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ARTICLE



## Exaltation and atrocity: why kenotic humility can't justify divine concurrence of evil

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### ABSTRACT

'Exaltation views' of humility are grounded on a kenotic view of humility, such that divine blessing comes proportionate to the extent to which an agent humbles herself. This article rejects exaltation views of humility which define humility kenotically, justify their arguments from a divine hiddenness perspective, and which conclude that divine concurrence with evil is justified as long as all humble believers eventually are exalted and blessed. Rather, I will contend that exaltation views misunderstand the meaning of both 'humility' and 'exaltation,' even from their own Christian standpoint. I ultimately offer an alternate response to the problem of evil based on an existentially grounded conception of 'humility' (a recognition of our need for others), which provides for a transmuted turn away from individual kenotic acts and toward community to transform those who suffer from atrocities.

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It has recently been posited that a theist's humility can serve as evidence for the best possible good defense of God's perfection against the problem of evil.<sup>1</sup> This article argues that (what I call) 'exaltation views' of humility are insufficient to account for atrocities in the world committed against those who are told to take on humility to emulate Christian perfection. 'Exaltation views' take the expectation of future exaltation to be the normatively justified reason to choose to be humble. Interestingly, though exaltation views of humility are explicitly Christian, as a response to the problem of evil, they borrow from a divine hiddenness argument<sup>2</sup> to explain why we cannot know why God allows atrocities in the world and to prescribe self-abasement in order to become more like God. Exaltation views of humility are grounded on a kenotic view of humility, such that divine blessing comes proportionate to the extent to which an agent humbles herself. This article rejects exaltation views of humility which define humility kenotically, justify their arguments from a divine hiddenness perspective, and which conclude that divine concurrence with evil is justified as long as all humble believers eventually are exalted and blessed. Rather, I will contend that exaltation views misunderstand the meaning of both 'humility' and 'exaltation,' even from their own Christian standpoint. I ultimately offer an alternate response to the problem of evil based on an existentially grounded conception of 'humility' (a recognition of our need for others), which

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provides for a transmuted turn away from individual kenotic acts and toward community to transform those who suffer from atrocities.

### Exaltation views of kenotic humility and the problem of evil

Although there will be disagreement as to the extent to which different exaltation views of humility prescribe suffering or self-abasement, one characteristic shared by proponents of exaltation views is that the promise of future exaltation for those who are humble (or, who suffer in their humility) is sufficient reason for the agent to act humbly now. Exaltation views of kenotic humility are richly theistic, and frequently evangelical, because ‘kenosis’ (literally, ‘emptying’) refers to the emptying of Jesus Christ, through his suffering. The Scriptural justification for humility draws most prominently from Christ in Matthew 23:12, ‘For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,’<sup>3</sup> as well as from Paul’s Philippians 2 exhortation to be ‘of the same mind as Christ,’ who took on the form of a servant (verse 7) and emptied himself – ‘made himself nothing’ to atone for human sin. Christ’s emptied humility provides a model for exaltation views that maps onto the picture given in Matthew, since after Christ’s suffering, God ‘exalted him to the highest place’ and ‘has given him a name that is above every name’ (verse 9). *Kenotic humility* is humility generated through an emptying of the self, often through voluntary or involuntary suffering. Voluntarily, kenotic humility entails that we take on a kenotic stance, so that we welcome suffering and mistreatment, and we lower our estimation of ourselves so that when suffering comes, we recognize we receive our due. What it means to have the same mind of Christ is difficult, of course, but *kenotic* interpretations are the most akin to exaltation views. When we involuntarily suffer, having a kenotic stance ensures that life is endurable despite suffering and shame, and our suffering and shame are endurable because they will be redeemed to some exalted, better state. When we voluntarily place ourselves in positions to be humbled, lowered, and mistreated, we approximate more closely the mind-set of Jesus, and so can allow God to exalt us later.

What Christ’s suffering means for those who are instructed to have the same mind as Christ is notoriously difficult to ascertain.<sup>4</sup> One of the most thorough semantic examples is found in Bruce Fisk’s work (in Evans, 2006, 63), in which he points out that a central element in understanding kenosis – and so our obligation to be humble – is the semantic force of Christ’s initiative in his descent. For kenoticism, ‘having the same mind as Christ’ depends upon the mode through which Christ exists as God in Philippians 2:6. Ought *hyparchon* (literally, ‘existing,’ ‘being’ in verse 6a) be understood *concessively* (‘although existing in the form of God’); *causally* (‘[precisely] because he existed in the form of God’); or *circumstantially* (‘who, in the circumstance of being God’)?<sup>5</sup> For any reading in which a divine Christ relates to humanity through an emptying of himself or his nature, the result is the same: Christ suffers for us. But, exaltation views of kenotic humility have argued that having the same mind as Christ means to self-abnegate – to voluntarily empty the self by seeking out suffering in order to experience exaltation in heaven.

