

# COSMIC GRATITUDE

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**Abstract.** Classically, gratitude is a tri-polar construal, logically ordering a benefactor, a benefice, and a beneficiary in a favour-giving-receiving situation. Grammatically, the poles are distinguished and bound together by the prepositions ‘to’ and ‘for’; so I call this classic concept ‘to-for’ gratitude. Classic religious gratitude follows this schema, with God as the benefactor. Such gratitude, when felt, is a religious experience, and a reliable readiness or ‘habit’ of such construal is a religious virtue. However, atheists have sometimes felt an urge or need for an analogous experience and virtue of gratitude, and theists sometimes feel intellectual discomfort with classical theistic gratitude on consideration of the misfortunes that characterize our life along with its blessings. In response, another conception of religious gratitude has been attempted, a construal that lacks the to-for structure. This paper probes the significance of the benefactor for gratitude, both secular and religious, and, with Søren Kierkegaard’s help, some features of the theology of classical religious gratitude that dissolve the problem of misfortunes.

## I. CLASSICAL GRATITUDE TO PEOPLE

The vast majority of discussions of gratitude in psychology and philosophy, both historical and contemporary, suppose that to be grateful is to acknowledge gladly the receipt of some benefit, favour, or gift, and the good will or benevolent intention of the giver of the benefit towards the recipient. The abstract structure of gratitude so conceived is

*A is grateful to B for C.* I call such tri-polar gratitude ‘to-for’ gratitude. *A*’s acknowledgment of *B* as the intentional source of *C* is not just verbal behaviour, but a glad or happy state of mind. The recipient is glad about two things: the benefit that he or she has received, and the benevolent attitude of the giver in giving it. Thus, in one sense of the word, gratitude is a happy *attitude* about a benevolent *attitude*. Another sense of the word derives from this one. We may also speak of a grateful *person*, meaning that the individual is reliably disposed to take this attitude toward benefits as received from benefactors. Most people, though not all (Aristotle 1980: 4.3; Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjánsson 2014), have thought of this disposition as a human excellence or virtue. The most thorough extant ancient account of gratitude, both as a virtue and as an emotion, is that of the Stoic Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), in his *De Beneficiis* (*On Benefits*).

In Seneca’s discussion, gratitude (*gratia*) is above all an attitude toward a benefactor, somebody who has done us a favour. The favour may be any of a wide variety of things – shelter, protection from harm, defence of our reputation, a listening ear, a gift or loan of money, instruction about something, rescue from danger, diversion from a bad choice, supportive presence in a time of distress, etc. (for the variety of possibilities, see *de Ben.* 1.5.1, 2.34.5, 2.35.3, 3.9.2). The material ‘benefit’ is really but a symbol of good will:

If I have saved a man’s children from shipwreck or a fire and restored them to him, and afterwards they were snatched from him either by sickness or some injustice of fortune, yet, even when they are no more, the benefit that was manifested in their persons endures. All those things, therefore, which falsely assume the name of benefits, are but the services through which a friendly will reveals itself ... what counts is, not what is done or what is given, but the spirit of the action, because a benefit consists, not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer. (1.5.4–5, 1.6.1)

The agency of the benefactor is thus more important than its product. The overriding salience of the benefactor in the mind of the grateful person is due to his or her sensitivity to the benevolent attitude with which the giver bestowed the benefit. The benefit plays a definite role, but according to Seneca, in the mind of the truly grateful person its role is chiefly that of indicating the graciousness of the benefactor’s mind toward the beneficiary. The grateful response is a heartfelt appreciative (joyful, benevolent) recognition of the graciousness of the benefactor (1.15.4).

Seneca is sternly critical of a mercenary attitude on the part of either the benefactor (as making his favour leverage for advantage or power or pleasure or glory (4.11.1)) or the beneficiary (as grasping the benefit in disregard of the benefactor (4.20.3)). The generosity-gratitude exchange as Seneca describes it is above all a meeting of the *minds* of two human beings – a mutual recognition of positive regard often utilizing a ‘material’ benefit as medium and symbol. The ideal giver uses the bestowed benefit to show his regard for the beneficiary, and the beneficiary uses a token benefit – a word of thanks, a smile, warmth of demeanour, or a return benefit – to show his positive regard for the benefactor’s positive regard.

