Gratitude to God

Edited by
Kent Dunnington

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Religions*

MDPI

Gratitude to God

Gratitude to God

Editor

Kent Dunnington

MDPI

Editor
Kent Dunnington
Biola University
La Mirada, CA, USA

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Religions* (ISSN 2077-1444) (available at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/ Gratitude_God).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

Contents

Preface to "Gratitude to God"

This Special Issue is entitled "Gratitude to God" and its purpose is to gather emerging research—philosophical, theological, and psychological—on gratitude to God. Although there is a large psychological and philosophical literature on general gratitude, the aim of this Special Issue is to specifically focus on gratitude to God. Much of the work featured in this Special Issue was funded by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation. I am grateful to all the authors featured in the Special Issue, as well as the grant leaders Bob Emmons and Pete Hill, for their collaboration on bringing this volume together.

Kent Dunnington
Editor

Review

U.S. Federal Investment in Religiousness/Spirituality and Health Research: A Systematic Review

Crystal L. Park [1,*], **Jamilah R. George** [1], **Saya Awao** [1], **Lauren M. Carney** [1], **Steven Batt** [2] and **John M. Salsman** [3]

[1]   Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA
[2]   University of Connecticut Library, Storrs, CT 06269-1005, USA
[3]   Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC 27101, USA
[*]   Correspondence: crystal.park@uconn.edu

Abstract: Objectives: Although robust associations between aspects of religiousness/spirituality (R/S) and physical health have been established, little systematic information is available about federal funding support for this area of research. To address this question, we conducted a comprehensive systematic review and analysis. **Study Design:** Systematic review. **Methods:** We used the information provided by the Federal RePORTER and searched from earliest date through the end of 2018. Abstracts were included if they were an empirical study and included both a religion/spirituality variable and a health variable. **Results:** Our search yielded 194 grants reflecting over USD 214 million in research expenditures, with the vast majority (85%) funded by the NIH. Most common were community-based observational studies with healthy populations (70%). Nearly three-quarters (73%) of studies specifying age focused on adults, but children and adolescents were also well represented in these projects. The proportion of studies focused on racial/ethnic minorities (47%) was disproportionate to their representation in the U.S. population, which could reflect either heightened efforts to address health disparities or a view that R/S is primarily or mostly relevant to minority groups. Less than half of funded studies (41%) considered religion a central focus and publications for R/S-focused studies were less common than for non-R/S-focused studies (M = 7.0 to M = 13.3, respectively, *p* = 0.06). Overall funding levels appear to be declining in more recent years, although this trend was not statistically significant (*p* = 0.52). Many abstracts did not provide adequate details for coding. **Conclusions:** Overall, the present review suggests that U.S. federal funding for research on R/S and health is substantial, but most of this has only peripherally considered R/S and has yielded modest return on investment. Promising future directions include a continued focus on racial and ethnic minority populations as well as in emerging areas such as religious gratitude and compassion along with well-designed intervention trials.

Keywords: religion; health; federal funding; systematic review

1. Introduction

Among the many psychosocial aspects that may influence health, religiousness/spirituality (R/S) tends to receive relatively little mainstream attention. This lack of attention may derive from the general skepticism voiced by many social scientists regarding R/S (Rutjens and Preston 2020) or the reluctance expressed by many healthcare providers regarding engaging in patients' spiritual concerns (Greenblum and Hubbard 2019). Yet R/S is an important aspect of many people's lives (Park et al. 2016), and many studies have established associations between R/S and physical health. The strongest evidence of this link is the robust association between religious service attendance and mortality (see (VanderWeele 2017) for a review). Less conclusive but growing evidence supports associations of attendance with additional health indicators, including cardiovascular disease (VanderWeele 2017). Other aspects of R/S, such as religious social support and religious coping (e.g.,

prayer), have received less attention but have also demonstrated associations with health (see (Park and Slattery Forthcoming) for a review).

However, the quality of research on R/S and health has generally been low. For example, most studies have employed less rigorous research designs (e.g., cross-sectional studies without a comparison group, observational studies with convenience samples) and have failed to include or control for confounding variables that may account for significant variance in outcomes (e.g., physical health status when predicting the association between religious service attendance and physical quality of life) (Park et al. 2016). Although all methods have strengths and limitations, the relatively low quality of this body of work as a whole has, in part, been considered by some as a byproduct of the relative neglect or bias against federally funded research on the topic of RS and health (see (Levin 2005; Levin 2016a)). Indeed, few federal health-related agencies highlight or even mention R/S in their materials, including on their myriad webpages. In addition, some researchers have noted the fraught legal issues involved in funding R/S work, raising the specter of mingling church and state (Levin 2016b), which may further hinder research in the field.

To date, no empirical research has directly evaluated the extent to which R/S-health research has received federal funding support. It may be that little federal funding is available or that it is primarily directed towards research with highly specific groups, such as religious communities, minorities, or people with specific conditions such as substance misuse (Levin 2016a). Another possibility is that federally funded investigators of R/S and health fail to produce substantive results. Thus, it is important to establish the investment of federal funding of R/S and health research—along with the specific areas in which these investments have been made and the publications that result from them.

To address this knowledge gap and guided by a "best practices" approach (Siddaway et al. 2019), we conducted a comprehensive systematic review and analysis of U.S. federally funded applications of RS and health. We used the Federal RePORTER, the most comprehensive database of federally funded studies available, as our source data. The Federal RePORTER includes, for example, funding from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), the Department of Defense (DOD), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

We asked three questions to characterize the state of funding on R/S and health over time and its impact: (1) What are the methodological and sample characteristics of studies that received funding? In addition, we examined the extent to which an emerging area of importance, religiously relevant virtues (Carlisle and Tsang 2013; Krause and Hayward 2015), has been covered in these funded projects. (2) What is the overall funding portfolio? (3) What is the return on investment from funded projects? By exploring these questions, this review aims to provide an informative and data-driven perspective on the nature of funding to support R/S and health research and the relative degree to which particular areas of inquiry have been successful.

2. Method

This systematic review, using data provided by the Federal RePORTER, was exempt from Institutional Review Board review. Federal RePORTER was used to identify funded projects with an explicit focus on or inclusion of R/S variable(s). This systematic review adhered to recommended guidelines for the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA (Page et al. 2021)). Our planned review approach was described as part of our funded grant proposal and is available on request.

2.1. Search Strategy

A health science librarian conducted the search on Federal RePORTER using search terms for R/S (spiritual OR spirituality OR religio* OR faith OR prayer OR prayers OR praying OR church OR churches OR churchgoing OR temple OR temples OR synagogue OR synagogues OR mosque OR mosques OR Jewish OR Jews OR Christians OR Protestant OR Protestants OR Catholic OR Catholics OR Muslim OR Muslims OR Ramadan OR Mormon

OR Mormons OR Adventist OR Adventists OR Buddhist OR Buddhists OR Buddhism OR Hindi OR Hindus OR Hinduism OR Scientology OR Scientologists OR Jehovah OR Evangelical OR Evangelicals OR Baptist OR Baptists OR Pentecostal OR Pentecostals OR Taoist OR Taoism OR Sikhism OR Sufism) and narrowed the results by including "and health". We wanted to provide as broad of a search strategy as possible and so we anticipated that "health" would be sufficiently comprehensive to include outcomes focused on both physical and mental health, and we did not limit our search terms to the title or abstract only. What that means is that even if a project does not specifically reference health in the title or abstract, if it had a mental health outcome (e.g., depression, anxiety), then these outcomes would have been indexed as part of the project terms and thus captured by our search strategy. There was no lower date limit and we searched through 2018. All resulting grant abstracts were uploaded to Covidence (www.covidence.org, accessed on 20 March 2018), a web-based platform and non-profit service working in partnership with the Cochrane Collaboration designed to improve production and use of systematic reviews for health and wellbeing.

2.2. Eligibility Criteria

Projects were included if they (1) were an empirical research study, (2) included an R/S variable, (3) included a health outcome, and (4) examined the link between an R/S variable and a health outcome. Projects were excluded if they (1) were duplicate projects or (2) conducted in a religious setting or with a religious group but did not evaluate the role of R/S in health.

Two research assistants independently reviewed each abstract, rating whether it met eligibility criteria (yes/maybe/no). Abstracts that had conflicts (i.e., yes/maybe vs. no) were examined by a third rater (C.L.P. or J.M.S.) to resolve the disagreement. Abstracts with a yes or maybe consensus recommendation were next examined independently by two raters (C.L.P., J.M.S.) for final recommendation (include/exclude) with disagreements resolved by consensus. The review is registered on Open Science.

2.3. Data Coding

A codebook was developed to guide the independent review and data extraction process. Data were extracted directly from Federal RePORTER by two raters and recorded in Covidence. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus with larger group discussion as needed. Study demographics focused on age group, sex, race/ethnicity, country where the research was conducted, study type (observational vs. interventional), sample (healthy/community vs. disease/clinical), and health outcomes (physical, emotional, social, and spiritual).

R/S variables were coded for centrality, role, and construct type. Centrality of R/S was coded as "yes" if R/S was a key variable in the study (e.g., primary outcome) or as "no" if it was not a main focus of the study (e.g., one of many potential moderators). R/S construct type was coded as affective (e.g., spiritual well-being), behavioral (e.g., religious coping), cognitive (e.g., beliefs about God), or other (e.g., religious social support) (cf. (Salsman et al. 2015)). The specific roles of R/S variables in the studies were coded as predictor, outcome, mediator, moderator, or multiple categories.

To examine the extent to which religious-relevant virtues were included in the set of funded projects, we searched the included project titles, abstracts, and keywords for the terms "gratitude", "grateful", "humility", "humble", "forgiveness", "forgive", and "compassion". To further characterize the overall research portfolio, funded projects were coded by total amount funded, years of funding, funding agency, grant mechanism, number of publications, and type of research institution. The Carnegie Classification System of Institutions of Higher Education (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research n.d.) was used to characterize institution type (doctoral universities, master's colleges and universities, special focus institutions, baccalaureate colleges, and not applicable (N/A)). An institution was classified as N/A if it was not an institution of higher education

(e.g., National Bureau of Economic Research) or if it was an institution outside of the United States.

Lastly, to evaluate return on investment, we recorded the total number of publications for each project from PubMed using the grant numbers. This information is only available for NIH grants because only NIH requires reporting of publications linked to the grant. Because the R series (i.e., investigator-initiated) is the most common funding mechanism used by NIH, we compared the total number of publications for which R/S was central to those for which R/S was not central among R series grants. Abstracts of each publication were exported and examined to determine if R/S was highlighted in the publication. If a key term (e.g., religion, spirituality, church, prayer, etc.) was included in the abstract, R/S was considered a central component of the publication, and the DOIs, journal names, and number of citations were recorded. The impact factor of each journal was retrieved from Journal Citation Reports (clarivate.com). For 10 journals, impact factors were not available on this database. Of those, 9 journal impact factors were retrieved from another source (e.g., journal website) and 1 journal impact factor was not found from any source.

3. Data Analysis

Study sample demographics, R/S characteristics, health outcomes, funding institutes, and grant mechanisms were tabulated and summarized using frequency distributions. In addition, the mean, median, and standard deviation of funded grants were calculated per award and per year. Overall amount of funding by research dollars and awards were calculated and examined using linear regression to identify significant changes over time. Next, the average amount of funding and number of publications per grant were calculated by R/S centrality (yes/no) and compared using T-tests to identify significant differences. Finally, we tallied the number/percent of our set of religious-relevant virtues mentioned in the abstract/keyword/search materials.

4. Results

4.1. Study Selection

The Federal RePORTER database search retrieved 7532 grants (Figure 1). After removal of duplicates, 7523 remained and were initially screened to ensure inclusion of a religious or spiritual variable. Of these, 6391 clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria and were discarded, and 1132 were assessed further to ensure that all inclusion criteria were met. Of these, 938 did not meet the inclusion criteria, while 194 did and were included in subsequent analyses.

4.2. Characteristics of Funded R/S and Health Projects

Abstracts from funded grants varied in the details provided about the sample characteristics, research design, and measures used. Although many characteristics were not specified, there were some notable features of the funded studies. More than one-third (39%; k = 75/194) of the studies focused on adults (or 73% of studies that specified an age group (k = 75/103)). Similarly, 47% (92/194) of studies specifically included non-Hispanic white participants, and 32% (k = 62/194) and 15% (k = 29/194) of studies recruited Black/African American or Hispanic or Latino samples, respectively, corresponding to 53% (k = 62/118) and 25% (k = 29/118) of studies that described a specific racial or ethnic group. The majority of projects utilized samples from the United States (87%, k = 169/194), focused on community-based or otherwise healthy participants (70%, k = 136/194), and used an observational approach (72%, 139/194). R/S was central in only 41% of projects (k = 79/194), was typically used as a predictor variable (60%, k = 117/194), and most commonly focused on "other" dimensions of the R/S construct (45%, k = 88/194). In terms of the religious-relevant virtues, we found 0 projects mentioning gratitude/grateful, humility/humble, or forgiveness/forgive. Two projects included the term compassion. Not surprisingly, physical health outcomes were most commonly reflected in funded projects (61%, k = 119/194),

but emotional (57%, 110/194) and spiritual health outcomes (52%, 101/194) were also common. (See Table 1 for additional characteristics of funded projects.)
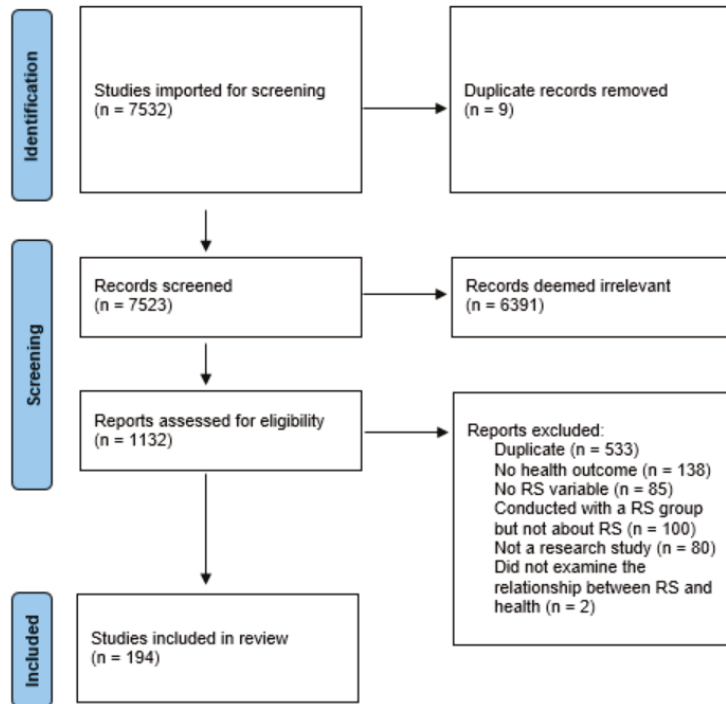
Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

Table 1. Proposed study demographics and R/S characteristics (k = 194).

Age Group	N	%
Older Adults	14	7.2
Adults (non-specified)	57	29.4
Young Adults	4	2.1
Pediatric	28	14.4
Unspecified	103	53.1
Sex		
Female	48	24.7
Male	31	16.0
Unspecified	134	69.1
Race/Ethnicity		
White	12	6.2
Black/African American	62	32.0
Asian or Pacific Islander	9	4.6
Native American or Alaskan Native	6	3.1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0.0

Table 1. *Cont.*

Hispanic or Latino	29	14.9
Unspecified	101	52.1
Country		
United States	169	87.1
International	31	16.0
Sample Type		
Healthy/Community	136	70.1
Disease: Cancer	16	8.2
Disease: Psychiatric disorder	13	6.7
Disease: Other (e.g., asthma, infertility, obesity)	10	5.1
Disease: HIV/AIDS	9	4.6
Disease: Multiple chronic conditions	6	3.1
Disease: Cardiovascular	4	2.1
Study Type		
Observational	139	71.6
Interventional	52	26.8
Unspecified	3	1.5
R/S Centrality		
Yes	79	40.7
No	115	59.3
R/S Variable Role		
Predictor	117	60.3
Outcome	54	27.8
Mediator	23	11.9
Moderator	25	12.9
Multiple	33	17.0
R/S Construct		
Affective	38	19.6
Behavioral	51	26.3
Cognitive	29	14.9
Other	88	45.3
Unspecified	8	4.1
Health Outcomes		
Physical	119	61.3
Emotional	110	56.7
Social	75	38.7
Spiritual	101	52.1

Note: Cells do not always add to 100% within categories as some characteristics are reflected in multiple projects.

4.3. Funding Portfolio of R/S and Health Research

The total amount funded across all 194 grants was USD 214,171,986. Per grant, the mean was USD 1,145,305 (SD = USD 1,549,018), the median was USD 577,665 and the range was USD 4496–12,974,479. Average number of years funded was 3.4 years (SD = 1.6 years). The majority of awards went to doctoral universities designated as "very high research

activity" (53%, 102/194) with those designated as "high research activity" (5%, 10/194) and as "professional universities" (0.5%, 1/194) also receiving a modest number of awards. Four-year medical schools and centers received 28 awards (14%) and master's colleges and universities designated as "larger programs" or "small programs" received 8 (4%) and 1 (0.5%) award(s), respectively. Forty-four awards (23%) were made to institutions not rated by the Carnegie Classification system.

Nine of the top ten funding agencies by number of awards granted were from NIH, which accounted for 85% of all funded projects (k = 164/194). NSF was the only federal agency not part of the NIH that was represented in the top ten funders, awarding an additional 17 projects. Within the NIH, the National Cancer Institute and the National Institute on Aging provided the largest investments with USD 41,482,047 and USD 31,639,406 in awarded research support, respectively. Table 2 provides additional details by funding agency.

Table 2. Number of grant awards by federal agency.

Agency	Awards	Amounts (USD)
* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development	26	27,438,617
* National Cancer Institute	22	41,482,047
* National Institute of Mental Health	22	20,860,171
National Science Foundation	17	604,771
* National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities	17	19,510,115
* National Institute of Nursing Research	16	20,624,542
* National Institute on Drug Abuse	14	11,615,678
* National Institute on Aging	12	31,639,406
* National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism	12	11,342,277
* National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute	9	19,306,572
* National Center for Research Resources	5	330,131
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	4	unavailable
* National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health	3	1,245,133
National Institute of Food and Agriculture	3	unavailable
* Fogarty International Center at NIH	2	707,235
National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention	2	1,615,521
* National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research	2	735,000
* National Institute of General Medical Sciences	2	1,471,543
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality	1	41,510
Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs	1	1,177,582
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	1	1,375,163
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control	1	1,048,972
Total	194	214,171,986

* Indicates a federal agency within the National Institutes of Health.

Not surprisingly, among NIH grants, R series grants were the most common awards (53%, k = 102/194), with the R01 mechanism accounting for almost two-thirds of the R grant awards (65%, 64/99). (See Table 3 for funding by grant mechanism.) Lastly, we examined funding patterns over time. Figure 2 depicts trends in the number of R/S and health projects funded and the amount of funding over time. Of note, the full range of grants funded was not available in the Federal RePORTER prior to 2008, so awards reflected in 2003 to 2007 were projects that continued through 2008 or later. These years will underestimate the total number of projects awarded. Overall, from 2008 through 2018, there was a modest but non-significant decrease in the total amount of funding (F (1,14) = 0.43, p = 0.52) and number of projects (F (1,14) = 0.13, p = 0.72).

Table 3. Grant mechanism and type of R series grant for NIH-funded projects.

Mechanism	Frequency	Percent
R	102	52.6
R01	64	33.0
R21	14	7.2
R03	12	6.2
R15	2	1.0
R34	2	1.0
R36	2	1.0
R24	1	0.5
R25	1	0.5
R35	1	0.5
R56	1	0.5
RL1	1	0.5
R00	1	0.5
Missing	22	11.3
F	18	9.3
K	17	8.8
P	12	6.2
U	8	4.1
M	5	2.6
Z	5	2.6
I	4	2.1
SC	1	0.5

R = research grants: R01 = NIH Research Project Grant Program, R21 = NIH Exploratory/Developmental Research Grant Award, R03 = NIH Small Grant Program, R15 = NIH Academic Research Enhancement Award, R34 = NIH Clinical Trial Planning Grant Program, R36 = Research Dissertation Award, R24 = Resource-Related Research Projects, R25 = Education Projects, R35 = Outstanding Investigator Award, R56 = NIH High Priority, Short-Term Project Award, RL1 = Linked Research Project Grant, R00 = NIH Pathway to Independence Award (K99/R00), F = Fellowship Programs, K = Research Career Programs, P = Research Program Projects and Centers, U = Cooperative Agreements, M = General Clinical Research Centers Program, Z = Intramural Projects, I = Non-HHS and Non-DHHS Federal Awards, SC = Research-Related Programs.
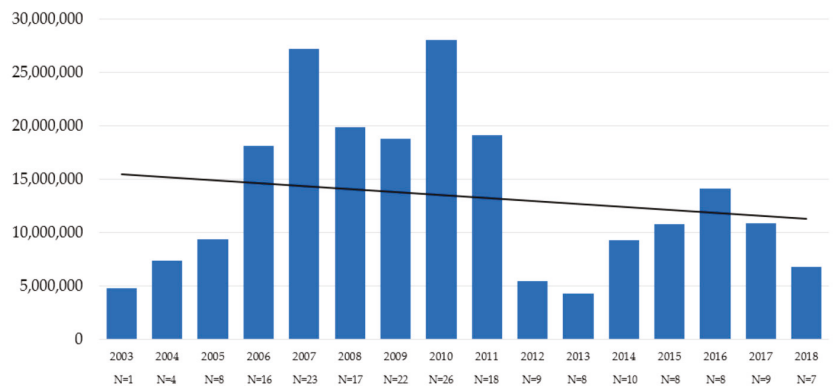
Figure 2. Total funding in USD of R/S projects by year.

4.4. Return on Investment

Analyses of funding and resultant publications for NIH-funded R series grants for which R/S was central (M = USD 1,352,306) received less funding compared to those that did not focus on R/S (M = USD 1,786,734), but these differences were not statistically significant ($p = 0.17$). Notably, grants in which R/S was central had fewer publications (M = 7.0) compared to non-R/S focused grants (M = 13.3). However, these differences were only marginally statistically significant ($p = 0.06$). Of the grants for which R/S was a central focus, almost two-thirds (63.8%) of their publications highlighted the role of R/S

and health, but the impact factor of those publications was modest (i.e., mean of 2.2) even though the average article citations were relatively strong (i.e., mean = 9.3).

5. Discussion

This review represents the first systematic inquiry into U.S. federal funding for research on R/S and health. Contrary to some widely held speculation, the federal government (especially the NIH) appears to have made a sizeable investment in research that includes a focus on R/S and health. This investment is spread across NIH institutes and other federal agencies. However, both the amount of money invested and the number of projects funded appear to be decreasing over time. This decline is occurring in the context of increasing budgets for federal research. For example, the NIH budget increased by approximately 30% in the years covered in the present review (Congressional Research Service 2021). In addition, R/S was a central component of less than half of the funded research reviewed here (41%); in the rest of the funded research, religion was one of many psychosocial variables studied.

The breadth and variety of these grants render characterizing prototypic studies of R/S and health difficult. Clearly, this research is not fully concentrated in specific groups. However, community-based research with healthy populations using an observational design is most common. Most of the studies specifying age focused on adults, but children and adolescents were also well-represented in these projects. The number of studies focused on racial/ethnic minorities is disproportionate to their representation in the U.S. population and could reflect either heightened efforts to address health disparities or a view that R/S is primarily or mostly relevant to minority groups (Holt et al. 2017). Regardless, given the increasing racial or ethnic diversity within the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010), this focus may represent an important opportunity for sustained attention within R/S and health research. In addition, R/S is often conceptualized as a predictor variable of multiple aspects of physical and emotional health reflecting the larger body of research identifying significant associations (VanderWeele 2017; Park and Slattery Forthcoming; Jim et al. 2015; Lucchetti et al. 2021).

Return on investment appears to favor studies in which R/S is not central, as those studies have more publications associated with their grants (although this finding was merely a trend in terms of statistical reliability). Publications from R/S-focused grants that highlighted the role of R/S, and health in their manuscripts are typically published in journals with a modest impact factor (i.e., <5). This finding, however, should be interpreted with caution. A journal's impact factor is a useful but flawed index of the relative importance of the research (Smith 2006). For example, journals with more issues and articles can have higher impact factors. Similarly, the journal impact factor is not necessarily an indication of the value of a scientific article. The citation of the individual articles is a more reliable guide of impact. For context, with 10 or more citations, an article is typically in the top 24% of the most cited work worldwide (Van Noorden et al. 2014). Since the R/S focused articles were cited an average of 9.3 times, this suggests a more meaningful impact of the R/S findings than that suggested by impact factor alone.

While these findings offer key insights into the nature of U.S. federal funding for research on R/S and health, limitations of our review must be noted. While the funding for R/S and health research appears substantial, it is difficult to contextualize these support levels without information on federal investments in other types of psychosocial factors. Our ability to identify specific study elements was limited in that we had access only to the abstracts of the grants rather than the full proposals (which are not publicly available); specific aspects of the study were often described poorly or not at all. The most commonly studied type of R/S was classified as "other", which could be an amalgam of different types of R/S in a single measure or a single item reflecting religious affiliation or could reflect the lack of specificity or clarity provided in abstracts. Finally, while Federal RePORTER is broad in coverage, it does not include foundation funding, which might fund a higher percentage of R/S and health research (e.g., John Templeton Foundation).

Despite these limitations, the present systematic review suggests that the U.S. federal government has invested substantially in research on R/S and health. However, the majority of this research is limited—less than half of it has considered R/S a central aspect of the study, and much of it has been observational. Furthermore, the trends in funding appear to be in decline in more recent years. Given the increasing evidence that at least some aspects of R/S are strongly associated with health (VanderWeele 2017; Park and Slattery Forthcoming) (Lucchetti et al. 2021), it might behoove federal agencies to encourage and support applications in which R/S is a central component. In addition, very few of the funded projects (27%) involved an intervention; this field of research may be maturing to the point where R/S interventions are appropriate (e.g., counteracting misinformation and vaccine hesitancy among some R/S groups). Researchers funded to study R/S and health should be encouraged to continue publishing high quality work and to target high-impact journals to better disseminate their findings.

Another consideration for future federal grant-seekers is to continue to broaden the scope of the types of R/S focused on in the research. For example, religiously relevant virtues such as gratitude, humility, and forgiveness have emerged as important and under-researched aspects of R/S that may influence health (Krause and Hayward 2015). Gratitude to God has been shown to related to myriad aspects of mental and physical health (e.g., Krause 2009; Upenieks and Ford-Robertson 2022), yet our review turned up no federally funded research on this topic. Finally, the concentration of R/S and health research in minority populations needs to be better understood. Efforts to promote health specifically in underserved groups can be fostered through community-based participatory research strategies (e.g., (Culhane-Pera et al. 2021)), and R/S may be an important aspect of these efforts. R/S is important to many people across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and research on its associations with health should be explored in order to fully maximize health and wellbeing for all.

References

Carlisle, Robert D., and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2013. The virtues: Gratitude and forgiveness. In *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality.(Vol. 1): Context, Theory, and Research*. Edited by Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline and James W. Jones. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 423–37. [CrossRef]

Congressional Research Service. 2021. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Funding: FY1996-FY2022. June 29. Available online: https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R43341.pdf (accessed on 9 September 2021).

Culhane-Pera, Kathleen A., Shannon L. Pergament, Maiyia Y. Kasouaher, Andrew M. Pattock, Naima Dhore, Cindy N. Kaigama, Marcela Alison, Michael Scandrett, Mai See Thao, and David J. Satin. 2021. Diverse community leaders' perspectives about quality primary healthcare and healthcare measure-ment: Qualitative community-based participatory research. *International Journal for Equity in Health* 20: 226. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Greenblum, Jake, and Ryan K. Hubbard. 2019. Responding to religious patients: Why physicians have no business doing theology. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 45: 705–10. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Holt, Cheryl L., David L. Roth, Jin Huang, Crystal L. Park, and Eddie M. Clark. 2017. Longitudinal effects of religious involvement on religious coping and health behaviors in a national sample of African Americans. *Social Science & Medicine* 187: 11–19. [CrossRef]

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. n.d. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. 2018 Edition. Available online: https://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php (accessed on 21 August 2021).

Jim, Heather S. L., James E. Pustejovsky, Crystal L. Park, Suzanne C. Danhauer, Allen C. Sherman, George Fitchett, Thomas V. Merluzzi, Alexis R. Munoz, Login George, Mallory A. Snyder, and et al. 2015. Religion, spirituality, and physical health in cancer patients: A meta-analysis. *Cancer* 121: 3760–68. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Krause, Neal. 2009. Religious involvement, gratitude, and change in depressive symptoms over time. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 19: 155–72. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Krause, Neal, and R. David Hayward. 2015. Humility, compassion, and gratitude to God: Assessing the relationships among key religious virtues. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7: 192–204. [CrossRef]

Levin, Jeff. 2005. Etioloty Recapitulates Ontology: Reflections on Restoring the Spiritual Dimension to Models of the Determinants of Health. *Subtle Energies & Energy Medicine Journal Archives* 12: 17–37.

Levin, Jeff. 2016a. "For They Knew Not What It Was": Rethinking the Tacit Narrative History of Religion and Health Research. *Journal of Religion and Health* 56: 28–46. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Levin, Jeff. 2016b. Partnerships between the faith-based and medical sectors: Implications for preventive medicine and public health. *Preventive Medicine Reports* 4: 344–50. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lucchetti, Giancarlo, Harold G. Koenig, and Alessandra Lamas Granero Lucchetti. 2021. Spirituality, religiousness, and mental health: A review of the current scientific evidence. *World Journal of Clinical Cases* 9: 7620–31. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Page, Matthew J., Joanne E. McKenzie, Patrick M. Bossuyt, Isabelle Boutron, Tammy C. Hoffmann, Cynthia D. Mulrow, Larissa Shamseer, Jennifer M. Tetzlaff, Elie A Akl, Sue E. Brennan, and et al. 2021. The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 372: n71. [CrossRef]

Park, Crystal Lou, and Jeanne Marie Slattery. Forthcoming. Religiousness and Spirituality in Health. In *APA Handbook of Health Psychology*. Edited by T. W. A. Smith Norman. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, in press.

Park, Crystal L., Kevin S. Masters, John M. Salsman, Amy B. Wachholtz, Andrea Clements, Elena Salmoirago-Blotcher, Kelly Trevino, and Danielle M. Wischenka. 2016. Advancing our understanding of religion and spirituality in the context of behavioral medicine. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 40: 39–51. [CrossRef]

Rutjens, Bastiaan T., and Jesse L. Preston. 2020. Science and religion: A rocky relationship shaped by shared psychological functions. In *The Science of Religion, Spirituality, and Existentialism*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 373–85. [CrossRef]

Salsman, John M., George Fitchett, Thomas V. Merluzzi, Allen C. Sherman, and Crystal L. Park. 2015. Religion, spirituality, and health outcomes in cancer: A case for a meta-analytic investigation. *Cancer* 121: 3754–59. [CrossRef]

Siddaway, Andy P., Alex M. Wood, and Larry V. Hedges. 2019. How to Do a Systematic Review: A Best Practice Guide for Conducting and Re-porting Narrative Reviews, Meta-Analyses, and Meta-Syntheses. *Annual Review of Psychology* 70: 747–70. [CrossRef]

Smith, Richard. 2006. Commentary: The power of the unrelenting impact factor—Is it a force for good or harm? *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35: 1129–30. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

U.S. Census Bureau. 2010. The Chance That Two People Chosen at Random Are of Different Race or Ethnicity Groups Has Increased since 2010. Available online: https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/2020-united-states-population-more-racially-ethnically-diverse-than-2010.html (accessed on 7 December 2021).

Upenieks, Laura, and Joanne Ford-Robertson. 2022. Give thanks in all circumstances? Gratitude toward God and health in later life after major life stressors. *Research on Aging* 44: 392–404. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Van Noorden, Richard, Brendan Maher, and Regina Nuzzo. 2014. The top 100 papers. *Nature* 514: 550–53. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

VanderWeele, Tyler J. 2017. Religion and Health: A Synthesis. In *Spirituality and Religion within the Culture of Medicine: From Evidence to Practice*. Edited by Michael Balboni and John Peteet. New York: Oxford Univ Press, pp. 357–402.

Review

Building on a Solid Foundation: Conceptual Mapping Informs Schemas for Relating to God

Lucas A. Keefer [1,*] and Adam K. Fetterman [2]

[1] School of Psychology, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406, USA
[2] Department of Psychology, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77004, USA
[*] Correspondence: lucas.keefer@usm.edu

Abstract: How do individuals manage to maintain strong emotional and personal relationships with God, despite the physical (and metaphysical) challenges posed by that task? Past studies show that individuals relate to God in characteristic ways based in part on *their* God concepts, the ways they internally represent the nature of God. The current manuscript summarizes research suggesting that these concepts arise in part through mapping processes involving metaphor and analogy. This review suggests these cognitive processes influence the content of God concepts that ultimately determine how individuals relate to God. Future research would benefit from considering the important role that basic cognitive mapping plays in far-reaching emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor; analogy; anthropomorphism; God concepts

---

If man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God.—(Feuerbach 1841), *The Essence of Christianity Chapter III*

1. Introduction

When individuals think about God or their relationship to God, they are faced with a uniquely daunting task. God is more abstract than directly sensible things in our environment to which we can easily refer. Additionally, God is understood as having features no other entity has, such as omnipresence and omniscience, whose definitions have long posed riddles to theology and philosophy. For some, God's fundamental ineffability means that human knowers are left without the epistemic or linguistic resources to capture or convey a satisfactory image of God (Coyle 2008).

Research in theology (e.g., McFague 1982) and the cognitive science of religion (e.g., Barrett 2011) has helped to shed light on the psychological processes people employ when engaging with the question of understanding their relationship with God. This research (reviewed below) suggests that people commonly make sense of God by relying on anthropomorphism, applying their personal and embodied knowledge of human psychology as a metaphoric lens for interpreting God. This work seamlessly integrates with a growing literature on the general use of conceptual metaphor and analogy in meaning-making. Individuals often gain a handle on complex or abstract concepts, like God, by systematically framing them with more concrete and familiar ideas.

This tendency to represent God metaphorically in terms of familiar human agency may also serve as an essential bridge for individuals to establish a personal relationship with God. Although psychologists of religion have established a number of important dimensions that characterize individuals' conceptions of their relationship toward God (reviewed below), this work has often neglected the underlying role of cognitive mapping processes by which individuals form schematic representations of that relationship.

At the outset, we will note that this review sets aside deeper metaphysical questions about the role of metaphor as a means of establishing true or accurate representations of God. However, others have certainly advanced the view that poetic discourse is necessary for our descriptive language to gesture toward a God that cannot be reduced to simple

description. As Rowan Williams puts it, "to think of language about God as 'metaphorical' is not to abandon truth claims nor to suggest that such language is the cosmetic elaboration of a simpler and more 'secular' literal truth. It is more like putting the question, 'What sort of truth can be told only by abandoning most of our norms of routine description?'" (Williams 2014, p. 6).

Our thesis, more narrowly, is that metaphor often allows individuals to schematize God and that one role of metaphor in this context is that it creates the kind of image of God to which we can meaningfully relate. Cognitive schemas are defined here as concepts or cognitive systems reflecting organized past knowledge that shape information processing. Accordingly, schemas influence all relationships, including in our view, the one people have with God, and a greater appreciation of conceptual metaphor offers new insight in this context.

2. God Is a . . .

Past research on the cognitive processes that individuals use to think about God and their relationship to God has generally focused on the role of *anthropomorphism*, the process of understanding God's mind in terms of human psychology. For instance, Barrett and Keil (1996) found that participants often used an anthropomorphic framing to interpret God's actions. By assuming that God has shared features of human psychology, such as preferences and emotions, people can make sense of God's actions by leveraging causes of behavior that are known to explain the unknown (see also Barrett et al. 2001). Follow-up investigations show that this tendency extends beyond simple turns of phrase into narratives that discursively represent the antecedents and consequences of God's actions with human characterization (Westh 2009). In other words, instead of being mere tropes, attributions of mental states to God are leveraged as rapid, cohesive accounts of the causes of God's behavior.

The process of using anthropomorphism begins even in childhood (Barrett et al. 2001; Barrett and Richert 2003; Richert et al. 2016). In one investigation, researchers (Shtulman 2008) found that both college students and 5-year-old children were more likely to attribute psychological properties (e.g., happy/sad) to God and Satan than non-psychological properties (e.g., young/old). In short, it seems that our natural tendency to mentalize in order to relate to others carries over into theological contexts, allowing theory of mind to form a foundation for representing and relating to God.

Although anthropomorphism may seem like a narrow and potentially rare process, contemporary tests of this idea demonstrate that a general tendency to mentalize (i.e., consider others' mental states) is a key predictor of belief in God. Across two studies and culturally diverse samples, White et al. (2021) found that a tendency to attribute others' behavior to mental states (in general) is a substantial predictor of both belief in God and belief in Karma, even after controlling for cultural differences between disparate groups (e.g., American and Singaporean participants). In other words, belief in God is associated with a general empathic tendency to consider others' thoughts and feelings; a tendency that often takes the specific form of attributing those mental states to God.

Anthropomorphism, however, is only one case of a broader psychological process of conceptual *mapping* that has been shown to influence language and behavior. Research on both analogy (e.g., Holyoak and Thagard 1995) and conceptual metaphor (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Landau et al. 2010) converge on the importance of conceptual mapping as individuals represent abstract concepts such as God using other, related concepts such as human psychology. For instance, in thinking about *life*, one can scaffold features of that idea onto more familiar aspects of a *journey* (e.g., the progression of time: physical distance: personal challenges: obstacles). Metaphorically comparing *life* to the familiar idea of a *journey* helps people to make meaning of various features of an otherwise ineffable concept.

This conceptual process occurs across many practically important contexts. For instance, when people are exposed to new acquaintances, how do they determine the best way to interact with them? Research on the social cognition of transference suggests that

novel others are analogically compared (via a mapping process) to schemas of familiar others to reduce uncertainty about how to interact with them (Chen and Andersen 1999). For example, if an individual's concept of their mother includes awareness that she is highly extroverted and assertive, they may adopt similar behavioral patterns toward a novel individual who is appraised as having similar traits (e.g., Andersen and Cole 1990; Andersen et al. 1995).

Because systematically mapping aspects of one concept onto another allows us to leverage past knowledge to navigate new situations, research suggests that this process has important implications for cognition. For instance, theorists have proposed that metaphor in language ultimately plays a role in allowing individuals to derive meaning from uncertain or abstract ideas (e.g., Keefer et al. 2011; Baldwin et al. 2016). The fact that metaphor enhances understanding directly influences social behavior: two daily diary studies demonstrated that on days in which individuals reported more metaphorical thinking, they also reported greater daily empathy and perspective taking (Fetterman et al. 2021a). Over time, this process of using metaphor to make meaning can help shed light on stable individual differences as individuals tend to rely on certain frames of reference to understand themselves and the world (Fetterman and Robinson 2013; Robinson and Fetterman 2014).

In light of research on conceptual mapping and meaning making, it would perhaps be no surprise that individuals employ anthropomorphism and other mappings to think of God. To the extent that individuals can map complex aspects of God and/or God's behavior onto an idealized human agent, they can effectively use a familiar, known construct to more confidently understand what God is like and why God acts in certain ways.

This brings us to the central question at the heart of this paper: *Does this mapping process generally play a role when it comes to understanding God?* There is good reason to think so; textual analysis of the Bible (e.g., DesCamp and Sweetser 2005; Gomola 2010) and lay religious experiences (Bohler 2008) highlight the important role that metaphor plays in allowing individuals to talk about their relationship to God. Biblical examples abound, for example Psalm 100:3 "Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." The specific metaphor that God is a shepherd, beyond anthropomorphizing God with familiar features of human psychology, also implies benevolence and protection (as shepherds tend to their flocks). In fact, religious studies scholars have urged greater attention to conceptual metaphor (Slingerland 2004), nevertheless, this call seems relatively unanswered.

Initial work in this area seems to indicate that metaphors for God are diverse, common, and psychologically meaningful. One recent analysis (Fetterman et al. 2021b) collected naturally occurring metaphor use data from a large sample ($N = 2923$) to determine which metaphors predominate lay conceptions of God. They found that God was commonly metaphorized as a kind of *power*, a *human agent*, and as *male* (e.g., through the use of he/him pronouns). Additionally, God was often metaphorized as a specific concrete entity or object, a conceptual mapping that has extensive Biblical precedent (e.g., God is a wall; Zecharaiah 2:5).

Using metaphors to conceptualize God is more than a mere flourish in discourse; rather it seems to have diverse psychological consequences. One example is work by Persich et al. (2018) which explored how the "God is light" metaphor (e.g., 1 John 1:5) might subtly influence cognition within and outside of the religious context. They found that individuals who were situationally cued to think of God subsequently rated stimuli as physically brighter and, furthermore, that social targets wearing lighter (vs. darker) clothing were assumed be more religious. Additionally, a series of studies indicate that metaphoric associations with God bias even subtle tasks: individuals are faster to process God-related concepts when they are presented in metaphorically consistent ways (Meier and Fetterman 2020). Specifically, when tasked with categorizing whether words were related to God, individuals performed faster when those concepts were presented in brighter font (God is light), at the top of the screen (God is up), or when God concepts were implicitly associated with words describing human agents (e.g., "person"; God is a human agent).

Finally, there is even some initial evidence that metaphorically representing God may play a valuable role in addressing existential concerns. In a series of studies, (Keefer et al. 2021) it was found that individuals who tended to think of God with a greater diversity of metaphors also reported substantially diminished death anxiety. Additionally, when Christian individuals were experimentally cued with a reminder about their own death (vs. a control group), they showed greater favorability toward passages from the Bible that rely on poetic/metaphoric imagery. Because metaphor allows individuals to understand an otherwise challenging concept (God), metaphoric imagery may be a particularly valuable means of securing a sense of God's existence and nature.

In summary, research on the cognitive science of religion has made a strong case for the role of conceptual mapping in how individuals understand God. Even from a young age, individuals make use of anthropomorphism to understand the mind of God and this reflects a general propensity to make sense of what God is like by referring to familiar, well-known ideas (e.g., shepherd, king, father). Next, we turn to the specific question of what role these mapping-rich God schemas play in religious thought and behavior.

3. God Concepts and Religious Behavior

Individuals do not always agree on the nature of God. History is replete with examples of conflicts, military or otherwise that stem from fundamental divides about what God is like. In light of this historical and anthropological significance, psychologists have long taken an interest in how individuals vary in their understanding of what God is like (Davis et al. 2013; Sharp et al. 2021)

Psychological research consistently demonstrates that conceptions of God vary substantially across individuals and demographic groups. For instance, one naturalistic study of religious children in a German elementary school tasked children with using a variety of raw materials to create a representation of how they understand God (Kaiser and Riegel 2020). The study found that boys tended to conceptualize God in anthropomorphic terms and were more likely than girls to employ manufactured objects (e.g., a watch) to make sense of God. Conversely, girls were more likely to represent God using natural objects (e.g., flowers, ferns) than boys. Other studies using self-generated narratives have indicated that among undergraduate samples, men (vs. women) are more likely to conceptualize God as providing a mission and purpose, whereas women tended to focus on God as a source of support and love (Foster and Babcock 2001).

Denominational differences in God concepts are also substantial. One early study found that individuals in the evangelical tradition were significantly more likely than either Methodist or Catholic individuals to conceptualize God as vindictive, stern, and a supreme ruler (Noffke and McFadden 2001). Additionally, experimental studies using images to subtly increase individuals' sense of God's authoritarianism (an angry God picture) or benevolence (a dove) demonstrated effects that were specific to non-Catholic participants (Johnson et al. 2013). However, more recent investigations using a higher order profile of God trait attributions found no baseline denominational differences in how members of various religious affiliations tend to conceptualize God ($p = 0.101$; Johnson et al. 2019).

Importantly, these differences in how individuals conceptualize God have numerous established effects on thought and behavior. For example, one investigation found that individuals who tend to conceptualize God as benevolent and caring were both more likely to have volunteered in the past and to express willingness to volunteer again (Johnson et al. 2013). The same project also found that individuals with more punitive and authoritarian concepts of God reported more willingness to respond aggressively, and less willingness to forgive, in vignette tasks.

Related to our focus on relationships, it is also worth noting that God concepts form a bedrock for individuals' personal relationships with God. In one recent effort, Sharp and Johnson (2020) found that people who conceptualized God as closer to them reported increased levels of religiosity, fundamentalism, and traditional religious practice as well as greater awareness of God. Notably, those individuals who felt closer to God also were more

likely to agree with an item assessing whether they conceptualize God in anthropomorphic terms, suggesting that this metaphor may play an important role in establishing a sense of intimacy.

We are now better positioned to address the intersection of these two literatures. On the one hand, people rely on conceptual mappings and metaphors to make sense of what God is like. Furthermore, God concepts that may emerge from this process of conceptual mapping demonstrate considerable variability and potential for psychological importance. Next, we turn to the specific question of how God concepts may influence individuals' *relationships* with God to further understand the potential role of conceptual mapping in this context.

4. Concepts and the Structure of Relationships with God

Research on the psychology of interpersonal relationships has leveraged insights on social cognition to explore how concepts shape relationship behavior. There is no shortage of notable examples here: people systematically vary in how they understand the nature of love (Hendrick and Hendrick 1986), their concepts of an ideal partner (against which current partners are evaluated; Eastwick et al. 2011), and their assumptions about the behavioral norms within a relationship (Clark and Mills 2012; Mills and Clark 2013).

Early models of cognition in relationships (e.g., Baldwin 1992, 1995) were premised on the idea that individuals evaluate themselves, their partners, and the status of their relationships based on established concepts or schemas about relationships. Knowing how one should behave toward a partner or interpret a partner's actions requires an appraisal based on previously acquired knowledge about relationship behavior.

Do people draw on similar schematic knowledge about human relationships to navigate their relationship with God? Some work has made an effort to translate constructs from the interpersonal cognition literature into a religious context with some success. Critically, this translation highlights the fact that relationships with God are themselves grounded on precisely the same schematic representations that we noted above as outcomes of conceptual mapping. Below we provide illustrative examples that bring together the roles of conceptual mapping, schematic knowledge, and personal relationships with God.

4.1. Attachment to God

One particular focus has been the role of concepts in attachment theory. Originally formalized as an extension of earlier psychoanalytic accounts, attachment theory proposes that individuals are innately motivated to seek support and reassurance from close others, particularly when confronted with threats to personal well-being (Bowlby 1969).

Experiences seeking support accumulate into established cognitive expectancies about relationships, termed in the theory as a working model or schema (Mikulincer and Shaver 2013). For instance, an individual who consistently receives support from close others establishes a schematic understanding of close others as reliable, trustworthy, and benevolent, a pattern more commonly labelled a *secure attachment style*. In contrast, individuals who experience chronic neglect develop schemas of relationship partners that are more pessimistic, resulting in sustained efforts to minimize intimacy and trust (*attachment avoidance*). Finally, more unpredictable support provision by close others is associated with a more *anxious attachment style*, a persistent insecurity about whether close others will be there for the individual, coupled with chronic fears of abandonment. Although typological in its initial formulations (e.g., Ainsworth et al. 1978), essentially all attachment researchers today identify attachment style along two dimensions: one's degree of anxiety and one's degree of avoidance with security reflecting low levels of each (Fraley et al. 2011).

Beyond decades of research developing and validating this approach to understanding the role of schematic knowledge in relationship behavior, attachment theory has been profitably applied to the religious context as well. Early studies established that individuals report the same characteristic patterns of attachment style in their relationships with God (e.g., Beck and McDonald 2004; Rowatt and Kirkpatrick 2002). Specifically, individuals'

relationships with God are also characterized by some degree of both attachment avoidance (resistance to trust/intimacy, discomfort with support-seeking) and attachment anxiety (fear of abandonment, jealousy at others who seem to receive more of God's love) with a more secure attachment style toward God reflecting low levels of both dimensions.

These early studies and those that followed (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2008) demonstrated strong, but selective, overlap between individuals' attachment schemas toward God compared with human relationships. It is well established that individuals who feel a strong sense of attachment anxiety in interpersonal relationships often demonstrate the same jealous and insecure patterns in their relationship with God, while evidence that attachment avoidance is comparable across relationships has been mixed (e.g., Hall et al. 2009). In short, chronic fears of abandonment and neglect based on schematic expectations that others are unpredictable seem to spillover from human to divine relationships.

This overlap is more than mere coincidence: evidence suggests that it may directly reflect the operation of conceptual mappings identified above. Freud (1927) initially proposed that God represents a unique form of transference: the creation of an idealized image of a father figure that operates as a metaphor for resolving paternal concerns. Early analysis found that individuals across cultures tend to associate God with more paternal (e.g., strength, authority) than maternal (e.g., warmth, patience) schematic knowledge (Vergote et al. 1969). More recent studies have reproduced the finding that paternal attachment is more strongly associated with attachment style toward God than maternal attachment (Limke and Mayfield 2011). Other studies have found that overlap between God attachment and paternal attachment is stronger for avoidance (vs. anxiety), while attachment anxiety toward God is more closely related to maternal schemas than avoidance (McDonald et al. 2005).

Given that individuals' relationships with God are conceptualized after initial relationships with parents, these results seem to speak to an important role for metaphor and analogy in how individuals make sense of their relationship with God. Although reality is considerably more complex than Freud's initial idea, data suggest that individuals often apply their schematic knowledge of human relationships as a framework for structuring their relationship with God through a process of conceptual mapping that is carried by metaphor and analogy (e.g., God is a father). For example, a recent set of studies found that those who endorse a fatherly metaphor for God tend to score higher for following religious rules, belief in an intervening God, and attachment to God (Ravey et al. 2022).

However, this is not to say that attachment to God is reducible to mere interpersonal attachment. Investigations have shown that more secure attachment to God uniquely contributes to well-being (e.g., Keefer and Brown 2018) and optimism (Sim and Loh 2003) even after controlling for individuals' expectations about interpersonal relationships. Even if schematic knowledge, created in part through conceptual mapping, plays a key role in establishing an attachment style toward God, studies like these demonstrate that the resulting schematic knowledge of God is a unique (albeit scaffolded) concept.

4.2. Gratitude to God

Although relatively sparse, initial investigations suggest that a sense of gratitude to God affords some psychological benefits to the individual. The impetus behind this work comes from decades of research demonstrating that gratitude toward (human) others is associated with well-being and that this relationship seems to be bidirectional (e.g., Emmons and Mishra 2011; Watkins 2004). Evidence suggests that the causal relationship between the two, however, is unidirectional with gratitude causing well-being but not the reverse (Wood et al. 2010). For example, many studies have shown that gratitude-based interventions (e.g., gratitude journaling) directly increase subsequent well-being (Emmons and Stern 2013).

In a similar vein, initial work demonstrates that gratitude to God is associated with well-being, at least under some conditions. In one initial project looking at older adults, Krause (2006) found that gratitude to God had no direct association with well-being after controlling for demographic factors (e.g., age, gender). However, there was a substantial

interaction between gratitude to God and neighborhood quality (as scored by the research team): specifically, individuals reported greater stress in poorer quality neighborhoods (e.g., with higher rates of poverty), but this association between environment and stress was eliminated at high levels of gratitude to God.

Further studies have extended and supported this initial work. For instance, another project found that individuals with higher gratitude toward God reported greater well-being and that this effect was due in part to optimism about the future (Krause et al. 2015). Put simply, gratitude to God seems to be beneficial in part because gratefulness for past benefits provides a sense of hope for the future. Additionally, research shows that gratitude interventions such as those mentioned above yield even greater benefits for emotional well-being when they are framed in the context of prayer, for example, by praying instead of merely journaling gratitude (Schnitker and Richardson 2019). Interestingly, these effects were moderated by effort such that those who found that the task required more effort reported the most substantial improvements in well-being.

Schemas directly shape gratitude to God due to the complex schematic structure of gratitude itself. Initial investigations into the prototype structure of gratitude (Lambert et al. 2009) reveal that gratitude has diverse forms, sometimes directed toward a specific benefit granted by a particular benefactor (e.g., God or another person) and sometimes diffuse or targetless (generalized gratitude). However, in all cases, gratitude requires that there be a focal *target* (even a nebulous one) who has offered *something* that can be appraised as a *benefit* (for a more detailed analysis, see Manela 2020). Only one study to our knowledge has attempted a similar analysis of the thematic structure of gratitude to God (Krause et al. 2012), but this project focused on descriptive features of gratitude to God discourse and did not attempt to demonstrate what schematic content determines gratitude to God.

However, one study that did consider the role of God images directly supports the idea that they are a foundation for gratitude to God. Specifically, Krause et al. (2015) found that gratitude to God was directly predicted by benevolent God perceptions. As noted above, this fits our general understanding of interpersonal gratitude: all else being equal, we feel grateful toward those who we see as acting benevolently or generously toward us (e.g., providing benefits with no expectation of reciprocity or payment).

However, there is a question about how people establish this schema of God's benevolence. Textual evidence indicates that many metaphorical models of God are predicated on a sense of benevolence (e.g., McFague 1982). For instance, in addition to God's representation as a father or parental figure, God is also commonly represented biblically as a benevolent king or ruler, counselor, teacher, shepherd, savior or other such figure (DesCamp and Sweetser 2005).

In short, it seems that schematic knowledge of God's benevolence may be grounded in conceptual mappings that foster a sense of gratitude to God. Individuals who habitually think of God with metaphors and analogies that imply benevolence (e.g., as a father) may have more benevolent images of God, resulting in greater gratitude. Conversely, those who tend to adopt different ways of conceptualizing God (e.g., as a judge or architect) may lack the same implied benevolence and thus show lower resulting gratitude to God.

The most stringent test of a causal role for metaphor here is an experimental study and, interestingly, initial experimental work demonstrates that metaphoric imagery implying benevolence can increase gratitude to God under specific conditions. In a series of recent experiments (Keefer et al. 2022), it was found that metaphorically describing God as a loving father or supportive manager enhanced a sense of gratitude to God (compared with subjects who read a non-metaphoric control passage), but primarily among those high in dispositional metaphor usage (Fetterman et al. 2016) and those low in trait agreeableness. Although this latter finding is perhaps surprising, individuals high in trait agreeableness reported universally high levels of gratefulness to God, while those lower in agreeableness had more potential to be swayed by the provided mapping.

Because interpersonal gratitude entails an appraisal of an agent as benevolently acting for the benefit of the self, there are questions of boundary conditions that merit further

consideration here. For example, conceptions of God that emphasize non-human or non-agentic traits (Johnson et al. 2019) may reduce gratitude because gratitude implies agency. That is, it may be that individuals must believe that God is acting, choosing or otherwise expressing some *intent* to feel a sense of gratitude, which contrasts sharply with certain images of God (e.g., God as a non-human object). Conversely, it may be that gratitude to God is more similar to an objectless emotion (e.g., Gosling 1965), subject to different assumptions than interpersonal gratitude. In that case, the role of mapping is likely considerably more complex than we have described in this initial discussion.

Summing up, when individuals evaluate God's actions toward them and feel a resulting sense of gratitude, this highly evaluative process can often be shaped by the concepts that inform that evaluation. Metaphors and analogies that enhance perceptions of God as a benevolent agent also imply that the blessings one receives from God are selfless enough to merit a feeling of gratitude. Conversely, one might imagine that mappings implying God's ineffability or selfishness might have the net effect of diminishing gratitude by reframing schematic knowledge of God in ways that undercut gratitude.

5. Future Directions

Thus far, we have claimed that conceptual mappings play an important role in shaping God schemas that are foundational for individuals' relationship with God. Taken together, this insight points to the need for future investigation that can bridge the gaps between representational processes and the emotional and behavioral consequences of those cognitive processes for everyday life. Below we highlight two important next steps in developing research on the cognitive roots of the individual's relationship with God.

5.1. Embodiment

First, it is worth noting that our position is closely related to other work that has considered the role of embodiment in religion (e.g., Soliman et al. 2015). Much has been written about the subtle differences between theories of embodiment and conceptual metaphor (e.g., Gibbs 2009), but there are essential differences to note here. First, conceptual mapping may include embodied knowledge, but does not essentially require it. For instance, an individual who understands God using motor simulations of their own behavior could leverage embodiment to understand God by employing a conceptual mapping (God does things like me). However, not all metaphors for God are or must be embodied: for instance, representing God as a shepherd does not require any direct physical experience of herding sheep. In short, embodiment may serve as a valuable contribution for conceptual metaphors and analogies used to understand God, but mapping remains an essential cognitive step in leveraging that knowledge to conceptualize God.

Looking ahead, future research in the psychology of religion could better attend to the role of both embodied cognition and conceptual metaphor in allowing individuals to establish a relationship with God. For example, many researchers have shown that embodied affective experiences are an indispensable component of individuals' relationships with God (e.g., Van Capellen et al. 2021, 2016). However, the question remains whether conceptual metaphor and analogy play a role in eliciting (or suppressing) those affective reactions. As noted above, individuals tend to show greater similarity in their relationship schemas between God and their human father. Accordingly, those with more favorable father concepts may be better positioned to form schematic representations of God capable of eliciting positive affect.

5.2. Variation in Mapping

As noted above, there is considerable variability in how individuals understand what God is like and how they relate to God. Building on past conceptual metaphor research (e.g., Persich et al. 2018), we contend that greater attention to individuals' preferred metaphors and analogies for representing God may help to explain other substantial individual differences in religious thought and behavior beyond God attachment and gratitude to

God. Not only is there considerable variation in anthropomorphic conceptions of God, but also wide variation in the use of non-anthropomorphic imagery (e.g., God is a wall, God is a rock).

To the extent that religious belief has far-reaching implications for important daily behavior, understanding the cognitive basis for individual differences could afford new insights in explaining even non-religious behavior. For instance, it is well-established that religious belief shapes individuals' views on environmental policy, particularly the view that God expects stewardship over the world (Preston and Baimel 2021). Could awareness of the mappings people use to relate to God inform behavior in this context? Presumably those who consider God to have more punitive or authoritarian views (e.g., God is a king) may feel greater pressure to protect and preserve God's creation. In other words, stewardship beliefs and other diverse outcomes may similarly be traceable to individuals' relationship with God and, ultimately, the cognitive mappings that undergird that relationship.

Gratitude to God may also play a unique and important role in this context. Individuals who feel a sense of indebtedness toward God or who otherwise conceive of Him in ways that are highly benevolent might be inclined to prioritize conceptions of God that are consistent with those judgments (e.g., God is a shepherd) while discounting those that are incompatible with their previous judgment (e.g., God is a judge). In other words, given the overwhelming evidence that individuals are motivated to maintain consistency in their beliefs (e.g., Nickerson 1998), it is likely that stable beliefs and feelings about God could strongly influence which visions of God they find accurate or helpful in their subsequent thinking.

Broadening the scope, this perspective could also afford new ways of understanding differences in God schemas across denominations, cultures, and religions. Discursive analyses of the metaphors and analogies common to religious groups could help to explain stable group-based differences in religious cognition (for an illustrative example, see Ashworth 1989). To the extent that certain images of God in sermons, artworks, and other cultural products become widespread, they may encourage collective patterns of thinking about and relating to God(s).

6. Conclusions

The current manuscript ties together literatures in the psychology of religion that have tended to exist in isolation. Specifically, we discussed (1) the idea that individuals rely on conceptual mappings such as anthropomorphism and other metaphors to make sense of God and explored (2) how this mapping process then informs variation in God images or concepts, the schematic representations people form to understand what God is like. Finally, we turn to the practical question of (3) how God concepts inform the ways in which individuals relate to God.

As with interpersonal relationships, individuals' sense of their relationship to God is based in expectations and norms at a conceptual level. Attachment style offers a prototypical analysis of this grounding: individuals build up cognitive expectancies about the supportiveness, benevolence, and reliability of others that create a foundation for future relationship behavior.

However, unlike relational schemas in interpersonal contexts that are constantly grounded in verifiable behavior, God schemas face numerous challenges based on the epistemic barriers facing a human knower. A partner's generosity or support can be direct, physical, and socially validated. Conversely, God's actions are inherently mysterious and not always obvious. Ideas of God are, therefore, commonly informed by the systematic use of anthropomorphic and other metaphors that allow them to gain a cognitive foothold to make sense of God and, ultimately, the world. If people use relational metaphors to understand God, it would seem easy, validating, and comforting to think of God as a benevolent person who is meant to protect and love unconditionally: a parent.

Because God schemas are based in metaphoric imagery and play a critical role in personal relationships with God, these connections suggest vital and important roles of metaphoric thought in every religious practice. As noted above, work is just beginning to consider the possibility that individuals' everyday metaphoric thought about God might have substantial effects on religious thought and behavior (e.g., Persich et al. 2018). As this work develops, it has the potential to explore the underlying cognitive processes that give rise to beneficial experiences such as a feeling of gratitude to God.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: L.A.K.; Writing-original draft: L.A.K.; writing-review and edition: L.A.K. and A.K.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Ainsworth, Mary D. Salter, Mary C. Blehar, Everett Waters, and Sally Wall. 1978. *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Andersen, Susan M., and Steve W. Cole. 1990. "Do I know you?": The role of significant others in general social perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59: 384–99. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Andersen, Susan M., Noah S. Glassman, Serena Chen, and Steve W. Cole. 1995. Transference in social perception: The role of chronic accessibility in significant-other representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69: 41–57. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Ashworth, William. 1989. Light of reason, light of nature. catholic and protestant metaphors of scientific knowledge. *Science in Context* 3: 89–107. [CrossRef]

Baldwin, Mark W. 1992. Relational schemas and the processing of social information. *Psychological Bulletin* 112: 461–84. [CrossRef]

Baldwin, Mark W. 1995. Relational schemas and cognition in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 12: 547–52. [CrossRef]

Baldwin, Matthew, Mark J. Landau, and Trevor J. Swanson. 2016. Metaphors can give life meaning. *Self & Identity* 17: 163–93.

Barrett, Justin L. 2011. Cognitive science of religion: Looking back, looking forward. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50: 229–39. [CrossRef]

Barrett, Justin L., and Frank C. Keil. 1996. Conceptualizing a nonnatural entity: Anthropomorphism in God concepts. *Cognitive Psychology* 31: 219–47. [CrossRef]

Barrett, Justin L., and Rebekah A. Richert. 2003. Anthropomorphism or preparedness? Exploring children's God concepts. *Review of Religious Research* 44: 300–12. [CrossRef]

Barrett, Justin L., Rebekah A. Richert, and Amanda Driesenga. 2001. God's beliefs versus mother's: The development of nonhuman agent concepts. *Child Development* 72: 50–65. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Beck, Richard, and Angie McDonald. 2004. Attachment to God: The attachment to God inventory, tests of working model correspondence, and an exploration of faith group differences. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32: 92–103. [CrossRef]

Bohler, Carolyn Jane. 2008. *God the What?: What Our Metaphors for God Reveal about Our Beliefs in God*. Woodstock: SkyLight Paths Publishing.

Bowlby, John. 1969. *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

Chen, Serena, and Susan M. Andersen. 1999. Relationships from the past in the present: Significant-other representations and transference in interpersonal life. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Edited by M. P. Zanna. Cambridge: Academic Press, vol. 31, pp. 123–90.

Clark, Margaret S., and Judson R. Mills. 2012. A theory of communal (and exchange) relationships. In *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*. Edited by P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski and E. T. Higgins. Southern Oaks: Sage Publications Ltd., pp. 232–50.

Coyle, Adrian. 2008. Qualitative methods and the 'the (partly) ineffable' in psychological research on religion and spirituality. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 5: 56–67. [CrossRef]

Davis, Edward B., Glendon L. Moriartiy, and Joseph C. Mauch. 2013. God images and God concepts: Definitions, development, and dynamics. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5: 51–60. [CrossRef]

DesCamp, Mary T., and Eve E. Sweetser. 2005. Metaphors for God: Why and how do our choices matter for humans? The application of contemporary cognitive linguistics research to the debate on God and metaphor. *Pastoral Psychology* 53: 207–38. [CrossRef]

Eastwick, Paul W., Eli J. Finkel, and Alice H. Eagly. 2011. When and why do ideal partner preferences affect the process of initiating and maintaining romantic relationships? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101: 1012–32. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Emmons, Robert A., and Anjali Mishra. 2011. Why gratitude enhances well-being: What we know, what we need to know. In *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward*. Edited by K. M. Sheldon, T. B. Kashdan and M. F. Steger. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 248–62.

Emmons, Robert A., and Robin Stern. 2013. Gratitude as a psychotherapeutic intervention. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 69: 846–55. [CrossRef]

Fetterman, Adam K., Jessica L. Bair, Werth Marc, Landkammer Florian, and Michael D. Robinson. 2016. The scope and consequences of metaphoric thinking: Using individual differences in metaphor usage to understand how metaphor functions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110: 458–476. [CrossRef]

Fetterman, Adam K., Nicholas D. Evans, and Jonathan J. Covarrubias. 2021a. On the interpersonal function of metaphor use: Daily metaphor use fluctuates with empathy and perspective taking. *Social Psychology* 52: 23–35. [CrossRef]

Fetterman, Adam K., Nicholas D. Evans, Julie J. Exline, and Brian P. Meier. 2021b. What shall we call God? An exploration of metaphors coded from descriptions of God from a large U.S. undergraduate sample. *PLoS ONE* 16: e0254626. [CrossRef]

Fetterman, Adam K., and Michael D. Robinson. 2013. Do you use your head or follow your heart? Self-location predicts personality, emotion, decision making, and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 105: 316–334. [CrossRef]

Feuerbach, Ludwig. 1841. *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by Z. Hanfi. Available online: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/essence/index.htm (accessed on 15 July 2022).

Foster, Rachel A., and Renée L. Babcock. 2001. God as a man versus God as a woman: Perceiving God as a function of the gender of God and the gender of the participant. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2: 93–104. [CrossRef]

Fraley, Chris R., Marie E. Hefferman, Amanda M. Vicary, and Claude C. Brumbaugh. 2011. The experiences in close relationships-relationship structures questionnaire: A method for assessing attachment orientations across relationships. *Psychological Assessment* 23: 615–25. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Freud, Sigmund. 1927. *The Future of an Illusion*. Translated by W. D. Robinson-Scott. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Gibbs, Raymond W. 2009. Why do some people dislike conceptual metaphor theory? *Cognitive Semiotics* 5: 14–36. [CrossRef]

Gomola, Aleksander. 2010. From God is a Father to God is a Friend. Conceptual Integration in Metaphors for God in Christian Discourse. In *Cognitive Linguistics in Action*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 387–408.

Gosling, Justin C. 1965. Emotion and object. *The Philosophical Review* 74: 486–503. [CrossRef]

Granqvist, Pehr, and Lee A. Kirkpatrick. 2008. Attachment and religious representations and behavior. In *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 2nd ed. Edited by J. Cassady and P. R. Shaver. New York: Guilford, pp. 906–33.

Hall, Todd. W., Annie Fujikawa, Sarah R. Halcrow, Peter C. Hill, and Harold Delaney. 2009. Attachment to God and implicit spirituality: Clarifying correspondence and compensation models. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37: 227–42. [CrossRef]

Hendrick, Clyde, and Susan Hendrick. 1986. A theory and method of love. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50: 392–402. [CrossRef]

Holyoak, Keith J., and Paul Thagard. 1995. *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Johnson, Kathryn A., Morris A. Okun, Adam B. Cohen, Carissa A. Sharp, and Joshua N. Hook. 2019. Development and validation of the five-factor LAMBI measure of God representations. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 11: 339–49. [CrossRef]

Johnson, Kathryn A., Yexin J. Li, Adam B. Cohen, and Morris A. Okun. 2013. Friends in high places: The influence of authoritarian and benevolent God-concepts on social attitudes and behaviors. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5: 15–22. [CrossRef]

Kaiser, Kathrin, and Ulrich Riegel. 2020. Differences in children's concepts of God. A replication study based on creative tasks with different materials. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 25: 187–96. [CrossRef]

Keefer, Lucas A., and Faith L. Brown. 2018. Attachment to God uniquely predicts variation in well-being outcomes. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 40: 225–257. [CrossRef]

Keefer, Lcuas A., Faith Brown, and Thomas G. Rials. 2021. An initial investigation of the role of death concerns in evaluations of metaphoric language about God. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 43: 135–160. [CrossRef]

Keefer, Lucas A., Faith Brown, and C. Dowell. 2022. Metaphors subtly influence feelings of gratitude to God. *Manuscript in preparation*.

Keefer, Lucas A., Mark J. Landau, Daniel Sullivan, and Zachary K. Rothschild. 2011. Exploring metaphor's epistemic function: Uncertainty moderates metaphor-consistent priming effects on social perceptions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 47: 657–660. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal. 2006. Gratitude toward God, stress, and health in late life. *Research on Aging* 28: 163–83. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Lindsey A. Evans, Gregory Powers, and Hayward R. David. 2012. Feeling grateful to God: A qualitative inquiry. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 7: 119–30. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, and Gail Ironson. 2015. Benevolent images of God, gratitude, and physical health status. *Journal of Religion and Health* 54: 1503–19. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lambert, Nathaniel M., Steven M. Graham, and Frank D. Fincham. 2009. A prototype analysis of gratitude: Varieties of gratitude experiences. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35: 1193–207. [CrossRef]

Landau, Mark J., Brian P. Meier, and Lucas A. Keefer. 2010. A Metaphor-Enriched Social Cognition. *Psychological Bulletin* 136: 1045. [CrossRef]

Limke, Alicia, and Patrick B. Mayfield. 2011. Attachment to God: Differentiating the contributuons of fathers and mothers using the experiences in parental relationships scale. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39: 122–29. [CrossRef]

Manela, Tony. 2020. Does gratitude to R for ϕ-ing imply gratitude that R ϕ-ed? *Philosophical Studies* 177: 3245–62. [CrossRef]

McDonald, Angie, Richard Beck, Steve Allison, and Larry Norworthy. 2005. Attachment to God and parents: Testing the correspondence vs. Compensation hypothesis. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24: 21–28.

McFague, Sallie. 1982. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Meier, Brain P., and Adam K. Fetterman. 2020. Metaphors for god: God is high, bright, and human in implicit tasks. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Advance online publication.

Mikulincer, Mario, and Phillip Shaver. 2013. *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mills, Judson, and Margret S. Clark. 2013. Communal and exchange relationships: Controversies and research. In *Theoretical Frameworks for Personal Relationships*. Edited by R. Erber and R. Gilmour. New York: Psychology Press, pp. 41–54.

Nickerson, Raymond S. 1998. Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises. *Review of General Psychology* 2: 175–220. [CrossRef]

Noffke, Jacqueline L., and Susan H. McFadden. 2001. Denominational and age comparisons of God concepts. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40: 747–56. [CrossRef]

Persich, Michelle R., Becker Steinemann, Adam K. Fetterman, and Micheal D. Robinson. 2018. Drawn to the light: Predicting religiosity using a "God is light" metaphor. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13: 390. [CrossRef]

Preston, Jesse L., and Adam Baimel. 2021. Towards a psychology of religion and the environment. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40: 145–49. [CrossRef]

Ravey, E., Nicholas D. Evans, Brian P. Meier, and Adam K. Fetterman. 2022. God is my father: Endorsing fatherly metaphors for God is associated with individuals' relationships with God. *Manuscript in Preparation*.

Richert, Rebekah A., Nicholas J. Shaman, Anondah R. Saide, and Kirsten A. Lesage. 2016. Folding your hands helps God hear you: Prayer and anthropomorphism in parents and children. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 27: 140–57. [CrossRef]

Robinson, Micheal D., and Adam K. Fetterman. 2014. Toward a metaphor-enriched personality psychology. In *The Power of Metaphor: Examining Its Influence on Social Life*. Edited by Mark J. Landau, Michael D. Robinson and Brain P. Meie. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 133–152.

Rowatt, Wade C., and Lee A. Kirkpatrick. 2002. Two dimensions of attachment to God and their relation to affect, religiosity, and personality constructs. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41: 637–51. [CrossRef]

Schnitker, Sarah A., and Kelsy L. Richardson. 2019. Framing gratitude journaling as prayer amplifies its hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, but not health, benefits. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 14: 427–39. [CrossRef]

Sharp, Carissa A., and Kathryn A. Johnson. 2020. Assessing spirituality on two dimensions: Closeness to God and focal orientation. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 30: 48–67. [CrossRef]

Sharp, Carissa A., Edward B. Davis, George Karisha, Andrew D. Cuthbert, Bonnie P. Zahl, Don E. Davis, Joshua N. Hook, and Jamie D. Aten. 2021. Measures of God representations: Theoretical framework and critical review. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13: 340–57. [CrossRef]

Shtulman, Andrew. 2008. Variation in the anthropomorphization of supernatural beings and its implications for cognitive theories of religion. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 34: 1123–38. [CrossRef]

Sim, Tick N., and Bernice S. M. Loh. 2003. Attachment to God: Measurement and dynamics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 20: 373–89. [CrossRef]

Slingerland, Edward. 2004. Conceptual metaphor theory as methodology for comparative religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72: 1–31. [CrossRef]

Soliman, Tamer M., Kathryn A. Johnson, and Hynjin Song. 2015. It's not "all in your head": Understanding religion from an embodied cognition perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10: 852–64. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Van Capellen, Patty, Megan E. Edwards, and Barbara L. Fredrickson. 2021. Upward spirals of positive emotions and religious behaviors. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40: 92–98. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Van Capellen, Patty, Maria Toth-Gauthier, Vassilis Saroglou, and Barbara. L. Fredrickson. 2016. Religion and well-being: The mediating role of positive emotions. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 17: 485–505. [CrossRef]

Vergote, Antoine, Alvaro Tamayo, Luiz Pasquali, Michel Bonami, Marie-Rose Pattyn, and Anne Custers. 1969. Concept of God and parental images. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 8: 79–87. [CrossRef]

Watkins, Philip C. 2004. Gratitude and subjective well-being. In *The Psychology of Gratitude*. Edited by R. A. Emmons and M. E. McCullough. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 167–92.

Westh, Peter. 2009. Anthropomorphism in God concepts: The role of narrative. In *Origins of Religion, Cognition, and Culture*. Edited by Armin W. Geertz. London: Routledge, pp. 410–28.

White, Cindel J. M., Aiyana K. Willard, Adam Baimel, and Ara Norenzayana. 2021. Cognitive pathways to belief in Karma and belief in God. *Cognitive Science* 44: e12935. [CrossRef]

Williams, Rowan. 2014. *The Edge of Words*. London: Bloomsbury.

Wood, Alex M., Jeffrey J. Froh, and Adam W. A. Geraghty. 2010. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30: 890–905. [CrossRef]

Review

Using Social Media to Assess Expressions of Gratitude to God: Issues for Consideration

Louis Tay [1],*, Stuti Thapa [1], David B. Newman [2] and Munmun De Choudhury [3]

[1] Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA
[2] Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, CA 94107, USA
[3] School of Interactive Computing, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332, USA
* Correspondence: stay@purdue.edu

Abstract: With the proliferation of technology-based communication, public expressions of gratitude to God on social media have become more pervasive. At the same time, data science approaches are increasingly being applied to social media language data to assess positive human attributes. We elucidate critical considerations in assessing public expressions of gratitude to God, including language variability and comparability, degree of authenticity, machine learning language analysis, and aggregation approaches that could affect assessment accuracy.

Keywords: gratitude expressions; public gratitude; social media; data science; machine learning; challenges; review

1. Introduction

Expressing gratitude to God is deeply rooted in many different religious traditions that call for adherents to develop and cultivate it as moral virtue (Emmons and Crumpler 2000). Recent work also points to how gratitude to God is associated with well-being outcomes such as better health, greater subjective well-being, and lower depressive symptoms (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Krause et al. 2014; Krause et al. 2015; Rosmarin et al. 2011).

Research on gratitude to God has been built upon the self-report survey paradigm (e.g., Krause 2006; McCullough et al. 2002), which has unique strengths such as allowing individuals to report on their own experiences and intentions. The administration of self-report questionnaires is fairly routine, and many participants are familiar with this method. Moreover, self-report assessments provide researchers with the flexibility and ease to examine precise measures and specific psychological mechanisms. Because the tradition of self-report has existed for many years, numerous resources that provide recommendations and guidance on construct validity exist (Cronbach and Meehl 1955; Loevinger 1957; Messick 1980; Messick 1995; Cronbach and Meehl 1955; Loevinger 1957; Messick 1980, 1995). Self-report methods can also be used in a variety of different methods, such as experiments, cross-sectional studies, longitudinal designs, and daily diary and ecological momentary assessment methods.

Nevertheless, self-report surveys have several weaknesses. For example, they do not provide observable expressions of gratitude. As aligned with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991), intentions to express gratitude do not always veridically emerge as gratitude expression behaviors. More broadly, self-ratings have multiple problems stemming from a lack of self-awareness, misremembering, or the use of heuristics that bias their accuracy (Schwarz 1999). Desirable responding may also influence participants' responses, resulting in reports that may not match their true beliefs or behaviors (Nederhof 1985). These examples highlight a broader principle, namely that all methods are flawed in various manners and have their own strengths and weaknesses (McGrath 1981). Therefore, the best approach in moving gratitude to God research forward is to rely on various, potentially complementary methods and acknowledge their own strengths and weaknesses.

One method that can be used to complement self-report methods is the use of text analytic techniques of social media language. This appears to be a promising candidate because social media applications are widely used by people across the world. It is estimated that 4.48 billion people worldwide use social media as of 2021 (Deen 2021). Importantly, from a cursory glance at social media posts, people often express gratitude to God on these platforms (e.g., 'thank god', 'praise god'), and these instances provide directly observable behaviors that happen in a naturalistic setting without researcher solicitation. Our team applied search terms (20 key terms, 10 God-focused and 10 interpersonal/general) to find relevant tweets, which resulted in a large quantity of observable behavior of gratitude towards God. Limiting it to the year 2019–2020, we found 1.2 million Tweets referencing gratitude; of the subsample of 105 k Tweets that were initially studied, 29.3% of the Tweets referenced gratitude toward God. We note that researchers more generally can use existing libraries such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al. 2015) to create a gratitude dictionary such as gratef*, grati*, thank*, or appreciat* (the "*" symbol means that all words that start with the same letters are included) (e.g., Anicich et al. 2022) and also consider specific gratitude terms (e.g., praying hands emoji, tgif). Such an approach would still need domain-specific validation, as dictionaries do not necessarily capture nuances in language. A natural language processing-based approach on the other hand is able to capture and learn from linguistic patterns (e.g., sequences of words), thus with the potential to provide better validity to gratitude measurements. For readers interested in text analytics in general, and how they can apply it to assess psychological phenomena via social media, we refer readers to reviews by Eichstaedt et al. (2021) and Tay et al. (2020).

Another strength is that the application of machine learning text analysis can provide not only individual but also communal assessments of gratitude to God in a potentially scalable, longitudinal, and cost-effective fashion. Achieving accurate assessments enables measurements at the levels of communities and geographic regions. Indeed, it has been proposed that gratitude can serve as a moral "barometer" for society (McCullough and Tsang 2004) and can serve to motivate prosocial behavior (Grant and Gino 2010) and civic engagement (Panagopoulos 2011), which are vital for communities. Further, this opens up possibilities to investigate antecedents and outcomes at different levels of analysis, such as determining the national conditions that predict expressions of gratitude to God, and how these expressions may evolve over time when punctuated by local or global events (such as the Coronavirus pandemic).

While there are strengths to using social media to assess expressions of gratitude to God, there are also critical considerations to ensure its validity and reliability. This paper elucidates these issues so that researchers can identify potential pitfalls and amelioration strategies when applying this approach.

2. Language Variability and Comparability

Given social media usage across different cultures and nations, there is an opportunity to capture different instantiations of gratitude to God expressions. On the linguistic front, they include formal or informal language (González Bermúdez 2015; Utami et al. 2019), the use of non-standard abbreviations, short forms, deliberate misspellings and grammar (Eisenstein 2013), the use of dialects (Huang et al. 2016), the use of emojis (Guntuku et al. 2019), the use of slang and colloquialisms (Reyes et al. 2012), the use of word lengthenings (Brody and Diakopoulos 2011), and the use of different types of languages (Li et al. 2020). Multi-language and cross-cultural investigations (e.g., De Choudhury et al. 2017) can inform us of differences in gratitude expressions that need to be taken into consideration, along with similarities in patterns of expressions (e.g., Guntuku et al. 2019; Li et al. 2020). This is made more complex by the different perspectives that religions hold on the concept of the divine: there is wide variation in the "God" worshipped (e.g., Allah, Christ, etc.). Similarly, the nature of gratitude can also vary based on language norms within a religion (e.g., "it is a blessing"; "praise God"). For instance, in Arabic, word pairs like "ALHAMD

LELLAH" which means thanks God and "ALLAH AKBAR" which means God is the greatest are used to express gratitude to God, but some also write them as a single word (Rabie and Sturm 2014). Cultural knowledge is necessary to understand these language norms and variations to properly measure them for cross-cultural studies. Clearly, while language on social media is not constrained like self-report ratings, researchers have to work through a vast multiplicity of gratitude expressions. These need to be carefully curated based on experience and expertise of the religion, culture, and language. Some examples include forming a cross-cultural team of researchers (Tam and Milfont 2020) who are involved in the community, use of qualitative or survey responses to understand context-specific knowledge (Broesch et al. 2020), as well as incorporating mixed methods that allow researchers to measure and compare these cross-cultural differences (Schrauf 2018).

The breadth of possibilities also raises the question of comparability across languages, cultures, and religions. At one level, a frequency approach, or counting the number of instances (or posts) where gratitude to God is expressed, may appear to have fewer issues in terms of comparability, providing the threshold for what counts as gratitude to God. At another level, an intensity approach (e.g., Madisetty and Desarkar 2017), where one seeks to capture the intensity of gratitude to God across expressions (e.g., "Thank God!!!!" Versus "Praise God") can be more challenging. This is compounded by the possibility of different languages, dialects, and the like. There are also additional issues in how aggregation is done, as discussed later.

In general, we recommend that the research team should set parameters around what language, region, nation, culture, and religion are being examined and obtain the appropriate expertise to determine what expressions are typically considered gratitude to God. Another possibility is to recruit active social media users who describe different ways in which they express gratitude to God, which provides researchers with exemplars of social media expressions.

3. Authenticity of Expressions

As expressions of gratitude to God on many social media platforms are public, it may be difficult to discern whether these expressions are genuine. Performative use of social media, in Erving Goffman's terms (Goffman 1959), has been observed in multiple contexts, and on these platforms, people are known to self-present or self-enhance (Hogan 2010), which would question their authenticity. For example, people may express mere rhetoric to look good in the eyes of other religious individuals. In addition, some expressions of gratitude may be subtle attempts to boast about themselves (e.g., "I truly can't explain why, but I find beauty in the ugliest/darkest things. #ThankYouGod") or pretenses to celebrate positive news (e.g., "I won this award for the 4th time running!! God is always on my side and I cannot thank His blessings enough") rather than sincere gratitude to God.

By extension, a lack of such expressions may reflect unease in publicly expressing gratitude to God. In fact, many religions instruct people to express gratitude to God through private prayer, which means that many expressions of gratitude to God may not be found on social media posts. Due to this, expressions of gratitude to God that exist on public social media may not be representative of the typical expressions of gratitude to God that occur naturally in daily life. That is, they may lack ecological validity. Nevertheless, the expressions of gratitude to God on public social media may still hold great value in predicting other types of experiences that may occur exclusively on such platforms. The idea is that this is the new reality in which people communicate and experience life and so expressions of gratitude to God measured through social media can predict outcomes such as expressions of well-being or engagement on social media.

Similarly, posts that reference gratitude to God also need to be differentiated from actual gratitude behavior. This can include things like advice for others (e.g., "Thanking your close ones every day is necessary. Appreciate people you have in your life!"), scripture quotes ("Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. 1 Thessalonians 5: 16–18"), or gratitude

additions to unrelated posts ("#selfie #GodIsGood"). Such considerations can be made in the annotation phase so that gratitude detectors or classifiers can also make such distinctions (more below).

Social media is also a place where people tend to engage in trolling behavior in which individuals seek to provoke others through their posts (Hannan 2018). There are good possibilities that gratitude to God expressions are in the context of trolling or, more broadly, inauthentic expressions. For example, depending on the context, audience, and political ideology of the expresser, a post such as "thank God for Trump!" or "praise God for Biden" may be insincere and sarcastic. Given this nuance, there needs to be additional care to examine the context of the language used beyond simple word counts (e.g., the number of times "thank God" is used). We note that the detection of sarcasm, irony, humor, and flippant remarks on social media is challenging, and it is an active area of research (Joshi et al. 2018).

On this issue of authenticity, we encourage researchers to be mindful of the limitations of counting every expression of gratitude to God on social media as genuine heartfelt expressions. There are likely differences in authenticity based on the normative culture of expressing gratitude to God online and the social context of the expression. More generally, expressions of gratitude to God on social media may not accurately capture a person's internal states, although they may still be very useful for assessing *perceptions* and *reactions* of others witnessing these gratitude expressions; or to understand why people express gratitude online publicly. In short, gratitude expressions online and self-reported gratitude may have only some degree of overlap and not have high convergence, but they could have good divergent validities in predicting different outcomes.

4. Machine Learning Process

One popular process for distilling information or inferring latent attributes and behaviors from social media language is to use machine learning. For instance, such methods can enable automatically identifying and/or assessing the rate or the intensity of a phenomenon of interest (Kern et al. 2016). A major advantage is the ability to scale the assessment of gratitude to God expressions to millions of social media posts in an efficient manner. Nevertheless, the building of these text classifiers (i.e., an algorithm that identifies whether a post or sentence expresses gratitude to God, in this case) comes with its own set of challenges that also require careful consideration to ensure accuracy and validity.

Due to the variability of language, supervised machine learning is often used where human annotators provide the "ground truth" (Tay et al. 2020). Human annotators will typically rate posts on whether it expresses gratitude to God, which is then used to train machine learning algorithms. This requires careful training of annotators and the development of a replicable process for how collective decisions are made. For instance, one needs to provide examples and practice with feedback to ensure that they accurately classify posts that reference gratitude expression to God. It is also important to determine the extent annotators agree with one another on each post, or inter-rater agreement (e.g., Krippendorff's alpha-reliability) (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). One also needs to be mindful that the algorithms developed may inherit the possible accuracies and biases of the annotators collectively (Tay et al. 2022). Finally, construct validity issues stemming from training data bias or dataset shift (i.e., training data for the machine learning model has a different distribution from the test data) may further paralyze the practical use of machine learning models (Ernala et al. 2019), while under-specified or opaque machine learning models may present ethical issues (Chancellor and De Choudhury 2020).

In the light of these challenges, one way that supervised machine learning can be implemented to study gratitude to God is by having social media users provide self-report ratings of the extent to which they express gratitude to God. These ratings can be treated as individual differences of gratitude to God. Using predictive modeling, the algorithms developed could then seek to predict which types of social media language reflect individual differences in gratitude to God. In this regard, the social media language

will be studied not as a display of direct expressions of gratitude to God, rather, the process will capture all the different types of words used by people who generally express gratitude to God. This can inform a qualitative understanding of how people publicly express gratitude to God.

In general, researchers need to be aware that training algorithms to detect expressions of gratitude to God is conceptually distinct, though possibly related, to training algorithms to detect personal subjective ratings of their own gratitude to God. The former emphasizes observable language behaviors, whereas the latter emphasizes the trait of gratitude to God in individuals.

5. Aggregation Approaches

Another key consideration in the use of social media language is how one aggregates the data to make inferences. It is possible to aggregate within an individual to assess the proportion of times an individual expresses gratitude to God (vs. not). In this regard, one needs to determine whether there needs to be a base number of posts an individual should have in order to reduce sampling biases. This is because any single post will have greater weight for people who have very few posts on a platform. For example, someone who has a single post on a platform, and if it so happens to be one expressing gratitude to God, this individual will be counted as 100% expressing gratitude to God. Similarly, principles behind the sampling biases often considered in survey research, such as selection bias, nonresponse bias, attrition, etc., (Olsen 2006) will also be relevant here; appropriate adjustments may be considered, such as weighting (based on overall number of posts) (Royal 2019) or propensity score matching (when making group-level comparisons) (Caliendo and Kopeinig 2008).

Due to the widespread use of social media, one may also seek to infer community- or geographic-level gratitude to God expressions. In this case, one needs to consider whether the aggregation will be done at the post or individual level. If done at the post level, one takes a count of the gratitude to God posts within a community or geographic region. However, because an individual can contribute to multiple posts, superusers may disproportionately be represented in such an approach. Another approach is to aggregate posts at the individual level first to obtain individuals' level of gratitude to God expressions; then, one proceeds to aggregate individual levels to the community or geographic level (Giorgi et al. 2018). While this approach limits the problem of superusers being disproportionately represented, there needs to be a sufficient number of active users on a platform to aggregate accurately. The issue of active users also raises the issue of the representativeness of a social media sample. For example, commonly used social media in text mining research such as Twitter has a skewed distribution with 42% of the userbase being ages 18–29 while 65+ only comprise 7% of the userbase (Pew Research Center 2022). Additional methods need to be adopted in this case to counter the digital divide (Van Dijk 2020), the gap between demographics at different socioeconomic levels in their access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital media (DiMaggio et al. 2001), as well as disproportionate levels of social media use in different communities and geographic regions.

As we have shown, the way aggregation is done from social media posts can be meaningfully different. Researchers who seek to extract social media language to index expressions of gratitude to God will need to make decisions on how best to perform aggregation. Beyond aggregation, there are also analyses that can be done to account for the structure of the data (i.e., individual posts nested within individuals which are in turn nested within communities), such as multilevel modeling (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002); this enables researchers to determine the level-specific predictors of these posts (e.g., what predicts the occurrence of the post within an individual; what predicts who tends to express gratitude to God; what communal factors predict communities that express more gratitude to God).

6. Conclusions

As researchers seek to move toward more observable behavioral approaches to capture gratitude to God expressions, social media language has become a prominent candidate as there are establishing machine learning techniques to harness such data. Nevertheless, there are also different issues that need to be considered when applying this source of data and the techniques associated with it. We hope that as the challenges are identified and made transparent, this will help researchers take steps to address or acknowledge limitations.

References

Aghababaei, Naser, and Mohammad Taghi Tabik. 2013. Gratitude and mental health: Differences between religious and general gratitude in a Muslim context. Mental Health. *Religion & Culture* 16: 761–66. [CrossRef]

Ajzen, Icek. 1991. The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50: 179–211. [CrossRef]

Anicich, Eric M., Alice J. Lee, and Shi Liu. 2022. Thanks, but No Thanks: Unpacking the Relationship Between Relative Power and Gratitude. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 48: 1005–23. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Brody, Samuel, and Nicholas Diakopoulos. 2011. Cooooooooooooooooollllllllllllll!!!!!!!!!!!!! Using Word Lengthening to Detect Sentiment in Microblogs. Paper presented at the 2011 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing, Edinburgh, UK, July 27–31.

Broesch, Tanya, Alyssa N. Crittenden, Bret A. Beheim, Aaron D. Blackwell, John A. Bunce, Heidi Colleran, Kristin Hagel, Michelle Kline, Richard McElreath, Robin G. Nelson, and et al. 2020. Navigating cross-cultural research: Methodological and ethical considerations. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 287: 20201245. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Caliendo, Marco, and Sabine Kopeinig. 2008. Some practical guidance for the implementation of propensity score matching. *Journal of Economic Surveys* 22: 31–72. [CrossRef]

Chancellor, Stevie, and Munmun De Choudhury. 2020. Methods in predictive techniques for mental health status on social media: A critical review. *NPJ Digital Medicine* 3: 43. [CrossRef]

Cronbach, Lee. J., and Paul. E. Meehl. 1955. Construct validity in psychological tests. *Psychological Bulletin* 52: 281–302. [CrossRef]

De Choudhury, Munmun, Sanket S. Sharma, Tomaz Logar, Wouter Eekhout, and René Clausen Nielsen. 2017. Gender and Cross-Cultural Differences in Social Media Disclosures of Mental Illness. Paper presented at the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, Portland, OR, USA, February 25–March 1; pp. 353–69.

Deen, Brian. 2021. Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social Media in 2022? Available online: https://backlinko.com/social-media-users (accessed on 11 May 2022).

DiMaggio, Paul, Eszter Hargittai, W. Russell Neuman, and John P. Robinson. 2001. Social implications of the internet. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 307–36. [CrossRef]

Eichstaedt, Johannes C., Margaret L. Kern, David B. Yaden, H. Andrew Schwartz, Salvatore Giorgi, Gregory Park, Courtney A. Hagan, Victoria A. Tobolsky, Laura K. Smith, Anneke Buffone, and et al. 2021. Closed- and open-vocabulary approaches to text analysis: A review, quantitative comparison, and recommendations. *Psychological Methods* 26: 398–427. [CrossRef]

Eisenstein, Jacob. 2013. What to do about bad language on the internet. Paper presented at the 2013 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies, Atlanta, GA, USA, June 9–14.

Emmons, Robert A., and Cheryl A. Crumpler. 2000. Gratitude as a human strength: Appraising the evidence. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19: 56–69. [CrossRef]

Ernala, Sindhu Kiranmai, Michael L. Birnbaum, Kristin A. Candan, Asra F. Rizvi, William A. Sterling, John M. Kane, and Munmun De Choudhury. 2019. Methodological Gaps in Predicting Mental Health States from Social Media. Paper presented at the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Glasgow, UK, May 4–9; pp. 1–16.

Giorgi, Salvatore, Daniel Preoţiuc-Pietro, Anneke E. K. Buffone, Daniel Rieman, Lyle H. Ungar, and H. Andrew Schwartz. 2018. The Remarkable Benefit of User-Level Aggregation for Lexical-based Population-Level Predictions. Paper presented at the 2018 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing, Brussels, Belgium, October 31–November 4; pp. 1167–72.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor.

González Bermúdez, Meritxell. 2015. An analysis of twitter corpora and the differences between formal and colloquial tweets. Paper presented at the Tweet Translation Workshop 2015, Alicante, Spain, September 5; pp. 1–7.

