

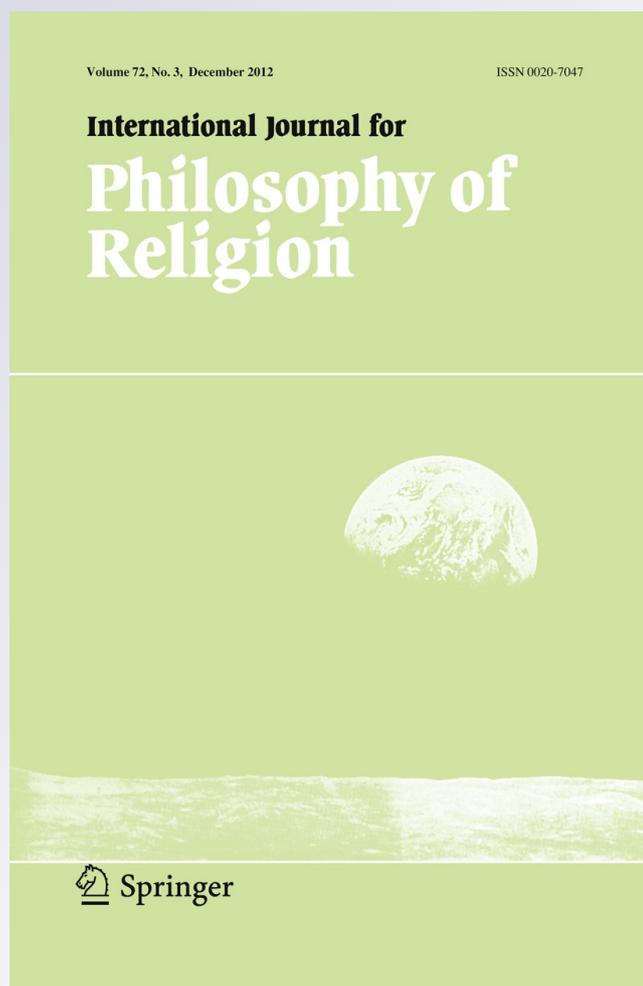
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## A cure for worry? Kierkegaardian faith and the insecurity of human existence

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**Abstract** In his discourses on ‘the lily of the field and the bird of the air,’ Kierkegaard presents faith as the best possible response to our precarious and uncertain condition, and as the ideal way to cope with the insecurities and concerns that his readers will recognize as common features of human existence. Reading these discourses together, we are introduced to the portrait of a potential believer who, like the ‘divinely appointed teachers’—the lily and the bird—succeeds in leading a life that is full of care, but free of worry. Such a portrait, we claim, echoes Kierkegaard’s portrait of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. In this essay we suggest that faith, as characterized in the ‘lily and bird’ discourses, is a kind of existential trust that would allow us to overcome worry, while remaining wholeheartedly engaged in the finite realm of our cares and concerns. We claim that Kierkegaard’s goal in these discourses is not to belittle our earthly cares, but to invite us to develop a modified attitude toward all that we are susceptible to worry about.

**Keywords** Faith · Kierkegaard · Love · Ethics · Existentialism

### Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard’s religious writings often appeal to familiar dimensions of human experience, in order to offer readers a compelling view of their own predicament as finite and contingent beings, whose lives are ultimately significant nevertheless. In his

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discourses on what we can learn from “the lily of the field and the bird of the air,” Kierkegaard presents faith as the best possible response to our precarious and uncertain condition, and as the ideal way to cope with the insecurities and concerns that his readers will recognize as common features of human existence. Faith is characterized in his 1847 and 1849 “lily and bird” discourses, and to some degree in a related series of discourses from 1848, as a kind of trust that would allow us to be oriented toward the finite realm of our cares—not away from it—in such a way as to prevail over worry. Because it is directed toward finite existence, and contrasted with distrust, Kierkegaardian faith as portrayed in these discourses bears a strong resemblance to the belief that sustains the “knight of faith” in *Fear and Trembling*, as well as the love that “believes all things” in *Works of Love*. The notion of faith developed in the lily and bird discourses therefore promises to throw light on a theme that is central to Kierkegaard’s philosophical vision. These texts are composed in a pastoral tone; and, although they include tales that are childlike in their simplicity, they address such difficult philosophical questions as: how should we come to terms with the vulnerability of the human condition? And: what is the importance of faith?

In this paper, we offer an interpretation of Kierkegaard’s often-neglected “lily and bird” discourses, with particular attention to the nature of faith and its relation to worry.<sup>1</sup> We focus primarily on Kierkegaard’s 1847 and 1849 discourses, “What We Learn From the Lilies in the Field and From the Birds in the Air” and “The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air,” tracing similar themes in his 1848 discourses on “The Cares of the Pagans” along the way.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on a Biblical image from the Sermon on the Mount, Kierkegaard seeks to offer a “cure” for worry: not, we argue, advising his readers to become unconcerned about temporal existence, but showing how the person of faith could live *with* his or her temporal concerns, without having to endure the torment of worry. His discourses are addressed to those who *are* concerned, who are “in distress” due to their cares (UDVS, p. 160), and who may feel that no one can understand them.<sup>3</sup> Here, Kierkegaard acknowledges the fact that we are finite beings,

<sup>1</sup> Among the few discussions of these discourses, some have stressed their “care-free” or otherworldly nature: see, e.g., [Possen \(2005\)](#). Gregor Malantschuk, in his brief discussion of these discourses, comes nearest to anticipating our own focus when he says that they attempt to address our dissatisfaction with “never having complete security in this world.” See [Malantschuk \(2003\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> Although the 1848 text begins with the same Biblical quotation that opens the 1847 and 1849 texts, and among its main themes is what we can “learn from the lily and the bird” (CD, pp. 9–10), its focus is slightly different. The lilies and the birds are contrasted in this text not only with the unbeliever, but also with the believer. Namely, more emphatically and elaborately than in the 1847 and 1849 discourses, the *difference* between them and the believer is discussed. Examining a list of worries that the pagans (by virtue of their lack of faith) have, and that the lilies and the birds (due to their nature) do not have, the 1848 text focuses on that which only the person of faith has: a unique relationship with God. However, a responsible characterization and analysis of this relationship (on the basis of Kierkegaard’s examination of the worries typical of the pagans) is a matter for a different paper. Thus, in the present paper we will refer to the 1848 text only to highlight its thematic parallels with the 1847 and 1849 discourses.

<sup>3</sup> We will use parenthetical abbreviations when citing one of the following texts: UDVS for [Kierkegaard \(1993\)](#), which contains the 1847 discourses “What We Learn From the Lilies in the Field and From the Birds of the Air.” WA for *Without Authority*, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), which contains the set of three 1849 discourses collectively entitled “The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air.” FT for *Fear and Trembling*, in one volume with *Repetition*, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). CD for *Christian Discourses*, which includes the 1848

vulnerable to loss and insecurely in possession of everything that we value. Some of our mundane concerns may be excessive or unjustifiable, but not all of them can be dismissed as unjustified or illegitimate: as Kierkegaard says, citing Matthew 6: 32, “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (WA, p. 5). His aim in these discourses is not to belittle or dismiss our earthly cares, but to invite us to adopt a modified attitude toward all that we are susceptible to worry about.