The worldview or ethics to which Seneca’s conception of gratitude belongs stands in subtle contrast with that of Thomas Hobbes, who also accords gratitude the status of a virtue. Hobbes comments,

As justice dependeth on antecedent covenant; so does gratitude depend on antecedent grace; that is to say, antecedent free gift; and is the fourth law of nature ... : that a man which receiveth benefit from another of mere grace endeavour that he which giveth it have no reasonable cause to repent him of his good will. For no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good; of which if men see they shall be frustrated, there will be no beginning of benevolence or trust, nor consequently of mutual help ... (*Leviathan*, Part I, chapter 15, p. 230)

Bernard Gert (2010: 95) says this passage shows that Hobbesian gratitude isn’t merely a device for extracting future benefits from benefactors. But to my ear it leaves the question of the beneficiary’s deeper motive open, and the egoism suggested by ‘no man giveth but with intention of good to himself’ seems to say that in the exchange both benefactor and beneficiary are primarily looking out for their own advantage. The accent in Hobbesian gratitude is on the benefit, to which the benefactor plays the secondary or derivative role of supplier. Whether or not Hobbes had this in mind, it provides an instructive contrast with Seneca’s view, which makes human fellowship, friendship, and love the primary value in the generosity-gratitude exchange. To exaggerate a tiny bit, the benefice plays more the role of a pawn in the essentially interpersonal or spiritual communion of souls.

## II. CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN GRATITUDE

Thanksgiving is a central practice of the Christian life, and it follows the schema of to-for gratitude. A classic expression is the prayer of General Thanksgiving in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, thine unworthy servants, do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. *Amen.*

By this prayer, worshipers express and communicate to God our recognition of his ‘goodness and lovingkindness.’ We then enumerate, in a general way, the tokens of God’s generosity: our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; and the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ. Then we petition God to strengthen and purify our gratitude, so that we may live our lives in happy appreciation and glad communion with God. Gratitude is a kind of love, and this prayer is a device for maintaining and deepening our love for God. Thanksgiving is a practice of love.

## III. ANOTHER KIND OF RELIGIOUS GRATITUDE?

Christians and other theists are not the only people who are inclined to feel gratitude for things not plausibly attributable to human agency. Atheists too sometimes feel this impulse. Robert Solomon thinks that a person who feels grateful for his life as such ‘is a better person and a happier one’ than someone who lacks such gratitude, and empirical research on the question seems to bear him out (Emmons 2013). ‘But one of the questions that has always intrigued me about such cosmic gratitude, and it certainly bothered Nietzsche as well, is *to whom* should one feel this gratitude?’ Solomon says that ‘being grateful “to the

universe” is a limp way out of this quandary’ (Solomon 2004: viii). The limpness obviously derives from the fact that the universe seems not to be an intentional agent, and gratitude attributes benevolent agency to the source of one’s blessings.

Solomon chides Albert Camus for commending, by way of his hero Meursault (*The Stranger*), that one open one’s heart to ‘the benign indifference of the universe’. He seems to suppose that Camus is representing Meursault’s emotion as gratitude, though that is implausible and the text doesn’t say it. It seems to me that if one is expecting to be guillotined before an approving crowd in the next few hours, one might feel hemmed in by hostile forces, and thus might experience some *relief* or even *joy* by construing the universe as indifferent (agents can be indifferent to this or that, but non-agents are *necessarily* ‘indifferent’). This relief will be a member of the class of ‘transcendent’ or ‘cosmic’ emotions. The indifference of the universe could strike one as benign by comparison with all the hostile human beings in one’s recent and expected experience – see the ‘howls of execration’ that Meursault anticipates from the crowd who will gleefully watch his execution. Throughout the novel, Meursault has remarked that nothing matters, nothing is really important; so his descent into terror in face of the guillotine represents an inconsistency in his worldview, which he now corrects by reverting to his characteristic construal of the universe as indifferent. But if Meursault’s transcendent relief is not gratitude, then Camus isn’t even trying to supply an answer to Solomon’s question about ‘to whom’.

