

Gratitude and Resentment: A Tale of Two Weddings

Abstract: There is an important distinction between two different kinds of expressions of gratitude: propositional expressions of gratitude and prepositional expressions of gratitude. I argue that there is a corresponding distinction between two different kinds of expression of resentment: propositional expressions of resentment and prepositional expressions of resentment. I then argue that theists should suppose neither that propositional expressions of gratitude are prepositional expressions of gratitude to God, nor that propositional expressions of resentment are prepositional expressions of resentment of God.

1

I am pleased that the sun shone on my wedding day. Given that it was mid-winter in Melbourne, it would not have been surprising if it had rained all day. Indeed, most of the week either side of my wedding day was dismal.

It is not just that I was pleased that the sun shone on my wedding day. Many other people—friends and relations—were pleased for me that the sun shone on my wedding day. I was—and they were—happy that the sun shone on my wedding day. I was—and they were—grateful that the sun shone on my wedding day.

Many of my friends and relatives are religious. No doubt, if asked, some of them would have claimed to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. Further, if asked, some may well have said that, in order to make sense of others' being grateful that the sun shone on my wedding day, it had to be that those others were grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. After all, to whom else would it even make sense to be grateful for making the sun shine on my wedding day?

I think that it is a mistake to run together being grateful that the sun shone on my wedding day and being grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. The *propositional* expression of gratitude—'being grateful that p'—is one member of a family of propositional expressions—'being happy that p', 'being pleased that p', 'being glad that p', 'being relieved that p', etc.—whose truth need not depend upon the truth of an appropriately related *prepositional* expression of gratitude—'being grateful to S for Φ -ing'.

Certainly, in my own case, given my naturalistic proclivities, I have no inclination to link my claim about what pleases me, or makes me happy, or makes me glad, to any claim about gratitude to God for performing particular actions. But, further, I suspect that many monotheistic religious believers will make a similar assessment: in a range of cases like the case that I have been considering, they, too, will have no inclination to link their claims about what pleases them, or makes them happy, or makes them glad, to claims about gratitude to God for performing actions directed towards *their* particular pleasure, or happiness, or gladness.

There have been recent attacks, on the idea that there is propositional gratitude, in the works of Roberts (2014), Manela (2018) (2019), and others. Indeed, Manela (2019) does so far as to say that there is an emerging consensus that analyses of the concept of gratitude should be

concerned only with prepositional gratitude. However, it seems to me that Rush (2020) provides a satisfying response to these critics, and, in particular, to their claim that propositional gratitude cannot be properly distinguished from propositional happiness, propositional pleasure, propositional gladness, propositional relief, and the like. For the purpose of this paper, I am happy to invite those who do not share my enthusiasm for propositional gratitude to take me to be arguing for claims conditioned on the assumption that the notion of propositional gratitude is in good order.

2

A year after my own wedding, one of my cousins was married in Melbourne in mid-winter. This time, it was a very wet day. Two sets of wedding guests did not make it to the wedding because they were involved in traffic accidents caused by the treacherous condition of the wet roads. The traffic accidents were minor: there was damage to the cars, but no injuries to anyone travelling in the cars. Nonetheless, the accidents, and the absence of the wedding guests involved, were not things that pleased or gladdened those involved in the wedding. On the contrary. Many of the guests were displeased that rain poured down on my cousin's wedding and prevented some other invited guests from attending. Many of the guests were unhappy that rain poured down on my cousin's wedding and prevented some other invited guests from attending. Many of the guests were resentful that rain poured down on my cousin's wedding and prevented some other invited guests from attending.