Since we have earthly needs which are significant, and which may not always be satisfied, the “logic” of worry appears to be irrefutable.<sup>4</sup> What Kierkegaard offers is not so much a refutation, but a way of changing our perspective on the problem of worry, a vision of faith that would enable us to cope with the legitimate concerns of human existence. In the chapter of Matthew’s gospel that serves as his point of departure in each of the “lily and bird” discourses, Jesus does not claim that earthly needs are utterly insignificant, or that they will always be fulfilled.<sup>5</sup> Yet his message to his disciples is that they can prevail over worry nevertheless: so what could he mean? Kierkegaard’s discourses endeavor to describe how a person of faith might cope with worry, and how the lily and the bird can offer us an example from which to learn. This requires him to explain why faith is an appropriate response to our existential insecurity and a remedy for our tendency to worry; it also requires him to illustrate the specific virtues that are involved in maintaining this kind of faith. In the following sections, we will deal with each of these two themes in turn: Kierkegaard’s justification of faith as a cure for worry, and his account of what faith (conceived in this way) would look like in practice.

## On worry and faith

Grant, then, that the one who is worried may truly learn from the divinely appointed teachers: the lilies in the field and the birds of the air! (UDVS, p. 157)

What does it mean to be worried? We worry about the well-being of our loved ones, we worry about our health, we worry about making a living, we worry that a war might strike. It seems to be intuitively clear why worrying counts as a problem: worrying is the opposite of being calm, of being content, of being happy, which are naturally taken to be desirable modes of existence. At the same time, leading a life free of worries sounds dangerously close to leading a care-free life, which is akin to leading a life devoid of responsibilities and meaningful attachments. This, obviously, is *not* held by Kierkegaard to be a desirable mode of existence. Thus, it is important to clarify: what does Kierkegaard refer to when he speaks about worry?

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Footnote 3 continued

discourses, “The Cares of the Pagans,” trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> On worry as an emotion involving uncertainty regarding some matter that we care about, see [Gordon \(1987\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard’s focus in the 1847, the 1848, and the S. Kierkegaard 1849 discourses is Matthew 6: 24–34. Here, we quote the New Revised Standard Version.

The Danish term most often translated as “worry” is “Bekymring,” although (as George Pattison points out) this word is not used in a technical sense by Kierkegaard, and can also be translated as “care” in some contexts.<sup>6</sup> For example, when Kierkegaard distinguishes the sort of “worry” [“Bekymring”] that we ought to avoid from the kind of “care” [“Bekymring”] that we should *not* wish to overcome, such as is involved in caring for others [“at sørge for Andre”] (CD, pp. 48–49), he uses the same Danish term in two different ways. According to our interpretation, *worry* is the state of mind that Kierkegaard’s discourses are addressing: they offer a therapeutic cure for worry, that emotion which a person ideally “should be without” (CD, p. 49), yet this cure does not require the elimination of *care* or *concern*. Although the distinction between worry (on the one hand) and care or concern (on the other) is suggested by Kierkegaard’s original texts, it is not consistently marked by a duality of terms in the Danish language. The analysis of this distinction, on which we base our treatment of the discourses, is derived from Kierkegaard’s texts but not specifically formulated by him. Therefore, we cannot establish a strict one-to-one correspondence between instances in which the concept of worry is employed and uses of a particular word in Danish. Having clarified this, let us return to the question: what does Kierkegaard refer to when he speaks about worry?

The state of “being worried” reflects at least three things: first, since we are worried about things we care about, it reflects our attachment to things which are dear and meaningful to us. Second, since “being worried” always regards the unknown (the “what will be”), it reflects our focus on the future—on the “tomorrow,” as the Gospel puts it,<sup>7</sup> or the “next day” (CD, pp. 70–71). As a consequence of that, thirdly, “being worried” reflects our awareness of the vulnerability of the things we care about. That is, we know that there is nothing that can completely secure tomorrow: we have no way to ascertain the future security of what we care about.

All of these elements are essentially connected to our existence as temporal beings. Let us then term the human situation as involving an *existential insecurity*. Now, it is quite obvious that in arguing against worrying Kierkegaard does not recommend that we deny or ignore our existential insecurity: he does not recommend a hardening of the heart or an indifference to finitude. So what does he mean when, following the Gospel, he appoints the lily and the bird as our teachers in not worrying? Given that worrying reflects essential aspects of our human condition, in what sense does he think worry can, and should, be defeated?

Every worry indicates, or is based upon, a concern. If we are to accept the human condition in all of its insecurity, then *concern* cannot—and should not—be defeated. However, our claim is that there is a correct way to address the concern entailed by our existential insecurity and an incorrect way to address it; only the *latter* amounts to worrying. Worrying, then, is the wrong way to handle our existential insecurity. In his 1847 discourses, Kierkegaard characterizes worry in the following way: “worry has

<sup>6</sup> See Pattison (2010). Pattison considers “anxiety” to be another English word that is suitable for rendering “Bekymring,” although we avoid this formulation since it could lend itself to being confused with the Danish “Angest,” a term which is important elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s work but, as Pattison notes, seldom used in the “lily and bird” discourses.

<sup>7</sup> “So do not worry about tomorrow, for each day has enough troubles of its own” (Matthew 6: 34).

its basis in a person's unwillingness to be contented with being a human being, in his worried craving for distinction by way of comparison" (UDVS, p. 171). While *concern* is the inevitable response to our existential insecurity and is thus based upon an actual need, *worry*, according to Kierkegaard, results more specifically from *comparison*.

To demonstrate this interesting claim—namely, that comparison, *and not an actual need*, is the real origin of worry—Kierkegaard tells us the following allegorical story about a worried lily. Once upon a time there was a beautiful lily that lived in a quiet place and was quite content with being who she was. But then 1 day a naughty little bird appeared in her life with the false promise that life is much better “out there” in the big world. The lily, who fell in love with the bird, listened with envy to his stories about the *truly* glorious lilies that flourish in far away places, and in comparison with them she felt ugly and worthless. Thus, the lily became distressed and could not bear her present situation anymore. She therefore willingly agreed that the bird uproot her from her home and take her with him to where the gorgeous lilies grow. She never got the chance to become one of these lilies, however, because being uprooted the lily withered on the way and died.

The worried lily, says Kierkegaard, “is the human being,” and the cruel bird is that little, nagging voice in one's head: “the restless mentality of comparison” (UDVS, p. 169). This is the tiresome temptation to look at what others have got rather than focusing on the value of your own possessions, material and mental alike. It is the malicious, unproductive voice that haunts the worried person, making him dissatisfied with himself and with his situation in life. Thus, the paradigm for a comparison-based worry is the behavior of the worried lily that exemplifies the restlessness and misery that are inevitable when one is focusing on the gifts given to others instead of appreciating one's own gifts. However, Kierkegaard wants us to realize that worry arises not only in the blatant context of envying others, but also in the more “legitimate” context of making a living. He therefore proceeds now to tell us the story of the worried wood-dove.