Receiving exaltation in heaven is the primary motivation for theistic kenotic humility, but there are also earthly benefits, according to the view. Christ’s suffering allows God to be present to agents who are humble in a way that would be impossible without

Christ's acquaintance with grief, and which aids the agent to see herself as a servant, similarly to Jesus. The suffering of the humble calibrates them and their action to the divine will, with the result that, though suffering need not be necessary, those who are humble in suffering can experience redemption from sin through the experience of confessing one's sin to the Christ who suffered – who experienced the ultimate atrocity through the Passion.<sup>6</sup> Finally, kenotic humility can serve a theodical purpose to non-believers by linking kenotic humility with theistic responses to the problem of evil. Christ's kenosis itself can provide a response to the problem of evil, since through it, Christ was emptied of the divine nature, participated in suffering as a man, and underwent the most heinous of horrors in order to redeem sin. Through Christ's emptying, God has both given humanity what it did not deserve (i.e. redemption and grace) and leveled the scales against moral evil (so, enacted justice).

Exaltation views of humility use the satisfaction of human sin through Christ's suffering as evidence that we should be humble: those who are humble take on the attitude that God's reasons for permitting evil in the world cannot be known, but God will eventually elevate their standing. Andrew Murray and James Spiegel are some of the best exemplars for the exaltation view of humility. Murray explains exaltation, Reckon humility to be indeed the mother-virtue, your very first duty before God, the one perpetual safeguard of the soul, and set your heart upon it as the source of all blessing. The promise is divine and sure: he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.<sup>7</sup> One must remember that Christian humility is not cultivated *in vacuo*. It is one element in a complex worldview and form of life. To the lowly, there is no small consolation in the fact that they and their kind 'shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger' and 'shall inherit the land.' Such satisfaction, Murray contends, is but one of the pleasures of humility.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, exaltation views have their expression in Aquinas and, even more strongly, in Thomas à Kempis, who scholars contend equivocates between 'humility' and 'self-abasement.' The appropriate response to the greatness of God in our lives, à Kempis contends, is recognizing that there is no worse nor more troublesome enemy to the soul than you are to yourself, if you be not in harmony with the Spirit. It is altogether necessary that you take up a true contempt for yourself, if you desire to prevail against flesh and blood. Because as you yet love yourself too inordinately; therefore you are afraid to resign yourself wholly to the will of others.<sup>9</sup> Samuel Kettlewell argued that, for à Kempis, contempt for the self toward 'the advancement of the soul towards perfection leads rather to the subjection and abasement of self, and to a greater manifestation of real love and kindness to our neighbors....'<sup>10</sup> Spiegel, who contends that humility just is the virtue of self-abasement (2003, 141), observes that, while à Kempis's language of self-abasement might seem too difficult to popularize, his view is consistent with traditional Christian thought on humility as that which follows from the natural condition of human beings before God. There are two causes of humility for fallen humanity, One is the degradation, wretchedness, and weakness of man to which by sin he has fallen .... The other is the superabundant love and worth of God in himself: gazing on which all nature trembles, all scholars are fools, all saints and angels blind.<sup>11</sup>

The seeming tension between the love of God that gazes on the natural condition of humanity and the suffering that comes from the human condition is ameliorated by the responses to the problem of evil by proponents of exaltation views. A common atheist response to the problem of evil is the divine hiddenness view, which says that the

existence of a perfect being would be an obvious feature of the world, so that if God is omnipotent, he would reveal himself to the world and if he is omnibenevolent, he would want to reveal himself. God's existence isn't obvious, given unexplained evil in the world.<sup>12</sup> Exaltation views are a theistic alteration of the divine hiddenness argument, a version of which can be represented this way<sup>13</sup>:

- (1) If there is evil in the world, there must be a God-justifying reason for God to permit it.
- (2) The suffering of the righteous is an evil in the world.
- (3) Therefore, there must be a God-justifying reason for God to permit the suffering of the righteous.
- (4) If humans can't think of a God-justifying reason for permitting the suffering of the righteous, it is because God has lovingly hidden that reason from them and has promised to exalt those who are humble in their suffering.
- (5) There is some suffering of the righteous, such that humans can't think of any God-justifying reason for permitting it.
- (6) Therefore, God has lovingly hidden the reason for permitting some suffering of the righteous from humans, and those who are humble will be exalted in their suffering.

