

My Humble Self

The 2021 Barry Lecture

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People who know my excessive love of humour will excuse me for saying at the outset that I am the only person in the world who can speak competently on humility. Yet there is a deeper reason than this rather threadbare joke for my choice of topic. For some years already, I have been setting my sights on a program that may sound strange: rehabilitating some good things that are medieval in origin and showing that they could be of great help for us in overcoming the predicaments of modernity. I take ‘rehabilitation’ here first in the meaning the word has acquired in legal practice: annulling a miscarriage of justice that led to the conviction of an innocent and removing the stain on the latter’s character. The Middle Ages have been the object of such a denial of justice since modernity endeavoured to distance itself from them and, to begin with, gave them their name—rather more name-calling than name-giving. This name became a sort of universal dustbin for whatever sounds obsolete in the world of today. As a consequence, it is a duty to show that this period was not so dark as our image of it, and certainly not darker than our twentieth century. Yet, I think we must go further and attempt a ‘rehabilitation’ of medieval ideas in another sense, that of the Spanish *rehabilitación*, i.e., making an impaired organ of the body again *able* to fulfil its function. Medieval ideas, so states my thesis, are still useful for us. They could even save us from many forms of impending doom. The virtue of humility is one of those ideas. Perhaps, if I may once more play on words, it even has pride of place among them.

1. Humility and its sisters

To begin with, it is apposite that we should try and isolate humility from the neighbouring ideas with which it is often confused.

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◆ **Shame** (Gr. αἰδώς, Lt. *pudor*), is a feeling that arises from the consciousness of one's being bare, either literally, in the nude, or as a metaphor, morally laid bare and exposed to the contempt of other people.

◆ **Shyness** or bashfulness is a feeling of fear arising from our becoming conscious—rightly or wrongly—of our inferiority or inadequacy to a task we have to cope with.

◆ **Modesty** is a behaviour that doesn't necessarily express an inner feeling. It is a compliance to the social code in a society whose revealed rules of the game require one not to lord it over other people. One can behave in an extremely modest way and be inwardly proud. One who looks down on others won't pay attention to their reactions, and hence won't even try to elicit approval from them. The paradoxical consequence is that this person will be able to behave in a flawlessly modest manner.

◆ **Submissiveness** is a kind of cowardice in front of somebody or something that one feels to be stronger, either by brachial force or psychological influence.

◆ An **inferiority complex** is a lack of self-esteem. It mirrors the objective situation of the child who can't manage by him or herself and requires the help of grown-ups. It normally disappears as the child grows and can provide for him or herself. Its remaining in the adult is pathological in nature. Such a complex is a psychological fact which, as such, is wholly value-free.

◆ **Humiliation** is the objective situation in which a superior power crushes an inferior one. The latter can't help but 'feel small'. Whether an objective situation of inferiority can suffice to bring about humility is doubtful. For humility is a virtue.

2. Ups and downs of a virtue

The heyday of humility was the medieval period. Next to unknown to the ancients, who saw in it a vice rather than a virtue, with the coming of the Middle Ages humility ascended into the firmament of human excellence, until it underwent a form of quasi-divinisation. The *deposuit potentes, exaltavit humiles* of Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke's Gospel somehow obtained for the virtue itself, too. A positive valuation of humble attitudes was not totally absent from the ancient world. But philosophers were no exception to the general rule. Aristotle deserves to be named first, for his description of

magnanimity (μεγαλοψυχία) and its two opposite vices. Humility, the deficiency, is a kind of self-underrating, the blameworthy excess being pride.¹ The elite, i.e. the philosophers, are hardly supposed to underestimate themselves. On the contrary, says Epictetus: they are proudly conscious of their divine origin, which nothing vulgar or lowly (ταπεινόν) can stain.²

Only after antiquity does humility become an important topic for spiritual writers. In the Greek half of Christendom, John the Sinaite (d. 649), known as Climachus because of the title of his work, devotes a chapter of his *Ladder* to humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη). The same holds true for Muslim writers. Qushayri (d. 1074), in his treatise on Sufism, has, in a glossary of Sufi words of art, an entry on humility (*tawāḍuʿ*). In al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) lengthy synthesis of Islamic religious practices and spirituality, the *Ihyāʿ*, there is a book against pride with a section on the excellence of humility. In Judaism, the Spaniard Bahya b. Paquda (fl. c. 1080) devotes a chapter of his *Duties of the Hearts* to humility. But the first independent monograph exclusively devoted to humility and its opposite, pride, is the work of a Christian monk and abbot, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. In his *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, written between 1120 and 1125, he distinguishes and describes twelve levels of the virtue and of the vice which counters it.

