

Annette Kehnel

WHO IS AFRAID OF A LITTLE LAMB?
MEDIEVAL HUMILITY AND THE GAP BETWEEN
«US AND THEM» IN THE SOCIAL AND
COGNITIVE SCIENCES

Introduction

What is the function of *humilitas*? Is this a legitimate question at all?

This paper is experimental in style. It proposes an interdisciplinary approach, linking representations of humility as explored in Medieval Studies with current concepts in the Social and Cognitive Sciences analysing processes of identity formation. I want to test the hypothesis that *humilitas* as discussed by medieval philosophers, as preached in the streets of the medieval cities and omnipresent in medieval art, might be understood as a sort of «container» (Daniel L. Smail) transporting collective knowledge, age old norms and experience about how to handle the fragile business of community building.¹ In other words: the paper examines the potential utility value of *humilitas* as a social device to balance out intergroup hostility, to facilitate intergroup coop-

1. For the use of the term «container» see D. L. Smail, A. Shryock, «On containers. A Forum. Introduction and Concluding Remarks», *History and Anthropology*, 20 (2018), 1-6, 49-51; D. L. Smail, On containers, Neubauer Collegium, Chicago University, 3. 12. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOmwwtyDZog>. He suggests the use of container both in the material sense as well as in the metaphorical sense of a notion, just like nation or family. Both material and metaphorical containers share that «they all apply order to their content, they preserve the stuff inside from natural cycles of decay», Smail speaks of containers as «anti-entropie machines».

eration and to bridge – what in the cognitive and social sciences is currently discussed as the «gap between US and THEM».²

In the first part of the paper I will very briefly sketch theories of identity formation and its socially problematic effects called «othering». The second and main part of the paper concentrates on medieval representations of humility such as the little lamb, represented by Agnellus of Pisa, in Thomas of Eccleston's Tractate on the arrival of the Franciscans in England, or interesting representations from daily life experience and from the natural world in the *Fasciculus Morum*, such as peacocks, eagles, lions, mountaineers or fathers who kneel before their sons, and finally the «foot stool of humility» from Friar Nicholas Philipp. The third part investigates the social values of this medieval imagery and its potential to ward off, or at least to minimize, socially problematic aspects of identity formation. Does it make sense to interpret the cardinal virtues as «containers», allowing the transfer of collective intergenerational knowledge about how to run communities from one generation to the next? This part also offers a critical appraisal of the gap-theory.

Othering and the gap between us and them – a brief survey

The «gap-between us and them» theory has its place in current theories of identity formation and the socially problematic effects subsumed under the keyword «othering». What it means is broadly speaking the tendency of the human brain to classify individuals or groups in two categories, namely either as 'one of us' or as 'not one of us'. John A. Powell defined othering as «a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities».³

2. J. Greene, *Moral Tribes. Emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them*, London 2013.

3. J. A. Powell, S. Menendian, «The Problem of Othering. Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging», *Othering&Belonging. Expanding the circle of human concern*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>, Accessed October 20, 2020.

Such identities might rely on religion, sex, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, skin colour etc. As so often with problematic human behaviour some try to explain it away, by attributing it to a tribal past where group cohesion was important, along with the demarcation between friend and enemy, the idea that friends would look out for each other, and that collective aggression would make them stronger against enemies. No doubt there is «a powerful evolutionary drive to identify in some way with a tribe of people who are ‘like you’, and to feel a stronger connection and allegiance to them than to anyone else. Today, this tribe might not be a local and insular community you grew up with, but can be, for instance, fellow supporters of a sports team or political party».⁴ Or, in other words, the question is – to speak with Esra Klein – why do we have a tendency to polarize?⁵

Of course the problem has long been treated in philosophy. In his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), Hegel developed the so-called dialectic of identification and distantiation. He analysed the process of identity formation as an interaction between a «self» able to constitute itself only in view of an «other» to be excluded (a «not-self»). This perception of the self and the other is also prominent in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) which systematically analyses the construction of women as the «other sex», and directs attention to the way in which men regard themselves as the norm, thus making women the other. The other is never free, but always in a helping role, since it is always a construction opposing and thereby at the same time constructing «the self». The female becomes the other, constructing the male self. De Beauvoir universalized Hegels theory of self and other in relation to both gender and other hierarchical social differences. A generation later with Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978) the concept of othering and otherness has taken root in postcolonial studies. The keyword is alienation, the process by which the Orient becomes the fascinating strange otherworld for European actors and spectators. The colonial view is always a dominating view, be it one of fascina-

4. Powell, Menendian, «The Problem of Othering».

5. E. Klein, *Why We’re Polarized*, New York 2020.

tion or subjection.⁶ Today «Othering» has turned into a key issue for the problems of the twenty-first century, to quote John A. Powell, the leader of the UC Berkley Othering&Belonging Institute:

In a world beset by seemingly intractable and overwhelming challenges, virtually every global, national, and regional conflict is wrapped within or organized around one or more dimension of group-based difference. Othering undergirds territorial disputes, sectarian violence, military conflict, the spread of disease, hunger, and food insecurity, and even climate change. (...) Group-based identities are central to each of these conflicts, but in ways that elude simplistic explanations. It is not just religion or ethnicity alone that explains each conflict but often the overlay of multiple identities with specific cultural, geographic, and political histories and grievances that may be rekindled under certain conditions.⁷

Naomi Klein recently pointed out the violence of othering in the world of global warming as seen in the indifference towards the thousands of humans drowning in the Mediterranean. And Saskia Sassen explained the increasing brutality in the global economy as an effect of othering and defined advanced capitalism in the 1980s as a reinvention of mechanisms for primitive accumulation, implying the treatment of people from another group not only as essentially different from the group you belong to, but also as generally inferior and therefore negligible.⁸

The concept of othering was also well received amongst medievalists. Recently Cristina Andenna analysed how monastic communities (she took as her example female Franciscans in the

6. For the philosophical background see S. Q. Jensen, «Othering, identity formation and agency», *Qualitative Studies*, 2/2 (2011), 63–78; L. Brons, «Othering, an Analysis», *Transcience*, 6/1 (2015), 69–90; G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, edited by H.-F. Wessels, H. Clairmont, Hamburg 1988, 120–56; S. de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, vol. 2, Paris 1949, 15; «Seule la médiation d'autrui peut constituer un individu comme un Autre»; E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978; M. Crang, *Cultural Geography*, London 1998.

7. Powell, Menendian, «The Problem of Othering».

8. N. Klein, «Let Them Drown – The Violence of Othering in a Warming World», *Edward W. Said London Lecture 2016 May 4, 2016*, posted May 10, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/166018049>; S. Sassen, *Expulsions. Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Cambridge 2014.

