 190.

at "the ingeniousness of the human eye and even more over expression in the eyes, because the animal has eyes but only the human being has expression in the eyes."[18] Thus in Greek, Kierkegaard says, the human being is called "the upright" with a double meaning: "First, that the human frame is erect and upright like the straight tree trunk and, next, that the erect and upright being directs his vision upward."[19] The consequence of this upward vision is that man can see higher than the mountains and therefore is "commanding," which is also suggested by the fact that the human being has hands, "for the ruler, after all, stretches out his hand when he commands."[20]

This description of the glory of the human body proceeds from the Socratic claim that the soul weaves the body as its clothing.[21] But Kierkegaard insists that this claim shows that Socratic discourse is not adequately aware of God.[22] Invoking the scriptural declaration that God created the human being in his image, Kierkegaard insists that we resemble God not in our visible features, but in our qualification as spirit. "God is spirit, is invisible, and the image of invisibility, of course, is invisibility . . . the image of God is explicitly the invisible glory . . . To be spirit, that is the human being's invisible glory."[23] The pagan Greek sought likeness to the gods in ruling, but our true resemblance with God is to be understood inversely: what makes the human being resemble God is not ruling as he rules but rather worshipping him as the sole ruler. "Only when God has infinitely become the eternal and omnipresent object of worship and the human being always a worshiper, only then do they resemble each other."[24] To seek to resemble God by ruling is to seek to *replace* God. But worshipping and praising the Creator, which is "something nature cannot do,"[25] is an invisible glory that makes manifest our resemblance to God.

The capacities of invisible spirit also include an ability to consider the future. Here the earlier idea of the human being's isolation returns: to be spirit or consciousness is also to be isolated and individuated in a way that animals cannot be. Though we are "earthbound,"[26] the human being as consciousness is also "the place where the eternal and the

[18] SKS 8, 288 / UD, 190–191.
[19] Ibid.
[20] SKS 8, 288 / UD, 191.
[21] SKS 8, 288 / UD, 190.
[22] SKS 8, 289 / UD, 191.
[23] SKS 8, 289–290 / UD, 192–193.
[24] SKS 8, 290 / UD, 193.
[25] Ibid.
[26] SKS 8, 269 / UD, 170.

temporal continually touch each other, where the eternal is refracted in the temporal."[27] Having the eternal in our consciousness, we can be weighed down by time in a way that animals cannot, and we can also become worried and anxious about the future. It is a human perfection to be able to have such a worry, but the task is to follow Jesus, the divine prototype, in having the consciousness of being without a nest and "in that situation to be free from care."[28] Similarly, it is a human perfection above the animal to be able to work as God's co-worker.[29]

Thus, whereas Socrates' distinguishing markers for the human being are the upright walk, the expressive eye that can look above the mountains, and the hand of the ruler, for Kierkegaard the distinguishing mark is spirit as an individuating consciousness that is the site of a self-relating intersection between the eternal and the temporal. Spirit is set over against nature and the resulting isolation of the individual is set over against number, the category of the animal. Of course, it is possible to fall into worries and into comparisons with others, and in so doing we fail to live up to the glory of the human being. But the possible glory is there.

Such conceptions of the human are quite similar to those in *The Sickness Unto Death*. I must be fully conscious of "being without a nest" and then must consciously choose to worry or not to worry in the sense here described; otherwise I am not isolated in the way Kierkegaard celebrates here and may not fit into the definition of the human. But after this initial position, Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses begin to pursue a different direction.

2. "The Cares of the Pagans" in *Christian Discourses*

The operative distinction is now a tripartite one. Rather than the binary opposition of human versus nature, what matters now are differences between the pagan, the Christian, and the realm of nature. The lily and the bird make clear what paganism is and what its cares are but without being pagans themselves, since they do not have those cares even as they have comparable necessities. They also make clear what a Christian is without themselves being Christian: "If you live as the lily and bird live, then you are a Christian—which the lily and the bird neither are nor can become."[30] The distinction here is due, as

[27] SKS 8, 292 / UD, 195.
[28] SKS 8, 293 / UD, 197.
[29] SKS 8, 295 / UD, 198–199.
[30] SKS 10, 21 / CD, 9.

before, to the higher-order capacities of self-relating and of understanding that make us human, and also now to human language that is a marker of those capacities. But now the word "spirit" no longer refers to those capacities as such, but rather to the right use of them. Thus it is not the realm of nature that is "spiritless," but rather paganism, and the right use of such capacities is now, in part, to refuse to employ them.

The Christian lives on "the daily bread" and in that resembles the bird, yet unlike the bird, the Christian also prays for bread and gives thanks for it. Praying and giving thanks "is human language in the most profound sense,"[31] and through it the Christian enters into a relationship with God. Thus when the bread comes, it is known to come from God. The Christian is consciously aware of her distinction from the birds: "He believes that a human being is not differentiated from the bird by his inability to live on just as little but by his inability to live 'on bread alone'"[32]—a reference to the scriptural passage declaring that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). The satisfaction of her need comes, as she knows, by blessing from God, and what the Christian truly seeks is not the satisfaction but the blessing, while the bird merely seeks to be satisfied.[33] The Christian is thus more "alive" than any bird, in the sense that she not only lives but also understands the conditions of her life and enters into a relation with her creator.[34] The bird is like an infant not yet separated from its mother and is an example of light-mindedness in comparison to the Christian, serving a master whom it does not know.[35] The bird is simply what it is, but the Christian *becomes* a Christian.[36] Aware of God as prototype and of her own continual need for God, the Christian is able to work for her daily bread as God's co-worker, while the bird does not work and the pagan "slaves" rather than works.[37]