Since what I have called the 'modern project' set on, humility has been humbled.³ True, with Kant, humility still manages to keep a certain place in morality. Paradoxically, his reinstatement of reason as sovereign in the practical realm of morality compels us to become conscious of our moral shortcomings. He defines humility as follows: "The consciousness and feeling of the poor state [*Geringfähigkeit*] of one's moral worth in comparison to the Law is humility [*Demut*] (*humilitas moralis*)."⁴ Humility thus occupies a peculiar place in Kant's philosophy: It is the only virtue which is in direct contact with the law, i.e. with the very principle of moral life. The feeling of respect, the only one which is directly brought about by the law,

¹ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, IV, iii (7), 1123a34-1125a35.

² Epictetus, *Diatribai*, I, 3.

³ On the 'modern project', see my *Le Règne de l'homme. Genèse et échec du projet moderne* (Paris: Gallimard 2015). English translation: *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and the Failure of the Modern Project*, trans. Paul Seaton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

⁴ Kant, *Tugendlehre* II, §11, 4 in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1900-), 6:435.

produces in turn the only sensation which can be said *a priori* to be unpleasant. Through the feeling of respect, the moral law ‘necessarily humiliates [*demütigt*] every human being.’⁵

Yet Kant’s outlook is hardly in keeping with the general atmosphere of the modern era. Machiavelli’s attack on humility is part and parcel of his attack on Christianity: ‘Our religion praised the humble and contemplative people more than active ones. It has located the supreme good in humility, lowliness and contempt for human things.’⁶ Humility is here of a pair with contemplation, which implies that action is implicitly associated with pride. The ‘Faustian’ (O. Spengler) type of modern man overvalues action so much that he cannot see contemplation as something distinct from mere submissiveness. Consequently, after the watershed of the eighties of the seventeenth century, a positive valuation of humility totally recedes from the intellectual scene of European culture. For David Hume, humility—together with other ‘monkish virtues’—should be placed ‘in the catalogue of vices’.⁷ For Nietzsche, humility is only a strategy of the weaker against the stronger.⁸ Freud and psychologists of all ilk ceased to view humility as a virtue and reduced it to a feeling.

3. Reasons and examples

Medieval men found reasons to feel small in the consideration of external nature. So Maimonides: ‘When he ponders these matters, he will recoil affrighted, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge.’⁹ This outlook finds a first *locus classicus* in Cicero’s Dream of Scipio, which reached the Middle Ages thanks to Macrobius’s quotations in his

⁵ Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* I, I, 3 in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:74.

⁶ Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, II, 2, 1 in *Tutte le Opere*, ed. Mario Martelli, 2nd ed. (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 468-469.

⁷ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, IX, 1, §219 in *Enquires Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, eds. L. A. Selby-Bigge & P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 270.

⁸ See, for instance, Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, ‘Sprüche und Pfeile’, §31 in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari, 2nd ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 6:64.

⁹ Maimonides, *Book of Knowledge*, trans. Moses Hyamson (New York: Feldheim, 1981), II, 2, p. 35b.

commentary: Scipio's soul, once in heaven, literally looks down upon the puny nether world.¹⁰

The inner nature of the human body, it was thought, teaches us the same lesson. Its excretory functions invite us not to brag too much. Medieval authors harp upon arguments like, 'we were made out of a filthy drop of semen', 'we were born between blood and shit', etc. Man's body is made of the elements of earth. Hence, he should be humble, faithful to the teaching of etymology: *humilitas* derives from *humus*. Yet the link between the ideas doesn't depend on the Latin pun, since it can also be found in languages in which it is not possible, such as Persian. The poet Sa'adi (fl. thirteenth century) contrasts the earthly nature of man and the fiery nature of the Devil: fire arises, earth is low.¹¹

Yet reasons are never enough for us to choose a walk or a way of life. Only examples can show us that what the reasons prompt us to do is feasible. Hence, it is important that there should be concrete examples of humble behaviour. And medieval man found many such examples in the physical world, among our fellow human beings, and even in the Deity.