Middle Ages) defined themselves in opposition to the secular world, or saw themselves as better. She shows how this opposition was balanced out in the case of Sancia (1281–1345), Queen of Naples and later Franciscan nun.⁹ Christina Lutter sketched visions of community in defense of the self against an «other» in a brief introduction to history and anthropology.¹⁰ However, for a long time great reluctance was predominant. Patrick Geary came to the conclusion that Medievalism for long time has almost matched Orientalism in its prejudiced mix of romantic stylisation and modernist contempt.¹¹

Medieval representations of humility

The call for papers of the conference *Representations of Humility and the Humble* suggested that authors might trace representations of humility in medieval sources. The examples collected here share a common origin in texts that were produced by, and circulated amongst, members of the Franciscan community in England between the 13th and 15th centuries. They are – with maybe one or two exceptions – not original in the sense that the Franciscans invented these representations. Instead they assembled familiar images, metaphors, stories and anecdotes and integrated them into their own chronicles, exempla-collections and poetry. No doubt humility figures prominently as a virtue within the writings of the English Franciscans. Their collective identity as members of a mendicant order, with a lifestyle beyond private property, self-fulfilment and power (poverty, chastity, obedience) committed them in a particular mode to the virtue of humility. They might be called experts in humility and therefore deserve special attention here.

9. C. Andenna, «Sancia, Queen of Naples and Soror Clara. A Life Lived between Secular Responsibilities and Religious Desire», in L. S. Knox, D. B. Couturier (eds.), *Franciscan Women. Female Identities and Religious Culture, Medieval and Beyond*, Saint Bonaventure NY 2020, 115–32.

10. C. Lutter, «Visions of Community. An Introduction», *History and Anthropology*, 26/1 (2015), 1–7.

11. E. Howden, C. Lutter, W. Pohl (eds.), *Meanings of Community across Medieval Eurasia. Comparative Approches*, Leiden 2016; P. Geary, G. Klaniczay (eds.), *Manufacturing Middle Ages*, Boston 2013.

Agnellus of Pisa (1194-1236), first Provincial Minister of the English Franciscan Province as a representative of humility in the Tractatus de adventu fratrum minorum by Thomas of Eccleston

The first example is *humilitas* as personified in the figure of the first provincial minister of the Franciscans in England: Agnellus of Pisa. We owe his biography to Thomas of Eccleston, chronicler of the arrival of the Franciscans in England around the years 1257/8.¹² Only recently have historians come to discover Eccleston's work as an extremely honest and reliable eye-witness as well as the quality of his report as that of a careful listener, a collector of contemporary voices, common beliefs, feelings, fears and hopes. Even so the chronicle has often been blamed for lacking historical facts, as it is full of popular stories, conversations, short biographies, and reflections on the advantages and disadvantages, burdens, and joys of the mendicant life. The author knows his community, gives detailed information on the various officials in the order, papal legates, the officials of the province and other organisational issues. We might call him a patriot. He was convinced that standards in the English province were remarkable. He shows a sympathetic bias towards his own province and its members, and identifies entirely with his community. He writes: «How I wish this province were placed in the middle of the world that it might be an example to all».¹³

12. A. G. Little (ed.), *Fratris Thomae vulgo dicti de Eccleston Tractatus de Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*, Manchester 1951. This edition is used here, the translations are usually those of E. G. Salter, *The Coming of the Friars Minor to England & Germany*, London 1926, 3-128. Cf. A. Kehnel, «The narrative tradition of the medieval Franciscan friars on the British Isles. Introduction to the sources», *Franciscan Studies*, 63 (2005), 461-530, here 477-81; A. Kehnel, «Francis and the historiographical tradition in the Order», in M. Robson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to St. Francis*, Cambridge 2011, 101-14; M. Robson, «Thomas of Eccleston, the chronicler of the Friars arrival in England», in M. Robson, P. N. R. Zutshi (eds.), *The Franciscan Order in the Medieval English Province and Beyond*, Amsterdam 2018, 3-27.

13. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 98. Thomas puts these words in the mouth of John of Parma, Minister General of the Order from 1247 to 1257 on his visitation of the English Province in 1248.

A second point is important here: Thomas' *Tractatus* was less of a chronicle than a compilation of stories, memories, anecdotes, and fragments of thoughts that circulated in the community. The unconventional mise-en-page in two of the four surviving manuscripts confirms this impression. A main text is written in the centre of the pages, leaving an exceptionally broad marginal space. These are filled with notes, stories and additional material, seemingly inserted at a later time. We do not have the autograph, but two of the manuscripts preserves traces of the original mise en page that resembles that of a notebook rather than a chronicle. The *Tractatus* assembles the experience of the first generation Franciscans in England, thus functioning as a sort of archive for the collective memory of the group.¹⁴ Eccleston gives a very practical insight into the circulation of stories within the group when he tells us about the friars in Canterbury assembling in their emergency accommodation in the school house in the evenings. There

they sat and built a fire for themselves; and they sat next to it and sometimes, when they had to have their collation, they put on the fire a little pot containing the dregs of beer, and they dipped a cup into the pot and each drank in turn and spoke some word of edification.¹⁵

At these cheerful meetings the friars shared their experiences with each other and as the years passed by his stories were sometimes read aloud. We can well imagine how they inspired other brothers to add their own experiences, and thus to continue the story once begun in Assisi by Francis and kept alive by the friars in Oxford, Northampton, Hereford and elsewhere. The textual shape of the manuscripts preserves traces of an ongoing process of writing, reading, adding, copying, and rewriting the shared memories amongst members of a group.

14. A. Kehnel, «Der mendikantische Konvent: Lokale Schaltstelle einer universalen Kommunikationsgemeinschaft. Überlegungen zum Aufbau und zur Textstruktur des *Tractatus de adventu fratrum Minorum in Angliam* von Thomas von Eccleston (1258/9)», in J. Röhrkasten, M. Robson (eds.), *Studien zu mendikantischen Lebensformen*, Münster 2010, 187–235.

15. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 7



Fig. 1. Agnus Dei from the Isenheim Altar, Colmar.