Grant, Adam M., and Francesca Gino. 2010. A little thanks goes a long way: Explaining why gratitude expressions motivate prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98: 946–55. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Guntuku, Sharath Chandra, Mingyang Li, Louis Tay, and Lyle H. Ungar. 2019. Studying Cultural Differences in Emoji Usage across the East and the West. Paper presented at the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, Münich, Germany, June 11–14; vol. 13, pp. 226–35.

Hannan, Jason. 2018. Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics. *European Journal of Communication* 33: 214–26. [CrossRef]

Hayes, Andrew F., and Klaus Krippendorff. 2007. Answering the Call for a Standard Reliability Measure for Coding Data. *Communication Methods and Measures* 1: 77–89. [CrossRef]

Hogan, Bernie. 2010. The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30: 377–86. [CrossRef]

Huang, Yang, Diansheng Guo, Alice Kasakoff, and Jack Grieve. 2016. Understanding U.S. regional linguistic variation with Twitter data analysis. *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems* 59: 244–55. [CrossRef]

Joshi, Aditya, Pushpak Bhattacharyya, and Mark J. Carman. 2018. Automatic Sarcasm Detection: A Survey. *ACM Computing Surveys* 50: 1–22. [CrossRef]

Kern, Margaret L., Gregory Park, Johannes C. Eichstaedt, H. Andrew Schwartz, Maarten Sap, Laura K. Smith, and Lyle H. Ungar. 2016. Gaining insights from social media language: Methodologies and challenges. *Psychological Methods* 21: 507–25. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal. 2006. Gratitude toward God, stress, and health in late life. *Research on Aging* 28: 163–83. [CrossRef]

Krause, N., R. David Hayward, Deborah Bruce, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, self-rated health, and depressive symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study for Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, N., R. A. Emmons, and G. Ironson. 2015. Benevolent Images of God, Gratitude, and Physical Health Status. *Journal of Religion and Health* 54: 1503–19. [CrossRef]

Li, Mingyang, Louis Hickman, Louis Tay, Lyle H. Ungar, and Sharath Chandra Guntuku. 2020. Studying Politeness across cultures using English Twitter and Mandarin Weibo. Paper presented at the AMC on Human-Computer Interaction, Oldenburg, Germany, October 5–9; pp. 1–15.

Loevinger, Jane. 1957. Objective tests as instruments of psychological theory. *Psychological Reports* 3: 635–94. [CrossRef]

Madisetty, Sreekanth, and Maunendra Sankar Desarkar. 2017. An Ensemble Based Method for Predicting Emotion Intensity of Tweets. Paper presented at the International Conference on Mining Intelligence and Knowledge Exploration, Hyderabad, India, December 13–15; pp. 359–70.

McCullough, Michael E., and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2004. Parent of the virtues? In *The Psychology of Gratitude*. Edited by Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 123–44.

McCullough, Michael E., Robert A. Emmons, and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2002. The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 112–27. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

McGrath, Joseph E. 1981. The study of research choices and dilemmas. *American Behavioral Scientist* 25: 179–210. [CrossRef]

Messick, Samuel. 1980. Test validity and the ethics of assessment. *American Psychologist* 35: 1012–27. [CrossRef]

Messick, Samuel. 1995. Validity of psychological assessment: Validation of inferences from persons' responses and performances as scientific inquiry into score meaning. *American Psychologist* 50: 741–49. [CrossRef]

Nederhof, Anton J. 1985. Methods of coping with social desirability bias: A review. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15: 263–80. [CrossRef]

Olsen, Kristen. 2006. Survey Participation, Nonresponse Bias, Measurement Error Bias, and Total Bias. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70: 737–58. [CrossRef]

Panagopoulos, Costas. 2011. Thank You for Voting: Gratitude Expression and Voter Mobilization. *The Journal of Politics* 73: 707–17. [CrossRef]

Pennebaker, James W., Ryan L. Boyd, Kayla Jordan, and Kate Blackburn. 2015. The development and psychometric properties of LIWC2015. Available online: http://hdl.handle.net/2152/31333 (accessed on 1 August 2022).

Pew Research Center. 2022. 10 Facts about Americans and Twitter. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/05/05/10-facts-about-americans-and-twitter/ (accessed on 15 July 2022).

Rabie, Omneya, and Christian Sturm. 2014. Feel the Heat: Emotion Detection in Arabic Social Media Content. Paper presented at the International Conference on Data Mining, Internet Computing, and Big Data, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, November 17–19.

Raudenbush, Stephen. W., and Anthony S. Bryk. 2002. *Hierarchical Linear Models: Applications and Data Analysis Methods*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Reyes, Antonio, Paolo Rosso, and Davide Buscaldi. 2012. From humor recognition to irony detection: The figurative language of social media. *Data & Knowledge Engineering* 74: 1–12.

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Royal, Kenneth D. 2019. Survey research methods: A guide for creating post-stratification weights to correct for sample bias. *Education in the Health Professions* 2: 48–50. [CrossRef]

Schrauf, Robert W. 2018. Mixed Methods Designs for Making Cross-Cultural Comparisons. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 12: 477–94. [CrossRef]

Schwarz, Nobert. 1999. Self-reports: How the questions shape the answer. *American Psychologist* 54: 93–105. [CrossRef]

Tam, Kim-Pong, and Taciano L. Milfont. 2020. Towards cross-cultural environmental psychology: A state-of-the-art review and recommendations. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 71: 1–18. [CrossRef]

Tay, Louis, Sang Eun Woo, Louis Hickman, and Rachel M. Saef. 2020. Psychometric and Validity Issues in Machine Learning Approaches to Personality Assessment: A Focus on Social Media Text Mining. *European Journal of Personality* 34: 826–44. [CrossRef]

Tay, Louis, Sang Eun Woo, Louis Hickman, Brandon M. Booth, and Sidney D'Mello. 2022. A Conceptual Framework for Investigating and Mitigating Machine-Learning Measurement Bias (MLMB) in Psychological Assessment. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science* 5. [CrossRef]

Utami, Ema, Anggit Dwi Hartanto, Sumarni Adi, Rahardyan Bisma Setya Putra, and Suwanto Raharjo. 2019. Formal and non-formal Indonesian word usage frequency in twitter profile using non-formal affix rule. Paper presented at the 2019 1st International Conference on Cybernetics and Intelligent System (ICORIS), Denpasar, Indonesia, August 22–23; pp. 173–76.

Van Dijk, Jan. 2020. *The Digital Divide*. Cambridge: Polity.

Article

Gratitude to God Predicts Religious Well-Being over Time

Philip Watkins [1,*], **Michael Frederick** [1] **and Don E. Davis** [2]

1   School of Psychology, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA 99004, USA; mfrederick4@eagles.ewu.edu
2   Department of Counseling and Psychological Services, Georgia State University,
    Atlanta, GA 30302-3980, USA; ddavis88@gsu.edu
*   Correspondence: pwatkins@ewu.edu

Abstract: The authors used a prospective design to investigate how gratitude to God predicts religious well-being over time. Gratitude to God is a central aspect of monotheistic religions, and thus may be particularly important to the religious/spiritual well-being of believers. Participants completed online measures of trait and state gratitude to God, along with spiritual well-being, nearness to God, and religious commitment scales over a one-to-two-month period. General well-being, trait gratitude, and the Big Five personality traits were also assessed. After controlling baseline levels, trait gratitude and the Big Five personality traits, dispositional gratitude to God at Time 1 predicted increased religious well-being, nearness to God, and religious commitment at Time 2. Although gratitude to God was significantly related to general well-being variables in cross-sectional analyses, it did not predict these variables over time. Validity data for the gratitude to God measures are also presented. The results suggest that gratitude to God is important to religious/spiritual well-being, and gratitude to God may be a critical variable for research on positive psychology and the psychology of religion/spirituality.

Keywords: gratitude; religiosity; spirituality; well-being

1. Introduction

> "We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?"
>
> —G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chesterton [1908] 1986, p. 258)

In the epigram above, Chesterton suggests one way that situations for experiencing gratitude might be increased: belief in a benevolent divine being who provides for a benefactor all the good things in life, and thus, there are many more blessings for which one can be thankful. But to date, few studies have investigated gratitude to God. Indeed, is divine gratitude a central aspect of spirituality and religiosity? The purpose of this study was to investigate the prospective relationship of gratitude to God to spirituality and religious well-being.

Why should gratitude to God be particularly beneficial to religious/spiritual well-being? In the following paragraphs, we describe theory foundational to this study. However, before presenting theory, we explain our critical concepts. We define the momentary state of gratitude as one's cognitive and emotional response to a circumstance one affirms as good, and which one largely attributes the benefit to an outside source. Thus, gratitude to God would be a response of gratitude to a benefit that one attributes at least, in part, to God. Trait, or dispositional gratitude, is one's tendency or disposition for gratitude. Thus, one high in trait gratitude would experience the state of gratitude frequently over a wide variety of circumstances. Therefore, trait gratitude to God would be one's disposition for experiencing gratitude to God. Those high in trait gratitude to God would have a low threshold for experiencing gratitude to God. Following Paloutzian and Ellison (1982), we define spiritual well-being as one's satisfaction with the spiritual domain of life, specifically,

satisfaction with one's relationship with the sacred or divine. In this study, we used three measures to assess religious/spiritual well-being: the religious well-being subscale of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian and Ellison 1982); a revised version of the Nearness to God Scale (NTG-R; Gorsuch and Smith 1983; Uhder et al. 2010); and the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SRF; Plante and Boccaccini 1997).

In describing our theoretical approach, we begin with proposals about the factors that should contribute to religious/spiritual well-being. For monotheists at least, one's perception of one's relationship to God should be central to religious well-being. Furthermore, we submit that one's relationships with fellow believers should be important to religious well-being. If one's relationships with others in one's community of faith are troublesome, it stands to reason that that one will not be satisfied with the spiritual domain of one's life. We propose that when one lives in accord with one's spiritual/religious principles, one should be more satisfied with the spiritual dimension of one's life. One who is minimally committed to one's religious values would seem to live in discord, and thus should score lower in religious well-being.

But more specifically, how might gratitude to God contribute to religious well-being? In explaining our theoretical approach, we rely on several theories of general gratitude and apply them to gratitude to God. In their influential review, McCullough et al. (2001) proposed that gratitude is a moral affect in that it is a moral barometer (gratitude is a measure of how good others have been to us), a moral reinforcer (when one expresses gratitude, it reinforces moral behavior), and a moral motivator (when one feels grateful, one is motivated to act in a prosocial manner). How might this theory apply to gratitude to God? Firstly, gratitude to God might act as a moral barometer for one's relationship with the divine. Thus, when one feels grateful to God, one should feel favored and affirmed by God and feel that God is being good to them. When one experiences the goodness of God, it seems to follow that this would enhance one's perception of one's relationship with God, which, in turn, should enhance religious well-being. Secondly, if gratitude is a moral reinforcer in human relationships, then when one expresses gratitude to God, one should feel that God will provide more blessings for them in the future, at least at the subjective level. This increased hope regarding future blessings should also enhance one's perception of one's relationship with God, thus increasing one's religious well-being. Public expression of gratitude to God in one's community of faith should also bind relationships with other believers, thus enhancing religious well-being. Thirdly, if gratitude is a moral motivator in that it encourages prosocial behavior, gratitude to God should encourage moral behavior in the spiritual realm. Indeed, some have proposed that gratitude to God is a central motivator for religious behavior (e.g., Barth [1956] 1961; Keller 2015). Thus, gratitude to God should increase commitment to one's religious values, and thus support religious well-being.

Gratitude has been shown to be valuable to relationships. Algoe (2012) has theorized—with considerable empirical support—that gratitude helps one *find* new relationships, *reminds* one of important relationships, and helps *bind* healthy relationships. At least in terms of the *remind* and *bind* aspect of her theory, this would seem to easily translate to gratitude to God. When one experiences gratitude to God, this should remind one of the importance of one's relationship with the divine, which might promote relationship-enhancing behaviors (e.g., prayer, worship, and other devotional practices). Furthermore, gratitude to God should bind one in one's relationship with God in that one should experience a subjective appreciation of the goodness of God, which, in turn, should increase one's perceived intimacy with God. Taken together, it seems reasonable to propose that gratitude to God should enhance one's relationship with God.

In a complimentary theory, Watkins (2014) has argued that gratitude enhances subjective well-being because it amplifies the good in one's life. Just as an amplifier increases the signal strength of sound going into a microphone, gratitude amplifies one's awareness, memory, and experience of blessings in one's life. Translating this theory to the theme of this paper, gratitude to God should amplify one's awareness, memory, and experience of

the goodness of God to them. Consequently, this should increase one's perception of one's relationship with the divine, which should enhance religious well-being. In short, there is a good theoretical basis to propose that gratitude to God is important to religious and spiritual well-being.

Research has shown that gratitude enhances well-being (Wood et al. 2010; Watkins 2014). Gratitude is strongly associated with subjective well-being (McCullough et al. 2002; Watkins et al. 2003) and prospectively predicts well-being (e.g., Wood et al. 2008). Furthermore, numerous experimental studies have shown that gratitude exercises increase happiness (for reviews, see Davis et al. 2016; Watkins and McCurrach 2021). As described above, studies have also shown that gratitude enhances relational well-being (Algoe 2012). Thus, gratitude appears to be a critical facet of a good life. Although gratitude research has flourished in the last twenty years, few studies have investigated how the nature of the benefactor impacts gratitude.

"To whom are you grateful?" is a question that seems to have largely eluded gratitude researchers. Does it matter to whom one is grateful? If one feels grateful to a mafia boss, does this foster the same benefits as feeling grateful to a virtuous person such as Martin Luther King Jr.? Does the character and trustworthiness of the benefactor affect the experience of gratitude? These questions are particularly relevant when considering gratitude to God. Indeed, recent surveys show that the vast majority of Americans (87%) still believe in a benevolent God (Gallup 2019), and thus, divine gratitude may be a significant experience for many people.

It seems reasonable that God would be an important benefactor for religious people. People who believe in the God described by the Abrahamic religions—over 65% of religious people (Pew 2012)—believe that God is the ultimate source of all good. In a recent study, 100% of students who said that they believed in a personal God also said that God was an important benefactor in their life (Scheibe et al. 2017). Although many benefits come through human benefactors, most theists believe that these are "secondary causes" and that ultimately God is the source of blessing.

Furthermore, gratitude to God may be beneficial to theists because of what McCullough and colleagues referred to as *gratitude span* (McCullough et al. 2002). Gratitude span refers to the extent of the blessings that one might be grateful for and has been cited as one of the critical components of dispositional gratitude. Stated simply, grateful people have many things to be grateful for. One advantage of gratitude to God is that one can be grateful for any blessing, regardless of whether there is a perceived human benefactor, as illustrated by the Chesterton epigram. Thus, gratitude to God may enhance gratitude span. We propose that God is a significant benefactor for religious/spiritual people, and thus, gratitude to God may be vital to religiousness/spirituality. In summary, gratitude to God may be critical to the spiritual well-being of believers in God.

Research on gratitude to God has been scant, but the available evidence supports the idea that it deserves further investigation. Firstly, gratitude to God has been found to be associated with emotional and physical well-being (e.g., Krause et al. 2014; Krause et al. 2017). Secondly, it is well known that religious people tend to be happier than their unbelieving counterparts, but several recent studies have shown that gratitude to God mediates the relationship between religiosity and well-being (e.g., Rosmarin et al. 2011). Although these are promising results, these studies used cross-sectional designs which are weak and often misleading tests of mediation (Cole and Maxwell 2003). In the current study, we used a prospective design to better evaluate whether gratitude to God enhances religious well-being.

In summary, although gratitude enhances well-being, little is known about how the nature of the benefactor impacts gratitude. Most people believe in a benevolent God (Gallup 2019), and thus, God may be an important benefactor to many people, particularly those who are religious. Thus, gratitude to God is likely to be significant to the religious/spiritual well-being of many people. The purpose of this study was to investigate how gratitude to God prospectively predicts spiritual and religious variables over time. As the develop-

ment of valid measures of gratitude to God are needed for this area to progress, we also present psychometric data on a new state measure of gratitude to God, and cross-validate a previously developed measure of dispositional gratitude to God (Watkins et al. 2019). In the current study, participants completed our measures twice, one-to-two months apart. We administered our questionnaires assessing gratitude to God, along with measures of religiousness, spirituality, and general well-being scales. Our primary hypothesis was that that trait gratitude to God would predict increased religious well-being over time. As previous studies have shown small relationships between gratitude to God and general well-being scales, we conducted exploratory analyses using these variables.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

In this prospective design, 101 participants completed the measures one-to-two months apart (M days = 47.35). The questionnaires were administered online via SurveyMonkey, and thus, the time between administrations varied. Participants received partial course credit for completing each survey. Due to the anonymous nature of the study, we did not assess demographics. Four participants were eliminated from the analyses because they failed the data validity check item in either of our gratitude to God measures. These items were included to ensure the attention of participants and prevent random responding (e.g., "For the purpose of data checking, please endorse '2' for this item."). Three other measures were included for purposes not related to this study (two joy scales and a measure of social networks) and are not described below. After providing informed consent, participants completed the questionnaires in the order described below. This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Eastern Washington University and adhered to the ethical principles of the American Psychological Association.

2.2. Measures

Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS)

We used a modified version of the short PANAS (Watson et al. 1988). In addition to adjectives from the short PANAS, we also included adjectives from the Gratitude Adjectives Scale (GAS) (McCullough et al. 2002) ($\alpha = 0.88, 0.93$); the Joy Adjectives Scale (Watkins et al. 2018); and descriptors we thought would be related to pride (e.g., "poised", "dignified") and narcissism ("superior", "better than others").

State Gratitude to God (S-GTG)

We developed a momentary state measure of gratitude to God that used comparative language (e.g., "Compared to how you usually feel, how grateful to God do you feel right now?"). This scale included 11 items, and participants responded to the statements on a 7-point scale ranging from "much less than I usually feel" to "much greater than I usually feel". As prior measures of state gratitude to God have shown the tendency to reveal both ceiling and floor effects (based on whether the participant was religious/spiritual), we hoped that this measure would eliminate these problems. Included in this measure were two reverse scored items, but unfortunately, these items had poor item-total correlations, and thus were deleted from the analysis. The final S-GTG showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97, 0.98$) and as seen above, good construct validity (see Appendix A for this measure).

Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SRF)

To measure religious commitment, we utilized the SRF (Plante and Boccaccini 1997). This is a relatively brief scale (9 items) that has been shown to effectively measure religious commitment ($\alpha = 0.98, 0.98$).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The SWLS is perhaps the most frequently used measure of the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Diener et al. 1985). A host of studies has supported the validity of this scale, and the SWLS showed good internal consistency in our study as well (α = 0.84, 0.91).

Nearness to God Scale-Revised (NTG-R)

The NTG-R was used to measure the perception of an individual's relationship with God (Gorsuch and Smith 1983). The original scale contained six items to which respondents were given a dichotomous forced choice ("agree" or "disagree"). In an attempt to improve the psychometrics of the scale, we added four items and changed the response scale to a 7-point scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree". This scale has shown good reliability and validity (Uhder et al. 2010) and had excellent internal consistency in this study (α = 0.96, 0.94).

Spiritual Well-Being Scale

We used the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian and Ellison 1982). This measure contains two subscales: existential well-being (α = 0.86, 0.88) and religious well-being (α = 0.95, 0.96). Participants respond to items such as "I believe that God loves me and cares about me" on a five-point scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree".

Big Five Inventory-2 Extra Short Form (BFIxs)

The use of the BFIxs gave us the ability to control the Big Five personality characteristics in our hierarchical regression analyses. The BFIxs (Soto and John 2017) contains 15 items that provide a good assessment of the Big Five personality characteristics. In prospective studies such as this, it is important to control basic personality traits, and this measure served that function.

Flourishing Scale (FS)

The FS was developed as a brief measure of eudaimonic well-being (Diener et al. 2010) and served as one of our measures of general well-being. There are eight items in the FS, and participants respond to statements such as "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life" on a seven-point agree/disagree scale (α = 0.90, 0.93).

Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6).

The GQ-6 served as one of our measures of dispositional gratitude (McCullough et al. 2002). This is perhaps the most utilized measure of trait gratitude and has good psychometric properties supporting its use (α = 0.86, 0.84).

Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test-Short (GRAT-S).

The GRAT-S is a short version (16 items) of the GRAT (Watkins et al. 2003) and has been used frequently to assess trait gratitude. This measure approximates the full GRAT well and contains good psychometric properties (Thomas and Watkins 2003) (α = 0.89, 0.91).

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS)

The SHS was developed to provide a more affectively loaded measure of happiness than the SWLS (Lyubomirsky and Lepper 1999). This measure is frequently used in positive psychology research and served as our third measure of general well-being (α = 0.87, 0.87).

Trait Gratitude to God Scale (GTG-T).

The GTG-T was developed to measure one's disposition for experiencing gratitude to God, and thus, it serves as the primary predictor variable in this study. This scale contains 10 items (e.g., "God has given me an overwhelming number of blessings in my life") that participants respond to on a 9-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". Previous research has shown that this measure has excellent psychometric

properties (Uhder et al. 2010; Watkins et al. 2019); however, in the current study the reverse scored item of the GTG-T did not correlate well with the total score. Thus, we eliminated this item when computing our scale means, and this somewhat revised scale showed excellent internal consistency (α = 0.99, 0.99). After participants completed this scale, they were thanked for their participation and awarded their course credit.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

Correlations among variables are reported in Table 1.[1] Trait gratitude to God, as measured by the Trait Gratitude to God Scale (GTG-T), was very strongly related to religious well-being, strength of religious faith, and nearness to God. Test-retest correlations showed that both the Trait- (GTG-T) and the State Gratitude to God (S-GTG) Scales were stable across time (GTG-T r = 90; S-GTG r = 0.71). As expected, the trait measure of gratitude to God was more stable than the state scale. In Table 1, we also show associations with the Big Five personality traits as assessed by the Big Five Inventory-2 Extra-Short form (BFIxs). These correlations show that people who tend to be grateful to God tend to be somewhat extraverted, agreeable, and emotionally stable. See Table 2 for means and SDs at Time 1.

3.2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses

To investigate how Time 1 trait gratitude to God predicted changes in our outcome variables, we used a two-step hierarchical regression predicting the Time 2 outcome variable. In Step 1, we entered scores on the Time 1 outcome variable, along with Time 1 scores of the Big Five personality traits and trait gratitude (GQ-6 and GRAT-S). In Step 2, we entered Time 1 scores of trait gratitude to God as measured by the Gratitude to GTG-T. This analysis allowed us to investigate how Time 1 trait gratitude to God predicted the Time 2 outcome variables after controlling the Time 1 variables.

Firstly, we present analyses of our predicted outcome variables, followed by the exploratory analyses. Trait gratitude to God should predict increases in state gratitude to God over time. Model 1 was significant ($F(8,92)$ = 13.80, p < 0.001), and as predicted, the F_{change} for Model 2 was also significant ($F(1,91)$ = 20.17, p = 0.01, ΔR^2 =0.082, GTG-T standardized β = 0.389, partial correlation = 0.426). Thus, GTG-T scores at Time 1 predicted increased S-GTG scores at Time 2, providing some evidence of the validity of both measures.

Time 1 trait gratitude to God predicted increases in the strength of religious commitment as measured by the SRF. Again, Model 1 was significant ($F(8,93)$ = 76.47, p < 0.001), but importantly, the F_{change} for Model 2 was also significant ($F(1,92)$ = 10.90, p = 0.001, ΔR^2 = 0.014, GTG-T standardized β = 0.236, partial correlation = 0.325). Hierarchical regression also showed that the GTG-T predicted increases in one's felt nearness to God. Model 1 for this analysis was significant ($F(8,93)$ = 32.42, p < 0.001), and the F_{change} for Model 2 was also significant ($F(1,92)$ = 21.79, p < 0.001, ΔR^2 = 0.051, GTG-T standardized β = 0.418, partial correlation = 0.438). A similar effect was found regarding the religious well-being scale from the Spiritual Well-Being Scale. Again, Model 1 for this analysis was significant ($F(8,92)$ = 53.14, p < 0.001), and the F_{change} for Model 2 was significant ($F(1,91)$ = 24.67, p < 0.001, ΔR^2 =0.038, GTG-T standardized β = 0.416, partial correlation = 0.462). However, the hierarchical regression for the existential well-being scale was not significant. Although Model 1 for this analysis was significant ($F(8,92)$ = 17.11, p < 0.001), the F_{change} for Model 2 was not ($F(1,91)$ = 0.07, p = 0.795, ΔR^2 < 0.001, GTG-T standardized β = −0.019, partial correlation = −0.027). In summary, dispositional gratitude to God predicted increases in variables related to religiosity and spiritual well-being, except for existential well-being.

Table 1. Correlations of Time 1 Variables.

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13		15	16	17
1. GTG-T	–																
2. S-GTG	0.70 **	–															
3. GQ-6	0.36 **	0.40 **	–														
4. GRAT-S	0.34 **	0.311 **	0.74 **	–													
SWBS																	
5.-RWB	0.85 **	0.68 **	0.29 **	0.25 **	–												
6.-EWB	0.15 *	0.19 *	0.69 **	0.52 **	0.21 *	–											
7. SRF	0.85 **	0.68 **	0.34 **	0.30 **	0.84 **	0.19 *	–										
8. NTG-R	0.84 **	0.71 **	0.33 **	0.27 **	0.87 **	0.19 *	0.87 **	–									
9. GAS	0.35 **	0.43 **	0.46 **	0.35 **	0.30 *	0.30 **	0.32 **	0.33 **	–								
10. SWLS	0.14	0.19 *	0.56 **	0.50 **	0.11	0.68 **	0.12	0.13	0.34 **	–							
11. SHS	0.30 **	0.24 *	0.64 **	0.54 **	0.24 *	0.66 **	0.28 **	0.28 **	0.39 **	0.60 **	–						
12. FS	0.23 *	0.28 *	0.75 **	0.60 **	0.17 *	0.74 **	0.23 **	0.23 *	0.36 **	0.63 **	0.64 **	–					
Big Five Traits																	
13. Ext	0.17 *	0.13	0.18 *	0.09	0.20 *	0.26 **	0.17 *	0.20 *	0.12	0.31 **	0.35 **	0.38 **	–				
14. Agreeable	0.15 *	0.18 *	0.36 **	0.41 **	0.11	0.30 **	0.15 *	0.09	0.14 *	0.20 *	0.37 **	0.34 **	0.04	–			
15. Consc	0.12	−0.02	0.34 **	0.22 *	0.05	0.38 **	0.02	0.02	0.21 *	0.33 **	0.33 **	0.50 **	0.24 **	0.14	–		
16. Neurot	−0.20 *	−0.14 *	−0.44 **	−0.35 **	−0.13	−0.51 **	−0.22 *	−0.16 *	−0.23 **	−0.48 **	−0.63 **	−0.52 **	−0.31 **	−0.20 *	−0.35 **	–	
17. Openness	0.05	0.16 *	0.26 **	0.26 **	−0.001	0.14	0.04	0.04	0.20 *	0.23 **	0.07	0.21 *	0.21 *	0.12	−0.02	−0.03	–

Note: GTG-T = Trait Gratitude to God; S-GTG = State Gratitude to God; GQ-6 = Gratitude Questionnaire; SWBS = Spiritual Well-Being Scale; RWB = Religious Well-Being Subscale of the SWBS; EWB = Existential Well-Being Subscale of the SWBS; GAS = Gratitude Adjectives Scale (a state gratitude measure); SRF = Strength of Religious Faith Scale; NTG-R = Nearness to God Scale-Revised; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; Ext = Extraversion; Consc = Conscientiousness; Neurot = Neuroticism. $* p < 0.05$; $** p \leq 0.001$.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations at Time 1.

Variable	Mean	SD	N
GTG-T	5.22	2.83	188
S-GTG	4.07	1.50	193
GQ-6	5.73	1.03	190
GRAT-S	7.00	1.16	190
RWB (SWBS)	3.35	1.53	191
EWB (SWBS)	4.26	0.94	192
SRF	2.22	0.97	193
NTG-R	3.89	1.86	193
GAS	3.64	0.95	196
SWLS	4.35	1.29	193
SHS	4.55	1.34	191
FS	5.44	1.00	190
Big Five Traits			
Extraversion	3.07	0.89	193
Agreeable	3.77	0.71	193
Conscientiousness	3.40	0.82	193
Neuroticism	3.33	0.91	193
Openness	3.80	0.74	193

Note: Means for the scales are average/item. GTG-T = Trait Gratitude to God; S-GTG = State Gratitude to God; GQ-6 = Gratitude Questionnaire; SWBS = Spiritual Well-Being Scale; RWB = Religious Well-Being Subscale of the SWBS; EWB = Existential Well-Being Subscale of the SWBS; GAS = Gratitude Adjectives Scale (a state gratitude measure); SRF = Strength of Religious Faith Scale; NTG-R = Nearness to God Scale-Revised; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale.

Due to the potential for collinearity of our trait gratitude measures at Step 1, we conducted the identical hierarchical regression analyses as above but excluded our trait gratitude measures from Model 1. These analyses for our spiritual well-being measures were similar to our planned analyses described above. All Model 2 F_{change} scores were significant (all ps $\leq$ 0.002), and partial correlations ranged from 0.32 to 0.45.

Observation of the items from the existential well-being scale of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale shows that this is largely a measure of general well-being. As will be seen, the finding on the hierarchical regression for this measure was consistent with those of our other general well-being questionnaires. Indeed, hierarchical regression analyses for the Gratitude Adjectives Scale (GAS), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and Flourishing Scale (FS) all showed that Model 2 was nonsignificant (all F_{change} ps > 0.61, all ΔR^2 < 0.002). Thus, trait GTG-T scores at Time 1 did not predict reliable increases in general well-being scales at Time 2.

4. Discussion

Recent work has shown that religious/spiritual well-being serves as a protective factor against the deleterious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (González-Sanguino et al. 2020). Thus, research on factors that contribute to religious well-being is particularly timely. In this study, we found that dispositional gratitude to God predicted increased religiosity/spirituality over time, supporting the idea that gratitude to God is a significant factor for religious well-being. After controlling Time 1 baseline levels, trait gratitude, and the Big Five personality traits, we found that levels of trait gratitude to God at Time 1 positively predicted Time 2 strength of religious commitment, one's perception of nearness to God, and religious well-being. Although gratitude to God was related to general well-being variables in cross-sectional analyses, it did not predict changes in these variables over time. In the discussion below, we explore the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Our results suggest that gratitude to God is important to religious well-being, and these appear to be consistent with past findings (e.g., Rosmarin et al. 2011; Watkins et al. 2019). Why is divine gratitude important to religious believers? Research on general gratitude may be informative to this question. As mentioned earlier, studies have shown

that gratitude enhances human relationships (Algoe 2012; Bartlett et al. 2012). Thus, it seems reasonable to propose that gratitude to God should enhance one's relationship with God. Indeed, we found that dispositional gratitude to God predicted enhanced intimacy with God over time. It is also possible that gratitude to God decreases doubt about the existence of God, thus increasing religious commitment and a sense of nearness to God. Indeed, Watkins et al. (2019) found that gratitude to God predicted increased confidence in the existence of God over time, and more research could be devoted to investigating how divine gratitude impacts doubts about the existence of God.

Another explanation for how gratitude to God is important to religious well-being was initially suggested by McCullough and colleagues (McCullough et al. 2001; McCullough et al. 2002). They proposed that those who believe in God always have a benevolent benefactor to thank for benefits. Thus, for religious believers, all benefits can potentially become gifts—divine favors intentionally provided to the believer. As Chesterton opined, "All goods look better when they look like gifts" (Chesterton [1924] 1990, p. 78). Is a benefit experienced more positively when it is perceived as a gift? Some evidence suggests that it does. Watkins et al. (2013) showed that individuals enjoyed a benefit more when it was presented as a gift rather than as a good (an equivalent benefit not intended to help the beneficiary). In short, a benefit was experienced with more happiness when it looked like a gift rather than a mere good. As this was a scenario study, more research is needed to investigate the proposition of Chesterton, but it is somewhat surprising that studies have rarely investigated this idea because this might be a notable mechanism that helps us understand the gratitude and well-being relationship.

As all goods can become gifts for those who believe in a benevolent God, this should increase their gratitude span, which should enhance well-being. Gratitude span refers to the extent of blessings that one might be grateful for (McCullough et al. 2002). Belief in a benevolent God makes all blessings potentially things that one might be grateful for, thus enhancing the gratitude span. The more things that one is grateful for, the more grateful one should be, and research has definitively shown that the more grateful one is, the happier one tends to be (McCullough et al. 2002; Watkins et al. 2003). Taken together, another potential explanation for the benefit of gratitude to God to spiritual/religious well-being might be that gratitude to God enhances the span of gratitude.

Our theoretical analysis of how gratitude to God supports religious well-being implies that gratitude to God is of particular importance. However, believers in God likely experience many other positive emotions toward God, such as hope, joy, interest, and awe. Is gratitude to God of particular importance to religious/spiritual well-being, or is it simply one of many positive emotions that support a spiritual satisfaction of believers? Our data cannot provide an answer to this question, but future research could focus on this issue.

If divine gratitude is important to religious well-being, this has noteworthy practical implications. Increasing gratitude to God should result in increased religious well-being. How might gratitude to God be encouraged? What spiritual practices might enhance gratitude to God? What we know from the general gratitude literature could be applied to divine gratitude. For example, a regular practice of grateful recounting (also known as gratitude lists) might be modified for focusing on God as a benefactor. An individual might recall three blessings and reflect on how God was involved with providing these benefits. Other practices such as gratitude letters or grateful reappraisal of unpleasant events could be adapted to a divine benefactor. Time-honored spiritual practices such as prayer, contemplation of sacred texts, and personal or corporate worship might be even more effective in enhancing gratitude toward God. Of course, these practices might only be of interest to individuals of faith, but it seems that this would be a fruitful area for future research.

Our results also provide validity data for two gratitude to God measures. The Trait-(GTG-T) and State Gratitude to God Scales (S-GTG) showed good evidence of reliability and validity. Both measures showed excellent internal consistency (ranging from 0.97 to 0.99), and good evidence of construct validity. As expected, Time 1 trait gratitude to God

predicted increased Time 2 state gratitude to God, providing evidence of the validity of both measures. In addition, as predicted, both measures showed strong relationships to religious variables, and were more closely associated with these scales than trait gratitude (see Table 1). In fact, some of these relationships were so strong that concerns might be raised about whether these are distinct constructs. However, even with these high correlations, the GTG-T still predicted increases in critical variables after controlling levels of the Time-1 religious variable.

As religiosity has often been found to be related to general subjective well-being, we would expect that gratitude to God should be related to these variables, and indeed, this was the case in this study. Stronger associations were found between gratitude to God and general trait gratitude, and these correlations add evidence of the validity of our gratitude to God measures. In summary, this study provides preliminary evidence for the validity of our state and trait gratitude to God questionnaires (see also Watkins et al. 2019), and researchers in positive psychology and the psychology of religion may find these scales useful.

Several limitations of this study should be highlighted. Of course, the well-known problems with self-report apply to this study. One could argue that biases created by self-report are even more of an issue with religious variables because religious individuals would like to see themselves in a favorable spiritual light. Future studies should attempt to control self-presentation biases. That being said, in our critical analyses, we controlled Time 1 baseline levels of the outcome variables, thereby essentially controlling self-presentation bias. We believe that future studies should recruit a population that is more religiously diverse than that of this study. In other studies, we have found that students at this university show higher rates of atheism than is reflective of the population more generally. Thus, we tend to see individuals that are either religiously committed or show some antipathy toward religion. This might explain why we achieved such high correlations between our religious/spiritual variables, and future studies may want to recruit a more diverse religious sample.

In summary, dispositional gratitude to God predicted increased religious well-being, intimacy with God, and religious commitment over time. The results from this study suggest that gratitude to God is important to religious well-being. This may be because divine gratitude supports all benefits being seen as gifts. "The great painter boasted that he mixed all his colours with brains", observed Chesterton, "and the great saint may be said to mix all his thoughts with thanks" (Chesterton [1924] 1990, p. 78). Indeed, gratitude to God may provide religious/spiritual people with a way to mix all their thoughts with thanks, which consequently increases their religious well-being.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.W. and D.E.D.; methodology, P.W., M.F. and D.E.D.; software, M.F.; validation, P.W., M.F. and D.E.D.; formal analysis, P.W.; writing—original draft preparation, P.W.; writing—review and editing, P.W., M.F. and D.E.D.; supervision, P.W.; project administration, P.W.; funding acquisition, P.W. and D.E.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Eastern Washington University (protocol code HS-5901 and date of approval: 4 May 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at https://osf.io/kptju/ (accessed on 16 June 2022).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

S-GTG

For the following items, please respond as to *how you're feeling right now, in this moment.* Simply circle the response that best represents how you're feeling right now, compared to how you usually feel.

1. Compared to how you usually feel, how grateful to God do you feel right now?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Least grateful to God than I've ever felt			About what I usually feel			Most grateful to God I've ever felt

2. Compared to how you usually feel, how much do you feel that God has provided you with an abundant life? (i.e., plenty of everything)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Least abundant life that I've felt			About what I usually feel			Most abundant life that I've ever felt

3. Compared to how you usually feel, how much are you experiencing the goodness of God right now?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
I feel much less of the goodness of God			About what I usually feel			I feel the goodness of God more than ever

4. Compared to how you usually feel, how much do you feel a warm sense of appreciation toward God right now?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Much less than I usually feel			About what I usually feel			Much greater than I usually feel

5. Compared to how you usually feel, how generously do you feel God has treated you?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Much less than I usually feel			About what I usually feel			I feel God's generosity more than ever

6. Compared to how you usually feel, how thankful to God do you feel right now?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Much less thankful than usual			About what I usually feel			More thankful to God than I've ever felt

7. Compared to how you usually feel, how much are you experiencing the grace of God?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Much less than I usually feel			About what I usually feel			I feel God's grace more than ever

8. Compared to how you usually feel, how much do you feel you have to thank God for?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Much less than I usually feel			About what I usually feel			Much greater than I usually feel

9. Compared to how you usually feel, how thankful are you for all the people God has brought into your life?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Much less than I usually feel			About what I usually feel			More thankful to God for others than I have ever felt

Note

[1] Correlations at Time 2 showed essentially the same pattern as the relationships at Time 1.

References

Algoe, Sara B. 2012. Find, Remind, and Bind: The Functions of Gratitude in Everyday Relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6: 455–69. [CrossRef]

Barth, Karl. 1961. *Church Dogmatics, Volume IV, The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Part One*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark Publishers. First published 1956.

Bartlett, Monica Y., Paul Condon, Jourdan Cruz, Jolie Baumann, and David Desteno. 2012. Gratitude: Prompting Behaviours That Build Relationships. *Cognition and Emotion* 26: 2–13. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. 1986. Orthodoxy. In *Chesterton: Collected Works*. Edited by David Dooley. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp. 209–366, First published 1908.

Chesterton, Gilbert Kieth. 1990. *Saint Francis of Assisi*. New York: Doubleday. First published 1924.

Cole, David A., and Scott E. Maxwell. 2003. Testing Mediational Models with Longitudinal Data: Questions and Tips in the Use of Structural Equation Modeling. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 112: 558–77. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Davis, Don E., Elise Choe, Joel Meyers, Nathaniel Wade, Kristen Varjas, Allison Gifford, Amy Quinn, Joshua N. Hook, Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Brandon J. Griffin, and et al. 2016. Thankful for the Little Things: A Meta-Analysis of Gratitude Interventions. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63: 20–31. [CrossRef]

Diener, Ed, Derrick Wirtz, William Tov, Chu Kim-Prieto, Dong-won Choi, Shigehiro Oishi, and Robert Biswas-Diener. 2010. New Well-Being Measures: Short Scales to Assess Flourishing and Positive and Negative Feelings. *Social Indicators Research* 97: 143–56. [CrossRef]

Diener, Ed, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larsen, and Sharon Griffin. 1985. The Satisfaction with Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment* 49: 71–75. [CrossRef]

Gallup. 2019. How Many Americans Believe in God? Available online: https://news.gallup.com/poll/268205/americans-believe-god.aspx (accessed on 15 May 2022).

González-Sanguino, Clara, Berta Ausín, Miguel Ángel Castellanos, Jesús Saiz, Aída López-Gómez, Carolina Ugidos, and Manuel Muñoz. 2020. Mental Health Consequences during the Initial Stage of the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) in Spain. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* 87: 172–76. [CrossRef]

Gorsuch, Richard L., and Craig S. Smith. 1983. Attributions of Responsibility to God: An Interaction of Religious Beliefs and Outcomes. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22: 340–52. [CrossRef]

Keller, Timothy. 2015. *Romans 8–15 for You*. Purcellville: Goodbook Company.

Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, Self-rated Health, and Depressive Symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, Gail Ironson, and Peter C. Hill. 2017. General Feelings of Gratitude, Gratitude to God, and Hemoglobin A1c: Exploring Variations by Gender. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12: 639–50. [CrossRef]

Lyubomirsky, Sonja, and Heidi S. Lepper. 1999. A Measure of Subjective Happiness: Preliminary Reliability and Construct Validation. *Social Indicators Research* 46: 137–55. [CrossRef]

McCullough, Michael E., Robert A. Emmons, and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2002. The Grateful Disposition: A Conceptual and Empirical Topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 112–27. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

McCullough, Michael E., Shelley D. Kilpatrick, Robert A. Emmons, and David B. Larson. 2001. Is Gratitude a Moral Affect? *Psychological Bulletin* 127: 249–66. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Paloutzian, Ray F., and Craig W. Ellison. 1982. Loneliness, spiritual well-being and quality of life. In *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy*. Edited by Letitia Anne Peplau and Daniel Perlman. Hoboken: Wiley Interscience.

Pew. 2012. The Global Religious Landscape. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/ (accessed on 15 June 2022).

Plante, Thomas G., and Marcus Boccaccini. 1997. Reliability and Validity of the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire. *Pastoral Psychology* 45: 429–37. [CrossRef]

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or Just Plain Grateful? A Comparison of Religious and General Gratitude. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Scheibe, Dan, Philip C. Watkins, and Jens Uhder. 2017. Gratitude toward God: Exploring an important source of spiritual well-being. In New Research in the Science of Gratitude. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Western Psychological Association, Sacramento, CA, USA, April 27–30.

Soto, Christopher J., and Oliver P. John. 2017. Short and Extra-Short Forms of the Big Five Inventory–2: The BFI-2-S and BFI-2-XS. *Journal of Research in Personality* 68: 69–81. [CrossRef]

Thomas, Melissa, and Philip Watkins. 2003. Measuring the Grateful Trait: Development of the Revised GRAT. Presented at the 83rd Annual Convention of the Western Psychological Association, Vancouver, BC, Canada, May 1.

Uhder, Jens, Amy Webber, and Philip C. Watkins. 2010. Favors From Heaven: Sources and benefits of gratitude toward God. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Diego, CA, USA, August 12–15.

Watkins, Philip C. 2014. *Gratitude and the Good Life: Toward a Psychology of Appreciation*. New York: Springer Science + Business Media. [CrossRef]

Watkins, Philip C., Amy Sparrow, Andrew Pereira, and Susan Suominen. 2013. Are gifts better than goods? Benefits are better when experienced with gratitude. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, HI, USA, July 31–August 4.

Watkins, Philip C., and Duncan McCurrach. 2021. Progress in the Science of Gratitude. In *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 3rd ed. Edited by Charles R. Snyder, Shane J. Lopez, Lisa M. Edwards and Susana C. Marques. Oxford Library of Psychology. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 571–85.

Watkins, Philip C., Kathrane Woodward, Tamara Stone, and Russell L. Kolts. 2003. Gratitude and Happiness: Development of a Measure of Gratitude and Relationships with Subjective Well-Being. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* 31: 431–52. [CrossRef]

Watkins, Philip C., Robert A. Emmons, and Jens Uhder. 2019. Thanks Be to God: Divine Gratitude and Its Relationship to Well-Being. *Unpublished manuscript*.

Watkins, Philip C., Robert A. Emmons, Madeline R. Greaves, and Joshua Bell. 2018. Joy Is a Distinct Positive Emotion: Assessment of Joy and Relationship to Gratitude and Well-Being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 13: 522–39. [CrossRef]

Watson, David, Lee Anna Clark, and Auke Tellegen. 1988. Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54: 1063–70. [CrossRef]

Wood, Alex M., Jeffrey J. Froh, and Adam W. A. Geraghty. 2010. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30: 890–905. [CrossRef]

Wood, Alex M., John Maltby, Raphael Gillett, P. Alex Linley, and Stephen Joseph. 2008. The Role of Gratitude in the Development of Social Support, Stress, and Depression: Two Longitudinal Studies. *Journal of Research in Personality* 42: 854–71. [CrossRef]

Article
Thomas Aquinas on Gratitude to God

Christopher Kaczor

Department of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 90045, USA; ckaczor@lmu.edu

Abstract: Discussions of gratitude to God characteristically presuppose some philosophical or theological framework. This philosophical and theological exploration of gratitude to God examines the topic in light of the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Unlike some treatments of Aquinas' account of gratitude, I draw extensively on Aquinas' commentaries on Scripture as well as lesser known works, such as his sermons, to illuminate these topics rather than exclusively relying on the *Summa theologiae*. In the first part of this article, I focus on how Aquinas understands the virtue of gratitude to God. In the second part, I examine his account of ingratitude to God. And in the third part, I consider the difference Jesus makes in Aquinas' understanding of these issues, including contesting the claim that "Jesus was an ingrate".

Keywords: Aquinas; virtue; religion; gratitude; gratitude to God

1. Introduction

What is gratitude? Aquinas defines the term as "recollecting the friendship and kindliness shown by others, and in desiring to pay them back, as Tully states (*De invent*. ii, 53)." (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 80, 1). Various kinds of benefactors can show us friendship and kindness. Aquinas notes that "corresponding to these various kinds of debt there are various virtues: e.g., *Religion* whereby we pay our debt to God; *Piety*, whereby we pay our debt to our parents or to our country; *Gratitude*, whereby we pay our debt to our benefactors, and so forth" (Aquinas 1920, I-II, 60, 3). Even though, strictly speaking, this way of categorizing various debts would lead to gratitude *not* being due to God or to parents (since religion and piety correspond to these debts), Aquinas does indeed sometimes speak of gratitude to God and explores the topic in a variety of works. In this essay, I gather the obiter dicta of Aquinas on gratitude to God, on the various forms of ingratitude to God, and on how Jesus makes a difference for gratitude to God. I also call into question the claim that "Jesus was an ingrate" (Leithart 2014, p. 68).

2. Gratitude to God

In his consideration of religion as expressed in Jewish liturgy, Aquinas asks whether there was a suitable order for the liturgical rites. He affirmatively answers, "The reason for this order is that man is bound to God, chiefly on account of His majesty; secondly, on account of the sins he has committed; thirdly, because of the benefits he has already received from Him; fourthly, by reason of the benefits he hopes to receive from Him." (Aquinas 1920, I-II, 102, 3 ad 10). Gratitude to God is part of due worship of God, but in third place. The highest form of liturgy is adoration of God for his Perfect excellence, the next highest is contrition for sin against God, the third is thanksgiving for God's blessings, and last is the prayer of petition asking for future blessings. Gratitude to God is not, in his view, the most important aspect of the virtue of religion.

Of course, we cannot "pay back" our debts to some people. We cannot give birth to our parents; nor can we bring the Uncaused Cause into existence. Taking this inability to repay into account, Aquinas writes:

In repaying favors we must consider the disposition rather than the deed. Accordingly, if we consider the effect of beneficence, which a son receives from his

parents namely, to be and to live, the son cannot make an equal repayment, as the Philosopher states (Ethic. viii, 14). But if we consider the will of the giver and of the repayer, then it is possible for the son to pay back something greater to his father, as Seneca declares (De Benef. ii). If, however, he were unable to do so, the will to pay back would be sufficient for gratitude. (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 106, 6, ad 1)

So, gratitude is a matter of disposition rather than a deed. This distinguishes gratitude from justice in typical cases. The just act must be accomplished, rather than simply willed. By contrast, Aquinas thinks of gratitude as primarily a matter of will, rather than of external deeds of repayment. He writes, "No man is excused from ingratitude through inability to repay, for the very reason that the mere will suffices for the repayment of the debt of gratitude, as stated above (Q. 106, A. 6, ad 1)" (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 107, 1, ad 2). Gratitude is more a matter of the interior than the exterior, and more a matter of the heart eager to repay than the deed of repaying.

In this way, gratitude to God as found in the virtue of religion is also to be distinguished from justice, properly speaking in that gratitude, unlike justice in the usual sense, involves the passions, whereas justice in itself is about operations (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 58, 9). If I owe you money, and I pay you back what I owe, then I have done an act of justice. Gratitude to God, by contrast, is more a matter of the heart, of the emotional life, of desire. Aquinas writes,

A poor man is certainly not ungrateful if he does what he can. For since kindness depends on the heart rather than on the deed, so too gratitude depends chiefly on the heart. Hence Seneca says (De Benef. ii): "Who receives a favor gratefully, has already begun to pay it back: and that we are grateful for favors received should be shown by the outpourings of the heart, not only in his hearing but everywhere.'" (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 106, 3, ad 5)

In giving a favor, the affections of the heart and not just the gift are relevant, so too with repaying the favor. Aquinas notes that "Seneca says (De Benef. ii): 'Do you wish to repay a favor? Receive it graciously'" (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 106, 4). Aquinas believes we cannot pay back God what we've been given. But in such cases, paying it back is done by "outpourings of the heart" not only directly to the giver but also to others who learn of the generosity of the giver. In the case of God, this is to give glory to God, not as if in itself God's glory (in the sense of intrinsic excellence) is augmented by praise but because the excellence of God can be made better known among human beings by way of our public praise (Stump 2012, p. 329). Religion as not merely a private but a social virtue involves public adoration, repentance, thanksgiving, and petition to God.

The importance of the heart is also emphasized by Aquinas in his *Commentary on the Psalms*. Aquinas writes, "Thanks is given in three ways: in heart, in words, and in deed." (Aquinas 2020a). Aquinas continues explicating the Psalm: "*I will be glad*. Here he gives thanks in the heart." (Aquinas 2020a). Rejoicing is a way of giving thanks to God in the heart which, for Aquinas, can be considered in two respects:

First, when we rejoice in the Divine good considered in itself; secondly, when we rejoice in the Divine good as participated by us. The former joy is the better, and proceeds from charity chiefly: while the latter joy proceeds from hope also, whereby we look forward to enjoy the Divine good, although this enjoyment itself, whether perfect or imperfect, is obtained according to the measure of one's charity. (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 28, 1)

Aquinas writes first of gratitude to God in the sense of rejoicing in who God is. To recognize and adore Perfect Goodness, Truth, and Beauty is to rejoice in God. Secondarily, however, gratitude to God is also due for gifts God has given or will give to us. The order of importance is not accidental. To do otherwise would be to focus on what is given rather than on the giver. In as much as Aquinas believes God is Absolute Goodness, to value the

gifts of God more than God himself is to act irrationally and wrongly by valuing the lesser good over the greater good.

Not only is God the greatest benefactor, but God also supplies the greatest benefit. Aquinas understands that benefactors aid us to different degrees. When the benefactor in question is God, our debt is the greatest of all because God is the First Cause of creation. In commenting on the Apostle's creed, Aquinas writes:

> We are led to give thanks to God. Because God is the Creator of all things, it is certain that what we are and what we have is from God: "What do you have that you did not receive?" [1 Cor 4:7]. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and all who dwell on it" [Ps 23:1]. "We, therefore, must give thanks to God: What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that He has done for me?" [Ps 115:12]. (Aquinas 2020b)

So, for Aquinas, gratitude to God is part of giving to God what is due to God as our creator. Gratitude to God involves awareness that God as the First Cause gives us all the good things in our lives—friends, family, faith, and our very lives—as gifts.

Indeed, "gifts" is the right word. According to Aquinas, God did not have to create anything at all. The Divine Freedom did not have to create the world as he created it. God could have created a world without the friends we love, without the beauty we enjoy, and without the delights we experience. Our very existence is a gift. After becoming aware of what God has given to us, gratitude also enjoins us to give thanks to God for these blessings. Finally, gratitude calls us to give to God something in return. For Aquinas, part of what is due to God is worship. Aquinas' account of gratitude differs from accounts of gratitude as merely a helpful practice for psychological well-being. For Aquinas, in order to be a just person, an agent has an ethical obligation to give gratitude to God.

Gratitude to God, understood as part of what Aquinas calls the religion, is a virtue. What then is virtue? Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of virtue: the infused and the acquired. The infused virtues are a free gift from God. The acquired virtues are gained through our own repeated actions. In defining what an infused virtue is, Aquinas endorses the definition he finds in Augustine of Hippo: "Virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us" (Aquinas 1920, I-II, q.55, a.4). Virtue is a habitual quality of the mind, but not just any quality of mind. The human mind may work for a variety of ends (e.g., financial, social, material). Good qualities of mind include mathematical understanding, ability in writing poetry, and expertise in legal matters. The phrase "by which we live righteously" suggests that the quality of mind called virtue is linked to ethical aims, acting in accordance with right reason and doing the right thing. The phrase "of which no one can make bad use" indicates that virtues (unlike skills and unlike knowledge) cannot be used for immoral purposes. For example, a surgeon can use her surgical skills to heal or to harm the patient. By contrast, a just person cannot make use of justice to do injustice. Finally, a virtue is that "which God works in us, without us." By this, Augustine and Aquinas mean that this good quality is a gift from God rather than a human accomplishment. Just as no one causes himself to be alive, so too no one causes herself to have the infused virtues.

Aquinas, again following Augustine, recognize that infused virtue and acquired virtue differ in one crucial aspect. In the definition of an acquired virtue, the phrase "which God works in us, without us" is missing because an acquired virtue is one attained through human actions. If someone repeatedly does just, courageous, temperate, and practically wise actions, that person builds just, courageous, temperate, and practically wise habits. As mentioned, Aquinas holds that our very lives (and hence the capacities we have to become virtuous) are themselves gifts from God. But these acquired virtues do not require (in Aquinas' view) extra supernatural power directly from God in order to be attained.

When considering the relationship between gratitude and virtue, we can then distinguish two different questions: (1) "Is gratitude to God the foundation or prerequisite to the infused virtues?" and (2) "Is gratitude to God the foundation or prerequisite to the acquired virtues?" In considering the first question, it is important to remember that the infused

virtues are unearned gifts from God. Infused virtues include the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love as well as infused practical wisdom, infused justice, infused temperance, and infused courage. These infused virtues as free gifts of grace are not earned by us, and therefore require no action on our part, though we may reject them. As the definition of the infused virtues states, these good qualities are what "God works in us, without us". Aquinas held that even a baby, through the gift of baptism, can have the infused virtues. But an infant, due to a lack of knowledge, cannot recognize a benefit or a benefactor or her status as a beneficiary, so a baby cannot have gratitude. This point applies not only to babies, but also to adults. The theological virtues are gifts of grace for the mature adult just as much as for the infant. These gifts are not earned by our action and do not depend upon our action, including our willingness to recognize God's benefits to us. So, gratitude to God is not the foundation or prerequisite of the infused virtues.

One can then ask, "Is gratitude to God the foundation or prerequisite to the acquired virtues?" The acquired virtues are gained through our repeated actions. The temperate person becomes temperate by eating the right amount of food and in the right way, repeatedly over time. Likewise, the virtue of justice is gained by giving to each person what is due over and over again until it becomes an ingrained habit to give each person what is due to that person. Similarly, an agent gains acquired courage and practical wisdom through repeated actions of those kinds. The question then becomes: is it possible to commit a just act, a temperate act, a courageous act, or a practically wise act without gratitude to God?

It seems that it is possible for the atheist to do a just act (say, pay back a debt) without acknowledging that God exists, let alone showing gratitude to God. Similarly, it would seem to be true that the atheist could do a temperate act (say, eating the proper amount of food) without acknowledging the gifts that God has given. If this analysis is correct, then gratitude to God is not the foundation or prerequisite for having the acquired virtues.

For Aquinas, the foundation and prerequisite of all true and perfect virtue is not gratitude to God but rather love as a gift of God. True and perfect virtue is not acquired but infused. He holds, following St. Paul in First Corinthians (13:3), that without love we cannot have true and perfect virtue of any kind (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q.23, a.7). Without love, the best a person can have is true but imperfect acquired virtue, since without love the human person cannot achieve the final end of all human life, an everlasting friendship with God. Aquinas holds that love is the greatest of the virtues.

But what exactly does it mean to say that a given virtue is greater than the others? Is gratitude (to God) the greatest of the virtues? How might we judge one virtue as greater than another? One virtue is greater than another, Aquinas says, because its "object" is greater. The object of the virtue is the focus of the virtue. For Aquinas, faith, hope, and love all concern God, the greatest good, in different dimensions. Faith connects us to God as First Truth. Hope connects us to God as Source of Perfect Happiness. Love unites us in loving friendship with God. Because faith, hope, and love connect us to God, who is the greatest good, these theological virtues are greater than virtues whose objects are of lesser importance, such as facing dangers (courage), enjoying bodily pleasure in accordance with the demands of what is right (temperance), or giving to each person what is due to each person (justice). Likewise, Aquinas says the virtue of religion (giving to the Creator what is due to the Creator) is a greater virtue than other acts of justice (say, giving to parents what is due to parents). So, the more directly a virtue connects us to God, the greater that virtue.

Aquinas notes another way in which love is greater than other virtues. In heaven, faith is no longer needed because we see God face to face. In heaven, hope (which concerns a possible but not certain future good) is no longer needed because we have actually attained and currently enjoy perfect Happiness. In heaven, love remains (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 24, 8). So, it would seem, one virtue is greater than another if it is more long-lasting than another.

But in this respect, gratitude to God is a greater virtue than faith or hope, since gratitude to God remains in heaven:

> I answer that the cardinal virtues will remain in heaven, but only as regards the
> acts which they exercise in respect of their end. Wherefore, since the virtue of

penance is a part of justice which is a cardinal virtue, whoever has the habit of penance in this life will have it in the life to come. But he will not have the same act as now, but another, namely, thanksgiving to God for his mercy in pardoning his sins. (Aquinas 1920, IV 16, 2)

If we consider a virtue to be greater inasmuch as it is more long-lasting, then gratitude to God is greater in this respect than faith or hope, both of which no longer exist in heaven. So, according to Aquinas, in heaven we both remember our sins and give thanks to God for his mercy in forgiving our sins, which makes gratitude to God, in this respect, greater than faith and hope.

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas places his discussion of gratitude within the context of justice. Yet, in the *Summa theologiae,* as well as in his commentaries on Paul, Aquinas also links gratitude to love. He writes, "The debt of gratitude flows from the debt of love, and from the latter no man should wish to be free." (Aquinas 1920, II-II, q. 107, a. 1, ad. 3). When we love someone and will their good, we appreciate that they are the kind of individuals to whom we can will good. Since we cannot love what we do not know, our knowledge of a person's goodness gives rise to our appreciation of the good of the beloved (Pruss 2013, pp. 23–26). When the goodness of individuals includes their generosity to us, gratitude follows. In his *Commentary on Colossians*, Aquinas writes that St. Paul "urges them to acts of love. He mentions two of these acts, peace and thankfulness, and implies a third, joy" (Aquinas 2020c). In this passage, thankfulness is considered an act of love rather than an act annexed to justice. Gratitude to God is therefore related both to justice and to love. In this way, gratitude is like other acts that are related to both justice and love. The act of murder violates love (since the murderer wills what is evil for the victim rather than what is good) but the act of murder is also an act of injustice (since the murder takes what is due to another, the victim's life.) Similarly, in a positive key, gratitude to God, as well as to other persons, involves both justice and love.

Elsewhere, Aquinas writes of gratitude to God as a cause of loving God. In his treatise *On the Two Commandments*, the Dominican says that in order to fulfill the commandment to love God perfectly, four things are required:

The first is the recollection of the divine benefits, because all that we have, whether our soul or body or exterior things, we have them all from God. Therefore, we must serve him with all this and love him with a perfect heart. A man would be extremely ungrateful if, after thinking of all the benefits he received from someone, he did not love him. (Aquinas 1939)

Here, gratitude to God gives rise to the love of God. Thus, for Aquinas, gratitude to God is both a *cause* of loving God and is also an *effect* of loving God. Gratitude to God causes the love of God to increase because when someone thinks of the benefits God has given, that person is prompted to love God more. Likewise, when an individual loves God, the individual is led to appreciate God in terms of giving benefits, which thereby inspires gratitude to God. Gratitude to God causes and is caused by the love of God.

For Aquinas, even adversities are divine gifts. The problem of suffering is, for many people, the most decisive reason to reject God's existence. Can we reconcile the reality of evil with a God of goodness, power, and love? To delve into a theodicy or a defense is beyond the scope of this essay (Stump 2012). But the existence of suffering is, for Aquinas, linked to gratitude to God. In his *Commentary on Ephesians*, Aquinas writes:

The more a person is influenced by his relation to God and knows him, the more does he see God as greater and himself as smaller, indeed almost nothing, in comparison with God. *Now my eye sees you. Therefore do I reprehend myself, and do penance in dust and ashes* (Job 42:5–6). So he declares *giving thanks always for all things*, for all his gifts, whether of prosperity or adversity. *I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be always in my mouth* (Ps 34:1). For adversities are also gifts to us on the way: *count it all joy when you shall fall into diverse temptations* (Jas 1:2). And the apostles *indeed went from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were*

accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus (Acts 5:41). *In all things give thanks* (1 Thess 5:18). (Aquinas 2020d)

Aquinas holds that if we remember the greatness of God and his absolute providential sovereignty over all things, then even temptations should give us joy and our suffering should lead to rejoicing. Aquinas believes that a loving God only permits evil for our own good (Stump 2012). This attitude to suffering is apostolic, but also difficult. In adversity, it is easy to agree with Winston Churchill: "If this is a blessing, it is certainly very well disguised" (Wilson 2006).

To be grateful to God, even in suffering, is also recommended by the example of Job as understood by Thomas Aquinas. This passage comes from *Expositio super Iob ad Litteram*:

> For it would not please God that someone should suffer from adversity unless he wished some good to come to him from it. So though adversity is bitter in itself and generates sadness, nevertheless it should be the cause of rejoicing when one considers the use because of which it pleases God, as is said about the apostles, *the apostles went rejoicing because they had suffered contempt for Christ* (Acts 5:41). For when taking a bitter medicine, one can rejoice with reason because of the hope for health, although he suffers sensibly. So, since joy is the matter of the action of thanksgiving, therefore Job concludes this third argument with an act of thanksgiving, saying, *Blessed be the name of the Lord*. The name of the Lord is truly blessed by men inasmuch as they have knowledge of his goodness; namely, that he distributes all things well and does nothing unjustly. (Aquinas 2020e)

By this time in his story, Job has suffered catastrophic losses, including the death of his children. Aquinas understands the suffering of Job as a severe mercy from God for Job's own well-being. "So though adversity is bitter in itself and generates sadness, nevertheless it should be the cause of rejoicing when one considers the use because of which it pleases God" (Aquinas 2020e). The bitter medicine is awful and there is no denying its terrible power. Rather than stoic detachment, Aquinas recognizes that a good person will feel the deep sadness that comes from catastrophic losses. But Aquinas holds that the bitter medicine is, at the same time, when considered as given by God for our own flourishing, a cause of rejoicing. The chemotherapy both makes us sick and destroys the cancer that is destroying us. Our hope for full recovery of health is a cause for joy.

What does Aquinas mean by saying that "joy is the matter of the action of thanksgiving"? To be joyful is to delight in the good at hand. The good of bitter medicine is not found in the bitterness but in the medical means that enable a good outcome. Even bitter medicine is a gift, not as bitter but as medicine. So, given that we have been given a gift, the gift of hope for future full recovery made possible by means of bitter medicine, we can rejoice even in our sufferings. Joy is the matter of the action of thanksgiving in that what gives joy is the good (or at least what is thought of as good), and it is the good gift that prompts thanksgiving.

In his *Commentary on Colossians,* Aquinas writes,

> So he [St. Paul] says: We thank God, the Author of grace: "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Th 5:18). And we thank God always, for the past and for the future. For although we cannot actually pray every minute, we should always pray by serving God out of love: "Pray constantly" (1 Th 5:17); "We ought always to pray" (Lk 18:1)." (Aquinas 2020c)

For Aquinas, prayer need not be limited to vocal prayer (which could not be done every minute of the day). He thinks it is possible to raise the mind and heart to God not just in words but in deeds. Every (morally permissible) action can be done with love of God as its final end. So, everyday activities could, in this view, become ways of thanking God. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Aquinas writes, "*I will sing*. Here he [the Psalmist] gives thanks in deed, for to sing is manual labor, and through this a good work is understood, since all our works should end in the glory of God. *So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven* (Matt 5:16). *I shall sing*

to my God as long as I shall be (Ps 145:2)" (Aquinas 2020a). Not just singing can be a deed giving thanks to God, not just manual labor, but any good work is a way to give thanks to God. In the words attributed to fellow Dominican St. Martin de Porres: "Everything, even sweeping, scraping vegetables, weeding a garden and waiting on the sick could be a prayer if it were offered to God" (Martin 1998, p. 39). As Aquinas puts it, "Every deed, insofar as it is done in God's honor, belongs to religion . . . " (Aquinas 1920, II–II, 81, 1 ad 2). The scope of gratitude to God can include, therefore, anything an agent does knowingly and willingly. All conscious activity can be done in gratitude to God.

3. Sins against Gratitude to God

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas proceeds by first introducing a particular virtue, like hope, and then treating deficiencies of the virtue, like despair and presumption. Aquinas views the evil of vice always as a privation of the good of virtue. He thinks we cannot properly understand an evil unless we have some sense of the good in question, which is spoiled by the evil. So, having laid out in the first part of this paper Aquinas' treatment of gratitude to God, we are now situated to consider sins against gratitude to God.

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas indicates that ingratitude comes in three degrees. There can be a failure to recognize the favor bestowed, a failure to expresses thanks for the favor and, finally, a failure to repay the favor in the suitable way (Aquinas 1920, II–II, 107, 2). An agent can fail by omission of any one of these three elements. A still worse kind of failure in gratitude is not to just omit but do the opposite of the three elements of gratitude, namely to view a favor as evil, to find fault with a favor, or to return evil for good. And in so doing, such an individual not only omits what is due in gratitude but does the opposite of what is due in gratitude. These failures might also arise with respect to gratitude to God.

In addition, we can consider what might be called false gratitude to God. Aristotle identified various simulacra of virtues, which look like and may be mistaken for virtues, but in fact are not true virtues. A solider who faces death in battle appears brave, but perhaps he only continues to fight because he is compelled to do so by his commanding officer's threats. The truly brave person is motivated not by threats but for the right reasons (Aristotle 1999). Or, imagine a woman who always drinks alcohol in moderation. She appears to be temperate. But if we learn that she has the mistaken belief that drinking more than two beers is fatal, her "virtue" is in fact not fully virtuous for it is based on ignorance. What appears to be virtue may not in fact be true virtue. So too with gratitude, Aquinas brings to light what might be called "false gratitude".

Consider, for example, the Pharisee who said, "O God, I give you thanks that I am not as the rest of men" (Luke 18:11). The Pharisee gives thanks to God. But is this the virtue of gratitude to God? Aquinas considers the man to be not virtuous but rather haughty. Aquinas says that to be haughty is a form of pride that is exhibited "when one attributes to himself what he has received from another, but considers that he earned it: *I fast twice in a week, I give tithes of all that I possess* (Luke 18:12)." (Aquinas 2020f). The Pharisee appears to be thanking God, but in Aquinas' understanding, the man is attributing his greatness not to God but to himself. He fasts twice a week, so the Pharisee reasons that God must really owe him a lot. The faux grateful person like the Pharisee fails to recognize what he has received from God, and he is haughty because he thinks that his excellence is his own. By contrast, the grateful person recognizes what she has received from God, and so does not attribute to herself what she should not, and so is not haughty in that respect (Konyndyk Deyoung 2004). When considering the poor sinner who is praying, the Pharisee lacks the conviction, saying, "there but for the grace of God, go I." He lacks that realization that his own goodness depends entirely on God.

The case of the proud man who praises God that he is not like other people raises the issue of the relationship between gratitude to God and humility, the opposite of pride. This connection is made clear in one of Aquinas' sermons:

> Imagine, you are a highly placed man or a scholar. You ought to ponder from
> where you have it: you do not have it from yourself, but from God, so that you

may subject yourself to him. And this realization not only takes away pride, but even brings on humility. For as the gifts increase, the reasons for giving honor increase; the more goods you have, the more obliged you are to God. But someone who does not know that the goods he has come from God, cannot thank God. Because of this [I say]: think this over, that whatever you have, you have from God (cf. also Jn 3:27), and that you are bound to give him thanks (cf. Eph 5:20, Col 3:15, et al. *ibi*) or, better, give to him thanks in return. Then those gifts will not lead to pride. (Aquinas 2020g)

Since Aquinas believes that all goods that individuals have come from God, the First Cause, he grounds his vision of human excellence in this reality. To be humble is not to be humiliated, to think that we human beings are mere worms or that we have no value. Rather, Aquinas notes that humility is related to the word for 'ground' (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 61, 1). To be humble is to be grounded in the truth about who we are. We did not give ourselves life. We did not give ourselves our native intelligence. If we have been given great gifts by God, then we owe great gratitude to God. Without gratitude, gifts given by God can lead to pride, and Aquinas believes that pride is deadly for a person's relationship with God and with other people (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 162, 6). So, Aquinas reasons, God might withhold further gifts from those lacking gratitude to God so as not to occasion someone's falling into the sin of pride.

Another manifestation of false gratitude is gratitude for what is mistakenly taken to be a benefit when in fact what is given is not a benefit. Imagine someone who is grateful to another for facilitating sinful behavior. Someone might think it a great gift to be given heroin to use, but this 'gift' entraps the user in deeper addiction. Aquinas writes,

Gratitude regards a favor received: and he that helps another to commit a sin does him not a favor but an injury: and so no thanks are due to him, except perhaps on account of his good will, supposing him to have been deceived, and to have thought to help him in doing good, whereas he helped him to sin. In such a case the repayment due to him is not that he should be helped to commit a sin, because this would be repaying not good but evil, and this is contrary to gratitude. (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 107, 1, ad 1)

Authentic gratitude is for an authentic good. But if a so-called 'gift' is actually harmful, then thankfulness is not called for in this case or, at most, only gratitude for the good will proceeding from mistaken suppositions. To help individuals to sin is to help them in self-harm.

For Aquinas, ingratitude is connected to all sin because all sin involves disobedience to the will of God and a disobedience that manifests an ingratitude to God for his gifts. Indeed, ingratitude might be considered the root of the first sin and the model of every sin. Aquinas writes, "God had conferred on human nature at its beginning, over and above the character of its own principles, that its reason would possess a kind of rectitude of original justice that could impress upon the lower powers without any resistance. And because this had been conferred gratuitously, it was justly taken away through the ingratitude of disobedience" (Aquinas 2020h, II, D.31, a.1). This linking of ingratitude to God and the disobedience of sin is found in another expression in 1542 by St. Ignatius of Loyola who believed ingratitude to be "the cause, beginning, and origin of all evils and sins" (Lehane 2011, p. 16).

Yet, is not at least the original sin traditionally linked with pride rather than ingratitude? Yes, but for Aquinas ingratitude is itself linked to pride: "Disobedience and ingratitude are not species of pride as if dividing pride essentially but are called species of pride as possessing a certain participation in pride, insofar as they are commanded by pride" (Aquinas 2020h, II.D42.Q2.A4.C.5). The ungrateful person has a distorted view of his own excellence as self-caused and not ultimately due to God's gift. For this reason, Aquinas writes that the sin of a more excellent person is aggravated in comparison to the sin of a less excellent person "on account of ingratitude, because every good in which a man

excels, is a gift of God, to Whom man is ungrateful when he sins: and in this respect any excellence, even in temporal goods, aggravates a sin, according to Wis. 6:7: *The mighty shall be mightily tormented*" (Aquinas 1920, I-II, 73, 10). The greater the gifts we have received, the greater the ingratitude of disobedience.

This understanding of ingratitude to God leads Aquinas to reason that God may withhold some gifts from ungrateful people, knowing from all eternity that if certain gifts were given to individuals, if the individuals were thereby to become more excellent than they are, these gifts would aggravate their sin (Aquinas 2022n, C1, L5, n.75). God sometimes withholds giving good gifts to an ungrateful individual since "not undeservedly, did condemnation follow his ingratitude for that same good. And owing to that ingratitude, what is good became evil to him, as happens to them who receive Christ's body unworthily" (Aquinas 1920, III.81.2). God's mercy is sometimes expressed through withholding gifts to the ungrateful, since these gifts, despite being good in themselves, could inadvertently harm the ungrateful.

For Aquinas, sin is the worst kind of evil that a human person can suffer. If by not giving further gifts God can prevent someone from falling into further alienation from God, it is a mercy, a severe mercy, for God not to give that person gifts. By analogy, imagine good parents withholding a cash gift to an addicted daughter because they foresee that she will actually be made worse off having more money to buy more drugs. God, foreseeing that a gift will be an occasion for the sin of ingratitude and perhaps other sins as well, could judge that people are better off, all things considered, not receiving a possible gift.

On the other hand, to give thanks to God is to occasion even greater blessings. Aquinas writes, "to the source whence blessings come they return, namely, by giving thanks, to flow again by repeated blessings" (Aquinas 2022n, C1.L5.n75.3). Aquinas does not specify what these blessings are, but given what he says elsewhere, to return thanks to God is itself a gift: the gift of intensifying the relationship to God. In giving thanks to God, we receive the blessing of turning our minds to God, of acknowledging his goodness in giving gifts to us, and of recognizing God's love for us. When we give thanks to God, it becomes easier to know and love God, which is, for Aquinas, the ultimate end of the human agent.

4. Jesus and Gratitude to God

In his book *Gratitude: An Intellectual History,* Peter Leithart offers one of the only works, and certainly the most influential work, on the history of gratitude. Because he is a prolific author, minister, and theologian, Liethart's voice is particularly an influential one in the Christian community, particularly when the topic is gratitude. Leithart writes:

> Little of Aquinas' account is distinctively Christian. Believing as he does in creation, he recognizes that all things are gifts of God. He, of course, endorses the Pauline exhortation to "give thanks in all circumstances. Yet when he gives direct attention to gratitude, he follows Seneca and Tully to give a slightly Christianized version of ancient reciprocity. In his work the infinite circle of Christian gift and gratitude contracted, and this contraction was perpetuated into the following centuries. (Leithart 2014, p. 94)

Liethart's observations are fairly accurate as far as the *Summa theologiae* goes, but are less accurate in terms of Aquinas' opera omnia, particularly his Biblical commentaries. Jesus does make a difference for Aquinas' understanding of gratitude.

For Aquinas, proper gratitude to God is incomplete without a knowledge of Christ. Aquinas writes:

> All the knowledge imparted by faith revolves around these two points, the divinity of the Trinity and the humanity of Christ. This should cause us no surprise, for the humanity of Christ is the way by which we come to the divinity. Therefore, while we are still wayfarers, we ought to know the way leading to our goal. In the heavenly fatherland adequate thanks would not be rendered to God

if men had no knowledge of the way by which they are saved. (Aquinas 2020m, ch.2)

We cannot be grateful if we do not know the favor we have received. Aquinas believes God saved us through the gift of God himself, who was made man, born of Mary, suffered, died, and rose from the dead for us. Thus, adequate gratitude to God, and giving thanks is part of this adequate gratitude, requires knowledge of Jesus. So, who is Jesus?

For Aquinas, Jesus was and is a perfect human being as well as perfect God. If Jesus is God, this complicates gratitude to God. Unlike God the Father who (according to Aquinas) does not suffer in giving us gifts, Aquinas believes that Jesus did suffer in giving us the gift of salvation by taking on human nature, suffering on the cross, and dying on behalf of sinners (Aquinas 1920, III, 46, 6). According to some accounts of gratitude, when the giver suffers in giving us a gift, we owe the giver a greater debt of gratitude than when the giver gives the gift without personal cost. If this principle is correct, the Christian owes a greater debt of gratitude to God than the kind of theist who holds that God does not suffer in giving us gifts.

Aquinas argues that Jesus taught us about gratitude to God in teaching his disciples how to pray. The Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, helps us to avoid the sin of ingratitude. Aquinas writes, "In these very words [give us this day our daily bread] the Holy Spirit teaches us to avoid five sins which are usually committed out of the desire for temporal things" (Aquinas 2020i, S4.3). Aquinas goes on to say:

> The fifth sin is ingratitude. A person grows proud in his riches, and does not realize that what he has comes from God. This is a grave fault, for all things that we have, be they spiritual or temporal, are from God: *all things are thine; and we have given thee what we received of thy hand* (1 Chr 29:14). Therefore, to take away this vice, the prayer has, *give us,* and *our bread,* that we may know that all things come from God. (Aquinas 2020i, S4.8)

Aquinas, in other words, thinks that the very prayer given to Christians by Jesus contains within it a teaching of the Holy Spirit about avoiding the sin of ingratitude.

Was Jesus an ingrate? A discussion of gratitude and the role of Jesus would be incomplete without a consideration of Liethart's claim that "Jesus was an ingrate" (Leithart 2014, p. 68). Although Jesus gave gratitude to God, Liethart holds that nowhere in the Gospels is it recorded that Jesus gave thanks to any human being. Would Aquinas agree with this reading of the Bible?

Having searched through Aquinas' commentaries on Scripture, both the free-standing commentaries and the interpretations of Biblical passages about Christ in texts such as the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, I found no passage contradicting Liethart's claim that Jesus never explicitly said "thank you" to any human being. Thus far, Aquinas and Liethart agree.

However, Aquinas argues, echoing John 21:25, that "Our Lord did and said many things which are not related in the Gospel" (Aquinas 1920, IV.29.3 reply to 1). There is no explicit passage in Scripture that Jesus consumed any nourishment between Mary's nursing him as a baby and his public ministry as a full-grown adult. But if Jesus was fully human, then he obviously ate food during this roughly thirty-year period between being an infant and being an adult in public ministry. There is no passage that talks about Jesus as a five-year-old or as a twenty-year-old, but Jesus must have spent time at these ages. So, the lack of Biblical passages in which Jesus shows gratitude to human beings would not be, for Aquinas, an indication that Jesus in fact never thanked other people.

Aquinas thinks that there is a good reason that Scripture does not record all the actions of Jesus. Aquinas writes:

> For to write about each and every word and deed of Christ is to reveal the power of every word and deed. Now the words and deeds of Christ are also those of God. Thus, if one tried to write and tell of the nature of every one, he could not do so; indeed, the entire world could not do this. This is because even an infinite

number of human words cannot equal one word of God. From the beginning of the Church, Christ has been written about; but this is still not equal to the subject. Indeed, even if the world lasted a hundred thousand years, and books written about Christ, his words and deeds could not be completely revealed. (Aquinas 2020j, C21.L6.n.2660)

As Scripture itself indicates, Scripture does not exhaust or capture in their fullness all the words and deeds of God in Christ, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if every one of them were to be written, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written" (John 21:25). So, we should not reason from the silence of Scripture to the conclusion that Jesus did *not* give thanks to human beings.

For Aquinas, there is reason to think that Jesus did in fact give thanks. Jesus perfectly fulfills the laws of the Old Testament (Matt 5:17). One of the fundamental commands of the Old Testament is to "honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). So, Jesus must have perfectly honored both his father and mother. Now, for Aquinas at least, honoring parents is one manifestation of gratitude (broadly speaking, since properly speaking the virtue of responding properly to the gifts of parents is 'piety'.) Recall that Aquinas differentiates various kinds of debts: "Corresponding to these various kinds of debt there are various virtues: e.g., *Religion* whereby we pay our debt to God; *Piety*, whereby we pay our debt to our parents or to our country; *Gratitude*, whereby we pay our debt to our benefactors, and so forth" (Aquinas 1920, I-II, 60, 3). Since Christ perfectly fulfilled Jewish law (Matthew 5:17–20), Jesus must have shown gratitude to his mother Mary (Hahn 2006).

Even if it is true that Jesus showed gratitude for his mother, was Jesus an ingrate to other human beings? To consider how Aquinas would answer this question, recall that Aquinas looks to Jesus as the human paradigm and model for how to live: "In His manner of living our Lord gave an example of perfection as to all those things which of themselves relate to salvation" (Aquinas 1920, ST III, 40, 2, Reply to 1). In his essay, "Jesus in the Moral Theology of Thomas Aquinas," Joseph Wawrykow notes, "Jesus is the model for authentic behavior, the great human exemplar who shows what is possible for those who are in correct relationship to God, who indicates in his own action how they might act as they move toward God as their end" (Wawrykow 2012, p. 21). According to Aquinas, Jesus had all the virtues: "Now the more perfect a principle is, the more it impresses its effects. Hence, since the grace of Christ was most perfect, there flowed from it, in consequence, the virtues which perfect the several powers of the soul for all the soul's acts; and thus Christ had all the virtues" (Aquinas 1920, III, 7, 2). Christ not only had the virtues, "He had them most perfectly beyond the common mode" (Aquinas 1920, III, 7, 2, ad 2). The perfect human being was perfect in virtue.

If Christ has every virtue, and if Aquinas is right that gratitude is a virtue, then Christ must have had gratitude to the people who helped him. There were many. Mary helped Jesus by carrying him in her womb, giving birth to him, and caring for him as a baby. Joseph helped baby Jesus by finding a place for him to be born, by protecting him from King Herod who sought to kill him, and by taking Jesus safely to Egypt and out of Egypt. The magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to baby Jesus. His cousin John helped Jesus by announcing the Lamb of God to the world. Peter and John helped Jesus to arrange the place to celebrate the Last Supper. Simon of Cyrene helped Christ carry his cross. This list is not exhaustive. If Jesus has the perfection of every virtue, and if Aquinas is right that gratitude is a virtue, then Christ must have had gratitude to these people who helped him.

Indeed, although the words "thank you" are not used, Jesus does exhibit gratitude to the woman who anoints him with expensive perfume, an event recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 7, and John 12). As found in the Gospel of Matthew:

> While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were

indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." (Matthew 26:6–13)

Is it fair to construe Jesus as expressing gratitude in this passage? The answer to that question depends in part on how gratitude is defined. We could define gratitude as Aquinas does, in terms of "[1] recollecting the friendship and kindliness shown by others, and [2] in desiring to pay them back . . . ." (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 80, 1). Or, we might follow Robert Emmons, who defines gratitude as "a willingness to recognize (a) that one has been the beneficiary of someone's kindness, (b) that the benefactor has intentionally provided a benefit, often incurring some personal cost and (c) that the benefit has value in the eyes of the beneficiary" (Emmons 2013, p. 5).

If we define gratitude according to either of these definitions, Jesus shows gratitude to the woman. Jesus recognizes that he has been the beneficiary of someone's kindness: "She has done a beautiful thing to me." He sees that she has intentionally provided a benefit incurring personal cost in using "very expensive perfume." Finally, this exuberant gift has value in the eyes of Jesus: "When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial." Jesus desires to and does return the favor immediately by defending the woman from criticism: "Why are you bothering this woman?" Christ praises her kind deed and glorifies the woman by saying, "Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." If we understand gratitude as Aquinas and Emmons define it, then Jesus was not an ingrate to this woman.

We have no reason to think that the example of this woman or these other examples of those giving to Jesus mentioned earlier definitively lists all the gifts Jesus was given. Indeed, the number of people who helped Jesus includes all those who helped those who helped Jesus. In as much as the Body of Christ is extended through time, found both in the Church and in those in need (Matthew 25), those who have served Jesus include a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9).

So, since Jesus received kindness and favors by others many times, there are grounds for Jesus to be grateful to others. It would be, then, a failure on the part of Jesus if he were not grateful. If it is true that gratitude is a virtue (gratitude not just to God but to other human beings), and if Jesus had all the virtues, then Jesus had the virtue of gratitude, as well as piety, and religion. In other words, Jesus was not an ingrate.

We can approach the question of whether Jesus was an ingrate in another way. Aquinas views Jesus as living a perfectly blameless life: "Christ wished to make His Godhead known through His human nature. And therefore, since it is proper to man to do so, He associated with men, at the same time manifesting His Godhead to all, by preaching and working miracles, and by leading among men a blameless and righteous life" (Aquinas 1920, III, 40, 1, Reply to 1). Aquinas thinks that Jesus is not only sinless but that "Christ was incapable of sin" (Aquinas 1920, III, 40, 3, ad 1). So, if it is true that ingratitude is a sin, then Jesus not only did not commit any sins of ingratitude, but could not commit any sins of ingratitude. Jesus was not an ingrate.

There are at least two possible responses to these considerations. First, it could be denied that gratitude is a virtue or that ingratitude is a vice. Although Liethart might disagree, Aquinas holds that gratitude is a virtue and ingratitude is a vice, so this way of defending the conclusion that "Jesus is an ingrate" is not available to Aquinas.

Second, it might be admitted that gratitude is virtuous and ingratitude sinful, but Jesus might (for whatever reason) not be subject to these categories. For example, although Aquinas holds that Jesus had the fullness of all the virtues, Aquinas qualifies this generalization later when he writes that Jesus did not have the virtues of faith or of hope.

For Aquinas, Jesus from the beginning of his human existence enjoyed the beatific vision (Aquinas 1920, III, 15, 10). And for Aquinas, faith is not had by those who enjoy the beatific vision for they see God face to face without faith. Likewise, hope for *future* eternal life does not exist in those who *now* enjoy eternal life in the beatific vision. So, Aquinas concludes that Jesus had neither faith nor hope, thus qualifying the claim that Jesus had all the virtues. So, perhaps, also with gratitude to human beings, Jesus did not have it even though (for other people) gratitude is a virtue and ingratitude is a vice.

Is gratitude like faith and hope, a virtue needed in general by human beings but not needed by Jesus? Recall that the reason Aquinas gives that Jesus does not have faith and hope is that Jesus was not just a wayfarer who journeyed towards God, but a comprehensor who enjoyed the beatific vision of God (Aquinas 1920, III, 15, 10). As such, he did not have faith or hope but saw and enjoyed God (Aquinas 1920, III, 7, 3 and III, 7, 4). But gratitude to God, as Aquinas noted earlier, continues in heaven (Aquinas 1920, IV Q16, a.2). Does gratitude also extend to human beings in heaven? If it does, then the beatific vision enjoyed by Christ is no obstacle to Jesus expressing gratitude to human beings.

Aquinas does not, as far as I can tell, ask and answer this question explicitly. But in the parable of the talents, Jesus teaches an eschatological story replete with gratitude: "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master!'" (Matthew 25:23). In Aquinas' interpretation, the master recognizes the good that the servant has done and rewards him for it (Aquinas 2020k, C25.L2.n2052.4). Although the word "gratitude" does not appear in this passage, the words of the master include an acknowledgement of the good done on behalf of the master, praise for this work, and a repayment of sorts—classic elements of gratitude. If the master of the parable represents Christ the Divine Master, then Jesus himself has gratitude to his servants. Indeed, for Aquinas, the faithful servant is a friend of the master:

> The master ought to feel towards his servant as a friend, hence it is said, *as your own soul*. For this is proper to friends, that they are of one mind in what they will and what they do not will. *Now the multitude of the believers were of one heart and one soul* (Acts 4:32). By which we are given to understand that there is a consensus of master and servant, when the faithful servant becomes a friend. (Aquinas 2020l, p. 2)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls his disciples not only servants but friends (John 15:15). Indeed, Aquinas says that "Christ is our wisest and greatest friend" (Aquinas 1920, I-II, 108, 4, also see Ryan 2016). If followers of Jesus are also friends of Jesus, then the gratitude of Christ to human beings is even more appropriate, since friends show one another thanks for gifts received. And this friendship (charity) between God and human beings does not end, but finds its completion in heaven (Aquinas 1920, II-II, 24, 8). So, although Aquinas does not explicitly address the question of whether Jesus has gratitude to human beings in heaven, this conclusion would not only be compatible but would also seem to follow from the parable of the faithful servants and the friendship that exists in the life to come.

Although it is surprising that there is no explicit passage recording Jesus thanking a human being, Aquinas would not conclude from this lacuna that Jesus was an ingrate. If gratitude is a virtue, and if Jesus had all the virtues, then Jesus had gratitude. In all four Gospels, Jesus expresses classic elements of gratitude to the woman who anoints him with expensive perfume. In the parable of the talents, the Good Master (Christ) acts with gratitude to the faithful servants who invested their talents and made a return. Jesus was no ingrate.

5. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to bring together various passages from Aquinas' *opera omnia* to shed light on his conception of gratitude to God and ingratitude to God, as well as the transformation Jesus makes to gratitude to God. In taking into account the totality of Aquinas' written work, the full scope of his views of gratitude to God move it beyond a

simplistic application of Stoic ideas of gratitude. This essay also argues that Jesus was no ingrate both because of how he treats the woman who anoints him and because Jesus had the fullness of all virtues, including the virtue of gratitude.

References

Aquinas, Thomas. 1920. *Summa Theologiae*. London: Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

Aquinas, Thomas. 1939. *Explanation of the Ten Commandments*. Translated by Joseph B. Collins. New York: J.F. Wagner.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020a. *Commentary on the Psalms*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020b. *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020c. *Commentary on Colossians*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020d. *Commentary on Ephesians*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020e. *Expositio Super Iob ad Litteram*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020f. *Commentary on II Timothy*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020g. *Sermon on Luke 14:16 A Certain Man Made a Great Supper*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020h. *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020i. *Exposition on the Lord's Prayer*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020j. *Commentary on John*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020k. *Commentary on Matthew*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020l. *Commentary on Philemon*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2020m. *Compendium of Theology*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aquinas, Thomas. 2022n. *Commentary on the Romans*. Steubenville: Aquinas Institute.

Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Emmons, Robert A. 2013. *Gratitude Works! A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hahn, Scott. 2006. *Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God*. New York: Random House.

Konyndyk Deyoung, Rebecca. 2004. Aquinas's Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence: A New Measure of Greatness. *Faith and Philosophy* 21: 214–27. [CrossRef]

Lehane, Brian J. 2011. Attitude of Gratitude: The Examen Prayer of St. Ignatius. *Partners*, 16.

Leithart, Peter J. 2014. *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Martin, Regis. 1998. *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Hell, Heaven*. San Francisco: Ignatius.

Pruss, Alexander. 2013. *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Ryan, Thomas. 2016. Jesus—'Our Wisest and Dearest Friend': Aquinas and Moral Transformation. *New Blackfriars* 97: 575–90. [CrossRef]

Stump, Eleonore. 2012. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wawrykow, Joseph. 2012. Jesus in the Moral Theology of Thomas Aquinas. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42: 13–33. [CrossRef]

Wilson, Andrew Norman. 2006. *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

MDPI

Article

Gratitude to God: Brief Prompts Do Not Increase It, Wording of Questions Matters, and Belief in a Loving, Powerful, Gift-Giving God Remains Central

Julie J. Exline * and Joshua A. Wilt

Department of Psychological Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106-7123, USA
* Correspondence: julie.exline@case.edu

Abstract: When good things happen, what thoughts elicit gratitude to God (GTG)? Building on work highlighting divine attributions and appraisals, we examined whether consciously priming people to think about God would increase subsequent reports of GTG. U.S. adult participants (N = 553) completed an online survey asking them to describe a positive event from the past month. They were then randomly assigned to one of six conditions, five of which brought up beliefs about God or the idea that God might work indirectly through natural events. Contrary to preregistered predictions, there were no statistically significant differences between conditions on an open-ended or a Likert measure of GTG. Yet GTG reports differed dramatically between the open-ended question (only 20% of participants reported GTG) and a Likert item (81% of participants, and 93% of those who believed in God, endorsed some GTG). The most endorsed response on the 5-point Likert scale was 5, indicating that most people reported feeling extremely grateful to God. These results suggest that the methods used to assess GTG could have a major impact on conclusions about GTG prevalence. Yet, regardless of assessment method, and directly replicating earlier finding, several factors emerged as consistent GTG predictors: religiousness, belief in a loving, powerful, and generous God with positive intentions, attributing the positive event to God, feeling loved in response, and framing the event as a gift from God.

Keywords: God; gratitude; supernatural attribution; religion; spirituality; gift; divine attributions; religious attributions; religious appraisals; measurement; religious belief

1. Introduction

Many people who believe in God feel grateful to God in response to positive events in their lives (e.g., Knabb et al. 2021; Tsang et al. 2021; Wilt and Exline 2022). Studies have shown that gratitude to God (GTG) is associated with positive personality traits such as honesty/humility, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Aghababaei et al. 2018), and the kindred concept of transcendent indebtedness to God has also been linked with reports of greater empathy, awe, humility, and prosocial behavior (Nelson et al. 2022). GTG also relates to many indicators of good mental health, such as lower levels of anxiety and depression (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Krause et al. 2014) and greater well-being (e.g., Aghababaei et al. 2018; Knabb et al. 2021; Nelson et al. 2022; Rosmarin et al. 2011; Sadoughi and Hesampour 2020; Watkins et al. 2019) and hope (Krause et al. 2015). Some studies also suggest positive connections between GTG and physical health (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Krause et al. 2014, 2015, 2017).

GTG has shown consistent positive connections with religiousness (e.g., Aghababaei et al. 2018; Wilt and Exline 2022; Kaplan 2012; Krause and Hayward 2015; Nelson et al. 2022; Rosmarin et al. 2011; Watkins et al. 2019) and shows many correlates with indicators of healthy religion or spirituality. For example, GTG may reflect a healthy sense of indebtedness to God (Nelson et al. 2022), one linked with perceptions of a secure attachment to God (Nelson et al. 2022; Watkins et al. 2019), spiritual transcendence (Watkins et al. 2019),

and tendencies to draw close to God in times of distress (Wilt and Exline 2022). GTG has also been linked with increases in religious well-being over time (Watkins et al. 2022).