Although they occupy the highest rung on the ladder of material beings, the heavenly bodies are supposed to be oriented towards their divine Creator in a relationship of obedience. At the other, nether end of the scale of beings, minerals and metals—although they don't possess a soul capable of willing—can be models of humility for us, in two ways. First, in a static way. Dust which is trodden upon is a model of lowliness. The sand to which the number of Abraham's offspring is compared (together with the stars, Genesis 13:16) alluded to the way in which the Jews were to be downtrodden by kingdoms in the course of their history. Second, in a dynamic way. Heavy bodies fall and get to the lowest possible place. The element of water is a model of humility. This idea is found in Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Creatures*. And Meister Eckhart, too, takes advantage of Aristotelian physics to explain that God is in a sense compelled to let his grace flow towards the soul, when it is lower, in the same way as heavy bodies have a natural tendency to reach for their natural abode, which is the centre of the earth.

¹⁰ Macrobius, *Somnium Scipionis*, 6, 20.

¹¹ Sa'adi, *Bustân*, c. 4, v. 1980-1983.

Finally, humility can be a feature of God himself. This is not the case in Islam, but in Judaism, and still more in Christianity. In the theology of some rabbis, humility can be said to cause the descent of God. This is the case in a well-known commentary on Exodus, the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: 'For whoever is humble will ultimately cause the Shekhina to dwell with man upon earth.'¹² God's adaptation to the conditions of the creatures in the course of salvation history is a condescension (*συγκατάβασις*). He makes Himself visible to human eyes; He adapts his message to the capacity of human intellects.

In Christianity, what governs the general economy of salvation comes to a head in the Incarnation of the Word, which culminates in the self-emptying of Christ, later conceptualized as the Son's *κένωσις*. Origen interpreted the hymn to Christ in the Epistle to the Philippians (2:5-11) as evidence of Christ's humility. St. John of the Cross, in the first version of his *Living Flame of Love* (c. 1585), boldly ascribes to God the virtue of humility—nay, identifies God with the highest point of humility. He makes it so that God and human beings are somehow put on the same footing.¹³

On the other hand, the Islamic God has every reason to be proud and to boast. The same image can even be assigned two contradictory meanings in Christian and Muslim texts. On the Christian side, Isaac of Nineveh (d. c. 700) writes in his Syriac treatise on spirituality: 'Humility is the garment of divinity; for the word which became man, put it on and spoke in it with us, through our body. And everyone who puts it on in truth, by humility takes the likeness of Him that has descended from His height.'¹⁴ As for Islam, several authors quote a Hadith in which God Himself is supposed to speak (*hadith qudsi*). Consider Ghazâlî: 'haughtiness is my cloak, grandeur is my loin-cloth, so that whoever tries to wrest them from me, I break him.'¹⁵

¹² R. Ishmael, *Massekta de-Ba-Hodesh*, VI, ed. H. S. Horowitz & I. A. Rabin (Frankfurt, 1931), 238; qtd. in Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 1:43.

¹³ San Juan de la Cruz, *Llama de Amor Viva*, III, 6

¹⁴ Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises*, LXXXII, trans. A. J. Wensinck (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923), 384.

¹⁵ Ghazâlî, *Ihyâ'*, III, c. 9.

4. Humility as basic virtue

Virtues presuppose a fundamental attitude: understanding that one is wanting, that virtues have to be got, that they are there waiting for me, that I am concerned and entrusted with the task of acquiring them. *De me fabula narratur*. The Good is not something towards which I could remain neutral. It requires my active participation. This feeling of being called by the Good to perform and enact it is none other than humility. As a consequence, humility is not a virtue among many other ones, but rather the root of all virtues, and, so to speak, the virtue of the virtues.

