Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 39 | Issue 2 Article 1

4-1-2022

Gratitude to God for Our Own Moral Goodness

Robert J. Hartman
Ohio Northern University, roberthartman122@gmail.com

Recommended Citation
Hartman, Robert J. (2022) "Gratitude to God for Our Own Moral Goodness," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 1.
DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.1
Available at: https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss2/1

GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR OUR OWN MORAL GOODNESS

Robert J. Hartman

Someone owes gratitude to God for something only if God benefits her and God is morally responsible for doing so. These requirements concerning benefit and moral responsibility generate reasons to doubt that human beings owe gratitude to God for their own moral goodness. First, moral character must be generated by its possessor's own free choices, and so God cannot benefit moral character in human beings. Second, owed gratitude requires being morally responsible for providing a benefit, which rules out owed gratitude to God because God must do what is best. Both reasons are unpersuasive. I argue that God can benefit morally good character in human beings with and without their free choices. Subsequently, I argue against views of moral responsibility that preclude divine moral responsibility and argue that influential accounts of moral responsibility preserve it. Thus, these two requirements generate no problem for owed gratitude to God.

It is natural to think that we owe gratitude to God for our own morally good character. On one reading of James 1:17, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above,"[1] all good things come from God, which includes our morally good character. This view gains further support from Paul's rhetorical question in 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What do you have that you did not receive?"[2] The implicature, for our purposes, is that our morally good character is a gift from God.

[1]All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

[2]One might doubt that people owe gratitude to God for their own moral goodness given Jesus's parable in Luke 18:10–14: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." But this parable provides no reasons to doubt that we can owe gratitude to God for our own morally good character because it is possible to be grateful for the right thing in the wrong way. The Pharisee's problem is moral pride. The previous verse, Luke 18:9, informs us that the parable is meant to help cure people who "trusted in themselves that they were

pp.189–204 FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY Vol. 39 No. 2 April 2022
doi: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.2.1

But two requirements on owed gratitude challenge this idea. The Benefit Requirement is that a person owes gratitude to God for something only if God benefits her. But one may doubt that God can benefit morally good character in human beings, because mental dispositions count as morally good character traits only through the free choices of their possessor. The Moral Responsibility Requirement is that a person owes gratitude to God for a benefit only if God is morally responsible for providing the benefit. But one might think that God is not morally responsible for God's actions, because God's character necessitates that God does what is best.

I argue that neither challenge succeeds. In the first section, I describe the nature of gratitude and owed gratitude, and I offer reasons in support of the Benefit Requirement and the Moral Responsibility Requirement. In the second section, I contend that God's actions satisfy the Benefit Requirement with and without human free choices. I argue it is false that mental dispositions count as morally good character traits only through the free choices of their possessor. And even if that free will condition on morally good character is correct, I argue that God could still benefit morally good character in human beings in ways that directly and indirectly involve human free choice. Third, I maintain that God's actions can satisfy the Moral Responsibility Requirement. I offer reasons to think that an account of moral responsibility that rules out divine moral responsibility is implausible and, after I defuse two other objections, it becomes clear that no mainstream account of moral responsibility generates a problem for owed gratitude to God. Thus, neither objection defeats owed gratitude to God for our own moral goodness.[3]

I situate these objections and responses in the context of the Christian religion, which is the religion that I know best. But the main responses generalize to other theistic religions and so the arguments should be of broad interest to ethicists and philosophers of religion.

Gratitude and Owing Gratitude

Gratitude is a three-place relation: "Y is grateful *to* R *for* φ-ing."[4] It has cognitive, affective, communicative, and conative dimensions.[5] The cognitive

righteous and regarded others with contempt." There is nothing morally objectionable about this relevantly similar prayer: "God, I thank you for your work in me. I now fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income. Your grace has brought me so far from the greedy and indulgent person I used to be, and I am so grateful to you for these changes!"

[3]There are other objections to owed gratitude to God that I do not consider. For example, gratitude is owed to a benefactor only if the benefactor has not allowed easily preventable and great harms to occur to the beneficiary. God allows all events to occur that occur, and God could easily prevent all the great harms that befall us. Thus, the great harms experienced by many people may defeat their owed gratitude to God. If this requirement is correct, answering the objection requires a solution to the problem of evil, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

[4]Manela, "Gratitude."

[5]Manela, "Gratitude."

dimension requires at least a belief that the benefactor has provided an undeserved benefit to the beneficiary. I believe that Josh's fixing my bike benefits me in a way to which I am not entitled. The affective dimension requires at least a disposition of good will to the benefactor in response to the benefit. I have warm feelings toward Josh in response to his fixing my bike. The communicative dimension requires at least a tendency to communicate or express such beliefs and feelings to the benefactor. I thank Josh with a smile and some words. I thereby share that I see the benefit that he provides and communicate my good will toward him in response to the benefit that he provided. The conative dimension requires at least a tendency to perform actions that go beyond mere communication such as returning the favor or giving gifts if the benefit is substantial enough.[6] I give Josh half of a pound of Kenyan coffee beans that I recently roasted to thank him.

