

Is It Reasonable to be Grateful to God for Protection from Natural Evil He Caused?¹

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Abstract

The problem of evil is an enduring question within the philosophy of religion. Yet, the question has an underexplored cousin: how ought we react in the face of nearly averted evil? Religion seemingly calls us to be grateful unconditionally, yet intuitively it feels hard to thank someone who has merely solved *their own* problems. In this paper, I attempt to outline a defense of the religious claim, at least within the context of preventing natural evil, as being reasonable under roughly the same paradigm of gratitude that we use amongst other people. Specifically, I find that this account of gratitude is inherently *intentionalist* in nature, meaning that good intentions are the key determining factor in whether we ought to give gratitude. After responding to several objections, I bring in a Thomist metaphysics of causation and divine action to show the difference between when God ‘causes’ harm and when He causes benefit.

¹ Adapted from the John Locke Essay Competition Theology Category Winning Paper

The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord

Job 1:21

1. Introduction

In the ruins of the churches destroyed by the 2010 Haiti earthquakes, Juliette Tassy, a local parishioner, observed that “the cross in front [was] still standing...It means that we need to keep our faith.”² Just months later, the *New York Times* reported Haitians were “thirsty for faith.”³ Similarly, after Job lost his wealth and family, he cried out not in anger but, puzzlingly, in thanks to God.⁴ Even in immense suffering and tragedy, the religious individual is called to give thanks to God. This remained the case for Job even as he ascribed responsibility to God for his suffering.

How could this be? I offer two ways that thanksgiving to God is distinguished from ordinary notions of gratitude. First, as Kierkegaard observed, because we are in a position of epistemic uncertainty relative to God, we cannot know whether any circumstance is *truly* good or bad.^{5,6} Anything may be a blessing in disguise, even if that blessing is only visibly fulfilled in the afterlife. Indeed, the religious person must hold dogmatically to God’s omnibenevolence. Second, we do not truly own or possess what God gifts to us. In the words of theologian Arthur McGill, we do not thank God for “liberating [one] from need...for God.”⁷ Instead, the religious person is always in a state of need vis-à-vis God, and her blessings are always only God’s (as in Job). Considering these facts, we therefore ought not to thank God for His gifts (which are never really ours), but we are called to be *unconditionally* thankful to God, for His inherent goodness and love *as* God (and His relationship with us).^{8,9}

At this point, it seems as though we have ‘answered’ our stated question: It is always reasonable (for the religious person) to thank God. Yet to merely claim that one ought to always

² Martin Kaste, “Haitians’ Faith Unshaken By Earthquake,” *NPR*, April 3, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/04/03/125477173/haitians-faith-unshaken-by-earthquake>.

³ Anne Barnard, “Suffering, Haitians Turn to Charismatic Prayer,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/25/nyregion/25nychaiti.html>.

⁴ Here, the word translated as “to bless” stems from the Hebrew *barak*. However, as Leithart notes, this word is often used interchangeably in the Hebrew bible to mean “to give thanks”. Peter J. Leithart, *Gratitude: An Intellectual History* (Baylor University, 2014), 60.

⁵ See footnote t. in Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 374.

⁶ See the chapter “The Lord Gave, and the Lord Took Away; Blessed be the Name of the Lord” which begins on page 109 in Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses (Kierkegaard’s Writings, Volume 5)*, trans. Edna Hong and Howard Hong (Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁷ Arthur C. McGill, *Dying Unto Life*, ed. David Cain (Cascade Books, 2013), 45.

⁸ I use the excellent work of Kent Dunnington who surveys several leading Christian theologians throughout history to distinguish gratitude to God. It is here that I find reference to Kierkegaard and McGill. Kent Dunnington, “The Distinctiveness of Christian Gratitude: A Theological Survey,” *Religions* 13, no. 10 (2022): 889, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100889>.