On this theistic reclaiming of the divine hiddenness argument, the absence of a reason at hand for God to permit evil – such as the suffering of the righteous – is not evidence that there is not a God-justifying reason. Rather, the absence of a reason instead indicates that God has hidden his reason from us. Further, God hides his reasons for allowing evil in the world because he loves us, and those who are humble have eschatological reasons to rejoice – they will eventually be exalted! Rather than being evidence against the existence of God, some theists see the hiddenness of God's response to evil as a grace – a gift that believers who suffer can accept with humility.<sup>14</sup> G.K. Chesterton<sup>15</sup> espoused such a position when he lamented, 'What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. . . . Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt – the Divine Reason. Suffering brings the humble theist to a lower state of mind, akin to Aquinas' perspective that humility restrains the mind 'lest it tend to high things immoderately.'<sup>16</sup>

Atheists might contend that the suffering of those who do not deserve it is the ultimate evidence against a perfectly existing God. But, exaltation views take the suffering of the righteous to demonstrate the immutable perfection of God; in allowing the humbled righteous person to suffer, God demonstrates his promise to the victim that future exaltation awaits. Suffering of the believer can, then, be motivated by a promise: that for every humility endured, God will bless the sufferer with spiritual goods. Taking a cue from the book of James 1:9, 'Let the brother who is lowly boast in being exalted; but the rich, in that he is made, because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away,' James Spiegel's exaltation view goes even further, . . .the connection between humility and exaltation is law-like, at least for the redeemed. That is, as far as the Christian is concerned, there seem to be no exceptions to this rule: the virtue of humility *always* leads to exaltation of some kind (314). God hides his reasons for permitting evil in the world – though he has sufficient God-justifying reasons – and

allows us to suffer because in the end, we will experience a greater good – exaltation out of our humbled state. On this view, the point of humility and subsequent exaltation is – ultimately – redemption. The point of suffering, when we do not know what reasons God could possibly have to justify it, is just to put our mental state into one like Christ's, in which we are open to suffering now to be exalted later. The result is that kenotic humility enables a person to better testify against the problem of evil and so, ultimately, to save souls.

A key to kenotic humility is the self-abasement Spiegel describes. To answer the problem of evil, an agent's humility must be virtuous, and so to be virtuous, an agent's humility must be genuine – and genuine humility invites suffering of the self. Gabrielle Taylor writes that humility just is when we accept that we are in a lowly position *and receive what is due us*,<sup>17</sup> and since none of us are innocent and without sin, receiving suffering can function to humble us and to allow us to be further humbled. Kenotic humility reflects our position as nothing, like the Christ of Philippians 2, and our subsumed position of nothingness can consistently be maintained with our expectation of future exaltation. Self-abasement – the pursuit of nothingness – can generate kenotic humility differently among agents: some agents can be forced into kenotic humility through circumstances, and others actively seek a low position, but as a response to evil, exaltation views must take a position like Hick, 'human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.'<sup>18</sup> Rather than blaming God for evil, the willing humble sufferer sees her suffering as a sign of God's plan for an all-things-considered good for those who believe. In the words of one of the sweetest, most well-meaning recently departed theists, Hugh McCann observes, 'Our own suffering presents perhaps our best opportunity for moral advancement. . .and of course we are also likely to better appreciate the needs of others when we turn again to them.'<sup>19</sup>

### **Problems with exaltation views and kenotic humility**

At first glance, exaltation views of kenotic humility seem properly motivated by, and grounded in, Scripture. We ought to seek out low positions so that God can exalt us; the temporary sufferings we endure will reap an eschatology of riches; if being virtuous isn't its own reward, we only need to wait to receive heavenly blessings (in fact, some seem to think that if we enjoy this life less, we may actually earn more eternal treasure). There are some general problems with exaltation views of humility, however, and more specific problems of tying kenotic humility to a response to the problem of evil. For this discussion, I'd like to table problems that plague all views of humility and just focus on problems stemming from exaltation views of kenotic humility, which impact responses to the problem of evil. One general worry with exaltation views is epistemic. The humble person cannot exalt herself by confirming that she has humility. So, she either has to deny to herself that she is humble, or hide it. She wouldn't deny that she is humble (lying to herself about being humble would be an additional vice), so she would have to hide it from herself. But, if having humility requires the one who possesses it to hide it, such that an agent never can acknowledge that she properly has humility as long as she indefinitely tries to obtain it and perfect her being, the result is that the humble person cannot herself realize – come to see – that she is humble.<sup>20</sup> There are ancillary