The wood-dove once lived peacefully in the forest, and just like the bird of the Gospel it let “each day have its own troubles” (UDVS, p. 174). But then 1 day it has a disturbing conversation with a pair of complacent tame doves, who with great satisfaction describe their carefree life: they, unlike the wood-dove, never have to worry about their living, because the rich farmer, in whose barn they live, takes care of all their needs. The wood-dove listens carefully and thinks how wonderful it would be “to *know* that one's living was secured for a long time,” and how miserable it is “to live continually in uncertainty” as he does (UDVS, p. 175).

This thought subsequently took over the wood-dove's life, and thus he turned into a worried bird even though, in essence, nothing had really changed in his life. He could not find peace and happiness in his *present* situation (which in itself was secure enough), but rather became restless by virtue of his wish to gain a security *for the future*. However, ironically enough, the efforts to gain such security led to the poor bird's death: the wood-dove tried to accompany the tame doves inside, but the rich farmer, who did not like the idea of having an invader in his barn, killed the stranger.

And Kierkegaard concludes by saying: “If the wood-dove had been contented with being what it was ... in the state of uncertainty it would have remained where it belonged, out there where the secluded tall trees are in melancholy harmony with the

cooing till of the wood-dove” (UDVS, p. 176). Thus, it is important to emphasize: there is no doubt that the life of the wood-dove—small and defenseless creature as he is—is *in essence*, even before he became worried, pervaded with some sadness and melancholy.<sup>8</sup> And of course, the fate of a human being is no better: thrown into the world, there are endless obstacles facing his existence. As we pointed out earlier, the human condition is a precarious one, and Kierkegaard does not wish to deny this. On the contrary, he uses the allegory of the worried bird to demonstrate that while concern is inevitable (given our “existential insecurity”), the misery that stems from turning our legitimate concerns into worry is of our own making.

Kierkegaard does not state it explicitly, but given his stories of the worried lily and the worried wood-dove, we can infer that there are three relevant kinds of comparison. First, the most common and concrete is the comparison of oneself with other people. This entails comparing their (material and mental) “possessions” to one’s own and being dissatisfied with the result. Second, there is the more abstract kind of comparison, that between the present (the “today”) and the future (the “tomorrow”). Accordingly, the bird of the Gospel does *not* worry about making a living, since “it does not compare 1 day with another ... it lets each day have its own trouble” (UDVS, p. 179). Thus, the legitimate concern for the future begins to be a problematic worry only when it turns into a wrongheaded focus on a potential deficiency that comes at the expense of appreciating what one has *in the present*.

The third kind of comparison is mentioned by Kierkegaard almost in passing, but it is the most problematic comparison of all (and in a sense it underlies the two other kinds of comparison). This is the comparison of oneself to God. What does this mean? Kierkegaard speaks about “the terrible way that a human being ... wants to compare himself to God, wants to have a security by himself, which no human dares to have” (UDVS, p. 178). Comparing oneself to God, then, means comparing one’s human capabilities to God’s, and being dissatisfied with the former. Such a comparison indicates a refusal to assent to the limitations of the human condition, as well as a desire to be capable of doing that which only God—an omnipotent being—can do. Thus, to compare oneself to God is, in effect, to want to depend on nothing other than oneself, or to do without God’s help (see CD, p. 63)—and this ultimately means refusing to come to terms with one’s existential insecurity. However, soon enough reality intervenes and proves that one is far from being self-sufficient—and one’s worry only increases.

Now, those who are most immune to comparisons are those who are contented with who they are; or, as Kierkegaard puts it, “contented with being a human being” (UDVS, p. 159). *This* desirable state would be achieved quite naturally if only we could understand, as Kierkegaard says, “how glorious it is to be a human being” (UDVS, p. 183). However, while the glory of the lilies and the birds in the context of the parable seems to be very clear—they are graceful, beautiful, delightful; they are innocent and free—it is not very clear what could be so glorious about being human. On the contrary, given our limitedness and insecurity we seem to be quite miserable, not glorious. So where would this alleged glory be found, if at all?

<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the bird in the parallel discourse from 1849 is said to be “tried in troubles and adversities,” certainly “not exempt from suffering” or “care-free” (WA, pp. 15–29).

Kierkegaard does not answer this question directly. Rather, he reminds us the famous verse from Scripture, according to which “God created the human being in his image.”<sup>9</sup> It seems, then, that a human being’s glory is to be found in his or her resemblance to God. But in what way does a human being resemble God? Such a resemblance is obviously not one of appearance: “since God is invisible, no one can *visibly* resemble him” (UDVS, p. 192). Rather, this resemblance is entailed in the human being’s capacity to perform acts that the rest of creation, in all its glory, is incapable of performing. Kierkegaard focuses on two such capabilities: worship and work. Worship, he says, “is what makes the human being resemble God, and to be able truly to worship is the excellence of the invisible glory above all creation” (UDVS, p. 193). And later he says: “To work is a human being’s perfection. By working, human beings resemble God” (UDVS, p. 199). How do we resemble God by worshipping and working, and what do these capabilities amount to?

To worship is (among other things) to place oneself as totally submitted to something that one conceives as greater than oneself; to worship God, then, is to conceive oneself as powerless in the face of His omnipotence. It thus seems that worshipping expresses the way we differ from God rather than resembling Him, and indeed Kierkegaard claims that in worshipping “[t]he human being and God do not resemble each other directly but inversely” (UDVS, p. 193). And yet he claims a resemblance—why? To worship God means to honor Him, not (only) in a symbolic or ceremonial way but rather in an active way, namely, by changing one’s way of living. Practically speaking, then, worshipping God means to act in a new way, to act in accordance with God’s will. The task of the worshiper is thus to align his own will with God’s will, to bring his individual will into similarity with the will of God.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we may assume that when Kierkegaard claims that we have a resemblance to God in the context of worshipping, he refers to the identification of the believer’s will with the divine will, which (quite reasonably) leads to a resemblance or parallel between the believer and God.<sup>11</sup>

And how do we resemble God by working? While worshipping is an unconditioned admission of one’s impotence, working is an expression of one’s potency. It assumes a self-understanding of oneself as having strength and capabilities (after all, if one does not believe that he *can* achieve something by working, one does not work)—and thus one is placed in the world in a different position. Kierkegaard speaks of this position in terms of being “God’s co-worker” (UDVS, p. 199). Namely, as a human being one is not only submitted to the greater power transcending him, but is also in co-operation with this power. This can be understood, for instance, as implying one’s freedom and responsibility to (actively) handle—with the appropriate attention and care—everything one was (passively) given “from above.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Genesis 1: 26–27. Cf. UDVS, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard elaborates this idea in “The Care of Presumptuousness” (CD, pp. 60–69).

