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Giving Thanks for the Gift of Life: Karl Barth on Gratitude to God for One's Own Life

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Abstract: This essay considers Karl Barth's conception of gratitude to God, and the significance of being grateful for one's own life within his doctrine of creation. I argue that Barth's account of gratitude authorizes an affirmation of one's own life that avoids the trappings of the egoistic self-love that he vociferously opposed. Additionally, I consider whether and how Barth's conception of gratitude for our lives demands cheerfulness, or whether it adequately leaves room for the type of sobriety and lament that Beethoven exemplifies in his "Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity."

Keywords: gratitude; Karl Barth; optimism; creation; Mozart; Beethoven

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1. Introduction

Even Aldous Huxley was moved by the religious power of Beethoven's *Holy Song of Thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity, in the Lydian Mode* (*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart*). In the final chapter of *Point Counter Point*, the inquisitive Spandrell is tempted to believe in God on the basis of Beethoven's masterpiece: "It proves all kinds of things—God, the soul, goodness—unescapably," he intones (Huxley 1928, p. 338). Huxley was not himself convinced: Spandrell's interlocutor Rampion rejects the argument, suggesting that the heavenly reaches of Beethoven's music are "too good," that its bliss is too transcendent to be human. Yet he admits the objection is desperate: "Almost thou persuadest me," Rampion tells Spandrell when the final notes die away (Huxley 1928, p. 340).

Whatever Beethoven's religious convictions were, the gratitude embedded within his *Heiliger* has an ethereal quality—yet without, I think, losing touch with the all-too-fragile conditions of this life. Beethoven composed the piece not long after his recovery from a serious illness, and it bears the marks of his escape from death: the *Heiliger*'s use of the Lydian mode echoes religious chorales, imbuing the piece with a reverence and solemnity. J.W.N. Sullivan described Beethoven's stunning work as the "most heart-felt prayer from the most manly soul that has expressed itself in music" (Sullivan 1960, p. 163). In Huxley's depiction, the *Heiliger's* opening has "the serenity of the convalescent who wakes from fever and finds himself born again into a realm of beauty" (Huxley 1928, p. 338). Though its thematic material is compact, it manages a wide range of emotional registers; while its Lydian portions are serious without ever being melancholic, the complementary portions that mark a "new strength" are bright without being cheap, and airy without being trivial.[1] The two atmospheres are resolved into a final section that synthesizes and transcends them both. Again, Huxley: "The ineffable peace persisted; but it was no longer the peace of convalescence and passivity. It quivered, it was alive, it seemed to grow and intensify itself, it became an active calm, an almost passionate serenity" (Huxley 1928, p. 340). Beethoven's gratitude pulsates with joy—but a joy that stands at the precipice of death, and has been ineradicably marked by it. It is not the joy of his more famous "ode" of his Ninth Symphony. Sullivan thought the victory the quartet offers is "so hard-won that we are left with none of that feeling of exultant triumph with which we have watched so many of Beethoven's

victories, but rather with a feeling of slightly incredulous relief, of thankfulness still tinged with doubt" (Sullivan 1960, p. 164). Despite Rampion's complaint that the *Heiliger* is too transcendent for mortals, it exudes an earthy acknowledgement of life's "shadows"—yet without being finally overcome by them.

While Karl Barth devoted more attention to gratitude than any theologian since Calvin, he took musical inspiration from Mozart, not Beethoven. As he famously wrote, Mozart "heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair . . . " (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 298). Such an affinity has raised worries that Barth's intense focus on Christ's victorious triumph over sin and his Christocentric account of creation fails to give the tragic dimensions of this world their due. As Joseph Mangina writes, "The danger in Barth's approach to suffering may be that it moves too quickly into the mode of affirmation. Mozart's music is beautiful, but our lives very often are not" (Mangina 2004, p. 112; McDowell 2019, pp. 221–23).

How long one must give way to grief and sorrow is an open, under-specified question. Barth himself put a variation of the same objection to the optimism of Leibniz and his heirs, arguing that they lacked the compulsion to "face this [shadowy, tragic] aspect of life without running away" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 406). Yet the fact that Barth lodged the same critique against optimism that he has been subject to does not in itself exonerate him. Beethoven's *Heiliger* poses a question about what it means to be grateful to God for our lives, especially when they are marked by frailty, sin, and death. Such a question is especially potent for Barth, whose account of gratitude runs through the very center of his theology. Though the theme has received comparatively scant attention from his English-speaking interlocutors, Helmut Gollwitzer has rightly proposed that for Barth "gratitude" is the "central word for the basic determination of human existence" (Gollwitzer 1974, p. 497).[2] As Barth famously puts it, gratitude is "the precise creaturely counterpart to the grace of God." While gratitude gives rise to both affections and actions, it also reaches beneath them to name the fundamental disposition of humanity toward God: the "being of man," Barth writes, "can and must be more precisely defined as a being in gratitude" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 166). Gratitude is not only "a quality and an activity," nor is it "merely a change of temper or sentiment or conduct and action." Instead, gratitude is "the very being and essence of this creature." Human being *is* gratitude, rather than being "merely grateful" (Barth 2010, II/1, p. 669).

At the same time, it is one thing for gratitude to mark the "being" of humanity and another to be grateful *for* that being. While gratitude to God in Barth's framework is ultimately responsive to the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, he also argues that our lives are among the gifts and benefits that God bestows upon us—and thus can be objects of gratitude to God.[3] As life for some of us hardly seems like an appropriate reason to give thanks to the Creator, whether Barth moves too quickly into an affirmative key within his treatment of gratitude is a crucial question. Yet allowing our own lives to be objects of gratitude to God also introduces the specter of "self–love" into moral theology. Barth's doctrine of creation requires affirming our existence as the proper response to God's grace—but does so without turning "self–love" into an architectonic principle for the moral life, a move that many Protestant moral theologians have aggressively resisted (including Barth himself). How Barth's account of gratitude within his doctrine of creation addresses these two features is the theme of this paper.

