



PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EXISTENTIAL GRATITUDE

Analytic, Continental, and Religious

EDITED BY JOSHUA LEE HARRIS,
KIRK LOUGHEED & NEAL DEROO

B L O O M S B U R Y

Philosophical Perspectives on Existential Gratitude

Analytic, Continental, and Religious

Edited by
Joshua Lee Harris, Kirk Lougheed,
and Neal DeRoo

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2023

Copyright © Joshua Lee Harris, Kirk Lougheed, Neal DeRoo and Contributors, 2023

Joshua Lee Harris, Kirk Lougheed and Neal DeRoo have asserted their right under the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgments on p. viii constitute an extension
of this copyright page.

Cover image: Yosemite National Park in California, USA
© Mihai P/Getty Images

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any
form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or
any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the
publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-
party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were
correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience
caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no
responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3502-8912-3
ePDF: 978-1-3502-8913-0
eBook: 978-1-3502-8914-7

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and
sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction <i>Joshua Lee Harris</i>	1
1 Existential Gratitude: A Social-structural Account <i>Joshua Lee Harris</i>	13
2 Gratitude and Resentment: A Tale of Two Weddings <i>Graham Oppy</i>	31
3 Gratitude and the Human Vocation <i>Brian Treanor</i>	45
4 Generous Existence? Gift, Giving, and Gratitude in Contemporary Phenomenology <i>Christina M. Gschwandtner</i>	65
5 Gratitude for Life-force in African Philosophy <i>Thaddeus Metz</i>	89
6 On the Contingent Necessity of the World <i>Michael Almeida</i>	109
7 Existential Gratitude in Avicenna's <i>Metaphysics of the Healing</i> <i>Catherine Peters</i>	123
8 Lessons from Anti-natalism on God and Gratitude for Our Existence <i>Kirk Lougheed</i>	143
9 <i>Thank You</i> : William Desmond's Metaphysics of Gift and Ethic of Gratitude <i>Ethan Vanderleek</i>	163
Notes on Contributors	179
Index	181

Gratitude for Life-force in African Philosophy

Thaddeus Metz

1 Introducing African Philosophy of Religion

For all we can tell, every long-standing culture has had philosophy of religion, at least if “religion” is taken broadly enough and does not require postulation of a deity as per Buddhism and Confucianism. However, in the case of the African tradition, it is only recently that such thought has been put down in writing. Until the twentieth century, a very large majority of indigenous sub-Saharan peoples had used oral means of communication to the exclusion of the written word. Although Europeans and Arabs had brought writing hundreds of years ago to some of the continent, it was not often used to recount, interpret, or develop African cultures, instead usually deployed to impart Christianity, Islam, and other exogenous worldviews. However, beginning in earnest in the 1960s, colonialism began to wane, Africans started to attend universities, and literacy spread. Consider that it was only in 1969 that the locus classicus of African philosophy of religion appeared, namely, the first edition of John S. Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy*, which largely expounds the salient religious and philosophical ideas Mbiti encountered upon engaging with some 300 sub-Saharan peoples about their worldviews.

In the absence of a large written corpus, probably combined with ignorance and disinterest (if not arrogance) on the part of other philosophers around the world, African philosophy of religion lacks a real presence in international books and journals. That is unfortunate since we can expect any culture that has existed for many centuries to have some insight into the human condition. In the case of Traditional African Religion, as it is often labeled by expositors and adherents, it turns out to be well understood as a form of monotheism different from what one encounters in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. How many philosophers beyond the continent are aware that the African

tradition characteristically posits the existence of a God who is self-aware, lives in an imperceptible realm, created the perceptible universe, and sustains the lives of everyone in it?

Although there are these broad similarities between the African God¹ and the Abrahamic God, there are also substantial differences between them in respect of God's nature, human nature, and the sort of afterlife for which to hope,² and hence, in effect, regarding what it is to be the highest being, what our less than highest essence is, and what the highest state of existence is that we beings could obtain. Cross-cultural comparisons and, more than that, debates are warranted.³

However, in this chapter I spend more time addressing elements of African philosophy of religion in their own right, specifically considering the intellectual resources it offers in support of the judgment common among indigenous sub-Saharanans that life is a gift from God. "The cock drinking water raises its head to God in thankfulness" is an influential proverb of the Akan people in Ghana.⁴ It is the epigraph on the very first page of a book about African religion by Laurenti Magesa,⁵ a Tanzanian theologian who is one of the most important philosophers of religion in the post-Mbiti era. In the following, I draw on works by Mbiti, Magesa, and other literate African thinkers to construct a formal argument for the conclusion that we have reason to be thankful to God, not merely for the availability of water and other resources needed for life, but also, and in the first instance, for life itself. The following quotations are not unusual to encounter in works addressing African religio-philosophical ideas:

In African societies, emphasis is put on vitality. Life is regarded as the most precious gift of God.⁶

(I)t is believed in African Traditional Religions that a person is created by God. . . . It is equally believed that life is the highest gift of God to humanity.⁷

Africans see God as being the Creator. The vital force manifested by the world in the generation of new life to whom everybody relates is God Himself. . . . Life is a gift from the Creator, the greatest of all gifts.⁸

At the centre of traditional African morality is human life. Africans have a sacred reverence for life, for it is believed to be the greatest of God's gifts to humans.⁹

These quotations are descriptive reports of characteristically African beliefs, whereas in this chapter I am particularly keen to address what merits belief. Supposing God exists, should we regard life as God's most precious, highest, or greatest gift to us? If so, should we be thankful to God for it? In the following I present and evaluate an argument that draws on characteristically African ideas in support of the conclusion that we should be thankful to God for having given

us the gift of intense and sophisticated life-force, roughly an imperceptible, divine energy that constitutes our selves and bestows a dignity on us that is lacking in the rest of the perceptible world on earth.

