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**“Mother Nature and the Mother of All Virtues:**

**On the Rationality of Feeling Gratitude Towards Nature.”**

by Dr. Karen Bardsley

***Introduction***

*“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but is the mother of all the rest.”*

*--Marcus Tullius Cicero, Pro Plancio.*

Many people believe that we have moral obligations to protect the natural environments that sustain life. In large part, these obligations stem from a more general duty to protect the interests of humans and other sentient creatures. Some people insist, however, that humans also have moral connections to nature itself. For example, it has been suggested that those who destroy their natural environment wantonly or through unconscionable negligence fail to manifest a key human virtue.<sup>1</sup> One of candidates for the virtue involved is gratitude. We should feel grateful to nature for its bounty, it is claimed, and to destroy nature is to show flagrant ingratitude for the precious gift of life itself.<sup>2</sup>

There are difficulties, however, with the claim that the wanton destruction of natural environments reveals ingratitude. Gratitude is typically defined as a response to another agent's deliberate choice to further one's interests, and yet the natural ecosystems that sustain us do not choose to help or harm us. Is it ever rational, we might wonder, to feel gratitude towards something that has no intentions?<sup>3</sup>

This worry about our ability to feel gratitude towards nature has been voiced before, as has the hope that it might be satisfactorily addressed. For example, Thomas E. Hill, Jr. has claimed that "a non-religious person unable to 'thank' anyone for the beauties of nature may nevertheless feel 'grateful' in a sense."<sup>4</sup> The French philosopher André Comte-Sponville writes that "[s]trictly speaking... gratitude can only be addressed to living persons," but he goes on to ask: "How could one not be grateful to the sun for existing? To life, to flowers, to birds?"<sup>5</sup> More recently, Ronald Aronson has cautioned that modern, secular society's failure to replace feelings of gratitude towards a God with feelings of gratitude towards both our fellow humans and the natural world "deprives living without God of much of its coherence and meaning."<sup>6</sup> Sadly, as one reviewer of Aronson's article commented, though such gratitude seems a "common-sense emotion for the theist," for the atheist it seems a "hopeless conundrum."<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I will explore possible grounds for feelings of gratitude, or a sentiment closely akin to gratitude, towards the natural environments that support human life. I will begin by offering an analysis of gratitude that identifies two distinguishable, though closely interrelated, sets of attitudes that make up the sentiment. I will then consider the connection between beliefs about intentions and each of these sets of attitudes. Ultimately, I will propose that intentional action is not a necessary condition for gratitude. Instead, feelings of gratitude

towards an entity are both rational and appropriate when: 1) that entity is the source of a valuable and unearned benefit and 2) the benefit did not result from some accidental and/or regrettable feature of that entity's character. I will end by applying this analysis to the question of whether or not we should be grateful towards the natural world.

### ***Section 1: Understanding gratitude***

Gratitude is typically defined as the appropriate affective response on the part of an agent when they are the beneficiary of the benevolence of another agent.<sup>8</sup> The paradigm case where gratitude is appropriate is the instance when one agent voluntarily and intentionally sacrifices his or her own interests for the benefit of another. For example, it is appropriate to feel a deep and profound gratitude towards an agent who willingly endangers his or her own life in order to save yours.

Roslyn Weiss has argued that gratitude is a reaction to the intentions and sacrifices of a benefactor and that, as a result, the recipient's attitude towards the gift or benefit is not relevant to whether or not he or she should feel grateful. The main challenge of the virtue of gratitude, Weiss writes, is that it calls upon us to feel grateful towards another's benevolence even if we have a less than enthusiastic reaction to our benefactor and/or to his or her gift.<sup>9</sup>

Weiss is right that virtuous individuals frequently feel grateful even when they are not delighted by the gift or benefit that they have received. However, surely there are situations where an individual's negative response to the gift legitimately overrides his or her obligation to feel gratitude. For example, if a painfully shy girl suffers intensely as an unwelcomed suitor serenades her in the school cafeteria, a lack of gratitude towards him does not seem to constitute

a moral failing on her part, even if she recognizes that the suitor is motivated by a genuine devotion.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, if someone values a gift highly, he or she may feel grateful, even if he or she is not that impressed by the intentions and/or efforts of the giver. As A.D. Walker points out, someone would probably feel profoundly grateful if he or she were saved from drowning, even if the rescuer did not have to exert much effort to pull him or her to safety.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the phenomenology of gift giving implies that gratitude is not merely a matter of appreciating a benefactor. When we give a gift we are pleased when the recipient is grateful. However, this pleasure is diminished if the person only recognizes the efforts made in acquiring the gift, but not the gift itself. This lessening of pleasure indicates that under normal circumstances we expect gratitude to be focused on the gift as well as the giver.