⁹ I draw from Roberts’s account of cosmic gratitude and his recalling of Kierkegaard. Robert C. Roberts, “Cosmic Gratitude,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 3 (2014): 65–83, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v6i3.163>.

thank God seems an unsatisfying answer indeed.¹⁰ Perhaps it is an unreasonable requirement that religion bestows upon us. Therefore, in an effort to minimize this uneasiness, I will seek to show that even using roughly the same conceptions of gratitude as with other people, we are still justified in thanking God for protecting us.¹¹

I will begin with some qualifying observations. In saying that it is reasonable to do X, I do not claim we have an obligation to do X. It also does not imply that it would be unreasonable to not do X. For example, in criminal courts, a verdict of “not guilty” may reflect both a reasonable belief in the accused’s innocence, and a reasonable belief in her guilt. Thus, I need only defend a pro tanto case for giving thanks. In addition, some facts may also only be reasonable considering certain other facts. In this case, my argument is based on the premise that the conception of classical Abrahamic God exists.

The structure of my argument is as follows: First, I outline and defend what I believe to be sufficient conditions that could *reasonably* warrant giving thanks. I then refute several prima facie arguments for believing God’s protection does not warrant gratitude, given the outlined criteria. Finally, I use a Thomist account of divine action and causation to argue against a ‘net-benefit’ criterion.

2. Criterion for Gratitude

In *De Beneficiis*, Seneca claims the *first* thing that we learn about gratitude is that “the benefit is not the gold, the silver... rather, the benefit is the intention of the giver.”¹² But it is not just ancient wisdom that supports the primacy of intention. Following Roslyn Weiss and Fred Berger (in the modern philosophical literature), I advance what I will call an intentionalist account of gratitude. By this, I mean that the key factor in determining whether we ought to be thankful is whether the benefactor has benevolent intentions.^{13,14} In the proceeding discussion, I denote the benefactor as A, and the beneficiary as B.

At first blush, it may seem that some concrete benefit must be necessary to our feelings of gratitude. Yet, in the following examples, we can see how thanksgiving can be divorced from any physical benefit.¹⁵

¹⁰ One might ask, then, why do we feel unsatisfied by this answer? It may be the religious and pastoral task to conform one’s (flawed) intuitions to what one theologically holds to be the case.

¹¹ Albeit I do modify certain standards of interpersonal gratitude where they obviously are not applicable with God. I do not take this to be the same type of move employed earlier, where we completely distance human gratitude with thanksgiving to God.

¹² Lucius Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Miriam Griffin and Brad Inwood (The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 23.

¹³ Fred R. Berger, “Gratitude,” *Ethics* 85, no. 4 (1975): 298–309, <https://doi.org/10.1086/291969>.

¹⁴ Roslyn Weiss, “The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (1985): 491–501, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1985.tb00419.x>.

¹⁵ It is likely that the degree of gratitude and thanks owed is less than in a case where the benefit is actualized. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess degrees of gratitude, as long as *some* amount of gratitude is warranted.

Consider the case where a thief throws you her stolen goods to hide them from the police. Although B benefits because of A's actions, it is unreasonable to claim that therefore B ought to thank A. The missing piece here is A's lack of an intent to act to benefit B for B's sake. B may be thankful for the fortunate circumstance, but not to A. Let us consider the opposite case. When a teacher nominates a student for an award hoping the student wins, it is reasonable for the student to genuinely thank the teacher, even if the student does not win. While the student may not be *thankful* for the overall circumstance, it is not unreasonable that the student may nevertheless thank the teacher for her intent. Therefore, I take Weiss's criteria¹⁶ as a starting point for intentionalist gratitude:

1. A does x, which he perceives as a benefit to B
2. A does x because he wishes to help B, and not seeking a return
3. A does x at some cost to himself.
4. A does x voluntarily and intentionally.
5. It is not the case that A has no business doing x.
6. B has no right to, or claim upon, x.

It is (mostly) undisputed that God acts voluntarily and intentionally, and that God has a 'business' to be doing any action (criterion 4 and 6).¹⁷ Thus, I find three remaining areas where God's acts of protection may be disqualified from gratitude, which I will deem standards: the sacrifice standard (criteria 3), the ulterior motive standard (criterion 2), and the "net benefit" standard (criterion 1 and/or 6). I will show how these standards either do not apply to God, or how God's protective actions meet them.

3. God's Benevolence

First, given an omnipotent God, God incurs no real cost for any action. By the sacrifice standard, it therefore seems we ought never to thank God. Yet, there are obviously scenarios where one could reasonably thank God. It is reasonable for an individual born into a life of complete luxury to thank God for her blessings, for example. Thus, by *modus tollens*, it is not gratitude to God that we must discard, but the sacrifice standard, which seems inapplicable to God.