One way of assessing the argument would be to test its metaphysical claims, for example, that God as understood in the African tradition exists, that God created us, that our selves are constituted by life-force, and so on. However, I instead focus on the argument's axiological claims, so as to enrich our understanding of what a salient part of the African tradition's approach to value is and how philosophically attractive it might be. Specifically, I defend the argument from several ways of objecting to the idea that being given a dignity can provide reason to be thankful.

In the following, I begin by reconstructing an African religio-philosophical argument for thinking that we should express gratitude to God for our dignity-conferring life-force (Section 2), after which I critically discuss some value-theoretic components of the argument (Section 3). For example, I respond to the objections that having an inherent dignity is not a benefit of a sort warranting gratitude and that those with bad lives have no reason to be grateful. I conclude roughly that while those with unavoidably bad lives indeed have some reason to be disappointed about the quality of their life, that is compatible with there also being some reason for them to express gratitude for their dignified life-force. I conclude the chapter by considering the prospects for secularizing the African position (Section 4), so that there might be reasons to be thankful for one's dignity in respect of merely perceptible conditions, supposing we doubt the contested metaphysical claims that God and life-force exist.

2 Life-force as God's Gift to Us

In this section I expound an argument for the conclusion that we have reason to be grateful and act gratefully toward God for our existence. The broad form of the argument is simple: God has given us a life-force that constitutes our selves and our dignity; if God has given us a life-force that constitutes our selves and our dignity, then we have reason to express gratitude to God for our existence; therefore, we have reason to express gratitude to God for our existence. I here provide some *prima facie* motivation for the argument's key axiological claims but leave consideration of objections to them for the following section.

Consider the premise that God has given us a life-force that constitutes our selves and our dignity, focusing, first, on the nature of God and God's creation.

Earlier I noted that the characteristically African conception of God shares several features with the Abrahamic view of God. In particular, for both, God is understood to be a person living in an imperceptible realm who is responsible for the form of the perceptible realm and hence the existence of life within it. Now, there are philosophically important differences between these monotheistic traditions in the way God is conceived, with just two being the fact that, for many African peoples, God exists in a location and did not create matter out of nothing.¹⁰ However, these differences do not seem to bear on the present rationale for expressing gratitude to God, and so I set them aside. I instead address other differences between the two traditions that do affect our understanding of why we might have reason to express thanks to our creator.

One difference is that African philosophers and religionists often conceive of God as the ultimate source of life-force and think of every concrete object that exists as composed of (or at least imbued with) life-force. This metaphysical worldview involves a force rather than object ontology.¹¹ That is, instead of the ultimate nature of reality being held to consist of different substances, which might persist independently of each other (particularly in respect of dualist worldviews), in the African tradition it is much more common to encounter the view that what exists is at bottom a web of interdependent energies. We are to think of stars, trees, cats, and humans ultimately not as things but, rather, as forces, ones that constantly interact not only with other perceptible forces but also with imperceptible ones such as God, lesser divinities, and ancestors.

Furthermore, all forces are commonly thought to be (or at least be imbued with) vitality, an offshoot of God conceived essentially as *bios* (life), not so much *logos* (reason). From this perspective, even apparently inanimate things such as rocks have divine energies in them, albeit ones that are low in terms of might and complexity.¹² “Life-force varies quantitatively (in terms of growth and strength) and qualitatively (in terms of intelligence and will).”¹³ It is frequently suggested that there is a hierarchy or great chain of being in the world,¹⁴ such that rocks are at the bottom for having the least quantity or poorest quality of life-force. Plants are thought to have a greater life-force than rocks, say, for being capable of reproduction and movement. Animals have a greater one than plants, for example, for being capable of self-motion and some pattern-making (consider a bird’s nest or beaver’s dam). Finally, “(o)ver all visible beings, in terms of intensity of vital force, stands humanity;”¹⁵ particularly for having self-awareness and genuine creativity.¹⁶

With regard to humans, the usual thought among indigenous Africans is not that we have a soul, that is, an immortal, spiritual substance that has come from

God, but instead a long-lasting, imperceptible life-force that has come from God. The person or self is (or at least is constituted by) an intense and complex divine energy that is for a time embodied but that will survive the death of its body and continue to reside on Earth as an invisible “living-dead,” at least for a time. More specifically, it is commonly thought that one’s disembodied self, metaphysically dependent on other forces, will persist for about four or five generations, which is about as long as descendants engage with one. Upon the sixth generation or so, a family typically no longer remembers its living-dead relatives and so no longer provides them sustaining energy, causing their selves to disintegrate and die.¹⁷

In respect of those African thinkers who maintain that there is a hierarchical order of beings in terms of life-force, most hold that final value tracks the hierarchy. That is, the stronger or more sophisticated the life-force something has, the more goodness for its own sake it has because of that.