In her paper on the «dresses of humility» Silvia Negri pointed to the lamb as a very popular medieval representation of humility. Cesare Ripa, Italian man of letters in the late 16th century describes the various aspects of humility in the image of four ladies in his *Catalogue of Iconography*, first published in 1593. One of his ladies is carrying a little lamb on her arm, an animal most docile and gentle par excellence.¹⁶ This image has a long standing tradition signifying Christ himself, and his humilitas, and gained popularity from the 13th century onwards in the Franciscan Order. (It is used in Ravenna in 547 and draws on Is. 53:7, and the use made of this to understand the crucifixion). The first provincial minister of the English province took the name Agnellus and we also know that the seal of the English province was stamped with a lamb bearing a cross.¹⁷

16. S. Negri, «Vêtir l'humilité: de Bono Giamboni à Boccace», *Philosophical Readings* X.3 (2018), 168–75, at 168.

17. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 78.

What we know of him – almost exclusively from Thomas of Eccleston – can be told briefly:¹⁸ Agnellus was amongst the very first members received into the fraternity by St Francis. According to Wadding he was a native of Pisa and joined the community around the year 1211. This means he must have been familiar with many of the early brothers such as Bernard of Quintavalle, Elias of Cortona, John Parenti, and Anthony of Padua. In his early years in the order he was active in the province of Tuscany, and then moved from there to France, where he took over the office of guardian of the house in Paris. At the general chapter in the year 1224 he was appointed to lead the mission to England. The source mentions that he was 30 years of age at the time, so he must have been born in the year 1194.

Under his lead a group of nine friars travelled from Assisi to northern France, stayed there for some time with the Benedictine monks of Fécamp, who generously supplied them with provisions for the journey and paid for their boat trip across the Channel. The group landed at Dover and set out for Canterbury on the 10th of September 1224. There they were given lodgings for two nights at the cathedral priory of Christ Church and then moved to the priest's hospice. Four of the group then moved on to London, the other five stayed in Canterbury. Soon, however, the advantages of residence in London rather than Canterbury persuaded Agnellus to settle in the capital. The friars moved to London, from there to Oxford where they were hospitably received by the Dominicans, then to Northampton and other English cities. In Canterbury, London and Oxford they were established in the leading ecclesiastical, commercial and academic centres and the order expanded in all the cathedral cities, monastic towns and towns of commercial importance, such as Norwich, Salisbury, Worcester, Hereford, Gloucester, Reading, Bristol, Northampton, Stamford, Nottingham and Lynn.

18. The only modern biography of Agnellus was compiled by J. Harding, *Agnellus of Pisa, 1194-1236: First Franciscan Provincial in England*, Canterbury 1977; cf. now also M. Robson, «Agnellus of Pisa minister provincial of England (1224-1236)», in Id. (ed.), *The Greyfriars of England (1224-1539)*, Padova 2012, 23-48 who however focuses less on Agnellus and more on a retelling of the first years of Franciscan settlement in England during his time as provincial minister.

All this happened during Agnellus' ministry. He died after twelve years in office on the 13th of March 1236 at the age of 42. Most of the stories about Agnellus were added in the original manuscript as marginal notes to the obituary of the first minister. They might have been added after talks in the house in Oxford on the occasion of his passing away. We also have to bear in mind the hagiographical bias in Thomas' account. Theodor Wolpers pointed out interesting parallels with other English Saints' Lives in the *South English Legendary* and the Lives of the desert fathers. The fifteen chapters are even titled *collationes* in reference to the *collationes patrum* of John Cassian.¹⁹ However, since we are interested in medieval representations of humility and not in a historical reconstruction of Agnellus' 'real' character this makes no difference. It is the 'portrait' we look at, not the man himself. And this can be summed up in the words of Amanda Power: Thomas of Eccleston's Agnellus is a perfect personification of humility, portrayed as a particularly attractive character, admired not only by his confreres but also by the general public.²⁰

Weeping, caring, travelling

One of the prominent features of Agnellus is compassion expressed in many different ways. He is described as extremely devoted when celebrating mass. In the oratory he spent long periods weeping.²¹ This contemplative side went hand in hand with active care and compassion. Thus, he once accompanied Brother Salmon, suffering from frostbite in his leg, to Noyon in France, to find healing at the grave of St Eloi. Likewise, he is described as a person who was always ready to take action, travelling throughout England, Wales, France, Assisi or Rome, whenever needed. This might have been a typical feature in the life of a provincial minister at the time, but Agnellus seems to have

19. T. Wolpers, *Die englische Heiligenlegende des Mittelalters. Eine Formgeschichte des Legendenerzählens von der Spätantiken Tradition bis zur Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1964, 237-45.

20. A. Power, «The Friars in secular and ecclesiastical governance», in Robson, Zutshi (eds.), *The Franciscan Order*, Amsterdam 2018, 28-45, at 37.

21. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 78.

travelled a lot and his early death according to Eccleston was the consequence of exertion from all his missions.²²

No problem with admitting faults

During the days of Agnellus simplicity, purity and humility in the community was so strong that the friars talked freely about all their faults – even about nightly orgasms (*de polutio nocturna*) – in the chapter meetings every evening. Whenever something went wrong they used to say «my fault» (*mea culpa*) and prostrated themselves on the ground. Here Eccleston adds a story attributed to a Dominican, to whom the devil once appeared and confessed that it was the constant «my fault» that took from him all the gain he might have hoped for among the Franciscans «that is, because they told their faults in turn, if one had injured another (*quia scilicet dicebant culpas suas invicem, si quis alium offenderet*)».²³

Extreme modesty in building activities

Agnellus is also portrayed as an ardent proponent of poverty. Even during his life time there was much enlarging both of houses and places for the friars in many cities. Agnellus, however, was so zealous for poverty that he would scarce permit sites to be extended or houses built save in so far as unavoidable necessity demanded. This was clearly shown in the case of the infirmary at Oxford, which he caused to be built so low that the height of the walls was little beyond that of a man. He also prevented the building of a guesthouse in Oxford. We also learn from Eccleston's account that it was by decree of Agnellus («per diffinitionem fratris Agnelli»), that the enlargement of the Franciscan house in Gloucester was prevented. Apparently Agnellus rejected a piece of land, received as a donation of Thomas de Berkeley, Earl of Gloucester and benefactor of the Franciscans. Agnellus' successor in office, Haymo of Faversham, had great difficulty to recover the land, he only succeeded «through the wisdom and devotion of the Earl's wife».²⁴

22. *Ibid.*, 13 for the journey to St Eloi in Noyon; 76f. for the Marches and Rome.

23. *Ibid.*, 25f.

24. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 45; cf. Robson, *Thomas of Eccleston, the chronicler*, 6.

