The Gift of a Penny as “Counter-Experience” in Kierkegaard’s Discourses: Humility, Detachment, and the Hidden Significance of Things

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Abstract: This essay assesses the relevance of Søren Kierkegaard’s non-pseudonymous, edifying writings for considering themes of desire, detachment, and humility within the religious context of Christian spiritual formation. Building on the argument of recent scholars who identify in Kierkegaard’s writings an account of a fundamental desire for God “implanted” in the human being, I explore the influence of this vision on Kierkegaard’s depiction of desire and detachment in his “Discourses on the Lilies and the Birds”. I then turn to how this relates to the perspective of humility that emerges from Kierkegaard’s reflections on the biblical story of “the widow’s mite”. In each case, these edifying writings aim to stir the reader into a process of interrogating faulty self-perceptions based on arbitrary measures of value. I read this mode of communication as able to initiate a “counter-experience”, provoking the reader to reorient her horizon of prior self-valuations so she might come to recognize the hidden significance of things and, ultimately, achieve a more accurate sense of oneself in relation to the authentic source of the self’s desire. Insofar as this reorientation of the self informs the practice of detachment or the development of humility, people might experience this same process in diverse ways. In this respect, the relevance of Kierkegaard’s edifying writings for reflecting on Christian spirituality is not that they provide a thoroughgoing account of detachment or humility that should replace the insights of various spiritual traditions. Rather, I argue that his discourses—when read alongside these traditions—offer a supplemental resource for reflecting on how our positionalities, dispositions, and proximate contexts will inform the divergent ways we might experience the practice of detachment or the manifestation of humility in each new life circumstance.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; Marion; humility; detachment; the virtues; spirituality; spiritual formation; “counter-experience”

1. Introduction

In recent years, increased attention has been given to ways of relating Kierkegaard’s writings to an exploration of the virtues1 [1,2], and there is a small but growing body of work on Kierkegaard and humility2. See, for example, Puchniak [3]; Lippitt [4–7]; Stern [8]; Vaškovic [9]; and Roberts [10]. While Robert Puchniak has provided an overview of various references to humility (Ydmyghed) in Kierkegaard’s writings and offered an interpretation of what we might conclude about the resulting depiction of humility this overview yields, this essay is very different in scope and purpose. I limit my reading to a few select discourses, focusing on the relationship between humility and detachment. For this reason, I will also limit my commentary on the above accounts, attending only to those most relevant to our considerations here. For the sake of clarity of argument, I will also relegate my discussion of secondary literature to the footnotes [3–10]. This article will focus on what I see as the unique contribution of Kierkegaard’s edifying writings to a broader discussion of humility and detachment within a religious or theological context. It responds to the concern that recent theological accounts of Christian spiritual formation...
sometimes depict “detachment” or “humility” in a way that would entail the total absence of self-concern or self-interest—thereby overlooking the potential importance of such concern within a variety of lived spiritualities and contexts. Against the reading of some scholars who find in Kierkegaard’s *Upbuilding Discourses* an account of humility similarly characterized by the absence of self-concern or a pattern of attention that involves thinking less about oneself, I show how it is possible to read the discourses in a different way that offers a corrective to this characterization of humility and a resource to contemporary theologies of Christian spiritual formation.

In what follows, I first introduce relevant questions that surface for reflecting on humility and detachment within a religious or theological context. After situating my reading of Kierkegaard, I turn to interpret the discourse “What Blessed Promise in Being a Human Being”, which is the third and final discourse in Kierkegaard’s 1847 *Discourses on the Lilies and the Birds*. Building on the argument of recent scholars that identifies in Kierkegaard’s writings the depiction of a fundamental desire for God “implanted” in the human being, I show how such desire relates to an account of detachment inspired by the scriptural paradox of *gaining one’s life through losing it*[^4]. I then introduce the phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion’s account of paradox as “counter-experience”, employing to show how Kierkegaard’s vision of detachment relates to a depiction of humility that emerges from Kierkegaard’s reflections on the biblical story of “the widow’s mite” in “Against Cowardliness”. In each case, Kierkegaard’s reflections aim to stir the reader to question her faulty self-perceptions and prior concepts concerning what and how things have significance. We might read this mode of communication as able to initiate a “counter-experience”, provoking the reader to reorient her horizon of prior self-valuations so she might come to recognize the hidden significance of things and, ultimately, a more accurate sense of oneself in relation to the true source of the self’s desire. Insofar as this reorientation of the self informs the practice of detachment or the development of humility, people might *experience* this same process in diverse ways.

My argument is not that it would be impossible to arrive at better or worse definitions of detachment or a normative account of humility as a virtue that involves the cultivation of various habits and practices as part of its development. Instead, Kierkegaard’s discourses offer something different that might complement such accounts. Furthermore, I do not understand the theological arguments I make about humility in dialogue with Kierkegaard’s writings without non-religious analogues. However, by limiting my focus to the specific concerns that arise for developing an account of detachment and humility within the context of Christian spiritual formation, I can show how Kierkegaard’s writings have relevance for addressing problems unique to this context. The relevance of Kierkegaard’s edifying writings for reflecting on Christian spirituality is not, in my view, that they provide a thoroughgoing account of detachment or humility that should replace the insights of various spiritual traditions. Rather, his discourses—when read as existential reflections on Christian life *alongside* these traditions—offer a supplemental resource for considering how our positionalities, dispositions, and proximate contexts will inform the divergent ways we might *experience* the practice of detachment or manifestation of humility, given the different implications this will have in each new life circumstance.

### 2. Humility and Detachment: Puzzles of a Theological Interpretation

Before getting at the unique set of questions that arise for reflecting on humility within a religious or theological context, it is first important to say something about recent debates concerning the virtue of humility more broadly. Interestingly, this virtue is receiving renewed attention from a variety of disciplinary approaches, including in various contemporary engagements with virtue ethics and from within the social sciences. While some understand humility as involving an ignorance or downplaying of one’s positive attributes and abilities[^5] [11,12], others see a more helpful starting point in some variation of Norman Richards argument that humility will ultimately contribute to one’s having a more “accurate sense of oneself”[^6] [13] (p. 254) and [14–16]. We recognize those who seem...
to have this more accurate self-awareness. Such people admit when they do not know something and are often more likely to find humor in recognizing moments of fumbling self-contradiction. Setting to one side the many nuances of this debate, I find this latter way of approaching humility helpful insofar as it resists the idea that the virtue of humility necessarily involves an active downplaying of one’s accomplishments or positive attributes.

When approaching humility from a religious or theological perspective, a unique problem nevertheless surfaces for developing a straightforward account of how humility might inform our self-perceptions. We glimpse an example of this issue when considering the classic treatise on humility by Thomas Aquinas. He argues that while “humility restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason”, magnanimity “urges the mind to great things in accord with right reason”. Since these two moral virtues concur insofar as each accords with right reason [17] (see ST, II-II, q. 161, arts 1–2), we might say that humility and magnanimity ought to strike a proper balance, enabling one’s movement toward the appropriate self-perceptions in various life circumstances. While Aquinas understands humility as a moral virtue rather than an intellectual one, we can at least infer that, on this account, having it would ultimately contribute to one’s having a more accurate sense of oneself.