Owing gratitude is a relation of desert.[7] The desert in question generates a *pro tanto* reason for the beneficiary to be grateful and show gratitude to the benefactor. Possibly, that reason is overridden by other moral considerations in particular circumstances, which can make showing gratitude inapt on an occasion in which gratitude is owed.[8]

There are various requirements that must be satisfied for it to be true that Y owes gratitude to R for φ-ing. I leave many of these requirements

---

[6]Marcus Hunt argues that the conative dimension makes gratitude to God unfitting, because it is fitting to feel gratitude toward someone only if that person can be benefitted in return and it is impossible to benefit God. See his "Fitting Prepositional Gratitude to God is Metaphysically Impossible."

But there are good reasons to doubt both premises. On the one hand, it is plausible that God can be benefitted. God loves human beings, and, as such, God is vulnerable. God has interests that can be promoted if the people whom God loves are helped and that can be set back if the people whom God loves are hurt or neglected. This seems to be a lesson from Jesus's parable in Matthew 25:40 about the sheep and the goats, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," and Matthew 25:45, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

On the other hand, assume that it is impossible to benefit God. Hunt agrees that it can be fitting to feel gratitude to the dead. Hunt appeals to the difference between *accidental necessity* (the person might not have died, and so the person could have been benefited in different possible circumstances) and *necessity* (there are no possible circumstances in which a person could have been benefited) to claim that it can be fitting to feel gratitude to the dead but not God. But this metaphysical difference is not *morally relevant*; in neither case can the person be benefitted. Thus, if it can be fitting to feel gratitude to the dead—which is a claim that Hunt grants—then it can be fitting to feel gratitude to God, at least as far as the conative dimension of gratitude is concerned. Furthermore, the conative dimension of gratitude requires merely that a person has a disposition to benefit the benefactor. Aquinas puts the point this way: "If . . . he were unable to do so [pay], the will to pay back would be sufficient for gratitude." *Summa Theologica* II.II.106.a.6. The will to make a return suffices for the conative dimension if God cannot be benefitted.

[7]Card, "Gratitude and Obligation."

[8]Reasons for gratitude are not so easily outweighed as reasons for blame are, and so reasons for gratitude are morally binding far more often. See Coates, "Gratitude and Resentment."

unspecified and focus on the two that generate the previously mentioned objections to owed gratitude to God. Here is an obvious requirement on owed gratitude:

> Benefit Requirement: Y owes gratitude to R for φ-ing only if φ benefits Y.[9]

It is a category mistake to think that Y owes gratitude to R for something that is not good for Y.

Here is a less obvious requirement on owed gratitude:

> Moral Responsibility Requirement: Y owes gratitude to R for φ-ing only if R is morally responsible for φ-ing.

But the Moral Responsibility Requirement is also plausible, even though this requirement on owed gratitude is a novel addition to the standard list.[10] In paradigm cases in which Jill is not morally responsible for providing the benefit, she does not deserve gratitude.

> Ignorance: Jill is ignorant that her action benefits anyone, including Jack.

> Coercion: Jill is forced at gunpoint to benefit Jack.

In such cases, Jill benefits Jack unintentionally or involuntarily, which undermines Jill's moral responsibility for producing the benefit. But to show that the Moral Responsibility Requirement is not merely parasitic on the familiar requirements of intentionality or voluntariness,[11] I offer a case in which Jill's beneficial action is intentional and voluntary but in which it is intuitive that she is not morally responsible.

> Manipulation: Neuroscientists have implanted new and extremely strong values, preferences, beliefs, and desires in Jill to ensure that Jill intentionally and voluntarily benefits Jack, whom she was previously loath to help.

In the cases of ignorance, coercion, and manipulation, it is intuitive that Jill is not morally responsible for producing a benefit for Jack,[12] and that

---

[9]I am uncommitted with respect to the following claim: the probability of benefit is itself a benefit. According to that view, the Benefit Requirement would be satisfied in a case in which R's φ-ing is an attempt to benefit Y with a reasonable probability of success, but the attempt fails. This position is committed to moral luck in owed gratitude (for a general defense of moral luck, see Hartman, *In Defense of Moral Luck*) because luck plays a salient role in determining whether a person's attempt to benefit someone is successful.

[10]See Manela, "Gratitude."

[11]Honderich, *A Theory of Determinism*, 518.

[12]Many incompatibilists and compatibilists about moral responsibility and causal determinism have the intuition that this determining manipulation undermines moral responsibility. Exemplar incompatibilists include Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*; Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*; and Stump, "Persons: Identification and Freedom." Exemplar compatibilists include Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*; Haji, *Moral Appraisability*; and Levy, *Hard Luck*. Alfred Mele reports this intuition with respect to both compatibilist and libertarian accounts of moral responsibility. See *Manipulated Agents*. But some compatibilists deny the responsibility-undermining intuition, and so affirm that Jill is morally responsible in such manipulation cases. See McKenna, "A Hard-Line Reply" and Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes."