Nietzsche, by contrast, does seem to be addressing the question of the *to whom* with his ungrammatical question, ‘How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?’ (Nietzsche 1967: 221) He seems to answer *to whom?* By saying, ‘To myself’, or ‘to my whole life’ (if these are different). This is perhaps an improvement over ‘to the universe’, inasmuch as Nietzsche is an intentional agent, somebody who can will the good for him(self). Apparently, Seneca had an interlocutor who thought like Nietzsche, and offers him a short tutorial in the logical grammar of interpersonal transaction words:

‘One ought, you say, ‘to bestow benefit on oneself; therefore one ought also to return gratitude to oneself’. [But] ... the man who gives to himself is not generous, nor is he who pardons himself merciful, nor he who is touched by his own misfortunes compassionate. For generosity, mercy,

and compassion contribute to others .... If a man says that he has sold something to himself, will he not be thought mad? For selling means alienation, the transferring of one's property and one's right in it to another. Yet, just as is the case in selling, giving implies the relinquishment of something, the surrendering of something that you have held to the possession of another. ... unless there are two persons, there can be no giving ... (*De Beneficiis* 5.9–10)

So we can't owe our whole life to ourselves.

Solomon himself proposes a way to be grateful for our life without being grateful to either God or the universe. He says, '... opening one's heart to the universe is not so much personifying the universe as opening one's heart, that is, expanding one's perspective' (2004: ix). He seems to be saying that we can be grateful for our whole life if 1) we think about our *whole* life, not just its particularities, while also 2) reflecting about how much of the good in our life we owe to parents, friends, teachers, and the like. If we make a habit of doing these two things, in alternation or in conjunction, then we will learn not to insist on being the primary authors of our life, and will acquire the habit of acknowledging, generously and realistically, how much we owe to others. This generalized attitude of grateful indebtedness can count, Solomon thinks, as gratitude for our whole life. We will be cognizant, of course, that we don't owe our life as a whole to any one of those human agents that we acknowledge, nor even to all of them collectively. Human agency cannot account for our whole life. Yet we do owe some aspects of it to diverse human agents, some of whom, at least, will probably have helped us from motives of benevolence. This solution seems to depend on confusing the various *aspects* of our life that we do owe to others with our *whole* life, which we cannot owe to other human beings. This is not what Solomon calls 'cosmic gratitude,' but a broadened gratitude to people.

George Nakhnikian tells of a cosmic gratitude he experienced when his eighteen-month old daughter had a close encounter with death. He was chatting with friends in his home while their children played together, when he suddenly realized that he didn't know where the baby was. In a mild panic he found the porch's screen door ajar, and a neighbour approaching him with the child in her arms. The neighbour had found her standing in the middle of the street looking at the housetops.

A car driven by elderly people had come to a stop just in front of her. Apparently they were waiting for her to get out of the way. In the

meantime, another car, driven by some impatient youngsters, had come up behind the first car. The youngsters could not see the baby, so they impatiently zoomed around the first car. The baby stood still while this was going on. If she had taken two steps in the wrong direction at a certain moment, she would have been killed instantly.

I took the child in my arms. She was calm and happy, her usual self. She had no idea of what had happened. I thanked our neighbor for her kindness. But what I felt at that moment was a vast thankfulness which I could not appropriately express to any human being. ... Had I retained the religion of my fathers, I should have thanked God in my heart, I should have gone to the nearest Armenian church to light a candle before the image of a saint, and I should have given the priest some money for the poor. (Nakhnikian 1961: 161)

Nakhnikian frankly attests to a certain frustration, one noted as well in the testimonies of Solomon and Nietzsche. The frustration arises from a strong sense that the emotion he feels has the to-for structure, combined with an equally strong resistance to following the 'to' with the only agent that qualifies for the role, namely God. Nakhnikian thinks his experience is a universal human susceptibility, not a vestige of his Christian upbringing. Like those who cope by thanking the universe, or themselves, or all the people that have contributed to their life, Nakhnikian finds some comfort in the finite:

Ever since the day I have recalled, I have felt a special tenderness for my child. When I see her sitting at the family table at mealtime, or when she comes home from school, I often reach over to stroke her hair, as if to say, 'Thank you for being here.' Also, what I am doing now, telling the story, is a way of externalizing what I feel. (Nakhnikian 1961: 162)

Nakhnikian is admirably honest in his tone of resignation that none of his 'externalizing' strategies is completely satisfying.