The Christian is thus "wide awake, awake to God," while the bird is "innocently ignorant" and the pagan is "spiritlessly ignorant."[38] Kierkegaard emphasizes several times this distinction in types of ignorance.[39] The bird is perfectly obedient to God's will but is

[31] SKS 10, 33–34 / CD, 22.
[32] SKS 10, 27 / CD, 15.
[33] Ibid.
[34] SKS 10, 28 / CD, 16.
[35] SKS 10, 46 / CD, 35. SKS 10, 71 / CD, 62.
[36] SKS 10, 52 / CD, 41.
[37] SKS 10, / CD, 21.
[38] SKS 10, 73 / CD, 64.
[39] SKS 10, 70 / CD, 61. Cf. SKS 10, 75 / CD, 66–67.

incapable of knowing him; it is therefore innocent but not spiritless. The pagan is capable of knowing God but does not in fact know him and is not perfectly obedient. To be "spiritlessly" ignorant is to misuse and thus to lose spirit: Kierkegaard also characterizes it as a matter of "desouling" oneself and as a matter of the "light of the spirit" having gone out.[40] One is then "enslaved to the earth" rather than a traveler as both the bird and the Christian are.[41]

The central form of enslavement at issue for Kierkegaard occurs when we try, as the pagan may do, to live "the next day" today.[42] The bird has no next day in this sense, while we have the task of getting rid of it.[43] Of course it is a human perfection to be capable of contemplating the future (as it was also in the earlier discourses). But with the distinction between the pagan and the Christian, both of whom are capable of this but one of whom is "spiritless," Kierkegaard introduces the idea that we are summoned to become *post-capable* and implicitly aligns this with the Christian opposite of spiritlessness. He employs here an image of disability: the God-fearing person "limps after having wrestled with God" (a reference to Jacob's limp in Genesis 32:22–32).[44] This limp is a figure for our work (including our prayer and thanksgiving) in view of the awareness that we need God, and it is at the same time also a figure for our getting rid of the next day. Kierkegaard aligns Jacob's limp with an actor blinded by lighting and with a rower sitting with his back to his goal. In each case, one foregoes capacities that might seem to provide an advantage in order to become "properly positioned":

> To be properly positioned, to take the correct position, is important for everything in life . . . It is well known that the actor, blinded as he is by the effect of the lighting, faces the deepest darkness, the blackest night. Now, one would think that this must disturb him, make him uneasy. But no, ask him, and you will hear; he himself admits that precisely this supports him, calms him . . . So also with the next day. At times we lament and find it sad that the future lies so dark before us. Ah, the misfortune is precisely when it is not dark enough, when fear and presentiment and expectancy and earthly impatience catch a glimpse of the next day!
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> The one who rows a boat turns his back to the goal toward which he is working. So it is with the next day. When, with the help of the eternal, a person lives absorbed in today, he turns his back to the next day. The more he is eternally absorbed in today, the more decisively he turns

[40] SKS 10, 56, 87 / CD, 47, 78–79. SKS 10, 97 / CD, 90.
[41] SKS 10, 45 / CD, 34.
[42] SKS 10, 86–87 / CD, 78–79.
[43] SKS 10, 80 / CD, 71.
[44] SKS 10, 76 / CD, 67.

> his back to the next day; then he does not see it at all. When he turns around, the eternal becomes confused before his eyes and becomes the next day. But when, in order to work toward the goal (eternity) properly, he turns his back, he does not see the next day at all, whereas with the help of the eternal he sees today and its tasks with perfect clarity. But if the work today is to be done properly, a person must be turned in this way.[45]

Jacob's limp, the actor's inability to see, and the back-turned rower are all self-inflicted limitations from a pagan or "spiritlessly ignorant" perspective. But they are actually markers of properly positioning ourselves. Earlier, it was assumed that we can and should employ our full human capacities of consciousness in being aware of the future in order then to choose to remain without care. Now, the summons is to move beyond our conscious mental capacities and even turn our back to them, because they can confuse us. Moving beyond them can look very similar to not having them at all: the bird can look a lot like the Christian, both of whom, as noted above, are characterized equally as "travelers" on the earth. But of course the distinction remains firm because the Christian becomes that way by positioning herself properly in conscious awareness of God, while the bird simply is so without knowing God in the way the Christian can.

3. "The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air"

The discourses discussed so far were all written prior to the composition of *The Sickness Unto Death*, which occurred in the spring of 1848. This third set, however, was composed afterwards and involves a major innovation of thought. These discourses continue to assume that we have a capacity for self-aware, conscious reflection that the bird does not, while still pursuing the idea of becoming "post-capable" by also insisting that we must silence the activities of that understanding. But whereas the earlier discourses emphasized that the lily and bird were obedient to the master without knowing him, now they "know" and "understand" a great deal, including God. This language now anticipates Connor Cunningham's argument, in his study of Darwin's idea of evolution, that something analogous to intelligence has to be assumed in the way even plant life adapts to its environment.[46] Kierkegaard's thought is reaching for an articulation of the lily's and the bird's knowledge as a pre-conscious intelligent orientation toward the world and one's

[45] SKS 10, 82 / CD, 73.