No interest in economics

Agnellus' humility was also apparent in his dealings with economic affairs. In another attempt to stress the purity of the early community, Thomas of Eccleston also talks about the organisation of temporal affairs. In those early days, he says the friars did avoid to contract debts and tried never to borrow money, even for their most urgent needs. Nevertheless, they carefully kept records. So when Agnellus wished to audit the reckoning of the friars in London the Guardian, Brother Salomon, showed him the accounting books. The Provincial Minister looked through them, and seeing how extremely frugal the brothers lived, he threw away all the tallies and the parchments with the debts securities (*tallias et rotulos*) and slapped himself in the face, exclaiming «What a fool I am» (*Ay me captivum*). Never thereafter he would do another auditing.²⁵

No strife for higher offices

For a long time Agnellus remained a deacon and never liked the idea of being ordained a priest. According to a marginal note in Thomas of Eccleston's *Tractatus* it was his confreres who actually obtained a formal order by the General chapter to have him ordained. Likewise, the promotion to the office of a provincial minister was apparently not his own choice. He is said to have moved to England from Paris, where he was a simple guardian, on personal request of Saint Francis, who appointed him in a private letter.²⁶

Simplicity combined with learning

He was radical in his claim for simplicity, but at the same time he promoted learning in the order, had the school of the friars built in Oxford and was responsible for the appointment of

25. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 7f.

26. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 77; Letter by Francis to Agnellus: «Ego frater Franciscus de Assisio Minister Generalis paraecipio tibi fratri Agnello de Pisa per obedientiam, ut vadas ad Angliam, et ibi facias officium Ministeratus. Vale. Frater Franciscus de Assisio», cit. after A. G. Little, *The Greyfriars in Oxford*, Oxford 1892, 176.

Robert Grosseteste as the first lector of the Franciscans there.²⁷ Michael Robson brought an interesting detail to our attention in a note from a text by Bartholomaeus of Pisa. He recalls how Agnellus later had reason for regret,

when he saw the friars spending their time on frivolities and neglecting needful things. For one day, when he wished to assess the progress they were making, he entered the schools whilst a disputation was going on, and hearing them wrangling and questioning *Utrum sit Deus*, he exclaimed 'Woe is me, woe is me! Simple brothers enter heaven, and learned brothers dispute whether there is a God at al'.

Then he sent £10 sterling to the court to buy the Decretals, that the friars might study them and abandon frivolities.²⁸

Functions as mediator

Agnellus is characterised as a person endowed with natural sagacity (*vir prudentia*), and marked out by every virtue, rank and honour. He would not tolerate members working in high offices, for example as scribes at the royal court, and he tried to avoid contact with worldly people.²⁹ Also he never sought involvement with the powerful and mighty, but at the same time was highly respected at court and the king made him his personal friend and confessor (Agnellus appears as an arbitrator in political conflicts on his behalf). According to Roger Wendover Edmund of Abingdon, archbishop-elect of Canterbury, assigned Agnellus to defuse tension between King Henry III. and Richard the Marshal, Earl of Pembroke. We are told that on the 22 December in the year 1232 Agnellus met with the Marshal in the Cistercian Abbey of Margam in Glamorganshire. Roger recounts the dramatic interview between the Franciscan minister provincial and the Earl. According to Wendover's report Agnellus was familiar with the king, and stood in high esteem as an important coun-

27. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 16f.

28. Robson, *Thomas of Eccleston, the chronicler*, 25 with reference to Bartholomaeus Pisanus, *De conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Iesu*, Liber I: *fructus i-xii*, Florence 1906, 331.

29. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 76, 78.

sellor. However, the conflict went on and some month later, the English prelates convinced Agnellus to travel to Rome for the sake of reconciling the Earl with the King.³⁰

He unites the community even in death

Agnellus came back from Rome and fell sick of dysentery at Oxford. This was caused, it was said, by the cold and toil which he had endured in the cause of making peace again between the lord King and his Earl Marshal, when he travelled too much in the Welsh Marshes, throughout England and to Rome. After the flux had been checked by medicines, a pain in the intestines seized him, and a pain in his side so that he could scarce keep from crying out. He did, indeed, cry out almost without ceasing for three days on end before he died. When he felt death drawing near, he made confession to Brother Peter of Tewkesbury «with marvellous contrition», then assembled the other friars and gave absolution to each of them. The whole group began to pray and Agnellus closed his eyes with his own hand, folded his hands to a cross on his breast and died. Eccleston also mentions a wonderful miracle. When in 1246/7 a new chapel was built in the house of Oxford the body of Agnellus had to be removed. Alas, they found the leaden coffin full of «purest oil, and the body itself and its wrappings alike uncorrupted and giving forth a most sweet odour».³¹

The representation of humility personified in the portrait of Agnellus of Pisa by Thomas of Eccleston can be read as a plea for the constructive functions of humility when it comes to community building. Agnellus' humility becomes the corner-

30. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 76; cf. Robson, *Agnellus of Pisa*, 48; M. Robson, «A Franciscan contribution to the *De Gestis Britonum* (1205–1279), and its Continuation to 1299», *AFH*, 107 (2014), 265–313, at 283; R. de Wendover, *Liber cui dicitur flores historiarum ab anno Domini MCLIV. annoque Henrici Anglorum regis secundi primo*, edited by H. G. Hewlett, vol. 3, London 1889, 64 describes Agnellus as «familiaris erat domino regi et consiliarius ipsius, ut ostenderet ei quae audierat in curia regis de eo ab ipso rege et consiliatoribus eius (...)». See also Matthew Paris on this incident in Matthew Paris, *The life of St Edmund*, edited by C. H. Lawrence, Stroud 1996, 51, 130–33.

31. Little (ed.), *Eccleston, Tractatus*, 76–78.

stone of the Franciscan success in England. It is interesting to see how Thomas reconciles the ambivalence between Agnellus' rejection of all forms of power and authority with the most positive form of leadership. His unselfish behaviour unites the community, even in death. The collective memory of the first generation Franciscans in England portrays their first provincial minister as a perfect because humble leader.

Peacocks, eagles, lions, mountaineers, fathers who kneel before their sons, and other representations of humility in the Fasciculus Morum (14th c. Franciscan preaching aid)

A surprisingly vivid tableau with a most colourful imagery is evoked in the *Fasciculus Morum*, a Franciscan exempla collection, compiled shortly after 1300 by an otherwise unknown English friar named Robertus Selke. The text is transmitted in 28 manuscripts, nearly all of them dating to the 15th century. Siegfried Wenzel, the editor, calls the *Fasciculus Morum* a «utilitarian text», a typical preaching aid, containing stories, prayers, sayings and other bits and pieces useful for a friar on a preaching tour. Since many of the stories are situated in Shrewsbury and Coventry, one assumes its origins were in the Franciscan Custody of Worcester.³² A large number of such preaching aids had been in circulation amongst members of the mendicant orders at the time, especially in England and France and the *Fasciculus Morum* was one such.³³ The material is arranged in logical order, dealing in seven separate chapters with the seven deadly sins.