The continuing frustration of deflecting the 'to whom' of to-for cosmic gratitude onto unsatisfactory objects may lie behind Brother David Steindl-Rast's program as outlined in his essay, 'Gratitude as Thankfulness and as Gratefulness' (in Emmons and McCullough 2004). Brother David proposes to distinguish two different kinds of gratitude: *thankfulness*, which is 'personal', and *gratefulness*, which is 'transpersonal'.

When we thank, we think – namely, in terms of giver, gift, and receiver. This is necessary for personal gratitude, but transpersonal gratitude – though cognitive – lies deeper than thinking and precedes it. When it is

an integral element of the experience of universal wholeness, gratitude does not yet distinguish between giver, gift, and receiver. (Steindl-Rast 2004: 286)

It is hard to know what difference Brother David is seeing between cognition and thinking. If we take Nakhnikian's experience as an example, it would seem that, even though he describes the emotion as 'cosmic', it involves thinking. For example, he reckons with the danger that his daughter has just been in, as well as her safety, and both thoughts are essential to his cosmic emotion. In fact, her safety is the 'gift' for which he is grateful, and the danger of being run over is what she is safe from. (That these thoughts condition his feeling of gratitude is consistent with the feeling arising 'spontaneously' (notwithstanding Steindl-Rast 2004: 285).) Nakhnikian is also aware that no finite agent is a good candidate for thanking. Another example of cosmic gratitude that he mentions follows on the thought of 'the sheer brute contingency of [one's] ever having been born' (Nakhnikian 1961: 159). Here the 'gift' is life – the fact that, despite the odds against it, one *was* born. One feels grateful for one's life – again, with the awareness that no person 'within the world', so to speak, is the proper benefactor.

Moreover, when Brother David comes to describe (cosmic) gratefulness more definitely, he seems to forsake his thesis that it 'does not yet distinguish between giver, gift, and receiver' (Steindl-Rast 2004: 286). He says that gratitude is a heightened appreciation, or 'celebration', that 'differs from all other celebrations by its *object*, that is, undeserved kindness' (Steindl-Rast 2004: 283, my italics). Brother David thinks this will be true of all gratitude, whether personal or cosmic. The undeserved kindnesses that persons do for us, and that deserve our *thankfulness*, are of many different kinds. The undeserved kindness that the cosmos does us, and that deserves our *gratefulness*, is 'undeserved admittance into a state of mutual belonging' (Steindl-Rast 2004: 284). That is, in feeling cosmic gratefulness, we 'celebrate' our inclusion in being. It is as though the universe welcomes us into a state of mutual belonging: in its kindness, the universe enfolds us, presents itself to us as 'kin' (Steindl-Rast 2004: 284), to us who don't deserve such welcome. It belongs to us and we belong to it. To me, this kindness of the universe sounds very much like a personification of it. The universe is construed as a kind of benevolent giver, whose gift is itself, like a mother who 'gives herself' to her child, so that she belongs to the child and the child belongs to her. So



the to-for structure is preserved, after all: gratefulness is *to* the cosmos *for* its kind and welcoming inclusiveness. We are reminded of Robert Solomon's comment that 'being grateful "to the universe" is a limp way out of this quandary' (Solomon 2004: viii). No doubt, it's to avoid this criticism that Brother David insists, in effect, that gratefulness does not, like thankfulness, have the to-for structure. 'Only thankfulness ... typically has as its object an intentional agent beyond the self' (Steindl-Rast 2004: 286). But his insistence that it does not take a personal agent as 'object' conflicts with his description of transcendent gratitude in such person-suggestive words as 'undeserved kindness' and 'kinship' and 'belonging'. I suspect that if one tried to do completely without personifying concepts, the description would fail plausibly to describe a kind of *gratitude*.

#### IV. COSMIC EMOTIONS OTHER THAN GRATITUDE

Many cosmic emotions have come to the attention of philosophers and theologians, and some of them differ strikingly from the gratitude on which Solomon, Nakhnikian, and Brother David focus. The various species of transcendent emotion are distinguished by the patterns of thought that give rise to them and internally determine the specific character of each. Let's return for a moment to Nakhnikian's thought of 'the sheer brute contingency of [your] ever having been born' (Nakhnikian 1961: 159), which he says might generate a feeling of cosmic gratitude for your life. But it seems that, to yield *gratitude*, the thought of sheer contingency needs to be combined with the thought of your life as something like an undeserved kindness, to borrow from Brother David. It won't yield gratitude if you don't think of your life as something good for yourself. If you hate your life, the thought of your radical contingency might yield cosmic anger about your colossally bad luck!

