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Can You Be Grateful to a Benefactor Whose Existence You Doubt?

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Abstract: Among philosophers who study gratitude, there is much disagreement about what gratitude is and when it is called for. One thesis no one has questioned, however, is the thesis that in order to be grateful to a benefactor, a beneficiary must believe that that benefactor exists. In this essay, I lay out novel reasons to doubt this thesis, and I explore a striking implication of rejecting it: the implication that doubters of various kinds—not just religious people in periods of doubt, but also lifelong agnostics, and even some atheists—might be capable of gratitude to God. I begin by developing a hypothetical case that demonstrates people can be grateful to human benefactors whose existence they doubt. My case shows that gratitude to a doubted benefactor is consistent with hoping that benefactor turns out not to exist. I then show how my case implies that theists in periods of doubt, agnostics, and a particular kind of atheist could be grateful to God, despite a lack of belief in his existence, and despite a lack of faith in God.

Keywords: God; gratitude; cosmic gratitude; doubt; atheism; agnosticism

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1. Introduction

Among philosophers who study gratitude, there is much disagreement about what gratitude is and when it is called for. One thesis often taken for granted, however, is the thesis that in order to be grateful to a benefactor, a beneficiary must believe that that benefactor exists. In this essay, I lay out novel reasons to doubt this thesis, and I explore a striking implication of rejecting it: the implication that doubters of various kinds—not just religious people in periods of doubt, but also lifelong agnostics, and even some atheists—may be capable of gratitude to God.

To those ends, I proceed as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, I clarify this essay's central question: Is it possible for you to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence you doubt? In Section 4, I lay out an argument for why belief in a benefactor's existence is necessary for gratitude. In Section 5, I present reasons for believing that we can be grateful to benefactors whose existence we doubt by exploring several other attitudes that we can have toward entities whose existence we doubt. In Section 6, I describe a hypothetical case showing that a beneficiary can be grateful to a human benefactor whose existence he doubts, and I use this case to generalize the conditions under which this is likely to happen. In Section 7, I explore several ramifications of my case, including the implication that gratitude to a doubted benefactor is consistent with *hoping* a benefactor turns out not to exist. In Section 8, I show how my case and its ramifications apply when the doubted benefactor is God: specifically, I show that theists in periods of doubt, agnostics, and a particular kind of atheist can be grateful to God, despite their lack of belief in his existence, and despite their lack of faith in God. In fact, I show, even doubters who lack faith in God can be grateful to God, in a substantial way that goes beyond merely thanking God. I highlight an implication these insights have for an argument about the existence of "cosmic gratitude," a concept of growing interest among philosophers of gratitude. In Section 9, I raise a number of questions—empirical and non-empirical, descriptive and normative—that my arguments make salient about doubters' gratitude to God. I close by suggesting

that doubters, including those who lack faith, may be capable of a variety of attitudes toward God other than gratitude, including contrition, forgiveness, praise, and love. This suggestion raises an intriguing possibility: that having a substantial relationship with God may be compatible with doubt and lack of faith in God's existence. My essay thus suggests that theists and nontheists might have more in common than most people realize.

2. Preliminary Clarifications

Before I begin, I must make three preliminary clarifications about the question this essay aims to answer. The first clarification I want to make concerns an ambiguity in what it means to doubt someone exists. I might doubt someone exists *now*, but believe they existed at some point in the past; or, alternatively, I might doubt that they *ever* existed. I take it as relatively uncontroversial that we can be grateful to someone who did exist but who (we now believe) no longer does. The more interesting question is whether I can be grateful to someone who I do not believe ever existed. So in this essay, I will ask whether it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor one doubts ever existed.

My second and third clarifications have to do with the notion of possibility in this essay's central question. When I ask whether it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence one doubts, what I am really asking is whether belief in a benefactor's existence is a strictly necessary condition for gratitude to that benefactor. Otherwise put, I am asking if failure to believe in a benefactor's existence immediately and necessarily implies that one cannot be grateful to that benefactor. I am not asking whether failure to believe in a benefactor's existence makes it *unlikely* that one is grateful to that benefactor, or whether failure to believe in a benefactor's existence in a particular case makes a particular person's gratitude in a particular instance impossible, but whether failing to believe some benefactor exists *eo ipso* always makes gratitude to that benefactor, for anything, impossible or incoherent.

Finally, when I ask whether failure to believe in a benefactor makes gratitude impossible, I am asking only whether we ever *can* be grateful to doubted benefactors, and not whether we ever *should* be grateful to doubted benefactors. In other words, I am not asking whether failure to believe in a benefactor always *eo ipso* renders gratitude *irrational* or *inappropriate* or *unfitting*. It may turn out that gratitude to a doubted benefactor is possible but never rational or appropriate or fitting—just as it may sometimes be possible to believe certain propositions that it can never be rational to believe. I will touch on the rationality and fittingness of gratitude to doubted benefactors in the final section of this essay, but those questions are larger questions deserving an essay of their own.

With these preliminaries out of the way, I turn now to a brief discussion of the core concept in my central question: the concept of gratitude.

3. Gratitude

In what follows, I will introduce a clarificatory distinction and several claims about gratitude I will take as starting points in this essay.

In this essay, I will be interested in *directed* gratitude, the attitude referred to by sentences like "Yardley is grateful to Rachel for saving him." Directed gratitude always involves a beneficiary, Y, a benefactor, R, to whom the beneficiary is grateful, and something, ϕ, the benefactor did to precipitate the beneficiary's gratitude. Directed gratitude is distinct from *propositional* gratitude—the attitude referred to in sentences like "Yardley is grateful that it did not rain on his wedding day." This attitude is Y's gratitude *that* some proposition *p* is the case. Directed gratitude is also distinct from what I will call *objectual* gratitude—the attitude referred to in sentences like "Yardley is grateful for his children." Objectual gratitude is Y's gratitude for some object that was not given to him by anyone. I will refer to propositional gratitude and objectual gratitude together as *appreciation*,[1] and I will treat directed gratitude as distinct from (though possibly contingently related to) appreciation.[2] In this essay, I will be interested in whether we can have directed gratitude

toward benefactors whose existence we doubt. I will not be directly interested in whether we can appreciate doubted benefactors and/or benefits we receive from them.

In keeping with a growing consensus in recent philosophical literature, I will take it that directed gratitude (which I will from here on out refer to as simply gratitude) is the fitting response to *benevolence*. More specifically, gratitude to R for ϕ-ing is typically fitting insofar as R's ϕ-ing is motivated by benevolence for Y.[3] By *benevolence* here I mean, roughly, a desire on the part of R to benefit Y for Y's own sake, and not merely as a means to some other end. Paradigm examples of gratitude-warranting benevolence include giving a beneficiary a gift he appreciates, when this gift-giving behavior is ultimately motivated purely or primarily by the thought of the recipient's happily enjoying the gift. Paradigm examples of gratitude-worthy benevolence also include successful helping behaviors motivated purely or primarily by sympathy, empathy or compassion for the beneficiary. These may not be the only sorts of acts that warrant gratitude, but I will take it that such acts generally do warrant gratitude.[4] However, if, in ϕ-ing, R benefits Y solely in order to advance his (R's) own reputation, or only as a means to the end of helping someone other than Y, or only as an attempt to harm or manipulate Y, or only as an attempt to harm or manipulate someone else, then R does not benefit Y benevolently.[5] In all of those cases, if R's ϕ-ing benefits Y, then we might say that R acts *beneficially* vis à vis Y. And it might be fair to say in many or all such cases that Y should *appreciate* that (be grateful that) R benefited him, and in some such cases, Y might owe R *praise* for ϕ-ing. But I will take it that genuine *gratitude* is typically only owed (by Y to R) for ϕ-ing that R did at least in part out of benevolence toward Y.[6]