Life implies the existence and interaction of mystical powers in the universe. Conversely, the continuous blending of mystical powers in the universe makes life possible. Thus, “reality is seen and judged especially from its dynamic aspects closely related to life. The farther a being is from these elements, the more unreal and valueless it is conceived to be.”¹⁸

This approach grounds an environmentalism according to which even landscapes and rivers have a moral status, that is, have a value such as to be capable of being wronged in themselves.¹⁹ Although so-called inanimate objects do morally matter from this perspective for having vital force in them, biologically living beings matter much more. Indeed, human beings matter the most (of the class of perceptible forces). Even if every perceptible force has some noninstrumental value, “all life forces, that is, all creation, are intended to serve and enhance the life force of the human person and society.”²⁰ As Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary often credited with being the first European to use the word “philosophy” to characterize African thought, remarks of the views of Bantu-speaking peoples:

Life belongs to God. It is he who summons it into being, strengthens and preserves it. His great and holy gift to men is the gift of life. Other creatures which, according to Bantu ideas, are lower or higher vital forces, exist in the divine plan only to maintain and cherish the vital gift made to man.²¹

Implicit in this passage is the idea that ancestors, who have a higher vital force than us, are nonetheless morally obligated to help human beings, insofar as the

ancestors once themselves took a human form and have been, and continue to be, part of a family.

African thinkers frequently maintain that, because of the divine spark in us, that is, the vital energy that has come from God and is stronger or more complex than any other life-force in the visible realm, we have a dignity, a superlative noninstrumental value inhering in our nature. Here is one clear statement of this view, held by the Akan people in Ghana:

(A) person is the result of the union of three elements. . . . The first, the *okra* . . . is supposed to be an actual speck of God that he gives out of himself as a gift of life along with a specific destiny. By virtue of possessing an *okra*, a divine element, every person has an intrinsic value, the same in each. . . . Associated with this value is a concept of human dignity, which implies that every human being is entitled in an equal measure to a certain basic respect.²²

Here is yet another mention of life being a gift from God—or more carefully *of* God. For the African tradition, human life is not merely a biological process but also a divine force that constitutes our identity, is greater than what one encounters in the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, and is what confers on us a dignity. While African peoples commonly think that God has given us what we need to sustain our lives and to flourish,²³ in the first instance and most importantly it is life itself, that is, our existence as persons, that is God's precious, highest, greatest, or holy gift to us.

The second major premise of the argument is that if God has given us a life-force that constitutes our dignity, then we have reason to express gratitude to God for our existence. The quintessential case in which gratitude is apt is when an agent intentionally and voluntarily bestows a good on someone that the latter was not entitled to receive from the former and does not do so merely in the expectation of long-term gain. There is substantial debate about not only how far to extend the concept of gratitude, for example, whether it is possible to be thankful without reference to any beneficiary,²⁴ but also when gratitude is appropriate, for example, whether it is appropriate to be thankful to an agent who did not intentionally bestow a benefit on the one benefited.²⁵ However, the African conception of human life-force as a gift from God that merits thanks appears to lie squarely within both the conceptual and normative cores of gratitude: God is an agent who aimed to create us and freely did so; our creation is a high final good, specifically a matter of having the greatest life-force in the perceptible realm, which is dignity-conferring; we were not entitled to have been created by God (indeed could not have been entitled to that, given our prior

nonexistence); and then presumably God did not create us merely so that, say, God could demand a favor from us down the road.

When I say that “gratitude is appropriate” or that “we have reason to be thankful” or the like, I mean two things. On the one hand, it is morally *right* that we *act* in certain ways. For instance, we should do things such as accept God’s gift of life (i.e., not commit suicide), treat our gift well, communicate thanks to God, and be willing to do God’s bidding. We owe God a debt of gratitude for our existence as human persons, and it would be wrong not to pay one’s debt in these behavioral ways. On the other hand, it is also *virtuous* to *be* grateful, that is, to judge that one has received a benefit from God *qua* agent and to feel positive emotions such as goodwill toward one’s benefactor and gladness about having been God’s beneficiary.

So defined, one could act in grateful ways without being grateful, and one could also be grateful without acting in grateful ways. Given the prominence in Traditional African Religion of not only prayers but also offerings and sacrifices,²⁶ it is natural to suggest that, according to it, both acting gratefully and being grateful are expected. Indeed, the ideal is surely to act gratefully in an outward manner toward God to *express* the inner gratitude one has for having been created with a dignified nature.