2. Gratitude to God in the Doctrine of Creation

Gratitude is the central term for humanity's response to God because, on Barth's view, humanity is both determined and revealed by Jesus Christ.[4] As those who have been elected by God in Christ, human beings are summoned by grace, which "sums up the mind and attitude and work of God towards the creature which confronts Him in his nature." Nothing internal within humanity can generate this summons, which means the "being of real man" stands in need of the event of God's grace for its perfection. "Human being" for

Barth is eccentric: the source and origin of our lives is outside of ourselves, in God and His gracious word to us (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 164, 166).[5]

"Gratitude" as the normative and fitting response to God preserves and reifies this eccentric character of human life. As gratitude constitutes our true humanity in its response to God's grace, Barth contends that Christ reveals the perfection of humanity's gratitude alongside the revelation of God's grace. At the Incarnation, "thankfulness is shown to be the essence of the creature, of the reality distinct from God" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 26). Christ represents the "grace of God, and thus gives man what is right, what is his due." And he also "represents the gratitude of man, and thus gives God what is right, what is His due" (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 439–40).

Whatever philosophical or anthropological resonances "gratitude" might have, then, Barth infuses his account with distinctive theological content. Because gratitude arises from inside the encounter with God's grace, it has a communicative and cognitive dimension: to "be grateful is to *recognise* a benefit," Barth writes, not merely to "receive, accept and enjoy" it (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). Gratitude simultaneously names both the dependent and interpersonal context in which humanity relates to God. Barth goes beyond these characteristics, though, and argues that in its purest form gratitude responds to a benefit "which one could not take for oneself but has in fact received" or to an "action which one could not perform for oneself but which has nevertheless happened to one" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). In one sense, passively receiving a benefit *necessarily* means the other has done something for us we cannot do for ourselves. While a graduate student might have funds to pay for their own coffee, the advisor who buys it instead makes the graduate student a recipient of an act of minor generosity—which they cannot do for themselves.[6] Yet the *benefit* Barth has in mind is one that exceeds our capabilities: the creature "cannot be gracious to itself, it cannot tell itself that God is gracious to it," Barth writes. "This it can only hear. The Word of grace and therefore grace itself, it can only receive" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). The absolutely unique benefit of grace means that, strictly speaking, *only* God can be thanked by humanity. Gratitude to God has a "depth and abandon and constancy" that corresponds to the benefit he gives us. While more modest types of benefits exist, from "first to last God the Creator is their source"—and as such, gratitude to others can be genuine because "first and last it is to God that they are thankful when they receive genuine benefits" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 169).

While gratitude to God is obligatory, as the fitting response to the disclosure of God's grace it both precedes and encompasses the logic of command and obedience that marks much of Barth's ethics. Specifically, gratitude is accompanied by obligations to *honor* God, a term that both distances the obligations of gratitude from any kind of system of individual merit *and* entails that the obligation cannot be dispensed with by any particular action. "To be grateful," Barth writes "is to recognise and honour as a benefactor the one who has conferred this good" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167). While honor might be given by returning gifts to the Benefactor, it is more fundamentally a matter of esteem and praise. Tying gratitude and honor together this way allows Barth to avoid reducing the relationship of gift and reciprocity to an economic exchange without committing him to an Anselmian account of debt satisfaction. Barth notes that gratitude (and, correspondingly, honor) must structure *every* human action: any human act "which is not basically an expression of gratitude is inadequate in the face of God." The "best and most pious works in the service of God, whatever they might be, would be nothing if in their whole root and significance they were not works of gratitude" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 170). Yet living in gratitude neither absolves the obligation to honor God nor compensates for the debt that we have accrued through sin. In a move similar to Kant's account of gratitude, Barth contends that the ongoing surplus of obligation we have toward God because of the uniqueness of His gift prevents the relationship from dissolving into a "transaction based on mutual self-interest" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 167).[7] Instead, the relationship between God and humanity is "continually renewed" in our expressions of honor.[8] Barth eventually re-deploys this non-economic account of honor in his doctrine of reconciliation: while Barth confirms

Anselm's judgment that humanity "owes the subjection of our wills to God, which is the one great honour which he can render to God and which he is indeed committed to render to Him as man," he emphatically rejects that the satisfaction of this debt of honor is the basis for God's forgiveness of us (Barth 2010, IV/1, pp. 486–87).

While living in gratitude preserves the eccentric basis of human life, it is also perfective of human life. Barth reformulates Hamlet's question "To be or not to be?" around gratitude, suggesting that the question of human being is "decided by the way in which we answer the question: To give thanks or not to give thanks?" In our giving thanks to God, we give "honour to the One to whom alone it is due, and the honour which alone is worthy of Him." As the subjective and spontaneous response to God's objective revelation of grace, thanksgiving is the "essential and characteristic action which constitutes [our] true being" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 171). As Mangina writes, gratitude is "the form of historical activity by which the agent corresponds to the activity of God," and so can be used "as a comprehensive description of the Christian life itself" (Mangina 2001, p. 137).

Behind Barth's mature construal of gratitude within his doctrine of creation lies his treatment of the subject in his ethics lectures of 1928 and 1929. There, gratitude also perfects humanity, but is located within the eschatological union with God, in which we are "one with God as children are with their father (Barth 1981, p. 463). As with Barth's later doctrine of creation, Barth stresses that our unity with God remains an encounter, and so is "not an intrinsic or an attained possession of man but a most actual affair of divine giving" that generates gratitude on the creaturely side (Barth 1981, p. 499). Similarly, Barth emphasizes that gratitude issues forth in action unconstrained by false notions of obligation, and has an affective dimension that responds to God's grace: gratitude specifies that "I am *gladly*, i.e., voluntarily and cheerfully, ready for what God wills of me in acknowledgment of what is given to me by God and as my necessary response to God's gift." The disclosure of grace that gives rise to gratitude is unremittingly particular: in it, we discover that God "expressly and unequivocally wants me myself," and that he has in fact won us for himself. While this can only be known properly from an eschatological standpoint, it establishes us as individuals. In renewing us in God's image, the Holy Spirit reveals the "eschatological reality of our divine sonship in which the 'I am' is possible" and liberates us to confirm God's command with our own affirmation of it. Somewhat uncomfortably, Barth appeals to a "self-command" to explain how gratitude corresponds to God's kindness: gratitude "cannot be commanded. I must really command it of myself." But such a command can only be issued if the individual confronts himself "as I do when seen from the standpoint of eternity in my divine sonship, in my participation in the divine nature" (Barth 1981, pp. 500–1).