However, to indicate that regardless of whatever finite perfection one may or may not possess, humility is a virtue appropriate to all human creatures, Aquinas goes on to claim that “in comparison with God”, human “perfection is found wanting” just as “All nations are before Him as if they had no being at all” [17] (ST, II-II, q. 161, a. 1 ad. 4.). In reflecting on this latter point, we begin to see how the humility one has before God would challenge our common, everyday assumptions concerning what it might mean to have an accurate sense of oneself. Indeed, this recognition of divine transcendence that calls all to humility also implies an altogether different way of viewing oneself—in the light of one’s utter contingency and finitude. Even if various methods of self-evaluation remain intact within the context of daily living, a theology of creation and redemption that together affirm *we have nothing we have not received* would seem to disrupt our everyday ways of evaluating and relating to our positive attributes or achievements, calling for an altogether different way of understanding and relating to them.

Recognizing that this acknowledgment of divine transcendence uniquely informs an understanding of what humility entails—both in the thought of Aquinas and in religious perspectives more broadly—the scholar James Kellenger identifies a distinct expression of what he calls “the religious virtue of humility” or simply “religious humility”. While acknowledging secular analogues, he characterizes religious humility as entailing a “cognitive element” having to do with the “recognition of a greater reality, God or a religious transcendent” [18] (pp. 332–334). Kellenger proceeds to argue that since implicit within religious humility is a recognition of that which transcends the self’s egoic concerns, the characteristic essential to one’s having it “is a turning away from self and self-concern” [18] (p. 334). Kellenger proceeds to highlight an implicit connection between such humility and detachment. Detachment, broadly construed, refers to the process of letting go of the desire to relate to people or things in terms of what I can manipulate, control, or possess. By relinquishing these potentially destructive modes of relating, one can approach things with a spirit of non-possession. While there are different ways to describe the practice of detachment, Kellenger aims to identify some common features of all its expressions across various religious and contemplative traditions. Among the features he identifies is “freedom from self-will” expressed through “self-centered desires”, so that, as he explains, “the detached person is completely free of self-concern”. For this reason, he sees religious humility as implicit within any manifestation of true detachment [19] (pp. 49–50). Of particular relevance to our considerations here is how Kellenger understands the relationship between humility, detachment, and human desire. While arguing that detachment—and the humility it entails—need not preclude one from having a disinterested form of self-love and “a number of quotidian desires related to everyday needs”, such desires must ultimately remain free of self-interest or self-reflective concern [19] (pp. 81–82).
I highlight Kellenger’s arguments here for two reasons. First, while some may wish to avoid distinguishing moral humility from religious humility in the way Kellenger does, his analysis nevertheless serves to demonstrate how a religious context invites unique considerations for understanding the character and significance of this virtue. In this regard, it also demonstrates how humility and the practice of detachment are, perhaps, mutually informing. Second, the emphases associated with his account reflect those of some recent theologies of Christian spiritual formation to varying degrees. We see an example of this in how Kellenger understands religious humility and detachment as entailing an abandonment of self-will and self-reflective concern. Reflecting on this portrayal, we might nevertheless wonder whether this is the best or only way to interpret how a recognition of divine transcendence will inform the character of one’s humility or the practice of detachment. While Kellenger sees religious humility as able to overcome the pride and shame resulting from a self-reflective gaze and as ultimately enabling freedom from false self-perceptions through “an awareness of oneself as one is” (p. 26), his account risks overlooking the variety of ways one might come to better self-awareness within a variety of different lived contexts. One might also wonder why the recognition of or concern for that which transcends the self must necessarily preclude one from having varied levels of self-concern when necessary or appropriate.

With these questions in mind, we still must grapple with the seeming all-or-nothing quality humility takes on in the context of a theology of creation and redemption that together affirms there is nothing we have not received. In considering what a Christian theological context and its traditional emphasis on humility might entail for one’s self-perceptions, the mysteriously paradoxical allusions to humility in Christian scripture do not seem to offer easy answers. We might consider, for example, the following statements: “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18.3-5); “many who are first will be first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mark 10.31); “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12.9); or “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16.25). While passages like these inform the context within which a Christian understanding of humility and detachment are implicitly forged, they also leave much to the contemplative imagination. They invite their hearer into active engagement with a play of metaphors and seemingly contradictory ideas. One is led to consider, for example, how growing in maturity involves becoming more like a child, what it might mean for divine power to manifest itself in human weakness, or the implications, not only of “the first” coming last but of “the last” taking priority of place. What these passages do not give us is a straightforward prescription for how one should understand and practice detachment and humility within the context of each new life circumstance.

Again, my point is not that it would be impossible to arrive at a definition of detachment or a normative account of humility as a virtue, but that such accounts do not fully capture how one might describe all that the experience of practicing detachment or developing humility might entail within a variety of Christian spiritualities and lived contexts—imbued with various symbols, scriptural metaphors, and theological affirmations. These contexts will inform how one makes sense of the ongoing significance of various spiritual practices or the cultivation of virtue in dialogue with developing life narratives and embodied ways of being in-the-world. If humility ultimately contributes to the accuracy of one’s self-perceptions, as my reading will assert is the case for Kierkegaard, we must also acknowledge that each person will experience this process of arriving at greater accuracy differently, depending on whatever prior self-conceptions create obstacles. It is here that we can begin to consider how and why Kierkegaard’s existential reflections on Christian life have unique relevance for considering an approach to detachment and humility within a contemporary theological context. Before turning to how Marion’s account of counter-experiences can help illuminate this point, we must first examine the character of Kierkegaard’s existential reflections on desire and detachment, which will set the stage for our further analysis.
3. Desire and Detachment in Kierkegaard’s Existential Reflections on Christian Life

I am not the first to notice something like an account of detachment in Kierkegaard’s discourses [24,25] and [19] (pp. 145–162; see especially 159–160). Christopher Barnett has explained, for example, that “Kierkegaard borrows notions such as ‘detachment’ from mystical writers and incorporates them into his spirituality” [24] (p. 5 n. 20). My reading of the role desire and detachment play in Kierkegaard’s discourse, “What Blessed Happiness Is Promised in Being a Human Being”, will build on relevant observations Barnett has made concerning this discourse [15]. In one of his journals, Kierkegaard writes, “Just like the arrow of the skilled archer that, as it streaks away from the bowstring, won’t allow itself rest before it has struck its target, so also is the human being created by God to set his sights on God, and finds no rest before he rests in God” [26] (KJN7, p. 341). Some recent commentators have likened this notion to the depiction of a fundamental desire for God implanted in the human being [27,28]. This desire first manifests itself, according to Lee C. Barrett’s depiction of Climacus’ account, as an unsettling “desire for the infinite” intrinsic to human existence, which is experienced as a “disruptive and aching lack”. “The individual longs for the infinite but is only aware of its incommensurability with the finite” [29] (p. 107). For this reason “can be content with no worldly achievement, and can find solace in no temporal comfort. Desire for the infinite disturbs all coziness, and destabilizes all sense that one has found fulfillment” [29] (p. 108). As we will see, reading Kierkegaard’s discourses in the light of this account of a fundamental desire for God resists a depiction of desire and detachment reducible to the mere abandonment of self-concern or self-interest.