Unsurprisingly, as with my wedding, many of the guests at my cousin's wedding are religious. But, if we had asked them, would they have claimed to resent God for making the rain fall heavily on my cousin's wedding day? It seems no stretch of ordinary language to suppose that they were resentful that rain poured down on my cousin's wedding. It was hardly fair that, while the sun shone on my wedding day, my cousin's wedding day was one on which it poured with rain. However, if you suppose that, in order to make sense of guests' being resentful that it poured with rain on my cousin's wedding day, it had to be that they resented someone who made the rain fall heavily on my cousin's wedding day, then what option would there be other than to suppose that they resented God for making the rain fall heavily on my cousin's wedding day? (Perhaps some might think to excuse God by insisting that it was the Devil who made the rain fall heavily on my cousin's wedding day. However, it seems to me that those among the guests who take this proposal seriously would equally have resented God's allowing the Devil to make it rain heavily on my cousin's wedding day.)

I want to say the same thing about resentment that I said previously about gratitude. The *propositional* expression of resentment—'being resentful that p'—is one member of a family of propositional expressions—'being unhappy that p', 'being displeased that p', 'being sad that p', 'being upset that p', etc.—that need have nothing to do with the *prepositional* expression of resentment—'being resentful to S for Φ -ing'. In my own case, given my naturalistic proclivities, I have no inclination to link my claim about what displeases me, or makes me unhappy, or makes me sad, to any claim about resenting God for performing particular actions. But, in this case, it seems to me that monotheistic religious believers are almost uniformly going to agree: they, too, have no inclination to like their claims about what displeases them, or makes them unhappy, or makes them sad, to claims about resentment to God for performing actions directed towards *their* particular displeasure, or unhappiness, or sadness.

Some may be inclined to deny that there are propositional expressions of resentment while nonetheless accepting that there are propositional expressions of gratitude. However, it seems to me that there are many considerations that speak against this view. I shall discuss only some of them here.

First, it should be noted that there is no evident difference in the relevant linguistic data. It is not in doubt that people do say things of the form ‘I am grateful that p’ and ‘I am resentful that p’. Whatever initial inclination we have to take what people say at face value, we have the same initial inclination in both cases. Moreover, there is no evident difference in the frequency of the usage of expressions of these forms that might point to a reason for taking only one of these kinds of expressions at face value. In particular, there is no evident difference in the frequency of the use of expressions of these forms that indicates greater comfort with expressions of the form ‘I am grateful that p’ than with expressions of the form ‘I am resentful that p’ that is not simply a reflection of greater comfort with expressions of the form ‘I am pleased that p’, ‘I am happy that p’, and ‘I am glad that p’ than with expressions of the form ‘I am displeased that p’, ‘I am unhappy that p’, and ‘I am sad that p’.

Second, it should be noted that there are many kinds of cases of resentment that are recognised across the disciplines—in, for example, literature, philosophy and psychology—that it is hard to construe as anything other than examples of propositional resentment. In some of these cases, perhaps, we might suppose that the resentment is directed towards a specific, non-individual actor: a group, a corporation, an institution, a community, a nation, of the like. But, often enough, in these kinds of cases, the most that we could suppose is that the resentment is directed towards ‘them’ or ‘the man’. And in some of these cases, even that kind of identification of a focus for the resentment seems to be lacking. As MacLachlan (2010) notes, among the things that a person might resent, there are all of the following: being trapped or locked into a difficult and unrewarding job; needing and receiving care, and being vulnerable in ways that come with that territory; witnessing long-term change in your neighbourhood or to other locations that you treasure for their beauty or history; observing general decline in manners, reciprocal social connection, personal grooming and fashion; noting the increasing prevalence of people whose dress codes are utterly impenetrable to you; and so forth. Resentments of some of these kinds might be based in group identification, or long-term historical claims, or observations of receipt of benefits based in historical injustice, or ill-directed resentment, or incomprehension of your prior resentment on the part of those to whom it is properly directed, and so on.

Third, it should be noted that there is nothing in credible evolutionary accounts of the origins of our reactive attitudes that would plausibly indicate the postulated asymmetry between propositional gratitude and propositional resentment. Prepositional gratitude and propositional resentment have obviously useful roles in coordinating the behaviour of members of small groups whose members are responsive to prepositional gratitude and propositional resentment. A general tendency, within a group, for more or less shared responses of gratitude when one member does something to benefit one or more of the other members in the group, and for more or less shared responses of resentment when one member does something to injure one or more other members in the group, given what it feels like to

be the object of such gratitude and such resentment, encourages intra-group beneficence and discourages intra-group infliction of injury. The step from prepositional gratitude and prepositional resentment to propositional gratitude and propositional resentment is plausibly a much later development, perhaps while humans are still living in relatively small groups, or perhaps only when humans are living in much larger groups. Either way, it is hard to see any reason to suppose that the step is any harder, or any less plausible, in one case than it is in the other.