Gratitude, then, is the fitting response to benevolence. What does this response consist of? In other words, given R performed an act of benevolence for Y, what kind of response must Y have to count as grateful to R? In this article, I will take it that a beneficiary's gratitude, as a response to a benevolent act, consists of certain affective elements and certain behavioral elements.[7] These elements include a motivation to express thanks to the benefactor.[8] That is, a beneficiary who recognizes an act of benevolence but has no inclination to express thanks to a benefactor falls short of gratitude. Another element of the grateful response is an "affective disposition" of goodwill: an enhanced tendency to wish the benefactor well to a certain extent in the future. If R does Y a benevolent favor, then Y should be more likely than he was before to be pleased when he hears things are going well for R, and sad or upset if he learns his benefactor has suffered. Insofar as Y is not disposed to feel these ways, and feels no upset upon hearing his benefactor is suffering, Y would seem to fall short of gratitude.[9] Finally, gratitude also includes an enhanced willingness or motivation to reciprocate a favor or benefit to a benefactor, should an opportunity arise.[10] Specifically, if R benevolently helps Y, Y should be motivated to help or protect R for R's own sake—not indirectly, or for motives that are ultimately selfish. We can call this element of the grateful response "grateful beneficence." Out of grateful beneficence, a beneficiary should be motivated to please, benefit, protect, or refrain from harming a benefactor in certain ways—especially if the benefactor requests it. And a beneficiary who lacked an intrinsic desire to benefit a benefactor, especially when she's in need, would seem to fall short of gratitude. If R benevolently buys Y a thoughtful gift, then insofar as Y is grateful, Y should thank R, wish R well in the future, and be more willing than he was before to buy R a nice gift, should the opportunity arise. Insofar as Y has these elements, in response to R's benevolence, Y is grateful to R. If R benevolently saves Y from drowning, insofar as Y is grateful to R for doing so, Y should thank R, wish R well in the future, and be more willing than he was before R saved him to risk or sacrifice in order to save R's life in the future, if R is ever in danger. Insofar as Y lacks any of these elements after benefiting from R's benevolence, Y falls short of gratitude. Insofar as Y has these elements, in response to R's benevolence, Y is grateful to R.

To sum up, then: gratitude is an affective disposition of goodwill, motivation to thank, and disposition to benefit a benefactor, all of which make up the fitting response to a benefactor's having performed an act of benevolence for the beneficiary. This relatively

uncontroversial (if brief) summary of what gratitude is a fitting response to, and what behaviors and feelings constitute gratitude, should make clear the central question I ask in this essay: Can we be grateful to entities whose existence we doubt?

4. Reasons to Think Gratitude Requires Belief in a Benefactor's Existence

We can find *prima facie* reason to think gratitude requires belief in a benefactor's existence if we consider not just the affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response, but the *cognitive* elements as well. In addition to the feelings and the behavioral dispositions of a grateful response, some have argued that certain *beliefs* are part of what's required in order for a beneficiary to count as grateful.[11] Specifically, these beliefs are thought to include the belief that the benefactor benefited or tried to benefit the beneficiary, and the belief that she did or tried to do so benevolently—out of some ultimate or basic desire to see the beneficiary fare well. Let us call this, for short, belief in the benefactor's *benevolent benefaction*.[12] Many philosophers take for granted the claim that beliefs like these are part of gratitude—part of what is required for a beneficiary to count as grateful. However, it is worth pausing to question this claim. Why think that in order to be grateful, a beneficiary must believe that a benefactor benefited or tried to benefit him, and did so benevolently?

I have argued elsewhere that such beliefs are necessary for gratitude for two reasons (Manela 2019, p. 299). The first is that without them, the feelings and behaviors typical of gratitude likely would not arise. After all, an affective disposition of goodwill, a desire to thank someone, and a desire to benefit that particular person more than one did before, do not typically come about spontaneously, *ex nihilo* in us. And without these affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response, a beneficiary could not count as grateful.

A second reason to think such beliefs are necessary for gratitude is this: even if the affective disposition of goodwill and the behavioral disposition of grateful beneficence could somehow arise in a beneficiary who did not believe his benefactor had benefited him benevolently, without such beliefs there would be nothing defining those feelings and behaviors as feelings and behaviors *of gratitude*, as opposed to, say, feelings and behavior of contrition, or love, or solidarity, or empathy, or concern. After all, the feelings and behaviors typical of gratitude—a desire to see someone fare well and a motivation to benefit them—are the same sorts of feelings and behaviors as those of empathy, loyalty, solidarity, filial piety, concern, love, and other attitudes. What makes them feelings and behaviors *of gratitude* in particular, when that is what they are, is their connection to a benefactor's having done or tried to do something good for the beneficiary. This connection appears in two related ways. Part of what makes feelings and behaviors feelings and behaviors *of gratitude to R* is that R's being a benefactor plays an essential role in the *justification* a grateful beneficiary has for why he is disposed to feel those feelings and act beneficently toward R. In other words, insofar as I am grateful to someone, when I am asked why I bear them goodwill and am disposed to treat them beneficently, my response should reference their having been my benefactor—their having benefited me or tried to benefit me benevolently. If my justification for goodwill and beneficence toward someone did not reference their benevolent benefaction but, rather, just their suffering, that attitude might be *compassion* or *sympathy*. If my justification for goodwill and beneficence toward someone referenced not their benevolent benefaction but the fact that they were my parent, that might make such feelings and behaviors those of *filial piety*. If it referenced not their benevolent benefaction but just the fact that they were a victim of my harms in the past, that might make such feelings and behaviors those of *contrition*. So a person with gratitude-typical behaviors and feelings must be inclined to cite a benefactor's benevolent benefaction as part of the justification for those behaviors and feelings in order for them to constitute gratitude.

A second way these behaviors and feelings must be connected to a benefactor's benevolence is this: the details of the benefactor's benevolent benefaction should modulate the amount and content of the behaviors and the intensity of the feelings. In other words, insofar as a person is grateful, if they find out that a benefactor showed more benevolence

to them than they had originally suspected, their affective disposition of goodwill and their tendency toward grateful beneficence should consequently become more robust. If Y's feelings and behaviors toward R didn't change at all in response to changes in how Y perceived the benevolent benefaction of R, it would seem strained to call those behaviors and feelings behaviors and feelings of gratitude to R.

What emerges from this is an argument for why belief in a benefactor's benevolent benefaction is a necessary part of gratitude (or at least necessary for gratitude). Without the belief that a benefactor benevolently benefited or tried to benefit the beneficiary, gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors would seem to lack the connection to benevolent benefaction that defines them as feelings and behaviors of gratitude. Without such a belief, the argument goes, a beneficiary's justification for gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors could not reference a benefactor's benevolent benefaction. Nor could the magnitude of those feelings and behaviors be influenced by the details of the benevolent benefaction. And so those gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors literally would not be behaviors and feelings of gratitude. So belief in a benefactor's benevolent beneficence is necessary for gratitude, because without it, gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors likely would not arise in a beneficiary, and if they did, those feelings and behaviors still would not constitute gratitude.

Now, if Y must have certain beliefs about R's status as a benefactor—certain beliefs about R's motives and intentions in ϕ-ing—in order for Y to be grateful to R for ϕ-ing, then it seems it should also be necessary for Y to believe the claims presupposed by those beliefs. And those presuppositions include the belief that R exists. If Y did not believe R existed, Y could not believe that R benefited Y or tried to benefit Y benevolently, and then, for the reasons I just mentioned in the last two paragraphs, Y would not have gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors concerning R, or Y's feelings and behaviors toward R would not be feelings and behaviors of gratitude. And without feelings and behaviors of gratitude toward R, Y could not be grateful to R.

This argument leaves us with *prima facie* reason to think that belief in a benefactor's existence is necessary for gratitude to that benefactor. It also helps define the challenge that must be met by anyone who wants to show that gratitude to doubted benefactors is possible: one must show that it is possible for goodwill and beneficence to arise in a beneficiary, and somehow be definable as feelings and behaviors of gratitude, in the absence of belief that that benefactor exists.

To get a sense for how this challenge might be met, it's worth reflecting on several other attitudes that one might have toward entities whose existence one doubts.