32. S. Wenzel (ed.), *Fasciculus Morum. A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, London 1989, 1–25, here 22f. Cf. A. Kehnel, «The narrative tradition of the medieval Franciscan friars on the British Isles. Introduction to the sources», *Franciscan Studies*, 63 (2005), 461–530, esp. 496–97.

33. See J. Berlioz, M. A. Polo de Beaulieu (eds.), *Les Exempla médiévaux. Introduction à la recherche, suivie des tables critiques de l'Index exemplorum de Frederic C. Tubach*, Carcassonne 1992; J.-T. Welter, *L'exemplum dans la littérature religieuse et didactique du moyen âge*, Paris/Toulouse 1927; J.-C. Schmitt, «Recueils Franciscains d' "exempla" et perfectionnement des techniques intellectuelles du xiii^e au xv^e siècle», *Bibliothèque de l'école des Chartes*, 85 (1977), 5–21.

Each vice is presented together with its opposite virtue as its uprooter (*extirpatrix*) in the classical tradition going back to John Cassian. So just as *ira* can be uprooted by *patientia* and *invidia* by *caritas*, so *superbia* is cured by *humilitas*.³⁴ In each chapter both vices and virtues are defined, illustrated, compared, then reasons for detesting a vice and for embracing a virtue are given. After the section on pride has been completed Lady Humility is introduced as the one who

risers against pride and false pleasures and overcomes them to restore the good qualities in humans. For she is the root and foundation of every good. In treating humility I plan to proceed as follows: first we shall see what it is and why it should be practised; second, to whom we must humble ourselves; third, what things lead to humility; and fourth, what the reward of people who humble themselves is.³⁵

The peacock, seeing that its feet are most vile, forgets about its splendid tail

The compiler of the preaching aid works with surprisingly practical examples from everyday life and he has a special liking for metaphors from the natural world. The first paragraphs define humility as the voluntary lowering of our mind and contempt for our own superiority («*humilitas est voluntaria mentis inclinatio et proprie excellencie contemptus*»).³⁶ Firstly humility must be practised because it patiently endures its troubles, just as a wife who is mistreated by her husband suffers it patiently so that she may not cause her husband to become worthy of public shame. Secondly «humility must be striven for, because it reflects on its shortcomings and hides its good qualities, like the peacock which, seeing that its feet are most vile, forgets about its splendid tail». Thirdly it must be striven for, because it meditates on and follows Christ's deeds. As the eagle looks at the sun with

34. The seven parts of the book deal successively with pride and humility (*superbia* / *humilitas*), wrath and patience (*ira* / *patientia*), envy and love (*invidia* / *caritas*), avarice and poverty (*avaricia* / *paupertas*), sloth and occupation (*accidia* / *contricio*), gluttony and sobriety (*gula* / *sobrietas*), lechery and chastity (*luxuria* / *castitas*).

35. Wenzel (ed.), *Fasciculus Morum*, 64f.

36. *Ibid.*, 64f.

unblinking eyes, just so does a truly humble person look at Christ, who is the sun of justice. Moreover, he is the incarnation of humility, because he humbled himself before God by assuming human nature, before his parents to whom he was always obedient, and before sinners, by letting himself be crucified. Therefore – the preacher admonishes his audience – we must humble our souls before him.

The lion who is gentler to humans who are prostrate than to those who stand upright. He, who wants to climb a mountain needs to bend down!

If we do so, Christ will act towards us as the lion does towards humans. Here the preacher cites Rabanus Maurus with the example of the lion who is gentler to people who are prostrate and captives than to those who stand upright and are domineering. In the same way Christ will be more gentle to the humble than to the proud. The account ends with an absolutely convincing argument from Isidore: «Notice: if someone wants to climb a steep mountain, he must bend down, lest by walking erect he might fall off; thus one surely climbs to heaven with humility, just as through pride one is flung to hell».³⁷

Humility and the obedient child

The next paragraph is dedicated to humbling oneself before God. Here the preacher is advised to use metaphors from parent child relationships:

Therefore I counsel that we act like obedient and sensitive children who, when they perceive that they have failed against their fathers's commands, take a rod and go to their father and ask for his mercy, fully ready to be disciplined and to receive their father's will. When their father sees that, he is moved by pity and lays aside all severity or at least softens it to a large extent.³⁸

37. *Ibid.*, 66f. With reference to Rabanus, *De universo* VIII 1 (PL 111: 217) and Isidore, *Synonyma* II 21 (PL 83: 850).

38. Wenzel (ed.), *Fasciculus Morum*, 70f.

Father in genuflexion before his son

To illustrate the force of forgiveness, inherent to humility, the author narrates a story from Valerius Maximus, the tale of

a rich father who had a son that continuously plotted his father's death, sometimes by murder, sometimes by poison and the like. When his father learned that and had ascertained from his wife the truth in good faith, namely that the boy was his own son and not someone else's, he took that son with him into the country some day, drew out his sword, placed it into his son's hands, knelt down and spoke to him as follows: "My son, what wrong have I done against you? Do not plot any more for your father's death. Look, I am ready; kill me now if you want to". When the son heard this, he naturally shrank in horror from murdering his father; with loud wailing and tears he threw himself at his father's feet and prayed for forgiveness. Then his father raised him up, embraced him sweetly, and gave him a kiss of reconciliation as a sign of peace.³⁹

In Frederic Tubach's *Index Exemplorum* this story appears as a most popular narrative in medieval exempla literature. The more popular version being that of a noble man who got killed in battle by his enemy. His son plans to take revenge and to kill the man who killed his father. However, he gives up his plans when he meets the perpetrator barefoot on the way to church bowing in humility before him and asking for forgiveness. The son of the victim forgives him and renounces revenge. Even Christ crucified in the church bowed his head before the young man who shortly after entered religious life.⁴⁰

Prostration might be called the most archaic gesture of submission. Jean-Claude Schmitt in his classical study on the *Raison de Gestes* uses texts and illustrations from Petrus Cantor, *De ora-*

39. *Ibid.*, 71. He cites Book 3, chap. 3 from Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri*, edited by C. Kempf, Leipzig 1888.

40. F. C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum. A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*, Helsinki 1969, Nr. 1375. Crucifix bows to merciful man. A noble man is killed in battle by his enemy. His son plans revenge. When he meets the murderer of his father barefoot on the way to church, bowing before the son of the dead noble man, he forgives him and renounce from taking revenge. Later the crucified Christ in the church bows before the young man, who soon took up a religious life.