1.1. Setting the Stage for Gratitude to God (GTG): Some Potential Cognitive Predictors

Given the many positive correlates and potential benefits of GTG, it is valuable to consider factors that might help to set the stage for GTG. Once people focus their attention on some benefit they have received, they may consider what caused this benefit, beginning an attributional search to identify possible causes. Some people will think of God as a possible source of the benefit, either spontaneously or through some type of external prompt—pathways that we will consider in this study. If the idea of God causing the benefit seems plausible to them, fitting well with their supernatural operating rules (cf. Exline et al. 2021) about God's qualities and typical actions, they may attribute the event, at least partly, to God. Based on this attribution, they may experience GTG, a feeling that may be enhanced if they see the positive event as a gift that has been freely given by God and are willing and able to receive this gift (Exline and Wilt 2022).

1.2. Beliefs, Attributions and Appraisals Linked with GTG: Results from a Prior Study

In another article (Exline and Wilt 2022), we presented results from a preregistered, cross-sectional study of GTG among U.S. adults, using correlations and path models. We asked people to recall a positive event from the past month and to answer a series of questions about the event, as well as background questions focused on religion and God-related beliefs. Results confirmed that people did report more GTG to the extent that they saw God as a powerful and loving gift-giver, one who could plausibly cause positive events in people's lives. As expected, people reported more GTG if they clearly saw God as a cause of the event and saw the event as a gift from God. Those who saw the event as a gift also reported more GTG if they reported both the desire and the ability to receive this gift.

Most of our key analyses from the earlier paper (Exline and Wilt 2022) focused on a direct, God-focused Likert item to assess GTG. Thus we were directly prompting participants to consider God as a possible benefactor for a positive event. However, we also had some analyses focused on an open-ended question: Which participants "brought God to mind", spontaneously listing God as a target of gratitude, before we mentioned God in any of our questions or prompts?

In the previous study (Exline and Wilt 2022), the survey page before the Likert GTG item included an open-ended question: "To whom, or to what, do you feel grateful when you think about this positive event?" About 16% of participants, and 18% of those who believed in God, listed God on this open-ended item. We also included another secondary set of correlational analyses focused on this variable. Correlations with this open-ended GTG variable paralleled those for the Likert GTG measure (though they were smaller in magnitude, which made sense given that this was a dichotomous variable). Relative to others, people who spontaneously listed God as a target of gratitude were more religious, believed more strongly in a God who they saw as a loving and powerful gift-giver, saw themselves as more frequent recipients of divine gifts, gave God more credit for causing the positive event they had described, and were more likely to frame the event as a gift from God.

1.3. The Present Study: Aims, Design and Key Hypotheses

The follow-up project described here served two main purposes: First, we wanted to do a direct replication of the key correlational findings from the earlier study. Specifically, we wanted to examine whether key findings from the original study—links between GTG and variables related to religiousness, God beliefs, divine attributions, and gift appraisals—would replicate in a new (but similar) sample. Given the novelty of this area of research, along with the large number of variables in the earlier study, we reasoned that this type of direct replication, in and of itself, would be valuable.

Second, we wanted to see whether certain experimental prompts—conscious primes designed to "bring God to mind"—would lead to greater reports of GTG. We reasoned that since belief in God's existence, attributions to God, and beliefs about God's supernatural operating rules were all connected to GTG, it might be possible to increase GTG reports by presenting questions that would serve as reminders of these themes.

What would be the value in such an experiment? We reasoned that if simply prompting people to answer brief, God-related and attribution-related questions would be enough to increase subsequent reports of GTG, such a finding could have important implications. In practical terms, knowing that certain prompts or questions could increase GTG might be helpful when designing interventions to facilitate GTG. For example, if we found that a particular type of prompt (e.g., thinking about God's ability to work indirectly through natural events) led to more GTG, this knowledge might lead clinicians to include this prompt or topic as part of a GTG intervention.

However, learning that these primes could affect subsequent GTG reports might raise methodological concerns as well: When researchers "bring God to mind" through survey questions, might they inadvertently introduce bias by making people think about God when they would not have done so otherwise? If we were to learn that simply mentioning God in a prior question would increase subsequent reports of GTG, it might suggest the importance of not presenting other God-related questions before asking about GTG, to avoid inflating reports of GTG.

Our experimental manipulation involved randomly assigning people to one of six conditions. They are listed below, in what we expected to be increasing order of influence on GTG.

(1) **Control:** List thoughts and feelings about the event.
(2) **Open-ended causes:** List possible causes of the event.
(3) **Belief in God:** Rate belief in God.
(4) **Grid of possible causes:** Rate belief in various causes of the event, including God.
(5) **God's indirect influence:** Rate agreement with idea that God can affect people's lives in indirect ways.
(6) **Base rates:** After reading that many people believe that God can affect people's lives in indirect ways, rate agreement with this idea.

In short, we reasoned that questions that focused more directly on God, and on God's ability to work indirectly through natural events, would be more effective in priming people to see God as a cause of the positive event, prompting more GTG.

We registered these hypotheses on the Open Science Framework (Exline and Wilt 2021), before data collection, along with other preregistered hypotheses from the original study (Exline and Wilt 2022), which we tested here as part of a direct replication. Links follow:

Main project: https://osf.io/n9k3c/ (accessed on 13 November 2021)
Priming hypotheses: https://osf.io/vrsx2 (accessed on 12 December 2021)
Replication hypotheses: https://osf.io/qnueh (accessed on 23 November 2021)

Due to length and space constraints, we do not report every variable from the other article in this article. Instead, to keep the scope manageable, we are including only the key predictor variables—the ones used in the path models of the earlier paper—in this report.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The study was approved by the Case Western Reserve University IRB (#(2021-1253: Gratitude to God: Multi-Situation Study for CloudResearch)). Many hypotheses and the survey were preregistered on the Open Science Framework (Exline and Wilt 2021) using the links listed in the prior section. We administered a 20-min Qualtrics survey through CloudResearch (Chandler et al. 2019), a company that contracts with other companies to recruit survey participants. Data were gathered between 15 December and 26 December 2021. A total of 917 people clicked on the survey. Of these, 84 did not consent, 49 failed

two attention checks early in the survey, and 124 said that they could not recall a positive event from the past month. All of these participants were exited from the survey. Of the 660 survey completers, we dropped data from 54 for typing nonsensical text into text fields, 43 for not identifying a specific positive event, and 10 for rushed responding, leaving 553 for the final sample.

2.2. Sample Demographics

The mean age was 43.5 years (*SD* = 16.2), with ages ranging from 18 to 95. Religious affiliations were predominantly Christian (64% total: unspecified Christian (26%), conservative or evangelical Protestant (16%), Catholic (16%), mainline or liberal Protestant (3%), unspecified Protestant (3%), Orthodox Christian (0.7%)) or nonreligious (26% total: no religion (15%), spiritual but not religious (3%), atheist (4%), agnostic (5%)), with the remainder identifying as Jewish (1.5%), Muslim (3%), Hindu (0.5%), Buddhist (0.5%), unsure (0.7%), and other (3%). Gender identities included cisgender male (35%), cisgender female (63%), with three participants identifying as transgender women and three endorsing other gender identities. Racial/ethnic identities included African American/Black (14%), American Indian/Native American/Alaska Native (3%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3%), Latino/Hispanic (8%), White/Caucasian/European American (77%), Middle Eastern (1%) and other (0.5%) (percentages exceed 100% because participants selected multiple categories where appropriate.) Marital statuses included married (35%), single (34%), divorced (11%), living with partner (12%), widowed (5%), and separated (2%). Sexual orientations included heterosexual (85%), bisexual (7%), homosexual (gay or lesbian) (6%), asexual (1.5%), and other (1.5%). Highest education levels completed included grammar/elementary school (1%), high school or equivalent (26%), some college (24%), vocational/technical school/community college (15%), four-year college (18%), master's degree (12%), doctoral degree (3%), and other (1%). Employment statuses included employed for wages (45%), self-employed (9%), unemployed (9%), homemaker (8%), retired (16%), student (5%), unable to work (8%), military (0.4%), and other (0.4%).

2.3. Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, measures were scored by averaging across items and were identical to those used in the earlier study (Exline and Wilt 2022), although some measures from the earlier study were not included in this article for the sake of brevity.

2.3.1. Positive Event Description

Participants read, "Please take a few moments to recall something positive that happened to you in the past month. Try to recall one of the most positive things that you experienced". They then wrote a brief description.

2.3.2. Measures for the Six Experimental Conditions

Participants were randomly assigned to complete one of the following six questions:

- **Control:** Participants read, "When you think back on this experience now, what thoughts or feelings come to mind?" This was followed by a text box.
- **Open-ended causes:** Participants read, "Who or what were the main causes of this event, in your opinion? (Please try to list as many possible causes as you can.)" This was followed by a text box.
- **Belief in God:** Participants read, "Below, which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?" and chose one of five responses ranging from 1 (*I don't believe in God*) to 5 (*I know that God really exists, and I have no doubts about it.*)
- **Grid of possible causes:** Participants read, "When you think about this event, who or what do you think CAUSED or INFLUENCED the event?" followed by eight causes in random order, rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The item of interest here read, "God (or a god/godess or Higher Power)." The other items were: another person (or multiple people), an impersonal force (e.g., karma, fate, destiny, luck, or the universe),

a person who has died (e.g., a loved one who died, a saint, an ancestor), you, natural factors or circumstances, random factors, and other).

- **God's indirect influence:** Participants read, "Do you believe that God can influence people's lives in indirect ways—by affecting natural events or by working through other people, for example?" and rated responses from 1 (*no, not at all*) to 5 (*yes, strongly*).
- **Base rates:** Participants read, "According to research studies, many people believe that God can influence people's lives in indirect ways—by affecting natural events or by working through other people, for example. Do you believe this idea yourself? Please choose a response below." Responses were rated from 1 (*no, not at all*) to 5 (*yes, strongly*).

2.3.3. Gratitude Variables

The open-ended gratitude item read as follows: "To whom, or to what, do you feel grateful when you think about this positive event? Please feel free to list multiple answers. (If you don't feel grateful to anyone or anything, please type "None" in the box below.)" Participants wrote responses into a text box. We coded these responses as 1 if participants listed God and 0 if they did not list God. Next was the Likert measure of GTG: Participants read, "When you think about this event, do you feel grateful to _____?" followed by a list of randomized items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). One item read "God (or a god/goddess or Higher Power)." (The other items were: another person (or multiple people), an impersonal force (e.g., karma, fate, destiny, luck, or the universe), a person who has died (e.g., a loved one who has died, a saint, an ancestor), yourself, and other. There was also an attention check item embedded in the list.). The earlier article (Exline and Wilt 2022) provided preliminary evidence of validity for these measures. Furthermore, self-report measures of GTG have shown evidence of discriminant validity from general gratitude and religiousness (Park et al. 2022).

2.3.4. Basic Beliefs and Experiences Involving God

Participants read, "To what extent do you believe in the existence of God (or gods or goddesses or a Higher Power)?" and rated responses from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*totally).* Participants with some belief in God (as endorsed on a yes/no item) read," To what extent do you see God as being loving?" and rated responses from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

2.3.5. Religiousness

Participants completed a religious belief salience measure adapted from Blaine and Crocker (1995), using four items rated from 1 (*strongly disagree/does not apply*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): "I allow my religious/spiritual beliefs to influence other areas of my life", "My religious/spiritual beliefs provide meaning and purpose to life", "My religious/spiritual beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life", and "Being a religious/spiritual person is important to me". They then read, "How often have you participated in each of these activities in the past week?", followed by six religious participation items (e.g., prayed or meditated; thought about religious/spiritual issues) rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*more than once per day*). These belief salience and participation items, which have been used in many prior studies (e.g., Exline et al. 2014), were standardized and averaged to assess religiousness.

2.3.6. Divine Attributions about the Positive Event

Participants read, "Do you think that God may have played a role in causing or influencing this event?" and rated responses from 1 (*no, definitely not*) to 5 (*yes, definitely*). They read, "Do you think that it's plausible (logical, reasonable, rational) to think that God may have caused or influenced this event?" and "Would seeing God as causing or influencing this event make the event seem more meaningful to you?", both with responses from 1 (*no, definitely not*) to 5 (*yes, definitely*), and "Do you want to see God as having caused or influenced this event?" with responses from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*totally*).

2.3.7. God-Related Appraisals (Including Gift Appraisals)

Participants read, "In this situation, do you think that God was trying to help, love, encourage, comfort, or protect you (or someone else)?" rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*totally*). They read, "Does thinking about this event make you feel loved, cherished, valued or appreciated by God?", rated from 1 (*no, not at all*) to 5 (*yes, extremely*). They also read, "Do you see any part of this event as a gift from God?" and responded from 1 (*no, definitely not*) to 5 (*yes, definitely*).

2.3.8. Questions about God's General "Operating Rules" and Gift-Giving

Participants who believed in God read, "In your opinion, how much power does God have in terms of being able to affect people's lives?" with responses from 1 (*no power at all*) to 5 (*total power*). They also read, "I think that God probably gives gifts to about ___% of people" and gave responses on a slider from 0 to 100. They read, "In your opinion, how often does God give gifts to people?" with responses from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*all of the time*). They also read, "How often do you think that God has given you a gift (or gifts)?" with responses from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*all of the time*).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics, Including Divergent Reports of GTG on the Open-Ended and Likert Measures

How much GTG did participants report? As shown in Figures 1 and 2, along with Table 1, results differed dramatically based on the mode of measurement. On the open-ended question, which asked participants to list those to whom they felt grateful about the event (if anyone), 20% of participants (24% of those who later said they believed in God, 3% of those who did not) spontaneously mentioned God. (See Figure 1 and top section of Table 1.) However, on the Likert question that immediately followed on the next page of the survey, the average participant endorsed moderately high levels of GTG: As Table 1 shows, the mean score was 3.6 on a 1 to 5 scale, between "moderately" and "quite a bit." Among those who believed in God, the mean was 4.1 out of 5. The modal response was 5, at the top of the scale, for both God believers (*n* = 256, 56% of sample) and the whole sample (*n* = 259, 47% of sample) (see Figure 2 for a visual depiction.) Only 19% of the whole sample (*n* = 105) and 7% of those who believed in God (*n* = 33) endorsed the response indicating that they did not feel grateful to God at all in response to the event. Thus, although a minority of people spontaneously reported gratitude to God, most people strongly indicated that they felt grateful to God when asked directly about it; and only a small proportion reported that they did not feel any gratitude toward God.
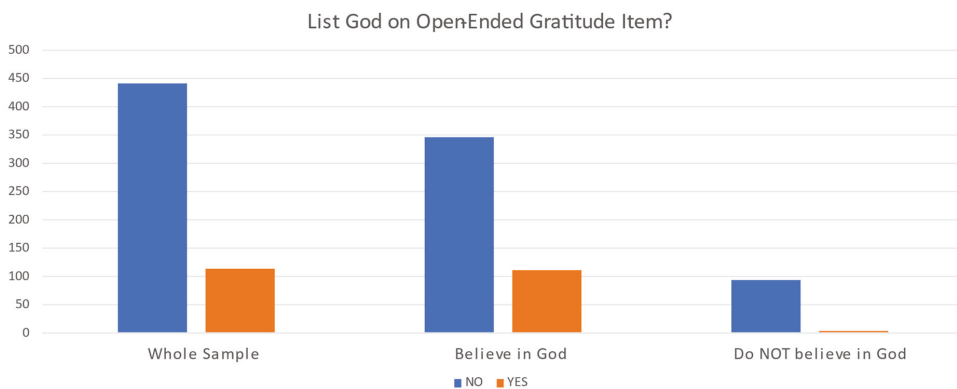

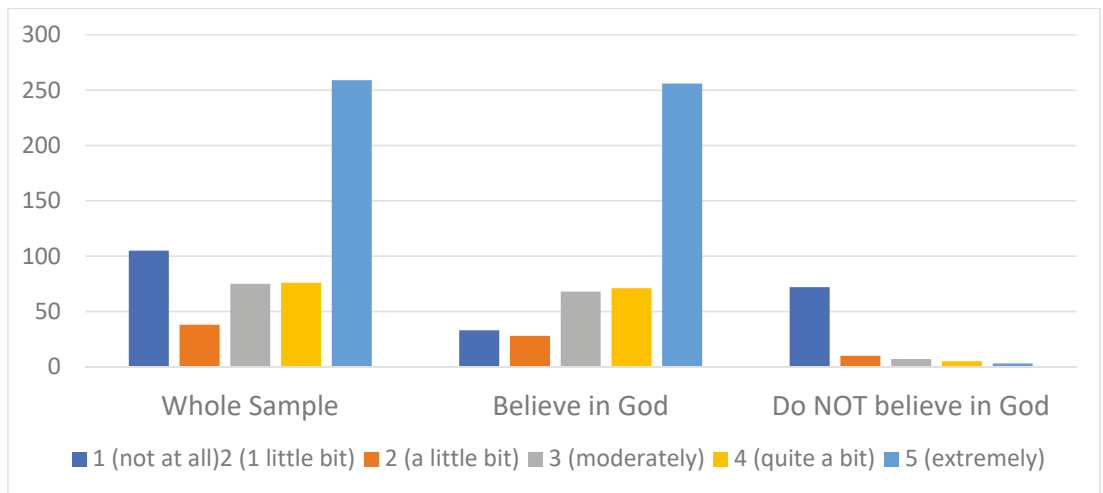**Figure 1.** Open-Ended Gratitude Item: Number of Participants Who Listed God.

Figure 2. Likert Item on Gratitude to God: Number of Participants Endorsing Each Response.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables.

Variable	*N*	Range	*M (SD) (α)*
Gratitude variables (GTG = Gratitude to God)			
List God on open-ended gratitude item? (0 = no, 1 = yes)	553	0 to 1	0.20 (0.4) (–)
List God on open-ended gratitude item? (God believers only)	456	0 to 1	0.24 (0.4) (–)
List God on open-ended gratitude item? (God nonbelievers only)	97	0 to 1	0.03 (0.2) (–)
Likert GTG measure (whole sample)	553	1 to 5	3.6 (1.6) (–)
Likert GTG measure (God believers only)	456	1 to 5	4.1 (1.3) (–)
Likert GTG measure (God nonbelievers only)	97	1 to 5	1.5 (1.0) (–)
Attribution-focused variables			
God caused or influenced event	456	1 to 5	4.0 (1.2) (–)
Plausible to see God as cause	456	1 to 5	3.9 (1.2) (–)
Want to see God as cause	456	1 to 5	3.7 (1.4) (–)
Seeing God involved makes it more meaningful	456	1 to 5	3.9 (1.3) (–)
Situation-specific appraisals			
God has power to cause this type of event	456	1 to 5	4.3 (1.0) (–)
God has positive intentions	456	1 to 5	4.0 (1.2) (–)
Feel loved, cherished	456	1 to 5	3.9 (1.3) (–)
Gift from God	456	1 to 5	4.2 (1.1) (–)
God's "operating rules"			
God has power to affect people's lives	456	1 to 5	4.3 (1.0) (–)
God gives gifts to people often	456	1 to 6	4.8 (1.4) (–)
God gives gifts to many people	456	0 to 100	82.0 (25.1) (–)
God has given you gifts often	456	1 to 6	4.5 (1.4) (–)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable	N	Range	M (SD) (α)
Background variables			
Religiousness (index)	553	−1.6 to 1.8	0.0 (0.9) (0.79)
Religious belief salience	553	1 to 7	5.0 (2.0) (0.96)
Religious participation	553	1 to 6	2.8 (1.4) (0.91)
Belief that God exists (Likert)	553	1 to 5	3.9 (1.3) (–)
Belief in God (no = 0, yes = 1)	553	0 to 1	0.8 (0.4) (–)
God seen as loving	455	1 to 5	4.4 (0.9) (–)
Likert variables from experimental priming conditions			
God caused positive event (grid item)	98	1 to 5	3.3 (1.7) (–)
Belief in God (modified GSS item)	89	1 to 5	4.1 (1.4) (–)
Believe God can influence people's lives indirectly	97	1 to 5	3.7 (1.6) (–)
Agree with base rate info: God can have indirect influence	90	1 to 5	3.7 (1.5) (–)

Skews were modest, with magnitudes less than 1.5 for the GTG Likert and open-ended variables for the whole sample and for God believers. Within the full sample, the Likert GTG item had a skew of only 0.66. Skews were higher for nonbelievers (2.0 on the Likert item and 5.5 on the open-ended item), as would be expected given that the items focused specifically on God. Given that skews for believers and the whole sample were not extreme, we did not attempt data transformations for non-normality in our remaining analyses, which focused only on these two groups.

Table 1 shows that, on average, participants in this sample were moderate in terms of religiousness but held high levels of belief in God. Those who did believe in God tended to see God as loving, powerful, and quite generous in terms of giving gifts often, to many people, including themselves. On average, they endorsed moderately high levels of divine attributions for the positive events that they described and were also quite likely to endorse the idea that these positive events were gifts from God.

3.2. Effects of the Experimental Manipulation

Contrary to our preregistered predictions, there were no statistically significant differences between the six priming conditions in terms of effects on subsequent reports of GTG, either on the open-ended item (using Chi-square tests; see Table 2) or the Likert item (using ANOVA with Bonferroni-corrected comparisons; see Table 3). Regardless of whether we considered the whole sample or only those who believed in God, it was clear that simply reminding people to think of causes for the event, prompting them to think about God, or even raising the idea of God as a possible cause of the event did not have significant effects on subsequent reports of GTG on either measure. Notably, the omnibus effect sizes (partial Ω^2) for these analyses were trivially small: 0.008 for the whole sample and 0.004 for those who believed in God.

Table 2. Effects of Experimental Condition on Spontaneous Mentions of GTG (Open-Ended Item).

Condition	*n*	Full Sample How Many Mentioned God? *n* (%)	*n*	God Believers Only How Many Mentioned God? *n* (%)
Base Rates	90	21 (23.3%)	78	19 (24.%)
God's Indirect Influence	97	22 (22.7%)	81	22 (27.2%)
Grid of Possible Causes	98	19 (19.4%)	78	19 (24.4%)
Belief in God	89	19 (21.3%)	71	19 (26.8%)
Open-Ended Causes	90	15 (16.7%)	71	15 (21.1%)
Control (Thoughts & Feelings)	89	17 (19.1%)	77	16 (20.8%)
Total	553	113 (20.4%)	456	110 (24.1%)
		χ^2 (5, $N = 553$) = 1.76, $p = 0.88$		χ^2 (5, $N = 456$) = 1.50, $p = 0.91$

Table 3. Effects of Experimental Condition on Gratitude to God (Likert Item).

Condition	*N*	Full Sample *M* (*SD*)	*N*	God Believers Only *M* (*SD*)
Base Rates	90	3.7 (1.5) [a]	78	4.0 (1.2) [b]
God's Indirect Influence	97	3.7 (1.6) [a]	81	4.1 (1.4) [b]
Grid of Possible Causes	98	3.4 (1.6) [a]	78	4.0 (1.3) [b]
Belief in God	89	3.6 (1.6) [a]	71	4.2 (1.2) [b]
Open-Ended Causes	90	3.4 (1.6) [a]	71	4.0 (1.2) [b]
Control (Thoughts & Feelings)	89	3.8 (1.5) [a]	77	4.2 (1.3) [b]
		F (5, 547) = 0.93, $p = 0.42$, partial $\Omega^2 = 0.008$		F (5, 450) = 0.34, $p = 0.89$, partial $\Omega^2 = 0.004$

Note. In each column, means with shared superscripts do not differ at $p < 0.05$ using the Bonferroni correction.

3.3. Were Participants Responding Accurately to the Questions within the Experimental Conditions?

Table 4 clarifies that the lack of significant between-group differences was not based on participants failing to respond accurately to the questions in the experimental conditions. Consistent with prior findings (Exline and Wilt 2022), participants did report more GTG (at least on the Likert measure; less consistently on the open-ended item) if they mentioned God as a cause of the event (Open-Ended Causes), if they endorsed the idea that God caused the event (Grid of Possible Causes), if they believed strongly in God (Belief in God), and if they endorsed the idea that God can influence people's lives indirectly (God's Indirect Influence; Base Rates). So it does not seem as though participants were failing to read or process the questions; instead, the more likely explanation is that these brief prompts were not simply powerful enough to shift GTG.

Table 4. Correlations between Within-Condition Responses and Ratings of Gratitude to God.

Likert Variables (from Priming Conditions)	Condition	*n*	List God on Open-Ended Gratitude Item (*r*)	Likert GTG Measure (*r*)
Mention God as a cause (open-ended item)	Open-Ended Causes	90	0.15	0.21 *
Belief in God	Belief in God	89	0.35 **	0.74 **
God caused positive event (Likert item in grid)	Grid of Possible Causes	98	0.35 **	0.73 **
Believe God can influence people's lives indirectly	God's Indirect Influence	97	0.33 **	0.66 **
Agree with base rate info on God's indirect influence	Base Rates	90	0.06	0.58 **

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

3.4. Both Measures of GTG: Associations with Religiousness, God Beliefs, Divine Attributions and Gift Appraisals

As Table 5 shows, the results did show a solid replication of the findings from the earlier study (Exline and Wilt 2022): Participant GTG was linked closely with religiousness, seeing God as a powerful and loving gift-giver, attributing the positive event to God and feeling loved in response, and seeing the event as a gift. As in the earlier study, too, correlations with the 5-point Likert item were stronger than correlations with the dichotomous (yes/no) open-ended item on whether participants spontaneously listed God as a target of gratitude. (Although there were no significant between-group differences, we still made the conservative choice to control for experimental condition using dummy coding—that is, we made five variables, each scored 0 or 1 to represent the six conditions, and we entered these as covariates.)

Table 5. Partial Correlations between Key Study Variables and Situational GTG (Controlling for Priming Condition Using Dummy Coding).

Variable	List God on Open-Ended Gratitude Item? (0 = No, 1 = Yes) (*pr*)	Likert GTG Measure (*pr*)
Gratitude variables (GTG = Gratitude to God)		
List God on open-ended gratitude item? (0 = no, 1 = yes)	1.0	0.33 **
List God on open-ended gratitude item? (God believers only)	1.0	0.28 **
Likert GTG measure (whole sample)	0.33 **	1.0
Likert GTG measure (God believers only)	0.28 **	1.0
Attribution-focused variables		
God caused or influenced event	0.27 **	0.53 **
Plausible to see God as cause	0.24 **	0.44 **
Want to see God as cause	0.21 **	0.49 **
Seeing God involved makes it more meaningful	0.20 **	0.46 **
Situation-specific appraisals		
God has power to cause this type of event	0.23 **	0.51 **
God has positive intentions	0.24 **	0.54 **
Feel loved, cherished	0.22 **	0.52 **
Gift from God	0.25 **	0.54 **

Table 5. *Cont.*

Variable	List God on Open-Ended Gratitude Item? (0 = No, 1 = Yes) (*pr*)	Likert GTG Measure (*pr*)
God's "operating rules"		
God has power to affect people's lives	0.22 **	0.53 **
God gives gifts to people often	0.16 **	0.42 **
God gives gifts to many	0.12 *	0.32 **
God has given you gifts often	0.16 **	0.44 **
Background variables		
Religiousness (index)	0.26 **	0.67 **
Religious belief salience	0.25 **	0.66 **
Religious participation	0.21 **	0.55 **
Belief that God exists	0.29 **	0.72 **
God seen as loving	0.17 **	0.46 **
Likert variables from experimental priming conditions		
Mention God as a cause (open-ended item)	0.15	0.21 *
God caused positive event (grid item)	0.35 **	0.73 **
Belief in God (modified GSS item)	0.35 **	0.74 **
Believe God can influence people's lives indirectly	0.33 **	0.66 **
Agree with base rate info: God can have indirect influence	0.06	0.58 **

Note. Partial correlations controlled for experimental condition using five dummy-coded variables representing the six experimental conditions. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion

This project was a direct replication and extension of another study (Exline and Wilt 2022) on cognitive predictors of situational gratitude to God (GTG) in response to a recent positive life event. The prior study, which focused on God-focused attributions and appraisals, suggested that GTG was more likely when people held religious, theistic worldviews that included a loving, powerful God who intervened often in the world and was a generous gift-giver. Such beliefs, in turn, predict greater odds of attributing positive events to God, framing them as divine gifts, and reporting GTG in response.

4.1. Experimental Manipulation: No GTG Differences between Conditions

A main aim of this study was to determine how malleable reports of GTG might be: Could we increase reports of GTG simply by priming participants, through individual survey questions, to reflect on God, to consider the idea of God working through natural events, or to consider God as a possible cause of the event they reported?

This experimental manipulation did not yield any significant differences between the six conditions, contrary to our preregistered hypotheses. Regardless of whether participants were reminded about God or asked to reflect on causes of the event, they reported similar levels of GTG across all six experimental conditions. These results yielded a clear conclusion: Simply prompting people to reflect on God or on event causes, at least using these single-item manipulations, was not enough to substantially change reports on GTG, on either the open-ended measure (which did not mention God) or the Likert measure of GTG.

In practical terms, the lack of significant differences between groups suggests some good news and some bad news. First, the bad news: For those who might be trying to facilitate GTG, it seems clear that simply mentioning God, or raising the idea that God can work indirectly through natural events, is not enough to substantially increase subsequent

reports of GTG. Granted, it is possible that adding an entire block of such questions or reflections, or introducing a lengthier set of material (e.g., a lecture or reading passage) might be more powerful in terms of the ability to increase GTG. However, it was clear from Tables 2 and 3 that these types of brief questions, when given singly, did not have significant effects on subsequent reports of GTG.

In methodological terms, though, it may actually be good news that brief mentions of God, or reminders how God might work in the world and influence human events, are not enough to substantially sway reports of GTG. These results might be encouraging for researchers who might be concerned that mentioning God early in a survey could inadvertently inflate reports of GTG. We had expected that, regardless of whether people actually felt more GTG in response to the prompts, they might perceive demand characteristics to think about God, which would have artificially inflated reports of GTG. Yet, we saw no evidence to support this idea. Instead, reports of GTG were similar across the six conditions.

4.2. The Method Used to Assess GTG May Affect Conclusions about GTG Prevalence

Although not the intended focus of this study, one of the most compelling findings, in our view, was that GTG reports looked very different depending on how GTG was assessed. Regardless of whether participants were prompted to think about God through the experimental manipulations, about 20% of participants—and 24% of those who believed in God—listed God as a target of gratitude on an open-ended item. Compared to those who did not list God, those who listed God were more religious, with strong beliefs in a benevolent, powerful, gift-giving God. These findings largely mirrored those from the earlier study (Exline and Wilt 2022), even though none of the participants in the earlier study saw any God prompts before answering the open-ended question about targets of gratitude. These findings suggest that the people who "brought God to mind" as a target of gratitude were those who came into the studies with strong prior beliefs in a powerful, loving, generous God who intervenes frequently in the world. This worldview, rather than a brief experimental prime, seemed to be key in terms of prompting participants to think of God as a benefactor.

Yet, even though some participants did spontaneously list God as a target of gratitude, it was still less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the sample—even among those who believed in God. This could have happened for a variety of reasons: Some people might have been reluctant to mention God in response to a prompt in a psychological survey, for example. However, it seems likely that others simply did not think of God as a benefactor. They might have quickly thought of other people as sources of the benefit, or they could have credited themselves or situational factors and stopped the attributional process there. It might be that once a single target of gratitude is identified, most people—even strong believers in God—do not continue to reach back to consider causes that they might see as more indirect, including God. Perhaps we would have seen more mentions of God if we asked people to list as many targets of gratitude as they could think of, or a specific number of benefactors, or if we did not allow them to move to the next question until a certain period of time had elapsed for reflection. However, would forcing this type of response lead to over-reports of actual gratitude? We think that it might.

Results were strikingly different on the Likert GTG item, which asked participants to rate GTG on a 5-point scale. Here, the modal response was 5 (extremely grateful), and the mean response for those who believed in God was above 4 on the 5-point scale. Only 7% of those who believed in God (and 19% of the whole sample) endorsed the response option suggesting that they did not feel any GTG at all. These responses suggest that, although relatively few people spontaneously report GTG, most people who believe in God will endorse GTG if asked directly about it; and very people endorsed a response that would suggest *not* being grateful to God.

These findings highlight methodological challenges for researchers who might be seeking the most valid way to assess GTG. Although we certainly cannot offer any sort of

definitive answer, our data suggest that prevalence estimates for GTG could show massive variation depending on how questions are framed: Spontaneously listing God as a target of gratitude will likely lead to much lower estimates of GTG prevalence than Likert items.

What issues might surround open-ended assessment of GTG? On the one hand, these types of spontaneous reports could be very valuable, because they allow us to see which types of people naturally think about God as a benefactor and are comfortable giving an answer involving God, with no prompts to lead them in this direction. But still, there are challenges here: Some people assume that they should list a person as a benefactor and would not think of listing other entities such as God. Additionally, others might be uncomfortable listing God in a response to a survey question, even if they privately feel grateful to God.

The Likert questions offer greater precision, as responses can be assessed on multi-point scales. These items also make it clear to participants that we are interested in their thoughts about God. Likert scales may be valuable when trying to examine associations between different God-related variables (such as the divine attributions and gift appraisals of interest here). At the same time, response sets and biased responding—along with the possibility that many people might not want to appear ungrateful to God—could complicate interpretation.

In sum, our results do suggest some thorny issues around GTG assessment. Open-ended items might lead to under-reporting of GTG, whereas Likert items might lead to over-reporting—especially among strong believers in God who see GTG as a virtue. We do see some benefit in asking about GTG relatively early in surveys, and especially before participants have answered long lists of other God-focused appraisal or attribution-focused questions that might create a response set involving God. Although we cannot be sure, the fact that we randomized the GTG Likert item with those focusing on other benefactors might have actually helped to work against tendencies toward over-reporting. If we had used a single, stand-alone item to ask believers about the extent to which they felt grateful to God (without mentioning other benefactors), might desires to endorse this virtue have been even higher? This remains an empirical question. Additionally, there may be studies in which GTG variables would show larger skews than they did in this sample. When skews are relatively large (perhaps those with a magnitude of 2 or above), there may be some benefit in using transformations, such as log transformations, to reduce skew. (For a thoughtful discussion of this issue, see Šimkovic and Träuble (2019)).

4.3. Direct Replication of Key Results from Earlier Study

Despite the different conclusions one might draw about the prevalence or frequency of GTG based on the measure used, a similar picture still emerges about the types of beliefs, attributions, and appraisals that are associated with GTG. This study directly replicated key correlations from the prior study (Exline and Wilt 2022): Participants reported more GTG (on both measures, but more strongly on the Likert measure) if they were highly religious and believed strongly in God—but in a certain type of God. GTG was greatest when participants saw God as loving, having substantial power to influence people's lives, and as a generous gift-giver—giving gifts often, to many people, including themselves. Seeing this particular event as a gift, seeing God's intentions as positive, and feeling loved in responses were all appraisals linked with more GTG. GTG was also related to attributional variables involving God, replicating results from the other study: Seeing God as a plausible cause of the event, wanting to see God as a cause, believing that the event would seem more meaningful with God as a cause, and actually attributing the event to God were all closely connected with more GTG.

4.4. Limitations and Future Directions

This study was based on self-report variables, which raises the possibility of biases such as response sets or socially desirable responding. These cross-sectional, correlational data do not allow causal inferences. We also cannot make conclusions about the order

in which certain GTG-related thoughts occur, due to our use of retrospective reports. In addition, our brief priming manipulation was based on administration of a single, randomized question. It is possible that a larger set of questions, when combined, might have affected subsequent GTG reports.

Our project drew on an Internet-based sample of U.S. adults; although the sample was reasonably diverse (especially in terms of age, education and occupation), it was not a representative sample of the U.S. population. Most participants who endorsed some religious affiliation identified with some part of the Christian tradition, and results may not generalize beyond this group. In future work, it would be useful to assess GTG and its correlates in other cultures or religious belief contexts—for example, among people who do not believe in a personal God or who do not believe that God intervenes frequently in the world or in people's lives. Additionally, although our GTG item was worded in a way that included the possibility for multiple gods or goddesses or a Higher Power, we were unable to delve into any nuances of how these non-monotheistic views of God could influence GTG. For example, participants from polytheistic traditions might see certain gods as being more loving than others, and there might be interesting gender differences that could make some people see goddesses as more loving or warm than a God (or god) who is thought of as male. Some might think of a Higher Power in a personal and relational way, while others might think of a more impersonal force. Exploring these sorts of differences would be a fascinating topic for future work on GTG.

5. Conclusions

The findings of our conscious priming experiment clarified that simply reminding participants about God via survey items is not enough to increase subsequent reports of GTG. Instead, the results described here provided a direct replication of other findings (Exline and Wilt 2022) suggesting that worldviews that include a powerful, loving, gift-giving God are consistently linked with more GTG. Our findings also raise some methodological cautions about the ways in which GTG is assessed. Although priming participants with thoughts of God was not enough to influence reports of GTG, the wording of the question did have a large effect. Particularly in studies that aim to evaluate the frequency of GTG, it will be important to carefully consider the types of measures used to avoid skewing responses, as conclusions could differ greatly based on the way in which questions are framed.

References

Aghababaei, Naser, Agata Błachnio, and Masoume Aminikhoo. 2018. The relations of gratitude to religiosity, well-being, and personality. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 21: 408–17. [CrossRef]

Aghababaei, Naser, and Mohammad Taghi Tabik. 2013. Gratitude and mental health: Differences between religious and general gratitude in a Muslim context. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 16: 761–66. [CrossRef]

Blaine, Bruce, and Jennifer Crocker. 1995. Religiousness, race, and psychological well-being: Exploring social psychological mediators. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 21: 1031–41. [CrossRef]

Chandler, Jesse, Cheskie Rosenzweig, Aaron J. Moss, Jonathan Robinson, and Leib Litman. 2019. Online panels in social science research: Expanding sampling methods beyond Mechanical Turk. *Behavior Research Methods* 51: 2022–38. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Exline, Julie J., and Joshua A. Wilt. 2021. CloudResearch Gratitude to God project: Gratitude to God Priming Study Hypotheses. Project on the Open Science Framework. Available online: https://osf.io/n9k3c/ (accessed on 13 November 2021).

Exline, Julie J., and Joshua A. Wilt. 2022. Divine attributions, gift appraisals, and supernatural operating rules as predictors of gratitude to God. *Manuscript submitted for publication*.

Exline, Julie J., Joshua A. Wilt, Nick Stauner, William A. Schutt, Kenneth I. Pargament, Frank Fincham, and Ross W. May. 2021. Supernatural operating rules: How people envision and experience God, the devil, ghosts/spirits, fate/destiny, karma, and luck. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., Kenneth I. Pargament, Joshua B. Grubbs, and Ann Marie Yal. 2014. The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and initial validation. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6: 208–22. [CrossRef]

Kaplan, Janice. 2012. Gratitude Survey: Conducted for the John Templeton Foundation. Available online: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_grateful_are_americans (accessed on 6 May 2022).

Knabb, Joshua J., Veola E. Vazquez, Kenneth T. Wang, and Robert A. Pat. 2021. The Christian Gratitude Scale: An emic approach to measuring thankfulness in every season of life. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. Advance online publication. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, and R. David Hayward. 2015. Humility, compassion, and gratitude to God: Assessing the relationships among key religious virtues. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7: 192–204. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, self-rated health, and depressive symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, and Gail Ironson. 2015. Benevolent images of God, gratitude, and physical health status. *Journal of Religion and Health* 54: 1503–19. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, Gail Ironson, and Peter C. Hill. 2017. General feelings of gratitude, gratitude to God, and hemoglobin A1c: Exploring variations by gender. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 12: 639–50. [CrossRef]

Nelson, Jenae M., Sam A. Hardy, and Philip Watkins. 2022. Transcendent indebtedness to God: A new construct in the psychology of religion and spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication. [CrossRef]

Park, Crystal L., Joshua A. Wilt, and Adam B. David. 2022. Distinctiveness of gratitude to God: How does this construc add to our understanding of religiousness and gratitude. *Manuscript in preparation*.

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Sadoughi, Majid, and Fatemeh Hesampour. 2020. Prediction of psychological well-being in the elderly by assessing their spirituality, gratitude to God, and perceived social support. *Iranian Journal of Ageing* 15: 144–58. [CrossRef]

Šimkovic, Matúš, and Birgit Träuble. 2019. Robustness of statistical methods when measure is affected by ceiling and/or floor effect. *PLoS ONE* 14: e0220889. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Tsang, Jo-Ann, Sarah A. Schnitker, Robert A. Emmons, and Peter C. Hill. 2021. Feeling the intangible: Antecedents of gratitude toward intangible benefactors. *Journal of Positive Psychology*. Advance online publication. [CrossRef]

Watkins, Philip C., Michael Frederick, and Don E. Davis. 2022. Gratitude to God predicts religious well-being over time. *Religions* 13: 675. [CrossRef]

Watkins, Philip C., Robert A. Emmons, and Jens Uhder. 2019. Thanks Be to God: Divine Gratitude and Its Relationship to Well-Being. Cheney, WA, USA, *Unpublished manuscript*.

Wilt, Joshua A., and Julie J. Exline. 2022. Receiving a gift from God in times of trouble: Links between gratitude to God, the affective circumplex, and perceived closeness to God. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 25: 362–79. [CrossRef]

Article

Liturgical Gratitude to God

Joshua Cockayne [1,*] and Gideon Salter [2,*]

[1] School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, St Andrews KY16 9JU, UK
[2] Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK
[*] Correspondence: jlc22@st-andrews.ac.uk (J.C.); g.salter@sheffield.ac.uk (G.S.)

Abstract: Gratitude to God is a core component of Christian liturgy; along with the countless hymns which express attitudes of thanks to God, Christian liturgy often includes acts of spoken gratitude, as well as prayers of thanksgiving. We argue that two aspects of liturgical gratitude distinguish it from gratitude more generally. First, liturgical gratitude is always scripted, leading to the worry that those who express gratitude do so disingenuously. Secondly, liturgical gratitude is always social in some way, as our gratitude is drawn into the worship of the community of the Church. The paper provides an account of liturgical gratitude that explores these two key distinctive features.

Keywords: gratitude; liturgy; group action; joint action; social ontology; gratitude to God

1. Introduction

One of the central features of Christian liturgy is the expression of gratitude. Gratitude might be expressed in spoken liturgy: for example, in reciting the words of a Psalm: "I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips". (Psalm 34:1). Alternatively, gratitude might be expressed in the bodily movements of eating and drinking in the Eucharist (Eucharist literally means *thanksgiving*). Or we might express gratitude to God in song, in singing one of the thousands of hymns of gratitude which have been written, whether accompanied by rock guitars, or choir and organ. Along with confession and petition, gratitude is arguably one of the key attitudes expressed in Christian liturgy.

Much work has been done in recent years demonstrating the positive therapeutic effects of gratitude. There is evidence that gratitude improves one's mental health and emotional wellbeing in a variety of ways, from a greater sense of purpose and success in achieving personal goals to an improved physical and psychological health (Emmons 2013; Emmons and Stern 2013; Petrocchi and Couyoumdjian 2016).

Given the prominence of gratitude in Christian liturgies, together with the positive therapeutic effects of gratitude, it seems reasonable to assume that Christian liturgy is good for us (even if gratitude may not be the only (or even primary) reason for this effect). Taking time to consider the good gifts we have received from God in song, in spoken liturgy, or in moments of quiet reflection provides an opportunity to grow in this important disposition of gratitude. This paper seeks to provide an account of liturgical gratitude.

In providing account of liturgical gratitude we outline two ways in which liturgical gratitude differs from gratitude more generally. First, liturgical gratitude is always scripted. Even in church traditions in which little formal liturgical script is present, there are always prescribed actions in the context of gathered worship. This need not mean that all liturgy includes a written script; if some kind of action is prescribed by the liturgy (e.g., you are expected stand up to sing, sit down to listen to sermons, etc.), then liturgy is scripted. This leads to the worry that liturgical gratitude might not really be gratitude—for if we are merely following a script, it might appear that we do not really mean it.[1] As many in the psychological literature on gratitude are keen to point out: feeling grateful is an important factor in being able to distinguish real gratitude from insincere gratitude, or worse. In liturgical contexts, many of us express gratitude to God, despite not always

feeling it.[2] To show why liturgical gratitude should count as gratitude even though it is scripted, we consider a recent discussion of liturgical action in the work of Terence Cuneo, which we think can explain how participating in acts of scripted worship can provide an opportunity for individuals to be grateful to God. Notably, for Cuneo, liturgical gratitude does not always involve *feeling* grateful. Building on Cuneo's account, we borrow from Everett Worthington's discussion of forgiveness to argue that it is important to distinguish the emotional component of gratitude with the decision to be grateful. What makes the decision to be grateful in liturgy valuable is not the emotions of the participant, but the fittingness of the actions in response to God.

Secondly, liturgical gratitude is always social in some way. Christian theology stresses that the worship of the Church, even in its seemingly most individual contexts must be understood as part of the community of the Church. However, while the literature on gratitude can tell us much about the positive effects of being grateful, there is very little work that focuses on gratitude as it occurs in groups. As Jo-Ann Tsang (2021) has recently observed, "the majority of research on gratitude focuses on single recipients of gratitude . . . The prototypical situation is one benefactor providing a benefit to one recipient". (Tsang 2021, p. 27). However, as Tsang continues: "humans are social creatures. We experience benefits on a group level, as well". Leading her to ask, "Do people still experience gratitude, even if the intended recipient is broader than themselves?" (Tsang 2021, p. 27). To understand what is going on in acts of liturgical gratitude we need to reflect on the group dynamics present. Building on our proposed taxonomy of group gratitude (see Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming), we note the ways in which group liturgical thanks (e.g., "we thank you God for . . . ") might express the gratitude of different subjects (e.g., the individual, the congregation, the Church). In doing so, we seek to offer an account of liturgical gratitude which is sensitive to its group dynamic.

Lastly, drawing these discussions to a close, we consider how liturgical gratitude may provide psychological benefits that are distinct from other forms of gratitude. Building on recent psychological literature on social bonding, we hypothesize that group gratitude may even have benefits beyond that of individual gratitude.

2. Liturgical Gratitude Is Scripted

One notable feature of liturgical gratitude that distinguishes it from acts of gratitude more generally is the presence of a script. For the presence of a script is foundational to what liturgy *is* (at least in the context of Christian worship).[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff, one of the leading figures in the study of Christian liturgy writes that,

> An enactment of a liturgy consists of the participants together performing scripted verbal, gestural and auditory actions, the prescribed purpose of their doing so being both to engage God directly in acts of learning and acknowledging the excellence of who God is and what God has done, and to be engaged by God. And the liturgy itself is that type of sequence of act-types that is enacted when the participants do what the script prescribes. (Wolterstorff 2018, pp. 29–30)

For Wolterstorff, participating in liturgy always requires following a script of some kind. However, this need not mean that liturgy is only found in formal or traditional contexts. In formal or traditional contexts, liturgical scripts are often written down in prayerbooks or service sheets, indicating when those present are to listen, to speak, to eat and drink, to sit and stand, and so on. In more informal contexts, there is still a script, even if this is implicit and unformalized; if no script were present, we would not know when to stand up and sit down, what words to sing and when, and to respond to the end of a prayer by saying "Amen". All liturgy has a certain set of prescribed actions, whether these are specified on paper or by social convention.

The scriptedness of liturgical gratitude raises the question of whether these are really instances of gratitude at all, or at the very least it should make us see that liturgical gratitude is unlike many other everyday instances of gratitude. As Wolterstorff notes "When one follows a liturgical script one does not choose one's own words; the words are prescribed.

Nor does one choose what saying or singing the words is to count as. The script, along with the linguistic conventions in force, determine the . . . significance of one's words". (Wolterstorff 2018, pp. 31–32). It seems possible that many who engage in liturgical thanks may do so with very little awareness of what they are gratitude for or to whom. Congregants may even participate in liturgical gratitude resentfully, feeling very little gratitude themselves. Moreover, we know that many go along to church and participate in liturgical gratitude without really ever *feeling* thankful to God. Think of the skeptical teenagers cajoled to church each week by their over-zealous parents, who reluctantly read along but have very little interest in doing so. Or consider the habitual churchgoer who has internalized the liturgy to the extent that they are more likely to be thinking about the previous day's football scores than attending to what God has given to them.

It is for precisely these reasons that some psychologists wish to emphasize the affective dimension of gratitude. Consider Robert Emmons's claim that, "Gratitude is an emotion, the core of which is pleasant feelings about the benefit received". (Emmons 2008, p. 469). It may be the case that one goes to church each week and expresses gratitude to God but rarely feels emotionally moved by the acts one is performing. Indeed, some even think that it is a feature of gratitude to God that an affective dimension is sometimes lacking. For example, Kent Dunnington suggests that if we

> focus on what is supposedly the essence of gratitude—grateful feelings—I suspect many Christians will agree that they fail to live up to the calling to be grateful to God. For many Christians, feelings of gratitude to God fall short of what one would expect given what Christians allege to be God's extraordinary beneficence. (Dunnington, forthcoming, p. 2)

On Emmons' characterization, these instances of liturgical gratitude which lack emotion would not count as genuine acts of gratitude, since they lacked an essential component, namely, an emotional response to God. Something seems intuitively right about this; for the mere presence of the word "thank you" seems insufficient for counting something as an expression of gratitude. So, an account of liturgical gratitude needs to explain what distinguishes proper gratitude from those who are merely reading a script.

In his book *Ritualized Faith*, Terence Cuneo provides an account of what it is to express gratitude through liturgy which can help us to make sense of the scripted nature of liturgical gratitude. First, Cuneo thinks, we need to make a distinction between liturgical acts (e.g., speaking, eating, prostrating) and the acts prescribed by these liturgical acts (e.g., blessing, petitioning, and thanking) (Cuneo 2016, pp. 156–57). Rather than maintaining that we must distinguish between gratitude and grateful liturgical actions in this context, Cuneo argues that,

> Actions of these latter sorts [i.e., speaking, eating, prostrating] do not merely accompany the linguistic acts prescribed by the liturgical script [i.e., blessing, petitioning, thanking], as if their function were merely to add emphasis to these linguistic acts. Rather, in the context of the liturgy, the kissing, prostrating, and eating also *count as* cases of engaging God by blessing, petitioning, and thanking God. In fact, these bodily actions are vivid cases of act-types by which a person can simultaneously perform multiple actions with expressive import without saying a thing. (Cuneo 2016, pp. 156–57; emphasis added)

Thus, as Cuneo goes on to argue, an act of liturgical gratitude, whether this involves speaking, eating, or kissing, does not depend on having a certain mental state whilst performing the action itself. Instead, he thinks, "Thanking, when all goes well, expresses gratitude. But to thank someone at some time, one needn't be feeling gratitude at that time". (Cuneo 2016, p. 157). In other words, the very act of eating or drinking bread and wine can count as an act of liturgical thanks when *all goes well.* Of course, eating and drinking may not be the only or even the primary mode of gratitude involved in the eucharist; the eucharistic prayer itself is an example of a scripted prayer of thanksgiving. What the acts

of consuming the elements help us to explore is those actions which do not obviously look like instances of gratitude.

So, what does Cuneo mean by "when all goes well?" Here, Cuneo refers to the notion of "aptness" to explain why some actions should count as gratitude and others not. He notes that an act of gratitude might be apt because it is accompanied by a relevant affective state, as in the following example:

> Suppose I write you a note thanking you for a gift that you have given me. If the writing of this note is accompanied by feelings of gratitude toward you, the expressive content of my action perfectly fits the mental state I am in when I write the note. As such, the performance of my action is especially apt. (Cuneo 2016, p. 157)

Similarly, the wrong kind of affective states may make an act of gratitude inapt, if, for example, "my action's expressive content fails to fit the mental state I am in when I write the note. It is thus an especially inapt or defective case of thanking". (Cuneo 2016, p. 157). However, for Cuneo, affective states are not the only measure by which we can assess the aptness of an expression of gratitude. If I write the note absent-mindedly, or because I am merely going through the motions (think of a manager writing thank you cards to hundreds of employees each Christmas), these can still count as acts of expressing thanks, according to Cuneo. He writes that,

> I may often fail to feel gratitude . . . their [i.e., the target of gratitude] actions may seem so remote in time that they fail to engage me emotionally. Still, arguably, my actions of thanking are highly apt. They are not apt because their expressive content fits the mental state I am in when I write these notes. Rather, they are apt because they are appropriate responses to what you have done on my family's behalf, which flows from a state of being resolved to express my family's gratitude. (Cuneo 2016, pp. 157–58)

According to Cuneo, the aptness of gratitude actions (whether eating/drinking or responding to a Eucharistic prayer) has to do with whether the responses are *appropriate*. While negative emotions may make certain actions defective or inapt, a lack of positive emotion is not enough to disregard certain actions as genuinely expressing gratitude. Thus, in the context of liturgy, Cuneo thinks, one successfully and fittingly (i.e., non-defectively) thanks God if one participates in a liturgical act of gratitude without the contrary attitude (i.e., resentment) towards God. This is because expressing gratitude is the *appropriate response* to what God has done on our behalf, regardless of how I feel about it. Thus, participating in the Eucharist without an attitude of resentment counts an instance of liturgical gratitude, so long as one is not participating whilst harbouring resentment against God in some capacity.

No doubt more needs to be said if we are to convince those who maintain that emotion is essential to any expression of gratitude that scripted liturgical gratitude is an appropriate response. In expanding Cuneo's notion of liturgical aptness/inaptness, it will be helpful to distinguish the grateful emotion from the grateful action. For as Gulliford et al. note, in "the earliest psychological writings about gratitude, there was no mention of a necessary emotional response. Bertocci and Millard defined gratitude as 'the willingness to recognize that one has been the beneficiary of someone's kindness, whether the emotional response is present or not.'" (Gulliford et al. 2013, p. 294; citing Bertocci and Millard 1963). While we are not advocating for a removal of talk about gratitude emotions, separating emotions from decisions can help us to examine more carefully how the two might be related.

Consider a distinction made in the psychological discussion of forgiveness. Everett L. Worthington, Jr. argues that "decisional forgiveness" (i.e., a wilful act to forgive someone who has wronged you) and "emotional forgiveness" (i.e., the feeling of no longer holding wrongdoing against a transgressor) can come apart in complex ways. Worthington writes, "People could decide to forgive and not experience emotional forgiveness. They also could experience sudden compassion for a transgressor . . . and realize that unforgiveness had

disappeared even though no decision had been made to forgive" (Worthington 2013, p. 25). It is not always the case, Worthington thinks, that emotional forgiveness always precedes decisional forgiveness or vice versa. While it is typically the case that decisional forgiveness leads to emotional forgiveness, this might not always be so; one's affective response to a perpetrator might change and lead to a decision to forgive. Worthington lays out the similarities between the two kinds of forgiveness as such:

Decisional Forgiveness

(a)   Arrived at rationally or by will
(b)   May come before or after emotional forgiveness
(c)   May occur without emotional forgiveness
(d)   Aimed at controlling future behavior (not motives or emotions)
(e)   May make person feel "settled," calming emotion and motivation (i.e., might lead to emotional forgiveness or at least reduce emotional unforgiveness)
(f)   May give new meaning to situation
(g)   Changes behavior
(h)   May improve interactions by de-escalating or promoting reconciliation

Emotional Forgiveness

(a)   Arrived at by emotional replacement
(b)   Necessarily reduces unforgiving emotions
(c)   May come before or after decisional forgiveness (but usually after)
(d)   May occur without decisional forgiveness on rare occasions
(e)   Aimed at changing emotional climate but inevitably triggers neoassociationistic networks leading to changes in motives, thoughts, and other associations
(f)   May give new meaning to situation
(g)   May change behavior
(h)   Will change motivation
(i)   Makes person feel less negative emotionally and perhaps more positive
(j)   May improve interactions and promote reconciliation
(k)   May reduce the injustice gap
(l)   May reduce the justice motive
        (Worthington 2013, Table 2.1, p. 59)

It seems plausible to think that a similar distinction might be made between decisional and emotional gratitude. We might apply these to claims to gratitude as follows:

Decisional Gratitude

(a)   Arrived at rationally or by will
(b)   May come before or after emotional gratitude
(c)   May occur without emotional gratitude
(d)   Aimed at controlling future behavior (not motives or emotions)
(e)   May make person feel "settled," calming emotion and motivation (i.e., might lead to emotional gratitude or at least reduce emotional ingratitude)
(f)   May give new meaning to situation
(g)   Changes behavior

Emotional Gratitude

(a)   Arrived at by emotional replacement
(b)   Necessarily reduces ungrateful emotions
(c)   May come before or after decisional gratitude (but usually after)
(d)   May occur without decisional gratitude on rare occasions
(e)   Aimed at changing emotional climate but inevitably triggers neoassociationistic networks leading to changes in motives, thoughts, and other associations
(f)   May give new meaning to situation
(g)   May change behavior
(h)   Will change motivation

(i)   Makes person feel less negative emotionally and perhaps more positive (Adapted from Worthington 2013, Table 2.1, p. 59)

Making this distinction allows us to say something more nuanced about the role of emotion in liturgical gratitude. It seems clear that liturgical gratitude always involves a kind of decisional gratitude, in which the participant chooses to engage in acts of thanksgiving to God. Moreover, in many cases of expressing liturgical gratitude it may be the case that participants do not respond emotionally to God. However, as the distinction above alludes to, participating in grateful liturgies by *deciding* to be grateful may still have the effect of increasing one's gratitude emotions in the long-term. As Worthington argues, acts of decisional forgiveness may *cause* emotional forgiveness; it seems reasonable to think something similar is going on in the case of gratitude. Indeed, as James KA Smith (2009) has argued extensively in his work on cultural liturgies, there is some value in participating in liturgy even if one is not "feeling it". Engaging in confession regularly, teaches one how to forgive and be forgiven. Petitioning God regularly teaches one how to pray. Similarly, liturgical acts of gratitude provide a kind of training for how to act gratefully to God. This may have the result of leading to an increase in emotional gratitude towards God, even if this outcome is not instantaneous. Indeed, one might argue that the function of a gratitude diary, a method used widely in the gratitude literature (see Emmons 2013, pp. 159–72 for an example), is precisely to develop gratitude in this way. By repeatedly *deciding* to record things that one is grateful for (regardless of one's feelings in that particular moment), one can become more grateful, in the sense of have grateful emotional experiences more often. It would be strange to suggest that gratitude is only really occurring much later down the line, only after one has been trained into emotionally responding to God in the appropriate way.

Thus, we think that it is important to not to dismiss liturgical gratitude as a bad instance of gratitude even if it lacks an emotional component. While it may be the case that the therapeutic effects of gratitude are lessened in these cases, there is still value in learning *how* to express gratitude in a way that is appropriate to the context. Similarly, encouraging young children to write thank you letters to their relatives after receiving birthday gifts each year is a good thing to do, even if they do so begrudgingly. The hope of the parents is that this practice of expressing gratitude becomes second nature to a child after years of learning how to respond; it is important for them to see that gratitude is the appropriate response to a gift. Moreover, it will also hopefully result in the development of emotional gratitude, especially if the child is encouraged to reflect on what it is they are doing when they write these letters.

Expressing gratitude in liturgy is just like this; we should do it even if we cannot always show-up emotionally, so to speak. A helpful example of this can be seen in the opening of the Church of England's Eucharistic liturgy:

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

All: **It is right to give thanks and praise** (Church of England 2000)

The liturgy indicates that thanks is the *appropriate* response to God. It would be a high bar for participation if this meant that one must always *feel* grateful in one's response to God. Engaging in acts of thankfulness in liturgy is often an instance of decisional gratitude; deciding to thank God because it is right to do so. Liturgy encourages us to be grateful to God even when we do not feel grateful—even if we have had a terrible week, even if we are feeling doubtful and worried—we should be grateful because *it is right to give thanks and praise to God*. We must remain open to the fact that for many (as in Dunnington's discussion), emotional gratitude may never arise through liturgical gratitude. Engaging in liturgical gratitude will ideally lead to emotional gratitude to God, but it cannot be a requirement that it must always do so. We decide to express gratitude to God because it is right to do so.

In recognising the scripted nature of all liturgies, we have argued that liturgy provides a training ground for learning how to be grateful to God, even if one is not always feeling

grateful. Cuneo's account of liturgical action provides a helpful starting point for thinking about how acts of speaking, kissing, eating, and so on, can count as instances of thanking God liturgically. It is reasonable to assume, we think, that many of the therapeutic benefits of gratitude will follow from liturgical gratitude, even if these are formed over a long period of time.

3. Liturgical Gratitude Is a Species of Group Gratitude

The second distinctive feature of liturgical gratitude is that it is always a kind of group gratitude. Christian worship is always situated in the context of the community of the Church. As the theologian Evelyn Underhill describes, it is a central pillar of Christian thinking about worship to see that worship is never merely about individuals. She writes,

> The worshipping life of the Christian whilst profoundly personal, is essentially that of a person who is also a member of a group . . . The Christian as such cannot fulfil his spiritual obligations in solitude. He forms part of a social and spiritual complex with a new relation to God; an organism which is quickened and united by that Spirit of supernatural charity which sanctifies the human race from above, and is required to incarnate something of this supernatural charity in the visible world. Therefore even his most lonely contemplations are not merely private matter; but always to be regarded in their relation to the purpose and action of God Who incites them, and to the total life of the Church. (Underhill 1936, p. 83)

As the Apostle Paul stresses in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, "the body does not consist of one member but of many . . . If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body". (1 Cor 12: 11, 19). The context of Paul's discussion here is that of spiritual gifts given to the members of the Church; some are given gifts of healing, others, gifts of prophecy, and some the gifts of speaking in tongues. There are many different gifts, but the context in which these gifts are given is in the community of the Church. To make sense of the individual responses to God, we need to situate them in the context of the Church as the community of God. As Paul puts it two chapters earlier, we see this unity in the Church starkly in the celebration of the Eucharist: "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10: 17).

This communal emphasis on the Church as the context of worship importantly shapes our understanding of liturgy. In Wolterstorff's words, "The church blesses God, praises God, thanks God, confess her sins to God, petitions God, listens to God's Word, celebrates the Eucharist. It's not the individual members who do these things simultaneously; it's the assembled body that does these things" (Wolterstorff 2015, p. 11). Thus, unlike many of the acts of practices recommended in the gratitude literature—gratitude journaling, spiritual disciplines, letter writing, etc.—liturgical gratitude takes place in the context of a group. As Tsang (2021) notes, those writing in field of gratitude have rarely paid attention to social contexts of gratitude. Thus, care is needed in thinking through this important feature of liturgical gratitude.

It will be helpful to begin with some examples:

(a) In the Church of England's liturgy for Holy Communion, the congregation are invited to say the following prayer together after receiving bread and wine:

> Almighty God,
>
> we thank you for feeding us
>
> with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
>
> Through him we offer you our souls and bodies
>
> to be a living sacrifice.
>
> Send us out
>
> in the power of your Spirit
>
> to live and work
>
> to your praise and glory.

Amen. (Church of England 2000)

(b) The first verse of the hymn written by American country artist, Jim Reeves begins as follows:

We thank Thee each morning for a newborn day

Where we may work the fields of new mown hay

We thank Thee for the sunshine

And the air that we breathe

Oh Lord we thank Thee (Reeves 1962)

(c) In a service in a low-church tradition, after the sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:18 ("give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"), the pastor stands up and prays using the following words:

Lord we are so grateful for what you are doing in the life of our community. Thank you for your Word and its challenge to us this morning to thank you in all circumstances. We pray you would make us a thankful people. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

How should we understand the meaning of these plural expressions of gratitude? In a recent article on group gratitude, we (Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming) offer a taxonomy for thinking about three different kinds of group gratitude. We think these distinctions can help expand our concept of liturgical gratitude. We offer the following distinctions:

Group-context gratitude: "gratitude is experienced or expressed in a group setting but the grateful agent is an individual, rather than a group"., e.g., imagine a "community stricken by natural disaster receiving money to fund the rebuilding of the whole town" in which an individual is grateful for the money received by the town. Here, "All that the group provides is the context for such gratitude". (Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming, p. 20)

Joint gratitude: "Joint gratitude involves 1) jointly attending to the source of gratitude, 2) co-attenders actively signalling their grateful attitude to that source (even if this attitude is not always identical in all participants) and 3) jointly responding with some kind of grateful action". E.g., "If . . . a couple received a gift from a friend, they could express gratitude individually; one might bake the generous friend a cake, and the other could write the friend a letter". (Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming, pp. 22–23)

Collective gratitude: "Collective gratitude occurs when organisations or social groups are organised such that they can act gratefully in response to benefits identified at the collective level. Note that unlike the other kinds of group gratitude in the taxonomy, collective gratitude is not dependent on joint attention, and we assume that there is no collective-level phenomenology. The individuals on whom the collective actions depend on may attend to group-level benefits, but the collective as the subject of gratitude can only *identify* benefits through decision-making procedure (such as voting, or group hierarchy)". e.g., "Suppose a university receives a large financial gift from one of its donors. The university hierarchy meets together to decide what the best response to this donation might be, and after some deliberation, decide to send a letter on behalf of the university, as well as naming one of their faculty builds after the benefactor. In the letter, the University Principal writes the following words: "On behalf of the university I would like to express my deep gratitude for your donation; this gift will benefit many students for many years to come"". (Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming, pp. 16, 26)

As we argue, "many cases will be difficult to map neatly onto this taxonomy. For instance, in cases of collective action it may be that all three kinds of group gratitude are occurring simultaneously—an organisation which displays collective-level gratitude may

do so through the joint actions of many individuals who are also experiencing gratitude individually" (Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming, p. 28). Nevertheless, this taxonomy seems useful in understanding the different ways in which group gratitude may be present in expressions of liturgical gratitude.

First, many of the examples discussed in the first section of this paper (such as expressing thanks by participating in the Eucharist in the appropriate manner) would seem to be instances of what we call "group-context gratitude". Cuneo's analysis focuses predominantly on how individuals might express liturgical gratitude in the context of corporate worship, but the focus is primarily on the individual expressing gratitude in the liturgy. This is the weakest form of group gratitude (in the sense that all the group contributes is the context for expressing gratitude), but clearly provides one way of making sense of the corporate claims made about liturgy by Underhill and others: gratitude is always expressed in the context of a group for one's relationship to God is always bound up in one's relationship to the Church as Christ's body. In many cases of liturgical gratitude, it may be sufficient simply to point to the context in which individuals are expressing thanks to God.[4] Yet, this notion of group-context gratitude is not the only kind of group gratitude occurring in liturgical contexts.

Secondly, then, there also seem to be many cases of joint gratitude in liturgy. Indeed, Cuneo argues that in the example of singing in liturgy, we are required to sing *together* not merely to sing as individuals; "to engage in group singing . . . requires that I adjust my singing to yours and that you adjust your singing to mine in 'real time', often in ways that are not dictated by the score that we are following". (Cuneo 2016, p. 138). In liturgical singing there are joint intentions present, such that individuals intend to sing the liturgy *together*, rather than intending to act as individuals. The difference is subtle, but significant. Consider an example from John Searle to why this is the case:

> Imagine that a group of people are sitting on the grass in various places in a park. Imagine that it suddenly starts to rain and they all get up and run to a common, centrally located, shelter. Each person has the intention expressed by the sentence "I am running to the shelter". But for each person, we may suppose that his or her intention is entirely independent of the intentions and behavior of others. In this case, there is no collective behavior; there is just a sequence of individual acts that happen to converge on a common goal. Now imagine a case where a group of people in a park converge on a common point as a piece of collective behavior. Imagine that they are part of an outdoor ballet where the choreography calls for the entire *corps de ballet* to converge on a common point. We can even imagine that the external bodily movements are indistinguishable in the two cases; the people running for shelter make the same types of bodily movements as the ballet dancers. Externally observed the two cases are indistinguishable, but they are clearly different internally. (Searle 1990, pp. 403–4)

While in cases of group-context gratitude, individuals may happen to express the same intention at the same time, in acts of joint liturgical gratitude, individuals attempt to mesh or merge their intentions, such that the subject expressing gratitude is "we", not "I". If I try to speak at the same time as my fellow congregants, or to co-ordinate my movements such that I raise my hand in worship when the worship leader sings the line: "so we raise up holy hands to praise the holy One", then liturgical gratitude is a kind of joint gratitude.

Note that on an account of joint liturgical gratitude, it can sometimes be difficult to pick out precisely who is included in the pronoun, "we". For it might be the case that the "we" in liturgical contexts extends to anyone included in my joint intention. For example, in singing a hymn of gratitude, I might intend to sing with the whole congregation; here the meaning of "we" seems to extend to all those contained in my intention. However, if I am a member of the choir seated at a distance from the rest of the congregation whom I am not consciously attending to, then plausibly, the meaning of "we" might only extend to the members of the choir. In other words, there are limits to joint gratitude. These analyses fail to capture all instances of group gratitude in liturgy.

The problem is not unique to liturgy either; as Stephanie Collins (2019) describes, joint action "rises and falls with the specific joint commitment that defines it—for example, a joint commitment to paint the house or go for a walk" (p. 56). Joint action analyses are helpful at explaining cases of actions performed by small groups, such as moving furniture or performing pieces of music, but they stop short of providing explanations for when group behavior is dispersed, or in which the "we" described persists beyond the specific actions performed. For example, a joint action account will fare poorly in explaining how it is that an organization like a university can express thanks to all its staff.

Thirdly, then, it seems that the liturgical "we" refers sometimes to a broader group than is captured by the joint-action account. We think that there may also be cases of collective gratitude present in liturgical contexts. At times, the subject of liturgical expressions of gratitude does not appear to refer to either those jointly enacting the liturgy or individuals who are enacting the liturgy in a group context. Consider the prayer we gave in example (c):

> Lord we are so grateful for what you are doing in the life of our community. Thank you for your Word and its challenge to us this morning to thank you in all circumstances. We pray you would make us a thankful people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The expression of gratitude in this prayer seems to refer not only to those jointly enacting the liturgy, but also to the community more widely. For instance, Betty, a long-standing member of the congregation, might have been in bed with a fever on the morning of this prayer, but arguably the pastor's prayer still applies to her as she is a member of the community. Similarly, Jon may have been distracted when the prayer was being said and fail to attend to the pastor's words. But the words still apply to him. In other words, group gratitude sometimes describes an action that is performed by a wider community, beyond instances of joint action. These actions might lead to groups developing a culture of gratitude. To specify what this culture amounts to, we need to say something about how a group is capable of acting. Consider an example from our previous work:

> Consider how a newspaper might be said to display the virtue of courageous journalism. While a team of investigative journalists might display courage through joint actions (such as the exposure of abuse by the *Boston Globe* as depicted in the movie, *Spotlight*), we might also say of a newspaper that it is courageous over a long period of time (i.e., we might say that the *Boston Globe* has consistently acted courageously in pursuit of the truth for the past two decades, even though its editorial team have changed entirely over this period). Joint action accounts do not allow us to say much of the long-term actions or virtues of a group if there are changes in constitution. (Cockayne and Salter, forthcoming, p. 15)

To make sense of such claims, we argue, we can think of groups as collectives, that is, agents capable of acting together through their organisational structure. For example, a government decides to enact certain policy by voting on the best course of action, or by deferring to an individual with ultimate authority, like a Prime Minister or President. In collectives, there are typically those who act on behalf of the group, and those who authorize others to act on their behalf. For example, as Christian List and Philip Pettit argue,

> In a participatory group like a voluntary association, members have the same status within the group agent; they equally authorize the group agent and take roughly equal parts in acting on its behalf. In a hierarchical organization, such as a commercial corporation or a church, there may be differences in the members' roles, for example through holding different offices or through belonging to subgroups with different tasks. (List and Pettit 2011, p. 36)

How does this help us to think about liturgical gratitude? Consider how churches make decisions as collectives. Typically, most churches have decision-making bodies (church councils, eldership bodies) which vote on which actions the church is to perform, but they may also authorize individuals to make decisions on behalf of all. For example, a worship leader may be authorized to choose the hymns for Sunday services. In these decisions,

whether they are made through voting or authorization, there are choices made about whether to act gratefully. What balance should be struck between praise and confession in the music used in worship? Should there be space in liturgy to hear testimonies of individual thanks? Should the Church express thanks to members in the community as a group through public statements and letters of thanks? These decisions will all impact the grateful actions of the church as a collective, but also the culture of the community itself.

Finally, this broader sense of "we" in the context of liturgical gratitude may extend to a much broader group, namely, the body of Christ. Return to Underhill's remarks that in worship we, form "part of a social and spiritual complex with a new relation to God; an organism which is quickened and united" by the Holy Spirit (Underhill 1936, p. 83). In expressing gratitude to God in liturgy, we are brought into a group that extends beyond what we are currently aware of either in congregational structure, or through jointly intentional action.

Thus, we have seen that liturgical gratitude is complex. There are many different ways of trying to understand the group dynamics present in liturgical gratitude. Future work on liturgical gratitude (empirical or not) will need to be sensitive to these distinctions; rather than thinking of group gratitude as a monolithic concept, it is important to see how the context of the gratitude expression makes a difference to the group dynamics present, as well as the ways in which the individual expresses gratitude in this context.

4. What Are the Effects of Liturgical Gratitude?

We have now considered how to make sense of liturgical gratitude by considering two distinctive features of liturgical gratitude. First, its scriptedness, and second, the fact that liturgical gratitude is always a kind of group gratitude. Clearly, there will be other instances of gratitude which are either, or perhaps both, scripted and social. However, unlike many of the cases of individual gratitude discussed in the psychological literature, liturgical gratitude always has these distinctive features present. This raises the possibility that there are important empirical effects of liturgical gratitude on those who participate, which are not always present in individual gratitude practices. We conclude by offering three ways in which liturgical gratitude might provide an effect on its participants. We hope these will provide impetus for future empirical studies of liturgical gratitude as a distinct context for gratitude behavior.

The first claim is that individuals are more likely to experience strong feelings of gratitude to God when experiencing these feelings in a group context. Studies have found that both positively- and negatively-valanced experiences are felt more intensely when shared with a partner. Garriy Shteynberg and colleagues (Shteynberg et al. 2014) found that sharing scary, sad and happy stimuli with another induced stronger emotional experiences of each kind. A similar pattern can be observed with sensory experiences; individuals rate chocolate as more likeable and flavorful having tasted it simultaneously with another, and rated an unpleasantly bitter chocolate as less likeable having tasted with another (Boothby et al. 2014). These studies provide evidence that shared experiences are not simply more enjoyable than solitary experiences but intensify emotional and sensory experiences.

It is reasonable to extend this logic to gratitude; grateful feelings are amplified when shared. In the context of grateful liturgical practices, it is plausible that this amplification will apply in cases of joint gratitude. That is, rather than a situation in which individuals in a group setting are encouraged to bring to mind reasons they are each individually grateful to God, all members of the group express gratitude to God together. This is not to claim that shared grateful experiences are *always* stronger than individual grateful experiences, but that sharedness is just one of many factors that might influence an individual's emotional experience.

The second claim, closely related to the first, is that expressing gratitude to God through liturgy as part of a group leads to greater positive effects on social bonding than those observed in cases of individual gratitude. The sharing of emotional experiences creates social closeness (Zahavi and Rochat 2015), as does shared activity of various kinds,

from synchronous bodily movements to planned joint actions (McNeill 1997; Hove and Risen 2009; Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). However, it is possible to go further than the claim that shared gratitude promotes social affiliation because shared emotions and actions in general promote social affiliation. Gratitude arguably has specific influences on social cohesion. While it has been highlighted how gratitude serves to promote social affiliation between benefactor and recipient, it is also plausible that there are effects that promote cohesion within larger groups (Algoe 2012; Algoe et al. 2008; Tsang 2021). For example, individuals that experience gratitude towards a fellow group member (such as a fellow sorority member) also feel more integrated within that social group (the sorority) (Algoe et al. 2008). A proposed reason for this is that a dyadic-level sense of social value that comes with gratitude serves to enhance one's sense that they are a genuine member of the group. It is plausible that this is also the case at the joint level; sharing gratitude with others helps create a sense of being part of an integrated group that experiences common benefits.

Here, particular features of gratitude to God are also relevant. Tsang (2021) suggests that group-based benefits (those that help an individual but are not specifically for that individual, such as healthcare, civil liberties, etc.) typically generate weaker grateful feelings than individual benefits (e.g., a benefactor paying for another's operation). She suggests that this because in the individual case it is clearer how a specific relationship benefits, which has the further effect of there being a clearer sense of a benevolent motivation. However, as Tsang goes on to suggest, if the benefactor is God, it is possible that a specific sense of relationship, and thus benevolence, can emerge. We might also expect different effects in the case of liturgy, where the sense of group is both at the collective level and at the joint level. Here, the sense of the group in which one is benefitting may be collective (i.e., the Church), but also distinctly local (i.e., this church), making the sense of group benefit much more specific. Thus, cases of *joint* liturgical gratitude have a specific benefactor (God) and a specific recipient (this community), which may help create a clearer and thus stronger sense of gratitude amongst that group, which in turn facilitates stronger integration amongst members of that community.

A further step is to follow Emmons and Stern's (2013) distinction between gratitude's "worldly" and "transcendent" definitions. Focusing on the latter, Emmons and Stern quote Streng (1989), who states that those who adopt a grateful attitude " . . . recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious and miraculous way" (Streng 1989, p. 5). Emmons and Stern thus define transcendent gratitude as " . . . the feeling of connection with humanity emerging from a sense of wonder and joy that participating in an intricate network of existence brings". (Emmons and Stern 2013, p. 847). If gratitude in its transcendent sense is a spiritual attitude pertaining to a sense of one's connectedness with others, it is plausible that this sense of social connectedness is magnified when experiencing a gratitude with others. The presence of others is an especially tangible reminder of one's connectedness, especially when those others are engaging in a shared grateful practice with. This may also be particularly so in the case of group gratitude to God, given that in such cases the transcendent sense of gratitude is salient even if the source of gratitude is something mundane (e.g., "thank you that our leaky roof has been fixed").

The third and final claim is that participating in acts of group liturgical gratitude can serve as a means of facilitating gratitude in individuals who are not experiencing gratitude to God as an individual. As previously highlighted, the gratitude literature already assumes that by engaging in intentional gratitude practices (such as journaling; Emmons 2013), an individual might facilitate an increase in grateful feelings, regardless of their emotional state at the point of deciding to engage in such practices, or engaging directly in the practice. We propose a similar process might occur in the case of participating in liturgy that expresses thanks. An individual participant who is not feeling grateful during the process of engaging in the grateful liturgy may nonetheless experience an increase in grateful feelings if they continue to participate in the practice over time. However, beyond the effectiveness of the practice itself, it is plausible that embedding that non-grateful individual within a group of grateful others might be a further avenue for increased gratitude. Participating in a shared

expression of gratitude like a liturgical practice may serve to align the attitude of the non-grateful participant with the attitude of the grateful participants around them, a process which has been argued to be an effect of participating in joint actions (Gallotti et al. 2017).

5. Conclusions

Given that liturgy is one of the primary places in which gratitude is expressed in the life of the Christian, it seems pressing to understand the nature of liturgical gratitude. We have argued that there are two features of liturgical gratitude that distinguish it from many typical instances of gratitude discussed in the existing literature. Firstly, liturgical gratitude is scripted, which leaves open the possibility that one might express gratitude even if they are not feeling grateful emotions. Here, we wish to resist the typical view that gratitude must always be accompanied by a corresponding emotional state; deciding to act gratefully in liturgy is the appropriate response to God because God deserves our gratitude, even if we are not feeling so grateful. Moreover, in deciding to be grateful, we argued, we create a context in which we can provide further opportunities to feel grateful, much like training a child how to respond appropriately to the social convention of gift giving. Secondly, liturgical gratitude always takes place in the context of a group. If we recognize the theological importance of seeing all worship as part of the community of the Church, then we should also see that liturgical gratitude is a kind of group gratitude. We have shown that group gratitude is a complex phenomenon (or set of phenomena) and that paying attention to the context is crucial for understanding the meaning of expressions of liturgical gratitude. Finally, we have argued that identifying these two distinctive features means that there are some important features to liturgical gratitude which we expect to result in distinctive empirical effects.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft preparation, J.C. and G.S.; writing—review and editing, J.C. and G.S.; funding acquisition, J.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] Arguably, as one anonymous reviewer helpfully highlights, such concerns regarding sincerity are primarily (or indeed only) an issue if assuming a Protestant view of Christian worship, whereby extemporaneous expressions of worship are often viewed as more sincere than formal, composed texts. Regardless, it is still helpful to our account to articulate a positive account of liturgical expressions of gratitude as genuine, both for addressing potential theological concerns (from a Protestant perspective or otherwise) and for addressing the potential concerns of psychologists who place a strong emphasis on gratitude requiring an emotional component (e.g., Emmons 2008).

[2] Indeed, Kent Dunnington (forthcoming) has recently argued that gratitude to God does not require us to have emotional gratitude states for precisely this reason.

[3] There are some who take a more general account of liturgy (see Smith 2009) to refer to any goal-oriented ritual. We refer to liturgy in its restricted sense in the context of gathered Christian worship, as in Wolterstorff's definition.

[4] Note that group-context gratitude best captures the kinds of group gratitude considered in Tsang's (2021) study.

References

Algoe, Sara B. 2012. Find, remind, and bind: The functions of gratitude in everyday relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6: 455–69. [CrossRef]

Algoe, Sara B., Jonathan Haidt, and Shelly L. Gable. 2008. Beyond reciprocity: Gratitude and relationships in everyday life. *Emotion* 8: 425–29. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Bertocci, Peter Anthony, and Richard Marion Millard. 1963. *Personality and the Good: Psychological and Ethical Perspectives*. New York: David McKay.

Boothby, Erica J., Margaret S. Clark, and John A. Bargh. 2014. Shared experiences are amplified. *Psychological Science* 25: 2209–16. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Church of England. 2000. Common Worship. Available online: https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/holy-communion-service (accessed on 5 August 2022).

Cockayne, Joshua, and Gideon Salter. Forthcoming. Group gratitude: A taxonomy. Under review. *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, unpublished.

Collins, Stephanie. 2019. *Group Duties: Their Existence and Their Implications for Individuals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cuneo, Terence. 2016. *Ritualized Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dunnington, Kent. Forthcoming. Being grateful to God and feeling grateful to God: Reconsidering the phenomenology of thanksgiving. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Emmons, Robert A. 2008. Gratitude, subjective well-being, and the brain. In *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*. Edited by Michael Eid and Randy J. Larsen. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 469–89.

Emmons, Robert A. 2013. *Gratitude Works!: A 21-day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Emmons, Robert A., and Robin Stern. 2013. Gratitude as a psychotherapeutic intervention. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 69: 846–55. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Gallotti, Mattia, Merle T. Fairhurst, and Chris D. Frith. 2017. Alignment in social interactions. *Consciousness and Cognition* 48: 253–61. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Gulliford, Liz, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson. 2013. Recent work on the concept of gratitude in philosophy and psychology. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47: 285–317. [CrossRef]

Hove, Michael J., and Jane L. Risen. 2009. It's all in the timing: Interpersonal synchrony increases affiliation. *Social Cognition* 27: 949–60. [CrossRef]

List, Christian, and Philip Pettit. 2011. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McNeill, William H. 1997. *Keeping Together in Time*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Petrocchi, Nicola, and Alessandro Couyoumdjian. 2016. The impact of gratitude on depression and anxiety: The mediating role of criticizing, attacking, and reassuring the self. *Self and Identity* 15: 191–205. [CrossRef]

Reeves, Jim. 1962. *"We Thank Thee", on We Thank Thee, [Music Album]*. New York: RCA Victor.

Searle, John R. 1990. Collective intentions and actions. In *Intentions in Communication*. Edited by Philip R. Morgan, Jerry L. Cohen and Martha E. Pollack. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 401–16.

Shteynberg, Garriy, Jacob B. Hirsh, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Jeff T. Larsen, Adam D. Galinsky, and Neal J. Roese. 2014. Feeling more together: Group attention intensifies emotion. *Emotion* 14: 1102–14. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Smith, James K. A. 2009. *Desiring the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Ada: Baker Academic.

Streng, Frederick. J. 1989. Introduction: Thanksgiving as a worldwide response to life. In *Spoken and Unspoken Thanks: Some Comparative Soundings*. Edited by John B. Carman and Frederick J. Streng. Dallas: Center for World Thanksgiving, pp. 1–9.

Tsang, Jo-Ann. 2021. (Un) special favors: Gratitude for group-based benefits. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 16: 27–37. [CrossRef]

Underhill, Evelyn. 1936. *Worship*. London: Mayflower Press.

Whitehouse, Harvey, and Jonathan A. Lanman. 2014. The ties that bind us: Ritual, fusion, and identification. *Current Anthropology* 55: 674–95. [CrossRef]

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2015. *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2018. *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Worthington, Everett L., Jr. 2013. *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Zahavi, Dan, and Philippe Rochat. 2015. Empathy≠sharing: Perspectives from phenomenology and developmental psychology. *Consciousness and Cognition* 36: 543–53. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Article

Personality Predictors of Gratitude to God: Examining the Roles of Positive Emotional Traits and Adaptive Relational Styles

Joshua A. Wilt * and Julie J. Exline

Department of Psychological Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA
* Correspondence: joshua.wilt@case.edu

Abstract: Research relating personality variables to gratitude to God (GTG) is in its nascent stages, as only a few descriptive, correlational studies have been conducted on this topic. We investigated whether two kinds of personality variables—positive emotional traits and adaptive relational styles—predicted higher GTG. Hypotheses linking these variables to GTG were based on a novel, pre-registered conceptual framework. We also explored whether general gratitude statistically mediated these links. In a cross-sectional study of $N = 698$ undergraduates from the United States, participants completed self-report measures of personality predictors, situational GTG and situational general gratitude in response to a positive event, as well as trait GTG. Correlations showed strong support for hypotheses connecting GTG (situational and trait) with positive emotional traits (extraversion, optimism, vitality, self-esteem). Correlations also supported hypotheses for one adaptive relational style (agreeableness) but not others (honesty–humility, lack of entitlement, secure attachment). General gratitude was a mediator of associations between positive emotional traits and both trait and situational GTG, and general gratitude mediated associations between adaptive relational styles and trait GTG. These results provide initial evidence suggesting that positive emotional traits have consistent, direct (and indirect via gratitude) links to GTG, whereas the evidence for adaptive relational styles was more inconsistent and indirectly mediated via general gratitude.

Keywords: God; gratitude; extraversion; optimism; vitality; self-esteem; agreeableness; honesty–humility; entitlement; secure attachment

1. Introduction

Gratitude to God (GTG), which may be defined as feelings of thankfulness and appreciation directed toward God in response to receiving benefits (Rosmarin et al. 2011; Krause et al. 2014), has been the focus of a growing amount of research (as evidenced by this special issue). Much of the pioneering work on this topic indicated that higher levels of GTG associated with various indicators of better psychological health (e.g., Krause et al. 2014; Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Sadoughi and Hesampour 2020). Such studies have established the potential importance of GTG and motivated attempts to understand the factors that predict GTG. Initial work focused on identifying predictors focused on religious/spiritual (r/s) (e.g., Krause and Hayward 2015), affective (e.g., Wilt and Exline 2022), cognitive (e.g., Exline and Wilt 2022a, 2022b), and personality variables (e.g., Aghababaei et al. 2018). We aim to contribute to the literature on predictors by taking a relatively comprehensive look at potential personality and individual-difference variables that may be relevant to GTG. In this paper, we not only examine a wide variety of potential predictors, but also offer theoretical frameworks for why certain kinds of personality variables may predict GTG, highlighting the potential roles of positive emotional traits and adaptive relational styles. Furthermore, as personality variables have also been linked to general gratitude (McCullough et al. 2002; Wood et al. 2009), we explored whether general gratitude mediated the associations between our predictors and GTG. Finally, we examined these questions regarding two kinds of GTG: (a) trait or average levels of GTG and (b) event-specific GTG

in response to a positive event. Thus, this study has the potential to increase understanding about the relationships between personality, GTG, and gratitude, and it also builds on the body of knowledge regarding how personality interfaces with religion and spirituality (Wilt et al. 2020).

1.1. Gratitude to God: Outcomes and Predictors

Given the robust body of work showing that general gratitude is highly adaptive (for reviews, see Emmons et al. 2019; Wood et al. 2010), most early work on GTG examined the possibility that GTG could be an important predictor of positive psychological outcomes. This work has been fruitful, as higher trait GTG associated with higher levels of multiple indicators of well-being: overall well-being (Aghababaei et al. 2018; Rosmarin et al. 2011; Sadoughi and Hesampour 2020), happiness (Aghababaei et al. 2018), hope (Krause et al. 2015), and life-satisfaction (Aghababaei et al. 2018; Aghababaei and Tabik 2013). GTG also related to lower levels of depression (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Krause et al. 2014), as well as better adjustment to stress (Krause 2006) and bereavement (Upenieks and Ford-Robertson 2022). Further, a recent study found that trait GTG predicted increased r/s well-being over time (Watkins et al. 2022). Only one study to our knowledge looked at event-specific GTG and found that GTG in response to both positive and negative events related to higher levels of perceived closeness to God (Wilt and Exline 2022). Concepts akin to GTG also relate to salutary outcomes. Prayers of thanksgiving are associated with higher life-satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism (Whittington and Scher 2010), psychological well-being (Zarzycka and Krok 2021), and marriage satisfaction (Fincham and May 2021). Similarly, transcendent indebtedness to God is linked to higher levels of awe, humility, empathy, and prosocial behavior (Nelson et al. 2022).

Most work on predictors of trait GTG has looked at r/s and personality variables. In the domain of r/s in general, predictors of higher trait GTG include religiosity (Rosmarin et al. 2011), belief in God (Aghababaei et al. 2018; Krause and Hayward 2015; Nelson et al. 2022; Rosmarin et al. 2011), positive views of God (Park et al. 2022), secure attachment to God (Nelson et al. 2022), and emotional and spiritual connection to r/s communities (Krause and Ellison 2009; Krause et al. 2014, 2015). Overall, this work suggests that GTG may be an outcome of healthy religion and spirituality. Personality predictors of higher trait GTG include higher extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty–humility (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Aghababaei et al. 2018).

Predictors of event-specific GTG include r/s as well as psychological (e.g., cognitive, motivational, affective) variables. People who reported relationships with God characterized by high degrees of love/safety and excitement/energy had higher levels of GTG in response to a positive event (Exline and Wilt 2022c). Cognitive and motivational variables related to receiving benefits also predicted higher GTG in response to positive events (Exline and Wilt 2022a, 2022b): These variables included (a) believing that God can cause positive events, (b) attributing a specific positive event to God, (c) seeing positive events as gifts from God, and (d) wanting to receive a gift from God. Finally, positive affect in response to positive *and* negative events related to higher levels of event-specific GTG (Wilt and Exline 2022).

1.2. A Theoretical Framework for Potential Personality Predictors of GTG: Positive Emotional Traits and Adaptive Relational Styles

Research on personality and GTG is just beginning. Thus far, it has documented associations between traits—higher extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty–humility—and trait GTG (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Aghababaei et al. 2018). In the current study, we aimed to expand on this work by focusing on two kinds of personality variables that we see as being linked theoretically with GTG (a) positive affective traits and (b) adaptive relational styles.

We use the umbrella term, "positive affective traits", to encompass traits that reflect individual differences in the experience of positive affect; that is, people with higher levels

of such traits experience more positive affect, whereas people with lower levels experience less positive affect. We hypothesized that people with higher levels of positive affective traits would experience more GTG based on the following rationale. First, as positive emotion is tied to reward, people with higher levels of positive emotion should be more likely to recognize benefits in their lives. Thus, such individuals simply will have more benefits that could be attributed to God. Second, as positive emotions signify a lively and energetic experience of life, it is possible that such traits relate to a more dynamic relationship with God, one characterized by spontaneity and excitement: note that these types of relationships with God are associated with higher GTG (Exline and Wilt 2022c). Thus, people with higher levels of positive emotional traits may view God as being highly involved in generating a fun experience of life. When such individuals people experience a benefit and consider whether God may be responsible, their view of God would match with beliefs about how God operates. We assessed several examples of positive affective traits in the current study. Extraversion is a broad personality trait reflecting individual differences in positive emotions as well as assertive behaviors and the desire for social attention (Wilt and Revelle 2016). Optimism is a disposition reflecting the positive emotions of hope and confidence (Scheier and Carver 1987). Vitality is defined as being energetic, strong, and lively (Ryan and Frederick 1997). Finally, self-esteem reflects one's overall evaluation (positive to negative) of oneself and contains a strong, positive emotional component (Watson et al. 2002).

We refer to the term, "adaptive relational styles", to signify traits that reflect individual differences in tendencies to relate to other people with warmth, comfort, and security. First, given their positive relationships with others, we reasoned that people with higher levels of adaptive relational styles would be more open to considering other agents, including God, as benefactors. Second, because such individuals—if they believe in God—may view God as a warm and caring provider, they may see benefits as provisions from God. Indeed, perceived relationships with God characterized by love and safety are associated with higher GTG (Exline and Wilt 2022c), Third, such individuals should be more be willing and motivated to credit God, perhaps to maintain and strengthen relational bonds. We assessed several traits reflecting adaptive relational styles. Agreeableness is a broad trait encompassing individual differences in tendencies for prosocial behavior, trust in others, kindness and empathetic ways of relating to others (Graziano and Tobin 2009). Honesty–humility is a broad trait concerned with the well-being of others and not overestimating one's own abilities (Van Tongeren et al. 2019). Psychological entitlement, in contrast to humility, reflects tendencies to be self-focused and put one's own needs ahead of the needs of others (Campbell et al. 2004); note that we conceptualize low levels of psychological entitlement as reflecting an adaptive relational style. Finally, we assessed attachment security, a working model of relationships characterized by the expectation that the other person in the relationship will support one's needs in a warm and caring fashion (Brennan et al. 1998).