In a lecture at the Center of Theological Inquiry (Princeton, New Jersey), March 13, 2014, Doug Ottati reported explaining to his son Albert how each of a very long string of extremely unlikely coincidences had to occur for Albert's dad to meet Albert's mom (Ottati 2014). Albert then remarked, 'Well, if you hadn't met Mom, then I guess somebody else would have been my dad.' In this response, Albert is expressing a sentiment that is very natural for human beings, the gut feeling that I *have* to be, that my existence is a non-negotiable *given*. Albert had a very

solid sense of the necessity of his being, a sense that Doug's explanation was designed to undermine. When Albert does finally come clearly and forcefully to see the nearly infinite improbability of his ever having existed, the feeling generated by this insight, against the background of Albert's sense of his own necessity, is likely to be an anxious sense of cosmic unsupportedness, a feeling that is quite the opposite of cosmic gratitude.

A similar feeling that seems to be an antithesis of Brother David's 'gratefulness' is one that Martin Heidegger describes as feeling anxiously 'uncanny' (*unheimlich* – not at home, *nicht-zuhause*) (see Heidegger 1962: 231–3; and Roberts 1977: 254–5 for discussion). Heidegger, like other 'existentialists', is highly sensitive to the fact that human consciousness 'projects' into the future, into a potentially wide-open 'world' of possibilities. But he also stresses that human beings are typically 'fallen' into closed physical, social, and ideological niches of their own and others' making, in which they comfortably and inauthentically live in 'oblivion' of their true nature as beings radically open to possibility. This artificially closed world has the homey character *heimlichkeit*, comfortable and complacent identity-giving familiarity. But on occasion, a person's true nature as open possibility makes itself obtrusively manifest, and his familiar world of commonplaces and conveniences and habits and predictabilities fails him and ceases to be 'home' for him. This anxious sense of out-there-ness, this feeling of uncanniness, of not belonging to one's world, is in some ways the polar opposite of Brother David's feeling of the undeserved welcoming kinship of the universe. The two cosmic feelings are as different from one another as anxiety and gratitude in ordinary intra-world experience. Just as cosmic 'gratitude' can be experienced as a connection to God, anxious cosmic uncanniness can be experienced as a yearning for God, though Heidegger seems to warn against interpreting his own analysis in this way (Heidegger 1962: 233; Roberts 1977: 255, note 14).

Ludwig Wittgenstein mentions two other transcendent emotions in his famous 'Lecture on Ethics'. One is a kind of wonder or awe, and the other is a sense of security.

I believe the best way of describing [this experience] is to say that when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist'. I will mention another

experience straight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.' (Wittgenstein 1965: 8)

When we wonder at something extraordinary, like a Turner landscape or Bach's B minor Mass, we focus our attention on it and implicitly compare it with other things that have been created by some process that we think we understand; and we are dumbfounded that the extraordinary thing was created – say, by a human mind and skill. But in the case of the transcendent wonder that Wittgenstein describes, we think of the whole of reality as an artefact, and are struck dumbfounded by the fact of its being in existence at all. When we feel safe in an ordinary way, say from being mugged in an upper class suburb, we think of harm from a certain quarter, say from marauding drug addicts on the streets, and note that here in the suburbs there's little or no danger from *that* quarter. Similarly, when we feel absolutely safe – safe from *any possible* harm – we survey the harms that might befall us, such as disease, starvation, death, calumny, torture, loss of family and friends, etc., and, adopting a perspective outside the world, so to speak, feel that even if all such 'harms' should befall us at once, we would still be fine.