Jill is not gratitude-worthy; the Moral Responsibility Requirement predicts this verdict, which is a substantial mark in its favor. A more general reason why the Moral Responsibility Requirement is true is that when an agent is not morally responsible for a beneficial action, she is not the source of it in such a way that the action is to her credit. But owed gratitude is a kind of credit-worthiness. Thus, we have a conceptual reason why a person must be morally responsible for something to be owed gratitude for it.

One might object that Jill is not morally responsible for providing the benefit in the cases of ignorance, coercion, and manipulation, and yet it is intuitive that Jack owes her gratitude for the benefit in those cases. That is, one might object in such cases that Jack should recognize the benefit rendered by Jill, have good will in response, communicate these beliefs and feelings, and be ready to return the favor. So, the Moral Responsibility Requirement is false.

In response, there are two mutually exclusive ways to analyze the emotions and dispositions that Jack should have with respect to Jill, in the cases of ignorance, coercion, and manipulation, that are consistent with denying that Jack owes gratitude to Jill for the benefit. First, suppose that Jack should be grateful in some way. In that case, it seems right to say that Jack should be *propositionally* grateful—that is, Jack should be grateful *that* Jill benefited him; this is different from saying that Jack should be *prepositionally* grateful *to* Jill *for* benefitting him.[13] Apt propositional gratitude is compatible with not owing prepositional gratitude.[14] An analogy may convince the reader: it can be fitting to feel gratitude *that* my young baby slept through the night without it being true that I owe gratitude *to* my baby *for* sleeping through the night. So, Jack should be propositionally grateful but does not owe prepositional gratitude. Second, suppose instead that Jack should have gratitude-adjacent feelings. In that case, what Jack should feel is gladness or appreciation that Jill benefits him.[15] Such emotions and dispositions do not necessarily include the communicative or conative dimensions of gratitude, because Jack could certainly be glad about Jill's providing the benefit by accident, coercion, or manipulation without his even being disposed to say so or return a benefit in the future.

[13]The basic distinction traces to McAleer, "Propositional Gratitude," 55–58.

[14]One might think that if Jack is propositionally grateful, he should return the favor to Jill. The idea is that there is a phenomenon concerning propositional gratitude that is analogous to Bernard Williams's famous concept of agent-regret. According to Williams, the lorry driver who faultlessly kills a child aptly feels regret and guilt over the event in a way that is markedly different from the apt feelings of a mere spectator due to the way in which the lorry driver's agency is causally implicated in the bad event; the lorry driver should also make reparation. "Moral Luck," 28. Analogously, perhaps the propositionally grateful person should make a return even if the original benefit is not produced in a way for which the agent is creditworthy; so, merely because Jill's agency is causally implicated in producing the benefit, Jack should be propositionally grateful in a way that includes his making a return. Even if there is apt propositional agent-gratitude, my interest is in paradigmatic prepositional gratitude.

[15]Manela, "Gratitude and Appreciation," 289–291.

I do not commit to whether propositional gratitude or gratitude-adjacent feeling is the correct way to describe Jack's apt response to Jill's providing a benefit in the cases in which Jill is not morally responsible for doing so, but I am committed to saying that one or the other is correct. Either response safeguards the Moral Responsibility Requirement from the objection.

In each of the sections to follow, I use either the Benefit Requirement or the Moral Responsibility Requirement to generate an objection to the claim that human beings owe gratitude to God for their morally good character.

An Objection from the Benefit Requirement

The argument that God cannot benefit morally good character in human beings turns on the nature of moral character. Moral character traits are mental dispositions of a certain kind. They are tendencies to notice, think, feel, and act in various ways in trait-relevant circumstances. For example, when a compassionate person is in a circumstance with people who are suffering, the compassionate person notices their suffering, believes that their suffering is bad, feels pity for them, and is motivated to act in ways that alleviate their suffering. These mental dispositions are also stable, relevantly thick, and normatively assessable.[16] A compassionate person tends to be compassionate through time; compassion is activated in a broad range of circumstances in which people suffer in different ways;[17] compassion reflects well on its possessor in the sense that possessing it is a mark in favor of its possessor's being a morally good person.

> *The Argument from Necessity*: God's actions cannot benefit morally good character in human beings, because mental dispositions are *morally* good or bad character traits only through the free choices of their possessors;[18] and God cannot possess our mental dispositions. But since no gratitude can be owed without a benefit, human persons cannot owe gratitude to God for their own morally good character.[19]

---

[16]Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, 3–36.

[17]Just how thick character traits must be is a matter of debate. But even the philosophers who are impressed with the skeptical reading of situationist social psychology acknowledge the reality of thin character traits. See Doris, *Lack of Character*, 64; Harman, "No Character or Personality," 92.