Interpreting the spirituality of the discourses, Christopher Barnett explains that Kierkegaard’s view is that “From God the human being receives the entire field of being and becoming as a gift. To go forth in the world as a free creature is precisely to realize that gift” [24] (p. 29). Rooted in the view that all is a gift, gratitude emerges as a central theme throughout the upbuilding discourses. Kierkegaard describes the practice of gratitude as resulting in a slow-going, subtle turning of one’s attention, enabling an ever-greater recognition of the creator as the source of all goodness. Given this underlying vision, Kierkegaard’s depiction of the progressive realizations that occur in practicing gratitude and prayer finds some resonance with the Ignatian practice of “finding God in all things”. Gratitude here functions not only as praise but also as a highly self-reflective process, enabling new interpretations of the self and its relation to God amid various life circumstances. Indeed, it would make sense that whatever depiction of humility we find in the discourses, one might assume that it will emerge in tandem with this vision that there is nothing we have not received [17]. With this function of gratitude in mind, we can now turn to consider the third in the collection of 1847 discourses on the lilies and the birds titled “What Blessed Happiness Is Promised in Being a Human Being”.

In an opening prayer in the preface to these three discourses, a request is made for the one who is worried—that this individual might “learn from the divinely appointed teachers: the lilies of the field and the birds of the air!” [31] (p. 157) The discourses make continual reference to Matthew 6, in which the reader is exhorted not to worry about one’s life, but to instead, “look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them”. Furthermore, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin” yet “even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Matt. 6.26-29) [31] Kierkegaard takes this exhortation seriously, yet as he considers the lilies and the birds in this discourse, it becomes clear that his reflections are not merely about not worrying. They are also not just about a method for escaping such worry [18]. Instead, these reflections strike at what Kierkegaard sees as the root of human worry, examining the role of human desire as it relates to both temporal, externally visible things and those realities that are eternal and unseen. We begin to recognize this through the way Kierkegaard seems to protest against the plain meaning of the Matthew 6 passage, noting a difference between the externally visible natural world—in this case, the lily and the bird—and the concern of the human being reflecting on nature:
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There is indeed beauty and youthfulness and loveliness in nature, there is indeed multifarious and teeming life, and there is rapture and jubilation. But there is also something akin to profound, unfathomable cares of which none of those out there has any inkling, and precisely this, that none has any inkling, is the sadness in the human being. [31] (p. 202)

In comparison with the lilies and the birds, this “sadness in the human being” is based on the awareness of a tension evident in creation; this tension, it seems, puts the human being in a unique position to find particularly disturbing:

Is it life or death? Is it life, which, eternally young, renews itself, or is it decay, which perfidiously conceals itself in order not to be seen for what it is, the decay that deceives with the loveliness of the lily and the field, with the carefreeness of the bird, while underneath the decay itself is perfidiously only waiting to reap the deception. Such is the life of nature: short, full of song, flowering, but at every moment death’s prey, and death is the stronger. [31] (p. 203)

While in an earlier discourse, Kierkegaard extols the merits of attending to the natural world, given how it might alleviate one’s worried concerns, we now see that such attention to nature sparks a new, more profound concern. The seeming futility and decay we witness in the natural world appear to legitimize the worry and despair we face as human beings—precisely as we contemplate the lilies and the birds. The grass withers, the flowers fade, and sparrows are sold for a penny. Yet, unlike the lily or bird, the human being is bothered by all of this in a unique way, bothered not simply by the fact of death but by an awareness of the coinciding of such beauty with its inevitable decay. Is beauty reducible to its final nullity and, for that reason, a mere deception?

Given this question, Kierkegaard understands as good news the stringent demand of the Gospel: “No one can serve two masters.” [20] Contemplating this demand, he claims, “Nature does not serve two masters; there is no vacillating or double-mindedness in nature” as we notice in observing the lily and the bird [31] (p. 205).

Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard, while the lily and the bird reveal God’s glory, they do not serve God, as is the choice and freedom of the human being. The lily and the bird do not demand to be anything in themselves: “there is no vacillating or double-mindedness in nature” [31] (p. 205). Further, “the bird is not seeking anything. However far it flies, it is not seeking: it is migrating and is drawn, and its longest flight is a migration. However, the person in whose soul the eternal is implanted seeks and aspires” [31] (p. 209). Kierkegaard attributes the unique restlessness in the human being to the desire for the eternal implanted in the human soul that “seeks and aspires”. The human being thus faces a decision concerning the following command: “Seek first God’s kingdom—‘which is within you’” [31] (p. 209). Kierkegaard explains,

If the visible does not deceive him, as the person is deceived who grasps the shadow instead of the form, if temporality does not deceive him, as the person is deceived who is continually waiting for tomorrow, if the temporary does not deceive him, as the person is deceived who procrastinates along the way—if this does not happen, then the world does not quiet his longing. [31] (p. 209)

Here, we see depicted yet another example of something like a fundamental desire that orients one toward that which transcends the self—which, for Kierkegaard, is ultimately a desire for God. Kierkegaard, nevertheless, interprets and describes this desire as a reason for the discontented conflict we already feel in reflecting on creation. His solution for overcoming such discontent does not end with a mere prescription for overcoming self-interested concern. Instead, he carries on with this reflection as a way of responding to the question of how and why this gospel might speak to the discontented self, the one who no longer knows how to interpret the beauty she sees in nature and is left wondering whether such beauty is a mere deception:
Seek first God’s kingdom. This is the sequence, but it is also the sequence of inversion, because that which first offers itself to a person is everything that is visible and corruptible, which tempts and draws him, yes, will entrap him in such a way that he begins last, or perhaps never, to seek God’s kingdom. But the proper beginning begins with seeking God’s kingdom first; thus it begins expressly by letting a world perish. What a difficult beginning! [31] (p. 209)

Such a depiction at first seems to assert a rather stark dichotomy between the desires associated with our finite, bodily existence and those associated with “the kingdom of God”—in a way that would seem to support the idea that Kierkegaard’s writings speak of a mere abandonment of self-reflective concern. However, as the discourse continues, it becomes clear that his emphasis is on returning to a lost beginning in order to orient oneself from the beginning, so that this new beginning, or starting point, might free the self for a renewed relationship with all else—including all the various gifts encountered in this life. We see this pattern more clearly in light of the final focus of Kierkegaard’s discourse: “But if a person seeks God’s kingdom first—‘then all these things will be added to him’” [31] (p. 211). He continues, “They will be added to him since there is only one thing that is to be sought: God’s kingdom. Neither wealth’s thousands nor poverty’s penny is to be sought; this will be added to you” [31] (pp. 211–212). Finally, in speaking of the rest that will be added to one, Kierkegaard declares, “Oh, what blessed happiness God’s kingdom must be! If you take everything the bird and the lily have, every glorious thing that nature has, and think of all this together, it is all contained in the word: the rest, all these things” [31] (p. 212).