Thus, the feelings of appreciation that accompany gratitude have two different foci. Ideally, the person who experiences gratitude appreciates: 1) the gift or benefit that is given and 2) the source of that gift.

### *Appreciating the gift*

There are many different ways in which we appreciate objects and events. I suspect that the appreciation of the gifts is a special kind of appreciation. Certainly, this appreciation often involves the straightforward admiration of the thing that we have received. This kind of admiration would be identical if we were admiring the object as a gift or just as something that we encounter in the world. We also may appreciate the gift's practical value to us; however, this appreciation would be the same if we had acquired the object ourselves. What makes these appreciative sentiments special in the case of gratitude, I believe, is the character they acquire in

virtue of our recognition that the object is a gift to us and that, therefore, it is not something that has been earned.

To say that a gift is not earned is not to say that it is undeserved or unmerited. Gifts given to friends, family and lovers are usually merited considering the significance of these individuals in our lives and the importance of their roles in our happiness. If such gifts are truly “gifts,” however, they are not earned as part of an exchange of goods or actions. Gifts are not payments for services rendered. They are not “owed” to people, and recipients do not have the right to demand them. There is an important difference, for example, between a gift of twenty dollars given to a grandchild by a doting grandmother in recognition of the child’s birthday and twenty dollars paid by the grandmother as a pre-arranged fee for the child’s help in the garden. Even if the child expects the twenty dollars on his or her birthday, he or she would be in the wrong to demand that money from his or her grandparent. In the case of the payment for work in the garden, however, the child would be justified, though perhaps a little impolite, to demand the money once the work was done.<sup>12</sup>

Alexander Comte-Sponville has argued that the fact that gifts are not earned causes them to give rise in the virtuous person to an appreciative joy that is not selfish or self-centered. It is a joy that should be accompanied by a degree of humility, since it comes with the recognition that the blessing was not earned, and it is a joy that is shared or at least open to sharing, since it is a celebration of the gift itself and not just the gift’s acquisition. As Comte-Sponville writes:

“The [ungrateful] egoist enjoys receiving; but his enjoyment is his alone and he keeps it for himself. Or if he shows his pleasure, it is because he wants to make others envious, not because he wants to make them happy: he displays his

pleasure, but it is *his* pleasure. He has already forgotten that others might have had something to do with it.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Appreciating the giver*

This brings us to the second focus of the feeling of gratitude: the source of the gift. We do not think that someone is being grateful if he or she only appreciates the gift and refuses to acknowledge and appreciate the source of that gift. As A.D. Walker notes, the grateful response involves a set of attitudes that combines an appreciation of the benefit conferred with feelings of goodwill and respect towards our benefactor. These feelings towards the benefactor should:

- 1) motivate the grateful person to demonstrate to his or her benefactor that he or she has these attitudes of well-being and thanks, and
- 2) prevent the grateful person from acting in ways that are incompatible with these attitudes.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the grateful person should, if possible, let his or her benefactor know that he or she appreciates the gift, and the grateful person should not take actions that are detrimental to the well-being of his or her benefactor (unless those detrimental actions are necessary for other, overriding moral reasons). Since the benefit conferred was a gift and not an item of trade, this duty towards the well-being of the benefactor does not amount to a debt of repayment. Feelings of gratitude are not something that needs to be “discharged” by giving the benefactor something of equal or greater value to the gift received. Instead, the gift gives rise to an appreciation of the benefactor. This appreciation gives rise to feelings of good-will, and it is

these feelings of good will (rather than the gratitude itself) that naturally prompt an active concern for the well-being of the benefactor.