[18]I do not mean that free choices must directly generate the character trait *ex nihilo*. Later in this section, I highlight four ways in which free choices may be suitably involved in character traits for them to have moral status.

[19]*The Argument from Sufficiency*: God's actions do not benefit morally good character in human beings, because human beings self-sufficiently generate their own morally good character via their own free choices, which leaves no room for God to benefit their morally good character traits. Although human beings are susceptible to think at least implicitly that they are self-made selves—see Strawson ("The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," 11–12)—this kind of implicit thinking is hard to sustain via conscious reflection on the sources of character. For example, it is not up to us which communities we are born into, but our communities greatly influence our character via preliminary moral education and desire

The crucial premise in the Argument from Necessity is the free choice condition on moral character, and it goes back at least to Kant:

> The human being must make or have made *himself* into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil. These two must be an effect of his free power of choice, for otherwise they could not be imputed to him and, consequently, he could be neither *morally* good nor evil.[20]

Call this *the Kantian thesis*. What is plausible about the Kantian thesis is that shaping character traits via a series of free choices, or even a single free choice, can be *sufficient*, in conjunction with the nature of the trait, to make them assessable as morally good or bad.

But there are two independent and plausible replies to the Argument from Necessity.[21] First, the Kantian thesis is false; free choices are *not necessary* to make character traits assessable as morally good or bad. Moral goodness and badness do not require the same kind of creditworthiness as moral properties that must come through free will such as moral responsibility, moral praiseworthiness, and moral blameworthiness. For example, a person grows up in an overtly racist community, absorbs beliefs about the inferiority of other races, and desires to treat people of her own race in a superior way. Plausibly, this racist disposition is morally bad.[22] It is a tendency to disrespect and harm people who ought to be respected and not harmed. But the racist is not blameworthy for her racist disposition—at least during the early part of her life—because her being bad in that way is not her fault. So, the racist can have a morally bad trait that does not trace back to her free will, which is a counterexample to the Kantian thesis.[23]

Furthermore, consider how the Kantian thesis led Kant himself to make implausible assertions about original sin. If the fundamental human tendency toward wrongdoing is to be morally bad or evil according to the Kantian thesis, it must be freely chosen. But the fundamental evil disposition is universal and part of human nature. So, how can it be freely chosen?

---

habituation. That is, they bestow to us many of our true moral beliefs; they also inculcate our desires away from many bad things and toward many good things. Additionally, our communities direct our aspirations and self-cultivations by offering role models to admire; they provide praising and blaming practices that function to reinforce commitment to moral norms; and we tend to become like the people with which we enjoy relational union. In fact, the person who believes that her good qualities are entirely self-made has what Thomas Aquinas identifies as a form of moral pride, because it is morally proud for a person to believe that she is the cause of something that is received from another. See *Summa Theologica* II.II.162.a.4. Thus, the Argument from Sufficiency is unsound, because human beings do not self-sufficiently generate their character in a way that precludes God from benefiting their character.

[20]Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:44, italics in original.

[21]A potential response is that God can cause a human person to make free choices that generate morally good character in themselves. This response requires that acting freely is compatible with the action's being causally determined by factors beyond her control. My replies do not presuppose compatibilism.

[22]Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 116n7.

[23]Hartman, *In Defense of Moral Luck*, 124–127.

Kant answers that all human beings make a timeless noumenal free choice to adopt either a fundamentally good or evil disposition, and all human persons freely choose the fundamental evil disposition.[24] It is, however, extremely implausible that human beings make any *timeless* free choices. Even if we set aside that implausibility, it is additionally implausible that *all* human persons make the *same* free choice, according to leeway libertarian accounts of free choice, to adopt the fundamental evil disposition.[25]

What follows, then, if the Kantian thesis is false? Morally good character in human beings need not trace back to their own free choices. Thus, God could directly produce morally good character in human beings, and the Benefit Requirement would thereby be satisfied. I find this response compelling. But to convince philosophers and theologians who embrace the Kantian thesis, I offer a complementary response that does not require rejecting the Kantian thesis.

Second, even if the Kantian thesis is true, and so character traits are morally good or bad only through the free choices of their possessors, God can benefit morally good character in human persons in four ways related to their free choices.

First, God provides enabling conditions to form morally good character. God creates human beings with the capacity for free will and sustains them in existence, which provides opportunities for them to exercise free will. Human persons are also unable to choose the good on their own—that is, apart from divine help.[26] At least part of the Christian tradition describes it as a "gift of grace that humans are able both to desire to do and actually do what they know they ought to do."[27] In this way, God makes it possible for human beings to cultivate morally good character.

Second, God influences human agency by supplying disincentives and incentives that give them reasons to make free choices to improve, or maintain, their morally good character. God sets up governing authorities to punish wrongdoers,[28] commands church leaders to discipline church members,[29] and commands believers to rebuke wrongdoing in one another.[30] God providentially arranges circumstances to ensure that believers always have an opportunity to avoid wrongdoing.[31] Furthermore, the Holy Spirit nudges believers to be and act in accordance with the good.