While Barth's mature account of gratitude folds it beneath the doctrine of creation, as we have seen, creation is only intelligible as a gift of grace when we see it from the standpoint of Christ's revelation. Although Barth revises the notion that gratitude gives rise to a "self-command" in favor of the grammar of honor, the substance of his early view that gratitude secures our identity as agents remains the same. In giving thanks, humanity freely and really honors God as the benefactor who gives to us the gift of his grace. Gratitude is thus neither self-abnegating nor self-denying: gratitude establishes the person in response to God, rather than annihilating us.[9] Yet it also leaves open questions about what, precisely, it might mean to see our own lives as a benefit which has been given to us by God—to be grateful for grace under the aspect or description of the "gift of life." While gratitude might not mean our self-annihilation, it might also not require any self-affirmation. To speak of affirming ourselves is to introduce the whole complex of problems regarding self-love, a position that Barth unequivocally rejects in I/2: "Our self-love can never be anything right or holy and acceptable to God" (Barth 2010, I/2, p. 388). What does it mean, from Barth's point of view, to be grateful to God for one's own life?

3. The Benefit of Life

One upshot of Barth's eccentric account of "human being" is that our lives are not self-interpreting, much less independently action-guiding or authoritative. While Barth's account of gratitude within his theological anthropology is nested within a personalistic, I–Thou framework, he extends the eccentric account of humanity into his account of our constitution and "life." Absent the divine summons and disclosure of humanity in Christ, the qualities or characteristics to which we might point to understand humanity are only "symptoms" or "phenomena" of real humanity. This includes our constitution, which is not an independent source for understanding ourselves but "merely follows as part of the summons" (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 150–52).

Barth is unequivocal, though, that life is a gift from God, and so a benefit. Properly construing life beneath the purview of God means that "it is not by an obscure fate or neutral decree, but in receipt of a divine benefit, that [a person] is 'alive'" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 336). This is especially clear in Barth's treatment of our *whence*, our origins as individual beings. Barth acknowledges the disquiet that can emerge when we consider our *whence*, as it means that "even from my origin I am threatened by annihilation, being marked as a being which can only advance towards non-existence" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 574). This anxiety is dissolved only when we realize that God "has preceded us in time, in all the times of our non-being," and as such we come from "the being, speaking, and action of the eternal God who has preceded us" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 577). Barth affirms the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, yet he breaks with tradition by suggesting that its "inner necessity" is disclosed only within an anthropological context. The doctrine expresses "the absolutely essential thing which is to be said of the creature of God as such, namely, that it derives from God and no other source, and that it exists through God and not otherwise." God creates humanity "as the one whom He summons into life" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 155). Birth thus functions for Barth as a uniquely potent "sign and witness" that the world is really ruled by God, as considering our origin (and our end) as individuals puts us into immediate proximity to God in a way that no other aspect of life can (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 199).[10]

The fact that our lives come from God also structures our constitution throughout time, in addition to our origins. For Barth, "life" names our non-autonomous independence as God's creatures: it is the "capacity for action, self-movement, self-activity, self-determination," which arises from the fact that humans have soul. Purely corporeal objects "lack the capacity for action," and while plants have life, we alone have direct and true knowledge of the capacity for independent life because the "human soul" is given to us in self-knowledge (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 374–77). To say humanity is "soul" is to say that "he is the life which is essentially necessary for his body." At the same time, we are "essentially and existentially in time as well," and so are also body. Life is the life of the embodied soul and the besouled body (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 349–51).

Yet life is not our immanent possession, such that we can be said to have it independently of God's ongoing gift to us. Our capacity for independent action is the gift of God through the Holy Spirit: we exist only as we are "grounded, constituted and maintained by God" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 348). Specifically, humanity "has Spirit" (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 353–54). As Barth puts it, "Spirit is the event of the gift of life whose subject is God; and this event must be continually repeated as God's act if man is to live" (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 359). Our life in time continues only because of the ongoing gift of God's presence—whether we recognize and give thanks for this or not. God's "presence as such is the gift of my time. He himself pledges both its reality and goodness," Barth writes (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 530).[11]

The fact that God sustains our life by giving us time enables Barth to argue that our duration is limited: the span of our life from birth to death is not only a punishment by God, but is a disclosure of his grace. While there is an appropriate protest we can raise against our limits, they are also indicators that we depend upon God *and* that God is good to us (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 557). As Barth writes in his ethics of life, "Just because [life] is limited,

it is a kind of natural and normal confirmation of the fact that by God's free grace man may live through Him and for Him, with the commission to be as man in accordance with the measure of his strength and powers . . . " (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 372). At the beginning and ending of our time, we are confronted by the gracious God with a special clarity, precisely because the only other alternative besides God is our annihilation and the nothingness or chaos that God originally said "no" to in creation (Barth 2010, III/2, pp. 568–69).

Barth's unremittingly theocentric account of "life" means it is primarily a benefit to us because it enables us to participate in God's display of glory in creation. As Barth put it, life is valuable within its limits because it gives us the "one great opportunity of meeting God and rejoicing in his praise" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 336). The life God gives us is, even within its limits, an "offer made to man." And as Barth writes, "What is offered with such exclusiveness by God is surely worthy of honour, attention and reflection, even though its significance may not be immediately apparent" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 572). As the final and fundamental explanation for life's value, the opportunity to praise God does not *preclude* participating in or enjoying other, secondary goods. Nor does it necessarily require us to dismiss the loss of those goods and the sorrows that accompany it, as we shall see. Yet it does entail that gratitude to God for "our own life" must be understood as a metonymy for gratitude to God for the opportunity to know and be united to Him.