Second, perhaps God only protects us from harm for His own glorification, expecting later praise. Thus, He is no longer worthy of our sincere gratitude. This account, however, falsely

¹⁶ I paraphrase and condense some of the criteria. Weiss, "The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude," 491–501.

¹⁷ Although there is disagreement as to the status of acts that a beneficiary does not want, I will also assume that we would like to be protected from natural harm as much as possible

assumes it is God who benefits from glorification or praise. Instead, as Joshua Hinchie (referencing Aquinas) notes, the doctrine of divine perfection means that God cannot be benefited in any way by our actions. There can be no *quid pro quo*. Instead, because God's glory is simply a *manifestation* or *communication* of His perfect goodness to us, "God's glorification does not involve an increase in [His] own possession of goodness, but only in *our possession* of that goodness."¹⁸ God can only further benefit us by receiving glory for His actions, and there is no 'ulterior motive' beyond love.

Finally, let us consider criterion 1 and 6. Taken individually, it seems obvious that God's actions would satisfy these standards. After all, it seems trivial that God seeks to benefit us in protecting us, and we do not generally conceive of us having any right to God's actions. Yet, taken together, they imply what I call the "net benefit" standard. If God first 'harms' us, is it possible that He owes us some compensation for that harm? By this logic, we ought only to be thankful when we are benefited (or rather, when the benefactor intends to benefit us) on net considering the affair holistically. Does this line of reasoning work? I argue it does not.

This holistic logic does not resemble how we ordinarily approach gratitude. After all, we hardly tally up a net account of beneficence (especially over the span of years). Indeed, it would reasonably be quite *ungrateful* for B to not give thanks for A's current benevolence, and instead remain preoccupied over past injuries. An objector may claim that if the two actions were intimately linked (such as cleaning up after a spilled drink), then it may not be reasonable to thank A.¹⁹ However, in God's case, there is no reason to assume that God's causation of natural harm is closely related temporally or metaphysically to His protection. For example, a hurricane today may be traceable to small disturbances millennia ago, while God may act to protect us presently. It hardly seems reasonable to hold a thousand-year grudge, as it were. As it stands, then, it seems that we have vindicated giving thanks to God for His acts of protection.

Yet perhaps, the objector bites the bullet, or simply holds differing intuitions. In this case, it is perhaps possible that one may insist upon the validity of the 'net benefit' standard. The objector may argue that a balance sheet of harms and benefits is, in some cases, appropriate. I take it that it is at least plausible that an objector may flesh out the idea of two actions being 'intimately linked', so as to warrant our consideration of them as one (for the purposes of gratitude). I will title this objection the modified 'net benefit' standard. While I won't sketch out the specifics of such an argument, what is important for the sake of the current argument is this standard relies upon some nexus and/or similarity between the (intent behind) actions which harm and help.

¹⁸ Italics mine. Joshua Hinchie, "Divine Glory: Responding to Another Euthyphro Problem," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 94 (2020): 183–92, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpaprocc202292137>.

¹⁹ Even this standard does not seem wholly reasonable. Consider the case where a robber steals \$100 dollars from me, but graciously returns the money. Should I thank him? Contrast this with the scenario where our robber was caught and forced to hand over the stolen money. It seems that, not only is it *reasonable* to thank the robber specifically for their change-of-mind (without being grateful to them in general), but that this is based on their intent.

With this in mind, I submit that a Thomistic account of divine action and causation allows the theist to ‘meet’ the standard.

4. Divine Action—A Thomist Account

The Laplacian determinism of classical mechanics appears to leave no room for intervening divine action outside of sustaining natural laws. In response, one might preserve divine action in broadly two ways. First, developments in science allow us to search for “causal joints”, areas where God may influence the world, such as using the indeterminacy in areas such as quantum mechanics and chaos theory.^{20,21} The second method, which I will be pursuing, claims that making use of a distinction between primary causation and secondary (or instrumental) causation allows divine action to be compatible with deterministic natural law.^{22,23}

Aquinas argued that causation for God is not necessarily the same univocal causation that the natural world (and creatures) exhibit.²⁴ Furthermore, even though we say God has ‘caused’ both protection and natural harm, the nature of the two actions (of causation) may differ. For Aquinas, in the same way that a carpenter and her saw both “cause” a wooden plank to be cut, God (the primary cause) works through natural secondary causes.²⁵ Critically, the primary cause is *not* mutually exclusive with secondary causes, such that only one cause *truly* causes the event (or they both only contribute partially). Instead, the secondary causes depend on God for their very being and force. Thus, any event may have a genuine multiplicity of causes, each *fully, though differently* causing it.