Some of the transcendent or cosmic emotions generate, by their inner logic, little or no motive to posit a transcendent or divine agent. Cosmic wonder, for example, or the feeling of absolute safety, Heidegger's anxious feeling of being 'not at home' in the world, or Meursault's feeling that the universe's utter indifference to him is benign, do not in themselves suggest an agent who created the world, or who is calling one home or keeping one safe, or who has good will towards oneself; though it is true that theists may connect such feelings with the doctrines of creation or providence or grace (see Wittgenstein's comments, 1965: 9). But the philosophical discussions of transcendent gratitude that we have considered do seem to have in common that they motivate a search for *somebody* to *whom* the gratitude is to be directed. Solomon ends up directing his 'expanded perspective' gratitude to teachers, friends, family, and other human beings. Nakhnikian thinks nostalgically of the forsaken God of his fathers, and ends by (irrationally) thanking his daughter for 'being there'. Nietzsche, again irrationally, thanks himself or his whole life. And Brother David ends up construing the universe as offering

'undeserved kindness', as being like hospitable 'kin' with whom (which?) we can enter into a 'mutual belonging'. The explanation of this difference is near at hand. Gratitude has the to-for structure. Other emotion types in the neighbourhood of gratitude do not have it, for example, Meursault's cosmic relief that the universe, being indifferent to him, is not like the crowds eagerly waiting to see the knife slice through his neck, or the simple joy at the existence of the world that Brother David sometimes takes to be gratitude (see Steindl-Rast 1984).

Bob Solomon, Brother David, Nietzsche, and George Nakhnikian all feel a theistic temptation stemming from their feelings of cosmic gratitude, and propose devices for escaping it. I have argued that their escape routes are dead-ends as long as the feeling they experience is *gratitude* rather than, say, relief or joy. The reason, I have argued, is that gratitude has the to-for structure. But atheists are not the only ones to have trouble with cosmic gratitude. If theists take what they perceive as the blessings in their lives to be favours expressing the benevolence of God towards them, warranting them to love God in return and to express this love in worship and thanksgiving and benevolent actions toward God's creatures, especially their fellow human beings – are they not, in logical consistency, committed to being hostile towards God on account of what they perceive as the troubles, disasters, adversities, trials, and tragedies in their lives? I turn now to Søren Kierkegaard's treatment of religious gratitude, which quite directly addresses this question.

## V. TO-FOR COSMIC GRATITUDE

Kierkegaard explores the peculiar features of a frankly theistic cosmic gratitude that has the to-for structure. In ordinary human-human gratitude, we usually take ourselves to be pretty good judges of the value of whatever holds the place of benefit in our tri-polar construal, and our judgment of that value influences our sense of our benefactor's benevolence. Very roughly speaking, the more wonderful the benefit, the more wonderful do we judge the benevolence; the less wonderful the 'benefit', the less wonderful the benevolence, all the way down to downright malevolence. (We don't generally attribute benevolence to people who give us a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.) *Very* roughly speaking, I say: even with human benefactors, we soon realize that their motives are mixed and their calculations of our good are fallible. Their

benevolence may be mixed with other motives for the good they do us, perhaps even with envy or some other kind of malevolence; their calculations are fallible, so we may be genuinely benefited by their efforts to hurt us, and the good they intend for us by their favours may misfire, even tragically. Or they may be so much wiser than we that the genuine good they do us may look to us like evil; and then it may be proper, despite appearances, to infer the goodness of the benefit from the benefactor's wise benevolence. Nevertheless, on the whole we consider ourselves pretty good judges of the quality of benefits that come to us from one another, and if we are virtuously grateful people, on the model commended to us by Seneca, we will value the giver above the gift, and so will generously tend to put the best construction on the giver's motives.

With God, the connection between what appears to us to be a benefit or a calamity and the intention of its agent is less naturally transparent, to put the point mildly. In a footnote from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus quotes a 'religious' person who seems not to have noted this point:

After many errors I finally learned to keep close to God, and since that time He has not left me in the lurch; my business flourishes, my projects have success, I am now happily married, and my children are well and strong, etc. (Kierkegaard 1941: 399)

The pattern of thought this person expresses is not really religious, says Climacus, but 'aesthetic': the goods he lists are to him (given his character) unambiguously and even ultimately good, and their reversal would be to him unambiguously bad. But to the really religious person this would not be so. Climacus continues:

... even if it pleases him to say that he thanks God for all these blessings, the question is how he thanks Him, whether he does it directly, or whether he first executes the movement of incertitude which is the mark of the God-relationship. Just as little as a man has the right in the midst of misfortune to say to God directly that it is misfortune, since he has to suspend his understanding in the movement of incertitude, so little dare he directly take all these things as evidence of the God-relationship. (Kierkegaard 1941: 399)

Climacus 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. This is, I think, what the prayer of General Thanksgiving of the *Book of Common Prayer* has in mind when it reads, ‘We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but *above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.*’ 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. 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.