5. Attitudes toward Entities Whose Existence One Doubts

A little reflection shows that we can have a variety of attitudes toward entities whose existence we doubt. We can fear things, for instance, whose existence we doubt. A person might believe vampires do not exist but still fear them. Such a person might, despite his lack of belief, still hang garlic on his door every night and experience feelings of fear and anxiety on nights when he realizes he forgot to do so, just in case vampires do turn out to exist. That fear might be irrational, but it is nonetheless fear. People can experience fear toward an object if they think such an object might exist—that its existence is possible—and if they have a mental representation of that object as having certain characteristics (e.g., a mental representation of vampires as posing danger to oneself). That belief in the mere possibility can be enough to give rise to certain feelings and to motivate certain behaviors (like hanging garlic on one's doorknob). Those feelings and behaviors are feelings and behaviors of fear because they are justified or explained by referring to a fearsome object: vampires.

Gratitude, though, is unlike fear in at least one important way: being grateful to others is not an attitude about what they might do to us in the future; gratitude is, at least in part, an attitude about *our* treatment *of them* in the future. As I noted in the last section, being grateful to someone includes grateful beneficence: an enhanced motivation to do them a favor or help them out or spare them from harm in the future, as well as an affective disposition of goodwill: a hope that they fare well in the future. In this regard, gratitude is

less like fear and more like *concern for* someone (what we might call *prepositional concern*). But a little reflection shows that concern for someone, like fear, is an attitude one can have toward entities whose existence one doubts. Imagine a golfer who believes, with good reason, that she is alone on a well-secured private golf course. She hits a shot that flies unexpectedly off-course toward a thick grove of trees. Though she believes with a high degree of confidence that nobody is in the trees, she is not certain that no such person exists, and she worries that if there were someone in the trees, they'd be in danger of being struck. Imagine that this thought causes her to shout a warning—not out of habit, and not out of fear for her own legal liability, but purely for altruistic reasons. Her justification for her actions and her feelings of worry center on the harm her action might cause someone, just in case there happens to be someone in the grove of trees. Now imagine it turns out, despite her initial belief, that there was a person in the grove of trees. It seems fair in this case to say that the golfer *felt concern* and *acted out of concern* for someone—and *was concerned* for someone—whose existence she doubted. So we can have some attitudes toward others whom we might affect in the future even if we do not firmly believe the objects of those attitudes exist, so long as we think that such objects might exist and, if they do, that our actions might impact them.

Gratitude, though, is unlike concern in an important way: gratitude is an attitude toward other persons qua *agents*, who do things, not merely persons qua *patients*, who can suffer or be benefited. More specifically, being grateful to someone is an attitude we typically have when see someone as having done something benevolent for us. That is a thought that must make it into a person's justification for gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors in order for those feelings and behaviors to constitute gratitude (as opposed to empathy or filial piety or loyalty). So gratitude requires more content in the cognitive attitude of its bearer than fear or concern do. Gratitude must represent its object not just as potentially open to harm and benefit, but also simultaneously as a past agent who did something rather specific: benevolently benefitted the beneficiary.

In order to show that gratitude to doubted benefactors is possible, what's needed is a plausible case of a beneficiary who is disposed to have gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors toward someone, and to cite that person's past benevolence toward him in his justification of why he has those feelings and behaviors, but who nonetheless never believes such a person ever existed. In the following section, I describe such a case.

6. A Vignette about Gratitude to a Doubted Benefactor

Imagine Yardley is a world-class professional tracker. In fact, he's the best tracker who ever lived, having successfully tracked hundreds of the world's craftiest human fugitives through dozens of natural environments on seven continents. For most of his life, he has lived a solitary existence. A moderate cynic, he believes that the average person is inherently selfish and not willing to benefit others for their own sakes. Yardley does, however, believe that some people are altruistic, and so even though he himself does not care much for the average person, he typically responds with reasonable levels of genuine gratitude toward those who benevolently help him.

Imagine that one day, Yardley survives the sinking of a ship at sea and washes ashore on a small uncharted island. He searches the island somewhat thoroughly, and, seeing no evidence of anyone else on the island, he comes to believe with a high degree of confidence that he is the only person on the island. The only source of food he notices at first is fish in a small creek in the island's small forest. He tries for hours to catch some fish at the creek, but he fails. He then finds some tools that washed ashore with him, and with those tools, he climbs some tall palm trees and cuts down fruit that otherwise would be inaccessible. He amasses a large hoard of fruit, but although he can cut down enough fruit to survive, he realizes that he will be malnourished if that is all he has to eat. So the next day, he returns to the creek, intent on figuring out how to catch fish. To his surprise, when he arrives at the spot where he had tried to fish the day before, he finds a fish lying on the bank exactly where he had stood the day before.

His first thought is that someone caught and placed the fish there. But then Yardley remembers that he searched the island somewhat thoroughly and found no evidence of anyone on the island. He searches the area around the creek again, more thoroughly, and finds no evidence of any human presence (aside from his own). While he acknowledges it's *possible* that there is someone else on the island with him, on reflection, he maintains his belief that there is no one on the island but him.[13] He is, after all, the world's best tracker, and so the odds of there being someone on this island who can evade him are vanishingly small. He thus comes to believe that this fish, fortuitously, must have flopped out of the creek at this exact spot. He eats the fish and returns to the same spot by the creek the next day to teach himself to fish. When he arrives at the spot where he'd found the fish the day before, he finds a crooked pointy branch, which appears to have snapped off a nearby tree. He picks up the branch and, on a whim, tries to use the pointy end as a spear to spearfish in the creek. To his surprise, the branch works perfectly as a spear—its strange angles perfectly correcting for the light diffraction of the creek's surface. Yardley catches as many fish as he can carry. As he fishes, he starts to wonder if this suspiciously effective stick may have been placed here for him to find by someone who wanted him to catch fish. Again, he searches the terrain around the creek, and again, he reaffirms the belief that he is alone on the island—the fish and the stick being mere fortuitous coincidences.

Still, though, he continues to believe in the *possibility* that someone else is on the island—specifically, someone who saw him trying to catch fish and caught one for him and left it for him in case he returned, and then left him a means to catch more fish. And that scenario remains salient in Yardley's mind.

Yardley returns to his camp on the beach, where his large hoard of fruit awaits him. As he eats and enjoys the fish, he thinks about the possibility of a benevolent neighbor. He realizes that if such a person exists and has been on the island for a long time, he probably has not been able to get at the fruit on the tall trees. After all, Yardley was only able to get at that fruit using the tools that washed ashore with him. As a result of having these thoughts, Yardley finds himself motivated to bring an armful of fruit to the creek where he found the fish—just in case there really is a benevolent benefactor who helped him. He does this not out of a selfish desire to keep his possible benefactor's benevolence flowing; rather, he does it out of the same sort of disposition that motivated him, throughout his life, to help benefactors who'd benevolently helped him—that is, out of an intrinsic desire to see his benevolent benefactors be happy or satisfied. Yardley feels a bit silly doing this, since he does not believe there is any such benefactor. But, he reasons, there is a chance there *could* be such a benefactor; and Yardley really has plenty of free time on his hands. Though it makes him feel very silly, he cannot resist the urge to shout, "If you're out there, thank you!" as he leaves the creek. And as he's falling asleep that night, even though he is pretty sure there is no such benefactor—even though he *believes* there is no such benefactor—he imagines a possible world in which there was such a benefactor, and he is satisfied at the thought of his benefactor's being happy when he discovers the fruit.

Now imagine that in the middle of the night, Yardley is awakened by rumbling sounds, and he realizes that the island is a volcano, which has just begun to erupt. Fortunately for him, he is spotted by the crew of a boat that had been searching for him, and he is rescued just in time. He watches from the safety of the boat as the entire island is covered in molten lava and the sea around the island begins to boil. He asks the crew if they saw anyone else on the island, and the reply they did not. Yardley still doubts there was anyone else on the island. In fact, Yardley still *believes*, on reflection, that he was alone on the island. But when he imagines the possible benefactor who benevolently caught him a fish, and reflects on the horrible end that that benefactor would have just suffered, it makes Yardley sad—and sadder than he would be if Yardley had learned of a typical selfish stranger who passed away.

