PART I

Gratitude and God
CHAPTER I

Joyful Recognition
Debt, Duty, and Gratitude to God

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As a response to a gift, gratitude is an obligation. But what kind of obligation is gratitude, especially gratitude to God? Martin Luther placed gift at the heart of his understanding of God’s relation to creatures and thus brought this question to the heart of Christian life. Gratitude and its obligations are key themes, as well, in Anthony Kronman’s massive Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan, which charges Christianity in general and Luther in particular with encumbering modern humans with an overwhelming existential burden and thus sapping our lives and our world of meaning. Before we engage these arguments, however, we need to explore a prevalent theological account of gratitude that lends some plausibility to his critique.

1.1 Gratitude as Repayment

For Thomas Aquinas, gratitude is a virtue ‘annexed’ to justice, to giving to others what is their due. When it comes to gifts we receive from others, we have no legal debt to repay, but we do have a moral one. It consists in recollecting the kindness shown and, above all, in paying them back. The

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3 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 80.
need for repayment, a prevalent intuition in many cultures, is rooted for Thomas in a metaphysical principle and is part of the natural order:

Every effect turns naturally to its cause; wherefore Dionysius says . . . that ‘God turns all things to Himself, because He is the cause of all’: for the effect must needs always be directed (ordinetur) to the end of the agent. Now it is evident that a benefactor, as such, is cause of the beneficiary. Hence the natural order (ordo) requires that he who has received a favor should, by repaying the favor (per gratiarum recompensationem), turn to his benefactor according to the mode of each. 

The natural order, at work in relation to divine and human benefactors alike, requires repayment (recompensatio) for the benefit received freely.

To understand Thomas rightly, it is important to distinguish between (1) thinking of gratitude itself as a form of repayment, in which case gratitude is given as repayment and thus in place of other forms of repayment and (2) considering these other forms of repayment a constitutive feature of gratitude in addition to giving thanks. In the first case, the fact that I have an obligation to thank my benefactor is taken to imply, first, that I owe the benefactor thanks, which is to say that thanks is her due. A gift sets up a moral relation of debt, where the debt is repaid with thanks. In the latter case, there is this same logic of obligation and debt, but repayment of the benefit itself is required. I owe something more than thanks.

Thomas holds the latter view. Gratitude requires three things. First, to recognize the benefit. Second, to express thanks for it. And third, ‘to repay (retribuat) the favor at a suitable place and time according to one’s means.’

Thanks alone do not discharge the debt of gratitude.

The logic of debt requires that repayment cover the entirety of the debt and possibly a bit more: the repayment must be as great and as good as that which it repays. The same applies to the debt of gratitude: the greater the favor, the greater must be the gratitude for it. When determining the amount of gratitude, we must enter into the calculation the fact that the benefactor was not bound to confer the favor. Since the favor was given

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4 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, q. 106, a. 3.
5 Thomas Aquinas was not alone among Christians or monotheists to insist that to be a creature is to incur an enormous debt to the creator. A century and a half before Aquinas, the Jewish medieval philosopher Bahya ibn Paquda (1050–1120) did the same in the third gate of the *Duties of the Heart* (Edwin Collins, ed., *The Duties of the Heart by Rabbi Bahya*: *Translated, with Introduction* [London: John Murray, 1905], 27–30).
6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, q. 107, a. 2.
gratis, the ‘beneficiary is under a moral obligation (ex debito honestatis) to bestow something gratis in return,’ argues Thomas. He continues,

Now he does not seem to bestow something gratis, unless he exceeds the quantity of the favor received: because so long as he repays (recompensate) less or an equivalent, he would seem to do nothing gratis, but only to return what he has received. Therefore gratitude (gratia recompensatio) always inclines, as far as possible, to pay back something more.7

Thomas recognizes and, importantly, affirms that it is not possible always to pay back as much as, let alone more than, what we were given. A son can never adequately repay parents the effect of the beneficence received from them, namely ‘to be and to live.’8 Even less can a creature repay God for the gift of life and of the entire creation. Nevertheless, Thomas believed that humans ought to do ‘what [they] can’ to repay God’s favor; one owes repayment only ‘according to one’s means,’ as he puts it in the passage on repayment quoted above. Such lesser repayment can be morally adequate in part because Thomas shares the view that ‘gratitude depends chiefly on the heart’ because the kindness for which it is repayment depends chiefly ‘on the heart (affectus) rather than the deed (effectus).’9 When, as in the case of God’s gift, ‘no equal repayment’ is possible, ‘the will to pay back would be sufficient for gratitude.’10 Sufficient, but inadequate nonetheless, we should add: the debt is only deemed to have been paid, but in fact has not been paid. Repayment of gratitude to God is always and inescapably incomplete.11

7 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 106, a. 6. The idea that we should return grace with grace (Thomas quotes Aristotle [Ethics, V.5] in support of this idea) is the application to the free giving of favors of the principle the Hebrew Bible insists ought to be applied in the cases of theft, theft being, in a sense, the opposite of gift. The one who has stolen ‘shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it’ (Lev. 6:5). Exodus is more demanding: ‘When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. The thief shall make restitution, but if unable to do so, shall be sold for the theft’ (Exod. 22:1).