In one respect, seeing our lives as gifts of God's grace means extricating them from the balancing tests of burdens and benefits that we tend to evaluate them through, and recognizing the peculiar and singularly important benefit that is available to us in God. At the same time, whether our lives warrant gratitude is an especially acute question when we consider our birth and death. As gratitude involves recognizing a benefit as *a gift* we have been given, distinguishing between any *particular* good within our life and the benefit of our lives *as a whole* means putting the latter in a comparative context where they are situated next to our non-existence. In that context, the stakes of seeing our lives as derived from God become clear.[12]

4. The Will to Live

Because "life" is not self-interpreting, Barth argues that it cannot be the basis for ethics as Albert Schweitzer thought it should be. "Where Schweitzer places life," Barth writes, "we see the command of God." Yet the divine command involves the "whole man," including those 'natural' dimensions (such as our "animal impulses") that are sometimes regarded as sub-ethical (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 325–28). Obedience to God the Creator means, in this sphere, "man's freedom to exist as a living being of this particular, i.e., human structure" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 324). Barth locates his ethics of life *after* his treatments of "freedom for God" and "freedom for fellowship" with other humans, in order to properly ensure that we understand what we owe our own lives follows after what we owe God and others. Despite that, the command of God with reference to our life has a distinct content, which is not *simply* the presupposition to the other forms God's command takes to us. Specifically, the "freedom for life . . . is the freedom to treat as a loan both the life of all men with his own and his own with that of all men" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 335).

The command to live, in its highest form, is a command to use the "time, space, and opportunity" that God has given us as creatures in active service to our neighbors. Our life is not an end in itself: as we live eccentrically through the gift of God, we are "called from the isolation and self-sufficiency of a life for life's sake" (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 476–77). Our participation in freedom as God's creatures only happens "to the extent that it does not have its aim in itself, and cannot therefore be lived in self-concentration and self-centredness, but only in a relationship which moves outwards and upwards to another" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 478). While this external orientation includes other creatures, we are finally summoned beyond the world of creatures to God in Jesus Christ (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 479–80).

Yet the summons to an active life includes an obligation to not only protect life, but a more basic responsibility to affirm the lives of others *and* the life we have been given. The gift of our lives is not a static possession or (merely) a presupposition for our action, but

must be *willed* by humanity within the limits that God has placed upon it (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 335). As Joseph Mangina writes, knowing God as Creator "is to be called to a life of joy, gratitude and active engagement with the world; it means receiving and affirming one's own life as a gift" (Mangina 2004, p. 88). Such an affirmation of our lives involves both gratitude and honor. As Barth writes, the summons to active service still leaves "a place for gratitude that he may live."[13] This "gratitude" for our permission to go on living is accompanied by Barth's reminder that we are "commanded to honour and protect life," precisely so that the active life can have "space and time and opportunity" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 471). In the *Leitsatz* to §55, Barth writes that humanity is ordered to "honour his own life and that of every other man as a loan" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 324).

Within this context, honoring our own life means respecting its uniqueness as a gift of God—or cultivating, in Barth's description, astonishment, humility, and awe toward it. Because Jesus Christ became incarnate, human life has the character "even in the most doubtful form" of "something singular, unique, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 339). The fact that our lives belong to God means we owe them not simply an attitude of wonder, but that they must be "affirmed and willed by man." The perception and confirmation of the fact that our lives are gifts and loans from God consists in our action, in the "making use of our life, the use prescribed by its nature" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 341). The biblical injunction "Thou shalt not kill" implies the "positive fact" that "according to God's command it may and should be lived as human life" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 344).

The required affirmation of life within the command of God includes the animal impulses and health that distinctly mark the good of our constitution as such. As Autumn Alcott Ridenour rightly observes, Barth draws on his account of humanity's limits to offer an ethics "that both resists death and accepts the limits of mortality" (Ridenour 2018, pp. 83–85). The will for more life must be qualified by the acknowledgment that God sets limits on us, and that he does not will for us an infinite duration of time.

Yet Barth also goes beyond health and our animal impulses, arguing that the required will for life is "also the will for joy, delight, and happiness" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 375). It is here that the logic of gift and gratitude to God for our lives comes to fruition, as joy occurs when our striving in time reaches a (momentary) resolution. Joy is the moment "where [a person's life] gives him no more trouble but presents and offers itself as a gift, and indeed as a gift of that which he has conceived of, or at least groped after or dreamed of, as genuine life (if not in its totality, at least from a specific standpoint, of that which he has promised himself from life." Even when we attain our end by our own efforts, Barth contends that joy "is really the simplest form of gratitude." (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 376). Paradoxically, joy as the fulfillment of our desire means a desire for its *duration* and a disinterest in *more time.* Because time stands still in joy, the "greater our joy is, the more unnecessary it will seem to us that there should be more time and movement." Instead, we "desire only the duration of this fulfilment, of life in the form of a gift, and therefore of the joyful moment." This desire is essential to joy, Barth contends, because "joy is gratitude for an effected fulfilment" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 377).

The will for life means *willing* joy, or at least willing the conditions that would put us in a position to experience it. The command of God in willing life means we must "continually hold [ourselves] in readiness for joy" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 377). Joy means not only remaining open to the possibility that the world would manifest itself as God's gift of grace, but to *expect* that life will "present and offer itself in provisional fulfilments of its meaning and intention as movement." In sum: to be "joyful means to look out for opportunities for gratitude" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 378). Such fulfilments are only provisional, to be sure, because the "whole of life is provisional." Still, as provisional joys are anticipatory of the great joy of our union with God, they can be rightly accepted: "We need not be joyful in vain here and now," Barth writes, even if this ethics "of respect for life at this climactic point" can only "point away beyond itself" toward the will "for the eternal joy and felicity which in all cases of joy is the only one in which it can be lasting and complete joy, the

definitive revelation of the fulfilment of life accomplished for us and addressed to us by God" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 385).