difficulties (for example, would kenotic humility be a virtue if we could never have knowledge that we possess it?), but the main problem is how a virtue can do its work if the agent is constitutionally unable to recognize its presence in her life. A second worry relates to the internal, rational consistency of requiring in a law-like fashion a virtue of humility (whose action resides in *not* giving due to privileges and entitlements) on the normative basis that privileges and entitlements will be paid to the sufferer. Robert Roberts and Jay Wood frame the difficulty this way (although they do not label this humility as ‘kenotic’), if we think of humility as a disposition to be *generally* inattentive to entitlements, it would be easy for the opposite of arrogance to become a disabling trait and thus a vice. But it is not quite right to describe this kind of humility as inattentiveness to one’s entitlements. Someone with the humility of unarrogance may be as attentive to particular entitlements as any other alert, rational person. The difference between him and persons who are less humble is that he is relatively inattentive to the ego-exalting potency of his entitlements.<sup>21</sup> The issue, then isn’t that it is irrational to expect humility of those who self-abase themselves for future entitlements, but that humility entails a disposition to not pay attention to the fact that your entitlements will, invariably, exalt you – which is pragmatically paradoxical.

There are additional problems, specific to exaltation views of kenotic humility and the problem of evil. If exaltation views are ‘law-like’ in their prescriptivity (as Spiegel wants), the law would be uniformly applied and all who believe would invite suffering – and benefit from the exaltation of those who suffer atrocities. But, evidentially, these prove false. Historically, Philippians 2 has been a way to justify the oppression of slaves, women, the poor, and the disenfranchised.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, some of history’s worst atrocities have been committed by the Church, not just under the banner of Christ but for reasons grounded in kenotic humility. Christianity has been a primary – in many women’s lives *the* primary – force in shaping the acceptance of abuse.<sup>23</sup> The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive.<sup>24</sup> If the person of the incarnate God gave his life for the benefit of others, then, to be of value, women are taught that they likewise must sacrifice themselves. Some contemporary feminists have undermined the evangelical view that Christ’s kenosis represents an opportunity for a shared identity between those who suffer and God, on the basis that the redemptive significance of Christ’s suffering is used to justify civil rights abuses against the oppressed. (This has led some to reject altogether a Christian rhetoric of humility, and instead to focus on redemption that comes through active service to the community like that of Christ.<sup>25</sup>) Perhaps a bit ironically, exaltation views of kenotic humility do seem to recognize a potential disparity of humility’s call in relationship to the problem of evil – kenotic views valorize suffering because it places the victim in a shared space with divine goodness. Spiegel writes (without irony, using the female pronoun): We need not view pain as necessarily evil and, therefore, as evidence against theism. Rather, we may see suffering as a divine blessing, disguised though it may be. Suffering is a form of involuntary humility that presents the sufferer with an opportunity to see and affirm her place before God. (2003, 104).

The interesting issue that comes out of the relationship between kenosis and the problem of evil is not whether God could limit himself, but that he *has* in such a way that allows for – and more, *encourages* the suffering of the faithful (the sins of whom his kenosis was meant to atone). But the dichotomies between the human need for grace

and justice create a paradox for those who look to kenotic humility to redress the problem of evil: if Christ is Judge and acts with absolute power to effect justice, perhaps he concurs with and is responsible for evil in the world; and if Christ is Victim, and with ordained power stands in unison with humanity, he stands with those who equally are borne into sin and are held accountable for it. The potential paradox is stronger for those who believe that Christ as God suffered in order to participate in human suffering. Proponents of a kenotic view of humility can disagree on the precise meaning of the ‘emptying’ of Christ’s self, on ‘a sliding-scale from “risk” to “self-limitation” to “sacrifice” to “self-giving” to “self-emptying” – and even to “annihilation.”’<sup>26</sup> But, nearly all Christian theists would agree that the cross allowed Christ to be ‘acquainted with grief’ (Isaiah 53:3) and so relate to humanity writ large, and ‘not just to sin, but to all suffering, all pain, all injustice, all decay and death – indeed to all that is wrong with the creation, human nature and human society as we know it.’<sup>27</sup> Kenotic humility requires that Christ suffers ultimately and completely to be responsible for the suffering of creation. Not only did Christ suffer, but his participation in suffering provides decisive evidence of God’s love, which should satisfy the problem of evil.<sup>28</sup> God could not be indifferent to the suffering in the world if he himself is a victim of it.