8 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 106, a. 6. Seneca basically agrees but does give examples to the contrary (Ben. 3.1.29).

9 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 106, a. 3. So even more insistently Seneca.

10 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 106, a. 6.

11 Seneca, on whom Thomas partly relies (Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 106, a. 6), thinks that the benefit predominantly consists in the goodwill rather than in the object given in the beneficial act. Correspondingly, gratitude consists predominantly in repayment in goodwill. But the goodwill is not fully adequate as repayment: ‘Goodwill we have repaid with goodwill; for the object we still owe (debemos) an object’ (Ben. 2.35.1).
1.2 Gratitude as Recognition

The problem of an unpayable debt and the burden of indebtedness arises if we think that gifts generate moral debts, which gratitude is supposed to repay in equal or even greater measure. Only thus do givers get their due. Let us call this the repayment account of gratitude. This is a common way of thinking about gifts and gratitude, and, like Thomas and Seneca before him, many believe that it reflects the natural order of things.

But gifts and gratitude are not unalterable ‘natural’ phenomena; they have a cultural history. Their character is variable depending on economic and political arrangements and prevalent anthropologies and social imaginaries. A plausible alternative way of thinking about gifts and gratitude is available. Take, first, gifts. One can think of them as completely free, with their recipients not owing anything to givers, let alone equivalent or greater returns. Granted, a great deal of ink has been spilled arguing to the contrary. Marcel Mauss’s interpretation of gift exchange in so-called archaic societies as obligatory and reciprocal has loomed large. Jacques Derrida has gone to the very edges of existence to find a place for the ‘pure gift,’ untainted by the demand for reciprocation, in death itself. Even so, cogent defenses of the possibility of truly gratuitous gift-giving have been elaborated, by Kathryn Tanner for example. This is not, however, the occasion to rehearse them. Suffice it to say that there is nothing logically self-contradictory about this understanding of gifts, and their actuality is at least plausibly defensible, above all in the case of God’s giving.

With this account of the gift in place, we can, of course, continue to think of gratitude as a repayment, except that such gratitude, rather than

13 As is evident from a cursory read of the articles in Émile Benveniste’s Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Chicago, IL: HAU Books, 2016), on ‘Gift and Exchange,’ ‘Giving, Taking, and Receiving,’ and ‘Gratiousness and Gratefulness,’ not to mention the extensive literature on gift exchange in the field of cultural history.


being an appropriate response to the act that elicits it, effectively undoes the gift, turns it into a clandestine bargain.¹⁶ If we accept both the repayment account of gratitude and this alternative account of gifts as completely free, the only proper gift would be an anonymous one which renders the recipient’s giving thanks to the giver impossible.¹⁷

But what if the ‘repayment account of gratitude’ is just the counterpart of the ‘debt-creating account of gifts,’ rather than the articulation of some unalterable, ‘natural’ essence of gratitude? What if along with the gift, we also take gratitude out of the economy of debt and repayment? This is exactly what we propose. The function of gratitude, we contend, is not to pay for the gift. Instead, gratitude is the way to recognize the gift for what it is – a gift, something that does not have to be, indeed, cannot be paid for. In contrast to the repayment account of gratitude, we will call this the recognition account of gratitude.

Construed in this way, gratitude has four dimensions. First, we recognize that what we have received is a gift rather than, for instance, an entitlement (e.g. a contractually specified payment), an investment (e.g. money we are to manage for the giver), or the fruit of a lucky find (e.g. an ancient coin my son found in our yard).¹⁸ Second, we indicate that what we have received is a benefit to us, or at least that we take the giver to have intended it as such. Third, we implicitly recognize the moral worth of the giver on account of the moral worth of their deed: they acted freely and yet to the benefit of someone other than themselves. Fourth, we do all this not with resentment but with a measure of joy – joy over the giver, joy over the gift, joy over having received the gift and having been set in a non-binding relation to the giver.

