Not that I have already obtained this or have reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained (3:12-16, NRSV).

According to Paul, the lack of perfection is primarily not to be seen as a temporary anthropological deficiency that could somehow be corrected by moral progress – according to Paul it rather functions as a crucial element of an even deeper experience of humility because it corresponds to the eschatological implications of ταπεινοφροσύνη: since the future hope focuses on Christ “He will transform the body of our humiliation (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως) that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (3:21, NRSV), current completeness or perfection would only be a misleading contradiction. In narrative terms, then, Paul puts himself in a structural analogy to Christ: as Jesus – after having practiced humility in an ultimate sense (2:6-8) – has been exalted (2:9-11), Paul expects for himself a future transformation (μετασχηματίζειν) of his τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως (3:21) by which he himself will participate in Christ’s cosmological rulership (3:21).

2.3. The apostle’s personal authority

In Phil 2:3 Paul implements ταπεινοφροσύνη in an exhortative setting. The community members are urged by Paul to “complete” his joy, not to do “something from selfishness,” and after that: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:4, NRSV). Paul uses the parenthetical form here as he does in various other passages in Philippians (e.g., 1:27-30; 2:12-18; 4:1ff.). The attitude of τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε is expected of the Philippian community in order to perfect the apostle’s joy (χαρά).

Paul’s parenesis thus is empowered by his insistence that the community’s ethical behavior will directly impact the apostle’s condition and mental state in his imprisonment. The parenesis in Phil 2 is personally authorized by Paul’s apostolic affiliation to Christ (e.g., 1:13), which – in the letter to the Philippians – is outlined as a direct subordination to Christ (δοῦλος: 1:1).

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19 In that sense John T. Fitzgerald, for instance, misperceives Pauline ethics when he looks at it in close analogy to the idea of “moral progress” which we can find in Hellenistic-Roman philosophy, cf.: J. T. Fitzgerald, “Passions,” 1-25.