It is important to stress that gratitude seems appropriate only when there is a *source* of a benefit. We have lots of ways of appreciating things, but those appreciative feelings only become gratitude when we think of the benefit as a “gift.” Part of seeing something as a gift is conceiving it as something that was not already ours. However, we also fail to see things as gifts when we acquire things that do not seem belong to anyone. For example, when I walk in the woods I feel glad, rather than grateful, if I stumble upon a piece of wood that serves as a nice walking stick. On the other hand, I do feel grateful when I find a useful stick that has been left at a trailhead by a previous hiker. We feel gratitude, it seems, only when we see a benefit as coming from a source that had prior rights to it. In other words, we do not feel grateful “for” things without, in at least some sense, feeling grateful “to” someone. Without both of these foci, our appreciative attitudes do not appear to amount to gratitude.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The relationship between the sets of attitudes*

According to this analysis, the two sets of attitude associated with the feeling of gratitude are:

- 1) the unselfish joy and appreciation felt in response an unearned gift or benefit and
- 2) the appreciation of the source of this gift and an accompanying valuing of the well-being of that source.

These two features correspond to the two foci of the feeling of gratitude: the gift itself and the source of the gift.

Although these two sets of appreciative attitudes are invariably interrelated, they contribute to the strength of our feelings of gratitude separately. As a result, strong feelings towards one focus of the feeling gratitude can compensate for, or detract from, feelings felt towards the other. For example, in the previously mentioned case of the person who was rescued from drowning, the person's incredible appreciation for the gift of being saved overwhelmed any lackluster feelings about the efforts of his or her rescuer. Conversely, a grandfather might be very grateful for an ugly and impractical gift, if he knows that his five year old granddaughter worked long and hard to create it for him.

Despite the ability of strengths in one aspect of gratitude to make up for deficits in the other, it seems that both are required for genuine feelings of gratitude to arise. For example, even if someone recognizes that another person was trying to give him or her a nice gift, he or she may understandably fail to feel gratitude if he or she feels the gift was actually earned or if the gift is deeply unappealing (as in the case of the shy girl who suffered greatly when publically serenaded). On the other hand, if someone is suspicious of the motives of a benefactor, he or she may find it impossible to feel grateful even if he or she values the gift. For example, an executive may understandably fail to feel grateful when she receives a beautiful and expensive painting from a fellow employee who may be trying to manipulate her decisions regarding promotions. We would not call the executive ungrateful, for example, if she refused the gift. Therefore, it appears that both features of the feeling of gratitude need to exist for gratitude to exist, even if strength in one feature can compensate for weakness in the other.



## *Section 2: Gratitude and Intentions*

Now that we have distinguished between the two sets of attitudes that make up gratitude, we can address the issue of whether or not gratitude is only appropriate towards agents that have intentions. It seems at least possible that the first set of attitudes arise independently of considerations about the intentions of a benefactor. In a world of scarcity and tragedy, it is reasonable to expect the virtuous person to react to an unearned benefit with a humble and unselfish joy. Certainly, we often accuse people of something like ingratitude, if they fail to appreciate the blessings that they have in their lives. In order to be grateful towards persons when appropriate, perhaps we need to train ourselves to celebrate all the benefits we receive and to recognize when they are unearned, even in instances when those benefits are the result of circumstance and luck more than the intentional action of agents. As Joseph Amato comments:

Gratitude is among the first human measures of the good. What has been given, which need not have been given, is always appreciated. In a world of scarcity it is deeply appreciated, for the individual's survival depends upon the reception of goods he could not have controlled.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of the second set of attitudes associated with gratitude, intentions are obviously more central. Our appreciation of the source of the benefit often depends on our appraisal of the efforts and intentions of our benefactor. For example, we usually do not feel appreciation towards a benefactor who helps us purely unintentionally or involuntarily. In fact, building off of the work of Peter Strawson, Scott Davison has defined gratitude as a "reactive attitude." "One distinguishing feature of these attitudes," Davison writes, "is that it is inappropriate to experience them in connection with another person's behavior if we discover

that this other person's behavior is involuntary."<sup>17</sup> For example, our gratitude disappears, Davison argues, if we discover that a person did us a favor or gave us a gift as a result of an irresistible compulsion.