Fourth, if it were to turn out that there are asymmetries in the use of expressions of propositional gratitude and propositional resentment, but only on the part of active participants in monotheistic religions, then that would tell us something interesting about participants in monotheistic religions, but it would not tell us anything of further significance about expressions of propositional gratitude and propositional resentment. While an asymmetry in the use of these expressions on the part of active participants in monotheistic religions might skew overall figures, the ready explanation in terms of pollution by prior theory would undermine the need for any further explanation.

While there is doubtless more to be said on this topic, I think that it is fairly safe to conclude that there is no deep, neutral, independent asymmetry in the use of expressions of propositional gratitude and expressions of propositional resentment that might lead us to take only the former at face value. The reasons that we have for thinking that there really are expressions of propositional gratitude carry over to reasons for thinking that there really are expressions of propositional resentment.

4

Even if it is accepted that there are expressions of propositional gratitude, some might think to claim that, while propositional expressions of gratitude are tied to prepositional expressions of gratitude, propositional expressions of resentment are not similarly tied to prepositional expressions of resentment. I think that there is something uncomfortable in this position. That is, I think that there is something uncomfortable in a position that (a) holds that propositional expressions of gratitude are tied to prepositional expressions of gratitude, but (b) denies that propositional expressions of resentment are tied to prepositional expressions of resentment.

In the previous sections, I listed a bunch of cases in which it seems plausible to say that, while someone is resentful that p , there is no S for which it is true that that one resents S for relevantly Φ -ing (e.g. bringing it about that p). But there are corresponding cases in which it seems no less plausible to say that, while someone is grateful that p , there is no S for which it is true that that one is grateful to S for relevantly Φ -ing (e.g. bringing it about that p).

A person might be grateful that they are not trapped or locked into a difficult and demanding job; that they do not need and receive care and so are not vulnerable in ways that come with that territory; that they are not witnessing long-term change in their neighbourhood or in other locations that they treasure for their beauty and history; that they are not observing general decline in manners, reciprocal social connection, personal grooming and fashion; that they are not noting the increasing prevalence of people whose dress codes are utterly impenetrable to them; and so forth. Lest it be worried that those examples were all negative,

we can also note that a person might be grateful that they are living in more enlightened times; that, at least so far, their children are making a decent fist of finding their way in the world; that, where they live, there is a centuries-old tradition of protecting the speech of those who dissent from the dominant religion of the community/city/province/nation in which they live; and so on.

Apart from the weight of cases, one might also think to add that it is very hard to see why it would have come about that, while propositional expressions of gratitude are tied to propositional expressions of gratitude, propositional expressions of resentment are not tied to propositional expressions of resentment. In particular, we might look at other expressions of our reactive attitudes, both negative—disapprobation, indignation, guilt, shame, pride—and positive—approval, delight, (some species of) love, esteem, honour, pride. In my estimation, there is no other pair of expressions of reactive attitudes in which we find the asymmetry that is being mooted in the case of gratitude and resentment.

5

Even if it is accepted that there are expressions of propositional resentment, and that it is generally true that expressions of propositional resentment are tied to expressions of propositional resentment, some may be inclined to suppose that it is not true that propositional expressions of resentment are tied to propositional expressions of resentment to God, while nonetheless supposing that propositional expressions of gratitude are tied to propositional expressions of gratitude to God.

I think that, quite apart from the difficulties discussed in the preceding two sections, there is something uncomfortable in a position that (a) holds that propositional expressions of gratitude are tied to propositional expressions of gratitude to God, but (b) denies that propositional expressions of resentment are tied to propositional expressions of resentment to God.