1.3. Exploring General Gratitude as a Mediator

The link between GTG and personality could be applied to other entities (e.g., another person, a group of individuals, another supernatural agent, etc.). Because of the potential for the framework to generalize across many entities, we see these steps as a framework for understanding general gratitude, which of course encompasses all types of gratitude: e.g., GTG, interpersonal gratitude, cosmic gratitude, etc. As such, we think it is possible that the personality predictors we identified could be related not only to GTG but to many kinds of gratitude. Note that this is consistent with findings indicating that a subset of our predictors—extraversion, agreeableness, honesty–humility—are linked with general gratitude (Aghababaei et al. 2018; McCullough et al. 2002). This line of reasoning led us to explore whether general gratitude statistically mediated the associations between our personality predictors and GTG. If we find evidence in support of mediation, this would be consistent with the idea that the personality predictors are linked with gratitude to various

entities through common processes, with God being one important kind of entity. If we find that associations between personality predictors and GTG remain when accounting for general gratitude, this might suggest that at least part of the link between personality variables and GTG is due to processes that are unique rather than generalizing across other entities.

1.4. Summary and Overview of Present Study

Our study examines two potential kinds of personality predictors of GTG: positive emotional traits and adaptive relational styles. We tested whether several variables in each of these categories related to GTG. Further, our framework may generalize beyond GTG to many other entities and thus could explain associations between personality variables and general gratitude. We explored this possibility by testing whether general gratitude mediated the associations between personality predictors and GTG. We tested all of these ideas for two kinds of GTG: trait GTG (i.e., overall or average levels) and event-specific GTG in response to a positive event. In the current study, a large sample of undergraduates filled out online self-report survey measures of key variables and reported reactions to a recent positive event. (Analysis scripts and deidentified data are available at https://osf.io/ztc9j/?view_only=b370c7916af144bc81f483e6ee0e0708).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

All methods were approved by the (anonymized) IRB. We recruited undergraduates from a private research university in the (anonymized) region of the United States (U.S.) via the introductory psychology participant pool. Participants were given informed consent and completed an online survey titled "Positive and Negative Events" for partial fulfillment of their research participation requirement. The survey included all measures relevant to the current study and additional measures that were a part of a larger project on GTG (see: https://osf.io/ztc9j/?view_only=b370c7916af144bc81f483e6ee0e0708).

A total of 717 students completed the survey. We excluded 19 students for failing an attention check, and therefore we retained $N = 698$ participants (390 women, 298 men, 6 "prefer not to say", 3 "other", and 1 transgender man) for analyses. Ages ranged from 18 to 34 ($M = 19.17$, $SD = 1.66$). Ethnicities included Asian/Pacific Islander (47%), White/Caucasian (42%), Latino/Hispanic (11%), African American/Black (7%), Middle Eastern (4%), Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native (1%), "other" (1%) and "prefer not to say" (1%). (Some participants selected multiple ethnicities.). R/s affiliations included Christian (36%: unspecified or other (13%), Catholic (15%), Protestant (7%), Eastern Orthodox (1%)), Hindu (10%), Muslim (3%), Jewish (3%), "spiritual" (1%), and "other" (2%). Non-r/s affiliations included no affiliation (18%), agnostic (12%), atheist (13%), and unsure (<1%).

2.2. Measures

Participants completed two types of GTG and general gratitude measures: trait measures and those focused on a specific positive event. Participants also completed standardized measures of positive emotional traits and adaptive relational styles. For all measures, scores were calculated by averaging across items.

2.2.1. Gratitude to God and General Gratitude Response to a Positive Event

One section of the survey asked participants to recall an especially positive event from the past month. Instructions read, "Please take a few moments to recall something positive that happened to you in the past month. Try to recall one of the most positive things that you experienced". Participants were asked to write a brief description of the event.

To assess GTG in response to this event, participants read, "When you think about this event, do you feel grateful to _____?" followed by a list of randomized items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). One item read "God (or a god or Higher Power)". To

assess general gratitude, participants read, "Overall, how much gratitude do you feel as you think about this event?" and rated responses on a slider anchored at 0 (*no gratitude*) 50 (*moderate gratitude*), and 100 (*extreme gratitude*).

2.2.2. Trait Gratitude to God and General Gratitude

To assess trait GTG, we used we used the six-item measure used by Rosmarin et al. (2011). Items (e.g., "I have so much in life to be thankful to God for") were adapted from the McCullough et al. (2002)'s dispositional gratitude measure and rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). To assess, trait general gratitude, we used McCullough et al. (2002)'s measure, with items (e.g., "I have so much in life to be thankful for") rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.3. Positive Emotional Traits

Participants completed the 12-item extraversion subscale of the BFI-2 (Soto and John 2017). Agreement with items (e.g., "is outgoing, sociable") was rated from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). We assessed optimism with the six-item Life Orientation Test (Scheier et al. 1994). Agreement with items (e.g., "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best") was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We assessed vitality with the six-item Subjective Vitality Scale (Ryan and Frederick 1997), with items (e.g., "I feel alive and vital") rated to the "degree to which the statement is true for you" from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). We assessed self-esteem with the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965). Agreement with items (e.g., "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others") was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.4. Adaptive Relational Styles

We assessed agreeableness with the 12-item scale from the BFI-2 (Soto and John 2017). Agreement with items (e.g., "is compassionate, has a soft heart") was rated from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). We assessed honesty–humility with the 10-item Honesty–Humility scale from the HEXACO-PI (Lee and Ashton 2004). Agreement with items (e.g., "I wouldn't use flattery to get a raise of promotion at work, even if I thought it would succeed") was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We assessed psychological entitlement with the nine-item measure developed by Campbell et al. (2004). Agreement with items (e.g., "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others") was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We assessed individual differences in secure attachment using the one-item measure developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). Agreement with the item, "It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me," was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

3. Results

We conducted all analyses in R (R Core Team 2021). We used base functions in R and the *psych* package (Revelle 2022) to compute descriptive statistics and Pearson zero-order correlations, and we used the **mediate()** function in the *psych* package to conduct mediation models.

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all measures. In response to a positive event, participants reported modest amounts of GTG and high amounts of general gratitude. Participants reported high levels of trait GTG and general gratitude. Predictor variables were typically endorsed around scale midpoints. All multi-item measures had acceptable-to-high levels of internal consistency.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Scale Range	*M*	*SD*	Cronbach's α
Gratitude variables (GTG = Gratitude to God)				
GTG in response to a positive event	1 to 5	2.09	1.39	–
Gratitude in response to a positive event	0 to 100	77.3	20.01	–
Trait GTG	1 to 7	5.46	0.95	0.85
Trait general gratitude	1 to 7	5.57	1.06	0.81
Positive Emotional Traits				
Extraversion	1 to 5	3.16	0.68	0.85
Optimism	1 to 5	3.13	0.73	0.80
Vitality	1 to 7	4.16	1.40	0.93
Self-Esteem	1 to 4	2.82	0.56	0.90
Adaptive Relational Styles				
Agreeableness	1 to 5	3.67	0.56	0.78
Honesty–humility	1 to 5	2.65	1.18	0.69
Psychological entitlement	1 to 7	3.32	0.46	0.90
Secure attachment	1 to 7	4.19	1.81	–

3.2. Correlations

Table 2 shows Pearson zero-order correlations between predictors and gratitude variables. We computed correlations for the entire sample ($N = 698$) and for those endorsing r/s affiliations ($n = 392$) because we wanted to see whether including people who did not endorse r/s affiliations impacted the results. Results were highly similar for the entire sample and the subsample of r/s affiliated participants. Positive associations between positive emotional traits and both forms of GTG supported our hypotheses. Notably, all effect sizes for these variables were small-to-moderate according to recent guidelines for interpreting effect sizes (Gignac and Szodorai 2016). We found mixed support for our hypotheses regarding adaptive relational styles. The small, positive associations for agreeableness supported our hypotheses. Further the negative association between psychological entitlement and trait GTG was consistent with our hypotheses. However, in contrast to hypotheses, psychological entitlement was not related to GTG in response to a positive event, and neither honesty–humility nor secure attachment associated with either kind of GTG. We found some small-to-moderate associations between predictors and general gratitude response to a positive event, and we found mostly moderate-to-large associations between traits and trait general gratitude.

Table 2. Pearson Zero-Order Correlations between Predictors and Gratitude Variables.

	Gratitude Variables							
	GTG in Response to a Positive Event		Gratitude in Response to a Positive Event		Trait GTG		Trait General Gratitude	
Positive Emotional Traits	Entire Sample	R/S affiliated	Entire Sample	R/S affiliated	Entire Sample	R/S affiliated	Entire Sample	R/S affiliated
Extraversion	0.12 **	0.12 *	0.19 ***	0.21 ***	0.08 *	0.12 *	0.36 ***	0.31 ***
Optimism	0.09 *	0.09	0.09 *	0.09	0.13 ***	0.20 ***	0.38 ***	0.41 ***
Vitality	0.15 ***	0.13 **	0.19 ***	0.18 **	0.14 ***	0.18 ***	0.45 ***	0.38 ***
Self-Esteem	0.12 **	0.14 **	0.05	0.11 *	0.15 ***	0.22 ***	0.41 ***	0.41 ***
Adaptive Relational Styles								
Agreeableness	0.08 *	0.10 *	0.13 ***	0.14 *	0.14 ***	0.19 ***	0.38 ***	0.41 ***
Honesty–humility	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.06	0.08	0.13 ***	0.14 ***
Psychological entitlement	−0.01	0.00	0.03	0.03	−0.10 **	−0.14 **	−0.23 ***	−0.22 ***
Secure attachment	0.06	0.06	0.09 *	0.09	0.04	0.06	0.28 ***	0.23 ***

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Correlations were computed for the entire sample ($N = 698$) and for those endorsing r/s affiliations ($n = 392$).

3.3. Mediation

We tested the mediation model depicted graphically by Figure 1. Each trait was entered individually as the predictor variable. In the positive event model, gratitude in response to the positive event was the mediator, and GTG in response to the positive event was the outcome. In the trait model, trait gratitude was the mediator, and trait GTG in was the outcome. We used bias-corrected standard errors (from 2000 bootstrap samples) to compute 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect (i.e., mediated effect) of predictors on GTG via general gratitude (MacKinnon et al. 2004; Preacher and Hayes 2004). Results of the models are displayed in Table 3. All estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients.
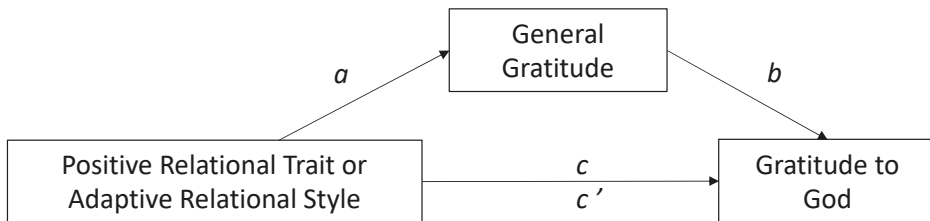

Figure 1. Conceptual Mediation Model. Note. "*a*" and "*b*" are direct effects. "*c*" is the total effect of a predictor on gratitude to God, and "*c'*" is the effect of the predictor on gratitude to God after accounting for general gratitude. In the positive event model, gratitude in response to the positive event was the mediator, and GTG in response to the positive event was the outcome. In the trait model, trait gratitude was the mediator, and trait GTG in was the outcome.

Table 3. Results from Mediation Models in Which Positive Emotional Traits and Adaptive Relational Styles Predicted GTG Variables Via General Gratitude.

	GTG in Response to a Positive Event					Trait GTG				
	a	*b*	*c*	*c'*	Indirect Effect [95% CI]	*a*	*b*	*c*	*c'*	Indirect Effect [95% CI]
Positive Emotional Traits										
Extraversion	5.66 ***	0.01 ***	0.25 **	0.17 *	0.08 [0.05, 0.13]	0.57 ***	0.24 ***	0.12 *	−0.02	0.14 [0.09, 0.18]
Optimism	2.46 *	0.02 ***	0.18 **	0.14 *	0.04 [0.01, 0.07]	0.56 ***	0.22 ***	0.17 ***	0.05	0.12 [0.08, 0.17]
Vitality	2.67 ***	0.01 ***	0.15 ***	0.11 **	0.04 [0.02, 0.06]	0.34 ***	0.22 ***	0.10 ***	0.02	0.08 [0.05, 0.11]
Self-Esteem	1.86	0.02 ***	0.30 **	0.27 **	0.03 [−0.01, 0.07]	0.78 ***	0.25 ***	0.25	0.08	0.17 [0.11, 0.24]
Adaptive Relational Styles										
Agreeableness	4.72 ***	0.02 ***	0.19 *	0.12	0.07 [0.03, 0.12]	0.72 ***	0.22 ***	0.23 ***	0.08	0.16 [0.10, 0.22]
Honesty–humility	1.52	0.02 ***	0.14	0.12	0.02 [−0.03, 0.08]	0.31 ***	0.23 ***	0.12	0.05	0.07 [0.03, 0.11]
Psychological entitlement	0.46	0.02 ***	−0.01	−0.02	0.01 [−0.01, 0.03]	−0.21 ***	0.23 ***	−0.08 *	−0.03	−0.04 [−0.07, −0.03]
Secure attachment	1.01 *	0.02 ***	0.05	0.03	0.02 [0.00, 0.03]	0.16 ***	0.24 ***	0.02	−0.02	0.04 [0.03, 0.06]

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. "*a*" is the direct effect of the predictor on general gratitude, and "*b*" is the direct effect of general gratitude on GTG. "*c*" is the total effect of a predictor on gratitude to God, and "*c'*" is the effect of the predictor on gratitude to God after accounting for general gratitude. Numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients.

Our mediation hypotheses were largely supported for positive emotional traits, as evidenced by positive indirect effects that did not include zero in the 95% CI (except for self-esteem in the positive event model). Further, there were significant direct effects

from positive emotional traits to general gratitude, and in turn general gratitude had positive direct effects on GTG. In the event-specific model, predictors maintained significant associations with GTG when accounting for general gratitude (*c'* path), but they did not in the trait GTG model. This indicates that general gratitude was a stronger mediator in the trait model than in the positive event model.

Among adaptive relational styles, mediation was supported for agreeableness. The results for this trait showed a pattern of results similar to that of the positive emotional traits described above. For other adaptive relational styles, mediation was not supported in the positive event models but was supported in the trait models. This divergent pattern of results is accounted for by the null or very small associations between these predictors and event-specific gratitude (see left side of table) in contrast to the significant associations between these predictors and general gratitude in the trait model (see right side of table). Therefore, although zero-order correlations between adaptive relational styles and trait GTG were mixed, people with higher levels of adaptive relational styles may experience higher levels of TGTG indirectly via higher levels of general gratitude.

4. Discussion

This project examined two kinds of personality variables, positive emotional traits and adaptive relational styles, as potential predictors of GTG. Consistent with hypotheses, various positive emotional traits (extraversion, optimism, vitality, self-esteem) related positively to GTG in response to a positive event and to trait GTG. Among adaptive relational styles, findings for agreeableness supported hypotheses; however, findings for other styles (psychological entitlement, honesty–humility, secure attachment) were sparse in correlational analyses. Notably, correlational findings were highly similar when excluding participants who did not endorse r/s affiliations. Because this study focused on normal personality, we wanted to include the entire sample in hypothesis tests. However, because GTG is likely less important for people who do not endorse r/s affiliations, we wanted to check whether excluding these participants would have substantially affected the results. Because it did not, we were more confident about interpreting correlational results and conducting mediation models with the entire sample.

We also explored whether general gratitude mediated associations between predictors and GTG. For positive emotional traits and agreeableness, findings supported the idea that gratitude as a statistical mediator of relationships, both for GTG in response to a positive event and especially for trait GTG. For other adaptive relational styles (psychological entitlement, honesty–humility, secure attachment), gratitude was not a mediator for GTG in response to a positive event but did mediate associations with trait GTG. This set of findings builds specifically on nascent work aimed at understanding how personality may relate to GTG and contributes to a wider body of knowledge on predictors of GTG.

4.1. Positive Emotional Traits Related Consistently to Higher GTG

Our rationale regarding positive emotional traits centered on the ideas that such traits would relate to recognizing more benefits in life (i.e., having more to be grateful for) and viewing God as being highly involved in generating a fun, lively, and rewarding life. Our results were consistent with these ideas, and thus future research may directly test these explanations. For example, a study could assess (a) the number and intensity of benefits and (b) lively interactions with God to determine whether these variables accounted for associations between positive emotional traits and GTG. Furthermore, our findings for extraversion replicated prior work on this trait (Aghababaei et al. 2018; Aghababaei and Tabik 2013) and thus introduces potential theoretical explanations (recognizing more benefits, having a lively relationship with God) for these earlier findings.

We tested general gratitude as a mediator based on the idea that our conceptual framework relating traits to GTG could apply to many forms of benefactors. For positive emotional traits, we found support for gratitude as a mediator, both at the positive event level and especially at the trait level. Regarding the positive event findings, the presence

of mediation supported the idea that positive emotional traits were linked with GTG in part due to processes common to their link to gratitude (e.g., perhaps through noticing more rewards or having a positive, harmonious, or pleasant relationship with various benefactors). Because unique relationships remained between positive emotional traits and GTG in response to a positive event, there also may be something unique (i.e., distinct from general gratitude) about this relationship. These findings add to a growing body of work distinguishing GTG from general gratitude (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013; Park et al. 2022; Rosmarin et al. 2011; Wilt and Exline 2022). At the trait level, findings supported the idea that positive emotional traits were linked with GTG in part due to processes in common with their links to gratitude. This is consistent with prior work showing that sometimes associations with GTG do not remain when controlling for general gratitude (Aghababaei et al. 2018). It seems that a promising avenue for future work would be to further explore where experiences of GTG and general gratitude converge and diverge.

4.2. Adaptive Relational Styles Had Somewhat Inconsistent Associations with GTG

Our rationale regarding adaptive relational styles as predictors of higher GTG was that these styles would relate to (a) being more open to considering God as a benefactor, (b) viewing God as a caring provider, and (c) being willing to credit God as a benefactor. Although one style, agreeableness, consistently correlated with higher GTG (as observed in previous work: see Aghababaei et al. 2018; Aghababaei and Tabik 2013), other adaptive styles (honesty–humility, lack of entitlement, secure attachment) did not. While these findings alone provide mixed support for the plausibility of our theoretical rationale, we believe that considering them in conjunction with the results for general gratitude may be helpful.

Adaptive relational styles had null (honesty–humility, lack of entitlement) or small (agreeableness, secure attachment) associations with gratitude in response to a positive event, and all styles had positive associations with trait gratitude. In all, these findings may be viewed as being mostly consistent with the idea that our theoretical rationale for these styles generalizes across various benefactors. That is, adaptive relational styles may predict general gratitude because they relate to (a) being more open to considering *other entities broadly defined* (i.e., others) as benefactors, (b) viewing others as caring providers, and (c) are willing to credit others. As prediction is generally higher when aggregating across events or situations (Epstein 1979), it is not surprising that we found higher associations for trait gratitude than event-specific gratitude. Furthermore, we found evidence for mediation of associations between styles and GTG by general gratitude at the trait level (but not at the event level). Note that this may be due to the measures of trait GTG and trait general gratitude being framed in similar ways; this may have inflated associations due to shared method variance. However, if the trait levels findings are not fully explained by method variance, they are consistent with the idea that the styles *are* linked with trait GTG due to processes in common with their links to trait general gratitude. That is, people with higher levels of adaptive relational styles experienced more trait gratitude, and these higher levels of gratitude predicted higher GTG. This finding constitutes another example of convergence (rather than divergence) between GTG and general gratitude (e.g., Aghababaei et al. 2018). The question of why most relational styles were not linked with GTG specifically awaits further research.

4.3. Limitations

Our cross-sectional, correlational design prohibits us from making causal conclusions about the relationships between personality and gratitude variables. Though our theoretical framework specified that causality flowed from personality to GTG and gratitude, we cannot rule out bidirectionality or reverse directionality. Similarly, we cannot make strong claims about the directionality of mediation models. Rather, we interpret the observed associations as suggesting that the causal direction we proposed remains plausible. This

was a necessary initial step for testing our framework. However, future longitudinal and experimental studies are better suited to test causality and directionality more directly.

Some limitations pertain to measurement. Measurement of GTG, and especially event-specific GTG, is still in its nascent stages. Our one-item measures of event-specific GTG and general gratitude, which were chosen for their high face validity and for economy, prevent us from examining internal consistency. Though one-item measures of these variables have shown validity as predictor and outcome variables in previous work (Exline and Wilt 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Wilt and Exline 2022), they may still be limited in terms of reliable variance and content coverage. This is perhaps another reason we observed weaker associations for event-specific variables. Future work may employ multi-item measures, which would allow for more rigorous psychometric evaluation, including latent variable modeling. More generally, as we relied on self-report, we encourage future studies to employ multiple measures of personality and gratitude (e.g., peer report, behavioral) to examine whether findings generalize across different methods.

Furthermore, the measures of general gratitude and GTG were highly conceptually related, which presents challenges for statistical modeling and interpretation. The event-specific measures of these variables were framed similarly and referenced the same event, and thus, if a person endorsed higher levels of GTG, it is reasonable that they would also endorse higher general gratitude. The trait measure of GTG was derived from the trait measure of general gratitude, possibly resulting in inflated associations between the measures. These features present challenges to isolating the unique variance of GTG apart from general gratitude, and this may be particularly difficult for the event-specific measures since they were more narrowly focused than the trait measures. Indeed, this is another reason why results may have been discrepant across event-specific and trait measures. We encourage future research to use conceptually convergent (like those in this study) and divergent (e.g., different prompts as well as different phrasing of items) measures of GTG and general gratitude. Doing so could allow for estimation of the impact of these potentially thorny measurement issues.

Though many findings were consistent with our hypotheses, future studies may provide more direct tests of our proposed explanations. For instance, a longitudinal study assessing events prospectively could have participants (a) report how many positive events they experienced, (b) list which entities were considered as benefactors, (c) report on whether the event matched with their beliefs about the entity's characteristics, and (d) report on desire or motivation to credit different entities as benefactors. Experiments could also include manipulations to make different predictors of GTG more salient; in these studies, we would predict that such manipulations would have greater effects on GTG and gratitude for people with higher levels of positive emotional traits and (perhaps) adaptive relational styles.

As we relied on a sample of undergraduates from the U.S. who identified predominantly as either Christian or non-r/s, our findings may not generalize outside of these contexts. We encourage future studies to examine whether results hold across a wider range of ages, as well as other faith traditions and countries. Focusing on polytheistic faiths may be especially interesting because it could allow for comparisons about the processes by which people credit different gods for positive events.

5. Conclusions

This study provided an initial test of whether positive emotional traits and adaptive relational styles predicted GTG in response to a positive event and trait GTG. We found rather strong evidence for the role of positive emotional traits predicting GTG directly as well as indirectly via general gratitude. The evidence for adaptive relational styles was more mixed and nuanced, though agreeableness did have consistent links to GTG. These results present a promising beginning to examining a conceptual framework linking personality to GTG and to general gratitude.

References

Aghababaei, Naser, and Mohammad Taghi Tabik. 2013. Gratitude and mental health: Differences between religious and general gratitude in a Muslim context. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16: 761–66. [CrossRef]

Aghababaei, Naser, Agata Błachnio, and Masoume Aminikhoo. 2018. The relations of gratitude to religiosity, well-being, and personality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21: 408–17. [CrossRef]

Bartholomew, Kim, and Leonard M. Horowitz. 1991. Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61: 226. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Brennan, Kelly A., Catherine L. Clark, and Phillip R. Shaver. 1998. Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. In *Attachment Theory and Close Relationships*. Edited by Jeffry A. Simpson and William S. Rholes. New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 46–76.

Campbell, W. Keith, Angelica M. Bonacci, Jeremy Shelton, Julie J. Exline, and Brad J. Bushman. 2004. Psychological entitlement: Interpersonal consequences and validation of a self-report measure. *Journal of Personality Assessment* 83: 29–45. [CrossRef]

Emmons, Robert A., Jeffrey Froh, and Rachel Rose. 2019. Gratitude. In *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures*, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 317–32.

Epstein, Seymour. 1979. The stability of behavior: I. On predicting most of the people much of the time. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37: 1097. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., and Joshua A. Wilt. 2022a. Bringing God to mind: Although brief reminders to not increase gratitude to God, and wording of questions matters, belief in a loving, gift-giving God remains central. *Religions* 13: 791. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., and Joshua A. Wilt. 2022b. Divine attributions, gift appraisals, and supernatural operating rules as predictors of gratitude to God. *Manuscript in preparation.*

Exline, Julie J., and Joshua A. Wilt. 2022c. Not just love and safety, but excitement energy, fun, and passion: Relational predictors of gratitude to God and desires to "pay it forward". *Manuscript in preparation.*

Fincham, Frank D., and Ross W. May. 2021. Generalized gratitude and prayers of gratitude in marriage. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 16: 282–87. [CrossRef]

Gignac, Gilles E., and Eva T. Szodorai. 2016. Effect size guidelines for individual differences researchers. *Personality and Individual Differences* 102: 74–78. [CrossRef]

Graziano, William G., and Renée M. Tobin. 2009. Agreeableness. In *Individual Differences in Social Behavior*. Edited by Mark Leary and Rick Hoyle. New York: Guilford, pp. 46–61.

Krause, Neal. 2006. Gratitude toward God, stress, and health in late life. *Research on Aging* 28: 163–83. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, and Christopher G. Ellison. 2009. Social environment of the church and feelings of gratitude toward god. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 1: 191–205. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, and R. David Hayward. 2015. Assessing whether trust in God offsets the effects of financial strain on health and well-being. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 25: 307–22. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, self-rated health, and depressive symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, and Gail Ironson. 2015. Benevolent images of God, gratitude, and physical health status. *Journal of Religion and Health* 54: 1503–19. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lee, Kibeom, and Michael C. Ashton. 2004. Psychometric properties of the HEXACO personality inventory. *Multivariate Behavioral Research* 39: 329–58. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

MacKinnon, David P., Chondra M. Lockwood, and Jason Williams. 2004. Confidence limits for the indirect effect: Distribution of the product and resampling methods. *Multivariate Behavioral Research* 39: 99–128. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

McCullough, Michael E., Robert A. Emmons, and Jo-ann Tsang. 2002. The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 112–27. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Nelson, Jenae M., Sam A. Hardy, and Philip Watkins. 2022. Transcendent indebtedness to God: A new construct in the psychology of religion and spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Advance online publication. [CrossRef]

Park, Crystal L., Joshua A. Wilt, and Adam B. David. 2022. Distinctiveness of gratitude to God: How does this construct add to our understanding of religiousness and gratitude? *Manuscript in preparation*.

Preacher, Kristopher J., and Andrew F. Hayes. 2004. SPSS and SAS procedures for estimating indirect effects in simple mediation models. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers* 36: 717–31.

R Core Team. 2021. *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*. Vienna: R Foundation for Statistical Computing.

Revelle, William R. 2022. *psych: Procedures for Personality and Psychological Research*. Evanston: Northwestern University.

Rosenberg, Morris. 1965. *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Ryan, Richard M., and Christina Frederick. 1997. On energy, personality, and health: Subjective vitality as a dynamic reflection of well-being. *Journal of Personality* 65: 529–65. [CrossRef]

Sadoughi, Majid, and Fatemeh Hesampour. 2020. Prediction of psychological well-being in the elderly by assessing their spirituality, gratitude to god, and perceived social support. *Iranian Journal of Ageing* 15: 144–59. [CrossRef]

Scheier, Michael F., and Charles S. Carver. 1987. Dispositional optimism and physical well-being: The influence of generalized outcome expectancies on health. *Journal of Personality* 55: 169–210. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Scheier, Michael F., Charles S. Carver, and Michael W. Bridges. 1994. Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): A reevaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67: 1063. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Soto, Christopher J., and Oliver P. John. 2017. The next Big Five Inventory (BFI-2): Developing and assessing a hierarchical model with 15 facets to enhance bandwidth, fidelity, and predictive power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113: 117–43. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Upenieks, Laura, and Joanne Ford-Robertson. 2022. Give thanks in all circumstances? Gratitude toward God and health in later life after major life stressors. *Research on Aging* 44: 392–404. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Van Tongeren, Daryl R., Don E. Davis, Joshua N. Hook, and Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet. 2019. Humility. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28: 463–68. [CrossRef]

Watkins, Philip, Michael Frederick, and Don E. Davis. 2022. Gratitude to God predicts religious well-being over time. *Religions* 13: 675. [CrossRef]

Watson, David, Jerry Suls, and Jeffrey Haig. 2002. Global self-esteem in relation to structural models of personality and affectivity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83: 185–97. [CrossRef]

Whittington, Brandon L., and Steven J. Scher. 2010. Prayer and subjective well-being: An examination of six different types of prayer. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 20: 59–68. [CrossRef]

Wilt, Joshua A., and Julie J. Exline. 2022. Receiving a gift from God in times of trouble: Links between gratitude to God, the affective circumplex, and perceived closeness to God. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25: 362–79. [CrossRef]

Wilt, Joshua A., and William Revelle. 2016. Extraversion. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Five Factor Model of Personality*. Edited by Thomas A. Widiger. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wilt, Joshua A., Julie J. Exline, and Eric D. Rose. 2020. Personality, spirituality, and religion. In *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*. Edited by Lisa Miller. New York: University of Oxford Press.

Wood, Alex M., Jeffrey J. Froh, and Adam W. A. Geraghty. 2010. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30: 890–905. [CrossRef]

Wood, Alex M., Stephen Joseph, and John Maltby. 2009. Gratitude predicts psychological well-being above the Big Five facets. *Personality and Individual Differences* 46: 443–47. [CrossRef]

Zarzycka, Beata, and Dariusz Krok. 2021. Disclosure to God as a mediator between private prayer and psychological well-being in a Christian sample. *Journal of Religion and Health* 60: 1083–95. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

MDPI

Article

Intangible Benefactors and the Contribution of Construal Level and Attitude Accessibility in Predicting Gratitude and Expansive Emotions

Jenae M. Nelson *, Sarah A. Schnitker, Emily Williams and Jo-Ann Tsang

Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76798, USA
* Correspondence: jenae_nelson@baylor.edu

Abstract: We tested whether manipulating construal level would change the experience of gratitude or other expansive emotions (gratitude, awe, compassion) and negative emotions. We also examined whether construal level was correlated with the type of gratitude benefactor that participants spontaneously listed, focusing especially on God and non-theistic intangible benefactors compared to tangible human benefactors. We manipulated construal level in 265 U.S.-based CloudResearch participants to test preregistered hypotheses that high-level construals would elicit more examples of gratitude toward intangible benefactors and increase expansive emotions. We conducted additional exploratory analyses, investigating whether attitude accessibility of God as a benefactor was correlated with increases in expansive emotions. High construal level manipulation was associated with more frequently listing non-theistic intangible benefactors. Further, trait construal level predicted expansive emotions. Additionally, attitude accessibility of God as a benefactor was positively related to expansive emotions. We discuss future research possibilities to differentiate between gratitude toward tangible and intangible benefactors and the use of attitude accessibility as an implicit measure of benefactor importance.

Keywords: gratitude; religion; construal

1. Introduction

Recent theory and research in the psychology of gratitude have begun to study gratitude toward God as a specific, intangible benefactor (Tsang et al. 2021). Much of this research has examined how gratitude toward God contributes to outcome variables, such as well-being (both psychological and physical) or relationship satisfaction (Aghababaei et al. 2018; Fincham and May 2021; Krause et al. 2014, 2017; Rosmarin et al. 2011). However, the outcomes of gratitude toward God are likely distinctive because the experience of gratitude toward God is distinctive. Specifically, given the abstract nature of God and other intangible benefactors, individuals who are grateful toward God may experience a greater magnitude not only of grateful emotion but also other expansive positive emotions, such as elevation, admiration, awe, and compassion. These differences in emotional experiences may be due, in part, to the use of high-level construals when thinking about these intangible benefactors. God, especially, may be more readily associated with transcendent values and, thus, lead to more expansive emotions (Tsang et al. 2021). In the current study, we investigate the potentially distinctive nature of gratitude toward intangible benefactors by examining construal level and attitude accessibility as mechanisms for the relationship between gratitude toward these benefactors and increases in expansive emotions.

1.1. Gratitude to Intangible Benefactors

In order to study the affective experience of gratitude, it is important to examine gratitude on a state level. State gratitude can be defined as an emotion that results from the receipt of a positive outcome from a benefactor outside of the self (Nelson et al. 2022).

Researchers have identified numerous variables that affect state gratitude, including variables associated with the benefactor, the recipient, and qualities of the positive outcome itself (Tsang et al. 2021). Although some research has examined how benefactor qualities, such as intention and benevolent motivation, affect state gratitude (MacKenzie et al. 2014; Shoshani et al. 2021; Tsang et al. 2021; Shoshani et al. 2020; Tsang and Martin 2016; Xiong et al. 2020), fewer studies have examined the association between the specific identity of the benefactor and gratitude (Rotkirch et al. 2014; Tam 2022).

The prototypical benefactor studied in gratitude research tends to be a tangible agent, such as another person (Algoe 2012). However, people are capable of thinking abstractly and imagining and interacting with intangible benefactors as well, namely, benefactors who are abstract and unseen (Tsang et al. 2021). God is one example of an intangible benefactor. God can be an important part of the gratitude experiences of religious individuals (Lambert et al. 2010). One survey found that 52% of U.S. adults regularly feel grateful to God (Kaplan and Flum 2012). Some research suggests that gratitude toward God is related to increased well-being above and beyond more general feelings of gratitude (Rosmarin et al. 2011).

Individuals can also be grateful to non-theistic intangible benefactors, such as nature. Tam (2022) found that individual differences in trait gratitude toward nature were predictive of positive environmental attitudes, as well as prosocial behavior (donating to an environmental group). An experimental induction of gratitude toward nature also predicted donation to an environmental group in participants who were initially low in trait gratitude toward nature. Others have theorized about the possible consequences of gratitude toward one's country (Eibach et al. 2015; Tsang et al. 2021), another potential intangible benefactor. As the U.S. and many other parts of the world are becoming less religious (Inglehart 2021; Pew Research Center 2019), gratitude to non-theistic intangible benefactors, such as one's country, science, or nature, may become more common.

1.2. Construal Level and Intangible Givers

One mechanism underlying potential differences between gratitude toward tangible and intangible benefactors may be construal level. Namely, intangible benefactors may elicit a higher construal level than more tangible human benefactors (Tsang et al. 2021). Construal level theory maintains that objects, actors, and events can differ in their psychological distance, which has ramifications for how these targets are construed (Trope and Liberman 2010). Psychologically close objects—for instance, human benefactors in one's immediate environment—represent one's self-relevant and current experiences (e.g., people and things that are certain, in the present, and geographically near) and tend to be construed at a concrete, low level. In contrast, psychologically distant objects—for instance, abstract entities, such as deities, nature, science, or the universe—transcend the immediate self in various aspects, such as time, space, certainty, and identity (e.g., people and things that are uncertain or hypothetical, in the past or future, geographically far). Individuals bridge this psychological distance through high-level construals, which are abstract and related to top-down concepts, such as prototypes and current goals (Trope and Liberman 2010).

Many qualities of intangible benefactors suggest that they can be categorized as psychologically distant. God, nature, and the universe often span or transcend large swaths of time and space. People vary in their certainty about some intangible agents, such as science or God. One research study suggests that individuals in Turkey and the United States tend to use high-level construals when thinking about God (Karataş and Gürhan-Canli 2020), supporting the application of construal level theory to God as an intangible benefactor. In the current study, we experimentally investigate the association between intangible benefactors and construal level by temporarily manipulating construal level to see whether high level construals lead to increases in gratitude toward intangible benefactors, such as God.

What difference might high level construals make for gratitude experiences? Because high level construals help bridge psychological distance between the self and others, they could potentially allow individuals to expand beyond their own self-interests and identities,

which, in turn, might increase the intensity of a self-transcendent, expansive emotion, such as gratitude (Stellar et al. 2017; Van Cappellen 2017). Thus, people who believe they have received benefits from intangible benefactors, such as God or nature, might experience gratitude more strongly than those who perceive benefits from more tangible benefactors, such as other people. Furthermore, high level construals generated from reflection on intangible benefactors might increase other expansive, other-focused emotions, such as compassion, awe, admiration, and elevation (Stellar et al. 2017; Van Cappellen 2017). Although the association between construal level and self-transcendent emotions has yet to be explored, other research has found that other-oriented, expansive motivations are construed more abstractly than self-enhancement motivations (Gu and Tse 2018). In summary, grateful individuals may view God and other intangible benefactors with higher level construals, leading to more intense levels of gratitude and expansive emotions.

1.3. Expansive Emotions and Attitude Accessibility of Intangible Givers

Although receiving benefits from intangible benefactors may be associated with increased expansive emotions, intangible benefactors may be less accessible for some individuals than for others. In other words, people may not spontaneously think of intangible benefactors first (or at all) while performing gratitude exercises. Additionally, the frequency with which intangible benefactors are considered may be lower than that for tangible benefactors due to the psychological distance of intangible benefactors (Tsang et al. 2021). Therefore, a potential predictor of gratitude and other expansive emotions may be the accessibility of intangible benefactors. There are at least two ways to test for the accessibility of intangible benefactors during gratitude practices. First, assessing how frequently people spontaneously list God or other intangible benefactors (e.g., science, nature, the universe) allows researchers to determine how easily intangible benefactors come to mind. Second, the order in which people spontaneously list benefactors might be indicative of the importance they attribute to those benefactors (Krosnick 1989). Attitude accessibility is a social psychological theory that salient, latent values and attitudes are easily accessible and will, therefore, be recalled easily when prompted with an appropriate stimulus (Krosnick 1989; Rocklage and Fazio 2018). Because gratitude to intangible benefactors may be less salient due to psychological distance, attitude accessibility of intangible benefactors could be a critical predictor of gratitude and expansive emotions. If God or other intangible benefactors are more accessible to an individual, that person's gratitude experiences should be more affected by the recognition of that intangible benefactor. Thus, any association between gratitude toward God and expansive emotions should be more apparent in individuals for whom God is a salient, accessible benefactor. We test this by examining the correlational association between benefactor accessibility and expansive emotions.

1.4. God Compared to Other Intangible Benefactors

In particular, compared to other intangible benefactors, God may be associated with increased gratitude and expansive emotions (Van Cappellen 2017). There are many theoretical reasons why gratitude to God may be distinctive, including (1) God is often viewed as benevolent and relatively unchanging, (2) both negative and positive events in an individual's life have the potential to be construed as beneficial to the individual (Nelson et al. 2022; Rosmarin et al. 2011; Tsang et al. 2021), and (3) God is associated with religious institutions that emphasize the cultivation of gratitude and expansive emotions (Van Cappellen 2017), whereas this is not the case with other intangible benefactors, such as the universe or science. Yet, to our knowledge, no research investigates whether gratitude toward God is distinctive from other non-theistic but intangible benefactors.

2. Methods

2.1. Purpose/Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was (a) to investigate the effect that a construal level manipulation has on gratitude felt toward God and other intangible (versus tangible)

benefactors and (b) to determine whether accessibility of gratitude to God (versus other intangible benefactors) is associated with increased expansive emotions. Because people's image of God is relatively stable, our anticipation was that manipulating construal levels might impact state gratitude to God more than trait gratitude to God.

2.2. Preregistered Hypotheses

We preregistered the following hypotheses about construal level and gratitude toward intangible benefactors. The full preregistration is available at: https://osf.io/3k6zn/ (accessed on 12 September 2022).

We predicted that participants induced to think in abstract, high construal levels would: (a) list more frequently and (b) rate gratitude more highly to God and other intangible givers, and (c) report higher levels of expansive emotions compared to those induced to think in concrete, low construal levels.

2.2.1. Exploratory Hypotheses

In addition to the above preregistered hypotheses, we analyzed the data to test the following exploratory hypotheses.

We predicted that participants with trait high construal levels would: (a) list more frequently and (b) rate gratitude more highly to God and other intangible givers, and (c) report higher levels of expansive emotions.

We predicted that: (a) accessibility of God versus non-theistic intangible benefactors or tangible benefactors in the gratitude task would predict more state gratitude and gratitude towards benefactors and (b) God accessibility versus non-theistic intangible benefactors would predict higher levels of expansive and positive emotions and less negative emotions.

2.2.2. Participants

The study consisted of 265 participants (51.7% male, M_{age} = 39.6 years) recruited from CloudResearch, an online survey platform. All participants were over 18, proficient in English, and resided in the United States. Participants identified as 78.1% Caucasian, 8.7% African American, 6.0% Asian American, 5.3% Hispanic, 0.4% Native American, and 1.5% other. Additionally, the sample was diverse in terms of religious belief and belief in God. Specifically, 25.3 of participants were agnostic, 24.5% were atheist, 21.1% Protestant Christian, 13.2% Catholic Christian, 8.3% had no religious affiliation, 1.5% were Buddhist, 1.1% were Jewish, 0.4% were Hindu, and 4.5% specified another religion. Out of all participants, 109 indicated that they believed in God (41.1%), 116 stated that they did not believe in God (43.8%), and 40 participants (15.1%) indicated that they were unsure if they believed in God or not. The survey took roughly 30 minutes, and participants were compensated 4 dollars for their time.

2.2.3. Manipulation

Construal Level Manipulation. Participants were presented with a construal level manipulation from Fujita et al. (2006). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: high construal (*n* = 63), low construal (*n* = 81), and an inactive control (*n* = 72). This manipulation involved presenting a list of 20 words (e.g., "SODA", "COMPUTER", "GAME") with different instructions for the high construal and low construal conditions. Participants assigned to the high construal condition were instructed to list one thing that the word was an example of (e.g., a COMPUTER is an example of "technology"), while participants in the low construal condition were instructed to provide an example of each word (e.g., an example of COMPUTER is a "laptop"). This manipulation was designed to evoke abstract (high construal) or concrete (low construal) thinking patterns for the duration of the experiment. Participants in the control condition did not participate in any construal manipulations and did not receive the construal word lists (e.g., "SODA", "COMPUTER", "GAME"); instead, they moved directly to the self-report measures.

Once data collection was complete, researchers manually evaluated participants' responses for the construal level manipulation. To meet inclusion criteria, participants in the high and low conditions needed to correctly answer two-thirds (14 out of 20) of the items for the manipulation to which they had been assigned. Participants who failed to adequately complete the intended manipulation were excluded from analyses. For example, a participant assigned to the low condition would be excluded from analyses if six or more of their answers were abstract rather than concrete.

2.2.4. Dependent Measures

As this study was part of a larger research initiative, we only report the variables used in the present work. Please refer to the online pre-registration for a full list of the variables collected.

Gratitude Benefactor List. Immediately following the construal level manipulation, participants were asked to create a gratitude list. Participants were instructed to reflect on things for which they felt grateful in that moment and answer the prompt: "*I am grateful to: _____ for _____.*". Participants were allowed to list as many as 20 benefactors to whom they were grateful. Participants spontaneously listed whoever came to mind without being prompted.

Accessibility of God as an Intangible Benefactor. We coded the accessibility of God as an intangible benefactor by creating a dummy code variable where 1 = listed God as the first benefactor and 0 = listed any other benefactor first in the gratitude task. All benefactor accessibility variables were coded by the first author. Coding criteria were determined among the co-authors so as to be in theoretical agreement. Only explicit mentions of God were counted ("God" or "god"). Religious constructs, such as "church" or "religious teachings", were not included. We also created a variable reflecting the proportion of times that God was listed as a benefactor at any time throughout the gratitude task by dividing the total mentions of God by the total number of benefactors listed.

Non-Theistic Intangible Benefactor Accessibility. We coded the accessibility of other, non-theistic but intangible benefactors by creating a dummy code variable, where 1 = listing a non-theistic intangible benefactor first (e.g., the universe, the earth, science) and 0 = listing any other benefactor first in the gratitude task. Non-theistic intangible benefactors that could be conflated with tangible benefactors (e.g., police officers, scientists, teachers, musicians—plural forms of tangible people) were excluded from the analysis (in total, 48 entries were excluded). We also created a variable reflecting the proportion of times that non-theistic intangible benefactors were listed at any time throughout the gratitude task.

Tangible Benefactor Accessibility. We coded the accessibility of tangible benefactors by creating a dummy code variable where 1 = listing a tangible benefactor first (e.g., mother, husband, friend) and 0 = listing any other benefactor first in the gratitude task. Tangible benefactors commonly included "family", "mom", and specific people by name. To avoid potential confounds, tangible benefactors that could be potentially construed as intangible (e.g., doctors, scientists, teachers, musicians—people in a plural, more abstract form) were excluded, as indicated above. Like previous measures, we created a variable reflecting the proportion of times that tangible benefactors were listed at any time throughout the gratitude task.

Gratitude Benefactor Ratings. Participants were then presented with a list of tangible and intangible benefactors and asked to rate on a slider scale the extent to which they were grateful to each entity. Responses ranged from 0 (*not at all grateful*) to 100 (*extremely grateful*). Tangible benefactors included mother, father, family, friends, employer, and pets. Intangible benefactors consisted of God, science, country, nature, universe, and technology.

2.2.5. Self-Report Measures

Affect and Emotions. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988) contains 10 items that measure positive affect (e.g., "interested", "determined")

and 10 items measuring negative affect (e.g., "upset", "irritable"). The PANAS was modified to include the following expansive emotions: *elevation*, *admiration*, *awe*, *compassion*, and *gratitude* (Algoe and Haidt 2009; Stellar et al. 2017), and participants were asked to respond with how they were currently feeling. Responses ranged from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Reliabilities were excellent for positive ($\alpha = 0.91$) and negative affect ($\alpha = 0.93$), as well as expansive emotions ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Trait Construal Level. The Behavioral Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher and Wegner 1989) was used to assess the way in which individuals typically construe the world around them and as a manipulation check for the experimental conditions. Twenty-five items consisted of scenarios in which participants selected the way in which they think about the goals associated with a task. For example, one item stated, "Making a list", with the options "writing things down" (0 = low construal) or "getting organized" (1 = high construal). Scores were created by summing all responses, where higher scores (up to a score of 25) indicated higher trait abstract construal levels. Reliability was excellent ($\alpha = 0.94$)

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses: Demographic Differences

Analyses were conducted using Stata 16 and SPSS Statistical software. Before running hypothesis-driven analyses, we considered demographic variables that may affect study outcomes. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test for demographic differences (gender, religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) in the study's outcome variables of interest, and Bonferroni post-hoc contrasts were used to identify significant group comparisons. Specifically, demographic differences were detected across benefactor lists, concrete and abstract benefactor gratitude ratings, and self-transcendent emotions, as described below. In response to these findings, researchers controlled for gender, religion, ethnicity, and /or socioeconomic status in all hypothesis-driven analyses where the demographic variable was a significant predictor of a dependent variable and the independent variable was a trait or state variable. Because of random assignment, demographics were not significantly different across conditions, so no controls were employed for analyses of conditional effects.

3.1.1. Gender

Significant differences were found across benefactor ratings, such that females generally reported higher levels of gratitude felt toward two rated benefactors: pets (concrete) and nature (abstract). Additionally, there were significant omnibus differences in levels of reported expansive emotions, but further Bonferroni post hoc testing revealed no significant conditional contrasts. There were no significant gender differences detected across gratitude benefactor lists and other concrete and abstract benefactors.

3.1.2. Religion

There were also significant outcome differences across religious affiliations, particularly for gratitude benefactor lists (both breadth and number of abstract benefactors), concrete and abstract benefactor ratings, and self-transcendent emotions. In general, Protestant and Catholic Christians generally reported (a) higher breadth and number of abstract benefactors to whom they were thankful, (b) higher ratings of concrete benefactors: father, family, and employer, (c) higher ratings of abstract benefactors: God, country, universe, and (d) higher self-transcendent emotions.

3.1.3. Ethnicity

Preliminary analyses did not reveal any outcome differences across ethnicity.

3.1.4. Socioeconomic Status

There were significant differences for socioeconomic status detected across concrete and abstract benefactor ratings, as well as self-transcendent emotions. General trends show

that upper-middle- and middle-class participants reported higher gratitude ratings for concrete benefactors (mother, father, family, employer) than lower-middle- and lower-class participants. Notably, we also saw this trend for just one abstract benefactor (country) and expansive emotions.

3.2. Manipulation Checks

To test the efficacy of the manipulations, construal levels across conditions were tested using the BIF (Behavioral Identification Form). No conditional effects were found, suggesting that our construal level manipulations failed to produce the anticipated effect; in other words, construal levels were not lower or higher in the low and high construal level conditions, in comparison to the control. Nevertheless, we ran the hypothesis tests to determine whether any conditional effects could be found on the dependent variables in the case that the manipulation was indeed effective but wore off after participants completed the gratitude activity. We further explored the effectiveness of the manipulation with new data, whereby the manipulation check occurred immediately following the construal level induction.

3.2.1. Additional Manipulation Check

Because the original manipulation check failed, we ran a small additional manipulation check study to further investigate the effectiveness of the construal-level manipulation. The methods and details of this study are included in the supplemental materials. It primarily differed from the main study in that participants completed the manipulation check immediately following the induction (rather than after the gratitude exercise), and an additional construal level measure that is more sensitive to state changes was employed. Results suggested that participants in the three experimental conditions significantly varied across the self-report construal measure, $F(2, 135) = 7.102$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.095$. Specifically, participants in the high construal condition reported higher construal levels than those in the low construal ($M_{diff} = 1.08$, $p = 0.042$) and control conditions ($M_{diff} = 1.59$, $p = 0.001$). Notably, there were no statistical differences between the low construal and control conditions ($M_{diff} = 0.51$, $p = 0.672$).

These results suggest that the construal level manipulation was effective, at least in part. Perhaps the original previous manipulation check used in the experiment (the 25-item BIF: Behavioral Identification Form, Vallacher and Wegner 1989) did not have the propensity to detect minute manipulated changes in the construal level, possibly due to (a) its development as a trait measure, (b) its placement in the survey farther away from the initial manipulation, or (c) its length, which would have prolonged participants' exposure to both high- and low-level dispositional construal answers. It is also possible that, in general, people may lean toward more low construal levels, which may explain the similarity between the low condition and control condition. A final explanation may be that online participants may be multi-tasking while completing the survey, therefore, reducing the saliency of the manipulations. Future work should take these findings into consideration. However, this additional manipulation check demonstrated that there was viability of the high construal level condition that allowed us to proceed with analyses.

3.2.2. Preregistered Hypothesis 1: Construal Level Effects

We predicted that participants induced to think in abstract, high construal levels would: (a) list more frequently and (b) rate gratitude more highly to God and other intangible benefactors, and (c) report higher levels of self-transcendent emotions.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tested for conditional differences across these outcomes. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences across the experimental conditions regarding gratitude to benefactors or self-transcendent emotions. However, post hoc contrasts with Bonferroni corrections found a significant conditional effect on the proportion of times that participants in the high

construal condition listed non-theistic intangible benefactors. This effect was not found for tangible benefactors or God. Please refer to Table 1 for a breakdown of these results.

Table 1. Hypothesis 1: Conditional differences across the proportion of types of benefactors in benefactor lists, gratitude ratings, and expansive emotions.

	F (2, 213)	p	Eta Squared	Post Hoc Contrasts
Benefactor List				
Tangible	0.71	0.49	0.01	
Non-theistic intangible	6.22	0.00	0.06	HC < Control
God	1.65	0.20	0.02	
Benefactor				
Gratitude Ratings				
Tangible	0.46	0.63	0.00	
Non-theistic intangible	0.01	0.99	0.00	
God	0.35	0.71	0.00	
Expansive Emotions				
	1.71	0.18	0.02	

Note. HC = High construal level condition. Only significant post hoc contrasts are shown.

3.3. Exploratory Hypothesis 2: Trait Construal Level and Expansive Emotions

We conducted additional exploratory analyses to test the prediction that participants who tend to think in abstract, high construal levels on the trait level would: (a) list more frequently and (b) rate gratitude more highly to God and other intangible givers, and (c) report higher levels of expansive emotions. To test this hypothesis, we ran a multivariate regression in Stata 16, which corrects for multiple comparisons. This conservative method resulted in higher p-values but ensured that our results were robust. The multivariate regression revealed that high trait construal levels were not significantly related to listing more frequently or rating more highly gratitude to God or other intangible givers. High trait construal level, however, was related to significantly more expansive emotions. Please see Table 2 for the results.

Table 2. Hypothesis 2: High trait construal levels predicting the proportion of types of benefactors in benefactor lists, gratitude ratings, and expansive emotions.

	F (2, 217)	p	R^2	95% CI {LL, UL}
Benefactor Listed in Gratitude				
Task				
Tangible	0.62	0.43	0.00	[−0.06, 0.15]
Non-theistic intangible	0.00	0.99	0.06	[−0.06, 0.06]
God	0.42	0.52	0.02	[−0.05, 0.09]
Gratitude to Benefactor Ratings				
Tangible	0.07	0.80	0.00	[−7.31, 9.48]
Non-theistic intangible	0.41	0.52	0.00	[−6.26, 12.24]
God	0.02	0.90	0.00	[−18.82, 21.46]
Expansive Emotions				
	1.71	0.02	0.03	[0.08, 0.86]

3.4. Exploratory Hypothesis 3: Attitude Accessibility and God as a Benefactor

Next, we tested whether (a) accessibility of God versus non-theistic intangible benefactors or tangible benefactors in the gratitude task predicted more state gratitude and gratitude towards benefactors, and whether (b) God accessibility versus non-theistic intangible benefactors predicted higher levels of expansive and positive emotions, and less negative emotions. See Tables 3 and 4 for more details.

Table 3. Hypothesis 3 and 4: Attitude accessibility predicting outcomes.

MANOVA Results					
	State Gratitude	Gratitude to Benefactor	Expansive Emotions	Positive Affect	Negative Affect
Benefactor First	$\eta^2 = 0.04$ *	$\eta^2 = 0.03$ *	$\eta^2 = 0.04$ *	$\eta^2 = 0.04$ *	$\eta^2 = 0.00$
Post-hoc contrasts	G > T	G > T, NI	G > T	G > T	

Note. G = God, T = tangible benefactor, NI = non-theistic intangible benefactor. * = *p*-value < 0.05, only significant post-hoc contrasts are listed.

Table 4. Hypothesis 3 and 4: Attitude accessibility predicting outcomes.

Multivariate Regression Results					
	State Gratitude	Gratitude to Benefactor	Expansive Emotions	Positive Affect	Negative Affect
	Proportion of Times Listing Benefactor				
(1) Non-theistic intangible	$\beta = 0.07$	$\beta = 0.21$ ***	$\beta = 0.02$	$\beta = 0.04$	$\beta = -0.01$
(2) God	$\beta = 0.17$ **	$\beta = 0.21$ ***	$\beta = 0.16$ **	$\beta = 0.08$	$\beta = -0.02$

Note. * = *p*-value < 0.05, ** = *p*-value < 0.01, *** = *p*-value < 0.001.

3.4.1. Part A: State Gratitude Responses

We tested this two ways. First, we used spontaneously listing God first (compared to other benefactors) as a predictor. Second, we used the frequency of listing God (or other benefactors) as a predictor. Please refer to Table 3 for more detailed results.

First, we ran a MANOVA predicting state gratitude and gratitude towards benefactor; we included a categorical variable, indicating whether God vs. a non-God intangible benefactor vs. a tangible benefactor was listed first in the lists as the independent variable. The results indicated that attitude accessibility (listing benefactor first) significantly predicted increases in state gratitude and gratitude towards benefactors. Post hoc contrasts revealed that gratitude and gratitude towards benefactor was significantly higher in participants who listed God first.

Second, we ran a multivariate regression and found that those who listed God more frequently experienced significantly more state gratitude. Listing non-theistic intangible benefactors more frequently was not associated with more state gratitude. State gratitude to benefactors was similar for those that listed God or non-theistic intangible benefactors more frequently.

3.4.2. Part B: Expansive Emotions

Next, we tested part b of the hypothesis, following the same pattern as part a: using listing the benefactor first as the predictor and then using frequency of listing the benefactor as the predictor. Results from the MANOVA analysis found that participants that listed God first versus other non-theistic intangible benefactors or tangible benefactors significantly predicted expansive emotions and positive affect, but listing God first did not predict decreases in negative affect after the gratitude task. Post-hoc contrasts revealed specifically that listing God first resulted in more expansive emotions and positive affect than listing a tangible benefactor.

Next, multivariate regression indicated that the frequency of listing God did not predict negative or positive affect; however, it was associated with participants reporting more expansive emotions. Further, belief in God (a control variable) was significantly associated with more positive affect after the gratitude task $\beta = 0.22$, $R^2 = 0.17$, $F(5, 278) = 11.09$, $p < 0.001$.

4. General Discussion

Although research has been accruing on the potentially unique effects of gratitude toward God and other intangible benefactors (Rosmarin et al. 2011; Tsang et al. 2021). Empirical evidence relevant to the mechanisms underlying these differences has been absent. The current set of experiments provided the first test of the importance of construal level in gratitude experiences toward intangible benefactors. Additionally, we expanded research on differential outcomes of gratitude to intangible benefactors by examining expansive, self-transcendent emotions, and we applied attitude accessibility in a novel manner to provide an implicit measure of benefactor importance.

God as a specific benefactor, elicited some unique outcomes. Participants who listed God first as a benefactor when reflecting on gratitude reported increased state gratitude, gratitude to God, expansive emotions, and positive affect. Participants who listed God more frequently in proportion to other responses experienced significantly more expansive emotions, such as gratitude, awe, and compassion, compared to participants who did not have God more accessible as a benefactor. Further research is needed to differentiate the gratitude experiences associated with different types of benefactors, both tangible and intangible.

4.1. Construal Level

Counter to our preregistered hypotheses, we failed to find an effect of our construal level manipulation on state gratitude or gratitude toward intangible benefactors. Surprisingly, however, we found that those in the high construal level condition were more likely than controls to list non-theistic intangible benefactors (e.g., nature, science). We did not find this effect for God.

There may be several reasons for these findings. One possibility is that our manipulation of construal level was insufficiently strong to elicit differences in expressions of gratitude toward God. Although previous research has successfully utilized a similar construal level manipulation (Fujita et al. 2006), that experiment had individuals participate in person, whereas our research tested participants online. It is possible that modality and propensity to multi-task may have adversely affected the strength of our construal-level manipulation. Although our first manipulation check was unsuccessful, a different manipulation check in another sample suggested that our construal level manipulation did have a detectable effect—particularly for increasing construal level in the high construal level condition (whereas the low construal manipulation did not decrease construal level, compared to controls). However, the lack of concordance between our manipulation checks suggests that the effect may have been weak and/or inconsistent. Future research on the association between construal level and gratitude toward God may benefit from using a different, stronger manipulation.

It may also be that gratitude to God is construed in a more concrete way than we originally thought. Research on attachment theory has found that attachment to God is often experienced similarly to human attachments (Kirkpatrick 2005) suggesting that God may be viewed as more tangible when it comes to other social constructs, such as gratitude. Recent research revealed that anthropomorphism of nature is positively associated with feelings of gratitude toward nature (Tam 2022), suggesting that concrete construals of intangible benefactors, such as God or nature, may play a role in the experience of gratitude toward intangible benefactors.

Alternatively, categorizing benefactors in terms of fixed tangibility levels may be overly simplistic. Instead, benefactors may vary in their tangibility between different situations and across time. For instance, although religious and civic institutions are sometimes construed in abstract terms, such as "the church" or "the law", at other times, they may be experienced more concretely, such as when individuals are interacting with specific representatives, such as church members or law enforcement officers. An individual who interacts with a pastor and subsequently feels grateful toward the church may be

experiencing the church as a benefactor in a more tangible way, compared to someone who is grateful to "the church" more abstractly.

Alternatively, agents who are typically perceived as tangible, such as friends or parents, might at times be construed more intangibly, and the individual is grateful not to a specific person as a friend but for that person's friendship more abstractly. People may even experience developmental changes in the tangibility of benefactors, as when a child moves from having a concrete conceptualization to a more abstract conceptualization of God in adulthood (Batson et al. 1993). Because of these possible state fluctuations in the tangibility of benefactors, it may be oversimplified to assume intangible benefactors are always, in fact, intangible. Instead, it may be more productive to investigate how momentary fluctuations in people's construal level may affect the experience of gratitude without linking construal levels to specific benefactors.

Nevertheless, we did find that non-theistic intangible benefactors were more likely to be spontaneously reported in the gratitude task when participants were induced to think in high construal levels. Further, trait construal levels predicted expansive emotions. This suggests that construal levels may play a role in predicting the recollection of some intangible benefactors and predicting expansive emotions. We found that construal levels did not predict state gratitude responses, but future research should further replicate these associations.

4.2. Expansive Emotions

We created two measures of attitude accessibility of God as a benefactor, which served as indirect, implicit indicators of the importance participants placed on God in the context of gratitude. We found that participants who mentioned God first or frequently in their list of benefactors experienced stronger intensities of expansive emotions, such as gratitude, awe, compassion, admiration, and elevation. The use of accessibility to investigate attitude importance may be a helpful methodological tool for many topics in the psychology of religion, as well as positive psychology, which often deals with constructs high in social desirability. Moreover, research in social cognition (Nisbett and Wilson 1977) and implicit attitudes (Bargh et al. 2012) suggests that individuals do not have conscious access to many of their psychological processes. Because implicit measures, such as our measure of attitude accessibility, do not rely on individuals to directly self-report attitude importance, they help address some of these methodological concerns.

Although the accessibility of God as a benefactor predicted gratitude intensity and other expansive emotions, the accessibility of other, non-deity intangible benefactors did not show similar associations. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that our sample was a predominantly White U.S. sample. Had the sample included more cultural and religious diversity, non-theistic intangible benefactors, such as nature, may have been more readily associated with expansive emotions (e.g., many indigenous peoples attribute transcendence to nature).

Another possibility is that God as a benefactor may, in fact, be more strongly associated in many people's minds with self-transcendence and expansive emotions. Others have made theoretical arguments consistent with this second possibility. For instance, Van Cappellen (2017) summarized research supporting a reciprocal relationship between religiousness and expansive emotions. She noted the prevalence of self-transcendent, expansive emotions in biblical texts. It follows that because sacred texts prescribe expansive emotions, such as gratitude and awe, God as a benefactor might more easily elicit these emotions. Additionally, specific characteristics ascribed to God might facilitate expansive emotions in people who experience gratitude toward God (Tsang et al. 2021).

For example, religions may teach that God is the distal source of many different benefits, benefits that are often of great existential importance, such as one's life, sustenance, and one's key interpersonal relationships. Reflection on God as the source of these meaningful benefits could trigger expansive emotions in ways that reflection on providers of more mundane benefits might not. Although other intangible benefactors, such as nature or

one's country, might also be the source of meaningful benefits; religious doctrine may attribute a more extensive list of benefits to God, which may link God more closely to expansive emotions as a result. God may also be unique as a benefactor in that some religious doctrines may teach that even negative events are ultimately God's plan and work out for good. This might again lead individuals to attribute more benefits to God as a benefactor, contributing to an association between God and self-transcendent, expansive emotions. Research is needed to replicate the positive relationship between the salience of gratitude toward God and expansive emotions and to empirically investigate whether specific qualities of God as a benefactor contribute to this relationship.

Research outside of the gratitude literature also supports the association of God with self-transcendence and concerns beyond the self. Specifically, Preston et al. (2010) demonstrated that religious primes activated prosocial behaviors that favored the ingroup, whereas God primes activated prosocial behaviors that were more universal in their scope. Whereas religion and God may both be considered intangible, God seems to be more closely related to the motivation to transcend self-relevant ingroup boundaries.

In summary, our finding that the accessibility of God as a benefactor was positively associated with experiences of expansive emotions is consistent with other literature in the psychology of religion and gratitude. Additional research is needed to replicate this association and further probe possible underlying mechanisms.

4.3. Limitations and Future Areas of Research

Several limitations of our study can be addressed in future research. Although our study included an experimental manipulation and preregistered hypotheses, the only significant effects that we uncovered were correlational and exploratory. Future research is needed to replicate the association between attitude accessibility of God and expansive emotions with relevant *a priori*, preregistered hypotheses. In addition, a stronger manipulation of construal level may better reveal any effects of construal level on gratitude toward God and other intangible benefactors.

Additional research is needed to compare intangible and tangible benefactors more generally. Is the experience of gratitude with tangible benefactors, such as other people, similar to gratitude toward more abstract benefactors, such as God or nature? As Tam (2022) argued, it may be that abstract benefactors, such as nature, need to be perceived in a concrete, anthropomorphic way in order to elicit gratitude. On the other hand, intangible benefactors may differ in specific ways from tangible benefactors, eliciting a qualitatively different experience of gratitude. These similarities and differences may be moderated by situational factors, such as cultural and religious norms. For example, some religions, such as Islam, prescribe viewing God in a more abstract manner, whereas other religions, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, prescribe a more anthropomorphized view of God (Nyhof and Johnson 2017). These differences in religious doctrine and cultural worldviews may affect the experience of gratitude toward tangible and intangible givers in systematic ways.

Another limitation of our research lies in our research sample. Although we expanded beyond the usual undergraduate student convenience sample used in much psychological research, our community sample had a higher than usual proportion of individuals who did not believe in God. This is a particularly relevant issue when studying topics such as gratitude toward God. We partially addressed this issue by controlling for belief in God and providing participants with non-deity intangible benefactors to rate. Further research using samples with a higher proportion of religious individuals, along with individuals from a greater variety of religions and cultures, would increase the generalizability of the findings.

4.4. Conclusions

Intangible benefactors such as God, the universe, and nature provide individuals with a multitude of meaningful, expansive gratitude experiences. Attitude accessibility

may be of particular importance when predicting transcendent emotions associated with gratitude to God. Further, trait construal level seems to enhance expansive emotions. The study of these intangible benefactors in the context of gratitude has the potential to unlock experiences and outcomes that push individuals beyond self-concern and into self-transcendence.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.A.S., J.-A.T. and J.M.N.; methodology, S.A.S. and J.-A.T.; formal analysis, J.M.N.; investigation, J.M.N. and E.W.; resources, S.A.S. and J.-A.T.; data curation, J.M.N. and E.W.; writing—original draft preparation, J.M.N., E.W. and J.-A.T.; writing—review and editing, S.A.S. and J.-A.T.; visualization, J.M.N.; supervision, S.A.S. and J.-A.T.; project administration, S.A.S. and J.M.N.; funding acquisition, S.A.S. and J.-A.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Baylor University, IRB Reference # 1825407, approved 26 October 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data available in a publicly accessible repository: https://osf.io/3k6zn/.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Aghababaei, Naser, Agata Błachnio, and Masoume Aminikhoo. 2018. The Relations of Gratitude to Religiosity, Well-Being, and Personality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21: 408–17. [CrossRef]

Algoe, Sara B. 2012. Find, Remind, and Bind: The Functions of Gratitude in Everyday Relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6: 455–69. [CrossRef]

Algoe, Sara B., and Jonathan Haidt. 2009. Witnessing Excellence in Action: The 'other-Praising' Emotions of Elevation, Gratitude, and Admiration. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4: 105–27. [CrossRef]

Bargh, John A., Kay L. Schwader, Sarah E. Hailey, Rebecca L. Dyer, and Erica J. Boothby. 2012. Automaticity in Social-Cognitive Processes. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 16: 593–605. [CrossRef]

Batson, Charles Daniel, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis. 1993. *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Eibach, Richard P., Matthew O. Wilmot, and Lisa K. Libby. 2015. The System-justifying Function of Gratitude Norms. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 9: 348–58. [CrossRef]

Fincham, Frank D., and Ross W. May. 2021. Generalized Gratitude and Prayers of Gratitude in Marriage. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 16: 282–87. [CrossRef]

Fujita, Kentaro, Yaacov Trope, Nira Liberman, and Maya Levin-Sagi. 2006. Construal Levels and Self-Control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90: 351–67. [CrossRef]

Gu, Xuan, and Chi-Shing Tse. 2018. Abstractness and Desirableness in the Human Values System: Self-transcendence Values Are Construed More Abstractly, but Felt More Closely than Are Self-enhancement Values. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 21: 282–94. [CrossRef]

Inglehart, Ronald. 2021. *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kaplan, Avi, and Hanoch Flum. 2012. Identity Formation in Educational Settings: A Critical Focus for Education in the 21st Century. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 37: 171–75. [CrossRef]

Karataş, Mustafa, and Zeynep Gürhan-Canli. 2020. A Construal Level Account of the Impact of Religion and God on Prosociality. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 46: 1107–20. [CrossRef]

Kirkpatrick, Lee A. 2005. *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion*. New York: Guilford Press.

Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, Self-rated Health, and Depressive Symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, Gail Ironson, and Peter C. Hill. 2017. General Feelings of Gratitude, Gratitude to God, and Hemoglobin A1c: Exploring Variations by Gender. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 12: 639–50. [CrossRef]

Krosnick, Jon A. 1989. Attitude Importance and Attitude Accessibility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 15: 297–308. [CrossRef]

Lambert, Nathaniel M., Margaret S. Clark, Jared Durtschi, Frank D. Fincham, and Steven M. Graham. 2010. Benefits of Expressing Gratitude: Expressing Gratitude to a Partner Changes One's View of the Relationship. *Psychological Science* 21: 574–80. [CrossRef]

MacKenzie, Michael J., Kathleen D. Vohs, and Roy F. Baumeister. 2014. You Didn't Have to Do That: Belief in Free Will Promotes Gratitude. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 40: 1423–34. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Nelson, Jenae M., Sam A. Hardy, and Philip Watkins. 2022. Transcendent Indebtedness to God: A New Construct in the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. [CrossRef]

Nisbett, Richard E., and Timothy DeCamp Wilson. 1977. Telling More than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes. *Psychological Review* 84: 231–59. [CrossRef]

Nyhof, Melanie A., and Carl N. Johnson. 2017. Is God Just a Big Person? Children's Conceptions of God across Cultures and Religious Traditions. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 35: 60–75. [CrossRef]

Pew Research Center. 2019. In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace. *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Blog)*. October 17. Available online: https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/ (accessed on 12 September 2022).

Preston, Jesse Lee, Ryan S. Ritter, and J. Ivan Hernandez. 2010. Principles of Religious Prosociality: A Review and Reformulation. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4: 574–90. [CrossRef]

Rocklage, Matthew D., and Russell H. Fazio. 2018. Attitude Accessibility as a Function of Emotionality. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44: 508–20. [CrossRef]

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or Just Plain Grateful? A Comparison of Religious and General Gratitude. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Rotkirch, Anna, Minna Lyons, Tamas David-Barrett, and Markus Jokela. 2014. Gratitude for Help among Adult Friends and Siblings. *Evolutionary Psychology* 12: 673–86. [CrossRef]

Shoshani, Anat, Or Aharon-Dvir, Dora Hain, and Adi Yaffe. 2021. Situational Determinants of Young Children's Gratitude: The Effects of Perceived Intentionality and the Value of the Benefit on Gratitude and Prosocial Behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 121: 914–32. [CrossRef]

Shoshani, Anat, Keren De-Leon Lendner, Amir Nissensohn, Gal Lazarovich, and Or Aharon-Dvir. 2020. Grateful and Kind: The Prosocial Function of Gratitude in Young Children's Relationships. *Developmental Psychology* 56: 1135–48. [CrossRef]

Stellar, Jennifer E., Amie M. Gordon, Paul K. Piff, Daniel Cordaro, Craig L. Anderson, Yang Bai, Laura A. Maruskin, and Dacher Keltner. 2017. Self-Transcendent Emotions and Their Social Functions: Compassion, Gratitude, and Awe Bind Us to Others Through Prosociality. *Emotion Review* 9: 200–7. [CrossRef]

Tam, Kim-Pong. 2022. Gratitude to Nature: Presenting a Theory of Its Conceptualization, Measurement, and Effects on pro-Environmental Behavior. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 79: 101754. [CrossRef]

Trope, Yaacov, and Nira Liberman. 2010. Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance. *Psychological Reivew* 117: 440–63. [CrossRef]

Tsang, Jo-Ann, and Stephen R. Martin. 2016. A Psychological Perspective on Gratitude and Religion. In *Perspectives on Gratitude: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Edited by David Carr. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 154–68. Available online: https://www.lib.byu.edu/cgi-bin/remoteauth.pl?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2016-22140-011&site=ehost-live&scope=site (accessed on 12 September 2022).

Tsang, JoAnn, Sarah A. Schnitker, Robert A. Emmons, and Peter C. Hill. 2021. Feeling the Intangible: Antecedents of Gratitude toward Intangible Benefactors. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1–17. [CrossRef]

Vallacher, Robin R., and Daniel M. Wegner. 1989. Behavior Identification Form: Levels of Personal Agency: Individual Variation in Action Identification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57: 660–71. [CrossRef]

Van Cappellen, Patty. 2017. Rethinking Self-Transcendent Positive Emotions and Religion: Insights from Psychological and Biblical Research. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9: 254–63. [CrossRef]

Watson, David, Lee Anna Clark, and Auke Tellegen. 1988. Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54: 1063–70. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Xiong, Wei, Xiaoxue Gao, Zhewen He, Hongbo Yu, Huiying Liu, and Xiaolin Zhou. 2020. Affective Evaluation of Others' Altruistic Decisions under Risk and Ambiguity. *NeuroImage* 218: 116996. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Article

Gratitude to God: A Unique Construct Adding to Our Understanding of Religiousness and Gratitude

Crystal L. Park [1,*], Joshua A. Wilt [2] and Adam B. David [1]

1   Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA
2   Department of Psychological Sciences, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA
*   Correspondence: crystal.park@uconn.edu

Abstract: In two national samples in the United States, we aimed to determine the extent to which GTG is distinct from both general gratitude and general religiousness, using statistical methods to determine (1) if GTG shows patterns of association with other variables distinct from general gratitude and religiousness, and (2) whether GTG predicts wellbeing above and beyond both general gratitude and religiousness. Online studies were conducted with 267 (Study 1) and 184 (Study 2) adults. Results across the two studies were consistent in demonstrating that GTG shows associations with relevant constructs that are distinct from both general religiousness and general gratitude. Further, GTG independently predicted aspects of psychological wellbeing, although findings were not consistent across all aspects. These findings indicate GTG is a unique construct warranting future research.

Keywords: gratitude; religion; religiousness

1. Introduction

Building on the proliferating empirical work on gratitude (Jans-Beken et al. 2020; Portocarrero et al. 2020) and the longstanding theological traditions of gratitude to God embedded within most world religions (Tsang and Martin 2013), attention has recently turned towards empirical work on gratitude to God. Although gratitude is central to many of the world's religions, little psychological research has explored religious gratitude, or more specifically, gratitude to God (GTG). The current set of studies aimed to determine the extent to which GTG constitutes a unique construct distinct from the more general constructs of gratitude and religiousness.

GTG is clearly relevant and important to many people, and studies have shown that people tend to report high levels of GTG. For example, in a national survey of Americans, 52% reported feeling regularly grateful to God while 44% saw gratitude as an expression of love for God or a higher power (John Templeton Foundation Gratitude Survey 2012). Preliminary work on GTG has found it to be associated with salutary mental and physical health consequences (e.g., Krause and Hayward 2015; Krause et al. 2017).

However, foundational questions about GTG remain. In particular, as the field matures, determining whether GTG constitutes a distinct construct or instead simply represents a subtype of general religiousness or general gratitude is critical to building a robust science. Considering GTG in this way does not diminish its potentially deep significance at a theological or experiential level, both of which are well-established (e.g., Emmons and Crumpler 2000; Townes 2021). Clearly GTG is substantively different in many ways from gratitude as it is usually studied (Rosmarin et al. 2011) and is also conceptually not the same as general religiousness. However, to constitute a focus of empirical psychological research, the construct of GTG must demonstrate some "added value" regarding its explanation of human experience rather than being wholly redundant with already well-studied constructs. That is, we already know a great deal about gratitude and about religiousness, but it remains to be seen if GTG comprises a unique construct.

One way to determine the distinctiveness of GTG relative to more general gratitude or religiousness is to compare patterns of associations of these three constructs with other constructs that might be expected to be especially strongly associated with GTG, such as one's views of and relationship with God. This approach was taken in a study of Iranian Muslim university students that compared associations of general gratitude and religious gratitude with personality and wellbeing. This study found similar patterns between the two types of gratitude, but most associations appeared stronger for general gratitude (Aghababaei and Tabik 2013). Similar results were reported in a series of subsequent studies of Iranian and Polish university students (Aghababaei et al. 2018). The latter set of studies, however, also included measures of religiousness and found that GTG related more strongly to intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness than did general gratitude (in the Polish sample only), suggesting that GTG and general gratitude may be somewhat distinct. However, this study did not test the extent to which GTG was distinct from general religiousness.

Aside from general religiousness, other constructs may also relate differentially to gratitude to God. For example, preliminary but intriguing research suggests that suffering and hardship may promote transformative personal development that may manifest as GTG (Krause et al. 2012). Thus, those who have survived major adversity may generally be more grateful to God. For example, suffering serious health issues often leads individuals to experience deep feelings of gratitude and a deepened relationship with God (Chun and Lee 2013; Krause et al. 2012; Sacco et al. 2014). Our research to date on major life stressors and trauma has also found that religiousness is a robust predictor of people's perceptions that they have grown through hardship and become closer to God (Park 2006, 2013). This preliminary evidence suggests that GTG may be a common emotional experience in the wake of high-magnitude stressful events, particularly for religious people. Curiously, the influence of major positive life events has received relatively little attention in the general psychological literature compared to the impact of trauma and adversity (e.g., García-Bajos and Migueles 2013; Collins et al. 2007). It is reasonable to conjecture that individuals who have experienced more major positive life events would feel more gratitude to God, although no research to date has examined this notion.

Another factor that may distinguish among general religiousness, general gratitude, and GTG is views of and relationships with God. If GTG is distinct from general gratitude and general religiousness, we would expect that GTG would relate more strongly to some religious variables such as views of God as benevolent or finding comfort from God than would either general religiousness or general gratitude; conversely, views of an authoritarian or malevolent God or spiritual strain might demonstrate a weaker relationship with GTG than with general religiousness or gratitude.

A second, perhaps more sophisticated, way to determine the distinctiveness and value of the construct of GTG is to examine whether it predicts important "outcomes" such as wellbeing even when taking into account the influence of already-established constructs such as general religiousness or gratitude. In this way, GTG could be established as a unique construct. However, although GTG has been related to health and wellbeing in several studies (e.g., Krause et al. 2014), few of these studies took into account (i.e., included and statistically controlled for) general gratitude, which is a well-documented robust predictor of health and wellbeing (e.g., Jans-Beken et al. 2020).

When general gratitude is taken into consideration statistically, studies generally show diminished associations of GTG with hypothesized variables such as wellbeing. For example, one study showed that while GTG was related at a bivariate level with mental and physical health indices, these associations disappeared when controlling for general gratitude (Rosmarin et al. 2011). Similarly, the above-cited study with three samples (two of Iranian Muslims in Iran and one of Polish Christians) found very few independent effects of GTG on a host of variables once general gratitude was taken into account (Aghababaei et al. 2018). Thus, we aimed to determine whether GTG predicted wellbeing after taking general gratitude into account.

An additional concern, that GTG is simply a subcomponent of more general religiousness, also remains to be addressed. Given its prominent role in most monotheistic religious

teachings (Emmons and Crumpler 2000; Portocarrero et al. 2020), higher religiousness would be expected to be associated with higher GTG. However, whether GTG merely reflects this larger construct of general religiousness or whether specifically assessing one's GTG adds predictive power to models of the effects of religiousness on outcome variables remains to be determined. Some studies have included and controlled for some aspect of religiousness, but these have mostly been behavioral aspects such as service attendance rather than internal or experiential aspects. Even so, these studies tend to find minimal residual effects for GTG and typically only for subsets of the sample (e.g., Krause et al. 2017).

One proposed way in which GTG may be distinct and not simply a subset of general gratitude or religiousness is that GTG may be especially relevant to certain groups, thus exerting robust effects in these groups that go above and beyond general gratitude or religiousness. For example, for highly religious individuals, GTG may be highly valued and cultivated and its effects might extend beyond general gratitude. Indeed, in the above-cited study by Rosmarin et al. (2011) that controlled for general gratitude, GTG did add additional predictive power over and above regular gratitude, *but only for the subset of the sample high in religiousness*.

In the current set of two studies, we aimed to determine the extent to which GTG is distinct from both general gratitude and general religiousness, using statistical methods to determine (1) if GTG shows patterns of association with other variables distinct from general gratitude and religiousness, and (2) whether GTG predicts wellbeing above and beyond both general gratitude and religiousness overall and/or in the subset of people who are particularly religious.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we first aimed to determine if GTG related especially strongly to a variety of constructs that might be more relevant to it than to general gratitude or general religiousness. One such construct is life event history, particularly major positive and negative events. We reasoned that people who have experienced more good fortune (i.e., more positive life events) and less adversity (i.e., fewer negative life events) would feel more gratitude, especially to God, although we were unable to find any previous research that has tested this proposition. We also included experiential aspects of religiousness, such as images of God and finding comfort from or feeling anger towards God. We anticipated that finding comfort from God and having benign views of God would be particularly strongly associated with GTG while spiritual strain and negative God images would be particularly inversely strongly associated with GTG. Our second aim was to determine whether GTG was associated with wellbeing after taking general gratitude and general religiousness into account, so we included a range of wellbeing indicators, including spiritual wellbeing, positive states of mind, and distress.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants (N = 267) were recruited from Prolific, an online platform for obtaining research participants. Two attention checks were used during the study, and responses were removed from the final data if they failed either check. Of the 267 participants who took part in the study, 5% (*n* = 14) failed one check and were removed from the data. Therefore, the current analyses are based on 243 participants. These participants ranged from age 18–67 years (M = 35.13, SD = 8.35). The sample skewed toward White individuals (N = 171), but also included 45 Black participants, 12 Multiracial, 8 Asian, 1 Native American, 1 Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 1 who chose not to say. Seventeen participants identified as Latinx. The sample was predominantly male (N = 151) with 88 female participants. The most popular religion was Roman Catholic (N = 127); others included 39 Non-denominational Christian, 22 Protestant, 21 Agnostic, 19 Other, 3 Muslim, 2 Hindu, 2 Buddhist, 2 Jewish, 1 Mormon, and 1 who chose not to say.

Participants were selected through Prolific under the requirements of being 18 years old or older, fluent in English, living in the U.S., and believing in a deity-based religion

or not being atheist. For that latter requirement, participants were screened for belief in God using the certainty of belief in God item from Rohrbaugh and Jessor (1975). Those who were certain in their belief in the non-existence of God were not eligible to participate. Participants who believed or who had uncertainty about God's existence were included, given that many studies have found that those who may even slightly believe that God exists often report having many feelings related to God (Exline and Rose 2013). Prolific is a newer alternative to Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which has been shown to be effective for rapid recruitment (Turner et al. 2020) with demonstrated high-quality data (Peer et al. 2022) and more diverse participants than MTurk (Peer et al. 2017). Participants completed the survey in Qualtrics. The amount of missing data was low, with fewer than 2% of items missing responses.

The study received ethical approval before any surveys were released. Respondents were compensated for their time with $5.00 for completing the survey based on an average estimated completion time of 25 min in Qualtrics.

2.1.2. Measures

General gratitude. General gratitude was assessed with the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough et al. 2002). Participants rated each of six items regarding how much they agree or disagree (1—strongly agree, 2—agree, 3—somewhat agree, 4—neither agree nor disagree, 5—somewhat disagree, 6—disagree, 7—strongly disagree). Sample statements include, "I have so much in my life to be thankful for", "If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list", and "When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for" (reverse scored). Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was 0.66.

General religiousness. The Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al. 2003) was used to assess general religiousness. Participants rated how true of themselves each of 10 statements were, using a 5-point Likert scale (1—not at all true of me to 5—totally true of me). The measure included statements such as: "I often read books and magazines about my faith", "I make financial contributions to my religious organization", and "I spend time trying to grow in understanding of my faith". Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was 0.96.

Gratitude to God. GTG was measured using the Religious Gratitude Scale (Krause and Hayward 2015) in which participants were asked to rate on a 4-point scale (1—strongly disagree, 2—disagree, 3—agree, 4—strongly agree) how much they agreed or disagreed with the 4 statements given, including: "I am grateful for God for all He has done for me" and "If I were to make a list of all the things God has done for me, it would be a very long list". Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was 0.96.

Major life events. To measure adverse and positive life events, items were aggregated from four life event scales (Lee et al. 2016; Seidlitz and Diener 1993; Berntsen et al. 2011; Brugha and Cragg 1990). Participants indicated whether a positive or negative event had happened to them in their lifetime, scored from never (0), once (1), two times (2), three times (3), four times (4), or five or more times (5). Sample negative events included: "natural disaster", "assault by a stranger", and "domestic violence", while sample positive events included "marriage" and "retirement". Sums were calculated from each list such that higher numbers represented more of each type of event.

God Images. Using the Limitless, Authoritarian, Mystical, Benevolent, and Ineffable (LAMBI) scale (Johnson et al. 2019), participants rated on a 1–7 scale (1—strongly disagree, 2—disagree, 3—somewhat disagree, 4—neither agree nor disagree, 5—somewhat agree, 6—agree, 7—strongly agree) to what degree they agreed or disagreed with words that pertain to the following dimensions of God: limitless, authoritarian, mystical, benevolent, ineffable, and no God. Examples of such words included: "Limitless", "Vast", "Boundless", "Wrathful", and "Punishing". Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.87 for limitless image, 0.84 for authoritarian image, 0.74 for mystical image, 0.89 for benevolent image, 0.77 for ineffable image, and 0.70 for no God image.

Religious strain and comfort. The Attitudes toward God Scale-9 (ATGS-9; Wood et al. 2010) has two subscales, Anger toward God and Comfort from God. Participants rated the

extent to which they agreed with each of nine statements from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Participants responded to the question: "to what extent do you currently...": regarding items such as "trust God to protect and care for you" (comfort) and "feel angry at God" (anger). Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was 0.93 for anger and 0.97 for comfort.

Spiritual Wellbeing. Spiritual wellbeing was measured by the Functional Assessment of Chronic Illness Therapy—Spiritual Wellbeing Scale (FACIT-Sp; Peterman et al. 2002). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with statements about how their spirituality and faith contributed to their quality of life in the previous seven days using a 0–4 scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very much". Examples included "I feel peaceful" and "I find comfort in my faith or spiritual beliefs". Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was 0.91.

Positive States of Mind. Positive states of mind were measured by the Positive States of Mind scale (PSOM; Horowitz et al. 1988). Participants rated the extent to which they were able to experience the following positive states of mind in the past week: focused attention, productivity, responsible caretaking, restful repose, sensuous nonsexual pleasure, sensuous sexual pleasure, and sharing. Definitions were provided for each state. The measure had participants indicate whether they related to each state of mind as "Unable to experience this even though I wanted to" (1), "Difficult to experience" (2), "Able to experience with only a little difficulty" (3), "Easy to experience" (4) or "Not relevant—have not wanted to experience". Scores for items where participants entered "Not relevant—have not wanted to experience" were omitted from the mean item score for the PSOM. Cronbach's alpha in this sample was 0.80.

Psychological Distress. An overall distress score was assessed with the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21; Henry and Crawford 2005). The DASS-21 is a validated 21-item measure of depression, anxiety, and stress that produces an overall measure of psychological distress. The measure had participants rate how much each statement applied to them using a 4-point scale ranging from 0 "Did not apply to me at all" to 3 "Applied to me very much or most of the time". Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was 0.96.

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics. Some results warrant highlighting (references to scores being high, low, and moderate are made in reference to scale midpoints). Trait GTG and Comfort from God were relatively high. Both adverse and positive events were common, with the typical participant reporting experiencing > 10 each of adverse and positive events over their lifetime. Though general religiousness (RCI-10) was only moderately high, levels of other variables reflecting close relationships with God and positive views of God were quite high, and anger towards God was low.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Measures.

Variable	Scale Range	*M*	*SD*	*Skew*	*Kurtosis*
GTG	1 to 7	5.84	1.43	−1.65	2.31
Adverse Events	0 to 60	15.44	11.19	1.19	1.17
Positive Events	0 to 45	13.79	7.08	1.90	3.90
General Religiousness	0 to 4	2.50	1.19	−0.75	−0.64
General Gratitude	1 to 7	5.51	0.89	−0.02	−0.58
God Image: Limitless	1 to 7	5.72	1.38	−1.74	3.21
God Image: Authoritarian	1 to 7	4.05	1.47	−0.07	−0.75
God Image: Mystical	1 to 7	5.61	1.01	−1.02	1.88
God Image: Benevolent	1 to 7	5.83	1.21	−1.45	2.40
God Image: Ineffable	1 to 7	4.01	1.55	−0.12	−0.79
God Image: No God	1 to 7	2.69	1.41	0.54	−0.35
Comforted by God	1 to 10	8.11	2.59	−1.69	1.75
Anger toward God	1 to 10	2.81	2.43	1.33	0.58
Spiritual Wellbeing	0 to 4	2.93	0.81	−0.87	0.40
Positive States of Mind	1 to 7	3.42	0.52	−0.91	0.34
Psychological Distress	0 to 3	0.82	0.67	0.65	−0.57

2.2.2. Bivariate Correlations among General Religiousness, General Gratitude, and GTG

Tests of bivariate associations among the three primary predictors in the study indicated that general gratitude and religiousness were positively correlated ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$) and GTG was positively correlated with both general gratitude ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and general religiousness ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$).

2.2.3. Partial Correlations Controlling for Demographics (Gender, Age)

To determine the extent to which general gratitude, general religiousness, and GTG differentially related to our set of positive/negative events, God image variables, feelings of anger/comfort toward God, spiritual wellbeing, positive states of mind, and psychological distress, we conducted a series of partial correlations (see Table 2) that controlled for demographics. We conducted Steiger tests (Steiger 1980) to determine whether the magnitudes of correlations differed across general gratitude, general religiousness, and GTG. GTG had a stronger positive correlation with adverse events, positive events, authoritarian image of God, no image of God, anger toward God, and positive states of mind than did general gratitude. GTG had a more positive correlation than did either general religiousness or general gratitude with spiritual wellbeing, comfort from God, and a benevolent image of God. GTG had a stronger negative correlation with ineffable image of God than did general gratitude and a stronger negative correlation with adverse events, positive events, spiritual wellbeing, anger toward God, ineffable image of God, and no image of God than did general religiousness. Interestingly, anger to God was even more strongly negatively correlated with general gratitude than with GTG.

Table 2. Partial Correlations Examining whether GTG Shows Distinctive Patterns of Associations Compared to General Gratitude and General Religiousness.

	Religiousness	GTG	Gratitude
Adverse Events	−0.04 a	−0.14 *b	−0.24 ***b
Positive Events	0.23 ***a	0.08 b	−0.13 *c
God Image: Limitless	0.18 **a	0.34 ***b	0.33 ***b
God Image: Authoritarian	0.01 a	−0.05 a	−0.24 ***b
God Image: Mystical	0.2 **a	0.20 **a	0.16 *a
God Image: Benevolent	0.57 ***a	0.76 ***b	0.34 ***c
God Image: Ineffable	−0.23 ***a	−0.34 ***b	−0.08 a
God Image: No God	−0.27 ***a	−0.46 ***b	−0.46 ***b
Comfort from God	0.74 ***a	0.9 ***b	0.22 ***c
Anger at God	−0.18 **a	−0.30 ***b	−0.52 ***c
Spiritual Wellbeing	0.65 ***a	0.74 ***b	0.43 ***c
Positive States of Mind	0.44 ***a	0.38 ***a	0.27 ***b
Distress	−0.22 ***a	−0.30 ***a	−0.34 ***a

Note: letters within rows indicate equivalent correlations based on Steiger tests. Numbers are unstandardized *b* coefficients. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

We were interested in examining whether GTG could be distinguished from general religiousness and general gratitude as a predictor of three outcomes (spiritual wellbeing, positive states of mind, and psychological distress). We also tested the interaction effect of general religiousness and GTG with these three outcomes.

2.2.4. Predicting Spiritual Wellbeing

First, we tested the three variables as predictors of spiritual wellbeing. Zero-order correlations revealed similar, large positive correlations of spiritual wellbeing with general religiousness ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) and GTG ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$) and a medium positive correlation between spiritual wellbeing and general gratitude ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$). We then conducted regression models predicting spiritual wellbeing separately from combinations of gender, age, general religiousness, general gratitude, and GTG. Model 1 included both demographic variables. Model 2a added general religiousness and GTG while Model 2b included demographics, general gratitude, and GTG. Model 3 included all predictors.

Model 4 included all predictors along with the interaction of religiousness and GTG. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results from Regressions Predicting Spiritual Wellbeing, Positive States of Mind, and Psychological Distress.

Models Predicting Spiritual Wellbeing	1	2a	2b	3	4
Predictor					
Man (vs. Woman)	0.21	−0.07	0.06	−0.01	−0.01
Age	0.01	−0.01 *	−0.00	−0.01	−0.01
General religiousness		0.19 ***		0.23 ***	0.00
General gratitude			0.19 ***	0.23 ***	0.21 ***
GTG		0.32 ***	0.39 ***	0.25 ***	0.21 ***
GTG × Religiousness					0.04
Models Predicting Positive States of Mind	**1**	**2a**	**2b**	**3**	**4**
Predictor					
Man (vs. Woman)	0.18 *	0.05	0.14 *	0.08	0.08
Age	0.01 **	0.00	0.01 *	0.01	0.01
General religiousness		0.16 ***		0.18 ***	0.19
General gratitude			0.09 *	0.12 **	0.12 ***
GTG		0.05	0.12 ***	0.01	0.01
GTG × Religiousness					−0.00
Models Predicting Distress	**1**	**2a**	**2b**	**3**	**4**
Predictor					
Man (vs. Woman)	0.16	0.24 **	0.17	0.18 *	0.18 *
Age	0.01	0.01 *	0.01	0.01	0.01
General religiousness		−0.01		−0.06	0.60 **
General gratitude			−0.20 ***	−0.21 ***	−0.17 ***
GTG		−0.14 **	−0.10 ***	−0.07	0.04
GTG × Religiousness					−0.11 ***

Note. Numbers are unstandardized *b* coefficients. * *p* < 0.05; ** *p* < 0.01; *** *p* < 0.001.