<sup>11</sup> We thank Ariel Meirav for the explanation offered in this paragraph of the relations between similarity to God, radical dissimilarity to God, and the identification with God’s will.

<sup>12</sup> Think, for example, about love. The extent of our influence upon the presence in our life of a romantic beloved, close friend, or a child is, at best, partial. And yet, given the fact that they are present in our life, there is a wide spectrum of possibilities regarding our behavior. It is our responsibility—and to a high

However, in order to understand how we *resemble* God by working, we must understand what “working” actually means. It does not mean only a manifestation of one’s powers—if that were the case, we would have to consider most of the animals as working as well. Rather, what is distinguished about human beings’ work is that it indicates *time perception*. We conceive of ourselves as “working” when we are making efforts to secure something for the *future*; we work because we can see the possibility of future *results*. And time perception, Kierkegaard claims, is a possibility for the human being—and only for him—because it is a result of having “the eternal in his consciousness” (UDVS, p. 195).<sup>13</sup> Namely, we resemble God by working because we are thus exercising our unique ability to look ahead, which in its breadth and direction is arguably akin to the divine gaze into eternity. However, having time consciousness is *eo ipso* to have an agonizing awareness of our insecurity: we discover a world of temporal concerns that the “bird does not know” (UDVS, p. 195). Thus, even when we work—and are in the position to feel our strength and control, which is one important aspect of “working”—this feeling of strength must be accompanied by an acknowledgment of our fragile existence. Accordingly, a deep understanding of our ability to work illuminates the sense in which, even in using our powers, we are only *co-workers*, depending upon the support of a power that is not our own.

Which brings us to the following point: we said that a human being’s glory is to be found in his or her resemblance to God, and that this resemblance amounts to the human capacity to worship and work. We now suggest that when Kierkegaard analyzes the humans’ resemblance to God in this way, he actually alludes to the human being’s *relationship* with God. Both “worshiping” and “working co-operatively” are terms that indicate a relationship. To claim that a human being resembles God by worshiping (Him) and by co-working (with Him) is in essence to claim that to resemble God is to perform a relationship with God. Returning to the question, “where would a human being’s glory to be found?”—we can now answer that it is to be found in the human being’s relationship with God.

Thus, while worrying is the problem, the solution amounts to the religious state of maintaining a relationship with God. Or, to put it differently, if worrying is the wrong way to address our “existential insecurity,” then maintaining a relationship with God is the correct way to address it. Accordingly, the following question arises: *how* does “maintaining a relationship with God” address the concerns inherent within the conditions of human existence, namely, our “existential insecurity”? As we have just seen, Kierkegaard speaks of our God-relationship in terms of “worshiping God” and “co-working with him” at one and the same time. Interestingly enough, this echoes his existential analysis of faith as a double movement of resignation and affirmation. This analysis is presented in *Fear and Trembling*, a work that focuses on the pain and

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Footnote 12 continued

degree in our power—to choose whether to treat them lovingly or selfishly, with joy or with gloominess, with generosity or with unkindness. On gifts “from above,” see Kierkegaard (1990), pp. 31–48, 125–158.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard’s rather obscure discussion of the “temporal and the eternal” in human consciousness here (UDVS, pp. 195–196) echoes the cryptic final pages of Kierkegaard (1985). It also seems to invite comparison with the account of “the existing individual” as “a composite of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence,” in the Kierkegaard (2009), p. 252.

insecurity involved in human temporality. Let us say a few words, then, about how *faith* addresses our existential insecurity.

Resignation expresses an unequivocal acknowledgement of what it means to be a temporal being. It is an acceptance of the agonizing fact that we—like everything that we have—are fated to suffer a change during our lifetime, to wither, decay, and finally die. This is the sad story of every being that exists in time, of any thing in nature; of every lily and every bird, of every man and every woman: our existence is inescapably insecure. To accept this fact with *resignation* means to gain a new understanding of both the value and the status of every single thing that we do have. The eye of resignation, since it looks wide open at the nature of temporality, sees everything as doomed to loss. However, this insight into the essential “lost-ness” of everything makes the gaze of resignation a loving and appreciative one. Against the background of the potential *absence* of whatever we “own” in our life, the deep meaning and desirability of its *presence* becomes very clear. Resignation, then, is an existential position in the context of which we have insight into the value of everything that we “possess”—while understanding that it is not really “ours.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, resignation is a deeply unhappy state: it is an acknowledgement of our inability to have a secure hold on anything in time, coupled with the understanding of how strongly we are attached to that which is essentially lost for us.

This is, then, the meaning of resignation. But if we have faith, we manage to perform the further movement of affirmation. *This* position expresses a return to the realm of finitude and temporality. Namely, having released any “possessive” hold on finitude in resignation—a hold that mistakenly assumes a security and control in the realm of temporality—the second movement of faith allows us to reaffirm our place in this world. It allows us to regain *joy* in the presence of what we value and care about. Whereas resignation is a full and clear recognition of the sense in which things are *not* ours, faith has to do with the ability to see how that which is not ours is nevertheless *being given to us*. Indeed, what we most care about does not belong to us. However, it belongs to someone we trust.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in faith, while admitting our essential impotence with regard to controlling what is most precious to us, we are nevertheless joyfully attached to those desirable finite things, because we trust that they are in the hands of a much greater being than ourselves.

According to the existential perspective presented in *Fear and Trembling*, then, having faith amounts to maintaining a desirable relationship with everything one has got (or wishes to have) already in this world, the temporal world. The position of faith offers a new way to relate to the things we care about, a new way to be attached to them, a new way to understand the significance of their presence in our life. In addition to Abraham, the Biblical “father of faith,” Kierkegaard presents in *Fear and Trembling* another knight of faith. This knight is characterized as someone who by virtue of his faith has a deep delight in finitude as if it were “the surest thing of all” (FT, p. 40). But of course, life in the realm of finitude is *not* the surest thing of all—an acknowledgement of this fact is the basis for both concern and worry. Thus, we

<sup>14</sup> See CD, pp. 27–28: here, Kierkegaard states that all finite “goods” are “essentially” already “lost.”

<sup>15</sup> That which is “from God” (CD, p. 15) is only “on loan” to us, as “entrusted property,” because “the owner is God” (CD, p. 29). On Kierkegaardian faith as a mode of trust, see [Krishek \(2009\)](#), pp. 99–101.

may say that whereas *worrying* amounts to a wrong manner of holding onto what we care about—namely, the possessive holding that insists on controlling finitude—faith amounts to the correct manner of holding of those finite goods. That is, a holding that acknowledges that they are essentially supported and sustained not by us but rather by the real owner of everything.