The idea is not mine. On the contrary, it crops up in many medieval authors. Augustine writes: ‘If we ascribe to ourselves our good deeds, pride will wring them out of our hands. Virtues are worthless if they are not grounded on humility.’¹⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux uses several images which converge towards the same idea, i.e. the decisive function of humility as the virtue which makes the other virtues possible in the first place: ‘Humility is the good ground on which every spiritual building grows and becomes a holy temple in the Lord.’¹⁷ Likewise Francis of Assisi: ‘without humility, no virtue is acceptable to God’.¹⁸

Eventually the idea, albeit true in itself, became hackneyed, and was even poked fun at. In his *Dialogue of Dogs*, Cervantes has one dog teach another: ‘You already know that humility is the ground and foundation of all the virtues, and that without it no virtue is a virtue.’¹⁹ Centuries later, the same idea is still being propounded by Edmund Burke, in the context of his famous attack on Rousseau (‘the great professor and founder of the philosophy of vanity’), who laid the groundwork for the French Revolution: ‘true humility, the basis of the Christian system, is the low, but firm foundation of all real virtue’.²⁰ Burke’s identification of pride as the main motive

¹⁶ Augustine, *Ep.* CXVIII, iii, 22 in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844-55), 33:442.

¹⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *De consideratione*, II, vi, 13 in *Patrologia Latina*, 182:750ab; *Opera Omnia*, eds. Jean Leclercq & Henri Rochals (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957-77), 3:421.

¹⁸ *Fioretti*, c. 12.

¹⁹ Cervantes, *Novelas Ejemplares*, ed. Jorge Garcia López (Madrid: Real Academia Española), 558.

²⁰ Burke, ‘Letter to a Member of the National Assembly’ (1791) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, eds. L. G. Mitchell & William Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8:294-334, at 313.

behind the revolutionary stance, and the modern cast of mind in general, is highly suggestive and deserves deeper study. But Burke is the exception: by this time, there were few, if any, other notable defenders of humility among modern philosophers.

The trade I ply is the history of ideas. I won't tell us what we can or should do right now. Allow me only to point out some guidelines. Humility's history suggests that we should divide it into three kinds, if we exclude from the outset the social play of modesty as well as merely psychological and pathological phenomena. (1) *Cosmological humility*, grounded in the lowly place of human beings in the grand scheme of things and in the debased status of the human body. (2) *Theological humility*, grounded in the smallness of creatures compared with God. It is the necessary condition for obedience to His commands. (3) A third kind could be assigned, at least tentatively, the moniker of '*ontological*' *humility*. It has to do with the fact, independent of any place on the ladder of beings, that we are not our own origin, but receive ourselves from something else (or, for religious people, from Somebody else) upon which or whom we have no hold.

An honest assessment of what we are, i.e. true self-knowledge, necessarily leads us to humility. We feel the actuality and urgency of a basically humble behaviour towards whatever comes before us, like nature and past history. Such a basic feeling need not induce in us any cringing attitude towards the origin to which we owe our very existence, be it Nature, Chance, or a creator God. On the contrary, it induces in people who are conscious of their true status feelings of thankfulness together with responsibility. Recovering a sense for humility might, paradoxically, coincide with a recovery of the consciousness of our dignity. To put it as T. S. Eliot: 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless'.²¹

It is increasingly important, in the present age, to distinguish humility as a basic virtue from mere humiliation. Today, new arguments for humiliation appear at an ever-accelerating pace. As we have seen, this was also the case in the Middle Ages. Consciousness of being humiliated led to the virtue of humility. But any apparent similarity belies a crucial difference; in fact, the mood has undergone a sea change. Freud's well-known essay about reluctance to

²¹ Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), East Coker, II, lines 96-99.

accept psychoanalysis is symptomatic.²² It is fundamentally wrong in its historical claims. We now know to what extent the founding father of psychoanalysis distorted historical facts, even the history of his own movement—nay, of his own cures—all the better for them to dovetail into the half-legendary account of his discoveries and achievements he was building. As for the way he reconstructs the prehistory of the reception of his own achievements, it is not only untrue, but even the contrary of truth. Neither Copernicus nor Darwin nor Freud's not-so-humble self, whom he puts on the same footing as the previous two, ever brought about among human beings a *consciousness of their indignity*. Their short-term effect was rather to the contrary.

Yet the very existence of Freud's essay, together with the highly uncritical way in which it was and is still accepted at face value in half-learned circles, gives evidence of a shift in mentality, towards a sort of gladly accepted, or even willed humiliation cum *Schadenfreude*. So many people now try to convince us that we are hardly more than successful 'higher' apes, that we have so much of our DNA in common with them, so on and so forth. Ironically, all these lovers of debunking can scarcely conceal the boundless pride they feel in showing their own superiority as enlightened people over against the benighted rag-tag and bob-tail who stick to the illusions which they were so smart to do away with. Hence, these alleged humiliations can scarcely foster true humility, humility as virtue—a virtue which we so badly need—towards nature, towards history, and towards reality as a whole.