2.2.5. Predicting Positive States of Mind

Next, we tested the three variables as predictors of positive states of mind. Zero-order correlations revealed similarly modest, positive correlations between positive states of mind and religiousness and GTG, with a small, positive correlation between general gratitude and positive states of mind: religiousness (*r* = 0.50, *p* < 0.01), GTG (*r* = 0.43, *p* < 0.01), and general gratitude (*r* = 0.21, *p* < 0.01). We followed the same sequence of models that we used with spiritual wellbeing, described above. Results are shown in Table 3.

2.2.6. Predicting Psychological Distress

Finally, we tested the three variables as predictors of psychological distress. Zero-order correlations revealed similarly modest, negative correlations between psychological distress and general gratitude and GTG, with a small, negative correlation between religiousness and psychological distress: general gratitude (*r* = −0.36, *p* < 0.01), GTG (*r* = −0.25, *p* < 0.01), and religiousness (*r* = −0.15, ns). We followed the same sequence of models that we used with spiritual wellbeing and positive states of mind (see Table 3) and found a significant interaction effect where general religiousness moderated the relationship between GTG and psychological distress such that high religiousness predicted less distress in individuals higher in GTG and more distress in individuals lower in GTG. For individuals low in religiousness, distress was less associated with GTG. The interaction is plotted in Figure 1.
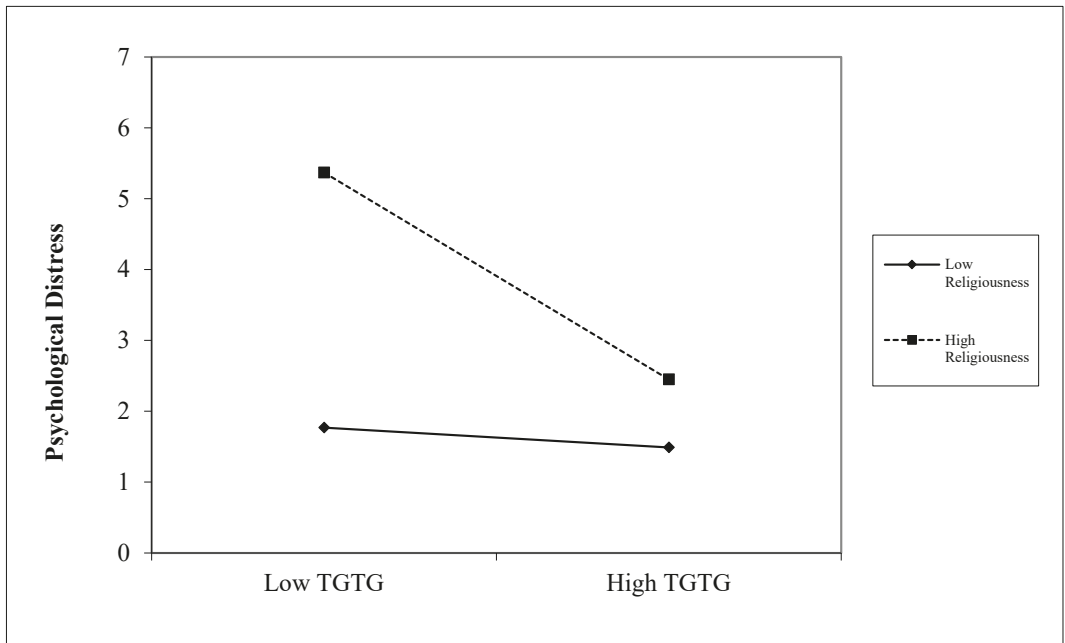
Figure 1. Interaction between General Religiousness and Gratitude to God Predicting Levels of Psychological Distress.

2.3. Discussion

Our aims in this study were to use two different methods for determining the extent to which GTG constituted a unique construct. First, we examined how associations of GTG with life events, religious variables, and outcomes differed from those of general religiousness and general gratitude, and then we examined how GTG predicted outcomes when taking into account general religiousness and general gratitude.

The correlational results suggest that GTG is indeed a unique construct: The associations of GTG with the targeted constructs were in some cases similar to general religiousness, and in other cases, with general gratitude, but in many respects the associations of GTG were also quite different from those of general religiousness or general gratitude. For example, more lifetime negative events were unrelated to religiousness but related to less GTG and even more so to less general gratitude, while experiencing more positive lifetime events was positively associated with general religiousness, unrelated to GTG, and inversely related to general gratitude. GTG was substantially more strongly related to benevolent aspects of religiousness such as benevolent God images and comfort from God.

Similarly, the results of the second approach—differential prediction of outcomes by GTG, general religiousness, and general gratitude—also suggest that these constructs are distinct. In predicting spiritual wellbeing, all three constructs contributed substantial variance, suggesting that the effects of GTG were not subsumed by general religiousness or general gratitude. On the contrary, GTG did not contribute unique variance to positive states of mind, but in predicting psychological distress, both GTG and general gratitude predicted unique variance in lower distress. Further, when all three constructs were entered in the model, general religiousness actually predicted *higher* distress. This latter finding might suggest that religiousness without gratitude is a product of or leads to more distress. In fact, we found the association between psychological distress and GTG was even stronger when taking general religiousness into account—those high on both GTG *and* religiousness

had much less psychological distress while for those with low general religiousness, GTG did not appear related to psychological distress.

These results must be interpreted within the limitations of the study. The study used a cross-sectional design, precluding examination of temporal ordering. GTG may, for example, lead to subsequent lower levels of psychological distress and more positive states of mind, or less distress and more positive states of mind may lead to more subsequent GTG. In addition, the measures of adversity referred to individuals' whole lives; it is likely that substantial retrospective bias influenced recollection of lifetime events (Belli 1998). In addition, Study 1 had limited ecological validity related to psychological distress, a weakness we addressed in Study 2. In spite of these limitations, the promising results of Study 1 suggest GTG is a unique construct, distinct from general religiousness and general gratitude, warranting future research.

3. Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate and build on the findings from Study 1. The first aim was to determine if GTG differentially related to a variety of constructs that might be especially relevant to it compared to general gratitude or general religiousness. We again included life event history, particularly major positive and negative events, but measured them more proximally to limit retrospective recall bias, again expecting that people who have experienced more recent good fortune (i.e., more positive life events) and less adversity (i.e., fewer negative life events) would feel more gratitude. We again included experiential aspects of religiousness, such as images of God and finding comfort from or feeling anger towards God. We also included a measure of locus of control, given that some theory has linked locus of control to general feelings of gratitude (Watkins et al. 2003), positing that those with an internal sense of control may be less likely to experience gratitude as they may see benefits more as a result of their own effort. However, the few studies that have examined this issue demonstrated that an internal locus of control predicts *more* general gratitude (Kashdan et al. 2009; Watkins et al. 2003); further, in Watkins and colleagues' study of college students, *divine* locus of control was even more strongly associated with general gratitude than was internal locus of control (Watkins et al. 2003). These intriguing findings suggest that individuals with an internal locus of control may experience that control as secondary (i.e., in conjunction with God's control). However, very little research is available on this topic, none specific to GTG.

As our second aim, we built on Study 1 findings by examining whether GTG was associated with wellbeing. However, because Study 1 collected all data cross-sectionally, the temporal association between GTG and wellbeing could not be determined. In Study 2, we examined associations between GTG and *subsequent* wellbeing after taking general gratitude and general religiousness into account, and rather than examining general wellbeing, we looked at more proximal short-term wellbeing aggregated across daily assessments over a two-week period.

3.1. Method
3.1.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants consisted of 184 individuals (51.35% female, 44.32% male, 1.08% transgender male, 2.7% non-binary/third gender) aged 18–74 (m = 33.8) who reside in the U.S. and are registered to the online survey site Prolific. Participants self-selected to take part in the study. The inclusion criteria were that the participant had to be at least 18 years old, read and write fluently in English, live in the U.S., and believe in a deity-based religion (Pew Research Center). For that latter requirement, participants were screened for belief in God using the certainty of belief in God item from Rohrbaugh and Jessor (1975). The study received ethical approval from the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board. Respondents were compensated for their time with $4.00 for completing the baseline survey and $1.50 for each of the 14 daily surveys completed. All constructs were assessed at baseline except for daily positive and negative affect.

3.1.2. Measures

Major life events. The same positive and negative life events items were used as in Study 1, but participants were asked to indicate if each positive or negative event had happened less than three months ago (1), less than 6 months ago (2), or had not happened (3). The 42 events in the measure included: "natural disaster", "assault by a stranger", "domestic violence", "marriage", "retirement", "took a vacation", and "major financial crisis". We combined categories 1 and 2 into a single category and scored each event dichotomously: 0 = did not happen, 1 = happened within 6 months. We then created a total score for adverse events (possible range = 0 to 26) and positive events (possible range = 0 to 15).

Locus of control. We used both the Locus of Control Scale (LoC; Lumpkin 1985), which measures internal/external locus of control and the God as a Causal Agent Scale (GCAS; Ritzema and Young 1983), which measures explicitly divine control. In the LoC scale, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with 6 statements such as: "When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work" and "What happens to me is my own doing" on a 5-point Likert scale (1—strongly disagree, 2—somewhat agree, 3—neither agree nor disagree, 4—somewhat disagree, 5—strongly disagree). On the GCA Scale, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with 14 statements such as "God Created the world by giving the commands", "Miracles happen much more frequently than most people suspect", and "I'm usually skeptical when someone tells me that they're convinced that God did something to change their attitudes or beliefs" on a 5-point Likert scale (1—agree, 2—somewhat agree, 3—neutral, 4—somewhat disagree, 5—disagree).

General Religiousness. This construct was assessed with the same measure as in Study 1, the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al. 2003).

Anger towards and Comfort from God. These constructs were measured with the same ATGS-9 (Wood et al. 2010) as in Study 1.

God Image. The same scale (LAMBI Johnson et al. 2019) used in Study 1 was also used in Study 2.

Gratitude to God. GTG was measured with the same scale used in study 1, the Religious Gratitude Scale (Krause and Hayward 2015).

General Gratitude. General gratitude was assessed with the same measure as in Study 1, the GQ-6 (McCullough et al. 2002).

Daily Positive/Negative Affect. Each daily survey contained a measure of affect using the SPANE (Diener et al. 2009). Participants were asked to rank on a 5-point scale (1—very slightly or not at all, 2—slightly, 3—somewhat, 4—moderately, 5—extremely) how much they were experiencing 12 feelings today including: "Positive", "Negative", "Good", "Bad", "Pleasant", and "Unpleasant"). We aggregated across days to compute average levels of daily positive/negative affect over two weeks.

3.1.3. Procedures

The baseline took approximately 35 min to complete and each daily survey took a few minutes.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Data Analysis Plan

The main data analysis plan was similar to that of Study 1: We computed descriptive statistics, examined patterns of correlations between GTG, general gratitude, and religiousness with various constructs, and then examined whether GTG predicted relevant outcomes beyond general gratitude and general religiousness. Prior to the main analyses, because locus of control measures showed poor psychometric characteristics in previous research, we conducted data reduction analyses to help create scales with acceptable levels of internal consistency.

3.2.2. Data Reduction for Locus of Control Scales

Although the LoC scale was designed to be a unitary measure, previous research showed poor psychometric characteristics of a composite scale (Lange and Tiggemann 1981). We therefore explored the structure of the items in the current study. Examination of scree plots and parallel analysis (Horn 1965) suggested that two factors were present in the data. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using the minimal residual method and direct oblimin rotation showed that the first factor consisted of the three items where higher scores indicated greater internal locus of control, and the second factor contained the three items where higher scores indicated greater external locus of control. We used items from these two factors as separate measures in this study.

Similarly, because previous work showed that composite measures of items from the GCAS (Ritzema and Young 1983) exhibited poor psychometric characteristics (Jackson and Coursey 1988), we conducted exploratory analyses of the items. Examination of scree plots and parallel analysis (Horn 1965) suggested that one or two factor solutions were acceptable. The one-factor EFA resulted in several items with low factor loadings (<0.30). In the two-factor EFA, we selected the seven items with strong loadings on the first factor (>0.30) to create our measure of God locus of control. We did not create a measure for items on the second factor due to the lack of theoretical rationale and empirical evidence for multifactorial solutions of God locus of control.

3.2.3. Descriptive Statistics

Table 4 shows descriptive statistics. Some results warrant highlighting (references to scores being high, low, and moderate are made with regard to scale midpoints). Both GTG and general gratitude levels were relatively high. Recent individual adverse and positive events were rare; the typical participant reported experiencing just over one each of both positive and negative life events. Levels of all aspects of locus of control were moderate to high. Participants' levels of general religiousness were moderate, but variables reflecting close relationships with God and positive views of God were quite high while anger toward God was low.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Baseline Measures and Aggregated Positive/Negative Affect.

Variable	Scale Range	*M*	*SD*	*Skew*	*Kurtosis*	*α*
GTG	1 to 4	3.35	0.72	−1.16	0.96	0.95
Adverse Events	0 to 26	1.43	1.93	2.59	8.72	0.68
Positive Events	0 to 15	1.20	1.32	1.41	2.26	0.45
External LoC	0 to 4	3.27	0.80	−0.02	−0.39	0.53
Internal LoC	0 to 4	3.40	0.77	−0.28	−0.15	0.60
God LoC	0 to 5	3.87	0.97	−0.80	−0.12	0.91
General Religiousness	0 to 4	1.78	1.09	0.23	−1.05	0.94
General Gratitude	1 to 7	5.71	1.00	−0.70	0.26	0.79
God Image: Limitless	1 to 7	6.21	1.12	−1.95	4.57	0.93
God Image: Authoritarian	1 to 7	3.89	1.52	−0.08	−0.67	0.87
God Image: Mystical	1 to 7	5.73	1.24	−1.42	2.62	0.88
God Image: Benevolent	1 to 7	6.26	1.08	−2.28	6.54	0.93
God Image: Ineffable	1 to 7	4.15	1.69	−0.14	−0.92	0.95
God Image: No God	1 to 7	3.85	1.35	2.03	4.08	0.95
Comforted by God	1 to 5	3.96	1.11	−1.07	0.34	0.95
Anger toward God	1 to 5	1.65	0.87	1.38	1.08	0.89
Aggregate Positive Affect	1 to 5	3.11	0.96	−0.01	−0.82	0.95
Aggregate Negative Affect	1 to 5	1.55	0.52	2.12	7.81	0.89

3.2.4. Bivariate Correlations among General Religiousness, General Gratitude, and GTG

Tests of bivariate associations among the three primary predictors in the study indicated that general gratitude and religiousness were positively correlated ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$)

and GTG was positively correlated with both general gratitude ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and general religiousness ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$).

3.2.5. Partial Correlations Controlling for Demographics (Gender, Age)

To examine whether GTG relates to other variables differently than general gratitude or religiousness, we conducted a series of partial correlations (controlling for age and gender).

Table 5 shows these associations between general gratitude, general religiousness, and GTG with recent positive and negative events, locus of control variables, God image variables, and feeling anger/comfort toward God. We conducted Steiger tests (Steiger 1980) to determine whether the magnitudes of correlations differed. GTG had higher, positive correlations with God locus of control, LAMBI-benevolent, and comforted by God than did general gratitude or general religiousness, as well as more negative correlations with LAMBI-no God. For other variables, GTG had similar magnitudes of correlations with general gratitude, general religiousness, or both.

Table 5. Partial Correlations Examining whether GTG Shows Distinctive Patterns of Associations Compared to General Gratitude and Religiousness.

	General Gratitude	**General Religiousness**	**GTG**
Positive Experiences	−0.04 a	0.09 a	0.10 a
Negative Experiences	−0.05 a	0.25 ***b	0.09 a
Internal LoC	0.17 *b	−0.15 *a	0.09 b
External LoC	−0.31 ***a	−0.10 b	−0.30 ***a
God LoC	0.43 ***a	0.47 ***a	0.78 ***b
LAMBI Limitless	0.35 ***a	0.37 ***a	0.58 ***b
LAMBI Authoritarian	−0.05 a	0.21 **b	0.27 ***b
LAMBI Mystical	0.08 a	−0.08 a	0.09 a
LAMBI Benevolent	0.32 ***a	0.30 ***a	0.60 ***b
LAMBI Ineffable	−0.13 a	−0.24 ***ab	−0.34 ***b
LAMBI No God	−0.32 ***a	−0.36 ***a	−0.62 ***b
Anger Toward God	−0.46 ***a	−0.13 b	−0.26 ***b
Comforted by God	0.50 ***a	0.43 ***a	0.82 ***b

Note: letters within rows indicate equivalent correlations based on Steiger tests. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2.6. Predicting Aggregate Positive and Negative Affect

Next, we examined whether GTG could be distinguished from general religiousness and general gratitude as a predictor of daily affect. Thus, we examined all three variables as predictors of aggregate daily PA and NA. Zero-order correlations revealed similar, positive associations between PA and each predictor: GTG ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), religiousness ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$), and gratitude in general ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). NA also had significant zero-order associations with GTG ($r = −0.19$, $p = 0.01$) and general gratitude in ($r = −0.25$, $p < 0.001$) but not with general religiousness ($r = 0.04$, $p = 0.59$).

We then conducted regression models predicting aggregate daily PA and NA separately from combinations of gender, age, baseline religiousness, trait gratitude, and GTG. Model 1 included both demographic variables. Model 2a added religiousness and GTG. Model 2b included demographics, trait gratitude, and GTG. Model 3 included all predictors. Model 4 included all predictors and the interaction of religiousness and GTG. Results are shown in Table 6. For PA, being a man and having higher levels of GTG were robust, positive predictors. For NA, none of the variables were consistent predictors.

Table 6. Results from Regressions Predicting Positive Affect and Negative Affect.

Models Predicting PA	1	2a	2b	3	4
Predictor					
Man (vs. Woman)	0.44 **	0.37 **	0.40 **	0.38 **	0.38 **
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
General religiousness		0.09		0.09	0.06
General gratitude			0.11	0.10	0.10
GTG		0.41 ***	0.39 **	0.33 **	0.35 **
Religiousness × GTG					0.13
Models Predicting NA					
Predictor					
Man (vs. Woman)	−0.02	−0.02	−0.02	−0.04	−0.03
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
General Religiousness		0.06		0.06	0.07
General Gratitude			−0.09	−0.09 *	−0.09
GTG		−0.15 *	−0.04	−0.08	−0.10
Religiousness × GTG					−0.05

Note. Numbers are unstandardized *b* coefficients. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

3.3. Discussion

Results of Study 2 were in many ways similar to and added to Study 1 findings. As in Study 1, we found strong evidence that GTG is a unique construct. Comparing associations with a range of different constructs suggests differential patterns for GTG, general religiousness and general gratitude. Once again, we found notably stronger associations of GTG with benevolent aspects of religiousness. Particularly striking was the strong association between GTG and divine locus of control. Future research is needed to understand why these two constructs are so closely related; perhaps divine locus of control leads people to attribute positive occurrences to God and thus they feel more grateful to God.

In terms of predicting subsequent wellbeing in the form of positive and negative affect, results were surprising and quite different from the findings in Study 1, which focused on more general and global aspects of wellbeing. In particular, neither general gratitude nor general religiousness predicted aggregated positive affect over the subsequent two weeks, but GTG was a very strong positive predictor of positive affect. However, neither general religiousness nor GTG related to negative affect, and general gratitude was only a modest (negative) predictor. These findings are inconsistent with previous work demonstrating robust salutary associations of gratitude and wellbeing (Portocarrero et al. 2020). However, we did find salutary associations between gratitude and affect before taking into account the demographics and other variables. When considered together, only GTG predicted positive affect. Unlike in Study 1, effects of GTG on wellbeing did not interact with general religiousness.

These findings should be interpreted within the context of study strengths and limitations. Building on Study 1, we considered a similar set of variables and also included multiple dimensions of locus of control. We were able to use a more ecologically valid method, daily diaries, to look at temporal relations between GTG, general religiousness, and general gratitude with measures of subsequent positive and negative affect. However, the longitudinal component of the study was very short, allowing us only a brief glimpse into the associations among variables. Further, we did not have more fine-grained detail regarding the attributions people make for positive and negative events.

4. Overall Discussion

The findings from this set of studies provide converging evidence for the assertion that GTG is a distinct construct and not simply redundant with either general gratitude or general religiousness. This distinctiveness is suggested both by findings from the correlational analyses showing differential strengths of associations between a host of religious and nonreligious variables with general religiousness, general gratitude, and GTG

and by findings showing that GTG predicts aspects of wellbeing in ways that neither general religiousness nor general gratitude do. This distinctiveness is important in establishing GTG as a unique construct worthy of more intensive study, demonstrating that GTG is not simply an aspect of already well-recognized constructs.

In regard to this first set of analyses, considering associations of GTG with a host of other constructs, we found across two studies that GTG appeared to have stronger relations with positive aspects of experiential religiousness such as a loving image of God or finding comfort in God than did either general religiousness or general gratitude. These close associations between viewing God as benevolent and loving and feeling grateful specifically to God may reflect a recursive process in which experiencing GTG is both based on and reinforces warm, positive views of God. The findings across both studies that GTG was less strongly inversely related to anger to God than general gratitude might reflect the potentially complex nexus of feeling grateful specifically to God but also potentially viewing God as ultimately in charge of the world. Anger to God is usually associated cross-sectionally with greater psychological distress but its resolution sometimes leads to greater spirituality or closeness with God (Wilt et al. 2017).

With regard to differential prediction of wellbeing by GTG, the strong and distinct associations of GTG with both positive and negative aspects of wellbeing across the two studies suggest again that GTG may make an important contribution to wellbeing over and above general religiousness and general gratitude rather than simply being redundant with them, which is further support for the notion that GTG comprises an important construct in and of itself.

In addition to shedding light on the unique nature of GTG, many of the specific findings and discrepancies across the two studies are interesting and warrant further inquiry. For example, we found individuals who reported higher lifetime adverse events had lower general gratitude as well as GTG, but those with more recent adverse events reported *more* general gratitude. Positive events were generally unrelated to gratitude but lifetime positive events were related to higher religiousness, yet not to GTG or general gratitude. Studies that delve deeper into these associations, perhaps following people over substantial periods of time, as well as studies inquiring about attributions and implications of positive and negative events, may help illuminate associations between life events and GTG.

The present set of studies were highly exploratory, given the lack of previous research on the topic of the uniqueness of GTG as a construct, and findings must be interpreted within the limitations of the studies. We relied on self-report correlational data, which suffers from method invariance and an inability to make causal inferences. The generalizability of our samples is also limited. Especially when studying constructs like GTG, it is important to consider how results might vary in different groups, such as people from different religious traditions. Future research on these topics should consider longitudinal and experimental research to better understand the directionality and causal nature of associations. Such work may include additional constructs of interest and focus on broader groups, extending this area of work to other ethnicities, cultures, and faith traditions. Based on our results, GTG appears to be a promising construct that warrants additional research attention to illuminate its unique and powerful properties.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.L.P.; methodology: C.L.P. and J.A.W.; formal analysis, J.A.W. and A.B.D.; writing—original draft preparation, C.L.P., J.A.W. and A.B.D.; writing—review and editing, C.L.P., J.A.W. and A.B.D.; funding acquisition, C.L.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the University of Connecticut IRB (Protocol# X21-0125) on June 17 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are available upon request from the first author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Aghababaei, Naser, Agata Błachnio, and Masoume Aminikhoo. 2018. The relations of gratitude to religiosity, well-being, and personality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21: 408–17. [CrossRef]

Aghababaei, Naser, and Mohammad Taghi Tabik. 2013. Gratitude and mental health: Differences between religious and general gratitude in a Muslim context. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16: 761–66. [CrossRef]

Belli, Robert F. 1998. The structure of autobiographical memory and the event history calendar: Potential improvements in the quality of retrospective reports in surveys. *Memory* 6: 383–406. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Berntsen, Dorthe, David C. Rubin, and Ilene C. Siegler. 2011. Two versions of life: Emotionally negative and positive life events have different roles in the organization of life story and identity. *Emotion* 11: 1190–201. [CrossRef]

Brugha, Terry S., and D. Cragg. 1990. The List of Threatening Experiences: The reliability and validity of a brief life events questionnaire. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 82: 77–81. [CrossRef]

Chun, Sanghee, and Youngkhill Lee. 2013. "I am just thankful": The experience of gratitude following traumatic spinal cord injury. *Disability and Rehabilitation* 35: 11–19. [CrossRef]

Collins, Katherine A., David B. Pillemer, Zorana Ivcevic, and Rachel A. Gooze. 2007. Cultural scripts guide recall of intensely positive life events. *Memory & Cognition* 35: 651–59.

Diener, Ed, Derrick Wirtz, William Tov, Chu Kim-Prieto, Dong-won Choi, Shigehiro Oishi, and Robert Biswas-Diener. 2009. New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research* 97: 143–56. [CrossRef]

Emmons, Robert A., and Cheryl A. Crumpler. 2000. Gratitude as a human strength: Appraising the evidence. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19: 56–69. [CrossRef]

Exline, Julie J., and Eric D. Rose. 2013. Religious and spiritual struggles. In *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2nd ed. Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. New York: Guilford, pp. 380–98.

García-Bajos, Elvira, and Malen Migueles. 2013. An integrative study of autobiographical memory for positive and negative experiences. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology* 16: E102. [CrossRef]

Henry, Julie D., and John R. Crawford. 2005. The short-form version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21): Construct validity and normative data in a large non-clinical sample. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 44: 227–39. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Horn, John L. 1965. A rationale and test for the number of factors in factor analysis. *Psychometrika* 30: 179–85. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Horowitz, M. A. R. D. I., N. A. N. C. Y. Adler, and Susan Kegeles. 1988. A scale for measuring the occurrence of positive states of mind: A preliminary report. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 50: 477–83. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Jackson, Laurence E., and Robert D. Coursey. 1988. The relationship of God control and internal locus of control to intrinsic religious motivation, coping and purpose in life. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27: 399–410. [CrossRef]

Jans-Beken, Lilian, Nele Jacobs, Mayke Janssens, Sanne Peeters, Jennifer Reijnders, Lilian Lechner, and Johan Lataster. 2020. Gratitude and health: An updated review. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15: 743–82. [CrossRef]

Johnson, Kathryn A., Morris A. Okun, Adam B. Cohen, Carissa A. Sharp, and Joshua N. Hook. 2019. Development and validation of the five-factor LAMBI measure of God representations. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 11: 339–49. [CrossRef]

Kashdan, Todd B., Anjali Mishra, William E. Breen, and Jeffrey J. Froh. 2009. Gender differences in gratitude: Examining appraisals, narratives, the willingness to express emotions, and changes in psychological needs. *Journal of Personality* 77: 691–730. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, and R. David Hayward. 2015. Humility, compassion, and gratitude to God: Assessing the relationships among key religious virtues. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7: 192. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, self-rated health, and depressive symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Lindsey A. Evans, Gregory Powers, and R. David Hayward. 2012. Feeling grateful to God: A qualitative inquiry. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 7: 119–30. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, Gail Ironson, and Peter C. Hill. 2017. General feelings of gratitude, gratitude to god, and hemoglobin A1c: Exploring variations by gender. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12: 639–50. [CrossRef]

Lange, Robert V., and Marika Tiggemann. 1981. Dimensionality and reliability of the Rotter IE locus of control scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment* 45: 398–406. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lee, Sharon Y., Crystal L. Park, and Amy E. Hale. 2016. Relations of trauma exposure with current religiousness and spirituality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19: 493–505. [CrossRef]

Lumpkin, James R. 1985. Validity of a brief locus of Control Scale for survey research. *Psychological Reports* 57: 655–59. [CrossRef]

McCullough, Michael E., Robert A. Emmons, and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2002. The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 112–27. [CrossRef]

Park, Crystal L. 2006. Exploring relations among religiousness, meaning, and adjustment to lifetime and current stressful encounters in later life. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping* 19: 33–45. [CrossRef]

Park, Crystal L. 2013. The meaning making model: A framework for understanding meaning, spirituality, and stress-related growth in health psychology. *The European Health Psychologist* 15: 40–47.

Peer, Eyal, David Rothschild, Andrew Gordon, Zak Evernden, and Ekaterina Damer. 2022. Data quality of platforms and panels for online behavioral research. *Behavior Research Methods* 54: 1643–62. [CrossRef]

Peer, Eyal, Laura Brandimarte, Sonam Samat, and Alessandro Acquisti. 2017. Beyond the Turk: Alternative platforms for crowdsourcing behavioral research. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 70: 153–63. [CrossRef]

Peterman, Amy H., George Fitchett, Marianne J. Brady, Lesbia Hernandez, and David Cella. 2002. Measuring spiritual well-being in people with cancer: The functional assessment of chronic illness therapy—Spiritual Well-being Scale (FACIT-Sp). *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 24: 49–58. [CrossRef]

Portocarrero, Florencio F., Katerina Gonzalez, and Michael Ekema-Agbaw. 2020. A meta-analytic review of the relationship between dispositional gratitude and well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences* 164: 110101. [CrossRef]

Ritzema, Robert J., and Carole Young. 1983. Causal schemata and the attribution of supernatural causality. *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 11: 36–43. [CrossRef]

Rohrbaugh, John, and Richard Jessor. 1975. Religiosity in youth: A personal control against deviant behavior. *Journal of Personality* 43: 136–55. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Sacco, Shane J., Crystal L. Park, D. P. Suresh, and Deborah Bliss. 2014. Living with congestive heart failure: Psychosocial resources, meaning, gratitude, and well-being. *Heart & Lung* 43: 213–18.

Seidlitz, Larry, and Ed Diener. 1993. Memory for positive versus negative life events: Theories for the differences between happy and unhappy persons. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64: 654–64. [CrossRef]

Steiger, James H. 1980. Tests for comparing elements of a correlation matrix. *Psychological Bulletin* 87: 245–51. [CrossRef]

Townes, Stephanie. 2021. A theology of gratitude for rising generations. *Anglican Theological Review* 103: 347–59. [CrossRef]

Tsang, Jo-Ann, and Stephen R. Martin. 2013. A psychological perspective on gratitude and religion. In *Perspectives on Gratitude: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Edited by D. Carr. London: Routledge, pp. 154–68. [CrossRef]

Turner, Anne M., Thomas Engelsma, Jean O. Taylor, Rashmi K. Sharma, and George Demiris. 2020. Recruiting older adult participants through crowdsourcing platforms: Mechanical Turk versus Prolific Academic. In *AMIA Annual Symposium Proceedings*. Bethesda: American Medical Informatics Association, vol. 2020, p. 1230.

Watkins, Philip C., Kathrane Woodward, Tamara Stone, and Russell L. Kolts. 2003. Gratitude and happiness: Development of a measure of gratitude, and relationships with subjective well-being. *Social Behavior and Personality* 31: 431–51. [CrossRef]

Wilt, Joshua A., Todd Hall, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Julie J. Exline. 2017. Trajectories of religious/spiritual struggles between years 1 and 2 of college: The predictive role of religious belief salience. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 27: 172–87. [CrossRef]

Wood, Benjamin T., Everett L. Worthington Jr., Julie Juola Exline, Ann Marie Yali, Jamie D. Aten, and Mark R. McMinn. 2010. Development, refinement, and psychometric properties of the Attitudes Toward God Scale (ATGS-9). *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 2: 148–67. [CrossRef]

Worthington, Everett L., Jr., Nathaniel G. Wade, Terry L. Hight, Jennifer S. Ripley, Michael E. McCullough, Jack W. Berry, Michelle M. Schmitt, James T. Berry, Kevin H. Bursley, and Lynn O'Connor. 2003. The Religious Commitment Inventory—10: Development, refinement, and validation of a brief scale for research and counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 50: 84–96. [CrossRef]

Article

The Distinctiveness of Christian Gratitude: A Theological Survey

Kent Dunnington

Department of Philosophy, Biola University, 13800 Biola Avenue, La Mirada, CA 90639, USA; kent.dunnington@biola.edu

Abstract: The positive psychology movement has increased and deepened our understanding of gratitude and its contribution to human well-being. Most of the literature to date has focused on gratitude to human benefactors, and the same has been true of philosophical analyses of gratitude. More recently, scholars of gratitude have turned their attention to gratitude to God, but relatively little work has been done on the relationship between particular theologies and spiritualities on the one hand and the phenomenology and structure of gratitude on the other. This essay makes a contribution to that strand of investigation by surveying the work of six Christian theologians, each of whom make bold, sometimes cryptic, claims about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude and gratitude to God. The essay challenges universalist assumptions about the structure and phenomenology of gratitude, including gratitude to God.

Keywords: gratitude; gratitude to God; God; Christianity; theism; religion; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Jonathan Edwards; Soren Kierkegaard

1. Introduction

The question animating this essay is whether Christian gratitude is distinctive. In what way, if any, does Christian belief and practice transform the exercise and experience of gratitude? Let me begin to sharpen the question by setting aside the following obvious affirmative response: "Yes, of course the gratitude of a Christian is distinctive, distinctive at least from the gratitude of an atheist or an agnostic, because Christian gratitude includes gratitude to God whereas atheist or agnostic gratitude does not". This is not the kind of distinctiveness I want to get at in this essay. Considering why will move us closer to the target question.

Suppose it were true that Christians can be grateful to God whereas agnostics and atheists cannot.[1] All that would suggest about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude is a distinctiveness of scope. Christians, and other theists, can train their grateful responses on a benefactor, God, who, because unknown by agnostics and atheists, is not a proper object of their gratitude. This difference is not particularly interesting. After all, every person's exercise and experience of gratitude is likely to be distinctive from every other person's by virtue of the scope of possible benefactors it includes. There is a person, x, to whom I will never be grateful since I will never know myself to have been benefited by x, and my exercise and experience of gratitude will thereby be distinctive from all those others who will have known themselves to be benefited by x.

Distinctiveness of scope, all by itself, is not a particularly interesting form of distinctiveness when it comes to gratitude. However, most of the contemporary scholarship on gratitude to God stays at this level of distinctiveness. The psychological literature, for example, is largely concerned with how gratitude to God can be measured and with whether those who are grateful to God experience on average greater well-being than those who aren't.[2] The philosophical literature is largely concerned with whether nonbelievers can nevertheless be grateful to God and with whether, in lieu of gratitude to God, nonbelievers

can rationally be engaged in something like "cosmic gratitude". Interesting questions, all, but notice how they tacitly assume that the basic structure, phenomenology, and conditions of possibility for gratitude are unchanged by bringing God within its scope.[3]

Why think, however, that there would be any distinctiveness to Christian gratitude beyond this relatively uninteresting one of scope? After all, we don't think that your exercise and experience of gratitude will be interestingly different from mine (in terms of overall structure or phenomenology, for example) just because you know person *x* imagined above and I don't. One reason to think that adding God to the picture ought to shake things up is that God—according to Christianity but also many other theistic traditions—is not a person like every other. God is all-powerful and all-good. This much, at least, is acknowledged in the scholarship on gratitude to God. Because God is all-powerful and all-good, the thought goes, theists are more likely to find themselves in a world brimming with blessings. For the theist, *every* good is plausibly interpreted as a divine benefit, whereas for the non-theist much of the good in life is either earned or just blind luck, nothing more. We could answer our original question, then, by saying that Christian gratitude, and theistic gratitude generally, is distinctive in that it is attuned to an additional benefactor, God, and a range of potential benefits that far outstrips what can plausibly be entertained by the non-theist.

This is still not the kind of distinctiveness I want to get at in this essay. Backgrounding most of the psychological and philosophical literature on gratitude to God is a view of God as especially generous and especially powerful, but in other respects just like us. Consider, for example, the following characteristic description from the psychological literature of how adding God to the equation might transform a person's experience of gratitude.

> Receiving $20 from a friend may induce gratitude regardless of one's spiritual persuasion, however finding $20 on the street can only induce gratitude if it is perceived (explicitly or implicitly) that a non-corporeal agent, such as God, brought about this event. Religion may therefore enhance gratitude through the mechanism of religious gratitude (i.e., by broadening its potential application to all positive life events). (Rosmarin et al. 2011, p. 390)

Notice how God is assumed to be like us, only bigger and better, a cosmic friend who leaves money laying around for us. But God, according to theism and especially according to Christianity, is far stranger than us.

Consider, for example, how different God is from every other human benefactor, according (at least) to Christian belief. God is not human by nature although God became human in the Incarnation. By nature, God is invisible spirit. Beyond this, God is elusive or hidden, so much so that many don't believe God exists and even those who do can find themselves doubting it. God is perfectly good, making it difficult to understand what it would mean for God to go above and beyond, to act supererogatorily toward us. God is all-powerful, making it difficult to understand how God's beneficence could be costly or difficult for God. God gives provisionally, never relinquishing full authority and control over that which is given: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away" (Job 1:21). God gives constantly: your existence, for example, is not a one-time gift but something you are given by God at every moment. And God is perfectly self-sufficient, which seems to suggest we can never benefit God in return. In each of these ways, God is very much unlike other benefactors to whom we might be grateful. God is a strange benefactor indeed.

God gives strange gifts, too. God gives gifts that explode the tripartite benefactor–benefit–beneficiary structure of gratitude. For example, God gives me my self; I am at one and the same time benefit and beneficiary. God's gifts stretch beyond the typical time-horizon of human gratitude: God saves us from death through Incarnation, cross, and resurrection, promising eternal reward in heaven and full incorporation into the Triune life, whatever that would mean. God's gifts are often opaque, too; what feels like a curse may well be a blessing, and vice versa.

For these reasons and more, we might suspect that gratitude to God would not come naturally or easily to us. Calibrated as they are to typical cases of interpersonal beneficence,

we might suspect that our gratitude detectors, so to speak, would be confounded by this strange giver who gives strange gifts.

Now we can sharpen the question. We want to know whether there is anything about Christian belief or practice that could be expected to significantly transform the Christian exercise and experience of gratitude, beyond simply adding a terrifically powerful and generous benefactor to the mix. Consider two communities, one generically theist (if there is such a thing) and the other specifically Christian. Will the exercise and experience of gratitude, including gratitude to God, be substantively different between these two communities? Would an observant anthropologist notice anything very different about the gratitude displayed in these two communities?

2. Method

I propose to investigate the question by way of theological survey. Given the prominence of thanksgiving in Christian scripture and liturgy, this might seem a daunting task. Most Christian theologians have had something to say about gratitude, and some—Luther and Calvin, for example—have made it central to their theology. However, my question is not about the prominence of gratitude in Christian theology, or even about gratitude as an organizing theological category. I am interested more specifically in theologians who have probed the difference that Christianity makes to the exercise and experience of gratitude, beyond simply increasing it. I can't claim to have read everything, of course, but in what follows I'll sketch the views of six theologians who have dwelt at varying lengths specifically on the *distinctiveness* of Christian gratitude and gratitude to God. Then, in the essay's concluding section, I'll try to organize the results in a way that sheds light on the question more systematically.

For the reader who wonders if the journey is worth the time, let me telegraph some of the conclusions up front. Some theologians argue that Christian gratitude significantly relativizes gratitude to merely human benefactors, in a way that represents a threat to traditional forms of human community. Some theologians argue that the inscrutability of God presents an obstacle to normal human psychology such that the "natural man" is incapable of genuine gratitude to God, making most exercises of gratitude to God delusional or counterfeit. Some theologians think that Jesus Christ transforms the Christian such that she may be grateful for her *self* in a way that makes constant gratitude a reality in the life of the Christian. The details, I think, are more interesting than the organizing typology, so I'll move in chronological order and not try to shape the material to that typology but rather try accurately to unpack what each theologian thought about Christian gratitude.

I'll examine Christian gratitude in the thought of Jonathan Edwards, Soren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Arthur McGill, Herbert McCabe, and Peter Leithart.[4] It is no accident that, with the possible exception of Edwards, each of these theologians is motivated by the larger project of reclaiming the distinctiveness of Christian faith in a post-Enlightenment world that pretends to have left Christian faith behind in the name of reason, progress, science, and liberal order, forgetting all the while that its deepest impulses are, as Leithart puts it, "crumbs from the table of Jesus and Paul" (Leithart 2014, p. 8). Perhaps it is no accident either that, with the exception of Herbert McCabe, each of these theologians is located within the Lutheran or Reformed Protestant tradition, since the core reforming impulse was a retrieval of the grace-gratitude shape of Christian life over against the medieval Catholic assimilation of Greco-Roman client-patron arrangements exemplified most memorably in the purchase of indulgences in exchange for heavenly merit. One final observation: I leave to the side the surge of interest within contemporary theology in the category of the "gift", triggered by the anthropological work of Marcel Mauss and, later, the philosophy of Jacque Derrida. "Gift", and a particular interpretation of the Christian structure of gift-giving, has become central to the theology of John Milbank, Jon Luc Marion, and many others. However, this theological trend has left the category of gratitude virtually untouched, a remarkable oversight given that gratitude is the proper response to a gift.

The thinkers I survey here pay especial attention to gratitude and its distinctively Christian limits and possibilities.

3. Survey

3.1. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

In his treatise on *The Religious Affections*, American Congregationalist theologian Jonathan Edwards draws a clear distinction between what he calls natural gratitude and spiritual gratitude.

> There is a certain gratitude that is a mere natural thing. Gratitude is one of the natural affections of the soul of man . . . an affection one has towards another, for loving him, or gratifying him, or for something in him that suits self-love . . . And hence men, from this principle, may be much affected with the wonderful goodness of God to mankind, his great goodness in giving his Son to die for fallen man, and the marvelous love of Christ in suffering such great things for us, and with the great glory they hear God has provided in heaven for us; looking on themselves as persons concerned and interested, as being some of this species of creatures so highly favored: the same principle of natural gratitude may influence men here, as in the case of personal benefits. But these things that I have said do by no means imply, that all gratitude to God is a mere natural thing, and that there is no such thing as a spiritual gratitude, which is a holy and divine affection: they imply no more, than that there is a gratitude which is merely natural, and that when persons have affections towards God only or primarily for benefits received, their affection is only the exercise of a natural gratitude. There is doubtless such a thing as a gracious gratitude, which does greatly differ from all that gratitude which natural men experience. (Edwards 2001, pp. 169–73)

Natural gratitude, Edwards says, is a function of self-love; it is because we want good for ourselves—and have some sense of what counts toward that good—that we experience gratitude when others benefit us. Spiritual gratitude is not like this, Edwards says. For Edwards, the gratitude of the regenerate Christian differs in its motives from natural gratitude. Whereas natural gratitude is motivated by self-love, spiritual or supernatural gratitude is motivated by love for God.

> True gratitude, or thankfulness to God for his kindness to us, arises from a foundation, laid before, of love to God for what he is in himself; whereas a natural gratitude has no such antecedent foundation. The gracious stirrings of grateful affection to God, for kindness received, always are from a stock of love already in the heart, established in the first place on other grounds, viz. God's own excellency; and hence the affections are disposed to flow out, on occasions of God's kindness. The saint having seen the glory of God, and his heart overcome by it, and captivated into a supreme love to him on that account, his heart hereby becomes tender, and easily affected with kindness received . . . Self-love is not excluded from a gracious gratitude; the saints love God for his kindness to them, (Ps. 116:1): "I love the Lord, because he hath heard the voice of my supplication". But something else is included; another love prepares the way, and lays the foundation for these grateful affections. In a gracious gratitude, men are affected with the attribute of God's goodness and free grace, not only as they are concerned in it, or as it affects their interest, but as a part of the glory and beauty of God's nature. (Edwards 2001, p. 173)

Edwards offers a helpful analogy. Citing the example of David and Saul, he points out that self-love is enough to generate gratitude even for benefits offered by a rival or enemy. It is because I love myself that I am able to be grateful for a fleeting kindness from someone who is otherwise indifferent or opposed to me. But the gratitude elicited by kindness from a friend is different, substantially heightened. Because I love my friend, his kindness to me is an exalted kind of gratitude. This gratitude does not exclude self-love, of course; it

may be triggered by a gift that he gives me that satisfies some want in me. But nor does my gratitude to my friend depend solely on the way in which my friend gratifies my self-love. Edwards supposes that I can be grateful for my friend simply in virtue of some excellency or beauty in his nature, quite apart from what my friend does for me, and that, furthermore, that gratitude for my friend's intrinsic excellence changes the kind of gratitude I experience toward my friend when specific benefits come from him.

And so it is with the regenerate Christian's gratitude to God, according to Edwards. Christian gratitude is only secondarily interested in the benefits God may bestow on the believer; primarily, Christian gratitude is elicited by God's intrinsic excellence. "That wonderful and unparalleled grace of God which is manifested in the work of redemption, and shines forth in the face of Jesus Christ, is infinitely glorious in itself, and appears so to the angels; it is a great part of the moral perfection and beauty of God's nature. This would be glorious, whether it were exercised towards us or no; and the saint who exercises a gracious thankfulness for it, sees it to be so, and delights in it as such" (Edwards 2001, p. 174).

For Edwards, then Christian gratitude is distinctive because it is motivated by love for God rather than love for self. It does not exclude love for self; this is no form of self-hatred or final self-renunciation. But the self is displaced, as Kyle Strobel suggests, in Edwards's Christian anthropology. Strobel explains that according to Edwards the natural project of human self-formation is pursued through an "I-I" relationship. I, the primal acting agent, pursue a certain projected picture of the self I would like to be. To use the language of psychology, this is how one "forms an identity". This is what Edwards means when he says the natural man is driven by self-love; the love that drives her development is love of a picture that she herself generates. The regenerate Christian, however, finds herself engaged in a different project. "It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20) is the apostle Paul's way of expressing this different way of being a self. Now the self is established through relationship with Christ, rather than through relationship with a projected self-ideal. "On Edwards's view", Strobel says, the second 'I', what we might think of as the 'projected I', needs to be displaced, such that the 'primal I' discovers itself, not in a self-relation first and foremost, but in relation to God" (Strobel 2022, p. 119).

Thus, there is no incoherence in Edwards's claim that the regenerate Christian might be motivated by love of God principally. After all, the regenerate Christian's very identity is constituted by loving relationship with her friend Jesus Christ. Christian gratitude to God has different priorities than merely natural gratitude to God. The latter begins and ends with providential benefits. The former, however, is firstly responsive to God's intrinsic goodness, secondarily to God's gift of Jesus Christ for the establishment of one's own self in Christ, and thirdly and least urgently, for the providential kindnesses that God may bestow on the believer.

3.2. Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

In a passage from his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the Danish Lutheran philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard contrasts what he calls "aesthetic" and "religious" gratitude.

> In this way the religious talk, too, regresses, e.g., when a man says: 'After many errors, I learned finally to cling to God in earnest, and he has not left me since. My business is flourishing, my projects prosper, I am now happily married and my children are healthy', etc. Here the religious man has returned to the aesthetic dialectic, for even if he is good enough to say that he thanks God for all these blessings, the question is still the way he thanks him, whether he does it directly or first makes the movement of uncertainty that is the mark of the God-relationship. For just as a person in the midst of misfortune has no right to say to God directly that this is misfortune, since in the movement of uncertainty he has to suspend his understanding, so too he may not take all these good things directly as evidence of the God-relationship. The direct relation is an aesthetic one and indicates

that in his thanksgiving he relates not to God but to his own idea of fortune and misfortune. For the fact is that if a human being cannot know for certain whether a misfortune is an evil (the uncertainty of the God-relationship), then he cannot know for certain whether his good fortune is a good. The only evidence of the God-relationship is the relationship itself, everything else is ambiguous, because religiously for every human being, however old he becomes, in regard to the dialectic of the external, it is a matter of being born yesterday and knowing nothing [cf. Job 8:9]. Thus the great actor Seydelmann [Karl Seydelmann, German actor (1795–1845)] (as I see from Røtscher's biography), on the night that he was garlanded in the Opera House 'to applause lasting several minutes', on coming home, fervently thanked God for all of this. The very fervour shows that he did not give thanks to God, for had he been hissed off the stage he would have rebelled against God with the same passion. If he had given thanks religiously and so thanked God, then the Berlin audience and the laurel wreath and the applause lasting several minutes would have become ambiguous in the dialectical uncertainty of the religious. (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 374)

Natural, or what Kierkegaard calls "aesthetic", human gratitude determines gifts with reference to an innate sense of what will make one more obviously fortunate, what will satisfy one's preferences. One can be grateful to God in this way, too: I wanted a spouse, and God has given me a wife; I wanted comfort and God has given me comfort; thanks be to God! Kierkegaard claims, however, that this is not Christian gratitude, or what he calls religious gratitude. After all, we do not ultimately know what is good for us, for the heart is deceitful above all things. The religious person is uncertain about what God may have in store for her, and how to rightly judge the contingencies that come her way, because she recognizes that given her limitations and corruptions, she could not possibly want what God wants for her. Therefore, she takes a position of uncertainty with respect to what is actually a blessing or a curse for her. She disclaims any certain understanding of what is actually a fortune or misfortune for her.

The actor Seydelmann was treating God as a Cosmic Santa Claus and not the Lord of the Universe. When things go badly for Seydelmann, Kierkegaard speculates, he'll curse God just as fervently as he thanks God now. After all, Santa Claus isn't supposed to let you suffer. In another of his books, *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard says that many who "call themselves Christians . . . actually live within pagan conceptions" (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 321). He isn't judging the salvation of such Christians by saying they live "within pagan conceptions". Rather, he is pointing out that the more we get acquainted with God—that is, the more we encounter a God who does not strictly do our bidding—the clearer it becomes that some of our pagan conceptions of the right and the good are inadequate to the bigness of God. This is especially relevant, Kierkegaard says, for the practice of gratitude. If we take our "pagan conception"—which, mind you, works perfectly well for standard interpersonal gratitude—and try to map it onto our relationship with God, the more frustrated we will become. In time, we may become so confused that we simply stop trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. We keep mouthing words of gratitude at the right time, but in reality we experience no gratitude to God.

How, then, is gratitude possible at all? How does the Christian not simply assume a posture of indifference, like a Stoic or a Buddhist, with respect to everything that comes her way? On this question, Kierkegaard is frustratingly obscure. He comes closest, perhaps, to offering an answer in a sermon on Job, entitled "The Lord Gave and the Lord Took Away: Blessed Be the Name of the Lord". There, Kierkegaard contrasts the biblical character Job to a man who, knowing the inscrutability of fate and fortune, has striven to "make his soul indifferent to everything" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 120) and thereby insulate himself against disappointment. Job is not like this, Kierkegaard observes. Instead, "Job traced everything back to God". "The very moment everything was taken away from him, he knew it was the Lord who had taken it away, and therefore in his loss he remained on good terms with the Lord, in his loss maintained intimacy with the Lord; he saw the Lord, and therefore he did

not see despair" (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 121). Because Job had not mistaken his fortunes as evidence that he was beloved by God, he was not turned against God when tragedy struck. Indeed, Job is able to "bless" the Lord (the closest Hebrew word for "thank") even in his pain and suffering: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away: blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Robert C. Roberts offers the following, helpful gloss on Kierkegaard's conception of religious gratitude, a gloss which nicely summarizes how Kierkegaard would have characterized the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude. According to Roberts, Kierkegaard "is saying that it's fine to thank God for these mundane blessings, as long as one's thanks are firmly subject to a proviso: *were these blessings taken from me, my gratitude to you, O God, would continue unabated*—not unchanged, perhaps, but unabated . . . That is, thanks for the God-relationship is *always* proper, takes precedence over thanks for the blessings of this life, and persists through the thick and the thin of the latter blessings" (Roberts 2014, pp. 77–78).

3.3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

In a short, unfinished reflection "On Gratitude among Christians", the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Gratitude arises not from the inherent capacities of the human heart but only from the Word of God. Gratitude must therefore be learned and practiced" (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 489). This appears to be a statement about the distinctive character of Christian gratitude, but what does it mean?

Bonhoeffer's remarks are bold but cryptic. Is he claiming that all gratitude is, at base, Christian gratitude, no matter what the grateful person believes and no matter her relationship to Jesus Christ? Or, is the claim that only gratitude that is rightly grounded in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is true gratitude, all else being counterfeit? It is not clear. The closest we come to an answer is in the following lines.

> Jesus Christ—and everything established in him—is the first and last ground of all gratitude. He is the gift from heaven, which we were not able to procure for ourselves, in whom the love of God encounters us in the flesh. In Jesus Christ alone are we able to thank God (Rom. 7:25). In Jesus Christ God gives us everything . . . That for which I can thank God is good. That for which I cannot thank God is evil. But the determination whether I can thank God for something is discerned on the basis of Jesus Christ and his word. Jesus Christ is the limit of gratitude. Jesus Christ is also the fullness of gratitude; in him gratitude knows no bounds. It encompasses all the gifts of the created world. It embraces even pain and suffering. It penetrates the deepest darkness until it has found within it the love of God in Jesus Christ. To be thankful means to say yes to all that God gives "at all times and for everything" (Eph. 5:20). Gratitude is even able to encompass past sin and to say yes to it, because in it God's grace is revealed—o felix culpa (Rom. 6:17). (Bonhoeffer 2006, pp. 489–90)

Bonhoeffer claims that Jesus Christ is the ground, limit, and the fullness of gratitude. Operative here is a thoroughly Christian metaphysics with—to quote the title of one of Bonhoeffer's books—"Christ the center". It is because Christ truly is the source and end of the created order that only Christian gratitude can adequately respond to the goodness of the world and God.

On Christ as ground of gratitude: "He is the gift from heaven, which we were not able to procure for ourselves, in whom the love of God encounters us in the flesh". Because gratitude is the recognition of love expressed through gift, and because it is Jesus Christ alone through whom we fully encounter the love of God, "in Jesus Christ alone are we able to thank God (Rom. 7:25). The Christian who knows the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ thereby has the proper basis for gratitude; his knowledge of the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ gives him access to the love behind every good gift from above.

On Christ as limit of gratitude: "the determination whether I can thank God for something is discerned on the basis of Jesus Christ and his word". The Christian, if I understand Bonhoeffer here, does not simply react gratefully to the goodness of the world

based on the promptings of his own heart. The heart, sinfully inclined to self-glorification, cannot be trusted to rightly discern the goodness in the world. Rather, the Christian judges the world in conversation with Jesus, who is both the origin and goal of the creation. As such, the Christian can find the love of God, and therefore can be grateful, even in pain and suffering, something that the unaided human heart cannot do. Conversely, there may be things toward which the heart inclines that are not worthy of gratitude. Only through conversation with Jesus Christ can such discernments accurately be made.

On Christ as the fullness of gratitude: "In Jesus Christ God gives us everything". Through Christ the world is created, which is why every good thing in the world is from him and calls out for gratitude to God through him. "Gratitude seeks the giver above and beyond the gift" (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 489). The Christian cannot fully or adequately give thanks for any good thing without ultimately referring it to Christ. Every last gift—even what we earn or deserve—is from God through Jesus Christ, and therefore "in gratitude every gift is transformed into a thank offering back to God, from whom it came" (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 490).

Bonhoeffer makes one more interesting claim about Christian gratitude. "It is the accursed thanks of hypocrites when I do not pass on the love of God that I have experienced, and for which I give thanks, to the disadvantaged. This is blasphemy against the Creator of the poor" (Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 491). In other words, for Bonhoeffer, Christian gratitude issues not only in a particular form of thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ, but also in the disseminating of God's love to others, the poor and needy especially, through works of mercy. Bonhoeffer makes no mention of whether or not Christian gratitude must issue in a return gift to human benefactors. Even then, we are left to think, the Christian thanks God primarily for the gift and responds in action by loving those who are poor and needy.

In summary, Christian gratitude according to Bonhoeffer is distinctive in three ways. First, Christian gratitude ultimately refers all gifts to God though Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Christian gratitude has no room for gratitude to human benefactors, but rather that such gratitude is never complete until the gift has been referred to God as its ultimate source. As a Christian, I have not been grateful for my mother's love until I have been thankful to my mother for her love and to God for my mother's love. Second, Christian gratitude makes unique judgments about blessings and curses. Because the Christian judges the goodness of the world by the standard of Jesus Christ and in conversation with Jesus Christ, the Christian will be grateful where nonbelievers see nothing for which to be grateful (in pain and suffering, for example), and the Christian may withhold gratitude in instances where nonbelievers, responding solely to the exuberance of their hearts, may experience it. Third, Christian gratitude necessarily issues in love for the poor and needy, not necessarily in return gifts to human benefactors.

3.4. Arthur McGill (1926–1980)

In a posthumously published talked entitled "The Positive Meaning of Need: Revolutionary Gratitude",[5] American Congregationalist theologian Arthur McGill takes dead aim at the notion that Christian gratitude is simply the expansion of natural human gratitude to include an additional bigger, kinder benefactor.

> Too often Christian gratitude is construed as if it were a perfectly normal human activity. Does not God like to give? Do not people like to receive? Is not gratitude that perfectly natural and inevitable attitude which any decent person would adopt in the face of God's giving? This, I believe, is an illusion, and it is an illusion that must be abolished. God's giving is not like ordinary giving, and receiving from God is not at all like ordinary receiving. In fact, it is just the opposite. (McGill 2013, p. 39)

McGill develops this provocative statement by contrasting "normal gratitude" and "Christian gratitude". Normal gratitude, McGill claims, is characterized by a specific form of giving and receiving. Consider a case in which your family is in crisis and a benefactor generously delivers a meal so that you don't have to cook. You are immensely grateful.

Consider, McGill asks, the kind of giving and receiving involved here. Crucial to the kind of giving that triggered your gratitude is that the giver really handed the meal over to you. The giver fully conferred this gift of a meal into your possession, relinquishing entirely his claim to it. "No strings attached", we say, indicating that the kind of giving that triggers our gratitude is that which doesn't trap us in a never-ending cycle of debt. So the giving is punctual, we might say; it doesn't drag out forever. Similarly, the receiving at issue here is a punctual affair. For a moment I acknowledged my neediness, my friend swooped in with his gift, I expressed thanks, and now my neediness is removed. "This is the familiar process", writes McGill.

> Because receiving removes my neediness, because it confers upon my existence that which I require, I do all myself to acknowledge that I am needy—but only for a moment. Understand this clearly: I acknowledge myself to be needy before another and let myself receive from that other, only because I expect that this receiving will remove me from needing that other anymore. The food for my hunger is now effectively mine . . . If I went to another to receive food and then couldn't be sure that I had enough control over it to eat it whenever I wanted, I wouldn't call that giving or receiving. And if I thought that would happen, I certainly would not go through the unpleasantness of acknowledging my neediness. So it is with normal receiving, and with the gratitude aroused in someone by normal giving. So it is with Thanksgiving Day. (McGill 2013, pp. 40–41)

McGill points out that nothing prevents the religious person from adopting exactly this posture toward God: treating God as the punctual giver who delivers me from my need. He considers the "bronzed person" who "owns what he needs". "He is grateful—of course, he is grateful. He is grateful, because he has received in a way which he finds reassuring. That is, he has received in a way which frees him from needing others. If he is religious, he probably feels this same kind of gratitude to God. He probably believes that God has been responsible for liberating him from need for others and even for God" (McGill 2013, p. 45).

> This customary form of gratitude to God is a lie, according to McGill. Christian gratitude is different.

> It is precisely in this way that God does not give and we do not receive through Jesus Christ. Giving and receiving between God and humanity in Jesus Christ is not the transfer of some third item, some "what" which passes from the possession of God into the possession of humans. God gives us a new self by which we belong to him and reflect his will—his loving, his knowing, his serving. He never delivers this new self into our control and our disposal. This new self is never ours; it is his. It remains his and not ours . . . All that we are is being received from God, and never established or owned for one instant by ourselves. Certainly this can be a source of unlimited gratitude, as Paul insists . . . But this human destitution can also be a source of uncontrollable fear. To have nothing, to receive nothing into our possession, to be able to put our names on nothing: to be only receivers—isn't that threatening and dismaying? I do not want God to give me myself. I want to make myself, I want to be my own achievement . . . Christian gratitude is not like secular, worldly gratitude at all. (McGill 2013, pp. 41–42)

McGill alludes here to the words of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 3, where, after urging the Christians in Colossae to "put on the new nature" and no longer strive to be Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian or Scythian, slave or freeman, Paul exhorts them: "whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him" (Col. 3:17). McGill finds here the most forceful expression of the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude. "This fundamental way of existing, where a person looks to Jesus for the fundamental shape and final meaning of his or life—this attitude is identified by Paul in this passage with our attitude of *gratitude*

... Thanksgiving pervades every corner, every dimension of this way of existing" (McGill 2013, p. 35). For McGill, the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude begins with the gift of a new self in Jesus Christ, a self that one never possesses but at every moment receives. Such radical contingency aggressively undercuts the human penchant to lay claim, transmuting the normal practice of gratitude—which dabbles in dependency and neediness but continuously escapes back to independence and sufficiency—into a "revolutionary" kind of gratitude that rejoices in neediness.

3.5. Herbert McCabe (1926–2001)

In a sermon entitled "Self-Love", the British Dominican philosopher Herbert McCabe claims that a special kind of gratitude, and especially gratitude for oneself, is underwritten by the Christian conviction that God is love—that God creates us from love, for love.

> The greatest gift of God to you is not just that he made you, but that you love him. The greatest gift of God to you is that you can speak with him and say 'thank you' to him as to a friend—that you are on intimate speaking terms with God. God has made us not just his creatures but his lovers; he has given us not just our existence, our life, but a share in *his* life. We converse familiarly with God on equal terms as the Son does with the Father. We love God with the same love that Jesus had for him, the love we call the Holy Spirit. And we love ourselves not only because we came forth from God but because our life is God's life, the life of the Spirit. (McCabe 2003, pp. 73–74)

The sermon is short and suggestive, and one wishes that McCabe would have developed his argument more fully elsewhere. Nonetheless, what stands out is a sense that the Christian doctrine of Trinity and Creation are playing a distinctive role in McCabe's understanding of gratitude, specifically gratitude for oneself.

"The words 'thank' and 'think' come from the same root", McCabe observes (channeling Heidegger). "To say 'thank you' is to say 'I *think* of you in this gift; I see it as also a gift of yourself to me, as a communication of yourself to me'" (McCabe 2003, p. 72). To explain the difference between Christian and what we might call merely theistic gratitude to God, McCabe asks the listener to think about the difference between gratitude for a bottle of wine from one's friend and gratitude for a letter from one's friend. One can certainly be thankful for the bottle of wine; one can "value it precisely as a gift, as coming from the giver, as an expression of his or her love and friendship". However, there are other ways of accurately valuing the wine. For example, you could value it for the price it will fetch or just for its own excellence, "for its own sake, without considering either its price or who gave it to you" (McCabe 2003, p. 72). The letter is different. It is really not possible to value the letter for its price (unless, I suppose, it's from a famous person), nor can you abstract away from its giver and value it in itself as just a letter with its own intrinsic excellence. No, McCabe says, to value the letter is one and the same as being grateful for it, to say 'thank you' for it, to think of your friend through it. And, McCabe says, in the Christian way of thinking, "you are really rather more like a letter than a bottle of wine" (McCabe 2003, p. 72).

Why would McCabe say this? Is there no room in the Christian outlook for valuing oneself for one's own sake, as an excellent and wonderful thing abstracted from the kindness of a generous Benefactor? McCabe thinks this is a theological mistake. Within the Christian understanding, it is not as though God creates a world including human persons and, in addition, gives them benefits. The creation itself is the first act of love, the commencement of an eternal friendship. Thus, McCabe says, the Christian knows that any effort to love oneself as anything other than a gift from God is bound to collapse into smugness or complacency. Either one will end up loving oneself for some extrinsic excellence—an achievement, some power over another, or perhaps some impressive possession—which is not, after all, loving oneself for one's own sake. Or, fearing that there is nothing truly lovable in oneself apart from the masks one wears to impress oneself or others, one will sink into some distracting pleasure in order to avoid the emptiness. This is

because, according to the Christian doctrine of creation, we are not like a bottle of wine with intrinsic excellence. Rather, we are like a letter whose excellence is nothing more or less than the expression of love from a friend.

For McCabe, then, Christian gratitude is distinctive for the way in which it rescues us from the hopeless project of establishing our own independent worth. Christians believe that God is love, an eternal relationship of friendship between the members of the Trinity, and that creation is simply the invitation and incorporation of the whole world, ourselves included, into that eternal exchange of love. For Christians, gratitude is not something we exercise or experience after we have seen the goodness of ourselves, others, and the world around us. Gratitude is what allows us to see the goodness of ourselves, others, and the world around us.

How, then, to state more precisely the Christian distinctiveness of gratitude for McCabe? He does not give us a formulation, exactly, but he comes close when he says, "It is our faith that God loves us that makes us able to love ourselves and, through that, to be grateful for the gift of ourselves" (McCabe 2003, p. 71). In other words, Christian gratitude foregrounds gratitude for self as the basis of all other genuine gratitude: "It is only if you love yourself because you take yourself as a gift from God, because you see yourself as given, granted, by God, that you can 'take yourself for granted.' And then you can see others and other things in their own right and not just as part of your plans, as material to be manipulated" (McCabe 2003, pp. 71–72).[6]

3.6. Peter Leithart (1959-Present)

The American Presbyterian theologian Peter Leithart has written more than anyone else on the Christian theology of gratitude to God. His book, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*, traces the shifting character of gratitude from Socrates to John Milbank. His is not an unbiased intellectual history, since he treats the "disruption" of Christian gratitude as the focal point of the story. It is Christian gratitude that gets things right, Leithart alleges, and only the social revolution inaugurated by Christian gratitude "is capable of preserving the political, scientific, economic, and social advances of modernity, while restoring a personal and human world" (Leithart 2014, p. 15).

Leithart begins his account of Christian gratitude with a startling statement: "Jesus was an ingrate" (Leithart 2014, p. 68). The Greco-Roman world in Jesus' day was obsessed with gratitude, understood as the perpetual cycle of benefit exchanges that held together the social world and maintained pacific relations with the gods. There were two independent circles of reciprocal relations: on the one hand, the people offered sacrifices to the gods in gratitude for divine benefits, on the other hand, clients offered return gifts to their patrons in exchange for protection, promotion, and any number of other favors. Two features were essential to the smooth functioning of the two-circle system. First, the two circles of reciprocal exchange were entirely independent: the circle of familial/civic/political reciprocity did not impinge in any way on the circle of divine-human reciprocity. Second, one did not give a gift without justified expectation of return, nor could one receive a benefit without inheriting a debt of reciprocation; to err in either direction was to introduce chaos into the airtight gift-gratitude schema that governed all of social life. The Jews of Jesus' day—Pharisees most of all—had left behind a rather different schema envisioned in the Old Testament and assimilated dramatically to the governing Roman ideology of gift and gratitude. And in such a world, Jesus could only appear an ingrate.

> He attacked the tradition of the elders. He encouraged disciples to leave, even to 'hate', parents in order to follow him . . . He criticized the reciprocities of Jewish social life . . . Jesus aimed to detach giving and gratitude from the honor system in which it was embedded in Roman society and in Jewish life. He instructed his disciples to give generously and to receive with thanks but without participating in any honor competition. They are not to give in order to gain leverage or impose debts. Jesus assaulted the gift practices of his contemporaries. (Leithart 2014, p. 68)

If Jesus rejected Greco-Roman and Pharisaical gratitude, what did he put in its place? It is a commonplace of popular Christian theology that Jesus replaced the cycles of Roman and Jewish reciprocity with a straight line of selfless altruism: "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35). In fact, Jesus does no such thing, for whenever he speaks like this, he immediately adds that his disciples can hope for a reward from the Father in heaven. From the perspective of modern altruism, the New Testament is embarrassingly replete with promises of eternal reward. A gratitude circle remains in play, but it is one that violates the strictures of Jesus' social world. For Jesus, the Father is both the beginning and end of the gift-gratitude circle. Benefactors may give generously and recklessly, trusting that they will be repaid with eternal reward. And beneficiaries may receive gladly without being pulled into endless debt cycles. In this way, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament vision. "In the Torah, the relationship between wealthy benefactor and poor recipient is always a triangular one: Yahweh, as it were, secures both loan and repayment" (Leithart 2014, p. 68). Thus:

> Jesus frees benefactors to give generously without anxiety about depleting re-sources or failing to get repaid honorably. The Father will take care of all that, Jesus says. The gospel likewise frees the recipient. Because givers look to the Father and not to the recipients for repayment, recipients are free from debt burdens. They have repaid their debt when they give thanks to the Father who was the ultimate source of the gift in the first place. (Leithart 2014, p. 71)

What is striking in Leithart's account is that Christian gratitude reorients not only gratitude to God but interpersonal gratitude as well. Before Jesus it would have been inconceivable and treacherous to suppose that one could properly respond to a benefactor without entering into his or her debt. After Jesus, this is not only possible but standard among the followers of Jesus. Nowhere is this more evident than in the writings of the apostle Paul, who

> urges the Romans to "owe nothing to anyone but to love one another" (Rom. 13:8). That is as much as to say, "Do not allow yourself to be put in a condition of debt to anyone". That does not mean, as it might seem, "Do not become a recipient of benefits". Paul knows that everyone is needy, dependent on God and on others for almost anything. "No debts" means that benefits are always finally referred to a single divine patron. In the community of Jesus, the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed *for* rather than *to* benefactors". (Leithart 2014, p. 74)

Leithart observes that Paul rarely (once) thanks his human benefactors directly at all. For example, when the Philippians assisted Paul financially in his ministry, he writes to them: "I thank my God for your remembrance of me" (Phil 1:3). By Greco-Roman standards this is a colossal failure of gratitude. Christian gratitude is so singularly focused on God that it relativizes interpersonal gratitude in a way that can offend any culture in which gratitude is the chief mechanism for social cohesion.

It is interesting, as well, to note the kinds of things for which Paul thanked God. Drawing on the work of David (Pao 2002), Leithart notes how Christian gratitude as exemplified by Paul "expands beyond personal benefits" (Leithart 2014, p. 73). Indeed, Paul rarely thanks God for personal benefits at all. Paul mainly thanks God for what God is doing in and through the lives of others: for the response of believers to the gospel, for the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world, for others' growth in Christian maturity, and so on. Paul encourages general thanksgiving to God more than thanksgiving that is triggered by the awareness of specific benefits. And Paul thanks God just as often for what God will do in the future as for what God has done in the past. In all these ways, Paul's display of Christian gratitude upsets the standard structure of interpersonal gratitude.

One final feature of Leithart's account deserves comment. In the Greco-Roman world, gratitude comprised three movements of varying importance. Most important by far was the return of a gift to the benefactor. Of secondary importance was the expression of thanks,

preferably publicly. And of least importance, bordering on irrelevancy, was the internal experience of an emotion of gratitude. Christian gratitude is different. Christian gratitude begins with the expression of thanks to God, in private prayer and in public prayers of thanksgiving, especially the Eucharist. But equally important is the return gift, not to the divine Benefactor, who after all is in no need of material benefit, nor even to the human benefactor who may have acted as God's agent of generosity. Rather, the proper material expression of Christian gratitude is works of love to the disadvantaged, quintessentially the giving of alms and the provision of hospitality to the poor and needy. Little is said about the affective dimension of Christian gratitude beyond Paul's expectation that Christian gratitude be heartfelt.

For Leithart, then, Christian gratitude is distinctive in several important ways. It resists and undermines the deployment of gratitude to cement bonds of social and political obligation. It invites God into the circle of reciprocity in a way that frees benefactors from fear of non-reimbursement and frees beneficiaries from the burdens of debt. It refers every good gift to God, relativizing to a dramatic degree the importance of standard interpersonal thanksgiving. And it reorients the material dimension of gratitude away from a reciprocal gift to a benefactor toward the sharing of God's love with the neighbor, especially the neighbor in need of care.

4. Summary

We are now in a position to answer our original question about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude. Return to our initial thought experiment in which an observant anthropologist is studying the different gratitude practices of two communities, one Christian and the other generically theist. This is a problematic thought experiment since it is unclear whether there is such a thing as generic theism and, even if there is, there can be no doubt that generic theism, even if relieved of the dogmas of the Abrahamic religions, retains many of the moral and spiritual impulses of the Abrahamic religions from which it is descended. Nevertheless, I think the theologians we have surveyed have helped us envision how a community of persons deeply shaped by Christian thought and practice might have a distinctive way of practicing gratitude. The survey has yielded at least five distinctives.

First: Edwards, McGill, and McCabe each claimed that Christian gratitude is characterized by a new relation to the self. Christians are given a new self in Jesus Christ and thereby freed from the dogged but ultimately fruitless project of establishing their own worth so as to merit love. Christians, we might say, are those who have recognized that they are loved into being, so to speak, and therefore have only to receive themselves in gratitude. Such a community would be characterized by a striking diversity, we might suspect, since its denizens would feel no pressure to establish themselves in some recognizably respectable identity or persona. And such persons would be freer to attend to the world around them, others especially, since they would not be continually burdened by the quest for their own significance.

Second: Leithart claimed that Christian gratitude is characterized by a posture toward human beneficiaries that, absent Christian faith in a divine Benefactor who "secures both loan and repayment" (Leithart 2014, p. 68) would seem irresponsible and reckless. A community of Christians shaped deeply by this dimension of Christian gratitude would be strange indeed. They would not be obsessively concerned with the social obligations of returning favors. They would not stress over when they should offer a return gift and exactly how it should be proportioned to the original kindness, nor would they stress if they gave a gift and received no return. They might not even write thank you cards! Of course, neither would they be devoted to *not* returning favors. Rather, they would be characterized by a sense of complete freedom about such matters, trusting that their generosity, such as it is, will be appropriately rewarded in heaven.

Third: Bonhoeffer and Leithart claimed that Christian gratitude is distinctive in that, for the Christian, the required material response to a benefit—whether directly from God or indirectly by means of a human intermediary—is neither a material return to God or the

human intermediary but rather the material expression of love for those in the community who are in need. A community so shaped would excel in works of mercy, and this would be not something in addition to their being grateful but the very expression of their gratitude.

Fourth: Edwards, Kierkegaard, and Leithart claimed that Christian gratitude is distinctive in its prioritization of the kinds of benefits most demanding of gratitude. It is not that the Christian is ungrateful for the daily, mundane providences that may come: good weather, a bonus, a win by the home team. But Christian gratitude is trained to look elsewhere: to the intrinsic goodness of God, to God's gracious plan of reconciliation and its outworking in the lives of oneself and others, and to the extraordinary gift of relationship with God. A community characterized by Christian gratitude will therefore see benefits where others do not and rejoice in developments that to outsiders may seem odd, dubious, or uncomfortably "religious". Although they will not act especially pious (remember that they do not need to establish their own significance) they will openly celebrate the workings of God in their own lives and the lives of those they love.

Fifth, and relatedly: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and McGill each claim that Christian gratitude is distinctive in its posture toward mundane "blessings". There's nothing wrong with thanking God for such blessings, of course, but the Christian knows that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, and that, moreover, we aren't even in a position rightly to judge whether something is a blessing at all. As Bonhoeffer claimed, Christians will try to form such judgments with reference to and in conversation with Jesus Christ. Even so, as Kierkegaard reminded us, Christian gratitude for the fleeting blessings of this life comes with a proviso: even should this blessing turn to tragedy, still I will thank you, O God, for being my God and friend.

5. Conclusions

Would a community characterized in these five ways be interestingly distinctive in its practice of gratitude? The theologians surveyed here provide ample reason to think that gratitude within a community deeply shaped by Christian belief and practice would indeed be exercised and expressed in ways that would set it apart from any other imaginable community. The structure of gratitude will be different. Christian gratitude for self challenges the standard tripartite benefactor–benefit–beneficiary schema. And the inclusion of the God in the "circle of reciprocity" means that expressions of thanks will be directed not primarily to human benefactors but to God, and material returns of generosity will be directed not primarily to human benefactors but to the neighboring needy. The phenomenology of gratitude will be different. Christians will not fear the neediness that gratitude implies, perpetually attempting to counterbalance gratitude with assertions of independence. And Christians will not prioritize the affective dimension of gratitude in the way that is common in contemporary practice. Finally, the conditions of possibility of gratitude will be different. Gratitude is not simply a reflex exercise of the preference-satisfying self. Indeed, Christian gratitude may take an ambivalent stance towards certain blessings that strike the natural person as unquestionably good. By contrast, in ongoing conversation with God through Jesus Christ, Christians find it possible to be grateful for circumstances that, absent Christian convictions, would more likely occasion terror or despair.

Of course, being "interestingly distinctive" is not a virtue. What matters is that persons and communities be grateful in the right ways, in ways that properly respond to the gifts that are truly given. But I hope this essay has displayed how Christians, because they have a distinctive view about the gifts that surround us, indeed the gifts that *are* us, will exercise and experience gratitude in a distinctive way.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

Notes

1   It is an important question whether atheists or agnostics can be grateful to God, but it isn't relevant to my purposes in this essay.

2   Most of the questionnaires used to test gratitude to God simply insert "God" into a questionnaire formerly used to test standard interpersonal gratitude. For example, in their several studies on gratitude to to God, Krause and colleagues adapt the GQ-6 of McCullough et al. (2002).

3   There are exceptions. For instance, there is psychological literature on how one's "God concept" modulates one's exercise and experience of gratitude to God; see, e.g., Krause et al. (2015). I hope this essay will shed new light on how theology and spiritual practice matters for the exercise and experience of gratitude in general, including gratitude to God.

4   I have left Karl Barth out of this survey, not because he has nothing to say about the distinctiveness of Christian gratitude, but because I struggle to understand what he is saying. Thankfully, Matthew Lee Anderson explicates Barth on Christian gratitude in a forthcoming (Anderson 2022) paper, "Giving Thanks for the Gift of Life: Karl Barth on Gratitude to God for One's Own Life".

5   The title of the talk is actually supplied by McGill's editor, David Cain.

6   I have wondered about the significant parallels between McGill and McCabe, but as far I know they did not engage one another. Both, however, were readers of Karl Barth (especially McGill), and it may be that they were both influenced by some suggestive, but undeveloped, comments that Karl Barth makes in *Ethics*, to the effect that Christian gratitude is first and foremost gratitude for oneself (Barth 1981).

References

Anderson, Matthew Lee. 2022. Giving Thanks for the Gift of Life: Karl Barth on Gratitude to God for One's Own Life. *Religions*, *forthcoming*.

Barth, Karl. 1981. *Ethics*. Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. New York: Seabury Press.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2006. *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940–1945 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16)*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Edwards, Jonathan. 2001. *The Religious Affections*. Carlisle: Banner of Truth.

Kierkegaard, Soren. 1992. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses (Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume 5)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Soren. 1998. *Works of Love (Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume 16)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, Soren. 2009. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Translated by Alistair Hannay. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Krause, Neil, Robert Emmons, and Gail Ironson. 2015. Benevolent Images of God, Gratitude, and Physical Health Status. *Journal of Religious Health* 54: 1503–19. [CrossRef]

Leithart, Peter. 2014. *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

McCabe, Herbert. 2003. *God, Christ, and Us*. London: Continuum.

McCullough, Michael, Robert Emmons, and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2002. The Grateful Disposition: A Conceptual and Empirical Topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 112–27. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

McGill, Arthur. 2013. *Dying Unto Life*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Pao, David. 2002. *Thanksgiving*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Roberts, Robert. 2014. Cosmic Gratitude. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6: 65–83. [CrossRef]

Rosmarin, David, Steven Pirutinsky, Adam Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or Just Plain Grateful? A Comparison of Religious and General Gratitude. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Strobel, Kyle. 2022. Gratitude to God: Jonathan Edwards and the Opening of the Self. *Scientia et Fides* 9: 115–31. [CrossRef]

Article

Giving Thanks for the Gift of Life: Karl Barth on Gratitude to God for One's Own Life

Matthew Lee Anderson

Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University, Waco, TX 76798, USA; matthew_l_anderson@baylor.edu

Abstract: This essay considers Karl Barth's conception of gratitude to God, and the significance of being grateful for one's own life within his doctrine of creation. I argue that Barth's account of gratitude authorizes an affirmation of one's own life that avoids the trappings of the egoistic self-love that he vociferously opposed. Additionally, I consider whether and how Barth's conception of gratitude for our lives demands cheerfulness, or whether it adequately leaves room for the type of sobriety and lament that Beethoven exemplifies in his "Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity."

Keywords: gratitude; Karl Barth; optimism; creation; Mozart; Beethoven

1. Introduction

Even Aldous Huxley was moved by the religious power of Beethoven's *Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian Mode* (*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart*). In the final chapter of *Point Counter Point*, the inquisitive Spandrell is tempted to believe in God on the basis of Beethoven's masterpiece: "It proves all kinds of things—God, the soul, goodness—unescapably," he intones (Huxley 1928, p. 338). Huxley was not himself convinced: Spandrell's interlocutor Rampion rejects the argument, suggesting that the heavenly reaches of Beethoven's music are "too good," that its bliss is too transcendent to be human. Yet he admits the objection is desperate: "Almost thou persuadest me," Rampion tells Spandrell when the final notes die away (Huxley 1928, p. 340).

Whatever Beethoven's religious convictions were, the gratitude embedded within his *Heiliger* has an ethereal quality—yet without, I think, losing touch with the all-too-fragile conditions of this life. Beethoven composed the piece not long after his recovery from a serious illness, and it bears the marks of his escape from death: the *Heiliger*'s use of the Lydian mode echoes religious chorales, imbuing the piece with a reverence and solemnity. J.W.N. Sullivan described Beethoven's stunning work as the "most heart-felt prayer from the most manly soul that has expressed itself in music" (Sullivan 1960, p. 163). In Huxley's depiction, the *Heiliger's* opening has "the serenity of the convalescent who wakes from fever and finds himself born again into a realm of beauty" (Huxley 1928, p. 338). Though its thematic material is compact, it manages a wide range of emotional registers; while its Lydian portions are serious without ever being melancholic, the complementary portions that mark a "new strength" are bright without being cheap, and airy without being trivial.[1] The two atmospheres are resolved into a final section that synthesizes and transcends them both. Again, Huxley: "The ineffable peace persisted; but it was no longer the peace of convalescence and passivity. It quivered, it was alive, it seemed to grow and intensify itself, it became an active calm, an almost passionate serenity" (Huxley 1928, p. 340). Beethoven's gratitude pulsates with joy—but a joy that stands at the precipice of death, and has been ineradicably marked by it. It is not the joy of his more famous "ode" of his Ninth Symphony. Sullivan thought the victory the quartet offers is "so hard-won that we are left with none of that feeling of exultant triumph with which we have watched so many of Beethoven's

victories, but rather with a feeling of slightly incredulous relief, of thankfulness still tinged with doubt" (Sullivan 1960, p. 164). Despite Rampion's complaint that the *Heiliger* is too transcendent for mortals, it exudes an earthy acknowledgement of life's "shadows"—yet without being finally overcome by them.

While Karl Barth devoted more attention to gratitude than any theologian since Calvin, he took musical inspiration from Mozart, not Beethoven. As he famously wrote, Mozart "heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair ... " (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 298). Such an affinity has raised worries that Barth's intense focus on Christ's victorious triumph over sin and his Christocentric account of creation fails to give the tragic dimensions of this world their due. As Joseph Mangina writes, "The danger in Barth's approach to suffering may be that it moves too quickly into the mode of affirmation. Mozart's music is beautiful, but our lives very often are not" (Mangina 2004, p. 112; McDowell 2019, pp. 221–23).

How long one must give way to grief and sorrow is an open, under-specified question. Barth himself put a variation of the same objection to the optimism of Leibniz and his heirs, arguing that they lacked the compulsion to "face this [shadowy, tragic] aspect of life without running away" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 406). Yet the fact that Barth lodged the same critique against optimism that he has been subject to does not in itself exonerate him. Beethoven's *Heiliger* poses a question about what it means to be grateful to God for our lives, especially when they are marked by frailty, sin, and death. Such a question is especially potent for Barth, whose account of gratitude runs through the very center of his theology. Though the theme has received comparatively scant attention from his English-speaking interlocutors, Helmut Gollwitzer has rightly proposed that for Barth "gratitude" is the "central word for the basic determination of human existence" (Gollwitzer 1974, p. 497).[2] As Barth famously puts it, gratitude is "the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God." While gratitude gives rise to both affections and actions, it also reaches beneath them to name the fundamental disposition of humanity toward God: the "being of man," Barth writes, "can and must be more precisely defined as a being in gratitude" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 166). Gratitude is not only "a quality and an activity," nor is it "merely a change of temper or sentiment or conduct and action." Instead, gratitude is "the very being and essence of this creature." Human being *is* gratitude, rather than being "merely grateful" (Barth 2010, II/1, p. 669).

At the same time, it is one thing for gratitude to mark the "being" of humanity and another to be grateful *for* that being. While gratitude to God in Barth's framework is ultimately responsive to the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, he also argues that our lives are among the gifts and benefits that God bestows upon us—and thus can be objects of gratitude to God.[3] As life for some of us hardly seems like an appropriate reason to give thanks to the Creator, whether Barth moves too quickly into an affirmative key within his treatment of gratitude is a crucial question. Yet allowing our own lives to be objects of gratitude to God also introduces the specter of "self–love" into moral theology. Barth's doctrine of creation requires affirming our existence as the proper response to God's grace— but does so without turning "self–love" into an architectonic principle for the moral life, a move that many Protestant moral theologians have aggressively resisted (including Barth himself). How Barth's account of gratitude within his doctrine of creation addresses these two features is the theme of this paper.

2. Gratitude to God in the Doctrine of Creation

Gratitude is the central term for humanity's response to God because, on Barth's view, humanity is both determined and revealed by Jesus Christ.[4] As those who have been elected by God in Christ, human beings are summoned by grace, which "sums up the mind and attitude and work of God towards the creature which confronts Him in his nature." Nothing internal within humanity can generate this summons, which means the "being of real man" stands in need of the event of God's grace for its perfection. "Human being" for

Barth is eccentric: the source and origin of our lives is outside of ourselves, in God and His gracious word to us (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 164, 166).[5]

"Gratitude" as the normative and fitting response to God preserves and reifies this eccentric character of human life. As gratitude constitutes our true humanity in its response to God's grace, Barth contends that Christ reveals the perfection of humanity's gratitude alongside the revelation of God's grace. At the Incarnation, "thankfulness is shown to be the essence of the creature, of the reality distinct from God" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 26). Christ represents the "grace of God, and thus gives man what is right, what is his due." And he also "represents the gratitude of man, and thus gives God what is right, what is His due" (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 439–40).

Whatever philosophical or anthropological resonances "gratitude" might have, then, Barth infuses his account with distinctive theological content. Because gratitude arises from inside the encounter with God's grace, it has a communicative and cognitive dimension: to "be grateful is to *recognise* a benefit," Barth writes, not merely to "receive, accept and enjoy" it (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). Gratitude simultaneously names both the dependent and interpersonal context in which humanity relates to God. Barth goes beyond these characteristics, though, and argues that in its purest form gratitude responds to a benefit "which one could not take for oneself but has in fact received" or to an "action which one could not perform for oneself but which has nevertheless happened to one" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). In one sense, passively receiving a benefit *necessarily* means the other has done something for us we cannot do for ourselves. While a graduate student might have funds to pay for their own coffee, the advisor who buys it instead makes the graduate student a recipient of an act of minor generosity—which they cannot do for themselves.[6] Yet the *benefit* Barth has in mind is one that exceeds our capabilities: the creature "cannot be gracious to itself, it cannot tell itself that God is gracious to it," Barth writes. "This it can only hear. The Word of grace and therefore grace itself, it can only receive" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). The absolutely unique benefit of grace means that, strictly speaking, *only* God can be thanked by humanity. Gratitude to God has a "depth and abandon and constancy" that corresponds to the benefit he gives us. While more modest types of benefits exist, from "first to last God the Creator is their source"—and as such, gratitude to others can be genuine because "first and last it is to God that they are thankful when they receive genuine benefits" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 169).

While gratitude to God is obligatory, as the fitting response to the disclosure of God's grace it both precedes and encompasses the logic of command and obedience that marks much of Barth's ethics. Specifically, gratitude is accompanied by obligations to *honor* God, a term that both distances the obligations of gratitude from any kind of system of individual merit *and* entails that the obligation cannot be dispensed with by any particular action. "To be grateful," Barth writes "is to recognise and honour as a benefactor the one who has conferred this good" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). While honor might be given by returning gifts to the Benefactor, it is more fundamentally a matter of esteem and praise. Tying gratitude and honor together this way allows Barth to avoid reducing the relationship of gift and reciprocity to an economic exchange without committing him to an Anselmian account of debt satisfaction. Barth notes that gratitude (and, correspondingly, honor) must structure *every* human action: any human act "which is not basically an expression of gratitude is inadequate in the face of God." The "best and most pious works in the service of God, whatever they might be, would be nothing if in their whole root and significance they were not works of gratitude" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 170). Yet living in gratitude neither absolves the obligation to honor God nor compensates for the debt that we have accrued through sin. In a move similar to Kant's account of gratitude, Barth contends that the ongoing surplus of obligation we have toward God because of the uniqueness of His gift prevents the relationship from dissolving into a "transaction based on mutual self-interest" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167).[7] Instead, the relationship between God and humanity is "continually renewed" in our expressions of honor.[8] Barth eventually re-deploys this non-economic account of honor in his doctrine of reconciliation: while Barth confirms

Anselm's judgment that humanity "owes the subjection of our wills to God, which is the one great honour which he can render to God and which he is indeed committed to render to Him as man," he emphatically rejects that the satisfaction of this debt of honor is the basis for God's forgiveness of us (Barth 2010, IV/1, pp. 486–87).

While living in gratitude preserves the eccentric basis of human life, it is also perfective of human life. Barth reformulates Hamlet's question "To be or not to be?" around gratitude, suggesting that the question of human being is "decided by the way in which we answer the question: To give thanks or not to give thanks?" In our giving thanks to God, we give "honour to the One to whom alone it is due, and the honour which alone is worthy of Him." As the subjective and spontaneous response to God's objective revelation of grace, thanksgiving is the "essential and characteristic action which constitutes [our] true being" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 171). As Mangina writes, gratitude is "the form of historical activity by which the agent corresponds to the activity of God," and so can be used "as a comprehensive description of the Christian life itself" (Mangina 2001, p. 137).

Behind Barth's mature construal of gratitude within his doctrine of creation lies his treatment of the subject in his ethics lectures of 1928 and 1929. There, gratitude also perfects humanity, but is located within the eschatological union with God, in which we are "one with God as children are with their father (Barth 1981, p. 463). As with Barth's later doctrine of creation, Barth stresses that our unity with God remains an encounter, and so is "not an intrinsic or an attained possession of man but a most actual affair of divine giving" that generates gratitude on the creaturely side (Barth 1981, p. 499). Similarly, Barth emphasizes that gratitude issues forth in action unconstrained by false notions of obligation, and has an affective dimension that responds to God's grace: gratitude specifies that "I am *gladly*, i.e., voluntarily and cheerfully, ready for what God wills of me in acknowledgment of what is given to me by God and as my necessary response to God's gift." The disclosure of grace that gives rise to gratitude is unremittingly particular: in it, we discover that God "expressly and unequivocally wants me myself," and that he has in fact won us for himself. While this can only be known properly from an eschatological standpoint, it establishes us as individuals. In renewing us in God's image, the Holy Spirit reveals the "eschatological reality of our divine sonship in which the 'I am' is possible" and liberates us to confirm God's command with our own affirmation of it. Somewhat uncomfortably, Barth appeals to a "self-command" to explain how gratitude corresponds to God's kindness: gratitude "cannot be commanded. I must really command it of myself." But such a command can only be issued if the individual confronts himself "as I do when seen from the standpoint of eternity in my divine sonship, in my participation in the divine nature" (Barth 1981, pp. 500–1).

While Barth's mature account of gratitude folds it beneath the doctrine of creation, as we have seen, creation is only intelligible as a gift of grace when we see it from the standpoint of Christ's revelation. Although Barth revises the notion that gratitude gives rise to a "self-command" in favor of the grammar of honor, the substance of his early view that gratitude secures our identity as agents remains the same. In giving thanks, humanity freely and really honors God as the benefactor who gives to us the gift of his grace. Gratitude is thus neither self-abnegating nor self-denying: gratitude establishes the person in response to God, rather than annihilating us.[9] Yet it also leaves open questions about what, precisely, it might mean to see our own lives as a benefit which has been given to us by God—to be grateful for grace under the aspect or description of the "gift of life." While gratitude might not mean our self-annihilation, it might also not require any self-affirmation. To speak of affirming ourselves is to introduce the whole complex of problems regarding self-love, a position that Barth unequivocally rejects in I/2: "Our self-love can never be anything right or holy and acceptable to God" (Barth 2010, I/2, p. 388). What does it mean, from Barth's point of view, to be grateful to God for one's own life?

3. The Benefit of Life

One upshot of Barth's eccentric account of "human being" is that our lives are not self-interpreting, much less independently action-guiding or authoritative. While Barth's account of gratitude within his theological anthropology is nested within a personalistic, I–Thou framework, he extends the eccentric account of humanity into his account of our constitution and "life." Absent the divine summons and disclosure of humanity in Christ, the qualities or characteristics to which we might point to understand humanity are only "symptoms" or "phenomena" of real humanity. This includes our constitution, which is not an independent source for understanding ourselves but "merely follows as part of the summons" (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 150–52).

Barth is unequivocal, though, that life is a gift from God, and so a benefit. Properly construing life beneath the purview of God means that "it is not by an obscure fate or neutral decree, but in receipt of a divine benefit, that [a person] is 'alive'" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 336). This is especially clear in Barth's treatment of our *whence*, our origins as individual beings. Barth acknowledges the disquiet that can emerge when we consider our *whence*, as it means that "even from my origin I am threatened by annihilation, being marked as a being which can only advance towards non-existence" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 574). This anxiety is dissolved only when we realize that God "has preceded us in time, in all the times of our non-being," and as such we come from "the being, speaking, and action of the eternal God who has preceded us" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 577). Barth affirms the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, yet he breaks with tradition by suggesting that its "inner necessity" is disclosed only within an anthropological context. The doctrine expresses "the absolutely essential thing which is to be said of the creature of God as such, namely, that it derives from God and no other source, and that it exists through God and not otherwise." God creates humanity "as the one whom He summons into life" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 155). Birth thus functions for Barth as a uniquely potent "sign and witness" that the world is really ruled by God, as considering our origin (and our end) as individuals puts us into immediate proximity to God in a way that no other aspect of life can (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 199).[10]

The fact that our lives come from God also structures our constitution throughout time, in addition to our origins. For Barth, "life" names our non-autonomous independence as God's creatures: it is the "capacity for action, self-movement, self-activity, self-determination," which arises from the fact that humans have soul. Purely corporeal objects "lack the capacity for action," and while plants have life, we alone have direct and true knowledge of the capacity for independent life because the "human soul" is given to us in self-knowledge (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 374–77). To say humanity is "soul" is to say that "he is the life which is essentially necessary for his body." At the same time, we are "essentially and existentially in time as well," and so are also body. Life is the life of the embodied soul and the besouled body (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 349–51).