Return to the case of my wedding. Even though it was mid-winter, there were dozens of weddings that took place in Melbourne on that day. In order for me to be grateful to God for making the weather fine on my wedding day, it seems that I need to think that God make the weather on my wedding fine *for me*. Suppose that, in fact, God was indifferent whether my wedding day was fine, but set on ensuring that someone else—married on the same day in the same weather conditions—enjoyed fine weather. In that case, I have no particular reason to be grateful to God for the fine weather on my wedding day. After all, the fine weather was in no way connected to its being my wedding day. At most, I have reason to be grateful *that* my wedding happened to fall on the same day as the wedding of the person who really did have reason to be grateful to God for the weather on his wedding day. Of course, we do not need to suppose that God was set on ensuring that someone else—married on the same day in the same weather conditions—enjoyed fine weather. For all we know, God may have been perfectly indifferent about the weather in Melbourne on that day, or any other day. Perhaps we have reason to be grateful that God had reason to create in the way that God did without having any reason to be grateful to God for creating as God did.

In order to explore the question of what kinds of gratitude to God, for doing certain kinds of things, are appropriate, it may help to distinguish different views that have been taken on God's creative activities.

Suppose, first, that Leibniz is right: there is a best universe, and, when God creates, God creates that best universe. On this view, it seems that, with respect to the weather on my wedding day, I have reason to be grateful that the best universe is one in which the sun shone on my wedding day, and I have reason to be grateful that God made the best universe. But it does not seem right to say that I have reason to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. After all, I have no reason to suppose that the shining of the sun on my wedding day played a role in making our universe the best universe. Perhaps our universe is the best *despite* the fact that the sun shone on my wedding day. For all I know, I have no reason at all to be grateful to God for making it the case that the sun shone on my wedding day. (Matters are no better if we add to the Leibnizian account that God *must* create the best. Perhaps they are worse. It still seems that I have no reason to suppose that the shining of the sun on my wedding day played a role in making our universe the best universe. And, given that God would have created the best universe whether or not the sun shone on my wedding day, it is hard to see why I do not merely have reason to be grateful that God had to create the best universe.)

Suppose, next, that Plantinga—following Molina—is right: if God creates, God chooses the best universe that it is open to God to create, where that choice is constrained by God's prior knowledge of how indeterministic causes will play out. On this view, it seems that, with respect to the weather on my wedding day, I have reason to be grateful that the best universe that it was open to God to create is one on which the sun shone on my wedding day, and I have reason to be grateful that God did make the best universe that it was open to God to make. But it does not seem right to say that I have reason to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. After all, I have no reason to suppose that the shining of the sun on my wedding day played a role in making our universe the best universe. Perhaps our universe is the best *despite* the fact that the sun shone on my wedding day. For all I know, I have no reason at all to be grateful to God for making it the case that the sun shone on my wedding day. (Matters are no better if we amend this account so that God must create the best of the universes that it is open to God to create. In this case, it is quite clear that God would have created the best universe whether or not the sun shone on my wedding day. So, it seems, at most I have reason to be grateful that God had to create the best universe.)

So far, we have considered accounts on which God *instantiates* a universe: God chooses from a range of universes which one to actualise. There are alternative accounts on which God merely *initialises* a universe: God chooses an initial state and laws, and there is a subsequent indeterministic evolution of the universe whose course is not known in advance to God. For example, on typical versions of open theism, God creates the initial state of the universe and the laws knowing only the range of possible ways in which the universe could unfold.

Suppose, as seems hard to rule out, that when God initialised our universe, it was not determined that my wedding day would be sunny. Suppose, further—as also seems plausible—that there was no subsequent point in the evolution of our universe at which God intervened to ensure that my wedding day would be sunny. In this case, while it seems that I have reason to be grateful that God created the laws and initial state that God created, and while I also have reason to be grateful that God did not intervene to bring it about that it was not sunny on my wedding day, I have no reason to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. For all I know, given that God initialised the universe, I have no

reason to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day because there was no point at which it was part of God's creative intent that the sun shine on my wedding day.