Now imagine that it turns out, despite a lack of evidence, that there really was another person, Randolph, on the island with Yardley. Randolph, who had washed up on shore years earlier, had grown paranoid after years alone on the island, and so he'd taken

measures to hide his existence from Yardley. He was able to do this successfully because he himself had been a skilled tracker, like Yardley. Randolph had been watching Yardley ever since Yardley started exploring the island. He had seen Yardley trying to catch fish and, out of benevolence, caught a fish (which he'd learned to do over the years) and left it for Yardley in case Yardley came back. He also left Yardley a fishing stick he had made. He left both these gifts out of genuine benevolence for Yardley. And he left both these gifts in such a way as to make them seem like strokes of good luck. When Yardley came back with fruit, Randolph was surprised (because he did not think he'd left Yardley with sufficient evidence to believe he, Randolph, existed), but he was deeply happy, because he'd never been able to cut down fruit from the tall palm trees. Imagine too that, just as Yardley had feared, Randolph ultimately died when the island's volcano erupted.

Here is a case of a beneficiary and a benefactor where the beneficiary doubts the benefactor's existence.[14] And though the case is a hypothetical one, Yardley's reactions in this scenario are not incomprehensible. We can understand what it's like to be Yardley in this case, and many of us might find ourselves responding just as Yardley does if we were in his position. Yardley responds to the fish and fishing spear next to the creek in the ways a grateful beneficiary should respond: Yardley acts the way a typical grateful beneficiary would act (finding a way to reciprocate), and does so for the sort of reasons (with the sort of motivation) that characterizes a typical grateful beneficiary. He does not just leave the fruit randomly, or as a way to get rid of a burdensome surplus of fruit at his camp, or for any selfish reason at all, but, rather, because he has an intrinsic desire to see his benefactor fare well—for the benefactor's sake. And he feels the way a grateful beneficiary should feel: when he sees the island engulfed in lava, he feels sad at the thought of his benefactor suffering and dying. Now, if he were pressed later to justify his behaviors and feelings—to say why he left the fruit by the creek, and why he felt sad when he saw the volcano erupt—his justification would cite or reference his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence. What motivated him was not the thought that the hypothetical neighbor was someone he had hurt, or someone he feared he might hurt, or someone he shared an identity with; it was someone he saw as having benevolently helped him. This thus seems to be a case where Yardley, a beneficiary, feels and acts gratefully—*is grateful*—to someone, Randolph, whose existence he doubts.

In the previous section, I presented an argument for thinking that belief in a benefactor's existence was necessary for gratitude. According to that argument, belief in a benefactor's existence was necessary for gratitude because such a belief was presupposed by the belief that the benefactor acted benevolently, and *that* belief was necessary to motivate a beneficiary's grateful feelings and behaviors. Belief in a benefactor's existence was also necessary for the benefactor's benevolence to appear in the beneficiary's justification for those gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors, and that in turn was necessary for those feelings and behaviors to constitute gratitude (as opposed to other attitudes). But now we can see where that argument goes wrong. Having thoughts of being benevolently benefited may be necessary for gratitude-typical behaviors and feelings to arise and count as gratitude. But belief in a benefactor's existence is not necessary for such thoughts, because another mental state might sometimes be enough to bring those thoughts about. What is that mental state? It's the mental state Yardley had vis à vis Randolph: Belief that Randolph *might* exist, together with a representation of Randolph, if he did exist, as having acted benevolently toward Yardley. That combination of elements, enlivened and made more vivid by the benefits Yardley received, could give rise to behaviors and feelings typical of gratitude. And it could place a benefactor's benevolence in a central role in the beneficiary's justification for why he is disposed to feel and act in gratitude-typical ways.

If this is true, then it would seem that failing to believe in the existence of one's benefactor does not make gratitude to that benefactor incoherent or incomprehensible. Indeed, one could be grateful to a benefactor he does not believe exists, who he *believes does not exist*, as long as he believes that that benefactor *might* exist, and thinking of that possibility helps lead to grateful behavior and an affective disposition of goodwill.[15]

7. Gratitude to a Benefactor One Hopes Does Not Exist

The case of Yardley and Randolph shows that doubting a benefactor ever existed is compatible with being grateful to that benefactor. The case suggests another implication worth noting: that gratitude to a benefactor is compatible with *hoping* that benefactor does not exist.

To see this, imagine Yardley is on the rescue boat watching the island become engulfed in lava. He realizes that if Randolph exists, Randolph would be suffering a horrible death right now. And because he hates the thought of Randolph suffering, he hopes that this is not the case. And because he hopes that is not the case, he finds himself hoping Randolph does not exist. Still, though, it seems fair to say he remains grateful to Randolph.[16] After all, he is disposed to feel sad at the thought of Randolph's suffering terribly in the eruption, and insofar as that disposition arose from his seeing Randolph as benevolent, that would seem to be a feeling of gratitude.

We could imagine other reasons that Yardley might hope Randolph turns out not to exist. One of those might be that Yardley, who prides himself on his survivalist abilities, likes the thought that he was able to survive for a time on the desert island all alone, dependent on no one but himself. Relatedly, we might imagine Yardley hoping Randolph does not exist because if he did, that would mean Yardley's tracking skills were further from perfection than he'd thought—and he prides himself on having excellent tracking skills. Imagine that for these reasons, Yardley hopes that Randolph turns out not to exist. These reasons might also lead Yardley to suppress his thoughts about Randolph, or suppress motivation to bring Randolph his surplus fruit; and if that happened, then it would seem questionable whether Yardley was grateful to Randolph. But Yardley's hope that Randolph not exist in this case need not make his gratitude to Randolph impossible. Notwithstanding these hopes, we could imagine that even while he believes he is alone on the island, the possibility of someone else on the island still tempts him enough that he's motivated to leave surplus fruit at the place where he found the fish, just in case benefactor Randolph does turn out to exist. It thus seems fair to say that a beneficiary can be grateful to a benefactor, even when he does not believe his benefactor exists, and even when he hopes his benefactor does not exist because of his pride in his skills or in his independence of the help of others. Now, insofar as this sort of pride constitutes a lack of proper humility, this implication has an interesting upshot: a beneficiary can be grateful to a benefactor while failing to be properly humble vis à vis that benefactor and his contributions to the beneficiary's wellbeing. And while this is consistent with some characterizations of gratitude,[17] it may be in tension with accounts of gratitude according to which gratitude requires humility (where this is understood as one's acceptance of one's imperfections and interdependence on others).[18]

8. Implications for Gratitude to Supernatural Entities

My case in Section 6 demonstrated that beneficiaries can be grateful to benefactors whose existence they doubt. In other words, the mere fact that a beneficiary does not believe a particular entity ever existed does not mean that beneficiary is incapable of gratitude to that entity. I demonstrated this in the case of gratitude to a human benefactor. But the same generalization could also be extended to apply to nonhuman benefactors. In theory, it could be extended to apply to supernatural benefactors, like ancestral spirits, natural spirits, ghosts, angels, gods, and God.[19] In the final two sections of this essay, I will explore the consequences of my generalization in one particular spiritual or religious worldview: a monotheistic view, according to which there is one supreme god (God) who benevolently benefits every human being in various ways but leaves human beings with room to reasonably doubt he exists.