5. Humility towards nature and history

The philosopher Hans Jonas proposed a new kind of humility towards nature, arising not from the consciousness of human weakness in a hostile environment, but on the contrary, from the realization of man's unbound power to submit nature to his will.²³ The illness which humility should endeavour to cure is technical *hybris*. In our present world, *hybris* takes concrete form in the dream (or nightmare) of man becoming a god, aired by supporters of the so-called 'transhumanism'. They ought to be asked: On which model

²² Freud, 'Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse' in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1947), 12:3-12.

²³ Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1979), I, viii, p. 55.

is the divinity of such a god conceived? The answer, I fear, is plain: not benevolence or mercy, but first of all boundless power. Even immortality, which is more often than not dangled in front of potential buyers of this dream, boils down to a special kind of power, namely mastery over time and death.

Over against such temptations, we should listen to what is valuable in the ‘green’ movement and adopt just conduct vis-à-vis the earth and its nourishing soil. First of all, we should refrain from devastating it. I already alluded to the etymology of *humilitas* from *humus*. It is high time that ecological consciousness taught us again some humility, at least as a counter-balance against the Baconian arrogance of conquest. Ultimately, this ecological humility must presuppose a definite view of nature. Some medieval thinkers conceived of nature as subservient to the Creator and obedient to Him, who, writes the Persian Muslim historian and moralist Miskawayh (d. 1070), ‘had entrusted Her the care of the material realm’. A similar image, probably first conceived by Alain of Lille in the twelfth century, was repeated by a bevy of other writers through the sixteenth century: Nature is God’s Vice-regent, and even vice-god. To the best of my knowledge, the last author who made use of this image was La Boétie, Montaigne’s bosom-friend. I could not find more recent witnesses, probably because the new view of nature taken since the inauguration of the modern project cannot accommodate it.

What holds good for nature has its counterpart for history. The past may have something to teach us. The contrary of humility in historical matters is ingratitude towards our ancestors, and even towards whatever brought us about in former times, beginning with the origin of life, or even with the so-called ‘Big Bang’. Such a stance is essential to the modern project, since Descartes claimed to be able to forget, or at least put into brackets, the intellectual inheritance of the past in order to start from a clean slate and build a new knowledge from scratch. This project underwent several iterations until it shifted from the level of the individual to the collective, thereby becoming a political program which was put into practice by the French Revolution. The same cast of mind is now rampant in some academic circles, which gives it the aspect of a caricature: students who won’t read anything in order, lest they run the risk of spoiling their own originality. As if great writers had not been first voracious readers, as if great painters had not first mastered the technique by

copying former masterpieces, as if Schubert had not begun as a choir-boy, etc.

Humility could be a useful counter-balance against the privilege we spontaneously and for the most part unwittingly confer on our own experience and opinions, simply because they happen to be our own. Leo Strauss writes:

One must take seriously the thought of the past, or one must be prepared to regard it as possible that the thought of the past is superior to the thought of the present day in the decisive respect. One must regard it as possible that we live in an age which is inferior to the past in the decisive respect, or that we live in an age of decline or decay. One must be swayed by a sincere longing for the past.²⁴

Mind you, Strauss puts all this in the key-tone of the modality 'possible'. It is a matter of keeping open a possibility, nothing more. We should avoid the dumb nostalgia of the *laudator temporis acti* as well as the naive confidence in progress which considers whatever is new as being *ipso facto* better. Steering such a middle-course is humility. It might be the case that our own enlightened thought supersedes the naive illusions of the past. But in the same way, the wisdom of former ages may counteract our present stupidity and, first of all, enable us to become conscious of our limits. New knowledge is often, or perhaps always, compensated by new ignorance.

In a recent book, I endeavoured to argue in favour of the deliberate spoonerism according to which conservation is basically conversation.²⁵ Conversation between ages excludes overbearing attitudes towards past centuries and invites us to a humble stance. Our partner in such a conversation may point out something we were not aware of and have something to teach us. This stance towards whatever may loom larger than our not-so-humble selves is the nourishing soil out of which Western culture has and could once again grow and thrive.