---

[24]Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:31; cf. Adams, "Original Sin," 81–90.

[25]Here is a more plausible view about original sin that presupposes the falsity of the Kantian thesis: original sin is a pervasive disposition toward wrongdoing possessed by contemporary persons; it is morally bad but is not freely chosen. As such, contemporary persons are not morally blameworthy for their pervasive tendency toward wrongdoing, at least at the beginning of their lives. See Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, 137–147.

[26]Romans 3:9–20.

[27]Pawl, "Free Will and Grace," 535; see also Romans 2:13–15.

[28]Romans 13:1–7.

[29]Matthew 18:17.

[30]Matthew 18:15.

[31]1 Corinthians 10:13.

Believers are given a role model in Jesus,[32] a description of examples and virtues to which to aspire,[33] and a description of commands to obey with incentives in heaven.[34] So then, God discourages and encourages various kinds of free choices to improve human moral character.

Third, God generates naturally good mental dispositions in human beings, and those characteristics become morally good as the human beings freely choose to maintain or augment them. That is, human beings can become morally responsible for the naturally good mental dispositions that are unilaterally produced in them by God if they omit making free choices such that if they had made those free choices, they would have foreseeably lost or marred that good character, or if they augment the goodness of those naturally good mental dispositions in a foreseeable way through their own free choices.[35] For example, the Holy Spirit indwells believers and generates fruit in them, which includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.[36] If someone were freely to break fellowship with God, the Holy Spirit would fail to indwell the apostate, and the fruit would thereby fall away. Thus, by freely omitting to break fellowship with God, those traits can thereby become morally good, according to the Kantian thesis, because those traits were freely maintained. Alternatively, human beings tend unconsciously to become like the others with whom they spend time. The indwelling Holy Spirit can work this kind of change,[37] and so can the members of the church with which believers meet.[38] And if believers subsequently maintain or augment these dispositional upgrades via their own free choices, those character traits can become morally good.

In sum, God provides three indirect benefits—namely, the enabling conditions to form morally good character, reasons to form morally good character, and the production of naturally good mental dispositions that can be ratified as morally good character. If those divine actions are constitutively related to human free choices that form morally good character, God does indirectly benefit their morally good character.

One might object, however, that these instances of God's supporting human free choice to generate morally good character are irrelevant to satisfying the Benefit Requirement, because they are indirect benefits and only direct benefits satisfy the Benefit Requirement. In concrete terms, human beings could owe gratitude to God for the enabling conditions, the incentives and disincentives, and the naturally good mental dispositions, but they do

---

[32]John 1:14–18.

[33]1 Corinthians 13:13; Titus 1:5–9; Luke 15:11–32; Luke 10:25–37.

[34]Matthew 22:37–40; 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

[35]Audi, "Responsible Action and Virtuous Character," 308; Hartman, "Indirectly Free Actions," 1421–1426.

[36]Galatians 5:21–22.

[37]John 15–17.

[38]1 Corinthians 12, 15:33.

not thereby owe gratitude to God for their morally good character if they do freely choose to form it.

I contend, however, that those indirect benefits can satisfy the Benefit Requirement. It may be easier to see it in an example from *The Saga of the Volsungs*: Regin reforges the indomitable sword Gram and gives it to Sigurd for the purpose of killing Fafnir, a fell dragon. Sigurd kills Fafnir using Gram, and he gains the golden hoard. Obviously, Sigurd can owe gratitude to Regin for Gram, at least as far as the Benefit Requirement is concerned, because it is a benefit to Sigurd that his power is magnified in this way. But Sigurd also can owe gratitude to Regin for his slaying Fafnir and gaining the golden hoard, at least as far as the Benefit Requirement is concerned. After all, Sigurd could not have done it without Gram, and Regin gave Gram to Sigurd for the purpose of slaying Fafnir and acquiring the gold. In other words, Regin's beneficence was suitably involved in the event of his killing Fafnir and becoming rich to make him a candidate for gratitude from Sigurd for the occurrence of those events, again, at least as far as the Benefit Requirement is concerned. It would be ungrateful for Sigurd not to share the gold with Regin beyond the worth of Gram. In this way, God's enabling human beings to make free choices to cultivate morally good character, providing incentives to make free choices that develop morally good character, and implanting naturally good mental dispositions that human persons can freely maintain as morally good are cases in which divine beneficence is suitably involved in the formation of morally good character to satisfy the Benefit Requirement.

Fourth, in contrast to the three kinds of indirect benefits, God can also directly benefit morally good character in human persons in response to their freely asking for it. For example, if a human person freely asks for wisdom from God,[39] God can be directly morally responsible for unilaterally producing that trait in her in response to her free choice, and she can be indirectly morally responsible for what God produces in her in virtue of its being an actual consequence of her free choice that she could reasonably have been expected to foresee.[40] Or, upon freely accepting God's saving grace, God makes the believer a "new creation," which includes a morally improved character in some way.[41] Becoming a new creation is a foreseeable consequence of freely entering into a morally transformative relationship with God in part because beginning that saving relationship requires contrition, repentance, and a commitment to live in a new way with God's help, which allows that dispositional upgrade to count as moral character.