This discourse does not prescribe a shift away from self-focus or the absence of self-concerned desire but rather emphasizes the freedom that comes through the gift of discovering and investing oneself in the ultimate source of the self’s desire, which is, by faith, not so easily subject to decay and not quite so quick to vanish. That this is his emphasis is evident in that Kierkegaard begins his reflection with an analysis of the unsettling awareness of death and, with such awareness, the gnawing question of whether we can appreciate beauty in the light of its inevitable decay. Is such beauty a mere fleeting deception? The gospel is good news in this context precisely because it is not merely comforting but unsettling enough to provoke a reorientation of the self, revealing the ultimate source of the self’s unsettled desire. Such reorientation of the self does not provide easy answers in the face of life’s difficulties. It does, perhaps, allow one to glimpse a hope that investing oneself in a love that is the transcendent source of our existence brings eternal significance to the embrace of all the various dimensions of our finite, temporal existence. In this way, one returns to the beauty experienced in the temporal, no longer viewing it in terms of death as its final meaning. We might understand this in terms of how Barnett, commenting on this discourse, describes the self as both “that being of infinitude, which longs to transcend death’s custody” and “that being of finitude, which seeks to find worth in this life” [24] (p. 116).

Coinciding with such a vision is a theme expressed in one of Kierkegaard’s Christian Discourses entitled, “The Joy of It: That When I ‘Gain Everything’ I Lose Nothing at All”:

> When the ‘everything’ I gain is in truth everything, then that which in another sense is called everything, the everything that I lose, must be the false everything; but when I lose the false everything, I indeed lose nothing. Therefore, when I lose the false everything, I lose nothing; and when I gain the true everything, I indeed lose the false everything—so I indeed lose nothing. [33] (p. 145)

The account Kierkegaard gives of self-loss or sacrifice in this context, especially when read alongside the previous discourse just explored, reveals an emphasis not on any particular loss but on freedom from marrying oneself to the “false everything”. We might see, in this emphasis, certain resonances with the practice of Ignatian detachment, wherein I am freed to truly enjoy the gifts of creation because I am not attached to them in an unhealthy sort of way. For Kierkegaard, enabling such detachment is the freeing recognition and embrace of a fundamental desire for what we are to seek first. As he claims, “In order
to have the power to understand that the false everything is nothing, one must have the true everything as an aid; otherwise the false everything takes all the power away from one” [33] (p. 145). Such a vision bears striking resemblance to an insight of the English mystic Julian of Norwich: “This is the reason why we do not feel complete ease in our hearts and souls: we look here for satisfaction [rest] in things which are so trivial [little] ... God wishes to be known, and is pleased that we should rest in him; for all that is below him does nothing to satisfy us”. A prayer follows this observation, concluding with the assertion that “only in you have I everything”.22 [34,35] (pp. 47–48). This notion that anything less than what we are to seek first will not satisfy us because it is simply not enough for us offers a different vantage point from which to view detachment.

Insofar as one might understand detachment and humility as having some relationship to one another, it seems the motivating factor for each would be important to Kierkegaard since, as he indicates, “the true everything” serves as an aid in our recognizing the “false everything” as such. Related to this point, I do not think that, in Kierkegaard’s writings, the practice of detachment is merely characterized by the absence of self-concern or self-interest23, nor the manifestation of humility reducible to an absence of the vices of pride24, nor a shift in one’s pattern of attention that involves thinking about oneself less25, as various interpreters have argued. The variety of lived contexts within which one finds oneself will call for the prudence to engage in varied levels of self-concerned interior reflection, which might include a reflection on one’s positive qualities or accomplishments26. Indeed, Kierkegaard warns against the potential failure to acknowledge the good that “dwells within” and the good that one does27 [37] (pp. 369–375). For Kierkegaard, what drives the ongoing development of humility will somehow involve the move toward a more accurate perception or recognition of “the true everything”. Such recognition nevertheless requires grappling with “the false everything”—or all those imagined things we cling to because we think they will give our lives significance. Importantly, the false everything will manifest itself in different ways for each person. Recognizing it as such will thus involve overcoming a variety of different delusions and faulty self-perceptions, which may very well involve a good deal of self-concerned interior reflection. For these reasons, insofar as the manifestation of humility—or the experience of developing it within one’s own life context—is alluded to in Kierkegaard’s writings, it does not seem that it is reducible to any of the above characterizations. To further clarify this point, I will first introduce Jean-Luc Marion’s account of paradox as “counter-experience” before exploring how it can help us make sense of Kierkegaard’s discourses and what they offer for reflections on humility.

4. Paradox as “Counter-Experience”: Toward a Reading of Kierkegaard’s Discourses

Marion explains, “[a] paradox is not the same thing as a logical contradiction of a proposition (or non-sense), nor is it an (empirical) impossibility of knowledge, nor an obscurity (a confusion) in phenomenality” [38] (p. 55). Instead, he defines a paradox as a “counter-experience”. A counter-experience involves the encounter with any phenomenon given to experience precisely by contradicting our expectations or exceeding various a priori conditions for making sense of it in terms of our prior concepts. Such experience does not forbid thought from contemplating it, while nevertheless exceeding one’s ability to comprehend it completely.

We glimpse an everyday example of what Marion would understand as a counter-experience in what Climacus refers to as “the paradox of erotic love”. As Climacus explains, “self-love is the ground or goes to the ground in all love”, so loving oneself is necessary for “loving the neighbor as oneself” [39] (p. 39). Yet, how exactly the two coincide, or “the paradox of self-love as love for another”, is notoriously difficult to grasp by way of a simple concept. Such a paradox is certainly not something one can grasp by thinking about it in a detached or disinterested sort of way—even though one may nevertheless experience its reality in the very moment one loves or fails to do so. The understanding must, therefore, give itself over to the paradox of love in a self-involved way—by loving—since, as Climacus claims, “the lover is changed by this paradox of love so that he almost does
not recognize himself any more” [39] (p. 39). We here see an example of how thought, to enter into a “mutual understanding” with the paradox, must relinquish possessing the paradox as a directly comprehended object of the understanding. Likewise, for Marion, what matters is that paradox, or counter-experience, always involves the experience of a “saturated phenomenon”, or a phenomenon that gives itself to our experience as something unknown—or not yet fully grasped—insofar as it exceeds whatever objectifying knowledge I might possess of it [29] (see [42] pp. 179–247; see especially, 199–245).

Insofar as the meaning or significance of what is given to such counter-experience exceeds whatever I might predict or grasp as a mere object of knowledge, its interpretation will require reorienting one’s horizon of prior concepts to begin making sense of it. Even then, our interpretations, while more or less accurate, may nevertheless remain partial. If we refer again to our example of what Kierkegaard calls “the paradox of erotic love”, we might consider the many different disciplinary approaches one could take to interpreting the experience of the mysterious connection between self-love and love for another. Interpreting this saturated phenomenon might result in slightly different, if complementary, interpretations, depending on how one approaches it, whether from an ethical, psychological, or theological perspective. At the same time, these approaches will not yield a final set of concepts to perfectly capture the phenomenon as an object of completely comprehended thought.

Importantly, two people might encounter the same saturated phenomenon—whether it be an event, communication, work of art, or even food—given to their awareness by contradicting or exceeding what either could predict or explain in advance. At the same time, each might describe the process of coming to recognize and better interpret what is given to their experience in slightly different ways, reflecting, among other things, subtle differences in whatever prior concepts and interpretive frameworks the counter-experience disrupts or calls into question for each person. As we will see, this latter point has relevance for interpreting the ways in which Kierkegaard describes the series of possible realizations that would seem to coincide with the practice of detachment or manifestation of humility.