And now we can return to the terminology of the 1847 discourses. *Worship* is akin to resignation: it is to submit oneself to God's will, which reflects an acknowledgement of one's powerlessness. Such an acknowledgement involves the recognition that "heaven and earth is God's house and property" (UDVS, p. 177). To consider everything in our life as "God's property" amounts, arguably, to releasing one's hold from everything that one had considered as one's own. And at the same time, it is to appreciate its infinite value: after all, it is *God's* property. On the other hand, *working*—namely, being an involved and active participant in the formation of our lives—attests to a return to finitude and to a renewed affirmation of our hold on it. Thus, despite being totally powerless and dependent, in a paradoxical way (expressed so vividly in *Fear and Trembling*) we nevertheless have our share in this world.

The noticeable similarity between the "double movement" of our relationship with God (worshiping coupled with working) and the double movement of existential faith (resignation coupled with affirmation), clarifies how *faith* is the positive alternative to worrying. Merely worrying, we said, is the *incorrect* way of addressing the concern entailed by our existential insecurity: it is to be preoccupied with comparisons. To *avoid* comparisons, on the other hand, is "to be contented with being a human being," which in itself is achieved through our relationship with God. Having a relationship with God, as we have just seen, amounts to faith, which is the *correct* way of addressing the concern entailed in the human state of existential insecurity. Thus, faith prevails over worry and overcomes it. Against the background of this conclusion, in the next section we will see further how faith allows us to address correctly our existential insecurity. More specifically, by presenting the virtues of faith as Kierkegaard characterizes them in the 1849 discourses—silence, obedience and joy—we will see yet again why faith is the desirable alternative to worry.

### The virtues of faith

As we explained in the Introduction, Kierkegaard's "lily and bird" discourses attempt to explain how the legitimate concerns of human existence can be addressed in a way that does not require denying their validity. Since we have earthly concerns which *are* significant, we cannot imagine ourselves to be perfectly invulnerable and self-sufficient. What Kierkegaard offers is an explanation of how faith could allow us to overcome worry, so that we are not overwhelmed by the concerns of a finite and contingent being. At this point, we have accounted for why it is that faith, according to Kierkegaard, is the *best* way of maintaining the cares that we should not wish to live without (see CD, pp. 48–49). Our goal in the present section is to say more about how we might develop and sustain faith in relation to our state of existential insecurity. In the words of Kierkegaard's three 1849 discourses on the lily and the bird, the virtues of faith are silence, obedience, and joy. His portrayal of these virtues provides us with

a more complete picture of the kind of faith that constitutes a response to the problem of worry.

In the first of his 1849 discourses, Kierkegaard depicts a scene in which someone is praying to God in a spirit of wishful self-assertion, asking that the world be forced into conformity with his own will. This person “who did not pray aright,” after making a litany of demands, finds himself trying to remember one last thing that he had intended to request. But then “something amazing” happens, and as he strives to remember his last demand, he becomes “completely silent.” Rather than making demands, he begins to *listen*. “He thought that to pray is to speak; he learned that to pray is not only to be silent but is to listen” (WA, pp. 10–12). Here, “to speak” means to be demanding and insistent, whereas “to listen” is to be open and receptive to whatever promptings and opportunities may arise if we are able to discern them. Such receptivity is impossible as long as we are only seeking to impose our own preconceived agenda on the world. This is why *silence* is the first trait we should learn from the lily and the bird. God is defined as “love” and “infinite wisdom,” and “what the human being knows” is little by comparison, “even in regard to his own welfare” (WA, p. 11). Kierkegaard’s argument is that *we don’t know what is best for us*, and could not serve as our “own providence” anyway (UDVS, p. 178); it is therefore ridiculous for us to wish for control over everything that occurs, as if we knew how it ought to be, and as if we were the omnipotent masters of our lives. So often what appears at first glance to be a misfortune, not what we would have wanted to happen, looks in retrospect like a disguised blessing; and, after getting what we wished for, we sometimes realize that it was not for the best after all.

Even as we strive to maintain our ideals and pursue our goals, we should bear in mind that “everything takes place in its time,” trusting that some good will befall us if we can “be silent and wait” (WA, pp. 13–14). To *have* plans, to aspire and strive, is another human excellence which we are not asked to relinquish but to keep in proportion.<sup>16</sup> If the bird finds its nest in disarray several days in a row, it just starts over again “from the beginning,” working with undeterred patience and care (WA, p. 29). We are invited to learn from this example, and to continue to pursue our ideals although their realization depends on factors that are largely beyond our control. Simply by virtue of being what it is, the bird shows a lack of doubt that some good may still come about—by not complaining, it displays something like a silent trust that all will be well. Thus, for human beings, the imperative that issues from this example is to trust that, eventually, everything is in God’s hands (see CD, pp. 18 and 64). When we ourselves fail to maintain this kind of trust, Kierkegaard suggests, it may be because we are guilty of “self-willfulness” (WA, p. 43) and unwilling to accept our finite condition.

One way of not being reconciled to finite existence is to reject contingency by willfully insisting that everything happen according to our own intentions; another is wishing for a different reality altogether, like the lily in the 1847 discourses that

<sup>16</sup> Even in relation to our grandest purposes, Kierkegaard says, we should not be any more self-important than the lily and the bird are “in their minor cares” (WA, pp. 17–18). In the 1847 discourses, he suggests that the bird lacks the aspiring soul of the human being (UDVS, pp. 208–209): to aspire and strive is a noble trait, but it can also lead to worry. Kierkegaard assumes that *we will* have cares, so he is trying to show us a way of caring that would allow us to cope with uncertainty, failure, disappointment, and so forth.

wishes in “despondency” that it could be transported elsewhere, or the “poet” in the 1849 discourses who wants to be something other than a human being (see UDVS, p. 170; WA, pp. 7–8). Both the attitude of willful self-assertion and that of not wishing to be what one is (or where one is) are refusals to accept one’s finite circumstances. In either case, this means wanting to be something other than a particular human being, longing to escape from the human condition rather than coming to terms with it. Of course, the lily and the bird do not have the option of complaining about their circumstances, just as they do not have the option of defying the will of God. They are able to demonstrate virtues of faith such as silence and obedience because each of these virtues is distinguished by an absence or a lack: silence by the absence of complaint, obedience by the lack of defiance.

Kierkegaard exhorts us to regard all that we value in life as a contingent gift, since its worth is not established through our own voluntary effort, and also because we cannot eliminate the risk of its being lost.<sup>17</sup> The bird of the air is “not exempt from suffering,” he notes: as a finite being, it too is subject to adversity and has a tenuous hold on whatever good its life may hold. Nevertheless it believes, and “is never deceived” in believing, that one must not complain about what is lacking at the moment. Rather, one should trust that all good things will arrive in due time, for those with the patience and faith to wait quietly for the significant “moment” in which they do arrive—“softly,” not noisily, and without warning, so that we will miss them unless we are silent and receptive (WA, pp. 14–15). This, Kierkegaard suggests, is how we discover meaning in life: by being quiet and receptive, and accepting whatever happens as if it were the will of God, instead of only giving voice to our own demands (WA, p. 19). The bird avoids being “tossed about” by worries only because every moment it “wills as God wills” (CD, pp. 61–62 and 68–69). In order for us to do this, we must abandon our stance of obstinate willfulness, and become capable of silent faith and trust, developing virtues that come so naturally to the bird of the air.