The scenario I described in the previous section's vignette could be seen as a close analog of this monotheistic worldview—at least if we accept two assumptions about people's relationships to God. One of these assumptions is that God is benevolent to human beings in roughly the same way human beings can be benevolent to each other—

that is, God does good things for human beings, for our sake, out of an ultimate desire to see us flourish. Another assumption is that gratitude to God is roughly the same as gratitude to human beings (i.e., gratitude to God and gratitude to humans are not fundamentally different concepts). More specifically, this involves the assumption that gratitude is the fitting response to God's benevolence, and that this gratitude to God involves the same sort of affective dispositions (hoping to see the benefactor happy, not disappointed) and grateful beneficence (behaviors aimed at pleasing the benefactor, because benefactor was benevolent) that gratitude to human beings consists of. If we accept these assumptions, then my vignette about Yardley and Randolph becomes a close analog of doubters' gratitude to God.[20]

In the vignette, Randolph is analogous to God, and Yardley is analogous to a human being who doubts God's existence. And just as my vignette shows that doubt in a human benefactor's existence does not necessarily disqualify someone from being grateful to the doubted person, my vignette implies that doubt in God's existence does not necessarily disqualify someone from being grateful to God. In other words, a person could doubt that God exists but still in theory be grateful to God. This might happen if a doubter experiences a series of unlikely, unexpected benefits, and is able to vividly imagine the possibility that those benefits were benevolently caused by God. Motivated by the thought of this possibility, such a person might go on to act in ways that he thinks would please God, and he might be pleased when he sees things that would please God. Insofar as thoughts of God's benevolence justify those feelings and those behaviors on his part, such a person would be grateful to God—even while he doubted God's existence.

There are three categories of doubters to whom this generalization might apply: religious people in periods of doubt, agnostics, and atheists. Religious people in periods of doubt are people who spend much of their lives believing in God but also go through periods of uncertainty. Some such people, for some period of time, may cease to believe that God exists. My vignette implies, however, that such people are still, during their periods of doubt, capable of gratitude to God. Such people would be like a person in Yardley's position who most of the time believed there probably *was* a benefactor helping him out, but who occasionally went through stretches of doubt. Imagine such a person went through a period of doubt while he was carrying his surplus fruit to the site where he found the fish, but he nonetheless continued to bring his surplus fruit to that spot through his period of doubt. Imagine he was motivated by his thoughts of his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence and a desire to please his benefactor just in case that benefactor turns out to exist, just the way the constant doubter Yardley was in the original vignette. Such a person would still be acting gratefully, and thus would still be grateful, to Randolph during his period. Imagine again that this occasional doubter in Yardley's position goes through a moment of doubt as he sees the island's volcano erupt. Despite that, he might still feel sadness at the mere possibility of his benefactor existing and dying a terrible death. He would thus have feelings of gratitude even in his moments of doubt. By the same token, a religious person in a period of doubt who continues to do things that will please God, motivated by thoughts of God's benevolence, is likewise still acting gratefully. And such a person who still feels saddened by thoughts of God's disappointment, and uplifted by thoughts of God's pleasure, might still have feelings of gratitude in periods of doubt. Religious people in periods of doubt are thus capable of being grateful to God through such periods.

This possibility should come as a relief to those religious people who worry that they have been ungrateful to God during their periods of doubt. After all, in many monotheistic sects, being grateful to God is an essential part of leading a good life, and so subscribers to such sects who go through periods of doubt might worry that during those periods, they have failed to lead good lives. If my arguments are correct, though, then such periods need not worry every religious person who goes through periods of doubt, since periods of doubt need not be periods of ungratefulness. Indeed, it is possible for a religious person to

go through periods of doubt but still have been continuously grateful to God throughout his life.

Another class of people who doubt God's existence are agnostics, whom, for the purposes of this essay, I will understand as people who do not have a belief one way or the other on the question of whether God exists. Agnostics, as I classify them here, are people who suspend judgment on the question of God's existence. They take themselves to lack sufficient evidence to believe he exists and to lack sufficient evidence to believe he does not. On the question of whether God exists, they are like someone facing the question of whether a coin toss that is about to happen will come up heads or tails. They do not believe it will come up heads and they do not believe it will come up tails. Agnostics are analogous to someone in Yardley's position who, upon considering all the evidence, does not come to believe that a benefactor exists, and does not come to believe that a benefactor does *not* exist on the island. He is unsure, and so he suspends judgment. Despite this suspended judgment, though, such a person might find motivation to carry surplus fruit to the site where he found the fish—motivation that comes from his thoughts of his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence. And he might still lament the thought of such a benefactor perishing when he sees the island's volcano erupt. Such a person was still acting gratefully and having grateful feelings, and thus was still grateful, to Randolph, despite not believing Randolph existed. By the same token, an agnostic who, motivated by thoughts of God's benevolence, does things that will please God, or grieves when he thinks of God's disappointment, is likewise still acting gratefully and feeling gratitude, and thus *being* grateful, to God. Agnosticism need not entail ungratefulness to God.

This possibility could play an important role in agnostics' deliberation about whether they believe God exists. After all, our beliefs are not always immediately obvious to us upon introspection, and many agnostics might occasionally wonder whether they really lean toward theism or atheism. Some agnostics who feel gratitude to God might, consciously or unconsciously, reason along the following lines: *I can't tell just from introspection whether I believe in this God, who might exist. But I do feel grateful to this possibly existing God. So I must believe God exists, since one can only be grateful to entities one believes exist.* As I have shown, though, the final premise in this argument can be questioned, and so the argument, even though valid, is unsound. Gratitude to God need not entail belief that God exists. Anyone who thinks otherwise, and reasons along the lines of the argument I just articulated, commits what we might call the *grateful agnostic's fallacy*.[21]

A final group of doubters worth considering is atheists. Atheists, as I will define them, are people who believe that God does not exist. Some atheists are *certain* God does not exist. Those atheists, I believe, may not be capable of gratitude to God. But atheists need not be certain God does not exist in order to be atheists, just like one need not be certain climate change is occurring in order to believe climate change is occurring. Some atheists, in other words, might put some credence in the possibility that God does exist and have a rather clear representation of what God, if he did exist, would be like.[22] These *uncertain atheists* are analogous to Yardley in the vignette from Section 6. And as I showed, it was plausible that Yardley was still able to find motivation to carry surplus fruit to the site where he found the fish, motivated by his thoughts of his hypothetical benefactor's benevolence. And we could imagine Yardley weeping at the thought of such a benefactor perishing when he sees the island's volcano erupt. Yardley was still acting gratefully and having grateful feelings, and thus was still grateful, to Randolph, despite being pretty sure that Randolph did not exist. By the same token, an uncertain atheist who, motivated by thoughts of God's benevolence, does things that he thinks would please God, or grieves when he thinks of God's disappointment, could likewise still be acting gratefully and feeling gratitude—could thus *be* grateful, to God. Atheism need not entail ungratefulness. And gratitude to God need not entail belief in God.

This possibility is significant for at least two reasons. The first is parallel to a remark I made about agnosticism above: this possibility could play an important role in uncertain atheists' deliberation about whether they are grateful to God. Many such atheists might,

consciously or unconsciously, reason along the following lines: *I can't tell just from introspection whether I feel any gratitude to God. But I do not believe God exists, so I cannot feel grateful to God, because one can only feel grateful to entities one believes exist.* As I have shown, though, the final premise in this argument is not safe to assume, and so the argument, even though valid, is unsound. Belief that God does not exist need not entail an absence of gratitude to God. We can think of this unsound argument as the *uncertain atheist's fallacy*.