I agree that feelings of gratitude towards a benefactor are often cancelled by the discovery that they helped us involuntarily. However, this does not mean that our appreciation of our benefactors always amounts to an appreciation of their good intentions towards us. If I find \$20 on the street, for example, I would appreciate the money, but feel sorry for, rather than grateful to, the person who dropped it. It certainly is an unearned benefit for me, but feeling gratitude towards the person who caused it to come my way would seem to amount to appreciating someone's predilection for losing money, and it does not seem virtuous to celebrate such a characteristic. Similarly, in the case of the individual who helps us as a result of an irresistible compulsion, it could be our reluctance to celebrate their compulsive behavior that dissipates our feelings of gratitude, rather than thoughts about intentions.

When the involuntary or unintentional behavior of an individual is a positive aspect of their character, gratitude seems unaffected. For example, we often feel gratitude towards others on the basis of the kind of person that they are, even though aspects of their character are manifested in actions that are so instinctual to them that they could be considered unintentional and involuntary. At least, the actions are performed without the formation of a conscious intention to perform an action of that kind. For example, a speaker could be grateful for his or her audience's polite behavior, even though he or she suspects no one entered the room with the conscious thought "I am going to be polite today." Furthermore, we might be grateful for a

friend's daily, small acts of kindness towards ourselves and others, even if we suspect that he or she performs these acts without thinking.

In such cases, the actions are voluntary and intentional in one sense, since the actions are consistent with, and may flow from, the individual's background beliefs and desires, even though those beliefs and desires were not consciously reflected upon at the time. After all, the friend would not regret all the acts of kindness if we were to point them out to him or her. However, the actions could also be described as involuntary and unintentional in the sense that they are not the result of any conscious decision process on the part of the agent. Such cases indicate that we feel gratitude towards another person either 1) on the basis of that other person's intentional choice to help or 2) on the basis of that person's beneficent character, where that character includes both intentional and unintentional aspects.

Patricia White discusses an interesting example that supports this way of understanding gratitude. In "Gratitude, Citizenship and Education," White describes the case of Christabel Bielenberg, whose husband was placed in a Nazi concentration camp after being connected to a plot to assassinate Hitler.<sup>18</sup> When Bielenberg visits the Nazi headquarters to plead for her husband's life she sees a prisoner being ill-treated. The prisoner remains calm and courteous throughout the mistreatment. Bielenberg described her reaction as follows:

I looked up into his face as he passed my chair and tried to show him how I felt. I tried to show him actually how proud, how humbly grateful I was that a human being could behave with such dignity in such circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

If Bielenberg's gratitude was genuine, then gratitude cannot *only* be appropriate towards individuals who consciously choose to promote our interests at the possible expense of their own. The prisoner being ill-treated was not maintaining his composure in order to provide Bielenberg with an inspirational example. In fact, while he was being ill-treated, he may not have been aware of Bielenberg at all. Bielenberg's feelings of gratitude may have been enhanced by her suspicion that the man believed no one present cared about his stoicism and dignity. This may be why it became so important for Bielenberg to communicate her appreciation to him.

A key point here is that, even when we are benefitting from someone's intentional behavior, we are often grateful even if we are not the direct focus of those intentions. So, for example, the prisoner's resilience may have depended both upon well-established features of his character and on specific decisions to contain his anger and fear. Bielenberg was not the focus of this behavior, whether intentional or not. Still, her gratitude seems appropriate. After all, we often benefit from actions that are not addressed to us specifically. The key to gratitude seems to be whether or not we see the intentional behavior as an admirable or regrettable feature of our benefactor's character. If we admire the behavior, we are grateful for the benefit that results. If the behavior is somehow tragic or regrettable, the gratitude disappears.<sup>20</sup>

If we accept that gratitude can be appropriate in the absence of the intentional choice to benefit another, then we may be able to account for another puzzling set of cases: instances where people feel gratitude towards institutions. A.D. Walker has argued that people often feel genuine emotions of gratitude towards universities, hospitals, sports teams, governments, etc.. These feelings of gratitude, he insists, cannot always be explained away as feelings towards the

individuals working in these institutions. However, the institutions themselves do not possess intentions, so how is the gratitude justified?