Yet life is not our immanent possession, such that we can be said to have it independently of God's ongoing gift to us. Our capacity for independent action is the gift of God through the Holy Spirit: we exist only as we are "grounded, constituted and maintained by God" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 348). Specifically, humanity "has Spirit" (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 353–54). As Barth puts it, "Spirit is the event of the gift of life whose subject is God; and this event must be continually repeated as God's act if man is to live" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 359). Our life in time continues only because of the ongoing gift of God's presence—whether we recognize and give thanks for this or not. God's "presence as such is the gift of my time. He himself pledges both its reality and goodness," Barth writes (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 530).[11]

The fact that God sustains our life by giving us time enables Barth to argue that our duration is limited: the span of our life from birth to death is not only a punishment by God, but is a disclosure of his grace. While there is an appropriate protest we can raise against our limits, they are also indicators that we depend upon God *and* that God is good to us (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 557). As Barth writes in his ethics of life, "Just because [life] is limited,

it is a kind of natural and normal confirmation of the fact that by God's free grace man may live through Him and for Him, with the commission to be as man in accordance with the measure of his strength and powers . . . " (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 372). At the beginning and ending of our time, we are confronted by the gracious God with a special clarity, precisely because the only other alternative besides God is our annihilation and the nothingness or chaos that God originally said "no" to in creation (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 568–69).

Barth's unremittingly theocentric account of "life" means it is primarily a benefit to us because it enables us to participate in God's display of glory in creation. As Barth put it, life is valuable within its limits because it gives us the "one great opportunity of meeting God and rejoicing in his praise" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 336). The life God gives us is, even within its limits, an "offer made to man." And as Barth writes, "What is offered with such exclusiveness by God is surely worthy of honour, attention and reflection, even though its significance may not be immediately apparent" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 572). As the final and fundamental explanation for life's value, the opportunity to praise God does not *preclude* participating in or enjoying other, secondary goods. Nor does it necessarily require us to dismiss the loss of those goods and the sorrows that accompany it, as we shall see. Yet it does entail that gratitude to God for "our own life" must be understood as a metonymy for gratitude to God for the opportunity to know and be united to Him.

In one respect, seeing our lives as gifts of God's grace means extricating them from the balancing tests of burdens and benefits that we tend to evaluate them through, and recognizing the peculiar and singularly important benefit that is available to us in God. At the same time, whether our lives warrant gratitude is an especially acute question when we consider our birth and death. As gratitude involves recognizing a benefit as *a gift* we have been given, distinguishing between any *particular* good within our life and the benefit of our lives *as a whole* means putting the latter in a comparative context where they are situated next to our non-existence. In that context, the stakes of seeing our lives as derived from God become clear.[12]

4. The Will to Live

Because "life" is not self-interpreting, Barth argues that it cannot be the basis for ethics as Albert Schweitzer thought it should be. "Where Schweitzer places life," Barth writes, "we see the command of God." Yet the divine command involves the "whole man," including those 'natural' dimensions (such as our "animal impulses") that are sometimes regarded as sub-ethical (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 325–28). Obedience to God the Creator means, in this sphere, "man's freedom to exist as a living being of this particular, i.e., human structure" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 324). Barth locates his ethics of life *after* his treatments of "freedom for God" and "freedom for fellowship" with other humans, in order to properly ensure that we understand what we owe our own lives follows after what we owe God and others. Despite that, the command of God with reference to our life has a distinct content, which is not *simply* the presupposition to the other forms God's command takes to us. Specifically, the "freedom for life . . . is the freedom to treat as a loan both the life of all men with his own and his own with that of all men" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 335).

The command to live, in its highest form, is a command to use the "time, space, and opportunity" that God has given us as creatures in active service to our neighbors. Our life is not an end in itself: as we live eccentrically through the gift of God, we are "called from the isolation and self-sufficiency of a life for life's sake" (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 476–77). Our participation in freedom as God's creatures only happens "to the extent that it does not have its aim in itself, and cannot therefore be lived in self-concentration and self-centredness, but only in a relationship which moves outwards and upwards to another" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 478). While this external orientation includes other creatures, we are finally summoned beyond the world of creatures to God in Jesus Christ (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 479–80).

Yet the summons to an active life includes an obligation to not only protect life, but a more basic responsibility to affirm the lives of others *and* the life we have been given. The gift of our lives is not a static possession or (merely) a presupposition for our action, but

must be *willed* by humanity within the limits that God has placed upon it (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 335). As Joseph Mangina writes, knowing God as Creator "is to be called to a life of joy, gratitude and active engagement with the world; it means receiving and affirming one's own life as a gift" (Mangina 2004, p. 88). Such an affirmation of our lives involves both gratitude and honor. As Barth writes, the summons to active service still leaves "a place for gratitude that he may live."[13] This "gratitude" for our permission to go on living is accompanied by Barth's reminder that we are "commanded to honour and protect life," precisely so that the active life can have "space and time and opportunity" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 471). In the *Leitsatz* to §55, Barth writes that humanity is ordered to "honour his own life and that of every other man as a loan" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 324).

Within this context, honoring our own life means respecting its uniqueness as a gift of God—or cultivating, in Barth's description, astonishment, humility, and awe toward it. Because Jesus Christ became incarnate, human life has the character "even in the most doubtful form" of "something singular, unique, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 339). The fact that our lives belong to God means we owe them not simply an attitude of wonder, but that they must be "affirmed and willed by man." The perception and confirmation of the fact that our lives are gifts and loans from God consists in our action, in the "making use of our life, the use prescribed by its nature" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 341). The biblical injunction "Thou shalt not kill" implies the "positive fact" that "according to God's command it may and should be lived as human life" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 344).

The required affirmation of life within the command of God includes the animal impulses and health that distinctly mark the good of our constitution as such. As Autumn Alcott Ridenour rightly observes, Barth draws on his account of humanity's limits to offer an ethics "that both resists death and accepts the limits of mortality" (Ridenour 2018, pp. 83–85). The will for more life must be qualified by the acknowledgment that God sets limits on us, and that he does not will for us an infinite duration of time.

Yet Barth also goes beyond health and our animal impulses, arguing that the required will for life is "also the will for joy, delight, and happiness" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 375). It is here that the logic of gift and gratitude to God for our lives comes to fruition, as joy occurs when our striving in time reaches a (momentary) resolution. Joy is the moment "where [a person's life] gives him no more trouble but presents and offers itself as a gift, and indeed as a gift of that which he has conceived of, or at least groped after or dreamed of, as genuine life (if not in its totality, at least from a specific standpoint, of that which he has promised himself from life." Even when we attain our end by our own efforts, Barth contends that joy "is really the simplest form of gratitude." (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 376). Paradoxically, joy as the fulfillment of our desire means a desire for its *duration* and a disinterest in *more time.* Because time stands still in joy, the "greater our joy is, the more unnecessary it will seem to us that there should be more time and movement." Instead, we "desire only the duration of this fulfilment, of life in the form of a gift, and therefore of the joyful moment." This desire is essential to joy, Barth contends, because "joy is gratitude for an effected fulfilment" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 377).

The will for life means *willing* joy, or at least willing the conditions that would put us in a position to experience it. The command of God in willing life means we must "continually hold [ourselves] in readiness for joy" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 377). Joy means not only remaining open to the possibility that the world would manifest itself as God's gift of grace, but to *expect* that life will "present and offer itself in provisional fulfilments of its meaning and intention as movement." In sum: to be "joyful means to look out for opportunities for gratitude" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 378). Such fulfilments are only provisional, to be sure, because the "whole of life is provisional." Still, as provisional joys are anticipatory of the great joy of our union with God, they can be rightly accepted: "We need not be joyful in vain here and now," Barth writes, even if this ethics "of respect for life at this climactic point" can only "point away beyond itself" toward the will "for the eternal joy and felicity which in all cases of joy is the only one in which it can be lasting and complete joy, the

definitive revelation of the fulfilment of life accomplished for us and addressed to us by God" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 385).

This openness and readiness for anticipatory fulfilments of joy in gratitude to God includes actively willing *ourselves* in a reciprocal endorsement of the gift of God to us. Insofar as respect for life requires an affirmation of life, it requires a "resolute will to be [ourselves.]" Such an affirmation is not of a general "I" or "self" which is our own possession, which we can know and command on our own terms. Yet because the divine summons comes to each individual *as* an individual, it requires that we take ourselves seriously as those who have been addressed by God. As Barth puts it, the "affirmation of life as self-affirmation is thus at root an act of obedience." It is not an act of "desire or rebellion or a bid for power," but is a "supreme responsibility" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 388). Barth regards character as the "outline of the I which each thinks he can have and know of himself." While we are not permitted to make the formation of character, our "I," a direct work or aim of ours, it emerges in response to our reception of God's summons and disclosure to us as individuals: character is the "a work of the grace of God on man." The command to "be what you are" can be made because we are already in that form in the "eyes of the eternal God," and thus can will that form obediently, "in perfect humility but also in perfect courage," rather than in a "subjective or egocentric" way. Forming our character as individuals by affirming our lives remains a task within the divine command to respect life (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 388).

The self-referential dimension that Barth admits into his ethics of life is necessary because gratitude is the recognition of a benefit—and insofar as our lives are gifts of God to us, they require affirmation as such. Barth's polemic against self-love is unsparing: there is no commandment to love oneself, and loving one's neighbor puts an end to one's self-love. Love demands an object that is *not* ourselves, which means that our "self-love can never be anything right or holy or acceptable to God" (Barth 2010, IV/2, p. 388). The divine command, by contrast, requires an affirmation of our lives in *gratitude* for their creation and for the ongoing space, time, and opportunity we have to rejoice in God and His praise. Gratitude to God for our lives ensures that our affirmation of them remains *modest*, as it is bound by the limits that God places upon them and by the recognition that the nature of the benefit is contingent upon God's affirmation of us. To that extent, self-love is not a foundation for ethics or an architectonic principle into which altruistic or other-regarding motivations must be shoehorned, but the necessary fruit of God's love for us.

Barth also builds in checks within his account of "life" against a pernicious egoism taking hold. At the very outset, he suggests that "egoism and altruism are false antitheses when the question is that of the required will to live" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 341). While God addresses each of us as a particular individual, human life "by its very nature consists in solidarity with those who have also to live it in their own way as it is lent to them." The divine command applies to us "only as a creature that has others of his kind" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 331). Barth says nothing about the basis for this universalizing judgment that our apprehension of "life" gives rise to, but seems to regard it as basic to the concept—and to be delimited by species, as it is founded upon the address of God to each individual rather than a naturalized concept of "life" *per se*.[14]

Barth is able to build in an affirmation of our own lives without reducing it to egoism or self-love, precisely because his account of the divine command includes a eudaimonistic dimension—which Barth ties to honor.[15] In his treatment of meta–ethics in II/2, Barth is explicit that God's command "also includes our salvation, namely, what God ascribes to us as desirable and pleasant and true and good and beautiful." Such an ascription means that the "the justifiable concern of eudaimonism need not be displaced." The command of God is "addressed to us for our own highest good, so that everything—the lowest as well as the highest—which we might demand of ourselves comes into its own by the fact that it is we ourselves who are demanded" (Barth 2010, II/2, p. 653). At the end of his doctrine of creation, Barth links this concern for our good beneath the divine command to the grammar of honor. Barth notes that the command of God *reveals* our nature, but also

corresponds to it: "When God meets man as his Commander," he writes, "the result is that man must recognise his own nature and being in its correspondence to the command of God." Our nature must be "referred to the command of God" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 567). The honor humanity has from God is revealed by God's command within our limits. This honor supplants the logic of "command" and "obedience" in favor of the grammar of free gratitude and return. God honors the creature by "raising him to His service" through the Incarnation and making us worthy for it (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 650). As such, any "obligation" to obey is dissolved: instead, obedience is "to rejoice in our honour before and from God" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 650). Our honor remains extrinsic to us: it is not our possession, but falls on humanity "as a reflection of the honour of God Himself". While it does not become our possession, the honor God shows us is still really ours, and is centrally determinative of our beatitude as God's creatures: our honor is the "supreme earthly good of man," because it is supremely protected by God Himself (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 663).

This "eudaimonistic" dimension is only one aspect of Barth's ethics, to be clear, and it is important to carefully specify what role it plays in our relation to the divine command. Nigel Biggar and Matthew Rose have both brought Barth's eudaimonism to the foreground, emphasizing the way in which God's command discloses and fulfills our human natures and suggesting that we should obey God's command "out of regard for" our own good.[16] By contrast, Jennifer Herdt argues that Barth's eudaimonism is not a "reason-source" view, in which our happiness supplies reasons. Instead, it is an "agent-perfective" eudaimonism, in which "my own good is not necessarily that for the sake of which I desire all else that I desire" (Herdt 2016, p. 163).[17] On her reading of Barth, while "'for me it is good to cleave to God', it is not in order to realize my good that I cleave to God . . . " (Herdt 2016, p. 166).[18] Barth's "eudaimonism" is indeed qualified: he objects in IV.3.2 to making "salvation" the goal of our Christian vocation, as it smacks of "the sanctioning and cultivating of an egocentricity which is only too human" (Barth 2010, IV.3.2, p. 567). Yet the gap between Biggar/Rose and Herdt arises from an unnecessary bifurcation between the divine command and our good that Barth's account of honor overcomes. The divine command supplies us reason to act—but that reason is manifold, and includes both the disclosure of God's grace *and* our good, concurrently, as the disclosure of God's grace *is* our good. The division between acting on the basis of God's command and acting on the basis of our good is thus an artificial one. We might revise Biggar and Rose's contention to mollify Herdt's concern by saying that we act *with* regard for our own good, rather than *out of* regard for our own good. As long as "one's own life" is at stake, its well-being and flourishing is commanded (and permitted) to be a part of one's reason-set for acting within the doctrine of creation. In honoring God through gratitude, we must necessarily honor our own lives. To that extent, Barth's ethics of command is unintelligible without this eudaimonistic dimension.[19]

By integrating a eudaimonist dimension into his divine command ethics and tying together the obligations of honor with the responsiveness of gratitude, Barth incorporates a non-aspirational account of "self-love" into his ethics that obligates us to see our lives as a gift of God. The obligations to honor God with our lives arise out of our gratitude for His gift of honoring us with His revelation and disclosure in Jesus Christ: they are obligations to receive the gift with responsibility and use it in conformity with the intentions of the giver (as a "loan"). In that way, the imperative to honor our life includes respecting the "equipment" we have received, but also goes beyond it: honoring God in gratitude for our lives means using what has been given, perfecting and completing the gift of life through our free action in correspondence with God's grace. Such honoring is not acquisitive, but arises out of the reality that we have been honored already: the affirmation of one's own life is a constitutive part of our recognition of God's grace to us, but is not the basis or grounds for an egoistic self-assertion or pursuit of our own honor, especially at the expense of the well-being or good of those around us.[20]

5. The Ambivalence of Gratitude for Life?

Barth's unequivocal stance "it is not by an obscure fate or neutral decree, but in receipt of a divine benefit, that [a person] is 'alive'" seems as though it precludes any type of ambivalence about the conditions of benefit at the outset (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 336). From our origins in God directly to the ongoing presence of His Spirit as the basis for our life, humanity only lives by and from God. While this entails that our lives are the "one great opportunity" of meeting God, it also reshapes how we assess the value of the life we have been given. The standard, immanent process of weighing the burdens and benefits within a life are insufficient on this score for determining whether life is a benefit to us, as a life lived wholly within suffering (if such a life is possible) would still be eccentrically oriented to and determined by God.

Barth is undoubtedly aware of how complicated it can be to think of one's own life as a "gift"—yet his affirmative stance offers a strong prophylactic against what might be otherwise irredeemably tragic situations. For instance, Barth's emphasis on God being the *sole* answer to humanity's *whence* tends to eclipse natural parents from the purview of our theological understanding.[21] Yet it also allows Barth to offer children a path toward affirming their existence even when their parents would not. In his treatment of parents and children, Barth notes that parents can procreate irresponsibly, giving birth to a child "of whom it might well be said from the parents' standpoint that they would have been better without it." Shockingly, Barth suggests the birth of such a child might indicate "divine judgment in some form" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 271). At the same time, his claim is carefully constrained: it might be said on the parents' side that they would have been better off without the child, but as the child comes from God, their life is irreducibly a gift and a benefit. If they join Job in his lament about the day of their birth, it cannot be their final word.

Yet if this permits Barth to move too quickly into an "affirmative" mode of theological reasoning, his triumphalism is strangely hesitant. The affirmation that life "is always (whether recognised or not) an advantage, a good and worthwhile thing" is equivocal. Barth cites Psalm 73:26 and Psalm 63:3, which clearly locate life as a subordinate and secondary good. The non-absolute quality of life both permits its tragic dimensions to persist and entails that they are not the final word: God can "will to restrict man's will to live for himself and in co-existence with others," by breaking and destroying it. Because God is leading us through this life to eternal life, respect for life cannot "consist in an absolute will to live" but must "move within its appointed limits" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 342). While Barth suggests that the person who takes to heart the gospel message is "plainly forbidden to be anything but merry and cheerful," the force of the command is necessary precisely because the grounds for rejoicing are sometimes so opaque.

Indeed, the ambivalence of the world means that we cannot be confident that we know "what constitutes the real pleasure of our real life, and in what the fulfilments which summon us to gratitude actually consist." This opacity means we must remain open to God even in the suffering of life, "because even life's suffering (or what we regard as such) comes from God, the very One who summons us to rejoice." The real "test of our joy of life as a commanded and therefore a true and good joy is that we do not evade the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ and are not unwilling to be genuinely joyful even as we bear the sorrows laid upon us." Our readiness for suffering and sorrow is the litmus test that the provisional joys we embrace are *real* joys, as it clarifies that *God* is our joy (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 383–84).[22] As Mangina observes, the maturity required to accept "life as a gift from God" is "tested in the experience of suffering, for it is here we discover that what we thought to be our joy may in fact have rested in a deception" (Mangina 2001, p. 150). Barth's capacity to make such a case is tied to his contention that the goods of creation are ordered toward and determined finally by Christ. As Autumn Alcott Ridenour writes, by "imaging Christ, believers defeat death with an ironic 'joy' by the power of Christ's presence and the hope of resurrection," following Christ in their suffering "in union with

Him through prayer, much like Jesus's own dark hour at Gethsemane" (Ridenour 2018, p. 87; Mangina 2001, pp. 144–45).

There is room within Barth, then, to acknowledge the many ways gratitude for our own lives can be complex. As noted above, Barth's opposition to optimism was animated, in part, by its proponents' inability to seriously suffer with those who suffer. Barth took seriously the "natural joy in life" expressed by Leibniz and others, even while recognizing how "little he harmonises with the spirit and outlook of our own time" (Barth 2010, III/1, pp. 404–5). While Barth's view seems triumphalist, he regards Christianity as ultimately incompatible with optimism precisely because it includes "a true and urgent and inescapable awareness of the imperilling of creation by its limits, of sin and death and the devil" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 407). The fact that Mozart heard the "whole of providence" and transcended suffering moves him *beyond* both optimism and pessimism: "he heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow *also belongs* but in which the shadow is not darkness . . . " The miracle of Mozart's music is that it includes the negative, yet without placing it on a par with the negative. Thus, Barth writes, "the cheerfulness in this harmony *is not without its limits*" (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 298, emphasis mine). This sense of *limits*, Barth thinks, is at the heart of Mozart's music: there is "no light which does not also know dark, no joy which does not also have within it sorrow". Yet, at the same time, the center of his music is one in which "the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yea rings louder than the ever-present Nay." These forces are never brought into an equilibrium, with the "uncertainty and doubt" that such an equivocation would entail (Barth 2003b, pp. 55–56). To that extent, Barth is acutely aware of the difficulty of Christian optimism: gratitude for one's own life is a miracle, given the shadow around us, that needs to be secured for us by the commanding grace of God in Christ. On life's own terms, outside of grace, we would be trapped within a perpetual ambivalence and oscillation between optimism and pessimism.

It is incommensurate with Barth's broader theology (much less his account of Mozart!) to speak of gratitude for our own lives as a task. Gratitude is the spontaneous, free recognition of a divine benefit which culminates in the joyful activity of honoring God in creation. Yet there are points during which we might feel our lives to be more burden than benefit. Barth speaks of an obligation to be merry and cheerful precisely because he is attuned to the difficulties of doing so within the terms of "life" on its own, absent the revelation of the grace of God. The sober, vibrant resolution of Beethoven's *Heiliger* is, to that extent, commensurate with Barth's ethics of gratitude within his doctrine of creation. If the final note is hesitating, it still offers a resolution that heralds the deeper joy that can only come when our union with Christ is made complete.[23] If Mozart saw the whole of providence, Beethoven stood within a single moment, which makes his expression of gratitude more fragile, but perhaps also more profound and—even—Barthian. After all, gratitude runs deeper than the affections, including that of joy: as the being of humanity, gratitude to God is fundamentally constituted by the return of our lives to God in honor and in praise. While gratitude to God requires the affirmation and willing of our life, it is compatible with any number of dispositions and feelings—provided that we are conforming our lives in word and (especially) deed to the grace given us in Christ Jesus, a grace that triumphs in the end over the forces of sin and death.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1. Beethoven annotated the two sections "*Neue Kraft fühlend*," or "feeling new strength."

2. Quoted in Hofheinz (2019), p. 461. Despite Gollwitzer's claim, neither *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, nor the *Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth* saw fit to give gratitude an independent entry. Joseph Mangina's discussion of gratitude is exemplary. This paper both tracks his reading and attempts to fill in some details about Barth's argument that he is attentive to, but does not elaborate on. See (Mangina 2001, pp. 125–63). Gerald McKenny's treatment of gratitude is concise but astute. See (McKenny 2013, pp. 17–20, 209–12).

3. While worries persist that Barth's Christocentrism collapses creation into redemption, Barth at least nominally sought to preserve creation as a unique (though not independent) dogmatic locus from redemption or reconciliation. R. Kendall Soulen has offered one such argument. See (Soulen 1996). More recently, Susannah Ticciati has argued that Barth logically (though not intentionally) collapses creation into redemption, which means that we cannot distinguish between the goods at work in each. Among other worries, Ticciati contends that Barth's emphasis on the *manifestation* at the *parousia* of what was previously *hidden* means that nothing fundamentally *new* transpires. The upshot is that death is only parasitic on the resurrection, which means there is "no room for a good which emerges through, and on the other side of, sin: a goodness after failure, and defined only in relation to that failure" (Ticciati 2016, p. 108). In IV.3.1, Barth notes that the order of creation "has its dignity, validity, power and fulness in the fact that Jesus Christ lives." Its "content and fulness" comes from the fact that Christ's life is the life of grace as the Saviour. As such, the "one order of God is the order of reconciliation," which is "more than the order of creation" but also the "confirmation and restoration of the order of creation." The life of Christ means the "establishment of the new order, the reconstitution of the old" (Barth 2010, IV.3.1, p. 43). Similarly, Barth is explicit within his doctrine of providence that God gives "time, space and opportunity" to creation even after the advent of the Christ (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 47). In IV.3.1, Barth reiterates this point (Barth 2010, pp. 335–36) but also suggests that this time between Christ's advent and his *parousia* has "its own specific glory," which is the particular glory of Christ Himself in the transition between them (Barth 2010, IV.3.1, pp. 360–62).

4. On Barth's doctrine of creation, see (Henry 2004; Hielema 1995; Tanner 2000; Gabriel 2014).

5. Paul Nimmo's discussion of the eccentric character of Barth's anthropology clarifies his "actualistic" ontology. As he writes, because the "existence, the history, and the activity of the ethical agent" have their "true determination in Jesus Christ, there is a real sense in which, for Barth, the ethical agent finds her true centre to be outside herself" (Nimmo 2007, p. 97). John Webster describes this feature as the "ecstatic character" of Barth's moral anthropology (Webster 1995, p. 225).

6. I have argued this point in "Gratitude for (One's Own) Life," forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

7. While Kant uses slightly different terminology than Barth, it is striking how similar their accounts of gratitude and honor are. As Kant writes, "Gratitude consists in honoring a person because of a benefit he has rendered us" (Kant 2017, p. 218). On Kant's account of gratitude, see (Timmons 2017).

8. Gerald McKenny rightly notes that Barth's account of gratitude does not *complete* grace, but rather corresponds to it, as the former would dissolve grace by reducing it to an economic transaction. See (McKenny 2013, pp. 210–11). As we shall see below, the dissolution of the logic of obedience only becomes clear when we see that the gift of grace we have received is God's honoring of us in Christ—and, to that extent, the honor that we return is caught within a cycle of reciprocity.

9. Gerald McKenny affirms the non-annihilating dimension of Barth's approach to the Christian life in his treatment of love. See (McKenny 2019, p. 389).

10. Birth and death have the advantage among other signs of being "contemplated directly," and of being present to us "continuously and naturally and self-evidently." Our recognition of our limits as bearing witness to God still hangs on special revelation—but regardless of whether humanity realizes it, "each individual man as such is a sign and testimony in this respect" (Barth 2010, III/3, pp. 227–28).

11. See also (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 530): "For our time is the dimension of our whole life. If our whole time is the gift of God, then God also pledges to maintain its reality as a whole."

12. I have elaborated on this comparative aspect of gratitude in "Gratitude for (One's Own) Life," forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

13. In II/1, Barth writes that the proper use of our free will "consists in our being thankful to God, not only for this or that but *for ourselves*, and therefore for God's foreordination which governs our self-determination" (Barth 2010, II/1, p. 586).

14. In this expansion of the judgment about the good of life to include solidarity with others, Barth has some commonality with John Finnis, for whom the initial perception of the "basic goods" of life, friendship, knowledge, etc. means seeing that they are "good not only for me or thee, but for 'anyone.'" Such a "childish" insight is then deepened by reflecting on the metaphysical capacities individuals have to actualize those goods, and by the evaluative judgment of the worth of those persons. See (Finnis 2011, pp. 35, 39).

15. The distinction between "egoistic" and "eudaimonistic" accounts is drawn from Nussbaum (2001), p. 31. While an egoistic theory might build moral norms upward and outward from the individual's interests or desires, a eudaimonistic theory answers how a person should live by specifying valuable features of a good life, but in such a way that explains why they are really valuable

for a particular person (rather than an abstract agent). For a helpful discussion of eudaimonism's role in the Christian life, see (Simmons 2016).

[16]   Biggar wries that we "should obey God's command, not out of spineless deference to the capricious wishes of an almighty despot, but out of regard for our own best good, which this gracious God alone truly understands and which he intends with all his heart" (Biggar, "Barth's Trinitarian Ethic," p. 215). Rose echoes Biggar, suggesting that God "ought to be obeyed not out of mindless obedience but out of regard for our own good and true happiness" (Rose 2010, p. 10).

[17]   Rose anticipates this worry. On his reading, the extrinsic basis of humanity's goodness in God means Barth's eudaimonism is unique, as it introduces discontinuities between what we "naturally" think is our good and the good as God reveals it to us in Christ (Rose 2010, pp. 123–32).

[18]   While Herdt rightly notes that it is because God gives us the gift of Himself that there is an "absolute claim on us," she argues the "heart of Barth's understanding of the basis of the divine command has not to do with debt as such, but with responsibility." Her worry is that it is not "just that we are bound because we are infinitely indebted—that we have somehow to pay God back for grace received," as that would entail we are "obliged *prior* to being commanded, simply reproducing the vicious circle that has always haunted theological voluntarism" (Herdt 2016, pp. 166–67). Herdt's corrective is helpful, yet she overlooks how gratitude and honor inform Barth's account of the divine command. While the same disclosure of grace that animates gratitude and honor gives the divine command, the moral forcefulness of the command is such that we are impelled to honor God who gives it to us. In that way, there is a sense of "debt" at the heart of the divine command that precedes responsibility—but it is non-economic, as we have seen, and cannot be repaid.

[19]   While a full treatment of Barth's ethics is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the difficulty of reconciling the reasons for action goes to the heart of his theology. Barth's treatment of God's love in II/1, §28 underscores that God loves for no good or purpose beyond His disclosure of Himself to us in Christ. As Tyler Wittman writes, we "must not seek for a higher motive, purpose, or end, than God's love in Christ, even if we attempt to locate that purpose in God's inner life . . . Whatever God's love means, it must enable us to say that God communicates himself to another as an intrinsically purposeful act without any higher end or greater good" (Wittman 2019, p. 172). At the same time, Barth writes that God's institution of the covenant with humanity through election is "the demonstration, the overflowing of the love which is the being of God, that He who is entirely self-sufficient, who even within Himself cannot know isolation, willed even in all His divine glory to share His life with another, and to have that other as the witness of His glory" (Barth 2010, II/2, pp. 9–10). This "glory" is transformed into honour within the domain of creation: creatureliness consists in having the covenant as a determination, in being "prepared for the place where [God's] honour dwells" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 364). God loves humanity for no good beyond Himself—yet this putative rejection of a teleological dimension to love sits alongside Barth's contention that creatures are teleologically ordered toward the display of God's glory and honor. The gap between these two is a feature of the gap between God's eternity and our time, and the problem of ethics that arises from it. Barth writes that "ethics must be a problem for us" because time has a beginning and end, as ethics "depends upon the command of the supra-temporal God" who is "bound to no time, and therefore the Lord of all times" (Barth 2010, II/1, p. 638). Gerald McKenny worries that this type of position is "ultimately self-defeating," asking whether God's action can "truly be *for* the human creature as such if the human creature as such is, and is what it is, solely so that God can be for it?" (McKenny 2021, p. 24). The worry seems predicated on the same bifurcation between humanity's own good and God that Barth, as we have seen, strives to overcome.

[20]   Barth invokes the notion of a "limited span" to life in order to reject any account of "life" that would lead to an acquisitiveness for more time. As Barth writes there, the limitations of our life by God mean that we are not "under the intolerable destiny of having to give sense, duration and completeness to his existence by his own exertions and achievements, and therefore in obvious exclusion of the view that he must and may and can by his own strength and powers eternally maintain, assert and confirm himself, attaining for himself his own dignity and honour" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 372).

[21]   I have addressed this feature in "Ectogestation and Humanity's *Whence*: An Exploration with Saint Augustine and Karl Barth, forthcoming in *Christian Bioethics.*

[22]   It is worth noting that Barth at points thought that gratitude was capable of taking on strange, paradoxical forms. In the *Göttingen Dogmatics,* he suggests that the penitence of the publican who cries "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner" in Luke 18 is paradigmatic of gratitude. See (Barth 2003a, p. 336).

[23]   Responding to Adorno's suggestion that Beethoven reconciled in his music what was unreconcilable in reality, William Kinderman writes that "Beethoven actually went far toward 'reconciling what is irreconcilable' through his handling of the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' in the lydian mode together with the animated, dance-like tonal sections marked 'feeling new strength.' If these drastically opposed idioms are at first juxtaposed, suggesting two independent beginnings, they are also partly integrated in the final section" (Kinderman 2006, p. 291).

References

Barth, Karl. 1981. *Ethics.* Translated by Dietrich Braun. New York: Seabury Press.

Barth, Karl. 2003a. *Unterricht in Der Christlichen Religion, Teil 3: Die Lehre von Der Versöhnung*. Edited by Hinrich Stoevesandt Gesamtausgabe. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag.

Barth, Karl. 2003b. *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.

Barth, Karl. 2010. *Church Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers.

Finnis, John. 2011. *Reason in Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gabriel, Andrew. 2014. *Barth's Doctrine of Creation: Creation, Nature, Jesus, and the Trinity*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Gollwitzer, Helmut. 1974. Der Glaube Als Dank. Christliche Existenz Als Leben in Der Dankbarkeit Bei Karl Barth. In *Liber Amicorum: Aangeboden Aan A. J. Rasker Bij Zijn Afscheid Als Kerkelijk Hoogleraar Aan de Rijksuniversiteit Te Leiden*. Edited by Kune Biezeveld. Leiden: Verlag nicht ermittelbar.

Henry, Martin. 2004. Karl Barth on Creation. *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69: 219–23. [CrossRef]

Herdt, Jennifer. 2016. Sleepers Wake! Eudaimonism, Obligation and the Call to Responsibility. In *The Freedom of a Christian Ethicist: The Future of a Reformation Legacy*. Edited by Brian Brock and Michael G. Mawson. London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, pp. 159–73.

Hielema, Syd. 1995. Searching for 'Disconnected Wires': Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation Revisited. *Calvin Theological Journal* 30: 75–93.

Hofheinz, Marco. 2019. Barth on the Christian Life. In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Bart*, 1st ed. Edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson. New York: Wiley, pp. 355–67. [CrossRef]

Huxley, Aldous. 1928. *Point Counter Point*. Garden City: Doubleday.

Kant, Immanuel. 2017. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kinderman, William. 2006. Beethoven's Last Quartets: Threshold to a Fourth Creative Period? In *The String Quartets of Beethoven*. Edited by William Kinderman. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, pp. 279–322. [CrossRef]

Mangina, Joseph L. 2001. *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God*. Issues in Systematic Theology. New York: Peter Lang, vol. 8.

Mangina, Joseph L. 2004. *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

McDowell, John. 2019. *Hope in Barth's Eschatology Interrogations and Transformations beyond Tragedy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

McKenny, Gerald. 2013. *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKenny, Gerald. 2019. Barth on Love. In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, 1st ed. Edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson. New York: Wiley, pp. 381–91. [CrossRef]

McKenny, Gerald. 2021. *Karl Barth's Moral Thought*, 1st ed. Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nimmo, Paul T. 2007. *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision*. London: T&T Clark.

Nussbaum, Martha. 2001. *Upheavals of Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ridenour, Autumn Alcott. 2018. *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging towards Death*. T&T Clark Enquiries in Theological Ethics. London: T&T Clark.

Rose, Matthew. 2010. *Ethics with Barth: God, Metaphysics and Morals*. Barth Studies. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Simmons, Frederick V. 2016. Eudaimonism and Christian Love. In *Love and Christian Ethics*. Edited by Frederick V. Simmons and Brian Sorrells. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, pp. 190–209.

Soulen, R. Kendall. 1996. *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Sullivan, J. W. N. 1960. *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, 1st Vintage ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Tanner, Kathryn. 2000. Creation and Providence. In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Edited by John Webster. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 111–26.

Ticciati, Susannah. 2016. How New Is New Creation? Resurrection and Creation Ex Nihilo. In *Eternal God, Eternal Life: Theological Investigations into the Concept of Immortality*. Edited by Philip Gordon Ziegler. London and Oxford: Bloomsbury T& T Clark, pp. 89–114.

Timmons, Mark. 2017. The Moral Significance of Gratitude in Kant's Ethics. In *Significance and System: Essays on Kant's Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 242–67. [CrossRef]

Webster, John. 1995. *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wittman, Tyler. 2019. *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Article

Is Scripture a Gift? Reflections on the Divine-Ecclesial Provision of the Canon

Brad East

College of Biblical Studies, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX 79699, USA; brad.east@acu.edu

Abstract: This article investigates whether the canon of Christian Holy Scripture is properly understood as a gift and, if so, what theological implications this might entail. Following the introduction, the article has three main sections. The first section proposes an expanded grammar by which to describe the production and reception of the canon in and by the church, under the superintending sovereignty of the divine will and action. The second section offers a guide to recent inquiry into "the gift" in the fields of philosophy and theology, particularly those theories that might prove useful for applying the concept of "gift" to Scripture. The third section unfolds a normative account of the Christian canon as a gift of the triune God to his people and through his people, thus making sense of the long-standing liturgical practice of responding to the reading of the sacred page in the public assembly with a cry of thanks to God.

Keywords: Bible; doctrine of Scripture; gift; gratitude; tradition; inspiration; church; liturgy; canon; theology

1. Introduction

"Thanks be to God!" Such is the church's response to hearing the Bible read aloud in worship. On its face the rationale for the cry of thanks is plain. For the lector does not merely read from the biblical text; she concludes the reading with a gloss, which hides in its formulaic simplicity a complex and indeed astonishing set of claims. Though formulaic, in other words, it is far from pro forma. The gloss is: "The word of the Lord". This phrase is a kind of liturgical suffix. It transforms in retrospect what the audience just heard. It is an ambassadorial announcement that those gathered in the assembly—whether thousands in a megachurch or hundreds in a cathedral or dozens in a storefront or two or three in a living room—have just been spoken to by the living God. How? Through the words of his servants: the written words of prophets and apostles, read aloud by pastors and priests of his people. These words are a medium, therefore, an instrument of the Lord's speech in the present tense and, hence, a means of grace. Just so, they are a mystery of the gospel: through them Christ is present to his beloved; through them Christ imparts blessings to the baptized; through them Christ fulfills his promise to his disciples: "I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you" (John 14:18).[1] Christ comes to believers through the word: for, as the passages continues, those who love Christ keep his word; he abides in them, together with his Father (v. 23), since the word believers hear and keep is not Christ's own, "but is from the Father who sent me" (v. 24). The Father sends also another, "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit", whose work it is to teach believers and to bring to remembrance all that Christ taught while still on earth (v. 26). So that, in the hearing of the word in the assembly of faith, the Spirit is as it were the agent of advent; it is he who brings Christ to his people through his word, he whose presence effects union of the body with the head, he whose secret operation makes ordinary elements of creation and culture—water, bread, wine, texts—the visible and audible words of God. Which is to say, channels of divine charity.

No wonder, then, the reiterated liturgical response of thanks. What the church encounters each time Holy Scripture is read aloud in the liturgy is nothing less than the persons

and works of the Holy Trinity. What the church encounters, in a word, is *grace*. Grace is a gift, and a gift given elicits gratitude. In this respect liturgical gratitude expressed in reply to the reading of the word in Christian worship is a matter of common sense. What else should we expect?

I want to suggest that we take a second look, however. For it is not only divine grace or divine presence—in brief, the gospel itself—for which the church gives thanks in response to Scripture's reading. It is thanks for the reading as such. Which means that it is thanks for Scripture itself. Which raises a pregnant theological question: Is Scripture a gift?

That is the question I aim to explore in this article. For, on one hand, "the gift" is a much-debated concept in philosophy, ethics, and theology; as is, on the other hand, the nature or ontology of the canon. My goal, though, is less probative than it is probing. I aim not to demonstrate a claim so much as investigate a range of conceptual possibilities. Is it fitting to call the Christian Bible a gift? If so, in what sense is it a gift? What are the plausible ways of construing it as a gift? How does its gift-like character inform the church's use of and relationship to it? And what are the implications either for describing the church's long history with it or for prescribing proper (and proscribing improper) practices of receiving it?—precisely as a gift, that is, with the requisite gratitude, whatever that might entail.

I will proceed in three sections. First, I will offer a theological account of Scripture's artefaction. For the canon stands at the end of a long production line, and the agents of its manufacture are simultaneously divine and ecclesial. Here I will provide a sort of lexicon for this divine-ecclesial process, drawing on well-worn concepts (inspiration, illumination) while expanding the roster of terms for the larger set of moments and discrete activities that call for description. Second, I will offer a guide to the spectrum of theories on the gift and gratitude. This will not be exhaustive but only a reasonable sketch of the main positions on offer so that we are able to see what it would mean, from different vantage points, to understand the Bible as a gift. I want less to commit to a single master theory of Scripture-as-gift than to hold open multiple conceptual paths: partly because I am less confident than others of the one true gift-theory; partly because this investigation is exploratory, and therefore patterned on the form of plural "if . . . then" queries rather than a single "because . . . therefore" argument. Third and finally, having provided both a set of ways of speaking of the canon as an artifact of divine-ecclesial provenance and a map of ways of speaking of the gift in general, I will suggest some conclusions about thinking and speaking of Holy Scripture as a gift of God for the people of God. My hope is to edge some small degree closer to understanding why it is, and why it is so fitting, that the people respond as they do: "Thanks be to God!"

2. The Making of Scripture

The doctrine of Scripture, or bibliology, contains many elements. The origins or making of Scripture is only one of them. Others include the nature of Scripture, its attributes or properties, its purpose in the mission of the church, and its proper interpretation. About these and related matters I will say little in what follows. I am interested exclusively in what I will call the artefaction of the canon.

For the canon, as is often said, did not drop from heaven. It is a made thing, an artifact of human creativity and culture. The church confesses that it is more than that—but it is not less. What that "more" comprises is a matter of faith, which is why it is an object of confession and not of empirical proof, much less logical demonstration. The phenomenal features of the texts of Old and New Testament are identical in kind to other members of the class of texts; in this respect, though not in others, the Bible is "like any other book".[2] There is no canonical text, no pericope or verse, not written by some or other human being. Not even the Decalogue as we have it is scribbled by the finger of God. The canon is a made thing; as such, it is also a human thing.

Be that as it may, the church has long held that, though the canon's human, historical, and cultural properties are real and relevant to understanding and interpretating it, they are not its defining feature. In perceiving them you have seen something true of the canon,

but you have not thereby understood what it most fundamentally is. For what it is—its ontology or nature—is a function of the divine will and action. Describing the canon apart from God is akin to describing a human embryo apart from her mother. Possible, but sorely incomplete and finally unilluminating. What the canon is, therefore, it is in relation to God. God is its preeminent maker and author, its first cause and special source, the prevenient artificer who has so fashioned these and only these texts that they are fit to serve as the embassy of his rule, the temple from which his voice resounds.[3] In accordance with his will, they thus constitute the one canon of Holy Scripture in and for the church, the one word of the one Lord for his one people.[4]

Neither Israel nor church fashions a theory of how this might be the case before it begins to read the prophets and apostles as God's word to his people. Rather, their writings appear in the midst of the people's life; the people eventually receive and transmit them in practices of public worship and private devotion; their presence and authority are taken for granted; and only then are theological questions about their nature and ultimate origins posed. After many centuries of liturgical use, personal piety, homiletical and commentarial interpretation, and subsequent theological reflection, the church developed a grammar by which to describe the scriptures' character as simultaneously divinely and humanly wrought. The primary term in that grammar is "inspiration". Following 2 Timothy 3:16, it was said that what set apart the canonical scriptures from all other texts, however true or edifying the latter might be, was that the former alone are inspired or breathed upon by God's Spirit. Unique among all texts, that is, they have God as their principal author or speaker. Whatever else is true of them, therefore, they successfully mediate the word of the Lord Christ to his body, the church; whatever other questions one might legitimately ask of them (the range of their competence; the nature of their historicity; the precision of their details; the relationship between them and sacred tradition), they are worthy of trust. From them the faithful are to learn; to them, in matters of faith and morals at least, they are to submit.

It is important to see, however, that while patristic and medieval thinkers presuppose the doctrine of inspiration, it is not load-bearing in their systems. It is not made to do much work. It functions more as a premise than as a conclusion, much less a detailed systematic theory.[5] It is not until the sixteenth century that inspiration assumes central importance; thereafter it is drafted into service as a major component of Christian doctrine (for obvious reasons).[6] Much of this service was fruitful: Protestant scholastic reflection on inspiration has a good deal to teach us, not least its rich integration with the doctrine of God and its sophisticated account of divine and human action.[7] But inspiration can be asked to do too much.[8] All too often there are only two major terms in bibliology: inspiration (God's role in Scripture's origins) and illumination (God's role in Scripture's reception).[9] The result is imbalance, superficiality, and misrepresentation. Imbalance, because inspiration ends up crowding out other aspects of God's work in making Scripture; superficiality, because the long and extraordinarily complex process of Scripture's coming-to-be is reduced by a single word to a simple once-for-all action; and misrepresentation, because the human-ecclesial component of Scripture is rendered either invisible or redundant. As I have already said, no account of the canon that elides or abjures its divine authorship can claim to understand it. But the reverse is true as well: to deny the *ecclesial* authorship of Scripture is equally to fail to grasp what it is. Under God, the church is the human author of the Bible.[10]

In search of a more adequate depiction of the nature and origins of Scripture, recent theologians have proposed new terms beyond the dyad of inspiration–illumination. These terms enlarge the theological imagination by offering a more detailed account of the discrete moments in the canon's production. The aim is for theological concepts to correspond to what we know to have been the case in the canon's actual history, human and ecclesial, and for these concepts to reinforce rather than undermine the church's confidence in the canon's determination by the divine will. Instead of inflating the reach of inspiration to mean *everything God did before the closure of the canon to make it his word*, inspiration is reserved for a

specific moment or activity, lest in coming to mean everything it ceases to mean anything.[11] In what follows I want to build on these recent suggestions, employing, refining, and expanding their proposed terminology. The goal is a revised theological lexicon for the artefaction of Holy Scripture.[12]

* * *

Start from the end. When we speak of the millennia-long labor to fashion a canon for ecclesial use, what is the finished product to which we refer? We have already seen the answer: the texts of the prophets and apostles mediate that which they are not themselves in full: the living word of the living God. That is to say, they make (truly) present that which is not (fully) present, under the form and aspect of a sign, both as a fulfillment of the *past* promise of the Lord to his people and as a *present* promise to be fulfilled in full on the day of the Lord's return. God's word in Scripture is thus an eschatological reality: provision for the passage in the wilderness from initial deliverance to final completion in the Promised Land; manna for sustenance between the Red Sea and the River Jordan. Put differently, the canon is a function of the Great Commission because the canon belongs—exclusively—to the time between the times. In the absence of sin, there is no need for it; in the presence of Christ, it is redundant.[13]

The church has a name for such phenomena in its life: μυστήριον, *sacramentum*. As Robert Jenson (1999, p. 260) writes, however, "The liturgical or devotional reading of Scripture is not 'a sacrament' by any usual enumeration". Nevertheless, "the coincidence of heaven and earth, future and past, sign and *res* is the truth of Scripture's role and power: Scripture is indeed a 'mystery'". By "mystery" Jenson means a symbolic practice of the church, however great or small, that effects communion with the triune communion of persons, thereby offering a foretaste in this life of that which the baptized will partake of, without restriction or limit, in the life of the world to come. Whether or not Scripture is aptly denoted a sacrament, then, there is no question that it is *sacramental* in function. It is among the chief mysteries of the church's life of worship and mission.[14]

As such, Scripture is the sacrament of revelation. Its character, in turn, is more specific than its generic definition as a means of grace or a vehicle of divine presence. It bears to believers the grace *of the Word*; it is the medium, not of a mute deity, but of the *communicative* presence of the Son. When God is unveiled, he speaks; and between Ascension and Parousia, Scripture is that unveiling. To stand in the assembly when the sacred page is read aloud is to stand with Isaiah in dumbstruck contrition: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple" (6:1). And just as Isaiah exclaims, "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (6:5) so the faithful cry out, "my ears have heard the Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth!" The reading of Scripture is thus a promise that a day is coming when faith will be translated into sight: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). Though the church cannot see her Lord, she does hear him. And his verbal bread is sufficient for the day.[15] For as St. Peter recognized, Christ alone has "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

A mystery of revelation: this is what the church, under God, produces in the canon. As a mystery, it is holy. What is holy is sanctified, set apart by the Lord for his sovereign purposes. Accordingly, John Webster (2003) argues that theology ought to deploy the term "sanctification" to the entire sweep of Scripture's existence. For "sanctification refers to the work of the Spirit of Christ through which creaturely realities are elected, shaped and preserved to undertake a role in the economy of salvation: creaturely realities are sanctified by divine use" (ibid., p. 26). But this work is limited neither to the beginning nor to the end of the canon's becoming, or even "to the text as finished product". Rather, "The Spirit's relation to the text broadens out into the Spirit's activity in the life of the people of God which forms the environment within which the text takes shape and serves the divine self-presence" (ibid., pp. 29–30). This broadening includes both "the complex histories of pre-literary and literary tradition, redaction and compilation" as well as canonization, interpretation, and illumination (ibid., p. 30). In short, the sanctification of Holy Scripture

by the Holy Spirit continues till kingdom come. It is a single operation across centuries, continents, and cultures to consecrate a book to be, and to be received in faith as, the word of God for the people of God. From ancient inciting events to stories handed down orally, from initial inscription to revision and redaction, from preservation and republication to ongoing liturgical use, from informal codification to memorization and translation, from synodal and episcopal lists to definitive canonization, from reception and approval to technologies of text production and private and personal use in the church: each and all of these moments, and many more besides, are superintended by God the Spirit in a temporally extended but unified action, working in and through the diffuse actions and wills of human beings to set apart the canon in and for the church.[16] As it is written, "no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but [human beings] moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:20–21). Sanctification is how this is true.

But not only sanctification. If that term denotes not only the production of Scripture but its ongoing use by—or better, its use by the Spirit in—the church, then what we need is a disaggregation of Scripture's sanctification into smaller moments, events, and activities. The simplest move is to draw a line, conceptually clear if historically tenuous, between the canon's creation and reception. Since it is the former that we are principally interested in, we will touch only briefly on the latter. The indefinite reception of the completed canon in the church's life may be understood as consisting in three elements: *transmissio*, *lectio*, and *illuminatio*. The church is tasked with (1) handing on the canonical scriptures, which includes taking care for their preservation, their translation, and their republication via various technologies. She is tasked further and above all with (2) *reading* the scriptures, privileging them in her life in all their irreducible textuality and linguistic particularity. But she is not to do so by her own lights, left to her own devices. Instead, the church is to read and to listen to Scripture (3) under the prayerful invocation of the Holy Spirit, by whose illuminating power alone the word heard in the words of the text will be "accepted . . . not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13 RSV). Thus is the Spirit's work of sanctification accomplished in the church's reception of the completed canon.

It is this completion on which we are focused. Like Webster, Paul Griffiths (2011) has proposed that we appropriate a theological term native to another doctrinal locus and repurpose it here, in the doctrine of Scripture, in order to describe the creation or production of the canon. The term is "confection". In a commentary on the Song of Songs, Griffiths writes:

> This piece of scripture, like most, has a long and complicated history of composition, redaction, edition, translation, commentary, and liturgical use, much of which is no longer accessible to us. "Confection" is a useful summary term for this process: to confect is to make something sweet and beautiful by judicious mixing of ingredients; it may also imply a co-making, an act of making in cooperation with other makers. The confectioner makes sweetmeats; the Catholic priest, it used to be said (the usage is archaic but elegant), cooperates with God and the people of God in the confection of the sacrament of the Mass; and the people of the Lord cooperate with the Lord in the confection of the canon of scripture as a whole and in each of its parts. (ibid., p. xxiii)

Griffiths goes on to elaborate a theory of Scripture's confection that includes not only various recensions of an initial document but continuous authoritative translations of whatever final form of the text—whether actual, hypothetical, or critically recomposed—is now taken to be a text's "original" version. For Griffiths, there are only versions; the "original" (almost always an imagined or critical construct) is the first of a series, and its location there is its sole precedence. Precedence, that is, with respect to the unqualified status of each and every version as truly Holy Scripture and therefore truly the word of the Lord to the church. For the Bible read aloud in the liturgy, whether in Latin or French,

Arabic or Swahili, is not prefaced or concluded by the proviso, "*a translation of* God's word". It is God's word as such.[17]

Griffiths is right about this, but we will leave his account of approved canonical versions to one side. It is his enlistment of "confection" for description of the divine-ecclesial activity of making the canon that I want to elaborate. The choice is felicitous in multiple ways. First, it draws on the language of the church's liturgy to describe another fixture of the same; for Holy Scripture is at once the cradle and the child of Christian worship. Theology does well not to forget this. Second, the language is sacramental, and as we have seen, the canon is a sacramental reality. Third, the sacramental analogue is the Eucharist, and the likeness between the visible word on the altar and the audible word on the page has long been a point of fruitful rumination for the church's teachers. Benedict XVI (2010, para. 56) writes in *Verbum Domini* that "Christ, truly present under the species of bread and wine, is analogously present in the word proclaimed in the liturgy". Likewise Henri de Lubac ([1959] 1998, p. 241) observes that "Scripture is bread, but for the Christian this bread does not become the living food that it ought to be until it has been consecrated by Jesus". Confection thus pairs well with sanctification, for as de Lubac observes, the scriptures are merely texts like any other, just as the bread and wine are food like any other, unless and until Jesus makes them otherwise.[18]

Fourth, then, "confection" recommends itself by its reference to a corporate human and ecclesial action in and through which the triune God enacts a work at once ordinary (a meal; a book) and miraculous (Christ's body and blood; the word of the Lord). It follows that no account of either the Eucharist or the canon will prove fitting that perceives divine and human activity to be mutually exclusive. In its production, Holy Scripture is both fully divine and fully human. There are no "gaps" in the record to fill in with exclusively divine action; nor are there parts of Scripture—its prehistory, its revisions, its editions, its translations, its collections—in which the work of the Holy Spirit is lacking. The canon comes from God; the canon comes from the church. In it we hear the voice of both. There is priority between the two: Ruth and Ezra, Acts and the Apocalypse are first of all the word of God; this is why they continue to be read in the church. But the priority of the divine does not erase the human. Ruth remains Ruth, and the vision of St. John was and is his and not another's. This reveals the disanalogy between the Supper and Scripture, at least on a catholic account of sacramental transformation. The authorial voice and human element of the Bible are not accidental to it. In this respect the sacramentality of the canon is akin more to consubstantiation than to transubstantiation.[19]

In any case, that is the rationale for employing "confection" to describe Scripture's creation, as a pair to its reception. But just as the latter calls for sub-division, so does the former. I will use two terms here, one familiar, one unfamiliar. The familiar is "inspiration". Inspiration includes the total sequence running from some original revelatory event or experience to its being written down in (more or less) fixed textual form. I suggest we see four discrete moments in this sequence, howsoever lengthy they may be in time: *revelatio*, *traditio*, *inscriptio*, *redactio*. For illustration, consider Ezekiel. "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (1:1). This is the revelatory moment. The moment of tradition is the handing-on, by word of mouth or formal teaching, of what was seen or heard, received or experienced. These are the folk stories of the patriarchs and judges, of Jesus and the apostles. In the case of an Ezekiel, one thinks of the circle of students or servants or fellow prophets who attend his message, spread it to others, or remember it after his death. Inscription is when that message is put into writing. Sometimes this might occur quickly; sometimes, not for decades or centuries. But at some point it occurs, whether or not during the lifetime of the subject or "author" in question. Finally, the text thus inscribed is revised: by colleagues (as with Ezekiel or Jeremiah); by delegates (as with St. Paul's letters); by a "school" (as with St. John's Gospel); by scribes of a more formal sort (as with the Law of Moses or the Psalms of David); by heirs who lay claim to a legacy (as with Isaiah).[20] This "moment" of redaction, best conceived as a complex

diachronic process, completes the whole series of events that began long before—say, by the river Chebar. The result: the Hebrew canonical book the church calls "Ezekiel".

Each of these moments or activities falls under the larger claim of inspiration. For inspiration is not limited either to the *writing* of a canonical text or to that text's *author's* mental or spiritual experiences or intentions. Inspiration is a predicate of canonical texts; inspiration therefore names the work of the Holy Spirit to produce each text just as it stands. If a text is something of a "pure" authorial product, lacking an inciting revelatory event, subsequent oral retelling, and serial revision—such as, plausibly, the letter to St. Philemon—then so be it: the old paradigm of the inspired author dictating a text in its finished form obtains in such a case. But this is the exception, not the rule. In nearly every case, the discrete texts that make up the canon contain, in their histories of production, most or all of the four aspects outlined above. And the doctrine of inspiration extends to each of them. God the Holy Spirit so moved in the lives, the minds, and the wills of each and every human person involved, however tangentially, in the creation of each and every canonical text—from Genesis and Exodus to the minor prophets to Acts and Romans to the catholic epistles—that the final product, the text as we have it, whether in the form of ancient manuscripts or an eclectic reconstruction, is in accordance with the divine will. The text, put simply, is what God wants it to be. It says what God wants it to say. In the formulation of St. Thomas Aquinas (1948): God's act, in sovereignly willing our free willing, is infallible but not coercive; he moves within us so that what we freely will to do is just what he wills that we do. Under conditions of sin, we may fail to do the good that God invariably desires; this failure he permits. But in the case of the canon, he permits no failure, no defection from his good intentions. The same logic that underpins the inscrutable δεῖ of the Passion—the claim that "it was necessary" for the Messiah to be handed over to the gentiles (Acts 17:3), to suffer and die and rise on the third day, for this occurred "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (2:23)—applies also to Scripture. Divine providence superintends its composition, from start to finish. This is what it means to say that it is inspired.

But inspiration is only one part of Scripture's confection: the familiar part. For inspiration concludes when the text in question is finished, and it is a mistake to extend the range of inspiration's meaning into the text's afterlife in the church. I suggest instead that we search for another term to denote this second part of Scripture's creation. Think of it along temporal lines: sanctification comprehends millennia, from Abraham to Christ's return.[21] The division between confection and reception lies somewhere in the middle patristic period (though given the informal character of canonization, it is conceivable to locate it much later, in the sixteenth century).[22] Inspiration then includes the whole history of Israel and the apostolic church, terminating traditionally with the death of the last apostle, though in my scheme continuing into the early second century (since certain canonical texts were likely written or definitively revised in that time).[23] But we need a means of describing the time, and in particular the activities, that occur between the apostles and, say, the Council of Chalcedon. There is overlap with what I have called the canon's reception, but in an important sense there is not a canon to be received during the second, third, and fourth centuries after Christ; the canon is a question and a task, not a fact. It is not merely given. This time is thus marked by *transmissio* and *lectio*; it is drawn forward by the Spirit toward canonization; but as a period of testing and discernment and debate, it includes also what I will call *probatio*. The term calls to mind the exhortation of 1 John 4:1: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world".[24] By analogy, what the postapostolic church was called to do, distributed as she was across a vast range of locales, beset as she was by all manner of candidates for canonical status, was *probare spiritus si ex Deo sint*: to test the texts "to see whether they are of God". For, as we saw above, "no prophecy ever came by human will, but [human beings] moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:21); yet as St. John warns, numerous pseudoprophets have gone out into the world. This means they must be tested, probed, discerned. The test for the spirits

(i.e., would-be Christian prophets claiming to speak by the Spirit) is plainly stated: "every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (1 John 4:2). The test for the nascent patristic church used an expanded principle of discrimination: the Rule of Faith. What was ancient, of apostolic provenance, received by the many churches, and in accordance with the Rule was judged canonical; what was not, not.[25] This is the time of canonical testing, a kind of probationary period before the church was secure in her confession of those texts, and just those texts, that God intended to bear preeminence in the church's worship and teaching. By AD 500, the matter is largely settled—though questions continue to linger on the margins for some time.[26]

Probation terminates in a decision; this decision is canonization. I therefore propose, as a final term in our enlarged lexicon of Scripture's coming-to-be, that the overall process of transmission, probation, and canonization be named with help from another sacramental register: "chrismation". Chrismation is the completion of the sacrament of baptism; it is the sign and seal of the grace and holiness received in the waters that drown the flesh and raise one to new life in Christ. Anointed with oil, the baptizand is literally "christ-ed"—christened or chrismated—which is to say, effectually made a "little Christ" (Lewis 1952, p. 177). Baptism's fulfillment in sacramental anointing is the church's confirmation that the new believer who has just joined Jesus in the Jordan has also joined the Twelve in the Upper Room; there the risen Jesus breathes on them the promised Holy Spirit (John 20:19–23), pictured by St. Luke as fiery tongues descending upon the apostles at the feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). In this way the paired comings of Son and Spirit are symbolized in the twin, and thus inseparable, sacraments of initiation into the church.[27] In Orthodox practice, furthermore, the neophyte immediately receives the Eucharist for the first time, whatever her age, thereby completing the sacramental saturation of this newly adopted child of the Father by the persons and graces of Christ and his Spirit.

Following Webster and Griffiths' respective repurposing of sanctification and confection, I suggest we mix sacramental metaphors and use chrismation as a fitting image for the work of the Spirit to complete the creation of Scripture between its composition and canonization. Why? First, because inspiration ought to retain its proper scope and focus: the manifold processes leading to the production of the particular texts of the canon. Second, because reception, properly speaking, does not begin with the apostolic fathers; the issue of the canon and what it consists of is far more muddled than drawing a simple line between the apostles, on one side, and their immediate successors, on the other. Here, as elsewhere, the church's theological description of God's work in salvation history ought to correspond to what we reasonably believe actually to have occurred in that history. Consequently, third, a *theological* account of the canon's origins and formation calls for language that depicts the period between the final redaction of apostolic texts and the episcopal and synodal proposals of canonical lists as a domain of divine action. At the same time, fourth, this account must be ecclesial in character, for it is the church and the church alone, humanly speaking, that receives and debates and discerns and ratifies the texts that become the canon. Griffiths is therefore right to say that the church confects the canon, even as we, like he, make clear that this is God's work in and through the work of the church.

In sum, just as classical treatments of inspiration must be amended so as to incorporate activities beyond the singular writer dictating words (to an amanuensis) dictated to him (by the Spirit),[28] so treatments of inchoate scriptural collections and semiformal canonization should be expanded and deepened so as to offer a global depiction of this process in all its human complexity, historical detail, and ecclesial character *as* governed and determined by the Lord. The canon *becomes* the canon, and not just an undefined list of inspired books, by the work of God in the people of God.[29] This work is the chrismation of the scriptures. Before they were not a canon; now they are a canon: the holy medium of the Lord's word to the faithful. The canon finds its perfection or completion in this act of anointing, as it were: a descent of the Spirit upon the texts, sealing their contents and attesting their finality, a descent akin to the coming of the Spirit upon the elements in the Eucharist.[30] For this

reason the traditional quotation of Revelation 22:18–19 as applying to the canon as a whole is entirely appropriate: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book". Read retrospectively, following the closure of the canon, this warning applies henceforth to all who might be tempted to alter it, whether by addition or subtraction.[31]

What Alexander Schmemann (1974, p. 75) writes of chrismation resonates wonderfully with its analogous deployment in bibliology: "Born again in the baptismal font, 'renewed after the image of Him Who created him,' restored to his 'ineffable beauty,' man is now ready to be 'set apart' for his new and high calling in Christ. Baptized into Christ, having put on Christ, he is ready to receive the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of Christ, the very gifts of Christ the Anointed—the King, the Priest, and the Prophet—the triune content of all genuine Christian life". By extension, the *munus triplex* applies not only to baptized and confirmed believers but also to the inspired holy scriptures.[32]

* * *

The canon of Holy Scripture is a sacramental artifact of the church, produced by the undivided work of the Holy Trinity for the edification and nourishment of the church in her liturgy and doctrine. Its holiness is a divine gift, bestowed from above by Christ through the Spirit, on a par with the holiness of the Christian, received by grace through the sacraments of baptism, chrismation, and communion. As these sacraments are administered by men and women whom God uses as channels of his saving grace, so Scripture was fashioned by human hands through which God worked, invisibly, infallibly, and lavishly. However complex the process, the outcome is simple enough. And the church has always known the proper response: gratitude.

3. Speaking of Gifts

Gratitude is apt to a gift given and received. But before we label the canon a gift, we must know what we mean—or what others mean—by the term. In lieu of a survey or historical sequence, in what follows I will distill and summarize what I take to be the fundamental questions posed and concepts proposed by the philosophical and theological literature on the gift. The questions in particular will serve as branches along a theoretical decision tree. In this section I will mostly refrain from deciding which branches I take to be correct, though some such decision is unavoidable in the act of summary selection. The aim, though, is to wait until the third section to judge which choices are most fitting with respect to conceiving of Scripture as a gift.

The first question about the gift concerns what distinguishes it from a commodity, that is, an item bought and sold in the marketplace. At first glance the question might seem straightforward, but it turns out there is no strict or obvious demarcation between the two. As Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2016) observes in his foundational work, *Essai sur le don*, at least three obligations paradigmatically attend practices of the gift: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate. The implicit sense, commonly held at least in certain Western classes and communities for the last century or two, that gifts are by nature "free" in the sense that they are neither conditioned nor obligatory, is by no means common to other societies at other times. There is, accordingly, no prima facie reason to accord it normative status as a definition, much less as an ideal. The fact that this sense exists does, however, open up "the gift" as a discourse in which and with which to argue.

One argument that follows this disjunction is the nature of obligation in general.[33] Is the state of being obligated by another necessarily less preferable than not being so obligated? Does gift giving, at least most of the time, unavoidably obligate and (if obligation is less than ideal) thereby put others in a position that one would, or should, rather avoid?

Is obligation merely, or at least intrinsically, a form of or analogue to *indebtedness*? So that gift-giving is by its very form an act of power over another through which the givee is placed into a kind of peonage to the giver?—until, that is, such time as she "pays off" the debt accrued by (the obligation to receive) the gift.

Such are the worries of some theorists of the gift with respect to its presumptive obligatory powers. A broader way to state the concern is that the gift, on this traditional construal, is reducible to an economic contract written (however invisibly) into the unspoken norms and social expectations of a community. *Do ut des* (or *quid pro quo*) becomes the primary or sole form of relation between individuals as well as groups. How, from this perspective, can a gift ever be other than a burden? How, further, can it be genuinely gratuitous?

Griffiths (2009, p. 52) offers a strong contrast between two ideal types: "an economy of obligation and an economy of gift". Having described the former, he sets in relief against it an account of the latter. For "not all transfer [of goods] occurs within an economy of obligation", since some "occurs under the sign of gift":

> These transfers . . . are noncalculative and do not bring debt or any other obligation into being. Gift-givers in this economy do not concern themselves with the credit worthiness of those to whom they give; they do not consider whether those they gift are deserving; and they do not give with expectation of gratitude or any other return—though they hope that the gift given will be accepted as what it is, and as a result bring joy, and the flourishing that goes with joy, to its givees; they may also entreat their givees to accept what is given as it is given, just so long as they do not make the gift conditional upon such acceptance. Givers in this economy also often transfer inexhaustible goods, goods that when given and accepted are not lost to the giver. Those who accept a transfer within the economy of gift are, when they accept the gift as given, therefore obliged to nothing, and this makes the relation between giver and givee in the economy of gift simpler than that connecting those involved in the transfer of goods in the economy of obligation. In the latter, there is debt, discharge, and calculation as well as goods transferred; in the former, there are only giver, gift, and givee.[34] (ibid., p. 55)

Griffiths goes on to offer imperfect but nonetheless illustrative examples of non-calculative, non-zero-sum gift-giving: teaching; friendship; marriage; blood donation; almsgiving (especially alms given anonymously to strangers; ibid., pp. 61–62). Moreover, he specifies that what may appear to be conditions or "strings" attached to gifts are rightly interpreted as warnings, predictions, and entreaties, not as binding obligations. In this case, even the "return" of gratitude "is no more or less than acceptance and proper use, which is certainly a kind of reciprocity, but not one of debt or obligation" (ibid., p. 57).

Now consider an alternative account of gift, debt, and gratitude, from G. K. Chesterton (1924). After describing the shock of realization and joy at thankfulness for one's sheer existence, and the role this shock plays in the happiness and wisdom of saints and mystics alike, he writes:

> [T]he shortest statement of one aspect of this illumination is to say it is the discovery of an infinite debt. It may seem a paradox to say that a man may be transported with joy to discover that he is in debt. But this is only because in commercial cases the creditor does not generally share the transports of joy; especially when the debt is by hypothesis infinite and therefore unrecoverable. But here again the parallel of a natural love-story of the nobler sort disposes of the difficulty in a flash. There the infinite creditor does share the joy of the infinite debtor; for indeed they are both debtors and both creditors. In other words debt and dependence do become pleasures in the presence of unspoilt love; the word is used too loosely and luxuriously in popular simplifications like the present; but here the word is really the key. It is the key of all the problems of Franciscan morality which puzzle the merely modern mind; but above all it is the key of asceticism. It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be for ever paying it. He will be for ever giving

back what he cannot give back, and cannot be expected to give back. He will be always throwing things away into a bottomless pit of unfathomable thanks. Men who think they are too modern to understand this are in fact too mean to understand it; we are most of us too mean to practise it. We are not generous enough to be ascetics; one might almost say not genial enough to be ascetics. A man must have magnanimity of surrender, of which he commonly only catches a glimpse in first love, like a glimpse of our lost Eden. But whether he sees it or not, the truth is in that riddle; that the whole world has, or is, only one good thing; and it is a bad debt. (ibid., p. 72)

Chesterton's point is threefold. First, what we have been given we could never repay. Second, this is the cause of praise and inexhaustible delight, rather than despair or resentment, not least because the giver of being is himself the infinite font of joy. And third—a distinctly Anselmian point—the infinite giver of a kind of infinite debt that debt, and then some, on our behalf as one of us; to such a double-giver no obligation could ever be bondage, for it is the highest form of freedom and flourishing.[35]

Turn, then, to the person of the giver broadly construed. What makes a giver a giver? What set of properties, dispositions, or obligations constitutes a giver as such—or, perhaps, sets apart the ideal or paradigmatic giver from approximations and failures to rise to that level? One strand of reflection on the gift, prominent in continental philosophy (and in theologians like Griffiths, as evidenced above), is that the giver must be free from compulsion: certainly of an external kind, possibly internal as well. Additionally, the giver must, on this view, be free of *interest* in more than one sense. The gift may not function as a sort of loan, collecting literal interest until the recipient "repays" with an equivalent gift "plus more" on top of the original "amount". In less strictly economic terms, the giver ought not to be *invested* in the use or issue of the gift. The negative example here is a parent "giving" (not loaning) an adult child a large sum of cash, then punishing the child—via disapproval, disappointment, resignation, or passive aggression—for not spending the cash wisely; that is, as the parent would have liked. In this way the ideal gift demands a wholly *disinterested* giver: both unbiased and removed from inserting herself into the designs and desires of the recipient.[36]

Whether or not the giver *conditions* the givee by giving a gift, may or should the giver's gifting be *conditioned* in some respect? Recent scholarship on St. Paul makes this question thematic for interpretation of his letters, specifically regarding the doctrine of grace. At the formal and historical level, John Barclay (2015, pp. 70–75) expounds six "perfections" of the gift, by which he means ways in which the concept and practice of the gift can be taken to their logical conclusion or even extreme. Each is a coherent account of the gift; though more than one may overlap, they need not entail some or all of the others; and no author, including Paul, should be presumed to mean any or all of the perfected concepts until exegesis shows it to be the case. Two of the six are especially relevant here: what Barclay calls the gift's "priority" and its "incongruity". The first names the total precedence of the giver's giving of the gift to the recipient's doing anything in relation to the giver so as to elicit the gift—including asking for it. "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The second perfection depicts the gift as incongruous, that is, as unrelated to and unmatched by the recipient's merit, or lack thereof. No relation obtains between desert and receipt. The gift is mine whether or not I asked for it, whether or not I deserve it, whether or not I am likely to use it well. In Barclay's words, such a gift may "be figured as one given without condition, that is, *without regard to the worth of the recipient*" (ibid., pp. 72–73, emphasis original). This is the strongest possible affirmative answer to the question of whether the giver, and thus the gift, ought to be unconditioned. This answer overlaps substantially with the traditional Augustinian and Reformed understanding of divine grace, though it is not coincident with it.[37]

One modest demurral from a Protestant theologian is worth noting, though. Edwin Van Driel (2021) affirms Barclay's proposal in the main but wants to amend one aspect of it regarding "conditionedness". For, as van Driel writes, "to say that God's election is not

based on any conditions in *us*"—for example, "lineage, genealogy, ethnicity, or biological connection" (Barclay 2015, p. 530)—"does not exclude that God's election may be based on conditions in *God*" (Van Driel 2021, p. 305, emphasis mine). He goes on:

> Theologically speaking, divine election can be characterized as a form of divine self-commitment. When God elects the other, God also elects Godself—that is, in election God commits Godself to be one's God, to be with and for the elect. If God elects not an individual but a people, God thereby commits Godself to the well-being of a lineage, of a genealogy—not because there is anything intrinsic to this lineage that conditions God, but because in electing a people God conditions Godself to be for this people and its offspring. (ibid.)

If we accept this argument as a plausible amendment to Barclay, then we may say the following: Even in situations of a gift's extreme incongruity, whereby nothing external to the giver conditions her giving, the giver herself may, by word or deed, condition herself, her future giving, and/or her ongoing relationship to the givee, just in virtue of giving a particular gift.[38]

There are, according to Barclay (2015, pp. 70–75), four other "perfections" of the gift. These are (1) *superabundance*, or the lavish nature of the gift; (2) *singularity*, or the complete characterization of the giver as generous without exception; (3) *efficacy*, or the infallible power of the gift to elicit precisely what it is given to do; and (4) *non-circularity*, or the postmodern "ideal" of a gift without return. Each of these raises alternatives for how to construe the gift, certainly with respect to God, grace, and Holy Scripture.

Consider efficacy. What does it mean, in whatever specified context, for a recipient to *fail* to receive a gift given? What concretely constitutes such failure? Are there situations in which it is impossible not to receive a gift? One common example here is creation. One cannot fail to be created, *having* been created, because there is no one "there" to resist the reception of being. At the same time, at least following upon a certain developmental threshold, failure to accept the gift of existence is possible: its name is suicide. Paired with creation is salvation. Is damnation a live possibility, or is God's will that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4) irresistible? If the latter were true, then in that sense the grace of Christ would be even less "optional" than the almost irresistible grace of creation. There is no suicide in heaven.[39]

This is efficacy in the strongest possible terms. Consider it in two other respects. First: In ordinary human situations, what is the ensemble of gestures, words, and actions—the choreography of reception and thanks—that together amount to *having successfully accepted a gift*? Doubtless it depends on context: time, culture, the type of gift, the relation between the persons involved. But such an ensemble always attends the giving and receiving of gifts, and there may, naturally, be unsuccessful attempts at performing the requisite moves, whether by misprision, ignorance, lack of practice, surprise, or flat disgust with or rejection of the gift. Second: Is part of the efficacy of the gift, as a function of its being received well, its issuing (whether with hope or with certitude) in certain behaviors on the part of the recipient? This might involve mere expression of gratitude; or action made newly possible by the gift; or a *change* in action on the part of the givee; or further circulation of the gift beyond the dyad of giver and givee. But whatever the intended behaviors may be, this aspect of efficacy is bound up with the earlier question regarding the interests of the giver. On one hand, it is difficult to imagine a truly uninterested giver. On the other, it is easy to see how the interests of the giver might easily, perhaps always, taint the gift with expectations that make of it something of a moral loan: *Do with this as I desire or command; if you do not, consequences will follow*. Those consequences might be mere disappointment, but they might also include penalties of a social, relational, legal, familial, or financial kind—most obviously a halt to future gifts!

This is the shadow side of the circulation of gifts. The positive side is that it is in the nature of gifts, across cultures, to create, foster, reinforce, or otherwise modify bonds within and among members of a community as well as between that community and other communities, including the community of heaven. Gifts, like sacrifices, are at once social and cultic, horizontal and vertical. They bind together that which always threatens to break

apart. Perhaps looking for a "pure" gift is a bit like looking for a "pure" exercise of coercion. Society cannot do without either, but neither is ever perfect in execution.[40]

Nevertheless, ideal types help to order and shape daily practice. Three further questions arise when we consider such types, each a concern within hailing distance of Mauss's threefold obligation and Barclay's six perfections, and all interrelated. Put simply: Is the gift given a *loss* to the giver? Is the gift itself a *scarce* good? And is the gift received *owned* by an individual or shared in common? Among contemporary theologians, Kathryn Tanner (2005a) has devoted considerable attention to these questions. As she writes, "what is notable about Christianity . . . is its attempt to institute a circulation of goods to be possessed by all in the same fullness of degree without diminution or loss, a distribution that in its prodigal promiscuity calls forth neither the pride of superior position nor rivalrous envy among its recipients" (ibid., p. 25). What such a vision generates, being rooted in an account of divine grace that is rooted in turn in a doctrine of the Trinity economically interpreted, is "a non-monetary, anti-monetary . . . market in goods" (ibid., p. 23). In other words, a non-competitive corporate life of abundant good and mutual fulfillment—without loss, without scarcity, without sacrifice, and without (the necessity of) reciprocity. Tanner elaborates:

> [G]iving to others should not mean the impoverishment of ourselves. Though we are not ourselves as an exclusive possession, though we are not only our own, neither are we dispossessed in giving to others—self-evacuated, given away. In human relations, as elsewhere in a theological economy, giving should not be at odds with one's continuing to have. Reciprocity of giving would certainly ensure this. In a human community where others are not holding their gifts simply for themselves, presumably what one gave away would come back to one from others. But reciprocity is not required to prevent self-sacrifice in giving here. Noncompetitive property and possession will do. What one gives remains one's property and possession and that is why giving does not come at one's own expense; one isn't giving by a giving away that might leave one bereft. . . . Rather than being in competition with our benefitting others, [therefore,] having becomes in this way the very condition of our giving to others. . . . As elsewhere in a theological economy, we are to give to others not out of our poverty but out of our own fullness. (ibid., 84)

Tanner's proposal, expanded in other works, is explicitly meant to be a sort of utopian intervention into the malaise and resignation of what she calls "the new spirit of capitalism" (Tanner 2019), that is, a market system dominated by finance. The ways in which both the economy of grace in Christ and the enactment of that grace in social spaces (including but not limited to the ecclesial) outside of market transactions are signs that there is a world beyond capitalism; which is to say, there are modes of having and giving and being and sharing that escape the reach of—if you will, *are unregulated by*—the market as we know it today. We are not (yet) at the end of history.

At any rate, Tanner's position usefully illustrates the difference made by how we understand the nature of the gift as a living event. The only remaining question concerns what she denies: reciprocity. Must there be a return? Must there be a countergift to the original gift? May gratitude alone satisfy the duty to respond to a gift in kind? Is St. Thomas Aquinas (1948) right that, though we owe the giver a fitting return, if we lack the means to "pay back" the gift, the *intention to do so* is adequate to the moral obligations of gratitude?[41] Or is Peter Leithart (2014) right to argue that, properly understood, Christian gratitude is due God alone, even and especially when fellow creatures bestow gifts upon us (whether or not we asked for them)? In such a case St. Paul is the exemplary "ingrate", for he exempts himself from the vicious circles of gift and countergift—debt and repayment, patron and bondage—by offering thanks *to* God *for* the gifts and persons of others.[42] After all, what good redounds to me from you has its ultimate source in God. The circle is not, however, hammered out into a straight line; in that case the altruists, or perhaps philosophers of the pure gift like Jacques Derrida (1992), would be right: no return; no gratitude; no conditions;

no interests; not even knowledge, either of the recipient or (ex hypothesi) of having given in the first place. On the contrary, Leithart interprets the New Testament to teach that the circle is not broken but rather expanded into an infinite circumference. So that, first, I know that in giving gifts to others, whether neighbors in need or even my enemies, I am through them giving gifts to Christ himself. And thus, second, for such good works or almsgiving, I neither expect nor demand a return in this life, whether of gratitude or of a countergift-plus-extra, certainly not from the poor, but also not even from my social or economic equal. This does *not* mean there will be no return, though. In this Jesus is one with Israel's sages: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed" (Prov 19:17); "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt 6:3–4). The return is intrinsic to the gift. The only question is when it will come and by whom.[43]

Which brings us back, once again, to thanks. Gratitude suffuses human life just as it does the life of the church. What form should such gratitude take in each of the contexts wherein we find ourselves? Is the gift incomplete without gratitude? Does gratitude *add* something to its recipient (that is, to the original giver)? Does it increase her honor or esteem or power or glory? Or is it merely a public or social recognition of a fact that is and remains true and complete regardless of such recognition? Should our answers to these questions change when we ask them of God? What, finally, is the meaning of the church's cry of thanks to God for the reading of the word in the liturgy? Does it denote the Bible as a gift? If a gift, what sort of gift? And what does this require of God's people, its collective recipient across time and space?

Having now laid the conceptual groundwork, these are the questions the next section aims to answer.

4. The Gift of Scripture

The premise or presenting issue for this article is the fact that the church gives thanks to God in response to the public reading of Scripture in the liturgy. This suggests the canon bears a gift-like status vis à vis the church. There is another way of coming at the question, though. The word of God is not owed humans, even apart from the fall. The presence of God's word to us is therefore and as such a grace, doubly so when that word imparts salvation to sinners. Nor need that word have been written down: there was when it was not, and nothing about itself or God's people requires its inscription. This makes of the Bible a kind of triple grace. Beyond being unmerited and salutary, Holy Scripture is lasting, reliable, imprinted not only on our hearts and minds but on parchment and paper. We receive it but also pass it on to each new generation.

Such continual passing-on is a hint, from another angle, of the gift-character of the canon. On one hand, we receive it not from God alone but from God through the church. On the other, we share somehow in the giving: whether merely by being the church in between our forebears and successors or more literally by fashioning, purchasing, sponsoring, annotating, donating, or bequeathing Bibles to and for the young—including our own children, grandchildren, and godchildren. In this sense the gift of Scripture is neither simple nor wholly asymmetrical. The *giving* of Scripture is grammatically and thus theologically participial: far from an ancient or a finished event, it is a living and unending process until the Lord's return.[44]

This understanding of Scripture's circulation among and between the many members of Christ's body across the generations accords well with our presentation of Scripture's artefaction in the first section. The canon comes from God, but at every stage and in every way its sanctification as God's word written is mediated by God's covenant people. Recall the language Griffiths (2011) proposed for the making of Scripture: confection. Here is Griffiths again, in his commentary on the Song, expanding on what his proposal means in practice for the church's life with the text. He begins by responding to the question, *What is a translated version of Scripture a version "of"*? Answer:

Among other things, of what the Lord says to his people. If scripture is the Lord's most explicit and complete verbal address to his people, then there is something that the Lord says to his people by way of scripture as a whole, and also by way of each of its proper parts, among which the Song is one. There is *a complex verbal caress with which the Lord delights and instructs his people, a kiss that he places upon his people's lips*—tropes especially apposite to the Song. This particular caressing kiss can be given to us here below only by way of words in some natural language or other, and since the depth and passion of the kiss is unfathomable, no set of such words can exhaust it. The words in which each version consists are successive attempts on the part of the people at various times and in various places to respond to *the Lord's verbal kiss*: this is true of the anonymous poets and scribes who put together the various successive versions of the Hebrew text; it is true of those who translated particular versions of that text into Greek and Latin and then subsequently into the languages of our times and places; and it is true too of those who have commented upon, preached about, or otherwise elucidated the words of the Song in any language. The confection of a scriptural book does not, therefore, end with the establishment of versions; those are its first yield, and they are inevitably and properly supplemented by commentary, which is confection's second yield, solicited by the first. Versions and commentary together are *the people's return of the Lord's kiss* (no kiss is given if one offered is not returned, as anyone knows who has kissed an unyielding pair of lips), and *the exchange of verbal kisses* will have no end here below. Versions and commentaries will, therefore, be endless. This book is one among those returned kisses. (ibid., p. xxvii)[45]

Scripture is a gift the way a kiss is a gift; and just as a gift's giving and receiving are a joint event, a kiss is not a kiss that is not mutual or shared. The church's repertoire of acts surrounding the scriptures—verbal, written, commentarial, homiletical, devotional, sacramental, liturgical—constitute the corporate response of the bride to the loving initiative of the bridegroom. We return Christ's kisses with our own.[46]

This imagery (a set of tropes, to be sure, but more than "mere" metaphors)[47] provides a useful point of contact with our exploration of the literature on the gift in the second section above, and thus may serve as a point of departure for considering some of the theoretical matters raised by a construal of the canon as a gift. So far my approach has been circumspect and somewhat dispassionate, wanting the terms and concepts to be clearly laid out before us. Having done that, however, I will now set forth a constructive and not only descriptively plausible rendering of the gift-character of the Bible. What follows, in a word, is a theological depiction of Holy Scripture as at once a divine and ecclesial provision to God's pilgrim people of the grace of God's word written.

* * *

The word of God is an unmerited and gratuitous gift bestowed by the God of Abraham to his covenant children. It is subject neither to purchase nor to possession; it can be neither bought nor sold.[48] It is a gift of love imparted, first, to Israel according to the flesh; second, to gentiles baptized into Israel's Messiah; and third, to the world on whose behalf Israel was called and for whose sake the Messiah died and rose again.[49] It is a gift of mercy for sinners in need, part of whose desperate condition is not only ignorance of God's word but ignorance of their need for it, and thus an incapacity to seek or even to beg for that which alone might cure them.[50] This poor state, however, this incurable malady is not just sinsickness but wickedness. The loving Lord provides the remedy out of his bountiful goodness, but nothing from without compels him to do so. His act is not conditioned in that sense. It *is* conditioned in the sense that it is responsive *to* a condition, one that is contingent and not caused by himself. The medicine of immortality is an aid to mortals, not angels. Humanity would not need God's word in the form in which we have been given it

unless we were wretched. Nor, in a similar sense, need the shape of the canon be precisely what it is: whereas the Law and the prophets are, subsequent to Abraham's election and Israel's exodus from bondage, necessary in a manner of speaking, the apostolic writings are contingent in still a further sense. They *become* necessary following upon the Lord's good pleasure not to return in the lifetime of the apostles and their delegates. Had he come then, as presumably most of them expected, there would be no New Testament, and thus no "Old" Testament: only the scriptures of Moses and David, Solomon and Isaiah et al. The Lord's grace in extending the mission of the messianic covenant to include so many different peoples from so many different times and places is the Spirit-ordained "condition" for the gift of the canon as we have it.

Does the canon obligate? It does.[51] It obligates Jews through the laws and ordinances of the Torah and it obligates the baptized through proclamation of Christ's cross, what St. Paul calls ὁ νόμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ (messianic torah for eschatological gentiles: cf. Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21).[52] Such obligations are no burden, however. As Jesus says: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light". (Matt 11:28–30). Hence, the obligations of the canon—which is to say, the obligations of the covenant—are but the form of life proper to the covenant people. The joy of this life, further, is positively rather than negatively correlated with obedience to the wise commands of God, which (again, in Pauline language) is nothing other than the obedience of faith (ἡ ὑπακοή πίστεως; Rom 1:5; 16:26): "I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (Ps 119:16). The law worthy of the Psalmist's love (vv. 47–48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 159, 163–167), which is at once "the royal law" and "the law of liberty" according to St. James (2:8, 12), is summed up in the Messiah who imparts to his followers the new command that they should love one another as he loved them (John 13:34). In him they have eternal life (3:14–16, 36), not only as servants but as friends; for they are his friends if they obey his commands (15:12–15). Life and freedom, in other words, are found in obedience to the word of God. Which is another way of saying that they are found in obligation, which is not contrary to but a form of the gift. As Barth ([1942] 2010b) says, the command of Israel's God is grace in the form of an imperative.[53]

To live under the obliging grace of Christ is not, furthermore, just another form of indebtedness—unless, in Anselmian fashion, we are inclined to reshape and redeploy the conceptual field of "debt" as a sphere conquered and saturated by divine love, overflowing with liberality, universal remittance, and every debt paid with infinite interest. If, on this view, we "owe" God, then what is owed has always already been "paid" by Christ, to whom we are united in the sacramental life of the church. The actions of the head are the actions of the body. The "payment", if such there be, is an eternal circle of speech and reply, procession and praise, gratitude and joy in hypostatic and thus ecstatic form.[54] The only resulting "debt" for the members of Christ is the debt of love: for "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:8).[55]

If the canon obligates, then, though it does not indebt, its giver is *dis*interested (which is to say, just)[56] but not *un*interested. The Lord gives generously but not to no end.[57] The purposes of Scripture are therefore bound up with this particular gift's efficacy. The divine fecundity of the word of God finds no better description than in the book of Isaiah:

> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
>
> and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
>
> making it bring forth and sprout,
>
> giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
>
> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
>
> it shall not return to me empty,
>
> but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,

and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (55:10–11)

Since Holy Scripture is, by the church's testimony, the word of the Lord, we are right to conclude that its efficacy is potent, even infallible. This is one of its chief perfections, together with its priority, superabundance, and incongruity. Among other things, what it effects by the Spirit's power is the unveiling, advancement, and announcement of the advent of God's reign in the cosmos. It does not fail to do this; it never has and it never will. Its enactment looks like the ministry of Jesus. It looks, too, like the church, which is his body: it looks like gathering, worshiping, feasting, and serving. It looks like God's word visible, consecrated on the altar; it looks like God's word audible, read aloud from the lectern. When it slays sinners in the Spirit and raises them to new life in Christ, its effectiveness is on display. When it cuts to the heart and elicits faith and baptism, it is the irresistible gift of God's word at work in the world.[58]

Barclay's (2015) other two perfections are more doubtful as applied to Scripture. We have already seen that the "gift" of Scripture is in fact a constant missionary and generational *giving*, which suggests an essential circularity, against the terminal asymmetry of an anonymous and even unknowing postmodern giver. As for the "singularity" of Scripture, or rather of God, we may leave the question open. There is indeed a sense in which God, in himself as well as in the economy and therefore in Scripture, is unstintingly good and incomparably generous. But as Barclay points out, such a description at times lends itself to an account of God as immobile or lifeless, less than agential, "automatic" or even machine-like rather than personal.[59] Moreover, while the attribute finds support in Scripture (the Lord *is* good and *does* good: Ps 119:68), it also finds resistance in canonical teaching regarding the Lord's judgment, wrath, and punishment.[60] When the word of God mortifies, the Bible is a rod in his right hand; when the gospel crucifies, the scriptures are the vehicle of the divine verdict. We are right to interpret such actions as the *grace* of judgment and thus *not* a denial of God's and therefore of the canon's singular goodness. But such actions plausibly fall outside the scope of a strictly Platonic or generic deity whose beneficence is so "pure" as to be unstained by retribution or bloodshed.

The question of divine judgment raises in turn the question of Scripture's reception; in particular, whether the gift of the canon may *fail* to be received and in that respect fail to be given. We have already specified that Scripture will not fail to have a hearing, will not fail to hail the coming king in the presence of his glad subjects. But that does not mean the convocation will be universal, at least short of his epiphany. There are those who have not heard across a lifetime; there have been and will continue to be those who hear and do not respond with faith, obedience, or gratitude. This is just another way of saying that *living as Christ's body* is the proper mode of reception—a reception presumptively obligatory for all who hear, perhaps for every human soul after Pentecost—but that such reception, namely of God's word in Scripture, will always be wanting in some persons and communities.[61]

Practically speaking, we have already seen what constitutes the mutuality of gift and receipt with respect to the canon: the liturgical exchange of kisses between Christ and his bride. The "holy kiss" to which St. Paul exhorts the saints is here a figure of the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture in the church (cf. Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26). Even when our verbal kisses amount to little more than the kiss of Judas, the kiss of Christ in the sacred meal is one and the same as that with which Christ fed the traitor at table: a gift we are free to receive, if only we will have it, and with it, himself.[62]

As we saw, though, the other side of this reception includes the church. In receiving the word of the Lord according to the Apocalypse I am entrusting myself not only to the words of the Seer as an instrument of the Lord's living speech or even to that word of which the Seer's words are an instrument. I am entrusting myself to the catholic and apostolic church as the corporate and diachronic recipient of the Revelation of St. John and, what is more, as its surety. In the terminology of the first section, the church is, in a more than nominal sense, the author of Scripture. The church's founders composed it; her predecessors preserved it; her councils canonized it; her leaders authorize its use in the present. To stand in a relation of grateful reception to God for the gift of Scripture, therefore,

is also to stand in a relation of grateful reception to God's people. It is to recognize the canon for what it is: an item of tradition, underwritten by the Holy Spirit. Just as I receive Christ from the celebrant, a member of the body standing in for the head, so I receive Christ's word from the church. For it is the church that has faithfully handed it on down through the centuries, right up to the point of my own hearing and faith and baptism and delectation in its delights—whereupon I join in the countless hands ("myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands": Rev 5:11) of the body of Christ and pass it on to those who yearn to hear it, both the living and the unborn.

Gifts create, maintain, renew, and strengthen social bonds. The gift of God's word builds the walls of the new Jerusalem. It effects the communion of the communion of saints: those at home with Christ and those still sojourning on earth, together with "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" (Rev 5:13). With one voice they offer the only "return" possible for the gift of God's word: worship. When we read that "the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshiped" (v. 14), we see the one fitting but altogether necessary reply of the people of God to hearing his voice in their midst: *Amen*.[63]

The *Amen* of the body of Christ is nothing other than the voice of Christ's Spirit speaking within it, just as the sacrifice offered on the altar is nothing other than the self-offering of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. As St. Paul puts it, writing with St. Timothy:

> As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been "Yes and No". For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you . . . was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes". For in him every one of God's promises is a "Yes". For this reason it is through him that we say the "Amen", to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. . . . [For] you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor 1:18–22; 3:3)

The letter of the text is dead apart from the work of the Spirit. But by the Spirit's ministry—himself the preeminent *donum Dei* (see Acts 2:38; 10:45; John 14:16; cf. John 4:10; Eph 2:8; 2 Tim 1:6)[64]—the letter is alive with divine power. Through the word the Spirit writes Christ on the hearts of the faithful, so that all the promises that are Yes in him are Yes for them, too. When they hear and believe, when the Spirit implants the gift of the word in the soil of their hearts, their cry in reply is not them alone but Christ in them speaking back to God the Word that he is in the love of the Spirit, who unites them as one.[65] As Jesus prayed, those who believe on his name are one even as he and the Father are one (John 17:11, 22–23). So that, when believers give thanks to God for his holy word, they are merely reiterating that primal prayer to the Father by the Son, with whom they are one: "Father, I thank [εὐχαριστῶ] you that you have heard me" (11:41). Whereas the church thanks God that she has heard him, for according to Jesus's promise, his followers are "made clean by the word [τὸν λόγον] which I have spoken to you" (15:3). The circle of gifts is thus complete. Jesus bears witness to the Father that

> I have manifested your name to those whom you gave me [ἔδωκάς μοι] out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me [κἀμοὶ αὐτοὺς ἔδωκας], and they have kept your word [τὸν λόγον σου τετήρηκαν]. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you [πάντα ὅσα δέδωκάς μοι παρὰ σοῦ εἰσιν]; for I have given them the words which you gave me [τὰ ῥήματα ἃ ἔδωκάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς], and they have received them [αὐτοὶ ἔλαβον] and know in truth that I came from you. (17:6–8 RSV)

By way of gloss: Those who belong to the Son (cf. 1 Cor 15:23; Gal 5:24) are gifts to him from the Father; they know all that the Son has is a gift to him from the Father, for the Son is himself from the Father (cf. John 5:26). The word of the Father, accordingly, is the word of the Son, and that word he has given in full to them that are his (cf. 2 Tim 2:19). They

have "received" it (ἔλαβον). What remains for them to hear, the Spirit will speak in the fullness of time, the same Spirit who will declare to them what is the Son's, for what is the Son's is the Father's (John 16:12–15). Or in the Pauline comment on the same reality: "all things are yours", for "you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor 3:21, 23).