---

[39]James 1:5: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you."

[40]Hartman, "Indirectly Free Actions," 1426–1431.

[41]2 Corinthians 5:17. Sometimes this character upgrade is interpreted as God's producing in the human will a new second-order desire for the good—that is, a desire for a desire for the good. cf. Stump, *Atonement*, 203–206.

In sum, because the Kantian thesis is false, God can directly produce in human beings morally good character in ways that are unrelated to human free choice. Even if the Kantian thesis is true, God can still directly produce in human beings morally good character for which they have freely asked, and God can also indirectly benefit their morally good character in various ways. Thus, human beings can owe gratitude to God for their morally good character as far as the Benefit Requirement is concerned.[42]

Objections from the Moral Responsibility Requirement

One might think that human beings do not owe gratitude to God for their own morally good character, because God is not morally responsible or praiseworthy for God's actions; and we owe gratitude to God for something only if God is morally responsible or praiseworthy for it. In what follows, I explicate and assess three arguments along these lines.

> *The Argument from Ultimate Self-Creation*: God is not morally responsible for God's actions, because a person is morally responsible for an action only if that person has created herself out of nothing and God cannot bring about the metaphysically impossible state of affairs in which God creates God's self from nothing.[43]

Why think that such a robust form of past self-creation is required to be morally responsible for a present action? Galen Strawson's answer is that what a person does is a function of who she is.[44] To ultimately control what she does, she must have exercised ultimate control over who she is, and the only way to exercise ultimate control over the self is to have created herself from nothing.

The Argument from Ultimate Self-Creation, however, is unsound. The premise that a person must have created herself out of nothing to be morally responsible for an action is far too demanding to satisfactorily describe a necessary condition on moral responsibility for actions.[45] What is sufficient for an agent's being morally responsible for an action is that the agent exercised capacities that grant her relevant control over the action, and those cognitive and volitional capacities need not be ones for which their possessor is morally responsible. The cognitive capacities include having the right kind of knowledge of morality and mundane matters of fact, and the volitional capacities include, perhaps, being properly

---

[42]One might further object that God's improving moral character in human beings is not necessarily a benefit, because, for example, God's making a person more courageous may eventually result in her destruction. Even if a morally good character trait sometimes has consequences that countervail the flourishing of the agent, it does not follow that being a recipient of the morally good character trait is not a benefit, because morally good character is integral to human flourishing.

[43]Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, 50.

[44]Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," 5–7.

[45]For example, see Fischer, "The Cards That Are Dealt You," 116–117; Hartman, "Constitutive Moral Luck," 172–176; Hartman, "Free Will and Moral Luck," 381–383.

responsive to reasons or being the agent-cause of one amongst several possible actions. Thus, a person can be morally responsible for an action to some degree even if she is not morally responsible to any degree for the capacities and character that explain and motivate the action; the ultimate self-creation requirement is false. God's failing to be an ultimately self-made self does not preclude owed gratitude to God.

> *The Argument from Alternative Possibilities*: God is not morally responsible for God's actions, because being morally responsible for an action requires having the power to choose between more than one option; and God necessarily chooses the best.[46]

Why must God choose the best? Better moral character disposes a person to choose the better moral option, and so perfect character recommends the best. Since the limit of dispositional strength to act in ways that are good is necessitation, God's perfect character necessitates that God chooses the best.

But the Argument from Alternative Possibilities is invalid. God's necessarily choosing the best option does not rule out the power to choose between more than one alternative. In some circumstances, for any good option, there is a better option; that is, there is an infinity of good options with no best.[47] In other circumstances, there are several options tied for best due to their being of incommensurable or equal value. If God is in a circumstance with one of those option sets, the alternative possibilities requirement does not preclude God's being morally responsible for beneficial actions.

> *The Argument from No Praiseworthiness*: Suppose that God's providing a particular benefit to morally good human character is tied for best option. Even if God can be morally responsible for choosing it, God cannot be morally praiseworthy for it, because no option is morally better than another.

Moral praiseworthiness is a contrastive property that attaches only to having freely made the morally better choice.[48] Importantly, however, a

---

[46]Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 227; Rowe, "Can God Be Free?" 409–410.

[47]Rowe objects that a perfect being could not choose amongst infinite options in which each option is better than the last, because a perfect being must do the best thing and there is no best thing (see his "Can God Be Free?"). But it seems possible for a perfect being to make a choice that is morally inferior to some other possible choice in that circumstance, because all the choices necessarily have this property; there is no deficiency in the chooser. See Hartman, "Heavenly Freedom," 57–60.