However, when God works through corruptible natural causes, even though he fully causes the event as the primary cause, we may attribute specifically the *harm* to the natural, secondary cause, without locating any real fault in Him. Recalling our carpenter, suppose her saw has malfunctioned. While she is the primary cause of a miscut plank, she does not have any active or meaningful responsibility for the harm *qua* harm. It is the harm that seeps in from the imperfect natural world. As Michael Dodds notes, “Natural evil is part of the structure of creation, since

²⁰ My argument on intervention most likely still applies to an incompatibilist or “causal joint” account, but I do not make any positive claim.

²¹ See chapter 3 specifically for an analysis of modern scientific advancements. However, chapter 5 and 7 also contrast a Thomist approach with other accounts. Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), Chapter 3.

²² *Ibid.* Chapters 1, 5, and 7.

²³ I also follow Edward’s analysis of Stoeger’s insight into natural law being merely an approximation. Denis Edwards, “Toward a Theology of Divine Action: William R. Stoeger, S.J., on the Laws of Nature,” *Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (2015): 485–502, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563915593478>.

²⁴ Here, I refer to the work of Ignacio Silva, among others, who interprets and advances the Thomist account of divine action. This paper specifically outlines the analogic conception of causality. Ignacio Silva, “A Cause Among Causes? God Acting in the Natural World,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 4 (2015): 99–114, <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v7i4.89>.

²⁵ Although, even such an analogy is incomplete because we do not sustain the wood or saw like God does for all beings.

creation includes beings that are capable of failure...God allows the natural evil of the corruption...without directly intending it."²⁶

In other words, evil arises from an imperfect 'transmission' from God as the primary cause to the secondary causes of the world. As an analogy, consider the game of telephone, where one must transmit a message by whispering it into the ear of the next person in a long chain of people (who must each do the same). By the time the message has reached the other end, it may have been completely corrupted and distorted. Such distortion is made easier if one subscribes to a privation or 'lack' theory of evil. This is because the 'distortion', as it were, is not anything substantive, but merely gaps, or lacunae in the transmission. To use another telephone-related analogy, consider how an audio recording can be wholly distorted merely by there being gaps in the audio. In addition, it is critical for our purposes that God does not directly "intend" such evil, as Dodds writes. As our general paradigm for gratitude is intentionalist, the lack of any ill intent vindicates the role of God in natural evil (at least for the purposes of our thanksgiving). Indeed, the religious individual holds that God's providence means that he intends some greater good arise because of said corruption/evil.

By contrast, God's protection may be far more proactive and intentional. There are two potential categories here. First, it is possible that what we call "protection" sometimes refers to instances where we were never "in harms way", so to speak. In this case, God never "harmed" in the first place us in the sense that is required by the "net benefit" standard. Indeed, we *do* find God's benevolence in His sustaining of the natural law in that particular manner which leaves us safe. Thus, in the first case, it is reasonable to thank God. What about the other cases?

In cases of genuine miracle, a Thomistic account finds that God acts not against nature but *beyond* it to protect us from harm. It is not that God has contradicted Himself or His prior action of creating natural law. Rather, God has "corrected" some external corruption (or lack) in nature which 'created' said harm.

This has important implications for our purposes. Recalling that the modified net-benefit standard relies upon a similarity between God's 'harming' and his 'helping' actions/intents, the account here shows that the two are meaningfully distinct. Whereas God's actions in the case of natural harm are only incidental, God's action to protect us is fundamentally of a different *type*: one where He *actively* works precisely *against* the corruption. Thus, by differentiating where the harm in natural harm comes from, God's protective actions can now reasonably meet the "net benefit" standard. From Him, only good flows.

²⁶ See also the following discussion of moral evil. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 236-243.

5. Conclusion

There may be many ways to defend what religion and faith already hold to be true. In this case, we find that, after a Thomist clarification of divine action and glory, it is reasonable to thank God for protection under the same intentionalist paradigm that we thank humans. We therefore can “give thanks always for all things unto God.”

Ephesians 5:20

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