I note that it is not clear that a requirement to be grateful and to act gratefully follows from the sort of vitalist *morality* that is in the African tradition standardly paired with the vitalist account of *final value* articulated earlier. Those who hold that we have a dignity by virtue of our intense and sophisticated life-force usually hold the moral principle that what is right is what produces life-force and what is wrong reduces it. Consider, for instance, these remarks from African theologians whom I have already quoted in this chapter:²⁷

I want to address more specifically the question of the general moral/ethical consciousness that the African view of the world engenders. . . . (I)n no way is any thought, word or act understood except in terms of good and bad, in the sense that such an attitude or behavior either enhances or diminishes life.²⁸

In African societies life-force is the meaning of being and the ultimate goal of anyone is to acquire life and live happily. . . . A person is good in so far as he or she promotes, supports or protects his or her life force and the life-force of his or her neighbours. Alternatively, a person is bad or evil in as much as he or she undermines or destroys this life-force.²⁹

The problem is that expressing gratitude does not seem to serve the function of promoting life-force in others, at least not reliably, and so does not seem to be

morally prescribed when it is intuitively apt. For one, *being* grateful, for example, feeling certain ways, is not likely to foster life-force in a benefactor more than merely *acting* gratefully toward him. For another, when it comes to a divine benefactor, God would already have the maximum quantity and highest quality of life-force; we could not improve it.

In reply, some would argue that expressing gratitude to God and any lesser divinities for past acts would make it more likely that these agents would do all the more to support *one's own* life-force down the road, where they would know if one did not actually exhibit the virtue.³⁰ Yet even if that were true, that function is an implausible explanation of why gratitude is morally appropriate. Intuitively one has ethical reason both to be grateful and to act gratefully simply because one has already been a beneficiary, not merely because one hopes to be a beneficiary again in the future. Even if one's motive for expressing gratitude were not to obtain more life-force, it is still philosophically dubious to suppose that expressing gratitude is morally appropriate if and only if doing so would serve that function.

Here is another way to put the point: God would be disinclined to promote one's life-force in the future because God would judge one's ingratitude to be wrong. That is the converse of the claim that one's ingratitude would be wrong because it would fail to get God to promote one's life-force.

It might be that a shift away from a teleological orientation of promoting life-force and toward a deontological one of honoring it would fill the gap. Is one appropriately honoring the dignity of great life-force, both God's and one's own, when one is grateful to God for having created one's life-force? An affirmative answer is plausible.

However, if the answer to that question is "No," it is ultimately open to the proponent of the argument I have constructed in this section to hold a vitalist account of final value and to deny that moral rightness or virtue is at bottom a function of vitality. For instance, he could coherently draw on another strain of African moral thought, one that is fundamentally relational and prescribes communal or harmonious interaction of a sort that would bring gratitude in its wake.³¹

Recall that I am downplaying metaphysical issues in this chapter. In the following, when evaluating the earlier argument for thinking that we should express gratitude to God for our existence, I do not question claims such as that God exists, God created us, and what we are (or at least have) is an intense and sophisticated life-force. I also grant a broadly vitalist picture of what has final value, and in particular that we have the highest

(of perceptible beings) on earth. Instead, I address reasons for doubting that having been created with a dignity is the sort of thing that would make gratitude toward God appropriate.

3 Does Dignity Merit Gratitude?

In this section I address three reasons for denying that life is a gift of a sort prescribing gratitude to God for our existence. All three objections to the argument from the previous section grant that God has created us with a life-force that confers a dignity on us but deny that this fact is enough to make gratitude on our part appropriate.

3.1 Benefit as the Proper Object of Gratitude

First, consider the fact that having a dignity on the face of it differs from receiving a benefit, where it is the latter that normally merits gratitude. For instance, one bare-bones analysis of the concept of gratitude, from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, is that it is “the proper or called-for response in a beneficiary to benefits or beneficence from a benefactor.”³² Similarly, a critical overview of recent work on gratitude notes that a “common assumption in philosophical analyses of gratitude is that it constitutes a triadic concept where the three variables involved are the beneficiary, the benefit, and . . . the benefactor to whom the beneficiary is grateful.”³³

Now, a benefit is straightforwardly understood as a welfarist good, that is, as something that makes one’s life go prudentially better or improves one’s well-being. Standard philosophical views of welfare include subjectivism, the idea that it is identical to pleasant experiences, satisfied desires, or positive emotions, and objectivism, that it is a matter of states and relationships such as knowledge, autonomy, love, and creativity. Welfare is a high quality of life, but dignity involves life itself having a superlative worth. Welfare is a personal value, while dignity is the noninstrumental value of a person. Welfare is a matter of self-interest being advanced, whereas dignity is a matter of the self being inherently good. Since dignity seems not to be a benefit, it is not a proper occasion for gratitude, so goes the first objection.

One tempting way to reply to this objection would be to point to non-welfarist goods apart from dignity that are plausibly the occasion for gratitude. For instance, consider the perfectionist good of having developed human nature,

say, by having exercised rationality in an exemplary fashion³⁴ or engaging in the ways that members of *Homo sapiens* characteristically bond and procreate.³⁵ For another example, consider the good of meaningfulness, where one's life merits pride or admiration for, for example, having made sacrifices (of one's own welfare) in order to advance a worthy cause or having received positive recognition for an aesthetic or intellectual accomplishment.³⁶ Perfection and meaning are standardly contrasted with welfare, and if others were to promote one's perfection or meaning, one would have reason to express thanks to them. Hence, gratitude can sensibly be occasioned by more than receiving benefits in the narrow sense of welfare.