This openness and readiness for anticipatory fulfilments of joy in gratitude to God includes actively willing *ourselves* in a reciprocal endorsement of the gift of God to us. Insofar as respect for life requires an affirmation of life, it requires a "resolute will to be [ourselves.]" Such an affirmation is not of a general "I" or "self" which is our own possession, which we can know and command on our own terms. Yet because the divine summons comes to each individual *as* an individual, it requires that we take ourselves seriously as those who have been addressed by God. As Barth puts it, the "affirmation of life as self-affirmation is thus at root an act of obedience." It is not an act of "desire or rebellion or a bid for power," but is a "supreme responsibility" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 388). Barth regards character as the "outline of the I which each thinks he can have and know of himself." While we are not permitted to make the formation of character, our "I," a direct work or aim of ours, it emerges in response to our reception of God's summons and disclosure to us as individuals: character is the "a work of the grace of God on man." The command to "be what you are" can be made because we are already in that form in the "eyes of the eternal God," and thus can will that form obediently, "in perfect humility but also in perfect courage," rather than in a "subjective or egocentric" way. Forming our character as individuals by affirming our lives remains a task within the divine command to respect life (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 388).

The self-referential dimension that Barth admits into his ethics of life is necessary because gratitude is the recognition of a benefit—and insofar as our lives are gifts of God to us, they require affirmation as such. Barth's polemic against self-love is unsparing: there is no commandment to love oneself, and loving one's neighbor puts an end to one's self-love. Love demands an object that is *not* ourselves, which means that our "self-love can never be anything right or holy or acceptable to God" (Barth 2010, IV/2, p. 388). The divine command, by contrast, requires an affirmation of our lives in *gratitude* for their creation and for the ongoing space, time, and opportunity we have to rejoice in God and His praise. Gratitude to God for our lives ensures that our affirmation of them remains *modest*, as it is bound by the limits that God places upon them and by the recognition that the nature of the benefit is contingent upon God's affirmation of us. To that extent, self-love is not a foundation for ethics or an architectonic principle into which altruistic or other-regarding motivations must be shoehorned, but the necessary fruit of God's love for us.

Barth also builds in checks within his account of "life" against a pernicious egoism taking hold. At the very outset, he suggests that "egoism and altruism are false antitheses when the question is that of the required will to live" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 341). While God addresses each of us as a particular individual, human life "by its very nature consists in solidarity with those who have also to live it in their own way as it is lent to them." The divine command applies to us "only as a creature that has others of his kind" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 331). Barth says nothing about the basis for this universalizing judgment that our apprehension of "life" gives rise to, but seems to regard it as basic to the concept—and to be delimited by species, as it is founded upon the address of God to each individual rather than a naturalized concept of "life" *per se*.[14]

Barth is able to build in an affirmation of our own lives without reducing it to egoism or self-love, precisely because his account of the divine command includes a eudaimonistic dimension—which Barth ties to honor.[15] In his treatment of meta–ethics in II/2, Barth is explicit that God's command "also includes our salvation, namely, what God ascribes to us as desirable and pleasant and true and good and beautiful." Such an ascription means that the "the justifiable concern of eudaimonism need not be displaced." The command of God is "addressed to us for our own highest good, so that everything—the lowest as well as the highest—which we might demand of ourselves comes into its own by the fact that it is we ourselves who are demanded" (Barth 2010, II/2, p. 653). At the end of his doctrine of creation, Barth links this concern for our good beneath the divine command to the grammar of honor. Barth notes that the command of God *reveals* our nature, but also

corresponds to it: "When God meets man as his Commander," he writes, "the result is that man must recognise his own nature and being in its correspondence to the command of God." Our nature must be "referred to the command of God" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 567). The honor humanity has from God is revealed by God's command within our limits. This honor supplants the logic of "command" and "obedience" in favor of the grammar of free gratitude and return. God honors the creature by "raising him to His service" through the Incarnation and making us worthy for it (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 650). As such, any "obligation" to obey is dissolved: instead, obedience is "to rejoice in our honour before and from God" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 650). Our honor remains extrinsic to us: it is not our possession, but falls on humanity "as a reflection of the honour of God Himself". While it does not become our possession, the honor God shows us is still really ours, and is centrally determinative of our beatitude as God's creatures: our honor is the "supreme earthly good of man," because it is supremely protected by God Himself (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 663).

This "eudaimonistic" dimension is only one aspect of Barth's ethics, to be clear, and it is important to carefully specify what role it plays in our relation to the divine command. Nigel Biggar and Matthew Rose have both brought Barth's eudaimonism to the foreground, emphasizing the way in which God's command discloses and fulfills our human natures and suggesting that we should obey God's command "out of regard for" our own good.[16] By contrast, Jennifer Herdt argues that Barth's eudaimonism is not a "reason-source" view, in which our happiness supplies reasons. Instead, it is an "agent-perfective" eudaimonism, in which "my own good is not necessarily that for the sake of which I desire all else that I desire" (Herdt 2016, p. 163).[17] On her reading of Barth, while "'for me it is good to cleave to God', it is not in order to realize my good that I cleave to God . . . " (Herdt 2016, p. 166).[18] Barth's "eudaimonism" is indeed qualified: he objects in IV.3.2 to making "salvation" the goal of our Christian vocation, as it smacks of "the sanctioning and cultivating of an egocentricity which is only too human" (Barth 2010, IV.3.2, p. 567). Yet the gap between Biggar/Rose and Herdt arises from an unnecessary bifurcation between the divine command and our good that Barth's account of honor overcomes. The divine command supplies us reason to act—but that reason is manifold, and includes both the disclosure of God's grace *and* our good, concurrently, as the disclosure of God's grace *is* our good. The division between acting on the basis of God's command and acting on the basis of our good is thus an artificial one. We might revise Biggar and Rose's contention to mollify Herdt's concern by saying that we act *with* regard for our own good, rather than *out of* regard for our own good. As long as "one's own life" is at stake, its well-being and flourishing is commanded (and permitted) to be a part of one's reason-set for acting within the doctrine of creation. In honoring God through gratitude, we must necessarily honor our own lives. To that extent, Barth's ethics of command is unintelligible without this eudaimonistic dimension.[19]