In short, gratitude recognizes joyfully the reception of the gift as a gift as well as the giver and their act as worthy of praise. As in the repayment account of gratitude, in the recognition account, gratitude is an obligation – an obligation entailed in receiving a gift as a gift. By recognizing the nature of the transaction, givers and their acts are rendered

¹⁶ Seneca, in fact, envisages such a situation: ‘When a man bestows a benefit, what does he aim at? To be of service and to give pleasure to the one to whom he gives. If he accomplishes what he wished, if his intention is conveyed to me and stirs in me a joyful response, he gets what he sought. For he had no wish that I should give him anything in exchange. Otherwise, it would have been, not a benefaction, but a bargaining (negotiation)’ (Brev. 2.31.2).

¹⁷ Some, like Derrida, argue that any form of gratitude is a form of return which compromises the purity of the gift, which suggests that they are still operating with the repayment account of gratitude.

¹⁸ On the distinctions between gift on the one side and entitlement and luck on the other, see Kronman, Confessions, 59–64.
truthfully and, in this way, they receive their due, it being the case that, on
the account of the gift to which this kind of gratitude is an appropriate
response, what they intended was, to quote Seneca, ‘to be of service and to
give pleasure to the one to whom’ they have given the gift. 19

How do we decide between repayment and recognition accounts of
gratitude? Explaining his reason for the repayment account, Thomas
Aquinas writes: ‘the effect must needs always be directed to the end of
the agent.’ 20 Well and good. But why cannot the goal of an agent – in this
case, a giver – be simply to benefit the beneficiary, and to benefit them-
selves, if at all, only by the fact of the beneficiary having received the benefit
rather than by anything they may do for us in return? Seneca certainly
entertains that possibility. 21 If so, why must the benefit always also return
to the giver in the form of the recipient’s repayment? It is not clear to us
what Seneca’s and Thomas’s answers to this question are.

For someone like Thomas Hobbes, the reason why the benefit must
always return to the giver lies in the theory of motivation according to
which ‘of all Voluntary Acts, the Object is to every man his own Good.’ 22
Gratitude must therefore be a repayment even if it is done in the form of
the ‘cheerful acceptation’ that honors the benefactor. 23 By honoring the
benefactor, gratitude increases the benefactor’s power, that is, the ‘present
means, to obtain some future apparent Good.’ 24 In giving freely, that is the
good the benefactor is seeking. If an agent always seeks their own good in
their free acts, no gift will be given without expectation of an at least
equivalent return, in whatever currency that return may be paid, and no
gratitude will be sufficient without this expectation having been met. In
fact, gratitude itself will always be an attempt to ensure the good of the
beneficiary. The goal of gratitude is to ensure that the benefactor does not
‘repent’ of his good will. Those who express gratitude and those who give
gifts each seek only their own good.

But is this how God gives gifts? Is this how humans, at their best, should
give them? In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the crowds gathered to listen
to him this teaching: ‘But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting
nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of

19 Seneca, Ben. 2.31.2. 20 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.2, q. 106, a. 3.
21 Seneca, Ben. 2.31.2.
22 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ch. 15. This is a refrain in Leviathan. Cf. ch. 14: ‘of the voluntary acts
of every man, the object is some Good to himself.’ Kronman discusses Hobbes on gift giving in
‘Desperate Debtors,’ unpublished paper submitted for Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation
the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:35–36). There is a tension in the text between expecting nothing in return and being promised a reward. But the command that human character and behavior align with the God who is merciful and kind to the ungrateful and wicked suggests that we not take the heavenly reward as a make-up for foregoing worldly repayment. The text suggests a vision of God who, while commanding humans to practice a divine kind of love, ‘expects nothing in return’ for the gifts God gives. It implies also a corresponding vision of humans whose being and reward are one and the same: to be and to act as the children of just that kind of God. Gratitude to this kind of God and gratitude to the children of this kind of God cannot consist in repayment.

Martin Luther can be read to advocate a vision of God, human beings, gift-giving, and gratitude like that implied in this Gospel text. Arguably, this vision is in fact the very core of his theology.

1.3 Luther’s Gratitude to a Loving God

‘The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it,’ writes Luther in the last thesis of his Heidelberg Disputation (1518). In the proof offered for the thesis, he explains: ‘Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good.’55 The negative part of these formulations is critical: God’s love is not about finding what is pleasing to it; it does not seek its own good. Consequently, when God bestows good, no repayment is needed. That is not just because no repayment is possible since God is fully self-sufficient and since everything humans could possibly have with which to repay God would be, ultimately, a gift from God in the first place.26 Equally importantly, and perhaps more fundamentally, no repayment is needed because the requirement of repayment would misconstrue the nature of God’s love: unlike (sinful) human love, which, Luther says, seeks ultimately its own good, divine love does not seek any good for itself, but instead bestows good on others. In his 1535 Lectures on Galatians (the biblical text to which he was ‘betrothed,’ his ‘Katie von Bora’),27 Luther writes:

For God is he who dispenses his gifts freely to all, and this is the praise of His deity. But He cannot defend this deity of His against the self-righteous

55 Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, in LW 31:357.
26 See Luther, Selected Psalms II, in LW 13:91.
people who are unwilling to accept grace and eternal life from Him freely but want to earn it by their own works. They simply want to rob Him of the glory of His deity.  