[48]Even if God is not morally praiseworthy in the direct way by virtue of choosing the better option, could not God's action be indirectly morally praiseworthy? That is, could not God's action inherit its moral praiseworthiness from God's morally praiseworthy character traits that limit God's options to equal or incommensurably good options? The answer is yes if God can be morally praiseworthy for God's character. But God cannot be morally praiseworthy for God's character because God necessarily possesses those character traits; so, God's free actions cannot influence God's character, which precludes God from being morally responsible or morally praiseworthy for God's character. (For a dissenting view in which God freely chooses God's loving character, see Murphy's *God's Own Ethics*.) Moral

person deserves gratitude for providing a benefit only if she is morally praiseworthy for doing so. Thus, even if God is morally responsible for providing a benefit, we do not owe gratitude to God, because God is not morally praiseworthy for it.

Nevertheless, the Argument from No Praiseworthiness is unsound, because it is false that a person deserves gratitude for providing a benefit only if she is morally praiseworthy for doing so.[49] Consider an example from Terrance McConnell: a teacher requires her student to volunteer at one of several equally good charities but leaves it to her discretion which one. Intuitively, the student's volunteering at a particular charity is not morally praiseworthy, and yet the members of the charity owe her gratitude for volunteering at their charity.[50] So, even if God is not morally praiseworthy for providing a benefit, we can owe gratitude to God for it.

Furthermore, God's actions do plausibly satisfy the Moral Responsibility Requirement, because God's actions satisfy sufficient conditions for moral responsibility according to a broad range of compatibilist and libertarian accounts, at least when we abstract away from contentious issues about the divine nature. Consider a brief description of such accounts: God's actions are voluntary in the sense that God does what God wants to do unimpeded by coercion, ignorance, or external constraints.[51] God acts voluntarily and God's character has not recently been radically changed by factors outside of God's control.[52] God's actions express who God is.[53] God wholeheartedly endorses the desires that give rise to God's actions.[54] God acts on reasons in accordance with the True and the Good.[55] God has taken responsibility for the rational processes leading to action; God ranks reasons in an intelligible pattern; and God would have acted otherwise if God had had different reasons for doing so.[56] God acts from God's own intellect and will and nothing outside of God is causally sufficient to produce God's action.[57] God is the event-cause of God's action in an appropriate way and God could have done otherwise.[58] God is the agent-cause

---

responsibility and moral praiseworthiness are properties that must trace back to free will. Nevertheless, God's character can be morally good without it tracing back to free choices because the Kantian thesis is false.

[49]A potential response to this argument is that praiseworthiness and blameworthiness are asymmetric such that being praiseworthy for an action does not even require having had alternative possibilities at the moment of choice, whereas being blameworthy for an action does. See Nelkin, *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility*, 31–64; Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, 85–89.

[50]McConnell, *Gratitude*, 16.

[51]Hobbes, *Leviathan*.

[52]Mele, *Manipulated Agents*, 40–121.

[53]Sripada, "Self-Expression," 1204–1206.

[54]Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 22–24.

[55]Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, 67–148.

[56]Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, 62–91, 207–239.

[57]Stump, *Aquinas*, 277–294.

[58]Lemos, *A Pragmatic Approach to Libertarian Free Will*, 8–56.

of God's action in the right way and God had the power to do otherwise.[59] Therefore, human beings can owe gratitude to God for their morally good character as far as the Moral Responsibility Requirement is concerned.

Conclusion

God can benefit human beings with respect to their morally good character in a way for which God is morally responsible. As such, God's actions can satisfy the Benefit Requirement and the Moral Responsibility Requirement. But then, those requirements do not rule out a human being's owing gratitude to God for their morally good character. My arguments do not demonstrate that human persons do owe gratitude to God for their own morally good character, because there are other necessary conditions on owed gratitude that I have not evaluated in this paper, especially in relation to the problem of evil. Nevertheless, by highlighting the way in which God's actions satisfy the Benefit Requirement and the Moral Responsibility Requirement, the way is cleared for others to argue about whether God satisfies the other relevant necessary conditions.[60]

Ohio Northern University

References

Adams, Robert M. 1999. "Original Sin: A Study in the Interaction Between Philosophy and Theology." In *The Question of Christian Philosophy Today*, edited by Francis J. Ambrosio (Fordham University Press), 80–110.

Aquinas, Thomas. 1948. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros).

Audi, Robert. 1991. "Responsible Action and Virtuous Character." *Ethics* 101: 304–21. https://doi.org/10.1086/293290.

Card, Claudia. 1988. "Gratitude and Obligation." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25: 115–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20014231.

Coates, D. Justin. 2019. "Gratitude and Resentment: Some Asymmetries." In *The Moral Psychology of Gratitude*, edited by Robert Roberts and Daniel Telech (Rowman & Littlefield), 160–75.

Doris, John. 2002. *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge University Press).

Fischer, John Martin. 2006. "The Cards That Are Dealt You." *Journal of Ethics* 10: 107–129. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25115852.