In what follows, I will apply these elements of Marion’s account of counter-experience to a reading of Kierkegaard. I am not the first to compare aspects of Marion and Kierkegaard’s thought nor to relate Kierkegaard’s employment of paradox to Marion’s account of “counter-experience”. In fact, Marion has himself made this connection, acknowledging the influence of Kierkegaard’s thought on the development of this very account. However, I will turn things around, applying Marion’s account of paradox as counter-experience to a reading of Kierkegaard’s discourses. We can now turn to how such a reading can help illuminate the discourses and their relevance for a broader set of questions for approaching humility within the context of a theology of Christian spiritual formation.

5. Humility, “Counter-Experience”, and the Problem of Our Self-Perceptions

Bernard McGinn interprets the use of certain “explosive metaphors” by Christian mystics as intended to “overturn and transform ordinary forms of consciousness through the process of making the inner meaning of the metaphor one’s own in everyday living” [50] (p. 85). It is possible to read some of the metaphors present in Christian scripture—such as becoming like children or gaining one’s life by losing it—through a similar lens. In so doing, it would be possible to distinguish between the articulation of these metaphors as such and more phenomenological modes of describing the lived experience, or “counter-experience”, to which they point and bear witness. We can apply this same approach to a reading of Kierkegaard’s discourses.

Kierkegaard’s existential reflections on Christian life not only refer to what we might understand as “counter-experiences”; they also aim to provoke them. Underlying the playful communication strategies and perpetual use of paradox within the discourses is Kierkegaard’s attentiveness to how the single individual will hear and appropriate their meaning. As already indicated, Kierkegaard’s paradoxical allusions to “gain” and
“loss” in the discourse explored above are intended to stir the reader to reorient her prior understanding of what and how things have significance so that she might come to a fuller recognition and embrace of “the true everything”. We see another example of this communication strategy in turning to “Against Cowardliness”, a discourse that has direct relevance for considering how our themes of desire and detachment relate to humility.

Here, Kierkegaard considers what it would mean for a person to resolve to put her talents to use in service of God, given the many inauthentic or self-serving motivations that might masquerade as good intentions, subtly influencing her resolve. An underlying function of the discourse is to challenge the reader to discover—through self-examination—ways in which her earnestness is driven by “the false everything” so she can come to realize a more stable and authentic resolution, or what Kierkegaard calls “the good resolution” because it “corresponds to the acknowledgment of the good” [37] (p. 361). The concern is thus to arrive at humble recognition of the good that should be “the goal” of one’s “striving” and “diligence early and late” [37] (p. 357).

Whether one has arrived at this authentic resolution that corresponds to recognition and embrace of the good is, Kierkegaard thinks, a difficult thing to discern. Indeed, “the good, the truly great and noble, is, of course, not just something general, and as such, the general object of knowledge; it is also something particular in relation to the individual’s particular talent”. This means that one person is capable of doing good “in one way” and “another in another”. Kierkegaard is quick to clarify that while mattering in its own way, “the talent itself is not the good, as if exceptional capability were the good and limited capability the bad” [37] (p. 358). Instead, insofar as “Against Cowardliness” invites the reader to reorient her perspective toward greater recognition of the good, we might best interpret the good as itself a saturated phenomenon. This is because, for Kierkegaard, the good is transcendent. As the reader proceeds through the discourse, it becomes clear that the good has God as its source. This reflects the discourse “Every Good and Perfect Gift is From Above”, in which Kierkegaard not only identifies God as the ultimate, uncreated good but also states that “a human being, insofar as he participates in the good, does so through God” [37] (p. 134). If we take these two discourses together, Kierkegaard’s view seems to be that while the good is transcendent, each human being must strive to contextualize the good—and recognize its various finite manifestations—in each new life circumstance. As we will see, this often requires a reorientation of prior arbitrary measures of value and faulty self-perceptions, which will mean something quite different for each person open to such a reorientation of the self.

Given the diversity of talents and capabilities amongst human beings, any two people may encounter different obstacles on the way to adopting “the good resolution”, inspired by a recognition of the authentic good. If, for example, one has exceptional capability or talent, “then cowardliness says, ‘When one is so equipped, there certainly is no rush about beginning. This is much too easy, take your time.’” Kierkegaard sees this form of evading the task at hand as rooted in the fact that “it is more difficult to begin quietly because it is less prestigious, and this bit of humiliation is precisely the difficulty” [37] (p. 134). If, on the other hand, “capability is slight”, it is then that “cowardliness says, ‘This is too little to begin with.’” In this situation, “rejecting everything is a much prouder thing than beginning with little” [37] (p. 359). In either case, recognizing the authentic good that would strengthen one’s resolve to begin the task at hand is made difficult because it would demand deconstructing ways we frequently become accustomed to understanding our significance—or the worth of our projects—on the basis of our capabilities or lack thereof. As Kierkegaard explains, “it is hard when it seems as if one could do so very much for the good, but it nevertheless is certain that the only thing and the greatest”, something each person is equally “capable of doing for God” regardless of one’s prior talent or perceived level of importance, “is to give oneself completely, consequently one’s weakness also” [37] (p. 369). That “the good resolution” corresponds to the good of one’s giving one’s whole self, along with one’s weakness, is precisely what makes it so challenging.
For some the fear of failure, or embarrassment over one’s limited capability makes it much easier to forgo the task at hand in the name of humility. Others face an “unwillingness to be humbly aware of [their] weakness” [37] (p. 369), which they must also give if they are truly to accomplish “the greatest thing”, which is “to give oneself completely” to the good. In the latter case, one may wish to be an “important instrument” in the service of God. However, “what does it mean”, Kierkegaard inquires, that the one “capable of something great, is incapable of something insignificant?” Indeed, promising “everything to the good . . . has a far more sacred and authentic meaning than the great-in-the-eyes-of-the-world thing he is able to perform” [37] (p. 367). “How close the ridiculous is to the most profound earnestness! That the greatest thing and the least thing are connected in this way, that a trifle mocks the great in this way” [37] (p. 367).

In considering Kierkegaard’s reflections on the one ashamed of her limited capability and the one too important to take seemingly insignificant work seriously, we might say that each suffers from unstable motivations based on inauthentic reasons for engaging in the task at hand. I would argue these inauthentic reasons have their basis in faulty self-perceptions—or misplaced understandings of the source of the self’s significance. Kierkegaard’s playful allusions to the contradictions surrounding how we perceive the significance of things are intended precisely to subvert these preconceptions so that, in seeing how “the trifle mocks the great”, we begin to understand the “trifle” differently, through a reorientation of our prior concepts. This mode of communication has the potential to initiate a counter-experience insofar as it invites the reader to encounter the good by provoking a more authentic mode of relating to it—and to oneself through this reorientation to the good—as one grapples with prior arbitrary measures of value and faulty self-perceptions.