[46] Connor Cunningham, *Darwin's Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), pp. 163ff.

tasks in it. "However simple the lily and the bird are," he writes, "they are not thoughtless," and there are "thought-categories" expressed in their actions.[47]

In the previous set of lily-bird discourses, Kierkegaard had claimed that praying and giving thanks were the highest forms of language, and such language use was appropriate and fitting as part of our becoming God's co-workers. But here, Kierkegaard disparages even "the verbosity [*Ordrigdom*] of thanksgiving"[48] and insists that what we must do is not speak but be silent:

> Surely it is speech that distinguishes humanity above the animal and then, if you like, far above the lily. But because the ability to speak is an advantage, it does not follow that the ability to be silent would not be an art or would be an inferior art. . . . Speech is the human being's advantage over the animal—yes, quite true, if he is able *to be silent*.[49]

Earlier, humans were said to resemble God in that we are spirit like him, and language was a marker of our special kinship. But here, speaking is not treated as a resemblance with God, and Kierkegaard speaks only ironically of the advantage of language. Our speaking, which is intimately associated with our conscious thought, is now a marker of our *distance* from God: "God is infinite wisdom; what the human knows is idle chatter; therefore they can hardly converse. God is love and the human being, as we say to a child, is a little ninny even in regard to his own welfare, and therefore they can hardly converse. Only in much fear and trembling is a human being able to speak with God."[50]

Nothing of the earlier emphasis on our kinship with God is retained. In the earliest lily-bird discourses, the bird is from the start more distant from God than we are, while in *Christian Discourses* we are capable of being either nearer to God than the bird (as Christians) or else further away (as pagans). But now, the lily and the bird are emphatically closer to God than we: humans chatter, but God is "out there with the lily and the bird, where there is silence and also something divine in this silence."[51] The earlier distinction between human awareness and the bird's ignorance is eradicated as the bird now "knows" and "understands" many things, especially the all-important moment for action in perfect obedience:

[47] SKS 11, 42 / WA, 38.
[48] SKS 11, 17 / WA, 11.
[49] SKS 11, 16 & 18 / WA, 10 & 12.
[50] SKS 11, 17 / WA, 11.
[51] SKS 11, 18 / WA, 13.

> The bird is *silent and waits*. It knows, or rather it fully and firmly believes, that everything takes place in its time; therefore the bird waits. But it knows that it is not entitled to know the time or day; therefore it is silent . . . When the moment comes, the silent bird understands that this is the moment; it uses it and is never disappointed.[52]

The same is true for the lily, who does not impatiently ask when spring will come but "knows that spring will come in due season . . . then comes the moment, and when the moment comes, the silent lily understands that now is the moment, and it makes use of it."[53]

These descriptions of the lily and the bird as knowing, understanding, and making use of the moment would have been impossible in the conceptual structure of the earlier lily-bird discourses. Kierkegaard is now finding in the lily and the bird a mode of living that is explicitly a possibility for the human being as well. The fact that we have to *become* silent, whereas the lily and the bird simply *are* so, continues to highlight a difference between the human and the animal, but the difference is now framed not as a matter of higher human capabilities that we might misuse, but rather as a matter of intrinsically damaging capabilities that keep us distant from God unless we can learn to silence them. The higher-order understanding that had been associated with spirit is here simply a matter of chattering. This is why Kierkegaard emphasizes that worldly human life demonstrates only "in a sad way" that speech distinguishes us from the animals.[54] We must learn to silence not only our tongue but our sagacity and human reasoning, which is itself merely a form of witty but empty chatter:

> Therefore you are not to say, "The lily and the bird, it is easy for them to be obedient; after all, they cannot do anything else . . . ." You are not to speak this way; you are to say nothing at all, you are to be silent and obey, so that, if it really is true that the lily and the bird make a virtue of necessity, you also might succeed in making a virtue of necessity. You, too, are indeed subject to necessity.
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> "But," you say, "the lily and the bird, they have it easy." Answer: Do not come with any "but"—but learn from the lily and the bird to become completely present to yourself in being today; then you, too, are joy. But as stated, no "but"; because this is earnestness, you *shall* learn joy from the lily and the bird. Even less may you become self-important, so that you, because the lily and the bird are simple, perhaps in order to feel that you are a human being, become witty

[52] SKS 11, 19 / WA, 13.
[53] SKS 11, 19–20 / WA, 14.
[54] SKS 11, 18 & 15 / WA, 12 & 9.

> and, speaking of a particular tomorrow, say: The lily and the bird, they have it easy, they who do not even have tomorrow to be plagued by.[55]

Noting that the lily and the bird do not have a tomorrow, while we do, was not idle chatter in the earlier discourses. It was a key point of difference, though of course we also had the task of getting rid of the next day. But now, any reasoning that seeks to identify how the human differs from nature by focusing on higher-order mental activity is decried as an attempt to evade the gospel injunction to learn from the lily and the bird. What was "spirit" in the earliest lily-bird discourses is now empty chatter and idle witticism.

Thus Kierkegaard systematically removes his own earlier emphasis on distinguishing between a humanity that can know God and a nature that cannot. Before, the lily and the bird were incapable of worship because they could not know God; now they are explicitly described as worshippers who seek God's kingdom first.[56] Earlier, the bird was incapable of working, but now "it knows that this is God's will" and "only has to do its work."[57] Earlier, the lily was incapable of care, but now in contrast it is "unconditionally free of care" because it is able to find the unconditioned.[58]

Kierkegaard does still keep in reserve a form of human perfection above the lily and the bird, adding at one point in parentheses that "if you have learned [what you are supposed to learn] thoroughly, you have become the more perfect one, so that the lily and the bird change from being the teacher to being the metaphor [*Billedet*]."[59] He does not explain the nature of our greater perfection, though it presumably has something to do with the two action verbs given, our abilities to learn and to become. He also does not explain the posited temporality of our changing relation to the lily and the bird, who are first teachers and then only later metaphors.