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard makes one important remark about why we should “learn to be silent”: it is because silence will enable us to find a “mitigating explanation” of what appears at first glance *not* to be good.<sup>18</sup> Silence, like the loving trust which is said to “believe all things,” is an expression of faith because it allows us to be open toward what we encounter, trying to view it in the most charitable light rather than being quick to find fault or to condemn. This passage adds another dimension to the idea of silence as receptivity. Although not every variety of silence is admirable—think, for instance, of “silent despair”—the silence praised in these bird and lily discourses is a state in which one is trusting and receptive, not preoccupied with making demands or complaints. In his 1849 discourses, Kierkegaard says that the virtue of obedience will follow from the virtue of silence, as if the one entails the other (WA, pp. 25–26). Why is this? If *silence* has to do with being open and receptive to whatever is granted to us, *obedience* is a matter of accepting what we are given with

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, pp. 56–58; see also Furtak (2005), pp. 115–116.

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 289–290 and 291–292. On what it means for love to “believe all things,” and why this is contrasted with an attitude of mistrust, see *Works of Love*, pp. 226–228 and 233–235. Edward Mooney 2007 mentions several varieties of silence.

unconditional trust—that is, actively consenting to it. We are truly liberated when we actively consent to follow God's will, and to embrace our finite predicament as a gift. By "obedience" Kierkegaard is not speaking about the dubious trait of being indiscriminately dutiful and compliant toward all laws and authorities, whatever they may be, but about the specific kind of obedience associated with faith: namely, accepting the constraints of finite existence, while taking them to be somehow an expression of God's will. In the words of the 1848 discourses, one who "sees with the eyes of faith" is "contented with being himself," as the bird of the air also is (CD, pp. 37–40). The contented lily accepts the place assigned to it, and "submits to its conditions," not complaining about its situation but making the best of it, demonstrating "courage and faith" regardless of where it happens to be placed (WA, pp. 27–28). Needless to say, we human beings are also thrown into a world in which the circumstances of our birth are very much beyond our control. We can either consent to our predicament, accepting our contingent finitude, or else we can rage impotently against our situatedness, bemoaning the fact that we were born in a particular time and place.

It bears repeating that Kierkegaard is not just recommending passive acquiescence: these discourses are addressed to those of us who are "in distress" by virtue of our cares (UDVS, p. 160). He is not advocating that we withdraw our love and concern from finite reality in favor of some ideal realm "beyond"—a temptation that he condemns in *Works of Love*—or that we float in care-free detachment like the "aesthete" in *Either/Or*. It is easy for the bird and lily to show "unconditional obedience," since they are not tormented by the capacity to imagine how things might be different (WA, p. 35). Yet we, too, must be reconciled to our situation in order to make any good of it; so it makes sense for us to accept the conditions of finite existence, rather than defying or rejecting them. Especially when we are "touched by the harshness of this life," it is difficult to accept these limitations, to "submit" to "necessity" and consent to finitude (WA, pp. 28–30). Yet the lily and the bird do this without showing any hint of ambivalence or complaint, not harboring secret grievances or cursing their fate (WA, p. 15). Here, disobedience is being equated with insisting upon our own conception of the good, measuring what actually happens against our own ideas of what we would have wished for; obedience, on the other hand, consists in accepting what transpires, trusting that we can find some good in it, not despairing or losing patience but "making a virtue of necessity" (WA, pp. 30–31).

Silent receptivity ought to lead to obedient acceptance. That is why, in this discourse and in the parallel one from 1847, a person is identified as serving God rather than Mammon only if he or she is well-disposed toward finite gifts, accepting whatever is given with silent receptivity and trust.<sup>19</sup> With this interpretation of what it means not to serve two masters, Kierkegaard reinforces the point that having faith means trusting in a higher power that disposes of human existence: and this means endeavoring to

<sup>19</sup> The last of the 1847 discourses, like the middle of the three 1849 discourses, is a commentary on Matthew 6:24, the verse beginning: "No one can serve two masters." In the 1848 discourses, "self-will" is identified as the "other master" chosen by anyone who "distances himself from God" (CD, pp. 88–89). Relevant to the discussion that follows is the earlier discourse entitled "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection," in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, esp. pp. 312–317. On why we should not withdraw our love and concern from finite reality in favor of some ideal realm "beyond," see Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, pp. 161–167.

accept and to make the best of every contingency that befalls us, rather than disdain whatever does not agree with our prior expectations. In short, Kierkegaard encourages us to trust in the source of all that is bestowed upon us, arguing that *unconditional acceptance* is the most appropriate response to “earthly uncertainty” (CD, p. 78), or to the uncertainties of earthly life.<sup>20</sup>

No matter whether our sufferings and worries are great or little, no matter whether we are more or less unfortunate, the argument of these discourses is addressed to us. Kierkegaard calls it “a matter of indifference” what our finite circumstances happen to be, and whether we find it easy or difficult at the moment to “submit unconditionally to everything” (WA, pp. 28–29). His claim is not that such mundane things do not matter at all—obviously, there is a significant difference whether one is starving or well-fed, less or more fortunate, and we have already seen that Kierkegaard is not disputing this. So what does he mean? His discourses are not proposing a reevaluation of values, but a different way of being disposed toward what we value. Kierkegaard is suggesting that we must find a way of accepting our precarious condition, renouncing any sense of entitlement toward the finite goods that we do or do not have. If we regard all that we value in life as a contingent gift, then we will not presume to possess it securely: whether we are rich or poor in food, health, friendship, or success, we should remember that none of these things are entirely in our power to acquire or to retain. Ultimately we are in a vulnerable predicament, regardless of “whether life treats you well or badly, whether you die today or not for seventy years” (WA, p. 45). Suffering, affliction, and loss are features of being human; we must face up to them, abandoning our wish for omnipotence over everything that matters to us—while allowing it to matter nonetheless. This, we suggest, is what it means to “submit unconditionally” to the human condition, and to accept its limits: it means *trusting* enough to take the risk of caring about finite existence, even though we cannot *know* that this is a risk worth taking.

Our condition is one of profound insecurity, and unless we are utterly indifferent about finite existence then we do have good reason to be concerned. What we need in order to face our predicament with confidence, and to have concerns without being in distress about them, is a disposition of silent receptivity and trust: this kind of faith would enable us to live with uncertainty, rather than being overwhelmed by it. If we can develop an outlook of “faith and trust,” then we can prevail over our worries (UDVS, p. 194), accepting what is given to us, not complaining or despairing any more than the bird does, even in the midst of its greatest sufferings (WA, p. 15). Note that we are not being advised to “rise above” our earthly cares or to look upon them with contempt: instead, we are encouraged to form a different attitude toward them, one that would allow us to affirm our life as human beings in full awareness of our tragic vulnerability. This must be distinguished, on the one hand, from making oneself self-sufficient by not caring about anything or anyone, like the “poet” who wishes to be free from

<sup>20</sup> On “earthly life, in which everything is uncertain,” see also Kierkegaard (2009), p. 73. See also the 1849 letter to P. M. Stilling, in which Kierkegaard refers to “accident, Governance, or whatever it may be” that reigns over mundane events: *Letters and Documents*, trans. by Henrik Rosenmeier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 338–339. Even when he seems unsure of how to characterize this higher power, Kierkegaard’s attitude toward it is trusting and receptive.