At the same time, the kind of reorientation that would allow each to embrace “the good resolution” will involve a different series of realizations for the one consumed by her lack of capability than for the one stifled by a sense of self-importance. For Kierkegaard, “cowardliness and concealed pride” will have many faces, depending on the circumstances. Hence, in the face of a counter-experience in which one is confronted with the authentic good, the path toward reorienting one’s perception of things to recognize it—and the experience of such reorientation to adopt “the good resolution”—is something one must “learn very particularly” [37] (p. 368). Even so, such reorientation will allow each to better grasp the less visible reality so often hidden in things—a reality made strange through an awareness of oneself before God.

Kierkegaard gestures toward the very different vantage point such awareness calls for, stating in “Against Cowardliness”: “Did not the widow give infinitely more than the rich man who gave out of his abundance!” Reflecting on this biblical story of “the widow’s mite”, he proceeds to explain that “one penny” can “signify just as much as all the world’s gold put together” if given out of compassion, and the penny is all one has [37] (p. 362). In considering further the biblical story of the “widow’s mite”, to which Kierkegaard alludes, we might wonder whether a “counter-experience” was required for Jesus’ disciples to understand how much more this woman’s seemingly insignificant gift signified in comparison with their initial estimations. Kierkegaard gestures to the idea that, in giving this gift, she gave much more than we could calculate. Indeed, since the gift was all she had, it signified her willingness to give her whole self, a gift we might certainly interpret as a saturated phenomenon. Recognizing the significance of this gift requires a reorientation of prior arbitrary valuations on a few different levels. I might, for example, need to question the importance I assign to the world’s gold. I might also need to pay greater attention to the context surrounding how this small gift was offered before coming to understand its great worth. Likewise, the person who thinks she has much of great importance to give in service to the good and the one who thinks she has “too little to begin with” will need to reorient their self-perceptions in different ways before understanding the true significance of what each has to offer. For some, this will require developing more humility; for others, it will require greater courage. One could argue, though, that grasping the spiritual insight Kierkegaard thinks is communicated through
the story of the widow’s mite would somehow involve the presence of both humility and courage. Indeed, learning to see oneself in a new, more authentic way is difficult. So, as Kierkegaard warns, in the face of such a challenge, one must not think that it is one’s “humility under the powerful hand of God, that makes [one] cowardly” (p. 352).

Given Kierkegaard’s view that all is a gift, we might read the vision of humility that emerges from “Against Cowardliness” against the backdrop of his ongoing paradoxical references to “gain” and “loss” and in light of the affirmation that there is nothing we have not received. Following from this view, there is a sense that our rightful status before God is nothing. From this perspective, the more one tries to “become something” based on an imagined notion of what is important, the faultier one’s self-perceptions become. Indeed, to seek to become something in this way means one is not already resting in the power that established the self. These false perceptions of the self’s importance are ultimately nothing insofar as they are an imagined, ideal image of “the important”. This nothingness is all that stands in the way of a grace-enabled embrace of the “true everything”, already there as the very source of the self’s existence. In this sense, I would agree with Robert C. Roberts’ explanation that, for Kierkegaard, “The self that is ‘denied’ in humble self-denial is the self that feels diminished when it envies a rival her success” (p. 289). As John Lippitt has argued, “to say that I am ‘nothing’ is not to say that I am insignificant” (p. 100).

These points gesture toward one way to interpret a seeming contradiction we find in various places throughout Kierkegaard’s edifying writings. In “Against Cowardliness”, for example, he indicates the human being should “come to himself in order to endure the contradiction that awaits him”, a contradiction that involves learning “that he is nothing” (p. 368). At the same time, Kierkegaard declares in Works of Love that the God “who creates out of nothing yet creates distinctiveness, so that the creature in relation to God does not become nothing” (p. 271). The ways in which the imagined self fails to recognize this insight by striving to “become something” are different for everyone. As Kierkegaard explains, “every human being should not just learn by rote but learn very particularly, that he is nothing” (p. 368). Indeed, he goes on to argue that some learn this “by recognizing that what they are capable of is as good as nothing, others by recognizing that what they are not capable of is as good as nothing” (p. 368). I do not read this point as entailing a clear-eyed affirmation of our unique capabilities as unimportant. No, Kierkegaard refers to the fact that each person will realize the good in a distinctive way in relation to one’s “particular talent”. While mattering in their way, such capabilities are fickle; they often frustrate, change over time, and may be lost at any moment. So, one’s capability—or lack thereof—cannot be an estimate of the self’s immeasurable worth.

An alternative interpretation of Kierkegaard’s seemingly contradictory statements concerning the self’s nothingness might involve reading Kierkegaard’s reference to “the penny” in this discourse as a metaphor for the self. Indeed, it is by no longer insisting on seeing the penny in terms of the standard measure of value assigned to it—as the unit of currency with the smallest denomination—that one begins to recognize how much more it signifies. Likewise, one cannot will to become oneself or rest in the power that established this self (p. 14) while clinging to external measures of value or success as the final source of the self’s significance. It is only by letting go of this nothingness that one paradoxically gains everything.

6. Conclusions: Detachment, Humility, and the Hidden Significance of Things

Far from requiring the absence of self-reflective concern, Kierkegaard’s edifying writings gesture toward the view that humility and detachment are developed within and supportive of an ongoing process of reorienting one’s self-perceptions. For Kierkegaard, such reorientation is informed by an ongoing discovery of the true source of the self’s desire, always already there. Given the self’s desire is already “implanted” by and therefore related to the source of the self’s longing, the reorientation of one’s desire to this source will ultimately disrupt and transcend simplistic dichotomies between what is so often referred
to as “self-interested” and “disinterested” desire. This means we should not think of the desire for God—or the detachment it inspires—as necessarily opposed to self-reflective concern or self-interest.

Furthermore, while comparison with others as a way to assess one’s progress in a given endeavor may have its rightful place in the day-to-day function of our lives, it should not form the ultimate basis of one’s sense of self-worth. In this sense, John Lippitt is right to emphasize that humility, for Kierkegaard, will not result in a more accurate assessment of oneself if such assessment is based on superficial forms of comparison. This is also why an account of humility as a spiritual disposition involving an awareness of oneself before God will not map straightforwardly onto an account such as Richard’s, noted above, which understands humility as entailing an “accurate sense of oneself” if such accuracy is understood in this way. Importantly, Richards understands this accurate sense as involving one’s not thinking “too highly” of oneself, and many of the examples he gives have everything to do with the accurate estimation of one’s accomplishments. As already indicated, while Kierkegaard does not see human talents and capabilities as irrelevant to one’s unique way of actualizing the good, he would certainly see the estimation of such capabilities as a superficial mode of self-evaluation, given that one’s measure of capability—or lack thereof—is ultimately nothing before a transcendent God who creates from nothing. Somewhat paradoxically, one might also wonder what it would mean to think “too highly” of oneself, given Kierkegaard’s utter insistence on the self’s immeasurable worth. At the same time, there may be a sense in which the detachment Kierkegaard describes would enable a more clear-eyed ability to evaluate one’s capabilities and talents insofar as one is no longer dependent on them as the source of one’s significance. In other words, the reorientation of our self-perceptions that Kierkegaard describes might free the self to assess its capabilities in a more detached and perhaps, for that reason, more accurate way.