Walker proposes that the gratitude is justified since such institutions have something akin to intentions. For example, he notes, we can talk of the “*purposes and functions* of an institution;” of the “policies which guide its operation,” of the “reasons why it produces the benefits that it does,” and we can differentiate “between the *intended* and *unintended* benefits that result from [an institution’s] operation.”<sup>21</sup> To build on Walker’s analysis, we could add that the appreciation of these sorts of features amounts to an appreciation of the character of those institutions, and that gratitude is often a response to character, rather than conscious intentions.

Ultimately, the answer to the question of whether or not beliefs about good intentions are essential to the appreciation of benefactors may depend on a nuanced understanding of the reasons why gratitude is cancelled or diminished in certain cases. Certainly, our gratitude disappears when we discover that the person who benefited us had bad or manipulative intentions (e.g., the example of the executive and the promotion-seeking employee mentioned earlier). However, there are several ways to interpret this. Certainly, it could be the absence of good intentions that cancels gratitude. However, it could be that it is the *presence* of bad intentions that is the deciding factor. This could be because 1) the bad intentions make it impossible for us to have appreciative attitudes towards the benefactor and/or 2) the benefactor’s bad intentions make it impossible for us to see the benefit as a gift.<sup>22</sup>

It is also the case that our feelings of gratitude are often cancelled when we discover that a benefactor did not consciously choose to help us. This may be because this discovery reveals that the person lacked the required good intentions to merit gratitude. However, as we have seen

above, there are other explanations. It could be that we are hesitant to appreciate a person's accidental, and possibly regrettable, actions and characteristics. As I have argued, we may remain grateful even when we discover that someone did not consciously choose to help us, if we believe that the benefit we received flowed from some admirable feature of their character. Gratitude is, therefore, a response to the benefactor's beneficence in general and only sometimes to the conscious and intentional choices that are one manifestation of this beneficence.

We can apply this analysis to the case of entities that have no intentions. If what has just been said is correct, it is appropriate to feel gratitude towards an entity that possesses no intentions: 1) if that entity is the source of a valuable, unearned benefit and 2) if we believe that the benefit did not result from some accidental and/or regrettable feature of the entity's character.

Of course, the cases described above may have to be discussed in much greater detail for our intuitions to become reliable and clear. In the end, we may decide that gratitude is only appropriate towards agents that have good intentions, or something closely akin to good intentions, to the people they are benefiting. If this is our conclusion, however, then it is worth pointing out that it would still be appropriate for rational agents to have the first set of appreciative attitudes that are associated with gratitude towards the benefits that we derive from entities that lack intentions. In other words, the rational and virtuous agent will still celebrate the valuable and unearned benefits that he or she receives with a humble and unselfish joy.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, we could say that in such cases it is appropriate to feel something like gratitude, or perhaps something that is a precursor to gratitude, as a result of benefits received from entities that lack intentions.

### ***Section 3: Gratitude and Nature***

Human beings clearly depend on nature's bounty to survive. It is also clear that we have not earned all of this bounty. At least, we cannot always separate those humans who live long and successful lives off of nature's bounty from those who fall victim to scarcity or natural disaster by saying that the first group were more deserving than the second.<sup>24</sup> Although sustaining and promoting human life takes a great deal of effort, the basic fact that we exist on a planet that sustains life of our kind is ultimately not our doing.

The natural world, therefore, can be looked on as the source of an incredibly valuable, and to a certain extent unearned, gift. Thus, it seems a likely candidate either for feelings of gratitude or for the first set of appreciative attitudes associated with gratitude. Of course in order to apply our previous analysis of gratitude to the natural world effectively and convincingly several things would have to be done. First of all, we would have to define carefully what the "nature" is that is the source of this gift. Nature would still exist if the planet became completely toxic to human life. Therefore, the proper focus of feelings of gratitude (or a similar sentiment) would probably be the various ecosystems and environments in the natural order that sustain human life.

Once we come up with a satisfactory definition of nature, there are three possible ways to argue that it is rational to feel gratitude, or a sentiment closely related to gratitude, towards this natural order.