To try to repay God for benefits, let alone to give God an initiating gift to which God would be obliged to respond, is to misrecognize both one’s nature as a creature and the moral character of the Creator (see Rom. 11:35).  

The way Luther explains the absence of sacrifices before the Fall and the nature of sacrifices after the Fall illustrates well both God’s free giving and the corresponding account of gratitude (which we have called the recognition account of gratitude). In the Garden of Eden, humans’ first home, God ‘does not prescribe the slaughter of oxen, the burning of incense, vows, fastings, and other tortures of the body. Only this He wants: that he [Adam] praise God, that he thank Him, that he rejoice in the Lord, and that he obey Him by not eating from the forbidden tree.’ There is no suggestion that praising, thanking, rejoicing, and obeying are ways of repaying a debt owed to God for the gift of existence in a world described as ‘very good’; rejoicing would seem a particularly odd currency for paying off a debt. The list contains appropriate ways of responding to God, including obligatory recognition of benefits received in gratitude and praise. After the Fall, God did institute sacrifices. But they ‘had no other purpose,’ writes Luther, than to set before early humans the ‘hope of future deliverance and [to] exhort them to show their gratitude’ to the God of love. Sacrifices in Genesis 4 are not repayment to God for gifts received; like the sacraments of the later church, Luther thinks of them as reminders for humans of God’s gifts, past and future.  

Luther’s Commentary on the Magnificat contains one of his best articulations of the primary effect of God’s generosity on humans’ relation to

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28 Luther, Lectures on Galatians, in LW 26:127. Unlike most of what Luther wrote, Luther’s Lectures on Galatians have the official status of a Lutheran confessional text.  
29 On the impossibility of putting God under obligation, see Luther, Lectures on Romans, in LW 25:376.  
30 Luther, Lectures on Genesis 1–5, in LW 1:306.  
31 Luther, Lectures on Genesis 1–5, in LW 1:247.  
32 In his Sermons on the Catechism (1528), Luther writes: ‘But if everything is the gift of God, then you owe it to him to serve him with all these things and praise and thank him, since he has given them and still preserves them’ (LW 51:165; see also Lectures on Genesis 21–25, in LW 4:42). Here, as later in the Smaller Catechism itself, satisfying God’s requirements is what humans owe to God because God gave them ‘everything.’ But that is not typical of how Luther thinks of the relation between God’s gifts and human obligations. In his Lectures on Genesis, the gift of creation does not seem to generate debts which are then paid with obedience to God’s requirement for humans to thank and praise and to obey and serve God. They are God’s commands, but they don’t seem to be obligations justified by God’s generosity, duties that generosity creates.
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God. It shows up in the concluding section of a longer passage in which he aligns God’s love in creating the world out of nothing and God’s love in elevating the presumed ‘nobodies’ of the world. Luther writes:

No one can love Him unless He makes Himself known to him in the most lovable and intimate fashion. And He can make Himself known only through those works of His which He reveals in us, and which we feel and experience within ourselves. But where there is this experience, namely, that He is a God who looks into the depths and helps only the poor, despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken, and those who are nothing, there a hearty love for Him is born. The heart overflows with gladness and goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God.33

Divine gifts do not create the burden of obligation to love God; debtors are not likely to love their creditors, which is what givers are if they must be repaid. Because divine gifts are free, they generate spontaneous joy in God and love for God. The command to love God assumes God’s free gift giving.

In the Commentary of the Magnificat, Luther addresses explicitly only the relation between God’s giving and love for God. In The Freedom of a Christian, he applies the same logic to God’s gift and love for neighbor.

Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one’s neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations. He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward. As his Father does, distributing all things to all men richly and freely, making ‘his sun rise on the evil and on the good’ (Matt. 5:45), so also the son does all things and suffers all things with that freely bestowing joy which is his delight when through Christ he sees it in God, the dispenser of such great benefits.34

The text is a brief commentary on two parallel texts recording Jesus’ great sermon (whether on the mount or on the plain): Matt. 5:43–48 and Luke 6:27–36. They are explaining the signature command of Jesus to love enemies and in the process address the more general issue of bestowing goods and gratitude. Luther quotes the text from Matthew about God who makes God’s sun ‘rise on the evil and on the good’ (5:45). Underscoring a theme exclusive to Luke, he repeats multiple times that God’s generosity

Luther, LW 21:300. Luther, LW 31:367.