Suppose, instead, that God's instantiation of our universe follows more classical lines: God's creative activities include both conserving the universe in existence and concurring with everything that happens. In this case, too, it seems that I have reason to be grateful that the universe that God has made is one in which the sun shines on my wedding day, and I have reason to be grateful that God conserves that universe in existence, and I have reason to be grateful that God concurs with the sun's shining on my wedding day. But none of that adds up to a reason to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. Indeed, for all I know, it may have been a matter of complete indifference to God whether the sun shone in Melbourne on that particular day. Perhaps, for all I know, it is always—or nearly always—a matter of complete indifference to God what the weather is like in Melbourne. (Some might think that this would help to explain the weather in Melbourne.) For all I know, given this more classical version of initialisation, I have no reason to be grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day because there was no point at which it was part of God's creative intent that the sun shine on *my* wedding day.

So far, I have made a *prima facie* case for thinking that we have reason to be sceptical that propositional expressions of gratitude must be tied to corresponding prepositional expressions of gratitude to God. It seems that I can be grateful that the sun shone on my wedding day without being grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. But perhaps there are theists who will want to deny this: perhaps there are theists who will insist that it can only be the case that the sun shines on *my* wedding day if it is part of God's creative intent that the sun shine on *my* wedding day.

It seems plausible to suppose that theists who take that line will be committed to a more general claim of the following form: *if God makes it the case that p, then it is part of God's creative intent that p*. Given this general claim, it is true that, if God makes it the case that the sun shines on my wedding day, it is part of God's creative intent that the sun shine on my wedding day. And then, if it is true that I am grateful *that* God made it the case that the sun shone on my wedding day, it is plausible that I should also be grateful *to* God for making it the case that the sun shone on my wedding day.

There are at least two reasons why this looks like a difficult road to take. Return to the case of my cousin's wedding. We have already noted that, if we are going to give anyone the credit for making it pour on my cousin's wedding, then it is going to be God who gets that credit. But, if we insist that, given that God made it the case that it poured with rain on my cousin's wedding, it was part of God's creative intent that it pour with rain on my cousin's wedding, what attitude should we suppose that it is appropriate to take towards God's creative intent that it pour with rain on my cousin's wedding? On the one hand, it seems to me very implausible to claim that we should be grateful to God for making it the case that it poured with rain on my cousin's wedding. And, on the other hand, it seems to me to be not implausible to claim that we should be resentful to God for making it the case that it poured with rain on my cousin's wedding.

The idea that we should be grateful to God for everything that God has made the case—even where those things that God has made the case are no part of God's creative intent—seems to me to be an appalling claim. Consider the Boxing Day Tsunami. On any of the accounts of God's creation that we considered above, the Boxing Day Tsunami is something that God

made the case. But I do not think—and I do not think that I will be alone in thinking—that we should not suppose that we should be grateful to God for the Boxing Day Tsunami. It seems very plausible to think that gratitude towards someone for doing some particular thing is warranted only if what that one does is beneficial to those who are grateful. It is inhuman to suppose that we should be grateful for disasters like the Boxing Day Tsunami because it is inhuman to suppose that the Boxing Day Tsunami was beneficial to humanity. The Boxing Day Tsunami was a disaster. Nearly a quarter of a million people died. About one third of those killed were children. More than one hundred thousand people were injured, and one and three quarter million people were displaced. Many ecosystems were damaged, some beyond repair. Many people will carry the resulting psychological trauma with them until they die. No one should be grateful to God for the Boxing Day Tsunami. It would be evidence of horrid pathology for someone to claim that we should be grateful to God for the Boxing Day Tsunami.