My elaboration of Kierkegaard's distinction, accepting for now the Hongs' translation of *Billedet* as "the metaphor," runs as follows. A metaphor always involves some form of carrying over, a transferal of attributes proper to one entity onto another, enabled by an identified point or area of similarity embedded in a more general recognition of the gap or the difference that the transfer is traversing. The potency and effectiveness of a metaphor depend in part on that gap always remaining a gap: we come to see an illuminating

[55] SKS 11, 34, 43 / WA, 29–30, 39. Cf. also SKS 11, 22 / WA, 17.
[56] SKS 11, 22 & 24 / WA, 16 & 19.
[57] SKS 11, 32 & 33 / WA, 28 & 29.
[58] SKS 11, 32 / WA, 27.
[59] SKS 11, 36 / WA, 32.

commonality only against the backdrop of a basic and enduring difference. In contrast, while there is also a transfer or carrying-over of a kind in the relation between a master and a learner or apprentice, this transfer is of a very different sort: it is a matter of imitation intended to *reduce* or *eliminate* the gap between master and apprentice. What the teacher-model does, the pupil-apprentice should do, and often in precisely the same way. The apprentice's task, certainly in the context of these Kierkegaardian discourses, is to find her way to taking the master's way of doing things as her own starting point. That is what must come first in our relation to the lily and the bird: we must not begin with the assumption that we have a different starting point (say, spirit), but we must arrive at a recognition that we have, or need to (re-)gain, the *same* starting point, which in this case is the pre-reflective but intelligent knowledge and orientation Kierkegaard now identifies in the lily and the bird. As we do so, arriving at the same starting point and thus learning thoroughly what we need to learn from them, we also discover, but subsequently, that there are some differences between us after all, not unlike an apprentice who becomes a master in her own right and discovers her own way of acting as such. At that point, the bird's way of life becomes a mere poetic figure or metaphor for us—a carrying-over across a gap of difference—instead of a model. The point is that the bird becomes a metaphor only *after* we have made the bird's way of being our own starting point.

What is that starting point exactly? What the lily and bird model and teach is unconditional submission to "the place assigned."[60] This submission is not at all a matter of despairing resignation, but is rather a matter of doing one's work without any regard to how conducive or unconducive to that work the place assigned may be. Kierkegaard writes:

> If the place assigned to the lily is as unfortunate as possible, so that it is easy to foresee that it will be utterly superfluous all its life and not be noticed by a single one who could find joy in it, if the place and the surroundings are so "desperately" . . . unfortunate that it is not only unsought but is avoided—the obedient lily obediently submits to its conditions and blossoms in all its beauty.[61]

Kierkegaard writes of the bird's migratory flight in the same vein, as an unconditional submission to the unconditional that he now calls the moment:

[60] SKS 11, 31 / WA, 27.
[61] Ibid.

> If, when the moment comes to fly away, the bird is ever so certain that its present situation is good just as it is, so that by flying away it will let go of the certain in order to grasp the uncertain—yet the obedient bird immediately starts out on its journey. Simply, with the help of unconditional obedience, it understands only one thing but understands it unconditionally—that now is the unconditional moment.[62]

The bird and the lily both see their assigned place and are aware of their task at each moment: to wait, to bloom, to make a nest, to fly, and in doing so to worship God and be his co-worker.

This unconditional submission to the place assigned and to the moment is an expansion and further development of Kierkegaard's earlier emphasis on being "earthbound."[63] It is merely the idle wish of a poet, Kierkegaard writes, to wish to be like the bird so one is free to fly away instead of "being bound and fettered and nailed to the spot."[64] For we *are* assigned to our spot and to our moment—the bird is too, though the poet does not recognize this—and it does no good to wish it were otherwise. The charge is to submit unconditionally to this and thus to find the moment in which to pursue the task that is ours, unconcerned with wishing our circumstances were otherwise. The bird does no differently. Yet our assigned places and moments do differ from it, which is why the bird eventually becomes a mere metaphor. They differ in that we, unlike the bird, are capable of ambivalence about doing God's will and have to make choices. Kierkegaard writes:

> There are two powers: God and the world, good and evil; and the reason a human being can serve only one master is undoubtedly that these two powers, even though the one power is infinitely stronger, are in mortal combat with each other. This enormous danger, in which a person is by being human—which the lily and the bird in their unconditional obedience, which is happy innocence, escape, since neither God and the world nor good and evil are fighting over them—this enormous danger, that a *human being* is placed between these two enormous powers and the choice is left up to him, this enormous danger is what entails that one must either love or hate, that not to love is to hate.[65]

That we must make choices is *not* fundamentally an issue of self-relating and higher-order mental activity. Our need to make choices is presented emphatically here as a matter of how we are placed. Kierkegaard then suggests further that our conscious understanding

[62] SKS 11, 33 / WA, 29.
[63] SKS 8, 269 / UD, 170.
[64] SKS 11, 13 / WA, 7.
[65] SKS 11, 37–38 / WA, 34.

of how and where we are placed comes only after we start making choices. We do not first understand our position and then choose deliberatively and reflectively; rather, we are first in the position of needing to choose, and must submit unconditionally to that position and make a choice. Only later can we come reflectively to understand our placement or position. Indeed, it is only a particular choice—for the good in obedience to God—that enables us to arrive later at a true understanding: "The Gospel knows very well that the way things go is not that a person first understands that what it says is so and then decides to obey unconditionally, but the reverse, that by unconditionally obeying he first comes to understand that it is as the Gospel says."[66] Kierkegaard is beginning to suggest here not only that we have to make choices regarding "God and the world, good and evil" before our higher-order mental capacities are capable of providing us with a reflective understanding of reality, but also that our pre-reflective choices affect the very operation of those mental abilities, for better or for worse.