A little later in the same footnote, Climacus comments on a case in which the religious gratitude is not a trait of character, but is subject to the ups and downs of the blessings of this life:

Thus the great actor Sydelmann (as I see from his biography by Rotschel) on the evening of his triumph in the Opera House, where he was crowned with a laurel wreath amid applause lasting several minutes, when he came home, passionately gave thanks to God. With the same passion with which he gave thanks he would have rebelled against God if he had been hissed off the stage. Had he given thanks religiously, and hence given thanks to God, the Berlin public and the laurel wreath and the applause lasting several minutes would have become ambiguous in the dialectical uncertainty of the religious. (Kierkegaard 1941: 399)

I’m not sure how Climacus knows the final counterfactual (perhaps it’s clear from the biography), but the ‘ambiguity’ of which Climacus speaks would be Sydelmann’s *appreciation* of the ambiguity of the value of his theatrical success, in the light of the supreme value of his relationship with God. And this appreciation would be a function of the order of Sydelmann’s cares: that his care for his friendship with God swamped and qualified his concern for theatrical successes so that he could forfeit the latter without despair.

Kierkegaard does not mean the religious relativizing of the concern for this life’s blessings to reduce it to Stoic indifference: ‘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?’ (Kierkegaard 1943: 14). In an edifying discourse on Job from 1843 he refers to Job’s losses with words like ‘the terrible’, ‘horror’, and ‘distress’, and does not deny that Job suffers terribly, even though Job is a paradigm for him

of religious gratitude as a character trait. Kierkegaard introduces the discourse in the opening section by reflecting on the role that Job plays or can play in the life of subsequent generations. He acts as a beacon of comfort whose place is ‘the outpost of humanity’. He is a comfort to serious people,

... as one who witnesses that the terror is endured, the horror experienced, the battle of despair waged, to the honour of God, to his own salvation, to the profit and happiness of others. Job walks by the side of the race and guarantees it its happiness, combats the apprehensive dream that some horror may suddenly befall a man and have the power to destroy his soul as its certain prey. (Kierkegaard 1943: 9)

Some people don’t like to be reminded of Job, because his case calls them to be honest about the fragility of their ‘happiness’. Kierkegaard uses several terms of character-defect to describe such people. They are ‘thoughtless’ (1943: 9), or ‘selfish’ (1943: 9), or ‘defiant’ (1943: 9), or ‘effeminate’ (1943: 10). For example,

Only the defiant could wish that Job had not existed, so that he might absolutely free his soul from the last vestiges of love which still remained in the plaintive shriek of despair; so that he might not complain, aye, even curse life; so that there might be no consonance of faith and confidence and humility in his speech; so that in his defiance he might stifle the shriek so that it might not even seem as if there were anyone whom it defied. (Kierkegaard 1943: 10)

Kierkegaard here describes someone who is so bitter about his loss that he doesn’t want to hear any word of comfort, refuses to allow even the love that his shriek of despair presupposes (you can’t even be desperate without caring positively about *something*). This person is so defiant that he shies even from admitting to himself that there is anyone to defy (like a poorly attached child who is so angry about his mother’s absence that he refuses to acknowledge her when she reappears).

The discourse is a meditation on the words that Job spoke on finding out that his herds of oxen, asses, and camels had been stolen by marauders, his servants killed, and all his sons and daughters had perished when a tornado struck the house in which they were eating and drinking together (Job 1:13–19): ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’

In the first interpretive section of the discourse, Kierkegaard comments on the fact that, when lamenting what the Lord had taken away, Job mentions first what the Lord *gave* him. That is, in the midst of comprehensive disaster, Job first ‘counts his blessings,’ and only then expresses the sadness of his loss. Then he worships God, acknowledging God as the source of all that he has (had), reaffirming his allegiance to God, and worshipping (honouring) him.

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. ... [The blessing] 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 1943: 15)

Thus Job’s religious gratitude is above all a personal relationship, with primary stress on the goodness of the benefactor, and treats the benefits as indicative of the benefactor’s benevolence.