If we suppose that the Boxing Day Tsunami was part of God's creative intent, then it seems to me that, if there is a reactive attitude that is appropriate to God's making it the case that the Boxing Day Tsunami occurred, then that proper reactive attitude cannot be weaker than resentment. If the Boxing Day Tsunami was part of God's creative intent, and if God made it the case that the Boxing Day Tsunami occurred, then it seems perfectly proper that we should be resentful that God made it the case that the Boxing Day Tsunami occurred. Arguably, this is seriously to understate matters. If the Boxing Day Tsunami was part of God's creative intent, and if God made it the case that the Boxing Day Tsunami occurred, we should be horrified and appalled that God made it the case that the Boxing Day Tsunami occurred. Nonetheless, even if it is understated, it is also true that we should be resentful that God made it the case that the Boxing Day Tsunami occurred.

While, of course, there is no proportionality between the Boxing Day Tsunami and the rain on my cousin's wedding, the upshot of the discussion is clear. On the assumption currently in play—namely, that if God makes it the case that p , then it is part of God's creative intent that p —if there is an appropriate reactive attitude towards God for the rain at my cousin's wedding, that attitude is resentment. It would be absurd to insist that we should be grateful to God for making it rain on my cousin's wedding; the rain at my cousin's wedding did not benefit anyone involved in the wedding. Moreover, it is reasonable to insist that we should be resentful to God for making it rain on my cousin's wedding; the rain at my cousin's wedding was harmful to some, and not beneficial to others, involved in my cousin's wedding.

The conclusion that I draw from the immediately preceding discussion is that theists should not suppose that it can only be the case that the sun shines on my wedding day if it is part of God's creative intent that the sun shine on my wedding day. Instead, theists should suppose that it may perfectly well be the case that the sun shines on my wedding day even though it is no part of God's creative intent that the sun shines on my wedding day. But then, I think, theists should suppose that I can be grateful that the sun shone on my wedding day without being grateful to God for making the sun shine on my wedding day. That is, even theists should suppose that there is no general connection between their propositional expressions of gratitude and prepositional expressions of gratitude to God. While that might seem like a bit of a cost, I think that it is also true that even theists should suppose that there is no general connection between their propositional expressions of resentment and prepositional expressions of resentment to God. It was fine for the monotheistic guests at my wedding to say that it was unfair that it was raining so heavily on my cousin's wedding day; in saying

that, they were not even implicitly committing themselves to the claim that they resented God for making it rain so heavily on my cousin's wedding day.

6

There are various loose ends left in the preceding discussion. I conclude by tying some of them.

First, while I have argued that theists should suppose that there is no general connection between their propositional expressions of gratitude and prepositional expressions of gratitude to God, I have not argued that theists must eschew all prepositional expressions of gratitude to God. For all that I have argued here, it may be perfectly proper for theists to be grateful to God for particular things that God has done for them. What matters, on the line that I have taken in this paper, is whether theists [properly] suppose that particular things that God has done that have benefitted them were part of God's creative intent, i.e. part of what motivated God to create the particular universe that God has created. If that condition is satisfied, then prepositional gratitude might be justified; else, not. (Hunt (2020) argues that prepositional gratitude to God can never be appropriate. I take no stance on this argument here.)

Second, the emphasis that I have placed on the distinction between propositional and prepositional gratitude has important consequences for recent claims that have been made about the importance of gratitude in a well-lived life. In the very large recent literature on the benefits of practising gratitude, the distinction between propositional and prepositional gratitude is typically entirely overlooked. (For a review at the more professional end of this literature, see Jans-Beken et al. (2019).) Many proposals in connection with practising gratitude—gratitude journals, gratitude jars, gratitude rocks, gratitude trees, gratitude ambles, gratitude reflections, gratitude flowers, and so forth—are focused squarely on propositional gratitude (though all may incidentally involve prepositional gratitude). Some proposals emphasise that there is value in other things—gratitude emails, gratitude visits, sincere direct expressions of gratitude to particular people—that are obviously expressions of prepositional gratitude. But it is quite clear that there is nothing in this literature that suggests that you cannot get the alleged benefits of practising gratitude solely by practising propositional gratitude. I am sceptical that this is right; I suspect that it is much better for you to spend quality time with those who love and appreciate you than it is to keep a gratitude journal. However, I confess that this is just speculation on my part.

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