The lily and bird obey unconditionally on the basis of a pre-conscious awareness of God and of their task that is expressed in how they act. There is no "light-mindedness" in the lily or the bird, Kierkegaard now writes,[67] in direct contrast to his earlier claim in *Christian Discourses* that the bird is a model precisely of light-mindedness.[68] Similarly, our pre-reflective choices are also not a matter of light-mindedness. It is the empty chatter and wit of self-conscious reflection that is light-minded. Our higher-order understanding is always only playing catch up and is easily misled if we have made the wrong choices. The more fundamental difference between the human and the bird is not reflective consciousness but our placement in a position of danger in which we must make a (pre-reflective) choice.

4. "Christ as Prototype, or No One Can Serve Two Masters" in *Judge for Yourself!*

In this final lily-bird discourse, written 1851–1852, what it means to be positioned as a human being is given further elaboration, and the word "spirit" is once again prominently invoked. But its meaning has changed considerably.

Kierkegaard writes that Christ used "the powers of omnipotence to ensure his continually being nothing" in what seems to have been an attempt "to force the human race to

[66] SKS 11, 38 / WA, 34–35.
[67] SKS 11, 42 / WA, 38.
[68] SKS 10, 33 / CD, 22.

take leave of its senses."[69] What Christ wanted was "to thrust upon [the human race], or to force into it, the qualification of being 'spirit,' something the human race has always considered a superfluity and, if this attempt is taken too far, has considered it necessary to defend itself for dear life against this lunatic, obsessed exaggeration that must come from someone who 'has a demon.'"[70] Spirit, in this understanding, is a dimension of existence beyond the customs and prudential rules of social life. When it is thrust upon us, it fundamentally changes in potentially painful ways "what it means to be a human being."[71] Christ, for Kierkegaard here, shows us what "spirit" is when he draws attention to himself as the extraordinary and then insists on refusing every high worldly position, declaring instead that his kingdom is not of this world. Christ embodied, as our prototype for living a life of spirit, what it means that "no one can serve two masters."[72] Our socialized mode of thought and experience expresses a belief that we *can* serve two or even more masters. But spirit is an awareness of the unconditional in distinction to the conditionalities of our worldly relations and thus in distinction to the human wisdom of moderation and prudence.

Part of Christ's effort to make us spirit involves directing our attention to the lilies and the birds. Here Kierkegaard finds "spirit" again, now in nature: "Pay attention to the lily and the bird! Surely there is spirit [*Aand*] in nature—especially when the Gospel inspirits [*beaander*] it, because then nature is pure symbol [*Sindbillede*] and pure instruction for man; it, too, is inspired [*indblæst*] by God and is 'profitable for instruction, for reproof, for correction.'"[73] The claim that there is spirit in nature is directly opposed to his assertions in the first set of lily-bird discourses, where spirit was what distinguished the human being from nature. In part, Kierkegaard is making a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference to the recently-published work *The Spirit in Nature* by the physicist Hans Christian Ørsted,[74] and he immediately then invokes Paul's words about scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17) to serve as a kind of corrective: spirit is in nature, yes, but not in quite the physical-materialist way Ørsted may think. Rather, it is "blown in" or "inspirited" by God. This inspiriting of nature is comparable to Christ's thrusting of spirit upon the human race, though human beings, unlike nature, put up resistance to it. Yet the claim that the

[69] SKS 16, 223 / FSE, 175.
[70] Ibid.
[71] SKS 16, 225 / FSE, 177.
[72] Matthew 6:24, often quoted in this discourse. Cf. SKS 16, 227 / FSE, 179.
[73] SKS 16, 230 / FSE, 182.
[74] Hans Christian Ørsted, *Aanden i Naturen* (Copenhagen: Andr. Fred. Høft, 1850).

inspiriting of nature makes it become "pure symbol and pure instruction" for the human being can appear to suggest that nature itself may not gain an awareness of the unconditional, and that Kierkegaard is returning to his early emphasis on a reflective higher-order consciousness enabling human beings to know God while nature cannot. Yet I argue that Kierkegaard is not in fact making such a return, for two reasons.