WHO IS AFRAID OF A LITTLE LAMB?



Fig. 2. The seven ways of prayer according from Peter the Cantor, *De oratione et partibus eius* (after 1220), Venice, Archivio dello Stato, Scuola Grande Santa Maria della Misericordia in Valverde, b.1 (cit. after J.-C. Schmitt, *Die Logik der Gesten im europäischen Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1992, 288).

tionem et partibus eius and Humbert de Romanis to illustrate the manifold bodily positions to be taken during prayer. *Inclinatio*, *genuflexio* and *prostratio* are gestures of prayer which have purifying effects on the body performing them.⁴¹

Gert Althoff studied the decisive role of these acts in the interplay of political communication in the middle ages, suggesting that the act of submission – called *deditio* – was actually a regular instrument by which the seemingly strong were forced back into the game by the seemingly weak. So, to take the famous example of the «walk to Canossa», the German King Henry IV lay three days in the depths of winter before the gates of the palace of Canossa and finally received revocation of his excommunication by Pope Gregory VII. Althoff's interpretation makes King Henry IV the winner of the game because by the act of submission, by using the political instrument of the *deditio*, he deprived his opponent of his scope of action. He left Gregory VII no choice, but to enact forgiveness.⁴²

Gnothi seauton!

What follows is a list of seven ways in which Jesus was betrayed by the crowd before crucifixion. In order not to make the same mistakes, the preacher should admonish his crowd to follow in Christ's footsteps, and accept, as he did, reproaches as well as honours.

Then follows the ultimate proof for the necessity of humility, namely the way the Romans treated their champions after victory according to the «Deeds of the Romans»:

if there was a hardy champion in the City who had fought for it and won a victory three times, he deserved a threefold honor: first, he was to sit in a golden chariot and four white horses were to draw him through the City; second, his enemies were in their defeat to be bound

41. J.-C. Schmitt, *Die Logik der Gesten im europäischen Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1992, 288.

42. G. Althoff, «Das Privileg der "Deditio". Formen gütlicher Konfliktbeendigung in der mittelalterlichen Adelsgesellschaft», in O. G. Oexle (ed.), *Nobilitas. Funktion und Repräsentation des Adels in Alteuropa*, Göttingen 1997, 27-52.

to his chariot; and third, he was to be led to the temple of Jupiter and there clothed in the cloathes of his god. But that he should not be too proud in these honors, he was to suffer threefold shame on the same day: first, a slave of the lowest class was to sit next to him in equal honour; second, this slave was to strike him and say, “Gnothi seauton”, that is “Know thyself”; and third, on that day his enemies could with impunity say anything they wanted against him.⁴³

The conclusions drawn by the preacher from all these wonderful representations of humility are rather sobering: «Therefore, for all these things it is evident how we must first humble ourselves before God as our father».⁴⁴

Paying tithes as an act of humility

What follows is a lengthy paragraph on humbling oneself before the church, starting with a vivid comparision, «just as a mother in this world and in the flesh first carries a child and gives birth to it, then washes and bathes it, next clothes, nurses, and feeds it, and at last brings it to rest with her in bed, so does our mother, the Militant Church». Humility in this case is specified in a very practical manner, and the preacher here focusses on one single issue: he admonishes his audience willingly to pay tithes, thus giving back to the mother church, that is, to the community, what she gave to the individual.⁴⁵

How the stork and the hoopoe humbly care for their parents

Another paragraph focuses on the relation between parents and children. Again representations from the natural world are frequently employed: The stork, according to Ambrose,

has such great care for its parents, that when their strength has faded and they have lost their feathers because of old age, their offspring stand around them and warm them with their own feathers and do not

43. Wenzel (ed.), *Fasciculus Morum*, 78f. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum*, Nr. 5084. Cf. N. F. Palmer, «Das “Exempelwerk der englischen Bettelmönche”: Ein Gegenstück zu den “Gesta Romanorum”?», in W. Haug, B. Wachinger (eds.), *Exempel- und Exempelsammlungen*, Tübingen 1991, 137–72.

44. Wenzel (ed.), *Fasciculus Morum*, 80f.

45. *Ibid.*, 80–83.

neglect to feed them with food they have gathered by their own labors, and they raise their aged parents with the help of their own wings and incite them to fly and to reemploy their unused wings in their former use. Which of us has ever put his aged parent, who has loved us so much in our youth, on his own shoulders as that bird does?⁴⁶

Likewise, the hoopoe is cited as a paragon of humility, when treating its ageing parents with admirable care. When they in old age go blind, the children of the hoopoe would go and seek a precious stone by the seaside and put it on their eyes so that they regain their sight. The preacher here reproaches his audience, declaring that most people nowadays would rather that their father lost both eyes and would die, in order to gain their father's possessions. Likewise, everybody seems to forget about their aging mothers, putting them on the third part and wishing that she might soon die. Mind you, this admonition for humility ends with an appeal to parents to educate their children: «a dear child wants teaching», rather than being spoiled and neglected.⁴⁷

The guardian of humility: remembrance of our own frailty

Finally, the preacher turns to the last things that can bring true humility and are suited of uproot all evil. He introduces them as the ultimate antidote against the poison of pride: consideration of our own frailty, shortness of this mortal life, the last judgement and condemnation of the wicked. Just a few of the representations of the frailty of human life will be called to mind following the account of Innocent III's treatise on the misery of human existence, *De miseria humanae conditionis*, with the famous passage that points out how in comparison to all other creature humans are rather dull, made from mud, the least noble of all the elements: whereas stars are made from fire, winds from air, fishes and birds from water, man was simply made from earth, just like ordinary cattle.⁴⁸ Siegfried Wenzel talks of «widespread common-places» that follow: «O man, son of the earth, father of worms,

46. *Ibid.*, 88f.

47. *Ibid.*, 88-93.

48. *Ibid.*, 92-95.

brother of moles – your strength is weakness, your wealth is poverty, your honor shame, and your joy mourning». ⁴⁹

All the representations of humility assembled from the *Fasciculus Morum* stress the ‘powers’ of this virtue, its use for the good of the individual as well as that of the community, its benefits for the relation between the generations, and the practical use for a healthy balance as a preventive force against abuse of power and ‘caesarean madness’. Humility might even be called a game changer, enabling reconciliation, bringing about peace and bridging insurmountable differences between hostile groups or individuals.

The footstool of humility: «the baunkere of lownesse» of the English Franciscan Nicholas Philipp (15th c.)