Now, I believe the reply plausibly shows that receiving goods beyond welfare can merit gratitude. However, I am not sure that dignity is analogous to the non-welfarist counterexamples of perfection and meaning. Even if the latter goods are distinct from well-being, they are ones that are *in* a life, whereas dignity is above taken to inhere in life(-force) itself. The critic can plausibly maintain that the best way to construe talk of "benefits" is in terms of what helps make a life go well for a person, which differs from what makes a person valuable. Arguably gratitude is rightly a response to what we have in the course of a life, not to what we essentially are. It makes no sense to be grateful for not being a cat or a tree, since one could not have been one of those things.

Consider, therefore, a second way to reply to the objection, namely, a thought experiment. Suppose that someone prevented you from losing your strong and complex life-force. Perhaps that individual rescued you from a calamity in which you would have suffered severe brain damage, say, by pulling you out of the path of an oncoming bus. Intuitively, you should be grateful and, indeed, the natural thing to say would be, "Thanks for having saved my life." Insofar as part of the gratitude is for avoiding a condition in which your self would have died or your personhood would have been impaired, it can be appropriate to express gratitude for what we essentially are, not merely for benefits construed in terms of what improve the course of a life. Although it probably does not make sense to be grateful for not being a cat or a tree, it does make sense to be grateful for being a live self as opposed to dead.

The critic will respond that "Thanks for having saved my life" is short for "Thanks for having saved my life so that I can have the opportunity to live well." That is, she will maintain that the only reason to be grateful for one's life having been saved is the desirable quality of life that is expected, not the dignity of the life itself.

However, I doubt that fully captures the reaction you would have if your life were saved—part of it would include being glad, appreciative, and indeed

grateful that *you* continue to survive. David Benatar and Frances Kamm have both argued that what makes death bad is not reducible to being deprived of benefits such as welfare, perfection, and meaning but also includes the loss of the self.

Each individual, speaking in the first person, can say: “My death obliterates me. Not only am I deprived of future goods but *I* am also destroyed. This person, about whom I care so much, will cease to exist. My memories, values, beliefs, perspectives, hopes—my very self—will come to an end, and for all eternity.”³⁷

In the way it would be bad for its own sake if a great work of art were destroyed, so it would be bad for its own sake if a self perished or personhood were seriously harmed.³⁸ It does seem to make sense to express gratitude for the good (if not “benefit”) of avoiding such a bad condition. By analogy, it makes sense to express gratitude for having been made a self or person in the first place, not merely for goods such as the fulfillment of self-interest or those coming in the course of a person’s life.

3.2 Improvement as the Proper Object of Gratitude

A second reason to doubt that the dignity of life-force is sufficient to merit gratitude is consistent with the idea that receiving the good of being prevented from having one’s self or personhood destroyed is an appropriate ground for being thankful. However, according to the second objection, that is true only once one’s self or personhood exists. After a human life-force is real, it would be an improvement for it to be sustained relative to it disintegrating. However, so the present objection goes, there is no improvement when a human life-force is created in the first place, making gratitude inappropriate for the “gift of life.”

There are two ways this objection might be plausibly advanced. First off, consider the principle that for a person to be benefited in a way that merits gratitude, the benefactor must “make him better off than he was before.”³⁹ When a person is created in the first place, he is never made better off than he was before, since he did not exist before. Therefore, gratitude for having been created is never merited. This argument has been advanced as a reason for thinking that children never owe their parents a debt of gratitude for having brought them into existence,⁴⁰ and it applies with comparable force to the argument that we owe God a debt of gratitude for having created us with a divine spark.

However, the principle that, for gratitude to be warranted, a benefactor must make a person better off than he was before admits of many counterexamples.

For a first one, consider the bus case earlier. If someone pulls you from the path of an oncoming bus and your life is saved, you are not better off than you were before. You are quite possibly in the same position as you had been. You should be grateful nonetheless, specifically for not being any worse off than you were.

Second, consider a variant of the bus case, where, in order to get you out of the way of the bus, you have to be shoved hard, and you end up with some cuts and bruises. Now you are worse off than you were before the shove. Even so, you should be grateful, since you would have been even worse off than that in the absence of the shove.

To avoid these kinds of cases, consider a second version of the objection, according to which, for a person to be benefited in a way that merits gratitude, the benefactor must make him better off than he would have been. This principle avoids and also explains the two bus cases. Had you not been shoved out of the way of the bus, you would have been injured or killed, whereas, upon being shoved, you avoid such conditions and at worst end up with some cuts and bruises, entailing that gratitude is appropriate. And it likewise follows from the present principle that a person never has reason to be grateful for having been created; he is never made better off than he would have been, since he did not exist before.