First, this discourse is clearly intent elsewhere on maintaining an emphasis on nature itself having an awareness of the unconditional. Kierkegaard's implicit reference to Ørsted's title is not merely meant tongue-in-cheek. Ørsted's claim that there is spirit in nature is highly amenable to Kierkegaard's own concerns already articulated in the previous set of lily-bird discourses: there, the lily and the bird "knew" and "understood" things; here, similarly, the bird "speaks" to sorrow and is able to be happy and clever, while the lily is "pensive" but also happy, having its own jests with sorrow.[75] In part this is personification—sorrow, too, is represented as speaking—but such language is not, for Kierkegaard, solely an instance of an anthropomorphizing metaphor that may paste human characteristics onto the lily and bird without much attention to their own way of being. The lily's and the bird's ways of being show that they know and understand things, and this can now, for Kierkegaard borrowing from Ørsted, be called "spirit." As already mentioned, Kierkegaard's later lily-bird discourses anticipate aspects of Cunningham's argument that something akin to intelligence must be assumed in the way animal and even plant life adapts to its environment. But what Cunningham calls adaption, following Darwin, is for Kierkegaard not a matter of the species but of the action of each lily or bird. This adaption to the environment is characterized in Kierkegaard's vocabulary as a matter of unconditional obedience to the unconditional; the perception and relation to local environmental factors (the place assigned) are thoroughly saturated by an orientation toward the unconditional as the over-arching "environment" or context in which the lily and bird are always acting and to which they are always responding. That is how they exhibit what Kierkegaard earlier called "finding the moment" and now calls "mastery in living," and it is how they teach "the peace that is rest or resting in God."[76]

In the previous set of lily-bird discourses, the lily and the bird were first teachers and then subsequently mere metaphors [*Billeder*], and their status as metaphor was a marker of our greater human perfection after we learn from them what we need to learn. Here, however, once the lily and bird have become inspirited by God, they are at once both pure

[75] SKS 16, 229–230 / FSE, 181.
[76] SKS 16, 230, 229 / FSE, 182, 181.

symbol [*Sindbillede*] and pure instruction [*Lærdom*] for us, and they remain so. The movement from a role of teaching to that of merely illustrating is eliminated: the lily and bird now teach and illustrate continuously and simultaneously, though they are not *Billeder* here but *Sindbilleder*. In the companion discourse "Becoming Sober," Kierkegaard uses these two terms in a close juxtaposition that can clarify a distinction between them. He provides two figurative illustrations of what he means by becoming completely sober: one is a horse who becomes unconditionally still at the command of the royal coachman, and the other is the unconditional stillness of the weather just before a thunderstorm.[77] Kierkegaard introduces the image of the weather as *et andet Billede*, another illustration, suggesting that both horse and weather are *Billeder*.[78] Yet immediately upon acknowledging that the scriptural passage on which he is focusing (1 Peter 4:7) associates being sober with being vigilant, he leaves behind the image of the weather and returns to the horse, declaring that it is like a *Sindbillede* of how we are to be.[79] He elaborates briefly: the horse is not only unconditionally still but is unconditionally attentive to the royal coachman and ready to be obedient to his every command. The horse, in other words, is not only a figure that we can take as an illustration of being sober and vigilant, but *is itself* also sober and vigilant. In contrast, the still weather before a thunderstorm can illustrate such a way of being but cannot be said to be that way itself except as a matter of mere metaphor. In Kierkegaard's usage here, then, a *Sindbillede* is a particular type of *Billede* and is distinguished from the broader generic category by its being an actual instantiation of that which it is taken to illustrate. The horse is still only "somewhat a symbol" [*ligesom et Sindbillede*],[80] presumably because it is vigilant only in relation to the royal coachman and only so long as he is present, while we are to be so in relation to God and at all times. Kierkegaard provides no qualifying *ligesom* in "Christ as Prototype" when he calls the story of the boy Jesus going missing and then being found teaching in the temple a symbolic [*sindbilledligt*] description. That occurrence illustrates and at the same time instantiates Jesus' task of serving only one master.[81] Nor is there a qualifying *ligesom* with respect to

[77] SKS 16, 163–165 / FSE, 107–109.
[78] SKS 16, 164 / FSE, 108.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] SKS 16, 213 / FSE, 164. It is quite a different matter for Kierkegaard's story in "Becoming Sober" of a Bachelor of Theology who seeks above all a job and who then upon finally getting one delivers a sermon on seeking the kingdom of God first. This story is characterized as a *Billede*, an illustration that, as an invented

the lily and the bird, who are instead *sheer* or *complete* symbol, *idel Sindbillede*, at the same time that they are pure instruction too.[82]

The lily and bird became *Billeder* in the earlier lily-bird discourses after we learned from them unconditional submission to the place assigned. This is presumably because they subsequently no longer instantiate what they (still) illustrate once we complete our apprenticeship and discover that our assigned place is a different one. But now, in the context of the new idea that there is spirit in nature too, the lily and the bird are instruction and *Sindbillede* at the same time. They actually do what they are taken to illustrate: they act in unconditional awareness of and obedience to the unconditioned. Kierkegaard no longer finds any value in differentiating what they do from what we are to do; he has now completely rooted out the last vestiges of the earlier idea that one of the things to be learned from considering the lily and the bird is our greater human perfection (differences still remain, as discussed below, but they are no longer framed as a matter of greater or lesser perfection). Kierkegaard does insist that the lily and the bird "really do not express anything" uniquely their own, since only Christ "is the truth of what the lily and the bird symbolize [*sindbilledligt betegne*, describe or designate in the manner of a *Sindbillede*]."[83] Christ, of course, as Kierkegaard emphasizes repeatedly, is the prototype [*Forbilledet*]. This is yet another type of *Billede* or illustration, differing from other types in that it must always be in the singular[84] and it comes *before* (in multiple senses) what it illustrates. All that comes after it, both subsequent illustrations and our experienced realities themselves, merely follows its "footprints."[85] Thus, in comparison to the divine prototype, the lily and the bird are "only" symbolic [*kun sindbilledligt*] and are teachers without authority.[86] Nevertheless, to claim that the lily and bird do not express anything of their own is not to say that they have no awareness or understanding of the unconditional. Rather, it is another way to say that the spirit in them is from God ("blown in," *indblæst*). That they do have an awareness of the unconditional is precisely what enables them to be *Sindbilleder* rather than *Billeder* alone.

fable, may bring an idea vividly to life for us but does not itself instantiate what it is illustrating (SKS 16, 166 / FSE, 110).