1) First of all, if we conclude true gratitude can only be a response to good intentions, then we could argue that nature has intentions or something like them, in the same way that A.D. Walker claimed that institutions have properties that are akin to intentions. Fortunately, there is an extensive body of work exploring questions of intentionality, purpose, and function in nature.

Some of this work compares natural systems to living organisms. For example, Claudia Card has noted similarities between ecosystems and living systems in order to attribute something akin to agency to non-sentient elements of the natural world.<sup>25</sup> Others, such as Val Plumwood, draw parallels between natural systems and minds in order to attribute intentionality and agency to them.<sup>26</sup> Finally, some theorists compare natural systems to human institutions. For instance, Christopher Stone argues that natural objects and systems are similar enough to institutions such as legal trusts, corporations, and nation states to merit their own legal standing and to have their interests protected.<sup>27</sup> Although the debate continues, these comparisons with organisms, minds and institutions add credibility to the attribution of intentions, or something like intentions, to aspects of the natural world. Building off this work, we could claim that gratitude towards nature is a response to such properties when they are beneficial to humans.

2) Of course, despite the work mentioned above, we may ultimately fail to be convinced that natural systems and objects ever possess anything like good intentions. In this case, if we still insist that good intentions are an essential to gratitude, then gratitude towards nature would not be rational.<sup>28</sup> However, we could still argue that it is rational to feel a sentiment related to gratitude towards aspects of the natural world. In particular, since the natural world is a source of valuable and unearned benefits, it is appropriate to feel the first set of appreciative attitudes towards those benefits.

3) Finally, based on the arguments presented above, we could accept that gratitude is the appropriate response to undeserved benefits from sources that: 1) do not have bad intentions towards us and 2) that are not benefiting us as a result of accidental or regrettable aspects of their character. If natural systems do not have intentions at all, then they certainly do not have bad



intentions towards us, so the first condition can be met. Furthermore, it makes a lot of sense to talk of the beneficial character of the ecosystems that sustain human life, and there seems no reason to call this character either accidental or regrettable.<sup>29</sup> If so, then gratitude towards such natural systems is appropriate, since they provide valuable and unearned benefits that arise from their non-accidental and non-regrettable character.

### *Conclusion*

There seem to be some promising ways to argue that it is rational to feel gratitude towards the natural world. Of course, even if one of these routes is successful, there would still be important theoretical issues that would have to be addressed before we can argue that certain actions taken towards the natural world count as acts of ingratitude on the part of human agents. For example, we would have to settle the issue of whether or not gratitude obligates someone to act to benefit the interests of their benefactor. Roslyn Weiss has argued that gratitude is an appropriate response to a “free gift,” meaning a gift with no strings attached. Since “free means free,” as Weiss argues, gratitude carries with it no moral obligation to take actions of any kind, though most human beings will naturally act in ways that demonstrate their appreciation of, and good will towards, their benefactors.<sup>30</sup> In response to this argument and others similar to it, Samuel V. Bruton has argued that gratitude can in fact impose certain duties and obligations to act in the interests of one’s benefactor. Bruton’s arguments seem convincing, but the issue could probably benefit from further theoretical exploration. Perhaps, the best way to resolve the issue would be to argue, as I suggested earlier, that the gift which initiates the feelings of gratitude does not itself create obligations to act in certain ways. It does, however, naturally give rise to feelings of well-being towards its source. It is these feelings of well-being that create duties to

promote the interests of that benefactor, just as the feeling of love towards a person arguably gives rise to the duty not to betray them.

Of course, even if feelings of gratitude create obligations not to harm the interests of one's benefactor, we still face the issue of whether or not it makes sense to say that nature has interests. My intuition is that it does not make sense, if the term nature is construed in its most general sense. However, if we are restricting talk of nature to talk of the particular ecosystems that sustain life on this planet, then it makes better sense to say that nature has interests, since we can define the elements that contribute to the flourishing of such systems. As Christopher Stone writes, "[w]e make decisions on behalf of, and in the purported interest of, others every day; these "others" are often creatures whose wants are far less verifiable, and even far more metaphysical in conception, than the wants of rivers, trees, and land."<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, clearly much more theoretical work needs to be done before we can argue that a failure to feel gratitude towards nature is a moral failing of any kind. Nor has it been proven that gratitude to nature provides any legitimate grounds for moral obligations to protect natural ecosystems. However, hopefully this paper has shown that there are several promising routes for the theoretical defense of the rationality of feelings of gratitude towards the natural world. Even if the amazing beauty and bounty of nature is not the result of any intentional decision to bless human life, it is still often appropriate to feel deeply grateful (or something like grateful) to the natural world that sustains us.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 211- 224.