The possibility that uncertain atheists can be grateful to God also has implications for a line reasoning about the existence and appropriateness of a mysterious kind of gratitude some philosophers call "cosmic gratitude."[23] This line of reasoning appeals to the experiences of atheists who, despite believing God does not exist, nevertheless feel deep, pervasive gratitude to something big, profound and non-human. Such people often find themselves reflecting on certain good things that have befallen them, or all good things that have befallen them, that seem not to have come from human benevolence. And these reflections sometimes seem to give rise to experiences of gratitude: feelings of gratitude and motivation to "make a return" by benefiting other people. An uncertain atheist who has such experiences might be tempted to reason as follows: *As an atheist, I believe God does not exist. But I feel deep, pervasive gratitude to something bigger, broader and more profound than any human entity. Since I do not believe God exists, it cannot be gratitude to God that I feel, because we cannot be grateful to entities we believe do not exist. So the gratitude I feel must be a special kind of gratitude, distinct from gratitude to human beings and gratitude to God. So there must exist a special kind of gratitude, "cosmic gratitude," which is substantially different from gratitude to human beings and gratitude to God.* The argument, however, is not sound, because we can doubt the premise that says we cannot be grateful to entities we believe do not exist. Once that premise is removed, the argument's conclusion no longer follows from the remaining premises. Another possibility emerges that could explain why at least some atheists seem to feel deep gratitude toward something profound and superhuman: they may be experiencing feelings of gratitude triggered by (1) good things in their lives, together with (2) a mental representation they have of a benevolent non-human benefactor (whose existence they doubt but regard as possible).[24] As my vignette about Yardley suggested, these two elements could potentially induce significant experiences of gratitude even in people who are highly confident no agential benefactor exists. Insofar as this explanation is simpler than positing the fittingness of a mysterious sort of gratitude (e.g., gratitude to a cosmic non-agent like the universe, the laws of physics, or existence itself), the experiences of such atheists leave us with less reason to take seriously the possibility of "cosmic gratitude."[25] I any event, my arguments suggest that uncertain atheists should take care not to jump too quickly from their experiences of gratitude and their disbelief in God's existence to conclusions about the existence or fittingness of mysterious sorts of gratitude.[26]

I've shown a number of interesting implications that follow from the possibility that nonbelievers are capable of gratitude to God. I want to close this section by pointing out three more implications that the Yardley vignette has for gratitude to God that are worth mentioning. The first two of these correspond to the two implications at the end of the previous section.

The first of these implications is that some degree of gratitude to God is compatible with hope that God turns out not to exist. There might be believers, agnostics and atheists who hope God does not exist because they look around the world and lament how disappointed God would be if he did exist. These people are like Yardley who, upon watching the island become engulfed in lava, hopes that Randolph turns out not to exist, because he hates the thought of his benefactor suffering—and thus prefers a world in which that benefactor did not exist. Despite that, his disposition to be sad at the thought of Randolph's suffering shows him to be grateful to Randolph. By the same token, a person's disposition to lament God's disappointment reveals such a person still to be grateful to God (at least insofar as that disposition arises from a representation of God as having been benevolent).

And so believers, agnostics and atheists may still be grateful to God even if they hope he does not exist.

There are other reasons someone might hope God turns out not to exist—besides sadness at thoughts of God's disappointment. Some people might hope God does not exist because they take pride in the thought that they are solely responsible for the good they have achieved, and are averse to the thought of their own dependence on something so much more powerful than themselves. Some people might hope God turns out not to exist because their reason has led them to that conclusion, and they dislike the thought that their reason could have led them to a false conclusion. These people are like Yardley hoping Randolph does not exist because he'd prefer a world where he survived on the island all on his own, with help from no one, or because he'd prefer a world where his tracking skills never led him astray. Despite that, Yardley's disposition to be sad at the thought of Randolph's suffering, and his motivation to bring Randolph surplus fruit, show him to be grateful to Randolph. By the same token, a person's disposition to lament God's disappointment and to be motivated to please God in certain ways, just in case he turns out to exist, would reveal such a person still to be grateful to God (at least insofar as that disposition arises from a representation of God as having been benevolent). Gratitude to God, then, is compatible not only with believing God does not exist, but *hoping* God does not exist as well.[27]

This last point suggests a second implication about doubters' gratitude to God worth considering: it suggests that some degree of gratitude to God is compatible with a lack of proper humility vis à vis God. Many people think that proper humility vis à vis God requires people to accept and welcome the fact that they are dependent on him for the good things they receive and the good things they achieve. My arguments imply, however, that a person may prefer God not exist because he prefers a world in which he did not depend on God, and yet still have grateful feelings and exhibit grateful behaviors toward God. So it may be possible to be grateful to God, at least to some extent, without being fully humble vis à vis God.

These considerations highlight a final implication my arguments entail: that gratitude to God is consistent with lack of faith that God exists, and lack of faith in God.[28] This follows from the fact that Yardley's gratitude to Randolph is consistent with Yardley's lack of faith *that* Randolph exists, and lack of faith *in* Randolph. Now, in order to have faith that p, I take it that one must have (1) some positive cognitive attitude (like belief, acceptance or reliance) toward p, and (2) a positive conative orientation toward p (e.g., a desire that p be the case).[29] But Yardley lacks both of these. He lacks (1), insofar as he *dis*believes Randolph exists. And he lacks (2) insofar as he hopes Randolph turns out not to exist. By the same token, an atheist might be grateful to God, but lack faith that God exists because he believes God does not exist and hopes God turns out not to exist.

Faith *that* God exists is different from faith *in* God. In order to have faith *in* some entity, R, one must place trust in R, have some confidence that R will come through when needed—enough so that one's behavior should be shaped or changed by this trust and confidence. In other words, faith in R should motivate ventures of trust. But this need not be the case with Yardley. Imagine that after bringing the fruit to the clearing, Yardley finds some delicious looking mushrooms at the bottom of a pit near the stream. He wants to get the mushrooms, but he realizes that if he goes into the pit, he may not be able to get out on his own. The thought crosses his mind that if Randolph did exist and heard Yardley's cries, Randolph might come to help him. But Yardley has so little confidence in Randolph's existence that he passes up the chance to get the mushrooms. In fact, the whole time he's on the island, he never counts on Randolph helping him out, never undertakes a risky venture that Randolph could save him from. This is still consistent, though, with his behaving and feeling gratefully toward Randolph in the ways I described in the vignette. So Yardley can be grateful to Randolph even while he lacks faith in Randolph. By the same token, an atheist could be grateful to God even while lacking faith in God. This can happen

if an atheist has grateful behaviors and feelings vis à vis God, but never trusts in God's existence enough to take risky ventures relying on God's help.

9. Broader Implications and Open Questions

In this essay, I have argued that it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence you doubt. Belief that a benefactor *might* exist can sometimes be enough to motivate gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors, and can do so in a way that makes such feelings and behaviors genuinely manifestations of gratitude. This can happen if a person believes the benefactor might exist, has a representation of that benefactor as benevolent, and comes to see certain past benefits as possibly having been bestowed by such a benefactor. Just as we can be grateful to human benefactors whose existence we doubt, it seems we can also be grateful to supernatural entities whose existence we doubt, insofar as we see those entities as possibly existing, have representations of them as benevolent, and think that certain past benefits might have come from them. And this means that doubters (religious people in periods of doubt, agnostics, and even some atheists) are capable of gratitude to God. Indeed, not only can people be capable of gratitude to a God they doubt; they can also be grateful to a God they *hope* turns out not to exist, and they can also be grateful to God when they lack faith in God or faith that God exists. I showed how these conclusions have important implications for doubters of various kinds. I also showed how my arguments help us understand the concept of gratitude more generally—by, e.g., revealing that belief is not a necessary cognitive element of the grateful response.

In this final section of my essay, I would like to highlight several questions my arguments raise as salient, and suggest some broad implications my arguments might have for doubters' relationship to God and to religion more generally.

Perhaps the most obvious questions my conclusion raises are empirical questions. I have shown that it is theoretically possible for doubters of various kinds to be, to some degree, grateful to God. How prevalent are grateful feelings and grateful behaviors among different stripes of nonbelievers? What psychological and social factors tend to predict whether a particular doubter will show certain degrees of gratitude toward God? These are questions that cannot be answered from an armchair. And insofar as people have assumed belief in a benefactor was necessary for gratitude to that benefactor, these questions likely struck empirical researchers as nonstarters. My conclusions in this essay, however, suggest that they are not.