[82] SKS 16, 230 / FSE, 182.

[83] SKS 16, 227 / FSE, 179.

[84] It is a mistake, Kierkegaard says, to try to take the lily and the bird as prototypes (in the plural, *Forbilleder*). SKS 16, 234 / FSE, 187.

[85] SKS 16, 199 / FSE, 147.

[86] SKS 16, 234 / FSE, 187.

The second reason I argue that Kierkegaard is not returning to his earlier emphasis on higher-order consciousness as that which differentiates the human from the animal has already been mentioned: that earlier emphasis had used the word "spirit" to describe such a consciousness, but now the word "spirit" is used in quite a different way. Jesus wants to thrust spirit upon a human race that already has spirit in the earlier sense; in addition, spirit is now blown into a nature that does not and cannot have spirit in that earlier sense. Spirit as awareness of the unconditional, as treated here, is of a different order than self-conscious awareness, with the consequence that higher-order mental activity is no longer crucial to the definition of the human. To articulate what replaces it, Kierkegaard returns to Socrates' definition of the human, which he had already mentioned in his first lily-bird discourses. He now engages with it quite differently, however.

What distinguishes human beings from the animals for Socrates involves the upright walk and the ability to gaze upward above the mountains. When he treated these ideas in 1846, Kierkegaard followed Socrates in claiming that these physical characteristics were understood as a manifestation of man's superiority and mastery. But then that entire train of thought became merely a foil for Kierkegaard to insist that really it is spirit, in the sense of higher-order mental capacities, that truly distinguishes us from the animal. Now, however, Socrates' description of uniquely human bodily features is not invoked merely as a foil but is affirmed, even as Kierkegaard gives his own meaning to it. The answer to the question of what it means to be human does indeed start with our body, but the key characteristics emphasized by Socrates are now framed without any relation to mastery. Instead, the point is that we are uniquely able to look up to the heavens, and so we can raise our head and eyes and be led to recognize that there is a dimension of height much greater than our own, indeed an absolute or unconditional height.[87] We can look higher than the mountains, but we cannot look higher than the sky. What we gain from looking up is now not an orientation of mastery over the earth but an orientation organized by our own placement below the heavens. This upward gaze is peculiar to the positioning or the emplacement we have been given as humans: the flower blooms, the bird takes flight, the human lifts the head and looks up.[88] We do not necessarily need to see anything when we do so; the very shape of our body and the movement of the head upward affords us an awareness of the greatest height or of the unconditional and our relation to it that is of a different order than our relative

[87] SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 183.
[88] SKS 16, 233 / FSE, 186.

positioning on the earth vis-à-vis other earthbound beings. Along with this awareness comes an orientation toward that greatest height, a (pre-reflective) understanding that our actions are and should be shaped in some way by our awareness of the unconditional. Thus Socrates' claims become in Kierkegaard's hands material for an anticipation of something like Merleau-Ponty's conception of bodily intentionality. This pre-reflective orientation also includes an awareness of the divine somewhat comparable to aspects of Heidegger's treatment of heaven and earth in his elucidations of poems by Hölderlin, though there is no space here to articulate all the connections and differences between them.[89] In any case, what we are to learn from the lily and the bird is how to arrive at or return to a pre-reflective but intelligent orientation to the world that includes an awareness of the unconditional and that arises in the first instance from our bodily shape.

By way of contrast, let us briefly consider one of Nietzsche's aphorisms in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche insists that the noble soul has no desire or need to look up:

> It may be a sublime art to let oneself be provisioned with gifts from above [*Geschenke von oben*] and to drink them up thirstily like drops of water, but for this art and gesture the noble soul has no aptitude. Its egoism provides a hindrance: it dislikes looking "up" at all—but either *in front* of itself, horizontally and slowly, or *down—it knows itself to be sky-high* [*sie weiß sich in der Höhe*].[90]

Nietzsche's noble soul already knows itself to be in the highest position and therefore dislikes looking up, which is presented here as a figurative action or gesture made in awareness of an "above" from which gifts may come (the figure for such gifts is rain). But for Kierkegaard, this is a ridiculous misunderstanding of the self: we are *not* in the sky and the very shape of our body enables (pre-reflective) awareness of the sky as the unconditionally highest and of our position below it. Nietzsche could be said to be invoking the orientation of mastery over the earth that Kierkegaard addressed in his discourses of 1846: the Nietzschean noble soul, looking only ahead or down, rules over all

[89] Cf. Heidegger's claim that "the earth is earth only as the earth of heaven; the heaven is heaven only insofar as it acts downward upon the earth" in "Hölderlin's Earth and Heaven," *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 186. One can compare and contrast this claim with Kierkegaard's insistence here that "God can no more be said to be the one who presses down than the arching sky can be said to press. No, the pressing down comes from the earth or from what in you is of the earth, but just as the arching sky lifts up, so God is the one who wants to lift up," SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 184.