So far, I have discussed more or less conventional representations of humility. The final example is a rather unusual one. Moreover, it seems somehow irritating: a surprisingly practical



Fig. 3. MS M.638, fol. 6v. Purchased by J. P. Morgan (1867–1943) in 1916 © The Morgan Library & Museum, New York⁵⁰.

49. *Ibid.*, 92f, 97 fn.

50. Old Testament Miniatures with Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian inscriptions, France, Paris, 1240s, New York, Morgan Library, MS M. 638, fol. 6v. The Morgan Bible, <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/crusader-bible/12>

representation, namely a footstool, a footstool of humility. The friars would know the footstool from their daily prayer of the psalter and the reading of the scriptures (Ps 110:1; Acts 2:35; Heb. 1:13, 10:13; James 2:3). However, the way Nicholas Philipp, a Franciscan preacher active in 15th century England, colours this representation in the literal sense of the word seems remarkable to me. Nicholas is known as the compiler of a collection of 70 Sermons preserved in six individual booklets, comprising altogether 177 leaves. We know that Brother Nicholas was an active traveller, leading the peripatetic life style of a mendicant preacher for at least seven years, and he seems to have copied and compiled his quaterni in various places at different times between the years 1430 and 1436 at places such as Lichfield, Lynn, Oxford, Newcastle upon Tyne.⁵¹ These sermon booklets assemble a vast variety of different texts, sermons written in Latin, English and French, by himself, but also those from other preachers, one of them being his teacher William Melton. A most prominent feature in Nicholas Philipp's work is a bewildering tendency for divisions and distinctions and subdivisions when explaining an issue.⁵² In the sermon Nr. 67 «Qui custos Domini sui gloriabitur» we find a meditation about the hospitality of a true Christian towards Christ, reflecting on the things necessary when offering a friend hospitality, namely proper surrounding and atmosphere, good company and good service. The first of these requirement, the proper surrounding, is then again exemplified in four very practical and vivid images taken from the world of interior design:

A tapyzce of trewthe,
A dossere of clenness,
A cowsschon of hoope
And a baunkere of lownesse.⁵³

51. A. J. Fletcher, «The Sermon Booklets of Friar Nicholas Philip», in Id. (ed.), *Preaching, Politics and Poetry in Late-Medieval England*, Dublin 1998, 41-57, here cited from the first version in *Medium Aevum*, 55 (1986), 188-202, at 193.

52. Fletcher, «The Sermon Booklets» 1986, 195.

53. Fletcher, «The Sermon Booklets» 1998, 52f.: «a carpet of truth / a bed of cleanness / a cushion of hope / and finally a footstool of humility».

The bed of cleanness stands on four posts: of deed, thought, will and clarity. The cushion of hope is concentrated on the last judgement. The footstool of humility finally has four colours: white for the innocent state into which humans are born, black for the guilt humans have begotten, green for death and red for hell. Clearly these four colours of the footstool are reminders of the four «guardians against pride» common in preaching manuals at the time, namely human frailty, death, judgment and condemnation of the wicked.⁵⁴ The preachers' poem contextualizes humility in terms of most ordinary household items. This was not uncommon in Middle English religious texts. The authors often use household space for the shaping of the inner self. Denis Renevey and Davis Spurr traced this in texts like the «Ancrenne Wisse» and in the «Doctrine of the Heart», where furniture takes a prominent role: bed, eating table, stool and candelstick, figure as representations of inner feelings. Each beeing associate respectively with inner peace, penance, judgement and self-knowlege. So the imagery used here was certainly not uncommon at the time. The household participates in the presentation of inner feelings.⁵⁵ However, there remains a certain trace of confusion, the author seems to indulge in detail, almost carried away by the beauty of the nice and cosy atmosphere in the guestroom he depicts. Humility as an ordinary piece of furniture in every household might have irritated the audience. And in fact, it might represent another important function of humility, namely the capacity to confuse deadlocked thinking habits and to produce surprise.

54. Cf. Wenzel (ed.), *Fasciculus Morum*, 92.

55. V. Gillespie, «Meat, metaphor and mysticism. Cooking the books in The Doctrine of the Heart», in: D. Renevey, C. Whitehead (eds.), *A Companion to The Doctrine of the Heart*, Liverpool 2010, 131–58; D. Renevey, «Figuring Household Space in Ancrene Wisse and The Doctrine of the Heart», in: D. Spurr, C. Tschichold (eds.), *The Space of English*, Tübingen 2005, 69–84, here 78; a solid introduction to the texts is offered by N. F. Palmer, «The authorship of De doctrina cordis», in: Renevey, Whitehead (eds.), *A Companion*, 19–56.

The social functions of humility?

Back to the «gap-between-us-and-them» theory. Can medieval representations of humility be linked to the current problems of «othering»? Is humility any good against the ever virulent tendency hostility against ‘others’? Against the human tendency to polarise?

Current explanations of, and solutions for, the problem of «othering», argue from the evolution of the human brain. Homo sapiens, so the idea goes, was endowed with a powerful evolutionary drive to identify in some ways with people ‘like you’. Others were seen as potentially hostile and therefore a threat. Joshua Greene, Harvard psychologist and neuroscientist, investigated the moral and ethical consequences of this presumed historical ‘fact’. He made out two layers of the underlying moral problem: The first being what he calls the «ME versus US», bias. This is known as the standard problem of cooperation, also known as the «tragedy of the commons», weighing individual interests against collective goals. Evolution has taught us all about the usefulness of cooperation, individual survival very much depends on the survival of the group. «US» is a useful strategie of survival. Our moral brains solve this problem primarily with emotion. Feelings of empathy, love, friendship, gratitude, honor, shame, guilt, loyalty, humility, awe, and embarrassment impel us to (sometimes) put the interests of others ahead of our own. Likewise, feelings of anger and disgust impel us to shun or punish people who overvalue ME relative to US. Thanks to these automatic settings, we do far less lying, cheating, stealing, and killing than we otherwise could, and that enables US to succeed – and of course me as a part of us. So that is, why basically «in sum we are a caring species, albeit in a limited way».⁵⁶ However, there is the second and more complex layer of the gap theory. It is the «US versus Them» bias. The human inclination to view the world in terms of «our interest versus theirs, our values versus

⁵⁶ Greene, *Moral Tribes*, 39; R. Bregmann, *Humankind. A Hopeful History*, London 2020; F. Cushman, A. Gaffey, K. Gray, W. B. Mendes, «Simulating Murder. The Aversion to Harmful Action», *Emotion*, 12/1 (2012), 2-7.