However, there are also strong counterexamples to this principle. Suppose that if Agent 1 had not shoved you out of the path of the bus, Agent 2 would have done so. In that case, Agent 1 does not make you better off than you would have been had she not shoved you, since Agent 2 would then have shoved you. By the present principle, no gratitude is owed to Agent 1, but that is surely counterintuitive.⁴¹

For another sort of counterexample, consider the point that merely trying to confer a benefit on someone is sufficient to make gratitude appropriate. If one aims to make another person better off than he would have been and takes steps reasonably expected to do so, then gratitude can be owed even if “the world gets in the way” and the person is not in fact made better off. A nice example is a colleague taking the time to nominate you for an award that you do not end up winning.⁴²

Perhaps there is a way of reformulating the sense in which there must be “improvement” to a person’s life in order for her to count as a beneficiary who has reason to be grateful and act gratefully. However, the above two formulations parallel distinctions in other debates, for example, about when the conferral of benefits on others makes one’s life meaningful,⁴³ which suggests they are, if not exhaustive, then at least central.

3.3 A Good Life as the Proper Object of Gratitude

The third objection is distinct from the first two; its proponent can accept that the creation of a dignified being, as opposed to the conferral of benefits on the course of a life or sustaining a life that already exists, is in principle the sort of good that *pro tanto* merits gratitude. However, it might be that life itself is something to be grateful for only when the quality of life is also something for which to be grateful. Maybe the good *of* life merits thanks only when one has much good *within* the life. Many anti-natalists would suggest that few of us in fact have a good life, or at least that the *good of* life has come at the objectionable cost of much *bad within* the life,⁴⁴ making gratitude to God for having been created inappropriate.

Consider a dignified person who is living a crummy life. If a person's life is filled with pain, dissatisfaction, regret, ignorance, oppression, enmity, and ugliness, it is natural to say that it would be reasonable for this person not to be grateful to be alive (or to have been created). If a bad life means that no gratitude is warranted, then the life-force (or selfhood or personhood) as such is not sufficient to make gratitude warranted.

A number of different explanations are *prima facie* plausible for thinking that, despite the dignity of life, gratitude is unwarranted in the face of a crummy life. One explanation of why gratitude is not warranted is that, although life as such is something of a gift and *contributes* to the conditions for which one should be grateful to God, it is not *sufficient* on its own to be grateful, which requires a good quality of life. Another is that, upon having reason to be grateful and to act gratefully for a good quality of life, one also has reason to in respect of what is necessary for that,⁴⁵ that is, life itself. For any one of these or other reasons, one might think that "Thanks, but no thanks" is apt when the quality of life is bad. Indeed, "Thanks for nothing" might seem to be the right response when one's life is particularly crummy.

In reply, one might be inclined to change the initial argument somewhat, to make it a claim not about our actual lives as having been created by God but, rather, about possible lives having been so created. That is, instead of holding that God exists, one might view the argument as a claim about what would follow if God existed, namely, that we would have a life-force of a certain intensity and sophistication that would constitute our selves and have a dignity. If one went this conditional route, then one could also suggest that if God existed, then God would not allow any lives to be so badly off as to make gratitude inappropriate. By this reasoning, the presence of crummy lives means the absence of God,

where the presence of God would be sufficient for both a dignified life-force and a good quality of life, and hence the aptness of gratitude on our part.

However, I do not think that this reply targets the heart of the objection. The objection is not so much that gratitude for being alive *is* unwarranted because some lives *are* crummy or otherwise face serious harms, but rather that it *would be* unwarranted if some lives *were* crummy or faced them. The latter point suggests that the mere fact of a dignified existence (in the form of great life-force or selfhood or personhood) is not sufficient to be grateful for having been created. Life in itself is not a gift that calls for gratitude.

A stronger reply, I think, is to say that it is coherent to be grateful about some facets of life and not grateful about others. Throughout this section I have routinely been drawing a distinction between the dignity inhering in having a life-force, instantiating a self, or being a person, on the one hand, and the benefits that come in the course of a life or a good quality of life, on the other. If one has a crummy life or suffers real harm, then, with the anti-natalists, it would be sensible not to be thankful for the course or quality of one's life, but (probably *contra* most anti-natalists) it could still be sensible to be thankful for existing in the form of a superlatively finally valuable life-force.⁴⁶ There are simply two different objects under evaluation, where talk of "being alive" or mere "existence" is ambiguous and glosses over the difference. In sum, supposing one had been created by God and one's nature has a dignity, one would have reason to be grateful and to act gratefully toward God for having done so, even if one would indeed also have reason to be disappointed about one's quality of life being poor. A mixed blessing would call for mixed reactions.

4 Conclusion: Secularizing the Argument

In this chapter I have drawn on sources from the African philosophy of religion to construct and evaluate the argument that we have reason to express gratitude to God for our existence since God has given us an intense and complex life-force that constitutes our selves and our dignity. As I have pointed out, I have set metaphysical issues aside, so as to focus squarely on the contributions that the African tradition might make to axiological matters, particularly about when and why gratitude is appropriate. In that respect, I have defended the argument by rebutting reasons for doubting that having been created with a dignified nature provides reason to be grateful to God.

Suppose, though, that debates about the metaphysics did not go in favor of Traditional African Religion. That is, suppose there is no God, no ancestors, and also no life-force. Would there still be reason to be grateful for existing with a certain essence?