My arguments in this essay also highlight the urgency of certain theoretical and normative questions about gratitude to doubted benefactors. Some of these are conceptual questions about other conditions, besides belief in a benefactor's existence, that make gratitude possible. Given that doubt in God's existence does not in itself disqualify a doubter from being grateful to God, we might wonder: are there other disqualifiers specific to doubters that would make gratitude to God impossible or attenuated? One possibility, for instance, is that agnostics and atheists typically lack a clear representation of God's interests, motives and values, and so they may lack a clear sense of how to reciprocate a benefit from God, or a clear understanding of the conditions under which God would be disappointed. And that could make being grateful to God impossible for such doubters. Another possibility is that agnostics and atheists may lack an understanding of how an omnipotent God sacrifices in benefiting them; and insofar as benefactor sacrifice is necessary for gratitude, they may thus be incapable of having a representation of God as worthy of gratitude. Another possibility is that doubters might have somewhat negative representations of God. Indeed, many doubters become doubters because of events that make them angry at God. To what extent is it possible for a doubter to be grateful to God for certain benefits while being angry with him for other things? Each of these questions is important for understanding the extent to which doubters are capable of gratitude to God, and the answer to each of them requires conceptual work on the nature of gratitude.

Perhaps even more pressing than these conceptual questions is a normative question that my conclusions in the essay make salient: Insofar as doubters are capable of gratitude

to benefactors whose existence they doubt, when (if ever) *should* they be? And what are the conditions under which doubters *ought* to be grateful to God? Is it always irrational, inappropriate or unreasonable to be grateful to benefactors whose existence one doubts? Or can it sometimes be rational, acceptable and reasonable? Can it ever be *good* to be grateful to benefactors whose existence one doubts? And can it ever be *bad* to *fail* to be grateful to benefactors whose existence one doubts? These are obviously intriguing and important questions. And though they are too large to answer adequately here, I believe that my case of Yardley and Randolph may be helpful in answering them.

Leaving gratitude behind, my arguments in this essay suggest a number of other counterintuitive possibilities about doubters' relationships with God and other supernatural entities. If one does not need to believe in God, or even have faith in God, in order to be grateful to him, perhaps belief and faith are not necessary for other complex social attitudes either. And that suggests the possibility that some doubters (namely, those who believe God might exist) could, to one degree or another, be contrite, forgiving, praising, compassionate, loving, and perhaps even obedient or loyal to God. Now, insofar as these attitudes, together with gratitude, make up the core of a healthy relationship with God, some doubters might be able to go a surprisingly long way toward having a healthy relationship to God.[30] And that in turn means, surprisingly, that theists and nontheists, those with faith and those without, or believers and nonbelievers vis à vis any particular religious tradition, share a piece of common ground.[31]

More generally, this raises the possibility that people who neither believe in nor have faith in the existence of supernatural entities could still nonetheless have robustly religious lives. Even without faith or belief in such entities, certain religious rituals, rites, and practices could still count as genuine expressions of certain important attitudes toward supernatural entities.[32] The extent to which this is possible would require careful analyses of each of these attitudes and the extent to which they can be had toward doubted entities. My method in this essay may provide a helpful roadmap for such analyses.

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Notes

1 Here I follow suggestions or arguments in, *inter alia*, Gulliford et al. (2013, p. 299) and Roberts and Telech (2019, p. 1). I give a justification for this use of the term "appreciation" in Manela (2016a, pp. 289–90).

2 This way of treating the relationship between directed gratitude and appreciation is now reflected in several recent authoritative texts on gratitude, including, for instance, the introduction to Roberts and Telech (2019). Argued defenses of this distinction can be found in Manela (2016a, 2020).

3 Philosophers who see gratitude as a typical response to benevolence or goodwill include Berger (1975), McConnell (2019), Roberts (2004, p. 62), and Strawson (1974). Sustained arguments for the benevolence claim can be found in Manela (2016a, sct. 2)

4 Some might argue that benevolence-motivated acts are not worthy of gratitude if they are done so recklessly as to unduly risk harming Y, or done without the Y knowing they were done by a benevolent agent, or done as a token of R's contrition to Y for some past wrong, or done as an instance of gratitude to Y for past benevolence Y did for R, or if Y already for other reasons deserved the benefit of R's ϕ-ing. I will consider only cases of benevolence where these factors do not come into play.

5 This list is similar to the lists of "disqualifying" conditions put forward by McConnell (1993); Simmons (1979).

6 Some, such as Fitzgerald (1998), might be inclined to think I've cast the net too narrowly here, in defining that to which targeted gratitude is a proper response. Even if such skeptics deny my claim that gratitude is owed *only* in response to acts of benevolence, most of those skeptics would likely still concede that gratitude is often (perhaps even typically) owed in response to benevolent acts. For such skeptics, then, the cases of gratitude I will analyze in this essay are still cases of genuine prepositional gratitude,

and though (for such skeptics) these cases represent only a subset of prepositional gratitude, my analysis of only these cases will still be sufficient to convince such skeptics that one can be grateful without believing one's benefactor exists.

7 What follows is a summary of the analysis I argue for in Manela (2016a, 2020).

8 On this point, I follow, *inter alia*, Berger (1975, p. 42), McConnell (1993, p. 57), and Swinburne (1989, pp. 65, 67), and I have argued for this in Manela (2019, pp. 301–3). There are virtually no philosophers who argue against this point, though Weiss (1985) believed that the requirement to thank was a social rather than a moral requirement associated with gratitude.

9 On this point, I follow, *inter alia*, Fitzgerald (1998, p. 120) and Walker (Walker 1980–1981, pp. 50–51), and I have argued for this in Manela (2016a, p. 283; 2016b, p. 136). Some have argued that as far as feelings go, a grateful beneficiary should also have feelings of gladness or appreciation toward the benefit; in other words, according to these philosophers, part of being grateful to R for giving me benefit T is being glad I have T. I am skeptical that this is truly a part of prepositional gratitude. However, for the sake of convincing those who disagree with me on this point, in this essay I will use cases of prepositional gratitude where the beneficiary does appreciate the benefit.

10 On this point, I follow, *inter alia*, Camenisch (1981) and McConnell (1993, pp. 48–51), and I have argued for this in Manela (2016a, pp. 283–84; 2019, pp. 300–1). Those who dispute this point include Fitzgerald (1998, p. 120); Weiss (1985, p. 492). For arguments against those philosophers on this point, see Manela (2016a, p. 283).

11 See, for instance, Manela (2019, p. 299).

12 Some might disagree with my claim in the previous section that gratitude is only ever fitting in response to benevolence. Such philosophers can feel free to interpret "benevolent benefaction" as a stand-in for whatever conditions they think are necessary and sufficient to warrant gratitude. Under most reasonable accounts of those conditions, the argument that follows will still be a *prima facie* case for why Y's belief in R's benevolent benefaction is necessary for Y to be grateful to R.

13 If you like, you can imagine that Yardley's degree of belief in the proposition that he's alone on the island is 0.99—that is, you can imagine that he typically aims to maximize his utility when taking bets, and would be willing to pay $0.99 for a bet that pays $1.00 if he were alone on the island and $0 if it turned out his benefactor existed.

14 One might object that this is not a case where Y doubts that R exists, because despite what Y might tell us, Y is still acting as if he believes R exists, and that is enough to reveal that he actually does believe R exists. But this objection can be met. Acting as if p is the case doesn't necessarily imply belief that p is the case, as reflections on attitudes like precaution show. I can believe with 99% confidence that lightning will never strike my house, but still take measures to protect my house from a lightning strike. By the same token, in the case of Yardley and Randolph, Yardley might genuinely believe with a confidence of 99% that Randolph does not exist, but still take measures to please Randolph just in case he turns out to exist.

15 To be clear, I do claim that a beneficiary can be grateful to a benefactor if the beneficiary doesn't regard the benefactor's existence as possible. If Yardley put no credence at all in the possibility that Randolph existed, I have a hard time seeing how Yardley could have the gratitude-typical feelings and behaviors that constitute being grateful to Randolph—at least insofar as Yardley is fully rational.

16 Indeed, in this case, his hope that Randolph doesn't exist may actually be a manifestation of his gratitude to Randolph.

17 In Manela (2016a), for instance, I have argued that being grateful doesn't require a beneficiary to be humble.

18 Such accounts include McAleer (2012); Roberts (2016).

19 Indeed, this generalization is perhaps most of use in the context of supernatural benefactors. After all, human benefactors almost never leave us with doubt that they exist, while supernatural benefactors are much more likely to have their existence doubted than typical human benefactors.