In short, the whole economy of grace is a storehouse of divine gifts. It is the domain of the supreme and unrivaled Giver, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is he and he alone, the Lord, who is the ultimate gift. The church receives him in many ways. As it is written, "When he ascended on high . . . he gave gifts to his people" (Eph 4:8). One such gift is the canon.[66] The artifact of Scripture has its place, therefore, within the triune economy. God's people have always been right to give thanks for it. In doing so, they thank the Lord for his grace: for his paternal care, his unrestricted solidarity, his accompanying presence. They thank him for speaking: for his wooing, his promising, his vowing—his kisses made of words. Most of all, they thank him for himself, since what the temple of Scripture bears to us just is the Lord; and from it his great and merciful voice resounds:

> The Lord is in his holy temple;
>
> let all the earth keep silence before him. (Hab 2:20)

Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. The infamous phrase comes from Jowett (1860).
3. I owe this image to St. Augustine of Hippo (1996, Pr.6).
4. "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:14–16, 27–30 RSV); "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph 4:4–7 RSV). What this means for the synagogue is beyond the scope of this article; for now see Marshall (2013); Jenson (2019); Kinzer (2015).
5. This is evident in, e.g., Origen (2017) and St. John of Damascus (2022).
6. See, e.g., Preus (1957).
7. See, e.g., Muller (1993).
8. As can the concept of "canon" itself: see Abraham (1998).
9. Not that there are no other terms proposed. Most of them, though, are analogies applied to Scripture as a finished product, rather than to elements or moments in its creation or reception.
10. For fuller arguments see East (2021, 2022a).
11. As it arguably does in Jenson (2019, pp. 187–219) and Farkasfalvy (2018).
12. Analogies abound in what follows, to various sacraments and to the incarnation itself. I take for granted that analogies by definition encompass disanalogies, for the likeness of the comparison is imperfect. I only rarely pause to signal when this is the case, assuming it throughout. The utility of the analogies lies in their fittingness and in their capacity to encapsulate, in a familiar term, some action or process for which we lack a name. I leave it to readers to judge whether the proposed analogous terms fit the bill.
13. As Griffiths (2016, p. 57) writes, "scripture belongs to the devastation only; it had no place in paradise and will have none in heaven".
14. For substantive patristic reflection, see Boersma (2017).
15. "Verbal bread" comes from Leithart (2009, p. 207).

¹⁶ See further Gordon (2019).

¹⁷ I expand on Griffiths' argument in East (2021). Both there and here, Griffiths is a constant interlocutor and stimulant to theological reflection on Scripture's origins and exegesis as well as the concept of the gift.

¹⁸ See Rogers (2021) for further reflection on the semiotic valences of that "otherwise".

¹⁹ Is the eucharistic analogy even weaker than this? Is the canon more like the waters of baptism or the oil of chrism than the elements of communion? Perhaps. But it seems to me that, while oil or water may be blessed and thus made holy, the texts of Scripture are more than blessed elements that, in their *use*, effect what they signify. Something in the nature of the texts qua texts and their collection qua collection is ontologically and permanently sacramental from the inspiration and closure of the canon forward. Consider, by comparison, the proposal of Barth ([1938] 2010a), according to which the words of the canon *become* the word of God on concrete occasions of their reading. This move does, I think, make the Bible on a par with the water and oil of baptism and chrismation.

²⁰ These examples encompass popular scholarly theories of canonical texts' histories of production without my committing to any of them being true. The point is that a proper account of inspiration is capable of incorporating any number of proposals about textual origins; it is not and never has been limited to the common image of the lonely author taking down the Spirit's words in the role of a secretary. For a sophisticated treatment of contested canonical authorship, see Johnson (2020).

²¹ The inciting event can be placed as early as Adam, if one prefers.

²² See, e.g., McDonald (2007); Metzger (1997); Barton (1998).

²³ As with authorship, so with dating: this theory clarifies that Christians are not committed to, e.g., apostolic canonical texts being written by AD 75 or 100. There is thus no need to shape the evidence to fit the theory; the doctrine of inspiration is not affected one way or another by arguments about authorship or dating. Having said that, biblical scholarship on these questions is often poorly argued or question-begging, so neither the theologian nor the church is bound to accept whatever the latest consensus is. For a wonderfully dispassionate and thorough-going reconsideration of the dating of the New Testament, see Bernier (2022).

²⁴ Greek: Ἀγαπητοί, μὴ π αντὶ πνεύματι πιστεύετε, αλλὰ δοκιμάζετε τὰ πνεύματα εἰἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστιν, ὅτι πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφ ῆται ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν κόσμον; Latin: *carissimi nolite omni spiritui credere sed probate spiritus si ex Deo sint quoniam multi pseudoprophetae exierunt in mundum*.

²⁵ The disanalogy being that texts deemed non-canonical were not thereby judged to be on a par with "false prophets". Instead they typically belonged to that vast and ever-growing category of edifying but fallible writings available but not per se necessary to any one believer.

²⁶ It is important to add that this process is principally liturgical, as is its result. Whether or not a text is canonical is answered by whether it has been, and should continue to be, read aloud in public worship.

²⁷ See further Jenson (1997); Schmemann (1974); Ramsey (1946).

²⁸ An image portrayed in texts and not only in paintings: consider Gerhard's (2006, 1.18.2) description of biblical authors as "moved, driven, led, impelled . . . and controlled" by the Spirit.

²⁹ See further Kelsey (2009) and de Sales ([1886] 1989), both of whom mark the important conceptual distinction between a list of authoritative texts and an authoritative list of texts.

³⁰ In this way "epiclesis" might be preferable to "chrismation" as an analogical term of art for the closure of the canon. For the former is an invocation of the church through her priest, acting in the person of Christ, for the Father to send the Spirit down upon the elements of bread and wine, that they might become the body and blood of Christ (and so be the *gifts* of God for the people of God). Inasmuch as "confection" is our chosen word for the "making" of the scriptures, why not conclude the action with the very term that captures the climax of the eucharistic rite? Much would be gained by doing so; I would not protest someone making the case. My main reservation is that the epiclesis is a *moment* in the extended ritual of the meal, not a discrete ritual as such; whereas chrismation, though it follows the sacrament of baptism, is a sacrament unto itself. For this reason it can be described as an action, rendered grammatically as a verb; less so, or more awkwardly, in the case of the epiclesis.

³¹ It is therefore an urgent ecumenical problem that the divided communions do not agree on the contents of the canon. Far too often evangelical treatments of the doctrine of Scripture elide the magnitude of this issue, as though (1) canonization was a straightforward process and/or (2) what the canon comprises is self-evident.

³² I elaborate on this briefly in East (2021, pp. 59–62).

³³ See further Adams (1999, chp. 10).

³⁴ The notion of being "obliged to nothing" by reception of the gift is, first, one I will criticize directly in the final section; second, seemingly evidently rejected by the plain sense of Scripture; and, third, curiously suggestive as a formulation. Instead of the gift—in theological terms, the gift of grace, of Christ, or of the canon—entailing that one is obliged *to God*, the phrase implies a worrying *nihil* standing behind or contained within the gift. As I argue below, the anxiety attending an obliging gift seems, at least in part, to trade on the idea that obligations must be a kind of debt, or at least necessarily burdensome. I see no reason, though, why that should be the case.

³⁵ See below for mention of St. Anselm and of some of his interpreters.

³⁶ See further Griffiths (2009); Derrida (1992); Caputo and Scanlon (1999).

37 For more details, see Barclay (2015, pp. 79–150; 2020, pp. 137–48).

38 I think this a reasonable extension of van Driel's point, though I would choose a different way to describe what it means for God in metaphysical terms. The danger is making God subject to time or to events in time, including events caused by God.

39 Given the pairing here of creation and salvation, this is a good place to mention the intersecting and diverging work of Marion ([1982] 2012, [1997] 2013, 2016); Milbank (1995, 1997, 1999, 2003, 2022); and Hart (2003, 2017, 2020, esp. chp. 2).

40 See again Mauss ([1925] 2016); Leithart (2014); Barclay (2015). See also Anderson (2013); Brown (2012, 2015); Hyde (2019); Visser (2008).

41 For his discussion of gratitude and ingratitude, see Questions 106–7 in *ST* II-II.

42 See the full treatment of Paul (and Jesus) as "ingrates" in Leithart (2014, chp. 3). The paradigmatic instance of St. Paul's resistance to coming under the thumb of a patron is his letter to the Philippians. We do not learn of the apparently quite generous gift the church sent him in prison until the closing verses of the letter (4:10–20), and nowhere does Paul thank *them* for the money; he offers thanks to God alone *for* their gift (starting in 1:3). Indeed, Paul makes it sound as though he did not need the money and, hence, that the principal benefit of the gift is to the Philippians, enriching them spiritually and producing fruit that glorifies God.

43 The natural answer is that God will make the return in the next life, and exclusively there. The answer is surely more complex than this, though. Consider Mark 10:28–31: "Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'" And with specific respect to alms, see Tobit 12:8–10: "Prayer with fidelity is good, and almsgiving with righteousness is better than wealth with injustice. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold, for almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own enemies". Compare the description of Cornelius, a gentile God-fearer, in Acts 10:2–4: "He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.'"

44 As participial, it is also participatory: the church cooperates in God's gracious action to gift his people with his holy word. This cooperation across time is the act of tradition, or παράδοσις; see further Lossky (1974); Lash (1978); Ker (1978); Kenneson (1989); Behr (1999); Louth (2005); Lattier (2011). It should be clear by now that every feature of my proposal, whether about the grammar of Scripture's production and reception or about the concept of Scripture as a gift, depends upon and supports a non-competitive understanding of divine and human agency. See further Tanner ([1988] 2005b).

45 This quotation shows that I have slightly modified Griffiths' concept of confection for my own purposes. I want to draw a hard and fast line between the making and the receiving of the canon. But Griffiths is right that no such line exists. He is further right that, if translation is participation in the confection of the scriptures, then properly speaking the making of the canon is a process without end; it is coterminous with the life and mission of the church militant. Its end is her end, which is nothing but the second coming of Christ. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that there *is* a moment in the church's history when the canon qua canon is extant; subsequent to this moment, further versions of the canon may and will be produced, but they are *additional yields* following what Griffiths calls the "first yield". In my scheme I assign these proliferating yields to the ongoing reception of the canon on the part of the church and, more broadly, to Scripture's sanctification by the Spirit across time.

46 See further St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1979, 2008).

47 See Jenson (1999, 39n.41).

48 Cf. Isaiah 55:1–2; Revelation 22:16–17.

49 See further Griffiths (2009, pp. 176–82); cf. Volf (2005; 2010, pp. 3–40).

50 By this I do not mean that nature, and the desire for God proper to nature, is snuffed out. I mean, on one hand, that our sense of what we need is a sort of wandering in the dark; and, on the other, that *when* we beg for what we truly need (the saving word of Israel's God), it is the prompting of grace within us that makes it possible. In this way begging is itself a sign of the gift's presence to us. St. Augustine of Hippo (1998) stands behind much of this. See also Johnson (2007); Hauerwas (2004, p. 241).

51 The sacraments are exemplary here. For the sacraments are themselves undertaken in response to the Lord's command, and these commands are found precisely in the canon. In other words, the dominical instructions regarding Eucharist and baptism take the grammatical imperative. Nor would any but the most anti-sacramental call the sacraments burdens! Yet they are covenant obligations imposed by the canon. This example not only confirms that divine commands may be free of burden (gospel may take the form of law); it also underwrites continuity between old and new covenants, *both* of which contain, in Lutheran language, "law" and "gospel" in distinctive ways. All of this contra Griffiths (2018, esp. pp. 57–78).

52 See further Rudolph (2016). I take the phrase "eschatological gentiles" from Fredriksen (2017).

53 The lengthy discussion, to which I already alluded in a previous endnote, begins on p. 509 in *CD* II/2.

54 See further East (2022b).

55   I am only representing, not endorsing, this view and similar ones that make "debt" either (1) a major term in accounts of obligation to God or (2) a synonym for it. I want to acknowledge that it has been done (and that it has roots in Scripture: Matt 6:12; Rom 13:6–10; etc.), but I am not myself employing it in my own account. If, on a minimal definition, an obligation denotes something we ought to do (or keep from doing), I see no need in principle to redescribe the obligation in social or economic terms as a debt. Regardless, see further St. Anselm of Canterbury (1998); Hart (1998); Marshall (2011). Cf. Søren Kierkegaard (2009, p. 172): "love is perhaps best described as an infinite debt: when a man is gripped by love, he feels that this is like being in infinite debt. Usually one says that the person who becomes loved comes into debt by being loved. Along the same line we say that children are in love's debt to their parents, because their parents have loved them first and the children's love is only a part-payment on the debt or a repayment. This is true, to be sure. Nevertheless, such talk is all too reminiscent of an actual bookkeeping relationship—a bill is submitted and it must be paid; love is shown to us, and it must be repaid with love. We shall not, then, speak about *one's coming into debt by receiving love*. No, it is the one who loves who is in debt; because he is aware of being gripped by love, he perceives this as being in infinite debt. Remarkable! To give a person one's love is, as has been said, certainly the highest a human being can give—and yet, precisely when he gives his love and precisely by giving it he comes into infinite debt. One can therefore say that this is the *essential characteristic of love: that the lover by giving infinitely comes into—infinite debt*. But this is the relationship of infinitude, and love is infinite."

56   "For there is no respect of persons with God": Romans 2:11 KJV (cf. 2 Chr 19:7; Prov 24:23; 28:21; Acts 10:34; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; Jas 2:1; 1 Pet 1:17).

57   "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21). Barclay (2015, pp. 439–42) interprets Paul to mean that mortal sin is a live possibility for believers; that is, having received the gift, one may fail to respond appropriately to its obligations and thus fail to keep it. It is in this sense that Barclay argues that grace is unconditioned but not unconditional: God's incongruous grace may be lost.

58   Note well the level of generality at which these claims are made. I am not arguing that in every instance the reading or hearing of the scriptural texts is an occasion of irresistible grace. I qualify such an extreme implication in the discussion below regarding the possibility of failing to receive the word for what it is.

59   By contrast, the works of David Bentley Hart (2003, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2022a, 2022b) amount to a sustained defense of this sort of Christian Platonism, with significant moral, hermeneutical, and doctrinal implications.

60   I have discussed some of the exegetical, historical, and theological questions raised by such teaching in East (2022c).

61   Advocates of universalism will disagree, though not necessarily with implications here, since the canon need not have a causal relation to postmortem purgation and deification of those who die in sin and/or in ignorance of Christ. See Hart (2019); but cf. Griffiths (2020). See also McCullough (2022) for a defense of what he calls "indeterminist compatibilism", which might be usefully deployed in the doctrine of Scripture and its (sometimes failed) reception.

62   A whole theology of the gift, differentiated by confessional lines, could be built upon the reception history of the Gospels' depiction of the presence of Judas at the Last Supper. See, e.g., Calvin ([1845] 2008, 4.17.33–34).

63   For further liturgical reflection, see Schmemann (1973); Zizioulas (1985).

64   See St. Augustine of Hippo (1991).

65   There is rich fodder here both for a doctrine of the Spirit as the *vinculum amoris* and for a doctrine of the church as the *totus Christus*.

66   See Webster (2012, chp. 2).

References

Abraham, William J. 1998. *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Adams, Robert Merrihew. 1999. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, Gary A. 2013. *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Anselm of Canterbury. 1998. *The Major Works: Including Monologion, Proslogion, and Why God Became Man*. Edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans. New York: Oxford University Press.

Augustine of Hippo. 1991. *The Trinity (De Trinitate), The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. Part 1. Translated by Edmund Hill. Edited by John E. Rotelle OSA. Hyde Park: New City Press, vol. 5.

Augustine of Hippo. 1996. *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana). The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Part 1. Translated by Edmund Hill. Edited by John E. Rotelle OSA. Hyde Park: New City Press, vol. 11.

Augustine of Hippo. 1998. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press.

Barclay, John M. G. 2015. *Paul and the Gift*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Barclay, John M. G. 2020. *Paul and the Power of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Barth, Karl. 2010a. *Church Dogmatics I/2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Translated by G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight. Peabody: Hendrickson. First published 1938.

Barth, Karl. 2010b. *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, J. C. Campbell, Iain Wilson, J. Strathearn McNab, Harold Knight, and R. A. Stewart. Peabody: Hendrickson. First published 1942.

Barton. 1998. *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Behr, John. 1999. Scripture, the Gospel, and Orthodoxy. *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42: 223–48.

Benedict XVI. 2010. *The Word of the Lord: Verbum Domini*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Bernard of Clairvaux. 1979. *Homilies in Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Translated by Marie-Bernard Saïd. Kalamazoo: Cistercian.

Bernard of Clairvaux. 2008. *Song of Songs I. Volume 2 of The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*. Translated by Kilian Walsh. Collegeville: Cistercian.

Bernier, Jonathan. 2022. *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press.

Boersma, Hans. 2017. *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press.

Brown, Peter. 2012. *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brown, Peter. 2015. *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Calvin, John. 2008. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Peabody: Hendrickson. First published 1845.

Caputo, John D., and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. 1999. *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. 1924. *Saint Francis of Assisi*. New York: Image Books.

de Lubac, Henri. 1998. *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture. Volume 1.* Translated by Mark Sebanc. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. First published 1959.

de Sales, Francis. 1989. *The Catholic Controversy: St. Francis de Sales' Defense of the Faith*. Translated by Henry Benedict Mackey OSB. Charlotte: TAN Books. First published 1886.

Derrida, Jacques. 1992. *Given Time, Vol. 1: Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

East, Brad. 2021. *The Doctrine of Scripture*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

East, Brad. 2022a. *The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

East, Brad. 2022b. Grace Upon Grace: Toward a Christian Grammar of Gratitude. *Comment*, January 13. Available online: https://comment.org/grace-upon-grace/ (accessed on 10 October 2022).

East, Brad. 2022c. Israel's Canaanite Conquest Presents a Question with Four Possible Answers. *Christianity Today*, March 22. Available online: https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march-web-only/destruction-canaanites-charlie-trimm-israel-conquest.html (accessed on 10 October 2022).

Farkasfalvy, Denis. 2018. *A Theology of the Christian Bible: Revelation, Inspiration, Canon*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Fredriksen, Paula. 2017. *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gerhard, Johann. 2006. *On the Nature of Theology and Scripture*. Translated by Richard J. Dinda. St. Louis: Concordia.

Gordon, Joseph K. 2019. *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 2009. *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 2011. *Song of Songs*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 2016. *The Practice of Catholic Theology: A Modest Proposal*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 2018. *Christian Flesh*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Griffiths, Paul J. 2020. Universalism's *Convenientia*. *Eclectic Orthodoxy* blog. Available online: https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2020/12/09/universalisms-convenientia/ (accessed on 10 October 2022).

Hart, David Bentley. 1998. A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*. *Pro Ecclesia* 7: 333–49. [CrossRef]

Hart, David Bentley. 2003. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hart, David Bentley. 2013. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hart, David Bentley. 2017. *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hart, David Bentley. 2019. *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hart, David Bentley. 2020. *Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Hart, David Bentley. 2022a. *You Are Gods: On Nature and Supernature*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Hart, David Bentley. 2022b. *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press.

Hauerwas, Stanley. 2004. *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.

Hyde, Lewis. 2019. *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*. New York: Vintage Books.

Jenson, Robert W. 1997. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jenson, Robert W. 1999. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Works of God*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jenson, Robert W. 2019. *The Triune Story: Collected Essays on Scripture*. Edited by Brad East. New York: Oxford University Press.

John of Damascus. 2022. *On the Orthodox Faith: Vol. 3 of the Fount of Knowledge*. Translated by Norman Russell. Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Johnson, Kelly S. 2007. *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2020. *Constructing Paul: The Canonical Paul, Vol. 1*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Jowett, Benjamin. 1860. On the Interpretation of Scripture. In *Essays and Reviews*. London: Parker, pp. 330–433.

Kelsey, David H. 2009. *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*. 2 vols. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

Kenneson, Philip. 1989. Nicholas Lash on Doctrinal Development and Ecclesial Authority. *Modern Theology* 5: 271–300. [CrossRef]

Ker, Ian T. 1978. Newman's Theory—Development or Continuing Revelation? In *Newman and Gladstone: Centennial Essays*. Edited by James D. Bastable. Dublin: Veritas Publications, pp. 145–59.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 2009. *Works of Love*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. New York: HarperCollins.

Kinzer, Mark S. 2015. *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Lash, Nicholas. 1978. Literature and Theory: Did Newman Have a "Theory" of Development? In *Newman and Gladstone: Centennial Essays*. Edited by James D. Bastable. Dublin: Veritas Publications, pp. 161–74.

Lattier, Daniel J. 2011. The Orthodox Rejection of Doctrinal Development. *Pro Ecclesia* 20: 389–410. [CrossRef]

Leithart, Peter J. 2009. *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Leithart, Peter J. 2014. *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Lewis, Clive Staples. 1952. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins.

Lossky, Vladimir. 1974. *In the Image and Likeness of God*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Louth, Andrew. 2005. Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category for Orthodoxy Theology? In *Orthodoxy and Western Culture: A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday*. Edited by Valerie Hotchkiss and Patrick Henry. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, pp. 45–63.

Marion, Jean-Luc. 2012. *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, 2nd ed. Translated by Thomas A. Carlson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. First published 1982.

Marion, Jean-Luc. 2013. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky. Red Wood City: Stanford University Press. First published 1997.

Marion, Jean-Luc. 2016. *Givenness and Revelation*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marshall, Bruce D. 2011. Debt, Punishment, and Payment: A Meditation on the Cross, in Light of St. Anselm. *Nova et Vetera* 9: 163–81.

Marshall, Bruce D. 2013. Christ and Israel: An Unsolved Problem in Catholic Theology. In *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*. Edited by Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 330–50.

Mauss, Marcel. 2016. *The Gift: Expanded Edition*. Selected, Annotated, and Translated by Jane I. Guyer. Chicago: Hau Books. First published 1925.

McCullough, Ross. 2022. *Freedom and Sin: Evil in a World Created by God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

McDonald, Lee Martin. 2007. *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*, Revised and Expanded Edition. Peabody: Hendrickson.

Metzger, Bruce M. 1997. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Milbank, John. 1995. Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic. *Modern Theology* 11: 119–61. [CrossRef]

Milbank, John. 1997. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Milbank, John. 1999. The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice. *First Things* 91: 33–38.

Milbank, John. 2003. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. New York: Routledge.

Milbank, John. 2022. The Universality of the Gift. *Comment*, March 3. Available online: https://comment.org/the-universality-of-the-gift/ (accessed on 10 October 2022).

Muller, Richard A. 1993. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2. Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Press.

Origen. 2017. *On First Principles*. 2 vols. Translated and Edited by John Behr. New York: Oxford University Press.

Preus, Robert. 1957. *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmaticians*, 2nd ed. St. Louis: Concordia.

Ramsey, A. Michael. 1946. *The Resurrection of Christ: An Essay in Biblical Theology*. London: Geoffrey Bles.

Rogers, Eugene F., Jr. 2021. *Blood Theology: Seeing Red in Body- and God-Talk*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rudolph, David J. 2016. *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. Eugene: Pickwick.

Schmemann, Alexander. 1973. *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Schmemann, Alexander. 1974. *Of Water and Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Tanner, Kathryn. 2005a. *Economy of Grace*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Tanner, Kathryn. 2005b. *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* Minneapolis: Fortress. First published 1988.

Tanner, Kathryn. 2019. *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Thomas Aquinas. 1948. *Summa Theologica*. 5 vols. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame: Christian Classics.

Van Driel, Edwin Chr. 2021. *Rethinking Paul: Protestant Theology and Pauline Exegesis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Visser, Margaret. 2008. *The Gift of Thanks: The Roots and Rituals of Gratitude*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Volf, Miroslav. 2005. *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Volf, Miroslav. 2010. *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Webster, John. 2003. *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Webster, John. 2012. *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

Zizioulas, John D. 1985. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

religions

Article

Endurance, Acceptance, or Constitutional Gratitude: Non-Theistic and Theistic Attitudes to Suffering

Caleb M. Cohoe

Department of Philosophy, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, CO 80217, USA; calebcohoe@gmail.com

Abstract: Against those who think that only believers in a personal God are entitled to be grateful for their existence and for reality itself (cosmic gratitude), I show that there are non-theistic views on which everything that happens is part of an overall good order, supporting gratitude toward that order's source. However, most non-theist views that affirm reality's goodness, including pantheism, axiarchism, and ultimism, hold that an individual's existence has value as part of a larger whole. Some things may be bad for me but good for the whole. In such cases, acceptance is the best available positive attitude. Many versions of theism, by contrast, support constitutional gratitude, a characteristic attitude of thankfulness toward the ultimate source of goodness. Using Marilyn Adams' distinction between global and local goods, I show how Christianity, Islam, and other theistic views that affirm a personal God who cares for the well-being of each individual as such enable constitutional gratitude. If the evils you experience will be defeated by greater goods that you personally experience, you can be grateful to God for God's presence and plan even in suffering. Whether this attitude is more appropriate than acceptance or endurance depends on facts about reality and value.

Keywords: gratitude; theism; acceptance; pantheism; axiarchism; ultimism; Stoicism; Kierkegaard; local evils; suffering

1. Introduction

When we experience illness, pain, loss, or betrayal, how should we react? Can any positive attitudes be appropriate or are sorrow, anger, and other negative attitudes the only fitting responses? This question is deeply practical. People who think that suffering, hardships, and disappointments are simply to be endured live differently than those who accept them as necessary or even see them as contributing to their good. Whether some positive attitude is appropriate (perhaps alongside negative ones) depends on how such events fit into my life's overall story and shape (if my life does, in fact, exhibit a narrative structure). It also depends on how such events fit into the overall order of reality: is there some greater meaning or plan that can explain away, balance out, or even defeat such evils? On many views, there is no reason to think that the sufferings I experience have any meaning or value, either for me personally or in some broader cosmic context. Given this, any positive attitudes or efforts to find meaning in them turn out to be mistaken. Endurance is the most appropriate attitude available.

Some hold that only those who affirm the existence of a personal and providential God are in a position to take a positive attitude toward apparent evils and failures. We need to affirm this sort of theism if we are to be grateful for our lives and what they contain. In this paper, I argue that the situation is more complex. Some non-theistic views do license gratitude for our existence and for reality itself, which I will call cosmic gratitude. They allow people to view everything that happens as part of an overall good order. This justifies a positive attitude of acceptance toward all the events in my life, including apparent evils and things that happen to me against my will. In seeing all that exists as part of an

overall good order, I can maintain gratitude toward the source of that order for this overall goodness, whatever occurs. Such an approach does not, however, go as far as some theistic views, which license what Robert C. Roberts calls constitutional gratitude. This is a lasting characteristic attitude of thankfulness toward God, not just in good times, but throughout all of life's successes and failures (R. C. Roberts 2014, inspired by Søren Kierkegaard). Roberts has argued for the importance of such an attitude to living well. In this paper, I use Marilyn Adams' distinction between global and local approaches to goodness and evil (Adams 1989) to argue that non-theists lack a suitable metaphysical and epistemological basis for this sort of gratitude toward what they see as the source of reality.

For Marilyn Adams, Christianity is distinctively committed to the view that God's overall plan for the global triumph of goodness over evil is inseparable from the local triumph of good over evil within the believer's individual life. Whatever evils and misfortunes an individual experiences will be overcome, not just insofar as they fit into some overall good order, but by being defeated within that very individual's life. This view supports the distinctive sort of constitutional gratitude for which Roberts advocates. According to this view, throughout any suffering I experience, there is an ongoing benefit that I receive and for which I can be grateful. This benefit consists of both an ongoing connection to God, the infinitely valuable divine being, and an assurance that whatever happens is part of God's good plan, a plan that is good not only for the whole world but also for the individual. These two claims support an attitude of gratitude even in the midst of suffering. It is important to note that not all Christians or theists affirm these theological commitments or endorse constitutional gratitude. However, it is only within the context of personal theism that constitutional gratitude can make sense. This kind of gratitude requires a theology that not only sees God as the all-powerful and all-wise designer of reality (something Platonists, Stoics, and numerous other non-theists affirm), but also as intimately related to each individual, showing love to individual created persons and fulfilling the desires of their hearts (cf. Eleonore Stump 2010). Many important theologians do, in fact, affirm a version of the defeat-of-evil views that Adam defends. The idea that God defeats evil at the individual as well as global level is found not just in contemporary thinkers such as Adams and Stump, but also in medieval theologians from both Christian and Muslim traditions (e.g. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas; al-Hilli and al-Murtaza). On such a framework, people of faith can be constitutionally grateful due to their belief that whatever happens in their lives will turn out to contribute to their good, albeit not in ways they can always foresee. This allows them to be grateful no matter which misfortunes they suffer.

While Stoics and other thinkers who affirm cosmic goodness can license cosmic gratitude and acceptance of whatever happens, their views do not support this kind of constitutional gratitude. Non-theist views that allow for cosmic goodness hold positions on which my existence as an individual has value as part of a larger whole. We see this historically in the Stoics (Aurelius 2011; Epictetus 2014). We also see this in contemporary defenders of axiarchism, the view that the cosmos and everything it contains exists because it is good (recent discussions includes Leslie 2001, 2013; Roberts 2014; Mulgran 2017; the position goes back to Plotinus and the Platonist tradition, see Cohoe 2017, pp. 752–54 for some of the ancient antecedents). The goodness these philosophers affirm is global and concerns the overall ordering of things. Axiarchism does not defend the idea that every individual's life will be good for the individual as such. The situation is similar with ultimism, a position that affirms the existence of an ultimate being that is the source of reality and value, but emphases human limitations in knowing such a being. John Schellenberg, one of the foremost contemporary defenders of ultimism, argues that ultimism is compatible with many world religions while also offering room for skeptics, agnostics, and those who think there is some higher power out there while not holding fully determinate beliefs (Schellenberg 2009). Jeanine Diller has further broadened ultimism by suggesting that it should not require that the ultimate principle be completely unlimited, but instead just needs to be "better than anything else in the actual world" (Diller 2013). While the

indeterminate character of this view allows it to include a diversity of perspectives, it also prevents ultimists from affirming anything similar to the position of Adams and Stump. Their affirmations of the goodness and order of the universe are too global and general to imply that whatever happens to you will be for your benefit. As we shall see, axiarchism and ultimism can, at best, support an attitude of acceptance, since you are entitled to think that whatever happens fits into an overall excellent order.

Since these views give priority to this cosmic whole, they cannot ensure the local goodness of an individual's life and everything in it. Some things may be bad for me as an individual but good for the whole. This is something that the ancient Stoics recognized and is a topic on which their contemporary adherents counsel acceptance (Aurelius 2011; Pigliucci 2015; Pigliucci and Lopez 2019, pp. 59–60). You should be willing to acknowledge that not everything is set up for your good. This may help in dealing with bad fortune, but this attitude of acceptance is quite different from gratitude. There are, then, types of gratitude that do not have a true equivalent for non-theists. Acceptance of fortune may offer a positive response to suffering, but it is not the same as constitutional gratitude. In this way, non-theist attitudes toward fortunate and unfortunate events are significantly different than the sorts of attitudes encouraged by Christianity, Islam, and other religions with a personal God who offers a loving relationship to each individual and cares for the well-being of each individual as such.

2. Characterizing Gratitude, Cosmic Gratitude, and Constitutional Gratitude

To see when and where gratitude is appropriate, we need to consider what gratitude is and what it requires. In this paper, I focus on gratitude in its proper sense. I follow the predominant contemporary philosophical and psychological approach, which takes gratitude in this proper sense to be a three-place relation: *you* are grateful for *something* to *someone* (Manela 2019, Section 1; Carr 2013; Gulliford et al. 2013; R. C. Roberts 2014; Manela 2016). This beneficiary–benefit–benefactor structure is found both in small cases, such as being grateful to your child for bringing you breakfast in bed, and in cases that encompass your whole life, such as being grateful to God for creating and sustaining you. Gratitude goes beyond mere appreciation for some good. According to this predominant contemporary understanding, gratitude consists of appropriately acknowledging the source of goods you have received without fully meriting (Gulliford et al. 2013; Carr 2013; Manela 2019). It requires recognizing the source behind these goods as something that has benefitted you in a special way and deserves thanks and praise. Some scholars have defended gratitude for non-theists by endorsing non-directed gratitude (Lacewing 2016) or giving up on the requirement that gratitude have an appropriate target (Bardsley 2013; Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2016). By contrast, I am maintaining the three-place beneficiary–benefit–benefactor structure. In my view, it better characterizes gratitude than these alternatives. Moreover, I think that non-theistic views can meet the requirements on a benefactor, so requiring a target for gratitude does not tip the scales too much in favor of theism.

Many scholars, however, hold that only persons can be targets of gratitude. Robert C. Roberts insists that, "without personifying concepts", any supposed description of gratitude "would fail plausibly to describe a kind of gratitude". (R. C. Roberts 2014, p. 73) The target of gratitude that we see as our benefactor needs to be a person (or at least needs to be personified). Similarly, Tony Manela argues that the source of the good must "intend to benefit the beneficiary under the description 'benefit the beneficiary'" in order to be an appropriate target of gratitude (Manela 2018, p. 630). This view raises questions about whether non-theists—those who do not believe that there is a personal God—can be grateful for their existence or for the existence of reality. In other work, I have argued that this cosmic gratitude, as I call it, does not require a belief that the cause of one's existence or the existence of the cosmos is personal (Cohoe 2022a, 2022b). Cosmic gratitude can be appropriate even for those with vague beliefs about the source of the cosmos or those who take its source to be non-personal (e.g., a system, form, nature, or idea) but good.

In my view, there are still important requirements that a source must meet to be regarded as a benefactor. To enable cosmic gratitude, non-theists must hold: (1) that our existence and the existence of the universe are good; and (2) that they come from a source that is itself good and causes the goodness of the universe and our lives (this causation may be either immanent or transcendent). This source need not be conceived as personal and does not need to aim at the good of individuals as such. The source could still count as a benefactor if it produces an overall good order in which an individual's good is included.

There are several historical examples of philosophers who have held views that allow for non-theistic cosmic gratitude, including the Stoics, Baruch Spinoza, and, on some readings, Plato. There are also a variety of contemporary metaphysical views that license cosmic gratitude, including the versions of ultimism and axiarchism previously mentioned (contemporary articulations of a view that meets this requirement include Parfit 1998; Leslie 2001, 2013; Schellenberg 2009; Diller 2013; Roberts 2014; Buckareff and Nagasawa 2016; Mulgran 2017). While only academic philosophers fully articulate such views, they have significant connections to the views of reality that many religiously unaffiliated people in contemporary societies seem to hold as measured by surveys and sociological work. For example, Pew 2018 found that a large proportion of the American population does not believe in a personal, biblical God but does believe that there is a good higher power or ordering force behind reality. If an appropriate target of gratitude need only be good and a reliable cause of goodness, there are important commonalities and connections between theists and non-theists when it comes to cosmic gratitude. As we shall see, however, the sorts of gratitude that theism and non-theistic accounts allow for are still significantly different due to differences in their accounts of the benefits we receive and our relationship to the beneficiary behind them.

To show the difference between theistic and non-theistic gratitude, we first need to explore the idea of constitutional gratitude. It is easy to be grateful for things we see as benefitting us. At the Thanksgiving dinner table, after enjoying a great meal and delicious pies, I find it easy to feel grateful to those who have prepared it and, more broadly, to all those responsible for the pleasant and comfortable life I enjoy. When we receive things we desire—a promotion, a raise or recovery from sickness—gratitude may come naturally. But what about things that happen in our lives that seem neutral or even bad? What about pain and suffering? Most of us would not be grateful for missing out on Thanksgiving dinner, much less losing a job or having our health permanently damaged. Robert C. Roberts, however, insists that for the Christian, gratitude to God should always be present:

> Thanks for the God-relationship is always proper, takes precedence over thanks for the blessings of this life, and persists through the thick and the thin of the latter blessings. It persists, that is, in the person whose cosmic gratitude is a Christian virtue, a firm and stable trait of character marked by the wisdom of the proviso. (R. C. Roberts 2014, p. 78)

The proviso to which Roberts refers has to do with the way that the Christian should receive good things from God, as secondary in importance to God's own goodness: "were these blessings taken from me, my gratitude to you, O God, would continue unabated" (R. C. Roberts 2014, pp. 77–78). God, as both benefactor and highest good, is the Christian's focus, allowing for gratitude to continue whatever else happens.

Roberts, following Søren Kierkegaard, takes constitutional gratitude to consist in this kind of abiding love and appreciation for God and everything God gives whether or not it seems good in the moment. In part, Christians can hold such attitudes because they recognize human limitations in identifying what is good or bad. What might seem harmful for you may turn out to be beneficial while desired goods might turn out to be harmful. As Robert says, the faithful Christian "steadfastly gives priority to the relationship with a benefactor by subjecting all good and bad fortune to a kind of humble skepticism about the value of every benefit and detriment in the light of God's unchanging goodness" (R. C. Roberts 2014, p. 82).

Even when real evils and harms are experienced, they are experienced within a larger context where the Christian is confident of God's care and overall plan for our good. This is not to say that the person will be unaffected. Roberts claims that the Christian's gratitude in the face of what seem to be misfortunes would be "not unchanged, perhaps, but unabated" (R. C. Roberts 2014, p. 78). When facing adversity, the believer's experience and reaction will be different, but it will still be a reaction of gratitude because the believer continues to have the benefit of relationship with God and continues to trust in God's plan. Here, Roberts draws on Søren Kierkegaard's reading of Job as an exemplar of gratitude.

Kierkegaard draws attention to Job's response to God when he loses all the blessings he had been given:

> At the moment when the Lord took everything, [Job] did not say first, "The Lord took", but he said first, "The Lord gave". The word is short, but in its brevity it perfectly expresses what it wishes to indicate, that Job's soul is not crushed down in silent submission to sorrow, but that his heart first expanded in gratitude; that the loss of everything first made him thankful to the Lord that He had given him all the blessings that He now took from him . . . It was not become less beautiful to him because it was taken away, nor more beautiful, but still beautiful as before, beautiful because the Lord gave it, and what now might seem more beautiful to him, was not the gift but the goodness of God. (Kierkegaard 1958, pp. 75–76)

For Kierkegaard, Job displays gratitude by continuing to appreciate the goodness of what he received even after it was taken from him. Instead of dealing with loss by insisting that what he received was not good or having the memory of its goodness destroyed, Job holds onto his appreciation of the gifts he was given.

Job appreciates their beauty but he appreciates more the beauty of the one who gave them:

> [Job] confessed that the blessing of the Lord had been merciful to him, he returned thanks for it; therefore it did not remain in his mind as a torturing memory. He confessed that the Lord had blessed richly and beyond all measure his undertakings; he had been thankful for this, and therefore the memory did not become to him a consuming unrest. He did not conceal from himself that everything had been taken from him; therefore the Lord, who took it, remained in his upright soul. He did not avoid the thought that it was lost; therefore his soul rested quietly until the explanation of the Lord again came to him, and found his heart like the good earth well cultivated in patience. (Kierkegaard 1958, p. 79)

For Kierkegaard, Job is not in denial. He feels sorrow at what is lost, but he retains his faith in God's goodness to him and acknowledges the goods he has received. The Lord continues to be a benefactor and Job's soul can rest given his trust in the Lord, even if he has not yet received any explanation. On the view Roberts develops, the person developing constitutional gratitude is going to be grateful in all circumstances, not just when things are going well. The Christian with constitutional gratitude is convinced that all things, whether apparently good or bad, are coming from a God who is absolutely good and also has the Christian's good in mind (cf. Stump 1993, 2010). This allows for patience in the face of adversity. Roberts and Kierkegaard see this virtue as specifically theological. If, however, non-theists can be grateful for their lives and the universe, can they also manifest this sort of constitutional gratitude?

3. Global and Local Goods and Defeat

In order for constitutional gratitude to be warranted, you need to be in a position to believe that all the things you receive will have value within your life. This is the situation that Job is in, at least in the interpretation of Kierkegaard and Roberts. This perspective is not, however, open to most non-theists because their views do not ensure that everything that happens to individuals will be good for them. To understand the relevant requirement for constitutional gratitude, we need to look to the helpful distinctions Marilyn Adams

makes between global and local evils and goods. As Adams notes, the source of good in a universe can be seen both at a cosmic level "as 'producer of global goods' and at a local or individual level as bringing about 'goodness to . . . individual created persons'" (Adams 1989, p. 302). For any good or evil, we can ask both about how it fits into the overall order of the universe and the ways in which it is good or bad for specific individuals.

Adams draws attention to the category of horrendous evils, which she defines as "evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason prima facie to doubt whether one's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole" (Adams 1989, p. 299). Whether something counts as a horrendous evil is not merely subjective: people can be mistaken in their judgments about their own lives. It is, however relative to someone's psychology and constitution because, as Adams claims, "nature and experience endow people with different strengths; one bears easily what crushes another" (Adams 1989, pp. 299–300). Adams does not precisely delineate this category but instead offers a number of paradigmatic examples:

> The rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one's own off-spring, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, . . . I believe most people would find in the doing or suffering of them prima facie reason to doubt the positive meaning of their lives. (Adams 1989, p. 300)

Adams selects examples that are actually found in our world and that seem, based on their awfulness, to call into question the meaning and goodness of the lives of those who experience them.

Adams then argues that the horrors that these individuals suffer cannot be addressed by global considerations about the good. Even if such evils can be included in "maximally perfect world orders", that fact would "not automatically provide consolation for the individuals who participate in or suffer these horrendous evils" (Adams 1989, p. 302). The horrors might have some "generic and global positive meaning" insofar as they are included within a "maximally perfect world order" but this would do nothing to ensure the goodness of life for the individual (Adams 1989, p. 302). Something can be tolerable as part of an overall order while still being utterly destructive of goodness within the life of some person. This means that the source of goodness in a universe "cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives [this source] allows to be engulfed in and/or defeated by evils—that is, individuals within whose lives horrendous evils remain undefeated" (Adams 1989, p. 302). Such a person's life would, on an individual level, be experienced as bad and as a failure even if it contributed to some overall excellent world order.

Adams' solution is to insist that on the Christian understanding, God is in a position to defeat horrendous evils not just globally, but for each individual. Adams appeals to two features of God that are central to Christian axiology. First, God, as the ultimate and infinite good, can offer something incommensurably better than the evil someone has suffered: "the good of beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would engulf . . . even the horrendous evils humans experience in this present life here below, and overcome any prima facie reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living" (Adams 1989, pp. 306–7). A life of loving intimacy with an infinite being is a good life even if it also contains horrendous evils. Going further, Adams thinks that God can providentially order individual's lives to bring good out of evil. God can "make all those sufferings which threaten to destroy the positive meaning of a person's life meaningful through positive defeat . . . by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person's relationship with God" (Adams 1989, p. 307). For Adams, evils will not just be outweighed by goods; they will, in some way, be turned to the good of the very individual who experiences them. Adams, drawing on the Christian tradition, suggests three possible ways in which evils might be integrated into someone's life and experience of the good: through allowing for more perfect identification with God and the suffering Christ, through increased divine

gratitude to the sufferer, and/or through increased insight into the divine life itself (Adams 1989, pp. 307–8).

On this view, the Christian can be grateful in the midst of suffering because of a final assurance that due to God's goodness this suffering will be defeated, ensuring that "for those who love God, all things work together for the good" (*Romans* 8:28). God produces good not just universally for a world order, but for each of those who love God. This position is not unique to Christians. Seyyed Jaaber Mousavirad notes that many Muslim theologians endorse the principle of compensation, which is the idea that someone will receive "an equal or greater amount of good in the Hereafter to compensate for the loss and hardship of the evil experienced in this world" (Mousavirad 2022). Mousavirad uses the notion of compensation in an analogous way to Adams to address the evil and suffering experienced by individuals. It is worth noting that compensation may not be as strong as the defeat that Adams endorses. Nevertheless, it may be enough to ensure that the sufferer can continue to see God as a benefactor and experience an ongoing benefit even in the midst of suffering thanks to trust in God and God's ultimate plan.

While many versions of theism are set up to ensure the defeat of local evils, this is not true of all versions. Peter van Inwagen's response to the problem of evil, for example, concedes that local evils may need to be accepted for the sake of global goods (van Inwagen 2006), resulting in a view similar to that of the Stoics and other goodness-affirming non-theists, as we will see in the next section. So, some theistic views only license acceptance, not constitutional gratitude. There are also important questions about whether these defeat and compensation views are plausible or even defensible. For the question of constitutional gratitude, however, we need only consider whether non-theists can make analogous moves. Can non-theist views of goodness ensure local defeat of evils in addition to incorporating them into global goodness?

4. Goodness-Affirming Non-Theists on Global and Local Goods

Non-theist views struggle to guarantee this because they do not involve a personal God who cares for the individual as such. The ancient Stoics serve as an excellent test case because they hold that Reason/Zeus orders all things and is active in every part of the universe. This means that there are no relevant limits on Reason's knowledge or power that would prevent Reason from promoting the good of an individual. Reason exercises a universal providence (one of many ideas in ancient Greek philosophical theology that influences theology in the Abrahamic traditions: see Cohoe 2017, pp. 752–54). For the Stoics, nothing happens that Reason does not order. However, they think that Reason aims at the good of the whole and the best overall order, not at individual goods (see Cohoe 2020, pp. 205–8 for more on how to understand pantheism—both Stoic and otherwise—in contrast to theism). Humans' role as sharers in reason is to act in ways that promote the good of the whole. It is not to seek our individual good primarily.

For the Stoics, we can aim at things that are according to nature, such as health, prosperity, and life, but we should only be disposed to aim at them insofar as this is in accordance with Reason's overall plan for the cosmos. Once we learn that part of the plan involves suffering something that is not generally according to nature, we should accept this even though it is not to our individual advantage.

The influential early Greek Stoic Chrysippus strongly emphasizes this point:

> As long as the future is uncertain to me I always hold to those things which are better adapted to obtaining the things in accordance with nature; for God himself has made me disposed to select these. But if I actually knew that I was fated now to be ill, I would even have an impulse to be ill. For my foot too, if it had intelligence, would have an impulse to get muddy. (Chrysippus, quoted by Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.6.9=LS 58J=SVF 3.191, trans. Long and Sedley 1987)

For Chrysippus, I should not just tolerate illness but instead see it, once it happens, as something to be selected positively because it is part of fate or Reason's overall plan for the world order. Just as the foot would be willing to undergo things that are not according to

nature with respect to its individual condition (e.g., getting muddy) because they promote a greater overall good (e.g., moving to some place that the whole body needs to be in), so I should be willing to undergo things that are not according to nature with respect to my individual condition. Chrysippus does not, however, appeal to any further individual benefit that I (or the foot, in the analogy) might receive by undergoing these things. I (and the foot) should choose them simply for the good of the whole.

Epictetus, a former slave who became one of the leading Stoic teachers in the Imperial Roman period, picks up on the foot example to emphasize that the primary good is not that of the individual human, but of the cosmic whole:

> It is natural for the foot to be clean, taken in isolation, but if you consider it as a foot and not in isolation, it will be appropriate for it to step into mud, and trample on thorns, and sometimes even to be cut off for the sake of the body as a whole; for otherwise, it will no longer be a foot. We should think in some such way about ourselves also. What are you? A human being. Now, if you consider yourself in isolation, it is natural for you to live to an advanced age, to be rich, and to enjoy good health; but if you consider yourself as a human being and as part of some whole, it may be in the interest of the whole that you should now fall ill, now embark on a voyage and be exposed to danger, now suffer poverty, and perhaps even die before your time. Why do you resent this, then? Don't you know that in isolation a foot is no longer a foot, and that you likewise will no longer be a human being? What, then, is a human being? A part of a city, first of all that which is made up of gods and human beings. (Epictetus 2014, *Discourses* 2.5.24–26, trans. Robin Hard)

Epictetus thinks we need to give up on seeking our individual good and, by seeing ourselves as parts of the cosmic whole, be content with contributing to the good of the whole. My part in the universe may involve uncompensated suffering if this leads to a better overall ordering. In the Stoic view, there is no reason to think that negative things will turn out to benefit me in the long run since the universe is not aiming at my partial good. Negative things need not be defeated by positive things or integrated into an individual's personal good.

Instead, the Stoic response to horrendous evils is to deny that anything external is evil and insist that the goodness or badness of our lives is entirely a matter of our choices and our virtue (or lack thereof). Things that are not according to nature such as disease, poverty, assault, and death are not evils (except insofar as they involve the vicious choices of individuals), while things according to nature such as health, prosperity, and life are not good. Only virtue is good and only vice is evil. For the Stoics, externals belong to the class of indifferents (even if, according to most Stoics, things according to nature may be preferred to their opposites, which are also in the class of indifferents). This allows for the Stoics to counsel acceptance of whatever happens as part of an overall good ordering. I should have a positive attitude toward everything that happens in my life, but this attitude is weaker and more limited than constitutional gratitude. I am not in a position to think that whatever happens to me will work out for my own benefit. Just as the foot may suffer things that harm it as a foot for the greater good of the body, so we may suffer things that harm us as humans while benefitting the universe as a whole. Your feet are there to serve your body. They do not primarily have their own individual good. I might develop calluses and hurt my feet in order to get somewhere quickly. If my foot has a cancerous growth, I might even need to destroy it completely. I am willing to do whatever is necessary to my feet in order to achieve my overall goals and what benefits my body. For the Stoics, we are rational feet, creatures who are self-aware but limited parts of the universe. We need to be ready to accept harmful things up to and including our own death, if that is for the greater good, without any personal consolation. The Stoics think I can avoid having negative attitudes about anything that happens to me by taking on this universal perspective. I should assent to what happens without sorrow or anger and, in seeing what happens as

part of an overall good order of reality, I can maintain cosmic gratitude and a positive attitude of acceptance toward all things (cf. Seneca 2011, II.30).

Being convinced that things will work out for the greater good is not, however, the same as Job's attitude, the approach of constitutional gratitude. Kierkegaard contrasts Stoic imperturbability with the reaction of Job:

> Is not that one who prides himself on not being able to sorrow in the day of sorrow put to shame by not being able to rejoice in the day of gladness? Is not the sight of such imperturbability unpleasant and distressing, almost revolting, while it is affecting to see an honorable old man, who but now sat in the gladness of the Lord, sitting with his fatherly countenance downcast, his mantle rent and his head shaven! (Kierkegaard 1958, p. 74)

For Kierkegaard, Job feels both sorrow and joy. In contrast to the Stoic, Job is not detached from what happens to him. He experiences things as good or bad for him and does not seek refuge in being part of a greater whole.

Instead, throughout the good and the bad, Job experiences gratitude to God as the source of goodness for both himself and the world and is confident that God is acting well:

> In the same instant that everything was taken from him [Job] knew that it was the Lord who had taken it, and therefore in his loss he remained in understanding with the Lord; in his loss, he preserved his confidence in the Lord; he looked upon the Lord and therefore he did not see despair. Or does only that man see God's hand who sees that He gives; does not that one also see God who sees that He takes? (Kierkegaard 1958, pp. 81–82)

Insofar as Job sees what happens to him as coming from God and continues to trust in God, he has consolation even in the midst of sorrow. This consolation rests on seeing God as both good and as good to Job, not just a source of global goods for a broad order of things.

It is this sense of goodness to Job that allows for continuing gratitude in the midst of sorrow. As Kierkegaard puts it:

> The Lord took it all. Then Job gathered together all his sorrows and "cast them upon the Lord," and then He also took those from him, and only praise remained in the incorruptible joy of his heart. For Job's house was a house of sorrow if ever a house was such, but where this word is spoken, "Blessed be the name of the Lord," there gladness also has its home. (Kierkegaard 1958, p. 83)

For Kierkegaard, gladness remains because Job continues to see what happens to him, sad as it is, as coming from a good God who continues to care for him. On Kierkegaard's reading, Job does not know how things will work out or how evils will be defeated but he remains confident in God and experiences God as a benefactor for him. As we saw, Marilyn Adams spells out Christianity's promise of goodness: God is able to defeat evils in the very life of the individual who experienced them. The theistic view acknowledges evil and sorrow but insists they can be defeated by God's goodness, while the Stoic view involves denying that what has happened is evil and remaining indifferent to all externals.

Committed Stoics are entitled to accept whatever happens to them with a positive attitude but they cannot be constitutionally grateful because they have no reason to think that what happens to them will be beneficial for them as individuals. This issue is not unique to the Stoics. While many non-theistic views of the universe do not go as far as the Stoics in denying the value of externals, they share the Stoic strategy of appealing to global goods and an overall ordering in justifying seemingly bad things. These global goods may ensure that the universe itself is a good place, but they do nothing to reassure individuals about the goodness of our lives as such. We see this in contemporary non-theistic views that affirm the goodness of the universe, such as those of axiarchists and ultimists. While most people are not familiar with the terms "axiarchism" or "ultimism," the views philosophers defend under these names describe attitudes toward reality embraced by many non-theists who experience gratitude and wonder. Axiarchism and ultimism both affirm the claim that there is some good higher power and that this goodness in some way causes or explains

both the existence of the cosmos and our existence as individuals. They also do not claim that this higher power is the same as the God of a revealed religion such as Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, and they leave open the question of what this higher power is (e.g., whether it is the cosmos itself or some transcendent ultimate divine being). In this sense, these views match well with the significant percentage of people in contemporary Western society who believe in a higher power but do not affirm that this higher power is the God of a revealed religion (Pew Research Center 2018).

As mentioned above, axiarchists hold that the cosmos and everything it contains exists because it is good (Leslie 2001, 2013; Roberts 2014; Mulgran 2017). However, axiarchism is a position about global goods. It maintains that reality as a whole is good in its overall ordering but it is not committed to thinking that each individual life is good. There is also no relationship of love or care between the good and the individual that allows individuals to trust that the goodness behind the universe will make their life good for them. The situation is similar with ultimism, a position defended by John Schellenberg and picked up by several other contemporary philosophers. Ultimists affirm that there is a metaphysically ultimate and, further, that it is connected to our good (salvifically ultimate) and is a source of value (axiologically ultimate). As Schellenberg puts it, "there is a metaphysically and axiologically ultimate reality (one representing both the deepest fact about the nature of things and the greatest possible value), in relation to which an ultimate good can be attained" (Schellenberg 2009, p. 1). Schellenberg thinks that the strength of ultimism lies in its openness and flexibility. It can fit with many world religions but does not endorse all their requirements, allowing space for skeptics, agnostics, and those who affirm some sort of higher power but lack a worked-out theology. Jeanine Diller has gone even further to broaden ultimism by suggesting that it should not require that the ultimate principle be completely unlimited in all dimensions, but simply needs to be "better than anything else in the actual world" (Diller 2013). For Diller, the best version of ultimism turns out to be a broad tent: "the disjunction of views claiming that there exists something that is metaphysically, axiologically, or soteriologically ultimate, in unlimited or limited ways" (Diller 2013, p. 230). This would allow a significantly greater number of people to count as ultimists. While Diller's characterization may be a little too broad to guarantee that endorsing ultimism would put one in a position to express cosmic gratitude, it expresses the idea that many people are implicitly committed to views in which there is a higher power or order that is both good and metaphysically explanatory, even if their views are not fully developed (for other views that would meet my conditions, see Parfit 1998; Buckareff and Nagasawa 2016; Mulgran 2017).

In both Schellenberg and Diller's versions, however, there is no reason to think that what happens to you will be good for you even if it may contribute to the goodness of the universe as a whole. Schellenberg's position is specifically set up to avoid anthropomorphic accounts of value, as he affirms the goodness of the overall universe while refusing to affirm that human beings play a central role in the value of the cosmos. Even if a view is not specifically set up to avoid anthropomorphic accounts of value, non-theistic positions are generally not equipped to affirm the conditions necessary for constitutional gratitude. Their affirmations of the goodness and order of the universe are too global and general to imply that whatever happens to you will be for your benefit. Such views can support an attitude of acceptance since you are entitled to think that whatever happens fits into an overall excellent order. This, however, is not the same attitude as constitutional gratitude. For the axiarchist or ultimist, you should be willing to acknowledge that not everything is set up for your good. This may help, to some extent, in dealing with bad fortune, but this attitude of acceptance or resignation is quite different from gratitude. Such views do not license the sorts of attitudes found in the Abrahamic religions, in which the global triumph of goodness over evil goes together with the local triumph of good over evil within the believer's individual life. Even though some types of gratitude can be shared between theists and non-theists, there are important differences between the kinds of attitudes

available to theist and non-theists that depend on the way that the ultimate relates to individuals and their goods.

5. The Value of Constitutional Gratitude

Constitutional gratitude can only be obtained in metaphysical views such as the forms of theism found in Abrahamic religions, which affirm the goodness of the ultimate toward the individual. I have not, however, fully explored the value of constitutional gratitude. If Roberts is correct and constitutional gratitude is a virtue that improves our lives, then theism's ability to support such a virtue counts in its favor. If, however, it has neutral or negative value, the situation will be different. Some think that asking people to be grateful for their suffering and to value their negative experiences is dangerous or unwarranted. D. Z. Phillips (2004) and Nick Trakakis (2008), among others, have attacked theistic defenders of suffering as morally insensitive and insisted that they are inappropriately justifying the unjustifiable. If these attacks are successful, then constitutional gratitude is unlikely to be an appropriate attitude toward suffering and misfortune. We should note, however, that these anti-suffering and anti-theodicy reactions attack the positive attitude of acceptance as well as constitutional gratitude. If suffering is an abomination, then any positive attitude, whether acceptance or constitutional gratitude, is inappropriate. Whether either of these attitudes can be defended depends on the nature of reality and value. In particular, the status of constitutional gratitude depends on whether the theist is entitled to believe that local evils will be defeated and whether this is enough to address anti-suffering and anti-theodicy worries (see Stump 1993, 2010; and Adams 1989 for important theistic responses).

6. Conclusions

Robert C. Roberts argues that constitutional gratitude, a characteristic and stable attitude of thankfulness toward an ultimate source of goodness, is a virtue. I have shown that non-theists lack the necessary metaphysical and epistemological basis for such an attitude. Most non-theist views that support the goodness of the cosmos, such as pantheism, axiarchism, and ultimism, hold that the existence of an individual has value as part of a larger whole. Since they give priority to a cosmic whole, they do not ensure the local goodness of an individual's life and everything in it. Some things may be bad for me but good for the whole. In such cases, acceptance may be the best available positive attitude, as ancient and contemporary Stoics counsel.

Many versions of theism, by contrast, support constitutional gratitude because they imply that whatever evils you personally experience will be defeated by greater goods that you personally experience. This allows you to be grateful even in suffering. Whether this is a better and more appropriate attitude depends on facts about reality and value. Even if both theists and non-theists can experience cosmic gratitude, their attitudes toward fortunate and unfortunate events are significantly different. Christianity, Islam, and other religions with a personal God who cares for the well-being of each individual agent as such enable constitutional gratitude, not mere acceptance.

References

Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1989. Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63: 297–310. [CrossRef]

Aurelius, Marcus. 2011. *Meditations: With Selected Correspondence*. Translated by Robin Hard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bardsley, Karen. 2013. Mother nature and the mother of all virtues: On the rationality of feeling gratitude toward nature. *Environmental Ethics* 35: 27–40. [CrossRef]

Boleyn-Fitzgerald, Patrick. 2016. Gratitude toward things. In *Perspectives on Gratitude: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Edited by David Carr. New York: Routledge, pp. 112–25.

Buckareff, Andrei, and Yujin Nagasawa, eds. 2016. *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carr, David. 2013. Varieties of Gratitude. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47: 17–28. [CrossRef]

Cohoe, Caleb M. 2017. Why the One Cannot Have Parts: Plotinus on Divine Simplicity, Ontological Independence, and Perfect Being Theology. *Philosophical Quarterly* 67: 751–71. [CrossRef]

Cohoe, Caleb M. 2020. Accounting for the Whole: Why Pantheism Is on a Metaphysical Par with Complex Theism. *Faith and Philosophy* 37: 202–19. [CrossRef]

Cohoe, Caleb M. 2022a. Why and How to be Grateful to Non-Personal Agents. Journal article manuscript under review, last modified September 15. Microsoft Word file.

Cohoe, Caleb M. 2022b. Targets of Cosmic Gratitude. Journal article manuscript under review, last modified October 1. Microsoft Word file.

Diller, Jeanine. 2013. The Conceptual Focus of Ultimism: An Object of Religious Concern for Nones and Somes. *Religious Studies* 49: 221–33. [CrossRef]

Epictetus. 2014. *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*. Translated by Robin Hard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gulliford, Liz, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson. 2013. Recent Work on the Concept of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47: 285–317. [CrossRef]

Kierkegaard, Søren. 1958. *Edifying Discourses: A Selection*. Edited by Paul L. Holmer. Translated by David Ferdinand, and Lillian Marvin Swenson. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Lacewing, Michael. 2016. Can non-theists appropriately feel existential gratitude? *Religious Studies* 52: 145–65. [CrossRef]

Leslie, John. 2001. *Infinite Minds: A Philosophical Cosmology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leslie, John. 2013. A Proof of God's Reality. In *The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is there Something Rather Than Nothing?* Edited by Tyron Goldschmidt. New York: Routledge, pp. 128–43.

Long, Anthony, and David Neil Sedley, trans. and eds. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manela, Tony. 2016. Gratitude and Appreciation. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49: 55–66.

Manela, Tony. 2018. Gratitude to nature. *Environmental Values* 27: 623–44. [CrossRef]

Manela, Tony. 2019. Gratitude. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (Fall 2019 Edition)*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab.

Mousavirad, Seyyed Jaaber. 2022. Theory of Compensation and the Problem of Evil; a New Defense. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14. [CrossRef]

Mulgran, Tim. 2017. Beyond Theism and Atheism: Axiarchism and Ananthropocentric Purposivism. *Philosophy Compass* 12: 1–11.

Parfit, Derek. 1998. Why anything? Why this? *London Review of Books* 22: 24–27.

Pew Research Center. 2018. *When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/04-25-18_beliefingod-00-03/ (accessed on 10 October 2022).

Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah. 2004. *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*. London: SCM Press.

Pigliucci, Massimo. 2015. *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Pigliucci, Massimo, and Gregory Lopez. 2019. *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control—52 Week-by-Week Lessons*. New York: The Experiment.

Roberts, John Russell. 2014. Axiarchism and Selectors. *Faith and Philosophy* 31: 412–21. [CrossRef]

Roberts, Robert C. 2014. Cosmic gratitude. *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 6: 65–83. [CrossRef]

Schellenberg, John. 2009. *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Sceptical Religion*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Seneca. 2011. *On Benefits [De Beneficiis]*. Translated by Miriam Griffin, and Brad Inwood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stump, Eleonore J. 1993. Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job. In *Reasoned Faith*. Edited by Eleonore J. Stump. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 328–57.

Stump, Eleonore J. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trakakis, Nick. 2008. *The End of Philosophy of Religion*. London: Continuum.

van Inwagen, Peter. 2006. *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Article

Shades of Gratitude: Exploring Varieties of Transcendent Beliefs and Experience

Pamela Ebsytne King *, Rebecca Ann Baer, Sean A. Noe, Stephanie Trudeau, Susan A. Mangan and Shannon Rose Constable

Thrive Center for Human Development, Fuller Theological Seminary, 180 N. Oakland Avenue,
Pasadena, CA 91182, USA
* Correspondence: pamking@fuller.edu

Abstract: The study of gratitude has expanded beyond interpersonal gratitude and considers how people respond to gifts that are not caused by human agency. Given the discord between the prominent understanding of gratitude requiring the appropriate recognition of a gift to a giver and the increasing divergence of transcendent belief systems that do not acknowledge a transcendent or cosmic giver, we explored how people with different worldviews viewed and experienced gratitude. Transcendence does not hinge on metaphysical beliefs, but it can be experienced phenomenologically and subjectively. We conducted a case-study narrative analysis ($N = 6$) that represents participants from three different categories of belief systems: theistic, non-theistic but spiritual, and other. Our findings demonstrate how people link their transcendent narrative identity to their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors pertaining to gratitude. Although the theistic participants thanked God for gifts, others who experienced transcendence without a clear referent or source described responding to gratitude by sharing goodness forward. These narratives suggest that the recognition and appreciation of a gift stemming from beyond human cause may be enough to generate transcendent emotions and values that prompt beyond-the-self behaviors.

1. Introduction

Given the mounting evidence in support of gratitude's positive effects on well-being and social ties, it is not surprising that the study of gratitude continues to expand, moving beyond examining gratitude between and toward people to examining gratitude toward more transcendent sources. This expansion is evident in recent publications on gratitude to less tangible benefactors (Tsang et al. 2021), transpersonal gratitude (Hlava et al. 2014; Steindl-Rast 2004), gratitude to God (Krause et al. 2014, 2015, 2017; Nelson et al. 2022; Roberts 2014; Rosmarin et al. 2011; Wilt and Exline 2022), higher-order gratitude (Lin 2014, 2017), existential gratitude (Jans-Beken and Wong 2021), and cosmic gratitude (Cohoe 2022; Manela 2019; Roberts 2014). Within this study, we were interested in how people's transcendent beliefs are linked to their views and experiences of gratitude for gifts that are not attributed to human agency. Although people in the US are moving away from conventional religious self-identification and affiliation toward broader understandings of spirituality and transcendence (Ammerman 2013; Kim et al. in press; Smith 2021; Steensland et al. 2018), psychological research generally neglects nuances of transcendent construals. Consequently, we conducted an in-depth case-study analysis of six individuals with either theistic, non-theistic but spiritual, or other beliefs.

1.1. The Power of Transcendent Narratives

Based on McAdams and Pals (2006) theory of personality, all persons internalize narratives that are more or less coherently integrated within their identities. These nar-

rative identities serve "to provide the person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning" (McAdams and Pals 2006, pp. 209–10). More recent work extends this conceptualization of narrative to distinguish transcendent narrative identities in order to highlight the unique orienting power of types of narratives imbued with sacred significance informing virtues such as gratitude and motivating moral actions (King 2020; King et al. 2020; Schnitker et al. 2019). Research points to the importance of religious traditions and institutions that offer transcendent narratives to promote meaning making and purpose (see Damon 2008; Furrow et al. 2004; King et al.; Lapsley and Hardy 2017; Liang and Ketcham 2017). However, not all persons have identities informed by clear conceptualizations of God or the divine. As noted above, trends show that fewer Americans ascribe to traditional theistic views about the transcendent (Smith 2021). Existing research demonstrates that theistic and nontheistic transcendent experiences may shape the meaning-making processes that galvanize a sense of self and worldview (Kim et al. in press; King et al. 2014; Mahoney et al. 2021; Nelson et al. 2022). People are increasingly adopting narratives about other sources of ultimacy or of the sacred that do not always include a metaphysical reality. Many are wrestling with what they believe, frequently departing from traditional faith, and their conceptualizations are often nebulous and unformed.

Increasingly, people report experiences of transcendence that do not involve a supernatural entity (Kim et al. in press; Nelson et al. 2021; Yaden et al. 2021). Callaway et al. (2020) describe that people not only conceptualize transcendence within theistic, humanistic, and naturalistic worldviews, but may experience ontological, phenomenological, or subjective transcendence. All of these offer a sense of expansion beyond the self as a way to find meaning. Ontological transcendence involves a metaphysical or supernatural reality. Within phenomenological transcendence, expansion beyond the self occurs in finding deep connection and obligation to an entity that is necessary for the conditions of life, such as humanity or nature. Still, for others, the self becomes the conduit for a sense of expansion that provides meaning or, in some cases, results in nihilism. Subjective transcendence may occur through the resonance and emotions inspired through art and beauty or through one's own agency. In the cases of phenomenological and subjective transcendence, individuals might have clear belief systems, but those systems do not explain a distinct agentic cosmic giver. Regardless of the type of transcendence, the beliefs or the experience of transcending the self defines ultimacy, is luminous, and defines what is essential or sacred-like.

Research suggests that clear views of the sacred and ultimate have orienting power on people's lives, yet many people are unclear about what beliefs and experiences define their lives. Emmons' (1999) research on strivings demonstrates that ultimate concerns serve to organize entire goal systems and orient life aims. In addition, life purposes are more likely to be incorporated into one's narrative identity when they include transcendent, spiritual, or sacred content (Bronk 2014; Damon 2008). Mundane goals given sacred meaning are pursued with greater effort, provide more meaning, and receive more social support than unsanctified goals (Mahoney et al. 2021). Thus, a transcendent narrative identity has organizing power and serves to instantiate meaning and motivates the development of virtues such as gratitude, a sense of belonging, and purpose beyond one's own life that inspire fidelity to one's beliefs, and a life lived accordingly (King 2020; Schnitker et al. 2019). Even narratives that are not embedded within religious contexts can serve to "sanctify" the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that comprise virtues. Given that increasing research demonstrates that people's narratives and sources of meaning do not necessarily stem from metaphysical beliefs but can be shaped by varied experiences of transcendence, within this study, we pursued *transcendent gratitude*. We were interested in exploring the self-reported transcendent narratives of participants and how these come to bear on experiences and practices of gratitude.

1.2. Gratitude

Since the turn of the century, research on interpersonal gratitude has continuously demonstrated gratitude's powerful effects on individual and interpersonal flourishing

(Emmons 2019). Within the existing psychological research, gratitude has been conceptualized as an affective state, meaning that gratitude is felt temporarily. as well as a trait, or an aspect of one's personality that endures over time (Carlisle and Tsang 2013; Emmons and McCullough 2003; McCullough et al. 2001, 2002; Lin 2014), as a life orientation (Wood et al. 2010), and as a virtue (DeSteno et al. 2019; Merçon-Vargas et al. 2017; Tudge et al. 2018). Despite the dissent on how to classify gratitude, generally, within the research literature, gratitude is most often understood as a response to a specific benefit received from a tangible *human* benefactor. Evolutionary theories within psychology emphasize the importance of the dynamic of exchange within interactions serving to bind communities together (McCullough et al. 2008). Such theories provide support for this binding function of gratitude by theorizing that gratitude produces a prosocial dynamic by alerting individuals to the prosocial efforts of others, while promoting them to behave prosocially in turn.

Recently, however, research has begun to highlight that experiences of gratitude towards more intangible agents might differ from interpersonal gratitude (Tsang et al. 2021). Such conceivable intangible benefactors could include entities such as governments; corporations; or more religious/spiritual agents such as God, spirits, ancestors, etc. Bolstering the case for the need to examine the linkages between more intangible benefactors and gratitude responses, early research on Gratitude to God demonstrated positive effects on well-being *beyond* the effects of interpersonal gratitude (Krause et al. 2014, 2015; Knabb et al. 2021).

In this study, we set out to explore this newer area of gratitude research by examining how transcendent narratives and belief systems shape experiences of gratitude toward intangible benefactors that might be considered divine, sources of transcendence, or other representations of ultimate reality. We chose to conceptualize gratitude as a virtue. Virtues involve constellations of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that enable a person to reliably do what is right or good and are embedded in transcendent narratives (King 2020). Consequently, we define gratitude as the virtue consisting of habituated patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that allow an individual to reliably receive and respond to gifts and inspire a gracious response to the giver and/or to others.

1.3. Transcendent Gratitude

Transcendent-narrative identities are beyond-the-self belief systems that are informed by transcendent experiences that provide orienting power that directs purpose and meaning making, and this, in turn, motivates the development of virtues. Within this framework, we were interested in exploring *transcendent gratitude*, which we conceptualized as a virtue rooted in the transcendent narrative identities of individuals and prompted by a response to gifts that cannot plausibly be attributed to human agency. While interpersonal gratitude is generally based on a benefactor giving a gift that is received, recognized, and can be responded to, not all conceptions of transcendence, such as the connectedness of all beings, are personified, nor do they have motivations or intentions. Although research documents that people have various conceptualizations and experiences of transcendence, most empirical studies do not account for the varied and complex nature of the structure of beliefs related to transcendence. In failing to do so, they lose the predictive capacity to identify the salient aspects of transcendent construal. In addition, insufficient recognition of the complex nuances of transcendent construals might lead to missing observable attitudes and/or behaviors in virtues such as gratitude.

What people believe about ultimate reality, the cosmos, or human nature informs how transcendent gratitude is experienced. For example, in a Judeo-Christian context, people often perceive God as psychologically similar to humans, with desires, emotions, intentions, and agency (Nyhof and Johnson 2017), and these perceptions potentially lead people to feel grateful to God in similar ways as they do in regard to persons. Research on transcendent gratitude from this perspective is usually referred to as gratitude to God, and such research focuses on the beliefs and experiences of an agentic, benevolent God (Krause et al. 2015, 2017; Stroope et al. 2013; Wilt and Exline 2022). Cosmic gratitude generally refers to

gratitude to nonhuman sources that are deemed benevolent (Manela 2019; Roberts 2014) or that are viewed as the sources of goodness (Cohoe 2022). However, we must ask, what about belief systems with less tangible benefactors that do not promote a metaphysical personified other? What if no cosmic giver—benevolent, agentic, or otherwise—is recognized? Do they have a similar attribution process?

Given that the prominent conceptual approach to interpersonal and cosmic gratitude involves an appraisal of a gift and personified giver (Cohoe 2022; McCullough et al. 2002; Roberts 2014), we seek a richer understanding of how beliefs factor into gratitude for gifts not attributable to humans, particularly if the giver is nebulous and not easily personified. Additionally, we want to explore if transcendent gratitude is related to prosocial responses in a manner similar to interpersonal gratitude. In order to answer questions such as these, this study explored the nuances of how different transcendent narratives specifically related to experiences of transcendent gratitude.

1.4. The Current Study

In the current study, we aimed to broaden current theoretical approaches to different understandings of gratitude. In order to do so, we employed a case-study analysis that was represented by individuals with varied belief systems in order to identify cases that exemplify or perhaps challenge current theories of gratitude. We purposely interviewed individuals who believed in God, those who were spiritual but did not believe in a God, and those who did not identify as spiritual or theistic. A narrative approach provides insight into the substantial features of their lives, enabling us to explore the consistency and coherency of their beliefs throughout their narratives.

2. Methods

This case-study analysis is part of a larger mixed-methods study of transcendent gratitude (Mangan et al. forthcoming). The study was designed to elicit person-centered perspectives, as well as variation across and within participants, given their self-identified transcendent beliefs. The following details the relevant aspects of the research design and the data analytic strategy.

The six participants included four females and two males, ranging in age from 25 to 59 (*M* = 45.7) years old. They represent a variety of ethnicities—Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian—living in both urban and suburban contexts in various parts of the US. The case-study participants were selected from 29 interviews conducted, in which we employed a purposeful sampling methodology to capture diverse belief systems across three categories: theistic, spiritual but non-theistic, and other. The subsample was chosen based on rich and cohesive descriptions of religious, spiritual, and existential beliefs and gratitude, and in order to maximize representation of religious, gender, and cultural diversity.

2.1. Instruments

Participants filled out an online demographic and beliefs screener survey (see Procedures below) and participated in a semi-structured interview.

2.1.1. Screener

The primary purpose of the first 10–15 min screener survey was to find out more about participants' belief systems to monitor and recruit even numbers of participants for each of our three main belief categories. The screener asked questions about demographics, their work during COVID, and their beliefs. Not only did this information allow us to ensure a distribution of participants across our three belief categories, but it also provided an opportunity for a quality check to eliminate participants who were unable to or did not provide coherent responses to open-ended questions about beliefs. Initially, users were asked, "In a few sentences, what kind of belief system helps guide you?" Then they were asked to choose one word to sum up the belief system they described (i.e., nature, God). They were then given a series of open-ended questions asking about how their belief

systems impacted their lives, their behaviors, their major life goals and informed their decisions, and they were prompted to give examples. Finally, participants were asked to select which category best described their beliefs: theistic (i.e., belief in a god); spiritual but not theistic, or other. The theistic group reflected belief in God. The spiritual but non-theistic group self-identified as believing in something spiritual, such as a force, essence, or power that connects all of life. The other group did not believe in spiritual realities. The other group generally identified as agnostic or atheist.

2.1.2. Interview

In order to gain more nuanced insight into the structure and composition of transcendent gratitude and to understand the meaning of potential benefactors more fully across belief systems, an open-ended qualitative questionnaire was developed. This study utilized a narrative inquiry approach with a lens of appreciation to elicit and interpret participant's narratives and beliefs. Specifically, we used a modified version of *The Life Story Model of Adult Identity* (McAdams 2008). The first section of our interview included key scenes in a life story (e.g., high point; low point; idealized future scene; and religious, spiritual, or mystical experience scene) with added probes about gratitude and joy. The second section focused on personal ideology, faith, and beliefs and drew heavily on the McAdams interview. The third section asked about gratitude, including their beliefs, experiences, and habits involving ordinary, mundane, or common gifts (e.g., good coffee, mail) and also extraordinary experiences of gratitude (e.g., the birth of a child). The fourth section was on joy, and the interview concluded with questions about challenges they had experienced during the early stages of the COVID pandemic.

The narrative approach yielded rich portraits of their lives, including pivotal moments and daily occurrences providing important context for understanding the substance and consistency of their beliefs. The open-ended qualitative approach allowed participants to describe experiences and perspectives relevant to gratitude and their beliefs about transcendence and potential cosmic benefactors.

2.2. Procedures

All participants were recruited simultaneously through Mturk and Prolific online data-sourcing platforms. The inclusion criteria for participants taking this study were that they were over 18 years of age; living in the United States; had internet access; and were able to speak, read, and write in English fluently. Participants were recruited through an advertisement to participate in a study on their beliefs and worldviews that would involve an online screener questionnaire, a survey, and a 90-min video interview via Zoom. A total of 976 users saw the recruitment advertisement (81% from Mturk). One hundred and fifty viewers indicated interest and completed the screener (94% from Mturk). Of those 150, 86 participants met our criteria and were invited by email to participate in the study.

Based on the screener survey, 86 participants answered all questions and demonstrated clarity of their belief system and were invited to participate in the rest of the study. Of these qualified individuals, 46 took a second survey on gratitude and were invited for an interview, yielding 29 interviews. Although we had an initial goal to recruit 10 participants in each of the three belief categories, ultimately, the sample size was determined by using the saturation principle, as is customary in qualitative studies. Data were collected and initially analyzed, and at 29 interviews, no new themes were emerging. In addition, throughout the process, participant demographics were reviewed to ensure a near-even distribution of participants' self-identified affiliation: theistic, non-theistic but spiritual, and other.

Data were collected between May and August of 2021. The compensation for interviews changed from $25 initially to $40 and then to $50. We continued to increase the price for two reasons: First, we noticed that mostly homebound people were engaging in the study, so we wanted to make the study more appealing to others. Second, given the

involved nature of the study, we had a difficult time recruiting new participants, so we increased the incentive to bolster participation.

2.3. Data Analysis

Although qualitative studies often seek nomothetic knowledge by identifying themes common to participants and potentially applicable to the populations of interest, our goal was to seek idiographic data and focus on the particularities of individuals around their understandings of meaning and experiences within the context of their lives (Allport 1965; McAdams 2011; Schachter and Ben Hur 2019). We sought to understand the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of gratitude for specific individuals in a holistic and person-centered manner to preserve the gestalt of participants' experiences and to ground the understanding of gratitude within the contexts of their particular beliefs and life narratives.

For the purposes of providing examples or challenges to existing theories about the structure of cosmic gratitude, we required that the interviews provided rich, coherent, and consistent descriptions of (1) their cosmic beliefs and how they made sense of the world; (2) to whom or what they were grateful; (3) their behaviors associated with gratitude; and (4) their attitudes, feelings, or perspectives that accompanied or were in response to gratitude. A team of four researchers reviewed the 29 interviews in order to select two interviews from each category that represented distinct belief systems. The interviews were reviewed by at least two researchers and then discussed with a broader team of five to reach a consensus on the interviews that represented diverse and coherent perspectives. In the iterative process of reading and distilling each interview or case study, we sought to personalize the analysis by abridging the interview narratives in a manner that retained the whole-person autobiographical tone while noting both personal and ecological particularities that distinguished their beliefs and conceptualizations and descriptions of gratitude (McAdams 2011; Schachter and Ben Hur 2019).

3. Results

For each participant, we provide a brief narrative description and offer quotations from him or her to highlight beliefs and experiences surrounding gratitude.

3.1. Theistic

Within our theistic category, we chose two participants who clearly delineated a belief system about a metaphysical being, specifically God.

3.1.1. Jennifer

Jennifer, a 46-year-old Black female, reported living with chronic pain and other medical issues. Her husband, with whom she had a good relationship, died of pneumonia in 2014. She self-identified as theistic but did not associate with any particular religion. However, she noted that she believes in the Holy Bible and prays to God. Jennifer's beliefs were influenced by her parents and her late husband.

For Jennifer, she said that her "guiding system of what to do and what not to do in life" was rooted in Christianity. She said she tries to "treat people the way they want to be treated, [and] to not still do things that harm others". While she reported at the time of the interview that she did not attend a specific church, she proactively engaged in practices such as reading the Bible and listening to sermons on a weekly basis, as well as praying daily. She constantly experienced God's comforting presence, saying, "He's always there. He's always with me . . . giv[ing] me a sense of protection. Yeah. A sense of comfort. Yeah, yeah, it's very comforting to know God's there. Always". She described God as having attributes such as being a protector, compassionate, loving, caring, helpful, and supportive.

She spontaneously linked her beliefs about God to gratitude. In response to a general question regarding her religious and/or spiritual approach to life, Jennifer immediately replied: "I believe in thanking God, being grateful, showing gratitude, being grateful for

what I have, [I] try not to complain about what I don't [have], and helping when I can, helping people, giving back".

God's role in her ideas about gratitude is evident when she described paying for her husband's memorial service. She recalls the following:

> When I had to pay for his service, memorial service, I didn't have enough money. And I needed help, and a co-worker of his started a collection and took up the money. I had been praying [for] an answer, and to me I believe God answered that prayer. Because we took up a collection and I was able to afford to pay the funeral home for the service. To me, that was God. God, because I didn't know, and I put it in God's hands, and he answered . . . I couldn't have been more grateful, I was truly grateful for that.

She then summarized, "I was grateful for God for answering the prayer, for God sending the people, for the people that donated, I'm just grateful. All of that". Additionally, when asked about what she was grateful for, Jennifer easily listed the following: "My husband, our relationship. I've been grateful for people that helped me along the way. I've been grateful that my parents are still here in the land of the living, relatively healthy. I've been grateful that medical procedures have gone well. I've been grateful for having a roof over my head, food to eat, having enough money to pay bills".

She also was clear about behaviors connected to gratitude. She expressed her thanks to others, and she said prayers of thanksgiving to God. At one point in her life, she kept a gratitude journal. "I did a daily journal, and I got the idea from Oprah. Did a daily journal of expressing, what is it? Five things [of] gratitude a day. Find five things you're grateful for each day, and write it down in a journal".

3.1.2. Randal

Randal, a 44-year-old Caucasian male, was living in a suburban environment in the Pacific Northwest at the time of the interview. He worked in data analysis and reported being married to his wife for five years. Although he grew up in the Pentecostal Holiness tradition in a remote, fairly poor agricultural community in Central California, he is now Eastern Orthodox. Early in his life, he began to value nature and the interdependence of life, but these views became more established through the Eastern Orthodox community.

Randal attributed a number of personal attributes to God: "God is good. God is loving. God is patient. God is gentle. Does not force himself. God is as pained as we are". He engaged in spiritual practices with his community, such as weekly liturgy, taking communion, daily prayer, and confession, which connect him to God. He valued the energies between community members and how that exchange reflects back to God. He explained, "So basically, God loves humanity and wants to raise us up into his Kingdom. And His energies permeate the world and permeate us and all of our relationships with each other and with him . . . it's part of my belief structure that God is in everything and everything is interconnected". He highlighted the importance of what this belief meant for him practically: "So knowing God is experiencing those energies, and coming into knowledge of our interdependencies with each other, our love that binds us all together, and how that then reflects back up to God".

Randal reported feeling gratitude for the beauty around him, as well as the beauty he saw in people when they treat one another with love. When talking about a transcendent giver, Randal ultimately attributed all gifts to God: "It's the story in our worldview that God is reconciling the world to himself . . . all of our good gifts come from him". He felt most grateful for beauty, love, and interconnectedness: "When I'm really impressed and feeling most grateful . . . It's when I see that people are just in sync with the way that things should be. That they're living in love, that they're living in beauty, that they're living in grace . . . . That's the deepest gratitude. It's when you see a life being lived well". Additionally, Randal highlighted the importance of being grateful for everyday life: "I'm not highly emotional, but when I see it, it's like I recognize it and I appreciate it. It's like smelling good food". In reference to interpersonal gratitude, he reported thanking and

acknowledging people when appropriate or keeping it to himself and smiling. He also said that much of his gratitude is directed to God.

3.2. Non-Theistic but Spiritual

Within the second category, belief systems varied broadly. Narratives not only included a variety of beliefs (e.g., magic, God), but beliefs ranged in degrees of consistency and comprehensiveness. For our purposes, we chose two participants with distinct non-theistic belief systems that were coherent and linked to their experiences of gratitude.

3.2.1. Esther

Esther, a 58-year-old Caucasian woman, was living in a large urban context in the Midwest at the time of the interview and was an artist and sculptor. Esther was the youngest of seven children and noted her early love of nature and the wilderness that brought her peace. She referred to herself as a "very spiritual" person. She reported growing up in Catholicism but questioning the existence of God amidst tragedy.

Her beliefs became shaped by readings on Buddhism, Taoism, philosophy, and science and her connection to nature. She reported that these beliefs center on an awareness of an "essence" she referred to as "life" which can be found in an awareness and connection to life, nature, and others. She explained, "I'm very nature-based; I do believe in, that there's essence of what I refer to as life, which isn't the heart beat or anything, it's more an awareness, I believe that it's in everything natural, not the unnatural things that we create, but that it exists in everything natural, and we should respect it".

When asked about what it meant for her to be spiritual, she explained that her body is only a vehicle to interact and connect with others. "To me, it means realizing that this is not me, this (body), it's just a convenient little bottle that I'm stuck into so that I can interact and people can interact with me. I believe our thoughts have just as much of an impact on all of life as we know it as our actions do, we feel negatively, we are contributing to that negative". She offered very vivid descriptions of how her meditation practice connected her to this energy: "I believe that by asking, like when I meditate, by opening my mind and being receptive to what is good and what is right, that I'm actually drawing that towards me, almost like lighting a candle in the dark in order to draw our modes in, you're becoming magnetic towards it".

However, for Esther, this source is not personified: "I just see it more as energy output, and by sharing, we multiply it, and that's what keeps it going". Her beliefs about the interconnectedness of all living things and her commitment to being aware were evident in her reflection on decision making: " . . . whatever I do to try, and I think consciously, 'Why am I doing this? . . . Is it the right thing to do? Is it for good, or is it selfish? . . . And try to focus everything I do on having the best impact, and especially when I'm dealing with other people, animals, that I can just think of what is best for them at that point in time".

In describing gratitude, Esther explained the following:

> I think gratitude is truly and completely recognizing the gifts that we are presented with, not from people and all, but from our experiences in life, and showing respect by actually recognizing them and feeling thankfulness and meekly, that what we're given is nothing that we could have achieved ourselves, that the feeling for love, just recognizing when you have an eureka moment, you suddenly understand a situation, gratitude is just a deep feeling of recognition, respect, and thankfulness for an experience that was given to you.

She further offered graphic descriptions of how gratitude served to energetically connect and benefit all things:

> I imagine, say, I'm interacting with you and I really feel much gratitude for you, I imagine more like if you had a spectrometer or something and you could see the auras that we put forth or the energies that we feel, it would come from me, it would just wash through you . . . then from there it multiplies and goes out into the essence, into the universe, the energy that goes through all of everything.

She provided several examples of gifts of gratitude. She was thankful for sharing her life with the people whom she loves; feeling wonder about nature, the sun on the trees, the clouds, and the rain; and the opportunities that each day brings. Esther reminded herself daily of the things she is grateful for. She reported these experiences as being linked with emotions of awe, being overwhelmed, and feeling a sense of humility. When she reflected on how she practically responded to gratitude, Esther reported that, when she was alone, she would smile, laugh, and say "Thank you" quietly to herself. When with others, Esther says she expressed her gratitude out loud, perhaps by taking a moment to stop, breathe, and express her thanks.

3.2.2. Maria

A 42-year-old Hispanic female, Maria, was a single mother, raising teenage children. She grew up in a low-socioeconomic neighborhood in a small city in the Dominican Republic. When she was a teenager, she immigrated to the United States with her father. Maria reported placing a high importance on dreaming and working hard for her aspirations. She grew up in a culture where "men dominate[d]", but she strayed against the norm and decided to pursue a career in Accounting and Software Engineering. She stated that she lives in the United States in order to provide her children with more robust educational opportunities.

Maria grew up Catholic in a country where 90% of people are Catholic; however, she reported no longer attending church because she felt she could pray and read the Bible on her own. She talked about how her beliefs evolved:

> I believe a lot in the cause and effect. You do something, there's a consequence to everything that we do, good or bad . . . And then personal responsibility. I get annoyed when people think that everything that happens is just luck or someone else's fault and doesn't want to take their own . . . responsibility for their own life . . . And that's my main belief. I think I'm responsible for everything that happens bad in my life, and for a certain percentage of the good things that happen, [chuckle] too, because there are good things, there are other people that intervene in the good things.

She also described a force that has supported her: "And probably because the way my life has been, I know there has been (a) certain power, force that helped me, people that I met that helped me, that supported me". In her own life, Maria experienced this power helping her to navigate tough life situations: "You have five good years, and then you have a couple of bad ones. But I feel like it has been there in the bad years as well. And somehow, it has helped me navigate, go to the good years in one piece [chuckle]".

She reported feeling empowered through this force to stay strong and to keep her mind strong, driving her to continue to "work to change it": "And it has been there, that force, it has been there to help me with my mind . . . " She described this power as dependable and fair: "But in my life, when I feel about these attributes of the higher power, I can tell you, to me, is something that is, how can I say it, fair, very fair for my life. Like I do my work, I feel I get reciprocated, so it's a fair power. It's dependable . . . "

Transitioning to Maria's perspective on and experiences of gratitude, Maria reported feeling grateful for her children, for being able to take care of her family's emotional and financial needs, for coffee in the morning, and for being able to work from home during the pandemic. When she was asked about the high point of her life, she described her deep joy and gratitude for being able to help a relative pay for college and how this gratitude translated to a deep desire to give back to others:

> I cannot quantify the value of that amount of money that I gave her, because right now, it translated exponentially. She's a professional at teaching . . . Those four or five years changed everything . . . just to be part of that, that was . . . I felt like it was one of my kids that was graduating from college, to be honest. So that one that was profound to me, and I felt at that moment, that I was . . . That was a gesture of gratitude to life. That person didn't do anything to help me

anywhere, but to me, represents a lot of other people that helped me throughout the way. A lot of things that get combined within my life to help me. And I feel that obligation, and it's not like an obligation, but I feel [the]thing that I need to go . . . To give back because I just received so much.

This feeling propelled her forward, motivating her to continue to help others. "I feel so good, but also I felt also compelled and responsible, maybe to do more in the future with other people". This sentiment of experiencing gratitude for good gifts in her life which prompted her to pursue prosocial behaviors is summarized well in this final quote:

"I think it's, to me, is just simple, to be aware of the good things that has happened in your life and to be able to get back, to give back, not necessarily to the people that probably helped you in the moment, because sometimes maybe those people are not around or you just can't give back to them, but give back in general to society, to other people that you know".

3.3. Other

The third category includes participants who identified as neither religious nor spiritual. We selected two case studies where the individuals clearly articulated their belief systems and how those systems played out in their lives.

3.3.1. Tina

Tina is a 59-year-old Caucasian female who, at the time of the interview, was living in a suburban environment in the Southeast. To bolster her strength, in her twenties, she joined a Medieval reenactment group and learned to fight in a full suit of armor. Tina's worldview and morality were shaped by the code of chivalry promoted within this group. She moved beyond that association, but it was formative for her. More recently, she became a competitive cyclist.

When interviewed, she said that she enjoyed trail running, cycling, and mountain biking. Tina stated she was not even "remotely religious". When asked about her spiritual beliefs or beliefs in God or a Higher Power, she flatly responded, "No". Despite this response, she described transcendent experiences that connected her with nature and with others:

"I certainly get overcome by a sense of wonder when I do star-gazing . . . It's like a little 30-s thing of just complete happiness of being able to observe these things that happen in nature . . . there'll be like this big open field with a bunch of those little yellow flowers and I'll just stop and be like, 'Whoa'. Or like right at sunset when everything sort of turns like a pink color sometimes, it never ceases to amaze me".

She reported feeling a deep bond with other mountain bikers that contributes to a "pay it forward" mentality.

Somebody was so cool to me on the trail and they helped me when I was lost. I mean, I've literally had people I don't even know see me go out on the trail after sunset and wait to make sure I got back . . . So when that happens, I wanna pay it forward . . . I take this little mental Rolodex, like, 'I gotta do something nice for somebody else. I gotta keep this moving'. And that's kind of a compulsion[as] . . . I absorb all this feeling of wellbeing, then I wanna make sure I share that, I wanna do a nice thing for somebody else, it's almost like somebody did me this huge favor, and this is too much for one person. I gotta make sure and help somebody else.

Tina reported a belief system that was deeply informed by an engrained moral code of chivalry that she picked up while participating in medieval reenactments:

"That whole kind of personal code of chivalry that I took away from that, I apply it all the time. And it sets the bar for human behavior unreasonably high, but I

keep trying. 'Cause it's basically expecting you to be the perfect individual, and nobody is, but there's nothing wrong with continuing to strive for that".