That the disenfranchised suffer the most is not itself evidence against exaltation views of humility. (It may, for example, simply indicate that the power structures of the Church and elsewhere have permanently remained inured to the corrective tonic of the virtue of humility.) But, when juxtaposed against the problem of evil, the evidential problems show a structural difficulty with exaltation views of humility: they produce faulty moral reasons for being humble which, at least on the face of it, can lead people to accept atrocious harms as justifiable because they want to participate in a later, greater good. As well-intentioned as he may have been, Spiegel commits this error, when he concludes, Jesus said that the first will be last and the last will be first. This suggests that those who suffer most (and thus place “last” in this world in terms of personal comfort and pleasure) are most blessed, for presumably they shall be most comforted and overjoyed in the next world. (2003, 147)

There are several odd implications of this view (not the least of which is that it imagines heaven as a compendium of people on some spectrum of needing more and less comfort, and receiving more and less personal pleasure from comfort needed and received). One is that it goes beyond the ramifications of redemptive accounts of suffering. Redemptive accounts justify concrete individual harms as long as they will be redeemed by some later, greater good (the moral scale in the end always favors the good). Alvin Plantinga, for example, cites the Atonement as a good that could only be brought about by an evil. (The most horrendous evil ever is the death of Christ, but it was required for humanity’s salvation – a good that could never be known or experienced without atrocity.) All of redemption banks on it – and its end is knowable. The later good of our personal and corporate redemption is the known result of the atrocity of the Passion of Christ. But, exaltation views of humility go beyond the glorification of suffering, on the basis of an end that is ephemeral at best. Exaltation views mandate suffering in order for an agent to be virtuous and require that the motivation for virtue be some (heretofore unseen) later good. The reason we can be justified in being motivated by an unseen later good (even if we don’t know what the content of the good is) is that God always acts for God-justifying reasons. Suffering that humbles the victim will result,

for the believer, in exaltation although the reasons for which God allows the suffering may remain hidden for us. But, there is a logical and moral problem with the hiddenness justification for mandating kenotic humility for the believer. Requiring suffering, of course, requires a perpetrator of suffering. I am not sure who this perpetrator should be, but if suffering is required to experience exaltation by God, someone has to commit horrendous evil. If suffering is required and requires a perpetrator, we could not consistently morally condemn acts which perpetrate atrocities as long as those atrocities function to humble the victim and ensure she is open to experiencing later exaltation. Not only can we not condemn horrendous evil – we would have to condone it. The benefits, after all, outweigh any of the harms that we could experience, proportionate to the harms suffered. These criticisms, to my eyes at least, seem unique to exaltation views of humility and not to other redemptive accounts of suffering.

So, exaltation views of humility have stark consequences for morality. But, it seems that they make a fundamental mistake when by mirroring the kenotic humility of the believer onto the kenosis of Christ. The content of ‘being of the same mind as Christ’ is a crucial fulcrum point to the Philippians 2 problem: Christ’s humility included emptying himself of everything in order to die as a human, becoming absolutely nothing by taking on the weight of all sin. The death of Christ was a complete pouring out of everything good within him – and, since there was nothing in him that was not good – *everything* was removed in his emptying. Oliver Crisp<sup>29</sup> presents this version of kenosis as a ‘phase in the life of the Word’ in which Christ retained essential divine properties (like omnipotence and omniscience) prior to incarnation, but during the incarnation, had a different set of properties, ‘some of which overlap with the first set (e.g. “being a person”, “being Christ”) but some of which do not (e.g. “being limited in power and knowledge”).’ The kenosis of Christ represents, then, the ultimate horror, the most complete atrocity possible: the eruption of divine nature from the divine. The cross situated Christ at the furthest possible distance from God the Father, the space necessary to accommodate all possibilities of sin.

But, humans cannot empty themselves of what makes them human and cannot empty themselves of everything while escaping death. So, being humble as Christ was humble cannot simply mean to empty the self and become a servant (even if that is required of Christians), because that sense of humility cannot capture being ‘of the same mind’ as Christ. Rather, I will argue in the last part of the article, that humility is a *recognition* at the point of kenotic emptying: In Christ’s case reflected in Philippians, he became sin for humanity – pure potential, pure contingency, so utterly not absolute, and so void of being that God the Father had to turn his head away during the Passion. Human humility that approximates Christ’s is just that – *not* a moment of humiliation – but an encounter of our own situation as purely contingent beings. A view of ‘humility’ as ‘recognition of our human contingency’ can be maintained independent of theistic commitment, cannot include self-abasement, and *in its act* can bring people into community.