20 At this point an atheist might object that there is a big difference between my vignette about Yardley and Randolph, on the one hand, and the case of doubters' gratitude to God, on the other: in the vignette, the benefactor Randolph turns out to exist. God, the objector might argue, turns out not to exist. According to this objector, even if my vignette shows gratitude to doubted *existing* benefactors is possible, it doesn't show that gratitude to *non-existent* benefactors is possible. And so those who doubt God's existence will not be persuaded that my generalization applies to gratitude to God. Theists will not find this objection persuasive, but atheists might. And since I do hope to persuade atheists that my conclusion applies even in the case of gratitude to God, this objection is worth addressing. The objection rests heavily on the claim that gratitude to non-existent benefactors is not really gratitude, and that claim, I believe, can be doubted. Reflection on other attitudes, like fear, tell against it. Think for instance of fear of vampires. Despite the fact that vampire do not exist, the fear of vampires is very much real fear. It's real because the feelings and behavioral dispositions that make it up are real—really felt by and motivating of people who are afraid of vampires. And it's fear *of vampires* because it's the mental representation of vampires as having certain characteristics that brings those feelings and behaviors about, and that determines their content and magnitude. The prepositional phrase *of vampires* need not pick out anything that really exists; it only picks out the representation. Now, if vampires do not exist, that might make fear of vampires unfitting, inappropriate, or irrational. And since vampires do not exist, it may be impossible to objectively confirm the extent to which one's representation of vampires, which sets the parameters of one's fear, is accurate. So different people's fear of vampires could manifest very differently—in different behaviors, for instance. But none of that stops fear of vampires from being real fear, and people who experience it as being really afraid. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to other attitudes, like gratitude. Gratitude to a non-existent benefactor, like (*arguendo*) God, is real gratitude, because the feelings and

behavioral dispositions that make it up are real. And it's gratitude *to God* because it's the representation of God as having certain characteristics that brings those feelings and behaviors about, and that influences their content and magnitude. The prepositional phrase *to God* need not pick out anything that really exists; it only picks out and defines the representation. Now, if God does not exist, that might make gratitude to God unfitting, inappropriate, or irrational. And if God does not exist, it may be impossible to objectively confirm the extent to which one's representation of God, which sets the parameters of one's gratitude, is accurate. So different people's gratitude to God could manifest very differently—in different behaviors, for instance. But none of that stops gratitude to God from being real gratitude, and people who experience it as being really grateful, in the prepositional or targeted sense.Now, if the objector remains convinced that gratitude to non-existent entities is not real gratitude, there are still versions of my thesis he might be prepared to accept. One statement of my thesis was *failure to believe in a benefactor doesn't always necessarily imply that gratitude to that benefactor is impossible*. The objector should still endorse this statement of my thesis as applying when the benefactor is God, since if God does not exist, then it's not a person's failure to believe in God that makes gratitude to God impossible: it's God's non-existence. I have also stated my thesis more sweepingly, as *it is possible to be grateful to a benefactor whose existence one doubts*. This is a version the objector might not accept as applying when the benefactor is God, because insofar as God doesn't exist, gratitude to God is never possible. But the objector should be prepared to accept a qualified version of this statement of my thesis—one that reads: *insofar as gratitude to some benefactor is possible, it may be possible to be grateful to that benefactor without believing he exists*. That's a version of my thesis that that both the objector and others should be willing to accept as applying to cases where God is a benefactor.

21 We could also imagine a darker version of this fallacy based not on a doubter's gratitude, but a doubter's anger toward God. An agnostic might reason along the following lines: *I can't tell just from introspection whether I believe in God. But I do feel angry with God. So I must believe God exists, since one can only be angry with entities one believes exist.* Insofar as anger is like gratitude, and can be had toward entities whose existence one doubts, then one cannot infer from one's anger at God that one believes God exists. To do so is to commit what we might call the *angry agnostic's fallacy*.

22 For data supporting this possibility, see Bradley et al. (2015, 2017).

23 Recent philosophers who have written about cosmic gratitude include Roberts (2014); Solomon (2006).

24 There is evidence that many nonbelievers do have such a mental representation of God. See Bradley et al. (2015).

25 One way a grateful atheist could respond to these remarks is by pointing out that if she were experiencing gratitude to a doubted God, such gratitude would not be appropriate (since, she believes, God does not exist, and gratitude to doubted benefactors, while possible, may be inappropriate). Thus, she might continue to reason, it is more likely that her gratitude is directed to some other entity, like the universe— making it a kind of cosmic gratitude. Whether this reply is compelling depends on whether gratitude to a doubted benefactor is always inappropriate or inapt (which it may not always be). The reply also assumes that the gratitude felt by the atheist in question is appropriate (which it may not be). The reply's compellingness also depends on whether gratitude to the cosmos, the laws of physics, or whatever else is supposed to be the target of cosmic gratitude is ever appropriate or apt (which it may never be). In any event, my point here is simply that it would be a mistake to infer from feelings of gratitude and a belief God doesn't exist *directly* to the claim that cosmic gratitude is the attitude being manifested. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to make this point.

26 These remarks also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to theists who seem to feel gratitude to something that is neither human nor divine. Some such theists might believe that in such moments, they are experiencing "cosmic gratitude." But before they infer this, another possibility must be ruled out: the possibility that they are really experiencing gratitude to some non-cosmic entity other than humans or God (e.g., some other supernatural entity) whose existence they doubt but regard as possible.

27 Of course, gratitude to God isn't compatible with *all* reasons for hoping God doesn't exist. An atheist who hopes God doesn't exist because he hates God, or has a representation of God as fundamentally malevolent, would probably not be capable of gratitude to God.

28 A similar point is made by Wolterstorff (2018). But Wolterstorff only goes so far as to argue that those who lack faith can, during liturgy, *thank* God. Now, it is an open question whether thanking God in liturgical contexts really amounts to expressing gratitude, as opposed to expressions of other related attitudes, like praise or appreciation. In other words, those who see atheists thanking God during liturgy and infer that they must have directed gratitude to God may be committing what I, in Manela (2022), have called the "thanks-gratitude fallacy". And even if thanking God during the liturgy really is meant to convey directed gratitude to God, thanking is only one element of the grateful response. My argument goes beyond Wolterstroff's by showing that atheists who lack faith can be grateful to God in a much more substantial and fuller sense: they can have grateful feelings and behavioral dispositions vis-à-vis God.

29 I take these conditions, and those in the next paragraph, from Howard-Snyder (2013).

30 It's worth noting that this line of reasoning also implies that doubters can have negative attitudes, like anger, toward God as well. So doubters' ability to have such attitudes toward God doesn't invariably imply they're likely to have healthy, positive relationships with God.

31 In certain religions, the recognition of this common ground could have significant consequences. It may help convince skeptical Catholics, for instance, of a suggestion recently made by Pope Francis: that nonbelievers—including atheists—may be capable of going to heaven. Francis's remarks on this possibility indicate that he thinks a life of good actions (actions that please

God), when motivated by an atheist's conscience, can be sufficient to make an atheist welcome in heaven. Some Catholics might doubt that this could be sufficient. They might reason that even people who conscientiously do good things must have some relationship with God in order to be welcome in heaven, and atheists, because of their lack of belief, can have no such relationship. My arguments in this essay suggest that line of reasoning is flawed. Nonbelievers, including atheists, might indeed be able to have a relationship with God—a relationship constituted by important attitudes like gratitude and contrition. Such attitudes may turn out not to be necessary to get into heaven. It may be the case that consistent good actions governed by a conscience really are sufficient. That is a question for clerics and theologians to settle. But if such attitudes do turn out to be necessary, that need not exclude nonbelievers from heaven. For more on Francis's remarks about nonbelievers entering heaven, see https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-chronicles/my-dad-heaven-little-boy-asks-pope (accessed on 20 December 2021).

[32] Here my arguments point in the same direction as remarks made by Wolterstorff (2018).

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