“worries and sufferings and adversities,” and happily “in love” with himself (WA, pp. 7–8). That, Kierkegaard explains, is *not* what the Gospel is advising us to do: that would be a wish to transcend the human condition. Rather than telling us to become detached from finite existence, his discourses offer us a way of becoming well-disposed toward all that matters to us within this realm: and *renouncing* our claim on contingent reality is not the same as *detaching* ourselves from caring about it altogether.

On the other hand, the perspective of faith, or trust, needs to be distinguished from having finite cares while believing oneself to be absolutely secure in relation to them, like the person for whom prayer is a fantasy of wish-fulfillment, or the tame dove who believes that he has an infinite supply of grain hoarded away. Just as Kierkegaard is not recommending that we abandon all finite cares, he is also not advising us to be zealously self-assured in relation to the concerns that we do have. The former is the attitude of someone who turns away from the world, perhaps toward an otherworldly God (a God on whom one does not depend for anything in this life, and whom one has no need to trust); the latter is the outlook of one for whom “faith” is an illusion of certainty, for whom God is the one who guarantees that all wishes will be granted, in the form of good fortune in this life or eternal reward.<sup>21</sup> Distinguished from either of these stances is the kind of faith defined and defended in the “lily and bird” discourses, which is an attitude of trust expressed in the context of one’s finite existence, such as we might learn from our “divine” teachers, the lily and the bird (WA, pp. 10–13; cf. CD, pp. 9–10). This faith, or trust, involves believing in the givenness of the finite realities upon which our well-being depends, and realizing that we will appreciate their value *only after* we have renounced our claim on them. It involves making the first movement of resignation and accepting our lack of control over what is most precious to us—like the “girl in love” who does not worry about whether her beloved will be with her tomorrow, but who gratefully welcomes and embraces him today, and who thereby has the only assurance she can have about tomorrow (UDVS, p. 180). With this second movement of *faith*—namely, the grateful welcome of today—she overcomes *worry* about the beloved whom she does not own.

So, to recap our interpretation so far: Kierkegaardian faith, as it is conceived in these discourses, would enable us to affirm our existential predicament by consenting to a finite life that is filled with the risk of insufficiency and deprivation. Such an outlook is distinguished by silent receptivity and obedient acceptance as its characteristic virtues.<sup>22</sup> *Silence* is needed in order for us to be receptive to whatever we meet with, even when it differs from what we ourselves might have wished for. *Obedience* involves accepting and embracing what has been granted to us: if silence consists in listening, then obedience involves actively agreeing with and abiding by what we hear. Thus, *joy*, the final topic of the 1849 discourses (about which more will be said below), is the appropriate mood in which to express these other virtues, since this is

<sup>21</sup> On the conception of God as “a kind elderly uncle who for a sweet word does everything the child wants, just as the child wants it,” see Kierkegaard (1988). The knight of “infinite resignation,” in *Fear and Trembling*, has no reason to trust in God as the source of all that is most precious to him, because he lacks any hope of finding joy or fulfillment in the finite realm of his concerns. This is why he is not especially vulnerable to worry. On this topic, although without specific reference to worry, see the valuable discussion by Adams (1990).

<sup>22</sup> Beabout (2006) describes “active receptivity” as the cardinal virtue of the 1849 discourses in his essay.

the emotional response awakened in a state of true acceptance: “should not obedience then always be joyous, should it hesitate for one single moment to be joyous—after all, it is simply and solely my own good that is advanced!” (CD, p. 86). According to Kierkegaard, faith or trust involves a wholehearted affirmation of our insecure and vulnerable condition.<sup>23</sup>

For example: Abraham, who maintains his faith within *this* life (FT, pp. 19–20), is silently receptive to his sacred imperative and obediently accepts what he cannot comprehend, and in doing so he manages to preserve his ability to “find joy” (FT, p. 50). We know this not only because it is overtly stated in *Fear and Trembling*, but also because Kierkegaard’s pseudonym includes in his “Attunement” (or “Exordium”) four variant ways to imagine the Binding of Isaac, each of which features a false Abraham who is something less than a knight of faith—one of whom “saw joy no more,” as his eyes were darkened and downcast after the ordeal (FT, p. 12). From this we can infer that the true Abraham did *not* become depressed, and did not lose the capacity to rejoice in life. And the other false Abrahams in *Fear and Trembling* lack the other virtues of faith as described in the “lily and bird” discourses. The first one fails to be silent: indeed, it seems that he cannot stop talking, as he tries to explain himself to Isaac and Sarah, asks forgiveness, and then changes his account of what he is doing (FT, pp. 10–11). In the last two cases, “Abraham” is either tormented by grief and remorse or else he shudders and clenches his fist while reluctantly carrying out the command (FT, pp. 13–14). From these examples we can gather that the real Abraham was obedient, as these false Abrahams were not. He never utters a word of lamentation or complaint (FT, p. 17). By having misgivings about what has been allotted to one, or acceding to the divine will in a spirit of angry protest, one falls short of being obedient—and the feelings of doubt, remonstrance, or hopelessness which are shown by the false Abrahams would also prevent a person from being joyful or wholehearted in embracing his plight. In *Fear and Trembling*, it is made clear that the true father of faith does *not* lack silence, obedience, or joy: and this brings us back to the theme explored in the last of Kierkegaard’s 1849 discourses.

Like the “knight of faith,” someone who learns from the lily and the bird will maintain trust that everything in the finite realm of existence that he cares about remains in God’s hands. In relation to the painful insecurity and uncertainty of human life, he will strive to interpret all things in a charitable light, remembering that “what one sees depends upon how one sees.”<sup>24</sup> However we interpret the conceptions of faith that are presented across Kierkegaard’s corpus, we can see the lily and bird discourses, on the one hand, and *Fear and Trembling* on the other, as mutually reinforcing one another by developing similar notions of faith. Each of these texts examines the question of how we ought to be oriented toward finitude, the realm in which we exist and in which our well-being and happiness depend on many contingent factors (see FT, pp. 36 and 49). Although it is painful to admit that everything we have been granted is liable to be taken away, we can remain bound to the finite world that we care about *if* we

<sup>23</sup> In the 1848 discourses, “joy” is named as the state of mind in which we maintain our “cares” with faith, rather than desperately craving a security that we cannot have (CD, pp. 43–45).