One final benefit of conceiving of humility as an encounter of our contingent situation is that a result of such an encounter is the sort of community theists believe Christ’s kenosis can provide. Seeking out suffering in order to be exalted can be a type of self-glorification and so requires a focus on the individual self, but seeking out others who have experienced a similar encounter opens up possibilities to reach out to those who have suffered and who have been humiliated by life’s circumstances. Conferring dignity back to those who suffer,

as a result of an encounter with our own contingency, stands as the action that demonstrates the love of Christ theists contend comes out of Philippians 2.<sup>30</sup> This action is more difficult to account for – and even more, to prescribe – from kenotic humility.

## Humility and humiliation

Exaltation views of kenotic humility improperly equivocate between humiliation and humility. Humiliation is self-abasement that need not have virtuous outcomes, and can in fact lead either to an overweening pride (in an agent's approximation to the suffering of Christ<sup>31</sup>) or to a separation of the self from others in community. But, equivocating between humiliation and humility can have the result of justifying atrocities to the self and others. To inform the difference between humiliation (required by exaltation views of humility) and true, virtuous humility, I will turn to the theistic existentialism of Gabriel Marcel – a 20th-century philosopher whose impact continues today in the areas of epistemology,<sup>32</sup> metaphysics,<sup>33</sup> ethics,<sup>34</sup> and beyond – and who condemned kenotic humility for its inability to capture the human need to recognize our condition. Marcel drew a hard contrast between humility (a virtue of recognizing our contingency) and humiliation when he wrote, But humility properly so called is of quite a different order [than the effacement of the self];... in the case of humility it is not error that is to be feared, but rather a claim which is incompatible with our condition as finite beings, the claim which would consist in believing that we are, or have the power to make ourselves, dependent only upon ourselves. (87) If Christ-like humiliation were humanly possible, humans would have to have a God-like aspect in the first place to empty out of the self. So, humiliating the self begins with an act of self-abasement is actually an act of self-acclaim – an act of defiance of the limits of our humanity and finitude. Not only is self-effacement a round-about way of deifying the self, it also assumes complete autonomy and independence of the self that we, as people needing community, cannot exhibit. By believing that we have the power to exist without others, and to empty ourselves or to allow a circumstance to empty ourselves, we resist our finiteness and contingency.

The call to human kenoticism based on humiliation is antithetical to Christian faith. Atheists (Marcel identifies Sartre as an example) attribute theistic humility with a sadistic craving for mortification. In this instance, as always with the author of *L'Être et le Néant*, the analysis holds good only in a quite restricted area of the life of consciousness; to put it more exactly, of a life of degraded consciousness.<sup>35</sup> But, humility is not degradation, self-humiliation, or the deprecation of the self or others. Instead, 'humility recognizes that we are nothing individually – as long as "nothingness" is understood as our individual contingency and need for community.' Note the key difference between kenotic humility and the kind articulated by Marcel: kenotic humility requires that someone empty themselves of what is essential (in order to be exalted); Marcelian humility requires a recognition that, on our own, we are nothing and cannot generate meaning. We are contingent and require others – both for our instantiation and for our flourishing. Exaltation views of humility run the risk of creating pride in how low a person is debased, and of valorizing suffering. But, Marcel repudiates acts that humiliate the humanity in ourselves to achieve humility, such that he calls humiliation *moral masochism* and argues that it prevents true Christian humility (1950, 88), The world today gives us terrifying examples of what this moral masochism can become. Here we are at the very heart of ignominy ... there is no

common measure shared by such a situation and that in which the human creature turns humbly and freely towards Him from Whom it holds its very being. Humiliation, then, as a deification of the self precludes the possibility of the individual turning to God, and so actually undermines the result that most theists want for humility. Rather than drawing closer to God through self-humiliation, self-deprecation is the antithesis of humility. A myopic focus on the individual self – even if the purpose for focusing on the self is to solicit suffering – is, for Marcel, a false act that perverts the purpose of humility. What we are bound to notice here, there can be no doubt, is a phenomenon of degeneration. . . . Another way of putting this would be to say that in so far as there is such a thing as religious masochism, it is always a perversion. (1950, 88–90)