One might doubt that the existence of dignity and other evaluative and normative categories are compatible with a scientific understanding of the world. However, as an adherent to value realism of a kind that parallels scientific realism,⁴⁷ I myself am not troubled by the suggestion. Even if the value of dignity and moral reasons to be grateful could exist in a purely physical world, it might seem that being thankful for existing with a dignity (say, in virtue of one's being a self or a person) would be out of place in a world without God, for then there would be no one to thank for having been given a gift of life. Is that more of a problem?

Now, there have been suggestions in the literature that it is coherent and even appropriate to be thankful for benefits without reference to any source of them or thankful to a source of benefits that is impersonal, for example, to nature.⁴⁸ However, it is plausible to suppose that these cases are better understood in terms of gladness or appreciation, not gratitude in a suitably narrow sense. Working, then, with a notion of gratitude according to which it is coherent and appropriate only ever to be grateful and act gratefully toward a personal benefactor, there is, I submit, a clear sense in which it would be fitting in a world in which God does not exist, namely, as directed toward one's parents. Indeed, even if God does exist, the logic of the argument for expressing gratitude to God applies with comparable force to doing so in respect of one's parents, who put in the lion's share of the labor.⁴⁹

Notes

- 1 When I call something "African" or otherwise employ a geographical label, I mean to connote what is *salient* in that part of the world. I am mentioning what is recurrent or prominent there in a way that it tends not to be elsewhere around the globe. Hence, to call something "African" does not necessarily mean that it is true of literally all African people, and nor does it imply that it is true of only them. For more on this approach to geographical labels, see Metz (2022: 7–12).
- 2 Emphasized by Wiredu (1990, 1998, 2011); P'Bitek (2011).
- 3 For an initial stab at the latter, see Metz and Molefe (2021).
- 4 Okrah (2003: 48–9).
- 5 Magesa (2013: 3).

- 6 Kasenene (1994: 140).
- 7 Pato (1997: 55).
- 8 Nkemnkia (2004: 684, 700).
- 9 Onah (2012). For additional mention of life as a gift in the context of indigenous African religio-philosophy, see the quotations below from Tempels and Wiredu, as well as passages in Mulago (1991: 123), Bujo (2006: 19), Molefe (2018: 24).
- 10 See, for example, Wiredu (2011).
- 11 See Imafidon (2014), Ijiomah (2016: 85, 101), Lajul (2017: 27–9).
- 12 Given the existence of thousands of ethnic groups in Africa, there are naturally some who do not hold the views articulated here, including the Akan in Ghana in respect of the claim that everything is composed of vital force (Wiredu 2011: xxiv–xxv).
- 13 Anyanwu (1984: 90).
- 14 For example, Magesa (1997: 39–51), Imafidon (2014: 40–2), Molefe (2018: 23–4).
- 15 Magesa (1997: 51).
- 16 Note that ancestors, residing in an imperceptible realm on earth for an unusually long time, are deemed to have an even greater life-force than humans.
- 17 Menkiti (1984: 174), Mbiti (1990: 25).
- 18 Magesa (1997: 51), quoting from Charles Nyamiti's *The Scope of African Theology*.
- 19 For example, Etieyibo (2017).
- 20 Magesa (1997: 51).
- 21 Tempels (1959: 56).
- 22 Wiredu (1990: 244).
- 23 For example, Mbiti (1975: 44–6; 1990: 41–3), Mulago (1991: 126, 130), Magesa (1997: 39).
- 24 Discussed in Gulliford, Morgan, and Kristjánsson (2013: 297–301).
- 25 Discussed in Manela (2019), section 2.
- 26 Mbiti (1975: 54–62).
- 27 See also Anyanwu (1984), Bujo (2006), Molefe (2018).
- 28 Magesa (1997: 57–8).
- 29 Kasenene (1998: 25).
- 30 Cf. Bewaji (2004: 398–9), and Wiredu (2011: xxvii–xxviii), on the largely pragmatic function of religious practices among African peoples.
- 31 Paris (1995), Tutu (1999: 34–5), Murove (2016), Metz (2022).
- 32 Manela (2019).
- 33 Gulliford, Morgan, and Kristjánsson (2013: 297).
- 34 E.g. Sumner (1992); Hurka (1993).
- 35 Kass (1972).
- 36 Metz (2013).
- 37 Benatar (2017: 104). See also Kamm (1993: 43–53).
- 38 Benatar (2017: 106–7).

- 39 Mentioned in Manela (2019) section 2.
- 40 McConnell (1993).
- 41 Notice that it will not do to suggest reformulating the principle so that for a person to be benefited in a way that merits gratitude, the benefactor must make him better off than he would have been, setting aside the interventions of other agents. Just imagine that if Agent 1 had not shoved you out of the way of the bus, a gust of wind would have done so. Even though you are not better off than you would have been without Agent 1's intervention, you should be grateful to Agent 1.
- 42 McConnell (1993: 44).
- 43 On which see Metz (2017: 15–7).
- 44 Cf. Shiffrin (1999).
- 45 Cf. Adams (2019).
- 46 The question of whether we have reason to be grateful for having been created differs from that of whether we would be wronged by having been created, where the latter is the normal anti-natalist focus (of, for example, Shiffrin 1999). It seems to me that it can be apt to express gratitude to someone who has wronged us, if, say, she meant well and succeeded in doing us good.
- 47 See, for example, Brink (1989), Miller (1992).
- 48 See discussion in Gulliford, Morgan, and Kristjánsson (2013: 297–301).
- 49 For comments on a prior draft, I am grateful to Kirk Lougheed and an anonymous referee for Bloomsbury.