<sup>2</sup> Some people may interpret this gratitude towards nature as gratitude towards a divine being that directs natural events. I will not be addressing this view in this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, “intentions” refers to states governing purposeful behavior and action, rather than the more general notion of intentionality as the “aboutness” associated with mental states such as believing, hoping, desiring, fearing, etc.. Of course, the two concepts are related since acting intentionally presumably involves mental states that are intentional in the more general sense. However, when analyzing the concept of gratitude, the concept of intention related to “acting with a purpose in mind” is the most relevant.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “Ideals of Human Excellence,” p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, Trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2001), p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Aronson, “Thank Who Very Much,” *The Philosophers’ Magazine* 34 (Spring 2006): 33-36.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Foster, “Gratitude and Atheism,” [Weblog entry] Reformed Musings, August 16, 2006, Blogspot, (<http://jasonffoster.blogspot.com/2006/08/gratitude-and-atheism.html>) (Accessed June 16, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Fred R. Berger, “Gratitude,” *Ethics* 85 (1975): 298-309.

<sup>9</sup> Roslyn Weiss, “The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23(1985): 491-501.

<sup>10</sup> If someone does feel gratitude after receiving a gift that they do not like, it could be that he or she considers the other person’s attempt to benefit them as a gift in itself.

<sup>11</sup> Other theorists who have argued that the value of a benefit plays an important and legitimate role in shaping feelings of gratitude include: Fred R. Berger in “Gratitude;” A. John Simmons in *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 177-178; and Paul F. Camenisch in “Gift and Gratitude in Ethics” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9 (1981): 1-34.

<sup>12</sup> I want to thank David Schmidtz for helping me to see the importance of this distinction between merited and earned benefits. In his response to an earlier version of this paper, Schmidtz argued that we are often grateful for gifts that are earned. He provided several examples of such cases. However, I would argue that such cases are instances where gifts are merited, but not strictly speaking earned. For example, he mentions a case where a stranger returns a wallet to its owner. The owner could easily see the wallet as a gift in such a case, but it is a gift that he or she also earned, since she paid for the wallet originally. In response, I would say that the gift in that case is not the wallet itself, but rather the action of returning the wallet. Such an action was merited, since the owner of the wallet had rights to it. However, it was not an action that was earned by the owner prior to the event, since he or

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she had no agreement with the stranger. A more difficult case is Schmitz's example of a waiter who earns a great tip by providing wonderful service. The tip is an earned benefit, Schmitz argues, but the waiter still feels grateful. Again, to the degree that tips count as gifts, I am tempted to say they are merited rather than earned. However, since tip giving is so institutionalized, it may be more accurate to think of tips as benefits that are earned as part of an agreed upon exchange of goods and services. If this is the case, then by my definition, waiters are not obligated to feel grateful for fair tips. I think this may be true. However, it is important to clarify that we often feel grateful as a result of circumstances surrounding the receipt of earned benefits. For example, if I earn fifty dollars through hard work, I would not see the fifty dollars as a gift. However, I may see the opportunity to earn it in the first place and the promptness with which I was paid, etc. as gifts for which I am grateful. Similarly, if I buy a sweater at a store, I would not see the sweater as a gift, but I might see the salesperson's exemplary kindness as a gift. The key here is that earned benefits do not create the obligation for the recipient to feel gratitude and, it appears, that gratitude felt for earned benefits can usually be explained with reference to aspects of the exchange of goods and services that went above and beyond what was agreed upon and expected.

<sup>13</sup> Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise*, p.133.

<sup>14</sup> A.D.M. Walker, "Political Obligation and the Argument from Gratitude," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 17 (1988): 191-211.