Humiliation (at the heart of exaltation views of humility) is perversions, then, in two ways. First, humiliation perverts the communal structure of human significance that is at the heart of human interaction. If kenotic humility was required of the virtuous, we would no longer be able to serve others – we would be nothing for anyone else. This functional way of thinking results in a diminished ‘capacity to love, to admire, and to hope’ and even a loss in the desire to transcend alienation and captivity.<sup>36</sup> Humiliation reduces humanity to its ability to be emptied of its humanity, and values estrangement, violence toward others and to the self, and (finally), to nihilism. The ‘techniques of degradation’ in the kenotically humble are substituted for humility and gratitude that are meant to mark human dignity.<sup>38</sup> (If we become nothing, then we welcome a loss of existentially meaningful activities and projects.) But, humiliation also perverts an attempt at a relationship with God. Kenotic humanity would mean that we would have to come to God by emptying ourselves of our humanity. Could God require that we come humbly to him by way of emptying out what God created us essentially to be? Humiliating our human nature cannot be what is required for virtuous humility.<sup>37</sup>

Rather, virtuous humility has as its root a secular sense, which is available for all people, and a theistic sense, which can generate further meaning for those who are theists. Secularly, humility is grounded by the recognition that by myself, I am nothing and can do nothing. I need others. The human need for others is an existentially true facet of our being that undergirds our ability to generate and sustain meaning in the world, and so it holds regardless of other epistemic commitments. There can be a richer sense of Christian humility, according to Marcel, that allows the believer to relate better to spiritual truths, such that, ‘By myself, I am nothing and I can do nothing except in so far as I am not only helped but promoted in my being by Him who is everything and is all-powerful’ (1950, 85). Both senses of humility open the self up to others, and to being dependent on something outside of the self.

Humility requires an openness to community with another person, since it is a recognition that we need the other. As a response to the problem of evil, Marcelian humility seems to do a better job of explaining the role humility can play in the face of suffering. Humility can transmute dignity back to a sufferer of atrocity, because it is open to, and centered on, the needs of the sufferer. Love and fidelity are component parts of humility because we find ourselves by being present to another, and by recognizing our mutual need for reciprocity with another person.

If Marcel is right, theists have long been confused by the kenotic humility evidenced in Philippians 2, and exaltation views are wrong both in what humility means, and why we should be humble. The meaning of Christ’s own humility and exaltation is altered:

Christ emptied himself became purely contingent and faced his own death in order to redeem humanity. His kenoticism helped him become an ally of humans, because by giving up necessary existence, he faced what we faced – the dependence on others for his continuation. Our humility likewise recognizes that we are nothing on our own: we are born contingently, and our existential meaning and flourishing is contingent on others as well. Christ's exaltation restores his place as an object of worship. Correlatively, our exaltation restores our place as subjects that can together create meaning, restore the suffering, and act morally.

If exaltation views mistake the concepts of humility and exaltation, and do not rely on humility as 'recognition,' then, when Spiegel (for example, 2003, 146) says, The sense of our contingency presses upon us, and it becomes a more difficult matter of will (or delusion) to feign independence and self-sufficiency. In short, suffering inclines us to recognize our vulnerability and limitation, thus overcoming the moral inertia of abject pride he does not realize that humility is qualitatively different than an abnegation of the self; it is instead an existential recognition that we are nothing on our own. Correlatively, to be exalted is to be called out of isolation and the pride of self-effacement, and into the privilege of community, not to be offered an advantage not offered to other believers. If we can shift the focus of the exaltation debate onto community, we can transmute the suffering we are called to endure together. And, indeed, when *that* occurs, we can then be able to agree with Spiegel when he writes, 'The humility of Christ provides the most important clue regarding the centrality of the virtue of humility to the moral life. God chose suffering and death as the antidote for evil.' That antidote provides for the community to do its transmutative work with and through humility.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Spiegel, "The Moral Irony of Humility," 131–150. See also Garcia, "Being Unimpressed with Ourselves: Reconceiving Humility," 417–435.
2. A version of which says that the existence of a perfect being would be an obvious feature of the world, so that if God is omnipotent, he would reveal himself to the world, and if he is omnibenevolent, he would want to reveal himself. God's existence isn't obvious, though, given unexplained evil in the world. Examples of this are found in Schellenberg, "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals," 33–61.
3. A referee rightly points out that there is debate about what this verse connotes, and that is correct. In the context of other scriptural uses of this principle, Craig Keener points out, The principle stated here occurs in Proverbs 25:6–7 with reference to seating at banquets, and elsewhere the principle refers to the future time when God equalizes everyone (Is 2:11–12; 5:15; cf. Ezek 17:24; 21:26), *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, InterVarsity Press, 2014, 104. What is not contentious, however, is that Matthew 23:12 is used by some theists as a basis for endorsing kenotic humility. Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended*, for example, divides the theistic arguments supporting kenosis into four categories, those in which: Kenosis gives the believer freedom to explore other areas of Christian belief; kenosis offers a plausible reading of the divine mind in relationship to the self; kenosis helps the believer identify with Christ; and kenosis helps the believer identify with (and so, build community with) other sufferers (London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd), 2010, 172–188.
4. It is instructive to remember that Bruce, *Philippians*, section 9) writes that part of the difficulty in understanding Philippians 2:5 is that there is a missing verb,