References

- Adams, Robert Merrihew. (2019). "Love and the Problem of Evil." In P. Tabensky (ed.), *The Positive Function of Evil*, 1–13. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anyanwu, K. Chukwulozie. (1984). "The Meaning of Ultimate Reality in Igbo Cultural Experience." *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 7: 84–101.
- Benatar, David. (2017). *The Human Predicament*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bewaji, J. A. I. (2004). "Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture." In K. Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, 396–403. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Brink, David O. (1989). *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bujo, Benezet. (2006). *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. J. O'Donohue, reprinted ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Etieyibo, Edwin. (2017). "Anthropocentrism, African Metaphysical Worldview, and Animal Practices." *Journal of Animal Ethics*, 7: 145–62.
- Gulliford, Liz, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson. (2013). "Recent Work on the Concept of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology." *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 47: 285–317.

- Hurka, Thomas. (1993). *Perfectionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ijiomah, Chris. (2016). *Harmonious Monism: A Philosophical Logic of Explanation for Ontological Issues in Supernaturalism in African Thought*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris.
- Imafidon, Elvis. (2014). "On the Ontological Foundation of a Social Ethics in African Tradition." In E. Imafidon and J. A. I. Bewaji (eds.), *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*, 37–54. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Kamm, F. M. (1993). *Morality, Mortality, Volume 1: Death and Whom to Save from It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kasenene, Peter. (1994). "Ethics in African Theology." In J. de Gruchy and C. Villavicencio (eds.), *Doing Ethics in Context: South African Perspectives*, 138–47. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Kasenene, Peter. (1998). *Religious Ethics in Africa*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Kass, Leon R. (1972). "Making Babies—The New Biology and the 'Old' Morality." *The Public Interest*, 26: 18–56.
- Lajul, Wilfred. (2017). "African Metaphysics: Traditional and Modern Discussions." In I. Ukpokolo (ed.), *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy*, 19–48. Cham: Springer.
- Magesa, Laurenti. (1997). *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Magesa, Laurenti. (2013). *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Manela, Tony. (2019). "Gratitude." In E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gratitude/>.
- Mbiti, John S. (1975). *Introduction to African Religion*. New York: Praeger.
- Mbiti, John S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Heinemann.
- McConnell, Terrance C. (1993). *Gratitude*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. (1984). "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought." In R. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, 3rd ed, 171–81. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2013). *Meaning in Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2017). "Neutrality, Partiality, and Meaning in Life." *De Ethica*, 4: 7–25.
- Metz, Thaddeus. (2022). *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Metz, Thaddeus and Motsamai Molefe . (2021). "Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of Monotheism." *The Monist*, 104: 393–409.
- Miller, Richard W. (1992). *Moral Differences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Molefe, Motsamai. (2018). "African Metaphysics and Religious Ethics." *Filosofia Theoretica*, 7: 19–37.
- Mulago, Vincent. (1991). "Traditional African Religion and Christianity." In J. K. Olupona (ed.), *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, 119–34. New York: Paragon House.

- Murove, Munyaradzi F. (2016). *African Moral Consciousness*. London: Austin Macauley Publishers Ltd.
- Nkemnkia, Martin N. (2004). "The World as an Eternal Entity and Vitalogical Living Reality." *Analecta Husserliana*, 79: 683–704.
- Okrah, Kwadwo A. (2003). *Nyansapo (The Wisdom Knot): Toward an African Philosophy of Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Onah, G. (2012). "The Meaning of Peace in African Traditional Religion and Culture." <http://beeshadireed.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-meaning-of-peace-in-african.html>.
- Paris, Peter J. (1995). *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Pato, Luke Lungile. (1997). "Being Fully Human: From the Perspective of African Culture and Spirituality." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 97: 53–61.
- P'Bitek, Okot. (2011). *Decolonizing African Religions*, rev. ed. New York: Diasporic Africa Press.
- Shiffrin, Seana. (1999). "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm." *Legal Theory*, 5: 117–48.
- Sumner, L. W. (1992). "Two Theories of the Good." *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 9: 1–14.
- Tempels, Placide. (1959). *Bantu Philosophy*, 2nd ed., trans. C. King. Paris: Présence Africaine. Digitized (online) in 2006. <https://pdf4pro.com/amp/view/bantu-philosophy-placide-tempels-1be879.html>.
- Tutu, Desmond. (1999). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Random House.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. (1990). "An Akan Perspective on Human Rights." In A. A. An-naim and F. M. Deng (eds.), *Human Rights in Africa: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, 243–60. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. (1998). "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion." *African Studies Quarterly*, 1: 17–46.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. (2011). "Introduction: Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion." In O. P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, rev. ed, xi–xxxvii. New York: Diasporic Africa Press.