By integrating a eudaimonist dimension into his divine command ethics and tying together the obligations of honor with the responsiveness of gratitude, Barth incorporates a non-aspirational account of "self-love" into his ethics that obligates us to see our lives as a gift of God. The obligations to honor God with our lives arise out of our gratitude for His gift of honoring us with His revelation and disclosure in Jesus Christ: they are obligations to receive the gift with responsibility and use it in conformity with the intentions of the giver (as a "loan"). In that way, the imperative to honor our life includes respecting the "equipment" we have received, but also goes beyond it: honoring God in gratitude for our lives means using what has been given, perfecting and completing the gift of life through our free action in correspondence with God's grace. Such honoring is not acquisitive, but arises out of the reality that we have been honored already: the affirmation of one's own life is a constitutive part of our recognition of God's grace to us, but is not the basis or grounds for an egoistic self-assertion or pursuit of our own honor, especially at the expense of the well-being or good of those around us.[20]

5. The Ambivalence of Gratitude for Life?

Barth's unequivocal stance "it is not by an obscure fate or neutral decree, but in receipt of a divine benefit, that [a person] is 'alive'" seems as though it precludes any type of ambivalence about the conditions of benefit at the outset (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 336). From our origins in God directly to the ongoing presence of His Spirit as the basis for our life, humanity only lives by and from God. While this entails that our lives are the "one great opportunity" of meeting God, it also reshapes how we assess the value of the life we have been given. The standard, immanent process of weighing the burdens and benefits within a life are insufficient on this score for determining whether life is a benefit to us, as a life lived wholly within suffering (if such a life is possible) would still be eccentrically oriented to and determined by God.

Barth is undoubtedly aware of how complicated it can be to think of one's own life as a "gift"—yet his affirmative stance offers a strong prophylactic against what might be otherwise irredeemably tragic situations. For instance, Barth's emphasis on God being the *sole* answer to humanity's *whence* tends to eclipse natural parents from the purview of our theological understanding.[21] Yet it also allows Barth to offer children a path toward affirming their existence even when their parents would not. In his treatment of parents and children, Barth notes that parents can procreate irresponsibly, giving birth to a child "of whom it might well be said from the parents' standpoint that they would have been better without it." Shockingly, Barth suggests the birth of such a child might indicate "divine judgment in some form" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 271). At the same time, his claim is carefully constrained: it might be said on the parents' side that they would have been better off without the child, but as the child comes from God, their life is irreducibly a gift and a benefit. If they join Job in his lament about the day of their birth, it cannot be their final word.

Yet if this permits Barth to move too quickly into an "affirmative" mode of theological reasoning, his triumphalism is strangely hesitant. The affirmation that life "is always (whether recognised or not) an advantage, a good and worthwhile thing" is equivocal. Barth cites Psalm 73:26 and Psalm 63:3, which clearly locate life as a subordinate and secondary good. The non-absolute quality of life both permits its tragic dimensions to persist and entails that they are not the final word: God can "will to restrict man's will to live for himself and in co-existence with others," by breaking and destroying it. Because God is leading us through this life to eternal life, respect for life cannot "consist in an absolute will to live" but must "move within its appointed limits" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 342). While Barth suggests that the person who takes to heart the gospel message is "plainly forbidden to be anything but merry and cheerful," the force of the command is necessary precisely because the grounds for rejoicing are sometimes so opaque.

Indeed, the ambivalence of the world means that we cannot be confident that we know "what constitutes the real pleasure of our real life, and in what the fulfilments which summon us to gratitude actually consist." This opacity means we must remain open to God even in the suffering of life, "because even life's suffering (or what we regard as such) comes from God, the very One who summons us to rejoice." The real "test of our joy of life as a commanded and therefore a true and good joy is that we do not evade the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ and are not unwilling to be genuinely joyful even as we bear the sorrows laid upon us." Our readiness for suffering and sorrow is the litmus test that the provisional joys we embrace are *real* joys, as it clarifies that *God* is our joy (Barth 2010, III/4, pp. 383–84).[22] As Mangina observes, the maturity required to accept "life as a gift from God" is "tested in the experience of suffering, for it is here we discover that what we thought to be our joy may in fact have rested in a deception" (Mangina 2001, p. 150). Barth's capacity to make such a case is tied to his contention that the goods of creation are ordered toward and determined finally by Christ. As Autumn Alcott Ridenour writes, by "imaging Christ, believers defeat death with an ironic 'joy' by the power of Christ's presence and the hope of resurrection," following Christ in their suffering "in union with

Him through prayer, much like Jesus's own dark hour at Gethsemane" (Ridenour 2018, p. 87; Mangina 2001, pp. 144–45).

There is room within Barth, then, to acknowledge the many ways gratitude for our own lives can be complex. As noted above, Barth's opposition to optimism was animated, in part, by its proponents' inability to seriously suffer with those who suffer. Barth took seriously the "natural joy in life" expressed by Leibniz and others, even while recognizing how "little he harmonises with the spirit and outlook of our own time" (Barth 2010, III/1, pp. 404–5). While Barth's view seems triumphalist, he regards Christianity as ultimately incompatible with optimism precisely because it includes "a true and urgent and inescapable awareness of the imperilling of creation by its limits, of sin and death and the devil" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 407). The fact that Mozart heard the "whole of providence" and transcended suffering moves him *beyond* both optimism and pessimism: "he heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow *also belongs* but in which the shadow is not darkness . . . " The miracle of Mozart's music is that it includes the negative, yet without placing it on a par with the negative. Thus, Barth writes, "the cheerfulness in this harmony *is not without its limits"* (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 298, emphasis mine). This sense of *limits*, Barth thinks, is at the heart of Mozart's music: there is "no light which does not also know dark, no joy which does not also have within it sorrow". Yet, at the same time, the center of his music is one in which "the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yea rings louder than the ever-present Nay." These forces are never brought into an equilibrium, with the "uncertainty and doubt" that such an equivocation would entail (Barth 2003b, pp. 55–56). To that extent, Barth is acutely aware of the difficulty of Christian optimism: gratitude for one's own life is a miracle, given the shadow around us, that needs to be secured for us by the commanding grace of God in Christ. On life's own terms, outside of grace, we would be trapped within a perpetual ambivalence and oscillation between optimism and pessimism.