What does all this have to say, more specifically, about a possible approach to humility as a spiritual disposition within a religious context? It is possible to conclude from my reading of Kierkegaard that such humility would support one’s openness to a potential “counter-experience” upon hearing the message communicated, for example, in the story of the “widow’s mite”. However, we could also say that the reorientation of one’s prior self-conceptions to grasp this message might entail one’s developing greater humility. The acknowledgment of this ambiguity is not only in keeping with the nature of Kierkegaard’s discourses; it also speaks to how one’s prudent response to a variety of life circumstances will inform what the appropriate manifestation of humility might look like in each new situation. Again, I do not think this entails the impossibility of developing a normative account of humility as a virtue that involves the cultivation of various habits and practices as part of its development. However, any such approach should avoid characterizing humility in ways that would preclude space for the ambiguities pertaining to how each person might experience and interpret the implications of developing humility within her own life context.

Perhaps for some, an imaginary status based on attachment to power, achievements, or possessions is the greatest barrier to developing humility. For others, the realization that one’s finite and seemingly insignificant life is infinitely known and loved by God is a far greater difficulty. If we return to Kierkegaard’s assertion that “a penny can be worth more than the world’s gold”, we see how either of these two different human tendencies would create their own disparate obstacles to perceiving the penny—or oneself—in a more accurate way. Interestingly, we might relate these two tendencies—or obstacles to adopting the good resolution—to two corresponding ways humility might assist one in “a true knowledge and feeling of oneself as one is” (p. 37), according to the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing. Here, the author names two types of humility, calling one “imperfect” and the other “perfect”. Imperfect humility has to do with the acknowledgment of one’s failings, limitations, and sin. In contrast, perfect humility involves awareness of “the superabundant love and excellence of God” (p. 37). Only the latter type of
humility is eternal, but each form of spiritual reckoning has its place of ongoing relevance in this life. As Martin Laird has argued, it is not just the first but also the second type of spiritual awareness that contributes to a more authentic self-knowledge, according to the author of The Cloud. As Laird explains, “self-knowledge cannot end in an awareness of our faults and failings. It opens onto God”\(^{43}\) [55] (pp. 126–129). In this sense, authentic self-knowledge, while gaining accuracy and deeper insight through detachment from faulty self-perceptions, will also plunge one into ever-new counter-experiences in the encounter with ever-greater mystery.

Given the many seeming contradictions one must endure to arrive at such insight into oneself, it might certainly seem more important to transcend such self-concern, to rid oneself of the finite limits and frivolous realities we come to see as embarrassingly unimportant, abandoning ourselves to the concern only for a common humanity, some greater cause, or ‘God.’ But this, too, can function as a form of self-evasion and escapism, and when directed at some notion of the divine, just another form of idolatry. After all, those scriptures Christians call sacred depict a God very much concerned with things that are very small, such as the widow’s mite or the child at play. While “two birds are sold for a penny”, God sees each sparrow that falls, and, as Kierkegaard so readily reminds us, “a penny can mean more than the world’s gold”.

It may be that grappling with the hidden significance of things is an important part of what it means to walk in humility. However, recognizing that our lives are very much involved with small matters, that we passionately concern ourselves with drops in the bucket, and that somehow, paradoxically, the sheer transcendence of God’s love implies God’s utter presence in our very small lives, is a difficult thing to grasp. Indeed, grasping it would demand nothing less than our \(^{44}\) becoming like children. It may be that regardless of whatever work we find to do in adopting what Kierkegaard calls “the good resolution”, mastering this paradox would constitute the effort of a lifetime. Even after that, it would be the gift of grace\(^{44}\).

**Funding:** Hong Kierkegaard Library Advanced Research Fellowship, St. Olaf College. [https://wp.stolaf.edu/kierkegaard/fellowship/](https://wp.stolaf.edu/kierkegaard/fellowship/) (accessed on 22 May 2024).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

1. Much of the growing interest in this topic follows the edited volume Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue. See [1]. While I cannot here deal with this topic directly, I find Mark Tietjen’s argument convincing that if we were to extrapolate a definition of the virtues from Kierkegaard’s writings, we might understand them as “dispositions to be achieved by works that one must strive to do in response to God’s grace, with the help of God’s grace” [2] (see p. 165).

2. See, for example, Puchniak [3]; Lippitt [4–7]; Stern [8]; Vaškovic [9]; and Roberts [10]. While Robert Puchniak has provided an overview of various references to humility (\(Ydmyghed\)) in Kierkegaard’s writings and offered an interpretation of what we might conclude about the resulting depiction of humility this overview yields, this essay is very different in scope and purpose. I limit my reading to a few select discourses, focusing on the relationship between humility and detachment. For this reason, I will also limit my commentary on the above accounts, attending only to those most relevant to our considerations here. For the sake of clarity of argument, I will also relegate my discussion of secondary literature to the footnotes.

3. Considering the ongoing scholarly debates over whether humility involves underestimating one’s abilities and accomplishments on the one hand or possessing a more accurate estimation of them on the other, John Lippitt sees the possibility of identifying in Kierkegaard’s writings an alternative to either view—since he considers the aforementioned perspectives of humility as involving, by necessity, comparison with others, the dangers against which Kierkegaard continually warns [7] (p. 174). The alternative he believes sufficiently avoids a comparison-based account of humility depends on the argument that we ought to think of humility “not in terms of self-abasement” or “underestimating oneself”, “but rather in terms of being focused on others and sources of value besides oneself: thinking not less \(\text{of oneself, but thinking less about oneself}\)” [7] (pp. 166–167. See also, 174). While Lippitt
argues that the view of humility he develops in conversation with Kierkegaard need not negate the possibility of self-awareness and even fosters greater self-acceptance and confidence through freedom from comparison-based worry [7] (p. 180). I wish to avoid so closely identifying humility with the phenomenon of thinking less about oneself. It fails to recognize that each person will hear this prescription in a different way. To think of oneself less will mean something quite specific, depending on how often and for what reasons a person thinks about herself to begin with.

This is a paraphrased reference to the gospel of Matthew 16.25.

See, for example, Driver [11]; Garcia [12].

Richards [13]. Richards argues that this accurate sense of oneself must be “sufficiently firm to resist pressures toward incorrect revisions”, specifically those that would lead one “to think too much of oneself, rather than too little” [13] (p. 254). For a more recent development of this line of argumentation, see Kupfer [14]. For a few examples of arguments made along somewhat similar lines but through a very different disciplinary approach, see Tangney [15]; Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder [16].

While, for Aquinas, the operation of humility essentially lies in restraining the appetite, he also argues that “its rule is in the cognitive faculty, in that we should not deem ourselves to be beyond what we are”. Furthermore, “the principle and origin of both these things is the reverence we bear to God” [17] (ST, II-II, q. 161, a. 6 resp.). The scholar James Kellenger cites this point as an example in support of his broader claim that religious understandings of humility entail a “cognitive element”, insofar as they involve the acknowledgement or recognition of divine transcendence. See [18] (pp. 331–333).

See also [19] (pp. 75–85; 145–162).