[90] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* §265 in *Werke in drei Bänden* II, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1955), my translation. Cf. also *Morgenröte* §74 "Ein Vorschlag."

it sees. But this misses, for Kierkegaard now in 1851–1852, the effects on our pre-reflective orientation that come about when we look up *at the sky* instead of merely looking *above the mountain*. The difference is subtle but significant. To look above the mountain is to keep one's view within the confines of the conditions and relativities of one's earth-bound life and thus to become or remain enslaved to the earth even as we may think we are masters of it. To look at the sky is for Kierkegaard to become aware of the unconditionally highest and to incorporate—again, already pre-reflectively—an awareness of the unconditional into one's orientation toward life.

Kierkegaard does also register, like Nietzsche, that we may not like to look up so high. Christ's efforts to thrust spirit upon the human race is an effort, in these terms, to get us to look up, while our resistance to his efforts can stem from a (Nietzschean) preference for looking down or straight ahead. Yet it remains the case that our bodily constitution enables us to look up and that it is a movement or position already afforded us naturally if we make the choice to enact it, though we can obscure or override any impulse toward doing so through our self-conscious reasoning and language that all too often become idle, self-important chatter. Nietzsche's noble soul "knowing" itself to be sky-high can perhaps serve as an example of such idle talk. The previous discourses' descriptions of our needing to properly position ourselves, of our human situation of danger, and of our need to make choices even before the conscious understanding catches up, are figured here as a matter of whether we choose to look up at the sky: a simple act but not a thoughtless one, even before any conscious thinking.

Christ thrusting spirit upon us, then, is not the imposition of something alien to our nature but is an effort to help us overcome the obscuring and distorting effects both of our conscious self-awareness and of our social conditions. The lily and bird need no further lessons, but the gospel injunction to learn from them makes this a conscious lesson for us, because it is reflective consciousness that has obscured it from our view. Thus we are to "learn from the bird to lose [our] senses [*at gaae fra Forstanden*] in order to become a human being."[91] We cling to the wrong spirit (that of the earlier understanding of the term) and need to learn to let go of it and receive the right spirit that is to be found in nature as well. Yet we do not learn from the bird how to become a bird. The bird can fly, but we can lift our head and eyes to the heavens; our bodily constitution makes us differently (though equally) aware, pre-reflectively, of absolute heights. Because looking up

[91] SKS 16, 232 / FSE, 184.

suddenly from earth to heaven can seem "too vigorous a movement…too abrupt a transition,"[92] Kierkegaard suggests that we can begin by following the bird with our eyes as it launches itself upward off the ground. The bird's flight leads us to lift our head and our eyes are brought to the sky, at which point, Kierkegaard tells us, "you are in the proper position."[93] What matters, again, is the positioning and the pre-reflective orientation it provides, not seeing anything in particular. Now we are able to "lose our senses"—our abilities of language and of reflective understanding employed as our primary source of orientation—in order to find orientation through a pre-reflective awareness of absolute height and of our peculiarly human relation to it that is shaped by our bodily constitution.

5. Conclusion

Kierkegaard does not draw out all of the implications of the conceptualizations of "spirit" and of the human at which his lily-bird discourses arrive. But it is abundantly clear that they open conceptual space to articulate an amendment or even a corrective of sorts to the definition of the human in *The Sickness Unto Death*. If Joshua Cockayne turned to *Works of Love* to suggest such an amendment, I think we can also do so here, and I believe with stronger textual support insofar as the definition of the human is one of Kierkegaard's explicit interests in the lily-bird discourses. Kierkegaard's start with the shape of the head and neck, and then the pre-reflective awareness of the sky and orientation toward the highest, does not at all exclude from the realm of the human those who may be incapable of higher-order mental activity. Such higher-order activities are indeed precisely what get in the way and make necessary the further instruction that is found, for Kierkegaard, in the gospel injunction to consider the lilies and the birds and that is also found in Kierkegaard's own discourses.

One of the consequences of this conceptualization is that we can be or become less isolated from one another. In the first set of lily-bird discourses, Kierkegaard had championed precisely the "isolation" of human individuation. But in the final lily-bird discourse, the effect of spirit is no longer to make us isolated, but rather to help us discover the unconditioned along with what is assumed as our already well-developed awareness of the relative world of human conditional interaction. That relative world is a shared world, of course, and so too is the world of spirit in this later sense. It is the world we

[92] SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 183.
[93] SKS 16, 231 / FSE, 184.

share with the bird, the lily, and every other being under the heavens, even if not all are aware of it. Here, Kierkegaard begins to suggest, is where the truly human, in company with nature and with other human beings rather than in isolation from them, is to be found. The very constitution of our body can already open us to this shared world, and while our self-reflective consciousness may isolate us from it, it can be regained and then integrated with our social human world in such a way that it reorients our interactions there. This was the goal of Jesus' thrusting spirit upon us.

Considered strictly as conceptual ideas, these claims may have benefited from further elaboration. But I contend that part of their interest arises already from the way in which Kierkegaard arrived at them: through repeated returns to the lily and the bird. Kierkegaard, we can say, is trying, repeatedly, to look at the lilies and the birds in obedience to the gospel injunction and to let himself be oriented by them, allowing the injunction and what he sees to shape his reflections rather than the other way around. Only by unconditionally obeying, he writes in the third set of lily-bird discourses, can we "come to understand" rightly. Or in this case, only by also *repeatedly* obeying, though there is much of value in every one of the lily-bird discourses. My effort in this article to chart some of the modulations of Kierkegaard's thought lays bare his process of coming to understand the lily and the bird through repeated returns to them. One cannot remove that sense of "coming to understand," or abstract from the textual context of Kierkegaard's lily-bird discourses the final conceptualizations at which he arrived, without potentially losing much of their meaning and value.