<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 59; see the discussion of this passage in Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, pp. 105–106.

develop an attitude of unconditional trust. Even though our life is fragile and insecure, and the risk of sorrow and loss cannot be eliminated, we are invited to feel joyful even if we have not “procured all the conditions” of joy (WA, pp. 37–38). This kind of joy goes beyond what is objectively justified, and it is *not easy* to cultivate, yet it is something that we can learn from the bird of the air, who greets and celebrates each day (WA, p. 36): the bird never ceases to sing joyfully, uttering an unconditional hymn of praise, even on the darkest of days (CD, pp. 85–86). Such an outlook is nothing other than an appreciation of all that life brings, a disposition in which we view everything in the most charitable light.<sup>25</sup> If we cannot “unconditionally rejoice” in our precarious and uncertain existence, this is understandable in one sense—after all, it is “almost” a “miracle” that a creature can be joyful in the midst of sorrow, peril, suffering, and ruin—but it is also a sign of our “self-willfulness” and our ingratitude for the contingent goods that we are taking for granted (WA, pp. 40–41 and 43–44). What is understandable in one sense is wrongheaded in another: it is difficult to be unconditionally joyful, yet we know that we are not in a position of mastery over finite existence, and that we do not have an absolutely secure grasp on all that is precious to us. What *is* within our power is to find joy in ordinary facts such as “that you came into existence, that you became a human being; that you can see, that you can hear . . . that you can taste, that you can feel; that the sun shines,” and so forth (WA, p. 39). We can rejoice in all these things when we view them as gratuitous benefits that we have no right to expect, rather than being worried about how we can render ourselves invulnerable in possession of them (see UDVS, p. 175).<sup>26</sup> In other words, we fully sense the value of everything we care about only after we have abandoned illusions of security, and utterly surrendered any proprietary claim upon the finite realm. This is how Kierkegaardian faith would allow us to renew our relationship with finitude, and to affirm our existence on truthful terms—not imagining ourselves to be either all-powerful or self-contained, but embracing our life as beings who are quite emphatically *not* in control of everything that we are concerned about. Like the knight of faith (see FT, pp. 39–46), the lily and the bird show us how we could renounce our hold on all that we love and care about, while nonetheless remaining at home in the finite world by embracing it again.

## Conclusion

How do the lily and the bird go about this, about something that looks almost like a miracle: in deepest sorrow to be unconditionally joyful; when there is such

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard describes the way an outlook of joyful faith and trust can explain everything in the best light: see *Journals and Papers*, ed. by Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1967–1978), § 4554. On “joyful insecurity” or “joyful acceptance,” see Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, p. 187; Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, p. 133. The importance of being disposed toward charitable interpretation is stressed by Ferreira (2001). See also Stokes (2007), who discusses the emphasis on “ways of seeing” throughout Kierkegaard’s work.

<sup>26</sup> In this passage, Kierkegaard points out that the wild dove is “no longer joyful” once it starts to worry about securing the material conditions of life. It is also noteworthy that “self-willfulness” is described elsewhere as an obstacle to loving the actual person we see: Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, p. 55.

a frightful tomorrow, then *to be*, that is, to be unconditionally joyful today—how do they go about this? They go about this quite plainly and simply ... [they] have taken to heart the apostle Peter's words ... “Cast **all** your sorrow **upon God**” (WA, p. 41).

Sorrow and concern are the two sides of the same coin: the coin of our human insecurity. Given our temporality, our limitedness, and the change and loss that we must endure during our lifetime, sorrow and concern are inevitably involved in being human.<sup>27</sup> And yet, Kierkegaard believes that sorrow, though inescapable, is not the last word; and that concern, though unavoidable, need not turn into worry. From a Kierkegaardian point of view, the astonishing possibility—“in deepest sorrow” to be “unconditionally joyful”—is a valid one, and in this paper we have claimed that such a desirable state of existence, i.e. faith, is the positive alternative to the more *common* state of existence, i.e. that of being worried.<sup>28</sup>

But what might “casting all one's sorrow upon God”—yet another description of faith—be like? Imagine a tired person, who returns home after a long and distressful journey. Someone who deeply loves this person is waiting for him at home—it might be a parent, a spouse, a friend—and, having heard all his troubles, is now telling the exhausted one the following words: now that you are here, you do not have to worry anymore. Go to bed, have some rest, leave all your worries to me: I will take care of everything.<sup>29</sup> If the worried person is able to accept this offer then, in a sense, he is depositing his worries (or at least some of them) in the loving hands of the other person. And he is capable of doing this because he trusts the other person: he has confidence regarding the care, wisdom and capacities of the loving one. Of course, this does not mean that he *forgets* about his troubles, but rather that he is not facing them alone: he has someone to trust, he has someone to co-work with.

Having this illustration in mind, we can now understand how being able to cast *all* (and not just some of) one's sorrows upon *God* (and not just a loving person) allows one to find joy in the midst of deep sorrow and peace in the midst of interminable concerns. This, to repeat, is Kierkegaard's alternative to worry; and, in this paper, we have explored the theological and existential meaning of this alternative. In the 1847 discourses Kierkegaard presents it in terms of “being contented with being a human being,” which is a state achievable only through one's relationship with God. Such a relationship amounts to both worshipping God (namely, working for the honor of God) and working *with* God. In the 1849 discourses Kierkegaard elaborates further on the alternative to worry, now presenting it in terms of silence, obedience, and joy. To be silent and obedient is to express *trust* in God, and this trust allows the kind of

<sup>27</sup> Regarding a faith that embraces “the vulnerability to loss entailed by our concrete human attachments,” see also Hall (2000).

<sup>28</sup> Other philosophical authors have examined the “fragility” of the human condition, or what we have called “existential insecurity”: although we have tried to show the distinct resources that are offered by Kierkegaard's theistic response, we lack time and space here to compare it to some of these other, more secular, alternatives. See, e.g., Nussbaum (1986) and such Heideggerian authors as Vogel (1994). On this theme, in relation to Kierkegaard and other philosophers, see also Hall, *The Human Embrace*.

<sup>29</sup> Here, we might remember the words from Matthew 11: 28, cited in several of Kierkegaard's writings: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.”

joy that one is capable of finding even while deeply acknowledging one's insecure existence. Trust, after all, amounts to believing that our concerns and sorrows are cared for by a greater being that “knows better.” Thus, since a rational calculation and sober assessment of the human situation cannot but lead to irresolvable sorrows and concerns, trusting such a being is the only justification—emotionally as well as rationally speaking—of joy.

Reading Kierkegaard's “lily and bird” discourses together, then, we are introduced to the portrait of a potential believer who, like the “divinely appointed teachers”—the lily and the bird—succeeds in living a life that is full of care, but devoid of worry. Such a portrait, as we have claimed, echoes Kierkegaard's existential portrait of the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. Thus, the importance of these religious contemplations on the lilies and the birds consists not only in providing an interesting solution to the familiar problem of worrying, but also in enriching our understanding of existential faith.

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