We might think, for example, of the common use of language referring to “overcoming the ego” or “decentering” the self, made with reference to Christian spiritual formation. See, for example, Zizioulas [20] (p. 236); Volf [21] (p. 71). We might also consider the emphases represented by claims such as Zizioulas’ that “Ascetic life aims not at the ‘spiritual development’ of the subject but at the giving up of the self to the Other” [20] (p. 84). Furthermore, while Sarah Coakley offers what is, in many respects, a very different account of desire and detachment from Kellenger’s, one could nevertheless note the emphases associated with her claim that “to bring different desires into true ‘alignment’ in God cannot be done without painful spiritual purification” [22] (p. 300).

For his reading of this discourse, see [24] (pp. 113–116).

The above reference to a “fundamental desire” for God appears in Joshua Furnal’s account. See [28] (pp. 29–44; see especially 31–38). While the argument for a fundamental desire for God has relevance for questions/themes surrounding the topic of nature and grace, I will limit my focus to how this vision of desire influences Kierkegaard’s depiction of desire and detachment.

For more on this double dimension of the receptivity and freedom involved in the self’s becoming in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous texts, see Mooney [30] (pp. 11–26). For an exploration of the self’s giftedness and becoming, focusing specifically on Kierkegaard’s theological anthropology, see Furnal [28] (pp. 29–44. See especially p. 32).

Lippitt also makes this connection between humility and gratitude in Kierkegaard’s writings. See, for example, Lippitt [7] (p. 175).

Cf [7] (pp. 166–168). Lippitt develops his perspective on humility by bringing various contemporary accounts of humility into conversation with Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses, focusing especially on the 1847 and 1849 discourses on the lilies and the birds. While these discourses are not aimed at explaining the nature of humility, Lippitt nevertheless detects a possible depiction of humility implicit within them. He explains that “in exploring the centrality of future-oriented worries to Kierkegaard’s lily and bird discourses, a central thought will be that such worries often stem from excessive self-absorption” (p. 167). He especially has in mind a self-absorption that has its basis in “the spirit of comparison” and concern over one’s status (pp. 168–167). Lippitt sees in Kierkegaard’s anecdotes to such status-obsessed worry, something akin to the vision of humility he aims to develop. While these arguments give special attention to Kierkegaard’s 1847 discourses on the lilies and the birds, which form the latter part of Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, Lippitt focuses on the first two without attending much to the third. However, all three of these discourses offer a slightly different interpretive lens on what the lilies and the birds, referenced in “the Sermon on the Mount”, might teach us.

While this point need not nullify the advice about worry offered in the first two discourses (see, for example, Lippitt [7] (pp. 168–171), the third discourse reveals that whatever helpful anecdotes to human worry they provide, they have not yet reached
the deeper, more profound source of concern. In this respect, one could argue that the first two discourses should be interpreted in light of the third.

For Barnett’s commentary on this choice one must face, and its relevance to the theme of desire and detachment, see [24] (pp. 114 and 116).

In some respects, the depiction of detachment this entails also has some resonances with what Sharon Krishek refers to as “the double movement of love”, wherein the movement of renunciation is “coupled with the paradoxical return to the world, to finitude, and to the self” [32] (p. 151; see also 138–165).

Phrases from the Middle English taken from chapter 5 of Julian’s Long Text appear in brackets. See [34].

Cf. Kellenger [19] (pp. 145–162; see especially 159–160).

For this notion of humility as an “absence” of the vices of pride, see Robert C. Roberts [36] (see especially p. 129); Lippitt [7] (p. 177). More recently, Roberts has also contributed to discussions of what Kierkegaard’s writings might teach us about the virtue of humility, and while I am unable to give a complete summary of these reflections here, the insights on humility he gleaned from Kierkegaard ultimately cohere with his earlier account, insofar as he argues humility might be understood as a kind of “purity of motive” or an “absence” of the vices of pride. See Roberts [10] (pp. 309–310).

I am grateful to Deidre Green for a conversation that first drew my attention to the relevance of this point within the discourse. Interestingly, Kierkegaard here gestures to the idea that there may even be prideful reasons for not acknowledging the good one does.

While Philosophical Fragments is primarily concerned with the ultimate paradox of the incarnation, and faith is the condition for thought to enter this “mutual understanding” with this ultimate paradox, Climacus repeatedly highlights different dimensions of the seeming contradictions involved in “the paradox of erotic love” as a kind of imperfect, everyday example, or what he refers to as a “metaphor” for the ultimate paradox. See, for example, [39] (pp. 25–26 and 47–49). Related to my interpretive claims here, see the interpretation of Fragments offered by Daniel Watts [40]. Regardless of whether one is convinced, as I am, by the basic tenants of Watts’ interpretation, what matters for this analysis is that Marion himself seems to read Fragments along similar lines. In Negative Certainties, Marion makes reference to Fragments as well as to an entry from one of Kierkegaard’s journals. Both references indicate that Marion reads Kierkegaard’s account of paradox not in terms of an illogical contradiction but as entailing a more productive relationship between thought and the unknown—so that this unknown has the potential to further influence the understanding in various ways. See, for example, Marion [41] (p. 207 and 263–64 note 6. See also [38] (p. 55). Importantly, Climacus’ example of “the paradox of erotic love” maps onto what Marion would refer to as a “saturated phenomenon” in the more general sense, as opposed to what he designates as “Revelation”, which would have more in common with Climacus’ account of the paradox of the incarnation.

For Marion’s account of “counter-experience” and “saturated phenomena”, see [42] (pp. 179–247; see especially, 199–245).

In the case of a theological account of Revelation, for Marion, or the paradox of the incarnation, for Climacus, this will involve faith. However, I am here concerned with outlining the more general account of counter-experiences for illuminating Kierkegaard’s discourses.

In recent years, Marion has done more to emphasize that saturated phenomena are not rare or exceptional within everyday life but include what we might think of as more mundane, everyday phenomena. For a succinct explanation of this, see the following interview: [43].

This is not to say that the specific character of the saturated phenomenon would not itself condition or inform the character of the counter-experience in various ways. I have offered a more detailed interpretation and analysis of Marion’s account of “counter-experience” as it relates to his articulation of “saturated phenomena” elsewhere. See [44].

For a few examples of such engagements, see Welz [45] (pp. 327–374); Søloft [46]; and Barnett [24] (pp. 63–85). Of further relevance to the growing interest in these two thinkers was the following volume edited by Jeffrey Hanson: [47].

See, for example, Stan [48]. Insofar as Stan considers the theme of paradox, or “counter-experience”, his analysis focuses on the way each thinker utilizes paradox in approaching a doctrine of the incarnation. More recently, Amber Bowen has outlined the influence of Kierkegaard on Marion’s thought in greater depth, particularly as this relates to the theme of Revelation as a saturated phenomenon, in a paper entitled “More than Quotable: The Explicit Kierkegaardianism in Jean-Luc Marion’s Phenomenology” (Kierkegaard in France Conference, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK, May 21, 2021) [49].
I am most grateful to Gordon Marino, Deidre N. Green, Troy Wellington Smith, Matias Tapia Wende, Andrew Gertner Belfield, and the Kierkegaard Summer Institute Fellows (2022) for the conversations that informed this essay. Members of the Women Shaping Theology Workshop through St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN, read and provided invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this essay, as did the anonymous peer reviewers for Philosophies.

References


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