theirs», or both. This is the modern moral tragedy – what Greene calls the «Tragedy of Commonsense Morality», because here – he says – the evolutionary tools described above seem not to hold much good. Here our disparate feelings and beliefs make it hard to get along. First because – according to Greene – humans are by nature tribalistic, unapologetically valuing US over Them. Second, different tribes cooperate on different terms. Some are more collectivist, some more individualist. Some respond aggressively to threats. Others emphasize harmony. And so on. Third, tribes differ in their language, or what Greene specifies as ‘proper nouns’ – meaning leaders, texts, institutions, and practices that they invest with moral authority. Finally, all of these differences lead to biased perceptions of what’s true and what’s fair.⁵⁷

In short: Greene argues that evolution endowed us with moral instincts to cooperate with others within our social group («ME versus US»), we have learned to do what is best for the group and to put ‘us’ above ‘me’, when needed. Evolution invented emotions, such as love, friendship or blame and shame to regulate these problems. However, on the level of inter-group harmony («US versus THEM») these intuitions cause problems (tragedy of commonsense morality) and deepen hostility between different groups. Collective emotions started to cause serious trouble when the history of human kind arrived in modern times. Nationalism, racism, Europeans versus Mediterranean boatpeople, developed countries vs. developing countries are no good as devices to overcome the problems of the global world. Greene’s solution is a pragmatic one: he suggests a utilitarian morality, or else what he calls «deep pragmatism».

So much to describe the theoretical framework in Greene’s evolutionary approach from psychology and neuroscience. The theory is presented here as one of many, trying to investigate and to find solutions for current problems of «othering». However, I see here one significant problem, maybe it is a hereditary problem from the so-called ‘modern’ sciences: The theory itself functions on the premises of a gap between us and them! It suggests

57. Greene, *Moral Tribes*, 293f.

a solution for the «US versus THEM» problem, by constructing and continually deepening a gap between «US» now in the global modern world, and «THEM» in the olden days, between «US» having to deal with problems never seen before in history and «THEM» living once upon a time, when life was pretty tough alright, but basically manageable with a few primitive social instincts.

The concept of humility as elaborated by Silvia Negri offers an alternative. Instead of focussing on the amazing advances of humanity since the primitive times of our ancestors, she concentrates on what we share with THEM. Women and men who, like US struggled through life some thousands of years ago, THEM, who like US tried to balance out the intricate framework between human needs and capabilities, between individual self-realization and social compatibility, between the need for independence and the advantages of cooperation. Negri's project might be called a deep dive research in the oceans of collective knowledge assembled over thousands of generations, searching for best practice models in dealing with individual and collective outbreaks of hybris, lethal to every community past or present.

Over thousands of years, humility was preached as a remedy against the vice of superbia. The idea to look at the cardinal virtues as 'containers' of collective knowledge, storing experience made over the generations in 'units' (i.e. images, metaphors, representations), transportable over the generations, is tempting. The concept of humility stores knowledge that overrides individual experience. Knowledge about how to deal with marginalisation, with divisions that become dangerous for the group, knowledge about how to balance the competing needs for othering and belonging, knowledge about how to bridge the gap between US and THEM without erasing apparent differences. Humility as represented in the person of Agnellus of Pisa, the first Franciscan Provincial Minister of England, offers very practical solutions that basically exist in reminders of fundamental principles of good leadership: no strife for higher offices, dedication and self-reflection (weeping), modesty, taking responsibility without overestimating one's impact, and finally simplicity and learning. The representations of humility drawn from the Franciscan preaching

aid focus on self-reflection – the peacock seeing his vile feet forgets about his tail – and on the transforming powers of humility. In particular, the image of a father, kneeling before his son, or the murderer before the son of his victim, asking for forgiveness and bringing about reconciliation seems interesting here. It seems to turn the relationship between the generations upside down. Humility enables the young to pardon the wrong doings of the elder generation. Moreover, humility overcomes the gap between US the victims and THEM the perpetrators. Finally, Nicolas Philipp's footstool of humility might celebrate the positive effects of ambiguity and trains the sense for the miracles of every day life.

Conclusion: Why study medieval representations of humility in the 21st century? Because they store experience about how to deal with the human tendency to divide the world into «US and the OTHER». The tendency to polarize. We can look at humilitas as a social device to ward off individual and collective superbia, acts of pride. Talking in terms of evolutionary psychology one could speak of humility as an invention to safeguard groups from collective suicide by overestimating their «US-skills and powers» and fall prey to the powers of «THEM». Instead – in the long run – groups and individuals are much better off with modesty, with reconciliation and with the fascinating gift of being irritated and confused. However, even the medieval sources add warnings. Therefore, we end with a caveat: Groups do profit a great deal from humility. However, too many humble individuals on one spot can cause severe problems. The sermons of Nicholas Philipp teach us a wonderful lesson here. As mentioned above his teacher William Melton was another popular preacher, famous for his humility. People followed him from town to town to listen to his sermons. One day, when he preached in the city of Lynn (presumably in the year 1426) he met with another expert of humility: the ecstatic visionary Margery Kempe. She practiced humility mainly by means of constant tears and crying. William Melton denied her access to the church, while he was preaching, since her humble sobs would disturb his sermon.⁵⁸ Margery on her side was really upset

58. *Ibid.*, 245f.; Fletcher, *Sermon Booklets*, 1998, 50f.

about this and she humbly pointed out that the insolent preacher did not even have a degree from Oxford!⁵⁹ So we might conclude from this example, that too many experts of humility might spoil the broth and break down the humble bridges over the gap between us and them.

ABSTRACT

Annette Kehnel, *Who is Afraid of a Little Lamb? Medieval Humility and the Gap between «US and THEM» in the Social and Cognitive Sciences*

A very prominent medieval image of humilitas is the little lamb (agnellus), representing purity and humbleness, a state of mind and body «based on introspective modesty and conscious sense of measure». The paper discusses representations of humility transmitted in Franciscan communities in England by Thomas of Eccleston (13th cent), in the *Fasciculus Morum* (14th cent) and by Friar Nicholas Philipp (15th cent.) Can medieval concepts of humility be related to problematic psychological dispositions in the human brain, currently discussed in the cognitive sciences as ‘othering’ or the ‘gap-instinct’ (Hans Rosling, John A. Powell, Joshua Greene)? Can we interpret medieval moral concepts like, for example, the cardinal virtues, as metaphorical ‘containers’ (Daniel L. Smail) transmitting intergenerational collective knowledge about how to avoid the undesirable side effects of identity formation?

Annette Kehnel
Universität Mannheim
annette.kehnel@uni-mannheim.de

59. S. B. Meech, H. E. Allen (eds.), *Book of Margery Kempe*, London 1940, 148–52, and remarks on 321.