Fischer, John Martin, and Mark Ravizza. 1998. *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press).

---

[59]O'Connor, *Persons and Causes*, 71–84.

[60]I thank Peter Furlong, Marcus Hunt, Sean McAleer, and two anonymous referees at *Faith and Philosophy* for comments. I am also grateful for comments and questions from the participants at the 2021 Gratitude to God Workshop and the 2021 Eastern Divisional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers. This research was generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation, grant no. 61513. The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

Frankfurt, Harry G. 1988. *The Importance of What We Care About* (Oxford University Press).
Haji, Ishtiyaque. 1998. *Moral Appraisability: Puzzles, Proposals, and Perplexities* (Oxford University Press).
Harman, Gilbert. 2003. "No Character or Personality." *Business Quarterly Ethics* 13: 87–94. https://doi.org/10.5840/beq20031316.
Hartman, Robert J. 2017. *In Defense of Moral Luck: Why Luck Often Affects Praiseworthiness and Blameworthiness* (Routledge).
Hartman, Robert J. 2018. "Constitutive Moral Luck and Strawson's Argument for the Impossibility of Moral Responsibility." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4: 165–183. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2018.18.
Hartman, Robert J. 2020. "Indirectly Free Actions, Libertarianism, and Resultant Moral Luck." *Erkenntnis* 85: 1417–1436. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-018-0084-7.
Hartman, Robert J. 2021. "Heavenly Freedom and Two Models of Character Perfection." *Faith and Philosophy* 38: 45–64. http://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.1.4.
Hartman, Robert J. 2023. "Free Will and Moral Luck." In *A Companion to Free Will*, edited by Joseph Campbell, Kristin M. Mickelson, and V. Alan White (Wiley Blackwell), 378–92.
Hobbes, Thomas. 1997. *Leviathan* (W.W. Norton & Co).
Honderich, Ted. 1988. *A Theory of Determinism: The Mind, Neuroscience, and Life-Hopes* (Oxford University Press).
Hunt, Marcus William. 2021. "Fitting Prepositional Gratitude to God is Metaphysically Impossible." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 89: 153–170. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-020-09772-w.
Hursthouse, Rosalind. 1999. *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press).
Kane, Robert. 1996. *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford University Press).
Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In *Religion and Rational Theology*, edited and translated by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press), 39–216.
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. 2014. *Theodicy.* In *Leibniz's Monadology: A New Translation and Guide*, edited and translated by Lloyd Strickland (Cambridge University Press).
Lemos, John. 2018. *A Pragmatic Approach to Libertarian Free Will* (Routledge).
Levy, Neil. 2011. *Hard Luck: How Luck Undermines Free Will and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford University Press).
Manela, Tony. 2016. "Gratitude and Appreciation." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 53: 281–94. https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40211532.
Manela, Tony. 2019. "Gratitude." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gratitude.
McAleer, Sean. 2012. "Propositional Gratitude." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49: 55–66. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23212649.
McConnell, Terrance. 1993. *Gratitude* (Temple University Press).
McKenna, Michael. 2008. "A Hard-Line Reply to Pereboom's Four-Case Manipulation Argument." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77: 142–59. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2008.00179.x.
Mele, Alfred. 2019. *Manipulated Agents: A Window into Moral Responsibility* (Oxford University Press).
Miller, Christian. 2014. *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford University Press).

Murphy, Mark C. 2017. *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil* (Oxford University Press).
Nelkin, Dana. 2011. *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility* (Oxford University Press).
O'Connor, Timothy. 2000. *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford University Press).
Pawl, Timothy. 2017. "Free Will and Grace." In *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, edited by Kevin Timpe, Meghan Giffith, and Neil Levy (Routledge), 531–42.
Pereboom, Derk. 2014. *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press).
Rowe, William L. 2002. "Can God Be Free?" *Faith and Philosophy* 19: 405–24.
Smith, Angela M. 2005. "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life." *Ethics* 115: 236–71. http://doi.org/10.1086/426957.
Sripada, Chandra. 2016. "Self-Expression: A Deep Self Theory of Moral Responsibility." *Philosophical Studies* 173: 1203–1232. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0527-9.
Strawson, Galen. 1994. "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility." *Philosophical Studies* 75: 5–24. http://doi.org/10.1007/bf00989879.
Strawson, Galen. 2010. *Freedom and Belief*. Revised ed. (Oxford University Press).
Stump, Eleonore. 1996. "Persons: Identification and Freedom." *Philosophical Topics* 24: 183–214. http://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199624224.
Stump, Eleonore. 2003. *Aquinas* (Oxford University Press).
Stump, Eleonore. 2018. *Atonement* (Oxford University Press).
Swinburne, Richard. 1989. *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford University Press).
Williams, Bernard, ed. 1981. "Moral Luck." In *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge University Press), 20–39.
Wolf, Susan. 1990. *Freedom within Reason* (Oxford University Press).