Having mentioned the *humble* stance of Western culture, I should add that I know full well I am thereby running counter to a whole school which does not tire in criticizing the Western past

²⁴ Strauss, 'On Collingwood's Philosophy of History', *Review of Metaphysics* 5.4 (1952): 559–86, at 576.

²⁵ See my *Curing Mad Truths: Medieval Wisdom for the Modern Age* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2019), ch. 9.

and its present arrogance towards other cultures. Far be it from me to gainsay the existence of Western pride, let alone the conquests that it mirrors, expresses, and legitimises. Yet, the achievements of the West, including the submission of the rest of the planet, were made possible in the first place by a willingness of Western people to submit to their own origins, whose superiority they acknowledged. The Tunisian historian Hichem Djaït (1935-2021) writes: “The basic humility of Europe was the spring of its later soaring upwards. ... Because Europe proved *humble* in front of Antiquity which it extolled and Christianity which it was subjected to, it overcame the former and kept a distance towards the latter.”²⁶

6. Humble knowledge

I can’t find any better, plainer word than ‘ontology’ to name what may be the most fundamental level on which the virtue of humility can help us. For what is at stake is nothing less than our relationship to Being in its whole. In some decisive passages from his work, Aristotle called *apaideusia*—lack of *paideia*, ‘[good] breeding’—the stance by which we foist on things methods that don’t fit them. Hence, the opposite stance that prevents us from yielding to this temptation and induces us to take things as they are should be some sort of *paideia*.²⁷ In some modern philosophy, likewise, there is a sort of elementary *respect* towards phenomena which is the ultimate underpinning of the phenomenological method. Edmund Husserl gave it a pithy formulation in his ‘principle of principles’: ‘simply to accept what offers itself in intuition, such as it gives itself’.²⁸ In order to clarify what he meant with ‘really giving itself’, Husserl adds in parenthesis a phrase: *sozusagen in seiner leibhaften Wirklichkeit*, something like ‘in the flesh’ or, in my native French *en chair et en os*.

To be sure, we have been told that the phrase is German common parlance and should not be over-interpreted. Husserl is careful to add a ‘so to speak’. Furthermore, this is a metaphor, since not all phenomena have flesh, but only living beings, and even then only animals. Nevertheless, this over-interpretation is precisely what I would like to indulge in, in the faint hope of bringing to

²⁶ Djaït, *L’Europe et l’islam* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 157.

²⁷ Aristotele, *Metaphysics*, Γ, 4, 1006a16, et al.

²⁸ Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1922), I, §24, p. 43.

the fore the hidden, probably unconscious depths of Husserl's thought. The adjective *leibhaft* derives from *Leib*, the living body, in contradistinction to *Körper*, the three-dimensional reality which can be a mineral or even a merely geometrical construction. The flesh is what can be hurt or even injured if we don't pay attention to its limits and cross them. Husserl reminds us of this quasi-moral rule: the given should not be taken regardless of its limits, but only inside the sacred precinct in which it gives itself. It is as if the phenomena as such had inherited the fundamental fragility, the vulnerability of the living body.

Husserl's former assistant, the young Martin Heidegger, during his first period as an associate professor in Freiburg, when he still was caught in an inner debate with phenomenology, may have hinted at this kind of problematic, when he once gave this basic attitude of phenomenological philosophy the rather unexpected name of *humilitas animi*.²⁹ This Latin phrase is found in Seneca, but with a derogatory shade of meaning, as a rendering of *μικροψυχία*. Humility only later became a virtue in the Christian worldview. Now, Heidegger may have been still struggling, existentially with his lost Christian faith, and intellectually with the Christian concepts which he had encountered in Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Imitation*, and Martin Luther. Be that as it may, what thereby comes to the fore are the moral underpinnings of all that might be considered as belonging to the realm of theory. This moral basis of thought was laid bare, probably for the first time, by Kant in his primacy of practical reason.

Humility was the keystone in the medieval system of virtues. It could hardly survive the modern project. If this project should reach its limits and prove lethal to itself in the long run, one could expect humility to make a comeback. Moreover, humility might prove to be the very cure for the intellectual and spiritual ailments of modern times.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (WS 1919/20) in *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975-), 58:23.