It is incommensurate with Barth's broader theology (much less his account of Mozart!) to speak of gratitude for our own lives as a task. Gratitude is the spontaneous, free recognition of a divine benefit which culminates in the joyful activity of honoring God in creation. Yet there are points during which we might feel our lives to be more burden than benefit. Barth speaks of an obligation to be merry and cheerful precisely because he is attuned to the difficulties of doing so within the terms of "life" on its own, absent the revelation of the grace of God. The sober, vibrant resolution of Beethoven's *Heiliger* is, to that extent, commensurate with Barth's ethics of gratitude within his doctrine of creation. If the final note is hesitating, it still offers a resolution that heralds the deeper joy that can only come when our union with Christ is made complete.[23] If Mozart saw the whole of providence, Beethoven stood within a single moment, which makes his expression of gratitude more fragile, but perhaps also more profound and—even—Barthian. After all, gratitude runs deeper than the affections, including that of joy: as the being of humanity, gratitude to God is fundamentally constituted by the return of our lives to God in honor and in praise. While gratitude to God requires the affirmation and willing of our life, it is compatible with any number of dispositions and feelings—provided that we are conforming our lives in word and (especially) deed to the grace given us in Christ Jesus, a grace that triumphs in the end over the forces of sin and death.

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Notes

1 Beethoven annotated the two sections "*Neue Kraft fühlend*," or "feeling new strength."

2 Quoted in Hofheinz (2019), p. 461. Despite Gollwitzer's claim, neither *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, nor the *Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth* saw fit to give gratitude an independent entry. Joseph Mangina's discussion of gratitude is exemplary. This paper both tracks his reading and attempts to fill in some details about Barth's argument that he is attentive to, but does not elaborate on. See (Mangina 2001, pp. 125–63). Gerald McKenny's treatment of gratitude is concise but astute. See (McKenny 2013, pp. 17–20, 209–12).

3 While worries persist that Barth's Christocentrism collapses creation into redemption, Barth at least nominally sought to preserve creation as a unique (though not independent) dogmatic locus from redemption or reconciliation. R. Kendall Soulen has offered one such argument. See (Soulen 1996). More recently, Susannah Ticciati has argued that Barth logically (though not intentionally) collapses creation into redemption, which means that we cannot distinguish between the goods at work in each. Among other worries, Ticciati contends that Barth's emphasis on the *manifestation* at the *parousia* of what was previously *hidden* means that nothing fundamentally *new* transpires. The upshot is that death is only parasitic on the resurrection, which means there is "no room for a good which emerges through, and on the other side of, sin: a goodness after failure, and defined only in relation to that failure" (Ticciati 2016, p. 108). In IV.3.1, Barth notes that the order of creation "has its dignity, validity, power and fulness in the fact that Jesus Christ lives." Its "content and fulness" comes from the fact that Christ's life is the life of grace as the Saviour. As such, the "one order of God is the order of reconciliation," which is "more than the order of creation" but also the "confirmation and restoration of the order of creation." The life of Christ means the "establishment of the new order, the reconstitution of the old" (Barth 2010, IV.3.1, p. 43). Similarly, Barth is explicit within his doctrine of providence that God gives "time, space and opportunity" to creation even after the advent of the Christ (Barth 2010, III/3, p. 47). In IV.3.1, Barth reiterates this point (Barth 2010, pp. 335–36) but also suggests that this time between Christ's advent and his *parousia* has "its own specific glory," which is the particular glory of Christ Himself in the transition between them (Barth 2010, IV.3.1, pp. 360–62).

4 On Barth's doctrine of creation, see (Henry 2004; Hielema 1995; Tanner 2000; Gabriel 2014).

5 Paul Nimmo's discussion of the eccentric character of Barth's anthropology clarifies his "actualistic" ontology. As he writes, because the "existence, the history, and the activity of the ethical agent" have their "true determination in Jesus Christ, there is a real sense in which, for Barth, the ethical agent finds her true centre to be outside herself" (Nimmo 2007, p. 97). John Webster describes this feature as the "ecstatic character" of Barth's moral anthropology (Webster 1995, p. 225).

6 I have argued this point in "Gratitude for (One's Own) Life," forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

7 While Kant uses slightly different terminology than Barth, it is striking how similar their accounts of gratitude and honor are. As Kant writes, "Gratitude consists in honoring a person because of a benefit he has rendered us" (Kant 2017, p. 218). On Kant's account of gratitude, see (Timmons 2017).

8 Gerald McKenny rightly notes that Barth's account of gratitude does not *complete* grace, but rather corresponds to it, as the former would dissolve grace by reducing it to an economic transaction. See (McKenny 2013, pp. 210–11). As we shall see below, the dissolution of the logic of obedience only becomes clear when we see that the gift of grace we have received is God's honoring of us in Christ—and, to that extent, the honor that we return is caught within a cycle of reciprocity.

9 Gerald McKenny affirms the non-annihilating dimension of Barth's approach to the Christian life in his treatment of love. See (McKenny 2019, p. 389).

10 Birth and death have the advantage among other signs of being "contemplated directly," and of being present to us "continuously and naturally and self-evidently." Our recognition of our limits as bearing witness to God still hangs on special revelation—but regardless of whether humanity realizes it, "each individual man as such is a sign and testimony in this respect" (Barth 2010, III/3, pp. 227–28).

11 See also (Barth 2010, III/2, p. 530): "For our time is the dimension of our whole life. If our whole time is the gift of God, then God also pledges to maintain its reality as a whole."