Tina said gratitude was "appreciating what you have in life to some extent, I guess, material lives, but just experiences. Yeah, it's just appreciation and recognizing what good things are in your life and being happy about that". Tina reported being grateful to a wide variety of friends and family, and she actively pursued behaviors to express these sentiments: "Well, if it's my husband, I'll just text him and tell him how awesome he is . . . I'll go, 'God, he's got so patient, he's so great'. I tell my older sister a lot, 'cause I'll call her and I'll just be freaking out about something, or she'll even call me, which makes me feel like really useful . . . "

Although Tina reported that she does not believe in a cosmic realm, she holds tightly to a set of beliefs that guide her moral behavior. In addition, she was able to experience transcendent connection with both others and nature, both of which seemingly affected her practice of gratitude. She was able to quickly identify those she is grateful to and was able to note both the prosocial behaviors and emotions experienced (for example, awe and wonder).

3.3.2. Ben

Ben is a 25-year-old Asian male who, at the time of the interview, was living in a suburb in New England. He reports being a part of a community of gamers. Ben's mother was Buddhist, and he remembered partaking in some Buddhist practices, such as praying and burning incense, while growing up. Ben reported meditating daily before bed to promote a sense of calmness. He identified as agnostic.

When describing his beliefs, Ben said, "I believe in what I know and what I observe around me and what others have observed and know. That's what I base my beliefs on . . . .As for anything else, I mean, I have an open mind about it. I leave it behind everything that has been proven, and it can be proven, and that's basically my belief system". As for Ben's sense of morality, he considered whether something "has a bad effect on other people".

Ben reported that it is important for him to be informed and make informed decisions, and he relies on what is observable or provable. When Ben reflected on gratitude, he explained that people should be "grateful for something that you have received at the expense of someone else". He also noted that you "can be just grateful for your situation, 'I'm alive, wild nature is beautiful and all that. I'm glad to be on this Earth'. We didn't really provide the Earth to ourselves . . . I am grateful that Earth exists. Thank you, Earth for existing".

When he detailed his feelings about gratitude, he compared himself to people less fortunate and said that he was grateful for the following:

The shelter I'm in right now, computer that I'm using to conduct this interview, I am living in luxury. I know that a lot of people are not living in this sort of luxury every day. I'm grateful for just being in the situation, I was born here, I never had to go out and hunt for food . . . I could just live here and I can go out and protest for something stupid and not be punished for it. It's a great place to live, as far as I can tell.

When Ben was asked to think about extraordinary experiences of gratitude, he struggled to find a response and then said, "Oh, heck no . . . !" Ben did not report a gratitude practice, and when asked about potential behaviors resulting from moments of gratitude, his comments came off as hypothetical and not very thought through. He explained, "If you're grateful for nature, just it being there, I *guess* you would pay it back by being more conscious of . . . let's say the products you buy, it has to be environmentally friendly or something. You could pay it back by just swapping out a few product brands, make sure that they're ecologically responsible". When speaking about his parents, he said, "I'm grateful for my parents for taking care of me, Mother's Day and Father's Day exists for a reason. You can also keep track of their birthdays if you're especially attentive to their

needs. Get them gifts and stuff, say the mushy, mushy 'I love you, Dad and Mom' and all that. We're not mushy, mushy though. Definitely not. A lot more business".

4. Discussion

Given the interest in exploring gratitude to transcendent or other non-human sources, and the shifting trends in religious and spiritual affiliation (Smith 2021), we aimed to explore how different belief systems impact gratitude experiences and their related behaviors. In order to capture the nuances of beliefs, we conducted a case-study analysis of six individuals with different worldviews. A life-narrative approach combined with semi-structured questions about gratitude allowed us to investigate the relationship between beliefs and gratitude across three different belief categories: those who were theistic or reported believing in God, those who described themselves as non-theistic but spiritual, and those who identified as other. We wanted to explore how individuals conceptualized and experienced gratitude for things that were not attributable to humans. We hoped to broaden the prominent conceptual approach to gratitude that emphasizes recognition of a gift and response to a benevolent, agentic giver as the fundamental appraisal processes underpinning gratitude (Cohoe 2022; Manela 2019; McCullough et al. 2002; Roberts 2014; Tsang et al. 2021). In addition, because the research demonstrates that interpersonal gratitude enhances relationships and generates prosocial action, we investigated the narratives to see if various conceptualizations prompted the same prosocial benefits.

Guided by the conventional understanding of gratitude, we examined whom or what each participant considered to be the source of gifts, to whom or what they thanked for these gifts, and their attitudinal and behavioral responses to those gifts. In all instances, the six participants were able to articulate to whom or what they were grateful. However, not all participants were able to name or describe a transcendent or non-human source; rather, they defaulted to expressing gratitude to persons or to the gift itself. Although the participants varied greatly in their beliefs and conceptualizations about gratitude, in each of the six cases, their narratives provided an arc of life experiences, transcendent beliefs, and views and experiences of transcendent gratitude.

For Jennifer, God was personal, a loving God who provided personal gifts directly to her or through others. She very intentionally prayed to and thanked God personally. In contrast to Jennifer, Randal's narrative emphasized the interconnectedness of all. He viewed God as loving and permeating all of reality. He was grateful to God for gifts that benefit all (e.g., beauty) and when people lived in harmony and grace. Both theists emphasized the importance of thanking God directly for gifts. Similar to Randal, Esther valued the interconnectedness of reality and a life essence. Although she did not name a cosmic giver, she described gratitude as an opportunity to intentionally send energy to the giver and beyond to the essence of life. Maria, a former Catholic and daughter of immigrants, valued personal responsibility. Although she recognized a higher power, she felt accountable alone for what she had earned. She recognized that others, such as her parents, helped her, so she desired to pay these gifts forward and assist others on their journeys. Tina also valued paying goodness forward. An explicit atheist, Tina did not recognize a transcendent source of any gifts. That said, she was animated by transcendent emotions of awe, wonder, and profound happiness when she found herself in nature or was helped by others. She had no cosmic giver to thank but felt a compulsion to pay gifts forward. Conversely, although agnostic, Ben's beliefs and statements of gratitude were directed toward what he observed. He viewed gratitude as something necessary when there was a perceived cost to another, and he viewed it as obligatory to express thankfulness by taking care of the gift.

These idiographic findings exemplify and challenge the existing theory and research on gratitude that identify as necessary the acknowledgement of a gift and an agentic and intentional supernatural giver (Cohoe 2022; Manela 2019; Roberts 2014). The two theistic participants, Jennifer and Randal, provided fitting examples to the existing gratitude-to-God literature (Krause et al. 2015; Roberts 2014; Rosmarin et al. 2011). They showed how

people construe an agentic and beneficent transcendent giver. They both expressed thanks directly to God. Their narratives correspond with existing theories such as Algoe's (2012) find–remind–bind theory. For both theists, the recognition of gifts prompted them to find God, the giver of all good things. The gifts, even when given through people, reminded them of their ultimate source, God; bound them further with God; and increased their gratitude and closeness to God.

The other cases challenge the prominent exchange approach to gratitude. Debates within the philosophical literature argue that in order to experience gratitude even within non-theistic worldviews, individuals need to have a benevolent giver to thank (Manela 2019; Roberts 2014) or perceive a source of goodness (Cohoe 2022). In addition, the psychological literature emphasizes that the cognitive appraisal of a good giver contributes to the relational and generous outcomes associated with gratitude (Algoe 2012; McCullough et al. 2002, 2008). That said, the remaining four cases, whether the individual identified as spiritual or not, did not report agentic givers deserving of gratitude or thanks. Furthermore, three of the cases articulated beliefs about paying gratitude forward to others, whereas the fourth, Ben, articulated the duty of paying back and sustaining the gift. For the three, in their own unique ways, they articulated how gratitude involved the recognition of a gift from a beyond-the-self source, and sometimes from beyond another human agent's credit, providing the opportunity to invoke reflection and awareness of something more than one's immediate life. For Esther, gratitude offered an opportunity for appreciation and respect that prompted meekness and humility, stirring her desire to contribute to the greater essence of life. Tina described being overwhelmed with the positive emotions of delight, awe, and wonder and being compelled to pass on these feelings of well-being to others. Maria, who most valued agency, was grateful for those who furthered her efforts and was deeply delighted to help others. Although her "paying it forward" might have originated from her quid pro quo mentality, she recounted that the high point in her life was the joy of helping someone graduate, and this experience inspired her to continue to help others.

None of these participants described a worldview with an agentic or benevolent, transcendent source of gifts. Regardless, emotionally stirred by their awareness of gifts, the three offered goodness forward. Although the literature suggests that gratitude might be easier to access if individuals believe in a personified transcendent source (Tsang et al. 2021), these findings illustrate that gratitude is possible to experience not only for non-theists, but also for those who have no explanation of a transcendent source. In particular, the interviews of Esther, Maria, and Tina suggest that an ultimate source of gifts is not necessary for gratitude to occur. Rather, their responses to gratitude were directed toward tangible acts to help others or energetically to the universe. Although technically or philosophically, some might describe their responses to gifts as *appreciation* because they had no giver to thank directly, appreciation does not account for their conscious responses of paying it forward. Perhaps, these cases challenge the proper understanding of gratitude that is dependent on thanking the giver. Furthermore, these narratives also challenge existing assumptions that gratitude produces prosociality because it alerts individuals to the prosocial efforts of others, prompting them to behave with the same prosociality (McCullough et al. 2001, 2008). In the case of these three participants, they had no prosocial (or otherwise) giver to be alerted to, yet they were still prompted to act generously toward others. Their examples may offer a modification to Algoe's (2012) find, remind, bind theory of gratitude for those whose belief systems have no transcendent giver. For the three women in this study, the find–remind–bind theory might be explained by finding a gift, not necessarily a giver; being reminded to appreciate that it was not of their own doing; and binding with others by passing on a gift.

Although the motivation or impulse to respond as part of gratitude—whether giving back or paying forward—might be explained through the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion that suggests that positive emotions open our perspectives and motivate us toward action (Fredrickson 2004), the direction toward which the action might benefit

is not predetermined. The good feelings that one experiences, whether like Tina when she experienced help while mountain biking, Esther when she experienced connection in nature, or Maria when she delighted in helping another, might spur one into action, but they do not guide behaviors directionally. Might the cognitive appraisals pertaining to gifts from sources beyond one's own doing, even without understanding or acknowledging a source of the gift, prompt enough of a beyond-the-self awareness and possibly attitude to stir generous and beyond-the-self actions? Furthermore, comments in Esther's narrative that named meekness and humility call into question whether receiving a gift from a beyond-human cause might give pause and reason to consider one's significance and, thus, responsibility.

An additional potential explanation of the prosocial responses to gratitude by individuals whose worldviews indicate no clear transcendent giver may be found in socio-affective neuroscience. Research by Immordino-Yang (2016) suggests that when people reflect on abstract beliefs and simultaneously experience transcendent emotions (e.g., gratitude and awe), they internalize the beliefs as meaningful (see also Riveros and Immordino-Yang 2021). Although we have no brain images of these participants, their narratives offer descriptions of transcendent emotions—being overwhelmed with awe, with wonder or experiencing mystery, and connecting these feelings to experiences that they internalized as beliefs that direct/orient their lives. For example, Tina recounted being overwhelmed by amazement when people assisted her while fighting or racing and that she was then compelled to pass on the feelings of well-being to others. Even Maria, who viewed the world in terms of cause and effect, was so moved by the joy of helping another make progress in her journey that she committed to continue to help others.

Ben provides an important contrast. He described himself as unemotional. He reported that his family was "not mushy", but "all business". His life was confined to gaming and possibly limited in regard to human interaction. Not surprisingly, his statements about beliefs and gratitude were similarly flat. His perspective was limited to the observable and what had been provided, and his narrative suggests that his life was very limited. Given his young age, the confines of quarantine, and that he reported spending the entirety of his time alone on his computer, either gaming or working through MTurk, his limited reflections on his beliefs and views of gratitude are not surprising. He reported being grateful for "what is", and recognizing a cost or a debt. His lack of emotion corresponds to his lack of enthusiasm and appreciation for anything beyond what is observable and obvious.

In addition, Ben's narrative contrasts to the others regarding the link between gratitude and connection to others. Ben's narrative had few mentions of relationships, except for saying that his were "all business" and describing a hypothetical sense of obligation to his parents to give them Mother's and Father's Day cards. He did not speak of friends, colleagues, groups, or organizations that he engaged in. He had no sense of transcendence–metaphysical or otherwise. Similarly, his descriptions of gifts were limited to things provided to him by others. He did not describe any prosocial or beyond-the-self inclinations. Gifts were viewed as a cost to others; there was no recognition of loving or kind intentions. The expression of thanks to the gift was a duty. There was no evidence of his being inclined toward sharing or paying his blessings forward.

Taken together, our findings suggest that beliefs do not need to involve a metaphysical other to provide meaning and substance to a transcendent narrative identity and to inform the meaning of virtues such as gratitude (King et al. 2020; Schnitker et al. 2019). These case studies provide six unique examples of how beliefs and worldviews inform gratitude and its perceived obligations and responses. These narratives exemplify how transcendent beliefs, whether theistic or not, are relevant. Five of the cases reported a clear sense that there was something more than themselves, and gratitude resulted from beyond-the-self realizations, prompting individuals to give thanks to God, offer good energy to the universe, or be helpful and generous to others. The one participant, Ben, who indicated no sense of transcendence, provided a stark contrast insofar that his lack of beyond-the-self (in his case beyond his home and computer) beliefs or experiences were consistent with his inability to

articulate gratitude beyond his immediate current situation and his lack of articulating any actual beyond-the-self prosocial actions.

The varying experiences of transcendence reflected in these case studies are further understood in light of the distinctions between ontological, phenomenological, and subjective transcendence (Callaway et al. 2020). Jennifer and Randal's experiences of gratitude to God exemplify ontological transcendence relating to a metaphysical other. Whereas Esther's experiences reflect phenomenological transcendence insofar as her explanation of transcendence was less predicated on beliefs but more on the experience of expanding beyond the self and feeling connected to the life essence. Tina and Maria exemplify different examples of subjective transcendence. The emotional resonance and stirring of emotions within Tina's narrative suggest an experience of transcendence which prompted generous actions. Maria emphasized personal agency and effort, and she also reflected that she found meaning through her efforts and connections to help others. Ben's narrative reflects Callaway et al.'s notion of an isolated self that may or may not perceive or experience transcendence.

Although the existing research suggests that transcendent gratitude involves the receipt of a gift, recognition of a giver, and a response, our findings suggest that, within worldviews without agentic sources of gifts, transcendent gratitude may involve appraisals of receipt of a gift, recognition and respect that there is more beyond the self, and prosocial responses.

4.1. Limitations and Future Research

Although these case studies provide textured nuances of beliefs in the context of details of actual lives, allowing for a thorough investigation of less conventional belief systems and gratitude, there are limitations to this approach. Important for consideration is the fact these narratives represent only the perspectives of the participants. We have no other sources of data to vouch for their credibility and validate that the attitudes, experiences, and behaviors have actually transpired. Although these six participants' interviews represented self-effacing comments and seemed genuine and authentic, research demonstrates that, in research, some people present themselves as socially desirable to a researcher and over-report qualities that may be deemed as good (Krumpal 2013). Additionally, our data were collected at a unique point in time, so we do not have a way to test if their responses would be reliable over time. Additional research would benefit from a follow-up study with the participant and include an additional source of data, such as a friend or family member.

It is important to note is that the data were collected from May to August 2020, which was at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with most of the United States living in quarantine, and when no vaccines existed. At this time, people around the world were still adjusting to the threat of the disease, possibly dealing with losses of loved ones and jobs, living in social isolation, and the unknown. Lives were marked by disruption, and mental health issues began to surface with enduring agitation and adversity. For some people, times of adversity and uncertainty become opportunities to reconsider and recommit to religious and spiritual beliefs. Additionally, such circumstances can intensify a sense of gratitude for life (Emmons and McCullough 2003). Consequently, we do not know the implications of the COVID context for this study, but we recognize that these interviews were conducted during an extraordinary moment in history.

Although these participants self-selected into the study, the case studies were chosen deliberately from the original 29 for the coherence and consistency of their beliefs. We recognize that some of the other 29 in the broader data set did not offer belief systems that were as rich or comprehensive, thus making it difficult to connect beliefs to gratitude. So, although our sample and findings expand existing conceptualizations of cosmic gratitude, they may not be relevant to all persons, even for those who share similar beliefs. For example, one participant who self-identified as not theistic but spiritual was not included in our analysis because he said he was agnostic, but still used God as a referent, and expressed gratitude to God. Several participants described that they rejected the conventional beliefs

of their youth or families but indicated that they did not fully differentiate a belief system. Further research is needed to explore how transcendent gratitude transpires for people who have ideas that are less clear about how they construe reality, how they make sense of their lives, and what holds ultimate value.

Although these findings challenge existing conceptual frameworks of transcendent gratitude that argue for a delineated target of gratitude (Cohoe 2022; Manela 2019; Roberts 2014), they are only initial findings and focus on belief systems. Given that we were curious about people's beliefs about potential targets of transcendent gratitude, we focused on their beliefs and not individual psychological differences. The narratives suggest that the participants varied in terms of their emotional range and regulation, the extent to which they related to others, and possibly their levels of dispositional gratitude that may all influence their capacities for transcendent gratitude. For example, the two men in our study, Randal and Ben, both described themselves as less emotional, and they either lacked or had the least developed descriptions of inclinations toward paying gratitude forward. In contrast, the four women had quite effusive descriptions of transcendent emotions, such as awe and wonder. In addition, they demonstrated strong self-awareness and spoke more vividly about their connections to God, nature, and/or other people. These differences raise questions such as, does one's attachment style or emotional-regulation tendencies influence one's experience of transcendent gratitude? Does attachment style or emotion regulation factor in differently if one has a more personified or a vaguer notion of a transcendent giver? Further research is warranted to explore and evaluate if different psychological tendencies may be more apt for different forms of cosmic gratitude.

4.2. Conclusions

These case studies illustrate how people with various transcendent belief systems are able to have psychologically rich experiences of gratitude for gifts that are not attributable to humans. Even though they may not recognize an ultimate source or transcendent giver to thank, they still are prompted to respond to gratitude by sharing goodness with others. The appreciation for gifts may prompt beyond-the-self thoughts and emotions that prompt future beyond-the-self actions. Participants' descriptions suggest that transcendence does not hinge on metaphysical beliefs or deliberate appraisals of a benevolent benefactor; they can be experienced through a sense of interconnectedness or union with life, nature, or humanity. Alternatively, others transcend themselves through profound emotional resonance or a sense of agency experienced through themselves. These findings suggest that current approaches to gratitude that are dependent on appraisals of a gift and giver may overlook viable opportunities to experience gratitude and related prosocial outcomes.

References

Algoe, Sara B. 2012. Find, remind, and bind: The functions of gratitude in everyday relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6: 455–69. [CrossRef]

Allport, Gordon W. 1965. Abraham Aaron Roback: 1890–1965. *The American Journal of Psychology* 78: 689–90. [PubMed]

Ammerman, Nancy T. 2013. Spiritual but not religious? Beyond binary choices in the study of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52: 258–78. [CrossRef]

Bronk, Kendall Cotton. 2014. *Purpose in Life: A Critical Component of Optimal Youth Development*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 69–89. [CrossRef]

Callaway, Kutter, Sarah Schnitker, and Madison Gilbertson. 2020. Not all transcendence is created equal: Distinguishing ontological, phenomenological, and subjective beliefs about transcendence. *Philosophical Psychology* 33: 479–510. [CrossRef]

Carlisle, Robert D., and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2013. The virtues: Gratitude and forgiveness. In *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol. 1): Context, Theory, and Research*. Edited by Kenneth I. Pargament, Julie J. Exline and James W. Jones. Washington: American Psychological Association, pp. 423–37. [CrossRef]

Cohoe, Caleb. 2022. Acceptance vs. constitutional gratitude: Non-theistic and theistic attitudes to suffering. *Religions* 13: 1005. [CrossRef]

Damon, William. 2008. *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

DeSteno, David, Fred Duong, Daniel Lim, and Shanyu Kates. 2019. The grateful don't cheat: Gratitude as a fount of virtue. *Psychological Science* 30: 979–88. [CrossRef]

Emmons, Robert A. 1999. *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality*. New York: Guilford Press.

Emmons, Robert A. 2019. Queen of the virtues and king of the vices: Graced gratitude and disgraced ingratitude. In *Psychology and Spiritual Formation in Dialogue: Moral and Spiritual Change in Christian Perspective*. Edited by Thomas M. Crisp, Steven L. Porter and Gregg A. Ten Elshof. Downers Grove: IVP Academic/InterVarsity Press, pp. 163–85.

Emmons, Robert A., and Michael E. McCullough. 2003. Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84: 377–89. [CrossRef]

Fredrickson, Barbara L. 2004. Gratitude, like other positive emotions, broadens and builds. In *The Psychology of Gratitude*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 145–66.

Furrow, James L., Pamela Ebstyne King, and Krystal White. 2004. Religion and positive youth development: Identity, meaning, and prosocial concerns. *Applied Developmental Science* 8: 17–26. [CrossRef]

Hlava, Patty, John Elfers, and Reid Offringa. 2014. A transcendent view of gratitude: The Transpersonal Gratitude Scale. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 33: 1–14.

Immordino-Yang, Mary Helen. 2016. Emotion, sociality, and the brain's Default Mode Network. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3: 211–19. [CrossRef]

Jans-Beken, Lilian, and Paul T. P. Wong. 2021. Development and preliminary validation of the Existential Gratitude Scale (EGS). *Counseling Psychology Quarterly* 34: 72–86. [CrossRef]

Kim, Sung, Stephanie Trudeau, and Pamela Ebstyne King. In press. Spirituality and meaning-making across contexts: Structural topic modeling of the Fetzer Spirituality Study in America. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, *minor edits for revision and resubmit*.

King, Pamela Ebstyne. 2020. Joy distinguished: Teleological perspectives on joy as a virtue. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15: 33–39. [CrossRef]

King, Pamela Ebstyne, Casey E. Clardy, and Jenel Sánchez Ramos. 2014. Adolescent spiritual exemplars: Exploring spirituality in the lives of diverse youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 29: 186–212. [CrossRef]

King, Pamela Ebstyne, Sarah A. Schnitker, and Benjamin J. Houltberg. 2020. Religious groups and institutions as a context for moral development: Religion as fertile ground. In *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Development*. Edited by Lene Arnett Jensen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 591–612. [CrossRef]

King, Pamela Ebstyne, Susan Mangan, and Rodrigos Mirenda Riveras. In press. Religion, spirituality, and youth thriving: Investigating the roles of the developing mind and meaning-making. In *Handbook of Positive Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. Edited by Ward Davis, Everet Worthington and Sarah Schnitker. New York: Springer.

Knabb, Joshua J., Veola E. Vazquez, Kenneth T. Wang, and Robert A. Pate. 2021. The Christian Gratitude Scale: An emic approach to measuring thankfulness in every season of life. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. 2014. Gratitude to God, self-rated health, and depressive symptoms. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 341–55. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, and Gail Ironson. 2015. Benevolent images of God, gratitude, and physical health status. *Journal of Religion and Health* 54: 1503–19. [CrossRef]

Krause, Neal, Robert A. Emmons, Gail Ironson, and Peter C. Hill. 2017. General feelings of gratitude, gratitude to God, and hemoglobin A1c: Exploring variations by gender. *Journal of Positive Psychology* 12: 639–50. [CrossRef]

Krumpal, Ivar. 2013. Determinants of social desirability bias in sensitive surveys: A literature review. *Quality & Quantity* 47: 2025–47.

Lapsley, Daniel, and Sam A. Hardy. 2017. Identity formation and moral development in emerging adulthood. *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood: Positive Development during the Third Decade of Life* 1: 14–39.

Liang, Belle, and Sharon Galgay Ketcham. 2017. Emerging adults' perceptions of their faith-related purpose. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9: 22–31. [CrossRef]

Lin, Chih-Che. 2014. A higher-order gratitude uniquely predicts subjective well-being: Incremental validity above the personality and a single gratitude. *Social Indicators Research* 119: 909–24. [CrossRef]

Lin, Chih-Che. 2017. The effect of higher-order gratitude on mental well-being: Beyond personality and unifactoral gratitude. *Current Psychology* 36: 127–35. [CrossRef]

Mahoney, Annette, Serena Wong, Julie M. Pomerleau, and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2021. Sanctification of diverse aspects of life and psychosocial functioning: A meta-analysis of studies from 1999 to 2019. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. [CrossRef]

Manela, Tony. 2019. Gratitude. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Fall 2019 Edition*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab.

Mangan, Susan, Pamela Ebstyne King, Rebecca Anne Baer, Lauren M. Van Vranken, Sean A. Noe, Shannon Rose Constable, and Jeff V. Ramdass. Forthcoming. What Gives? Exploring How Beliefs Influence Pathways to Transcendent Gratitude. *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

McAdams, Dan P. 2008. The Life Story Interview. Available online: https://fliphtml5.com/kycl/gvku/basic (accessed on 1 November 2022).

McAdams, Dan P. 2011. Narrative identity. In *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. New York: Springer, pp. 99–115.

McAdams, Dan P., and Jennifer L. Pals. 2006. A new big five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist* 61: 204–17. [CrossRef]

McCullough, Michael E., Shelley D. Kilpatrick, Robert A. Emmons, and David B. Larson. 2001. Is gratitude a moral affect? *Psychological Bulletin* 127: 249–66. [CrossRef]

McCullough, Michael E., Robert A. Emmons, and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2002. The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 112–27. [CrossRef]

McCullough, Michael E., Marcia B. Kimeldorf, and Adam D. Cohen. 2008. An adaptation for altruism: The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17: 281–85. [CrossRef]

Merçon-Vargas, Elisa A., Katelyn E. Poelker, and Jonathan R. H. Tudge. 2017. The development of the virtue of gratitude: Theoretical foundations and cross-cultural issues. *Cross-Cultural Research* 52: 3–18. [CrossRef]

Nelson, Taylor A., Andrew A. Abeyta, and Clay Routledge. 2021. What makes life meaningful for theists and atheists? *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13: 111–18. [CrossRef]

Nelson, Jenae M., Sam A. Hardy, and Philip Watkins. 2022. Transcendent indebtedness to God: A new construct in the psychology of religion and spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. [CrossRef]

Nyhof, Melanie A., and Carl N. Johnson. 2017. Is God just a big person? Children's conceptions of God across cultures and religious traditions. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 35: 60–75. [CrossRef]

Riveros, Rodrigos, and Mary Helen Immordino-Yang. 2021. Toward a neuropsychology of spiritual development in adolescence. *Adolescent Research Review* 6: 323–33. [CrossRef]

Roberts, Robert C. 2014. Cosmic gratitude. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6: 65–83. [CrossRef]

Rosmarin, David H., Steven Pirutinsky, Adam B. Cohen, Yardana Galler, and Elizabeth J. Krumrei. 2011. Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6: 389–96. [CrossRef]

Schachter, Elli, and Avital Ben Hur. 2019. The varieties of religious significance: An idiographic approach to study religion's role in adolescent development. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 29: 291–307. [CrossRef]

Schnitker, Sarah A., Pamela E. King, and Benjamin Houltberg. 2019. Religion, spirituality, and thriving: Transcendent narrative, virtue, and telos. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 29: 276–90. [CrossRef]

Smith, Gregory A. 2021. About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated. *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (blog)*. December 14. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/ (accessed on 8 August 2022).

Steensland, Brian, Robert D. Woodberry, and Jerry Z. Park. 2018. Structure, placement, and the quest for unidimensional purity in typologies of American denominations. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57: 800–6. [CrossRef]

Steindl-Rast, David. 2004. Gratitude as thankfulness and as gratefulness. In *The Psychology of Gratitude*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 282–90.

Stroope, Samuel, Scott Draper, and Andrew L. Whitehead. 2013. Images of a loving God and sense of meaning in life. *Social Indicators Research* 111: 25–44. [CrossRef]

Tsang, JoAnn, Sarah A. Schnitker, Robert A. Emmons, and Peter C. Hill. 2021. Feeling the intangible: Antecedents of gratitude toward intangible benefactors. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1–17. [CrossRef]

Tudge, Jonathan R. H., Lia B. L. Freitas, Lia O'Brien, and Irina L. Mokrova. 2018. Methods for studying the virtue of gratitude cross-culturally. *Cross-Cultural Research* 52: 19–30. [CrossRef]

Wilt, Joshua, and Julie J. Exline. 2022. Receiving a gift from God in times of trouble: Links between gratitude to God, the affective circumplex, and perceived closeness to God. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25: 362–79.

Wood, Alex M., Jeffrey J. Froh, and Adam W. A. Geraghty. 2010. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review* 30: 890–905. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Yaden, David B., Salvatore Giorgi, Margaret L. Kern, Alejandro Adler, Lyle H. Ungar, Martin E. P. Seligman, and Johannes C. Eichstaedt. 2021. Beyond beliefs: Multidimensional aspects of religion and spirituality in language. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. [CrossRef]

Article

Can You Be Grateful to a Benefactor Whose Existence You Doubt?

Tony Manela

Department of Philosophy, Siena College, 515 Loudon Road, Loudonville, NY 12211, USA; amanela@siena.edu

Abstract: Among philosophers who study gratitude, there is much disagreement about what gratitude is and when it is called for. One thesis no one has questioned, however, is the thesis that in order to be grateful to a benefactor, a beneficiary must believe that that benefactor exists. In this essay, I lay out novel reasons to doubt this thesis, and I explore a striking implication of rejecting it: the implication that doubters of various kinds—not just religious people in periods of doubt, but also lifelong agnostics, and even some atheists—might be capable of gratitude to God. I begin by developing a hypothetical case that demonstrates people can be grateful to human benefactors whose existence they doubt. My case shows that gratitude to a doubted benefactor is consistent with hoping that benefactor turns out not to exist. I then show how my case implies that theists in periods of doubt, agnostics, and a particular kind of atheist could be grateful to God, despite a lack of belief in his existence, and despite a lack of faith in God.

Keywords: God; gratitude; cosmic gratitude; doubt; atheism; agnosticism

1. Introduction

Among philosophers who study gratitude, there is much disagreement about what gratitude is and when it is called for. One thesis often taken for granted, however, is the thesis that in order to be grateful to a benefactor, a beneficiary must believe that that benefactor exists. In this essay, I lay out novel reasons to doubt this thesis, and I explore a striking implication of rejecting it: the implication that doubters of various kinds—not just religious people in periods of doubt, but also lifelong agnostics, and even some atheists—may be capable of gratitude to God.

To those ends, I proceed as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, I clarify this essay's central question: Is it possible for you to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence you doubt? In Section 4, I lay out an argument for why belief in a benefactor's existence is necessary for gratitude. In Section 5, I present reasons for believing that we can be grateful to benefactors whose existence we doubt by exploring several other attitudes that we can have toward entities whose existence we doubt. In Section 6, I describe a hypothetical case showing that a beneficiary can be grateful to a human benefactor whose existence he doubts, and I use this case to generalize the conditions under which this is likely to happen. In Section 7, I explore several ramifications of my case, including the implication that gratitude to a doubted benefactor is consistent with *hoping* a benefactor turns out not to exist. In Section 8, I show how my case and its ramifications apply when the doubted benefactor is God: specifically, I show that theists in periods of doubt, agnostics, and a particular kind of atheist can be grateful to God, despite their lack of belief in his existence, and despite their lack of faith in God. In fact, I show, even doubters who lack faith in God can be grateful to God, in a substantial way that goes beyond merely thanking God. I highlight an implication these insights have for an argument about the existence of "cosmic gratitude," a concept of growing interest among philosophers of gratitude. In Section 9, I raise a number of questions—empirical and non-empirical, descriptive and normative—that my arguments make salient about doubters' gratitude to God. I close by suggesting

that doubters, including those who lack faith, may be capable of a variety of attitudes toward God other than gratitude, including contrition, forgiveness, praise, and love. This suggestion raises an intriguing possibility: that having a substantial relationship with God may be compatible with doubt and lack of faith in God's existence. My essay thus suggests that theists and nontheists might have more in common than most people realize.

2. Preliminary Clarifications

Before I begin, I must make three preliminary clarifications about the question this essay aims to answer. The first clarification I want to make concerns an ambiguity in what it means to doubt someone exists. I might doubt someone exists *now*, but believe they existed at some point in the past; or, alternatively, I might doubt that they *ever* existed. I take it as relatively uncontroversial that we can be grateful to someone who did exist but who (we now believe) no longer does. The more interesting question is whether I can be grateful to someone who I do not believe ever existed. So in this essay, I will ask whether it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor one doubts ever existed.

My second and third clarifications have to do with the notion of possibility in this essay's central question. When I ask whether it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence one doubts, what I am really asking is whether belief in a benefactor's existence is a strictly necessary condition for gratitude to that benefactor. Otherwise put, I am asking if failure to believe in a benefactor's existence immediately and necessarily implies that one cannot be grateful to that benefactor. I am not asking whether failure to believe in a benefactor's existence makes it *unlikely* that one is grateful to that benefactor, or whether failure to believe in a benefactor's existence in a particular case makes a particular person's gratitude in a particular instance impossible, but whether failing to believe some benefactor exists *eo ipso* always makes gratitude to that benefactor, for anything, impossible or incoherent.

Finally, when I ask whether failure to believe in a benefactor makes gratitude impossible, I am asking only whether we ever *can* be grateful to doubted benefactors, and not whether we ever *should* be grateful to doubted benefactors. In other words, I am not asking whether failure to believe in a benefactor always *eo ipso* renders gratitude *irrational* or *inappropriate* or *unfitting*. It may turn out that gratitude to a doubted benefactor is possible but never rational or appropriate or fitting—just as it may sometimes be possible to believe certain propositions that it can never be rational to believe. I will touch on the rationality and fittingness of gratitude to doubted benefactors in the final section of this essay, but those questions are larger questions deserving an essay of their own.

With these preliminaries out of the way, I turn now to a brief discussion of the core concept in my central question: the concept of gratitude.

3. Gratitude

In what follows, I will introduce a clarificatory distinction and several claims about gratitude I will take as starting points in this essay.

In this essay, I will be interested in *directed* gratitude, the attitude referred to by sentences like "Yardley is grateful to Rachel for saving him." Directed gratitude always involves a beneficiary, Y, a benefactor, R, to whom the beneficiary is grateful, and something, ϕ, the benefactor did to precipitate the beneficiary's gratitude. Directed gratitude is distinct from *propositional* gratitude—the attitude referred to in sentences like "Yardley is grateful that it did not rain on his wedding day." This attitude is Y's gratitude *that* some proposition *p* is the case. Directed gratitude is also distinct from what I will call *objectual* gratitude—the attitude referred to in sentences like "Yardley is grateful for his children." Objectual gratitude is Y's gratitude for some object that was not given to him by anyone. I will refer to propositional gratitude and objectual gratitude together as *appreciation*,[1] and I will treat directed gratitude as distinct from (though possibly contingently related to) appreciation.[2] In this essay, I will be interested in whether we can have directed gratitude

toward benefactors whose existence we doubt. I will not be directly interested in whether we can appreciate doubted benefactors and/or benefits we receive from them.

In keeping with a growing consensus in recent philosophical literature, I will take it that directed gratitude (which I will from here on out refer to as simply gratitude) is the fitting response to *benevolence*. More specifically, gratitude to R for φ-ing is typically fitting insofar as R's φ-ing is motivated by benevolence for Y.[3] By *benevolence* here I mean, roughly, a desire on the part of R to benefit Y for Y's own sake, and not merely as a means to some other end. Paradigm examples of gratitude-warranting benevolence include giving a beneficiary a gift he appreciates, when this gift-giving behavior is ultimately motivated purely or primarily by the thought of the recipient's happily enjoying the gift. Paradigm examples of gratitude-worthy benevolence also include successful helping behaviors motivated purely or primarily by sympathy, empathy or compassion for the beneficiary. These may not be the only sorts of acts that warrant gratitude, but I will take it that such acts generally do warrant gratitude.[4] However, if, in φ-ing, R benefits Y solely in order to advance his (R's) own reputation, or only as a means to the end of helping someone other than Y, or only as an attempt to harm or manipulate Y, or only as an attempt to harm or manipulate someone else, then R does not benefit Y benevolently.[5] In all of those cases, if R's φ-ing benefits Y, then we might say that R acts *beneficially* vis à vis Y. And it might be fair to say in many or all such cases that Y should *appreciate* that (be grateful that) R benefited him, and in some such cases, Y might owe R *praise* for φ-ing. But I will take it that genuine *gratitude* is typically only owed (by Y to R) for φ-ing that R did at least in part out of benevolence toward Y.[6]

Gratitude, then, is the fitting response to benevolence. What does this response consist of? In other words, given R performed an act of benevolence for Y, what kind of response must Y have to count as grateful to R? In this article, I will take it that a beneficiary's gratitude, as a response to a benevolent act, consists of certain affective elements and certain behavioral elements.[7] These elements include a motivation to express thanks to the benefactor.[8] That is, a beneficiary who recognizes an act of benevolence but has no inclination to express thanks to a benefactor falls short of gratitude. Another element of the grateful response is an "affective disposition" of goodwill: an enhanced tendency to wish the benefactor well to a certain extent in the future. If R does Y a benevolent favor, then Y should be more likely than he was before to be pleased when he hears things are going well for R, and sad or upset if he learns his benefactor has suffered. Insofar as Y is not disposed to feel these ways, and feels no upset upon hearing his benefactor is suffering, Y would seem to fall short of gratitude.[9] Finally, gratitude also includes an enhanced willingness or motivation to reciprocate a favor or benefit to a benefactor, should an opportunity arise.[10] Specifically, if R benevolently helps Y, Y should be motivated to help or protect R for R's own sake—not indirectly, or for motives that are ultimately selfish. We can call this element of the grateful response "grateful beneficence." Out of grateful beneficence, a beneficiary should be motivated to please, benefit, protect, or refrain from harming a benefactor in certain ways—especially if the benefactor requests it. And a beneficiary who lacked an intrinsic desire to benefit a benefactor, especially when she's in need, would seem to fall short of gratitude. If R benevolently buys Y a thoughtful gift, then insofar as Y is grateful, Y should thank R, wish R well in the future, and be more willing than he was before to buy R a nice gift, should the opportunity arise. Insofar as Y has these elements, in response to R's benevolence, Y is grateful to R. If R benevolently saves Y from drowning, insofar as Y is grateful to R for doing so, Y should thank R, wish R well in the future, and be more willing than he was before R saved him to risk or sacrifice in order to save R's life in the future, if R is ever in danger. Insofar as Y lacks any of these elements after benefiting from R's benevolence, Y falls short of gratitude. Insofar as Y has these elements, in response to R's benevolence, Y is grateful to R.

To sum up, then: gratitude is an affective disposition of goodwill, motivation to thank, and disposition to benefit a benefactor, all of which make up the fitting response to a benefactor's having performed an act of benevolence for the beneficiary. This relatively

uncontroversial (if brief) summary of what gratitude is a fitting response to, and what behaviors and feelings constitute gratitude, should make clear the central question I ask in this essay: Can we be grateful to entities whose existence we doubt?

4. Reasons to Think Gratitude Requires Belief in a Benefactor's Existence

We can find *prima facie* reason to think gratitude requires belief in a benefactor's existence if we consider not just the affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response, but the *cognitive* elements as well. In addition to the feelings and the behavioral dispositions of a grateful response, some have argued that certain *beliefs* are part of what's required in order for a beneficiary to count as grateful.[11] Specifically, these beliefs are thought to include the belief that the benefactor benefited or tried to benefit the beneficiary, and the belief that she did or tried to do so benevolently—out of some ultimate or basic desire to see the beneficiary fare well. Let us call this, for short, belief in the benefactor's *benevolent benefaction*.[12] Many philosophers take for granted the claim that beliefs like these are part of gratitude—part of what is required for a beneficiary to count as grateful. However, it is worth pausing to question this claim. Why think that in order to be grateful, a beneficiary must believe that a benefactor benefited or tried to benefit him, and did so benevolently?

I have argued elsewhere that such beliefs are necessary for gratitude for two reasons (Manela 2019, p. 299). The first is that without them, the feelings and behaviors typical of gratitude likely would not arise. After all, an affective disposition of goodwill, a desire to thank someone, and a desire to benefit that particular person more than one did before, do not typically come about spontaneously, *ex nihilo* in us. And without these affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response, a beneficiary could not count as grateful.

A second reason to think such beliefs are necessary for gratitude is this: even if the affective disposition of goodwill and the behavioral disposition of grateful beneficence could somehow arise in a beneficiary who did not believe his benefactor had benefited him benevolently, without such beliefs there would be nothing defining those feelings and behaviors as feelings and behaviors *of gratitude*, as opposed to, say, feelings and behavior of contrition, or love, or solidarity, or empathy, or concern. After all, the feelings and behaviors typical of gratitude—a desire to see someone fare well and a motivation to benefit them— are the same sorts of feelings and behaviors as those of empathy, loyalty, solidarity, filial piety, concern, love, and other attitudes. What makes them feelings and behaviors *of gratitude* in particular, when that is what they are, is their connection to a benefactor's having done or tried to do something good for the beneficiary. This connection appears in two related ways. Part of what makes feelings and behaviors feelings and behaviors *of gratitude to R* is that R's being a benefactor plays an essential role in the *justification* a grateful beneficiary has for why he is disposed to feel those feelings and act beneficently toward R. In other words, insofar as I am grateful to someone, when I am asked why I bear them goodwill and am disposed to treat them beneficently, my response should reference their having been my benefactor—their having benefited me or tried to benefit me benevolently. If my justification for goodwill and beneficence toward someone did not reference their benevolent benefaction but, rather, just their suffering, that attitude might be *compassion* or *sympathy*. If my justification for goodwill and beneficence toward someone referenced not their benevolent benefaction but the fact that they were my parent, that might make such feelings and behaviors those of *filial piety*. If it referenced not their benevolent benefaction but just the fact that they were a victim of my harms in the past, that might make such feelings and behaviors those of *contrition*. So a person with gratitude-typical behaviors and feelings must be inclined to cite a benefactor's benevolent benefaction as part of the justification for those behaviors and feelings in order for them to constitute gratitude.

A second way these behaviors and feelings must be connected to a benefactor's benevolence is this: the details of the benefactor's benevolent benefaction should modulate the amount and content of the behaviors and the intensity of the feelings. In other words, insofar as a person is grateful, if they find out that a benefactor showed more benevolence

to them than they had originally suspected, their affective disposition of goodwill and their tendency toward grateful beneficence should consequently become more robust. If Y's feelings and behaviors toward R didn't change at all in response to changes in how Y perceived the benevolent benefaction of R, it would seem strained to call those behaviors and feelings behaviors and feelings of gratitude to R.

What emerges from this is an argument for why belief in a benefactor's benevolent benefaction is a necessary part of gratitude (or at least necessary for gratitude). Without the belief that a benefactor benevolently benefited or tried to benefit the beneficiary, gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors would seem to lack the connection to benevolent benefaction that defines them as feelings and behaviors of gratitude. Without such a belief, the argument goes, a beneficiary's justification for gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors could not reference a benefactor's benevolent benefaction. Nor could the magnitude of those feelings and behaviors be influenced by the details of the benevolent benefaction. And so those gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors literally would not be behaviors and feelings of gratitude. So belief in a benefactor's benevolent beneficence is necessary for gratitude, because without it, gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors likely would not arise in a beneficiary, and if they did, those feelings and behaviors still would not constitute gratitude.

Now, if Y must have certain beliefs about R's status as a benefactor—certain beliefs about R's motives and intentions in φ-ing—in order for Y to be grateful to R for φ-ing, then it seems it should also be necessary for Y to believe the claims presupposed by those beliefs. And those presuppositions include the belief that R exists. If Y did not believe R existed, Y could not believe that R benefited Y or tried to benefit Y benevolently, and then, for the reasons I just mentioned in the last two paragraphs, Y would not have gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors concerning R, or Y's feelings and behaviors toward R would not be feelings and behaviors of gratitude. And without feelings and behaviors of gratitude toward R, Y could not be grateful to R.

This argument leaves us with *prima facie* reason to think that belief in a benefactor's existence is necessary for gratitude to that benefactor. It also helps define the challenge that must be met by anyone who wants to show that gratitude to doubted benefactors is possible: one must show that it is possible for goodwill and beneficence to arise in a beneficiary, and somehow be definable as feelings and behaviors of gratitude, in the absence of belief that that benefactor exists.

To get a sense for how this challenge might be met, it's worth reflecting on several other attitudes that one might have toward entities whose existence one doubts.

5. Attitudes toward Entities Whose Existence One Doubts

A little reflection shows that we can have a variety of attitudes toward entities whose existence we doubt. We can fear things, for instance, whose existence we doubt. A person might believe vampires do not exist but still fear them. Such a person might, despite his lack of belief, still hang garlic on his door every night and experience feelings of fear and anxiety on nights when he realizes he forgot to do so, just in case vampires do turn out to exist. That fear might be irrational, but it is nonetheless fear. People can experience fear toward an object if they think such an object might exist—that its existence is possible—and if they have a mental representation of that object as having certain characteristics (e.g., a mental representation of vampires as posing danger to oneself). That belief in the mere possibility can be enough to give rise to certain feelings and to motivate certain behaviors (like hanging garlic on one's doorknob). Those feelings and behaviors are feelings and behaviors of fear because they are justified or explained by referring to a fearsome object: vampires.

Gratitude, though, is unlike fear in at least one important way: being grateful to others is not an attitude about what they might do to us in the future; gratitude is, at least in part, an attitude about *our* treatment *of them* in the future. As I noted in the last section, being grateful to someone includes grateful beneficence: an enhanced motivation to do them a favor or help them out or spare them from harm in the future, as well as an affective disposition of goodwill: a hope that they fare well in the future. In this regard, gratitude is

less like fear and more like *concern for* someone (what we might call *prepositional concern*). But a little reflection shows that concern for someone, like fear, is an attitude one can have toward entities whose existence one doubts. Imagine a golfer who believes, with good reason, that she is alone on a well-secured private golf course. She hits a shot that flies unexpectedly off-course toward a thick grove of trees. Though she believes with a high degree of confidence that nobody is in the trees, she is not certain that no such person exists, and she worries that if there were someone in the trees, they'd be in danger of being struck. Imagine that this thought causes her to shout a warning—not out of habit, and not out of fear for her own legal liability, but purely for altruistic reasons. Her justification for her actions and her feelings of worry center on the harm her action might cause someone, just in case there happens to be someone in the grove of trees. Now imagine it turns out, despite her initial belief, that there was a person in the grove of trees. It seems fair in this case to say that the golfer *felt concern* and *acted out of concern* for someone—and *was concerned* for someone—whose existence she doubted. So we can have some attitudes toward others whom we might affect in the future even if we do not firmly believe the objects of those attitudes exist, so long as we think that such objects might exist and, if they do, that our actions might impact them.

Gratitude, though, is unlike concern in an important way: gratitude is an attitude toward other persons qua *agents*, who do things, not merely persons qua *patients*, who can suffer or be benefited. More specifically, being grateful to someone is an attitude we typically have when see someone as having done something benevolent for us. That is a thought that must make it into a person's justification for gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors in order for those feelings and behaviors to constitute gratitude (as opposed to empathy or filial piety or loyalty). So gratitude requires more content in the cognitive attitude of its bearer than fear or concern do. Gratitude must represent its object not just as potentially open to harm and benefit, but also simultaneously as a past agent who did something rather specific: benevolently benefitted the beneficiary.

In order to show that gratitude to doubted benefactors is possible, what's needed is a plausible case of a beneficiary who is disposed to have gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors toward someone, and to cite that person's past benevolence toward him in his justification of why he has those feelings and behaviors, but who nonetheless never believes such a person ever existed. In the following section, I describe such a case.

6. A Vignette about Gratitude to a Doubted Benefactor

Imagine Yardley is a world-class professional tracker. In fact, he's the best tracker who ever lived, having successfully tracked hundreds of the world's craftiest human fugitives through dozens of natural environments on seven continents. For most of his life, he has lived a solitary existence. A moderate cynic, he believes that the average person is inherently selfish and not willing to benefit others for their own sakes. Yardley does, however, believe that some people are altruistic, and so even though he himself does not care much for the average person, he typically responds with reasonable levels of genuine gratitude toward those who benevolently help him.

Imagine that one day, Yardley survives the sinking of a ship at sea and washes ashore on a small uncharted island. He searches the island somewhat thoroughly, and, seeing no evidence of anyone else on the island, he comes to believe with a high degree of confidence that he is the only person on the island. The only source of food he notices at first is fish in a small creek in the island's small forest. He tries for hours to catch some fish at the creek, but he fails. He then finds some tools that washed ashore with him, and with those tools, he climbs some tall palm trees and cuts down fruit that otherwise would be inaccessible. He amasses a large hoard of fruit, but although he can cut down enough fruit to survive, he realizes that he will be malnourished if that is all he has to eat. So the next day, he returns to the creek, intent on figuring out how to catch fish. To his surprise, when he arrives at the spot where he had tried to fish the day before, he finds a fish lying on the bank exactly where he had stood the day before.

His first thought is that someone caught and placed the fish there. But then Yardley remembers that he searched the island somewhat thoroughly and found no evidence of anyone on the island. He searches the area around the creek again, more thoroughly, and finds no evidence of any human presence (aside from his own). While he acknowledges it's *possible* that there is someone else on the island with him, on reflection, he maintains his belief that there is no one on the island but him.[13] He is, after all, the world's best tracker, and so the odds of there being someone on this island who can evade him are vanishingly small. He thus comes to believe that this fish, fortuitously, must have flopped out of the creek at this exact spot. He eats the fish and returns to the same spot by the creek the next day to teach himself to fish. When he arrives at the spot where he'd found the fish the day before, he finds a crooked pointy branch, which appears to have snapped off a nearby tree. He picks up the branch and, on a whim, tries to use the pointy end as a spear to spearfish in the creek. To his surprise, the branch works perfectly as a spear—its strange angles perfectly correcting for the light diffraction of the creek's surface. Yardley catches as many fish as he can carry. As he fishes, he starts to wonder if this suspiciously effective stick may have been placed here for him to find by someone who wanted him to catch fish. Again, he searches the terrain around the creek, and again, he reaffirms the belief that he is alone on the island—the fish and the stick being mere fortuitous coincidences.

Still, though, he continues to believe in the *possibility* that someone else is on the island—specifically, someone who saw him trying to catch fish and caught one for him and left it for him in case he returned, and then left him a means to catch more fish. And that scenario remains salient in Yardley's mind.

Yardley returns to his camp on the beach, where his large hoard of fruit awaits him. As he eats and enjoys the fish, he thinks about the possibility of a benevolent neighbor. He realizes that if such a person exists and has been on the island for a long time, he probably has not been able to get at the fruit on the tall trees. After all, Yardley was only able to get at that fruit using the tools that washed ashore with him. As a result of having these thoughts, Yardley finds himself motivated to bring an armful of fruit to the creek where he found the fish—just in case there really is a benevolent benefactor who helped him. He does this not out of a selfish desire to keep his possible benefactor's benevolence flowing; rather, he does it out of the same sort of disposition that motivated him, throughout his life, to help benefactors who'd benevolently helped him—that is, out of an intrinsic desire to see his benevolent benefactors be happy or satisfied. Yardley feels a bit silly doing this, since he does not believe there is any such benefactor. But, he reasons, there is a chance there *could* be such a benefactor; and Yardley really has plenty of free time on his hands. Though it makes him feel very silly, he cannot resist the urge to shout, "If you're out there, thank you!" as he leaves the creek. And as he's falling asleep that night, even though he is pretty sure there is no such benefactor—even though he *believes* there is no such benefactor—he imagines a possible world in which there was such a benefactor, and he is satisfied at the thought of his benefactor's being happy when he discovers the fruit.

Now imagine that in the middle of the night, Yardley is awakened by rumbling sounds, and he realizes that the island is a volcano, which has just begun to erupt. Fortunately for him, he is spotted by the crew of a boat that had been searching for him, and he is rescued just in time. He watches from the safety of the boat as the entire island is covered in molten lava and the sea around the island begins to boil. He asks the crew if they saw anyone else on the island, and the reply they did not. Yardley still doubts there was anyone else on the island. In fact, Yardley still *believes*, on reflection, that he was alone on the island. But when he imagines the possible benefactor who benevolently caught him a fish, and reflects on the horrible end that that benefactor would have just suffered, it makes Yardley sad—and sadder than he would be if Yardley had learned of a typical selfish stranger who passed away.

Now imagine that it turns out, despite a lack of evidence, that there really was another person, Randolph, on the island with Yardley. Randolph, who had washed up on shore years earlier, had grown paranoid after years alone on the island, and so he'd taken

measures to hide his existence from Yardley. He was able to do this successfully because he himself had been a skilled tracker, like Yardley. Randolph had been watching Yardley ever since Yardley started exploring the island. He had seen Yardley trying to catch fish and, out of benevolence, caught a fish (which he'd learned to do over the years) and left it for Yardley in case Yardley came back. He also left Yardley a fishing stick he had made. He left both these gifts out of genuine benevolence for Yardley. And he left both these gifts in such a way as to make them seem like strokes of good luck. When Yardley came back with fruit, Randolph was surprised (because he did not think he'd left Yardley with sufficient evidence to believe he, Randolph, existed), but he was deeply happy, because he'd never been able to cut down fruit from the tall palm trees. Imagine too that, just as Yardley had feared, Randolph ultimately died when the island's volcano erupted.

Here is a case of a beneficiary and a benefactor where the beneficiary doubts the benefactor's existence.[14] And though the case is a hypothetical one, Yardley's reactions in this scenario are not incomprehensible. We can understand what it's like to be Yardley in this case, and many of us might find ourselves responding just as Yardley does if we were in his position. Yardley responds to the fish and fishing spear next to the creek in the ways a grateful beneficiary should respond: Yardley acts the way a typical grateful beneficiary would act (finding a way to reciprocate), and does so for the sort of reasons (with the sort of motivation) that characterizes a typical grateful beneficiary. He does not just leave the fruit randomly, or as a way to get rid of a burdensome surplus of fruit at his camp, or for any selfish reason at all, but, rather, because he has an intrinsic desire to see his benefactor fare well—for the benefactor's sake. And he feels the way a grateful beneficiary should feel: when he sees the island engulfed in lava, he feels sad at the thought of his benefactor suffering and dying. Now, if he were pressed later to justify his behaviors and feelings—to say why he left the fruit by the creek, and why he felt sad when he saw the volcano erupt—his justification would cite or reference his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence. What motivated him was not the thought that the hypothetical neighbor was someone he had hurt, or someone he feared he might hurt, or someone he shared an identity with; it was someone he saw as having benevolently helped him. This thus seems to be a case where Yardley, a beneficiary, feels and acts gratefully—*is grateful*—to someone, Randolph, whose existence he doubts.

In the previous section, I presented an argument for thinking that belief in a benefactor's existence was necessary for gratitude. According to that argument, belief in a benefactor's existence was necessary for gratitude because such a belief was presupposed by the belief that the benefactor acted benevolently, and *that* belief was necessary to motivate a beneficiary's grateful feelings and behaviors. Belief in a benefactor's existence was also necessary for the benefactor's benevolence to appear in the beneficiary's justification for those gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors, and that in turn was necessary for those feelings and behaviors to constitute gratitude (as opposed to other attitudes). But now we can see where that argument goes wrong. Having thoughts of being benevolently benefited may be necessary for gratitude-typical behaviors and feelings to arise and count as gratitude. But belief in a benefactor's existence is not necessary for such thoughts, because another mental state might sometimes be enough to bring those thoughts about. What is that mental state? It's the mental state Yardley had vis à vis Randolph: Belief that Randolph *might* exist, together with a representation of Randolph, if he did exist, as having acted benevolently toward Yardley. That combination of elements, enlivened and made more vivid by the benefits Yardley received, could give rise to behaviors and feelings typical of gratitude. And it could place a benefactor's benevolence in a central role in the beneficiary's justification for why he is disposed to feel and act in gratitude-typical ways.

If this is true, then it would seem that failing to believe in the existence of one's benefactor does not make gratitude to that benefactor incoherent or incomprehensible. Indeed, one could be grateful to a benefactor he does not believe exists, who he *believes does not exist*, as long as he believes that that benefactor *might* exist, and thinking of that possibility helps lead to grateful behavior and an affective disposition of goodwill.[15]

7. Gratitude to a Benefactor One Hopes Does Not Exist

The case of Yardley and Randolph shows that doubting a benefactor ever existed is compatible with being grateful to that benefactor. The case suggests another implication worth noting: that gratitude to a benefactor is compatible with *hoping* that benefactor does not exist.

To see this, imagine Yardley is on the rescue boat watching the island become engulfed in lava. He realizes that if Randolph exists, Randolph would be suffering a horrible death right now. And because he hates the thought of Randolph suffering, he hopes that this is not the case. And because he hopes that is not the case, he finds himself hoping Randolph does not exist. Still, though, it seems fair to say he remains grateful to Randolph.[16] After all, he is disposed to feel sad at the thought of Randolph's suffering terribly in the eruption, and insofar as that disposition arose from his seeing Randolph as benevolent, that would seem to be a feeling of gratitude.

We could imagine other reasons that Yardley might hope Randolph turns out not to exist. One of those might be that Yardley, who prides himself on his survivalist abilities, likes the thought that he was able to survive for a time on the desert island all alone, dependent on no one but himself. Relatedly, we might imagine Yardley hoping Randolph does not exist because if he did, that would mean Yardley's tracking skills were further from perfection than he'd thought—and he prides himself on having excellent tracking skills. Imagine that for these reasons, Yardley hopes that Randolph turns out not to exist. These reasons might also lead Yardley to suppress his thoughts about Randolph, or suppress motivation to bring Randolph his surplus fruit; and if that happened, then it would seem questionable whether Yardley was grateful to Randolph. But Yardley's hope that Randolph not exist in this case need not make his gratitude to Randolph impossible. Notwithstanding these hopes, we could imagine that even while he believes he is alone on the island, the possibility of someone else on the island still tempts him enough that he's motivated to leave surplus fruit at the place where he found the fish, just in case benefactor Randolph does turn out to exist. It thus seems fair to say that a beneficiary can be grateful to a benefactor, even when he does not believe his benefactor exists, and even when he hopes his benefactor does not exist because of his pride in his skills or in his independence of the help of others. Now, insofar as this sort of pride constitutes a lack of proper humility, this implication has an interesting upshot: a beneficiary can be grateful to a benefactor while failing to be properly humble vis à vis that benefactor and his contributions to the beneficiary's wellbeing. And while this is consistent with some characterizations of gratitude,[17] it may be in tension with accounts of gratitude according to which gratitude requires humility (where this is understood as one's acceptance of one's imperfections and interdependence on others).[18]

8. Implications for Gratitude to Supernatural Entities

My case in Section 6 demonstrated that beneficiaries can be grateful to benefactors whose existence they doubt. In other words, the mere fact that a beneficiary does not believe a particular entity ever existed does not mean that beneficiary is incapable of gratitude to that entity. I demonstrated this in the case of gratitude to a human benefactor. But the same generalization could also be extended to apply to nonhuman benefactors. In theory, it could be extended to apply to supernatural benefactors, like ancestral spirits, natural spirits, ghosts, angels, gods, and God.[19] In the final two sections of this essay, I will explore the consequences of my generalization in one particular spiritual or religious worldview: a monotheistic view, according to which there is one supreme god (God) who benevolently benefits every human being in various ways but leaves human beings with room to reasonably doubt he exists.

The scenario I described in the previous section's vignette could be seen as a close analog of this monotheistic worldview—at least if we accept two assumptions about people's relationships to God. One of these assumptions is that God is benevolent to human beings in roughly the same way human beings can be benevolent to each other—

that is, God does good things for human beings, for our sake, out of an ultimate desire to see us flourish. Another assumption is that gratitude to God is roughly the same as gratitude to human beings (i.e., gratitude to God and gratitude to humans are not fundamentally different concepts). More specifically, this involves the assumption that gratitude is the fitting response to God's benevolence, and that this gratitude to God involves the same sort of affective dispositions (hoping to see the benefactor happy, not disappointed) and grateful beneficence (behaviors aimed at pleasing the benefactor, because benefactor was benevolent) that gratitude to human beings consists of. If we accept these assumptions, then my vignette about Yardley and Randolph becomes a close analog of doubters' gratitude to God.[20]

In the vignette, Randolph is analogous to God, and Yardley is analogous to a human being who doubts God's existence. And just as my vignette shows that doubt in a human benefactor's existence does not necessarily disqualify someone from being grateful to the doubted person, my vignette implies that doubt in God's existence does not necessarily disqualify someone from being grateful to God. In other words, a person could doubt that God exists but still in theory be grateful to God. This might happen if a doubter experiences a series of unlikely, unexpected benefits, and is able to vividly imagine the possibility that those benefits were benevolently caused by God. Motivated by the thought of this possibility, such a person might go on to act in ways that he thinks would please God, and he might be pleased when he sees things that would please God. Insofar as thoughts of God's benevolence justify those feelings and those behaviors on his part, such a person would be grateful to God—even while he doubted God's existence.

There are three categories of doubters to whom this generalization might apply: religious people in periods of doubt, agnostics, and atheists. Religious people in periods of doubt are people who spend much of their lives believing in God but also go through periods of uncertainty. Some such people, for some period of time, may cease to believe that God exists. My vignette implies, however, that such people are still, during their periods of doubt, capable of gratitude to God. Such people would be like a person in Yardley's position who most of the time believed there probably *was* a benefactor helping him out, but who occasionally went through stretches of doubt. Imagine such a person went through a period of doubt while he was carrying his surplus fruit to the site where he found the fish, but he nonetheless continued to bring his surplus fruit to that spot through his period of doubt. Imagine he was motivated by his thoughts of his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence and a desire to please his benefactor just in case that benefactor turns out to exist, just the way the constant doubter Yardley was in the original vignette. Such a person would still be acting gratefully, and thus would still be grateful, to Randolph during his period. Imagine again that this occasional doubter in Yardley's position goes through a moment of doubt as he sees the island's volcano erupt. Despite that, he might still feel sadness at the mere possibility of his benefactor existing and dying a terrible death. He would thus have feelings of gratitude even in his moments of doubt. By the same token, a religious person in a period of doubt who continues to do things that will please God, motivated by thoughts of God's benevolence, is likewise still acting gratefully. And such a person who still feels saddened by thoughts of God's disappointment, and uplifted by thoughts of God's pleasure, might still have feelings of gratitude in periods of doubt. Religious people in periods of doubt are thus capable of being grateful to God through such periods.

This possibility should come as a relief to those religious people who worry that they have been ungrateful to God during their periods of doubt. After all, in many monotheistic sects, being grateful to God is an essential part of leading a good life, and so subscribers to such sects who go through periods of doubt might worry that during those periods, they have failed to lead good lives. If my arguments are correct, though, then such periods need not worry every religious person who goes through periods of doubt, since periods of doubt need not be periods of ungratefulness. Indeed, it is possible for a religious person to

go through periods of doubt but still have been continuously grateful to God throughout his life.

Another class of people who doubt God's existence are agnostics, whom, for the purposes of this essay, I will understand as people who do not have a belief one way or the other on the question of whether God exists. Agnostics, as I classify them here, are people who suspend judgment on the question of God's existence. They take themselves to lack sufficient evidence to believe he exists and to lack sufficient evidence to believe he does not. On the question of whether God exists, they are like someone facing the question of whether a coin toss that is about to happen will come up heads or tails. They do not believe it will come up heads and they do not believe it will come up tails. Agnostics are analogous to someone in Yardley's position who, upon considering all the evidence, does not come to believe that a benefactor exists, and does not come to believe that a benefactor does *not* exist on the island. He is unsure, and so he suspends judgment. Despite this suspended judgment, though, such a person might find motivation to carry surplus fruit to the site where he found the fish—motivation that comes from his thoughts of his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence. And he might still lament the thought of such a benefactor perishing when he sees the island's volcano erupt. Such a person was still acting gratefully and having grateful feelings, and thus was still grateful, to Randolph, despite not believing Randolph existed. By the same token, an agnostic who, motivated by thoughts of God's benevolence, does things that will please God, or grieves when he thinks of God's disappointment, is likewise still acting gratefully and feeling gratitude, and thus *being* grateful, to God. Agnosticism need not entail ungratefulness to God.

This possibility could play an important role in agnostics' deliberation about whether they believe God exists. After all, our beliefs are not always immediately obvious to us upon introspection, and many agnostics might occasionally wonder whether they really lean toward theism or atheism. Some agnostics who feel gratitude to God might, consciously or unconsciously, reason along the following lines: *I can't tell just from introspection whether I believe in this God, who might exist. But I do feel grateful to this possibly existing God. So I must believe God exists, since one can only be grateful to entities one believes exist.* As I have shown, though, the final premise in this argument can be questioned, and so the argument, even though valid, is unsound. Gratitude to God need not entail belief that God exists. Anyone who thinks otherwise, and reasons along the lines of the argument I just articulated, commits what we might call the *grateful agnostic's fallacy*.[21]

A final group of doubters worth considering is atheists. Atheists, as I will define them, are people who believe that God does not exist. Some atheists are *certain* God does not exist. Those atheists, I believe, may not be capable of gratitude to God. But atheists need not be certain God does not exist in order to be atheists, just like one need not be certain climate change is occurring in order to believe climate change is occurring. Some atheists, in other words, might put some credence in the possibility that God does exist and have a rather clear representation of what God, if he did exist, would be like.[22] These *uncertain atheists* are analogous to Yardley in the vignette from Section 6. And as I showed, it was plausible that Yardley was still able to find motivation to carry surplus fruit to the site where he found the fish, motivated by his thoughts of his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence. And we could imagine Yardley weeping at the thought of such a benefactor perishing when he sees the island's volcano erupt. Yardley was still acting gratefully and having grateful feelings, and thus was still grateful, to Randolph, despite being pretty sure that Randolph did not exist. By the same token, an uncertain atheist who, motivated by thoughts of God's benevolence, does things that he thinks would please God, or grieves when he thinks of God's disappointment, could likewise still be acting gratefully and feeling gratitude—could thus *be* grateful, to God. Atheism need not entail ungratefulness. And gratitude to God need not entail belief in God.

This possibility is significant for at least two reasons. The first is parallel to a remark I made about agnosticism above: this possibility could play an important role in uncertain atheists' deliberation about whether they are grateful to God. Many such atheists might,

consciously or unconsciously, reason along the following lines: *I can't tell just from introspection whether I feel any gratitude to God. But I do not believe God exists, so I cannot feel grateful to God, because one can only feel grateful to entities one believes exist.* As I have shown, though, the final premise in this argument is not safe to assume, and so the argument, even though valid, is unsound. Belief that God does not exist need not entail an absence of gratitude to God. We can think of this unsound argument as the *uncertain atheist's fallacy*.

The possibility that uncertain atheists can be grateful to God also has implications for a line reasoning about the existence and appropriateness of a mysterious kind of gratitude some philosophers call "cosmic gratitude."[23] This line of reasoning appeals to the experiences of atheists who, despite believing God does not exist, nevertheless feel deep, pervasive gratitude to something big, profound and non-human. Such people often find themselves reflecting on certain good things that have befallen them, or all good things that have befallen them, that seem not to have come from human benevolence. And these reflections sometimes seem to give rise to experiences of gratitude: feelings of gratitude and motivation to "make a return" by benefiting other people. An uncertain atheist who has such experiences might be tempted to reason as follows: *As an atheist, I believe God does not exist. But I feel deep, pervasive gratitude to something bigger, broader and more profound than any human entity. Since I do not believe God exists, it cannot be gratitude to God that I feel, because we cannot be grateful to entities we believe do not exist. So the gratitude I feel must be a special kind of gratitude, distinct from gratitude to human beings and gratitude to God. So there must exist a special kind of gratitude, "cosmic gratitude," which is substantially different from gratitude to human beings and gratitude to God.* The argument, however, is not sound, because we can doubt the premise that says we cannot be grateful to entities we believe do not exist. Once that premise is removed, the argument's conclusion no longer follows from the remaining premises. Another possibility emerges that could explain why at least some atheists seem to feel deep gratitude toward something profound and superhuman: they may be experiencing feelings of gratitude triggered by (1) good things in their lives, together with (2) a mental representation they have of a benevolent non-human benefactor (whose existence they doubt but regard as possible).[24] As my vignette about Yardley suggested, these two elements could potentially induce significant experiences of gratitude even in people who are highly confident no agential benefactor exists. Insofar as this explanation is simpler than positing the fittingness of a mysterious sort of gratitude (e.g., gratitude to a cosmic non-agent like the universe, the laws of physics, or existence itself), the experiences of such atheists leave us with less reason to take seriously the possibility of "cosmic gratitude."[25] I any event, my arguments suggest that uncertain atheists should take care not to jump too quickly from their experiences of gratitude and their disbelief in God's existence to conclusions about the existence or fittingness of mysterious sorts of gratitude.[26]

I've shown a number of interesting implications that follow from the possibility that nonbelievers are capable of gratitude to God. I want to close this section by pointing out three more implications that the Yardley vignette has for gratitude to God that are worth mentioning. The first two of these correspond to the two implications at the end of the previous section.

The first of these implications is that some degree of gratitude to God is compatible with hope that God turns out not to exist. There might be believers, agnostics and atheists who hope God does not exist because they look around the world and lament how disappointed God would be if he did exist. These people are like Yardley who, upon watching the island become engulfed in lava, hopes that Randolph turns out not to exist, because he hates the thought of his benefactor suffering—and thus prefers a world in which that benefactor did not exist. Despite that, his disposition to be sad at the thought of Randolph's suffering shows him to be grateful to Randolph. By the same token, a person's disposition to lament God's disappointment reveals such a person still to be grateful to God (at least insofar as that disposition arises from a representation of God as having been benevolent).

And so believers, agnostics and atheists may still be grateful to God even if they hope he does not exist.

There are other reasons someone might hope God turns out not to exist—besides sadness at thoughts of God's disappointment. Some people might hope God does not exist because they take pride in the thought that they are solely responsible for the good they have achieved, and are averse to the thought of their own dependence on something so much more powerful than themselves. Some people might hope God turns out not to exist because their reason has led them to that conclusion, and they dislike the thought that their reason could have led them to a false conclusion. These people are like Yardley hoping Randolph does not exist because he'd prefer a world where he survived on the island all on his own, with help from no one, or because he'd prefer a world where his tracking skills never led him astray. Despite that, Yardley's disposition to be sad at the thought of Randolph's suffering, and his motivation to bring Randolph surplus fruit, show him to be grateful to Randolph. By the same token, a person's disposition to lament God's disappointment and to be motivated to please God in certain ways, just in case he turns out to exist, would reveal such a person still to be grateful to God (at least insofar as that disposition arises from a representation of God as having been benevolent). Gratitude to God, then, is compatible not only with believing God does not exist, but *hoping* God does not exist as well.[27]

This last point suggests a second implication about doubters' gratitude to God worth considering: it suggests that some degree of gratitude to God is compatible with a lack of proper humility vis à vis God. Many people think that proper humility vis à vis God requires people to accept and welcome the fact that they are dependent on him for the good things they receive and the good things they achieve. My arguments imply, however, that a person may prefer God not exist because he prefers a world in which he did not depend on God, and yet still have grateful feelings and exhibit grateful behaviors toward God. So it may be possible to be grateful to God, at least to some extent, without being fully humble vis à vis God.

These considerations highlight a final implication my arguments entail: that gratitude to God is consistent with lack of faith that God exists, and lack of faith in God.[28] This follows from the fact that Yardley's gratitude to Randolph is consistent with Yardley's lack of faith *that* Randolph exists, and lack of faith *in* Randolph. Now, in order to have faith that *p*, I take it that one must have (1) some positive cognitive attitude (like belief, acceptance or reliance) toward *p*, and (2) a positive conative orientation toward *p* (e.g., a desire that *p* be the case).[29] But Yardley lacks both of these. He lacks (1), insofar as he *dis*believes Randolph exists. And he lacks (2) insofar as he hopes Randolph turns out not to exist. By the same token, an atheist might be grateful to God, but lack faith that God exists because he believes God does not exist and hopes God turns out not to exist.

Faith *that* God exists is different from faith *in* God. In order to have faith *in* some entity, R, one must place trust in R, have some confidence that R will come through when needed—enough so that one's behavior should be shaped or changed by this trust and confidence. In other words, faith in R should motivate ventures of trust. But this need not be the case with Yardley. Imagine that after bringing the fruit to the clearing, Yardley finds some delicious looking mushrooms at the bottom of a pit near the stream. He wants to get the mushrooms, but he realizes that if he goes into the pit, he may not be able to get out on his own. The thought crosses his mind that if Randolph did exist and heard Yardley's cries, Randolph might come to help him. But Yardley has so little confidence in Randolph's existence that he passes up the chance to get the mushrooms. In fact, the whole time he's on the island, he never counts on Randolph helping him out, never undertakes a risky venture that Randolph could save him from. This is still consistent, though, with his behaving and feeling gratefully toward Randolph in the ways I described in the vignette. So Yardley can be grateful to Randolph even while he lacks faith in Randolph. By the same token, an atheist could be grateful to God even while lacking faith in God. This can happen

if an atheist has grateful behaviors and feelings vis à vis God, but never trusts in God's existence enough to take risky ventures relying on God's help.

9. Broader Implications and Open Questions

In this essay, I have argued that it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence you doubt. Belief that a benefactor *might* exist can sometimes be enough to motivate gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors, and can do so in a way that makes such feelings and behaviors genuinely manifestations of gratitude. This can happen if a person believes the benefactor might exist, has a representation of that benefactor as benevolent, and comes to see certain past benefits as possibly having been bestowed by such a benefactor. Just as we can be grateful to human benefactors whose existence we doubt, it seems we can also be grateful to supernatural entities whose existence we doubt, insofar as we see those entities as possibly existing, have representations of them as benevolent, and think that certain past benefits might have come from them. And this means that doubters (religious people in periods of doubt, agnostics, and even some atheists) are capable of gratitude to God. Indeed, not only can people be capable of gratitude to a God they doubt; they can also be grateful to a God they *hope* turns out not to exist, and they can also be grateful to God when they lack faith in God or faith that God exists. I showed how these conclusions have important implications for doubters of various kinds. I also showed how my arguments help us understand the concept of gratitude more generally—by, e.g., revealing that belief is not a necessary cognitive element of the grateful response.

In this final section of my essay, I would like to highlight several questions my arguments raise as salient, and suggest some broad implications my arguments might have for doubters' relationship to God and to religion more generally.

Perhaps the most obvious questions my conclusion raises are empirical questions. I have shown that it is theoretically possible for doubters of various kinds to be, to some degree, grateful to God. How prevalent are grateful feelings and grateful behaviors among different stripes of nonbelievers? What psychological and social factors tend to predict whether a particular doubter will show certain degrees of gratitude toward God? These are questions that cannot be answered from an armchair. And insofar as people have assumed belief in a benefactor was necessary for gratitude to that benefactor, these questions likely struck empirical researchers as nonstarters. My conclusions in this essay, however, suggest that they are not.

My arguments in this essay also highlight the urgency of certain theoretical and normative questions about gratitude to doubted benefactors. Some of these are conceptual questions about other conditions, besides belief in a benefactor's existence, that make gratitude possible. Given that doubt in God's existence does not in itself disqualify a doubter from being grateful to God, we might wonder: are there other disqualifiers specific to doubters that would make gratitude to God impossible or attenuated? One possibility, for instance, is that agnostics and atheists typically lack a clear representation of God's interests, motives and values, and so they may lack a clear sense of how to reciprocate a benefit from God, or a clear understanding of the conditions under which God would be disappointed. And that could make being grateful to God impossible for such doubters. Another possibility is that agnostics and atheists may lack an understanding of how an omnipotent God sacrifices in benefiting them; and insofar as benefactor sacrifice is necessary for gratitude, they may thus be incapable of having a representation of God as worthy of gratitude. Another possibility is that doubters might have somewhat negative representations of God. Indeed, many doubters become doubters because of events that make them angry at God. To what extent is it possible for a doubter to be grateful to God for certain benefits while being angry with him for other things? Each of these questions is important for understanding the extent to which doubters are capable of gratitude to God, and the answer to each of them requires conceptual work on the nature of gratitude.

Perhaps even more pressing than these conceptual questions is a normative question that my conclusions in the essay make salient: Insofar as doubters are capable of gratitude

to benefactors whose existence they doubt, when (if ever) *should* they be? And what are the conditions under which doubters *ought* to be grateful to God? Is it always irrational, inappropriate or unreasonable to be grateful to benefactors whose existence one doubts? Or can it sometimes be rational, acceptable and reasonable? Can it ever be *good* to be grateful to benefactors whose existence one doubts? And can it ever be *bad* to *fail* to be grateful to benefactors whose existence one doubts? These are obviously intriguing and important questions. And though they are too large to answer adequately here, I believe that my case of Yardley and Randolph may be helpful in answering them.

Leaving gratitude behind, my arguments in this essay suggest a number of other counterintuitive possibilities about doubters' relationships with God and other supernatural entities. If one does not need to believe in God, or even have faith in God, in order to be grateful to him, perhaps belief and faith are not necessary for other complex social attitudes either. And that suggests the possibility that some doubters (namely, those who believe God might exist) could, to one degree or another, be contrite, forgiving, praising, compassionate, loving, and perhaps even obedient or loyal to God. Now, insofar as these attitudes, together with gratitude, make up the core of a healthy relationship with God, some doubters might be able to go a surprisingly long way toward having a healthy relationship to God.[30] And that in turn means, surprisingly, that theists and nontheists, those with faith and those without, or believers and nonbelievers vis à vis any particular religious tradition, share a piece of common ground.[31]

More generally, this raises the possibility that people who neither believe in nor have faith in the existence of supernatural entities could still nonetheless have robustly religious lives. Even without faith or belief in such entities, certain religious rituals, rites, and practices could still count as genuine expressions of certain important attitudes toward supernatural entities.[32] The extent to which this is possible would require careful analyses of each of these attitudes and the extent to which they can be had toward doubted entities. My method in this essay may provide a helpful roadmap for such analyses.

Notes

1. Here I follow suggestions or arguments in, *inter alia*, Gulliford et al. (2013, p. 299) and Roberts and Telech (2019, p. 1). I give a justification for this use of the term "appreciation" in Manela (2016a, pp. 289–90).

2. This way of treating the relationship between directed gratitude and appreciation is now reflected in several recent authoritative texts on gratitude, including, for instance, the introduction to Roberts and Telech (2019). Argued defenses of this distinction can be found in Manela (2016a, 2020).

3. Philosophers who see gratitude as a typical response to benevolence or goodwill include Berger (1975), McConnell (2019), Roberts (2004, p. 62), and Strawson (1974). Sustained arguments for the benevolence claim can be found in Manela (2016a, sct. 2)

4. Some might argue that benevolence-motivated acts are not worthy of gratitude if they are done so recklessly as to unduly risk harming Y, or done without the Y knowing they were done by a benevolent agent, or done as a token of R's contrition to Y for some past wrong, or done as an instance of gratitude to Y for past benevolence Y did for R, or if Y already for other reasons deserved the benefit of R's φ-ing. I will consider only cases of benevolence where these factors do not come into play.

5. This list is similar to the lists of "disqualifying" conditions put forward by McConnell (1993); Simmons (1979).

6. Some, such as Fitzgerald (1998), might be inclined to think I've cast the net too narrowly here, in defining that to which targeted gratitude is a proper response. Even if such skeptics deny my claim that gratitude is owed *only* in response to acts of benevolence, most of those skeptics would likely still concede that gratitude is often (perhaps even typically) owed in response to benevolent acts. For such skeptics, then, the cases of gratitude I will analyze in this essay are still cases of genuine prepositional gratitude,

and though (for such skeptics) these cases represent only a subset of prepositional gratitude, my analysis of only these cases will still be sufficient to convince such skeptics that one can be grateful without believing one's benefactor exists.

[7] What follows is a summary of the analysis I argue for in Manela (2016a, 2020).

[8] On this point, I follow, *inter alia*, Berger (1975, p. 42), McConnell (1993, p. 57), and Swinburne (1989, pp. 65, 67), and I have argued for this in Manela (2019, pp. 301–3). There are virtually no philosophers who argue against this point, though Weiss (1985) believed that the requirement to thank was a social rather than a moral requirement associated with gratitude.

[9] On this point, I follow, *inter alia*, Fitzgerald (1998, p. 120) and Walker (Walker 1980–1981, pp. 50–51), and I have argued for this in Manela (2016a, p. 283; 2016b, p. 136). Some have argued that as far as feelings go, a grateful beneficiary should also have feelings of gladness or appreciation toward the benefit; in other words, according to these philosophers, part of being grateful to R for giving me benefit T is being glad I have T. I am skeptical that this is truly a part of prepositional gratitude. However, for the sake of convincing those who disagree with me on this point, in this essay I will use cases of prepositional gratitude where the beneficiary does appreciate the benefit.

[10] On this point, I follow, *inter alia*, Camenisch (1981) and McConnell (1993, pp. 48–51), and I have argued for this in Manela (2016a, pp. 283–84; 2019, pp. 300–1). Those who dispute this point include Fitzgerald (1998, p. 120); Weiss (1985, p. 492). For arguments against those philosophers on this point, see Manela (2016a, p. 283).

[11] See, for instance, Manela (2019, p. 299).

[12] Some might disagree with my claim in the previous section that gratitude is only ever fitting in response to benevolence. Such philosophers can feel free to interpret "benevolent benefaction" as a stand-in for whatever conditions they think are necessary and sufficient to warrant gratitude. Under most reasonable accounts of those conditions, the argument that follows will still be a *prima facie* case for why Y's belief in R's benevolent benefaction is necessary for Y to be grateful to R.

[13] If you like, you can imagine that Yardley's degree of belief in the proposition that he's alone on the island is 0.99—that is, you can imagine that he typically aims to maximize his utility when taking bets, and would be willing to pay $0.99 for a bet that pays $1.00 if he were alone on the island and $0 if it turned out his benefactor existed.

[14] One might object that this is not a case where Y doubts that R exists, because despite what Y might tell us, Y is still acting as if he believes R exists, and that is enough to reveal that he actually does believe R exists. But this objection can be met. Acting as if *p* is the case doesn't necessarily imply belief that *p* is the case, as reflections on attitudes like precaution show. I can believe with 99% confidence that lightning will never strike my house, but still take measures to protect my house from a lightning strike. By the same token, in the case of Yardley and Randolph, Yardley might genuinely believe with a confidence of 99% that Randolph does not exist, but still take measures to please Randolph just in case he turns out to exist.

[15] To be clear, I do claim that a beneficiary can be grateful to a benefactor if the beneficiary doesn't regard the benefactor's existence as possible. If Yardley put no credence at all in the possibility that Randolph existed, I have a hard time seeing how Yardley could have the gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors that constitute being grateful to Randolph—at least insofar as Yardley is fully rational.

[16] Indeed, in this case, his hope that Randolph doesn't exist may actually be a manifestation of his gratitude to Randolph.

[17] In Manela (2016a), for instance, I have argued that being grateful doesn't require a beneficiary to be humble.

[18] Such accounts include McAleer (2012); Roberts (2016).

[19] Indeed, this generalization is perhaps most of use in the context of supernatural benefactors. After all, human benefactors almost never leave us with doubt that they exist, while supernatural benefactors are much more likely to have their existence doubted than typical human benefactors.

[20] At this point an atheist might object that there is a big difference between my vignette about Yardley and Randolph, on the one hand, and the case of doubters' gratitude to God, on the other: in the vignette, the benefactor Randolph turns out to exist. God, the objector might argue, turns out not to exist. According to this objector, even if my vignette shows gratitude to doubted *existing* benefactors is possible, it doesn't show that gratitude to *non-existent* benefactors is possible. And so those who doubt God's existence will not be persuaded that my generalization applies to gratitude to God. Theists will not find this objection persuasive, but atheists might. And since I do hope to persuade atheists that my conclusion applies even in the case of gratitude to God, this objection is worth addressing. The objection rests heavily on the claim that gratitude to non-existent benefactors is not really gratitude, and that claim, I believe, can be doubted. Reflection on other attitudes, like fear, tell against it. Think for instance of fear of vampires. Despite the fact that vampire do not exist, the fear of vampires is very much real fear. It's real because the feelings and behavioral dispositions that make it up are real—really felt by and motivating of people who are afraid of vampires. And it's fear *of vampires* because it's the mental representation of vampires as having certain characteristics that brings those feelings and behaviors about, and that determines their content and magnitude. The prepositional phrase *of vampires* need not pick out anything that really exists; it only picks out the representation. Now, if vampires do not exist, that might make fear of vampires unfitting, inappropriate, or irrational. And since vampires do not exist, it may be impossible to objectively confirm the extent to which one's representation of vampires, which sets the parameters of one's fear, is accurate. So different people's fear of vampires could manifest very differently—in different behaviors, for instance. But none of that stops fear of vampires from being real fear, and people who experience it as being really afraid. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to other attitudes, like gratitude. Gratitude to a non-existent benefactor, like (*arguendo*) God, is real gratitude, because the feelings and

behavioral dispositions that make it up are real. And it's gratitude *to God* because it's the representation of God as having certain characteristics that brings those feelings and behaviors about, and that influences their content and magnitude. The prepositional phrase *to God* need not pick out anything that really exists; it only picks out and defines the representation. Now, if God does not exist, that might make gratitude to God unfitting, inappropriate, or irrational. And if God does not exist, it may be impossible to objectively confirm the extent to which one's representation of God, which sets the parameters of one's gratitude, is accurate. So different people's gratitude to God could manifest very differently—in different behaviors, for instance. But none of that stops gratitude to God from being real gratitude, and people who experience it as being really grateful, in the prepositional or targeted sense.Now, if the objector remains convinced that gratitude to non-existent entities is not real gratitude, there are still versions of my thesis he might be prepared to accept. One statement of my thesis was *failure to believe in a benefactor doesn't always necessarily imply that gratitude to that benefactor is impossible*. The objector should still endorse this statement of my thesis as applying when the benefactor is God, since if God does not exist, then it's not a person's failure to believe in God that makes gratitude to God impossible: it's God's non-existence. I have also stated my thesis more sweepingly, as *it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence one doubts*. This is a version the objector might not accept as applying when the benefactor is God, because insofar as God doesn't exist, gratitude to God is never possible. But the objector should be prepared to accept a qualified version of this statement of my thesis—one that reads: *insofar as gratitude to some benefactor is possible, it may be possible to be grateful to that benefactor without believing he exists*. That's a version of my thesis that that both the objector and others should be willing to accept as applying to cases where God is a benefactor.

21 We could also imagine a darker version of this fallacy based not on a doubter's gratitude, but a doubter's anger toward God. An agnostic might reason along the following lines: *I can't tell just from introspection whether I believe in God. But I do feel angry with God. So I must believe God exists, since one can only be angry with entities one believes exist.* Insofar as anger is like gratitude, and can be had toward entities whose existence one doubts, then one cannot infer from one's anger at God that one believes God exists. To do so is to commit what we might call the *angry agnostic's fallacy*.

22 For data supporting this possibility, see Bradley et al. (2015, 2017).

23 Recent philosophers who have written about cosmic gratitude include Roberts (2014); Solomon (2006).

24 There is evidence that many nonbelievers do have such a mental representation of God. See Bradley et al. (2015).

25 One way a grateful atheist could respond to these remarks is by pointing out that if she were experiencing gratitude to a doubted God, such gratitude would not be appropriate (since, she believes, God does not exist, and gratitude to doubted benefactors, while possible, may be inappropriate). Thus, she might continue to reason, it is more likely that her gratitude is directed to some other entity, like the universe— making it a kind of cosmic gratitude. Whether this reply is compelling depends on whether gratitude to a doubted benefactor is always inappropriate or inapt (which it may not always be). The reply also assumes that the gratitude felt by the atheist in question is appropriate (which it may not be). The reply's compellingness also depends on whether gratitude to the cosmos, the laws of physics, or whatever else is supposed to be the target of cosmic gratitude is ever appropriate or apt (which it may never be). In any event, my point here is simply that it would be a mistake to infer from feelings of gratitude and a belief God doesn't exist *directly* to the claim that cosmic gratitude is the attitude being manifested. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to make this point.

26 These remarks also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to theists who seem to feel gratitude to something that is neither human nor divine. Some such theists might believe that in such moments, they are experiencing "cosmic gratitude." But before they infer this, another possibility must be ruled out: the possibility that they are really experiencing gratitude to some non-cosmic entity other than humans or God (e.g., some other supernatural entity) whose existence they doubt but regard as possible.

27 Of course, gratitude to God isn't compatible with *all* reasons for hoping God doesn't exist. An atheist who hopes God doesn't exist because he hates God, or has a representation of God as fundamentally malevolent, would probably not be capable of gratitude to God.

28 A similar point is made by Wolterstorff (2018). But Wolterstorff only goes so far as to argue that those who lack faith can, during liturgy, *thank* God. Now, it is an open question whether thanking God in liturgical contexts really amounts to expressing gratitude, as opposed to expressions of other related attitudes, like praise or appreciation. In other words, those who see atheists thanking God during liturgy and infer that they must have directed gratitude to God may be committing what I, in Manela (2022), have called the "thanks-gratitude fallacy". And even if thanking God during the liturgy really is meant to convey directed gratitude to God, thanking is only one element of the grateful response. My argument goes beyond Wolterstroff's by showing that atheists who lack faith can be grateful to God in a much more substantial and fuller sense: they can have grateful feelings and behavioral dispositions vis-à-vis God.

29 I take these conditions, and those in the next paragraph, from Howard-Snyder (2013).

30 It's worth noting that this line of reasoning also implies that doubters can have negative attitudes, like anger, toward God as well. So doubters' ability to have such attitudes toward God doesn't invariably imply they're likely to have healthy, positive relationships with God.

31 In certain religions, the recognition of this common ground could have significant consequences. It may help convince skeptical Catholics, for instance, of a suggestion recently made by Pope Francis: that nonbelievers—including atheists—may be capable of going to heaven. Francis's remarks on this possibility indicate that he thinks a life of good actions (actions that please

God), when motivated by an atheist's conscience, can be sufficient to make an atheist welcome in heaven. Some Catholics might doubt that this could be sufficient. They might reason that even people who conscientiously do good things must have some relationship with God in order to be welcome in heaven, and atheists, because of their lack of belief, can have no such relationship. My arguments in this essay suggest that line of reasoning is flawed. Nonbelievers, including atheists, might indeed be able to have a relationship with God—a relationship constituted by important attitudes like gratitude and contrition. Such attitudes may turn out not to be necessary to get into heaven. It may be the case that consistent good actions governed by a conscience really are sufficient. That is a question for clerics and theologians to settle. But if such attitudes do turn out to be necessary, that need not exclude nonbelievers from heaven. For more on Francis's remarks about nonbelievers entering heaven, see https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-chronicles-my-dad-heaven-little-boy-asks-pope (accessed on 20 December 2021).

32   Here my arguments point in the same direction as remarks made by Wolterstorff (2018).

References

Berger, Fred. 1975. Gratitude. *Ethics* 85: 298–309. [CrossRef]

Bradley, David F., Julie J. Exline, and Alex W. Uzdavines. 2015. The god of nonbelievers: Characteristics of a hypothetical god. *Science, Religion and Culture* 2: 120–30. [CrossRef]

Bradley, David F., Julie J. Exline, and Alex Uzdavines. 2017. Relational reasons for nonbelief in the existence of gods: An important adjunct to intellectual nonbelief. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9: 319–27. [CrossRef]

Camenisch, Paul F. 1981. Gift and Gratitude in Ethics. *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9: 1–34.

Fitzgerald, Patrick. 1998. Gratitude and Justice. *Ethics* 109: 119–53. [CrossRef]

Gulliford, Liz, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson. 2013. Recent Work on the Concept of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47: 285–317. [CrossRef]

Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 2013. Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50: 357–72. Available online: http://www.jstor.org/stable/24475353 (accessed on 15 January 2021).

Manela, Tony. 2016a. Gratitude and Appreciation. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 281–94.

Manela, Tony. 2016b. Negative Feelings of Gratitude. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 50: 129–40. [CrossRef]

Manela, Tony. 2019. The Virtue of Gratitude and Its Associated Vices. In *The Moral Psychology of Gratitude*. Edited by Robert Roberts and Daniel Telech. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 296–316.

Manela, Tony. 2020. Does gratitude to R for ϕ-ing imply gratitude that R ϕ-ed? *Philosophical Studies* 177: 3245–63. [CrossRef]

Manela, Tony. 2022. Thanks for being, loving, and believing. *Philosophical Studies* 179: 1649–72. [CrossRef]

McAleer, Sean. 2012. Propositional Gratitude. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49: 55–66.

McConnell, Terrance. 1993. *Gratitude*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

McConnell, Terrance. 2019. Acting from Gratitude. In *The Moral Psychology of Gratitude*. Edited by Robert Roberts and Daniel Telech. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Roberts, Robert C. 2004. The Blessings of Gratitude. In *The Psychology of Gratitude*. Edited by Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roberts, Robert C. 2014. Cosmic gratitude. *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 6: 65–83. [CrossRef]

Roberts, Robert C. 2016. Gratitude and Humility. In *Perspectives on Gratitude: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Edited by David Carr. New York: Routledge, pp. 57–69.

Roberts, Robert, and Daniel Telech. 2019. Introduction. In *The Moral Psychology of Gratitude*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Simmons, A. John. 1979. *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Solomon, Robert C. 2006. *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Strawson, Peter F. 1974. Freedom and Resentment. In *Freedom and Resentment, and Other Essays*. London: Buttler & Tanner, pp. 1–25.

Swinburne, Richard. 1989. *Responsibility and Atonement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Walker, A. D. M. 1980–1981. Gratefulness and Gratitude. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 81: 39–55. [CrossRef]

Weiss, Roslyn. 1985. The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude. *The Journal of Southern Philosophy* XXIII: 491–501. [CrossRef]

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 2018. *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.