The interpretative problem in this verse lies partly in the supplying of a verb for the adjective clause *ho kai en Christō Iēsou* and partly in the understanding of the phrase *en Christō Iēsou*. These two are interrelated, for if... we supply the verb *ephronēito* (“was minded”), then *en Christō Iēsou* will most naturally mean “in the person of Christ Jesus”; if on the other hand... we supply *prepei* (“is fitting”), then *en Christō Iēsou* will mean “in your common life in Christ Jesus”.

See Jill Hernandez, “Acquainted with Grief,” 97–111.

5. For more on kenotic interpretations of the Atonement, informed by Fisk’s work, see Hernandez, “Acquainted with Grief.”
6. Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, is not a proponent of exaltation views but does make a strong argument that the passion and crucifixion of Christ was the ultimate horror, or horrendous evil.
7. Murray, *Humility*, 77.
8. Newman, “‘Humility and Self-Realization,’” 275–285, 282.
9. à Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ*, 121.
10. Kettlewell, *Thomas À Kempis and the Brothers of the Common Life*, 228.
11. Spiegel, “The Moral Irony of Humility”, 137.
12. See, for example, van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 2006.
13. The atheist’s divine hiddenness argument can be found in Bergmann’s “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” 374–99, 374. Bergmann defines a ‘God-justifying reason’ as a reason for permitting evil that would justify God, if God existed, in permitting evil. See also Schellenberg’s, *The Wisdom to Doubt*.
14. Edelman, “Suffering and the Will of God,” 383, for example, views suffering as a brace that brings a person ‘to an understanding of the nature of God, or the nature of God’s love for the world’ and which shows that life itself is a grace.
15. Chesterton, “Orthodoxy,” 27–28.
16. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.
17. Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt*, 17.
18. *Evil and the Love of God*, 292.
19. McCann, “Pointless Suffering?” 171.
20. St. Teresa of Avila makes this point in *Way of Perfection*, Chapter X, 43, such that humility and detachment ‘have the property of hiding themselves from the one who possesses them,’ and that the person who is humble and detached ‘forever tries to obtain them.’
21. Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 246–247.
22. Parker and Brock write,

In this self-abnegation, we enact a culturally prescribed role that perpetuates sexist social structures. The needs and thoughts of men matter, but not ours [women’s]. Christian theology presents Jesus as the model of self-sacrificing love and persuades us to believe that sexism is divinely sanctioned. We are tied to the virtue of self-sacrifice, often by hidden social threats of punishment

*Proverbs of Ashes*, 36.

23. Browne and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, 2.
24. Hernandez, “Acquainted with Grief.”
25. See, for example, Parker and Brock (2002),

Does Jesus’ self-sacrifice on the cross end dominance and submission? No. Jesus’ crucifixion was a consequence of domination, not its cure. An oppressive system killed him to silence him and threaten others who might follow him. Domination still operates in our world and has left many lives bereft of intimacy and joy. 37

26. Coakley, *Love*, 203.
27. Young, *Can These Dry Bones Live?* 43.
28. Evans, *Exploring Kenotic Christology*, 18ff.
29. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, 138.

30. Peterson, in “Philippians 2:5–11” argues that Paul was urging that having ‘the same mind... means, among other things, having mutual love,’ 178–182, 178. Having the same mind would mean that love and wisdom are not abstract notions, but concretely embodied in God and through our actions which, Vanhoozer “Love’s Wisdom”, 247–275, suggests requires, among other things, proper judgement that comes from special revelation, 274.
31. McInerney and Pecknold indicate that humility is the manner in which a person becomes great, such that ‘the context of humility is always understood in relation to the greatness to which calls a person as his image and likeness’, *The Greatness of Humility*, 173.
32. Sweetman, *The Vision of Gabriel Marcel*.
33. Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity*.
34. Hernandez, *Gabriel Marcel’s Ethics of Hope*.
35. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Volume I*, 85.
36. Keen, *Gabriel Marcel*, 11.
37. Marcus, *In Search of the Spiritual*, 148.

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