<sup>15</sup> This point is particularly important in the case of feelings of gratitude towards nature. This is because one simple way to resolve the apparent tension that such feelings present would be to insist that we have feelings of gratitude *for* beneficial aspects of the natural world without having feelings of gratitude *to* any benefactor. We would then simply have to show that gratitude *for* benefits that we receive can be legitimately felt without reference to anyone's intentions. This line of reasoning is not without promise. (In fact, I offer a version of this response as one of the options at the end of my paper.) However, for the reasons cited above, I find it hard to completely disconnect feelings of gratitude for a benefit from feelings of gratitude towards the source of that benefit.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Anthony Amato II, *Guilt and Gratitude: A Study of the Origins of Contemporary Conscience* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Davison, "The Pre-Conditions of Gratitude" (unpublished manuscript). See also, Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48: 1-25; reprinted in Strawson, *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia White, "Gratitude, Citizenship, and Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 18 (1999): 43-52.

<sup>19</sup> Christabel Bielenberg, *The Past is Myself* (London, Corgi Books, 1994), p. 231. Quoted in White, "Gratitude, Citizenship, and Education," p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Another good example of this is the gratitude that is felt to rescue dogs by the people that they find. The rescue dogs' intentional behavior is probably directed towards pleasing their handlers and to completing a much practiced task rather than towards a lost person that they have never met. Still, the rescued person is often grateful to the dogs for their laudable and life-saving character (e.g., their dedication, perseverance and ability).

<sup>21</sup> A.D. Walker, "Political Obligation," p. 199.

<sup>22</sup> In the latter case, the benefit might seem like the presentation of something that we will later be expected to "earn" in some way or another.

<sup>23</sup> I suspect that this may be the only virtuous response to good fortune in a world where so many people are the victim of undeserved misfortune. Rejecting good fortune when it arises does not seem healthy or virtuous. However, it is also not virtuous to selfishly celebrate one's good fortune in a way that lords it over others. The unselfish joy that accompanies gratitude may be the only acceptable compromise between these two reactions, since it allows us to recognize the value of good fortune while remaining both humble and inclined to share.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, some people may bring disaster on themselves by abusing their environment, etc. However, many people who die in natural disasters or as a result of scarcity are not themselves directly responsible for such abuses.

<sup>25</sup> Claudia Card, "Environmental Atrocities and Non-Sentient Life," *Ethics and the Environment* 9(2004): 23-45.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Val Plumwood, "Intentional Recognition and Reductive Rationality," *Environmental Values* 7(1998): 397-421.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? Law, Morality and The Environment*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> An interesting option here might be to argue that such gratitude is *natural* to humans, even if it is not rational. Building off of Daniel Dennett's work on the intentional stance, we could argue that it is natural and evolutionarily advantageous for humans to see purpose and intentions in nature. If so, then it might also be natural and evolutionarily beneficial for humans to feel gratitude and similar reactive attitudes towards nature, even if such attitudes ultimately have no rational grounds. (Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Boston: MIT press, 1987))

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<sup>29</sup> Unless we see nature as the result of the intentional designs of a deity, I suppose we might be tempted to call the character of natural systems “accidental.” However, we often quite appropriately distinguish between the regular features of a natural system and the random events within that system that occur as a result of outside influence (such as a massive oil spill). In fact, those who are concerned about the environment are often worried that our actions will permanently alter the delicate and actively maintained balance in our natural ecosystems. This balance certainly seems like a non-accidental and non-regrettable feature of the environment. After all, we can say a lot to explain why our natural environments operate in the way that they do. For example, even though I do not believe that rain falls from the sky because God wants the plants to grow, I would also feel very odd claiming that rain makes plants grow (or that eyes react to light, or that acorns grow into oak trees...) *by accident*.

<sup>30</sup> Roslyn Weiss, “The Moral and Social Dimensions of Gratitude,” p. 493.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?*, p. 11. By way of example, Stone notes that he can judge that his lawn needs water with more certainty “than the Attorney General can judge whether and when the United States wants (needs) to take an appeal from an adverse judgment by a lower court.” The key point here is that if it makes sense to say that a complex and abstract entity such as the United States has wants, needs and interests, then it also makes sense to claim that certain natural systems do as well.