12 I have elaborated on this comparative aspect of gratitude in "Gratitude for (One's Own) Life," forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

13 In II/1, Barth writes that the proper use of our free will "consists in our being thankful to God, not only for this or that but *for ourselves*, and therefore for God's foreordination which governs our self-determination" (Barth 2010, II/1, p. 586).

14 In this expansion of the judgment about the good of life to include solidarity with others, Barth has some commonality with John Finnis, for whom the initial perception of the "basic goods" of life, friendship, knowledge, etc. means seeing that they are "good not only for me or thee, but for 'anyone.'" Such a "childish" insight is then deepened by reflecting on the metaphysical capacities individuals have to actualize those goods, and by the evaluative judgment of the worth of those persons. See (Finnis 2011, pp. 35, 39).

15 The distinction between "egoistic" and "eudaimonistic" accounts is drawn from Nussbaum (2001), p. 31. While an egoistic theory might build moral norms upward and outward from the individual's interests or desires, a eudaimonistic theory answers how a person should live by specifying valuable features of a good life, but in such a way that explains why they are really valuable

for a particular person (rather than an abstract agent). For a helpful discussion of eudaimonism's role in the Christian life, see (Simmons 2016).

16 Biggar wries that we "should obey God's command, not out of spineless deference to the capricious wishes of an almighty despot, but out of regard for our own best good, which this gracious God alone truly understands and which he intends with all his heart" (Biggar, "Barth's Trinitarian Ethic," p. 215). Rose echoes Biggar, suggesting that God "ought to be obeyed not out of mindless obedience but out of regard for our own good and true happiness" (Rose 2010, p. 10).

17 Rose anticipates this worry. On his reading, the extrinsic basis of humanity's goodness in God means Barth's eudaimonism is unique, as it introduces discontinuities between what we "naturally" think is our good and the good as God reveals it to us in Christ (Rose 2010, pp. 123–32).

18 While Herdt rightly notes that it is because God gives us the gift of Himself that there is an "absolute claim on us," she argues the "heart of Barth's understanding of the basis of the divine command has not to do with debt as such, but with responsibility." Her worry is that it is not "just that we are bound because we are infinitely indebted—that we have somehow to pay God back for grace received," as that would entail we are "obliged *prior* to being commanded, simply reproducing the vicious circle that has always haunted theological voluntarism" (Herdt 2016, pp. 166–67). Herdt's corrective is helpful, yet she overlooks how gratitude and honor inform Barth's account of the divine command. While the same disclosure of grace that animates gratitude and honor gives the divine command, the moral forcefulness of the command is such that we are impelled to honor God who gives it to us. In that way, there is a sense of "debt" at the heart of the divine command that precedes responsibility—but it is non-economic, as we have seen, and cannot be repaid.

19 While a full treatment of Barth's ethics is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the difficulty of reconciling the reasons for action goes to the heart of his theology. Barth's treatment of God's love in II/1, §28 underscores that God loves for no good or purpose beyond His disclosure of Himself to us in Christ. As Tyler Wittman writes, we "must not seek for a higher motive, purpose, or end, than God's love in Christ, even if we attempt to locate that purpose in God's inner life . . . Whatever God's love means, it must enable us to say that God communicates himself to another as an intrinsically purposeful act without any higher end or greater good" (Wittman 2019, p. 172). At the same time, Barth writes that God's institution of the covenant with humanity through election is "the demonstration, the overflowing of the love which is the being of God, that He who is entirely self-sufficient, who even within Himself cannot know isolation, willed even in all His divine glory to share His life with another, and to have that other as the witness of His glory" (Barth 2010, II/2, pp. 9–10). This "glory" is transformed into honour within the domain of creation: creatureliness consists in having the covenant as a determination, in being "prepared for the place where [God's] honour dwells" (Barth 2010, III/1, p. 364). God loves humanity for no good beyond Himself—yet this putative rejection of a teleological dimension to love sits alongside Barth's contention that creatures are teleologically ordered toward the display of God's glory and honor. The gap between these two is a feature of the gap between God's eternity and our time, and the problem of ethics that arises from it. Barth writes that "ethics must be a problem for us" because time has a beginning and end, as ethics "depends upon the command of the supra-temporal God" who is "bound to no time, and therefore the Lord of all times" (Barth 2010, II/1, p. 638). Gerald McKenny worries that this type of position is "ultimately self-defeating," asking whether God's action can "truly be *for* the human creature as such if the human creature as such is, and is what it is, solely so that God can be for it?" (McKenny 2021, p. 24). The worry seems predicated on the same bifurcation between humanity's own good and God that Barth, as we have seen, strives to overcome.

20 Barth invokes the notion of a "limited span" to life in order to reject any account of "life" that would lead to an acquisitiveness for more time. As Barth writes there, the limitations of our life by God mean that we are not "under the intolerable destiny of having to give sense, duration and completeness to his existence by his own exertions and achievements, and therefore in obvious exclusion of the view that he must and may and can by his own strength and powers eternally maintain, assert and confirm himself, attaining for himself his own dignity and honour" (Barth 2010, III/4, p. 372).

21 I have addressed this feature in "Ectogestation and Humanity's *Whence*: An Exploration with Saint Augustine and Karl Barth, forthcoming in *Christian Bioethics*.

22 It is worth noting that Barth at points thought that gratitude was capable of taking on strange, paradoxical forms. In the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, he suggests that the penitence of the publican who cries "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner" in Luke 18 is paradigmatic of gratitude. See (Barth 2003a, p. 336).

23 Responding to Adorno's suggestion that Beethoven reconciled in his music what was unreconcilable in reality, William Kinderman writes that "Beethoven actually went far toward 'reconciling what is irreconcilable' through his handling of the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' in the lydian mode together with the animated, dance-like tonal sections marked 'feeling new strength.' If these drastically opposed idioms are at first juxtaposed, suggesting two independent beginnings, they are also partly integrated in the final section" (Kinderman 2006, p. 291).

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