Kierkegaard then describes three alternative scenarios, in which what might have seemed like religious gratitude turns out, in the face of loss, to have been a mere counterfeit and no real virtue. All three are marked by subordination of the appreciation of the giver to the apparent value of the gift in times past, now that the blessing has been withdrawn. In the first scenario, the subject’s memory of blessings past made the loss seem even bitterer, ‘and his ingratitude punished him by painting it as more desirable than it had previously been’ (Kierkegaard 1943: 17). In the second, the subject is tortured with regret that he did not more fully appreciate the benefits when he had them, and with a forlorn desire that ‘he might only regain the glory for a short time so that he might satiate himself with happiness, and thereby learn to disregard the pain!’ (Kierkegaard 1943: 17). In the third kind of case, of which Kierkegaard briefly describes several variants, the subject refuses to understand that he has lost the benefit, or denies that the benefit was really all that great anyway, or assures himself that the terrors of life are not really so hard to bear (Kierkegaard 1943: 18). By contrast, 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 1943: 19)

Next, Kierkegaard points out that Job frankly attributes the withdrawal of his blessings to the Lord's agency. Of course he knows that Sabaeans stole his asses and oxen and killed his servants, lightning destroyed the sheep and their shepherds, Chaldeans raided the camels and killed their keepers, and a violent wind overturned the house in which his children were making merry, burying them in the ruins. But he goes simply to the point: 'the Lord has taken away.' Again, Kierkegaard contrasts Job's gratitude with the theological reflections of less hardy minds, who try to exonerate the Lord by driving a wedge between his agency and that of the Sabaeans, the lightning, the Chaldeans, and the tornado (1943: 20–21). The verse following Job's speech comments, 'In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong' (Job 1:22). The fault of the less hardy minds is that they insist on using their own standards of good and evil to judge the case, failing to apply 'the dialectical uncertainty of the religious' and to have faith that 'in everything God works for good with those who love him' (Romans 8:28).

Job ... did not retard his soul and extinguish his spirit in reflections or explanations which only engender and nourish doubt ... In the same instant that everything was taken from him he 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. (Kierkegaard 1943: 21–22)

Because Job has the requisite humility and faith, he has no need to exonerate God. Job is steadfast in his allegiance to God and his belief in God's goodness, regardless of the strangeness of God's goodness to Job's own preconception of what is good for Job. Unlike the actor Sydelmann, Job does not judge God's goodness by Job's preconception of what is

good for himself, but ‘suspend[ing] his understanding in the movement of incertitude’ realizes that God’s ways are not his ways, and generously gives God ‘the benefit of a doubt’. In this steady grateful adherence to God he finds comfort in his sorrow and happiness in the midst of a devastated life.

## CONCLUSION

Gratitude, as an emotion distinct from other ‘positive’ emotions such as joy and relief, has the to-for structure: *A* is grateful *to B for C*. It is thus a tri-polar construal: *A* beneficiary construes *himself* as beholden to a *benefactor* for a *benefit*. This conception seems to be widespread common sense, despite the fact that in casual discourse people sometimes say they are grateful when they are only glad, that is, when no benefactor is plausibly denoted. The significance of this observation is deepened when we consider that some of the profoundest thinkers about gratitude (e.g. Seneca and Kierkegaard) think that the virtue of gratitude involves a conceptual subordination of the benefit to the benefactor, making gratitude a species of interpersonal love.

The to-for structure carries over to cosmic gratitude, where the natural candidate for benefactor is God. I’ve presented some evidence that even people who are decidedly unfriendly to the concept of God tend to presuppose the to-for structure in descriptions of their experiences of cosmic gratitude (gratitude for things that cannot be plausibly attributed to human agency). But those who are friendly to the concept of God also sometimes feel uncomfortable thanking God for blessings, because they feel that doing so commits them to being angry with God for misfortunes. In answer to this discomfort, I have outlined Kierkegaard’s conception of religious gratitude as a virtue, as a kind of love for God that steadfastly gives priority to the relationship with the Benefactor by subjecting all good and bad fortune to the ‘dialectical uncertainty of the religious’ – a kind of humble scepticism about the value of every benefit and detriment, in the light of God’s unchanging goodness.

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